

Images (Holy and Otherwise): Dostoevskian Subtexts in Contemporary Russian Cinema

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This paper focuses on the heroines of two recent Russian films: Natalia in Vera Storozheva's *Traveling with Pets* [*Puteshestvie s domashnimi zivotnymi*] (2007) and the title character of Andrei Zviagintsev's *Elena* (2011). Both characters bear striking resemblances to figures from Dostoevsky's works, among them "A Gentle Creature" ["Krotkaia"] and *The Brothers Karamazov*. By analyzing the echoes of Dostoevskian imagery, character development, and themes in these two films, I hope to investigate how contemporary Russian filmmakers respond to and diverge from significant cultural references and tropes.

One particularly fruitful line of inquiry involves the shared imagery of religious icons. Holy images abound in Dostoevsky's fictional universe, especially the icon of the Mother of God. For instance, the title character of "A Gentle Creature" holds an icon in her hands while committing suicide, an ambiguous act encompassing both despair and spiritual liberation. While Natalia in *Traveling with Pets* is a true innocent, she experiences guilt for the "sin" of not loving her husband. The priest she consults gives her an icon of the Mother of God. Unlike Dostoevsky's character, however, Natalia does not succumb to despair. Instead, she experiments with various forms of liberation from her oppressive past, settling finally on modeling herself after the image of the Mother of God. Natalia adopts a boy from the orphanage she herself was raised in, and we last see her dressed in blue (the color associated with the virgin Mary), gazing at her new son with adoration.

Elena also seeks guidance from the church after her husband has a heart attack, and she is told to place candles at the icons of the Mother of God and St. Nikolai. However, her attempts to find solace in the church fail. Although she seems to possess genuine affection for her husband, Elena's strongest emotional attachment remains to her son and grandchildren. Indeed, her dedication to motherhood leads her to commit murder. Natalia may be seen as an alternative version of the gentle creature who survives and thrives, achieving personal independence and

emotional transformation, but Elena represents an entirely different and darker path. While the gentle creature comes close to murdering her husband, in the “duel” scene, Elena shows us another variation of the storyline: she does murder her wealthy husband in order to save her son from poverty and her grandson from the army. While Natalia represents a triumphant version of the gentle creature whose maternal instinct saves and transforms her, Elena becomes an even more tragic figure than Dostoevsky’s heroine.