

Novikov-Yanginov: *Stars* (Zvezdi, 2018)  
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Walk Out Alone My Way...

*Stars* is a tragicomedy with elements of criminal drama, which is an adaptation of Mikhail Lermontov's poem "I Walk Out Alone My Way...", a story of a pilgrim, a foreign native, a Russian who becomes a stranger among other Russians. But the actual movie of Alexander Novikov-Yanginov's debut film resembles an adaptation of the Putin's Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of 2005 with the famous phrase: "the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century".

Yuri Alekseevich Derbenev, nicknamed Gagarin, is the main character of the movie. He is an ethnic Russian, but with a passport from Uzbekistan. Yuri was born in 1961, when Gagarin went to space, and his name and patronym are exactly the same as his more famous namesake. This is one of many post-soviet nostalgic lines in the film. All the immigrants Derbenev meets in this story express very warm feelings about the cosmonaut, as a symbol of the Soviet common past. As one of the immigrants says: "Everything was different before. We did not have money either. But we had happiness. There was space. There was harvest. Children were smiling. And now- no money, no happiness. Different times...". At the typical Central Asian table with pilaf, fruits, salad, spring onion and flat bread an old Uzbek tells to his younger compatriots: "I remember the real Gagarin. He was tall and fit. Guys, when Gagarin flew to the space, we were celebrating for three days in our kishlak. Nobody was working!"

Derbenev-Gagarin is trapped in a difficult life situation. He is in his late 50s, working as a teacher of Russian language at the secondary school in Tashkent. His daughter has fallen ill and his family has no money to help her. He sells his car and buys a ticket to Moscow to find job, as many other Uzbeks and people from other Central Asian republics do. He envisioned his wife's cousin would help him settle in Moscow, but his cousin is himself bundled in troubles. He has debt and is currently on the run.

Gagarin, Uzbek illegal worker and an ethnic Russian, has to overcome major obstacles. He works at a construction site where the manager turns the workers over to the police and where they are sent home without any payment. Yuri is lucky to escape the police raid, but he has not received his payment either and he still needs to send money to his family in Uzbekistan.

The characters are dichotomously caricatured as good guys and bad guys. The good ones are hardworking illegal Uzbek workers, the bad ones are practically all Russians whom Gagarin meets in his attempts to earn money in Moscow. Uzbeks are hospitable, respectful to the elder people and help their fellow compatriots even if they ethnically different. They are victims of a majority culture. In contrast, policemen and border guards are rude and dangerous, ready to target their authority at the weak. Most of the Russians he meets are intolerant, even to their ethnical compatriot Gagarin. Even the flamboyant workers at migration service are ignorant. “We are not in a hurry”, they say, suggesting that Yuri should take and pay for a test of Russian language in order to legalize his stay in Russia. Russian teacher Gagarin is humiliated. He finds another job where he works together with other immigrants as a maintenance technician for a rich Russian and his cranky wife. But he quickly loses it once his employers’ catch him taking a bath in their apartment. This scene is visually recognizable and becomes one of the comedic components. At the same time, it shows the dismal side of Gastarbeiters’ life in Russia, living in small apartments with little or no comfort. Only in the very end of the movie, Russians are retributed when the Slavic driver who saved Gagarin says “Yurchik, we will help you! Our people are companionable – we should help”.

Moscow’s migrants and other non-Slavic people are in confrontation with each other throughout the film (e.g., competing interests at the market between Caucasians and immigrants from Central Asia). However, they show deep solidarity with their own group. For instance, Yuri was hired as a porter at the market by recommendation of one Uzbek fellow selling mandarins. The same person offers Gagarin to stay with his family in an old trailer in exchange for Russian lessons for his son.

The manager at the market is a Kazakh, who occasionally mentions that he is a PhD in chemistry. This is an important detail – a reminder of the immigrants, who come to Russia for some unqualified jobs, who often stay illegally, due to the difficult life circumstances in their home country. These people are often perceived as provincials, they are often perceived as voiceless strangers, or even more often people do not bother even to think about migrants as personalities. But in *Stars*, Gagarin meets teachers, poets, musicians, and scientists working in Moscow at construction sites and markets.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and disappearance of the former people's friendship is the main thread throughout the movie. This is expressed through the characters' narrative and turn of events. There is also a poetic thread in the film. Gagarin has dreams through the whole film where he relives Lermontov's poem. The dreams allow Gagarin to escape the unfortunate reality where he has to become an unskilled worker. These dreams are a mix of images of post-Soviet nostalgia, adaptation of the Lermontov's poem and Yuri's homesickness. In Gagarin's dreams we find Lermontov's duel, a rocket taking off, as well as his wife and daughter in the mountains. Lermontov's poem, as well as the portrait of the poet, appear on the screen every now and then. The portrait even in the very end of the film on the front panel of the truck, where usually one can find icons, family photos and pictures with naked girls.

The dramaturgy of the story is built on the contrast between the seamy side of reality and social realism with the tearful details, friendship of the Uzbeks, and indifference of Slavic Russians. This tendency is especially seen in the climax of the film. During New Year's Eve, when Gagarin is going for a drink with his ex-co-workers, a young Uzbek is giving a compliment to the passing Slavic girls, who in return call him "churka uzkoglazay" (a gook). A fight breaks out with the Slavic guys hanging out in the same park. Beaten and broken, Gagarin finds himself later in the police, where he learns that his host family of Uzbeks died in fire in their old trailer. Their son Yusuf, who was reading Lermontov, also died.

Zvezda has many commonalities to *Brat* by Alexey Balabanov. This is mainly due to the main character played by the recognizable Viktor Sukhorukov. Similar to *Brat*, there is also an atmosphere of unbearable loneliness of a stranger in a big city, who must overcome a series of unbearable obstacles in his life.

Similarly to Gagarin, director Alexander Novikov-Yanginov was also born in Uzbekistan, then moved to Russia with his Uzbek passport. He obviously understands the background of this story better than many others. And the intention was to show a story about people, not about nationalities (Novikov-Yanginov & Sukhorukov, 2017). But during the course of producing the film, its initial ideas has changed. The film is made with a financial support from the Ministry of culture and lead by the producer Fedor Popov, who has influence not only on the post-production, but also on the scenario and production. Even though producer repeats the words of film director about the film showing the people's stories and not the Soviet nostalgia, the

result looks different (Popov, 2018). This is a story told through nationalities and not the people embodying them.

The choice of famous actor Viktor Sukhorukov, as a main character is key to the narrative of the movie. He is apparently very much emotionally involved with the post-Soviet nostalgia. In an interview, Sukhorukov claimed:

“I am a child of a huge country, which I didn’t have time to travel through, to fly over, to discern... There were people, there was society, there were human worlds, there was territory, there was the history of culture, the history of birth, there were own Gods- everything was our own. There were 15 republics, and there were over 140 nationalities, and they all existed on one ground, which was called Soviet Union”(Novikov-Yanginov & Sukhorukov, 2017).

Sukhorukov’s emotional speech in his interview about *Stars* to Sputnik shows not only his personal attachment to the topic, but the whole message of the movie: nostalgia about Soviet Union and the confusion of many people about territories and identities which were left after the dissolution.

*Stars* addresses a very interesting theme of foreign natives, people with different identities, both in their passports and in their minds. But the production turned the movie in a different direction. There is a thin line between nostalgia and political statement in this kind of films. The intentions of the film makers could be sincere. And indeed, the life of immigrants is shown quite realistic. Even if the script writer has never been to Central Asia, he was observing immigrants from Central Asia quite closely in Nizhnevartovsk, where he was working on the local television (Ivaschenko, 2018). But the way they present their story are closer to a political statement. It is closer to a filmic adaptation of the Putin’s sorrowing of the collapse of Soviet Union and not about a story of people with mixed identities.

The film touches upon important and overlooked topics of intolerance of Russian society towards others, particularly towards those who used to be friendly nations and peoples from the Soviet Union. *Stars* received the Special Prize for “protecting the rights of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers” from the International organization “OXFAM” and the Prize Debut-Stalker at the International Film-Festival “Stalker” in 2018. But political messages permeating the film unfortunately leaves the potential of *Stars* unrealized. People’s stories are covered by unnecessary dramatic exaggerations. Real people stories are way more dramatic.

*Stars*, Russia, 2018  
Color, 97 minutes  
Director: Alexander Novikov-Yanginov  
Scriptwriter: Alexey Zhitkovsky  
DoP: Andrey Fedotov  
Composer: Alexey Polyakov  
Sound director: Lola Bukaeva  
Costume design: Tatiana Shapovalova, Vladimir Nikoforov  
Editing: Viktor Saprin, Leonid Melman  
Cast: Viktor Sukhorukov, Seidulla Moldakhanov, Amadu Mamadakov, Georgy Pitshelauri, Igor Gasparyan, Elena Sachuk, Alesya Guzko, Maruf Atadgonov  
Producers: Fedor Popov, Viktoria Leschenko, Lala Rustamova  
Production: Producers 'center VGIK Debut, with the financial support of the Ministry of Culture of Russia

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