

NOT EVEN PAST



Film Review – Ayka (Dir: Sergei Dvortsevov, 2018)

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In the second season of BBC America's TV show *Killing Eve*, we are introduced to a new villain, whom Eve Polastri labels "The Ghost." In every way, The Ghost is the main villain's polar opposite: while Villanelle's killings are elaborately staged performances, the Ghost kills her targets simply, quietly, and without much blood. She is "considerate" and even "respectful," as Eve and the other MI6 agents note. But most importantly, The Ghost is able to go in and out of buildings, hotels, and apartments without drawing any attention to herself. She is, as Eve puts it, "someone who can go about their business without anyone noticing, because what they do is seemingly uninteresting. They're not important. They're invisible. It's the kind of woman who people look at every day and never see."

The Ghost turns out to be exactly as Eve predicts: a middle-aged woman of color masquerading as a low-wage domestic worker. She passes as a nurse, a beautician, a cleaning woman, a janitor – any category of person who is quite literally invisible to our eyes because of the labor they perform. She makes our food, cleans our floors, takes out our garbage, and yet, we – that is to say, the average middle-class white viewer or customer – never see her.



Photo from *Ayka*, by Denis Sinyakov © VOLGA film company (via Kinoart)

Sergei Dvortsevov's 2018 film *Ayka* (Айка), is precisely about making us see this kind of woman. The film stars the brilliant Samal Yeslyamova as Ayka – a role for which she won the award for Best Actress at the Cannes Film Festival – as a young woman who has come to Moscow from Kyrgyzstan in order to make a different life for herself from the one she left back home. Like all migrant workers across the globe, Ayka is trying to survive by working any odd job she can find: plucking chickens, cleaning floors, serving coffee behind the counter at a car wash, even clearing snow – any job, in other words, that doesn't require a right to work or a residency permit. She has a bed in an illegal "hostel" – a dirty flat she shares with many other migrants, under the dual threats of extortion and deportation. And while her lot is that of any migrant worker trying to make ends meet, trying to save enough to send back home, trying to avoid police, her case is complicated by the fact that she owes money to creditors, and has recently given birth.

While this is Dvortsevoi's second feature film, it is shot in a documentary style, with a handheld camera and an emphasis on real spaces of city streets and buildings, and engaging non-professional actors, many of them, migrant workers themselves. The project took six years to complete and is a testament to Dvortsevoi's desire to show the real experiences of migrant workers in Russia. Besides conducting extensive interviews, and getting permission to film inside illegal hostels, Dvortsevoi spent many months observing migrant labor: the scene at the underground slaughterhouse, for example, took many months to film, and Yeslyamova and other actresses were trained in how to clean and defeather chickens. Like the bleak landscape and the limited color palette of the film as a whole, the soundtrack is minimal and entirely diegetic. Particularly, we hear the sound of Ayka's telephone constantly ringing that signals the creditors' ability to reach her anywhere and everywhere. This sound is replaced toward the end with the wailing of her hungry child, a different kind of demand that Ayka also tries throughout the film to resist.

The film opens with Ayka's unexpected escape from the maternity ward through a bathroom window. We spend the next six days following Ayka around snow-covered Moscow as she searches desperately for a job that will earn her the money she needs to pay back her creditors, until finally returning to the hospital for her child. The final scene is of Ayka crying in an entryway of an apartment building while nursing her baby boy, precisely the position she had desperately tried to avoid five days earlier by escaping from the maternity ward. The entire time, the camera stays close to Ayka, making sure that we really *see* her: the film's editing ranges from extreme close-ups of Yeslyamova's face and following shots from a handheld camera that sometimes falls behind, sometimes moves alongside, and sometimes runs slightly ahead of the always hurrying Ayka.

Despite the close-ups, the story that the film tells is almost as anonymous as its heroine. Ayka is not individualized but is a kind of combined portrait of migrant women. She could exist almost anywhere: Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Canada, Mexico or the United States – anywhere, where migrant workers try to make ends meet in a hostile environment that both relies on and denigrates their labor. As it is, we barely learn Ayka's name, where she comes from, or the fact that somewhere, perhaps back home in Kyrgyzstan, she has a married sister with many children. We piece together that this is the lot Ayka tried to avoid by borrowing money to start her own sewing business and then running away to Moscow to escape her creditors. The film tells us almost nothing about her past, her future or her dreams, but is very much about the present: a five-day desperate search for money as she struggles with the physical and psychological consequences of giving birth, of being a single woman, with no right to work or live in Moscow, surrounded by violent, cheating, or in the best case, indifferent people.



Still from *Ayka* (via IMDB)

Even the setting, while realist, is largely nondescript. This is not tourist Moscow. There are no major landmarks visible to orient our gaze, but instead, only glimpses of the insides of buses, trams, escalators in the metro, dank basements, grimy hallways, and traffic-heavy city streets that have to be constantly cleared of accumulating snow. From the extortionist practices of the loan sharks, to the petty crooks who exploit female labor and run off without paying wages, to the threats of the hostel owner and the police, to the unfeeling nurses in the maternity ward, and to the other women just like you who take your job while you are ill – Moscow, icy, windy, dirty and cold seems to mostly consist of underground passageways and cramped spaces, from broom closets that serve as makeshift living quarters, to illegal abortion clinics, to crowded buses and subways. It is a place where no one will give you directions, much less a job.



Like everyone else around her, Ayka lies and schemes to try to get ahead, and resorts to violence when other means fail. As we get to know her better, we understand how she was able to leave behind her newborn child and even to offer him to the creditors to pay off her debt. Despite the camera's insistent proximity to its subject, we are not meant to identify with the main character or her struggle, but rather, to acknowledge her. The point is to make us see this "ghost," this woman who exists on the margins, in the in-between spaces of hallways, subways, and passageways; who brushes against us every day without our noticing.

The only humanity in the film seems to be reserved for animals, and Ayka's temporary job at an animal clinic provides a glimpse of human relations as they could be: kind words and sentiment are reserved for animals undergoing surgery and other medical procedures, conducted by doctors and nurses in a sterile environment – in direct contrast to the illegal abortion clinic in which Ayka herself is treated for postpartum bleeding and infection, or even to the unfriendliness of the maternity ward where Ayka gives birth. It is here that Ayka finds a temporary place washing floors, replacing another Kyrgyz woman with a sick child. The exchange is done without the knowledge of the veterinarian, and it is remarkable that he even notices the change. This is also the closest Ayka comes to having a place of her own or something that resembles a home: the broom closet in the back of the clinic serves as a kind of make-shift living space, with a bed, a table, and a tea kettle. The cleaning woman offers Ayka warmth, comfort, a temporary job, and she even loans her some money. It is not clear that Ayka will give her back her job if she returns.

And yet, it is also the scenes in the animal hospital that most directly speak to the ways this film is about the *abject*. From the child urinating into a wash bucket, to Ayka emptying her breastmilk into a tea bowl, to the incontinent dog splayed on the hospital floor, to puppies nursing at a bleeding breast – all shot in extreme close up by Jolanta Dylewska's unforgiving camera – we are exposed to a world of bodily fluids, of blood, vomit, and piss, and wasted mother's milk and everything that belongs inside that has now been spat out, rejected; a "dark revolt of being," as Julia Kristeva puts it, "directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable."^[1]



Photo from *Ayka*, by Denis Sinyakov © VOLGA film company (via Kinoart)

For Kristeva, the abject is "improper / unclean." It is a loathing for an item of food, for a piece of filth, waste, or dung. But more than mere disgust, the abject is also, "the shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery." (2) It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (4) We may call it a border, writes Kristeva, but abjection is above all "ambiguity." (11) The abject confronts us "with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal."^[2] (12)

It is not difficult to see that Dvortsevov's film is precisely about this notion of the abject. Ayka's presence disturbs society, system, order. She does not respect borders, positions, or rules. She lives in the in-between: both victim and perpetrator, mother and non-mother, Russian-speaking but outsider, human and animal. The wounded dachshund nursing her young is meant to remind Ayka of her refusal to nurse her baby. The scene in the underground slaughterhouse visually aligns Ayka and her child with the chickens that have to be de-feathered and cleaned. The bloody water in which the naked chicken carcasses are washed and which makes Ayka nauseated are meant to remind us of bathing the newborn just after birth. They might also make one a vegetarian.



Given this relentless identification of Ayka with everything that is abject, it is curious that according to Dvortsevoi the final image of Ayka crying in a cold entryway while nursing her baby was meant to be a moment of reconciliation:

I wanted to make a film about mothers. First of all, I wanted to show that maternal instinct is the strongest, stronger than any obstacles or barriers, any circumstances. At the end of the film, she takes him home – this means that she will keep him with her always and never give him up.[3]

Internationally, the film was released under the title *My Little One* (Moi malenkii), shifting the emphasis from the fate of the protagonist to that of her child and underscoring this “maternal” storyline. Most critics, following this logic, have understood the final scene of breastfeeding as the triumph of Ayka’s “maternal instinct.”

And yet, literally everything in the film works against this interpretation. Ayka’s final acquiescence to her child’s persistent demand – stressed in the last minutes of the film by the baby’s relentless crying – is first and foremost an acknowledgment of her impotence in the face of the forces united against her. By keeping the baby, Ayka has once more failed to pay off her debt to her creditors, and this debt is as much symbolic as it is material; it is as much to the criminal organization as it is to the Big Other. Ayka’s tears are not the joyful tears of a mother who feels the satisfaction of the newborn at her breast, but the total helplessness that comes from knowing that the choices before her are now even more limited. Still in debt, but now saddled with a newborn child (that may or may not be the product of a rape), Ayka has literally nowhere to go. And her final position, hidden in an entryway of some high-rise apartment building next to a row of mailboxes, leaves her permanently suspended in this “in-between.”

Ayka challenges us. It is a film about seeing that which we have rejected, spat out, *othered* and now refuse to acknowledge as part of ourselves. Ayka and other ghosts exist on the margins of our society, in the in-between border spaces that demarcate our lives. They beseech us, convulse us, cry out to us. Their ambiguity and placelessness challenge us, make us question our humanity, our privilege, our deepest held beliefs in the value of our symbolic support. Dvortsevoi’s film tries to get us to see Ayka and the others not as objects but as subjects, as equals, as that part of ourselves and our society that we have vomited up. To see them, in other words – as another director would have it – as *us* [*Us* (dir. Jordon Peele, 2019, USA).



Ayka, Russia/France/Germany/Poland/China/Kazakhstan, 2018

Director: Sergei Dvortsevoi
Screenplay: Sergei Dvortsevoi, Gennadii Ostrovskii
Cinematography: Jolanta Dylewska



Sources:

[1] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 1.

[2] Kristeva, 2, 4, 11, 12.

[3] Lazat Zhanybek kyzy, “Dvortsevov; Ayka – obraz ochen’ sil’noi kyrgyzskoi zhenshchiny,”

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