‘Always already dead’: Losing the Lost in Andrei Zvyagintsev’s *The Return* (2003)

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Shivering atop of an abandoned tower, the overtures of lost adolescence and masculinity measured through landscape are delineated in the opening scene of *The Return*. Twelve-year-old Ivan, having chosen not to leap into the freezing lake below with his peers, stands alone hours after his failed participation in this ritual act of performative manhood, tells his pleading mother: "I can't go home. I *have* to jump.” Indeed, Zvyagintsev’s debut work is defined by this state of inexorability - a hauntological exegesis of childhood on the brink. Or rather: boyhood on the precipice of paterfamilias. A process which is expedited through the (re)emergence of Ivan and his older brother Andrei’s father after 12 years of being ‘away’.

Such trials are commonplace, universally regional - they form kaleidoscopic contours into the geographical strictures of childhood on the edge. A phenomenological frontier, the wilderness (dis)locates the familiar locality of childhood. An unforgiving habitat, its non-human otherness is simultaneously punctuated with an intensity of the *real*. A realness which by-and-large is bound up in a particularly male strain of myopic primordialism. “The mythic frontier”, writes William Cronon in *The Trouble with Wilderness*, is “almost always masculine in gender: here, in the wilderness, a man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be before civilization sapped his energy and threatened his masculinity”.[i] Yet, such returns to nature are often precluded by initial-initiatory experiences. These are often located in the locus of lost innocence and can be mapped in the emotional geographies of childhood, where the wild functions as an intermedial threshold. The opening scene of *The Return* announces this theme of initiation, with the subsequent return of the father prompting a cyclical chronology of “separation, liminality and reintegration” - albeit in a very abstracted cosmology.[ii]

The following then explores the dynamics of return through Zvyagintsev’s uncanny naturalism: an auteurism which captures the transient mythos of childhood as an unfolding site of (re)memory and loss. In exploring the cyclical nature of *The Return* and its absent presence and present absence of masculine adulthood, this work will attempt to understand the notion of adolescence as a broken site of temporality. Reapproached through the framework of hauntology and the spatial poetics of the Russian landscape (Zvyagintsev’s film formally and aesthetically relating to a Pan-Slavic and Tarkovskian worldview), this analysis will focus on the subsequent crash-course trip into the wilderness prompted by the father's return. An attempt at making up for ‘lost time’ and the ‘consolidation of masculinity’, the wider tradition of the ritual father-son excursion into nature will also be examined, considering the role of the wilderness as a site of adolescent liminality.

Journal of Children in Popular Culture, Volume 14, Issue 1, Winter 2024
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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
Number: 1286882178

“Let’s jump like we said”: Prelapsarian Play & the Mechanics of Motherhood

A common point of tangency, the opening shots of Zvyagintsev’s debut are a reification of a particular state, or rather stasis: a place where we have all been, where we all must leave, and ultimately, a place we will attempt to return - knowing, of course, the unattainability of such a deed. One of the work’s main motifs, the spectral doubling of the tower sequence appears in the culmination of the film with narrative and aesthetic functions, when the returned father accidentally falls from a similar structure. The consequentiality of the fall; death realized. In an uncanny leakage the eerie episode of *The Return*’s opening scenes played out again with heartbreaking consequences. The young actor Vladimir Garin (Andrei), who had spent his life petrified of water, had insisted on doing the jump into Lagoda Lake for the film and in the process completely lost his fear of water. Precisely a year after filming the first take, 16-year-old Garin would drown in a lake not far from where he made his leap of faith. Dared by local girls to jump into the central waters of Lake Sinovetskoye - a dangerous enterprise given the jets and freezing currents - a little drunk, Garin rose to the crucible. He jumped.

In *The Return*, Andrei’s younger sibling Ivan (Ivan Dobronravov) refuses to jump and is ostracized. Labeled a “chicken”, his occlusion from the group highlights the often-exorbitant demands of adolescent bravado and the dangerous strictures children can place on themselves. From what little Zvyagintsev shows us of the group of boys' unadulterated play, it is notable that Ivan - 12-years old, two years younger than his brother and perhaps one of the youngest - represents a different state of boyhood. “As we age”, writes Owain Jones, “childhood becomes another country, a disputed territory of memory and meaning. Its true geography is quickly forgotten, given way to the adult-imagined universe”.[iii] Indeed, the sheer plurality and otherness of childhood is often forgotten as we get further away from its emotional proximity. In the rear-view mirror not much separates twelve and fourteen. That is to say: at such ages social interactions through playfulness/playing are dramatically (re)constituted the closer they are to adolescence/adulthood. Acts of play increase in their consequential gravity and decrease in their freedom and spontaneity. The work of Guattari acknowledges the complexity of the adolescence matrix; he suggests that adolescent children may be closer to adulthood in some ways (for example, in their knowledge) but this too is a very *other* state to that of adulthood.[iv]

Age has agency in Zvyagintsev’s cinematic debut. Closer to the fixity of manhood, Andrei’s participation and apparent coarsity in the face of such dangerous trials can be comprehended (un)consciously as preparatory conditioning. And so, in a topography of absent/mythic fathers these conflate a form of masculinity with maturation and childhood. In this context and given Guattari’s statement above, Andrei’s compliant and pleased reaction to the return of his father is a congruence: the observation, identification and imitation of adult masculinity. As such, Andrei copies his father’s facial expressions and gestures - chewing a toothpick and picking wild berries. A little younger Ivan constitutes a different emotional locus of childhood, he is imbued with a child-like proteanism and an

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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
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untempered freedom: more boyish than teen. Defiant and skeptical of his father's return, Ivan's independence is partially configured by his maternal dependence (she has to rescue him from the tower).

With the initial diving board scene Zvyagintsev "sets the tone for the film's atmosphere, grounded in questions of courage and virality".[v] "The scene", augments Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu, "a form of mise en abyme, the major theme of initiation as well as Ivan's role as protagonist in this and the absence of the father, which is implicitly suggested by the mother's arrival to rescue the child from the dangerous situation he cannot (yet) overcome alone". [vi] With the father's return this initial initiation process becomes a protracted excursion. An irreversible effacement of innocence, this rite of passage via the wilderness is a deliberate action taken to expedite the death of childhood; to make the boys men. There is a certain Oedipal leakage to their week-long initiation, which through the film's bell-curve narratology addresses the absence-presence dialectic presented at the film's start. Anaïs Cabart's address this:

> "diving into the depths of the lake, from a Jungian perspective represents the depths of the unconscious. Thus Andrei passes this first step of initiation, which allows him to belong to the group of friends and symbolizes rebirth. On the other hand the young Ivan, who is not yet ready to face his interior mind does not muster the courage to dive… remain[ing] closely attached to his mother. From a psycho-analytical point of view, Ivan's vertigo can be seen as an indication of his incapacity to face his unconscious. The initiation that takes place in the film will ultimately allow him to resolve his Oedipal complex and thus to abandon the cocoon of maternal safety.[vii]

The threonic equivocacy of Zvyagintsev's work simultaneously invites and resists such interpretations, imbued with Tarkovskian sensibilities: it is constructed as a richly multivalent text, "its palimpsestic nature, distinctly personal to each and every viewer, makes attempts to decode its symbolism interesting yet ultimately redundant".[viii] As will be discussed later in this chapter, the state of inexorability in *The Return* and the recurrence of the absence-presence dialectic functions as lamentation of loss; a landscape of lost fathers and sons. And while Cabart's oedipal analysis of the initiation process is adolescence-cum-adulthood comes at a cost: the death of childhood, (re)loss of his father and the burden of masculinity. Perhaps most overlooked is the lost mother.

Reordering the hierarchy of familial relations, when the boys become men the agency of the nameless mother (Natalya Vdoninva) is left in question. The constitution of her maternal parentship is shown in her compassionate rescue of Ivan in the opening scene. Her authority is revealed subsequently, after Andrei calls Ivan a "chicken" and they have a vicious fight, Ivan yells: "Mum will kill you". Both boys, then, run home as fast as they can in order to be able to tell their mother of the others' crimes. Through a Tarkovskian homage - a chromatic circuit of exchange which semiotically (re)doubles images from Tarkovsky to create a filmic metanarrative - when the boy's arrive home: "they come upon her [their mother] in a distinctly Tarkovsian pose, back to the camera smoking a cigarette while gazing

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ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
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into the distance, replicated almost directly from *Mirror* (*Zerkalo*, 1975), which also saw a young mother struggling to raise her children alone".[ix] A lineage of late Soviet screenology, where "paternity [was] declared an acute, endlessly ramifying problem in post-Soviet society, rooted in the passivity, self-indulgence, and fecklessness of men raised by single or divorced mothers who dote on their sons".[x] The focus on the back of the mother's neck is a call-back to the cinematography of Russian cinema of the Khrushchev Thaw Period - the resurrection of this particular Tarkovskian frame from *The Mirror* also a "representation of the abandoned mother, a canonical element of Russian cinema".[xi]

When the father returns to the domestic space, the silence of the grandmother and mother is palpable. Precipitating the restoration of the traditional maternalism - passive and meek, her authority is diminished. And so, *The Return* is an elegy, a conflation of time and space into a broken scape where both male and female (albeit with an increased marginality as the film goes on) are (re)visited and must (re)experience cycles of loss and sites of death. Indeed, in a rare comment on the work, Zvyagintsev stated: "I would say it's about the metaphysical incarnation of the soul's movement from the mother to the father".[xii]

"Where did he come from?": Apocryphal Absence & the Omnipresent Father

"Russian fathers", state Goscilo and Hashamova in their work on post-Soviet Film, "are essentially absent… Attributing the contemporary epidemic of 'fatherlessness' to the catastrophic loss of all lives in World World II, Chernov maintained that during the Soviet postwar era the country's leaders and screen personalities functioned as compensatory virtual fathers".[xiii] The demise of communism and Chechen Wars further facilitated the conditions for the near complete absence of the father figure on screen: the milieu of the post-communist identity crisis "culminat[ed] decades of conflicts and troubled negotiations between generations of males - similarly reflected".[xiv] Zvyagintsev's father figure in *The Return* is drawn as such, plucked anonymously from the disavowing mass of phantom-fathers - his namelessness and ahistoricity, then, overtures of Zvyagintsev's use of temporal demarcation. The abstraction of the father is multivalent, also allowing him to function as a symbol of omnipresence and act as a narrative vector for the brother's rite-of-passage. As such, his death at the end of the film, which will be addressed in more detail later on, facilitates a posterical restoration: a return to the state of absence-presence.

It is no surprise then, upon rushing home at the beginning of the narrative they are astonished to find their absent father, presently asleep. After being away for 12 years, the boys struggle to recognise their prodigal stranger. When they quietly tip-toe into him, two things are notable. Firstly, the aforementioned lack of recognition. Secondly, Zvyagintsev deliberately reconstructs his image, *mutais mutandis,* an intermedial (re)doubling of Mategna's *The Lamentation Over the Dead Christ* (c1480) and Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972). The use of adaptation and interposition in *The Return,* points out Anaïs Cabart:

> "[can] at times serve as symbols of a specific metaphysical tradition. The tragedy of *The Return* is intricately linked to the return of the past and its coexistence in the

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> present, another characteristic of the Eastern European films, as the cyclical nature of time in the films Pan-Slavic metaphysical worldview. The use of what Deleuze defines as crystal-images, particularly through photographs seen within shots, highlights the coexistence of the different temporalities.[xv]

Indeed, such a referential device, by retracing an old family photograph hidden in an attic, that Andrei and Ivan are able to confirm their father's identity. A relational relic, the photograph further places the past in the present and the present in the past. That is to say, the photograph acts diegetically twofold: verifying the father's claim in the present, while serving as a memorial device from the past by renewing the memory of his absence. A metaphysical effacement - an example it would seem, of what Cabat discusses in the passage above, whereby the temporal boundaries between the past and the present are abridged. The photograph itself is kept in what, rather surprisingly given the director's deeply religious approach, is the only religious object in the film, an illustrated bible. Rather prophetically, the photograph is placed on pages next to the image of Abraham sacrificing his son: the biblical parable which Zvyagintsev inverts. The object, a clue for the coming events; the sacrificial and spiritual motifs, and the oedipal nature of the story.

The sleeping father as the dead Christ - a scene which immediately precludes events in the attic - further explicates his sacrificial function: "His being asleep announces his later death, not only through the religious but also as a characteristic to Zvyaginstev's cinematic *topoi*, if we only remember *The Banishment* where the mother appears several times as sleeping before her death".[xvi] An obfuscatory character, the father is in essence a vessel: abstracted, nameless and with no information on his past - he is disposable. Absent and already-dead, his return and presence are akin to a desacralised Christ - a pre-destined vehicle able to spectrally enact his function as a father. An interchangeable entity, he serves to equip and educate his sons for adulthood, after which he can return to the habitual state of fatherly absence.

"Look after yourselves for a bit": Everyday Initiation & Making Manhood

Shortly after Andrei and Ivan encounter their father, the family share their first meal together in twelve years (a scene composite to Leonardo da Vinci's 'The Last Supper c 1495-1498'). In a somewhat portentous manner, the authoritative dinner table presence of the unnamed father foregrounds the boys' movement from the formative maternal home. He gives the boys their first glass of wine which rather tellingly the mother and grandmother dilute; occupying the position at the head of the table as the primary breadwinner (despite the fact that it is almost certainly the labors of the mother and grandmother that have put the food there).[xvii] For a work that deals in ambivalence, the opening lays out in no uncertain terms, the perspective of the father: in light of his authoritative absence the boys have become soft, feminized, and deficient in masculinity. Surmounting to what Ella Taylor calls:

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ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
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"an implacable discounting of maternal love, but also, perhaps, of Mother Russia (enfeebling) into Father Russia (character building)".[xviii]

And so the father decides that in order to counterbalance their masculine eschewment, he will take them on a fishing trip: "away from their mother and the emasculating effects of modern civilization, a realm which has cosseted them since infancy".[xix] The weeklong journey is a crash course; a headlong dive into the crafts of manhood and its fierce virility:

> The boys are coached on how to drink (later abuse) alcohol; drive a car; admire surreptitiously the wriggling of a passing woman's behind; stand by the consequences of their words and deeds; order from a waitress in a restaurant, engage in street justice […]; pitch a tent without it sagging; excavate a car stuck in mud; repair the hull of a boat and then moor it securely (significantly, a task they do not learn adequately; row their boat through a storm even when exhausted; then appreciate the magnificent landscape and seascape from atop a watchtower.[xx]

Throughout these initiatory set-pieces, Zvyagintsev refrains from simplification - harsh, confrontational, consistently inconsistent - it is hard to navigate the banal rituals of day-to-day adulthood and the practice(s) of masculinity. No clear roadmap, nor any formal diegetic moralism comes to the fore. The father is a complex vector of contention, his aims as well as his history are inscrutable. As their journey unfolds, "the question of "Who is he?" which dominates the early part of the film following the Father's arrival, is soon replaced by questions "Why did he come back?" and "What does he want?" as the boys struggle to fulfill the Father's constant, often cruel demands".[xxi] McSweeny augments this notion, ultimately asking; "is he just cruel and manipulative or is he guiding Ivan and Andrei through the necessary rites of passage so they can become men?".[xxii] Oscillating it would seem, between expectations and reality of the symbolic paternal functions: what is wished for in absence; against what is *needed* in the condescended present-presence. A tough harbinger, the trials he sets for them show them the severe realness of reality, a world that lies just around the bend; downstream in the rapids of post-adolescence.

Perhaps then, in this unpalatable parable Zvyagintsev reaches for something profound via the profane. Measuring and marking manhood through trials of love, the dad is both: Father (God) and Son (Christ). His exorbitant demands, intense initiations and demands for respect and love are tests: "the experiential odyssey undertaken by every father–son pairing concerns how we can love (or at least direct and contain our brutality), not only in a world steeped in violence, but also in context of aggressive, rageful and hateful feelings that are an ingredient of every relationship?".[xxiii] If there is predestination and knowing to his acts, then the father is Christ-like in his return, knowing the sacrifice - equipping his sons with the tools to operate in a lapsarian world before returning to his state as already dead. As Lisa Wakamiya writes: "[this] brief, period of pedagogical experience with their father integrates them into a preconstituted symbolic order. The process of

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learning depicted here is not so much one of self-discovery as of integrating the self in relation to others, language, and the law".[xxiv]

Oscillating between emotional/physical brutality and a compassionate mercifulness, the father is showing his sons' the bleak and ubiquitous violence of life. The true dimension of his love is found in the incongruous austerity of his behavior towards his children. Showing them what they *need,* not want. A necessary roadmap for children to cope, and even learn love, the bleakness of the broken world; how to negotiate their conduct within the landscape of masculine adulthood. As Barrat writes: "Here the film is blatant… violence is indulged and perpetuated mostly by men, it falls conspicuously to the father, or father figures, to demonstrate how such negotiations might be engaged".[xxv] Unsupervised in the open world, they are given responsibility - their interactions a stark jeopardy. Left with his wallet, they are mugged by a group of boys. After arraigning the assailant, he gives Ivan and Andrei agency: "You got hit, right? Do what you want with him? What are you waiting for?" The violent brevity of the encounter - extreme, indifferent, and *real* - shocks the boys, realizing they are now children in an adult world. When they decline, he gives the kid money for something to eat.

The father, then, is the juxtaposition of the messianic: a god-like "and Christ-like figure, fully embody[ing] the conception of mystery. He will ensure the initiation of his own sons by bringing them into confrontation with the mysteries of nature, life and death".[xxvi] A cruel compassionate being, the father is both burdened and the burden. Returning and then leaving: a condensed temporality, where years of inaction is offset through the intensity of his action. A crash course education where his labor is always already predestined. Paying the ultimate sacrifice, his death is a stilted stubborn re-counter with his own adolescence that he may have lost prematurely. Yet never quite left. Zvyagintsev's work is about the eternal state of adolescence and the sad stain of the inevitable. In the vector of childhood is endless return - a place, where we leave too soon yet always come back to. *The Return* is a story of several returns to and from childhood. In its ambivalence, the (in)definiteness of the act is refracted. A microcosmic re-ordering threefold: the father on his return, the revisiting of the island, and the return of the boys' at the trip's end. There is a transcendental spirit in the cruelness and economy of the work: initiation and imitation travailed through nature/naturalism. A father-son ritual that is profound in its presence and uncertainty.

"Dad, What is This Place? Where Are We?": Uncanny Naturalism & Spatiotemporal Transcendence

After their protracted journey, a process which maps the encounter and experience of manhood, albeit through the banality of its everyday constitution, the boys arrive at the destination: a demarcated Edenic island. A topography of trial and transcendence. In returning to the wilderness there is a chronotopic purity and togetherness, the need for trust a key condition for connection. Against the feral austerity of the natural world even the smallest acts have a laden mortality. It is in these zones, that lessons of a higher order are

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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
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learnt: a synthesis tempered and taught in nature and man. Unforgiving in its make or break mentality, here boys *must* become men - otherwise the posterity of instinct and survival fails. That is to say: all bets are off. So the logic follows that transition from boy to man is stunted - with a state of permanent dependance the result of failed passage. Rather, without these core markers of manhood - independence and future dependence (children/family) both fall by the wayside. Remaining forever children - a league of eternal sons. Yet, on this island and in the return to nature, the poetics of this notion are imbued with elements of tragedy: the cost counted, the results of the journey (un)justified and undermined. In death: inheritance. The son(s) becomes the father. Learning from him: the tools to navigate and respect the natural world, given an intensive guidebook for the violent everyday via experience and expedition and a harsh masculine form of love. A kind of love that is impersonal in its compassion, abstract in its practice, absent in its presence and alien in its empathy. But, also love which is graceful, metaphysical and transcendental. A simple love of duty, unsentimental and incidental. A realm where sacrifice is necessary; where the act of dying is par for the course.

A fractured pedagogy, the ritualized return to nature is a crucible of father-son relations. The harsh quietude of its constitution oscillates between fractious rites of the feral landscape and the punctuating silence between themselves and nature. The island is the setting for the final trial and confrontation between the father and his two sons - a private place of transaction and transition. In European literary traditions:

> the journey to the island can be compared to the crossing of the Styx, representing the passageway into Dante's fifth circle of Hell. In Greek mythology, similarly, the crossing can be compared to that of the Archeron on Charon's ferry, which brought the dead to the underworld… Literally [an] "other place", the term is defined by the author as a setting for initiation. It is a place that is open to the rest of the world and can be located geographically yet difficult to access. The island is, like the house in *The Sacrifice* and that in *Nostalghia*, the true cosmos, the ultimate primordial setting. It is a sanctuary in which both death and rebirth through initiation will take place.[xxvii]

And so it does, after stealing his knife and arguing with his father, Ivan runs away from his father, climbing atop an abandoned towering structure to escape him (a spectral doubling of the opening scene). In an act of love the father attempts to climb to the top after him, and accidentally falls to his death. Now alone in the austere and unforgiving natural world, the boys realize the sacrifice of their father, knowing in order to return home - they must do what he taught them over their car crash weekend. The two adolescents become men. Filling the absence left by their father, as he returns to nature, to innocence.

"God knows. Maybe he wants to forget": Spectrality and Still Life

The boys' manage to successfully navigate their way off the island. Yet their boat sinks and in the process they lose the corpse of their father. Returning us to the very opening shots

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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
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of the prologue of the film, which showed us a mysterious underwater vessel, images which now make sense. Also images which utterly skew temporality, there is an uncanny leakage here (there was nobody in the vessel at the start); nor evidence of the father to be found anywhere at the end. These haunted frames might seem holistic in their narratological bell curve, but their synchronicity is at odds with the reality of what has just unfolded. In the prologue of the film, the trips taken by Andrei throughout the trip with their father appear on screen. The father proves to be absent in every photograph from their journey. The photographs show nothing either of the trips hardships, the endurance the boys suffered. Was the father ever really there?

Journal of Children in Popular Culture, Volume 14, Issue 1, Winter 2024
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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
Number: 1286882178

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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
Number: 1286882178

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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
Number: 1286882178

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