

Copyright © 2025 by Cherkas Global University



Published in the USA
Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)
Issued since 2005.
ISSN 1994-4160
E-ISSN 1994-4195
2025. 21(3): 445-455

DOI: 10.13187/me.2025.3.445
<https://me.cherkasgu.press>



Existential Motifs in Russian Feature Films of the early 21st century

Roman Salny ^{a, *}

^a Rostov State University of Economics, Russian Federation

Abstract

The article presents an analysis of works on the subject of the article, which showed that scholars adhere to a one-sided view regarding early 21st-century Russian cinema, considering it only from the perspective of atheistic existentialism. This circumstance served as the main reason for conducting our research. We analyzed the main ideas of religious existentialism by G. Marcel and atheistic existentialism by J.-P. Sartre; identified fundamental differences in their approaches to formulating the categories of freedom, love, hope, and alienation; and presented variations of the representation of these categories in Russian feature films of the early 21st century.

The material for this study consisted of Russian feature films made in the second half of the 2000s – early 2010s. As a philosophical toolkit for their analysis, the categories (existentials) of alienation, freedom, love, and hope, as presented in the religious (theistic) and atheistic existentialism of G. Marcel and J.-P. Sartre, were used. To identify and describe the state and worldview attitudes of characters, the artistic space, and the dramaturgy of feature films representing the concepts of religious and atheistic existentialism, axiological, semiotic, and aesthetic types of analysis were employed.

Based on the results of the conducted research, the article concludes. The impenetrable boundary between the inner and outer worlds in the consciousness of the heroes of the films *Koktebel* (Russia, 2003), *Free Floating* (Russia, 2006) and *Hearts Boomerang* (Russia, 2011) makes them closed, unable to express feelings and understand themselves. This becomes the main reason for their internal lack of freedom and alienation. Openness, sincerity and the ability to love make the heroes of the films *The Island* (Russia, 2006) and *The Priest* (Russia, 2009) truly free.

Keywords: Russian cinema, religious existentialism, Marcel, atheistic existentialism, Sartre, the beginning of the 21st century.

1. Introduction

The intensifying cultural crisis in Russia manifested itself particularly strongly at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, when fundamental socio-political changes occurred: the collapse of the Soviet Union, a severe economic downturn, the powerful influence of Western culture, and the destruction of the ideological and value-based foundation of social consciousness. At the beginning of the current century, phenomena of rationalism and technocratism, which depersonalize the world and devalue human life, gained wide prevalence in our society. All this led to serious changes in social perceptions of the meaning and value of life, the role and purpose of a person, the forgetting by part of society of the concepts of nobility, honor, dignity, and, as a result, to an existential vacuum.

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: roman_tag82@mail.ru (R. Salny)

Against this background, existential issues became central for a whole generation of young filmmakers, the so-called "new quiet ones": A. Zvyagintsev, A. Popogrebsky, V. Sigarev, N. Khomeriki, V. Khlebnikov, and others. Their films, by all dramaturgical and aesthetic criteria, can quite rightly be classified as existential dramas. The characters in their films are "abandoned" in a soulless and absurd world, where an atmosphere of hopelessness, alienation, and despair prevails; there is no glimmer or illusion that anything might change for the better. If any of the heroes try to cope with the course of senseless and meaningless events, the world crashes down on them with all-encompassing cosmic injustice and cruelty.

A pessimistic view of reality is only one side of the coin of contemporary Russian cinema. On the other side, one can place the films of P. Lungin (*The Island*. Russia, 2006), V. Khotinenko (*The Priest*. Russia, 2009), which tell about the saving role of love, about hope that gives strength, about the transformation of the human soul. For their heroes, "abandonment" in a cruel and absurd world does not become a hopeless and desperate situation; on the contrary, it helps them find meaning and realize the purpose of their lives.

The films of the first and second "groups" do not reflect a deep philosophical perception of life and are not a form of authorial philosophical reflection on the problematic nature of human existence, but the dramaturgical conflict, plot motives, characters' actions, and aesthetics contained in them reflect existential experiences and are connected with the posing and solving of existential questions. They address the main range of problems of atheistic and religious existentialism, interpreted in terms of life and death, freedom and dependence, love and alienation.

2. Materials and methods

The material for this study consisted of Russian feature films made in the second half of the 2000s – early 2010s. As a philosophical toolkit for their analysis, the categories (existentials) of alienation, freedom, love, and hope were used, as presented in the religious (theistic) and atheistic existentialism of G. Marcel and J.-P. Sartre.

In order to identify and describe the states and worldview attitudes of the characters, the artistic space, and the dramaturgy of feature films representing the concepts of religious and atheistic existentialism, the following types of analysis were used:

- axiological analysis, aimed at identifying the values of the individual existence of the characters in feature films;
- semiotic analysis of the system of signs and images reflecting the existential attitudes of the author's worldview;
- aesthetic analysis, aimed at identifying the existential characteristics of the spatial-temporal dimension of artistic reality.

3. Discussion

Researchers show rather modest interest in the problem of representing existential motives in contemporary domestic cinema. Our review showed that to date, this topic has been directly or indirectly addressed by the authors of two articles in a Russian collection of an international scientific conference ([Mankovskaya, 2023](#); [Sterkina, 2023](#)) and the author of one American monograph ([DeBlasio, 2020](#)).

N.B. Mankovskaya reveals the specifics of the verbal and visual expression of existentialist issues in contemporary art based on domestic and foreign literature, cinema, theater, art practices, and internet art. Using the example of films by A. Zvyagintsev: *The Return* (Russia, 2003), *The Banishment* (Russia, 2007), *Elena* (Russia, 2011), *Loveless* (Russia, France, Belgium, Germany, 2017)), she describes existential situations in which the absence of love appears as the dominant feature of existence. "The relationships between parents and children, husbands and wives here are marked not just by indifference, but by the chilling coldness of soullessness, insensitivity. Existentialist portraits highlight the fangs of monsters beneath the masks of outwardly ordinary people, which even the loss of a child is unable to awaken. The same pain points were addressed in the films *Melody for a Street Organ* (Ukraine, 2009) by K. Muratova, and *To Live* (Russia, 2012) by V. Sigarev" ([Mankovskaya, 2023: 71](#)).

N.B. Mankovskaya shows the transformation of existentialist concepts of man in our century compared to the previous century, concluding that the pessimistic essence of the existentialist vision of man has been exacerbated by apocalyptic moods. "If, for example, in Sartre and Camus, man was a clearly defined personality capable of stoically resisting the absurdity and chaos of the

world, then the modern existentialist hero is amorphous, often devoid of inner life, unable to resist circumstances" (Mankovskaya, 2023: 79).

N.I. Sterkina, using the example of D. Mamulia's film *Another Sky* (Russia, 2010), considers silence as the main marker of the existential crisis, which has become one of the main themes in contemporary Russian cinema. Signs of this crisis also include the vulnerability of man in a cruel world, alienation, indifference and insensitivity in close relationships, empty, gray, gloomy spaces, and a sense of timelessness.

According to N.I. Sterkina, D. Mamulia "created a serious artistic text about the problems of human consciousness in the 21st century..." (Sterkina, 2023: 204). The crisis of consciousness, manifested in the gap between the inner and outer worlds, between the personal and the social, becomes a symptom of the spiritual illnesses of society, the depiction of which is dedicated to many contemporary Russian feature films. As in the film *Another Sky* (Russia, 2010), they convey a sense of loss of authenticity in relationships, isolation, detachment, and selfishness.

American researcher A. DeBlasio, in the monograph "Philosopher for the Filmmaker: Merab Mamardashvili and Russian Cinema," analyzes and characterizes the influence of the "Georgian Socrates" on the worldview and creativity of Soviet and Russian filmmakers. She associates the possibilities of this influence with M.K. Mamardashvili's ideas about consciousness and freedom as one of the key concepts of existentialism, directly related to the idea of responsibility for one's life, for "what will happen to us." According to A. DeBlasio, the inability to cope with one's freedom leads the characters in A. Zvyagintsev's films to catastrophe.

The existential dramas of A. Zvyagintsev *The Return* (Russia, 2003); *The Banishment* (Russia, 2007), *Elena* (Russia, 2011), *Leviathan* (Russia, 2014), *Loveless* (Russia, France, Belgium, Germany, 2017), according to A. DeBlasio, are devoted to the problems of fatherlessness, the destruction of the family, serving as an "allegorical axis in all the director's works depicting the trauma and crisis of Russian society as a whole" (DeBlasio, 2020: 212). In his films we see that "lovelessness" is the state in which a person is alienated from their consciousness and, consequently, from society" (DeBlasio, 2020, p. 218).

A. DeBlasio characterizes the aesthetics of the "new quiet" films, aimed at depicting unspoken psychological drama: a slow narrative pace, the skeletons of abandoned buildings, black tree branches, gray sky, deserted streets – a space symbolizing the collapse of human relationships, the "shadow zones of human consciousness." "Like Mamulia for *Another Sky* (Russia, 2010), Zvyagintsev chose Moscow for filming the movies *Elena* (Russia, 2011), and *Loveless* (Russia, France, Belgium, Germany, 2017)... The characters are separated from the uninhabited space by glass, fenced off by windows and doors, like animals in captivity, gazing into the expanse of lost freedom they long to regain" (DeBlasio, 2020: 213).

A. DeBlasio analyzes D. Mamulia's film from the standpoint of classical existentialism of A. Camus, J.-P. Sartre, M. Heidegger: "the collision between the general, universal language of thought and the language imposed from outside for political or ideological reasons lies at the core of the existential collapse in *Another Sky* (Russia, 2010)" (DeBlasio, 2020: 110).

Analysis of contemporary Russian cinema by N.B. Mankovskaya, N.I. Sterkina, and A. DeBlasio is presented from the perspective of atheistic existentialism, which is determined by the authors' choice – film directors associated with the group of "new quiet ones," characterized by common stylistic features, primarily a space of loneliness and isolation, where the character's desire to hide under the cover of their private life from a senseless, hostile world is felt. Everyday phenomena in their films include lies, betrayal, death, and characters who have lost one of the soul's main qualities – the ability to empathize and sympathize. There is evident spiritual damage and paralysis. Therefore, N.B. Mankovskaya's conclusion that the heroes of modern feature films are "deprived of that existential outlet, which the first existentialists saw as the justification of their life through art" (Mankovskaya, 2023: 79).

As the main trends in 21st-century Russian cinema, N.B. Mankovskaya, N.I. Sterkina, and A. DeBlasio identified the depiction of absurdity, melancholy, loneliness, alienation, and the especially poignant theme of lovelessness. Meanwhile, films with Christian themes were not considered by them, and therefore other tendencies were not noted – ideas of freedom, love, hope, which make consciousness whole and fill a person with the desire to live. One of the key components of the worldview of the Russian person, the Russian soul – Christian virtues – which are connected with spiritual quests in the works of the most influential writers (F.M. Dostoevsky, I.S. Shmelev, etc.), philosophers (N.A. Berdyaev, I.A. Ilyin, etc.), and film directors

(A.A. Tarkovsky, L.E. Shepitko, V.M. Shukshin, etc.) in Russian and world culture, has remained outside their attention.

From the above analysis, it is evident that scholars hold a one-sided view regarding early 21st-century Russian cinema, considering it only from the standpoint of atheistic existentialism. This circumstance served as the main reason for conducting our research. We performed an analysis of the main ideas of religious existentialism by G. Marcel and atheistic existentialism by J.-P. Sartre; identified fundamental differences in their approaches to formulating the categories of freedom, love, hope, and alienation; and presented variants of the representation of these categories in Russian feature films of the early current century.

In existential philosophy, a person is described as being in a constant state of becoming. Their authentic essence manifests in moments of being on the boundary between existence and non-existence, in "borderline situations," in which they gain a vision and awareness of the futility of everyday reality, the illusory nature of social values and ideals. In this state, a person experiences the need to search for meanings and goals of life, the necessity to "go beyond" ordinary reality in order to move toward authentic being, toward oneself. In atheistic existentialism, this intentionality is defined as a movement toward one's essence from "nothing". In religious existentialism, it is realized in the person's participation in being as a whole and all-encompassing (K. Jaspers).

In the 20th century, two currents of existentialism were formed: religious and atheistic, whose major representatives are considered to be G. Marcel and J.-P. Sartre. G. Marcel developed his philosophy of existentialism based on "positive" existentials (faith, hope, love, freedom) and the idea of a universally spiritual core of personality, incarnated in a person by God. He considered the basis for distinguishing inauthentic and authentic life to be the vertical of the universal, set by the relationship between the temporal and the eternal, the empirical and the metaphysical. This vertical axis predetermines the direction of a person's movement and the ultimate goal of their transcendence – the realization of oneself as a spiritual being.

J.-P. Sartre built his existential philosophy on the basis of "negative" existentials (absurdity, loneliness, fear, death) and the idea of an individual-existential consciousness, within which "resides" a universal essence that serves as the foundation for distinguishing between inauthentic and authentic life. The ultimate goal of transcendence is absent in his existentialism. For Sartre, a person goes beyond themselves in order to constitute themselves, but the final point of their movement from past to future is not defined.

G. Marcel, in his works, started from the position that the abstract scientific approach cannot serve as the basis for the philosophical analysis of the phenomena of being. He believed that the result of the functioning of objectifying thinking, which reifies the surrounding reality, others, and oneself, becomes a situation of alienation, the fading of the ontological need to be. In his existentialism, a clear boundary is drawn between the objective world, comprehended by rational thinking, and the world of "mystery," revealed to the individual in intimate-personal immersion, the involvement of their being, "participation in being." G. Marcel considered the "mystery" as a part of human life, one that cannot be objectified and that spiritualizes life. He associated its experience with the feeling of the sacredness of the inexplicable sense of contact with the world as a whole. The disclosure of the ontological meaning of the "mystery" is possible through revealing the content of existential experiences caused by faith, hope, and love.

According to G. Marcel, objectifying thinking is actualized in objectifying actions that realize a selfish attitude – the need for ownership, possession of things or other people. The satisfaction of the need to "have" consumes the person themselves and ultimately leads them to alienation. "In reality," reflected G. Marcel, "at the very heart of unfriendliness we always find a kind of alienation. ... I understand everything, I acknowledge it, abstractly...; I even sympathize, if you will but only abstractly: for I still have to admit to myself that I feel nothing" (Marcel, 1995: 100). By alienation, he meant "the fact that a person becomes increasingly estranged from themselves, from their own essence..." (Marcel, 1995: 108). The only way, in his opinion, to overcome the selfish attitude can be self-denial as a genuine act of freedom manifestation.

G. Marcel connected religious faith and freedom, pointing out that in his contemporary reality, dechristianization and the growing spirit of abstraction, embodied in the achievements of technological progress, lead to the captivity of the free human spirit. Modern civilization "dehumanizes" and blinds man. Losing freedom, he becomes dependent on pleasures and material

values, dissolves in social processes, which prevents him from realizing himself and revealing his essence (existence).

G. Marcel saw the source of existential freedom in the Divine Presence. Freedom, in his view, allows a person, thrown into a meaningless world, to find the possibility to turn to higher values, to God. The impulse beyond empirical reality, transcendence, which connects man with eternity, with God, is hope. Hope, according to G. Marcel, "consists in the affirmation that there is in being – beyond the given, beyond all that can be counted, that can serve as the basis for any calculations – a certain secret principle that is at one with me..." (Marcel, 1995: 88-89). He considered the only true hope to be that "which is directed toward what does not depend on us, which is driven by humility, not pride" (Marcel, 1995: 92). Therefore, it can be attained only by overcoming one's own self-love and vanity.

According to G. Marcel, love for God is the foundation of love for people. It has an active nature and is connected with the will, not desire. Love overcomes egoism, which leads a person to despair arising from distrust of the world and others. The lover and the beloved do not distinguish themselves; there is no distance between them. Love is a mystery in which there is no opposition between subject and object, Self and Other. G. Marcel believed that "in love, it is most noticeable how the boundary between the concepts 'within me' and 'before me' is erased" (Marcel, 1995: 82). The value of love cannot be rationally explained, but it can be felt through the full involvement of one's entire being in the "mystery" of the Other's existence. To love means to desire eternal life for the Other. In such an attitude toward the Other, a person can find their true Self.

The problem of the relationship between subject and object, the opposition of Self and Other, is resolved in the act of communication. "From the moment," wrote G. Marcel, "when communication is established between me and the other, we move from one world to another, entering that zone where one of us is not merely among others and where transcendence takes the form of the bliss of love" (Marcel, 2004: 57). Communication is open and profound interaction leading to self-knowledge within the space of intersubjectivity. In communication, the light of authentic being and eternity arises, actualizing the ideal space of intersubjectivity, where the individual, sincerely experiencing feelings of love, loyalty, and brotherhood, transcends their own limits.

The work of another French existentialist, J.-P. Sartre, is filled with a tragic worldview caused by loneliness, alienation, fear of death, and confrontation with "nothingness." Existing in an uncertain, absurd, and meaningless world, his characters experience melancholy, boredom, despair, and horror. Nothing brings them joy or happiness. They feel "nausea" and powerlessness in relation to a fleeting and lifeless reality, at times resembling a hallucination. Despite this, J.-P. Sartre's characters retain the ability to resist the absurdity and chaos of existence, finding within themselves the strength to continue living.

According to J.-P. Sartre, the relationship between man and the world is conflictual; harmony between them is not the norm but an illusion. Constant struggle with the environment, society, and oneself is necessary for the formation of human essence. Man faces trials and suffering, through which he must maintain his dignity. In this case, he can realize his own freedom and overcome his limitations. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, the justification of one's existence can only be found in creativity and art, in which the depersonalizing objectivity of the world is overcome.

The concept of freedom holds a significant place in Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy, who asserted that "man is condemned to be free." He believed that for some people, the thought of their own freedom is unbearable, and to avoid the suffering and anxiety caused by this thought, they hide behind a mask, betraying themselves. By denying themselves the possibility of preserving their inner freedom, a person acts immorally in difficult situations, justifying themselves by saying that they "could do nothing about it." In this sense, a person is responsible for remaining faithful to themselves. "Whatever our existence may be," Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, "it is a choice; it depends on us – to choose ourselves as 'great' and 'noble' or 'low' and 'humble'" (Sartre, 2000: 481).

J.-P. Sartre contrasted freedom with love. Love, in his view, "implies... a certain way of appropriation: it is precisely the freedom of the other as such that we want to capture... Therefore, the lover does not wish to possess the beloved as a thing; he demands a special kind of possession. He wants to possess freedom as freedom" (Sartre, 2000: 382). In such a case, the beloved, according to Jean-Paul Sartre, voluntarily gives their freedom to the lover. The absence of the prospect of absolute reality, God, in these relationships creates a situation in which the Self and the Other exist in a space of impenetrable infinite mirror reflections. Love in J.-P. Sartre's view is possible in solitude as a necessary condition for maintaining distance and not enslaving the beloved.

In J.-P. Sartre's philosophy, the concept of freedom is linked to the notion of alienation. Independence, the autonomy of a person from society as a form of expressing freedom, becomes one of the causes of alienation. Alienation is a characteristic of a person's state in a situation of social relations that evoke feelings of burden and oppression. A person becomes merely a means for another to satisfy desires, making genuine unity between people impossible. J.-P. Sartre believed that communication gives a person the joy of superficial existence among indifferent people. Meanwhile, delving within oneself, one discovers that they are truly alone, as at the core of their own Self lies the abyss of "Nothingness."

In the understanding of J.-P. Sartre, everyday human existence appears as a world filled with artificial things, while the natural world can only evoke an illusion of beauty and meaning. The external world is alien to man, and alienation is insurmountable. The boundary between "being-in-itself" and the external world is insurmountable.

Hope, like love, is considered by J.-P. Sartre as a kind of self-deception, an illusion. Hope is connected with the possibility of creating meaning in one's life for oneself, projecting, anticipating one's own future. However, by projecting oneself into the future, a person cannot achieve something stable because the moment they attain some embodiment of themselves, it immediately ceases to be what it just was. Meanwhile, existentialism, according to J.-P. Sartre, "is not an attempt to discourage a person from action, for it tells a person that hope lies only in their actions, and the only thing that allows a person to live is action" (Sartre, 1990: 335). Having no other world apart from the world of human subjectivity, a person is left with only one hope – to find themselves.

Significant differences in the semantic content of the categories (existentials) of alienation, freedom, love, and hope in the existentialism of French philosophers are primarily related to the religiosity of G. Marcel and the atheism of J.-P. Sartre.

According to G. Marcel, alienation is caused by the action of objectifying thinking and the satisfaction of the need to "have." Its overcoming is possible through open and profound communication with others, in the space of intersubjectivity, where sincere feelings of love, loyalty, and brotherhood arise. For J.-P. Sartre, the cause of a person's alienation from their essence and from others lies in material (productive) and social relations. Trying to escape loneliness, a person goes beyond themselves but encounters the absurdity of the external world.

Freedom for G. Marcel is the possibility to turn to higher values, to God. It is this intention that allows a person to overcome the pressure of social relations and rational forms of thinking and to enter the space of authentic being in intersubjectivity. J.-P. Sartre saw freedom as the reason why a person feels alien in this world and therefore strives to attain their uniqueness, their Self.

In G. Marcel, love manifests itself in action aimed at overcoming one's own selfishness, participating in the life of another, and involvement in the "mystery" of their being. Love is considered by J.-P. Sartre in the painful and conflictual relationships between the Self and the Other. Genuine love is impossible for J.-P. Sartre, as he understands it only as the fullness of possessing the other, but not as self-renunciation for the sake of the other.

Hope, for G. Marcel, is placed in something greater than ourselves, in God, who brings us salvation, gives the possibility to overcome misfortune, and to unite with eternity through overcoming one's pride and vanity. In the alien world, J.-P. Sartre leaves no hope for humans to discover a higher meaning, as it does not exist. Humans are left to rely on the possibility of finding the meaning of their existence, to acquire their essence, which they experience as an ontological lack.

4. Results

Existential categories (existentials) of alienation, freedom, love, and hope in their religious and atheistic versions are represented in the dramaturgical and aesthetic content of Russian films *Koktebel* (Russia, 2003), *Free Floating* (Russia, 2006), *Boomerang Hearts* (Russia, 2011), *The Island* (Russia, 2006), and *The Priest* (Russia, 2009).

The film *Koktebel* (Russia, 2003) is based on the developing conflict between a father and his eleven-year-old son. Nothing held them in Moscow, from which they hitchhike to Koktebel – a town where rising air currents carry gliders into the sky, where the endless blue sea washes sandy beaches. There, they hope for a new happy life. They do not know where they will end up tomorrow or where they will find shelter for the night. The flow of life carries them into an unknown future. They walk through fields and forests, spend the night in a culvert under the railway, travel in a freight train car from which a railway worker removes them, stop in a half-abandoned summer

house where the father is wounded by a gunshot, and end up in the house of a nurse who takes in the travelers.

The father is unemployed, the son does not attend school – they have no social obligations. They also do not have close relationships. More often, they simply remain silent or communicate through gestures. According to J.-P. Sartre, they are truly free. However, while the father feels comfortable in this false freedom, the boy clearly suffers. And it is probably only he who prevents the father from completely falling to the social bottom.

The father is running away from his past. He has lost his sense of responsibility and self-worth, so he does not strive to find meaning or achieve any vital life goals. He behaves selfishly and weak-willed, succumbs to temptations, stops paying attention to his son when he makes acquaintances with people he happens to meet, and ultimately betrays him. The events of their lives take place against a backdrop of a depressive environment that intensifies the feeling of alienation. Long static shots of desolate and gloomy autumn landscapes symbolize the rupture of interpersonal connections and the boy's loneliness.

In one of the early episodes of the film, the boy tells his accidental travel companion: "I can see everything from above... Look." Then he covers his eyes with his hand, and about ten seconds later, aerial shots of forest strips, fields, and a road appear on screen, followed in the next shot by a schematic plan of the area drawn by him in the sand. The boy has a supernatural ability – he can see the earth from a bird's-eye view. This symbolically shows the boy's unconscious existential need – the need to rise above the soulless world.

He asks his father questions about the albatross, examines its image, and reads about it in a book. The albatross can soar for a long time high above the sea. Thoughts about it embody the desires and dreams living deep in the boy's soul, where he is free and where hope for a happy childhood life is founded.

The father spends more and more time with his new acquaintances. The boy is left alone more often. Eventually, he runs away from his father and continues the journey to the "dream" city on his own. By chance, he ends up with a truck driver in a truck, traveling to Koktebel. In the truck cabin, the song *Solo noi* by Toto Cutugno plays. The expressive and rising intonation of the Italian singer's voice in the choruses – sounds of freedom that will prove deceptive.

The boy's dream collapses. Updrafts do not lift gliders into the sky, and the wind prosaically carries and throws a piece of paper it has tossed onto the ground. Koktebel turns out to be as gloomy a place as those he had encountered during his travels. In the final scene, he sits on the edge of a pier washed by the dark waters of the Black Sea, looking into the distance, apparently hoping for nothing anymore. His father approaches and sits beside him. Both remain silent. The journey is over.

A shattered dream, an age too young to choose one's life path, and dependence on a weak-willed father leave the boy with no hope. Ahead of him lies uncertainty once again. Having lost trust in the world and faith in goodness, he becomes even more withdrawn and lonely.

The hero of the film *Free Floating* (Russia, 2006), like the characters in *Koktebel* (Russia, 2003), drifts in the current of life toward an unknown direction. His name is Lenya, he is twenty years old, and he hopes to find a job in a small provincial town with half-abandoned and half-ruined buildings that have become symbols of post-Soviet decay. The factory in the town is closing, and the local men are trying to find any kind of temporary work.

Lenya lives in a world where bosses look at the entire surrounding world and other people "predatorily" (G. Marcel), while ordinary workers obediently and passively follow their orders. They have lost their life energy, aspire to nothing, realizing the hopelessness of their situation. In this indifferent world, Lenya feels the full weight of Sartre's freedom upon himself. It seems he is the only one here trying to be honest, kind, and striving to preserve his humanity.

The film creates the effect of frozen time and space, recreating a state of inertia. The characters do not know what love or happiness are, cannot rejoice, and do not strive to achieve any goals. They have no past and no future, no fate, no life. In the endlessly gray space, the tragic helplessness of the characters is frozen in the face of prevailing hopelessness. Lyonya and his acquaintance, a girl nicknamed "Piglet," want to be closer to each other but are incapable of it. They cannot hold a normal conversation, cannot express feelings or affection, cannot even call each other by name, but use humiliating terms or insults.

Lyonya's attempts to find a proper job are futile. He takes a job as a shoe salesman but leaves after the first day, goes to work as a plasterer in another city, but gets off the bus at one of the stops

and returns home because he sees absurdity and deception everywhere. After unsuccessful attempts, Lyonya got a job at the road repair and construction department, where there are only two workers who fill potholes with broken bricks. Lyonya immediately sensed the absurdity of the situation. The head of the department greeted him with the words: "We repair roads, that is, we heal the surface. So we are woodpeckers of the road... to make sure it doesn't hurt, so as not to offend it, you have to do it all with soul..." He was able to work here for a little over a month and resigned after being beaten by the boss for exposing him as a liar.

Lyonya accidentally meets a group of his colleagues with whom he worked at the factory. He goes with them to apply for a job at a wood processing plant. They are refused there, and they happily head to the riverbank, where by nightfall they get drunk. Lyonya once again immerses himself in an atmosphere of foolishness and recklessness. While his drunken colleagues make plans for a carefree and peaceful future, he stands with his back to them, looking toward the river. In the next scene, a depiction of a miserable and wretched world is recreated, from which Lyonya tries to escape: he swims in the black river water and says, "I'll break the whole river now." When he becomes exhausted, he remembers his mother: "And mom is sleeping. Mom. Well, mom. Mom. Sleep, come on." Love for his mother is the only thing that supports him, gives him strength, and makes him seek his own life path.

The spirit of freedom, nurtured in Lyonya by his mother's love, calls for finding a way out of the world of emptiness and alienation. It seems that he manages to do this, but only partially.

In the final episode of the film, Lyonya comes to the river. An old, small barge, used for transporting cargo along the Volga, docks at the shore. Two men get off it, repair the drive chain, and return back. He stands for a long time watching them leave. Then he slowly starts to follow them and climbs onto the barge. In the final scene, Lyonya is sailing down the river on the barge, and for the first time, a genuine, spontaneous smile appears on his face; he openly expresses his emotions. Light music from Toto Cutugno's song *Il treno va* plays. Lyonya has set off on a free journey, but it is obvious that it will take place within the confines of the same miserable and indifferent world.

Kostya, the main character of the film *Boomerang Hearts* (Russia, 2011), lives with his mother and works as an assistant train driver in the Moscow metro. He is 23 years old.

At the beginning of the film, a "borderline situation" is set: a person "facing death." Kostya learns about a rare heart pathology. The doctor tells him the diagnosis: "You are a perfectly healthy person... It's just that you can die at any moment." After visiting the doctor, he walks through a long, dimly lit tunnel. The oppressive black walls and the noise of shuffling boot covers create a sense of the tragedy of existence.

The authors set the film's intonation as a state of alienation. Kostya's emotions are hidden deep inside him. The external expression of his feelings is only a hint: slightly raised corners of the lips, a faintly perceptible detached yet empathetic gaze. Every day he descends the escalator in the metro, where mechanical sounds are constantly heard. The camera follows the impersonal flow of people, capturing their tired and sullen faces.

Having learned his fatal diagnosis, Kostya changes nothing in his life, does not begin searching for answers to questions like "why did this happen to me?" or "how to live on?" Instead, he only goes to a fortune teller who resembles a crazy businesswoman and visits his father, who turns out to be completely indifferent to him and his personal life.

There are only two people in the film whose interaction brings a genuine smile to Kostya's face. These are the metro attendant and his mother. The scenes of interaction with his mother are touching. The mother takes off the boots from her sleeping son, covers him with a blanket, and adjusts his sock. She inquires about her son's personal affairs, asks if he has been to the dentist, and when he and Anya will get married.

The film constantly conveys Kostya's inner loneliness. His partner talks about his family life, shopping trips, cooking, and how they spend weekends. Kostya listens to him detachedly. The partner asks Kostya to say something: "Come on, open your mouth. Say something." Kostya says: "Mom." It feels like there is an impenetrable barrier between the characters. Kostya resembles an outside observer of a life in which he feels emptiness. He meets a girl (Anya) in winter on the street. They walk together through snowy, deserted streets, sit on a bench, swing on swings. Kissing her, he touches her lips and immediately pulls away.

Kostya hides his diagnosis and his feelings from everyone, apparently feeling that everyone is a stranger to him. He quietly leaves this world, sitting in his place as an assistant machinist, looking into the dark, dimly lit tunnel. His heart stops.

Long shots of black-and-white urban deserted landscapes, which begin and end the film, evoke the thought that tomorrow will be just like yesterday, that in this snowy, deserted, and motionless world filled with mechanical sounds, there is no place for sincere human feelings and relationships, no hope. Indifference reigns in it.

The film *The Island* (Russia, 2006) begins with events from the Great Patriotic War. An enemy ship captures a Soviet barge carrying a skipper and a stoker. A German officer offers the stoker, who is hysterically pleading for mercy, to shoot the skipper and save his own life, placing a pistol with one bullet in his hand. The stoker fires the shot, and the skipper falls overboard. By choosing life, he commits a mortal sin that will "strangle" him for more than thirty years.

After committing the killing, the stoker enters a monastery and over the years becomes a monk, Father Anatoly, then an elder, ascetic, and spiritual struggler with the gift of clairvoyance and healing people from illnesses. His life becomes an example of self-denial and self-sacrifice. For many years, suffering and tormented by memories of the committed crime, he prays sincerely and diligently, which leads to the resurrection of his soul.

The embodiment of his inner world became the harsh northern nature, the hard monastic life. The feeling of slow passage of time, stillness, sounds penetrating the space: the clatter of the coal cart wheels, the creak of wooden oars, the cries of seagulls, the noise of black sea waves and cold wind, convey the state of deep immersion of Father Anatoly into himself.

Father Anatoly occupies the lowest position in the monastery – the place of the stoker. He lives in the boiler room, sleeps on a pile of coal, his face and clothes smeared with coal dust. He has overcome the mindset of "having," and now his being is illuminated by the light of "divine truth" (G. Marcel), despite the feeling of oppressive sins.

Complete trust in God is what Father Anatoly tries to convince the pilgrims who come to him of. Even the abbot of the monastery is grateful to him for showing him his sins – attachment to things (avarice). Father Anatoly urges people to surrender to God's will, reproaching them for their lack of faith. He demands that the mother of a sick boy stay in the monastery for his communion, addressing her strictly: "And what about you, is your own son dearer or your work?!" "Did you love your husband?" Father Anatoly asks a widow who came to him, hinting that she values household chores more than her husband, who went missing during the war. He tries to show them how worldly affairs and material goods enslave them.

Because of their lack of faith, the people who come to Father Anatoly are afraid to trust God's will and therefore despair, losing hope. Hope, according to G. Marcel, is born from humility, faith, and love, because it is through them that individual existence is "penetrated" by the "Divine Light," which dispels melancholy and despair.

Feeling the approach of his death, standing "before the face of death," Father Anatoly selectively quotes lines from the Psalter: "The waves of death have washed over me, and the deadly nets have surrounded me." He prepared a coffin for himself, resembling an ordinary wooden box, and is preparing for repose. Before dying, he meets the skipper whom he shot during the war, who was wounded in the shoulder at that time and survived. Father Anatoly asks for his forgiveness. He also asks forgiveness from Father Job, whom he tried to expose for vanity with his daring jokes and hints. Lying in the coffin, Father Anatoly utters his last words: "Lord, receive my sinful soul."

The film *The Priest* (Russia, 2009) tells about the work of the Pskov Orthodox mission during the Great Patriotic War. The main character of the film is Father Alexander, one of those who revive church life in the territory occupied by the Germans. In the USSR, he is considered a traitor to his homeland. Meanwhile, he does not collaborate with either the fascist invaders or the Soviet authorities. He does not betray his homeland – the heavenly fatherland. Father Alexander believes that all this godless government in the world is temporary: "Neither the Germans nor the Bolsheviks are eternal. Only Jesus Christ is eternal. Before Him, we shall give an account."

Father Alexander is guided by moral duty and sincere feeling, uncompromisingly and selflessly fulfilling the duties of his pastoral ministry, bringing love to people. He serves the Truth, balancing on the edge: he could be killed by partisans or arrested by the Germans. He is open to all who come to him: orphans rescued from the hands of the fascists, concentration camp prisoners, those weakened by hunger, a partisan who intends to carry out a reprisal against him. Only hope in God directs him. Father Alexander is in a situation about which Jesus Christ speaks in the Gospel:

"Behold, I send you forth as sheep among wolves: therefore be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matt. 10:16).

In the conditions of occupation, aware of the threat from German soldiers, Father Alexander does not refuse help to anyone in need. He supports the civilians, stands up for them, and delivers clothes and food to the prisoners in the concentration camp. On his way, the priest meets various people, showing responsiveness, sympathy, and compassion toward them.

"Every genuine life is an encounter," wrote M. Buber (Buber, 1993: 41). "Encounter" is one of the most important concepts of G. Marcel. In an encounter, as the French philosopher believed, the light of true being and eternity arises, the space of intersubjectivity is actualized, where a person experiences sincere feelings of love, loyalty, brotherhood, makes an "exit" beyond their own limits, and feels their freedom.

The film contains "encounters" that change people's destinies and their attitude toward life. At the very beginning, Father Alexander "meets" a Jewish girl named Eva, baptizes her, and then adopts her. Then he "meets" three children, refugees from Leningrad, and brings six children rescued from a concentration camp. He baptizes them, adopts, and takes them in. Eva becomes the eldest daughter in his large family, raising and educating the younger foster children.

One late evening, Father Alexander "meets" in the church with a young partisan, Alexey Lugotintsev, who has decided to kill the priest, whom he believes serves the fascists. "Before you carry out your plan, at least allow me to forgive all your sins," Father Alexander tells him and hears his confession. Alexey changes his attitude towards him and later tries to protect him from attempts by partisans and Soviet soldiers to exact revenge on him.

One of the key elements in the film is the "meetings" between Father Alexander and the Orthodox German officer Ivan Fedorovich Freigauzen, who oversees the work of the Pskov mission. At the film's conclusion, they have a conversation in the church, during which the German officer talks about Germany's failed military campaign of 1943 and the danger of remaining on Soviet territory. He offers to evacuate Father Alexander's family to Germany, to which he refuses. At Freigauzen's request, Father Alexander hears his confession before they part.

Father Alexander's freedom is revealed in his simplicity and sincere Christian love, which is higher and stronger than fear. It unites people and instills hope in them.

5. Conclusion

The films *Koktebel* (Russia, 2003), *Free Floating* (Russia, 2006), *Boomerang Hearts* (Russia, 2011) capture a pessimistic, bleak view of the world resulting from the destructive tendencies of the 20th century: the desacralization and dehumanization of the world. Freedom in them is presented in the Sartrean form of alienation in a world where nothing is stable, but everything is carried away into the unknown by the flow of life. The slow passage of time and empty space form a unified stylistic poetic dimension of artistic reality. In static long shots of gray and gloomy landscapes, a sense of loneliness and "abandonment" (M. Heidegger) is recreated.

Silence and insensitivity have become the main traits of the psyche of characters in the films of directors A. Popogrebsky, V. Khlebnikov, and N. Khomeriki in the 2000s – early 2010s. The lack of sincerity in their relationships and inability to express feelings testify to the destruction of the sphere of interpersonal relationships. According to G. Marcel, this state is the result of forgetting the religious and moral foundations of human existence, indifference to higher values. That is why the absence of hope is so strongly felt in them.

Perhaps the only hint that the characters in the films "Koktebel" and "Free Floating" possess any degree of inner freedom is their feeling of emptiness and alienation in the world around them, their unconscious desire to go beyond it, and their ability to dream. They do not rebel, which in the existentialism of A. Camus and J.-P. Sartre would be a genuine expression of freedom, but deep down they have a need to fight for their existence. At the same time, the hopelessness of the situation in which the characters find themselves is a complete embodiment of hope as an illusion (J.-P. Sartre).

The impenetrable boundary between the inner and outer worlds in the consciousness of the heroes of the films *Koktebel* (Russia, 2003), *Free Floating* (Russia, 2006) and *Boomerang Hearts* (Russia, 2011) makes them closed, unable to express feelings and understand themselves. This becomes the main reason for their internal lack of freedom and alienation.

The existential nature of the films by P. Lungin (*The Island*. Russia, 2006) and V. Khotinenko (*The Priest*. Russia, 2009) is not obvious. They lack a dramatically and aesthetically expressed

philosophical foundation, but a predisposition to an existential worldview is revealed in the psychological dominant – religious feelings. The characters reflect on eternal life, undergo trials that contribute to their spiritual development. Their striving to search for authentic being arises not from the "fear of nothingness" (J.-P. Sartre), but due to the experience of sincere love for another person, the feeling and awareness of the existence of higher ideals, absolute, metaphysical reality.

Existential experiences are shown in episodes where, with poignancy and utmost sincerity, Father Anatoly (*The Island*. Russia, 2006) prays to God asking for help for a sick boy, asks for forgiveness from Father Job; where Father Alexander (*The Priest*. Russia, 2009) tells a Jewish girl about the Orthodox faith, confesses the Soviet partisan Alexey and the German officer Fairhausen, and with a strained cry appeals to the Germans asking for forgiveness for the underground fighters standing on the gallows. In these episodes, their essential openness to the "other," their "participation in being," realized in love "given to the other" (G. Marcel) is revealed. Their love for people is based on love for God and the attitude toward others as "children of God" (G. Marcel). According to G. Marcel, this love is connected with the will that implements the stance of being, rather than desire, which implements the stance of having.

Openness, sincerity and the ability to love make the heroes of the films *The Island* (Russia, 2006) and *The Priest* (Russia, 2009) truly free.

6. Acknowledgements

The research is supported by a state scholarship from the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation in the field of cinematography for the year 2025.

References

- Buber, 1993 – Buber, M. (1993). Ya i Ty [Me and You]. M. [in Russian]
- DeBlasio, 2020 – DeBlasio, A. (2020). Filosof dlya kinorezhissera. Merab Mamardashvili i rossijskij kinematograf [Philosopher for a Film Director. Merab Mamardashvili and Russian Cinema]. Saint Petersburg. [in Russian]
- Mankovskaya, 2023 – Mankovskaya, N.B. (2023). Ehkzistencial'nye koncepcii cheloveka v iskusstve XX i nachala XXI veka [Existential concepts of man in the art of the 20th and early 21st centuries]. *Ehkzistencializm i ego reprezentaciya v literature i kino. Posvyashchaetsya 200-letnemu yubileyu F. M. Dostoevskogo. Materialy XIII Mezhdunarodnoj nauchnoj konferencii po ehstetike ehkranizacii 26–27 aprelya 2022 goda*. M.: 63-81. [in Russian]
- Marcel, 2004 – Marcel, G. (2004). Opyt konkretnoj filosofii [Experience of concrete philosophy]. Moscow. [in Russian]
- Marcel, 1995 – Marcel, G. (1995). Tragicheskaya mudrost' filosofii: Izbrannye raboty [The Tragic Wisdom of Philosophy: Selected Works]. M. [in Russian]
- Sartre, 2000 – Sartre, J.-P. (2000). Bytie i nichto: Opyt fenomenologicheskoy ontologii [Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology]. M. [in Russian]
- Sartre, 1990 – Sartre, J.-P. (1990). Ehkzistencializm – ehto gumanizm [Existentialism is humanism]. *Sumerki bogov*. Moscow: 319-344. [in Russian]
- Sterkina, 2023 – Sterkina, N.I. (2023). Molchanie kak simptom ehkzistencial'nogo krizisa ("Drugoe nebo" D. Mamulii) [Silence as a Symptom of Existential Crisis (Another Sky by D. Mamulia)]. *Ehkzistencializm i ego reprezentaciya v literature i kino. Posvyashchaetsya 200-letnemu yubileyu F. M. Dostoevskogo. Materialy XIII Mezhdunarodnoj nauchnoj konferencii po ehstetike ehkranizacii 26–27 aprelya 2022 goda*. M.: 198-204. [in Russian]