

Elena

Andrei Zvyagintsev

2011

Andrei Zvyagintsev is Russia's most prominent contemporary director. Garlanded with awards and international acclaim, the film world stands to attention whenever he releases a film. *Elena* (2011), his third feature, won the Special Jury Prize in the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes as well as Russia's Golden Eagle for best film. Yet Zvyagintsev's success can seem strange. He focuses on intimate family dramas and harsh psychological profiles, where individual stories of grief and hardship constitute a piercing critique of contemporary Russia. Whilst applauding Zvyagintsev himself, critics are often taken aback by the tragic scale of his works. And yet, his films for all their specificity and brutality, leave audiences rapt.

Anyone familiar with Zvyagintsev's films would be able to name the director and perhaps even the film from seeing just a few out of context shots. The gorgeous and ghostly cinematography that defines his mature works was developed between Zvyagintsev and his long term cinematographer Mikhail Krichman, the visual language transforming these harrowing tales into modern-day fables. *Elena* is a film that shows more than it tells. For an intimate family drama, the dialogue is sparse. When dialogue occurs it is vital and revealing. The rest is told through the convergence of the visual and aural; the film features an evocative Philip Glass score, as well as incredible performances.

Nadezhda Markina, the eponymous Elena, won the Nika Award and the IFFI award for best actress for her work in the film. Really, Markina plays two roles in the film. First, as the wife of a wealthy older man, and second, as the matriarch of an impoverished family. When these two roles become irreconcilable, Elena makes a desperate choice. As is often the case with Zvyagintsev, internal conflict is expressed through the external environment, the visual interface of the film providing telling contrast. As Elena travels from her luxurious home in Moscow's centre to the crumbling block where her son and his family live on the outskirts, the viewer journeys across Russia's stark class divide. This binary is even expressed through Elena's appearance. Zvyagintsev said of his leading lady, "When you look straight in her face, you see a simple, down-to-earth, working, typically Russian woman. But

if you see her sideways — and I do, in the movie, show her in profile a lot — she looks like royalty. She looks aristocratic. And this duality intrigued me." Zvyagintsev's use of this duality, and Markina's powerful and often wordless performance, imparts much of the film's message. As Elena travels through Moscow, the capital diminishing from grandeur to decay the further out she gets, she is often shot from the side. Her profile, distinguished and austere, contrasts with the increasingly dilapidated environment. In conversation with her husband, or his daughter, she is often shot face on, her honest appearance betraying a vulnerability in the face of their confidence.

Despite the vast divide between these two worlds, it is made evident that money is the guiding principle in both. One side is guided by desperation, and the other is corrupted by excess. There is an interesting parallel between Katya, Vladimir's daughter, and Sergei, Elena's son. Katya is described by her father as a hedonist who lives off her father's money. She herself admits that she habitually abuses substances, even if only now on the weekend. Sergei is presented as lazy, with a simmering alcohol problem. Their vices place them in parallel, but in society's eyes, and certainly Vladimir's, Katya is allowed her transgression because of her wealth and class. To Sergei, he shows minimal sympathy.

Many critics have suggested that *Elena* is a film teeming with unsympathetic characters. Roger Ebert stated that the film "concludes on a note that would distinguish a film noir, although many noirs end on notes of poetic justice, and there is no poetry in *Elena*, and no one deserving justice." Perhaps it is true that there is little hope left for the adult characters. Elena is left to live a life of guilt. Sergei seems set in his ways. Sasha, his son, is violent and apathetic. Sasha's final appearance in the film shows him spitting off Elena's balcony, his face still bruised from a recent fight. Unlike the view of gangs and delinquents from the balcony in the suburbs, in Moscow's centre he overlooks wealthy children playing sport. The film, shortly after, ends on the image of Elena's baby grandson, sleeping on Vladimir's death bed. It becomes apparent whose company this baby will grow up in. Finally, it becomes obvious who she damned herself in order to save.