

# Little Vera

VASILY PICHUL

1988

Vasily Pichul's film became emblematic of an era, and an extremely depressing era at that. The film was made possible as a result of Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* or openness. Taking that openness to a new level, Maria Khmelik's script provides the basis for one of the most notorious films in late Soviet history: a cultural phenomenon that drew in audiences, fascinated by its scenes of nudity and its unflinchingly open approach to the taboo. In terms of genre, it draws more from western cinema than Soviet, and in spite of its cultural specificity, stylistically it belongs in the same canon of British social realism from filmmakers like Ken Loach or Andrea Arnold.

*Little Vera* (1988) is now synonymous with *perestroika*, and the Soviet project's failure to regenerate towns, opportunities and lives. *Little Vera* (1988) begins with scenes of a foggy, industrial landscape, where people's lives are ultimately as depressing as the facades. The name Vera comes from the Russian root for faith, so ambiguously the title can also mean 'little faith'. On the nose, perhaps, but it certainly pertains to truth in this desperate portrait of what can happen when economy and possibility atrophies. Vera's family are foul mouthed and violent; her parents scream about the behaviour of their daughter and torture themselves about how it came to be, darkly funny dialogue that skewers their rather blatant personal failures. Vera's father is flagrantly anti-semitic. This is a dark and unresolved element of Soviet culture and one Pichul's film makes apparent still provided an 'us' and 'them' conflict in an allegedly classless society.

The intrusion of western culture is everywhere evident, from the pop songs Vera listens to on her transistor radio to the fashions she and her friends wear. Her alcoholic father frequently repurposes an empty bottle of beefeater gin for his locally bought or brewed vodka. Vera herself embodies a sexual liberation that scares her parents, who feel a strong affiliation with solid traditional values, despite the proliferation of physical and sexual violence in their

society. In many scenes Vera suffers sexual violence in a way that makes it seem normalised. Whilst virtually no one in *Little Vera* appears sympathetic, her family's lack of opportunity should be noted. Which ideas can one cling to in the face of a destructing world, and limited opportunity? This is central to the film's major theme of class division. Vera's romance with Sergei, an engineering student, brings this to the fore. Daria Ezerova for *Senses of Cinema* notes Sergei's own class failings, 'Although the film certainly does not romanticise the workers as the chiseled Stakhanovites of 1930s socialist realist sculpture, it is hardly optimistic about the nascent, Americanised bourgeoisie either.' He is presented as frequently rude and derisive to the family, both disrespecting them in their home and deriding their intellect. It should be mentioned that Sergei does not have to work, and his parents support him from abroad.

The film has many firsts: in terms of nudity and brazenness. The lead actress Natalya Negoda would go on to pose in *Playboy* and it is the first Soviet film to reference the AIDS crisis. But ultimately it is the relationship between Vera and her parents that provides the emotional heart of the film and is the element that keeps it compelling to today's difficult to shock audiences. The oscillations of love and abuse are terrifying to witness, a desperate sort of love only visible in emotional climaxes. Her mother screams at her, 'I never wanted to have you anyway.' In one integral moment her father clutches at her, professing his love despite his frequent abuse. In these moments, one has to wonder what happened to her parents to make them like this, and indeed will Vera follow in their footsteps.

The film ends on a shot that resembles the opening. Khmelik has said that the idea for the script came to her after she visited her husband's home town for the first time. If it wasn't made obvious throughout the film, here is the ultimate suggestion that the emotional and physical states of the citizen's is ultimately tied to broken Soviet promises.