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Published online: 12 Oct 2023.

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Queer women of Kantemir Balagov: subjectivities in extreme contexts

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ABSTRACT

The discussion focuses on two films – *Closeness* (2017) and *Beanpole* (2019) – by Kantemir Balagov, and is concerned with interrogating the possibilities of queer-crip dynamic in contemporary Russian-language cinema. I argue that the queer-crip dynamic allows the film director to stage a critique of ableism and heteronormativity as part of the examination of power dynamics in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. Balagov demonstrates that the heteronormative, cis-gender, able-bodied, white person of mainstream cultural identity dominates the discourse by placing oneself in charge of power relations. Balagov's self-criticality permits a complex understanding of queer women as powerful individuals forming relationships through own agency. In his oeuvre, crip-queerness emerges in extreme contexts encompassing a range of tropes such as claustrophobia, punishment and strangulation, which are associated with sexual practices, on the one hand, and on the other, with the protest of the queer body against repressive social regimes. The discussion advances debates about crip-queerness in world cinemas by conceptualising the notions of queerness and extreme contexts, that is, contexts characterised by the extensive and intolerable magnitude of experience and its physical and emotional effects on individuals.

The discussion focuses on two films – *Closeness* (*Tesnota*, 2017) and *Beanpole* (*Dylda*, 2019)[1] – by Kantemir Balagov (born 1991 in Nal'chik, the capital of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria). *Closeness* was produced by Aleksandr Sokurov's Fund 'Example of Intonation' (Primer Intonatsii) and the famous Lenfilm studio (see Kelly 2021) in St Petersburg, telling the story of a family living in Balagov's home town. The film won the Best Debut award at the Kinotavr Film Festival and the FIPRESCI Prize at Cannes Film Festival in Un Certain Regard. *Beanpole* is set in Leningrad after the end of World War II. It was made by Sergei Melkumov's Non-Stop Production studio, which is one of the major

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private film companies in the country. *Beanpole* premiered at Cannes, where it again won the FIPRESCI Prize and Best Director award in Un Certain Regard. It was selected as the Russian entry for the Best International Feature Film for the 92nd US Academy Awards. The film had the backing of the Jewish-Ukrainian-Russian producer Aleksandr Rodnianskii, who had directed the Kinotavr festival and promoted his business interests through the donations of Russian-Jewish-Israeli-(British-Portuguese) billionaire Roman Abramovich and his cultural foundations. Balagov himself graduated from a film course in Nal'chik led by Sokurov as a form of redress of his own cultural identity.

These circumstances suggest that, albeit Balagov being a young director, between 2015 and 2020 he was at the centre of contemporary Russian and international cinemas in terms of film production and distribution, artistic expression, film festival circuit and global visibility. From this experience it is possible to learn a lot about the cultural politics and the structure of cultural industries of the Russian Federation (RF), and the economies of visibility – regional, federal, and global. The artistic merits of his films invite a discussion of the filmic affinities of the director and formalist readings of his works, highlighting their innovative cinematography. However, a survey of the director's oeuvre is not my objective.[2] Instead, I am concerned with interrogating the possibilities of queer-crip dynamic in contemporary Russophone cinema and culture.

I argue that the queer-crip dynamic allows the film director to stage a critique of ableism and heteronormativity as part of the examination of power dynamics in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. Balagov demonstrates that the heteronormative, cis-gender, able-bodied, white person of mainstream cultural identity dominates the discourse by placing oneself in charge of power relations. Balagov's self-criticality permits a complex understanding of queer women as powerful individuals forming relationships through own agency. In his oeuvre, crip-queerness emerges in extreme contexts encompassing a range of tropes such as claustrophobia, punishment and strangulation, which are associated with sexual practices, on the one hand, and on the other, with the protest of the queer body against repressive social regimes. The discussion advances debates about crip-queerness in world cinemas by conceptualising the notions of queerness and extreme contexts, that is, contexts characterised by the extensive and intolerable magnitude of experience and its physical and emotional effects on individuals.

The discussion is organised in three steps: in the first section, I provide a range of theoretical propositions that foreground the analysis of Balagov's feature films in the two subsequent sections. First, I examine the scope and orientation of queerness as emerging in *Closeness*, and then, I analyse the intersections of queerness and disability in *Beanpole*. The last two sections are linked through the concepts of violence and intimacy, and I show how Balagov connects the two by framing intimacy as violence and by stressing that the experience of violence is always intimate. In both cases, the experiences are extreme, that is, offering cinematic transgressions and enabling conceptualisations of extreme contexts and queerness. In the conclusion, I conceptualise the discussion through the notion of differing bodies, that is, bodies who experience sex and sexuality in different, non-mainstream, non-heteronormative ways such as non-organismic bodies, thus extending the knowledge about global queer experiences.

Research for this article was carried out in 2019–20 and included field trips to the region – the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, attending relevant film festivals such as Kinotavr in Sochi, and carrying out interviews with members of regional communities.

This research is underpinned by theories of world cinemas, examining cinematic exchanges and interrelations of films cultures instead of constructing a singular Hollywood-oriented history of film.[3] The polycentric approach advocated in the field of world cinemas (e.g., Dennison et al. 2008) is adopted to consider the films from and about the North Caucasus, thus avoiding the colonial/othering readings of such films, that is, as manifestations of 'ethnic', 'peripheral', and 'divergent' films, which dominate- academic and popular film discourses about the RF.[4]

Theoretical recap: extreme contexts and queer-crip intersections

Research presented in this article is informed by contemporary queer film theories (e.g., McCann and Whitney 2019), advancing the intersectional approach to the study of queer and queer-crip cultures in context. In discourse, identity construction and meaning making, context conveys the interrelated conditions for something to exist and/or emerge. Making use of the notions of queer 'space', 'settings', and similar terms, an expanding body of literature examines the role of context – spatial, cultural, linguistic and so on – for the emergence and meanings of queer subjectivities (see, for example, Dawson 2018a; Griffiths 2005; Jones and Juett 2010; Lema-Hincapié and Domènech 2020; Lindner 2017; Schoonover and Galt 2016). Conversely, the terms 'queer identities' and 'queer cultures' have been employed to investigate the intersections of various contexts such as local and global contexts. For example, Peter A. Jackson (2009) singles out a whole academic tradition of thinking about cultural globalisation through proliferation of trans-national same-sex and transgender identities.[5] As is evident from the examples, contexts can be described using a variety of terms such as local and global, urban and rural, mainstream and alternative, and so on. In my analysis, I am concerned with differing intensities of contextualisation, and more specifically, with contexts of experience that can be defined as 'extreme'.

In social sciences, extreme contexts are defined as environments 'where one or more extreme events are occurring or are likely to occur that may exceed the [. . .] capacity to prevent and result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences to – or in close physical or psychosocial proximity to' individuals (Hannah et al. 2009, 898). In film studies, it has been recognised that extreme cinema is salient across a range of different cultural, historical, and socio-economic contexts, including art house and mainstream forms of cinematic violence and provocation (Ezerova 2023; Kendall and Horeck 2012). It is more than viewing onscreen violence per se, rather films 'adopt these techniques to encourage viewers not to view violence for entertainment, but rather they encourage viewers to understand the potential in all humans to commit such acts' (Brown 2013). Of course, violence is not the only way in which extreme contexts can be perceived; however, it is a significant component. With violence being the most evident manifestation of extreme contexts, for my analysis I focus on the extensive and intolerable magnitude of experience and its physical and emotional effects on individuals.

To confirm, 'extreme' does not mean 'exaggerated' and/or 'staged', and therefore, in terms of queerness and extreme contexts I do not mean either the exaggeration of gender performance such as in drag performances or sexuality as in camp, which is a means to challenge the constructed notions of gender and sexuality. Instead, 'extreme'

in the analysis below refers to heightened historical, cultural, social and emotional contexts in which the characters have to sustain themselves and to emerge as queer subjects. Hence, the novelty of the analytical approach is in interrogating the intersections of queerness and extreme contexts, not in considering the style or genre of the film productions. I also demonstrate how the characters' extreme reactions are predicated on the powers of these contexts, not on their own discursive strategies. (It is true, though, that in terms of non-conforming gender and queer sexualities, extreme contexts are not different from the regular contexts with violence inherent in the very structures of invisibility of queer subjectivities.)[6] The consideration of extreme contexts allows new conceptualisations of queer experience, too.

Debates about the meanings of queerness are ongoing, with two strands – experiential and political – dominating the debates:

> For some, 'gay' and 'lesbian' are descriptive terms that capture socially lived experience, while for others they constitute the political programme of declaring one's gay or lesbian identity. Naming and publicly embodying a different desire transcends compulsory heterosexuality and demands rights to *diverse sexual, erotic and affectionate relationships and gendered embodiments*. (Mennel 2012, 1; emphasis added)

The notion of non-normative desires is particularly useful in understanding of queerness. For example, Nick Davis (2013) argues that cinema can reflect and also produce non-normative desires. For Rama Srinivasan (2013), expressions of non-normative desires produce queer temporalities and queer times in Indian cinema. And for Leanne Dawson (2018a), non-normative desires are at the centre of alternative cinematic aesthetics in recent German cinema. In this article, I use the term 'queer' to speak about non-normative desires and sexual and gender non-conforming individuals involved in transgression of repressive social norms. The discussion evidences how strategies of transgression are informed by extreme contexts, and not dependent on the medically, socially or culturally constructed identities. To confirm, in my analysis, 'queer' means transgressive actions in extreme contexts, not a prescribed identity and/or behaviour, thus expanding the existing repertoire of queer transgressions.

In addition, my understanding of queer transgression is also about adopting a self-critical, contextually-informed relation. Its main application is in destabilising the binaries of gender and sexuality, on the one hand, and on the other, the binaries of able/disabled and healthy/unhealthy bodies. The self-critical perspective allows for a critique of the binary of nature (sex, impairment) and culture (gender, disability) and a conceptualisation of dynamic queer and crip categories as emerging and open to fluctuations and trans-formations. In particular, the discussion aims to accelerate theoretical investigation of queer-crip subjectivities with focus on women's subjectivity (see, for example, McRuer 2006; Stone 2018; Whitney and Whitney 2006). Both the approaches are employed to inquire about the diversity of queer cultures in the context of the RF.

In terms of politics of the nation-state, the analysis reveals the emergence of a complex understanding of gender, sexuality and (dis)ability, differing in its inclusivity from the restrictive and repressive norms of official discourse, such as the 2013–23 acts of the Duma, limiting representations of LGBTQI+ in media and culture, and the official doctrine of disability (1995–2022). The meanings of the former have been analysed in the intro-duction to the special issue. As for the latter, the legislation concerning people with

disabilities is a fast-moving area of policy in the RF, and in its current form it focuses on the question of 'compensation' offered by the state to individuals with disabilities, less so on social meanings of disability and discursive forms of identification and belonging. In actual terms, this means, for example, that the government invests in provision for wheelchair users, but not in educating citizens about the meanings of disability, including sexuality and disability. There is also little evidence to suggest that there has been a move towards broader theory of disability comparable to the crip discourse in the West. Research has focussed on the histories of disabilities (e.g., Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2013) and on the questions of state provisions of access to services (e.g., Hartblay 2017). To reveal the potentialities of queer crip representations, I focus on the connotations of difference and diversity emerging in the context of increased globalisation of cultural activities in the twenty-first century.

Ethnicity, religion and cultural identity: queerness and extreme violence in *Closeness*

The English translation of the title – Closeness – evokes the notion of intimacy whereas, in fact, the actual connotation of the Russian original is that of being constrained, of not being free.[7] Becoming free through getting unconstrained, through transgression and through empowerment, is the main theme of Balagov's first feature. In this regard, it is a story of emancipation, not just escape. Though not rehearsing Hollywood clichés, the film celebrates freedom as the ultimate goal, portraying characters willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of their own liberty. The juxtapositions of freedom and un-freedom underpin the characterisation, editing and symbols of the film. As a result, *Closeness* offers an alternative, yet perfectly discernible, narrative of emancipation, cele-brating the human subject capable of disentangling oneself from the constraints of political geography, repressive society, and conservative tradition. It is significant that the subject capable of initiating change, breaking free and achieving emancipation, is a woman. This is particularly important in the male-dominated cultural context of North Caucasus and Russophone male-focused discourse (see, for example, Abrahamyan, Mammadova, and Tskhvariashvili 2018; Tsibiridou 2022). Through allusions and symboli-sation, Balagov re-invents the narrative of captivity – the colonising other is kept captive by the local subject – thus inverting the imperial dyad,[8] and advances the notion of queer transgression as a means of emancipation of contemporary subjectivity.

The film tells the story of Ila (Dar'ia Zhovner), a young woman living in Nal'chik in the 1990s. Her father Avi (Artem Tsypin) owns a car repair shop, and her mother Adina (Ol'ga Dragunova) has a small business selling Western brands of drinks and confectionary. The two businesses exemplify the 'informal', 'off-the-books' economy that emerged during the perestroika period and dominated in the 1990s, relying on un-registered and un-taxed activities at the time of transition from late socialism to neo-liberal capitalism. In fact, 1998 is a particular date in recent Russian history and the country's involvement in global capitalism: the financial crisis of 1998 resulted in the de-facto bankruptcy of the state, a change of government (Putin was appointed acting president in the following year), and the first taste of real-life capitalism. Elsewhere (Strukov 2016a) I have argued that 1998 was the turning point in the history of the RF, bringing the socialist period to an end. The in-between economic status of Ila's parents is in that they are neither employed by the

state nor by private entrepreneurs, making them both independent of state and corporate controls, on the one hand, and on the other, dependent on the community in which they live and which they serve. Indeed, the community helps the family raise ransom money for Ila's brother David (Veniamin Kats), after he and his fiancée Lea (Anna Levit) are kidnapped on the eve of their engagement.

A wave of kidnappings swept across the region in the late 1990s (Dunlop and Menon 2006), which was due to the economic hardships of the time. The film directly documents the destitution in the capital city: unpaved roads, refuse heaps, dilapidated apartment blocks, dark streets, and so on. The film also reminds the viewer of the deprivation through evocation such as fashion trends (e.g., shell suits and brands acquired in second-hand shops), elements of décor (e.g., exposed wiring and rugs hung on walls), and food (e.g., confectionary such as Snickers considered a luxury whilst home-made pastries are not valued). *Closeness* reconstructs the 1990s as a historical period, but it does so without the nostalgia that characterises a lot of films made in the 2010s (e.g., Norris 2012). Instead, the film offers a critical investigation of economic and social conditions in which kidnappings became wide-spread. Unlike the Hollywood action film, where kidnapping is a variation of the master plot, *Closeness* is not concerned with the identification and apprehension of the perpetrator. The viewer never learns about who carried out an attack against David and his fiancée and why, breaking the conventions of the crime thriller genre. Instead, the film focuses on the effects of the kidnapping on Ila, her family and the local community; and on the symbolical level, on how the economic deprivations continue to impact society in the RF.

In the beginning, the director emphasises the close, intimate relationship between Ila and her family. After a long day at the car repair shop, she is shown chatting away with her dad, as she gazes warmly at him (Figure 1). As she comes home, she and David sneak out to enjoy a cigarette, teasing each other jokingly. The family/home emerges as a safe

Figure 1. Ila, wearing denim overalls and a cap, with her father in the car repair workshop. Still from *Closeness*.

haven in the context of the economically, socially and politically challenging 1990s. However, eventually, it transpires that the family/home is also a site of oppression, as the relationship between Ila and her mother becomes increasingly intense. Adina is a controlling figure: she orders her daughter to wear a dress for the brother's engagement party, tells her off for going to see her boyfriend Zalim (Nazir Zhukov), and forcibly blow-dries Ila's hair. The conflict between mother and daughter is a central one, and it is a diversion from the cinematic trend[9] of the 2000s–2010s which predominantly investigated the father-son relationship,[10] thus drawing the viewer's attention to the issues of gender and gender (non)-conforming behaviour. In *Closeness*, Adina's expectations of Ila grow, and the pressure comes from two sources: the first is the need to secure ransom money to release David, and the second is the need to assure that Ila's behaviour conforms to the expectations of the local community and its moral code.

Ila and her family belong to a traditional Jewish community.[11] Nowadays, in popular imagination, the NorthCaucasus is a region populated by Islamic peoples, which is a belief betraying a colonising approach, that is, creating a false perception of cultural homogeneity in the region. The film reminds the viewer of the migration of Jews to the region in the 20th century, that is, 'the city Jews', and also of the indigenous Jewish population – the so-called 'Mountain Jews' – who had populated remote areas of Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and other parts of the North Caucasus for hundreds of years. This is not a distinction that the film puts forward directly; rather, it is an understanding of cultural difference that emerges from the knowledge of the region. However, it is important that the film does not advance a singular Jewish identity but instead engages with the complex meanings of Judaism in the Caucasus.[12]

Closeness portrays the Jewish community at the time of celebration – David's engagement party – and at the time of crisis, when the rabbi addresses the congregation with the plea to raise the ransom money. The scene in the synagogue is very emotional as the members of the community consider their contributions, and it transpires that they have enough money to rescue Lea but not David. Then the pressure is entirely on Ila's family: Adina decides that they should not report the kidnapping to the police, and so they sell all her merchandise and Avi's car repair shop, but even then, the money is not sufficient. As a last resort, Adina arranges Ila's marriage to Rafa (Andrei Natotsinskii), hoping to use the groom's dowry towards ransom payment. Adina's decision comes as a shock with Ila staging a protest against her mother and the traditions of arranged marriage.

In an earlier scene, Adina expresses her disapproval of Ila's dating a Kabardian man, because 'he is from a different tribe' [*plemia*]. Her fear of inter-ethnic relationships – in the US context, these would be defined as inter-racial – is a result partly of being a member of the strict Jewish congregation, and partly of living in the Caucasus where 'tribalism' is a dominant identity doctrine (see, for example, Jersild 2002). In both cases, 'the need to protect own identity' is a defence mechanism employed by communities that for centuries had experienced oppression and threats of elimination. What is peculiar is that, in the film, this mechanism is activated in the absence of the most recent colonialising power, the Russians, thus outlining a different dynamic of power in the region. *Closeness* depicts an oppressive context in which minorities are unable to build networks of solidarity, for example, between the Jews and Kabardians. In terms of presences, if Jews are a minority in Kabardino-Balkaria, the Kabardians are a minority in the RF. And in terms of absences, the other constitutive minority group in the Republic – the Balkars – is

entirely absent from the film's narrative. Thus, *Closeness* challenges the applicability of the term 'minority' in the RF, where there are multiple (in)visibilities and multi-directional identity politics. Ila's protest – staged from the perspective of another minority, that of a gender non-conforming woman – supersedes the ethnic identity politics insofar as her quest is universal, bridging ethnic, religious and other divides.

Ila's protest is directed at her mother and through her, at the pressures of neo-liberal capitalism and demands of identity politics. Adina is ruthless in her determination to protect her family, even though this protective behaviour is damaging. In one scene, when David announces that he would remain in Nal'chik, Adina approaches him from behind and tries to shut him up, effectively gagging him. This is a gesture of dominance, familiar to the viewer from pornographic films and Hollywood action films, elucidating aggression and submission. The dominance is exercised by a woman, which suggests a transgressive inversion of gender roles. Indeed, it is Ila's father who projects nurturing qualities towards his children and people in the community. The evolution of Adina into a controlling parent is evidenced in the changes in her appearance: she uses less and less make-up, so that in the end the natural state of her face is revealed: wrinkled, austere and mournful. She also starts wearing a headscarf, covering her head which makes her more conservative and less visible in the Kabardino-Balkarian context. Ol'ga Dragunova's acting is outstanding in that her character exudes terror and love at the same time. The contrasting emotions are conveyed through gesture, on the one hand, and on the other, through her gaze, revealing internal struggles. The camera brings Adina into focus, analysing her face through close ups.

Ila's protest takes the form of confrontation with her mother, community and society. She disobeys Adina's orders as she continues to see Zalim; by violating Jewish traditions, she rejects the community for its failure to protect her brother; and she adopts a sexual behaviour considered to be completely inappropriate in the North Caucasus. All three are inter-connected via Ila's gender non-conforming ways, thus realising queer politics at three levels: those of the family, the community, and society. When Ila understands that her arranged marriage is inevitable, at night she goes to see Zalim and she initiates sex. Early in the morning, on her way home, she meets eyes with sex workers in the streets of Nal'chik, thus becoming aware of her new potential social status, i.e., how she may be perceived. On the same day, during the engagement party, Ila hands her stained under-wear over to Adina as she makes a promise 'to sleep with every man'. From the local perspective, Ila 'degrades' herself, and so becomes inadmissible as a bride, hence Rafa's refusal to marry and Zalim's change of attitude. Moreover, Ila brings shame on her family, which makes their departure from Nal'chik imminent. In the Caucasus, the pledge to remain sexually abstinent until marriage is a doctrine, regulating social norms and especially the norms concerning female sexuality. Its violation is considered unacceptable in many communities in the region, in some cases leading to ostracism and violent attacks against women. Ila's behaviour is gender non-conforming insofar as it does not conform to the prevailing cultural and social expectations about what is appropriate for women in the Caucasus.

In this context, Ila stages a protest against all forms of authority, which gains her respect in the family – Adina accepts her as the leader (at the end of the film, Ila drives the family car out of the city) – but not with the community or society. Her protest is performative as it employs a public demonstration of her sexuality. Ila's protest

encompasses transgression, sexuality, identity politics and performativity. And the film itself emerges as an act of representation, rage and resistance, as it concerns violence of social norms against individuals. As Judith Halberstam contends, it is about 'the fine line that divides non-violent resistance from rage and rage from expression and expression from violent political response. [...] The relationship between imagined violence and "real" violence is unclear, contested, negotiable, unstable, and radically unpredictable' (Halberstam 1993, 187).

On one level, Ila's violence is aimed at herself, and through this violence she emerges as a queer subject, that is, one challenging sexual norms and identities: in the context as set in the film, her sexual behaviour is as divergent as that of same-sex relationship. On another level, her violence is aimed at identity politics, regimes of ethnic dominance and institutions of tradition in the Caucasus. In that sense, her politics is queer, as it is aimed at the discursive regimes in a specific context. As is the norm in the RF, her protest is individual, that is, not constitutive of a movement, but representative of the struggles of oppressed communities such as women and queer individuals (see Beumers et al. 2017). Ila's protest is oriented towards freedom, including freedom to love who she chooses, irrespective of their ethnic, religious and cultural identity. It is also about re-claiming her body through transgression of conservative body politics. Hence, her actions are political, especially in the context where communities have to defend their independence (e.g., the reference to the Chechen war) and individuals have to defend their dignity (e.g., the reference to sex workers). Ila's departure from Nal'chik – she changes her mind about staying in Kabardino-Balkaria after David is released – should be seen not as an escape, but as a conscious move towards freedom. It is celebrated as a non-violent action: in one of the final scenes, Ila is with her mother in a cave, their bodies appearing tiny against the background of a magnificent waterfall. As the camera zooms in, it shows Adina hugging Ila from behind, which is a reversal – both in terms of positions and emotions – of the gagging scene with David (Figure 2). The scene celebrates women's solidarity and love, leading to the celebration of freedom: the walls of the cave are reminiscent of female sexual organs, protecting the mother and daughter from the violence of the outside world. Thus, the film re-orients itself away from violence and towards protection, from rage towards care, and from repression towards freedom.

Closeness examines different kinds of violence: violence of social traditions and institutions; violence of parental control; sexual violence; and extreme violence of the war period, i.e., the Chechen war.[13] The latter is integrated into the kidnapping narrative of the film: as Ila spends time with Zalim and his friends, drinking beer and watching videos on a VHS player, she is exposed to the recording of an execution by war fighters of captive Russian-speaking soldiers.[14] The video makes Ila aware of the dangers threatening her kidnapped brother, compelling her to act in a more deliberate fashion. This extended sequence begins with the camera showing Ila and her friends watching videos, but then the camera zooms onto the television screen, merging with the video message. The viewer is confronted with the imagery of the soldiers being humiliated – physically and verbally – by the fighters, which is followed by images of the execution: one of the fighters slaughters a soldier by cutting his throat with a dagger. The details – visual and acoustic – of the slaughter are graphic, and the video sequence is extremely difficult to watch. Its extended duration intensi-fies the experience, raising concerns about the ethics regarding the pain of others and

Figure 2. Ila, wearing her brother's jacket, with her mother in a cave in the mountains of Kabardino-Balkaria. Still from *Closeness*.

of watching the film as a whole. The video is a recording of a massacre that took place in 1999 (the Tukhchar massacre); so it is nothing like staged acts of violence in blockbuster movies or arthouse films, such as Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty. To confirm, the execution is not re-enacted or evoked, but is an actual act of extreme violence registered in the documentary manner. Indeed, the video sequence ignites repulsion and causes the terror of memory, since the viewer is reminded of the atrocities carried out during the Chechen wars and subsequent terror attacks in the Caucasus and elsewhere.

Through the use of the video sequence, Balagov transgresses the genre boundaries and the conventions of viewership, placing emphasis on violence. In this regard, *Closeness* is in line with the arthouse tradition of depicting violence on screen. In her analysis of the Cannes 2009 screenings, Ipek Celik Rappas identifies the narrative limits and possibilities of a global movement in arthouse cinema, which is the portrayal of extreme corporeal violence. She notes a wide range of depicted violent acts – from brutal rape and dismembering of the body to graphic scenes of torture, genital mutilation and murders – and comes to the conclusion that these acts are employed 'to reinforce the reality effect' (Çelik Rappas 2016, 670). *Closeness*, which premiered at Cannes too, is not concerned with marketing of sensationalism, nor is it interested in a critique of the disposability of bodies in a neo-liberal economy. Instead, the film investigates the war-time trauma and suggests that contemporary subjectivity in the RF is indeed a traumatic subjectivity, that is, its experience is pre-determined by past traumas, such as the hardships of the 1990s. The transgressive strategy of *Closeness* is evident in the uses of extreme contexts as a means of querying the possibilities of genre, viewer expectations and calls for 'reality effect'. Cumulatively, the film's engagement with extreme contexts releases its gender non-conforming, queer potentiality, thus expanding the queer framework to include not

only individual scenes, moments and characters, but the cinematic discourse, too. In this regard, the film deals with global concerns, such as the conventions of genre and gender, and frameworks of identification and cultural form.

Disability and trauma: queer-crip subjectivity and extreme intimacies in *Beanpole*

In *Closeness*, Balagov examines the issues of ethnicity, religion and cultural identity from the angle of gender non-conforming subjectivity and queerness; in his second feature, he considers the intersections of queerness and disability, putting forward an interrogation of women's queer-crip subjectivity. *Beanpole* critiques cinematic gendered ableism and focuses on the empowerment of women who are in the process of exploring and accepting their differing sexuality. In this regard, *Beanpole* advances the concerns of *Closeness* but in a different historical and cultural context. The film tells the story of two women living in post-war Leningrad; they are involved romantically with one another and other partners, too, eventually forming a non-heteronormative, non-monogamous sexual partnership. The film ends with a queer vision: Masha (Vasilisa Perelygina) tells her younger partner Iia (Viktoriia Miroshnichenko) that soon Iia will get pregnant, and when the child is born, they will live happily together as a family. The final moment of the film – the two women engaged in an embrace – signifies love and intimacy, just like the scene with the mother hugging her daughter at the end of *Closeness* signifies love and freedom. In both films, the main characters embark on a new life in a world that they do not/cannot know: Ila is not familiar with life in Voronezh where her family wishes to go, and the women in *Beanpole* look into the unknown future of post-World War II reconstruction.

If *Closeness* moves towards a destruction of intimacies – Ila's relationship with her brother and boyfriend, and also with the city and region ravaged by inter-ethnic conflicts – *Beanpole* moves towards a re-consideration and re-imagining of intimacies: the two women now envisage a new, happy life in a world emerging from the catastrophe of World War II. Similarly, if *Closeness* puts forward an understanding of freedom as a process of letting go – literally of belongings, property, jobs, and relationships, *Beanpole* re-imagines freedom as making a new commitment and acquiring things that signify independence such as clothes, accommodation, and so on. In the first film, the search for freedom is spatialised as movement – at the end of *Closeness* the family travel to the mountains, which are traditionally associated with freedom searching – and in the second film, this search is 'temporal-ised': having returned to Leningrad with the aim of re-building their lives, the characters face the eternity of suffering, trauma and death, on the one hand, and on the other, the eternity of love and devotion.[15] Both the films are concerned with the notion of choice, i.e., deliberation – romantic, ethical, and existential – and how it underpins freedom. The characters are tested in the most extreme situations of post-Soviet economic collapse and inter-ethnic conflict in the former case, and in the latter, of extreme deprivations in the city almost destroyed by Nazi Germany.

In *Closeness*, gender non-conforming subjectivity emerges through protest – against the family, community and society – and leads to empowerment (in the final scene, Ila is in the driver's seat of the family car). In *Beanpole*, this subjectivity arises as a result of acceptance – of trauma, memory and hope – and empowerment is found in the relation-ship of one to another. Some may argue that Balagov's second film advocates the

normalisation of queer subjectivities (i.e., the women decide to form a unit which is patriarchal in its structure: two spouses and a child), whilst others may claim that the story of two women is indicative of the struggle of queer individuals for acceptance and of the difficult process of emancipation (i.e., their unit has not happened yet, it is to be formed, and the women have to rely on men to realise their dream, and therefore it remains a strategy and also a fantasy). Either way, Balagov's film is about the quest for love in the context of post-war Leningrad where, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, 'to love after the siege is barbaric'. Barbarism, or to be precise, violence – like in *Closeness* – is the ontologically-framed contextual precondition for transgression, including the transgression of the ultimate boundary between life and death. (Arguably, in *Closeness* this transgression is examined in the execution scene.) These transgressions are contextualised on two levels: on a macro-level, through the spaces of post-war Leningrad whereby the city represents a destroyed Europe, and on the micro-level, through the environment of the hospitals where the characters – and through them all survivors of the war – undergo rehabilitation.[16]

Iia works in Leningrad's male veterans' hospital as a nurse; she grapples with fits of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or, possibly, brain damage. When the fits occur, she 'freezes' and becomes unable to control her body. In *Closeness*, the issue of a woman (not) being in control of her own body had been presented in a cultural, not medical context. Iia raises a young boy, who, as the viewer learns later, is Masha's biological son; however, Iia and those around her, including the director of the hospital, Nikolai (Andrei Bykov), consider the boy to be her child. One day, Iia has one of her fits whilst playing with the boy on the floor. Through an extended close-up shot, familiar to the viewer from *Closeness*, the camera shows how, whilst being unconscious, Iia smothers the boy to death with the weight of her own body. The sequence is painful to watch, just like the execution sequence in *Closeness*. Later in the film, Iia carries out another manslaughter, that of the hospital patient Stepan (Konstantin Balakireev), suffering from full body paralysis. He and his wife Tania (Alena Kuchkova) convince Iia to 'help him out' as 'he is tired of living' and so she administers a lethal dose of anaesthetic. Later it emerges that, on Nikolai's orders, Iia performed euthanasia on many occasions, 'helping out' different patients in the hospital (Figure 3). Masha becomes witness of Stepan's case and she blackmails Iia and Nikolai into having sexual intercourse in order to impregnate Iia. This way, Masha, who is unable to get pregnant due to an abdominal wound that she got from shrapnel during the war, hopes to become a mother again.[17] In the meantime, Masha starts a relationship with Sasha (Igor' Shirokov), the son of Leningrad apparatchiks, as he is able to provide her with much needed supplies, including food. When Sasha introduces Masha to his parents, his mother Liubov' (Kseniia Kutepova) insults her, insinuating about Masha's sexual exploits at the front. (This is another parallel with *Closeness* where one woman – the mother figure – degrades another – the daughter figure.) In addition, the humiliation appears as a degrading assault on the war hero, whereby verbal violence seems more impactful than physical violence.

Through this complex story-line and uncompromising honesty of the camera work (DoP Kseniia Sereda), Balagov enquires about issues which are sacrosanct in one's individual life and also in the life of a country. For example, the film challenges the official discourse about World War II, celebrating male victors; instead, *Beanpole* re-writes history from the women's perspective, thus following the global trend of historical research (see,

Figure 3. Iia speaking to the hospital director in a ward. Still from *Beanpole.*

e.g., Twells, Midgley, and Carlier 2016). The film also challenges the mainstream perceptions of the effects of warfare, focusing on both physical and mental impacts, including PTSD. The film links the latter to the issue of sexuality, which is a departure from canonical war films. Balagov dwells on the story of Stepan, who is much loved by hospital staff and other patients. The nurses find Stepan's wife as they hope to discharge him and save on cost of his care. However, when Tania arrives, she makes it clear that Stepan will be useless to her as sexual partner and to their children as father, and so Stepan and Tania decide to beg Nikolai for euthanasia. (Here again, a woman is in charge of making existential decisions; this time they are determined by the extreme context of deprivation – economic, social and physical – in the male-dominated world, thus raising concerns about whether she has the freedom to make any real choices at all.) Moreover, the sexual and reproductive functions of the body – both male and female – are examined explicitly in *Beanpole*, which is a striking departure from the canon of Russian-language war films that underscore the heroism of Soviet people (see, e.g., Youngblood 2006) whilst shying away from the politics of war-time sex and sexuality, or presenting them in an allegorical manner.

In one scene, the camera shows Stepan's unresponsive limbs and horrible bedsores; in another, it shows a huge scar on Masha's belly. Iia is not in control of her body and mind either: her fits make her incapable of looking after herself and others, and these fits – mini-experiences of death – bring her closer to those patients whom she and Nikolai put through painless killing. The ultimate idea of the film is that although the actual war is over, it continues in everyday Leningrad, where everyone – apart from the apparatchiks – has to make choices between life and death. The horrors of these choices and their effects on women – like those in *Closeness* – are reminiscent of mainstream war films both in Soviet and world cinemas, for example, Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes are Flying* (*Letiat zhuravli*, 1957); however, Balagov departs from the canon by focusing on the female

body – including its sexuality – appearing debilitated, mutilated and traumatised, but not heroic as in Lev Arnshtam's *Zoia* (1944).

The female body is framed through and framed as extreme contexts. Iia is a very tall person: on several occasions, the camera highlights her physical difference, for example, when she is travelling on a tram, or standing next to her colleagues in the hospital. She does not fit – literally – in the space of post-war Leningrad. Her body is too visible and too different, and it is marked linguistically in the use of her nickname, beanpole ('dylda'), where the Russian word signifies an anatomical difference – long legs – in both men and women, and the word itself is of common gender, not masculine, feminine or neuter. In other words, the title of the film refers to gender mergers and/or singularities, whereby gender is linguistically both marked and unmarked, both visible and invisible. Indeed, being very tall makes Iia both visible and invisible, or inconspicuous through hyper-visibility. The size of her body accentuates her fits, and in return, the convulsions, jerks and twitches make the viewer even more aware of her body.

The fits are a result of trauma – psychological and/or physical – and they signify moments of emotional transfiguration, such as the moment when Iia plays with the child forgetting about the atrocities of the war. This makes Iia vulnerable emotionally and physically; in fact, the viewer eventually realises that she is a threat to others (the manslaughter of the boy) and to herself (she could be killed by a tram if she were to have a fit in the street). Or, in these moments, she could be abused sexually. This is something that the director implies by introducing a character, a single man who lives in Iia's communal apartment and who makes several unsuccessful approaches. There seems to be no cure to Iia's condition, and she gets no support, except from her colleagues at work. Iia is aware of her sexuality but she is not sexually active, nor is she knowledgeable about the functions of the female body, and it is clear that she finds sex with men repulsive and/ or unnecessary. She shows fondness only for Stepan because he poses no threat due to being completely paralysed. Similarly, it is possible to read their closeness as an affinity between two incapacitated bodies, leading to a proposition – still marginal in the Russian-language cinema – about sex, sexuality and disability.

Balagov accentuates this proposition by engaging with queer-crip politics: Iia's feelings towards Masha are sexually charged, as is evident in the scene of house renovations. As Iia passionately kisses Masha on the lips, the green paint that was being used to decorate the wall is spread over their faces, symbolising life and desire. Later in the film, Masha wears a dress of vibrant green colour which completes her transformation from a war-time soldier (she wears a military uniform) into a sickly patient (she wears a hospital uniform on top of ill-fitting rags), and finally into an independent, beautiful woman (Figure 4).[18] In the earlier scene in the bathhouse, the emotional and sexual charge between Iia and Masha is very strong as Masha confides that she 'desires to have a man/person inside' [*cheloveka vnutri khochu*]. The phrase refers to having a child inside, but the choice of the word – quite unusual in the context, i.e., 'a human' rather than 'a child' – compels the viewer to enquire about the political meanings of insemination and childbearing. Masha communicating her desires to Iia builds a strong emotional bond between them: the camera focuses on two desiring women's bodies, and the context is such that Iia emerges as a participant. In the same scene, the camera inspects Masha's body paying special attention to her stomach and revealing the abdominal trauma. The ugly scar is

Figure 4. Masha trying the new dress in her and Iia's room in the communal apartment. Still from *Beanpole*.

a reminder of experienced violence, and scarring is conceived of as a universal symbol of suffering.[19] Masha is different insofar as she cannot possibly be a mother: her frantic attempts to find a male sexual partner signify her fervidly denying the fact that she can no longer conceive, rather than manifest her desire to have heterosexual sex.

The body in *Beanpole* is impossible insofar as its queer: too big, too confused, too traumatised, too violent, too emotional, and so on. The scarred queer body, or queer body as scarred body, achieves the symbolic status of queer (disability) history whereby both this body and this history are possible through their extreme impossibility (O'Toole 2015). The impossibility of the body – and of queer living – is symbolised ultimately by the body of Stepan. Having lost sensation in all the limbs, he is in full control of his mind and emotions. He takes part in hospital procedures and celebrations, such as when visited by the government official. His incapacity, including as a sexual partner, is confirmed by his wife: 'he is too tired to live', and his inability/disability emerges as a form of queerness.[20] His character is compared to that of Nikolai who – though having a functioning body – is so exhausted that he no longer wishes to use it. Indeed, he and Stepan employ the same turn of phrase when describing their state, that of extreme fatigue (that is, fatigue as an extreme context). Stepan decides to end his life and Nikolai makes plans to retire, but their plans are challenged by Iia and Masha. Masha compels him to have sexual intercourse with Iia so that she can get pregnant, and in this regard, he is subjected to female sexual violence. Balagov frames the sex scene in ways that are similar to those used in *Closeness*: women initiate intercourse; they do not wish to achieve pleasure, as they have other objectives; they perform the sexual act in a claustrophobic space; and the camera records the suffering of everyone involved. If the two films are to be seen as variations of the same conflict, then the sex scene in *Beanpole* illustrates the violence of one woman (the mother/Masha) against the other (the daughter/Iia) through the use of the male figure (Zalim/Nikolai). The characters have sex in extreme contexts contradicting the patriarchal model, or the expectations of a particular community.

Notions of sexuality become political towards the end of the film: in the scene of Masha visiting Sasha's parents, sexuality is framed in relation to one's contribution to the war effort. Sasha's mother insinuates about Masha being a prostitute on the front, and Masha plays along, thus exposing mid-twentieth century hegemonic gender structures. Liubov' represents the ruling class of the Soviet Union, the apparatchiks that control resources (as a matter of fact, they live in what used to be a nineteenth century palace), discourse (Liubov' visits the hospital in order to gain political clout), and sexuality (Liubov' regulates the sexual life of her son and by extension of Masha and others). In the Soviet Union, sexuality was thought of as an ideological force: sexual promiscuity and the squandering of sexual energy were criticised, that is, identified as elements of the hedonistic, bourgeois, imperialist structure of desire (see Mole 2019). 'To harness energy, to use the scarce force for the production of the classless society, to move away from sexuality to will-power and self-control, meant to stay away from children' (Kaganovsky 2008, 69). *Beanpole* amplifies the return of sexuality, and sexual freedom, as a form of resistance to the controls of totalitarian society. Masha's re-orienting her romantic interest towards Iia signifies a queer protest against the dominant heteronormative regime: Stalin criminalised male homosexuality in 1937, just before the start of the war. So, whilst not committing a crime per se, Iia and Masha perform a transgression thanks to their orientation towards desire.

Although the film is set in the 1940s with Joseph Stalin leading the USSR, evocations of the contemporary RF are apparent in terms of perceptions of non-heteronormative sexuality, unequal wealth distribution, and discursive violence. The 2010s were characterised by protest movements: the 2011–13 protests focused on the ruling party and electoral fraud, but eventually the agenda was expanded to include the issues of corruption, wealth distribution, and the violence of the state. In 2013, the government brought in legislation regulating the distribution of information about LGBTQI+, thus paving the way to a full ban on positive representations of LGBTQI+ that was introduced in 2022. In both *Closeness* and *Beanpole*, Balagov interrogates and critiques the return of the conservative norms regulating sexuality. He uses historical contexts to explore the contemporary moment; and the choice of the historical periods – World War II and the 1990s – is significant in that both have been used in the government official communication to define the country's identity (see, for example, Bernstein 2016; Norris 2014). Hence, the queer body helps de-centre the official discourse – historic and contemporary – both through appearing and through agency, including the prerogative to self-identify.

In addition to queer subjects, *Beanpole* portrays people with disability and functional diversity. They make up a cohort of characters with whom the viewer empathises, whilst the apparatchiks are represented as unlikeable fully-bodied people with corrupt morality. Hence, ableism here is not about representation per se, but about power and the social regimes of impairment. At the same time, Balagov searches for a new vocabulary of queerness and disability, a concern which – as mentioned above – is rarely addressed in cinema produced in the RF, with the notable exception of such films as Valerii Todorovskii's *The Land of the Deaf* (*Strana glukhikh*, 1998) and Kirill Serebrennikov's *The Student* (*Uchenik*, 2016). Todorovskii's feature is about two women – one of them is deaf – forming a romantic relationship in contemporary Moscow; Serebrennikov's film is about teenagers coming to terms with their sexuality, including a boy with a walking disability

who has a crush on another boy. The films are concerned with oppressing social norms, such as patriarchy and the demands of neoliberal capitalism in *The Land of the Deaf*, religion and institutionalised violence in *The Student*, and social structures and medical othering in *Beanpole*.

Conclusion: differing bodies

Indeed, Balagov's films bear some affinity to both *The Land of the Deaf* and *The Student* through narrative framing and portrayal of violence against queer individuals. However, in his films, queer sexualities enable transgressions of social norms and repressive frameworks not through pairing ableism and sex-positivity, but through rejection of normalcy and portraying broken bodies, repressed bodies, asexual bodies, and non-orgasmic bodies. *Beanpole* is about rejecting compulsory sexuality (Masha's reproductive urges) and focusing on (a)sexual insights about intimacy, eroticism and fulfilment (Masha and Iia's intimacies).[21] In this regard, Balagov steers away from Moscow-centric/Hollywood hegemonic conservative ideologies of compulsory sexuality, health, able-bodiedness and longevity.[22] His stance is queer insofar as he rejects historical legacies and contemporary ideologies of medicalisation of the body (e.g., notions of 'perversions' and 'deformities' that appear in literature on sexuality in the twentieth century). Both *Closeness* and *Beanpole* advance an understanding of queer-crip subjectivity not as a source of shame and pity but rather something to be claimed and celebrated.

The queer framework allows Balagov to stage a critique of ableism as part of the examination of power dynamics in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. He demonstrates that the heteronormative, cis-gender, able-bodied, white person of mainstream cultural identity dominates the discourse by placing oneself in charge of power relations. Balagov's self-criticality permits a complex understanding of queer women as powerful individuals forming relationships through own agency. In his oeuvre, queerness emerges in the context of extreme violence encompassing a range of tropes such as claustrophobia, punishment and strangulation, which are associated with sexual practices, on the one hand, and on the other, with the protest of the queer body against repressive social regimes. His films are not about the fetishisation of love, but about breaking free to achieve happiness. The freedom is found in moment of extreme intimacy including sex, violence and death.

Notes

1. For reviews of Balagov's films see Ezerova (2018) and Kaganovsky (2020).
2. It includes short films that he made at the start of his career and most recently, unfinished work on the television series *The Last of Us* (HBO, 2023, multiple directors) (Kit 2021).
3. Moscow-based film studios and cultural institutions function in the same way, that is, by exercising hegemonic discursive power over other centres of cultural production.
4. An example of ethnic othering of film culture of the RF can be found in McGinity-Peebles (2022).
5. According to the scholar, the chief aim of this scholarly approach is critiquing accounts of global queering in terms of the spread of Western, especially US, sexual and gender cultures (Jackson 2009, 15).

6. Research in this article does not focus on violence against queer subjects (e.g., Kondakov 2022), but on how queer subjects sustain themselves in regimes of violence.
7. For a discussion of body movement and gestures in Balagov's films, see Stepanova (2023); for a discussion of queer meaning of gestures in Russian cinema, see Strukov (2016b).
8. See, for example, Strukov and Hudspith (2014), where in film representations of the Caucasus the dominant narrative of captivity is inverted thanks to the queer optic.
9. For example, in Andrei Zviagintsev's *The Return* (*Vozvrashchenie*, 2003), the father comes back home to impose order on his sons, whilst their caring mother remains at home awaiting their return from a fishing trip.
10. See, for example, Goscilo and Hashamova (2010). It is possible to argue that *Closeness* belongs to a new trend in contemporary Russian cinema, which focuses on mother-daughter relationship, as we find in Vasilii Sigarev's *Wolfy* (*Volchok*, 2009).
11. For an autobiographical account of a Jewish woman growing up in the North Caucasus, see McPhail (2014).
12. The discussion of reasons for such portrayals are outside the scope of this article.
13. For a conceptual overview of the uses of violence in Russian literature and theatre, see Beumers and Lipovetsky (2009).
14. In the 1990s, Western propaganda referred to them as 'freedom fighters', whereas Russian media used the term 'terrorists'. There was a change in Western usage of terms in the 2000s following the start of 'the war on terror' by the Bush Jr administration.
15. It is possible to read the final scenes of *Closeness* in this temporal aspect, too: the characters contemplate the majestic, eternal mountain range of the Caucasus, that is, frozen time.
16. The choice of locations is an allusion to a wide range of films and literary texts, including *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann.
17. Katia Suverina has suggested that Masha wishes to re-claim her gender because she thinks that she lost it due to her inability to get pregnant. This supposition evidences the violence of the patriarchal doctrine of gender and also explains Masha's transgressive behaviour as an attempt to re-gain womanhood through exercise of female heteronormative sexual practices.
18. The colour symbolism of the film – as a reference to Aleksei Iu. German's films – was noted by Nancy Condee, who writes that 'here exactly is the importance to Balagov's color palette: its near-unbearable saturation of greens and reds is the visual language of how memory will come to recollect "Autumn 1945," an elusive "meaning-beyond-cognition suffusing" everyday life' (Condee 2021, 391).
19. I am grateful to Olga Andreevskikh for suggesting that the shape of the scar – side to side – symbolises the cancellation of any prospects and hopes of motherhood. It is similar to the C-section scar, making associations between maternity and violence.
20. The open discussion of sexuality of male subject traumatised by the war is not canonical; see, for example, Kaganovsky (2008).
21. Some may argue that Balagov starts with the representation of two stereotyped categories of disabled bodies: oversexed perverts and asexual innocents (Brown 1994, 125). Indeed, Masha is portrayed as a sexually aggressive person whilst Iia is asexual and/or innocent. Their roles are manifested in the dating scene when Masha meets Sasha and forces him to have sex with her in a car. Iia keeps querying if that was necessary and at this stage it is not clear whether she asks because of jealousy or because of her own asexuality. Later in the film, the representation of the two characters becomes more balanced as the two complete a journey towards one another.
22. And he firmly rejects the discursive iterations of totalitarianism with its obsession with health, heteronormative masculinity and abled bodies (on the latter, see Kaganovsky 2008).

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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