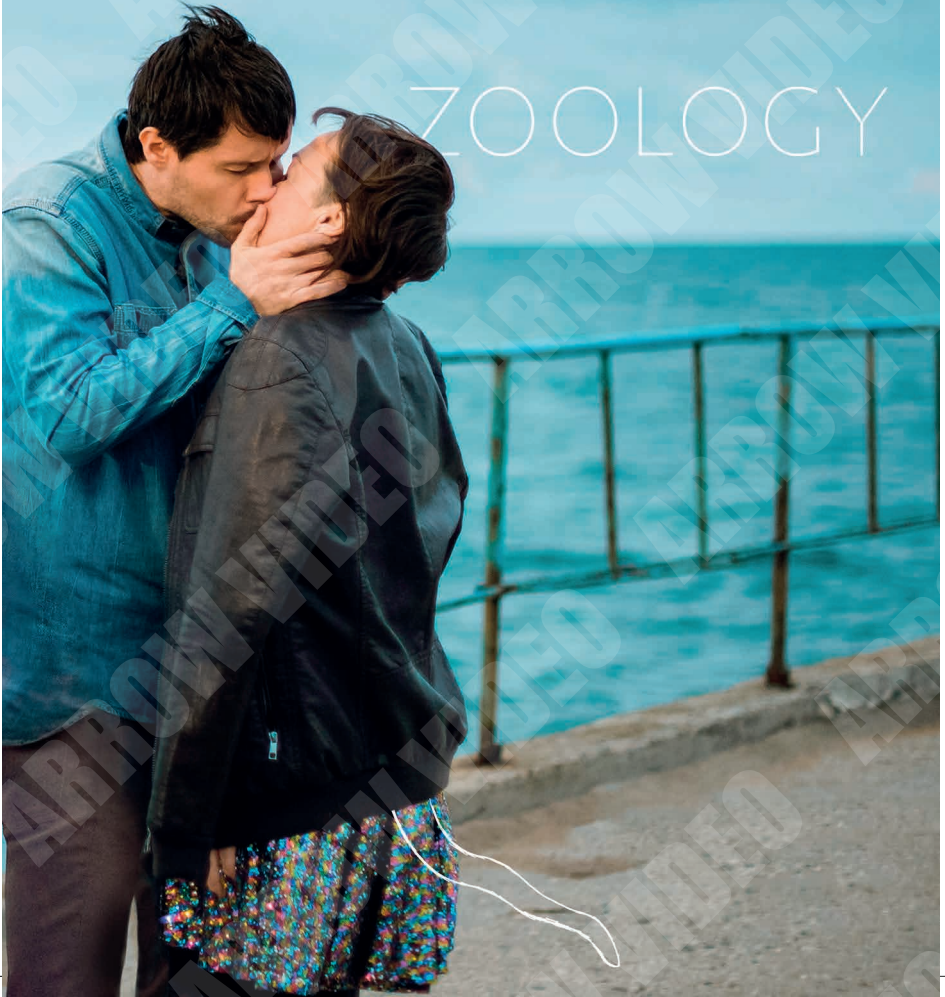


ZOOLOGY



A woman with short dark hair, wearing a black backless bodysuit, is seen from behind, looking into a large mirror. Her reflection shows her from the front, looking upwards with a slightly pained or intense expression. The room is dimly lit, with a desk and a lamp visible in the background. The entire scene is framed by a dark wood-grain border.

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ZOOLOGY

[Zoologiya]

CAST AND CREW

Natasha **Natalya Pavlenkova**

Peter **Dmitry Groshev**

Katya **Masha Tokareva**

Stylist **Aleksandr Gorchilin**

Therapist **Yuriy Vnukov**

Surgeon **Aleksandr Nekhoroshikh**

Mother **Irina Chipizhenko**

Zoo Director **Demikhova Zhanna**

Secretary **Olga Ergina**

Written, Edited and Directed by **Ivan I. Tverdovsky**

Director of Cinematography **Alex Mikeladze**

Art Director **Vasily Raspopov**

Costumes by **Anna Chistova**

Producers **Natalya Mokritskaya, Ulyana Savelieva, Mila Rozanova**



TAIL AND TABOO

by Michael Brooke

Premiered when he was only 27, but already after he'd made numerous documentaries, Moscow-born writer-director Ivan I. Tverdovsky's debut fiction feature *Corrections Class* (2014) plays like one of Ken Loach's more confrontational social-problem films, the problem in this case being a social system that clearly doesn't have the appropriate resources to place a very bright but nonetheless physically disabled teenage girl in an appropriate school class. Instead, as the title reveals, she's essentially dumped with the delinquents in the "corrections class", a high-discipline but low-achieving environment that's little more than a holding pen until they can be released into the adult world, with little interest paid to their psychological welfare.

Tverdovsky depicts all this with a keenly sympathetic eye for his largely juvenile cast: like Jean Renoir before him, he gives everyone a reason for behaving the way they do (which at least explains if not necessarily excuses what happens), and leavens the finger-pointing with lighter moments, such as the running subplot about Lena and her new boyfriend Anton trying to snatch moments of private intimacy while dealing both with the logistics of Lena's wheelchair and the constant prying eyes of both school staff and concerned parents. Shot handheld in real locations, the film is stylistically pretty familiar (the films of Loach and Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne being clear antecedents), but there's more than enough compelling narrative and psychological detail along the way to make it a very promising debut.

Tverdovsky's second feature *Zoology* (2016) is both a logical development from his first and an unexpected side-swerve into more fantastical and satirical territory. It starts by detailing the pitifully rudimentary life of fiftysomething zoo employee Natasha (Natalya Pavlenkova), who lives with her elderly mother (Irina Chipizhenko) in a run-down block of flats. Grey in both dress and demeanour (her only apparent vice is smoking, which she conceals from her mother with the help of some judiciously applied air freshener), she's the kind of woman at whom we rarely give a second glance - indeed, she's only really noticed at work when she unexpectedly faints, precipitating ribald gossip amongst her colleagues about the cause. The fact that the possibility of pregnancy is immediately dismissed with raucous laughter is revealing in itself, not just about Natasha's lack of any kind of social life but also the way that she's a figure of fun behind her back, something reinforced later during a chat over a crossword ("Seven letters, a type of hippo - Natashal!") and a practical joke involving a drawerful of live rats. Moments like this are strongly reminiscent



of the casual cruelty that peppers much of *Corrections Class*, and are in many ways more hurtful since the perpetrators are notionally supposed to be responsible adults instead of troubled, emotionally abandoned teenagers – although at least Natasha has plenty of friends amongst the zoo’s non-human denizens.

So far so familiar, but things become considerably stranger when she seeks medical advice over an unexplained ache in her lower back. When she disrobes prior to undergoing an X-ray, she reveals that the cause is a fully-grown tail, long enough to extend past her knees and as bare and pink as the rest of her body – and far from being a uselessly dangling appendage, it appears to have a distinct life of its own. That’s the first surprise; the second is that X-ray technician Peter (Dmitri Groshev) seems completely blasé about this turn of events, merely admonishing her for not advising him beforehand that he might have to deal with an unusual situation. This immediate lightening of the tone steers the film away from the kind of Cronenbergian body-horror that such a scenario might otherwise suggest, although it’s not exactly played for laughs either: like Lena’s wheelchair in the earlier film, the tail is a permanent reminder of Natasha’s physical otherness, as is the constant overheard gossip about a local woman cursed by the devil in the form of a tail (or was it three?). Are they talking about her, even if they’re not aware of her identity? Although she tries to play along at first, joking about what such a creature might do to hide her tail, or whether her affliction comes with a bonus death stare, it becomes increasingly and poignantly clear that she is indeed the subject of their conversation, which in turn means that someone at the hospital must have been blabbing.

Natasha initially determines to make the best of her situation. If God, the devil, or a quirk of nature has made her different, then she’ll embrace that difference to the full, other people’s opinions be hanged. From this perspective, her single-handed – or single-tailed – evacuation of an entire dancefloor when her appendage suddenly pops into view after a blissed-out moment of complete unselfconsciousness must be counted a triumph rather than a calamity, at least in the very short term. In part a response to Peter’s clear interest in her (which we initially assume is personal; the fetishism comes later), in part her own desire to change her lifestyle after decades of cringing conformity (her mother clearly gave her a strict religious upbringing: as she prepares for her first X-ray, she bites the cross that hangs round her neck), she changes her whole image (make-up, hairstyle, clothes, body language), seemingly shedding years in the process.

On screen for much of the running time, Pavlenkova (better known in Russia as a distinguished stage actress) gives a beautifully modulated performance in what was clearly a physically demanding role – not just in terms of prosthetics but also her willingness to expose the rest of her body with all its middle-aged creases, bulges and sags, the “before”

stage prior to her rejuvenation. The scene in the bathtub is discreet enough for it not to be too obvious that she’s exploring the self-pleasuring potential of her new appendage, but that’s surely what’s happening beneath the waterline. And why not?

This heralds another potentially taboo-trampling theme: not just that of middle-aged sexual awakening, but of relationships where the woman is considerably older than her male partner and doesn’t trouble to hide this, something that still raises eyebrows even in societies considerably more tolerant than present-day Russia. One has only to think of the voyeuristic reaction to the hefty age gap between the current French President Emmanuel Macron and his wife Brigitte, as well as the fact that she started out as his teacher. As in the animal kingdom, once a woman is no longer deemed to be of child-bearing age, the mere notion that she might have any kind of sexual urge is considered repulsive – a particularly common reaction (and therefore clearly innate) when people try to imagine their own parents having sex, even though they would literally not exist if such congress (with all its attendant engorgements and bodily fluids) hadn’t happened at least once.

Tverdovsky finds plenty of room for more generalised social commentary. A running issue among the zoo’s staff concerns unscrupulous cost-cutting involving animal feed (the rats, it seems, were purchased as alternatives to manufactured product); the hospital scenes offer plenty of glimpses of the day-to-day reality of waiting lists and overworked staff; and Natasha’s day-to-day existence is something that carers of elderly relatives (an often thankless task) will recognise immediately. But Tverdovsky’s main theme is the challenge of being different in a society where absolute conformity is considered essential in practically every sphere: home, work, leisure, the church. (Given the extreme intolerance currently being displayed towards sexual minorities in Russia, it’s not hard to see one of the things that may have inspired Tverdovsky to come up with his central metaphor.) It’s not just the tail that marks Natasha out: her boss isn’t even aware of it, but is outraged by her dressing inappropriately for her age and position, and also for casually swearing during formal departmental meetings. Later, Natasha is asked to leave a New Age-style ceremony after initially laughing at its overweening pretensions (“I am holding the Universe in my hands!”) and then participating so over-enthusiastically that she stands out even more. When she introduces Peter to her favourite animals, we sense that she’s very much in her element: if her favourite zebra has opinions about her behaviour, it keeps them very much to itself. Unlike her human colleagues, they don’t answer back.

As the film develops, it becomes increasingly surreal: a lovemaking scene within the confines of the zoo emphasises the act’s essentially animalistic nature, while the cold and clinical colour scheme that’s dominated much of the film is dramatically subverted in the final act by Natasha’s mother’s decision to paint hundreds of red crosses all over



the wallpaper, like an inversion of the traditional cross-daubing on the door of a suspected plague victim. (Mother is trying to keep out the pestilence, oblivious of the fact that she gave birth to it in the first place.) It's a startling visual coup that from a distance suggests that the flat has been splattered with blood – which, as far as mother is concerned, it might as well have been. When Natasha, now completely alone in the world, finally lets it all hang out while wandering the streets, she's visibly shunned by passers-by – but would the rest of us react any differently? Or would staring make it worse? Can we ever be truly neutral in such a situation? Her ultimate solution isn't so much predictable as tragically inevitable – and in turn it echoes other forms of mutilation (usually of specifically female body parts) in order to get them to conform to societal norms. The abrupt cut to the closing credits is viciously well timed.

Zoology has surprisingly few cinematic antecedents, but there are several clear literary forebears. Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is an obvious inspiration: if Natasha doesn't quite wake up one morning to find herself transformed into a gigantic insect, she would nonetheless find much common ground with the hapless Gregor Samsa, not least in their shared experience of the paranoia that their situation ends up triggering, both on their own part and that of the people around them. And, going further back, there's the 19th-century satirist Nikolai Gogol, who would certainly recognise Tverdovsky as a kindred spirit, with Kovalyov in *The Nose* being Natasha's equally unfortunate male counterpart (while she gets a new appendage in the rear, he loses a prominent one in the front, which then develops a disconcerting independent existence of its own), and grotesque caricatures of Russian institutions have been a recurring theme throughout its cultural history, in part as a means of staying sane. The novelist Andrei Makine described a typical Russian existence as that of living "very mundanely on the edge of the abyss", and it's a quality that very much suffuses Tverdovsky's work to date: the mundanity and conformity is essential for basic survival, even if it means imprisoning ourselves in metaphorical cages.

Which, ultimately, is what the title of *Zoology* seems to refer to – if it's stylistically very different from the Hungarian filmmaker György Pálfi's startling *Hukkle* (2002), both Pálfi and Tverdovsky similarly refuse to distinguish overmuch between humans and animals, uncovering far more similarities than differences. They are, after all, creatures of flesh, blood and deeply primal instinct. Is there that much difference between a gorilla bounding about his cage and dancers strutting their stuff under a glitterball? Tverdovsky suggests not, and it's hard to disagree. Animal societies also frown on overt displays of individualism, making poor Natasha doubly shunned: she may have a tail, but she's clearly not one of them – but can we consider her to be fully human? "We" being the operative word here, because if there's one thing Tverdovsky wants us to take away from his beguiling and disquieting little fable, it's that societies are by definition constructed from the opinions of

others. Like so many other issues raised by *Zoology*, it's an uncomfortable thought, but it's also hard to deny its essential truth.

Michael Brooke is a regular contributor to Sight & Sound, The Journal of Film Preservation and other outlets. As a Blu-ray and DVD producer, he's indulged a decades-long interest in central and eastern European cinema through such projects as the BFI's Jan Švankmajer collections, Arrow's Walerian Borowczyk and Krzysztof Kieslowski box sets, plus numerous contributions to Second Run releases.





INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR IVAN I. TVERDOVSKY

Your previous film focused on the lives of teenagers, now you're portraying a mature woman – how was it to write about someone much older than you?

Both films are different – both in their subject matter and the age of their protagonists.

In case of *Zoology*, it was surprisingly easy for me to write a story about a middle-aged woman, as we have quite a bit in common. I projected myself to the events that could have happened to her. In a way, I am even older than her.

In our film Natasha is kind of a virgin who encounters for the first time – at 55 years old – complexities of life, true feelings, conflicts and misunderstanding. These are her circumstances. Of course, my fellows and myself, we encounter those circumstances much earlier in life. But what is extremely important in this story is that a woman who has lived the longest part of her life already and who theoretically needs to start winding down her life, her feelings, this woman gets a second chance. She starts living a new and different life, getting into something she never had a chance to experience before. For me, this is a very interesting aspect of the dramatic composition here.

Your films give a voice to people who are different, 'odd', excluded from society. Why do you have this particular interest?

Today the society that I live in and people who surround me are living in such a way that is different from something that was happening even five years ago. People don't crave their individuality anymore, instead they long for something universal. You need to buy your clothes in the popular stores, go to popular concerts, in your refrigerator there is a pre-set selection of food, the same as in your neighbor's fridge. If you go down into the subway wearing a colored t-shirt you inherently distinguish yourself from the black-and-white crowd, and so on.

Our film is primarily about self-identification in the space that surrounds you. And the finale of our movie, in my opinion, quite accurately reflects things that are currently happening in my country and in Russian society. I suspect that in a lot of less totalitarian countries, a resolution similar to the ending of our film would not be possible.

For me, this film is a method of fighting reality. I hope that *Zoology* will truly turn out to be an effective ‘medicine’ against unification and standardization in any society.

The supernatural element of the tail really stands out in contrast to the realistic setting. Where did you get this idea from?

We did not want to make a science-fiction film. But of course, there is a fantastic element in the story. People don’t grow tails, it’s a scientific fact. But I wanted to imagine – hypothetically – how a tail would look like if every human being actually could grow one. I can hardly envision it being fluffy or beautiful. With our designers and VFX specialists, we worked on coming up with something realistic. Of course, some people may say that our tail looks hideous – maybe it would have been exactly that had we grown one. We don’t ask whether our genitals look aesthetic enough or not. I think this depiction of a tail as a mere organ is realistic enough.

What does the tail mean to you?

The tail is a person’s distinguishing trait, something special that each of us has. It can be anything – your political views, your taste in music or art, sexual orientation or racial profile. I view this very widely.

Our protagonist says at some point “We are all different” – and for me this is the main significance of the tail. Your tail that distinguishes you from millions of other people.

How did you make the actual tail? What was difficult about the shoot with such a prop?

It was an animatronic serviced by several technicians. Of course, we could create the tail using VFX. But for me it was important that the actress, Natalya Pavlenkova, actually spends some time with the real tail and not sees it as something theoretical that will be added later in post-production. I needed her to physically feel it. I needed to have this actual tail on set. Moreover, we did not allow the actress to take it off. She had to live through the whole story wearing it. Otherwise, we would not have a realistic enough result on screen.

The film is shot in a specific location, it does not look like the gloomy outskirts that we can see in many films coming from your country, something more akin to Zvyagintsev’s *Leviathan*. What does this location mean for you?

We specifically wanted to avoid those “gloomy outskirts”. The story of *Corrections Class* happens in a mid-Russian provincial town, and I did not want to visit that terrain again. We chose a seaside town in the South of Russia.

Very surreal still – where else would you find an orthodox church located inside a grocery store or huge concrete sputnik belonging to a meteorological station. Nothing was built or faked – those are all real places. But we wanted this surreal place to be beautiful, and I hope that the seaside location helped achieve that result.

A man with a mustache and a woman are in a hair salon. The man is standing behind the woman, who is sitting in a chair and wearing a dark blue salon cape. He has his hands on her head, looking at her hair. The woman has a surprised or concerned expression. The background shows shelves with various hair products and a window with a view of the outdoors.

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

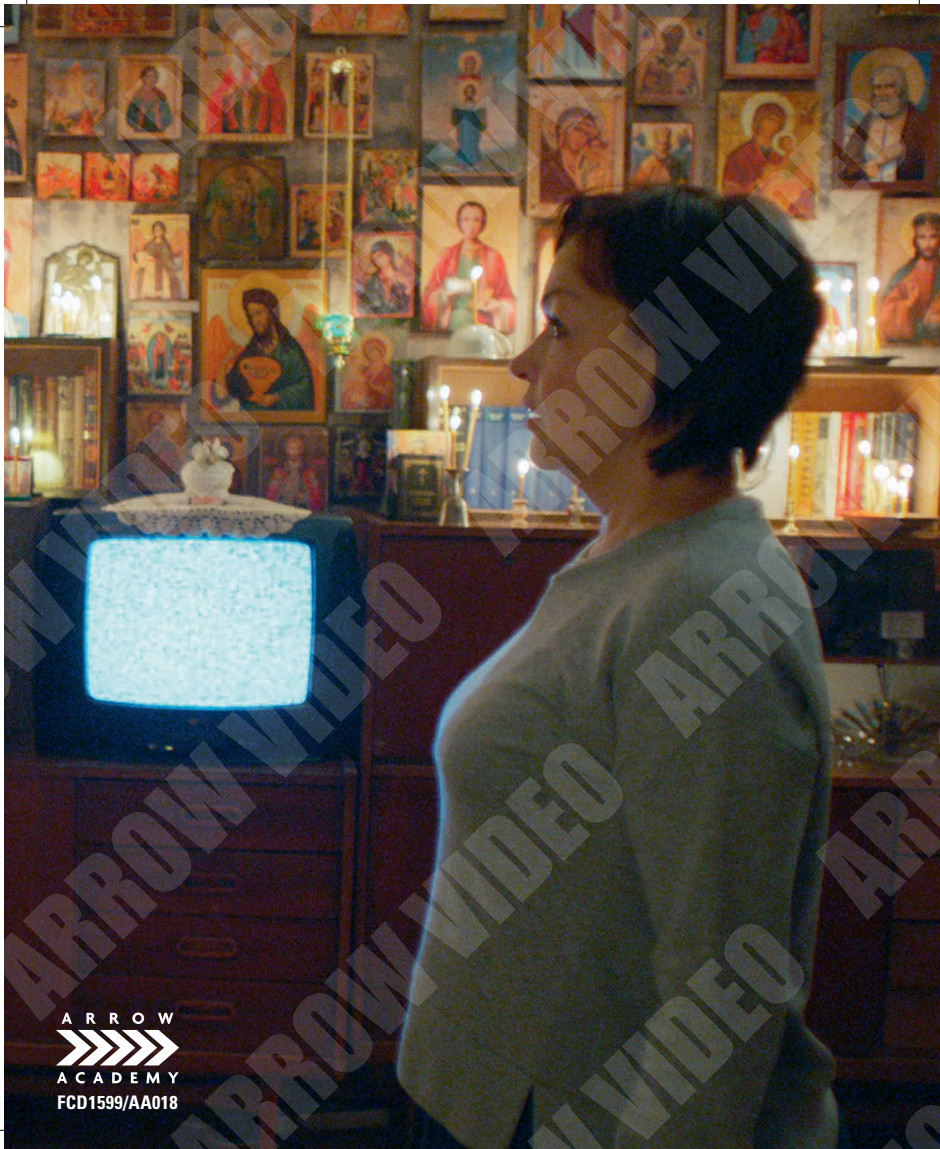
Zoology appears in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 5.1 surround sound. The High Definition master was supplied by New Europe Film Sales.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by Kevin Lambert
Executive Producer Francesco Simeoni
Technical Producer James White
QC Manager Nora Mehenni
Authoring & Subtitling DCU
Artist The Poster House / Studio Murugiah
Design Obviously Creative

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, James Blackford, Michael Brooke, Ian Froggatt, Dimitry Groshev, Peter Harnes, Rebecca Masterson, Jon Robertson, Anna Ryasik, Jon Sadler, Vitaly Yerenkov



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