Japanese Slavic and East European Studies **Vol. 43. 2023**

Melodrama and War after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the critical investigations on the polarizing opposition between Russia and Ukraine has revealed that the dichotomy prevents us from objectively understanding the current situation and the background of the war. In this article, I argue that the dichotomy is supported and reinforced by melodramatic imagination. The representation of traumatic experience in Ukraine follows the traditional manner of classical theater melodrama, focusing on visual images of suffering and redemption and aiming to invoke empathy in the wider international audience to enlist support against Russia's invasion. While Putin mirrors the logic of revenge, which has become an integral part of post-9/11 political melodramatic discourse, his lack of concern for the visibility of suffering is unusual for traditional melodrama. A comparative reading of Putin's political discourse with Balabanov's blockbuster series *Brother* and *Brother 2* allows us to suggest that the thoroughly individualized moral universe of Putin's discourse does not require the representation of suffering accompanied by empathy to legitimize its right to violence and vengeance. Putin's political speeches grotesquely mark the extent to which melodrama's orientation toward subjectivism and emotion could reach.

Keywords: Russia's invasion of Ukraine; melodrama; binary opposition; emotion; moral occult

Introduction

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the polarizing opposition between Russia and Ukraine has been discussed in the context of a variety of identities, such as state, nation, language, culture, religion, and economy, and these discussions have revealed the complexity of the Russia–Ukraine dichotomy. These critical investigations have been conducted to problematize the "historical unity of Russia and Ukraine" that President Putin uses as a pretext and ideological background for the invasion. However, it is increasingly apparent that the dichotomy prevents us from objectively understanding the current

situation and the background of the war, simplifying issues and rendering many important and complicated problems invisible. In this article, I argue that the dichotomy is supported and reinforced by melodramatic imagination, which is the cultural imagination that has viewed morality as a popular guideline for a world that has lost absolute authority from the nineteenth century to the present day. By comparing visual representations of traumatic experiences in Ukraine to Putin's obsessive desire, expressed in his speeches regarding avenging and recovering the lost unity that allegedly existed in the past, we can unveil the melodramatic imagination shared by both sides across the political discourse and media narrative on the war.

Melodrama was the most popular theatrical genre in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century but became obsolete in the twentieth century when cinema replaced it as a new popular entertainment medium. In his monumental work *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), Peter Brooks found in melodrama, which had long been forgotten as a genre of popular theater, the modern imagination that nurtured nineteenth-century classic novels. The fundamental characteristics of the melodramatic imagination, he writes, are emotional excess and moral occult. Brooks suggests that the melodramatic mode as the "desire to express all"[1] reveals and exhibits the order hidden in chaotic post-revolutionary France. The melodramatic mode served as a guiding principle for the lives of the rising bourgeoisie when the sacred was lost.[2] "Most notably, evil is villainy: it is a swarthy, cape-enveloped man with a deep voice. Good and evil can be named as persons are named — and melodramas tend, in fact, to move toward a clear nomination of the moral universe."[3] The morality that

1 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess,* New ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 4.

2 "The origins of melodrama can be accurately located within the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath. This is the epistemological moment which it illustrates and to which it contributes: the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms — tragedy, comedy of manners — that depended on such a society. Melodrama does not simply represent a 'fall' from tragedy, but a response to the loss of the tragic vision." *Ibid*. at pp. 14–15.

3 *Ibid*. at p. 17.

melodrama presents is subjective as far as it is articulated as and through feeling. Morality and sensation are thereby merged.[4]

A similar understanding of melodrama is found in Russian cultural studies. Balukhatyi's article, "Toward the Poetics of Melodrama" (first published in 1927, revised as "The Poetics of Melodrama" in 1990),[5] is the most comprehensive study ever conducted on this topic in the field of Russian cultural studies. According to Balukhatyi, the main aesthetic task of melodrama is the evocation of "pure and vivid emotions," which is always combined with a moralizing tendency.

In this moral-oriented world of melodrama, which should conclude with a happy ending, at least in the genre's early "classical" stages, the role of love is secondary. Love between parents and children or between men and women is just one of the motifs constituting the plot, which leads to the "happy ending" of final recognition of the true order of an existing community after all obstacles are overcome. A classic example is seen in one of the earliest "classical" melodramas, *Christopher Columbus, or, The Discovery of the New World,* written in French by the father of melodrama, René-Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt (1773–1844). First published and presented in Paris in 1815 (Russian translation in 1821), this melodrama portrays the father–son relationship, which had been lost since Columbus left home to find the New World, only to be restored by the son's sudden reappearance in which he saves Columbus from a villain. Furthermore, the marriage of a couple on the island is threatened with breakup by the villain, who instigates the jealous husband to kill Columbus and his son. In the "happy ending," not only is their marriage saved and the villain defeated, but also the European conquerors and the island's indigenous people are finally reconciled and become allies.[6]

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[4] Jonna Eagle, *Imperial Affects: Sensational Melodrama and the Attractions of American Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), p. 7.

[5] *Балухатый С. Д.* К поэтике мелодрамы // Поэтика. Сборник статей. Вып. III. Л., 1927 [Sergei Balukhatyi, "Toward the Poetics of Melodrama," in *Poetics. Collection of Articles.* Vol. III (Leningrad: Academia, 1990)], pp. 63–86; *Балухатый С. Д.* Поэтика мелодрамы // *Балухатый С. Д.* Вопросы поэтики. Л., 1990 [Sergei Balukhatyi. "Poetics of Melodrama," in Sergei Balukhatyi, *Problems of Poetics* (Leningrad: Leningrad State University Press, 1990)], pp. 30–79.

[6] *Христофор Колумб, или Открытие нового света: историческая мелодрама в трех действиях*. Соч. г. Пиксеркура. Перев. Р. М. Зотова. СПб., 1821 [René-Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt, *Christopher Columbus, or, The Discovery of the*

After 9/11, melodramatic imagination was adopted to prompt political discourse that encouraged suffering citizens of the United States to identify with state power. As Elizabeth Anker outlines, political melodramatic discourse posits that the suffering that binds a nation is caused by a villain outside the national body rather than by different allocations of state power. Such discourse, she writes, also aims to elide differences within the nation rather than to emphasize them.[7] Thus "[t]he visual spectacle of nationwide injury by terrorist villains retrospectively generates the nation's moral purity and nourishes a vengeful form of nationhood aiming to salve the nation's gaping wound by asserting U.S. freedom through acts of global violence."[8]

The following analysis carefully examines the appropriation of melodramatic imagination to the political and media discourses that aim to make a sharp divide between "we" and "they" in the current situation of the war in Ukraine.

Melodrama and Visual Representation of the Suffering in Ukraine

In Japan, the melodramatic representation of Ukraine's precariousness was seen immediately after Russia's invasion, in the news coverage by the European mainstream media. On March 7, 2022, BBC News Japan aired a Ukrainian military couple's wedding on the front line. While the news item is concise, the video reporter adds a melodramatic embellishment ("bride and groom — defenders of Ukraine") overlapping the couple's fate with that of Ukraine.[9] On March 12, BBC News Japan announced that a pregnant woman injured in the bombing of a Mariupol hospital had given birth the following day. Tweets by the Russian embassy in the United Kingdom asserting that she was an actress and the

New World: A Historical Drama in Three Acts, Rafail Zotov trans. (Saint-Petersburg: Printing house of the Imperial theaters, 1821)].

[7] Elisabeth R. Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 260, n. 2.

[8] *Ibid.* at p. 25.

[9] 「志願兵が首都キーウの最前線で結婚式　ウクライナ侵攻」["Volunteers get married on frontline in Kyiv after invasion of Ukraine"], *BBC News Japan*, March 7, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/japanese/video-60643316 (accessed on November 5, 2022).

aftermath of the attack was staged, show how widely the news was perceived as melodramatic.[10]

These melodramatic scenes of suffering and redemption were reported, when the invasion had just begun and news on the war was filled with traumatic scenes of pain and suffering in Kyiv, Irpin, Bucha, Mariupol, and other cities. On March 16, in an address to the U.S. Congress, President Zelenskyy, seeking international support, showed a video with over 2½ minutes of traumatic scenes depicting "what Russian troops did on our land" and demanding "new tools" to stop the war "[s]o that evil is punished immediately."[11] The imagery of melodramatic scenes of suffering that merit "happy endings" was summoned to control emotional reactions to traumatic scenes and appeal to the audience's empathy in an attempt to unify the Ukrainian nation and the international community, respectively.

Putin's Political Melodramatic Discourse

While melodramatic narratives on suffering in Ukraine have drawn primarily on visual images, the Russian side has not presented its own images of suffering that could elicit empathy for and identification with the state.[12] This is not surprising, in a sense, given that its army has aggressed on the territory of another country. Nevertheless, melodramatic imagination also plays a significant role in Russia's conduct in this war, as is evident in President Putin's speeches that are saturated with melodramatic imagination.

As previous studies have pointed out, Putin's regime has repeated the narrative that Russia is threatened by the U.S. and other Western powers in a plot

10 「攻撃された産院で負傷の女性、女の子出産と　ウクライナ・マリウポリ」 ["Injured woman at maternity hospital attacked gives birth to girl in Mariupol, Ukraine"], *BBC News Japan*, March 12, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/japanese/60718370 (accessed on November 5, 2022).

11 "Address by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the US Congress," *President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy Official website*, https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/promova-prezidenta-ukrayini-volodimira-zelenskogo-pered-kong-73609 (accessed on November 5, 2022).

12 On Freud and Lacan's implicit assumption of the primacy of the visual over other channels in the relationship between perception and identification, see Anne Friedberg, "A Denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification," in E. Ann Kaplan ed., *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 38–39.

to destroy Russia's unity that supposedly existed in the past. In a discussion of Putin's article, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," published in July 2021 on the Kremlin's website, Nobuya Hashimoto points out, "[i]t is easy to read in it not only a distorted presentation of history by the autocratic authority, but also a menacing impulse derived from a traumatic fear."[13] Hashimoto further writes:

> What is important is not the ostensible declaration of historical unity, but rather the condemnation of the loss and sacrifice of territory, people, and glory due to the double dismantling of the empires of Russia and the Soviet Union, which is revealed in the words, "Russia was robbed, indeed." Additionally, there is an obsessive vigilance against a conspiratorial "anti-Russian" project, a joint effort by the "West" and the Ukrainian government.[14]

Kyohei Norimatsu defines Putin's discourse on Russia's imagined unity, which always puts blame on "the enemy" for its loss and destruction, as the ideologization of revenge. This discourse of revenge invokes the expansionist ideology of "the Russian world (русский мир)," which, seeking for the "Russian" around the world, does not offer a clear account of "Russianness" and hence allows practically infinite expansion of the Russian community.[15] Thus, Putin's regime hinges on the continuous process of recalling and restimulating the trauma, which inevitably threatens the stability of the Russian social order. Russian society has a vicious, self-destructive circular structure, presenting revenge as the only remedy for trauma — even against its own interests.[16]

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[13] 橋本伸也「「紛争化させられる過去」再論:: 記憶の戦争から軍事侵攻への飛躍について」『世界』（臨時増刊 ウクライナ侵略戦争）、2022年 [Nobuya Hashimoto, "'The Past Made into a Battlefield' Revisited: On the Leap from Memory War to Military Invasion," in *World*, 2022 (Special issue, "Ukraine Invasion War")], p. 100. Translations from this article are mine.

[14] *Ibid.* at pp. 99–100.

[15] 乗松亨平「イデオロギーと暴力」『現代思想』2022年6月臨時増刊号（総特集＝ウクライナから問う：歴史・政治・文化） [Kyohei Norimatsu, "Ideology and Violence," in *Contemporary Thought*, June 2022 (Special Issue, "Questioning from Ukraine: History, Politics, Culture")], pp. 297–298. Translations from this article are mine.

[16] *Ibid.* at p. 299.

According to Anker, however, if "the nation's terrible injury becomes the foundational justification for violent and expansive state power,"[17] then Putin is only precisely mirroring the political melodramatic discourse that followed 9/11.[18] In fact, in his speech at the military parade in honor of the 60th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War, Putin celebrated the day as marking "the victory of good over evil and of freedom over tyranny" — the same slogan used by the U.S. in its War on Terror.[19] The self-destructive revenge structure mentioned above is not unique to Putin's regime. It supports, and is a part of, melodramatic discourse that transforms masochistic pain, suffering, and a sense of powerlessness into sadistic but legitimized violence against villains and an awareness of subjectivity acquired by self-identification with the state that is capable of that violence.[20]

Anker describes this transformation in terms of Nietzsche's "orgy of feeling," in other words,

> a counterintuitive attempt to ameliorate confusing feelings of powerlessness by imposing intense affects of victimization — including terror, pain, sorrow, helplessness, and shock — upon the self. [...] According to Nietzsche, orgies of feeling aim to rehabilitate freedom, or at least ameliorate the affects of felt powerlessness, through new experiences of intensive affect.

Anker concludes that through this mechanism, longstanding yet ordinary experiences of political powerlessness in the late modern era were displaced by the terror of 9/11.[21]

In the broader political context after 9/11, Putin's speech is revealed as a reproduction of political melodramatic discourse, especially regarding the legit-

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17 Anker, *op.cit.* at p. 3.

18 On mirroring of the West as Putin's strategy for revenge, see Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), p. 16.

19 橋本、前掲書 [Hashimoto, *op.cit.*] at p. 100.

20 Jonna Eagle argues that melodramatic form "has relied upon the vacillation between masochistic and sadistic modes of identification — between the appeals of suffering and vulnerability, agency and violence." Eagle, *op.cit.* at p. 18.

21 Anker, *op.cit.* at p. 15.

imation of violence through revenge. However, notwithstanding the similarity to 9/11 discourse, there is a significant difference between the discourses of the two "brothers," which we will discuss in the next section.

Putin's Discourse and the *Brother* Films: Reaching the Limits of the Melodramatic Imagination

As mentioned earlier, Putin's melodramatic discourse on the ongoing war in Ukraine, repeatedly depicting Russia as wounded and victimized by the attacks of the West,[22] lacks visual representation of the scenes of suffering, whereas the scenes of the airplane attack on the World Trade Center and the collapse of its buildings have been televised countless times in the U.S. following 9/11. This is all the more noteworthy given that Putin's celebrations of victory in World War II, especially from 2004 onward, were visual confirmations of suffering and redemption and of trauma and recovery, as Elizabeth A. Wood has clearly analyzed. The Great Patriotic War and its attendant May 9 holiday (Day of Victory) serve as morally loaded tales of suffering and redemption. The commemoration of war can produce empathy for others' suffering, drawing each individual person into a collective sense of belonging and redemption. Thus, Putin's regime has underlined the unity and coherence of the nation and has striven to give it legitimacy and status as a world power.[23]

Wood indicates five principal contexts that allow Putin to personally identify with the commemoration of World War II: One impressive example is his narration of his family's suffering in the Leningrad blockade, accompanied by two documentary films: *The Blockade of Leningrad* by Kirill Nabutov («Блокада

[22] In his speech announcing a partial mobilization in Russia on September 21, 2022, he summarizes this idea in the most laconic manner: "The purpose of this West is to weaken, divide and ultimately destroy our country." «Обращение Президента Российской Федерации» // Президент России ["Message from the President of the Russian Federation," *President of Russia*], September 21, 2022, http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390 (accessed on December 1, 2022). Translations from this website are mine.

[23] Elizabeth A. Wood, "Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of World War II in Russia," in *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, Vol. 38: Issue 2, pp. 173–175. For a more recent and broader discussion on this topic, see Marlene Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist?: Unraveling Propaganda East and West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), especially Chapter 3.

Ленинграда», January 2004*)* and *The Birth of Victory* («Рождение Победы», May 8, 2005, NTV), both describing Putin's father's injuries during the blockade. Wood insightfully points out the iconic nature of Putin's rule, created by this personal performance of memory — by his demonstrating of a connection to the war and Russia's greatness:

> Ultimately, references to World War II in Russia today, especially those that are acted out and not just spoken, appeal to the *iconicity* of this event, both as a paradigm of suffering and as one of victory. It is an icon because it is perceived visually and through affect rather than through reason.[24]

Compared to the prevalence of visual images of suffering and redemption in Putin's ritual of personal identification with World War II, his lack of interest in invoking traumatic experiences in the melodramatic discourse on the ongoing war in Ukraine is striking.

To unravel the enigmatic absence from Putin's discourse on the war of the visual representation of suffering that is necessary for both classical and political melodrama, we refer to *Brother* («Брат», 1997) and *Brother 2* («Брат 2», 2000), the most popular and beloved blockbuster films in post-Soviet Russia. Mark Lipovetsky's investigation of *Brother 2* is significant for us because he finds that the melodramatic form, which is key to the film's enormous popularity, is inherited by today's war. He argues that the melodramatic construction of *Brother 2*, with its polarization of good and evil and heightened emotionality, is needed to substantiate the conflict between Russia and the U.S. In that conflict, Russia is cast in a virtuous role, suffering but ultimately triumphant, while the U.S. is portrayed as a global evil. Although the righteousness of the film's hero Danila is in fact baseless and poorly justified within the film, he is nevertheless elevated as the embodiment of "Russian truth." Notwithstanding the numerous anti-values that the hero represents, and that his "truth" is completely incomprehensible, he is clearly righteous *a priori*.[25]

Lipovetsky's excellent reading can be extended by adding that the righteousness ascribed *a priori* to Danila makes him inappropriate as a hero of traditional

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[24] Wood, *op.cit*. at p. 175.

[25] Mark Lipovetsky, "*Brother 2* as a political melodrama. Twenty years later, Balabanov's film serves to justify war with Ukraine," *Russia. Post,* July 11, 2022, https://russiapost.info/society/brother_2 (accessed on November 6, 2022).

melodrama. His righteousness removes the need for the violence he executes to be justified by suffering, whereas classical and political melodrama requires a narrative of suffering to culminate in the defeat of evil. Although both *Brother* and *Brother 2* present Danila as an ex-soldier who served in the Chechen War, the possible traumatic experiences he suffered there are never depicted on screen.

During the police interrogation following *Brother*'s opening scene, in which a scuffle breaks out at a filming location, Danila responds succinctly to an interrogator's question, "Where were you serving?" "In the army." He repeats this terse statement in key moments of the film: the second time, in his first meeting with his elder brother Viktor in St. Petersburg; next, before having an intimate relationship with a married woman, Sveta; and in the final scene, during his conversation with the truck driver with whom Danila hitches a ride when leaving for Moscow. In all instances except the first at the police station, Danila claims that he sat at headquarters as a scribe during wartime, which gives the impression that he must be concealing traumatic battlefield experiences because his expert shooting and combat skills are demonstrated throughout the story.[26]

The interplay between concealing and revealing the hero's traumatic experiences becomes more obvious and emphasized in *Brother 2*. The film opens with a scene in which Danila and his two friends from the war are interviewed on a TV program featuring war heroes. They are invited there because one of Danila's friends, Kostia, has received the Order of Courage. Another friend, Ilia, describes one of the battles during the "special operation" as follows:

> So, I am bleeding, my hip is broken, and it is painful. And I look, I see that Danila's Kalashnikov rifle AKM is boom, boom, boom on his head. Here! And I think at that moment, it's good that I have my helmet on. Our guys were all left there.[27]

It is telling that no images of suffering or pain are captured in the photo from the war that Ilia shows to the camera; rather, three young male soldiers appear relaxed in front of a tank. The following story that Ilia tells about Danila, who was "the toughest," "fast on the uptake," and "was not afraid of anything,"

[26] Brigit Beumers, "Brother," in Rimgaila Salys ed., *The Russian Cinema Reader, Volume Two: The Thaw to the Present* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), p. 265.

[27] All translations from *Brother* and *Brother 2* are mine.

is interrupted by another shot with pop star Irina Saltykova talking on the phone, watching that TV show. Danila and his friends' traumatic experiences never appear as visual images.

Thus, presenting a happy ending based on a clear-cut dichotomy between good and evil, the melodramatic narrative of *Brother* and *Brother 2* is nevertheless inconsistent and far from fully fledged because it lacks or, more precisely, negates the representation of the hero's experiences of traumatic suffering, which are only alluded to verbally. However, this lack of visual imagery of suffering does not prevent Danila from executing justice — killing villains and protecting "brothers" regardless of nationality (e.g., Hoffmann the German, in *Brother*) or gender (e.g., the Russian prostitute Dasha a.k.a. Marilyn, in *Brother 2)*. "The new Russian hero is no victim," as Brigit Beumers accurately points out.[28]

Most scholars discussing the *Brother* movies agree that Danila appeared as a new type of hero in Russian cinema after the myth of the Soviet socialist hero, which viewed the hero as part of the historical process, was debunked.[29] According to Beumers, at the time of the first *Brother*'s release, Russian critics were preoccupied with cinema's oscillating identity related to either art and commerce or moral education and industry:

> In the eyes of many, cinema remained the most powerful means of expressing moral values and providing guidance, while some Russian directors and producers began to realize cinema's potential as a business that could, one day, make a profit.[30]

Situated in a post-Soviet ideological space where "violence and the accrual of power, itself the galvanizing idea, was newly sufficient,"[31] Danila has often been considered to uphold no morals[32]: "Indeed, his personality and background are like a blank page onto which any story could be written."[33] His "violence

[28] *Ibid.* at p. 264.

[29] See, for example, Brigit Beumers, "To Moscow! To Moscow? The Russian Hero and the Loss of the Centre," in Brigit Beumers ed., *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), p. 83.

[30] Beumers, "Brother" at p. 261.

[31] Nancy Condee, *Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 218.

[32] Beumers, "Brother" at p. 263.

[33] *Ibid.* at p. 265.

is neither morally nor emotionally motivated, but is triggered by an automatic reflex acquired in combat."[34] To another scholar, he is a part of human material processed by recurrent modes of mindless compulsion, who has succumbed to the cities' articulation of human primal drives, dominant among them the death drive.[35]

However, the fact that Danila's actions are guided by his strong moral feelings cannot be overlooked. He knows what to do, faithfully (and even sincerely!) performs his duties and obligations, and does not objectively reflect on the meaning or effect of his behavior. His morality is so subjective and emotionalized that we cannot give any logical explanation for it, but this does not mean that he lacks any moral feeling.

What matters here is not the *content* of Danila's morality but its *intensity*. The moral and ideological inconsistencies in both films have been discussed in several studies. Brotherly love, presented as the basis of Danila's justice, is in fact marked by falsehood and betrayal, inviting the viewer to suspect that it is "only a convenient fiction, not a moral absolute."[36] Although fraternal and national bonds are more emphatically conflated in *Brother 2* with the renewed Cold War opposition between the U.S. as evil and Russia as good, the numerous and often conflicting portrayals of brothers of all kinds in the film[37] undermines the ideological and moral bases of the bond of brotherhood: Danila abandons his brother Viktor in Chicago, devoting himself to the defense of his "brothers" of war, Ilia and Kostia, and later at the end of the film, returning to the homeland with Russian prostitute Dasha. Anti-American and especially anti-African American, Danila nevertheless has an intimate relationship with Chicago TV anchor Lisa Jeffery, who is African American, and builds a reliable friendship (almost a brotherhood) with the American truck driver Ben Johnson.[38] Although

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[34] Anna Lawton, *Imaging Russia 2000: Film and Facts* (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2004), pp. 128–129.

[35] Condee, *op.cit.* at p. 223.

[36] Susan Larsen, "National Identity, Cultural Authority, and the Post-Soviet Blockbuster: Nikita Mikhalkov and Aleksei Balabanov," in *Slavic Review,* Vol. 62, No. 3, p. 504.

[37] *Ibid.* at p. 509.

[38] For the readings of the films as a parody of the concept of brotherhood, see Beumers, "Brother" at p. 264; Condee, *op.cit.* at pp. 232–236; Larsen, *op.cit.* at pp. 504–505.

both films show the many dangers and absurdities of using either brotherhood or national identity as a basis for moral judgment or action, Danila surrenders to his moral feeling without examining its base. Regardless of how absurd and irrational this may seem, the absurdity and irrationality themselves attest to the *intensity* of his moral feeling, making him a new type of hero of melodrama, which no longer requires visualized scenes of suffering to legitimize the hero's execution of violence and revenge.

As was confirmed at the beginning of this article, the moral occult of the melodramatic imagination is subjective and internalized, based on emotional feeling as a product of the post-sacred world that has lost reliable authority. The depiction of Danila's self-affirming moral judgment and execution of vengeful violence — without any presentation of the traumatic experience that should be a prehistory of revenge — can be seen as the most radical and developed version of melodrama's orientation toward subjectivism and emotion. By not presenting suffering as the primary cause of the viewer's empathy and identification with revenge, melodramatic imagination reaches its limits and exposes its structure, which is constituted by the juxtaposition of a totally individualized moral universe and an almost indifferent, even cynical, irony directed to it.

More than two decades after the screening of the two *Brother* films, we witness the resurgence of this radical melodramatic imagination in Putin's political discourse on the war in Ukraine. The discourse is grounded in the intensity and fortitude of Putin's (and, allegedly, the Russian people's) moral feeling being so evident that it no longer requires visual imagery of suffering for verisimilitude against discursive and physical attacks from foreign enemies, mainly the West. Lipovetsky is correct when he comments that modern political and, especially, illiberal discourse is built precisely on the inability to distinguish the statement of a view from a parody of it, and vice versa, as Balabanov discovered in making the films. In Putin's statement, "Real power is in justice and truth, which is on our side,"[39] he almost literally repeats the phrase that Dania hurls at Mennis,

[39] «[Н]астоящая сила — в справедливости и правде, которая на нашей стороне». «Обращение Президента Российской Федерации» // Президент России ["Message from the President of the Russian Federation," *President of Russia*], February 4, 2022, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843 (accessed November 6, 2022).

an American millionaire and now defeated villain, at the end of his U.S. adventure in *Brother 2*: “The power is in truth (Сила в правде).” Putin’s political melodramatic discourse can, therefore, be located in this melodramatic space.

Conclusion

For the purpose of undoing and critically analyzing the binary ideological opposition between Russia and Ukraine that is widely accepted in the current situation, this article has explored the melodramatic imagination that both sides share, which supports and reinforces the dichotomy. The representation of traumatic experience in Ukraine follows the traditional manner of classical theater melodrama, focusing on visual images of suffering and redemption and aiming to invoke empathy in the wider international audience to enlist support against Russia’s invasion. Putin’s obsessive urge to execute violence and revenge, as observed in his speeches, mirrors the logic of revenge, which has become an integral part of post-9/11 political melodramatic discourse.[40] What makes Putin’s discourse on the war in Ukraine idiosyncratic is its lack of concern for the visibility of suffering. A comparative reading of Putin’s political discourse with Balabanov’s blockbuster series *Brother* and *Brother 2* allows us to suggest that the thoroughly individualized moral universe of Putin’s discourse does not require the representation of suffering accompanied by empathy to legitimize its right to violence and vengeance, supported by indifferent and cynical attitudes involuntarily accepting his worldview. Putin’s political speeches on the Ukraine war are hyper-melodramatic, grotesquely marking the extent to which melodramatic imagination could reach.

[40] One more parallel between *Brother* films, Putin’s speeches on the war in Ukraine, and post-9/11 political melodrama could be established by Mark Lipovetsky and Daniil Leiderman, “Angel, Avenger or Trickster? The ‘Second-World Man’ as the Other and the Self,” in Stephen Hutchings ed., *Russia and Its Other(s) on Film: Screening Intercultural Dialogue* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 205. The authors explain “the myth of the Russian specific path, trivialized, yet recognizable in Danila’s version of Russian ‘truth’ as ‘the myth of a non-belonging to the common world, an exclusiveness, a commitment to the irrational, unattainable core value of the collective “I” / “We”’,” suggesting that the myth is also applicable to the post-9/11 American isolationism.