

Vampirism in/as Family: Filmic Avatars of the *Vourdalak*

Wampiryzm w rodzinie i jako rodzina: filmowe wcielenia vourdalaka

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ABSTRACT

Through the diachronic survey of Italian, French and late-Soviet era screen adaptations of Count A.K. Tolstoy's 19th-century French-language novella introducing the Slavic vampiric figure of the *vourdalak*, whose trademark is to feed on its loved ones, this study shows how the disintegration and/or reconfiguration of the family structure is diversely treated in terms in diegetic, thematic, stylistic and socio-historical terms.

Keywords: vampirism; *vourdalak*; family; European film

ABSTRAKT

Poprzez diachroniczną analizę włoskich, francuskich i późno-radzieckich adaptacji filmowych XIX-wiecznej noweli hrabiego A.K. Tołstoja, napisanej w języku francuskim i wprowadzającej do literatury słowiańską postać wampira – *vourdalaka*, którego charakterystyczną cechą jest żywienie się własnymi bliskimi – niniejsze studium ukazuje, w jaki sposób rozpad i/lub przekształcenie struktury rodziny są przedstawiane w zróżnicowany sposób na poziomie diegetycznym, tematycznym, stylistycznym oraz społecznohistorycznym.

Słowa kluczowe: wampiryzm; *vourdalak*; rodzina; film europejski

A lesser-known elder cousin of towering giant of Russian letters Leo Tolstoy, Count Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy (1817–75) was nonetheless an accomplished poet-cum-novelist-cum-dramatist-cum-diplomat in his own right, not to mention a polished polyglot. At the precocious age of 22 – and at a moment in time when vampire fiction in Western Europe was still mostly limited to the British progenitor of the genre, John W. Polidori's *The Vampire* (1819), and various con-

stituents scattered in French texts¹ – he penned a French-language Gothic novella revolving around a peculiar case of vampirism: *La Famille du Vourdalak. Fragment inédit des mémoires d'un inconnu* (1839).² Almost immediately thereafter, Tolstoy committed to paper a prequel of sorts, also in French: *Le Rendez-vous dans trois cents ans* (*The Reunion After 300 Years*). A couple of additional stories in the vampiric vein followed: *Oupyr* (1841) and *Amena* (1846), the former written in Russian, the latter in French (and the only one of its supernatural tales to appear in his lifetime). Nonetheless, the *vourdalak*-centered piece unquestionably remains today the most striking and successful of the four, so much so that it was once regularly anthologized.

Owing to the deferred, posthumous publication of Tolstoy's story,³ the introduction and popularization of the word *vourdalak* into Russian language is generally attributed to Alexander Pushkin on the basis of an eponymous poem, published in 1835 as part of his *Songs of the Western Slavs* cycle, which happened to be a translated ballad from Prosper Mérimée's *La Guzla* where the reference to [a] "brucolaque" is precisely rendered by *vurdalak* in Russian. To complicate matters, *La Guzla*⁴ eventually turned out to be one of the most notorious literary hoaxes in 19th-century Europe. What had been presented, complete with critical or erudite apparatus, as mere translation work of "Illyrian" folk ballads interspersed with tales of vampires or the evil eye, was soon revealed to be Mérimée's own invention and creation. With *La Famille du Vourdalak*, Tolstoy then effected what might be termed a vampiric looping of the linguistic and literary loop, since under the influence of Pushkin he turned to the French language the better to reappropriate a Russian adaptation of an exoticizing Gallic mystification under the guise of a translation of Slavic folk tales – no less!

The *vourdalak* as an entity is, therefore, essentially a folkloric Slavic or Balkan variant of the vampire figure, initially presenting the physical appearance of an uncouth, archaic patriarch that is a farcry from the image of the suave or dashing seducer made popular by Bram Stoker's *Dracula* toward the end of the Victorian era, to say nothing of the countless cinematic incarnations that have since ensued. While retaining the primary mechanism of vampiric contamination, the *vourdalak* mythos adds a specific twist residing in the nature of the target or victim: Serbian vampires only feed on their loved ones. In the words of the Marquis d'Urfé, Tolstoy's inset narrator, "although their habits are similar to vampires of other countries, *vourdalaks* prefer to suck the blood of close relatives and friends, who

¹ See, in particular, the vampires featured in Charles Nodier's *Smarra, ou les démons de la nuit* (1821) and *Infernaliana* (1822), or in Prosper Mérimée's *La Guzla* (1821).

² Translated into English as *The Family of a Vourdalak*. See A.K. Tolstoy, *Vampire Stories of the Supernatural*, trans. Fedor Nikanov (Hawthorn Books, 1969), 92–125.

³ In 1884, in Russian translation; in 1950, in the original French.

⁴ Now available in English as *Songs for the Gusle*, trans. Laura Nagle (Frayed Edge Press, 2023).

die and become vampires also. In Estonia and Herzegovina entire villages may be composed of *vourdalaks*.⁵ In *The Family of the Vourdalak*, as in many of its filmic renditions, the grandson is thus old Gorcha's prey of choice when he returns home, turned *vourdalak*, at the stroke of midnight. Unsurprisingly, the child, once corrupted, will chew on his mother. Thus is initiated a virtually endless and uncontrollable cycle transmuting affection into predation, equating fusion with contagion. As the very title of Tolstoy's story already suggests, the family unit – or, rather, its reassessment through entropic disintegration and possible reconfiguration – is the intrinsic cornerstone of *vourdalak* narratives.

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How did cinema, whose relation to literature has commonly been said to be, to a greater or lesser degree, vampiric in nature, position itself vis-à-vis the convoluted, indeed vampire-like genesis of the literary *vourdalak* as previously described? To what extent and in what ways has the adaptation process perpetuated, recycled or added to that practice of predation and contamination? Focusing on some of the cinematic renditions of Tolstoy's *The Family of the Vourdalak* within a general frame of remediation, reappropriation or recontextualization, the purpose of this essay is to examine varied facets and treatments of an anthropological motif identified above as at the core of *vourdalak* lore, namely the familial bond and structure forming the primordial basis for social order, but here under damaging threat and/or in structural transition. The range will be shown to be significant, from melancholy tone to grotesque, from period piece to modernization, from "straightforward" adaptation to experimental fragmentation, from social critique to political subtext. For, surprisingly enough perhaps, if Tolstoy's novella is nowadays too often neglected, including in vampire literature/film scholarship, it has been multiply and diversely transposed to the small and big screen over the years.

The adaptational process was set afoot by two Italian opuses: the "I Wurdalak" segment of Mario Bava's horror anthology film *Black Sabbath (I tre volti della paura)*, 1963) and, a decade later, Giorgio Ferroni's *The Night of the Devils (La notte dei diavoli)*, 1972). The screen versions would henceforth cut across national boundaries. Centered around the romance between the young nobleman protagonist and alluring Sdenka (the peasant family's daughter), a Spanish variant was helmed in 1975 by José Antonio Páramo and titled "La familia *vourdalak*," an episode of *The Fifth Horseman (El quinto jinete)*, a Spanish series transposing classics of fantasy and horror for television. After a hiatus of over a decade, a couple of expe-

⁵ *Vampire Stories of the Supernatural*, 96.

rimental Soviet films came out only one year apart from each other. Directed by Gennadiy Klimov (also producer) and Igor Shavlak (also lead actor), *The Family of the Vourdalaks* (*Semya vourdalakov*) was released in 1990. Shot by Yevgeny Yufit (the late founder of “necrorealism” and a key figure of “Soviet parallel cinema”), *Daddy, Father Frost Is Dead* (*Papa, umer Ded Moroz*) was screened in 1991. After yet another protracted interval, a handful of new adaptations have recently made their appearance. If Russia’s *Vamps* (*Vurdalaki*, 2017; dir. Sergey Ginzburg) and Argentina’s *A Taste of Blood* (*Sangre Vurdalak*, 2020; dir. Santiago Fernández Calvete) are clearly concerned more with spectacular pyrotechnics than with the actual source material, a more interesting if partly flawed proposition has come from France, in a new form of circling back (with regard to the language of the original text), with Adrien Beau’s debut feature: *Le Vourdalak* (2023).

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Courtesy of Mario Bava’s visual genius, the inaugural screen version is already a vivid illustration – possibly to this day the most impressive of all adaptations – of a familial reconfiguration whereby an entire household is being vampirized from within. The emphasis is therefore on the family members acquiring a new global identity in a predatory domino effect. Hence the plural definite article in the original Italian title (“I Wurdalak”) where Tolstoy’s title was meant to designate Gorka’s singular status as ogre-like patriarch and initiator of the family’s mutation – as both arch- and *Ur-vourdalak*, as it were. One of the film’s earliest memorable moments is when Gorka, impersonated by an aging Boris Karloff, flees the family cottage in the dead of night – and into a dense forest – with his beloved grandson, Ivan, on horseback. Esthetically as well as thematically the scene plays out like a loose reenactment, or at least a variation, of the Scandinavian *Erlking* legend which concerns a supernatural being, the eponymous king of the fairies, assailing an infant child riding with his father and eventually causing his death. Before being exemplified by a multitude of 19th-century paintings, that figure was made famous by a poem by Goethe (“Erlkönig,” 1782), more somber, even thanatotic, in tone and substituting a boy as prey for the young man pursued by a maiden elf in the Danish folk ballad serving as source of inspiration. A suspicion of pedophilia, if not rape, is thus perceptible in the last but one quatrain of the piece: “‘I love thee, I’m charm’d by thy beauty, dear boy / And if thou’rt unwilling, then force I’ll employ.’ / My father, my father, he seizes me fast, / For sorely, the Erl-King, has hurt me at last.”⁶

⁶ *The Poems of Goethe*, 115.

The even more disturbing conflation of the (grand-)paternal figure and the menacing, destructive entity at play in *I Wurdalak* appears to be paradoxically uncoupled with such psychoanalytical modalities as the Oedipal conflict or with the mythical exemplar of Saturn (or Cronos) devouring his children as so strikingly depicted by Francisco Goya in one of his “Black Paintings” (1820–23). Indeed, the frail Ivan returns “in one piece” from the beyond, kneels outside the home in the icy-cold night, almost reminiscent of a diminutive, albeit treacherous Christ-like figure. He sonorously begs his mother to open the door and let him in, which she is only too eager to do, even if it means killing her husband who tries to reason with her and stop her. When she finally flings the front door open she is met not by her imploring son but by the merciless, feral face of Gorka who proceeds to vampirize her, perhaps in avoidance of what would have been an explicitly – and morbidly – taboo embrace between a mother and her living-dead infant. Regardless, what the film ultimately proposes is but a new *modus vivendi* for the family through vampiric inbreeding, or endogenous, indeed incestuous, contamination. Before bringing her back into the “redefined” fold, Gorka in the presence of his next of kin had made it clear to his daughter Sdenka (subsequent to her “elopement” with French diplomat Vladimir d’Urfe, whose misfortune it was to have come upon this secluded Serbian village) that “[n]o one can love you more than we do...” Echoing previous face-to-a-window shots, the concluding triptych pictorially uses light, color and windowpane to unite the family members ontologically as well as visually within a single (over)frame in their respective squares. All their eyes are fixed on the newly reaffiliated Sdenka kissing Vladimir until her head slowly moves toward his jugular. No matter how abnormally or monstrously in viewers’ eyes, Bava’s film implements not only analogous restructuring of the initial family unit along strictly *vourdalak-esque* line, but integrative incorporation of an externality (D’Urfe as an allogenic or exogamous element in both socio-economic and cultural terms) into the familial matrix.

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In an unassimilable rather than inclusive perspective this time, Giorgio Ferroni’s *The Night of the Devil* also foregrounds, in a modern-day setting (the early 1970s), the *forestiero* status of Nicola, the lumber importer who after a car accident on a deserted road has found refuge at a farmhouse located near the Slovenian border, a liminal space *par excellence*. A *forestiero*, i.e., a stranger, an outsider, or even an intruder, in the eyes of the Ciuvlakas, a family name that uncoincidentally “rhymes” with *vourdalak*. The woodland villagers are in return perceived as not just “strange, totally ignorant and hardheaded,” but also “frightened witless by all the local crazy

legends and fairy tales,” to quote from the saw-mill owner who Nicola does business with. Even more intriguing is the introduction of a new character, a former *brigadiere* by the name of Kovavich, who highlights the “us vs. them” dichotomy while providing a rare, if somewhat muddled, definition of the *vourdalak*, a term that is barely even mentioned in some of the films in our corpus – or in the Tolstoy narrative, for that matter. In his parsing of the word, Kovavich interestingly resorts to oxymoron, a canonical rhetorical figure in the fantastic genre as it transgresses boundaries or fuses opposites, in designating *vourdalaks* as “incorporeal material creatures.” He is also not adverse to analogical thinking: “Something like the notes of this music,” he muses in a monotonous, almost gloomy delivery, while playing the organ in a Catholic church as he is wont to do in his free time. The continuation of his exposition blends the concrete and the abstract, the ontological and the metaphysical: “It’s the terror of silence on which they feed, the terror of solitude. They kill for love, for companionship – in order to have near them the people they loved the most. And their victims search for their own company. A never-ending chain of death until it’s broken.”⁷ Eros, Thanatos and Melancholia all rolled into one, so to speak – a rather heady brew, curiously at odds with the overall tenor and mood of the film, including its gore factor or the generally stilted performances and mediocre dialogues.

Referring to witch-hunt as a historical phenomenon, the *brigadier* more mundanely explains how he was fired from the police force “for being too superstitious, for practicing exorcism”: “They got rid of me the same way they did with witches in the old days.” The unnamed sorceress is in fact another idiosyncratic addition in the film whose physical or sartorial attributes tend to suggest a diabolical or undead essence (wan complexion, red circles under the eyes, maniacal laughter, dark clothes). By virtue of her being portrayed as the sole or primal source of evil, the patriarchal bent inherent to the *vourdalak* narrative appears to be displaced. As a result, Gorca’s only fault (albeit a cardinal failure as *pater familias*) lies, of his own admission, in his inability to protect his family from the curse somehow visited upon them by the bloodthirsty hag. In her ferocious showdown with Gorca (which is largely left off screen so as to sustain doubt about the outcome), the witch wields a bull’s horn against her opponent’s impaling stake, making explicit her “phallic woman” stature and the formidable castrating power attached to it. Whether this is a reproduction of a misogynistic trope or a reflection of masculinist anxiety vis-à-vis the rise of feminism in the 1970s (the witch as a conduit for a liberating force wreaking havoc with patriarchy), or both, remains a matter of interpretation.

In fact, Ferroni’s film generally tends to turn the tables on the original novella in terms of the gender dynamic. The boy in the peasant family is, for instance,

⁷ My own translation from the Italian audio track.

substituted by two young girls, Irina and Mira, first seen huddled together with their doll at a window, at once outwardly frightened and subtly spooky. This shot is very likely an intertextual reprise of an already noted Bavaesque motif as well as a narrative harbinger since the underlying sinister streak will soon prevail. Once vampirized, little Irina thus turns savagely on her own progenitor, most tellingly (as a sign of radical emancipation) after dropping her doll to the ground – a doll which she had previously cradled and comforted, pretending it was sick, in true *maternal* fashion. Not content with biting her mother's neck Irina proceeds to rip her blouse so as to expose her breasts which she then gnashes with her fingernails with cruel relish – a deliberately violent transgression of societal norms in the way of eroticism and motherliness. Siblings Irina and Mira will later be seen laughing mockingly and hysterically during Nicola's ordeal at the hands of the rest of the now *vourdalakized* family as he desperately tries to fend off their assaults. The tragically ironic twist of the epilogue returns viewers to a framing narrative completely different from the one devised by Tolstoy (a learned, aristocratic assembly listening to the marquis d'Urfé recounting at length a lived anecdote), since it features an agitated, possibly deranged Nicola confined to a mental asylum ward. Similarly, unlike what occurs in the source material and in most of its filmic avatars, Sdenka is wrongly perceived as a threat or an agent of *vourdalak-esque* infection. Instead of melting or caving in, her face remains beautifully intact as she lies lifeless on the floor after a frantic Nicola has pierced her heart with a rod. It goes without saying that Ferroni and his scriptwriters have been somewhat heavy-handedly striving all along to hoodwink their audience as well. Most notably, a number of physical or behavioral signs evinced by Sdenka, such as her fixed stare, altered voice and suspiciously overeager vows of eternal love (just as, earlier, the reported coldness of her body or the blood on her neck), clearly seem to have been planted so as to invalidate the hypothesis of her being the sole (uncontaminated) survivor in the family. The same would apply for the less than convincing explanation put forward by Sdenka herself: "maybe they loved me less than the others"...

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In its own way, the most recent avatar on celluloid, Adrien Beau's *The Vourdalak*, offers a vivid encapsulation of the dichotomous thrust running through the Ferroni film in a scene where Sdenka and her brother, Piotr divulge fairly detailed background information geared to enlighten an unbelieving Marquis d'Urfé (not forgetting skeptical viewers in the process). "Even love is a curse around here," Piotr asserts almost factually, albeit resignedly. His sister supplies further details about the *vourdalaks* that are a complete novelty compared to the *Ur-text* and

potentially take the onto-metaphysical dimension of *The Night of the Devils* into a more psychoanalytical direction. One specific element will be later corroborated and eventually serve a decisive narrative function (more of which anon): “Some say that, to soak up their drool, they chew the shroud in which they were buried.” Such a deceptively infantile or regressive demeanor will be periodically exemplified over the course of the film, calling attention to this attachment to a transitional object that arguably metaphorizes the maternal breast. One may be reminded here, in an even more primal, foundational sense, of the mother of all mothers: the Biblical Eve, obliquely referenced when deep in a presumably primeval forest the marquis bites off a fallen apple to find in it a writhing worm that Sdenka is prompt to pick up and swallow...

Shot on grainy Super 16, Adrien Beau’s film is overall characterized by an assumed artificiality that translates into a fairly high degree of theatricality and wordiness in terms of acting and dialogue. It also walks a fine line between the grotesque and the poetic or the romantic, as is instantiated by the bold choice of live-action puppetry to impersonate Gorcha, the arch-*vourdalak*. The Nosferatu-inspired,⁸ skeleton-like marionette with clawed fingers was created and operated by the director himself who also lent his own voice to the character. Particularly revealing is a slight alteration of a passage from Tolstoy’s short story where D’Urfé imagines in his sleep Gorcha stealthily entering his bedroom at night and “ben[ding] over [him], his livid face so close to [his] that [he] could feel his corpse-like breath,”⁹ before waking up to realize that the old man is in fact peeking in through the window. In Beau’s version, the Marquis wakes up – or dreams of waking up – to find in horror that Gorcha is lying in bed alongside him. Shortly after this sequence, Vlad’s mother will confide to D’Urfé a horrifying nightmare of her own: looking for her son at night she only found an empty blood-soaked bed in his room filled with a pungent stench and a repulsive munching sound...

Since such a disturbing intrication of Eros and Thanatos will prove to be a plain foreshadowing of the poor child’s fate at the hands of his grandfather, it is not inconceivable that D’Urfé’s nocturnal vision was equally, if elliptically, proleptic, especially in view of the protagonist’s final return at nightfall to the family household where a surprisingly impassioned Sdenka awaits him. The pair ends up in bed, but in mid-coitus the unfortunate Frenchman discovers in a mirror on the wall that he is in actuality making love to a corpse that is none other than the skeletal Gorcha, relishing the copious amount of blood dripping from his mouth with a characteristic taunt: “My Lord, exquisite taste!” The scene

⁸ Another influence is likely the Crypt-Keeper, the wisecracking puppet host and narrator of the *Tales from the Crypt* HBO series.

⁹ *Vampire Stories of the Supernatural*, 104.

fits, in a way, within a larger frame of gender obfuscation or fluidity throughout the film. As a wig-wearing royal courtier from France, his face plastered with chalky white powder and his cheeks with rouge, a *mouche* or taffeta patch tastefully placed under his left eye, D'Urfé himself cannot but come across as effete to both Serbian peasants of the time and today's audiences. Most conspicuously, Piotr is early on and then repeatedly perceived as a cross-dresser or a gender-nonconforming person. D'Urfé first mistakes him for a woman and Gorcha, his own father, later calls him "girlie" or "sissy" (*fillette* in French). Be that as it may, viewers may still be incredulous that the Marquis has indeed copulated with Sdenka-impersonating Gorcha, even if, once impaled on his couch, the presumed shape-shifter continues to play the role until D'Urfé sets the bed ablaze and Gorcha's/Sdenka's professed love turns into a ferocious curse. And yet, the unforeseen reappearance of the "real" Sdenka near the edge of a cliff in the film's coda not only tends to substantiate such a conjecture, but also enables a final clever spin on an already-encountered structuring bipolarity that frequently breeds prejudice, discrimination, stigmatization, and victimization. On the one hand, an urban(e), lone stranger from Western Europe stereotypically represents the epitome of rationality and civilization – here, in the Age of the Enlightenment; on the other, a remote rural community is shown to adhere to an "archaic" belief-system or world-view. Having fallen victim to intrafamilial vampiric contamination, *The Vourdalak*'s elder son Jegor had accordingly turned D'Urfé into a scapegoat responsible for having brought misery upon his household – in other words, of being an external, causative agent of infection. Due punishment had soon followed, the "culprit" being beaten, then tied up to a pillar in the house cellar. Ironically, the film ends on an inversely symmetrical trajectory. Upon the vampire-bitten, soon-to-commit-suicide Marquis's encouragement and equipped with his letters of introduction, Sdenka's flees to France, where an unsuspecting Duchess provides shelter to this oddity of a foreigner ushered in by her chambermaid at dawn, "lost and pale as a ghost," as the noblewoman writes in her diary, which fills up the entire closing black screen in white letters. The revenge of Eastern Europe peasantry upon French aristocracy (which the film half-strives to metaphorize as some form of reverse colonization) is potentially in place since a fleeting telltale sign reveals that Sdenka, far from having miraculously escaped the vampiric curse, has instead turned into a ghoul herself. For, as she rides away on horseback, Sdenka is seen munching on a piece of cloth, in true *vourdalak* fashion (as redefined by the film)...



Turning to two Soviet films of the early 1990s, Evgeniy Yufit's *Daddy, Father Frost Is Dead* and Gennadiy Klimov and Igor Shavlak's *The Family of the Vourdalaks*, allows somehow for a circling back, but not without a few twists and turns along the way, to the original Russianness of the storyline. While being far looser than the screen adaptations considered thus far, both films are also much more historically specific – in a contextual rather than diegetic sense, that is, since, in contrast to Beau's opus, neither is a costume drama attempting to recreate an early 19th-century setting. Instead, they opt for a temporal shift (to contemporaneity) which obliquely yet eloquently resonates with the troubled late Soviet zeitgeist.

A Russian filmmaker, photographer and painter with a streak of the prankster and the exhibitionist in him, at least in the first part of his career, Evgeniy Yufit directed several shorts before shooting *Daddy, Father Frost Is Dead*, a black-and-white, slow-burning experimental film whose minimal dialogue, non-existent soundtrack, long static shots, and, most importantly, oneiric-hallucinatory and cryptic treatment of the *vourdalak* mythos all sidestep or subvert the main tenets of narrative logic. Apart from both being debut features, Yufit's *Daddy, Father Frost Is Dead* and Beau's *The Vourdalak* unpredictably share a motif extraneous to the source material. One will recall that the *vourdalaks* infantilely chomp on their burial shroud in the French version. In the Soviet film, the victims, infected or not, are unaccountably wrapped, not unlike mummies, in shroud bindings, some of which, once loosened, end up being blown away and spectrally caught in tree branches. This is but one example of numerous mesmerizing visuals and arresting, oftentimes poetical moments, which readily revolve around the figure of the child as the focus of all of his grandfather's mortiferous attentions. A scene showing the latter returning home with an unusual present for his grandson (a bottle covered in rough clay and planted with matches) is later followed by the dying young boy found under wetland grasses, whispering "Grandpa... kiss me again." His coffin is then enigmatically buried inside a gigantic pile of logs on top of which lies, as if catatonic, the cadaverous *vourdalak*-patriarch whose hand eventually slowly grasps the rifle by his side. Equally incongruous, absurd or surreal episodes abound, such as when the biologist-protagonist, plagued by a toothache, consults a dentist who, after uttering mystical ramblings about the Unknown, proceeds to stuff his "patient's" mouth full with cotton before hurriedly walking away. The hapless scientist is then left at the mercy of a posse of ostensibly living-dead creatures in ties and suits, "supposedly inspired by the official 'zombies' of the Brezhnev era."¹⁰

¹⁰ Josephine Woll, "Exorcising the Devil," in *Horror International*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (Wayne State UP, 2005), 352.

If space permitted, the film would have to be carefully reinscribed within Necro-realism, an artistic movement that flourished from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. Primarily concerned with death and decay from the perspective of black humor or absurdism, it was also an integral part of the development of “Soviet Parallel Cinema,” an underground circuit for films made and distributed outside of the official Goskino State Cinema system, even with *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies gradually loosening censorship. A critic aptly summarized the Necrorealist ethos as the “exploration of the liminal state between life and death, in which crazed ‘zombies’ or necro-denizens wander apocalyptic landscapes and commit acts of wanton cruelty, homosexual violence, and murder,”¹¹ all of which characteristics are, to a greater or lesser extent, present in *Daddy, Father Frost Is Dead*. While Necrorealism was far from a strict or systematic parody of Socialist realism, a more or less explicit political or ideological subtext is easily detectable in a film whose only extensive verbal sequence features a disembodied voice, presumably coming from a transistor radio, but eerily redolent of some subliminal form of propaganda. The monologue heard explains how “moles do much damage to the country” so that “the struggle with moles is one of our main tasks,” where the emphatic repetition of *moles* (Kpot in Russian) cannot but alert to the polysemy of the word (animal/spy), even if the most obvious allegorical reading has to be a *mise en abyme* of the narrative proper. A transitive equality might be posited as follows: mole = *vourdalak* = dissident (or opponent, or adversary, of the State). From the viewpoint of authority all “terms” must be eradicated, following the example, mentioned in voiceover, of the mysterious chemical agent F-17 (“agent” offering a new instance of double-entendre: substance/spy), developed to exterminate moles as “enemies of agriculture” with sure results: “Application of it guarantees the death of a rodent in 10 minutes.” Much later in the film, a section seemingly disconnected from the storyline shows one of the zombies/*vourdalaks* communicating in Morse code before he is joined by one of his equally sinister-looking cohorts. For no apparent reason both decide to empty a wooden cabinet of its contents, including archival documents, dismantle the shelves and knock it over. Their next move is to pour a pot full of boiling water – or is it agent F-17...? – over the face of a man lying on the floor and now writhing in pain. Outwardly aberrant in terms of internal logic as well as plot relevance, the above scenes do not fortuitously segue from the capture of the protagonist by a contingent of the same menacing undead who are inexplicably content with swathing his head with gauze and pulling his pants down. Coded communication, ransacking, humiliation, torture, execution – all actions and

¹¹ José Alaniz and Seth Graham, “Early Necro Cinema in Context,” in *Necrorealism. Context, History, Interpretations*, ed. Seth Graham (Russian Film Symposium, 2001), 9.

methods that are not unequivocal of operations conducted and crimes perpetrated by the KGB or related secret police agencies under Soviet rule...

These are but localized examples in a film that has immersed its viewers in a dystopian, almost post-apocalyptic environment as early as its opening frames, where a man is seen wading through the murky water of what looks like a sewer or a flooded underground tunnel, until he trips and his head gets caught in a hanging wire noose, killing him almost instantly. Even if this is revealed to have been a disturbing dream experienced by the protagonist, a researcher about to leave for the countryside for the dual purpose of a study on a particular type of shrew-mouse and a visit to his cousin's family, the oneiric dismal mood and existential dread will soon spill out into "reality" to the point of blurring all distinctions between the two realms. No comforting sense of closure will be provided in the final scenes. Far from returning us to the prologue and ideally putting a definite end to the "nightmare," they plunge the viewer even deeper into it through confusion, fragmentation and ellipsis, especially where elements foreign to Tolstoy's novella are concerned, such as the young boy lying down across deserted rail tracks and promptly crushed by an oncoming locomotive, or the unused aspen stake and a photographic close-up of a shrew mouse's muzzle floating down the river. In the coda, a silent-film-style title card announcing the onset of cold weather is followed by a long static overhead shot of the zombie-like gait of the now familiar suited men advancing slowly amid scattered, frail and bare trees. In a sense, the conflation of the two figures, vampires and zombies, throughout the film, is not only a characteristic reflection – along with cyborgs, mutants and aliens – of Necrorealist concerns with "in-between subjects," but also an allegorization of the socio-political situation immediately leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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A color film less experimental or radical in format than Yufit's feature, Klimov and Shavlak's *The Family of the Vourdalaks* is just as visually stunning (in its use of overexposure, in particular) and poetically allusive in its editing, more oneiric, even melancholic perhaps, than grotesque or absurdist in its treatment. Oftentimes detached from the letter of its source it is nonetheless deeply true to its spirit, generally harkening back to Bavaesque Gothicism in modern-day guises. In lieu of a full-fledged analysis exceeding the limits of the present essay, a few cursory comments are offered here, tied to an underlying socio-political agenda. The latter can transpire in the course of the dialogue, as in a late statement by Maria (Sdenka's counterpart in the film) that could conceivably be subjected to a less individual than collective, less supernatural than ideological reading: "I'm not a master of my

destiny... I'm under the influence of some other powers." On a more visual level, the actual start of the film, past the dream-prologue but in symbolic, almost symbiotic connection with it, is another case in point. In their juxtaposition of innumerable coffins with army helicopters or a state funeral, the war photographs taken by journalist Igor (a modern-day, "commoner" version of the Marquis D'Urfé's) are not a mere daylight, "prosaic" echo of the nocturnal burial desecration perpetrated in the opening scene. They also seem to call for a specific contextualization, which might have been more immediately perceptible to Slavic audiences at the time of the film's release. The emphasis on art, and in particular religious iconography, all along the film might, in particular, be laced with a political subtext. Indeed, Shavvak's film appears to be subtended by the clandestine, subterranean endurance of faith in the face of "evil" forces which, whether supernatural or all-too real, have resulted, for instance, in a nearby church being in a state of utter dereliction... As for resilient faith as a form of resistance, it is *a contrario* emblemized by two personal items that Maria clings to devotedly. One is a small silver-framed icon inherited from her grandmother – and the only relic from the plundered house of God – which she secretly prays to; the other is a medallion she wears around her neck, depicting, in the semblance of the icon, a Madonna and Child. As a gesture of continued transmission, this piece of jewelry is gifted by Maria to Igor as he is forced to leave the family. It will eventually fill the closing frame as, subsequent to a suspensefully protracted showdown with the ghoul family and an equally extended slow-motion fall, Igor finds himself somehow catapulted from the snow-covered, *vourdalak*-infested forest onto the crowded city pavement of Moscow holding the medallion in his hand as he comes to. It is ultimately a moot point whether the object is a relic from the past (an heirloom, as was the case with the grand-maternal icon) or from some other space-time continuum (as if it belonged to a dream or fantasy world)... As a throwback to the beginning when the vampiric corpse's waking up in its violated tomb immediately prompted Igor to suddenly emerge from his presumed dream, the second hypothesis would tend to suggest that the film is structured around a bookending device.

Last but not least, the *vourdalakization* of the entire household is presented as unfolding along two major deviations, not only from the original novella but from all of the other screen adaptations. First, it occurs sometime not before but *after* the protagonist's eviction or departure from the area. In that respect, Yufit's opus comes out as even more of an outlier as it is devoid of a to-and-fro movement (between the protagonist's "home turf" and the remote community). Second, the editing style corresponding to the predatory chain reaction among the family is recurrently enigmatic or equivocal. For instance, a form of punctuation such as a cut to black following Igor's intense gaze at a painted portrait necessarily problematizes its own significance (is it a causal linkage or a disconnect?) as well as the significance

of what comes next, namely young Nikita pleading with his mother outside the family house at night and the inevitable consequences of her letting him back in. Is this a pictorially induced reminiscence, open-eye dream, “vision” or premonition? A related idiosyncrasy is the presentation of plot points as condensed or elliptical concatenation, as is exemplified by the last-mentioned sequence considered in its entirety: the mother giving in to her “returning” son’s supplications and unlocking the door for him; husband and wife lying side by side on the white sheets of their “death-like” bed until the wife rolls over to feed on her spouse; the latter biting in turn his brother’s neck amid the marshland reeds.

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One of the most salient points that has transpired through the exploration of this small corpus of *vourdalak*-inspired films is perhaps not so much their *chronotope* in a Bakhtinian sense as the temporal and, most importantly, societal context within which the fate – or the doom – of the family unit caught in the process of *vourdalakization* is narrativized and thematized. Adopting the quasi-ahistorical frame of folk and fairy tales, Mario Bava’s “I Wurdalak” focuses exclusively on an isolated household that subsists, (d)evolves and “reinvents” itself as a self-enclosed, autarchic microcosm. The family structure proves to be akin to a living organism willing and able, if necessary, to integrate or assimilate a foreign body (in the person of D’Urfe). Although a first attempt at modernizing the original novella and blurring the gender dynamic that underpins the family structure, Giorgio Ferroni’s *The Night of the Devils* retains, for its part, a measure of socio-historical indecidability as figured geographically by the more or less indeterminate or undefined no man’s land (the border area between Italy and Slovenia) where the events are supposed to occur.

The process of a synchronic displacement or (re)contextualization, outside of historical reenactment (of the source), is what truly distinguishes the two late-Soviet era adaptations functioning as barely veiled allegories. In Yufit’s film, control, propaganda and repression are framed within a bleak, dystopic environment that reduces citizens to robotic, zombified and/or maniacal beings, and as such extends far beyond familial confines. For Klimov and Shavlak, religion (personal faith and a sense of the sacred secretly passed on across generations) seems to be the only shelter from and, potentially, resistance against oppressive forces. An associated adverse effect is, however, that the only remaining sane form of family might be restricted to a symbolic and iconic entity, distilled to its purest duality: the originary, irreproducible unit of Madonna and Child. Perhaps not unlike the unpredicted widening-of-the-scope denouement of Adrien Beau’s *The Vourdalak* implicitly

pointing in the direction of the ineluctable dissolution of the French monarchy, the societal disintegration at play in the two Soviet films can be regarded as a herald, whether conscious or unconscious, of the breakdown of the USSR... which indeed was to come barely a year later.

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