

# Russian, Belarusian, and Sakha Horror

## An Introductory Note

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## Russian, Belarusian, and Sakha Horror

### An Introductory Note

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This dossier presents a report of the event that took place in a relatively recent but completely shattered past. In May 2021, Denis Saltykov and I—both PhD students in Film and Media Studies and the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Pittsburgh—curated a two-day horror panel at the Annual Russian Film Symposium *Representations and the Reel*. The first section screened Belarusian comedy slasher *Spice Boyz* (2020) and featured Adam Lowenstein as a respondent and Volha Isakava as the program notes writer. The second section, which involved Neepa Majumdar as keynote speaker, discussed the ethnic horror film *Ich-chi* (2021) by independent Indigenous Sakha filmmakers from the Russian Far East.

Inspired by the gradual restoration of the in-person mode after months of pandemic lockdown, we enthusiastically looked forward to the panel and the symposium in general. Adam and Denis looked even further, negotiating the publication of this dossier with the wonderful editorial team of *Monstrum*. We could not have imagined that the future as we had planned it would never come. A few months after the symposium, Denis Saltykov tragically passed away. Crushed by this personal loss, we faced the news in the following months of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine—a catastrophe of a different scale, which, among many things, ravaged the field of Slavic Studies as we knew it.<sup>1</sup> Nearly two years later, we are fortunate to be able to present the proceedings of the panel and symposium in this dossier on Russian, Belarusian, and Sakha horror.

This dossier and the initial horror panel bring together Slavic and non-Slavic film scholars to form a multifaceted perspective on multilingual horror films. The two first pieces written by Volha Isakava and Adam Lowenstein jointly introduce recent Belarusian movies as a distinct chapter of contemporary horror cinema. Overviewing the regional trends of the past decade, Isakava maps the local specifics of Belarusian horror as it is grounded in the country's political and social dynamics. The following piece by Lowenstein discusses *Spice*

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<sup>1</sup> The more recent death of Volodya Padunov, who founded RFS in 1999 and was a mentor for generations of Slavic/Film scholars at Pitt, has looped the dark times for us at the University of Pittsburgh.

*Boyz* (Vladimir Zinkevich, 2020), a gory slasher film based on an actual event involving substance abuse at a bachelor party in Gomel in 2014. In his critical review, Lowenstein traces the relations of the film's Belarusian context to global politics, the matrix of cultural tastes, and genre influences.

In the next essay, Neepa Majumdar and I introduce Sakha Indigenous cinema, which—for different historical and aesthetic reasons—largely centers on the horror genre. Our essay places the film *Ich-chi* (Kostas Marsaan, 2021)—the first Sakha film to gain international distribution—within the context of Sakha identity and memory politics as they co-evolved with local cinema practices, audiences, and markets during the past three decades.

The translation block introduces relatively recent texts on horror cinema published in leading Russian journals and online media on film and visual culture, appearing here for the first time in English. These essays—varying from the historical excursus into the Soviet/Russian horror genre to the interview with the contemporary horror producer Vladislav Severtsev—were selected by Denis Saltykov and translated by Felix Helbing, a literary scholar at the University of Pittsburgh.

The decision to keep the dossier in accordance with Denis' initial plan is meant to respond to two horrendous events—his death and the Russo-Ukrainian war. First of all, we wish to honor the memory of our friend and colleague by bringing his last project to life. At the same time, by introducing horror films from Belarus and the Republic of Sakha, as well as pre-war critical discussions of the horror genre in Russia, we aim to share the ideas beyond the political restrictions and alienation that military aggression and hegemonic ambitions have fomented for more than a year. By avoiding a homogenizing framework for Russian, Belarusian, and Sakha horror films, we intend to accentuate the cultural and ethnic diversity of these regions, currently lying in the shadow of the Kremlin's campaign. We believe our intention to speak across the political regimes will make this dossier an invitation to a lively conversation rather than an obituary to my partner in work and life or a record of collective despair.

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**Eva Ivanilova** is a PhD candidate in the interdisciplinary Film & Media Studies and Slavic Languages and Literatures Program. She is working at the intersections of Russian intellectual history, film theory, and political economy. Primarily, her research is focused on regional film practices in modern Russia that are included in a broader framework of geopolitical and

geo-economic demarcations. Her publications have appeared in *KinoKultura*, *Iskusstvo kino*, *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, several anthologies, and popular websites.

**Denis Saltykov** was a scholar of cinema and culture, with a focus on contemporary popular culture, cult film, horror film, and sociological theories of cinema. His publications appear in *Studies in the Fantastic*, *KinoKultura*, *New Literary Observer*, *Sociology of Power*, and *Iskusstvo Kino*, as well as the popular Russian websites *Kino-Teatr* and *Knife.Media*. He was trained in philosophy at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow) and in film studies and Slavic studies at the University of Pittsburgh.

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