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Alexandra Oberländer

## “To be a woman is hard work”.<sup>1</sup> The Changing Landscape of Gendered Emotions in the Late Soviet Union

When the melodrama “*Moskva slezam ne verit*” (Moscow does not believe in tears) opened in Soviet cinemas in March 1980, the audience’s response was enthusiastic. The film became a blockbuster, selling 84 million tickets within a few months.<sup>2</sup> The fact that it won the Oscar in the category of best foreign film in 1981 only boosted its success at home. To this day, the film remains a classic icon of late Soviet culture with well-known quotes from the film peppering contemporary post-Soviet conversations. In the 1980s, the movie’s success puzzled many professional Soviet film critics who were hesitant to accept the growing popularity of melodrama, a genre which was under dispute for its banal, bordering-on-bourgeois morality from its very beginning in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> The journalists’ reactions were straightforward: this is a ‘women’s film’ (*zhenskii film*). This label was not exactly a compliment in the Soviet world of art, a verdict amplified since the film’s release date in some cities coincided with International Women’s Day.<sup>4</sup> A film targeting women audiences only was an unambiguous deviation from the ideal that art had to address the broader working class or the Soviet population at large. A ‘women’s film’ was prone to challenge Soviet film critics who were used to looking for a broader socialist moral purpose in every production.

What made the film feminine in the eyes of its beholders was its emotionality. This was true both for its enthusiasts as for the critics, who denounced the film as *liricheskii*

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<sup>1</sup> Molodezh Moldavii [Youth of Moldavia], 8 April 1980.

<sup>2</sup> This figure is taken from Joshua First, Making Soviet Melodrama Contemporary: Conveying Emotional Information in the Era of Stagnation, in: *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, 2, 1 (2008), 21–42, 38. There is a fair amount of research on this particular film, e.g. David MacFayden, Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears: From Oscar to Consolation Prize, in: *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, 1, 1 (2007), 45–67; Viktoriia Tiazhel'nikova, “Moskva slezam ne verit”: zhiznennye strategii sovetskikh zhenshchin v 1950–1970-e gody [“Moscow does not Believe in Tears”: Soviet Women’s Life Strategies from the 1950s to the 1970s], in: Sergei S. Sekirinskii ed., *Istoriia strany/ istoriia kino* [A History of the Country/A History of Cinema], Moscow 2004, 363–374.

<sup>3</sup> On the emergence of melodrama see e.g. First, Making Soviet Melodrama, see note 2.

<sup>4</sup> According to Mary Ann Doane, women’s films “obsessively center and re-center a female protagonist” in a position of agency. Cit. following Alexander Prokhorov and Elena Prokhorova, *Film and Television Genres of the Late Soviet Era*, New York 2017, 173.

(lyrical), meaning it was overflowing with emotions and feelings and thus was garnished with a condescending sneer.<sup>5</sup> With its explicit emotionality, the melodrama *“Moskva slezam ne verit”* completed the detour from socialist realist art, which essentially had allowed no room for emotional turmoil (at least not of the heart).<sup>6</sup> Film scholars today consider the film to have been “the most radical in the late-socialist period,” highlighting how the “rise of the urban middle class, the centrality of the nuclear family, and the changing role of women comprise the semantic elements” of the genre.<sup>7</sup> This change in the social role of women in the Soviet 1970s took a conservative turn towards traditional gender norms, yet, curiously, many of the female viewers of *“Moskva slezam ne verit”* appreciated the turn. While in Thaw cinema it was the female protagonist who usually shaped the male hero into a morally improved person, this article starts from the premise that in many films of the 1970s it were men who helped women rediscover their ‘authentic’ feminine self.<sup>8</sup> *“Moskva slezam ne verit”* is in many ways the pinnacle of this sort of ‘patriarchal cinema,’ which interestingly rests on a thorough portrait of the (male) hero’s emotions.

Both the film and the reactions to it demonstrate the extent to which the Soviet order of feelings was, on the one hand, rigidly gendered, since it was built upon the categorical division between two allegedly natural/biological sexes with corresponding social characters and feelings. On the other hand, taking inspiration from Damien Boquet and Didier Lett by “observing what gender does to emotions and what emotions do to gender,” I show the extent to which the gendered order of feeling was unstable and fluid in the late Soviet period.<sup>9</sup> I will closely read how the film played with and extended traditional gender roles and in doing so, illuminate the broad scope of gender fluidity portrayed therein. Focusing on “the plasticity and fluidity of the way emotions are distributed between the sexes,” I will follow up with how hybrid such supposedly

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance *Iskusstvo kino [The Art of Cinema]*, 2 (1980), 40.

<sup>6</sup> Generally, the influence of socialist realism was radically declining after 1953 and was non-existent in popular Soviet cinema anymore in the late 1970s. See Prokhorov/Prokhorova, *Film and Television*, see note 4. On socialist realism and its sinking star in Thaw cinema see Marko Dumančić, *Rescripting Stalinist Masculinity. Contesting the Male Ideal in Soviet Film and Society, 1953–1968*, PhD dissertation, Chapel Hill 2010. On the alleged absence of emotions in socialist realism see for instance Beth Holmgren, *Writing the Female Body Politic (1945–1985)*, in: Adele Barker and Jehanne Gheith eds., *The Cambridge History of Russian Women’s Literature*, Cambridge/New York 2002, 225–242.

<sup>7</sup> Prokhorov/Prokhorova, *Film and Television*, see note 4, 18.

<sup>8</sup> On the role of women in Thaw cinema see Olha Kofman, *Freed by Ideology, Imprisoned by Reality. The Representation of Women in the Cinemas of the Thaw and the Perestroika*, PhD dissertation, Ohio 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Damien Boquet and Didier Lett, Editorial. Emotions and the concept of gender, in: *Clio. Women, Gender, History*, 47, 1 (2018), 7–22, 9. On looking beyond binary concepts in Soviet History see Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat. A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*, Cambridge 2010, 12.

gendered emotions were in reality, too.<sup>10</sup> This will be demonstrated in my analysis of audiences' perceptions. Professional journalists and cultural commentators evaluated and discussed the film in published reviews and articles. The rank-and-file audiences, and above all, women, flooded the newspaper offices with letters to the editors. Local party cells organised roundtables attended by people living or working in the neighbourhood. These sources allow us to assess the gendered order of feelings in Soviet society, its fluidity in everyday life as well as its reification, as represented in the film.<sup>11</sup> Guiding my investigation are the questions: "Whose emotion is valued? When is emotion acknowledged as a sign of legitimacy and truth of an utterance and when is it written off as 'merely emotion'?"<sup>12</sup> Emotions and gender cannot be reduced to a question of who experiences more or less emotions in total. Nor is a certain emotion in and of itself more female or male.<sup>13</sup> I will show that the heroine's checked feelings and above all, the hero's emotionality, were key to the film's success. In today's discourse, men who "talk about their feelings, cry at sad movies and pick up their kids from school" have become "the pinnacle of contemporary gender equality."<sup>14</sup> Emotional men are perceived as a progressive breakthrough. In this article, I will present a different perspective. As my reading of this film will demonstrate, the somewhat flipped order of commonly assumed and traditional gendered feelings, its fluidity, did not destabilise gender roles at all. On the contrary: paradoxically, the depicted atypical gender roles in fact helped to reify a binary gender and emotional order.

This article scrutinises fluidity and hybridity for its potentials in overcoming gender binaries and thus examines the many grey places in-between, articulated on a continuum of emotions available and open to all genders. The history of the Soviet Union is particularly apt for illuminating those grey places in-between. Socialist countries have achieved some remarkable results in gender politics (some of which Western capitalist societies have not achieved to this very day).<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the many different phases

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<sup>10</sup> Boquet/Lett, Editorial, see note 9, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Films give their viewers a "specific perspective or framework through which to examine their daily experiences and analyze the contemporary innovations that facilitated a new way of seeing reality", see Dumančić, *Rescripting Stalinist Masculinity*, see note 6, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Stephanie A. Shields, Dallas N. Garner, Brooke Di Leone and Alena M. Hadley, *Gender and Emotion*, in: Jan Stets and Jonathan H. Turner eds., *Handbook of the Sociology of Emotions*, Boston 2006, 63–83, 79.

<sup>13</sup> I am explicitly not concerned with the 'feminisation' of men and the 'masculinisation' of women. For too long, historians have been blind to the ingrained hybridity of emotions and gender. Moreover, by describing and analysing a biased gendered order of feelings they have sometimes implicitly affirmed that very order. See Jeanne Boydston, *Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis*, in: *Gender & History*, 20, 3 (2008), 558–583.

<sup>14</sup> Sam de Boise, *Men, Masculinities, Music and Emotions*, Basingstoke 2015, 13.

<sup>15</sup> To this day women in former Eastern European states enjoy greater access to prestigious and comparatively well-paid jobs. See Kristen R. Ghodsee and Julia Mead, *What has Socialism Ever Done for Women?* in: *Catalyst*, 2, 2 (2018), 100–133. State socialism was committed to women's education and professional development. For the GDR see e.g. Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the*

of gender history in the Soviet Union by no means constitute a linear progression towards equality, yet they amply illustrate the constant negotiation of gendered emotions in their fluidity and rigidity, and the simultaneous extension and suspension of gender boundaries and feelings. Examining the socialist case might help to demonstrate not only the extent to which the Soviet Union was *avant la lettre* in gender politics and their proximity to gender equality, but also the extent to which it was this very equalising gender politics that reified the gendered order of feelings. Social(ist) progress was by no means an attempt to transcend gender. After all, the very act of legislating equality between these two genders was in itself an act of affirming their differences, rather than criticising gender as a category per se.

In what was to be called the Soviet Union after 1922, the political, economic and social gender equality had been an official state goal since 1917. Legal reforms in the 1920s brought a new degree of sexual liberation once abortion had been decriminalised and divorce had become an administrative matter requiring little more than a signature. However, these achievements were short lived.<sup>16</sup> From the mid-1930s onwards, the nuclear family regained importance and new laws impeded divorce and abortion. Despite this conservative turn, a stunning 820,000 women served in the Red Army during the Great Patriotic War from 1941 to 1945, of whom 120,000 were combatants (soldiers, snipers or pilots). Being a soldier and a 'feminine' woman were not mutually exclusive but compatible.<sup>17</sup>

With the end of the Second World War a wider array of masculinities started to develop.<sup>18</sup> On top of the emblematic worker and soldier, fathers began to appear with increasing frequency in public discourse. In media representations and official state and party discourse, at least, the loving and caring father "engaging in the household and childcare was a sign of modern, socialist masculinity."<sup>19</sup> As Marko Dumančić shows in his reading of Thaw-era films, the Stalinist ideal of heroic and hard-bodied hypermasculinity was exchanged in favour of an image of physically imperfect men who were insecure, soft and above all, emotional bordering on depressed. The Thaw and its cinema "established intimate romantic feelings as a motivating force in people's lives."<sup>20</sup> Many of these feeling happened at home and were partly made possible by Khrush-

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Domestic. Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic, Princeton 2008.

<sup>16</sup> On gender utopias in Revolutionary Russia see Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams. Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*, New York/Oxford 1989.

<sup>17</sup> On female combatants see Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*, see note 9.

<sup>18</sup> See Claire McCallum, *The Fate of the New Man. Representing & Reconstructing Masculinity in Soviet Visual Culture, 1945–1965*, DeKalb, IL 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Jill Massino, *Something Old, Something New: Marital Roles and Relations in State Socialist Romania*, in: *Journal of Women's History*, 22, 1 (2010), 35–60, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Dumančić, *Rescripting Stalinist Masculinity*, see note 6.

chev's massive housing program, which made room for a new domesticity.<sup>21</sup> The cherished apartment of 50 square meters also meant that women were increasingly expected to find their happiness and bliss in these comparatively spacious new homes and less so at work.<sup>22</sup> While there is a consensus among scholars that the new ideals for men allowed for a hitherto unthinkable emotional breadth and thus a multi-layered personality, the picture gets complicated when we look at assessments of femininity after 1953. While Dumančić for instance stresses that the Thaw culture stopped perceiving women as secondary and indeed liberated women from their strictly supportive role for heroic masculinity, Olha Kofman offers a contrasting interpretation. She seconds Dumančić's reading of women who have the power to change men (for the better, of course), but her emphasis in reading movie heroines lies on their very own inability to change. Women did not evolve, let alone progress; they stagnated, she contends. Although women were increasingly depicted in leading social roles (there were quite a few female factory directors on the Soviet Screen since the 1970s), they were always caught between feminine roles at home and masculine roles in public whereas men could just be what they were.<sup>23</sup> As Lynne Atwood has shown for the 1970s, the "Soviet model woman who successfully juggled professional and domestic roles was [...] fiction."<sup>24</sup> And this is where the film begins.

## 1. "Moscow does not believe in tears"<sup>25</sup>

With a total running time of two and a half hours, the film follows the successful career and unhappy love life of Katia in two episodes. The first episode is set in 1958. Katia and her two roommates have just arrived from the provinces to work and live in Moscow. Their status is precarious: they belong to the army of *limitchiki*, people

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<sup>21</sup>See McCallum, *The Fate of the New Man*, see note 18; Mark B. Smith, *Property of Communists. The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev*, DeKalb, IL 2010.

<sup>22</sup> This is a 180-degree reversal of utopian ideas, such as those in the 1920s, in which housework was about to become collectivised, thereby liberating individual women from such menial tasks. The advent of individual apartments in the 1950s and 1960s put an end to this utopian vision and effectively propagated the ideal of the nuclear family, with its traditional gendered division of labour. See Susan E. Reid, *Women in the Home*, in: Melanie Ilič, Susan E. Reid and Lynne Atwood eds., *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, New York 2004, 149–176. On the shaky notion of 'private' or 'privacy' in the Soviet context see e.g. Lewis H. Siegelbaum ed., *Borders of Socialism. Private Spheres of Soviet Russia*, New York 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Other examples are "Old Walls" [*Starye steny*, 1973], "I wish to speak" [*Prozhu slovo*, 1976] or "Office Romance" [*Sluzhebnyi roman*, 1977].

<sup>24</sup> Lynne Atwood, *Gender Angst in Russian Society and Cinema in the Post-Stalin Era*, in: Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd, eds., *Russian Cultural Studies. An Introduction*, Oxford 1998, 352–367.

<sup>25</sup>The film with English subtitles can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7GuhjGZ-xs> or <https://ok.ru/video/363287153175>; access: 24 June 2021.

granted permission to live and work in Moscow for a limited amount of time.<sup>26</sup> For three young women at the tender age of 20 the city of Moscow offers a promise of happiness. For Liuba, the most adventurous among the three, happiness is to be found in a husband, a 'prince', whose social status should ideally elevate her own. Tosia, the very down-to-earth, albeit rather dull roommate, finds her life companion very early in the film.<sup>27</sup> She settles for Kolia, a rank-and-file worker who promises her a peaceful and calm family life. At one moment, Liuba quips that just by glancing at Tosia's romantic bliss she gets bored. "First they will save for a TV, then for the washing machine, and finally they will buy a fridge. It's just like Gosplan, everything laid out for the next 20 years."<sup>28</sup>

The determined Katia, by contrast, pursues her dream of getting into a higher education institute to study. She does not seem too eager to search for love or find a husband. Her life does not revolve around men and her aspirations are not limited to being swept off her feet by such specimens as those of her roommates. Love arrives instead as a catastrophe embodied in Rudolf, a charming yet unscrupulous cameraman who lives according to the same idea as Liuba: to find a woman of higher social status who will give him access to material benefits (for example, a big apartment). In a scene that today would likely be labelled as rape, Rudolf forces himself onto Katia and leaves her pregnant as soon as he realises that she is nothing but a simple factory worker.<sup>29</sup> The first episode ends with Katia, now a single mother of a new-born child, studying for her entrance exams through the night before crying herself to sleep.

The second episode resumes Katia's story about 16 years later.<sup>30</sup> While the first instalment featured the three women with a slight narrative emphasis towards Katia, the second part focuses entirely on her fate alone. She is no longer little 'Katia' but Katerina Tikhomirova, a successful Soviet career woman. Katerina has few material wants, owns a car and lives with her teenage daughter in a very nice apartment. She is the director of a large chemical enterprise. Early in this second episode we see her at work, checking the production process, examining the product and reprimanding male engineers. A man in a suit (probably a party member) walking the rounds of the factory with her remarks

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<sup>26</sup> On *limitchiki* see Emily Elliot, Soviet Socialist Stars and Neoliberal Losers: Young Labour Migrants in Moscow, 1971–1991, in: *Journal of Migration History*, 3, 2 (2017), 274–299; Dietrich A. Loeber, *Limitchiki: On the Status of Migrant Workers in Large Soviet Cities*, in: *The Soviet and Post Soviet Review*, 11, 1 (1984), 301–308.

<sup>27</sup> Quotes are taken from the film.

<sup>28</sup> Gosplan was the state agency for central planning.

<sup>29</sup> Not a single review in the 1980s interpreted this scene as one depicting rape. However, it deeply bothers viewers today. See for instance David Hayter, *For The Sake of Russia: MOSCOW DOES NOT BELIEVE IN TEARS and Feminism in Russia*, at: <http://www.cinepunx.com/for-the-sake-of-russia-moscow-does-not-believe-in-tears-and-feminism-in-russia>; access: 9 November 2020.

<sup>30</sup> The majority of articles and reviews referred to a 20 year gap, while the review by Elena Bauman calculated a 16 year gap. See E. V. Bauman, *Vremia skvoz' sud'by* [Time through fate], in: *Iskusstvo kino*, 2 (1980), 38–47, 42.

approvingly that she is a “strict but just” director. She is a highly accomplished professional, the only woman among men, appreciated, respected, and maybe even feared as a director.

Katerina Tikhomirova is an exemplary boss, a single mother and on top of all she also manages to somehow fulfil her Soviet civic duties as a member of the Moscow Soviet of People’s Deputies, the city administration. Nevertheless, happiness is not a remotely adequate description for this life full of duties and obligations. Her love life is limited to an unfulfilling affair with a married man. After almost being caught by his wife, who unexpectedly returns home early from her holidays, Katerina decides to end the affair. That night Katerina – Katia – once again ends up crying herself to sleep in her new and well-furnished apartment.

Enter Gosha: it is through the narrative device of fate that the film introduces this man who, though he never receives a surname, ultimately brings happiness to Katia. They meet by chance on a suburban train. Katia disapprovingly notices his dirty boots when he sits down opposite her, prompting him to retort that such “judging” (*otsenivaiushchii*) looks usually only come from unmarried women. Or policemen or executive workers, two options that Gosha immediately excludes. From the very first moment of their encounter, it is important to Gosha that he establishes her profession as one that cannot possibly be above his own. Amused, Katia softens and chooses not to correct his presumption that she might be something like a forewoman. The two start a love affair, but as soon as Gosha becomes aware of Katerina’s social position as factory director, he immediately breaks it off. Her higher status is something his masculinity simply cannot endure. Eventually, after drenching Moscow with some more of her tears, they get back together on one condition: at home Gosha will be the boss and Katia will defer to him.

## 2. Prince Charming

This film, or rather its male hero, received a lot of attention. As is often the case in romance, perceived as a genre decidedly for women, the film revolved around the character of Gosha. Some reviewers contended that the film essentially only began with his appearance on the commuter train, a full 90 minutes in. A review in the popular film magazine “*Sovetskii ekran*” (Soviet screen) found that Gosha “leads the film into a new orbit, he provides the film with a depth and significance, he broadens our conception about the inner life of the contemporary person – the worker.”<sup>31</sup> The same review

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<sup>31</sup> *Sovetskii ekran* [Soviet Screen], 3 (1980), 3. In contrast to “*Iskusstvo kino*”, which was a journal for those professionally working in movies and movie-production “*Sovetskii ekran*” was addressed at the rank-and-file movie-goer. Its circulation in 1966 numbered over 2.6 million exemplars. See Dumančić, Rescripting Stalinist Masculinity, see note 6, 226–227.



qualified everything that happened before Gosha's captivating entrance as "old news," thereby labeling the lives and biographies of the three heroines as "trivial."<sup>32</sup> Although Gosha is clearly not the leading protagonist, audiences and journalists alike often perceived him as the film's true hero. In an article in "*Sovetskii ekran*" entitled "A real everyman (*narodnoi*) character," one journalist wrote that from "the first moment this hero appears on screen you can feel his powerful, magnetic force."<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the article flipped the film's narrative lens, retelling the story through Gosha's eyes: it is *he* who coincidentally meets a grumpy woman ("deep in her unhappy thoughts") on the train. The full-page article mentions Katerina's name once and omits that she raised a smart daughter on her own, neglects her astonishing career and her political work, instead solely praising Gosha's qualities. In many reviews and audience discussions, Gosha was the film's central figure in spite of the fact that he in no way resembled the stereotypical Soviet screen hero. Childless, divorced, he worked in a scientific laboratory (Nauchno-Issledovatel'skii Institute, or NII), a workplace usually associated with shirkers. He lacked any further professional aspirations and was not engaged in any political work at all.<sup>34</sup>

Although the director Vladimir Menshov (born 1939) repeatedly insisted that his film depicts "the most common lives" of the most "common people," most audiences viewed it as a fairy tale.<sup>35</sup> Katia played the role of Cinderella (*Zolushka*) and Gosha, of course, was her prince. Apart from the odd inverted fact that Cinderella was the director of a chemical factory in Moscow and the prince a simple worker, albeit one with "golden hands," this image of "*Moskva slezam ne verit*" as an unrealistic fantasy was repeatedly stressed in the reviews. The provincial newspaper "*Volzhskaia kommuna*" (Volga commune) compared Gosha to a "magician" (*volshhebnik*) who manages to bestow Katia with a completely new life.<sup>36</sup> In contrast to the classic Cinderella plot, the reversed social hierarchy between Katerina and Gosha provided grounds for a new fairy tale in which a man could climb the social ladder thanks to his woman.

The explicit social hierarchy between a regular male worker and an accomplished female director elicited a lot of commentary. Gosha "doesn't do anything remarkable. He does not draw attention, he is dressed like thousands of other men and has the typical job – he is a metal worker."<sup>37</sup> Although he is depicted as just a regular worker, he is one who demonstrates an exemplary work attitude. Gosha is not a man of shallow words but a man of action. His "golden hands" are mentioned frequently throughout

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<sup>32</sup> *Sovetskii ekran*, 3 (1980), 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Sovetskii ekran*, 2 (1980), 5.

<sup>34</sup> On shirking see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Social Parasites: How Tramps, Idle Youth, and Busy Entrepreneurs Impeded the Soviet March to Communism*, in: *Cahiers du monde russe*, 47, 1–2 (2008), 377–408.

<sup>35</sup> *Iskusstvo kino*, 9 (1980), 29.

<sup>36</sup> *Volzhskaia kommuna* [Volga commune], 17 February 1980.

<sup>37</sup> Boris Pavlenok, *Khoziain zhizni* [Master of his life], in: *Sovetskii ekran*, 24 (1979), 0–1, 1.

the film.<sup>38</sup> Many of the reviews praised Gosha precisely for his mundane existence. The fact that he was not an outstanding hero made him an exemplary hero: “[...] this man understands labour as creative activity (*tvorchestvo*), he sees pleasure in work, for him pride in labour is both a somewhat higher notion and principle, yet at the same time entirely mundane, something without which he could not fathom himself.”<sup>39</sup>

Although his alleged work attitude was crucial for establishing Gosha as an equal match for Katerina, we never actually see him at work. Nevertheless, the audience could rest assured that in his scientific research institute nothing would happen without him. “He is a worker in the highest sense of this word, he is the sovereign master in everything [literally: in all things large and small],” wrote yet another journalist, convinced that every word Gosha or his scripted colleagues uttered about this exemplary man must be true.<sup>40</sup> Whereas for Katerina her career was a persistent obstacle, especially in light of her duties as a single mother, Gosha’s job was the source of his energy and pride. His authenticity and romantic exertions both in love and at work seemed to know no boundaries. This everyday hero did not do compromises; he did not recognise duties or accept obligations.

Gosha’s public perception closely followed his own self-characterisation in the film: “I prefer to do what I love, and not what is fashionable, prestigious or proper.” He was totally himself, which makes him immensely attractive. A Vladivostok journalist described how female audiences held their breath every time Gosha was on screen, whereas male audiences wondered if men like Gosha really existed.<sup>41</sup> In letters to the editor, female film-goers asked where to find such a prince. In 1980, a certain L.G. from Moscow wrote to “*Sovetskii ekran*”: “Thank you, Gosha. What a pity that you exist on screen only! Huh, if only I knew in which commuter train you ride. I had a life once, too. I am 34 years old, and I am waiting for your arrival. Until then I’ll ride in the neighbouring carriage. I won’t lose hope (*Glavnoe – ne padat’ dukhom*).”<sup>42</sup>

As this letter amply demonstrates, Gosha managed to inspire women with a sense of hope for a better future in romantic terms. His screen-image alone enticed L.G. to share her dream of finding someone just like Gosha. Aligning herself with Katia, L.G. bemoaned that without someone like Gosha neither she nor Katia were actually even living life.

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<sup>38</sup> Volzhskaia kommuna, 17 February 1980.

<sup>39</sup> Bauman, *Vremia skvoz’ sud’by*, see note 30, 46.

<sup>40</sup> Boris Pavlenok, *Khoziain zhizni*, see note 37, 1. One review even compared Gosha to *the* exemplary worker of late Soviet cinema, Potapov in the film *Premiia* (Bonus), see *Molodoj dal’ne Vostochnik* [Young Far Easterner] (Khabarovsk), 30 March 1980.

<sup>41</sup> See V. Teplov, *Tsena nastoiashchego uspekha* [The price of true success], in: *Krasnoe znamia* [Red Banner] (Vladivostok), 1 March 1980. A female journalist knew the answer and outright disputed that there could be such men in real life, see *Ural’skii rabochii* [The Ural Worker], 6 March 1980.

<sup>42</sup> *Sovetskii ekran*, 13 (1980), 14.

Gosha represented an ideal man whose positive qualities consisted first and foremost in his broad emotional repertoire. What made the character of Gosha a dream-prince for many Soviet women was that he was a *feeling* man. He was “charming,” “soft,” and “lays his soul” open from the very first minute of his encounter with Katia.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, he was “masculine,” “strong” and “affectionate.” He carried himself with a “proud dignity” (*gordoe dostoinstvo*) and “confident peace” (*uverennoe spokoistve*).<sup>44</sup> At the same time he was “easily hurt.”<sup>45</sup> The critic M. Kvasnetskaia, whose review was nothing short of a love letter to the fictional Gosha, wrote: “Undoubtedly, the maximalism of his feelings is the reason for his attractiveness. He is also attractive because of his knightly code of male honour, which consists in caring about those who are dear and near to him, the defence of the weak, his sharp sense of responsibility and duty.”<sup>46</sup>

Although maximalism was usually not a positive attribute in Soviet discourse since it reeked of egocentric, even narcissistic behaviour, Gosha was praised and found to be attractive for precisely that attitude. Here was a character who was able to feel to a maximalist degree, which manifested in him being unforgiving, even relentless in his feelings. An emotional overdose for men: that was what was wanted, or rather, what women wanted. Kvasnetskaia, the journalist, peppered her portrayal of Gosha’s emotional maximalism with the gendered attributes of honour and knightly codes, the latter in particular being somewhat surprising in a socialist society. What were perceived to be his positive traits lacked distinct socialist values. What Gosha’s character did not lack, however, was an emotion-centred ideal of manly behaviour in which feeling is not tantamount to weakness but a marker of strength. In his weakest moment, heartbroken after discovering that Katia lied to him by concealing her profession, Gosha is portrayed as a feeling man “tortured by doubts,” whose voice became “expressionless.” In other words: he is authentically romantic and romantically authentic. He is *all* feeling.<sup>47</sup> His knightly qualities made him desirable not only for Katia but single women in general, like L.G., and as the journalist Danila Akivis wrote in “*Sovetskaia kul’tura*” (Soviet Culture), even for married women.

Gosha’s devotion to Katia, who he assumed to be a worker like himself, bordered on subservience, yet this emphasised rather than diminished his manly – read: knightly – courtship. Being an emotional maximalist, Gosha nonchalantly took on tasks that were usually interpreted as decidedly female. In Kvasnetskaia’s review he was portrayed as caring about those “who are dear and near to him.” Such ‘emotional caring’ was understood as a feminine role consisting of emotional work done at home, whereas the typical masculine equivalent of relating to those “near and dear” was ‘materially pro-

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<sup>43</sup> Sovetskii ekran, 2 (1980), 5.

<sup>44</sup> Sovetskaia Rossiia [Soviet Russia], 15 March 1980.

<sup>45</sup> Vechernaia Moskva [Evening Moscow], 9 January 1979.

<sup>46</sup> Sovetskii ekran, 2 (1980), 5.

<sup>47</sup> R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, Hegemonic Masculinities: Rethinking the Concept, in: Gender & Society, 19, 6 (2005), 829–859, 841.

viding' by earning money outside the home. An article in the newspaper "*Sovetskaia kul'tura*" praised Gosha's caring actions in the following words: "He tells her to 'take a break' and wraps her legs in something warm and fluffy, he himself sneaks off on tiptoes just to think of something else he might please her with."<sup>48</sup>

Gosha's actions reversed what was commonly assumed to have been a rigidly gendered order of feelings. This was underlined in the article's use of words like "warm" and "fluffy" to describe the blanket Gosha carefully spread out over sleepy Katia upon her return home from work. At the beginning of the film, the so-called "Moscow lottery" was a game of finding a real man who would be able to provide a decent lifestyle, a goal Katia only reluctantly pursued. In light of Katia's successful career, she and her daughter clearly did not need Gosha to provide for them in material terms; in the eyes of filmgoers, however, this left Gosha's masculinity surprisingly undamaged.<sup>49</sup> On the contrary: their perception of his masculinity was boosted by him taking on the female task of emotional care.

In romantic terms, the character of Gosha turned traditional Soviet male gender roles upside down too. Due to the death of millions of men during the Second World War, the Soviet Union suffered from a surplus ratio of single women to single men. In the Soviet dating world, this demographic imbalance led many women to actively pursue relationships, while men were in a position of waiting and choosing. In the film, it is Gosha who essentially woos Katia into a romance. He turns up unannounced in front of her home offering to carry her shopping bags up into her apartment. He takes her out on a Sunday morning with a picnic he has prepared, wrapping her yet again into a blanket and telling her to sleep the work week off. His care for her irresistibly attracts Katia, whose life until this point has always been about caring for others. While Gosha knew from the first moment of their chance encounter that this woman was for him, Katia needed to be convinced. Through Gosha's coaxing, she gradually transitioned from "grumpy" to hesitant to outright happy.<sup>50</sup>

### 3. The female pursuit of happiness

Whereas Gosha seemed to enjoy his carefree life as much as he could, Katia's life was about meeting expectations and fulfilling duties. Katia was "diligent" or "industrious";<sup>51</sup> she had to make an effort if she wanted to gain something as Bauman in her review

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<sup>48</sup> *Sovetskaia kul'tura* [Soviet Culture], 26 February 1980.

<sup>49</sup> On the role of breadwinning and masculinity see Natalia Jarska, *Women's Work and Men. From Breadwinning to Consumption and Emancipation*. Unpublished paper given at the workshop *Men & Masculinities under Socialism. A Social and Cultural History*, University of Bern, 8–9 October 2020.

<sup>50</sup> *Sovetskii ekran*, 2 (1980), 5.

<sup>51</sup> *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 15 March 1980.

explicated: “Katerina Tikhomirova made her way... It did not fall from heaven, she did not win the ‘Moscow lottery’. She paid with her labour and her tenacity, she achieved everything honestly, she invested strength, soul, will, human and civil self-esteem. Everything has been earned.”<sup>52</sup>

Katia’s biography rested on determination and perseverance. She was eager, serious, focused and constantly under pressure when at work. She was an esteemed colleague and commanded respect as a director but her occupation did not provide her with a sense of satisfaction or fulfilment. Katerina’s attitude towards work as well what she effectively gained from it was juxtaposed against the seemingly easygoing yet fulfilling work-life Gosha lead. For her, work has more than once appeared as an obstacle. She lost her first love, Rudolf, after he had realized that Katia was only a simple worker and not a professor’s daughter. Some 16 years later, she loses Gosha, the ‘love of her life’ when he learns that Katerina is the powerful director of a chemical plant. In a socialist state that propagated emancipation for women through work, it was her occupation –twice –that essentially deprived her of love. Her men could not bear it either way: her social status was too low the first time and too high the second. The film addressed the problem of work for women in socialist states where the promotion of gender equality was largely limited to the occupational – as distinct from social – sphere.

Although Katerina was the quintessential Soviet citizen who lived for her work and demonstrated a wealth of positive characteristics (strength, soul, will...), she was not blessed with a happy life. We never see her smiling at work. Sara Ahmed has described, how in the gendered order of feelings, happiness is “actually not what happens, it’s what you earn,” contending that “happiness” derives from the verb “to happen.”<sup>53</sup> Katia’s happiness was based on both chance and merit. She ‘earned’ her happiness in love by being a diligent worker and single mother. She ‘earned’ her chance meeting with a man like Gosha.

This notion of *female* happiness as a chance that must be earned framed how female audiences commented upon Katia’s fate. In public discussions, Katia figured not only as the quintessential Soviet citizen but also as the typical woman, because her life was viewed as one requiring constant effort. She worked hard for everything she achieved, whereas Gosha simply charmed himself into the hearts of those around him. In contrast to Katia, Gosha was not lonely. He was at home among his workmates, who were also his friends, and his work and leisure activities compensated for the lack of romantic love. Katia’s friends, by contrast, were her former roommates. Her position as a director did not allow her to feel at home among colleagues since she had to maintain hierarchies and distance. Her life required constant restraint and she couldn’t simply be herself. Not

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<sup>52</sup> Bauman, *Vremia skvoz’ sud’by*, see note 30, 42.

<sup>53</sup> Sigrid Schmitz and Sara Ahmed, *Affect/Emotion: Orientation Matters. A Conversation between Sigrid Schmitz and Sara Ahmed*, in: *Freiburger Zeitschrift für GeschlechterStudien*, 20, 2 (2014), 97–108, 105.

only did women have to earn their happiness, they had to make decisions for or against it. Katia opting for a career was tantamount to opting against happiness in her private life. The film portrays this major life decision as an 'either/or'.

The kernel of the film's fairy-tale message to women was that once you pursue a life like Katerina Tikhomirova it is highly unlikely that you will find your prince. In a letter to the lead actress, Vera Alentova (born 1942), one woman juxtaposed the mutually exclusive public and private sphere as follows: "Your character Katia was so lucky to meet someone like Gosha. It's sad, but things rarely happen that way. I wait and wait, but my prince just doesn't come. I'm the same age as your heroine: I've been blessed with an interesting job and everything's okay financially, but [...] what I am supposed to do? Live with my 'proud loneliness'?"<sup>54</sup>

For women in socialism, a 'career' came at a heavy price. This woman's "proud loneliness" marked a choice between having an occupation as a source of pride but being lonely, or pursuing love (and family life), which was less proud but also less lonely (in the film this is the path taken by Katia's roommate Tosia). Katerina's persistence and career achievements led to a certain *deformation professionnelle*, for example, an inability to compromise.<sup>55</sup> There was hope for her yet, however, as one journalist wrote: "In the second instalment we have a developed character in front of us, the current type of a business woman, a little bit brusque, but not hardened, gifted with a masculine grip in all things job-related [v delakh], but not one of those women in blue-stockings; she kept her female charm and also a certain fragility, as becoming of her gender."<sup>56</sup> This review pointed to her masculine traits, but conceded that Katia had managed to stay feminine. Its female author explicitly linked emotions and gender, observing how men were expected to be brusque and hardened, whereas brusqueness on the part of women simply camouflaged their fragility. Katerina's hidden femininity was crucial, since this was why Gosha was able to rescue her. "She is a living normal woman, with a heart [...], by no means parrying natural female passions," is how one male participant of a roundtable discussion in Moscow put it.<sup>57</sup> Her femininity was a trait which was never to be displayed at work, it only showed in the private sphere and it was something Gosha had to slowly uncover.

In many of the reviews Katia was imagined as a woman who perceived romantic love as the realm where she can be "actually happy."<sup>58</sup> Yet this belief in the promise of

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<sup>54</sup> Sovetskaia kul'tura, 12 June 1981.

<sup>55</sup> Volzhskaia kommuna, 17 February 1980. That urban professional women in leading positions were unable to compromise is a common trope in Soviet films. See Prokhorov/Prokhorova, *Film and Television*, see note 6, 175: "Usually the female protagonist was the only character in the picture who refused to compromise and settle for an illusion of happiness. Instead, she fought all the way alone both professionally and personally."

<sup>56</sup> Bauman, *Vremia skvoz' sud'by*, see note 30, 47.

<sup>57</sup> *Iskusstvo kino*, 9 (1980), 21.

<sup>58</sup> Volzhskaia kommuna, 17 February 1980.

happiness in love baffled many reviewers, leading them to characterise the film as “lyrical” or, more directly, “banal.”<sup>59</sup> Katia’s happiness depended on love, while for Gosha romance was more like an unexpected bonus. She needed love to be happy, he already was. This is why he was Prince Charming and she a grumpy, unhappy woman on a commuter train.<sup>60</sup> The film’s depiction of the romantic love ideal as a version of the pursuit of happiness was stripped of virtually all Soviet particularities. As John Griffith Urang has shown for the German Democratic Republic, romantic love was remarkably similar in capitalism and (late) socialism. As a plot structure, two characters falling head over-heels in love hardly needed any special explanation. Even in highly ideological societies love and romance function as an “authorizing force.”<sup>61</sup>

As “*Moskva slezam ne verit*” amply demonstrated, work for women in the late Soviet Union did not promise happiness or at least not *enough* happiness. The film scrutinised a Soviet way of life in which work overwhelmingly figured as the site of self-actualisation for (wo)men. This scepticism opened up a space for questions about differentiated (Soviet) ideals of happiness for different genders. The thorny issue of gender equality revolved around the question of whether work could be a source of happiness to women, to which the film answered, ‘not enough’ to lead a happy life. Furthermore, the film told its viewers, the bliss of romantic love differed for women and men. The message to female audiences was: even if you are successful, if you manage to take control of your own life and steer it with your own hands, if you manage to overcome countless obstacles, and happen to live in supposedly the best society ever known, – socialism – all this will still amount to nothing if you do not find love. In other words: real happiness for women was only to be found at home.

A roundtable discussion organised by the journal “*Iskusstvo kino*” (Art of Cinema) addressed these questions of female happiness and where to find it. A group of 15 to 20 people (workers, local residents, party members, and representatives of the journal) participated in the roundtable, which took place in Moscow’s central Frunzenskaya district. At times the discussion became “openly emotional,” as the journal’s editor described it.<sup>62</sup> This heightened emotionality was largely thanks to the director of a local

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<sup>59</sup> See e.g. Volzhskaja kommuna, 17 February 1980; Kuzneckii rabochii [The Kuznetsk Worker], 19 February 1980; Pochemu tak... [Why like that...], in: *Iskusstvo kino*, 9 (1980), 16.

<sup>60</sup> The absence of romantic love was a dominant trope for portraying women in Soviet films after the Thaw. This holds for rank-and-file female workers, e.g. “*Vysota*” [Height, 1957], “*Devchata*” [Gals, 1962] and “*Koroleva benzakolonki*” [The Queen from the Petrol Station, 1962] but also for women in leading positions in films mostly from the 1970s, such as “*Starye steny*” [Old walls, 1973].

<sup>61</sup> John Griffith Urang, *Legal Tender. Love and Legitimacy in the East German Cultural Imagination*, Ithaca 2010, 6.

<sup>62</sup> A transcript of the roundtable can be found in *Stenogramma zasedaniia kruglogo stola ‘Moskva slezam ne verit’* [Shorthand transcript of the round table on ‘Moscow does not believe in tears’], Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Literatury i Iskusstva (RGALI) [Russian State Archive of Literature and Art], fond 2912, opis’ 6, delo 2, 9 April 1980. It was published in abbreviated form in *Iskusstvo kino*, 9 (1980), 14–37.

school, Valentina Aver'ianova. Although several of the participants observed that this was a film about finding happiness, Aver'ianova stressed that it was specifically about "finding *female* happiness."<sup>63</sup> She championed a very clear vision about the proper role of women in socialist societies and expressed absolute certainty that there was no such thing as "happy single, unmarried women."<sup>64</sup> For Aver'ianova, Katia's unhappiness was entirely her own fault: she made the wrong choices. It was simply not a woman's job to become the director of a chemical plant. Aver'ianova fully embraced Katia's unhappiness as something coherent, consistent and legitimate.

For Aver'ianova, 'woman' and 'mother' were synonymous. She pointed out that the pupils with the fewest problems in her school came from families with a stay-at-home mother. In her view, to be a housewife was the proper social function for a woman in a socialist society. Aver'ianova's insistence on the role of women as housewives is somewhat surprising considering that she herself had pursued a career as a school director. Thus, her severe emotional reaction to "*Moskva slezam ne verit*" might very well have been a reflection of her own life history (whether she had children I do not know).<sup>65</sup> Echoing the reviews in journals and newspapers, the other women in the roundtable discussion praised the film's fairytale characters while Aver'ianova talked herself into a proper rage. According to her, it was simply impossible for women to pursue a career in real life as Katia does in the film. Furthermore, she contended that someone like Katia would never fall in love with a Gosha, let alone submit to him.

Several of the female commentators conceded this point, for they too had a hard time believing that Katia would be capable of simply giving in to Gosha. How could she possibly switch from being a respected and earnest director in public to a loving and submissive woman at home? The contention put forward at this roundtable discussion was that Katerina has essentially lost her inherent (feminine) quality of giving to her role of being a director. She has crossed the boundaries of gendered feelings. Other participants, such as the male worker Vladimir Komitsyn, who acknowledged that Gosha's patriarchal ideas were somewhat outdated, were convinced that this is exactly what Katia wanted: "No matter how much Katerina was accustomed to being independent, this is precisely what she looked for."<sup>66</sup> The female engineer Agasian had a similar perspective on what "real" women wanted: "But every woman wishes for men to remain strong, energetic and be the real head of the family. [...] By nature as such, no matter how confident we [women] feel about our lives, we need someone next to us who

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<sup>63</sup> 'Female happiness' is also explicit in some of the reviews. See for instance the newspaper Kuzbass (Kemerovo), 8 March 1980. The emphasis on 'female' in the quote is mine.

<sup>64</sup> *Iskusstvo kino*, 9 (1980), 18.

<sup>65</sup> Before going to the cinema, she had been warned about it being a "women's film," implying she should not bother taking her husband. Aver'ianova "risked" it and proudly reported that her husband enjoyed the film as much as she did. Nevertheless, she wondered if he suffered from an "inferiority complex," a detail that was omitted from *Iskusstvo kino*. RGALI, f. 2912, op. 6, d. 2, l. 13.

<sup>66</sup> *Iskusstvo kino*, 9 (1980), 20.



supports, corrects and defends us. [...] Katia is a real woman – and Gosha is a real man.”<sup>67</sup>

What does it mean for women like Agasian to have imagined “real” women as submissive “by nature” to men? Doesn’t such a statement undermine my argument about fluid emotions and contradict my attempt at de-centring female and male emotions? Like the fictional Katia and the raging Aver’ianova, Agasian had successfully pursued a career. And just like the fictional Katia, she was a respected colleague, since it was probably nobody else than her work collective which chose her to be their delegate to this roundtable. In contrast to Aver’ianova, Agasian did not scrutinise Katia’s career choice. Agasian drew a distinction between spheres of confidence (work) and spheres of submission (home) for women, and in doing so she explicitly argued for fluidity and for different registers of feeling for women depending on the spaces they moved around in. This is something she probably knew very well from her own experience as a female engineer at work and a feminine woman at home.

#### 4. Conclusion

Socialist workplaces were comparatively feminised spaces on account of the fact that gender equality was more than mere lip-service from the Soviet state. The Soviet Union had come a long way and profoundly changed possible roles for women in its society. At the same time, the gender politics of the Soviet regime were much harder on women since it was them who had to shoulder the many (and mind you, ‘progressive’) changes in gender politics in the first place. As much as women were expected to go to full-time work as men did, they were also expected to do their second shift at home. Since the revolutionary zeal of the 1920s to transform care-work was short lived this essentially meant that women were confronted with a triple burden for the largest part of the Soviet Union’s existence: work, social activism and care-work at home.

The 1970s appear as a decade in which women both on screen and real life were exceedingly realising that they essentially exchanged their (private) happiness for a questionable (public) career. Sometimes this insight led to a rapidly deteriorating work ethic as in the 1977 blockbuster “*Sluzhebnyi roman*” (Office Romance), in which yet another unlikely working-class prince rescues his unhappy female director and introduces her to the immensely gratifying potentials of romance. In “*Starye steny*” (Old walls, 1973), the heroine even leaves her position as a director after finding romantic love. The image, at least in popular films, was unambiguous: work does not provide women with happiness. To be sure, in “*Moskva slezam ne verit*”, Katia did not give up her job once she found her prince. However, the film just stops at the point where Katia decides to reconcile both roles: a happy wife/lover and a ‘strong, energetic’ director. The

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<sup>67</sup> *Iskusstvo kino*, 9 (1980), 20.

viewers can imagine the future tightrope walk of hers as a precarious one since this was already a lived reality for the majority of married working mothers in the Soviet Union: navigating most of their time between the different spheres (work/home), with their differing emotional styles (energetic director/submissive wife), and therefore well attuned to the constant need to switch, to adapt, to fit in. Women had to constantly bend over backwards. Playing on different registers of emotion was almost second nature to women who had to slide in and out of seemingly contradictory behaviours, practices, and feelings. In this sense, fluidity was ingrained in every women's performance of gender, which is what the film depicted.

While *“Moskva slezam ne verit”* challenged some notions about gender (Gosha as a caring male and taking on care-work), it left others entirely intact (the expectation that Katia should feel ashamed for having an extra-marital affair, men achieving happiness at work but women achieving theirs at home). Both Katia and Gosha display a wide array of emotions and do not differ much in their variety of feelings. Yet the way in which their emotions signalled what proper, gender-confirming behaviour should look like is where the differences come in. While Gosha's manliness was elevated by acknowledging his emotions, Katia's presumed absence of feelings jeopardised her femininity. Pursuing her career and being tenacious, headstrong and proud, she was on the verge of losing her womanliness altogether. Whereas in Katia's case her gender was constantly scrutinised both in the film and in audience reactions to it, this certainly was not the case for Gosha. He was unquestionably a “real man,” irresistibly male and a dream-like prince, because he was capable of more than the traditional male emotional repertoire.<sup>68</sup> He charmed himself into Katia's arms and the audiences' hearts by displaying his emotions openly: Gosha pushed the romance forward, he was the one who talked about his feelings, and he was the caring, fatherly figure when he rescued Katia's daughter from hooligans. Most importantly, Gosha did not have to change to another emotional repertoire when he crossed from work to home. He could always remain himself, for him there was no need to bend over backwards and he certainly did not have to compromise. His emotions did not serve to question his gender. On the contrary: thanks to his emotional maximalism he was a real man. Rather than perceiving emotions as a way to overcome the gender regime, it might very well be that “men's privilege is [...] reproduced through emotions.”<sup>69</sup> The emotional man reifies the gendered order of feelings. And caring, loving, charming Gosha was its Soviet incarnation.

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<sup>68</sup> *Iskusstvo kino*, 9 (1980), 20.

<sup>69</sup> De Boise, *Men*, see note 14, 62.