

# A moving portrayal of the tragedy suffered by young Russians

Lilja4Ever, directed by Lukas Moodysson

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This is an astonishing film, deeply tragic with genuine emotional impact. Made in Russian and Swedish, it is animated by a search for explanations for the catastrophe overwhelming a generation of young people in the former Soviet Union.

*Lilja4Ever*, the name scratched out by a 14-year-old girl on a bench in the midst of a dismal housing estate somewhere in Russia, is directed by Lukas Moodysson. His previous works, *Fucking Amal* (*Show Me Love* for the English and American markets) and *Together*, have been affectionate, funny and observant investigations of teenage life in Sweden. The latter, a teenager's view of growing up amidst the excruciatingly embarrassing and hilarious activities in a shared house of Stockholm hippies in the 1970s, drew larger audiences in Sweden than *Titanic*.

With his new film, Moodysson again utilises a remarkable capacity to draw an audience into the minds and feelings of his young characters. This time they confront the relentless brutality of contemporary Russia. The film was made in housing estates and abandoned Soviet bases in Estonia; the Swedish scenes were shot in Malmö.

A young battered-looking girl is stumbling along west European streets, under scaffolding. A chimney puffs harmless white smoke into an indifferent grey sky. She stops over a motorway bridge and begins to climb over the bridge—the soundtrack is angst-ridden metal from East German band Rammstein. Something terrible is happening.

Three months before, Lilja, the girl played wonderfully by Oksana Akinsjina, is happily telling her friends that her mother is taking her to live in America. Her mother has met a new man through a dating agency. But Sergei does not want a teenage stepdaughter and Lilja is betrayed by her mother, left behind to fend for herself. She knows she might not make it. The film covers the three short and disastrous months between her mother's departure and her finding herself on the motorway bridge in Sweden.

There are innumerable moving and powerful scenes:

Lilja befriends 11-year-old Volodya, whose father is insane and has thrown him out of his house. She saves his life and stops *him* from jumping off a motorway bridge. Her mother's cousin, Anna, expels Lilja from her comfortable flat, throwing her into a squalid ex-soldier's residence. Lilja and her glue-sniffing friends find the war medals the old man kept polished while all around him fell apart. Lilja and Volodya wander around a derelict and stripped former Soviet submarine base where both their parents used to work. They sniff glue and dance on the roof.

Lilja picks herself up. She tears up a picture of her mother, sticks it back together, burns it, then comes to understand why her mother left. She does not really blame her or Anna, who is old, sick and needs somewhere to die. She is forced into selling herself in the downtown sex clubs to business men and criminals. Next day she trips around the local store, gleefully filling her shopping basket, staring the shop assistant in the eye. She buys Volodya a basketball.

She meets a good looking young man who seems less sleazy than the sex club clientele and who promises her a good life in Sweden. She is suspicious, but never suspicious enough. He is a talent spotter for a Swedish-based prostitution racket. He wins her over with the claim, "Everything is good in Sweden, it is in the EU, but here everything is hard." She gets to Sweden, her passport is taken from her and she is left locked in a flat. The pimp keeps the keys, coming back to rape her, give her food, and ferry her to his clients. She cannot go to the Swedish authorities. They will deport her back to Russia, where the mafia will kill her.

Much of the film's immediate impact comes from the remarkable filming arranged by photography director Ulf Brantås to express Moodysson's efforts to explain events from the standpoint of the participants. Using a handheld camera, Brantås brings the film audience into the grimy flat where the teenagers high on glue are giggling over the war medals, or under Volodya's "hut" made of chairs and

blankets where he and Lilja try to keep warm, or chatter and play with the basketball. Lilja's sex clients are a series of straining male faces and heaving bodies seen from her eyes.

Moodysson is a remarkable talent. Coming from an "average, normal, Ikea kind of family" in Sweden, he started out as a poet, wrote some books, thought about being a lawyer, tried photography before turning to filmmaking. His first film earned him praise from Ingmar Bergman, along with various titles including Sweden's "angry young man" and "the most hated man in Sweden"—the latter after he insulted an audience full of film buffs.

He told the *Observer* about *Lilja4ever*:

"My intention was for the audience to just sit there and feel like they were being run over by a train, and that they cannot really defend themselves. I don't want people just to be sad and depressed. Most people get angry. That's really the reaction I wanted."

The film, loosely based on the short life of Dangoule Rasalaite, a 16-year-old from Lithuania who threw herself from a Swedish apartment block, has been used in campaigns to warn young women in Eastern Europe of the dangers of a sex trade which the United Nations reports involves 700,000 women and children. As propaganda, it is probably more powerful than a dozen conventionally made documentaries.

The film has attracted some criticism because of a perceived religious thread which runs through it. Moodysson has deeply held Christian beliefs, although "not fundamentalist", and considered making Volodya into a Christ-like figure. He told the *Observer*, "I believe in God, and God is present in the film. I do believe that someone will take care of me when I die just like he takes care of Lilja. I honestly don't think I could have made this film without that belief."

In my opinion, in this work at least Moodysson's belief in divine salvation does not detract from his portrayal of earthly damnation. He seems able to understand a Russian generation that has witnessed a catastrophic attack on its living standards and cultural level, accompanied by the celebration of a capitalism which has only brought suffering and pain. Such is Moodysson's skill and honesty as an artist that the experiences and emotions he seeks to describe and articulate cannot be much altered by his religious views.

Organised religion has flourished in Russia and Eastern Europe. Lilja carries a framed print of an angel around with her. She takes it to Sweden, but it too, like capitalism, like America, Sweden and the EU, like all her friends except Volodya, betrays her. She smashes it.

The dead Volodya appears in a dream, after he kills himself from a drug overdose, with uncomfortable looking angelic wings stuck on his back. This seems to be a

powerless but friendly angel, and has no more weight to save Lilja than a dream or the memory of her only friend.

Moodysson is also undergoing a political development. Between the making of *Together* and *Lilja4ever* he attended the anti-capitalist demonstration in 2001 in Gothenburg that was attacked by armed riot police. "The sight of Social Democratic Party members handing out red roses to the police who had beaten people, and harassed people, and almost killed one person made me realise that I was in opposition. Maybe I was blind before, but, suddenly, I felt once again like the outsider I was at 16."

Framing the entire film is the—at least for Moodysson—unexplained collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike some recent Russian films that have simply evaded the matter entirely, or have focussed exclusively on Stalinist brutalities, Moodysson looks squarely at the depths of the Soviet collapse—the vile social conditions and unrelenting backwardness that have come with gangster capitalism, where children, like everything else, have become commodities to be looted.

The teenagers skipping through the wrecked naval base find a Brezhnev speech referring to a significant event "50 years ago", the October Revolution of 1917. They have no idea what they are reading.

While his characters remain ignorant, Moodysson's film shows how answering why the Russian Revolution ended in betrayal is key to finding a way out of the terrible social impasse into which millions have been led. One hopes that this is not the last effort he and others will make to explore this theme.



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