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the cinema of
ALEXANDER SOKUROV

figures of paradox

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In closing, I would like to quote the final words Gilbert said to me when I last saw him, in October 2011: 'It's been fun.'

Brussels, 11 September 2013

P R E F A C E

I first became aware of the cinema of Alexander Sokurov while in St. Petersburg in the summer of 2002. The contact was initially indirect, through an encounter with a woman whose beauty and depth of soul changed my life. I learned about her enthusiasm and even erotic attraction for an older actor -- Sergey Dreyden, whom I met in 2003 and has since then become a dear friend. That same summer, I also saw Leonid Mozgovoy perform the play *Смешной* (*Smeshnoy*), based on Dostoevsky's *Dream of a Ridiculous Man* (*Сон смешного человека*). I was soon to discover that these two men were the lead actors of Sokurov's most recent films at the time, *Moloch*, *Taurus*, and *Russian Ark*, which I all saw later that year.

It was not until 2005, however, that my interest for Sokurov took a more academic turn, when, following a talk I gave at the University of Pittsburgh, I was able to get in touch with the director and conduct a lengthy interview with him in his St. Petersburg apartment. While I was already familiar with many of his films, I must confess that it was the charisma, depth, and intelligence of the man, as well as the profound sense of solitude and existential suffering emanating from him that impressed me most and compelled me to delve deeper into his oeuvre and write about him. The interview was published in *Critical Inquiry* (it is included in the present volume as an addendum), and marked a point of no return for me. Thus began a very special relationship with the director's oeuvre, full of meanderings, frustration and illuminations, which reaches its (hopefully happy) provisional conclusion here.

Writing about Alexander Sokurov's cinema is a daunting task, something attested to by the lack of any real comprehensive, unified monograph on his oeuvre. From a Film Studies perspective, so accustomed to the tradition of semiotics, psychoanalysis and Marxism, it is somewhat counter-intuitive to work on a figure who professes a clear disdain for any of these disciplines. Cinephilia is no recourse either: Sokurov approaches cinema merely as his work, and does not particularly value it as an art-form. Neither does he watch a lot of films. Under these circumstances, it is somewhat complicated to write about this quintessential auteur from a traditional auteur perspective.

Writing about Sokurov's cinema also requires complementing a Film Studies approach with an in-depth knowledge of several discrete subjects (history, art history, literature, etc.), as his art combines great simplicity with extreme sophistication and in-depth knowledge of these disciplines. This epistemic ambiguity makes it difficult to fully account for its many effects while avoiding excessive precision or, conversely,

overly generalist/allusive commentary. Under the spell of this man who, in many ways, is a sort of spiritual and artistic guru, but also extremely endearing as a human being, it is also difficult to navigate the waters between indiscriminate praise (and other such celebratory views) and a detached and deconstructive approach, which would inevitably kill what accounts for his cinema's power of attraction and fascination.

While I most certainly avoided none of these pitfalls completely, I hope that I was able to write productively about some very important aspects and motifs of his oeuvre while inscribing it in its time and place, thus helping the reader to extract a global picture of this remarkable body of works – even if, it is understood, this book is very much written from a Western perspective, vis-à-vis a quintessentially Russian subject.

What derives from the latter statement and must be specified here is that, while I am a keen admirer of Sokurov's oeuvre and I do admire the man, I have decided nonetheless to go against the grain of certain aspects of his discourse, and to address some topics that he probably would not like to see developed in any form or shape. I hope readers will understand that my approach has nothing to do with a deliberate attempt to avoid critical servility, and even less with sensationalism. It is the role of the scholar and critic to try to deliver an assessment that comes as close as possible to one's perception of what is true, even if diplomatic glossing over thorny subjects is generally the favoured route. Through this effort, I hope to encourage others to contribute to a non-biased, non-partisan, and truly broad appreciation of Alexander Sokurov's oeuvre.

INTRODUCTION

The Fragment and the Infinite, or, the Hypothesis of the Third Term in the Cinema of Alexander Sokurov

I

The year is 1951. A child is born. His father is in the military, so the family will move extensively throughout remote corners of a huge dominion – the Soviet Empire.¹ The child's birthplace, Podorvikha, near Irkutsk and Lake Baikal, will be submerged under the waters of an irrigation plan, wiped off the face of the Earth before the boy can even form a memory of the place. Many years later, he will evoke the image of a boat on a lake, looking down into the water – looking down into the abyss of memory, a place where he was and yet cannot remember. The image will haunt him.

Years go by. The boy watches the ceiling of a barren hospital room. He has no other contact with the outside world, nor any other means of distraction, than the radio in the room, playing classical tunes for which he will develop a great love – second only to his love of literature. The child has developed bone tuberculosis, and soon a chunk of his leg will be removed. In the meantime, he lets his mind wander away from his sick and painful body, carried by the music to depths and heights unsuspected. He survives. He is deeply marked by the clinical ordeal as well as by the gloomy loneliness of a long convalescence.² In spite of a limp caused by the surgery, the sad and thoughtful child lives and grows. He turns into an inquisitive, perhaps difficult, but unusually bright and talented young adult. He receives a degree in history at the University of Gorky, while working at the local television station. There he begins to make documentaries that do not yet carry the full stamp of his artistic persona but are already imbued with a certain voice, characterised by strength, slight bitterness, and regret. Soon the young man enrolls at VGIK, Moscow's prestigious film school, polarising its establishment and graduating in memorably difficult circumstances. Finally, after many years of repression, he is hailed as one of the world's most important and adventurous cinematic *auteurs*, a position he occupies to this day.

One of the last standing representatives of a breed many had thought extinct, Russian director Alexander Sokurov has in turn kept his audiences intrigued, enthralled, confused, and even angered at times, with a cinema that is all at once incredibly diverse and yet immediately recognisable as bearing the seal of its maker. Its outward components are well known, whether revered or derided: Sokurov's cinema is a delicate but difficult exploration of the human conscience and soul, of memory, destiny and history, be it in its fictional or documentary form.³ His elegiac offerings plunge the viewer into a universe of deep introspection, characterised by mournful, caressing slowness and painterly compositions often resorting to distorting lenses. Described as 'spare, gloomy, contemplative' (Alaniz 2011: 155), the experience of this cinema is at the same time plentiful, immensely rewarding, and radiates with a true love – if of an often suffering, compassionate kind – for its subjects: humans, nature and art, the latter seemingly endowing all things with meaning.

It is a very difficult task to speak of Alexander Sokurov's cinema in precise yet broad and comprehensive terms that would not fall into cliché or amount to tautologically and reductive commonplace journalese. This is hardly surprising; after all, his cinema is as much a tantalising epistemic object as its elucidation and investigation is daunting: Sokurov blurs the lines between image and word, between representation and intimation, between body and soul, more perhaps than any other living director. It serves the purpose of the present book in a variety of ways, however, to open on a (perhaps unpalatably) psycho-biographic anecdote. Inspired in spirit by the director's own poetic documentary cycle called 'elegies', it sets a certain tone, and goes a long way to capturing the sadness and beauty, yet also vibrant resilience, of Alexander Sokurov's cinema, and opens it up retrospectively on a narrative of destiny of the human soul. This is but one of the crucial motifs that the Russian director, in his many interviews conducted over the years, has been keen on discussing, alongside history, power, art (and the conscience and responsibility of the artist). We also find, in the scarring experience of the long hospitalisation and its outcome, other motifs that are clearly fundamental:⁴ loneliness, suffering, which in turn informed a triad which the artist has been reluctant or outright loath to discuss. Yet these topics are prevalent in his oeuvre, namely the anxiety of influence of twentieth-century art, death and homosexuality.⁵ All these quintessentially Sokurovian tropes will be developed in the following chapters of this book, each dedicated to a feature film, in chronological order, from the hardships of his debut, *Lonely Voice of Man* (*Одинокий голос человека*; *Odinokii golos cheloveka*, 1978, released 1987) to the (somewhat unlikely) critical triumph of his *Faust* (*Фауст*, 2011), that great and strange allegory of knowledge and power.

II

I feel as if there were two personalities inside me. One is very active, versatile, and exuberant, the other is sober, strong, and almost ascetic. Sometimes one dominates, sometimes the other. (Sokurov, in Carels 1999: 73)

Born under the sign of Gemini,⁶ Alexander Sokurov readily acknowledges an important dual quality in his personality, and this dualism is the primary interpretive key to understand his cinema. Likewise, this book will acknowledge its own dual methodology, constantly complementing and enriching the close analysis and personal, biographical data with a historicising approach. It is, I believe, the best way to envisage Sokurov's highly personal, private cinema, yet which constantly addresses the many geopolitical shifts of its time, from Brezhnev's 'Stagnation' period to Putin's increasingly totalitarian grip on contemporary Russia.

However much Sokurov himself has repressed and negated the Soviet period (which he refers to as 'a dark, sinister period' in *Russian Ark* (*Русский ковчег*; *Russkii kovcheg*, 2002)) it has informed the filmmaker's life and his cinema in a variety of ways.⁷ The two fundamental vectors (the personal and the global) account for the fate of the unconventional artist hounded by the repressive rules of a crumbling totalitarian regime, threatening at every turn to crush the individualist ethos with its heavy bureaucracy and mechanisms of censorships. Against the Soviet *doxa*, Sokurov, at once the modernist auteur and nineteenth-century Russia nostalgic, has developed a discourse of grand Russian nationalism (and sometimes sententious essentialism), assuming that most identifiably stereotypical idea of the artist's role in Russia, at least since Pushkin: the bearer of a prophetic, quasi-messianic message and vocation within society. We can immediately sense the contradiction and the sheer logic of this positioning: on the one hand, Sokurov's project does not necessarily diverge so substantially from the assertiveness of any great national ideological promotion (the parallels between the equally messianic aspirations of pre-revolutionary thinkers and Marxist materialist dialectics are clear); on the other, we will see that the romantic ideal of the artist as resister is at times contradicted by very pragmatic considerations, as it must be in the case of any filmmaker vying for theatrical distribution in order to make a living from his craft.

If truth be told, Alexander Sokurov is hardly singular, among the Russian population, in his rejection of the Soviet years: following the brutality of the revolution and the civil war, Stalinist terror and the short-lived promises of the Thaw period, living in a country under the yoke of totalitarianism, with a nepotistic agenda favouring the *nomenklatura* alone and maintained through the mazes of a vastly incompetent and corrupt administration and political establishment, could hardly have enthused anyone. But the aspects which Sokurov most overtly lamented about the Soviet years were their violence, their radical rupture with the past, their atheism, their boorish vulgarity, their abolition of religion. It is a negative influence, thus, but an important one, which explains why Sokurov, otherwise the modernist auteur *par excellence*, has so deliberately tried to establish the gap with the pre-revolutionary. Yet for all his efforts to play down the influence (let alone positive legacy) of the Soviet years and their ideology on his own worldview, there is another, even more important aspect, and of a constructive kind, debated alike by nineteenth-century Russian social democrats and twentieth-century Soviet ideologues, which inform Sokurov's cinema deeply (and which this very discussion of the biographical and the historical instantiates): the idiosyncratic articulation of a somewhat contradictory dialectics of the individual

and the collective. Even if socialist ideas were as strong in nineteenth-century Russia's intellectual spheres as they were in the rest of continental Europe, it goes without saying that Herzen's and Dostoevsky's writings must have had a more important place in Sokurov's own philosophy vis-à-vis the collective than Chernyshevsky's proto-revolutionary efforts. But it is a Soviet writer that he ultimately chose (and not perforce) in order to subvert the Soviet *doxa* of his time: Andrey Platonov.

In his film *Lonely Voice of Man*, an adaptation of two stories by Platonov, Sokurov expresses a unique collective singular voice (emulating the one found in the writer's prose), which seems not so much to make one element subservient to the other, but to propose a new original mode of expression, a third term, as it were – the originality of which was considered fundamentally subversive by the Soviet authorities.⁸ Many years later, with his tetralogy of power (composed of *Moloch* (Молох, 1999), *Taurus* (Телец; *Telets*, 2000), *The Sun* (Солнце; *Solntse*, 2005), and *Faust*), we will see how Sokurov investigates history from a most peculiar perspective, articulating a dialogue between a properly historic time (in all its complexity, expressed in the director's audio-visual treatment of space and time in these films) and a history and destiny of the human soul – his first and latest feature film thus bookending his preoccupation with the relationship of the singular with the collective.

Even though he did not receive any formal religious upbringing, Sokurov has repeatedly asserted his belief in God and His creation, a worldview which must deny history its quality of absolute, ultimate horizon of all epistemology, another clear jab inflicted upon the ruling official ideology of Marxism. But Sokurov is by no means an individualist or proponent of capitalism, and the importance of history and the collective (an inheritance both of pre-Soviet Russia and Marxism) is undeniable in his case. From this perspective, his idiosyncratic and profound negotiation of the influence and legacy of historic events, even if they are subsumed to a transcendental horizon which bypasses historical temporality, seems to propose the Divine hypothesis as yet another analogue to a Hegelian end of history.

Between atheism and faith, between communism and capitalism, between individualism and collectivism, between non-denominational religion and a 'religion of art', Sokurov has always strived to occupy an in-between space, one that dialectically contradicts both positions. In this we can see a late instantiation of another Russian romantic writer's theses: Lermontov's vision of Russia as the 'third term' between East and West, between Occidentalism and Slavophilia. Possibly feeling a kinship for the predicament of the superfluous man ('лишний человек', 'lishny chelovek') which the romantic poet embodied, Sokurov has tried to isolate himself from the cultural contexts of the twentieth century. This constant effort to re-enter the past bespeaks his desire to immobilise or escape the present and his concerns about a possibly disquieting future. In order to give this utopian space a platform, he has built a discursive and practical realm, which he calls 'the other life' ('другая жизнь'; 'drugaya zhizn', or, sometimes, 'другой мир'; 'drugoy mir' – the 'other world') and which his cinema invites us to experience. And to experience it, which is more, as a most serious matter. As the director puts it himself:

By creating a film, we interfere with the work of God – we are creating a different world. It is not a human privilege – let's not forget about that. As if they felt guilt, most directors try to create a kind of reflection on the screen of the real world, 'to show it as it is in real life'. They immerse themselves in the details of the social world surrounding man, in the details of social interactions – that is, they speak of what is well known to every viewer anyway. Yes, it's nice for the viewer to see on the screen all the things that he has seen in his life. And thereby, to be on the same level of life as the author of the created work. This collusion of audience and author creates a most dangerous phenomenon, which is called mass culture. (2012: 311; translation mine)⁹

Even though he stands by the opinion that cinema is not an art, but just the most unique craft of the twentieth century, Sokurov underlines the importance of the filmmaker's responsibility: not to yield to the modern audience's laziness, and to stay away from mere entertainment: watching a film is not only an enlightening service performed by the director, it is a sacrifice consented to by the viewer, who gives one or two hours of his life to watch the film. This attitude paradoxically betokens as much a form of sacrificial, Christ-ological hubris as well as great humility. Clearly, it also positions itself miles away from the Western conception of cinema (and even art cinema); much closer, indeed, to the Russian (and, in part, Soviet) tradition of seriousness and excellence in art with a didactic, socially responsible dimension. Pitted between romanticism and modernism, Sokurov's 'other life' is no less utopian and ambitious than the Communist dream.

The cinema of Sokurov thus expresses the socio-economic and political background of the Soviet formative years in many ways: the hybrid sources composing his cinema, especially during the impoverished late Soviet years, yielded a hodgepodge of fictional, archival, and documentary material.¹⁰ This quality goes, of course, against the misconception (formulated in the West particularly) whereby Sokurov is the heir to Tarkovsky and the author of a beautiful and painterly, but gloomy and introspective, monolithic cinema. This latter qualifier constitutes the real point of contention: indeed, as Mikhail Lampolski has brilliantly identified and repeated, Sokurov is a master of disparity and, as such, is one of the most miraculous 'combinators' of the fiction and documentary idioms, producing scores of feature fiction films and documentaries which are completely unique not only in their depth and introspective charge, but also in their generic and genetic peculiarity, as well as in their idiosyncratic, even bizarre, nature. At the same time, the quality of many of his early films puts Sokurov in line with Lukács' conception of realism as necessarily heterogeneous, inscribing him in a progressive brand of late Soviet art.

The question of realism is an important one in the case of a director who is such a brilliant practitioner of both the documentary and the fiction feature film, alternating ceaselessly between them, often blending elements of the two together. One of this book's methodological choices has been to focus primarily on the feature fiction films (dividing the chapters accordingly), but without ever forgetting Sokurov's prodigious documentary output for all that.¹¹ This approach derives from the director's own image,

when he compares fiction films to a solid house and documentary to a lighter, more glass-like structure. I personally hold the view that while the latter are just as worthy of note and inquiry as the former, it is the fiction films that ultimately reprise, refine, and synthesise his philosophy in a more complete, if also more contrived way.¹² As Sokurov himself has pointed out, the need for fiction film arises when the representation and pure recording of reality at hand are not sufficient to convey the meaning intended by the filmmaker. The fiction film thus pushes the Sokurovian project of creating the 'other life' further.¹³ But, in the end, all his films, from the shortest elegies and the epic documentary cycles to the feature films treated in this book, belong together and must be considered as a whole.

Perhaps the best way to envisage this simultaneous diversity and unity is in seeing how many attempts can be found at mapping 'cycles' in Sokurov – another aspect of the utopian, grand project of his cinema, but also its genealogical, genetic, organic design. The tetralogy of power (*Moloch*, *Taurus*, *The Sun*, *Faust*) is the most obvious, and least problematic example. But then we immediately see problems with the 'blood-ties' cycle (supposedly *Mother and Son* (*Мать и сын*; *Mat' i syn*, 1997), *Father and Son* (*Отец и сын*; *Otets i syn*, 2003), and the possibly forthcoming *Two Brothers and a Sister*) with the presence of a generically ambiguous film such as *Alexandra* (*Александра*, 2007). Another example would be the chronological and aesthetic contiguity of *The Second Circle* (*Круг второй*; *Krug vtoroy*, 1990), *The Stone* (*Камень*; *Kamen'*, 1992), and *Whispering Pages* (*Тухие страницы*; *Tikhie stranitsy*, 1993) as a cycle about the 'beyond-ness of death', complicated by the possibility of a 'Malyanov' cycle (*Days of the Eclipse* (*Дни затмения*; *Dni zatmeniya*, 1988), *The Second Circle*, and *The Stone*) as proposed by Alexandra Tuchinskaya.¹⁴ Yet another proposed cycle might string together *Days of the Eclipse*, *The Second Circle*, and *Whispering Pages*, this time as Malyanov's Virgil-like voyage through death and to hell. This attempt at classification does not take the documentaries into account – and they are, unquestionably, closely connected with the feature films: *Russian Ark* has *Elegy of a Voyage* (*Элегия дороги*; *Elegiya dorogi*, 2001) as its manifest companion piece, and so does *Alexandra* with *Elegy of Life* (*Элегия жизни*; *Elegiya zhizni*, 2006). More intriguingly, and as Fredric Jameson has suggested, the potential of the dead son, a central trope to Sokurov (the tragic, untimely, unfair loss) at the sad heart of *Maria* (*Мария*, 1978, released 1988) might be realised in *Mother and Son*. But, as I suggest, the presence of a shot, in that film, of a valley over which a dark cloud hovers (taken from the documentary *Spiritual Voices* (*Духовные голоса*; *Dukhovnye golosa*, 1995)) might relate the hero to the experience of loneliness and contemplation found at the outpost of the Russian empire – demonstrating a seeping of meaning and images through an interstice (a term I will return to). This son could either be, as alleged, a former soldier reminiscing on his past experience as a conscript, or, more metaphorically (and the fairy tale-like texture of the film would lend itself to this interpretation), embodying the poignant sadness of the orphaned child. We understand, from all of the above, that Sokurov's cinema is a whole, in which thematic concerns, obsessions, and moral pursuit come and go in a flow of intertwining and intersections, some emerging as more prominent in one film, and then subdued in

the next. But the essence – if the term can be used – always remains the same: the mark, and voice, of a true auteur, preoccupied first and foremost with the spiritual condition of man in his historic moment.

III

What all the above has suggested already, beyond other considerations, is that Alexander Sokurov is not only marked by the sign of duality, he is also a highly contradictory figure. And while it is rather commonplace to say that most great works of art and artists are filled with contradictions,¹⁵ and that cinema is the most hybrid, contradictory (and contradicted) of all the arts (see Jacques Rancière in *La Fable cinématographique* (2001)),¹⁶ there is a measure to all things nonetheless. I contend that Alexander Sokurov embodies contradictions and inhabits paradoxical spaces perhaps better than any other director, and so do his films. He generates a paradoxical dynamic between the self and the collective, history and a form of meta-history, putting his films always in a milieu that is neither one, nor the other, but a third undefined term: a surprising synthesis that seems to be random and yet filled with some sort of pre-conditioned meaning. It is almost as if Sokurov had been traveling in time, not only as a prophet, but also a re-visitor of the past. In the process, destiny and chance assume the form of a doubled Möbius strip.

The image of the Möbius strip couldn't be more facile in the case of a book subtitled *Figures of Paradox*. It is, however, not a facile set of implications that the reader will be invited to share. Yet the paradoxical affect brought about by the vision of Sokurov's films was always very much evident. In what follows, I would like to defend and justify this choice of title and its implications. To be sure, if one looks at the most literal definition of the term paradox in the traditional, or logical sense, then indeed, it is ill-fitting: Sokurov is no master of temporal or philosophical paradoxes, and his cinema does not seek to confuse or quizzically taunt the viewer. As a matter of fact, it is in many ways emotionally earnest and straightforward, which does not take away from its richness and depth. As a consequence, even though contradictions and the author's dualism can lead to reversible readings of his oeuvre, these two terms accrue but do not amount to what we would traditionally refer to as a paradox. The choice of the word 'paradox' may thus seem inappropriate, or tautological. Unless we decide, as Sokurov often does himself, to refuse a simple, linear, and literal answer or explanation, to infuse an old concept with new meaning. If we choose to look at the word as a compound (*para-doxa*), we can break it down in two signifiers: *para*, as in paraphrase, for instance: that which stands next to, which complements, enriches, re-articulates; and *doxa*, in the Greek philosophical meaning: a system, ideology, or set of beliefs. Then indeed we see the emergence of a *para-doxa* in all of Sokurov's art, its programmatic desire to create another world, to do things differently, and the resulting allusive nature coupled with its potent affect, almost always receivable in mutually exclusive terms (e.g. riveting or boring; inscrutable or limpid; ugly or beautiful; morbid or life-affirming). If we combine the three elements (contradiction, dualism, and 'para-doxal' representations and discourse), the paradox is allowed to emerge indeed, even when

envisaged from a more traditional perspective: that which seems to go against reason, to be impossible, and yet *is*.¹⁷

It goes without saying that countless paradoxes could be listed about any artist, should a critic feel inclined to do so. In the present case, however, and at the detriment of conciseness, this task must be undertaken, at least to cite a few glaring examples. The most hackneyed paradox in Sokurov is that between his perception as a conservative, 'archaist' thinker, and concurrently as a 'vanguard experimenter,' or the 'anti-avant-garde avant-gardist'.¹⁸ These terms have given pause to quite a few thinkers, who have tried to reconcile Sokurov's reactionary views vis-à-vis twentieth-century art (as in the statement of intent in *Mother and Son*'s press dossier, his motto that no painting worthy of that name has been produced in the last hundred years, for instance, or his critique of modernisms and modern life) and the obvious pioneering aspect of his films. Similar to this problem are the attempts at neatly positioning Sokurov in either the modernist (of which he would be a late, anachronistic representative, as Jameson has demonstrated) or the postmodernist sphere (more along the lines of Lyotard than Jameson's definitions of the current). Both assertions are true in part, even if, in his obvious commitment to the work of art's autonomy and his essentialist statements, Sokurov truly embodies a remnant of the otherwise almost entirely defunct cinematic modernism. His films are notoriously set in stark contrast from the mainstream, and even from the usual Euro-art circuit: they are reportedly difficult, original, daring as well as dark, preoccupied with time, and filled with notions of anomie, solitude, alienation, and the like. Conversely, they carry quite a few notions more easily associated with postmodernism, for instance a deconstruction of grand narratives (Marxism or Nazism as cases in point), in turn counterbalanced by a celebration and rewriting of pre-revolutionary Russia's past grandeur. In *Russian Ark*, we see an obvious Russian inclination for high kitsch, as well as a profound nostalgia that nevertheless does not entirely align itself with postmodern, late capitalist nostalgia. All these aspects speak to a highly hybrid, in-between aesthetics.

Another key contradiction and paradox in Sokurov lies in the fact that his most intimate, 'chamber' films (*Father and Son*, *Mother and Son*) and his short elegies elicit the most riveting sublime emotion, while his grandiose films (such as *Russian Ark*, dealing as it does in the 'Imperial' sublime) or the images of traditional sublime landscapes (the mist-shrouded alps in *Moloch*), provoke no such reaction. On the contrary, while there is an objective admiration in the mind of the viewer at the genius behind the masterfully crafted choreographies or splendid cinematography of the landscapes, one is rather underwhelmed by it all. *Russian Ark* appears as a slow-paced, almost painfully *anaesthetic* piece of cinema, eliciting a rather sedate, dream-like affect, which one watches as though plunged in a fuzzy, cotton-like slumber, despite its wealth of spectacle, both technological and narrative, as hundreds of extras dance a farewell waltz at Imperial Russia's final ball.

This affect characterises the other side of Sokurov as a Janus-like, two-faced artist. In his world, the small, the banal, the everyday can acquire tremendous, awe-inspiring scope – a form of 'intimate sublime' founded on the close-up and use of beautiful music; while the traditionally 'sublime' can leave one in a state of distinguished

boredom, or, its twenty-first-century pathologised equivalent, melancholia (perhaps because, in these films, the narcissistic impulse is never replenished, as identification with Sokurov's characters can never be truly achieved; see chapter five). So it is that Sokurov's cinema is, sometimes discretely, sometimes simultaneously, and sometimes in alternate viewings of the same film, riveting and profoundly boring, but never in an idle, 'empty' way. Consequently, I believe it appropriate to speak, in Sokurov's case, of an intimate but also degraded sublime – degraded not so much by virtue of its imagery (although often representing a weakened texture, feeble or dying characters, and so forth), so much as by the perpetual tension in his work between two forces in constant dialectic struggle (or engaged, as I shall elaborate upon in chapter fifteen, in a devilish dance): one voluble, life-loving and celebratory: the other ponderous, dark and brooding.

Let us add yet a couple of further examples to this enumeration of paradoxes, this time on the public level: the constant shift between the physical, concrete, visibly present aspect of Sokurov's work (many people have heard of him, his films are crowned at festivals, scores of articles are written about them) and the ineffable, elusive, fleeting aspect of his cinema. In official home video distribution, and across America, Europe, and Russia, his available titles presently amount to only a little over a half of his total and growing body of work. Sokurov certainly has a physical, tangible presence, yet he is at the same time, almost literally, a ghost. This ambiguity is allegorised in *Russian Ark*: the Marquis de Custine (Sergey Dreyden) and the narrator constantly and imperceptibly shift from felt and seen presences to invisible bystanders, an impression the director felt very acutely during the period in which his films were shelved and prevented from any form of official distribution. Until *perestroika*, as Lyubov Arkus and Dimitri Savelev note (1994), the paradox of invisibility derived from Sokurov's underground notoriety (his *Lonely Voice of Man* having acquired a cult status through screenings at film clubs and in front of small audiences) as well as public transparency: he was the invisible man, banned from film journals and magazines (*Искусство кино*; *Iskusstvo Kino*) and the Sovexportfilm catalogue for international festivals, until the reversal of fortune that followed the fifth congress of the Union of Soviet Cinematographers in 1986. Following this coup, Elem Klimov, then head of the organisation, wrote a very warm (and somewhat obsequious) letter to Sokurov, allowing him to complete his second feature, *Mournful Insensitivity* (*Скорбное бесчувствие*; *Skorbnoe beschuvstviye*, 1983, released 1986; see chapter two) and propelling him to the position of the most prestigious Soviet filmmaker.¹⁹ The paradox here is that Sokurov, so atypical, so unrepresentative of Soviet cinema, would become its emblem abroad. And here again, another paradox emerges: that of Sokurov as the private, sensitive, withdrawn man difficult to approach, and the intellectual figure eager to discuss and promote his ideas (about Russia, about art, about human conscience, for instance), who hosted a television programme (*Остров Сокурова*; *Ostrov Sokurova*; 'Sokurov's Island') in Russia in the late 1990s and who, for a short while, even tried to similarly educate none other than Boris Yeltsin before the outbreak of the war in Chechnya. Throughout the three decades of his career, as one of Russia's most prominent directors, Alexander Sokurov has always been inside

and outside the system: a player and an outcast, a beacon and a marginal figure – or so at least do we perceive him.

Reprising the idea of the sedate in the spectacular and of Sokurov as a public figure, we must unearth another paradox – perhaps the most important of all – namely that of Sokurov as a political and simultaneously apolitical filmmaker. As the reader will discover throughout this book, I defend the idea that Sokurov is, of course, very much a commentator on the political situation in his country (and, perhaps, in the world), but also a political player in Russia's culture industry. I want to argue here, using *Russian Ark* as my example, that the paradox of this film's sedate affect evoked above, in spite of its spectacular aspect, has to do principally with its unspoken political agenda: both because it is impossible to rekindle the liveliness of yore (in this sense, it embraces a morbid, embalming quality), but also because there is something insincere or untrue about the enterprise, namely the (Czarist) imperialism meant to come and erase a previous one (Soviet), but which serves rather as a guise for a third expression (Putinism) (if anything, they all partake of the same struggle for power and hegemony). This dissonance is expressed, more than in the film's melancholy (its memorable closing), in the vacuous hollowness of the vibrant moments (the ball, the actresses running across the Winter Palace's halls, etc.). In an important article, Fredric Jameson argued that

This opposition – between historical and existential decline – is best seen, however, as a difference in the representational capacities of the two genres – documentary and fictional narrative – and goes a long way towards accounting for Sokurov's virtuosity in both forms. The resolute political neutrality of his works (or if you prefer, their political 'degree zero') makes it unnecessary to decide whether the two versions of time express a vision of history or simply a metaphysics of life and death. (2006: 5)

What is certainly illuminating about Jameson's comment is the way in which Sokurov has indeed devised a time which is at the same time finite and infinite: where chronos becomes aeon, the time of pure event, the time of idea, of eternity, yet which at the same time remains a historic time, somehow. Here we have yet another paradox or 'third term'. Unlike Jameson, however, I want to decidedly argue (and I will do so most forcibly in chapter fourteen, dedicated to *Alexandra*) that Sokurov's political 'neutrality' is merely a decoy he has masterfully developed to avoid the hardships of his early years as a filmmaker, but also to avoid being pitted in any specific group, an attitude not uncommon of artists, of course, but which, far from paralysing his productivity, has allowed for his professional perennality. Yet it has also caused an uneasy dialectics of the private and the public in his case and encouraged his detractors to qualify him as insincere and opportunistic.

And yet, in spite of all the potential dishonest, ambiguous, or hermetic agenda contained in these contradictions and paradoxes, and in spite of the disparate elements composing the fabric of his art, Sokurov has produced an oeuvre that is highly cohesive, deeply thought-out, moving in a very specific direction and overall much more

accessible than some indulgent observers would have it. Conceiving of how duality, contradiction, and paradox escalate in accord with one another is thus an indispensable, but insufficient step to understand the mechanisms of Sokurov's cinema. Going beyond the causal, binary, and schematic workings just mentioned, and in great part thanks to his artistic commitment and his use of the sublime, Sokurov does yield artworks which are at once disparate, hybrid, heterogeneous and of a whole, distinctly unified quality. Sokurov's whole artistic engine, constantly in motion, seems to feed on the reunion and the explosion of two completely opposed terms. So it goes with the consistent clashes of the material and the spiritual, of life-affirming and death-ridden, of the bodily base and the sublime in his works. Sokurov's dualism calls for and eminently entertains the dialectical process. But his is not a purely logical or mechanical form of dialectics: it operates in a personal, organic, physical way.

We could correlate Sokurov's art and philosophy's investment with dualism with Michel Foucault's own obsession with the topic of the double. As Gilles Deleuze has argued (1986), the former derives from Foucault's preoccupation with the lining (*doublure*), and therefore of the fold (*pli*), which serves as a representation of his entire philosophy and worldview: of an outside turned into an inside by virtue of a folding inward. But in this image of a containment of the external, much as in the writer's sudden change of tone and emotional recounting of the mistreatment of sodomites in his *Discipline and Punish* (1975), one can clearly see a correlation (or, again, a folding in) between a most complex epistemological representation and a most direct ontological preoccupation – here connected with the person's sexual preferences, whether acknowledged and embraced or not. Deleuze, in order to detract from the rather obvious relationship with the rectum that Foucault's own diagrams yield (1995: 128), favours instead the term *invagination* of the surface. In a recent article, Lampolski has commented upon this correlation between reassuring distortion, flatness and womb-like enfolding:

Sokurov's space is often distorted and flattened. Distortions serve to better embed figures in space; frequently they are not shown as freely moving in a neutral three-dimensional volume, but – thanks to a mutual distortion of figures and their surroundings – they are inscribed into space as if onto a surface. In this way figures lose their autonomy in relation to the space that contains them. Space and figures are amalgamated by the same energy of alteration; they are not mutually autonomous. Such treatment transforms space into a kind of womb that keeps figures wrapped in its folds. (2011: 114–15)

Both womb and anal imagery can apply not only for this fold, but for Sokurov's art, given again his preoccupation with original trauma and the eroticised male body. His entire dualistic approach to life can thus be captured and represented in this image of the fold, of a philosophical entrapment and volume, even if his cinema itself is constructed around the idea of flatness. As if art itself could never represent the three-dimensional complexity of philosophical thought, but was nevertheless its indispensable companion and mode of reflection and expression.

In light of the above, Sokurov emerges as the master of the interstice in the fold of thought and matter, from which stem the most vivid, arresting ideas and images – often one and the same thing. In this sense, and also because besides Kantian dualism, one finds in Sokurov's cinema a profound commitment to Hegelian dialectics, the most productive method I have been able to develop to analyse the director's films is what I propose to call *interstitial dialectics*, a coinage which may be derided as vapid jargonizing. But considering how Sokurov, definitely, is 'neither/nor', but is no mere hybrid, either, claiming a territory of his own, both classically infused and rebelliously original, because he does claim this territory of the third term and occupies it with such aplomb, I believe this idiosyncrasy demands a terminology of its own. Besides, the visual associations of the interstice is not only relevant from a theoretical perspective, it does also resonate with a substantial amount of imagery found in Sokurov's cinema, including very literal instances, such as the opening dream sequence of *Father and Son*, or the contortions of Faust and Mauricius inside the latter's putrid lair, near the ending of *Faust*.

While we can attempt to think of Sokurov in terms of whole, neatly designed concepts emerging from a viewing of his films (e.g. with the tetralogy: power and greatness are always antithetical), this method will only succeed on the level of the most superficial, sound-bite-oriented discourse. It will never fit the complexity of the actual experience of Sokurov's art, nor do justice to its reflecting and addressing the complexities of our world. To this end, the concept of the interstitial is useful insofar as it helps explain the constant recycling and re-integration of found footage or original visual and aural material in Sokurov's various films as elements of connectivity, establishing, as it were, tunnels and corridors between all parts of his artistic house. It also reconciles the lofty aspirations of the transcendent and the Divine in Sokurov with the obvious dimension of the grotesque and the corporeally degraded. The term interstitial was used by Julia Kristeva in her discussion of the abject, and while that latter term hardly applies to Sokurov's cinema, I contend that it fits well any discussion of his cinema. The crack in the whole, the glimmer of light through the tightly-knit pieces of fabric, the interstice of meaning in the opaque image, or, conversely, of short-circuiting nonsense in the otherwise seemly text, *Life in Death* and *Death in Life*: these are the elements in which Sokurov's art finds its most compelling expression.

The concept of interstitial dialectics allows us also to view this oeuvre in terms of a totality by way of enfolding. The combined and deceptively fragmentary nature and unity, the image of the island and that of a whole 'other world', carried in Sokurov's imaginary and in his discourse and practice, all bespeak not only dualism, contradiction, paradoxes or loneliness and idiosyncrasy, but, much more importantly, the trope of totality, and the engulfment of such totality in the personal experience. Totality, this holy grail of modern art, is thus an essential and paradoxical term in the case of Alexander Sokurov. How, indeed, does one achieve it out of such a heterogeneous, hodgepodge of audiovisual materials, freely embracing archival footage, documentary video capture, painting-like compositions on 35mm film, etc.? The answer is simple, and it has to do with an indomitable force of will, work ethic, world vision, and intelligence, of which Sokurov is anything but lacking, coupled with the ability to incor-

porate, to enfold disparate, isolated materials and impress an organic meaning upon them. And this collage of sources and influences, acknowledged and not, leads to the same conclusions, they pave the way to a grand oeuvre which, like a body, constitutes a quasi-organic whole, wherein each tiny cell contains in itself the greatness of the whole design, yet is always inhabited by the ghostly echoes of the sad, dejected, forlorn nature of its components, by analogy with its author's utmost, intimate, solitary being. This is one of the reasons why Sokurov's earliest films, done when he was in his twenties, and his latest, completed when he was sixty, carry the same ethos and are in constant dialogue with one another, a dialogue that this book will try to transcribe. But in this lies also the reversible quality of the terms of this equation, whereby the most intimate can resonate with the greatest strength and the apparently universal retreats into the utmost private. It is thus that Sokurov's cinema embodies an organic sense of fullness, wholeness, all the while being fragmented, disparate, like memory and life itself.

Ultimately, the totalising drive in Sokurov to contain his own artistic world – by resorting to extreme long takes, elaborate camera movements, and multiplying aspects of intermediality – engulfs and captures paradoxes and contradictions as fully inherent to this process as to the finished product. Thus the tensions are resolved, or at least subsumed to a greater and more meaningful whole. Yet there is a crack there, too, as the fold is never hermetically sealed; a contradiction persists, insofar as the symbolic compensation can never truly transform the fragmented world from which it derives, cannot transcend it. The sad, longing, mournful dimension so manifest in Sokurov's work may thus derive not only from the impossibility to revive and return to the prelapsarian past, but also from the realisation that it is, ultimately, impossible to create a totality, given the world in which we live. This may account for the open-ended, seemingly unfinished dimension of many of his works. But this lack of closure also entails that there need not be an end to the process: as long as the artistic impetus remains, life remains open, in all its possibilities. Fragments. Infinity.

IV

I shall now list several discrete and important tropes usually separated or obfuscated from the study of Sokurov's cinema. Beginning with Death: this 'endstate' (to use Nancy Condee's coinage (2009)) which is foundational of all symbolic human activity must be the opening point of our review of the major Sokurovian tropes. Death bespeaks, even more so under its appearance of totality and engulfment, the profound paradoxical and contradictory nature of the director. Not in the obvious contradictions to be found in any great artist; not even in Sokurov's duality, or in an unmasking of ideology beyond the one he professes himself (in short, his over-determined historical justification of his obliterating of the Soviet years as an aberration, while these were, after all, the formative period of his life, at least in the sense that he grew up during them). Much deeper, like the engulfed town of Podorvikha where he was born, it speaks to a profound fracture to be found on the broadest levels and horizons of all inquiry: that unspeakable, unknown (un)conscious that goes even beyond History and the Transcendent (religion/theology). In other words, that which supersedes even

the fundamental terms which are common to both regimes: utopia and ideology – the realm of non-conscience of which, however, all aforementioned grand narratives are acutely aware. Since we do not possess the language to address what lies both beneath and beyond (an epistemic fifth dimension, as it were, much as the relationship of time travel from a flat square to a cube), we can at least try to comprehend its unknowable, yet looming, questioning presence, and envisage a fairly commonplace entryway into its conceptualisation. So, it is understood, Sokurov is not preoccupied so much with Death or the cadaver, as many have claimed, as with all the possible ways that humans have to accept it (psychoanalytical, structural, spiritual, phenomenological). For this reason, this fundamental and rather inscrutable effect will only be touched upon by peripheral, though not anecdotal phenomena: the representations of bodies as hazy shadows on the verge of extinction. As if these distortions, these anamorphic representations were a perception of the world of the living seen from a ghostly perspective, perhaps from beyond the grave.²⁰

Why? Because Sokurov might be writing his whole artistic output from the perspective of the person who should have died, yet survived, something in between the post-traumatic and the miraculous, while others who might have lived, perished early. In this sense, Jameson probably is right in intuiting that

‘encrypted’ is above all ... the dead boy in his first documentary, *Maria*, the peasant youth we glimpse on horseback in the early footage and whom the later footage, ten years after, reveals to have been killed by a drunken truckdriver.^[21] The boy would have gone to school, his mourning family tells us, he would have had technical and professional training. This dead boy, far more than the dead father of *The Second Circle* or the dying mother of *Mother and Son* is the true place of mourning. (2006: 7–8)

This ‘melancholy of the dead son’ implies a mourning for the self which is of course an impossible occurrence, lest we attribute emotions such as self-pity to Sokurov, which would be necessarily a very partial and reductive view. Instead, Sokurov lives a life close to the world of the dead and the living, his intimacy with the traumatic experience of nearly-lethal and scarring disease having given him a remarkably deep insight which informs his treatment of cinematic representations. Here, as elsewhere, but not least of all, we find the totalising drive to reunite all terms, including the most contradictory, a trait common to all Sokurov films, documentary and fiction, shorts and features alike.

However major a trope, Death is naturally only one of the many elements of the transcendental puzzle that Sokurov’s output proposes. It is difficult to ascertain, for instance, whether Sokurov himself believes in the afterlife, and whether his cinematic representations should let us believe in it (see the final dialogue between the departed mother and her son in *Mother and Son*). And so, with the motif of Death alone, we understand that there is something intimidating, paralysing even, about the task of trying to piece together the vast puzzle of influences and elements constituting this cinema’s universe, an undertaking for which the linear form of scholarly writing seems ill-fitting, and with respect to which the dearth of profound and compelling writing

on the subject in its totality diagnoses. More so than trying to chart the geography of an island, more even than a continent, such an undertaking requires the ability to conceive of an artistic universe in its surface and its depths and heights, yet also in its embedded-ness within history.

To put it in most schematic terms, and while most of his films known in the West will seem ahistorical in the narratives (or 'historically escapist', as is the case of *Russian Ark*), Alexander Sokurov is one of the most important and deft commentators (in his cinema itself more so than in his interviews) and philosophers of the history of the twentieth century. As already stated, throughout the chapters of this book I shall attempt to historicise and list the ways in which he and his films engage in a truly profound way with this subject. Let us just point out the clear interplay between the historical and political moments the director lived through as an adult and professional, and their eminent reflection in his films: from the cinema of impoverishment and resistance of the Brezhnev years to the reflexive ebullience of the *perestroika* period (in hindsight, by far the best, or at least most promising period in Russia's troubled history in the last hundred years), when he yielded two of his most remarkable masterpieces, *Days of the Eclipse* and *The Second Circle*. The post-Soviet period, divided unambiguously between the quasi-anarchism of the Yeltsin years and the growing totalitarianism of the Putin years, are equally reflected in Sokurov's production: from the seemingly apolitical *Mother and Son* and *The Stone* to the tackling of spectacular big-budget narratives invested in notions of power, a glorification of pre-revolutionary Russia (*Russian Ark*) and a underhanded, if intelligently ambiguous, justification of Russia's role in the Chechen war (*Alexandra*).

From this last statement, one should not deduce that Sokurov is a proponent of war and violence. If his Grand Russian ethos compels him to view Russia's imperialist conquest as part of its destiny, Sokurov nonetheless perceives tragedy in war itself. What interests Sokurov is not combat itself (or the adrenalin-filling spectacle of warfare in cinema), but the everyday life of soldiers within military structures – both an allegory of the outside world and a self-contained instance of the 'other life' which clearly attract the director's attention, as his many films on the subject attest. This, of course, derives in great part from young Alexander's experience, growing up in a military household, his father an officer and World War II veteran, and the many geographical displacements this entailed. Whence the director's clear compassion and sympathy for soldiers, but also his desire to view them as tragic figures, far away from the more violent aspects of their profession. Perhaps this accounts in great part, beyond the obvious representations of the military (be it in fiction or documentary form), for the rejection of violence by the filmmaker. Thus the absence of sharp angles, of any form of aggression, traded instead for often muddled visual palettes, or dialogue whispered to the point of being unintelligible. They are very much part of Sokurov's aesthetic philosophy: things should not be sharp, loud, violent. The director – for many years threatened with blindness, and a victim of physical aggression – favours a worldview that would speak against those values, already overwhelmingly present in the outside world and in the media. Instead, the tone and texture of his films, the careful work of transfiguring the image and refining the sound, are meant to recreate Sokurov's 'other

life' – a life of reinvented sentience and experience, of caresses binding the physical and spiritual, the latter coming always through the former.

If one deals with the narratives themselves, a more in-depth scrutiny will help decipher many of their sibylline traits. But the crucial import of Sokurov's investment with the military has to do with his fascination for and with the male body, a fascination which has led his *Father and Son* (in which virile wrestling between athletic male bodies turns into longing gazes and oneiric caresses) to be recuperated as a beacon of queer cinema, against Sokurov's vehement objections.

Alexander Sokurov is an especially private, sensitive man, and no doubt the walls surrounding him have been erected to protect him. At the centre of this citadel lies the single most sensitive and irksome subject: not only is it anathema to ask about homosexuality in conversations with Sokurov, it is also lacking entirely from Sokurov studies in general. This manifest absence is patently an elephant in the room, too large and obvious to be ignored yet which people choose to turn away from, for fear of touching upon a delicate issue, for a variety of reasons. And yet everybody who knows Sokurov, and a vast majority of informed viewers who have seen his films, likely intuit that under the existential solitude that emanates so poignantly from his oeuvre, lurks the uneasy question of repressed homosexuality.

If, to this day, even the very best scholars writing on Sokurov have elected not to address the question of homosexuality in his films, it is either because the issue is of little concern to them (this certainly holds true of Jameson), or out of respect for the director's own stance vis-à-vis the question. Furthermore, no critic seems keen on addressing Sokurov's take on religiosity and faith, which may suggest a connection between the two (the erotic brand of the passion, or a concatenation of physical love and the love of God). Iampolski is a perfect case in point of this lacuna in Sokurov studies: his writings, otherwise excellent, both richly textured and informed, try to take a roundabout route around these two seemingly fraught notions. In his essay 'Truth in the Flesh' (1999) Iampolski on the one hand reduces the sacred to a merely structural phenomenon void of a real significance, and then tries to convince the reader that Sokurov's interest in bodily suffering, implying ugly, mortified bodies, alone explains the absence of beautiful female bodies in his cinema. But what do we make, then, of the highly eroticised, young, muscular male bodies to be found so often in Sokurov's fiction films and documentaries?

The fact that I have been asked by some Sokurov scholars *not* to write about Sokurov's homosexuality, as it was either 'trading in unfounded gossip' or potentially hurtful to the filmmaker, only adds to the obvious (and the obviously contentious) nature of the problem: in short, trying to cater to the man's, rather than the artist's, sensitivity while also keeping alive the flame of old Soviet homophobia, revived today in Putin's Russia and its infamous 'anti-gay propaganda' laws.²² On this very timely subject, it is of the utmost importance to stress that there is no sensationalist aspect or 'dirty secret' disclosure to the assertion above. I by no means want to hurt Sokurov by underlining the homosexual aspects of his art, nor do I believe that it could suffer from such a statement. On the contrary, we can only gain a greater and better understanding of his cinematic universe if we take this fundamental element into account. It is, as a matter of fact, very productive insofar as it exhibits another fundamental tension in

Sokurov: between the corporeal and the spiritual. This tension explains how Sokurov is both a masterful sensualist and an ascetic, intellectual filmmaker, the two aspects playing a key role in the dynamics of Sokurov's art and life, mutually informing one another. (The same applies with loneliness, a trope so prominent in his cinema, which finds its analogue in a life of mournful celibacy.) I shall dwell extensively on the correlation of homosexuality and the transcendent in Sokurov in chapter twelve, dedicated to *Father and Son*. In the meantime, any assessment of Sokurov's cinema that does not take the elements above into account must remain incomplete.

V

Obstacles to obtaining a thorough picture of Sokurov's oeuvre, however crucial, are not solely connected to certain taboos firmly rooted in Russian culture: much more prosaically, it has been difficult to access his body of work as a whole (I myself only owe it to a series of happy coincidences to have been able to watch all his films, between 2002 and 2011). Since the early 1990s, his films have been shown in the West. Of the several complete (or near complete) retrospectives dedicated to his work, we can point out those held at MoMA in 2002; Turin in 2003;²³ Montréal in 2005; Paris in 2007; London in 2011; and a more recent one in Brussels in 2013. Another retrospective, dedicated to his documentary work, was also held in Nyon in 1998. What emerges from a viewing of Sokurov's entire filmography is a clear global perspective, which helps dissipate a substantial portion of the mist surrounding the nature of his work, characterised by a wealth of themes and ideas unified by a common, organic dimension. But these local events celebrating the filmmaker's output have only benefitted a happy few. At the cost of a great effort, one may compile Sokurov's entire filmography on video format. This is hardly an ideal solution, however: his films are definitely meant to be appreciated on the big screen, where liberties taken with proportion, magnified size and the flow of time acquire their truly appropriate interplay.

The fact that no monograph, until this, has been written about Sokurov's entire oeuvre may have to do with the difficulty to access the films, let alone to view them in ideal conditions. It does not mean that the literature dedicated to the director's cinema is either lacking or of poor quality. Sokurov has been hot intellectual property at least since the *perestroika* period²⁴ and as such has received deserved critical attention.²⁵ There have been many insightful and a few seminal articles in journals; chapters in books; and collections of essays published, among other places, in Russia, France, Italy, the UK, the US, Japan and Brazil. First and foremost, one should salute the efforts of Lyubov Arkus, the editor of the Lenfilm-based film journal *SEANS*, for putting out two indispensable (and accordingly oft-quoted), lavishly illustrated collections of essays on Sokurov, the first published in 1994, and the second one, updated with a wealth of new material, in 2006 (and with an updated revision in 2012 following *Faust's* triumph).²⁶ These two milestones lay the groundwork for any serious Sokurov study worthy of that name. Next to a score of excellent essays (one or two written for each film, wavering between the journalistic review and occasionally the more scholarly, theoretical piece), these books also offer a glimpse into Sokurov's production

notes and sketches from a series of his films. These include a thoroughly documented account of his hardships at the time of his senior project at VGIK, which would become his debut feature *Lonely Voice of Man*, as well as excerpts from notes about *Mournful Insensitivity* (Arkus's favourite film by Sokurov) and *Save and Protect* (*Cnacu u coxpanu; Spasi i sokhrani*, 1989). If vastly celebratory in tone, the Arkus volumes offer a rare and precious insight into the laudatory side of the Russian perspective on Sokurov. Another Russian scholar worth noting is Alexandra Tuchinskaya, who has consistently written insightful and clear commentary on Sokurov's cinema, including a wealth of material that can be accessed on the filmmaker's official website: 'The Island of Sokurov' (*Ocmopob CokypoBa; Ostrov Sokurova*).²⁷

Naturally, Sokurov is a most polarising figure, and there has also been a fair share of Sokurov-bashing in Russia, including for what some perceive as a form of boring pretentiousness in his films, certain allegations of anti-Semitism (gladly these must remain unfounded or unsubstantiated in print) and Sokurov's ambiguous relationship vis-à-vis the powers that be in Russia. While I by no means align myself with this hostile stance, I certainly have my reservations about some of the ideological positions expressed by Sokurov, covertly or not, in some of his films and in interviews, and will voice these in the relevant chapters. Nevertheless, it is important to point out immediately that however unpalatable some of Sokurov's ideas, it is his dedication to his art that commands respect, even for his questionable beliefs. Such beliefs, once again, may be understood as constitutive aspects of a whole that is profoundly organic and must be taken seriously as such.

In the West, the rare but essential writings of Fredric Jameson have constituted the earliest backbone of a serious inquiry into Sokurov. In keeping with the themes and methodologies that have preoccupied his illustrious career, Jameson has addressed Sokurov's *Days of the Eclipse* as a geopolitical commentary on the fading Soviet Union and the impending doom enacted by the arrival of late capitalism in that corner of the world (1992). Elsewhere, Jameson has investigated Sokurov's historical narratives (especially *Moloch* and *Taurus*) as re-inventing the genre entirely, pressing forward a treatment of cinematic time that likens the director to the great tradition of cinematic modernism, resisting late capitalism's reviled cultural idiom: postmodernism (1991, 2006).²⁸

The other major scholar who bridges the gap between Russian and Western appreciation of Sokurov is Mikhail Iampolski. A personal friend and one-time consultant of Sokurov, Iampolski also expertly deconstructs the fraught association of the Russian director with his illustrious predecessor, Andrey Tarkovsky. If both artists can be considered as 'anti-avant-garde avant-gardists', they otherwise differ almost entirely from one another, be it on human or aesthetic levels (see chapter three). Among Iampolski's many seminal writings, exhibiting his erudite theoretical versatility and often steeped in (mostly Lacanian) psychoanalysis, we find an article on the importance of the trope of Death in Sokurov, arguing how he is the only director to actually represent Death itself (and not merely the fact of dying).²⁹ The point is so brilliantly demonstrated that it obfuscates, again, the flip side of the coin, the other aspect of this Janus-faced artist: his life-affirming dimension.

Iampolski's name unsurprisingly appears in two recent collections of essays: one in French, edited jointly by François Albera and Michel Estève, simply titled *Alexandre Sokourov* (2009); the other one in English, co-edited by Nancy Condee and Birgit Beumers, *The Cinema of Alexander Sokourov* (2011). The absence of any subtitle to these volumes indicates how richly polymorphous and how difficult it is to reduce the director's oeuvre to one aspect. Both collections boast a variety of approaches, with scholars spanning disciplines such as literature, film studies, history, Slavic studies, and so on. The result, unsurprisingly, is one of a somewhat dissonant, if rich and interesting, combination of voices. By and large, however, these two volumes attempt to cover Sokourov's career and reinforce the received notions already laid out above.

Albera's and Estève's collection offers an excellent summary and introduction of Sokourov's oeuvre by Albera, as well as a fine piece by philologist Leonid Heller on the important kinship between Platonov and Sokourov (a point to which I subscribe entirely and elaborate upon further in chapter one). The volume also offers a chapter that serves as a digest of sorts to Diane Arnaud's *Figures d'enfermement* (2005), which, to the best of my knowledge, serves as the first monograph (derived from a chapter of Arnaud's dissertation) dedicated to Sokourov.³⁰ It focuses on the filmmaker's representation and 'poetics' of space in how it reflects an inner, psychological movement of withdrawal and surge, expressed in several of his films but also perhaps in his life itself. Several other pieces worthy of note investigate important aspects of Sokourov's cinema, namely his use of sound (often unjustly overshadowed by his memorable painterly visuals), but also his investment with the ghostly and the spectral, as well as dialectics of figuration and 'dis-figuration' in a piece by Sylvie Rollet.

One of the major merits of Condee and Beumers' volume is to give access to non-russophones to a sampling of the pieces from the Arkus volumes (translated by Richard Taylor). However, in spite of its pretense to being the first comprehensive book on Sokourov in English, about two thirds of Sokourov's corpus are never addressed, or are only referred to in passing (including four of his feature films).³¹ Rather, the number of films thoroughly discussed seems to have been sacrificed in favour of a more in-depth investigation of the best known of Sokourov's films: *Lonely Voice of Man*, *Days of the Eclipse*, *Russian Ark*, and the first three films of the tetralogy (*Moloch*, *Taurus*, *The Sun*).³² While this editorial method allows one to reflect on the films from several compelling angles, one can lament the many pages lost in redundant summarising of the same plots or recounting of the same ideas and criticisms. As in the French volume (where he discusses the notion of *kairos* and a philosophy of arrested time in Sokourov, which I did not shy away from borrowing in these pages), Iampolski stands out as a highlight, producing yet another impressive demonstration of his virtuosic ability to mix classical knowledge, psychoanalysis, and film studies. In the essay 'Truncated Families and Absolute Intimacy', Iampolski elaborates on the trope of the binomial families to be found almost everywhere in Sokourov's cinema, most evidently in *Mother and Son* and *Father and Son*. This binary connection prevents the resolve of habitual psychological processes (such as the Oedipal conflict), thus deadlocking the characters in situations of caressing and loving proximity, which nevertheless evacuate the potential for expressions of 'regular' sexuality. Here, as in much of his writings, Iampolski's

personal investment with the filmmaker might preclude a more comprehensive assessment of some of his tropes. I will return to this issue in chapter twelve.

Other important thinkers or critics have written about Sokurov, including Jacques Rancière, with the short but very interesting piece 'Le cinéma comme la peinture?' ('Cinema as painting?') (1999). Rancière's investment with the intricacies of the cinematic image and the paradoxes of this ever-contradictory medium is of multiple interest to the present book. In this essay, dealing primarily with *Whispering Pages* but published at the time of *Mother and Son's* release, Rancière tries to come to terms with the tension between Sokurov's progressive experiments in the artistic domain and his backward ideological declarations. The French Marxist's effort is to obliquely unmask Sokurov as a genius who deludes himself in believing that he is the conservative he claims to be. In the process, he touches upon something fundamental, namely the intense contradictions and meanderings of Sokurov's discourse. But while Rancière's fabled intuition and talent at seeing beyond the surface of things procures a strong argument, he is ultimately, I think, victim of some of his own prejudices. While I will return to his essay in chapter eight, it is important to point out that in interviews the director is neither self-delusional nor aggrandisingly deceptive, but rather that he retains in his *modus operandi*, as artist and thinker, an insularity that reflects his own life-long solitude. This solitude primarily favours introspection and depth of thought: Sokurov's often brazen or authoritative responses consistently have more to them than the single-dimensionality for which they have often been mistaken and dismissed.

One should also point out the efforts, in English, of Ian Christie, who edited the first issue of *Film Studies*, entirely dedicated to Sokurov and featuring translated pieces of great value, including Sokurov's 'Death, the Banal Leveller', written after Tarkovsky's untimely passing. In 2011–12 Christie was instrumental in organising a near-complete retrospective of Sokurov's films in London. Undoubtedly, this initiative was bolstered by Sokurov's *Faust* being (quite literally) lionised at the Venice Film Festival, a suit sure to be followed by further critical attention.

In Italian, we should point out *Eclissi di cinema* ('Eclipses of Cinema'), the beautiful catalogue of the 2003 retrospective (including translations of seminal articles by Jameson and Iampolski), as well as the recent *Osservare l'incanto* ('Observing the Incantation', 2009) and *I corpi del potere* ('Bodies of Power', 2012), the titles of which evocatively reference two of the ways in which Sokurov has been viewed: as some sort of cinematic conjurer as well as a specialist of the question of power (and the representation of the human body). Besides, it is in Italy that Sokurov's partly autobiographical *Nell'entro dell'oceano* ('In the Middle of the Ocean') was first published, in 2009, before its release in the original Russian, under the title *В центре океана* (*V tsentre okeana*) in 2012. I shall return to this important volume in my conclusion.

Though Sokurov may have published in Italian and made films in German and in Russian, it does not make it any easier, for many film scholars in the West, to overcome the linguistic barrier, which his study entails: even a good knowledge of Russian would not suffice, in most cases, to warrant a successful foray into Sokurov's archives. In this might reside the greatest issue with Sokurov studies: the director's network is well organised, but also tightly sealed. This is coterminous to the nature of archival/scien-

tific work and global human interactions in Russia, a problem which can often only be surmounted through personalised networks and the leverages of nepotism. But in this specific case, there is another important reason for the difficulty in accessing Sokurov's archives. For reasons both concrete and imagined, Sokurov has a great deal of distrust, sometimes verging on paranoia, of particular people or institutions. As a consequence, the few scholars who do have access to his archive keep it jealously to themselves. This may account for the relatively narrow channels through which informed Sokurov scholarship is produced, often dealing in a re-hashed celebration of his work. This would be fine indeed if these readings did not also serve the purpose of erecting a wall, avoiding certain fundamental topics that the filmmaker himself repudiates. The gesture is easy to understand, even to sympathise with, as these people are partisans, and sometimes even friends of Sokurov. In the process, however, key elements to the understanding of the director's oeuvre are obfuscated, and it is this book's avowed project to rectify this situation, as best as it can.

I cannot claim to possess the definitive keys to analysing and decoding Sokurov's work entirely, but want to suggest the usefulness of a mode of inquiry constantly conceiving of his oeuvre in this paradox(ic)al and interstitial way, as occupying a third term pitted between the role of the artist, promoting the autonomy of his output, and the politician, the diplomat (for lack of a better word), maneuvering and navigating the tormented seas of power. Such a multi-layered approach will, inasmuch as possible, aid in the interpretation of this complex oeuvre.

VI

This introduction has laid out the fundamental tenets of this book, beginning with the paradoxical treatment of the individual/biographical and the collective/historical, as well as their implications vis-à-vis representations of story and history. In its adoption of interstitial dialectics, it discloses a methodology for a productive understanding of Sokurov, which will allow for the reconciliation of the dualist and paradoxical nature of his oeuvre with the concrete project of totality it sets out to realise, through the enfolding of disparate elements into an organic whole. This introduction also announces the filmmaker's fundamental themes and motifs, whether it is those that are most prominent within his scholarship (the soul and conscience, the role of the artist, history, power, death) or those instead that are seldom or never discussed in Sokurov studies (homosexuality, the sacred, the sublime). In so doing, this book always keeps in mind the works of the filmmaker's most perceptive and/or influential critics.

Because literature, painting, and music occupy such an important place in Sokurov's life and art, I shall, in the course of this volume, also correlate and refer his oeuvre to important models: the authors whose books he has adapted, or who have greatly influenced him and screenwriter Yuri Arabov (Goethe, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Platonov, Shaw, Mann); the painters whose works he references in some of his most visually striking films (El Greco, the Dutch and Flemish schools, Friedrich, etc.); and the composers whose music play an important role in his films (Bach, Mozart, Wagner,

Beethoven, Glinka, Tchaikovsky, but also Otmar Nussio and Andrey Sigle). However, it is filmmakers themselves who will be given most attention: Sokurov may consider cinema an immature, inferior art form, yet he does acknowledge the greatness and importance of some prominent directors, if not their influence (Tarkovsky, Bresson, and Bergman). I will also refer in passing to other directors whom he has often pointed out as being of major importance: Eisenstein, Dovzhenko, Fassbinder, and Fellini. Other names should immediately be mentioned here, although I will not delve into them in this book: D. W. Griffith, Robert Flaherty, and Jean Vigo. As forefathers of all fiction and documentary cinema, the first two will lurk in any discussion of filmmaking. As for Vigo, it is worth mentioning that Sokurov saw in his work, especially *L'Atalante* (1934), the first instance of truly organic cinema stemming from documentary and fiction film practices.³³

The chapters that follow, straddling film criticism and theory, try to capture some of the essence of one of the most unique and enduring voices of world cinema, mapping his world, its sounds and images, however hybrid and disjointed, yet unified under what is perhaps *the* most coherent and interrelated oeuvre in film history. I have tried to delineate and shed an original light on each of Sokurov's fifteen feature films, broaching many of his documentaries in the process, and moving as far as possible from the shadow of the analyses, great and small, already written about them.

May this book be helpful to the reader and viewer in the discovery of one of the world's most remarkable filmographies. Alexander Sokurov's may at first come across as unnecessarily difficult but will, eventually, as a whole, open up, in all its hitherto inscrutable simplicity, onto the tightly-knit tapestry of the experience of a unique artist (unique, again, in the place he occupies and in the ways he occupies it), or, to borrow the title of his debut feature, the multiple echoes of individuality and totality of experience to be found within the lonely voice of man.

Notes

- 1 Alexander Sokurov's youth was one of perpetual displacement, between Poland, eastern Russia, and Asia Minor.
- 2 This telling and moving anecdote comes from Sokurov's friend and film critic Lyubov Arkus. The filmmaker himself is most discreet when it comes to discussing his private life, past and present.
- 3 The distinction between the two terms, however indispensable, is fraught.
- 4 While I will retain the term for the sake of clarity, it is important to note early on that Sokurov himself (2012) does not consider cinema an art-form but, rather, a craft. Unlike art, cinema, in Sokurov's assessment, lacks a tradition and a formed language – and, perhaps, a soul. It remains nonetheless the single greatest craft of the twentieth century, but one that has been all too often used to dangerous ends. Against his unabashed and endless love of literature, music and painting, Sokurov specifies: 'I am not a fan of cinema ... I just work in it' ('Я не фанат кино ... Я просто там работаю'; 'Ya ne fanat kino ... ya prosto tam rabotayu') (2012: 312).

- 5 Ahead of my July 2005 interview with Sokurov, I was expressly instructed by Lyubov Arkus *not* to broach these three subjects.
- 6 He playfully reminds us of the inquisitive spirit, ascribed to this eminently two-faced sign in Chaldean astrology, in a line of *Russian Ark*.
- 7 If only, and very simply, for the fact that Sokurov comes from a working-class family whose ‘pull toward culture’ (as he put it in the interview he gave on 1 June 2012, during the talk-show *На ночь глядя*; *Na noch' glyadya*) could have been compromised in a capitalist system, for instance.
- 8 During his ‘underground’ period (when his films were all systematically shelved), Sokurov made *And Nothing More* (*И ничего больше*; *I nichego bolshe*, 1982, released 1988), a film about World War II made exclusively with archival footage. The film’s title was inspired by the Latin maxim ‘tertium non datur’ (‘there is no third term/option’). Sokurov’s cinema, in a way, can be said to precisely occupy the ‘tertium datur’ position.
- 9 ‘Создавая кинематографическое произведение, Мы вторгаемся в дела Господи – Мы создаем Другой мир. Это привилегия не человека – и не будем забывать об этом. Как бы чувствуя свою вину, большая часть режиссеров пытается создать на экране некое отражение реального мира, ‘показать как в жизни бывает’. Они погружаются в подробности описания окружающего человека социального мира подробности социальных отношений – то есть говорят о том, что и без них каждому зрителю хорошо известно. Да, приятно зрителю на экране увидеть все то, что он в жизни видел. И тем самым оказаться на одной ступени жизни с автором произведения порождает опаснейшее явление, которое называется массовой культурой.’
- 10 And beyond: even in the post-Soviet years Sokurov has continued to combine a wide range of techniques and mediums – film, video, DV, HD, use of digital intermediates, and so on.
- 11 With only a very few exceptions, all of Sokurov’s documentaries will be addressed in the course of this book. But I should here point out the fact that I could not include a commentary of his two medium-length fiction films, *The Degraded* (*Разжалованный*; *Razzhalovanny*, 1980) and *Empire* (*Ампи*; *Ampir*, 1987).
- 12 This being said, the reality depicted in some of Sokurov’s ‘documentaries’ (truly the word ‘poetic diary’ would apply better) is equally strange, if not more so, than that found in his feature fiction films (think, for instance, of the relatively traditional *Alexandra* as opposed to *dolce...* (1999)).
- 13 The present volume, therefore, will preoccupy itself more with the intricate architecture and rich layout of the house of fiction cinema, without losing sight, from a distance, of the beautiful glass house of documentary in the filmmaker’s artistic garden. May this lacuna be complemented by a future companion book dedicated to that aspect of his oeuvre.
- 14 In the supplementary notes for the Russian DVD release of *Days of the Eclipse*.
- 15 Leonid Heller underlines the ‘problematic, incomplete, contradictory nature of all art’ (2009: 49; translation mine). Furthermore, paradoxes, double-structures,

and tensions of all kinds have always been at the core of great literature and art, from the doubling of the narrative identified by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the New Testament, through the couple of Eros and Thanatos as described by Denis de Rougemont in *L'Amour et l'Occident*, and continuing to Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and beyond.

- 16 Rancière reminds us of the medium's fundamental hybridity, poised between the primacy of the image, the evanescent affects of sound, and the pressing surge of the narrative to regiment it all.
- 17 As for the term 'figure' in the book's title, it should not serve to qualify the films alone, but the posture adopted by the director in his own meta-critical discourse.
- 18 Iampolski has best captured Sokurov's character: 'Alexander Sokurov is an avant-gardist with a moral tendency, joining to the radicalism of his aesthetics a traditional philosophy of life. He is undeniably innovative in the reversal of clichés, but he does at the same time defend the idea that cultural and moral values must be saved and considers it one of the important tasks of his life' (1989b). Yet is Sokurov's cinema truly meant to promote and restore older values? His general attitude seems to cultivate a certain ambiguity, avoiding dogmatic statements. If one wants to discern a message of any kind in Sokurov, it is probably much more present in the form of his films than in their scripts (see chapter fourteen). Even his most clearly nostalgic film, *Russian Ark*, seems to hint at what I call the 'utopia of restoration' (see chapter eleven).
- 19 This situation had as its source, as François Albera and Michel Estève have pointed out, a series of factors which had contributed to the director's singularity, his isolation hitherto, and the fact that he did incarnate a certain conception of the artist which responded, as it were, to a social 'demand' at the time (2009: 23). The result was that Sokurov's singularity and insularity were turned into an emblem, an example. Some believed that Sokurov, opposed as much to socialist realism as he was to the new 'liberal' anti-Stalinist *doxa*, would become more accessible, and start making a more commercial cinema, once the context would allow for it. The exact opposite happened: his films from the late 1980s and early 1990s are among his most personal and least commercial. And yet therein lies one supplemental socio-economic paradox: Sokurov, one of the world's least commercial filmmakers, has produced more feature films than many commercial (and even successful) directors, not to mention his score of documentaries. This is due, naturally, to his remarkable professional ethos and power of artistic vision. But it is also a by-product of his ability to receive the attention, or even the support, of many important figures, including Boris Yeltsin and, more recently, Vladimir Putin. While it is perhaps apparent that Sokurov was never as persecuted as the mythology around his life suggests, his journey was no bed of roses. Sokurov's oeuvre and life reside in this interstitial space between want and plenty, publicity and isolation, negative and positive sublime, riveting sensations and sedate boredom. This very unsettled (and often unsettling) position accounts for the powerful dynamic, which is at the heart of each and every entry in his impressive filmography.

- 20 It is important to bear in mind that the term 'anamorphic' refers to a specific type of cinematic lens, used for widescreen image formats. The term is often used very liberally in discussions of Sokurov's cinema, the English language not being equipped with the more appropriate French word *anamorphose*. I therefore will often simply use the words 'distorted', 'distortion', and so on.
- 21 Although Jameson is right in his general intuition with regard to the figure of the youth in this film, his factual account is slightly incorrect: Yura, Maria's son (born in 1959), died long before the shooting of the film. The footage showing Maria mourning her son by his grave belongs not to the additional footage shot by Sokurov from the mid-1980s, but to the original documentary he shot while still at Gorky Television, in the mid-1970s.
- 22 This was always done very diplomatically and cordially, but with an inescapable assertiveness. I can see these scholars' point, now as I did then, and hope that they too will understand the need for me to address this issue nonetheless.
- 23 The catalogue from the Turin conference compiles the most important articles written about Sokurov at the time, as well as many testimonies by his close collaborators.
- 24 This turnaround was ushered in by Goskino in 1986 when Sokurov's entire back catalogue, most of which had been shelved previously, was released in a context of a short-lived (and unviable, as George Faraday has illustrated) explosion of late-Soviet cinematic distribution, and his name featured, along with those of Kira Muratova and Aleksey German, as part of the new wave of late-Soviet directors.
- 25 This attention is reasonably voluminous in terms of number of articles, interviews, and collections of essays – but whole areas, and certainly monographs, are lacking. Because of this incomplete nature, Sokurov studies are, as it were, simultaneously vibrant and impoverished.
- 26 Most of the contributors to both volumes are members of the *SEANS* editorial committee itself.
- 27 http://www.sokurov.spb.ru/isle_en/isle_bio.html
- 28 While I cannot begin to express the debt I owe to Jameson's writings, I would like, in places, to challenge and complement some of his ideas (Jameson's famous Marxist take on literature and cinema is a great foundation), while retaining those aspects that I ascribe to, notably his perceptive rejection and deconstruction of the theory according to which Sokurov is the heir to Andrei Tarkovsky.
- 29 Iampolski, *Smert' v Kino* (1991). This article has been translated into English and French.
- 30 In French, Bruno Dietsch has written a curious, short lyrical paean to Sokurov, with a couple of interviews with Sokurov's collaborators as appendages.
- 31 *Mournful Insensitivity, Save and Protect, The Stone, and Whispering Pages*.
- 32 Although released after the film's premiere, the Beumers and Condee collection was published too early to incorporate *Faust* in its discussion.
- 33 'Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* is, to me, the first organic work in cinema. All aspects of cinematic art are present in this film' (Sokurov in Cazals 1993; translation mine).

CHAPTER ONE

Lonely Voice of Man: Singular Murmurs, Multiple Echoes

‘The revolution is here, now we will be happy.’

– Lyuba, in Andrey Platonov’s *The River Potudan* (1937)

‘I don’t believe in revolutions. I only believe in evolutions.’

– Alexander Sokurov

Sokurov first learned the craft of filmmaking while an assistant at the local TV station in the town of Gorky, where he also studied history, during the so-called Stagnation period (*застой*; *zastoy*) of the Brezhnev years (1964–82). Following the early 1960s’ ‘Thaw’ period (*Омменение*; *Ottepel*), which had seen a renewed vitality in Soviet art, Soviet censorship was re-ignited in the 1970s in all its absurd vigour, as the extenuating and grotesque case surrounding the release of Tarkovsky’s *The Mirror* (*Зеркало*; *Zerkalo*, 1975) testifies.¹ Against the general feeling, among the population, of a renewed decline (economic and democratic as well as artistic) and wasted potential, Soviet cinema was encouraged to promote happy, joyful values; many absurd examples were reported where filmmakers had to either cut or add entire scenes that compromised the integrity of their films in order to conform to the party line.² It is in this context that Sokurov made his first TV documentaries,³ including *Самые земные заботы* (*Samye zemnye zaboty*; ‘The Most Earthly Concerns’, 1974)⁴ and *The Last Day of a Rainy Summer* (*Последний день ненастного лета*; *Poslednii den’ nenastnogo leta*, 1978),⁵ both about the world of state farms in the Gorky region. While these early efforts were formally very tame, and, following the prevailing etiquette, celebrated the labour of good socialist workers, they already announced Sokurov as a serious filmmaker, pessimistic yet one with a profoundly humane and compassionate outlook.

In 1975, having received his B.A. in History a year earlier, Sokurov was accepted into VGIK, the national film school in Moscow. There he distinguished himself as a particularly brilliant but uncouth and intellectually rebellious student. His master in the documentary section, Alexander Zguridi (1904–1998), in Sokurov's own words, was often perplexed by his student's personality, but allegedly never forbade him from doing anything, thus tacitly encouraging his idiosyncratic character and talent.⁶ Without Zguridi's perceptiveness and open-minded approach, Sokurov might never have made it through the programme at VGIK, which would have made his chances to land a position at a film studio in the Soviet Union almost impossible.

The attitude of defiance and resistance which would characterise Sokurov's style and life for the next ten years is discreetly reflected in his documentary short *The Summer of Maria Voynova* (*Лето Марии Войновой*; *Leto Marii Voynovoy*, 1975), which celebrates the labour of a peasant woman working on a flax plantation. This film, closer in tone and spirit to the films of Alexander Dovzhenko than those of Dziga Vertov, undermines its unabashedly lyrical imagery with the theme of the protagonist's dead child. Maria's own untimely death, although the filmmaker could not have known it at the time, lurked ahead, and many years later (in 1987) Sokurov would return to the small village and screen his documentary to the local crowd, including Maria's daughter and her hostile, remarried husband. The sense of wasted potential and lost opportunities would loom much stronger in this updated and completed film, simply titled *Maria* (released in 1988).

A similar sense of loss and gloom would pervade Sokurov's senior film project, initially meant to be a documentary about Andrey Platonov (1899–1951), though it later acquired a life of its own as a feature fiction film, *Lonely Voice of Man*. Few first films offer such a clear articulation of, and, at the same time, so many of their author's preoccupations and obsessions as Sokurov's debut feature. An adaptation of two texts by Platonov, it serves as a formal and thematic matrix for a very substantial part of the filmmaker's oeuvre. The film also illustrates how Sokurov creates a cogent whole out of an extremely precarious film production, and manages to reach the most universal of themes even with the most intimate, confidential material: the story of two young people simply trying to achieve a simple kind of happiness, in the immediate post-Civil War period.

Upon seeing a rough cut of the film at VGIK, Andrey Tarkovsky was sufficiently impressed to later hail Sokurov as the peer to many of the greatest masters of cinema.⁷ This the young artist could only have achieved with his steadfast resilience, indomitable dedication of purpose, and clarity of vision, yielding, in the shape of this micro-budget and initially ultra-confidential production, a cinematic murmur of sorts, a whisper that had the power of a wind of change, a wind which echoed and carried with it a visionary flow and the silenced voices of thousands. In this sense, it is not an overstatement to regard the mystical energy inhabiting this debut as a very compelling expression of a specifically artistic religion.⁸

The film's status as an epochal experience for a whole generation, a reality that is manifest in its extraordinary if troubled reception history, will provide the endpoint for a discourse of hybridity and singular collectivity that will be introduced within

the context of Sokurov's careful cinematic reconstitution of Platonovian aesthetics. In so doing, we will be sure to consider how the film's production limitations not only beget its form, but even how it encouraged an essentially Platonovian collective 'voice'. From here, this chapter will consider the specifically Sokurovian aspects and motifs of *Lonely Voice of Man*, qualities and strategies that again draw disproportionately on the inspiration of Platonov. We will then ask the following question: how did such a small, private film, one that was shelved and only shown at private screenings until 1987, resonate with the audience of its time, acquiring the cult status that it attained?

I

Why was the resurgent figure of Andrey Platonov – the author had fallen out of favour previously with Stalin, as did many other great Soviet artists – such a crucial choice for Sokurov's career? The biological convergences and artistic affinities between the filmmaker and Platonov tell much of the story: Alexander Nikolaevich Sokurov was born on 14 June 1951, just a few months following the death of the great Soviet writer (on 5 January of that same year). Both came from working-class backgrounds and would come to express a profoundly dualistic approach to life in the hybrid yet coherent nature of their respective oeuvres. Freely blending various sources and styles – divergent and even competing linguistic registers in Platonov; documentary and fiction in Sokurov – they also combine a profound humanism with a sense of despondence. Creatively precocious, both men produced accomplished works in their respective domains from their early twenties. Finally, both can be seen as 'renaissance men': Platonov excelled in a wide range of literary production, from the journalistic essay to the novel to the short story and poetry; while Sokurov is not only a director of both documentary and fiction film, but also an accomplished cinematographer, editor, sound designer, writer, and narrator.

Sokurov accordingly would do much more than merely illustrate the writer's life, finding a kindred spirit, a voice echoing with the same isolation and solitude in Platonov's writing. *Lonely Voice of Man* is based primarily upon a series of narrative passages faithfully drawn from Platonov's simple and poignant *The River Potudan*. Here, Nikita, a young peasant who fought on the side of the Red Army, comes home after the Civil War. Back in the provinces, he reconnects with Lyuba, his youthful sweetheart. They are poor, and resources are scarce. Nikita falls ill with typhus, but Lyuba, with selfless love and care, nurses him back to health. After she graduates from medical school, the two get married, but somehow Nikita cannot handle this simple happiness. After weeks of impotence, he runs away from his home, submitting himself to a life of base chores at a nearby town, Kantemirovka. One day, Nikita's father happens upon him while selling some grain at the local market. He stoically informs Nikita that Lyuba has attempted suicide by throwing herself in the river, and is now very ill. The young man runs to his wife's side with the promise that they will always be together.

Adding to this basic outline, Sokurov likewise included elements and imagery drawn from a second Platonov work, *The Origins of a Master*, after deciding to turn

the fictional segments of his documentary into a fully-fledged feature film.⁹ In this tale, a mysterious monk witnesses scenes of workers in a factory and walks by Nikita's side when he runs away to Kantemirovka, while a subplot, parallel to Nikita and Lyuba's story, tells of an employee of the sinister ZAGS registry office (the official body for marriage registration in Russia) who married them. In an example drawn from the latter storyline, the employee sitting on a boat with another man decides to take a plunge into the water down below, echoing Nikita's descent into a quasi-animal state during his self-imposed mortifying exile. At the end, when Nikita has returned to Lyuba and professes to 'having gotten used to being happy with her', the man emerges from the lake and back onto the boat, having narrowly escaped death, profoundly shaken by this transformative experience.¹⁰

Literary critic Georges Nivat has underlined the convergences between the artistic universes of Platonov and Sokurov, stemming from thematic lines (misery, solitude, survival, the path to love). Nivat evokes 'a world reduced to the essential, the intimate, the warmth of bodies, the breath of the heart. Platonovian beings reach out their arms toward each other in a world of thin grass, a meagre steppe where the wind blows. Man is a piece of refuse, here, a refuse from heat, hope, and utopia' (2004: 326; translation mine). Utopia, but also dystopia, is epitomised in Platonov's most striking work, *Chevengur*.¹¹ Platonov's texts lay bare the exhaustion of the individual, the sense of heartache set against venues of old shacks and fences falling to pieces (here we feel Platonov's influence on Sokurov's subsequent *Days of the Eclipse*, which also borrows many elements from the novella *Dzhan*) – the painful inscription of the man-as-refuse, but also the fallen man, in a present of hunger, misery, dirt, following the horror of war.

Many other thematic elements can be found in both artists' oeuvres: the atmosphere of the life of small towns, the passing of time (the seasonal cycles), the importance of food (and hunger), and, of course, the theme of the outsider. The latter is a man outside the system, incapable of embracing it and of experiencing careless and/or mindless bliss that only dissolution into the pattern of collective phenomena promises – something to which both men could closely (and painfully) relate. Still, while both have experienced the rejection of the system, and have therefore had to grow autonomous in many senses, they both regard self-sufficiency as evil and dangerous: a non-spiritual stance. The film's title underlines the solitude which runs through the life and work of Sokurov, who poetically captured life, in quasi-Biblical terms, as a 'period from betrayal to the repentance of small isles of assimilation' (Arkus and Savelev 1994: 36).

The dualistic dimension in Platonov and Sokurov perhaps best coincides with their relationship to the Divine. While a committed communist, Platonov infused his works with religious and spiritualist symbols – from the Bible to Nikolay Fyodorov's blend of Orthodox mysticism and futurism, as Thomas Seifrid illustrates in his text *Andrey Platonov: Uncertainties of the Spirit* (1992).¹² Of Platonov one might say, as Robert Chandler has put it, 'he writes about spiritual matters in material terms and about the material world in spiritual terms' (2008: vii). Though he never received a religious education and though he distrusts the Church as an organised institution, the same

could be said about Sokurov, even if he could hardly be called a communist and has never hidden his spiritualist aspirations. Indeed, Sokurov is profoundly informed by religious works of art, and several of his films, including the exemplary *Lonely Voice of Man*, carry a profound sense of the mystical and transcendent.

Platonov and Sokurov also converge in their discreet but potent discourse about love and eroticism, and can be compared in terms of what we may call their 'sexual politics': addressing and representing sexuality in unique ways, both Platonov and Sokurov view it primarily as an inescapable but nagging distraction from the life of the spirit.¹³ In this lies what is no doubt the single most important theme of the story for Sokurov (who time and again has repeated that his film is primordially about the gap between the flesh and the soul): instead of a deficit of love, it is the latter's overflow, its paralysing excess, which is at the core of the characters' unhappiness. But this predicament, while potentially universal, does not forget about its historical context.

Platonov sets the action of his story in a deeply troubled period – the immediate aftermath of the civil war – torn by internal struggles and bloodshed, when the leaders of the young Soviet Union were trying to implement deep and radical societal changes over a very short period of time by, amongst other things, regulating sexuality and challenging the traditional notion of family. The most important items on the agenda, in this respect, were the elimination of church rituals and facilitating the processes of marriage, divorce, and abortion, in order to move away from the 'natural order' toward the 'social order'. In so doing, the Soviet Union sought to progressively remove the raising of children from the bourgeois values of family and the home (or 'the hearth'). Instead, they promoted a social rearing mode, in an effort to create a new generation of *homini sovietici*, attached not to their biological parents so much as to the Union itself, comrades instead of brothers, a new format for which the vastly illiterate and shell-shocked Soviet Union was all but unprepared.¹⁴

The social anarchy of the civil war was thus matched with an unclear, likewise anarchic spirit in sexual mores, and the attempts at sublimating sex through the revolutionary cause – Lenin's *vœu pieux* – were thwarted and inefficient. Viewed from this angle, the symbolism of Platonov's story, with its dysfunctional couple, in a world where most people are either widowers or orphans, and where the notion of family is indeed very much challenged, is clearly over-determined: the lack of chemistry between the young traumatised proletarian and the sensitive intellectual (even though both come from modest backgrounds) is added to the inadequacy of the new social rules, supposed to bring about happiness; as in Lyuba's own words, 'The revolution is here, now we will be happy.' The sincerity of the character's statement is matched here by Platonov's own disillusionment with the unfulfilled promises of the Bolshevik revolution.

Nevertheless, while Platonov draws attention to the de-humanised romantic mores of a period that Stalin's administration was also criticising violently at the time,¹⁵ re-instituting the values of family and making abortion and homosexuality anathema, he also implies that the impossibility of reaching happiness for those traumatised by the horrors of revolution and civil war goes beyond that specific historic moment.¹⁶ For Platonov, the effects of the age, as ripples on a lake, or as in an eternal return of the



Lonely Voice of Man:
Post revolutio, anima triste
 – impotence for physical
 love, and for happiness

same (two images memorably used by Sokurov, at the beginning and end of the film) would continue to affect the future.

The author likely aims also at the terror of the Stalinist repression. The latter's castrating dimension is expressed in Nikita's impotence and subsequent alienation from the self, with death seemingly alone as a vague and gloomy promise of reconciliation and peace. This dark, if accurate, picture covering the first twenty years of the Soviet Union, far from the official ideology and imagery of the times, reflects as much, if not more, on the atmosphere of the time at which it was written (surely Platonov's publishing undertakings met with more 'castration' and lack of freedom under Stalin than during the early Soviet years) than on the immediate post-revolution and civil war period. Platonov depicted a world in which happiness could not exist, despite his work's profusion of upbeat socialist realist imagery, tainted with grotesque and animal imagery to convey his darker feelings.¹⁷

The virile enthusiasms of revolutionary propaganda are thus substituted for something very different in most of Platonov's works. One could sense a potent sexual influx in the early works of Soviet cinema – most explicit perhaps in Eisenstein, both in terms of a negative, capitalist sexuality, as in the scene where a bourgeois woman stabs a Bolshevik with her umbrella in *October* (*Октябрь*; *Oktyabr*, 1927), and in a positive, revolutionary, life-affirming élan, as in the quasi-orgasmic storming of the winter palace at the end of that same film – their celebration of modernity and will to create a new world and a new Communist man, as in Vertov's man/machine interpolations. This spirit is replaced here by a mournful voice of shell-shocked impotence, solitude, and decay.¹⁸ With that said, the analogy between revolution and orgasmic uproars is not absent entirely. To many, Platonov was presenting a warped reality, a Soviet world as seen through a shattered glass, darkly. Perhaps his representation, on the contrary, was only too accurate, and few better than him captured the essence of reality and literary realism in all its necessary rich and disturbing heterogeneity.

Sokurov may belong to an entirely different generation than Platonov, but being born just a short period after his death, the potent kinship of their pessimistic yet humanist visions marks them rather as equivalents of sorts, each in his own time and

medium and with his own idiosyncratic approach to modernism, as Lampolski has argued.¹⁹ *Lonely Voice of Man*, in particular, provides a criticism of the Soviet Union of the late 1970s, much as Platonov's short story covertly hinted at the gloom and despair under the upbeat (and forcibly imposed) socialist realist rhetoric that masked the Stalinist terror.

II

If we accept that in cinematic adaptations it is fundamental for the author to first capture a writer's style, even before concerning oneself with the adapted author's thematic preoccupations as laid out in the previous section, then Alexander Sokurov's and screenwriter Yuri Arabov's idea to recreate a 'Platonovian rhythm' for *Lonely Voice of Man*, conveying an impression of time that would be physical rather than historical, was of a fundamental importance. It was also important to the young men to evoke, in the script, an island on a river, foreshadowing the powerful motif of the insular, lonely figure in Sokurov (Arabov in Arkus 1994: 26).²⁰ This scenic detail itself was not retained, eventually, but the concern remained to create a film that would be an analogue to the peculiar stylistic universe and poetics of Platonov.²¹ Indeed, as Lampolski has demonstrated, *Lonely Voice of Man* is not only faithful in its rhythm to Platonov's story; it also tries to find an equivalent to the style of Platonov's unique language. The latter is famously tainted with the colours of the *skaz*, a tradition which entails a narrator while also featuring a fairly anonymous author.²² There are thus two implicit narrators, two voices: one that we may call 'interior' (the character in the story) and one that is social, historical, mythical, as expressed in Platonov. There is thus a distinction to be made between narration and expression: the structure of the former being subjective, and the structure of the latter being 'objective' but de-personalised (as an abstract voice of 'the people'). This subtle complication of the narratorial instance is akin to what Boris Eikhenbaum (1987) referred to as the 'ornamental *skaz*' a folklore-imbued style that lacks a traditional narrator. Author and narrator blend, creating in Platonov this strange prose tainted with idiolect, akin to the style of self-taught writers (самоучки; *samouchki*). Here, personal and impersonal degrees of enunciation collide and build a productive artistic tension. As Michel Heller (1999) has illustrated, the Platonovian *skaz* incorporates the voices of all those who had placed their hopes in the revolution. The individual and concrete are mixed with the abstract, creating the tone of Shklovskyan *ostraneniye* (остранение), all the while indicating that the distinction between the two voices is of a tangential, porous nature. In his production diaries, Sokurov notes how he wanted to emulate these shifts of tone and this strange universe between illusionism and the constant breaking of the literary illusion. He writes how the actors could acknowledge the camera at times, almost as in a candid documentary, and then forget about it, and return to their intra-diegetic existence, if the term even applies in such a peculiar film. Very early on, Sokurov's hybrid approach to fiction and documentary was already firmly in place, much as his artistic vision was already powerfully formed (as is revealed in his recurrent preoccupation with themes of solitude, resilience, and the motif of the island).

One of the great achievements of *Lonely Voice of Man*, as we gathered from the above, is to have produced a cogent and powerful film from its highly hybrid, mixed components.²³ Here, we should underline the fact that while germane to the subject at hand and to the inner workings of Platonov's prose, this formal quality was by all means an imposition, due to the extreme paucity of the means at Sokurov's disposal and its tight production history. Shot on a shoestring budget, with hardly enough film stock (16mm tail ends, at that) to cover the running time of a feature film, the director had no coverage or extra takes to work with whatsoever.²⁴ This tension underlines the fragmentary dimension of the finished film, and as Lampolski writes (1994a: 48), forgetfulness, just as memory, can be termed fragmentary, as can death itself. Sokurov thus, whether intentionally at the stage of the film's production, or in the editing room (the level at which many films are re-conceptualised, when the filmmakers and editors are confronted with the ways in which the material they shot combine and 'work' together), integrates this mechanism of partial memory so typical of Platonov into a broader discourse of love and death. This is illustrated most clearly in the absence of many reverse shots in the film. Far from merely underlining a shortage of footage, these instances endow the film with an irresistibly poetic, suggestive quality. This is made possible by the entrancingly beautiful images of empty interiors and of nature which are imbued with an intrinsic significance. The best illustration of this poetics of metonymy happens in the final shot in Lyuba's house, where the lovers are heard but not seen, while the camera pans down on a stem of wheat growing from between the planks of the wooden floor. Yet the absence of the actors in the shot also poses the question of the reality of this 'happy ending'.

The past of Platonov's characters is often mangled, or they are deprived of one altogether, and the only thing they cling to is the present, in order to remember that they are alive. Nikita tells Lyuba that he kept thinking about her during all these years: 'One should never forget.' She replies – in a laconic statement, which could very well be one of Sokurov's mottos, the emphasis being not so much on a concrete detail or object, but on the very action of memory as nostalgia, as yearning, in an elegiac mode: 'I remember them, you remember me, they will also remember you – this is a chain of existence which preserves its matter.' But this gentle innermost force is a weak force (in Arkus 1994: 35).²⁵

One of Sokurov's favourite means to implement this Platonovian form of memory is his use of old still photographs.²⁶ In one of the film's most complex scenes, Nikita looks at Lyuba as she sleeps on the bed, her eyes covered with her braided hair. Through a simple, yet richly textured composition of the frame, the onlooker turns out to be reflected in a mirror. In the next shot, it is Lyuba, in a pre-revolutionary flashback, who appears in a mirror, as Nikita, inside his flashback, now looks from within the memorial realm, standing in a doorframe, as his sweetheart looks at old photographs in an album. The scene then proceeds to show the photographs in close-up, creating a unique regime that blends various types of past tenses, but also fictional footage and real pre-revolutionary elements, which the film clearly eulogises. However tenuously

connected to the film's actual diegesis, these old photographs partake in a general atmosphere of regret and loss, evoking better, happier past times, as the peaceful and meekly playful music accompanying this moment testifies.

Memory of lost places, events, the deceased: for Platonov, as for Sokurov, there is little doubt that dead people – the memory of them, their ghosts – are as worthy and important as the living, and equally deserving of inquiry. Platonov's hero in *The River Potudan* remembers the village to which he returns, but as though he had known it as a different person – a comment on the transformative, if not traumatic, unspoken experience of war.²⁷ In the process, he has become both sensitive and afraid of life, like a flayed animal, incapable of trust and, in this case, happiness. Later in the story, Nikita will take refuge from memory and mortal grief in utter forgetfulness of who he once was, dulling himself with chores in the Kantemirovka market as he becomes a quasi-soulless, speech-deprived half-wit. This, to Sokurov, is another important motif of both the novella and his film: a weak heart, for which happiness is hard work, and might eventually be shunned entirely – a form of neurasthenia that would be reworked in completely different and extreme ways in Sokurov's tetralogy.²⁸ This ambivalent, pained relationship to joy and happiness is quite clearly a fixture of both Sokurov's and Platonov's works, although they are expressed differently, and their sources may be quite different indeed.

In many ways, the greatly impoverished means of production of the film reflected the state of mind and reality of Soviet society of the time, unlike the propagandistic films still released by the studios, enforcing a tone of optimism that was all but out of place during Brezhnev's regime of stagnation. Sokurov's rebellious and inflexible artistic ethos voiced the silent disgruntled feeling of his contemporaries, as much in its technological poverty as in the meanings they convey. Still, it is paradoxical that he would do so with such an intimate, personal, but also despondent, possibly even egotistical film. Yet, as everywhere else in Sokurov – the dualist, Janus-faced artist whose cinema's 'double' nature would only be reinforced by the thematic obsessions of screenwriter Arabov – each dark or negative emotion carries a set of positive values. While certainly a rather depressing story, *Lonely Voice of Man* is also a vibrant life-affirming statement through its unflinching commitment to cinema as art.

IV

The analogies between the lives, talents and works of Platonov and Sokurov, and their handling of hybrid material and form, constitute crucial aspects which this chapter wished to discuss. However, as far as the history of Russian cinema, and the forthcoming career of Alexander Sokurov are concerned, the most important aspect of *Lonely Voice of Man*, and the most important legacy of Platonov that it carries, is its peculiar and remarkable recreation of a collective singular, the single, lonely voice containing a myriad of voices of its time. Platonov, for Iampolski and for Oleg Kovalov, is the quintessential author of the first person plural ('the Platonovian "we" here is "us"' – Kovalov 1994: 39–41), and Sokurov unquestionably succeeds in offering to this Platonovian collectivity within *Lonely Voice of Man*.²⁹ Sokurov's is a cinematic equivalent that would

become the staple of his films, emulating his most idiosyncratic spatial poetics, a maze of points of view, sometimes anchored in a character's perspective, sometimes fairly objective-referential, and sometimes oddly arbitrary. To Iampolski, the deep sense of melancholy that emanates from both artists' works has to do with this articulation of voices and points of view: it is 'the vague world of the lost 'I', which a descent into Platonov's universe entails' (1994a: 44). Examined from this perspective, the reasons behind the inclusion of the monk and ZAGS employee in Sokurov's film become more clear, resonating strongly with the notion of the 'collective I'. Early in the film, when the monk is seen looking into a house through a window, the 'point of view' shot reveals old, black and white footage of workers in a factory, evoking strongly Eisenstein's *Strike!* (*Стачка!*; *Stachka!*, 1925) one of Sokurov's favourite films, precisely because it is one of those rare works in cinema genuinely written in the first person plural. Trying to emulate this successful model, Sokurov multiplies the articulation of points of view: the camera's, Nikita's, the monk's; and even the universes pictured, be it that of the fiction (present time) or that of the documentary (the past). (The time of writing of the story, in Sokurov's film, is connected further with the present of the film's production.) The resulting alternation of point of view shots and referential wide shots creates an at least dual articulation of the narration.

Surely, as suggested above, the title of the film can tip us off: the voice of the title is not really Nikita's, nor Lyuba's, nor any other main character in the diegesis, for that matter. It is, as we shall see, the voice of 'man' as a collective entity, as hinted at in the doubling and echoing structure of the narrative reproduced in the above synopsis. It is also the lonely voice of the artist, who serves as a receptacle and resonance chamber for the muted voices of those silenced under authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. Finally, in this specific case, it is the superimposition of one artistic voice (Platonov's) over another (Sokurov's, and, to a certain extent, his crew and artistic team's, especially his screenwriter Yuri Arabov's).

V

Leaving Andrey Platonov behind for the moment, let us focus on the Sokurovian in *Lonely Voice of Man*. Breaking down the film's title, we see the emergence of three key concepts in Sokurov's life and art: loneliness, the voice, and man. The first is self-explanatory: loneliness is central to Sokurov's life, and painfully plagues many of his characters, manifesting itself in their alienation, anomie, and existential solitude.

Secondly, few directors will have so thoroughly investigated the voice throughout their careers: from the form of muttered, unintelligible mumbling (as in *An Example of Intonation* (*Пример интонации*; *Primer intonatsii*, 1991), about Boris Yeltsin) to the crisp explosion of an actor's impeccable diction straight into a radio studio's microphone (*Reading from the Book of Blockade*; *Читаем блокадную книгу*; *Chitaem blokadnyu knigu*, 2009). For Sokurov, sound constitutes an independent, fully artistic realm. It does not merely serve the purpose of conveying the dialogue or musically illustrating the images. Sokurov narrates a great number of his documentaries (as well as, most famously, *Russian Ark*), using his voice in all its modulations to great effect,

from the uncertain murmur to the ironically forceful statement. His use of music is just as personal: the *leitmotif* of *Lonely Voice of Man*, *Rubensiana* (by Otmar Nussio), a neo-romantic symphonic poem which will return in several of his subsequent films, constitutes a sonic signature carrying the affects that Sokurov particularly favours: a mellifluous sadness, somewhat bordering on kitsch, but never lapsing into it entirely. There is also a great visuality to Nussio's nostalgic piece, taken from a cycle entitled *Music and Paintings*, underlining further the filmmaker's joint pursuit of applying a tactile, visual, tangible feel to his soundtracks through a variety of means, from the mix to the application of 'noise' (or 'grain') to the 'sonic image'. In general, as with his use of various lenses to distort the image, Sokurov has endeavoured to make the human voice a sonic mass, which can be treated as independent from the image, but also independent from its semiotic meaning in the case of language – while still yielding a compelling, thorough artistic experience. Of all sounds, the human voice is the most important, as it is understood in Sokurov to be an expression of the soul – the history of which, to quote Paul Schrader's interview with Sokurov (1997), 'is a sad [one]'.

The theme of the human, and humanism, is absolutely central to Sokurov's philosophy. His concern, curiosity, and love for a whole range of human types has led him, time and again throughout his career, to devise a vast tapestry of cinematic portraits, celebrating what he calls 'personalities'. There, we find people with destinies, positive if painful ones, such as in the case of Fedor Shalyapin, Dmitri Shostakovich, or Alexander Solzhenitsyn; or negative ones, as in the case of Stalin, Lenin, Hitler – Sokurov's great architects of doom. Yet all partake of the same world – the tormented 20th century – and some of Sokurov's most brilliant characterisations come from delin-
 eating the human in the monstrous (as he does with Hirohito or, to a certain extent, Lenin in his tetralogy of power), while the 'positive' personalities can remain distant – loved or admired yet misunderstood. Then, of course, there are the simple people, and it is in them that Sokurov finds some of the most extraordinary inspiration in his oeuvre. In spite of his own exceptional destiny, Sokurov never feels above the humble and the meek, but rather identifies deeply with them: Maria, the simple and noble peasant woman crying over her dead child; Malyanov, the hapless son trying to cope with his father's death in *The Second Circle*; or the Son tending to his Mother's final hours in *Mother and Son* – here are human beings, most worthy of our attention, in spite of their seemingly unexceptional stories.

From the examples above, however, it becomes clear that Sokurov's humanism is always tainted with the presence of death, the flip side to the light-filled characterisations. Mourning, ruins, desolation, melancholia, and nostalgia are therefore inescapably at work in his cinema. And they could not be more profoundly present than in the traumatic post-war context of *Lonely Voice of Man*: a rural Russia torn by many years of world conflict, revolution, and civil war. Nikita serves here as a blueprint for one of Sokurov's male archetypes (of which there will be several). Quite the anti-*homo sovieticus*, the awe-struck, feeble Nikita is, in a very Russian tradition of unjust suffering, the man of all miseries, or, to use Sokurov's words, the 'weak heart'. This hapless, spiritually and physically impotent person, played always by actors of rather slender

statures, represents the quasi-inexplicable resilience of the human being confronted by the tragedy of war, and more specifically by the unspeakable ailments brought about by the Soviet regime. Underfed, lacking initiative, but still driven by some secret, albeit weak energy, some degraded version of Grace, the Sokurovian men of all miseries are often confronted with (ghostly) father figures, with whom they long to connect. Such are the protagonists of *Lonely Voice of Man*, *The Second Circle*, and *The Stone*. And yet, for all their weaknesses and despondence, they are aesthetically characterised by a somewhat angelic expression, evocative of icons – effete and pale, striking a balance constantly between the bland and the divine. In this, these characters are not unlike degraded versions of Christ, and their ordeal appears like secular (Soviet?) versions of a path of the Cross to Golgotha. We can feel the filmmaker's attraction to this character, as he communicates what to Sokurov constitutes one of art's fundamental missions: to convey an excerpt of the path of misery, and, hopefully, elevate passive spectatorial commiseration or narcissistic self-pity to a real humanistic impulse of compassion, by experiencing, if not the suffering of others, at least the amount of work, time, and effort involved in the production of great art – or, at least, of great craft.³⁰

Opposite Nikita, Lyuba emerges as the first important female character in the director's fictional output.³¹ As opposed to his male actors, often played by handsome young men, Sokurov makes a point of using actresses who are, to say the least, a departure from traditional beauty canons. Lyuba here is no exception to the rule, although she is an extraordinary and beautiful human being.³² As in all his films, the woman is at once an unreachable ideal (the purity of love – and the impossibility of fulfilling heterosexual love) and a fallen idol, which man cannot understand (Sokurov 2012: 211). For Sokurov, (2012: 212), man is merely a degraded reflection of woman. The latter, as a figure of nature, defies synthesis.

VI

The opening and closing images of *Lonely Voice of Man* shows archival footage of workers, operating a large wheel in slow motion and with great effort, followed by a



The chronicle image, which opens and closes *Lonely Voice of Man*: the heavy, endlessly repetitive burden of the simple folk

boat sailing into the distance.³³ These two images capture visually several fundamental tropes in Sokurov: next to the notion of the dignity of simple workers in face of sometimes inhumane labour, the image of the wheel evokes the figure of the circle, so central to Sokurov's cinema and philosophy, exemplified by the circles of life, history, destiny, or mysterious cosmic pressure. All phenomena, great or small, can be envisaged in terms of circularity in Sokurov. But this specific image – that of men and women executing an apparently endless, senseless, and difficult chore – also speaks to the trap that constitutes the circle. The sadness and melancholy deriving from this observation are at play in the image of the ship leaving harbour and sailing to uncertain, distant lands. Here arises the primordial concept of nostalgia in Sokurov, reinforced by the use of the no-less nostalgic *Rubensiana* leitmotif on the soundtrack.

Throughout the film, and certainly in its opening footage, Sokurov also suggests suffering in its repetitive, temporal unfolding. He shares Platonov's temporal articulations, not so much as historical but as physical time, as was Sokurov and Arabov's project. The time Platonov describes is ultimately ahistorical because it addresses universal miseries, not necessarily attached to their own moment and location. Sokurov's title, then, is even more polysemic than we hinted above. It is the lonely voice of man as the expression of a unique perspective as well as the voice expressing the suffering and repressed dignity of the collective; but it is also a voice unique in its a-temporality, in its inscriptions of the past and of the future, of all moments of human suffering.

In spite of the imagery of the wheel with which the film opens and closes, *Lonely Voice of Man* is not structured as a cycle, from light to light, but rather, in line with the discussion above, as a spiralling descent into darkness until the final, *in extremis* resurgence of dim hope, combining the idea of the circle with the Platonovian plunge. The first encounter between Lyuba and Nikita takes place on a small path between trees, and this path will be seen again several times, each time in a darker light (when Nikita brings the coffin for Zhenya in the novella, and when he runs away from Lyuba). As such, a shot of leaves covered with snow can be viewed, more than a seasonal cycle indicator, as a metaphor of night and death, outstripping the promise of a rebirth of any kind.³⁴ The film can be seen as mildly optimistic: the reunion of the lovers, a promise of a spiritual rebirth, however meek, in marital love, akin to the ending of *Crime and Punishment*. Then again, because of its shattering general tone and movement downward, it can equally aptly be read as pessimistic: Lyuba's consumption being her imminent undoing, and Nikita's promise of following her wherever she will go meaning a rejoining in death through suicide – a suicide he alludes to himself by contemplating drowning in the river.

The idea of a revelatory plunge into the recesses of one's soul must have appealed to Sokurov, who throughout his career has insisted on the importance of cinema as the 'other life', and for whom the essential, ideal goal for his debut feature, was to create 'truth' (in Arkus 1994: 33). This motif derived in part from the director's reading of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*,³⁵ which he indicated in his notes at the time of the film's production: absolute despair, viewed face-on.³⁶ In her own efforts to extract the truth of Sokurov's cinema, Diane Arnaud (2005) has elaborated on the notion of descent

and plunge, be it physical or metaphorical. Drawing upon psychoanalysts' Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham's theses about the 'inner crypt', Arnaud associates this movement in Sokurov with a plunge (entombment) followed by a return upward, both metaphorical and physical, into the world of the living. The global movement and despair felt throughout *Lonely Voice of Man*, with the final re-emergence of the ZAGS employee from the bottom of the lake, serves as a fine illustration of this trope. It is important to note that this re-emergence contradicts the fate of the fisherman in the Platonov tale, in which the man plunges and is subsequently found dead. Beyond the possible redemptive (and Christian?) interpretation of this return/salvation/resurrection, the character's re-emergence in the film can be correlated to the working of memory so engrossing to Sokurov, and connected with his anecdote about looking down, from the vantage point of a boat, at the place where he was born, now under water – symbolically plunging, as it were, to retrieve a memory or deeper understanding of his birth and existence. The whole moment, at any rate, certainly epitomises the contradictory motion between mournful contemplation of death (the desire to plunge) and vibrant lust for life (the need to re-emerge) found in Sokurov's cinema.

VII

While it had been expected that Sokurov's work would enshrine the life and work of Andrey Platonov as a positive and lionised figure of Soviet literature, *Lonely Voice of Man*, at least from a traditional, superficial perspective, had practically the opposite effect: it unearthed the mystical and religious qualities in the Soviet writer, and offered his art not to official rhetoric of the establishment, but to the souls of those who needed recognition, who wanted to join the collective chorus of the 'lonely' voice of man. If Platonov presented a romantic couple, thwarted by the horrors of war and then prevented from recovery by the contemporary climate in the emerging Soviet Union, Sokurov amplified the affect by expressing the stagnation of the Brezhnev era and the feeling of awkwardness that he, as a perpetual outsider and insubordinate youth, experienced in connection with it. In doing so, he incarnated a feeling deep-seated but rarely voiced in many of his contemporaries: the mournful sexuality it yielded in its whispered images of loneliness was also a loud scream of the soul, and this may explain its seminal power with and appeal to young intellectuals of the time. Certainly it served as a lasting indictment of the fundamental injustice of being denied the pursuit of simple happiness. Implying that sexual impotence, history, and politics could be connected – leading the failed path of the *homo sovieticus* from the Marxist 'Great Evening' to the night of the soul of Brezhnev's stagnation policy – was probably as subversive as one could be at the time.

It is little wonder, then, that the film irked the VGIK authorities the way it did, who dismissed it on the basis that it was far too gloomy and failed to reflect Platonov's universe – the 'official' Platonov, that is. Clearly, however, the implications laid out above (and, beyond, Sokurov's reputation as an insolent and outspoken troublemaker), the way in which this film subtly but with steadfast resolve challenged Soviet dogma and its gatekeepers' stultified authority, was all but intolerable to them. On counts of

'lack of faithfulness to its source material' the film was turned down, leaving Sokurov without a project to graduate.

Undeterred, Sokurov approached a series of intellectual and artistic authorities to condone his work. An aging Konstantin Simonov (a friend of Yuri Arabov's mother) initially agreed, but Sokurov never heard back from him.³⁷ Sergey Gerasimov (the author of several Soviet classics, including the two-part adaptation of Mikhail Sholokhov's *Quiet Flows the Don* (*Tuxuii Дон; Tikhii Don*, 1957–58)), asked to watch the film, left the screening room after ten minutes, arguing that it had no connection to Platonov whatsoever (Zvonnikova in 'Arkhiv', Arkus 1994: 28) and exclaiming that Platonov was a buoyant writer (жизнерадостный; *zhizneradostny*), whereas Sokurov's film was gloomy and nostalgia-inspiring (тоску вызывающий; *tosku vyzyvayushii*).³⁸ The VGIK rectorship, aggravated by Sokurov's persistence in trying to find someone to defend the film, and its 'illegal' screenings on the very premises of the school, gave an order to destroy the print and its negative. Sergey Yurizditsky, the cinematographer, smuggled the copy out of VGIK into his dormitory, and legend has it that he slept on the prints under his mattress, while the copy that was provided for destruction instead was none other than a used print of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*.³⁹

In secret, screenings of the film continued, Sokurov receiving the unabashed support of two female faculty at VGIK: Paola Volkova and Paulina Lobachesvkaya. With their intercession, the film was shown to Marlen Khutsiev (b. 1925), who had, in his time, already played a moderately positive role in supporting *The Mirror* (after criticising it initially).⁴⁰ But whereas Tarkovsky's film, which eventually obtained release, is quintessentially a film in the first person singular, Sokurov's film's 'crime' was admittedly worse: nearer to the epic mode, expressing the Platonovian 'we' as the voice of the collective unconscious of Russia and the Russian people, its 'noxious' potential was perhaps far greater than that of Tarkovsky's masterpiece.

In the end, Sokurov was effectively forbidden from graduating with *Lonely Voice of Man* as his senior project. Yet, his predicament had prompted a growing number of people to support him, even within VGIK itself. Eventually, he presented his older documentary, *The Summer of Maria Voynova*, and managed to graduate summa cum laude anyway. However, he had also made quite a few enemies in the process of imposing his cinematic views, and finding employment in the film industry in Moscow had become unlikely. Luckily for Sokurov, Andrey Tarkovsky extended a hand and found his young colleague a position at Lenfilm studios in Leningrad, which has been his base ever since. Thus the solitude, hardships, and painful processes at play in *Lonely Voice of Man* were replicated, as it were, in Sokurov's life – including the glimmer of hope at the end of the tunnel.

VIII

Sokurov's *coup d'essai* proved to be a *coup de maître* – and so a master was born. It would take about ten years, however, until the Soviet authorities would recognise him as such. In the meantime, while kept off the map of official channels (domestic or international distribution, festivals, magazines), Sokurov's reputation only grew with

each private screening of *Lonely Voice of Man*, as well as a growing list of intriguing documentaries made entirely with archival or found footage, on which Sokurov would work tirelessly, as though to stay alive though they would all be shelved – including one of his very best, *Sonata for Viola* (Альтовая соната. Дмитрий Шостакович; *Altovaya sonata* (1981)), about Dmitri Shostakovich. In spite of the humiliation of censorship, Sokurov's amalgam of youthful energy and mature worldview crept underground like a stream that would one day spring forth in broad daylight. The youth of Leningrad with access to this resilient meandering stream had found a master in Sokurov ahead of the rest of the world. A group of filmmakers, calling themselves the 'necrorealists' and led by Yevgeny Yufit (b. 1961), would incorporate several of Sokurov's techniques (and, as it were, his dark, morbid, grotesque thread), including a resilient use of found footage, sometimes multiplied *ad libitum* by the technique of temporal looping.⁴¹ It was meant as a formal tool expressing, on the philosophical plane, the distressing sensation of being caught in a deadlock – in farcical, absurdist terms in necrorealism; and in a more sober (and less conspicuous) way in Sokurov.

It is this very sensation, of a whole generation dissatisfied with the present and wasting away its potential, of hearts pounding, too big, in a fossilised ribcage grown too small, that elevated *Lonely Voice of Man* to the cult – if intimate – status it still occupies to this day. The film, carried by a wave of renewed interest and romance between the USSR and Western Europe following Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, went on to win the Bronze Leopard at the 1987 Locarno Film Festival. It was dedicated to Andrey Tarkovsky, who had died a few months earlier. For many people, Sokurov had just filled in the void left by his illustrious friend and colleague.⁴² But this legacy was not what Sokurov had on his mind, lamenting, rather, the passing of a dear friend, stating later that

[Tarkovsky] used to say that there was some sort of continuity between us. I'm not sure about this; I felt much closer to him in human terms, he meant more to me as a man than as a director. (Ustyukova 1994: 40)

In 1978, few could have predicted Tarkovsky's untimely death, and fewer still that Sokurov would become one of the world's most prolific and critically acclaimed filmmakers: the old Soviet system was not defunct yet, and his path to official recognition would still be long in the making. In 1982, following the death of Brezhnev, Sokurov would finally be given the opportunity to shoot his sophomore (and first legitimate) feature effort, which would be similarly stalled in production and shelved: the aptly titled *Mournful Insensitivity*.⁴³

Notes

- 1 See chapter three, and Natasha Synessios's book on the film (2001).
- 2 There are many emblematic examples, whether it is Sergey Paradzhanov's imprisonment on charges of homosexuality, or, again, the case of Tarkovsky's *The Mirror*. But let us cite another: in a letter to Goskino's vice president Boris Pavlenko,

vice-general director Agafonov wrote, about the final cut of Andrey Smirnov's *The Fall* (*Осень*; *Osen*, 1974), in which a scene of a walk through the woods on a sunny day had been incorporated, 'Following the instructions of the direction of the State Committee of the Counsel of the USSR attached to cinematography as well as the head of Mosfilm studios ... in order to dissipate the feeling that a rainy or dreary [aspect] predominates in the film. [...] Consequently, 4,830 meters of footage have been added to the film' (translation mine).

- 3 His very first assignment was a live broadcast of a musical programme dedicated to Chopin. Sokurov, who was only eighteen at the time, was petrified by the challenge which working with four live cameras represented. After the programme was over, the young man was convinced he had done terribly. However, he was called back and went on to direct his own documentaries at the Gorky TV studio.
- 4 The film tells about the life of workers in a *sovkhos* (state farm) in the Gorky region, their achievements and challenges, including responses to new agricultural machines. This is probably the only film Sokurov ever made that seemed to follow an official, formal pattern, including the upbeat delivery of the voice-over narration.
- 5 While it was shot when Sokurov was working at the Gorky TV station, this film was re-edited and presented at VGIK in 1978 with a tone diverging from the party line, now a chronicle of the gradual collapse of the *kolkhoz* system.
- 6 'Alexander Zguridi, a talented director of popular science documentaries. When I did graduate, and found myself "free"; he told me, "I swear, I have no idea why I let you in the programme back then." He said this to me very frankly, very straightforwardly. But during my studies, not once did he say no to me. I could do whatever I wanted. He did not like what I did, I knew it, but never once did he say to me "I forbid you..."' Sokurov, quoted in *Cinéma* (quotes originally from the Russian magazines *Sovetsky Ekran* and *Iskusstvo Kino*).
- 7 It is Tarkovsky who helped Sokurov get a job at Lenfilm after the uncouth young man fell from grace at VGIK. In his book *Sculpting in Time* (1986), Tarkovsky mentions Sokurov, who at the time had only made one feature film, alongside the names of Robert Bresson, Kenji Mizoguchi, and Federico Fellini – an accolade from the old master to the young if there ever was one.
- 8 There is very little doubt that, while he continues to drive the cinematic medium into new areas with his experiments, Sokurov has very much turned – regretfully, mournfully, even painfully – towards a past when religion and art had not yet been divorced, and his admiration very clearly goes almost exclusively to works of art made before the twentieth century. His most important documentary cycle – the 'Elegies' – is meant to commemorate events which have transpired and have come to their conclusion. And while, as we shall see in a later chapter, the elegiac drive in Sokurov can sometimes double as eulogy, it never loses its powerful nostalgic sheen. Platonov's concern with memory is just as complex as Sokurov's. As Robert Chandler (2008) suggests, the writer's head was turned toward the future, but his heart always yearned for a lost past. In the work of both artists, this conflicting relationship of forward thinking and nostalgia is tightly connected, though never explicitly, with trauma and loss.

- 9 *The Origins of a Master* serves as the opening chapter of Platonov's epic dystopia *Chevangur*, which Platonov wrote around 1926–1928, but which was not released until 1972 in the West, and only officially in 1988 in the Soviet Union.
- 10 In the original Platonov text, it is a fisherman who decides to plunge into a lake to see what is happening down below, in the realm of death.
- 11 This dystopian, crazy, borderline experiment would be reprised in Sokurov's next film (although it is adapted from George Bernard Shaw): *Mournful Insensitivity*.
- 12 Leonid Heller sees a lot of influence of Fyodorov's mysticism in Sokurov (2009: 61). He ascribes the dualistic dimension in both Platonov and Sokurov to Fyodorov's philosophy, turned towards the past yet moving in the direction of the future, with one's back turned to it, as it were. To bring the dead, who patiently await it, back to life; the aspermic theory (to love one's parents, and not the children of the couple); and the 'transmental' dimension (to overcome death and await resurrection) are indeed all elements that one can easily identify in Sokurov's cinema.
- 13 Only in *Dzhan* are the raptures of sex and eroticism envisaged as potentially holy, and even joyful at times. However, sexuality for the sake of simple pleasure is criticised here too, as enacted by the villain Nur Mohamed, a thinly-veiled symbol of bourgeois values and immorality, who wants to sell the Dzhan people into slavery and rapes a little girl as, we are told, 'without pleasure he was unable to exist' (Platonov 2007: 83).
- 14 By and large, the early Soviet model never really found any actual application in the countryside.
- 15 Aiming especially at Trotskyist ideology, even if 'free love' was already formulated, albeit in different forms, by Marx and Engels, and later reluctantly reprised by Lenin as well.
- 16 Homosexuality was considered a criminal offence as of 1934, and would remain so until the end of the Soviet Union. It was not until 1993 that it was decriminalised, and not until 1999 that it was cleared of allegations of mental illness. However, in 2013 Vladimir Putin signed a new law penalising 'homosexual propaganda' when 'aimed at minors of age'. Abortion would remain illegal until 1954.
- 17 'In his mature work', Chandler writes, Platonov 'seems to delight in eliding every conceivable boundary between animal and human' (2008: vii). Platonov uses grotesque imagery in *The River Potudan* (the rat in Nikita's nightmare; the 'eternal' cricket – another collective 'I' or 'we' – living in the walls of the father's house), but the most famous example in his corpus is the heartbreaking story *The Cow*, in which a bovine suffers, without knowing really why, from the fact that her calf has been taken away from her, and ends up letting herself be run over by a train. People and animals are endowed with an equal ability to suffer in Platonov's prose, so palpable that it must necessarily undermine any other description or discourse, however triumphalist or positive. This is hardly lost on Sokurov, who uses footage from a slaughterhouse, of a dead and half-flayed cow – using this powerful image in several instances – to signify Nikita's feverish delirium, but also hunger, sadness, waste of possible happiness with Lyuba herself, and, of course, her suicide attempt and the ravages of war. The parallel between war and the slaughter of a cow of

- course comes directly from one of the most famous scenes of Eisenstein's *Strike!* (1925).
- 18 At once individual and collective, expressing the collective singular or the all inclusive 'we,' as Mikhail Iampolski and Oleg Kovalov have pointed out.
 - 19 This, of course, holds much truer for Platonov than it does for Sokurov, who since the *perestroika* period has enjoyed a rather prolific career, embraced by film festivals and critics around the world. Some of Platonov's most important novels, on the other hand, had yet to be officially published in the USSR when Sokurov was making *Lonely Voice of Man*.
 - 20 The image of the island, of an isolated body floating on the waters of history, is key for Sokurov, whose short-lived TV show and website are, as already noted, called 'Ostrov Sokurova' ('Sokurov's Island').
 - 21 Nariman Skakov (2011) compares the flow of the story to the Heraclitian river, in which no one ever bathes twice, an idea that is appealing but contradicted by the spiraling, cyclical structure seen in the film.
 - 22 Non-individual and dialectal, the *skaz* originates from Gogol's prose, and finds its most intense expression in Leskov.
 - 23 As Iampolski notes, the many tensions that the film yields constantly replay and realise Platonov's stylistic duality (1994a: 49). It is indispensable here to underline the importance of hybridity in the very specific fabric of Platonov's prose, and his particular realistic idiom which goes beyond a 'veneer' realism and accesses a truer expression and experience of life through this acknowledgment of its sheer diversity and lack of harmonious unity.
 - 24 In forgoing reaction shots and creating an original cut, Sokurov does, in many ways, exactly what Godard did in his early films, although in his case the drastic cuts were due, allegedly, to a wealth of material, as opposed to a Sokurov's paucity of footage.
 - 25 English translation by Nariman Skakov in Beumers, Condee 2011.
 - 26 This investment with memory and pre-revolutionary photographs in Sokurov expresses the impossibility of realising happiness in the present.
 - 27 Nikita is not the only person afflicted with this 'de-personalised' memory and forgetfulness. The Soviet powers themselves, to whom Lyuba's mother's house technically belongs as government property, seem to have forgotten about it, not claiming any rent or tribute for it. It is unclear to whom the house belongs anymore, and the protagonists live, literally, in a memorial no-man's land.
 - 28 See chapters nine, ten, thirteen, fifteen, and the postscript to the tetralogy.
 - 29 This collectivity is hardly synonymous with Dostoevskian polyphony as analysed by Bakhtin, for instance.
 - 30 Sokurov has repeatedly stated that cinema is not really an art, although it is unquestionably the greatest craft of the 20th century and beyond.
 - 31 Marya Voynova being the first major female character in his documentary world. When it comes to women, Sokurov confesses to having been most impressed, perhaps, by the dancer Alla Osipenko, whom he cast in *Mournful Insensitivity*, as the lead role in *Empire* and as a bit part in *Russian Ark*.

- 32 We will come back to female character archetypes and their function in later chapters, especially in *Save and Protect* and *Alexandra*.
- 33 'A passage from the chronicle – people going around in a circle. A tone of dark blue evening. This is the continuous, endless work of tired people on the river. In fact, it can be both a morning or a day job. This is a symbol of time, not historical, but physical time. The circle can be edited with Nikita. He either passes by, or walks along the bank of the Potudan and looks at the people on barges as if from above, from a hillock.' (Sokurov, 'odinokii golos cheloveka,' in Arkus 1994: 35; translation by Nariman Skakov, 2011.)
- 34 Associated by Iampolski with a 'pillow shot,' a term drawn from the theories of Noel Burch on Ozu's cinema.
- 35 'Thomas Mann had an extraordinary influence on me. Nothing compares to the immense impression he exerted on me. Many of my cinematic ideas come from the profound astonishment I had experienced back then.' (Alexander Sokurov, *Vse opiraetsya na traditsy literatury*, exhibit at the National Russian Library, Moscow (June 2011); translation mine. <http://wokourov.info/lib>)
- 36 'Art doesn't want to be play and illusion anymore, it wants to become knowledge.'
- 37 Simonov (1915–1979) was already quite ill at the time, and died a little over a year later.
- 38 To this, Zvonnikova is said to have riposted: 'And can you know the whole spirit of Chekhov's *Lady with the Lapdog* after reading the first line?'
- 39 Incidentally, and ironically enough in this case, Sokurov had received the S.M. Eisenstein fellowship to support him during his years at VGIK.
- 40 For a good summary, in English, of the fates of the film, see, again, Synessios' 'Film Companion' book to *The Mirror* (2001).
- 41 Sokurov himself has reverted to temporal looping and temporal reversals, albeit discreetly, in recent films such as *Alexandra* and *Faust*. His most notable use of the technique remains the shot of a pensive Fyodor Fyodorovich Shalyapin in *Petersburg Elegy* (1989).
- 42 While there are some visual quotations of Tarkovsky's universe in *Lonely Voice of Man* (including shots of rain and wind blowing through the trees, and a shot evoking Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow*), it should be pointed out that these remain on the surface, and it is Platonov who is much more present in the fabric and structure of the film. I will return in more depth to the analogies and dissimilarities between Tarkovsky and Sokurov in chapter three.
- 43 As for the influence of Platonov, beyond the profound dualism and play with a variety of modes that informs most of Sokurov's output, its reemergence would be apparent in subsequent films, most clearly in the relocation of *Days of the Eclipse*'s story to the Soviet Republic of Turkmenia. Sokurov spent his adolescence there, where Platonov also located his famous novella *Dzhan*. In more than one way, Sokurov's film is as much a retelling of Platonov's tale of tragic loneliness and spiritual rebirth as is the Strugatsky Brothers' science-fiction story that served as its official source.

CHAPTER TWO

Mournful Insensitivity: The Apocalypse of the Modern

Following his eventful graduation from VGIK, and with the providential intervention of Andrey Tarkovsky, Sokurov found employment at Lenfilm where, for the next four years (1978–82), and until the death of Leonid Brezhnev, he produced documentaries made exclusively with archival footage, all of which were shelved. In many of these films, we can feel the disillusionment and bitterness of the director. However, Sokurov's refusal, during this period of constant humiliation, to quit his position (he famously claimed, in a 1983 letter to the Goskino, 'I am 32 and I have no intention to change jobs' (in Arkus 1994: 81)), and his unrelenting work on projects that were systematically rejected, clearly positioned him as a paradoxical maker of 'Underground State cinema' (to use Lyubov Arkus's expression). The use of old film stock, the grain of the image, the obvious paucity of resources obliging him to resort to temporal loops in order to prolong some takes, all speak to the filmmaker's defiant, resistant attitude: to make films, *no matter what*, was how he would earn his badge of honour as the maverick of late Soviet cinema. In other words, Sokurov was like a stream running underground, perhaps even against the flow, meandering in an unlikely path, resisting and enduring resiliently. It would eventually conquer its place under the sun – becoming, as it were, the admired as much as the hated 'dominant meander,' a paradoxical position of fame and constant doggedness, which the director made his own.

Leonid Brezhnev's death (1906–82) would not immediately bring changes in the global climate of the Soviet Union, by then one of rampant depression, decay, and corruption.¹ However, under the short-lived succession of Yuri Andropov (1914–84) and Konstantin Chernenko (1911–85), both of whom held the position of General Secretary of the Soviet Party only briefly (fifteen months for Andropov, eleven for Chernenko), Sokurov managed to get his second feature film – titled at the time *The Seventh Degree of Concentration* – under way. Based on George Bernard Shaw's *Heart-*

break House (1919), the film would be finally released, following a mangled and oft-interrupted production history, under the title *Mournful Insensitivity*.

In years when the Soviet Union was crumbling – even as a spirit of anarchic freedom and an increasingly complex market economy was dominating in the West – Sokurov yields a film that is formally wild: both farcical and sombre, detached and brilliant, full of non-sequiturs and sibylline imagery.² Conveying a sense of the disjointed, the film utilises faux documentary footage of an elderly (and jocular) G.B. Shaw himself to serve as a mirror reflection on ideals of early twentieth-century socialism – a socialism that was even then looking at its own demise, much as an indifferent, melancholy bourgeoisie looked on at the horrors of World War I in the play.

Much as he had done with *Lonely Voice of Man*, Sokurov would use his feature film as a covert commentary on contemporary times with a narrative taking place in the early twentieth century. *Mournful Insensitivity* is an obituary of the modern that draws both on this early twentieth-century tradition and on postmodernism (if only stylistically and not philosophically). With his debut, the director had set off to express the ‘collective singular’ voice of Andrey Platonov’s prose in cinematic terms, a properly communist artistic gesture (which went un-appreciated nevertheless by the Soviet authorities). With his next feature, more sophisticated stylistically and thematically, he would do something very different altogether: to express a world becoming too complex for its own clear understanding, agitated yet on the verge of extinction, soon to drown in the dark waters of history. In order to express a society whose collectively alienated features led to an actual fragmentation of the social fabric; to account for the kaleidoscopic complexity of history, Sokurov opted for the metaphor of the multiplicity to be found in a single mind – but not just any mind.

I

George Bernard Shaw started writing his play *Heartbreak House* in 1913, and completed it by 1916, but decided not to release it until after World War I, in 1919.³ The play, a typically witty comedy with dark undertones, berates the playful detachment of the bourgeoisie vis-à-vis the horrors of the war. It takes place over a day and a night in a large country mansion that looks like a ship, the property of the old Captain Shotover. There, Hesione Hushabye, Shotover’s daughter, invites the young and charming Ellie Dunn in an effort to prevent her from marrying Boss Mangan, a ‘practical man of business’, who is also the employer of – and roughly the same age as – Ellie’s father, ‘soldier of freedom’ Mazzini Dunn. Both men are to join the party shortly. Another unexpected guest is Ariadne, Captain Shotover’s other, long absent daughter, who married a rich and industrious businessman, Mr. Utterword. Ariadne is escorted by her smitten brother-in-law, Randall. This eccentric menagerie is complemented by the loudmouthed maid, Lady Guinness, as well as Hector Hushabye, Hesione’s handsome husband, who seduced Ellie while parading under a pseudonym.

The play revolves mostly around idle banter and flirtatious interactions between the various characters, whose personalities, more complex than first meets the eye – as one would expect – are revealed as the plot evolves. Ellie wants to marry Mangan for

his money, but it turns out eventually that he has none, so the young woman finally elects old Captain Shotover as her Prince Charming and father figure.⁴

While no direct reference to World War I is made during the entire play, it ends in bombs descending upon the area. The family narrowly escapes death, while Mangan and a burglar, who as it happens is Ellie's biological father and a former husband of Lady Guinness, are blown to pieces by an explosion inside an underground cache of dynamite.

Shaw called his play 'a fantasia in the Russian manner on English themes', and it indeed can be related to the general style and tone of Chekhov, most clearly his *Cherry Orchard*, albeit with a more ferocious humour and less pronounced sense of nostalgia than the Russian writer's. Yet one is at a loss, initially, trying to understand what spurred on Sokurov (and his screenwriter Yuri Arabov) to adapt this wicked parody for their sophomore feature film.⁵ Sokurov described how he had been moved deeply by a passage from a letter in which Shaw recounted the cremation of his mother, recalling her 'passage' with both dark humour and a deep humanity. The horrid details of disposing of the physical body were eventually reconciled with an understanding that her spirit would live on. Sokurov confessed that his interest in Shaw lay in this ultimate spiritually-infused humanism, seeing him as a representative of Western European culture's paradoxes.⁶ In adapting the play, however, Sokurov was not seeking to translate the terms of the story to the screen so much as to recreate what he perceived to be the writer's inner world, his multi-layered and complex mind, coupled with the realities of the times. The ambition was to produce a 'very simple' film with 'a very difficult mission' (Sokurov in *24 Images* 1990: 61): to establish a link between each of the characters and the destiny of Europe during World War I. Sokurov also wanted, using the text, to show the failure of modern life to establish genuine connections between people, proposing instead a 'theatre' of superficial courtesy or false affection, which could very quickly lapse into barbarity.

At the early stages of promotion of the project through various commissions and censorship boards, one pragmatic argument legitimating this enterprise (in the eyes of the studio) could be found, undoubtedly, in Shaw's prestige and status as one of the twentieth century's most vehement and uncompromising socialist figures. Upon scrutiny, this most certainly was the filmmakers' primary incentive, especially considering Sokurov's general difficulties with getting any type of project off the ground in those years. Beyond this, the relationship of the final film to the source text is tenuous at best, and the aspects defining the play – witty protracted theatrical dialogue, elements of screwball comedy, British humour, and even the Chekhovian echoes – are all but lost. Surely one can consider the film amusing in parts, but its general affect is in perfect analogy with its title – a Russian translation of the medical syndrome *Anaesthesia psychica dolorosa*, a form of post-traumatic stress disorder or deep melancholia that makes one utterly detached, yet with a painful awareness of said detachment, from all direct human emotions. And so, in spite of its beautiful widescreen cinematography (courtesy of Sergey Yurizditsky), vibrant soundtrack, constantly agitated characters, and interplay of fiction and archival footage, one watches it all with both an ever renewed intellectual fascination and also a thorough sensory detachment, or even perhaps indifference tainted with '*ennui distingué*'. Moreover, in spite of being – by

far – Sokurov’s most intensely edited film, with hardly any of the shots exemplifying the filmmaker’s forthcoming trademark long take, it hardly carries any sense of the petulant or the riveting that its characters’ antics seek to convey.⁷ Yet, therein might lie the answer to this specific technical question: the number of characters on screen far outnumbering usual Sokurovian efforts, this film might actually suffer from under-cutting, the remarkable ensemble cast’s *typage* making up for the lack of traditional psychological or causal development.⁸

Whereas *Lonely Voice of Man* reached out to a wide audience through its universal affects, in spite of its intimate story of those left on the shore of the flow of history, *Mournful Insensitivity* realises the opposite end: though it is a tale of universal scope, the sheer complexity of the treatment makes it one of Sokurov’s most personal projects; and though *Mournful Insensitivity* is one of the director’s most colourful and superficially comedic films, its intensely cerebral nature precludes an immediacy of affect, which reduces the film’s reach to a most selective audience. This, however, should not diminish the stakes of the film, and its remarkable acute political awareness: through its sedate, mournful aspect, the film captures the atmosphere of its time, the grey years immediately predating *perestroika* in the Soviet Union – a critique available for those willing to read it, of the current Soviet zeitgeist. But the formal profusion of the film, its hodgepodge nature (its ‘political unconscious,’ to use Fredric Jameson’s coinage, the way a text serves as a symbolically social act: how its form, influenced by its historical moment, expresses it) also speaks to the fragmentation of a world defunct and falling apart which also promises a distant hope, that of a less monolithic society, but one which also carries in itself the promises of overly-disparate, dislocated human connections and civilisation.

Much as Shaw treated the petty mercantilism of British society in the 1910s, Sokurov and Arabov with this film denounce the spirit of idleness and dereliction which characterised the Soviet Union of the early 1980s. As various critics, including Lampolski, have noted, the film’s locale and demented company serve as an allegory for a Caligari-esque madhouse, which one could connect to the deliquescent home politics of the crumbling Soviet Union. Certainly the theme of madness and eccentricity runs large in the narrative. But this madness is always subdued by the careful work of the film’s editing and sound mix – the dull everydayness of it all, even on the eve of apocalypse, neutralising the spastic drives of the characters taken individually. In his production notes (Arkus 1994: 84), Sokurov noted how the ‘household, mundane aesthetics’ (бытовая пластика; *bytovaya plastika*) of the film should engulf the aspects of histrionics and choreography, with the damp waters surrounding the Shotover home adding to the impression of stagnation and decadence. Instead of emulating and recreating the voice of the writer as a whole, as he had done with Platonov, Sokurov channels Shaw, in his trademark paradoxical fashion, only to retain a slice of his literary affect, neutralising the liveliness of his text within the half-fantastical universe of the film. This approach yields a ‘mournful insensitivity’ that aims at the less manifest, darker implications to be found in the work of the Irish writer.

Indeed, there was already, in Shaw’s play, an element of this ‘psychic anaesthesia’, to the extent that none of the characters’ ‘heartbreaks’ were particularly compelling,

moving, or even sincere: their 'condition' and broken hearts resonated more on an existential and historical level than on the purely romantic, individual plane. The detachment (to use Mazzini's words) of these 'very charming people, most advanced, unprejudiced, frank, humane, unconventional, democratic, free-thinking, and everything that is delightful to thoughtful people' (Shaw 1919: 114) would serve exactly as Shaw's point: that the insouciance and detachment of the liberal elites from the realities of the time, and the utter moral corruption that would come with it (in other words, the amoral levity of liberal capitalism), were at the core of the cataclysm and the absurdity of World War I.⁹ To further express this point, beyond the comedy and laughter that the play would occasion, Shaw wrote a lengthy, acrimonious introduction to the play entitled 'Heartbreak House and Horseback Hall', where he berated, in keeping with his internationalist-socialist (and even remnants of Christian) beliefs, the contradictions and corruptions of the immediate pre- and post-war English society. And while Sokurov and Arabov do eliminate most of the play's direct affects in their adaptation, they certainly re-inject it with a vast substrate of cultural references, beginning with the text of Shaw's introduction, which in many ways is more faithfully accounted for in the film than the plot of the play itself: the hypnotised Mangan,¹⁰ thought to be dead, is nearly dissected by Dr. Knife – a character to be found nowhere in the play, but who is present, although not named thus, in Shaw's introduction. Dr. Knife in fact is drawn from a passage in which the playwright, in crude images of bodily dismemberment, tears to pieces positivist rationality and the pseudo-sciences that divide medicine and surgery into two separate realms: the laboratory and the butcher's slab. Surely the profuse imagery of physical mutilations during and following World War I would have made Shaw's remarks even more resonant at the time of the play's release. Of course, this scene also echoes Arabov's love of the gothic and the macabre, providing an even earlier matrix for the film's more grotesque content.

Apart from Dr. Knife, two additional original characters are added in the script: a rotund salesman and his geisha-like assistant, who provide Captain Shotover with dynamite. These characters speak to the critique of mercantilism and bourgeois fads to be found, again, in Shaw's introduction – here, 'Japonism' as embodied by the assistant, but also echoed in the kimonos worn by Hector and Lady Guinness.

Ending this listing of the play's para-textual material's inscription in the film is the fact that *Mournful Insensitivity* includes footage of an elderly George Bernard Shaw (shot in the 1940s), coupled with fictional material of an actor made-up to look unmistakably like him, interacting (albeit silently) with Shotover and looking rather grimly at the proceedings.

More generally, the bitter acidity and sense of the absurd nascent in the playwright's ironic remarks is pervasive in the spirit with which, again, Sokurov and Arabov deconstruct, destroy even, the play's plot. In the end, the film is nearly incomprehensible to anyone who has no prior knowledge of the play, further becoming a puzzling, confusing, and ultimately detached modernist experiment that is also a (post)modern palimpsest.

To be sure, never before and never since has Sokurov delved so intensely into this hybrid mix of the two dominant aesthetic currents of the twentieth century. The gesture, however, is perfectly justified: the film harkens back to the troubled times of the play, and

thus to the modernisms that would emerge from the rubble of World War I, in Western Europe and in early Soviet Russia.¹¹ Yet at the same time, the film is a product of its time and place: a gradually rotting Soviet Union about to lapse into a global postmodern, late capitalist moment, torn between a sense of decay and the promise of a liberation through the crumbling of the regime's ossified structures. These were the days of dying Soviet heads of state and lesser party luminaries: Brezhnev's long, extenuating reign of stagnation quickly followed by the short-lived spasms of Chernenko and Andropov evoked in the opening of this chapter – the tips of an iceberg of geriatric *apparatchiks*.¹²

The paradoxical, strangely conflicting winds of resilient hope and melancholic despair, blow through the whole enterprise of *Mournful Insensitivity*, neutralising each other in the spirit of the very 'text' itself. From a formalist perspective, the film is clearly in line with the modernist experiments of the 1920s with its associative, quasi-experimental montage of found footage and disjointed fiction material, not to mention its overall obscurity and 'writerly' dimension. Simultaneously, it is postmodern in its take on nostalgia. The single most directly affecting aspect of the film is its use of familiar tunes, such as the American songs *It Hurts to Say Goodbye*, *Sparky and the Magical Piano*, or the *Three Little Pigs*' anthem, *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf*, from the Walt Disney short – a diachronic, anachronistic palimpsest of World War I temporality overlaid with tunes written subsequently, some from the years of World War II. The film is also postmodern in its takes on in-between-ness and hybridity, its cool detachment (or immanence), and its approach toward the grotesque, which was already present in *Lonely Voice of Man*, and would prove a staple of every Sokurov and Arabov collaboration. This being said, by and large the film remains predominantly modernist in essence, as does all of Sokurov's output, because of its momentous dedication and undercurrent moral urgency – its postmodern traits no more than superficial adornment.¹³

II

In his wonderfully erudite explorations of the film's network of references (the Bible, Nietzsche, Rudolf Steiner, Paul Valéry, Guy de Maupassant, the *grand-guignol* tradition, Edgar Allan Poe and so on), Mikhail Lampolski has underlined Sokurov's interest in Eastern philosophies, and in the notion of metempsychosis in particular – i.e. the belief according to which men could be reincarnated as animals, and vice versa.¹⁴ The play abounds with animal imagery in the characters' lines,¹⁵ and the film features a wild boar, a crane,¹⁶ and flying geese in the fiction material; and a lion, a polar bear, kittens, seagulls, and giraffes in its archival footage.¹⁷ Whether read in terms of metempsychosis or the grotesque, the conclusions to be reached are identical: the film (and the play) criticises a group of people losing what probably constitutes humanity, and separates civilisation from chaos.¹⁸ Near the end of the film, the guests devour the wild boar Balthazar, which appears to have been a house pet. As in the play, Mangan ultimately reveals his paradoxical humanity: by choking on the meat, while the others, cannibals of sorts, eat it unhindered. This scene, among other things, illustrates the mindless, inconsequential self-cannibalisation of a culture incapable of preventing its own fall – and potentially jeopardising civilisation as a whole in the process.

Giraffes, running
away – the quizzically
comic image closing
Mournful Insensitivity



While Sokurov's investment in the animal and the grotesque is an indicator of things to come, thematically speaking, it seems as though the two most important elements to have appealed to both director and playwright are the motifs – evidently related to the notion of humanity vs. animality – of immaturity and the valences of the human soul. No other filmmaker has investigated with such flair and idiosyncrasy the contradictions of power and lack of maturity, and certainly both the play and the film make ample display of the consequences and potential ravages of inconsiderate levity. Even Captain Shotover, who dispenses compelling words of wisdom, appears to be little more than an eternal child, willing to defy the typhoon on the deck of his ship, and dreaming of distant lands – Africa or the North Pole. Likewise, however sophisticated and manipulative Hesione and Ariadne are, their entreaties come across as ultimately petty and girlish in the face of impending doom and the gravity of their situation. The notion of immaturity fascinates Sokurov and Arabov, particularly in relation to figures like Hitler and Lenin: emblems of absolute power with an unfinished, incomplete or regressing mind.¹⁹ To use an image from the play, they set fire to the dynamite without having reached the 'seventh degree of concentration' to which Shotover purportedly aspires. The closest the old man will get to Nirvana, ironically, will not be through profound meditation, but by drowning himself in rum. Yet the drunken Shotover experiences blinding flashes of lucidity. In a key moment of the play (which is one of the very few passages Sokurov and Arabov did not entirely tear to shreds for the purposes of the film's script), Shotover and Ellie discuss the value of a soul (Shaw 1919: 85–86). This last element, perhaps more than anything else in the Shaw text, might have been what got Sokurov hooked on the project, and this highly complex and difficult issue would reoccur many times in his subsequent oeuvre, especially in the forthcoming tetralogy of power.

III

Formally, *Mournful Insensitivity* also expresses the thematic notion of detachment and 'insensitivity' boasted by the script. While taking place almost exclusively inside one defined space (the boat-house), it plunges us in a strange maze, where each room is styled differently. In this, the film actually evokes Joris-Karl Huysmans' classic *Against the Grain* (*À Rebours*, 1884), in which the main character, the decadent Des Esseintes, arranges each room of his house according to a different template, from Oriental smoking salon to a boat cabin with rounded portholes (much like one of the

bedrooms in the film). The decadent and disjointed aspects are reinforced by Sokurov's trademark disregard for traditional continuity editing. As a result, lines of points of view are often violated and the rule of traditional cinematic 'suture' loses all pertinence. To this, one should add the very first instalment of a framework that Sokurov would develop further in the tetralogy, namely the idea of surveillance by another, semi-undefined perspective. When Lady Guinness goes to fetch Dr. Knife, we see them crossing water through a telescope's lens; earlier in the film, we saw Captain Shotover inquisitively looking through a field-glass, but it is impossible to ascertain whether he is the actual source of this later perspective; the scene in which a crouching Randall spies on Ariadne flirting with Hector reveals another nascent Sokurovian formal and thematic pattern; and the film also features a bizarre shot of a frogman, whom the viewer has not seen before and will not see again, emerging from the water. All these instances contribute to suggesting a world of invisible surveillance, speaking of course to the old tradition of espionage in Russia (going back to Ivan the Terrible's oprichnina and culminating in the KGB practices under Stalin), but also, more subtly, to the 'milder' structures of control which the snake of capitalism would include in its many constricting rings (see Deleuze 1990).

The paradoxical affect of the detached ('insensitive') yet disquieting ('mournful') world of the film is also conveyed through the scale of shots, jumbled and rendered inconsistent: the only close-up will be of the face of Ellie when she first meets Captain Shotover, the rest consisting of medium and long shots arranged in a most confusing, if beautifully composed way. Much as the film's authors destroyed the coherence of the play, so they have razed to the ground and built anew conventions of cinematic spatial representation. This would remain one of the most outstanding and enduring trademarks of Sokurov's cinema: a constant challenging of spatial rules with their own artistically compelling force – not to be mistaken, for instance, for the Bressonian 'any-space-whatever' with which they do, however, retain a distant kinship in their disregard for basic continuity editing rules of a 'verisimilar', 'logical' spatial representation.²⁰

Beyond its commentary on the end of an era, the film is also Sokurov's own way of taking on apocalyptic '*fin de siècle*' decadent aesthetics, his female characters resembling nothing so much as Aubrey Beardsley's beautiful but sickly etchings. But even if the film is rife with women, it remains utterly indifferent to female eroticism, representing it as almost morbid.²¹ Sokurov cannot repress, however, a scene in which the young actor playing Randall runs naked in and around the house. Even though the young man is shot from a distance, this scene contains much more erotic tension than the slender and beautiful naked body of Ellie. It is so because Sokurov infuses the scenes involving the young man with vibrancy and energy, whereas women are represented as filled with a languor bordering on stupor throughout the film.

At the end of the film, *fin-de-siècle* yields to *fin-du-monde* as the boat-house explodes and is turned into a raft, akin to Géricault's representation of the raft of the Medusa, with dead people being thrown into the sea. This image replaces that of the Shotover 'ark' stranded on land, which had already been represented as a microcosm with macrocosmic implications by the memorable tracking shot fully circling the strange boat-mansion – echoing the totalising drive at the heart of Sokurov's cinematic

enterprise as a whole. Considering the way in which Podorvikha, Sokurov's birthplace, was wiped off the map, the choice of imagery of a deluge, over destruction by, say, fire or other cataclysm (bombing and dynamite explosion in Shaw's play), was an intensely personal one. Such destruction denies homecoming and will, forever after, stimulate, almost as though by parapraxis, the desire to return, over and over again, and to remember what one cannot: their place of origin. Ultimately, past and present are reunited in an ironic, dark yet detached finale evocation of the deluge. Even if it can be read as Sokurov's most exuberant film, *Mournful Insensitivity* also appears as his most *twilight* film, commenting upon the end of an era and promising the end of another. This impression is reinforced, in the final portion of the film, by the use of black and white silent footage, with an added filter to make the footage seem old and scratched.

Thanks to the many dark motifs and implications of this 'comedy' of manners (and errors), *Mournful Insensitivity* attempts to become one of the very few films to express the complexity of an author's mind as a dangerous, maze-like multiplicity, while also reflecting the schizophrenic and fragmented quality of its specific era. What all these characteristics have in common, no doubt, is an expression of Modernity and of its correlative economic emphasis, capitalism: as an explosion and assertion of its rules in the early twentieth century, the 'logical' conclusion of its own inner logic of growth and destruction; and as a gripping force rotting the foundations of communism to the core, announcing the liberal market economy of the 1990s in Russia, its promises of rebirth, and its many questionable consequences. In this sense, the film proves to be prophetic, though it is so merely because of Sokurov's keen knowledge of history, and his steadfast belief in its cyclical nature: a world where the future is a foregone conclusion, and the lessons and epiphanies of the past have been conveniently ignored.

Sokurov thus signs the obituary of the Modern, of the Heartbreak House. In the final sequence of his film, the director's distaste for modern life collides with the passion with which he carries out his fascinating cinematic experiment. Unfortunately for him, it would take him longer than expected for his vision to reach its audience. As Shaw wrote in his introduction, 'war muzzles the dramatic poet', Sokurov, for almost a decade, experienced how conventions could restrain a non-conformist artistic persona.

IV

The film's production was halted on December 20, 1983, when screenings revealed how alien to the play Sokurov's footage actually was. From the records of the commission debating the film's fate, it becomes clear that the problem was not, officially, the ideological content of the film, but rather its formalism. Moreover, the problem may have resided in personal conflicts between Sokurov and Vitali Aksyonov, the head of Lenfilm at the time, who complained about his younger colleague's insubordinate attitude and refusal to listen to his advice. At the end of a heated meeting, with some members of the commission pulling for Sokurov, Aksyonov cut the debate short, and an executive order was given that the production of the film be stalled at once. Moreover, the money lent to the project – 274,000 roubles – was to be returned, although the studio never followed up on this demand. The film would be completed in 1985,

though without government funding, thus accounting in very pragmatic terms for its fragmentary, somewhat incomplete nature – a predicament from which many other of Sokurov's films would suffer as well.²²

On 11 March 1985, just hours following the death of Konstantin Chernenko, Mikhail Gorbachev (b. 1931) was appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union by the Politburo. His accession to power would lead to a score of badly needed political reforms; *Glasnost* (Гласность) literally meant to enforce greater transparency in the Soviet bureaucracy; and *perestroika* to renovate the system, allowing for a set of shifts in political and cultural life in the Soviet Union.

Around the same time, after many trials and efforts, Sokurov at last received the long-awaited accolade from his peers: following the Fifth Congress of the Union of Soviet Cinematographers in May 1986, he was sent a warm letter from the newly appointed head of Goskino, Elem Klimov, dated June 13, 1986. Ushering in a new period of positive reception and greater distribution of his work, past and present, Sokurov received the correspondence on his 35th birthday (Arkus 1994: 95). And so, after nearly ten years in the dark, Sokurov would become, alongside Kira Muratova and Aleksey German, the most celebrated cinematic auteur of the late Soviet period – and beyond.

V

Here we can venture a comparison between Sokurov and another rebellious master of European art cinema. In the early eighties, hounded and depressed, the Russian director expressed, in a letter of complaint, that if he were provided the opportunity to give his creativity full license – something Sokurov most certainly did not have, in his view – he would manage the same level of productivity as his extraordinarily prolific German colleague Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945–1982) (Arkus 1994: 94). Fassbinder's name might seem incongruous in the context of a monograph on Sokurov, yet I want to contend that there is a kinship, if only in their prolificacy, between the two artists.²³ They are also fabled for their rare combination of extraordinary intuition, artistic flair, acute perceptiveness; and an extreme investment in research and theoretical reflection in the course of their projects. Unsparring towards themselves, both men's reputations for being extremely difficult, mercurial, and even capricious were at least partly founded, and thus both attracted a number of enemies and detractors. In spite of this, they were highly respected for the uncompromising force of their artistic visions, a respect reflected in the fidelity and dedication of their close collaborators. Even physically, Fassbinder and Sokurov resembled one another: round (often mustachioed) burly faces, stocky builds, and intense, penetrating gazes. Both men had strong ties with their mothers, beloved, cryptically celebrated figures in their lives and works. Both can rightly be labelled notorious workaholics, as well as gloomy, tenebrous old souls who produced films with strong (overt or covert) political messages, which electrified their generation of compatriots. Sharing a remarkably youthful freshness, energy, and inquisitiveness in their work, the two also had, from the early stages of their careers, an amazing degree of maturity and insight into matters of human

psychology and philosophy. Finally, both were children of troubled times – Fassbinder born in the immediate aftermath of World War II, Sokurov during the twilight of Stalinist terror – inducing the impression of intense loss pervading their cinema.

Where the two men differ, of course, is in the general tone of their cinema, and in their investment in politics and sexuality. Openly, brazenly bisexual, destroyed in the end by his excesses of drinking and drug abuse, Fassbinder is the flip side of the Sokurovian coin, a man who famously never drinks alcohol, who has worked all his life negating any form of homosexual tendency in his oeuvre, and who has dedicated his existence to an intensely ascetic work ethic, in abnegation vis-à-vis his loneliness and celibacy. Fassbinder and Sokurov also differ widely on the political spectrum: in Fassbinder's case, the practice of bisexuality was as much a matter of personal inclination as of his borderline anarchistic politics, whereas Sokurov has always aligned himself with a conservative agenda. But regardless of these divergent allegiances and paths of life, both men are linked by their fates, neither able to escape intense existential sufferings and solitude – a commonality reflected in each and every one of their films, and contributing to their deserved reputations as two of the greatest practitioners of cinematic art.²⁴

Fassbinder died on 10 June 1982, a few days after Sokurov's 31st birthday. The German filmmaker left an enormous body of work behind him, while Sokurov would have to wait a few more years, until *perestroika*, to be granted full lease to his own prolific capacity. From the shipwreck of *Mournful Insensitivity*, from the cold and damp of Leningrad where the film was shot, he would move to the place where he completed his high school education, the Turkmeni desert town of Krasnovodsk, and to the messianic promise of the paradoxically solar-doused *Days of the Eclipse*.

Notes

- 1 Perhaps better than the historical accounts, the late Alexey Balabanov's recent *Cargo 200* (2009), an extremely dark film taking place at precisely this time, serves, even if by use of caricature, as the best way of capturing the essence of what had gone horribly wrong with the Soviet Union, yet also pointing out the cowardice, opportunism, and cynicism of the youth of the 1980s who would become the oligarchs of the post-Soviet era.
- 2 These were the years of emergence of punk music in Soviet Russia. Yevgeny Yufit's necrorealist movement, in some ways inspired by Sokurov, was just around the corner.
- 3 *Heartbreak House* would eventually premiere in London in 1921.
- 4 An ironic nod at the tradition, in a number of turn-of-the-century Vaudeville pieces (one thinks of Feydeau comedies, or, a bit later, of Maurice Braddell), wherein the gold digger ingénue dodges attempts at seduction by middle-aged men, only to elope with the old uncle or grandfather, who is not suspected of comparable sexual vigour.
- 5 The play featured second on a list of 19 feature adaptation projects proposed by Sokurov to the Lenfilm direction at the request of Vitali Aksyonov. It became a

- local legend, 'because of the author's unprecedented unwillingness to conform to the factor of "feasibility" at the time and connected to the difficult economic juncture' (Arkus 1994: 79; translation mine). Other titles included Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*; Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*; Goethe's *Faust* and Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, the motifs of the two latter texts possibly combined in one single adaptation. The full list can be found in Arkus (1994: 79).
- 6 In *24 Images*, issue 48 (1990: 61).
 - 7 The film features over 330 cuts and no fewer than 300 different shots – three times as many as most of Sokurov's feature films.
 - 8 The film seems isolated in the Sokurov canon. But if his debut was clearly a formal matrix of most of his essentially humanist motifs, this sophomore feature forms another matrix – for his obsessions with war, power, history, the price of a soul, the grotesque, and immaturity; and formally for disjointed spaces arranged by sibylline points of view – something that will be much in evidence in his tetralogy consisting of *Moloch*, *Taurus*, *The Sun*, and *Faust*.
 - 9 This is instantiated in the film's soundtrack: bombs and machine guns are heard falling and firing throughout, much to the indifference of the house's hosts and guests.
 - 10 An amusing stage convention in the play, whereby the character, thought by Ellie and Hesione to be asleep, can eavesdrop on their (very critical) conversation.
 - 11 Eisenstein was fascinated with Shaw's play, and, as a student of Meyerhold, wanted to adapt it for several years in the early 1920s.
 - 12 As the Parisian newspaper *Libération* titled one of their front pages in its 851st issue, from 14 February 1984: 'L'URSS vous présente ses meilleurs *vieux*' (instead of 'vœux' – 'The USSR presents you with its best dotards' instead of 'best wishes').
 - 13 The closest example to a postmodern film we can find in all of Sokurov's gigantic corpus might be the short *Patience, Labour* (*Терпение и труд*; *Terpeniye, trud*, 1985, released 1987), which was done almost in jest. Revolving primarily around the training of professional figure skaters, it was a commission work meant to celebrate the hard work and sacrifice of young Soviet athletes to attain the highest degree of their sport – and art. In its whimsical editing and derisive use of pop music, it represents Sokurov's mocking and dejected take on the nature of the assignment. The title was likewise meant as an ironic jab, but was taken at face value by the people who funded it. This anecdote goes to show the growing gap between societal actuality and the crumbling structures of the regime and its official doctrine at the time. Yet even in this film, the moral urgency and seriousness (the excellence of the editing, for instance, which at once parodies and transcends the epileptic quick cuts usually found in music videos and commercials for the MTV generation) which pervades any film by Sokurov still puts it at odds from postmodernism, if we understand the current in Jamesonian terms, as an aesthetic expression of late capitalism and its moral relativism. There too, Sokurov occupies a third term, and cannot be reduced to a given current or tendency.
 - 14 In an article available in Russian and also in Italian, in the Turin retrospective catalogue (2003).

- 15 The animal and grotesque references are numerous in the play, conveying Shaw's idea that 'Man lost his better half in war: dog goes back to his vomit and the sow to her wallowing in the mire' (Shaw 1919: iii); and ironically equating man (or woman) with animal: 'There is no animal in the world so hateful as a woman can be' (Shaw 1919: 95).
- 16 For Andrey Dyatchenko, the crane is associated with the painter Walter Crane, founder of the Arts and Crafts movement (1994: 107).
- 17 The archival footage evokes the exotic locales Shotover visited: Zanzibar and the North Pole.
- 18 'Ever since Thucydides wrote his history, it has been on record that when the angel of death sounds his trumpet the pretenses of civilization are blown from man's heads into the mud like hats in a gust of wind' (Shaw 1919: xxv).
- 19 Even though *Moloch* and *Taurus* were made nearly 20 years later, the concept of the tetralogy was formed at the same time as *Mournful Insensitivity*.
- 20 In his cinema books, Gilles Deleuze writes about these *espaces quelconques*, (a symptom of the shift from the movement- to the time-image) the representation of which often disregards traditional continuity editing, expressing spaces we no longer ascribe any certainty, know how to react to, or to describe. These spaces do call for a 'new race of characters', of which Bresson's models (*modèles*) are an eminent example. I do return to the influence of Bresson on Sokurov in chapter five.
- 21 As Karina Dobrotvorskaya notes, this is Sokurov's most 'feminine' film (2006: 75). Yet Ariadne and Hesione appear withered and disenchanted.
- 22 I will return to other such instances throughout the book, most emphatically in chapter seven, about *Whispering Pages*. Yet Ariadne and Hesione appear as withered, disenchanted women.
- 23 Fassbinder directing 44 films before his untimely death, Sokurov having 57 titles to his credit as of 2013, feature films and documentaries combined.
- 24 If we look for direct aesthetic convergences between the two men, Armond White has noted, about *Father and Son*: 'Sokurov's burnished imagery recalls the tinted masculine world of Fassbinder's *Querelle* – an impassioned orange and earth-tone for ardor, bloom, ebullience' (in the US release DVD booklet).

CHAPTER THREE

Days of the Eclipse: 'Adieu, Babylone'; Adieu, Tarkovsky

I

While the negative of *Lonely Voice of Man* was threatened with destruction and the film only shown in private circles, and the shoot of *Mournful Insensitivity* interrupted for over a year before resuming in precarious conditions that prevented its satisfactory completion, *Days of the Eclipse* was Sokurov's first feature to enjoy a relatively unhindered production history. Upon its release in the context of *perestroika*, which was favourable to original and 'different' Soviet products, *Days of the Eclipse* received a wide range of positive reviews and acclaim at festivals worldwide, leading to its theatrical release in numerous countries.

In the West, it was Fredric Jameson, an unrelenting champion of the film, who contributed most to its prestige, illuminating the aspects of 'Soviet magic realism' to be found in this idiosyncratic adaptation of the Strugatsky Brothers' *One Billion Years to the End of the World* (aka *Definitely Maybe*, 1974). Truthfully, Sokurov's film has little in common, in terms of plot, with the Strugatsky text. The latter, written at the height of Brezhnev's politics of stagnation, was set in Leningrad and described how, under the pressure of a 'homeostatic universe' ('гомеостатическое мироздание'; *gomeostaticheskoe mirozdaniye*), scientists were unable to carry on with their research, distracted by a series of odd and unexplainable events. Yet, under the guise of science fiction, one could naturally see this novella as an allegory for the difficulties to think, create, and live in a totalitarian regime exerting pressures to prevent progress – pushing it back, it seemed, 'a billion years'.¹ Yet at the time of the making of the film, the end of a world was at the door – the Soviet Babylon crumbling as it had been for most of the decade.²

The Strugatsky novella, in fact, resonated with Sokurov in more ways than its current applicability: 'When I read the ... story, it aroused in my subconscious memories of that particular place [Krasnovodsk] inhabited by people of different nationalities, but where there was a complete cultural vacuum, which could drive even the most unpretentious person to despair' (in Andreev 1988: 20). And indeed, from a certain perspective, the use of the source text seems to be almost the perfect pretext for Sokurov to illustrate this despondent desertic landscape, filled with suicidal or aloof characters. Beyond its somewhat vague apocalyptic motif, only few literal elements were retained from the Strugatsky story in this 'adaptation': the protagonist's name (Malyanov, played by a non-professional actor, the athletic Alexey Ananishnov); the notion of heat, albeit a dry, desert heat (the novella opens with an account of Leningrad doused in white heat, on an atypically hot and humid summer day); and, most importantly, the sense of some strange force, perhaps of extra-terrestrial origin, exerting pressure and 'impinging on our monad' (to use Jameson's phrase), compelling the characters to take actions that often seem arbitrary.

But, Jameson asks, is this force impinging on humans, a rational reaction on the part of the super-force, or rather a 'spasmodic gesture of the gods'? Uncertainty reigns supreme: novella and film are fables about this epistemological riddle, 'this ultimate challenge to cognitive mapping' (1992: 88). This uncertainty is reflected in the hybrid, liminal nature of the film: mixing documentary with fiction footage more seamlessly than the previous films, it is difficult to ascertain at first whether or not *Days of the Eclipse* qualifies as a choral, polyphonic work, or whether it has instead a unified voice hiding behind the score of characters crossing paths through the atypical diegesis.

Ultimately, Fredric Jameson's passionate endorsement of *Days of the Eclipse*, in his *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, remains the single most eloquent piece written on Sokurov in the English language, viewing the pressure felt by the scientists of the novella as moving from a political frame to an economic one as it reflects on this end of an era. As such, the film serves as an allegory of the passage of the Soviet Union into a free market economy and the threats of late capitalism and postmodernism promised by the union's impending collapse. Jameson points out that this allegorical dimension would have been lost on most viewers, and possibly on the filmmakers' themselves, but upon scrutiny, his interpretation holds its own. One element serving Jameson's argument is his knowledge of the Strugatsky body of work (1992: 107–9), in which the alien force evolves from a colonial-style aggressor to an insidious, increasingly 'late capitalist' force that adopts new ruses and methods of distraction to deflect and divert the attention of humans from their quest for progress. In other words, the weapon turns into champagne and caviar, or as the film has it, lobster in aspic.

Beyond the Marxist interpretation, Jameson argues that what one, regardless of their allegiance, can retain from *Days of the Eclipse* is a profound sense of transition, which the film beautifully captures in all its trepidation, fear, anxiety and ultimate nostalgia: the shift from one historic moment into another, what has been lost and what might be gained. Complementing Jameson's analysis with psycho-biographical elements, I wish to address the film and its affects as a reflection not only of the fate of a collapsing Soviet Union, but also the transition, in Sokurov's own life, from a certain

innocence of youth into the disillusion of adolescence and adulthood. This interpretation is supported by the film's setting in the place where the director spent most of his teenage years and completed his secondary education: the town of Krasnovodsk in the Republic of Turkmenia, located at the outskirts of the Soviet empire. The film is fundamentally a paean to the author's youth, therefore, while also addressing motifs such as death and decay. It is to *Days of the Eclipse's* thematic organisation and content that this chapter now turns.

II

Mikhail Iampolski's reading of the formation of the *syuzhet* of *Mournful Insensitivity* in terms of a non-linear but associative pattern applies to *Days of the Eclipse* as well: a Tower of Babel of people, languages, and events, the film's 'plot' would seem to be organised around an accumulation of arbitrary events and a dialectic of oppositions. This premise is reflected in the idea of non-related, but intersecting vectors of fate, much as in the cosmic phenomenon of the title: the eclipse being the intersection of the stellar and the planetary, the encounter of two lines, which do only very seldom converge. However, the characters do not realise this, and the film seems to comment negatively on their obliviousness to central, key 'details'.

This intersection becomes chaos when the strangeness of the events brought about by the cosmic world compels the human characters to actions they would not have taken otherwise. The forces of the cosmos thus descend upon earth, represented by the film's memorable opening downward tracking shot. Under this strange pressure, multiple choices are enacted: a strange, seemingly disabled postman brings a package to Malyanov, yet one that the young man never ordered; Malyanov's sister disappears much the way she came to visit him; Snegovoy, a Russian officer friend of Malyanov, shoots himself, and the two subsequently have a conversation in a morgue, where the corpse appears more talkative than the living; Gubar, a renegade soldier, barges randomly into Malyanov's home, before being shot by the military; a young boy appears one day on Malyanov's doorstep, illuminating the film with his angel-like, mysterious presence, before being claimed and lifted up in the skies by unknown hands; Malyanov starts burning his research papers before suddenly putting out the fire; the meek Vladlen Glukhov seems, somewhat reluctantly, to embrace the Turkmen lifestyle and domesticity with a local beauty, and urges Malyanov to abandon his research;³ while Vecherovsky (Eskender Umarov), the hero's best and only friend, after finding his apartment ransacked and with a dark, charred and purulent patch adorning his wall, leaves town, to Malyanov's great dismay.

A brief description of the episodes constituting *Days of the Eclipse's* 'plot' immediately indicates its fragmentary, episodic nature. Rather than in terms of a traditional script, it is much more productive to think of the film as a difficult but superb poem, articulated around sets of dialectic oppositions, such as life and death, opening and closure, youth and old age, and descent onto the earth and flight upward into the skies. *Days of the Eclipse* is composed no less of doubling motifs and rhymes as, for instance, in Snegovoy and Glukhov's separate remarks about 'detective' stories: Snegovoy asks

Days of the Eclipse:
Malyanov and the
star child



Malyanov whether he reads detective stories while Glukhov asks for a copy of the newspaper to find out whether there will be a good crime mystery on TV that day.⁴ This latter doubling strategy serves the pivotal purpose of tying together Sokurov's superficially arbitrary film.

Snegovoy and Glukhov represent middle-aged men, nearer to death and decay (Snegovoy's face is covered with scars, Glukhov is a feeble-looking hunched man) while Malyanov and Vecherovsky are young and healthy.⁵ The motif of youth and health is fundamental to the film, epitomised in the 'star-child,' but also in Malyanov's pursuit as a doctor, and in his dissertation about the greater resistance to illness of old-faith Christian believers. Thus the motifs of science and religion intersect, taking root both in the ground and the skies, addressing temporal and eternal issues, mediated, as it were, by the motif of mental illness (with which the film opens).⁶ No less notable is the animal motif, which, like the film's discourse on mental illness, extends *Mournful Insensitivity's* madhouse-like menagerie: wild boars, lions, and giraffes are replaced here by camels, a monitor lizard, a lobster, a rabbit and, most memorably, a huge pet snake. Along these lines, Jameson correlates the strange hairy and purulent dark patch on Vecherovsky's wall, which might be what is left of the dog we saw earlier at his place, with other moments in the film involving charred materials: for instance the burns on Snegovoy's face and the documents burned by Malyanov. All this tightens the poetic network that makes this film such a compelling (and ultimately coherent) work of art.

Other fundamental motifs are referred to by the characters themselves in their recurring concerns with displacement and memory: the former theme is illustrated in Malyanov's philosophical, if lackadaisically formulated approach to where one belongs:⁷ originally from Nizhny-Novgorod,⁸ Malyanov spent many years studying medicine in Moscow and seems rather at ease on the outskirts of the Soviet empire, in his stoical resolve, scorching heat and all. These considerations are set against the obvious discomfort of Snegovoy and Gubar, military men forced into this outpost, and Vecherovsky's own story – that of a Crimean Tatar adopted by a Volga German family after his biological parents' death (wherein the dark shadow of Stalinism, and the many other millions of lives it claimed, encroaches upon the film's landscape). This notion of displacement, uprooted-ness, and a lack of belonging are further elaborated upon in the idea of travel or immobility, of the pointlessness of either choice as one can travel to no end on a round earth – never getting lost while never finding one's way either.

The motif of memory is illustrated further by the Sokurovian trope of old photographs, whether it is in the diaries that Snegovoy and Veчерovsky give Malyanov, or more deeply perhaps, in the choice of the film's 'chronotope' – Sokurov's former hometown. Extending the notion of memory into a pre-historic time, the landscape surrounding Krasnovodsk is germane to an idea of 'geological' time. The mountains and desert, set on the borders of the Caspian sea, all convey a sense of timelessness, coupled with an eternal, unrelenting heat that even the solar eclipse and night of the soul do not seem to alleviate. The air blown through electric fans does little to cool the atmosphere, the picture literally drowned in layers of sepia hues, wrapping the characters in a sense of intangible doom and decay, in spite of its implacable dryness. It is one of the film's most remarkable traits, and one, once again, that reveals the filmmaker's uttermost sense of paradox: the solid and the fossil become liquid, seeping into the characters' bodies and minds. As a result of the pressure, they are led to precipitate their fates, one way or another. In this context, Malyanov seems to emerge as more and less than human all at once. In spite of his Apollonian muscular body, his deadpan face resembles a primate or Neanderthal, a feature reinforced in his apparent ease with animals (which scare Veчерovsky or his sister). Midway between the human and the animal, Malyanov perfectly embodies the paradox of the film, positing the joint question of conscience and consciousness. Indeed, while Malyanov is hardly the narrator of the film, he serves as its filtering central consciousness, and through his eyes we are given a set of moral dilemmas to address.

Days of the Eclipse comes to us as a strange, late Soviet fairy tale, a fable whose contents render it available to various readings. Foremost among these is the film's contrast of civilisations, its contraposition of an old system in throes of decay with a newer, postcolonial reality that remained at this stage no more than unrealised promise. The former, the 'Babylonian' as it were, was, as described by Alexandra Tuchinskaya, a compound of cultures, states, peoples, on the verge of collapse and dissolution:

For the first time in Soviet cinema, where the ideological model of the brotherly unity of the nations had been long established, Sokurov showed the painful and unnatural symbiosis of national cultures and ways of life as the result of violently imposed mix ... evoking a Babylonian pandemonium.⁹

Porous and centrifugally attracted to the global world, *Days of the Eclipse* emerges finally as a 'Tower of Babel' with a multiplicity of languages augmenting the cultural chaos of the Soviet Empire: Russian, Turkmen, Armenian; but also Latin, Finnish, English, and even Italian – courtesy of a Catholic mass heard on the radio.

As Julian Graffy has pointed out (2011), this radio broadcast from the Vatican helps in locating the time frame of the film as belonging precisely to mid-August 1987. In this regard, the film comments upon pressing contemporary issues, addressing a *zeitgeist* comprised of Afghan war, Chernobyl, and approaching post-colonial dissent.¹⁰ Even so, the descent with which the film opens is also like a relapse into the past (i.e. into Sokurov's own adolescence) and the music, dirge-like and nostalgic, speaks to this, as well as to the end of an era: the end of the Soviet world.

In many ways, *Days of the Eclipse* begins where *Mournful Insensitivity* ended – or never quite got to. The latter film's opening shot was meant to be inspired by a painting by Albrecht Altdorfer, *The Battle of Alexander* (*Die Alexanderschlacht*, 1528–29), a global view of the skies and the battle on earth below, speaking to the totalising drive in Sokurov. This ambitious camera movement could not be realised in his sophomore feature, replaced instead by the 360-degree tracking shot, from ground level, circling the Shotover boat-mansion.¹¹ Closer to the Altdorfer project, *Days of the Eclipse* opens with a vertiginous aerial shot descending faster and faster onto the land, epitomising the phrase according to which, in Sokurov's cinema, it is not men who look at the cosmos, but the cosmos that looks at men.

The opening shot, the 'fall' of some cosmic entity onto the town itself, is as much a fall from Grace and cosmic descent as it is a flashback: Sokurov traveling back in time and space to the place where the best of his youth, and perhaps the early torments of love, may have played out. The descent is therefore somewhat violent, no gentle landing but a crash, a wake-up call, the soundtrack moving from children laughing playfully and gentle Oriental strings over the credits, to a strident female chorus screaming as the camera draws us in its inexorable fall downward. And thus, by virtue of the magic of the cinematic apparatus, we are 'back', returned to where we never were.¹²

Once it has lighted on earth, the film submerges us in an atmosphere of distress, and the theme of madness and alienation, illustrated in the 'madhouse' that was Captain Shotover's boat-house in the previous film, is continued here in the shape of an actual mental asylum.¹³ The long and memorable prologue continues with documentary footage of the dismal, run-down institution's mentally ill patients, as though suffering expressions of humanity's refuse, castaway in the middle of nowhere. The sepia hues in the cinematography reinforce the 'desert-like' feeling – the heat and the sandy dirt foremost, but also convey a sense of old age, even if this 'documentary' section was shot contemporaneously to the 'fiction' footage, unlike in *Mournful Insensitivity* (where archival footage co-existed with reconstructions parading as period material, and the actual fictional material itself, shot both in colour and black and white). For almost seven minutes, the shots alternate between the faces of demented and mentally damaged individuals, sane but grim-looking people, and camels. All this inescapably summons the first part of Andrey Platonov's *Dzhan*, a story of human suffering and resilience in which a whole people is threatened with extinction. The film's locale evokes the miserable village of Sary Kamysh from the novella, and its sepia hues hardly bring any warmth to the despondent spectacle of rubble and illness of its opening. In this, *Days of the Eclipse* echoes Platonov's words: 'The sun was shining high and plentifully yet its light was unable to warm a human heart into a state of happiness' (2007: 56). Sokurov thus covertly adapts the atmosphere of Platonov's story and combines it with elements of the Strugatskys' text. In so doing, the director boasts once again an intertextual approach, underlining the continuity and organic dimension of his work, with all films comprising pieces of a larger whole.

The intriguing footage opening *Days of the Eclipse* then moves to a cemetery, already announcing the death of the Soviet regime. This, and many subsequent instances in the film, such as decaying monuments once erected to Soviet glory, or a late sequence depicting a derelict factory where workers' hands dabble in some disgusting greasy paste, attests to what Julian Graffy has called the 'the object failure ... of the Soviet project' (2011: 80). But when the camera also lingers on a dead dog – a traditional symbol of hope and faithfulness reduced to a few bones and some dried skin – it speaks to the despondence and lack of optimism beyond the crumbling walls of the empire. The general feeling emerging from these images is hardly an uplifting one, especially as it is complemented by the remarkable score of Yuri Khanin: a dirge-like song of uncertain origins, influenced by both Western and Eastern traditions, with its repetitive musical pattern and ghostly female vocals penetrated by a sense of longing and sadness.

The strong connection between real past experience and fiction is reinforced here by the combination of documentary and non-documentary footage – which often mutually inform and interpenetrate each other in Sokurov's work. This inter-penetration, if puzzling, is not counterproductive. As Fredric Jameson puts it in a note to his 'On Soviet Magic Realism' piece, the film does 'not merely [unite] two distinct generic aspects ... but also dialectically allows each one to batten off the other: the fairy tale drawing unexpectedly new strength from this ciné-vérité and vice versa' (1992: 112). This hybridity is exhibited sometimes within the same shot: for instance in the scene in which Malyanov and Vecherovsky walk on the street together, reciting their dialogue, before disappearing in a crowd of cheerful locals celebrating a wedding. Sokurov's camera lingers for a while, and by the end of the scene, actor Umarov re-enters the frame, completely out of character, probably ready for another take.¹⁴ The curious shift, in this example, within the same shot, from sepia to a more realistic colour scheme, may serve as another meta-filmic comment upon this free combination of reality and the contrivances of 'fiction'.

IV

The film parallels and announces the chaos of reactions (immigration, bankruptcy, suicides) that would come with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the dramatic devaluation of the rouble by Boris Yeltsin a few years later. If, on the meta-filmic level, *Days of the Eclipse* stands as a stunning prophecy of things to come, within the film itself most of the events remain incomprehensible to the characters, hence their violent, spastic reactions. In this context of random suicides, panic, and flight, Malyanov's (at times indifferent) stance to remain, at all costs, in his place, posits him as the central, archetypal figure of human resilience. The everyday and the mythological seem to coexist in the universe of *Days of the Eclipse*, much as the boundaries between the living and the dead, but also the human and the animal, become blurred. In a particular scene, Malyanov, in a fashion evoking a cow chewing grass, calmly devours a sandwich next to the pet monitor lizard, Yosif.

The lizard is but one of the many seemingly random animal incursions in the film, appearing to be more symbolic than fantastical. For Mikhail Iampolski (2009: 40),

these incursions all have a meaning, but one that is esoteric and might be lost on most, including the film's characters: these animals represent the Oriental message, related to the solar eclipse, announcing the cycle of the film. The boa constrictor, lobster, and rabbit encountered over the course of the narrative can be interpreted in terms of constellations and their astrological connotations: in various mythologies, a snake is often said to devour the sun – in this sense, the snake is the eclipse; the lobster stands for the change of solar cycles; and the rabbit for the cycle of an eternal renewal (and of course, the animal can always be seen as connecting the world of the living and the dead). Yet all this cryptic information is lost in the film and its Central Asian locale on its Russian 'intruders', as it were.

The archaic, mythical dimension of the film is stressed further by the film's aesthetics. Sokurov does not yet resort to distorting lenses *per se* in this film, but by its very nature, the widescreen anamorphic lens distorts straight lines on the edge of the image, giving it a slightly crooked, dreamlike quality which contributes to the film's mythical aspect, only reinforced by the use of sepia filters, interspersed, here and there, by shots in radiant colour. The way in which the 'fictional' footage is interspersed with documentary, 'direct' cinema also heightens the sense of interpenetration of various realms in this central-Asian Babylon. Multilingualism and multi-ethnicity are repeatedly stressed, more often than not as contiguous with death or dying: a dialogue in Armenian is heard from an apartment neighbouring Malyanov's, between an old dying father and his adult daughter; Snegovoy's soldier recites lines in Latin from Horace's 'Eheu Fugaces,' a poem about impermanence and death. And the music contest with its multi-ethnic jury, a scene apparently boring and banal, is made interesting and relevant by its contiguity with another ritual – the protracted forensic removal of Snegovoy's body from his apartment. In short, *Days of the Eclipse* brings to the fore the ritualistic and mythical qualities contained in all things, and which one can unearth at all turns, equipped with the right tools. A way, perhaps, to divert one's attention from the hopeless 'cultural vacuum' proposed by this otherwise mundane and quotidian existence, and which seems to lead Snegovoy to despair and suicide (lest it is the doing of some extra-terrestrial instance indeed).¹⁵

V

The central scene in which Malyanov comes to see Snegovoy's body at the morgue announces Sokurov's forthcoming fascination with the cadaver and the nature of death, certainly prominent in *The Second Circle* and *Mother and Son*, but also substantially investigated in *Save and Protect*, *The Stone* and *Taurus*. The scene's tension derives from the youth and beauty of Malyanov set against the older man's corpse, who first asks why Malyanov came to see him before announcing that he now belongs with him – in the realm of death.

The deadpan acting of Ananishnov makes it difficult to sense the degree of terror that he experiences at this exchange with the beyond. Nevertheless, he runs to Vecherovsky's home, lying down on his neat (German) apartment's floor, confessing his terror at the sight of these strange phenomena. The homosocial proximity and inti-

macy of the two friends, already underlined in earlier dialogues between them, acquires its clearest expression here. The two men whisper to one another, bodies touching in the narrow widescreen frame, half undressed, Malyanov confiding his fears, and Vecherovsky responding in his calm, soothing voice.

While the homoerotic tension is quite palpable in this scene, critics have frequently decided to gloss over it. For Jameson, the film represents pre-adolescent fantasy without sex or desire (1992), and Alexander Sokurov himself has, in a rare comment on the question, discarded a homosexual reading of the intimacy between the two men (see Cazals 1993). Yet the conspicuous absence of female erotic interest and the romantic intimations of Vecherovsky and Malyanov's 'story' speaks to a typically covert gay romance narrative: two intimate 'friends' live together in a town where they are both outsiders – for a variety of reasons.¹⁶ One decides to leave, the other stays – it is the end of the world. Considering the context of its production, from its director's personality and beliefs to the actual place and time at which it was made, an openly queer narrative would have been impossible here. To discard any intimation of homosexual atmosphere in the film, however, would be missing an important point. Jameson's theory of an asexual, pre-adolescent realm in the film might hold on the purely narrative level, but it crumbles under its texture and representations: Malyanov's sculptural, fully formed and muscular body is a clear indicator of manhood. He is by no means a late expression of the socialist-realist hero, fully dedicated to the communist project, sublimating his erotic drives in his professional pursuit. On the contrary, the film, as Maya Turovskaya points out (2006), with its investment in madmen, naked bodies, death and the sacred, seems to announce many motifs of the post-Soviet cinema of the 1990s and 2000s. Considering Sokurov's love of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, Malyanov's intense friendship with Vecherovsky could instead be read in terms of the myth of the 'romantic friendship' between two people of the same sex, void of any sexual tension or attraction; but such absence of eroticism has been challenged by the advances of queer theory and the gradual acceptance of gay and lesbian cultures, so that even then, to comment about Malyanov as asexual does not quite seem right.¹⁷

Even if there is no romantic interaction between Malyanov and Vecherovsky on the diegetic level, the homoerotic energy between them seeps through the image: the proximity of young male bodies, whispering their affection to one another, their shirts open on bare chests, looking at one another longingly. Reading the film (especially considering the striking resemblance of Umarov with Sokurov at the time of the film's making) as a tale of yearning for a youth's lost love seems much more compelling, even if it is, naturally, only one of the elements that compose the rich thematic tapestry of the film. The homoerotic dimension, like much of the film, is of a liminal nature – coded more in the texture of the film than its actual subject, often felt and fleetingly suggested, yet never explicitly stated. Sokurov's subsequent body of work would only confirm this sensitivity, however indirectly, whereas heterosexual embraces would consistently bear the seal of doom and aberration.¹⁸

In keeping with the film's liminal and ambiguous spirit, it is unclear whether Malyanov and Vecherovsky will have had their parting '*nuit d'amour*', as Jacques Offen-

Days of the Eclipse:
close and ambiguous
proximity between
Malyanov and Vecherovsky



Days of the Eclipse:
longing gazes as the two
friends part ways



bach's *Barcarolle* suggests when the two take the train to the harbour before saying goodbye. The scene allows us to return to an unambiguous and undisputed important thematic element in the film: the imminent consequences of the crumbling structures of the Soviet Empire. As the blond, Slavic (or possibly Baltic) Malyanov and the Tatar Vecherovsky ride together on the train, they are stared at by a local man and woman – she with a slight mocking smile, he with a blank, inscrutable expression. Malyanov angrily shouts at the man ‘What are you looking at?’ His anger is clearly not only caused by his irritation at seeing his dear friend leave town, but is also yet another expression of the tensions that probably always existed between the Russian or Soviet coloniser and the local populations, and would only grow in the following years among the new republics (Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan – not to mention the extenuating conflict with Afghanistan which was still raging at the time of the film’s production). And so, Sokurov swaps the totalitarian dimension of the ‘homeostatic universe’ in the Strugatskys’ tale, for an anticipated postcolonial dimension, whereby the Russian presence is no longer desired. But these are merely temporal, geopolitical concerns that will soon recede into the past, Sokurov seems to suggest, like the Soviet Union itself – like all human constructs, giving way to more eternal questions.

As the two friends get off the train and onto the boat that will take Vecherovsky away, Offenbach’s music is replaced by the *Three Little Pigs* song, with the sound of machine guns and explosions in the mix, as taken from the *Mournful Insensitivity* soundtrack. This borrowing hints, thematically, at the notion of the boat and its uncertain fate at sea already encountered in that film. But it also hints at the organic, bodily nature of Sokurov’s films and life as a whole, all connected in spite of a conspicuously

heterogeneous, hybrid dimension – one of the many aural cross-references that help unify the universe of the Sokurovian cinematic ‘house’. This idea of heterogeneous yet unified space is at play in the growingly uneasy, yet still necessary, multi-ethnic cohabitation in the train, as the Soviet Babylon dies.

VI

In spite of all its unquestionably grim themes, *Days of the Eclipse* constitutes a wonder of cinematic energy and inventiveness. Commenting upon decline and missed opportunities – closer in tone to *Platonov* than to the Strugatskys – it is nevertheless one of Sokurov’s most life-affirming, youthful films, his belated expression of a Soviet ‘New Wave’.¹⁹ Surely the film has formal common traits with the vibrant explosions of European cinema of the early 1960s: thematically daring and disregarding conventions, freely blending fiction and live documentary footage, and so on. The New Wave’s spirit lies also in the sheer insolence of its maker. This insolence, however, at a time when Sokurov at last sensed that his moment had arrived, may be read as closer to Jacques Rozier’s than Jean-Luc Godard’s meaner, more obnoxious brand. The analogy may seem far fetched, but with its theme of interrupted youthful romance, sunny locales, pop music, and military contexts, as well as the fleeting nature of happiness and of the impermanence of love, *Days of the Eclipse* can be read as Sokurov’s *Adieu Philippine* (1963) – both constituting miraculous free-form experiments that transcend film language and create a new, singular idiom.²⁰

Whereas Rozier eschews the death and war that loom large in the background of his film, Sokurov would not be Sokurov if he did not weigh the potential for levity and romance with serious considerations about individual and collective undoing. The theme of lost, interrupted youth is expressed here in various ways, nowhere more clearly than when the little boy, left in the care of Malyanov, is taken away from him by a mysterious, alien figure. In *Days of the Eclipse*, farewells are not only paid to youth and beauty, they are also extended to an Empire, with the rural outpost he depicts offering an exotic metonymy for the whole of the Soviet Union.

Rozier’s *Adieu Philippine* ends with Michel leaving his two girlfriends, Liliane and Juliette, waving as his boat leaves the Ajaccio harbour, a joyful pop tune playing over the image, in contradiction to the sadness and promise of the Algerian war for which the young man was drafted. The farewell between Malyanov and Vecherovsky in *Days of the Eclipse* bears odd similarities to Rozier’s film, with its forlorn friend or lover left on the shore – the end of the summer and conscription to war echoed in the end of the Soviet era and promise of an uncertain future. But while Rozier’s final shot was taken from the boat, showing the two young women waving on the pier, here Sokurov stays with Malyanov, on the land, the composition of the frame replicating the sense of longing and loneliness in Malyanov’s heart – doubled by a breeze suddenly felt to cool off the air. At once left behind and remaining at the front line, in-between the realm of the dead (signified by his dialogue with Snegovoy) and the living, Malyanov witnesses the end of the empire, as the universe of the film returns to its geological, fossil, pre-human state.

VII

Like his hero, Sokurov in some sense never left Krasnovodsk: with his youth having crystallised there, *Days of the Eclipse* becomes both a celebration of a personal past as well as an enterprise of mourning. Having bid farewell to his own history, at once entombed and celebrated in this tale of the loss of something essential, Sokurov was now doomed to a profoundly existential, philosophical sense of longing and solitude. Knowing he could never return, the director would come to work with a renewed fervour, and, very soon liberated from the constrictions of Soviet censorship, embark upon an oeuvre dedicated to charting the endless territory constituting the human soul – his pressure coming no longer from without, but from within.

One can easily surmise the reason behind the conflation of life-affirming, energetic drives and mournful, wake-like motifs in *Days of the Eclipse*. On the one hand, the film marked the liberation of Sokurov's art from the parochial censorship of the late Soviet establishment, ended by Gorbachev's reforms. On the other hand, the ailing old regime, or even the impending doom of global economy and late capitalism's threats, as Jameson argues, while clearly a motive behind the reflective apocalyptic tone of the film, do not entirely account for the dimension of nostalgia and sadness that pervades it so poignantly. Rather one should seek, in these affects, a more personal reason.

Andrey Tarkovsky, who had played such an important role in Sokurov's career, died in exile in Paris, on December 29, 1986. *Days of the Eclipse* was thus Sokurov's first feature following the death of his illustrious colleague, making this the ideal place to discuss the actual influence of Tarkovsky on Sokurov's oeuvre.

To some, Sokurov came to fill in the void left by Tarkovsky's untimely death, effectively becoming the heir to the throne of a beautiful, contemplative, profoundly philosophical and quintessentially Russian cinema. To others, however, including Fredric Jameson or Mikhail Iampolski, two of Sokurov's greatest experts, the two directors have nothing in common.

Sokurov found out about his colleague and friend's death while himself in a Leningrad hospital. The sadness that came over him compelled him to write a beautiful text, published in English under the title 'Death, the Banal Leveller', and to direct the documentary *Moscow Elegy* (Московская Элегия; *Moskovskaya Elegiya*, 1988), about Tarkovsky's homes and places of dwelling (his *dacha*, his Moscow apartment, and the tiny, squalid tenement he occupied with his mother during the war). If it is undeniable that there are echoes (as Robert Bird and Nariman Skakov underline, 2011) of *The*

Days of the Eclipse:
Malyanov stoically stays
behind, only to witness the
world of men vanish



Mirror in Lonely Voice of Man,²¹ and that Sokurov overtly quotes the opening POV-shot descent of *Andrey Rublev* (1967) in *Days of the Eclipse*,²² these references clearly remain superficial. And while I will demonstrate, along the lines of Jameson's and Lampolski's arguments, that Tarkovsky and Sokurov have indeed very little in common, I would also like to bypass these boundaries to show how they represent the inescapable mirror reflection (pun intended) of one another, across the divide of personal and collective history, and how they form a necessary companionship, which can help us understand the strictures of Soviet and Russian history.

To some, including Jacques Rancière (1999), the irritation manifested and comments made by Sokurov as to the lineage between him and Tarkovsky can be read as an expression of an anxiety of influence, a rejection by Sokurov of the immediate philosophical and artistic ether surrounding him. It is, and it is not: Sokurov is no island, and there are parapractical elements in his disdain, by and large, for twentieth century art (or, as he puts it, the works of mere 'intellectual figures' such as Picasso) but his work is far remote, philosophically and structurally, from Tarkovsky's. And those traits that the two directors share (their mission as modernist authors, with a strong focus on subjectivity, endeavouring at producing a serious and dignified art cinema, stressing simple, raw emotions and the importance of blood-ties, plunged in a complex historical moment), or their interpolation of documentary and fiction footage, all pertain to the overly generalistic, universal, or the anecdotal.

We saw in chapter one how Sokurov produced the voice of the collective singular, the voice of the 'lost I' of Platonov's prose, a world where the voice of man-as-individual had been muted, in direct opposition to the poignantly egotistical sublime (and more immediately universal, but perhaps deceitfully so) of Tarkovsky's *The Mirror*. If the two directors share one fundamental trait, it is of a most personal nature, namely their sense of nostalgia. One could argue that Krasnovodsk, the town in Turkmenia where Sokurov shot *Days of the Eclipse* and where he spent his teenage years, was to Sokurov precisely what the places portrayed in *Moscow Elegy* were to Tarkovsky, whose poignant narration from *The Mirror* illuminate these emotions, in dream-like recollection:

And in my dream I know that I am only dreaming, and my joy is hopelessly darkened by the expectation of awakening. At once, something happens, and the dream of the house, and the pine trees surrounding the house of my childhood, vanish. This is when I start to yearn. I eagerly and restlessly wait for this dream to return, in which I will see myself as a child once again, and feel happy again. Because everything will still lie ahead, everything will still be possible.²³

And yet, could one imagine two brands of nostalgia more different from one another? Those who attempt to correlate the two through their investment in blood-ties, the celebration of the mother figure and a manifestly problematic relation to the overarching and simultaneously absent father figure, or even through the fact that both, in the Grand Russian tradition, trade in matters of the transcendent and the metaphysical, are promptly confronted with the aporia of the limitations of such analogies.

Indeed, the two directors have been opposed along the following lines: Tarkovsky the lyrical artist, the emotionally heightened, or, to use Wölfflin's terminology, the linear ('Dürer'); against Sokurov's epic expression, the sedate and mournful, and the painterly ('Rembrandt'). It is Lampolski (2009) who most compellingly suggested the opposing terms of Tarkovsky as master of *correspondence*, with a cinema where everything, even the most sibylline utterance or symbol, seems to carry a meaning, itself inscribed within the greater meaning procured by the work of art as a unified whole; versus Sokurov's mastery of *disparity*, his association of random, accidental occurrences and footage nowhere better illustrated than in *Mournful Insensitivity* and *Days of the Eclipse*, and against the meaning imparted to all things, to the point of titillation, in Tarkovsky. The world, in Sokurov, remains untouched so long as it is distinct from thought, and the two can only coincide by chance, as opposed to the much greater design and control in Tarkovsky.²⁴ And yet, much as these convenient categories speak to us and comfort us, they are ultimately far too simplistic and do not do justice to the crucial aspects that distinguish these artists: their relationship to the transcendent and to history.

Gilles Deleuze (1985) and Fredric Jameson (1992) have both pointed out a fundamental quality in Tarkovsky's cinema: the fact that the universes of his films, however diverse, are constantly wet, drenched in water, rain, and other liquids (spilled milk and blood), a humid realm filled with a promise of spiritual rebirth located therein. In this oeuvre, constantly torn between a professed asceticism and lyrical spirituality, the 'wetness' of his images illustrate and allegorise this fullness. As Deleuze puts it:

The rain and wetness in Tarkovsky constantly brings up the question: what burning bush, what fire, what soul, what sponge will drench this land? This weight, this water, this soaked earth, is of course the symbol of a Slavic faith in the possibility of a renewal of faith and religion. (1986: 101; translation mine)

This hopefulness for a spiritual rebirth seems totally absent from Sokurov's cinema, which is closer to an Eastern, fatalistic (even by Russian standards) and resigned worldview than it is to Tarkovsky's Christianity: as Malyanov, left behind, stoically awaits the passing of all things. Which does not make Sokurov's oeuvre any less religious, but its *telos* is in the form of a geological cycle, beyond time, and consequently, for lack of a better term, it remains locked in a permanent present, turned away from any Great Evening or epiphany.

For Jameson, the rich, archaic post- or pre-human Tarkovskyan swamp (and its coterminous promise of messianic return and nostalgic reaching out for a prelapsarian past) is thus posited against the dry, geological, a-historical or cyclical land in Sokurov's 1988 opus, whose filters desaturate images 'in such a way as to mute the autonomy of multiple colors' (1992:100) and the richness of his glorious predecessor. The Marxist critic however might not have been aware of Sokurov's two previous features, and their profusion of liquid elements. But the rainstorm of *Lonely Voice of Man* or the humid locale of *Mournful Insensitivity*, the wetlands on which the boat-house of Captain Shotover both sits and floats, have nothing to do with a promise of rebirth: much

rather are they the ominous promise of a deluge or a total destruction, an entropy and disaster which has already taken place, instantiated, however allegorically, in *Days of the Eclipse* and, most manifestly, in the director's *Russian Ark*. Even the damp squalor of *Stalker* (1979) breathed with the painterly lyricism, mysticism, and beauty injected in the interplay of running water and stone contrasts with Sokurov's stagnant waters, which are wet and cold, and, most importantly, remote. Water here, much as the desert, is associated with an indifferent immensity of the universe and history – and, of course, with death.

It is through their approach to death that Tarkovsky's and Sokurov's brands of cinematic sublime can be distinguished. To use the terminology of the sublime codified by the late Thomas Weiskel (1976; see chapter five), Tarkovsky might be, at least in parts, the positive, 'beautiful,' immediately overwhelming sublime author. Sokurov always refuses direct beauty, drowning it systematically in layers of mists, haze, and muted palettes, and his 'negative' sublime emerges through indirect channels: whereas miracles happen within the shot (think of the finale of *Stalker*), in Sokurov, they take place in the interstice, in between shots, and in the interplay of images with his pointedly independent and whimsical soundtracks, so that even the two directors' borrowing of classical music sets them at stark opposites. But beyond all these motifs the two have in common and yet don't, it is in the temporality of Tarkovsky's full and vibrantly deep shots, and Sokurov's flattened images that we must consider and understand their deepest division, and then turn to see their chiasmic complementarity, along the lines of what defines cinema before all: time.

Tarkovsky attempted to theorise cinematic time as plastic, 'sculptable', fixated on film ideally through observation. In order to express the way events leave a trace on things, Tarkovsky used the Japanese word for 'rust', '*sabi*' – hence, for Iampolski, the profusion of liquids evoked above. In accordance with this idea of flow, everything that Tarkovsky represents is connected to the past. While, for Sokurov, the past to access is unknowable, as the place of his birth was flooded and could never be accessed again, Tarkovsky's cinema has an intense familiarity, a quasi-haptic grasp of the past as it recaptures the magical emotions of childhood. But the reason why it does so in such compelling fashion is sobering. The protagonist yearning to reach back into the past to retrieve its most precious affects finds out, in a moment of painful reckoning, that he himself is a figure trapped in the past. The world he is confronted with has already acquired its form – it is sculpted, and therefore can only be conceived in terms of nostalgia, while also desperately fending off depression and melancholia. Sokurov builds his films on entirely different philosophical grounds vis-à-vis time: his characters are in a cinematic present trying desperately to be reconnected with an idealised past from which they are separated. It is specifically a history beyond memory they can never reach, which entails the paradoxical sensation that this unreachable past (because it is so intensely desired) is more real than the transient, uncertain and unhappy present. From the latter's vantage point, Sokurov's cinema longingly scrutinises images of the irretrievable emotions and moments of the past as though it were the opposite bank of an impassable river, seen through the mist rising from the waters of time.

While Tarkovsky asked the question, over and over again, 'What is Russia? When was Russia? Why am I no longer there?', Sokurov, who never knew the place of his birth, asks a question at once far more egotistical and complex: 'What is it to be human? What is this aberration, this unfortunate absurdity whose beauty overwhelms and humbles me, and that one yet needs to take upon oneself, and endure with dignity?'

Let me take an example that would add another layer to these theories, coupling my point about the 'wet and lush depth' of Tarkovsky and the flatness of Sokurov's images with these observations on their relationship to time: a shot of the wind blowing through tall grass in a meadow, in Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* and Sokurov's *Mother and Son*. Everywhere in Tarkovsky, and certainly in *The Mirror*, the past is a live actor, a fundamental presence resurrected through elaborate set buildings, and the very notion of time is articulated through camera movements and *mise-en-scène* that brings, if only in this ornate, symbolic form, the ghost(s) of the past back to life, surprising us at every moment, yet being extinguished the very next.²⁵ In Sokurov, while melancholy and nostalgia are fundamental elements as well, the past is desired, and conceived of as a perpetual present, yet one that is unable, and perhaps unwilling, to ever return. And so he does not recreate the past; he creates an artifact of the past in the present (here the image of the 'ark' as a museum is illuminating), his method therefore freezing, abolishing time.

The wind blowing in the meadow in *The Mirror* is a profoundly emotional, moving moment, endowed with a quasi-animistic or mystical power. Tarkovsky claimed to fixate time in order to 'sculpt' it, but it was always a mass with a malleability and life of its own, as it were, because through this demiurgic gesture the director could envision an act of Faith, against the many promises of defeat and uncertainty of life. In *Mother and Son*, Sokurov illustrates a static, frozen, solid time, not only by virtue of the absence of camera movement or the angle secluding the shot to just this sea of tall grass, but also because it does not bring anything back to us. It is not, as in Tarkovsky, time in dialogue with another time, a moment of interpolation of past and present. In Sokurov, the image is an image, and its vectorisation/directionality is ambiguous, merely serving one fundamental purpose: to prepare us for the inevitable. The wind blowing in Sokurov's grass seems to almost do so in a loop, in tune with the idea of cycle evoked in the introduction and chapter one. The nature and purpose of time in both men's works differs, and so, again, does their treatment of space. Tarkovsky takes space and time and expands them, much in the fashion of an accordion (the final set-piece in *Nostalgia* (1983) is a good example); Sokurov, on the contrary – in line with his repeated comments about the dignity of the cinematic image as related to the tradition of painting, which refuses the illusions of relief and three-dimensionality – *flattens* the image, committed to this ideal of planarity that also contributes to an impression of abolished time, even in a film such as *Russian Ark*, where Sokurov's trademark anamorphoses are replaced by a play of zooms and tracking shot enhanced by an invisible, digital doctoring of the image. This is done in accordance with one and the other's fundamental worldviews, and we see better now that they are as intimately connected – and as opposed – as yin and yang, but also as Icarus and Dedalus. As if these lives were mythical tales written in the stars and meant to be repeated in our modern times.

What of the question, then, so important in Russian culture, of Destiny and Faith? For Tarkovsky, the latter is correlated with the former: the quasi miraculous discovery of the exact alloy by the young bell-founder in *Andrey Rublev*, the course of the great icon painter's life, his unlikely survivals and escapes, and his transcendence through art, the agitation of the mother at the fear of having misspelled Joseph Stalin's name in one of *The Mirror's* most mundane, yet also riveting episodes, the miraculous power of the young girl in the closing shot of *Stalker*, or the determination of the old man to save the world, and his son's resilience at watering a dead tree until it bears fruit again in *The Sacrifice* (1986), all have to do with this combination, this necessary fusing of destiny and faith. We find no such thing in Sokurov, for whom world and thought only coincide by chance, and whose characters are always far away from history, always divorced from any significant event, prisoners of their own de-classified 'zone'. Even the historical figures proper, Hitler, Lenin, Stalin or Hirohito, seem detached and completely at odds with any potential to seize history.²⁶ In line with Kierkegaard, Sokurov conceives of fate and chance as an irrational encounter of two deterministic series adhering to a rigorous necessity. And necessity, as Kierkegaard pointed out, is the only thing that cannot return or disappear, because necessity *is*. So the Sokurovian worldview is of a vast network of necessary chains, wherein the role of man is reduced to very little indeed. It is this commitment to chance and destiny that would trigger the key encounters that led to several of his projects, such as his random meetings with non-professional actresses Cécile Zervoudacki and Gudrun Geyer, whom he would cast as the leads of his films *Save and Protect* and *Mother and Son*. In simple words, we are confronted here with a belief in a peculiar form of destiny, parading under the guise of chance, in contrast with the grand design of Tarkovsky. We can also sense here Sokurov's own feeling of anomie and solitude, his unique and lonely ethos, that of a man moving through a time he feels divorced from, which may account for his intense yearning for the past and his often-times disparaging comments about the present mentioned above.

Can we historicise these fundamental differences between the two artists? We not only can, but we also must. Moving from cinematic, individual time, let us embrace the weight and importance of history not only for but also on the two men, who lived across both sides of a fundamental chronological divide, and how it may shed light on their philosophies from a collective perspective. Tarkovsky was born in the midst of Stalinist terror and repression, and spent several years of his childhood during World War II. This dark episode was followed by the Cold War, and, following Stalin's death in 1953, the frustrated raptures of the Thaw period and its many unfulfilled promises, which nonetheless allowed for Tarkovsky's unique cinematic voice to emerge with *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), right as the tensions between East and West re-emerged against the backdrop of the Cuban crises and the Vietnam War. This, I believe, on equal weight with the divorce of the parents and the absent yet overbearing figure of the poet father, explains the director's obsession with time as an entity that can be sculpted – the product, no doubt, of a period of utopia and terror, a heightened historical moment, a world filled with the necessity of faith as a response to its many uncertainties, accounting for Tarkovsky's blend of humanism with megalomaniac, Icaric and radical demiurgic élan:

in Tarkovsky the desire to replay the past has as much to do with the nostalgic yearning for a space where everything could be lived again, as it does with the strictures of totalitarianisms and the brutal impositions of a reshaping of society it entails.

In Sokurov, on the other hand, the fact that there is nothing to replay, for there is nowhere one comes from, given that the past is inaccessible, and the horror of War and Stalinism, are only experienced consciously in the shape of ripple effects of this reign of terror, still heavily imprinted on Russia's psyche, and, in many cases, in its flesh. The director then grew up during the Stagnation years, which his debut potently criticised. After the brief promises of *perestroika* were thwarted by the chaos of liberal democracy in Russia, the director came of age in an amorphous time, a spiritual vacuum where the only ones seemingly able to seize history were shrewd entrepreneurs and businessmen turned into Oligarchs, where freedom of religion (and the dominion of a corrupt Orthodox church) deprived faith from its nobility and sense of adversity, and where today's power parades in the shape of a sour mix of personality cult and authoritarian brutality – bad history replaying itself all over again. In this world where the future is a foregone conclusion and everyone seems to have forgotten the lessons from the past, melancholia has replaced uncertainty – a hazy, misty realm (hence the many striking formal features of the director's subsequent films) where all the artist can do is preclude the present, look at the past in longing, and prepare himself (and the others) for death. Such is the ungrateful, if dignified task Alexander Sokurov assigned for himself, his vocation and sacrifice.

And yet, while Andrey Tarkovsky faced the hardships of exile, separated from his son, and died far away from the Motherland he so wished to see again, his luminous, sublime films universally praised and inspiring generations of filmmakers; Sokurov aptly navigated the censorship of the Stagnation Era, thrived during *perestroika*, was close to Boris Yeltsin, and had his most expensive films, *Russian Ark* and *Faust*, produced with government funds through the intercession of Vladimir Putin, even as the world of art became by and large co-opted by the culture industry, his island of high, serious cinema much admired, but seldom emulated. As I mentioned in this book's introduction, paradoxes are often coterminous to great art, and their makers' no less fascinating lives. In this, to be sure, one can witness a chiasmic continuity and kinship between the life and works of Andrey Arsenevich Tarkovsky and Alexander Nikolaevich Sokurov, almost as two figures reflected in a mirror in a darkened room, looking at each other in an uncanny moment of (mis)recognition, across space and time.

Notes

- 1 As Alexandra Tuchinskaya points out, one billion years seems to be the duration separating the stagnation era from the changes desired by the people. The film obliquely comments upon this: while it is clearly set in the summer of 1987 (see Graffy 2011: 79–80), the voice of Brezhnev, as though still alive, can still be heard on a radio station, addressing the Soviet youth.
- 2 Boris Strugatsky considered the film to be a successful adaptation of his story: it faithfully conveyed the idea of transfer, of a world that is strange and a little

- scary, in which man must work, live, and create, regardless of circumstances, not worrying about anything. This, as Strugatsky put it ambiguously, 'is not a simple thing' (see the notes to the film in the bonus material to the Lenfilm Russian DVD release of the film).
- 3 Glukhov, to use Julian Graffy's description, stands for the 'supine conformism of Soviet intelligentsia' (2011: 86–7).
 - 4 More broadly, *Days of the Eclipse* possesses a dimension of the detective story in its unresolved murder and suicide mystery plotline.
 - 5 However, all is relative: to the little boy, Malyanov is already old, as the wrinkles around his eyes indicate.
 - 6 The madman is often referred to as 'blessed', '*blazhenny*', in Slavic cultures.
 - 7 'You can live everywhere, and even the more so here'; 'What does it matter where I live? They sent me here, so I came.'
 - 8 It is Maxim Gorky's birthplace, of course, but also the town where Sokurov went to college and learned his trade as documentarian at the local TV station.
 - 9 Tuchinskaya, in the notes on the film's Russian DVD edition. Translation mine.
 - 10 As Mikhail Trofimenkov notes (1994: 129), a motif of mutation runs through the film, from the deformities of the mental inmates to the anecdote told to Malyanov by a mother whose child swallows hairpins with no harmful consequence – the hairpins never showing on x-rays.
 - 11 This long-lasting obsession would not be fully realised until much later, ultimately through CGI, in Sokurov's *Faust*, which quotes the Altdorfer painting quite literally, including the celestial frame floating in the skies.
 - 12 In this sense, *Days of the Eclipse* can be related to Sokurov's documentary cycles of elegies, recreating that poetic genre's investment with the overlapping of past temporalities in the contemplation of the impermanence of things, or death.
 - 13 It is now the town of Turkmen-Bashi in the independent republic of Turkmenistan. The place has a long and complex history of colonialism, which Julian Graffy elaborates upon in his excellent and well researched piece in *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov* (2011).
 - 14 As Alexandra Tuchinskaya points out, the actors never play themselves, but are not professionals, either. However, Umarov introduced his own personal story, that of a Crimean Tatar adopted by Volgan Germans, into the fabric of the film.
 - 15 Jameson (1992: 101–03) analyses at length the long investigation of Snegovoy's house following his suicide, showing how in the film the crime lies not in death but beyond, in idle bureaucracy and madness – portrayed in the way the policemen refuse to look at each other, etc.
 - 16 In a film as cryptic as *Days of the Eclipse*, the equivalent of a modernist poem, many valid readings or analyses emerge. Jameson rules out the Freudian or sexual dimension of the strange, purulent hairy patch on Vechevsky's wall. Yet one could see, there, the possible resurgence, in a violent outburst, of a monstrous and mysteriously ominous form of femininity.
 - 17 Larry Kramer, for instance, deconstructs the book *The Overflowing of Friendship* by Richard Godbeer along these lines. In his typical acerbic tone, Kramer criticises

Godbeer's account of eighteenth century Colonial times: 'Godbeer is hell-bent on convincing us that two men in Colonial America could have exceedingly obsessive and passionate relationships (he called them, variously, "sentimental", "loving", "romantic") ... [men would] spend many a night in bed together talking their hearts out, without the issue of sex arising in any way' ("Queer Theory's Heist of Our History", *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, 16, 5, (2009)).

- 18 As indicated in the doomed relationship of Nikita and Lyuba in *Lonely Voice of Man*; the many infidelities of Emma in *Save and Protect*; Eva Braun and Hitler's dark embrace in *Moloch* covered by documentary footage of a pilot ready to unleash bombs, his smile ambiguous, his eye in the visor both voyeuristic and filled with an expression of demented fright; in *Faust*, the night spent together by the protagonist and Margarete as the product of a pact with the devil, illustrated in terms of plunge and seemingly bearing only the seal of doom for those involved: Margarete will probably be accused of her mother's death, poisoned by Mauricius, who takes Faust to the other world, preventing him from helping his beloved.
- 19 The fact that the middle-aged scientists of the novel are presented as young men in the film speaks to this.
- 20 In retrospect, the scenes that seem to hold significance with regard to Sokurov's own biography would include the silent scene of soldiers running, framed at the level of the ground so as to only reveal their legs and boots. Similar imagery would reoccur in *Father and Son*, and one can already get a sense for how there must have been, in young Sokurov's proximity with the military, an utter fascination with discipline, the uniform, military operations, and their movements and athleticism.
- 21 A tone of regret and suffering pervades the film, reminiscences are conveyed through a mirror in a key scene, and a shot of a snowy landscape and village evokes Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow*, such a key work in Tarkovsky's oeuvre, as quoted indirectly in *The Mirror* and directly in *Solaris*.
- 22 A reference to the balloon falling down in *Andrey Rublev*. A later scene of Malyanov burning documents a quote of Kelvin in the exact same pose in *Solaris*. Indeed, we should note that both directors have adapted a work of Soviet sci-fi by the Strugatsky Brothers, yielding very idiosyncratic versions of their universe.
- 23 'Я уже во сне знаю что это мне только снится и непосильно радость омрачается ожиданием пробуждения. Иногда что то случается и мне перестает сниться и дом и сосны вокруг дома моего детства. Тогда я начинаю тосковать. Я жду и не могу дожидаться этого сна в котором я опять увижу себя ребенком, и снова почувствую себя счастливым. От того что еще все впереди, еще все возможно.'
- 24 This is another eminent convergence with Platonov's philosophy.
- 25 The finale of *The Mirror*, where Bach's music and the child's calling are combined and echo one another against shots of nature so sublime they overwhelm any rational thought, in a positive sublime epiphany which marks the apex of this tendency, and perhaps the first zenith of Tarkovsky's cinematic enterprise: the complete enshrinement of the perfect moment which can never be relived again.

- 26 We will return to this notion in later chapters, using the concept of Kairos, which is the moment when one seizes one's destiny that in turn defines the role one comes to play in one's own historical moment.

CHAPTER FOUR

Save and Protect: Of Angels and Flies

She looked me straight in the eyes; and for a moment I had the feeling that those two blue discs were immense, were overwhelming, were like a wall of blue that shut me off from the rest of the world. I know it sounds absurd; but that is what it did feel like.

‘Don’t you see,’ she said, with a horrible bitterness, with a really horrible lamentation in her voice, ‘Don’t you see that that’s the cause of the whole miserable affair; of the whole sorrow of the world? And of the eternal damnation of you and me and them...’

– Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier*

Days of the Eclipse extended the motifs of madness, alienation and apocalypse already at work in *Mournful Insensitivity*. Sokurov’s following feature film, *Save and Protect* – an epic and epically strange adaptation of Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, located in a deliberately vague, timeless southwestern Soviet landscape – focused on the work and temporality of death and its intertwined relationship with human destiny and everyday actions. But while *Days of the Eclipse* boasted a clear dialectics of light versus dark, youth versus old age, spirit versus matter, and life versus death, *Save and Protect* seems to posit its fundamental paradoxes at an entirely different level altogether. Within its central character, the film embodies the tensions between corporeality and spirituality, producing a very different final affect than the director’s three previous features.

While Malyanov was unquestionably the protagonist of *Days of the Eclipse*, the film’s plot was shattered into a variety of episodes that were only vaguely related to one another, and which each featured a series of idiosyncratic and recognisable characters (Vecherovsky, Snegovoy, Gubar, etc.). *Save and Protect* also features a consider-



Save and Protect:
Cécile Zervoudacki,
a most atypical type for a
most atypical adaptation
of *Madame Bovary*

able number of secondary characters, all taken, although in warped fashion, from the Flaubert novel. These are unquestionably ciphers, a dimension emphasised by their blank inscrutable stares. In contrast, the only character, the only *personality*, who really matters in the film is the adulterous woman, never referred to as Emma, but whom we shall call thus for simplicity's sake, as she will remain central to this chapter's thesis.¹

It is at the 1987 Locarno Film Festival, where his *Lonely Voice of Man* would go on to receive the Bronze Leopard, that Sokurov met by chance the French ethno-linguist of Italian and Greek descent, Cécile Zervoudacki. On the spot, he decided that she would be the one to incarnate his tragic anti-heroine. On repeated occasions, Sokurov has recounted the anecdote of how the two had met, stressing that the film would never have been made without this chance (or destined) encounter. The choice might have seemed strange, but Zervoudacki, a middle-aged woman with striking clear blue eyes, is a quintessentially Sokurovian 'actress' – non-professional and with a physicality so unique it verges on the allegorical.

All at once young and old, ugly and oddly beautiful, histrionic and full of restraint, she creates a most intriguing character for the film, accomplishing the feat of being at once the victim and perpetrator of her own destiny. Propelled by her atypical acting style and on-screen bilingualism (French and Russian), Zervoudacki is inside and outside the film: Zervoudacki the woman in a Sokurov film, and Zervoudacki as Emma inside the narrative, more and more blinded as desire and passion get in the way of her better judgment; she is both Antique chorus fully aware of her destiny, and clueless character moving inexorably toward her doom. This aesthetic of foreboding, in fact, is literally embodied by the actress: Sokurov insisted that she lose thirty pounds to appear as emaciated as possible for the part.

In *Days of the Eclipse*, Sokurov dedicated a substantial amount of 'dead' screen time to the protracted scene in which policemen and forensics carry the body of Snegovoy out of his apartment. But this scene, however important for future developments of Sokurov's cinema, still remains but one of the poetic elements, one of the 'episodes' of the multi-layered film, and a means finally to provide contrast for the beautiful

bodies of Malyanov and the mysterious and timeless star-child. For *Save and Protect*, by comparison, Sokurov decided to focus entirely on the finality of death and decay, with the entirety of the film, caught under the yoke of an inescapable, unrelenting and unforgiving destiny, progressing inexorably towards its long final funeral scene.

While Sokurov's chance encounter with Zervoudacki provided the immediate impetus for the film's production, its genesis goes back, initially, to Sokurov's youth and the town of Krasnovodsk (where again *Days of the Eclipse* was shot). It is there that the *Madame Bovary* project initially formed in Sokurov's mind, as he later recounted: while listening to the radio one evening, he was captivated by an interpretation of the novel by the great actress Alissa Koonen (in a *mise-en-scène* by Alexander Tairov). To Sokurov, the words themselves mattered less than the intonation of the voice, full of gravitas and expressing the dark fate of the provincial French *petite bourgeoisie* transformed into an epigone of a Greek tragic character. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Sokurov stripped most of Flaubert's ironic humour and beautiful language and retained only the bodily grotesque (Hippolyte's ill-fated club-foot, Emma's agony recounted in quasi-naturalistic detail) and the tragic existential dimension of the great novel. If many episodes are still present in the script concocted with Yuri Arabov, they are hardly of any dramatic use. Much more do they serve as background of recognisable '*fabula*' elements, with the '*syuzhet*' of the film instead concerned with depicting the immutable movement of mankind towards death, the shared destiny of all humanity.²

The temporality of the '*syuzhet*' is jumbled in several key instances: ellipses throw us off with abrupt jumps from summer to winter followed by seemingly illogical cuts from summer to winter again, as in the church scene. The film's lack of defined temporality, not to mention its universal scope, are underscored likewise by the general nineteenth century setting that is suddenly disrupted by the appearance of a car and a twentieth century factory, and by the costumes of characters taken from a variety of periods from the last two centuries. While this clear jab at verisimilitude might emphasise the film's and its story's universality, it also goes a long way to accounting for the *bizarrierie* of Sokurov's cinema.

Throughout *Save and Protect*, an impression is given of Emma's destiny being sealed from the outset, that her story and fate never move in a direction motivated by conflicts and resolutions. Rather, the narrative drifts like a piece of wood on murky waters, caught in a circle – consigned to the inevitability of fate. This idea and image of circularity is very dear to Sokurov, who would use it time and time again, including in the title and fabric of his subsequent and final Soviet feature film, *The Second Circle* (1990). In *Save and Protect*, the notion of spatial and thematic circularity is expressed visually with most shots extending for a substantial duration, even as they lack a clear sense of direction.³ The hand-held aesthetics accordingly emphasise its floating, drifting aspect.⁴ The film accordingly resorts to reaction shots only rarely, and when it does, it often disrupts cinematic space, as in the scene in which the film cuts from the lovers to the scarred face of the implacable merchant Lheureux, there to collect his dues.

As the film is shot in a 4/3 aspect ratio, Emma, who is so central to the vast majority of the shots, is imprisoned within a spatio-temporal cage, doomed to the end. This trope of encaging is represented visually in several moments of the film, as

when the down from a comforter (torn open by Emma) covers her birdcage, or when the shot reveals her behind the bars of the merchant's home, begging him to accept silverware in exchange for her debt.

We are thus reminded of Diane Arnaud's theses on Sokurov's cinema as a cinema of enclosure (*'figures d'enfermement'*), which is nowhere more evident than in the director's fourth fiction feature. In one key early sequence, Emma is at first inside the space of a house and then, through a feat of *mise-en-scène*, finds herself outside and looking up at the skies without having moved. (All the while invoking the Lord's misericord, a famous phrase from the Russian Orthodox liturgy, *Спаси и сохрани*, *Spasi i Sokhrani*, which gives the film its title.) Emma however remains the prisoner of the frame, even under the immense blue skies or when set against the open expanses of a millennia-old mountain. This scene announces the film's end: it rhymes with Emma's final night, when she again will be covered in the down from a ripped pillow, facing upward, ready to be reunited with the great beyond.

The film never veers from this project of entrapment within the circles of fate. Emma tries desperately to inject some hope into her existence or to redeem herself, but all attempts fail miserably, something that is announced not only visually, but also in the soundtrack: the sinister buzzing of flies, over an often anti-naturalistic soundscape, reminds one constantly of death and announces the rotting and decayed body of the cadaver; in other parts, a train whistle underlines the impossibility of the escape to a better, yet out-of-reach 'elsewhere'.⁵

The flies buzzing on the soundtrack are a perfectly appropriate, if sickening device. They constantly remind one of the contrast between two worlds – that of the animal and that of the human, or of the represented visual space and the off-screen universes – and they serve both as reinforcement and counter-point to the action, most conspicuously in the 'love' scenes. Already divested from any erotic charge on the visual plane (from the grotesque coitus of Charles to the spasms of the effete Léon), the lovemaking in the film is rendered further strange and detached by the absence of direct sound where the soundtrack superimposes the insects' buzzing. When the film employs this



Save and Protect:
bodies lying under the
sun after making love,
like faceless cadavers

strategy for the scene in the meadow, where Emma and Rodolphe lay motionless, their faces out of sight, the effect is that the couple resembles nothing so much as corpses lying in the sun.

Likewise, the complex and at times ambiguous symbolism of colours should also be pointed out: the red of the hotel room where Emma has her carnal rendezvous with Léon will turn to a rotten crimson when he refuses to help her financially. Later on, the red of passion is further adulterated by the chromatic pattern in the visit to the doctor and Rodolphe's factory scenes, where the red acquires a symbolic sheen of betrayal and hell. In general, bright colours seem to carry notions of seduction and deception, as further illustrated in the dresses Emma buys from Lheureux, the malicious merchant. When she visits him early in the film, he dons a bright orange kimono, while she, still pure, as it were, appears all in white.

Yet in spite of the cruel and implacable treatment to which Sokurov subjects his heroine, there seems to be, through the notion of separation of body and soul, some redemption in the afterlife. From the very beginning, the film overtly (but in anything but a Marxist critique) denounces the vain accumulation of material objects of its protagonist, while making clear that it is never straightforward vanity that leads Emma to her doom: she seems always conflicted about acquiring new items from Lheureux, yet cannot help doing so, as though in the grips of compulsion – much as her sexual drive can be interpreted in terms of nymphomania, however justified her infidelity seems in view of her pathetic husband. Two Emmas emerge metaphorically, therefore: one beautiful, noble, solar-like, a victim of base male desires and of her own desire for Love; and the other petty, capricious, a perpetrator of her own doom, who stares at the existential abyss and almost willingly drags herself to hell. At all stages she is larger than life, larger than the frame, larger than the space of the film.

If the crime and punishment derived from the quasi-Promethean desire of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* to introduce the aesthetic into the dull bourgeois world, Sokurov's Emma's crime is her larger-than-life dimension and her yearning to overcome her fate. The two entities – body and soul – are in constant conflict, reflecting, no doubt, the inner conflict that has defined and nagged Sokurov as an artist and human being, expressed not so much in clear narrative terms as in Zervoudacki's acting: her play with objects and wiggling hands, and her constant clear blue eyes penetrating the image, as though to confirm what her soul knows already – that her destiny is sealed, one way or another, an impression that seems to burst forth through the frame and come right at us. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the gorgeous shot of Emma reclining on a rock, facing the skies and smoking a cigarette, evoking, in a poetic rhyme, the longing for the train, heard hooting in the distance. Her yearning to live is expressed verbally as it is immediately contradicted in the fleeting, scattered smoke, exhaled and promptly blown in the direction of the camera. Emma's soul seems to jump out at us, her efforts to save herself equally flimsy and evanescent.

At some point during the film, in Emma's feeble attempts to pay her debts to Lheureux, it seems as though a possibility of exchange value – matter for spirit, as it were – is implemented; but this wager is an evil one, and Emma would rather destroy her body by swallowing arsenic than yield to the offers of the Bacchus-like city doctor (in a scene

evocative of Rubens). Finally, Emma is humiliated, by the refusal from her former lover, and by men's betrayals in general. For Sokurov, Emma's only salvation is an honourable, if excruciating, death. In its throes, the dying heroine asks to see her daughter, whom she seems to want to hold onto all the way into death, while her female servant violently pulls the child out of her grip. In the next shot, Emma (or rather, a sinister puppet looking like her) lies inert in bed, her dead eye shimmering with a sinister red glow.

The final segment of the film, a fourteen-minute funeral scene concluding with a Latin Mass and the cheerful laughter of children playing, represents the closing statement and logical conclusion of a long film whose end is already present in its very first scene. The story has drifted full circle as it were, the quasi-geological dimension of its final images weighted with all the might of a triple casket, made of oak, mahogany, and metal, as though one coffin would not suffice to bury Emma and her sufferings. The event acquires a somewhat mythical dimension, with its funerary procession evoking, in some ways, those seen in Eisenstein – one thinks of Vakulinchuk's wake in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), but also the lines of the faithful in the closing scene of *Ivan the Terrible* (1944). The casket itself is magnified, rendered huge, by the use of a wide-angle lens. Yet the excruciatingly long funeral scene is suddenly disrupted by a final, symbolic image of Emma, inside a non-descript space, a crypt or church cell filled with a diffuse, soothing light. Emma now peacefully looks into the camera, while her puppet lies gently next to her face. The two Emmas are finally represented literally, the separation of body (the decaying, sickly looking puppet) and soul (an appeased Emma softly praying) finally completed, and the reconciliation of the main character with her destiny thereby achieved.

Save and Protect is not without its arrestingly beautiful moments: the film clearly initiates a new step in the visual aesthetics of Sokurov, with some brilliant concepts of *mise-en-scène* and pictorial compositions. The influence of great painters informs many frames: Rubens, but also and more importantly the French school: Corot, Delacroix, and Doré. The film also announces the forthcoming Sokurovian visual distortions, here not yet through filters so much as through the occasional use of extreme wide-angle lenses. But overall, the experience of watching *Save and Protect* is a profoundly difficult one, now as it was at the time of its release. Consequently, the admiration of some critics for the film (as opposed to the audience's reactions, which were predominantly dismissive), hailing here one of the great masters of a by-then defunct (or dormant) cinematic modernism, was all but ill-placed and inappropriate. *Save and Protect* has never been intended as an enjoyable cinematic experiment, except perhaps in the frame of masochistic self-infliction. It is a great work of art, no doubt, but it is, of all of Sokurov's films, the most unpleasant. Yet the experience is worth the suffering, rife with insight into human experience, but also, and more importantly perhaps, indicative of a strong and compelling paradox. As noted also by Alexey Gusev, speaking of the 'tanathographic cinematic aesthetic' of Sokurov (2006: 119–25): it is the gaze of the camera that kills Emma, and the duration of it all is justified by this very process, as death often takes time. And so, as the cinematic screen is a window onto the world viewed (and, as it were, killed) by cinematic time and the gaze of the camera, it is also a mirror in which we witness and are reflected in the process of death and dying

itself. This process is constantly hinted at by the absence of reaction shots in the film, our gazes caught in a deadlock with Emma's, nowhere more compellingly than in the film's most vibrant and beautiful scene, set in a theatre. Emma is still inescapably the object of our gaze, but this time hers is set firmly on the opera scene from the angle of a spectator, emphasising the double nature of active and passive looks in this film.⁶

The very process of watching, for almost three unending hours, the tragic fate of Emma makes not only her the victim and the perpetrator, but also the spectator, the assassin and the assassinated. In this dialectic interplay of dying and killing, of vicarious and direct suffering, we can probably do little else than admire Sokurov's unflinching dedication to exposing the work of death and the necessity, in all human society, for the penetrating revelations and distractions offered by aesthetic, and furthermore artistic productions.

One can venture here an inverted analogy. It took Gustave Flaubert ten years to write *Madame Bovary*. The excruciating process was documented, almost day-by-day, by the writer in his correspondence with Louise Collet. If he at times vehemently argued that there was nothing of him (Flaubert the man) in this novel, his legendary quip '*Emma, c'est moi*' still endures. Perhaps the middle ground, found in a letter written shortly after the novel's serial publication in *La Revue de Paris*, in March 1857, best synthesises both positions:

There is nothing real in *Madame Bovary*. It is an entirely made up story; I put nothing there of my own feelings, nor of my existence. The illusion (if there is one) comes on the contrary from the impersonality of the work. It is one of my principles, you should not write yourself. The artist must be in his oeuvre as God in the creation, invisible and almighty; that he be felt everywhere, but that he not be seen.⁷

We have observed how Sokurov has subtly combined the impersonal and demiurgic drives while allowing a place for chance and destiny in his film. Thus this cinematic Emma is at once entirely 'him' and completely outside himself, an external and indispensable element to the fabric of the whole. Also, conscious of the many years it took Flaubert to produce a masterpiece of realist literature, Sokurov might have elected to deconstruct the enjoyable finished product, and yield instead a raw work of art in progress, demanding the viewer's participation and suffering to complete it. In evacuating the many pleasures of reading the Flaubert novel and retaining only the pain of time passing and leading to death, Sokurov illustrates again a deeply original and powerful way of translating literary works of art to the screen, while also delivering yet another incarnation of his technique of narrative *sublating*, cancelling and retaining the plot and putting it at the service and mercy of the work of death.

All of Sokurov's films from the subsequent decade would reflect on this dimension of death and decay, frozen more and more in the pictorial analogy (culminating in 1997's *Mother and Son*), and commenting more or less indirectly on the fall of the Soviet empire as much as on human fate. Following the hopeless circularity of *Save and Protect*, his next (and final Soviet) feature, *The Second Circle*, would serve as one of the

most undeniably compelling representations of death as a physical phenomenon in the history of the cinematic medium.

Notes

- 1 This is how she is referred to by Sokurov himself in his notes to the film.
- 2 The film's vectorisation of human destiny appears, for example, in the over-determinate manner by which Emma comes to collect the poison that she will later ingest to commit suicide; here, the filmmakers place a skeleton behind her in a quasi-expressionistic moment of dark irony.
- 3 Generally over the one minute mark, often much more, with some jump cuts and cross-dissolves implying that several shots were even longer, and shortened a bit in the editing room.
- 4 The lighting of the film, it bears noting, and the way in which the film stock was processed, gives *Save and Protect* a timeless, aged look, with some shots evoking the typical soft illumination of the cinema of the 1970s. To this point, some scenes evoke films by Ken Russell, and others, those of Peter Weir, especially to the extent that the rocky, semi-arid landscape, costumes, and lighting resemble nothing so much as the Australian bush of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), shot nearly fifteen years prior to Sokurov's fourth fiction feature.
- 5 Be it Paris or Moscow, where Emma yearns to go, much like the real life Zervoudacki yearned to leave her home in Grenoble and move to Paris, with her husband and children.
- 6 With music by Yuri Khanin, the composer of the memorable score of *Days of the Eclipse*, here reprising lines from a famous poem by Afanasy Fet, 'когда расстались мы с тобой, я был растерзан'; 'When we parted ways, I was torn up inside.'
- 7 'Madame Bovary n'a rien de vrai. C'est une histoire totalement inventée ; je n'y ai rien ni de mes sentiments, ni de mon existence. L'illusion (s'il y en a une) vient au contraire de l'impersonnalité de l'oeuvre. C'est un de mes principes, qu'il ne faut pas s'écrire. L'artiste doit être dans son oeuvre comme Dieu dans la création, invisible et tout puissant; qu'on le sente partout, mais qu'on ne le voie pas.' Letter to Ms. Leroyer de Chantepie, 18 March 1857.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Second Circle: Winter, Light, and the Intimate Sublime

On the cusp between the Soviet and post-Soviet moments, Alexander Sokurov left behind the warm climates of his two previous features and shot *The Second Circle* in a frigid, wintry environment. The film's plot is extremely simple: on a cold, snowy winter day, Malyanov (although a different Malyanov from the muscular doctor of *Days of the Eclipse*, and played here by another non-professional, Pyotr Alexandrov) comes to visit his sick father, only to find that he has arrived too late. Feebly, the hapless son witnesses rather than truly tends to his departed father's funerary rites: robbed on a bus, the stupor-stricken young man cannot even cover the minimal fees for the funeral; Malyanov nonetheless insists throughout that the body should not be incinerated, but that instead it should be buried, in keeping with old tradition as opposed to the new 'hygienic' rules. Eventually, it is the aggravated undertaker tending to the funerary arrangements who will pay for the funeral. Afterwards, Malyanov burns his father's purportedly infected clothes and sheets in a dumpster.

With its significant symbolism of hibernation and hell, *The Second Circle* inescapably is, despite its realist setting, a highly allegorical affair. In being released at such a crucial moment in the history of Russia, it speaks eminently to the 'death' of the regime, leaving the next generation all but unprepared for an uncertain future, at the mercy of the whims or good will of those with more acumen or resourcefulness. Historicising the film further, *The Second Circle* also embodies, in its central fixation, the expression of a repressed, taboo subject hitherto in the Soviet Union: the millions of dead left unaccounted for, whose memory had been buried as surely as their corpses were swallowed by common graves during the height of communist and Stalinist terror. But there is more to *The Second Circle*, far more, even, than its morbid and frozen representations.

Save and Protect was dedicated to Mikhail Iampolski, and surely his influence and contribution to Sokurov's universe cannot be underestimated. *The Second Circle* prompted one of the best pieces of criticism on Sokurov by the scholar, who, like this writer, holds the film to be Sokurov's finest. 'Death in the Cinema,' ('Смерть в кино'; 'Smert' v kino' (first published in 1991)) an erudite exploration of the trope of death, argues that in spite of its countless featured accidents, murders, sudden deaths and the like, cinema never actually focuses on death *per se* – the temporal regime of the cadaver – evacuating the lifeless body as soon as it has given up the ghost. In most films, Iampolski argues, death happens not out of necessity, but as an accident, thus comforting the viewer in a fantasy of immortality, one's own death being mediated and evacuated by the many repeated instances procured on the screen, and exorcised at once in a cathartic gesture of acknowledgment and denial, a dramatic pathetic fallacy turned against oneself. In Sokurov, however, cinema is not about looking away from death while watching so many people die – it is about learning of death and how to die. Proceeding by a semiotic and structuralist approach, including a reflection on the simulacrum ('making-up' the dead and giving him the look of the living, creating a confusion between the living and the dead), Iampolski reminds us also of the physical experience of death: particularly the regime of tactility imposed by the corpse. The piece ends by stressing how Sokurov's film introduces, in cinema, the missing link of death in its metaphysical dimension.

However remarkable and indispensable the discussion of death and the corpse in *The Second Circle* is, it seems as though Iampolski's response to the film remains incomplete – at least in accounting for its power and appeal – precisely because the critic devotes most of his attention to the dead body and the work of mourning. These are fundamental to the story, but in many ways *The Second Circle*, in spite of its lugubrious, death-ridden dimension, might be paradoxically a more uplifting, less depressing effort than its predecessor – and it certainly elicits some of the most memorably sublime moments in Sokurov's oeuvre. In *Save and Protect*, death strikes at the end, but is always present. In *The Second Circle*, it has struck at the beginning, leaving room for some sort of hope via oddly moving human interactions. Early in the film, when the character finds his dead father, a diffuse, quasi-angelic light of unknown origin bathes the upper side of the screen. This element of light is ambiguous throughout the film, announcing the dualism between elevation and humiliation, warmth and cold, the spiritual and the corporeal/physical, the living and the dead.

Save and Protect, while filled with episodes, adventures, actions, characters, and camera movements, ultimately feels incredibly aimless, almost static, as illustrated in my metaphor of a piece of wood drifting in a puddle, agitated by the flow of water but never breaking free. In spite of being much more static visually, *The Second Circle* presents a perfection of tempo: each take, however long, feels as though it has been measured in regard to the whole and to be of exactly the right length.¹ The general effect of the film is to be almost riveting, in spite of the lack of action on screen. This can be attributed to the expert editing, the austere beauty of the cinematography, and

the remarkable work on the soundtrack, no doubt, but also to the tension within the fabric of the film between light and dark, cold and warmth, life and death, lack of sensation (the corpse) and a 'mournful sensitivity'. Indeed, and as Lampolski touched upon in his article, this film not only solicits the usual senses of vision and hearing; it has a clear tactile, haptic dimension, also appealing to the sense of smell (the small enclosed space of the apartment filled with the stench of the decaying body), and taste (the bitterness of cigarettes). The living, however feeble, are filled with a sentience which leads to passivity and melancholy, or a reluctant compassion that compels the female undertaker to help Malyanov and pay for the expenses of the funeral. This gesture is hardly nurturing or kind, but it is one of basic human decency, of moral obligation, and the philosopher whose theses seem to serve the purpose best here, even more so than Kant, is Emmanuel Lévinas: '*le visage de l'autre m'oblige*' ('the other's face compels me'). The face of the dead father, in which the son recognises himself, obliges the latter to perform the funerary ritual. The face of the son, hurt, helpless, in turn obliges the female undertaker to begrudgingly help him. This may explain the early scene in which the face of the doctor (who has come to pronounce the father dead) is not revealed; or why Malyanov's face is highlighted before he is drowned in the crowded bus scene and robbed by an abstract, anonymous mass, and not by individuals. Touch and the haptic are important here, and will be returned to, but faces are central to the film, from the parchment-like countenance of the old employee at the polyclinic to the apparition of the young boy who gently reassures Malyanov, in the same shot, that 'everything will be alright'.²

The young boy's quasi-miraculous intrusion into this world of gloom and decay is one of the few, discreet but undeniable elements infusing the film with a powerful, resilient, life-affirming dimension, in spite of everything and against the odds – the promise of light at the end of the tunnel, of spring to come after the long and cold winter. One could however elect to discard this optimistic reading, against its crushing profusion of depressing material, and indeed confront the film as a great enterprise centred on unmasking the cadaver in Soviet life and history. For John MacKay,³ the film's unrelenting focus on the corpse of the father and the emphasis on death and the post-mortem ritual redeems the absolute silence that had been imposed for decades in the Soviet Union surrounding the millions of deaths incurred during the revolution, civil war, and World War II, along with the many enterprises of mass extermination (for instance, the Stalin purges, the building of the Belomor canal, or the Gulag). The negated memory and suffering of these people, as it were, re-emerged after a long period of repression, gushing forth like refuse from a clogged septic well. One could further argue that the lethargy of the son stands as the dimension of paralysis when confronted with such a gigantic, overwhelming – indeed, sublime – task to undertake in *undertaking* these millions of unaccounted cadavers, staggering numbers instead of properly buried individuals, left floating in the limbo of history.

This analysis is undeniably accurate, in line with the squalid state of the father's apartment, seemingly *impregnated* with death and decay at every corner. And yet it does not account for the film's vibrant affect, or for its paradoxical playfulness. In spite of its grim premise, it seems as though Sokurov and his crew made a point of pushing

the limits of the power of their artistic vision.⁴ *The Second Circle* might be strongly unified in terms of its minimalistic plot, but each of its sequences is nevertheless a new wonder, a re-invention of image and sound and their interplay. The result leaves one shaken, elated, perhaps even transcended. But are the audio-visual elements (or in other terms, the form) of the film alone accountable for such an effect on the viewer?

Although set in the entirely de-sacralised frame of the late Soviet Union, the film obviously carries a religious impetus, in the power to transcend, collectively if not individually, the self confronted with a crucial moment in human existence – here, death and the sheer anthropological necessity to carry out a funerary ‘ritual’. Reasons to envision the film’s ending as positive are scarce, but it does feature a promise of resurrection, however dim. One manifest indicator could be read in the film’s sparse but striking use of colour, among a predominantly monochrome treatment.⁵ The overwhelming pink hues of sunset early in the film may hint at an indifferent nature eliciting a tragic emotion. But the resurgence of bright colours at the end, when Malyanov has accomplished his mission of burning everything *but* his father, could carry a message of hope. As Leonid Heller has suggested in his discussion of Nikolay Fyodorov’s philosophy and its influence on both Platonov and Sokurov (2009: 61), the unconditional love of one’s parents, and the resilient, patient wait, even in death, to be reunited with them, negates death. By loving our parents, we overcome and cancel their passing, in a transmental gesture, awaiting resurrection. But this is an ungrateful, difficult task, Sokurov seems to say, and one that might entail a long, lonely wait, as the final shot indicates: a cold and empty room, filled with a sense of anomie, solitude, and the smoke from the funeral ‘pyre,’ ambiguously lit by a single, cold light-bulb. It is followed by the words: ‘Lucky those nearest and dearest to us, who have died before us.’

Ultimately, hope remains, if neither in form nor narrative, then in the impetus of the film’s very making. In line with the thesis laid out in the book’s introduction, *The Second Circle* serves as a perfect example of the Sokurovian, hybrid but totalising effort at producing a universe of its own – circular, perhaps cyclical, self-contained, autonomous, yet deeply in dialogue with its time: to conquer death by an over-determined account of death. The film thus comments upon the death of the father (literally), the death of communism (semi-cryptically) and even perhaps the death of God (see Lampolski), leading to an aporia, the quasi-aphasic Malyanov and the monosyllabic interjections of the undertaker being a clear indicator of this fall and loss. Yet life – and light – go on. The use of Otmar Nussio’s *Rubensiana*, this elegiac, romantic piece evocative of farewells and voyages, carries the paradox of the film’s not-so-lugubrious pathos in its tune.⁶ The piece emerges surprisingly, after 83 minutes without any music.⁷ *Rubensiana* immediately reconnects us with the world of *Lonely Voice of Man*, and we realise that *The Second Circle* is yet another variation on the same themes: the return (a young man walking on the road, toward us, engulfed by the landscape or a snowstorm); the difficulty to live after the trauma (of war, of death, of totalitarianism – and relating to women); but also the notion of uncertainty (is this the final trip, a new departure, or more likely still, both?).

The Second Circle also exhibits several key themes of Sokurov by virtue of its affect. *Mournful Insensitivity*, *Days of the Eclipse*, and *Save and Protect* were full of

the somewhat irritatingly grotesque imagery and humour, probably injected by Yuri Arabov. In this latest film, the comedy is latent, but never manifest in its own right. The script of *The Second Circle* has potential for antics, though: Malyanov running under his father's coffin to grab his slippers, while the woman remarks how the departed is not going for a walk and thus does not need shoes. However the *mise-en-scène*, the gravitas of the subject and the acting, but also the motifs of solidarity and hope preclude the potentially jocular tone of these scenes. *On ne badine pas avec la mort*.⁸

There remains, then, the pain and suffering experienced by the characters. And this, more than death, may be the centre of the film, as expressed in its postscript. The film is about sadness, specifically the sadness of loss, which is at once a nobler and less pathological trait than melancholia. Perhaps then *The Second Circle* is less a metaphysical film than a profoundly philosophical, humanistic, and immanent one, addressing one of the simplest human emotions: that of the attachment and love we feel for our parents, and our deep-rooted anxiety at the idea of losing them, regardless of their age, disuse, or even estrangement.

Nonetheless, even after their deaths, there remains a connective dialogue with our departed loved ones. In the film, it is beautifully articulated through the scene in which Malyanov looks at the small tin box containing a variety of heirlooms left behind by his father: a cigarette box with a few pills, sewing thread, a thimble, a hairpin, brass knuckles. In this 'internal museum' of paucity, which at once says nothing and says it all, we feel the absent female figure – albeit only metonymically referenced through these small objects; more directly, we are acquainted with the sad presence of the father, the confrontational, probably abusive and tormented retired military man, who, we are told, got into a fight with his former colleagues (which in all likelihood led to his revocation). We metonymically experience how he must have spent the rest of his years in the gloomy isolation of the small dirty apartment in the anonymous Soviet town, seemingly without any distraction but pain and tid-bits of memories, his treasure a few worthless (and nearly abject) trinkets, his legacy some sweat and sickly secretions on an old mattress. This feeling of isolation is reinforced further by the traces of the absent mother, either long dead or perhaps having abandoned the father.

What reinforces the introspective and rather glum (but, again, somehow never sordid) assessment is the diegetic soundtrack: filled with the howling of the wind on snow, the dripping of water from a torn pipe, but also, perhaps most conspicuously, the sonic modulations coming from the old radio station, present in many shots. We saw in the opening anecdote to this book, the importance of the radio in Sokurov's life, just as we saw what role it played in the genesis of *Save and Protect*. But here, in the father's apartment, the radio and its electric sound, signifying the absence of emission, only serves to reinforce the idea of isolation, alienation, and existential angst. Yet, this sense of sadness is coupled with a strange serenity. What it evokes, perhaps, is the Eastern concept of *Mono no aware* – the emotion of marvelling in sadness at the beauty of things passing (epitomised in the cherry tree's petals falling and blowing in the wind) indeed, even if Sokurov said that this emotion was alien to Russians, his investment with Japanese culture renders this analogy especially fitting.⁹ The film



The Second Circle:
Malyanov, the feeble,
prostrate young man lost
in the late Soviet
snowstorm

manages to exalt beauty in a most sordid locale: a small, run-down Soviet apartment with a corpse, in the bleak midwinter.

In the end, Malyanov, the half-angel, half-animal creature, having ritualistically purified his father by washing him in the snow and burning his clothes and linen, vanishes in the snowstorm, much as he had in the opening shot. His stupefied, exhausted, suffering postures give way to an appeased spirit. The flame, the old Khrushchev-era blocks, the cold – all are indifferent. In this, returning to Lampolski's argument, the viewer has indeed been given a deep, profound, extremely rare form of cinematic experience, a catharsis not founded on the idea of immortality, but on the confrontation with death, its acceptance, or rather, its reconciliation with the simultaneous unknowable and familiar aspect of the great, banal leveller of all things. The last voyage, the beginning of something new. Winter. Light.

II

If this most intimate film by Sokurov seems to reach heights of universality, I want to argue that it is not merely because of its theme (the death of a loved one). *The Second Circle*, it seems to me, serves as one of the best examples, in the director's filmography, of what I want to designate as the 'intimate sublime', which I correlate to Kant's notion of a 'negative' sublime (opposed to an 'egotistical' sublime founded upon beauty). As we know, in Kant, the sublime moment takes place when some sight or event suspends the cognitive processes associated with the aesthetic feeling. When something is so overwhelming (e.g. the terror and grandeur invoked by huge mountains) that it cannot be judged as beautiful (or ugly) anymore. One could therefore think Sokurov's film's environment ill-fitted for such qualification. Yet upon closer scrutiny, a dying world, about to crumble into ruins, serves the purpose of the sublime very well. By this I do not mean to suggest that it is specifically the sordid locale, or the miserable social background shown in *The Second Circle*, which accounts for this form of sublimity (and neither are we dealing with the philosophical flights of the undergrounds found in some of the works by Dostoevsky). The intimate sublime is not only a vague yet

potent affect in us, the spectators, but also a rather concrete artistic construction, the workings of which I shall describe below.

Broadly speaking, the sublime, in Sokurov, has to do with the transcendent and religious elements informing his art (the indomitable power of his vision). These elements, considered from a formalist perspective, need to be taken seriously as the starting point of a reflection on the workings of the director's cinema, rather than a definitive endpoint (dismissing the man for a faith or alleged dogmatism that may seem parochial to some). One could try, even from an atheistic or an agnostic perspective, to emulate the works of contemporary religious thinkers or critics who have bridged the gap between modern art and faith, or whose own beliefs have informed their readings of films (as is the case, famously, of the humanistic and Christian readings of various films by André Bazin, including those of William Wyler and Robert Bresson). But a problem is posed by Sokurov's lack of belonging to any identified religious tradition, even if it falls globally within the Russian Christian Orthodox Church. His personal, idiosyncratic approach to religion, founded on a distrust and rejection of the church as an organised institution (and, of course, of any organised structure of power), and strongly informed by his fascination with Oriental philosophies, puts his relationship to the Divine, as to many other arenas, in strictly personal, solitary terms. Sokurov's distrust of socialist authorities and dialectical materialism is therefore somewhat replicated in his relationship with the Church, something his primary formation as a historian no doubt informs. Beyond the brooding intellectual, we also see here the reiterated image of Sokurov as the uncouth, sometimes insolent *enfant terrible* – so we can hardly expect him to take a traditional theological approach or expect his work to be informed by one straightforwardly. Nevertheless, Sokurov's conflicting relationship to father figures of all kinds (human, institutional, or eternal) serves the purpose of a non-religious analysis of the transcendent in his work – and brings us back, thus, to the concept of the sublime, which is a 'natural religion', as it were.

As Thomas Weiskel illustrated in his *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (1976), the term has many definitions and underpinnings. Weiskel's writings mostly address the implications of the term in its heyday – the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – distinguishing (among many subtleties and varieties of sublime depending on the authors and the period) between a 'positive' egotistical and a 'negative' sublime, akin to the emotions that Kant and Schopenhauer write about. Focusing on romantic literature primarily, Weiskel's theses might seem a bit remote from the twentieth- and twenty-first-century media of cinema and video. However, I want to argue that with the advent of cinema comes a renewed interrogation of the nature – but also the pertinence – of the term 'sublime'. In many ways, cinema as spectacle and as secular religion has both incorporated and neutralised the singularity of the sublime emotion (the overwhelming sizes and dimensions on the screen, the magical, quasi-inexplicable apparitions akin to phantasmagoria, etc.), further weakening it by offering scientific, mundane, technological explanations. In other words, all cinema, to a certain extent, is by its very means of production and projection concurrently sublime and no longer sublime, the term having been co-opted by the familiarity and materiality of the device.

Or, to use the terminology proposed by Weiskel, cinema, in and of itself, as a technology and spectacle, partakes primarily in a regime of the egotistical sublime, seducing, rather than overtaking, the mind and the senses by patterns of loudness (loudness of sound and monumental scale of image), substituting titillation and agitation for a deeper form of anxiety that characterises the ‘real’, negative sublime.¹⁰ In other words, the sublime is degraded and becomes tautological in its application to the cinematic medium as pure spectacle. Yet this primarily concerns the medium’s modes of production and exhibition rather than its textual dimension. In the latter, we find of course many films that hardly have anything sublime in them, but there are those cases, especially in European art-house cinema, where the term can thrive in a variety of sub-categories, even in the most unlikely places: think of Michael Haneke, a director of the cripplingly mundane and the banality of evil, but also of a cinema where truth and certainty are constantly elusive, generating, *in absentia*, an ‘epistemological sublime’ (*Caché* (2005), *The White Ribbon* (*Das weiße Band; Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte*, 2009) and even the recent *Amour* (2012)); Werner Herzog and his constant sadomasochistic quest of the exotic, liminal sublime (*Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (*Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes*, 1972), *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), or even *Grizzly Man* (2005)); Béla Tarr and his aesthetic (inherited from Jancsó, Tarkovsky, and ... Sokurov) of the epic long take, creating a feeling of the sublime through the protracted representation of the sordid and the inscrutable (*Sátántangó* (1994), *Werckmeister Harmonies* (*Werckmeister harmóniák*, 2000), *The Turin Horse* (*A torinói ló*, 2011)); or the facetiously perverse Lars von Trier, who constantly blurs and renews the rules of his cinema, notably by including terms of what can be referred to as ‘digital sublime’, but also addressing outright sublime events such as the end of the world in his *Melancholia* (2011).¹¹ In short, there are as many forms of sublime as there are artists willing to engage with it. In Sokurov’s case, we find another such artist whose work can justifiably qualify for a re-emergence and productive re-appropriation of the term, perhaps in a more rich and compelling (because less formulaic) rendition than in any of the filmmakers mentioned above, but most definitely dominated by a mood – that of a vertigo-inducing nostalgia, and possible melancholy as captured in the director’s image of the dead, engulfed town, and a man on a small boat, alone on the expanse of water, above, peering down below. But what, may we ask, exactly makes this beautiful but detached image *sublime*? This is not Tarkovsky’s *Mirror*, where the tune of Bach and closing image of a meadow bathed by the golden hues of sunset instantly coalesce into one of the most potently moving moments in the history of cinema, where the idea of nostalgia (and the irretrievable loss of childhood) is conveyed in a universally graspable way – an epiphany. While both directors are tremendously informed by nostalgia, they express it in fundamentally diverging ways. Reprising the idea I laid out in comparing the two directors in chapter three, the way in which Sokurov’s nostalgia and his take on the sublime relate to Tarkovsky’s is very much like an object to its reflected image in the mirror. The positive/egotistical (and, according to Weiskel, overly direct and simple) sublime of Tarkovsky is therefore opposed to the Sokurov’s negative, deeper, unsettling yet more potent sublime, which is the phenomenon’s truer expression, however counter-intuitive this assertion may seem.

Before investigating this sublime dimension in detail and from a concrete example, let me first map out a series of concepts connecting Sokurov and the study of the phenomenon as proposed by Weiskel. In so doing, I want to suggest a movement upwards from the bottom to the top – from the bodily to the spiritual – as the latter, which both theology and Fyodor Dostoevsky have taught us, can never truly be achieved without the experience of the former.

At the very bottom of the ‘sublime’ chain in Sokurov we find the basest expression of human corporality: the soul-less body, the corpse. As we saw, this lifeless yet arresting presence is a prominent trope in the director’s films, and it has been central to some of the best (and worst) literature about his films. Yet I wish to argue that while death can be seen as the end of all things from a secular, materialist perspective, in Sokurov it is rather the starting point of a whole interrogation, or an obligatory rite of passage. Death is both a ‘banal leveller’ and an ever-unknowable phenomenon, in spite of its ubiquity and familiarity.¹² It is the source of all anxiety, and sometimes terror, that generates the sublime emotion, yet it requires mediation by other epiphenomena – the end of life expressed in terms of cognitive and linguistic breakdown.

Surrounding and following death in our chain, we find the grotesque – a liminal state between the animal and the human. The grotesque is another fundamental and ubiquitous trope in Sokurov, injected in no small part into his cinema by his faithful screenwriter Yuri Arabov. Uncanny doubles and animal presence are a fixture of their films, where one also finds humans behaving like animals, as the ‘tetralogy of power’ best illustrates with its grotesque Hitler (in *Moloch*), Lenin (in *Taurus*), and the abject Mauricius (in *Faust*). With its implications of baseness and impurity, the grotesque also resonates with Sigmund Freud’s deconstruction of the sublime (Weiskel 1976: 6). For Freud, who rejected the spiritual transcendent hypothesis outright, the sublime emotion was an expression of an immature mind, a figment of the adolescent imagination, and so the ‘ghosts and goblins’ contiguous with the intimation of a fantastic realm were to be discarded accordingly.¹³

In Sokurov, however, immaturity and the grotesque serve as stepping-stones to a higher state. Indeed, many of his characters are young men trying to achieve a process (of return, of scientific or spiritual inquiry, or of burial of their parents), and their relationship – conflicting or otherwise – to father figures provides the next link in the chain toward the Sokurovian transcendent. Weiskel uses the example of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), where the adventurous and ‘disobedient’ son proves his worth by straying from the model of bourgeois gregarious industriousness advocated by his father. He notes that the relationship to the father (or, if we accept the Divine hypothesis, to God) is a common trope in the sublime moment: something is lifted and there is an influx of energy, what Longinus refers to as the ‘proud flight’ (Weiskel 1976: 12) – the movement to the fourth and final moment in our proposed sequence.

Transcendence is thus apprehended through the unknowable, the trauma of (someone else’s) death and worked through from the bodily grotesque to an experience of the Divine (and in this sense, the sublime in how it evokes or elicits transcendence can become synonymous, but applied to different objects and moments of a process). A cycle is drawn, especially in the case of the physical father’s death leading to the



The Second Circle:
the body of the father –
echoes of Holbein

promise of resurrection or a reunion in the afterlife, as is the case in *The Second Circle*, but also *Mother and Son*, both very much preoccupied with death and its beyondness. While the latter seems to be the film most conducive to a discussion of the sublime in Sokurov, with its reinvention of cinematic time and use of painterly imagery directly referencing the heydays of the term, we will focus on *The Second Circle* as our case study.¹⁴

In spite, or perhaps because of its simplicity, *The Second Circle* has a mythological quality that gives its plot the structure of a quest (as analysed by Vladimir Propp or Algirdas Julien Greimas), rather than a traditional film narrative based on the resolution of a conflict. The son must carry out the burial of his father, and he will be assisted in his quest by positive and negative ‘adjuvants’, most notably the woman undertaker. Yet if a mythical structure applies here, one can never lose sight of the film’s setting in the depressed (and depressing) locale of the small, late Soviet town and apartment building in the bleak midwinter – the final death throes of the Soviet system.

From a strictly semiotic perspective, the sublime moment is defined by ‘the moment in which the relationship between the signifier and the signified breaks down and becomes “indetermined”’ (Weiskel 1976: ix). Such dislocation is everywhere at work in *The Second Circle*. We find the contradiction of the sordid locale magnified, or



The Second Circle: Like father, like son: Malyanov recognises himself in the dead father



The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb (Hans Holbein, 1520–22)

sublimated, by the cinematography and *mise-en-scène*. The father's corpse, while obviously dead, has a tremendous presence on the screen: it strikingly resembles Holbein's *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, whose role in Russian culture (through the famous scene in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*), and its influence on Sokurov, cannot be underestimated (see also chapter twelve).

Even though he is dead, the father is almost as vibrant as his feeble, ghost-like son. And, as Lampolski brilliantly demonstrates (1990), a gradual shift and confusion of identity occur(s) between the two characters: the mannequin of the corpse made for the film was modeled after Alexandrov's features, and in a late dream scene of the film, the two men's faces are equated. In this scene, the same actor, appearing as old and young, is frozen in a deeply silent, eerie fixity conveyed by the use of holographic technology.

In this nightmare scene, in the uncanny replication of the son's features in his dead father's face, we witness an abundance of narcissistic supply, but of a negative kind. This prompts the anxiety that is foundational to the sublime moment, and which will call, ultimately, for resolution in the shape of a metaphor revolving around the notions of death, cleansing, and rebirth. The ambiguity between father and son, but also between life and death, is again further illustrated in a parallel drawn between not only their faces, but also their *naked feet*, another clear example of some kind of negative doubling and reflection of one another. The father's feet protrude from beneath his Sunday best, and the son's are revealed at the moment when he is summoned to produce socks for his father, and, not finding any in the squalid apartment, takes off his own. As the mourning son runs around the cold room barefoot, a strange hybrid of tragedy and comedy occurs – another instance where the superposition of meaning and representation become ambiguous.¹⁵

The cadaver is an eminent, central *topos* of dissolution, being the 'place' where reason and language have no more lease. But while it is this place where all meaning collapses, it is also that which endows most human activity with its drive toward meaning, forcing the organisation of social structures: the need to bury the dead for fear of being devoured by the animal, and, later – as in the film – for fear of disease. This latter part is, of course, connected with the sheer power of disruption of the social bond that the dead possesses, the threat (both cognitive and hygienic) its rotting physicality constitutes. There is thus, in the film, this conflict between a fascination with the dumb-striking sublime instance (the cadaver, which leaves the son speechless) and the civilisational need to hide, to destroy the dead. This causes, in turn, conflicts among the living: between the hapless son and the pragmatic undertaker, between the humane emotion and the de-humanised bureaucratic instance, as embodied by the faceless doctors.

Likewise, the ambiguity remains complete over why, exactly, the undertaker helps the son. Does she do so out of an anthropological (or Kantian/Lévinasian, as I argued above) drive to carry out what is her moral duty, in spite of her obvious irritation? Does she comply with her professional ethos, in fear of leaving a corpse unattended? Or does she, in stereotypical Russian fashion, hide her feelings of sympathy under layers of grouchiness and hostility? This uncertainty (because it leads to the ultimate surprise that, indeed, money has been found to properly bury the deceased, almost as in an instance of *Deus ex machina*) is essential to the overall mechanism at play here.

The son himself, through his dumbstruck difficulty to formulate coherent sentences, seems psychically affected by the overwhelming and fragmenting effects of the events around him. His tears, then, are never clearly an expression of sadness for his loss or a token of self-pity, and his otherwise self-detached aloofness, interspersed with violent outbursts at people who try to handle his father's corpse, only complicate his motivation and *état d'âme* – the 'state of his soul'. Which in turn leads to the most self-reflexive form of ambiguity of all: that the sublime at work here affects as much the film's spectator as it does its own characters.

In short, we are faced in this first stage with the inscrutable dimension of the sublime, in which meaning is lost and indeterminacy reigns: this is, again, the moment of the cadaver, trauma, anxiety, the grotesque, the feeble, the undefined, the formless or the immature. If one wants to apply Kant's own categories of the sublime moment, we find here the second moment, when boredom and harmony (if the word can apply in the late Soviet context) have been overtaken by surprise and astonishment (the realisation of the father's death): 'a natural phenomenon catches us unprepared and unable to grasp its scale. Any excess on the part of the object cancels the representational efficacy of the mind which can only turn, for its new object, to itself. But self-consciousness, too, can be prior and can force the rupture when the object (or memory) represented is too insignificant (fails to signify)' (Weiskel 1976: 24). In the Kantian sublime, a surface is broken, and discontinuity occurs between what can be grasped and what is felt to be meaningful (1976: 21). This can be experienced by the idealist (leading to a 'lofty' emotion) as well as by the empiricist/materialist (the notion of 'depth', profundity); much like death, the sublime 'speaks' to all.

Of course (and this is truly one of the defining aspects of how the Sokurovian sublime operates), it is precisely the sense of dissolution and decay that summons a strange force, or destiny, which will allow for elevation, in which the momentary anxiety and terror, as Longinus proposed, cure the soul from boredom (1976: 13). In spite of the grotesque, the aggression of his fellow men, the torn pipes preventing the washing of the corpse, the cold weather outside, and even his general apathy, the son manages to carry out his duty. Later he looks, in extreme close-up, at the small trinkets that are the 'memorial museum' left behind by his father, metonyms for a whole life of hardships. After having weighed heavily on the space of the room (through his physical presence, as much as his post-mortem stench), the human, buried, absent presence of the image, returns metonymically through the object, which we can view as the turning point and second moment in the Sokurovian sublime – and the third in the Kantian typology:

In the third, or reactive, phase of the sublime moment, the mind recovers the balance of outer and inner by constituting a fresh relation between itself and the object such that the very indeterminacy which erupted in phase two is taken as symbolizing the mind's relation to a transcendent order. This new relation has a 'meta' character, which distinguishes it from the homologous relation of habitual perception. [...] Should there be a reversion to habitual perception, the sublime moment subsides or collapses into something else. For it is precisely the semiotic character of the sublime moment which preserves the sublimation necessary to the sublime. (Weiskel 1976: 25)

In the film, having bidden farewell to his father's belongings, the son throws them into a dumpster before setting them on fire – a bonfire that signifies at once the second burial and the cleansing resurrection of the dead. To be sure, this resolution does not serve as the ultimate conclusion – Malyanov's quest is achieved, but his hardships are far from over (as the epigraph to the film reminds us). Yet the negative sublime expressed in the film serves as an epiphany to both the character and the viewer. Its semiotic resolution comes in the shape of the metaphor: death as rebirth, on the local plane, and death as the end of the Soviet regime, on the global level – with the promise of Resurrection, the most important moment in the Orthodox faith, lying ahead.

While it can, as we saw, serve as an allegory for the collapse of the Soviet system, *The Second Circle* features, for a Sokurov film, few sibylline occurrences. This element refers us to yet another way in which Sokurov cultivates the cinematic sublime in many other films: by the interpolation of seemingly random and inexplicable episodes and 'intrusions' the overlapping of lines of 'destinies' (to use Lampolski's image (2009)). This unusual interpenetration of several 'lines of destinies' is by no means entirely random; chance is only left to the actual encounter of two such lines. Take, for instance, the intrusion of Gubar in Malyanov's apartment in *Days of the Eclipse*. The rebellious soldier goes just as he has come, his fate having only a marginal impact on the life of the central character. Yet these occurrences do contribute, in their intriguing (or outright absurd) quality, to the overall sublime, profound affect of Sokurov's cinema. The melancholy which is bound to be associated with the intimate sublime in Sokurov, has to do with the lack of narcissistic and erotic feedback, speaking to the man's existential and sexual solitudes, and is literally *sublimated* through his art.

We have just investigated how Sokurov uses the sublime on the thematic, textual level. But just as the structure of the sublime always implies dualism, so Sokurov likewise can be seen to express the sublime formally. His idiosyncratic film grammar further serves the purpose of eliciting in the viewer feelings of the sublime. Deconstructing (wittingly or not) the concept of cinematic 'suture,' Sokurov plunges his viewer into a space whose geometries are categorically redefined. Here, the director's interest in three-dimensional space as a plane surface, but envisaged in its own depth, comes to the fore. Sokurov works on the cinematic image as though it were a painting (and thus a two-dimensional entity), yet he also probes its aesthetic and philosophical dimensions so as to give it this 'non-dimensional depth'. It leads to an impression of vertigo, of a sense

of losing one's footing in these moments of rupture, when the senses are overwhelmed and the mind follows suit.¹⁶ But Sokurov also exposes a less anxiety-ridden, 'egotistical' sublime, for instance by use of the close-up and extreme close-ups: in *The Second Circle*, their sudden appearance creates (beyond the notion of 'pillow shot' proposed by Noel Burch when dealing with Ozu's cinema, and reprised by Iampolski in application to Sokurov (1994)) a sensation of drifting, of sudden focus on a detail which unsettles and compels contemplation, while carrying out the motifs of life and death simultaneously. This we see in the close-ups of objects in the father's apartment: doused in a blinding overexposed light, and endowed with life through *photogénie*, yet covered in dust and left abandoned, alive and dead all at once.

The play of scale in Sokurov is not limited to close-ups. In many of his films, including *The Second Circle*, he uses miniatures of the buildings and sets that he is shooting. In *Days of the Eclipse* and *Save and Protect*, actors are actually shown walking through these models of houses and towns, creating a surrealist tension – and discreetly sublime sensation – at the sight of these literally 'larger-than-life' entities (or, to use Sokurov's preferred term, 'personalities') traversing the small, almost insignificant material world.

In *The Second Circle*, the effect is used to particularly intriguing ends at the film's closure, when the dumpster where all of Malyanov's father's belongings are burning appears as larger than the village itself. But there is another, almost contradictory dimension to the use of miniature sets in Sokurov, pertaining to sadness and nostalgia.¹⁷ One should not forget *The River Potudan*, by Andrey Platonov, the text on which Sokurov primarily based his first feature film, *Lonely Voice of Man*, which serves, in more than one way, as a thematic matrix for most of his subsequent productions. The novella opens on lines expressing the relationship between trauma, the return, and a world grown smaller:

Grass had grown again on the trodden-down dirt tracks of the Civil War, because the war had stopped. With peace it had become quiet again in the



Save and Protect:
a 'gigantic' Emma
traverses a set of
tiny houses

provinces and there were fewer people: some had died in the fighting, many were being treated for their wounds and were resting with their families, forgetting the heavy work of the war in long sleep, while some of the demobilized men were still making their way home in their old greatcoats, carrying their kit bags and wearing soft helmets or sheepskin caps-walking over the thick unfamiliar grass which there had not been time to see before, or maybe it had just been trampled down by the campaigns and had not been growing then. They walked with faint, astonished hearts, recognizing again the fields and villages along their paths. Their souls had changed in the torment of war, during illnesses and in the happiness of victory, and they were on their way to live as if for the first time, dimly remembering themselves as they had been three or four years ago, for they had turned into quite different people – they had grown up because they were older, they had become more intelligent and more patient and had started to feel inside themselves the great universal hope which had become the idea of their lives – lives that were small as yet and which had had no clear aim or purpose before the Civil War. (2007: 213)

Although this opening passage speaks of a collectivity, it is also a typical instance of collective singular, so frequent in Platonov's prose. In an early passage, similar emotions are revisited, this time from the perspective of Nikita alone:

The day after he got home from the civil war Nikita [...] walked all around the familiar, beloved town where he had been born, and his heart began to ache to see the small houses grown old, the rotting fences of wood and wattle, and the few apple trees in the yards, many of which were already dead, dried up forever. In his childhood those apple trees had still been green, and the one-story houses had seemed large and wealthy [...] the streets had been long, the burdock leaves tall, and the plants growing wild on patches of wasteland [...] had seemed in that long ago time to be sinister copses and thickets. But now Nikita saw that the small houses were low and wretched [...], that the tall weeds on the wasteland were pathetic, more dejected than terrifying, [...] and that the streets soon came to an end in the earth of the fields and the light space of the sky – the town had shrunk. Nikita thought it must mean he had lived through a lot of his life, if large mysterious objects had now become small and dull. (2007: 218)

The impression of attrition described in these passages resonates with a variety of important themes in Sokurov, and is illustrated in *The Second Circle* through scenes in which the son, as though shell-shocked by the consequences of his father's death, wanders around a town that has grown small as he has grown older. But the resultant feeling is hardly one of empowerment; rather it elicits a sense of ill-fitting, of being an outsider at home, and, as Platonov writes, provokes nostalgia for a time when proportions were different, when heart and hearth fitted one another. Following the trauma

(of war, of death, of the loss of youth and innocence), this impression of a world grown smaller can be correlated to the effect of emotional distancing and withdrawal connected with the experience of the Civil War, but also as re-inscribed in the regime of the Sokurovian sublime. This impression is clearly relatable to the 'danger of precipitant attenuation' that Weiskel locates in Wordsworth's poems, in connection with the second moment of the Kantian negative sublime (1976: 24).

Then, there is the use of sound. When, after seventy-seven minutes of a dense yet austere soundtrack, Sokurov unleashes Otmar Nussio's *Rubensiana* over the soundtrack of *The Second Circle*, the viewer is wrapped within a layer of mellifluous, nostalgic music which creates a sense of beauty that is clearly partaking in the regime of the egotistical, somewhat regressive sublime (beauty and the sublime being, again, opposed in Kant's 'negative' sublime). But the refusal of the outright indulgence in aural pleasures, rather connecting them to momentous issues such as destiny and the life of the human soul, enriches the essence of this sublime, keeping it at bay from the pitfall of superficiality or redundancy.¹⁸

The intimate sublime is to be found throughout Sokurov's oeuvre, and is accountable for the lasting appeal of his films. It is found in the strangely sedate passages, in these long takes where apparently nothing happens, and in which sound and image are often dissociated (or in a time lag vis-à-vis one another, as in *Elegy* (Элегия; *Elegiya* 1985), or in the combination of documentary footage and the fiction film (the distinction of which, for Sokurov, is remissible). Sokurov often utilises the degraded quality of the found footage or, to produce similar effects, he distorts his imagery by bathing it in smoke or mist. In any case, he creates something similar in effect to the ruins and the wasteland that dominate both romantic and modernist literature. Thus we understand that Sokurov's inclination for visual distortions and filters insinuates more than mere aesthetic pursuit, but is also quite distinct from the visual inscrutability with which it has often been associated. Incidentally, if most images in Sokurov are stylised and demand closer attention to be fully understood, it is not for the sake of obscurity. Their purpose is not to be unrecognisable, but to be acknowledged as rich and subtle, to be contemplated and investigated, 'written' rather than simply 'read', to use Roland Barthes' celebrated distinction. This partakes in a cinema that stands as heir to romantic poetics, as Jacques Rancière has written: 'an art eminently appropriate to these metamorphoses of signifying form, which allow for the construction of memory as a set of interweaving disjointed temporalities, and heterogeneous regimes of images' (2001: 211; translation mine).¹⁹

What we intuit, from all the examples above, is that the fundamentally dualist structure of the transcendental and the sublime always carries, within itself, a dialectical tension. Weiskel's study constantly reminds us of the complications and potential aporias this tension implies, constantly working with antonymic pairs ('negative' versus 'positive' sublime, transcendent versus secular/materialistic approach, etc.). Weiskel, incidentally a Gemini like Sokurov, was no doubt informed in his theoretical mapping as much by the actual aspects and implications of his object of study as he was by his own dual approach to life.²⁰ Likewise, as we saw at length in the book's introduction, Sokurov boasts an acutely dualistic world, taking dualism to a further, more extreme,

ubiquitous level: that of the conflict, the oxymoronic, the paradoxical. Such sets of tension are to be found *ad infinitum* in his body of work, and they are multiplied by Arabov's own obsession with the uncanny and the double, or the trope of Janus. The workings of the sublime, then, are both founded upon this profusion of hybrid, disparate elements in his oeuvre, and elicited by their unlikely reunion. In this, the intimate sublime in Sokurov also expresses the workings of his interstitial dialectics, of how all fragments are pieced together into a whole, in the director's artistic totalising drive. To capture the latter visually, I proposed the image of the fold, of a philosophical entrapment and volume, or, in keeping with the book's introductory metaphor, of drowning, submerging, engulfment.²¹

Returning to the nostalgic image of the boat over deep waters, *Lonely Voice of Man* features an important scene (drawn from Platonov's *The Origins of a Master*) in which a man plunges into dark waters to investigate the realm of death, down below. Such is the principle of each of Sokurov's offerings: an investigation of the soul and spirit. In Platonov, the man drowns and dies. In Sokurov, however, he comes back to the surface in extremis, scarred by the ordeal rather than elated by the experience. What this most programmatically illustrates is a desire in Sokurov to *return* confronted with its own impossibility, and the suffering that comes with it – in other words, to expose oneself to what is by definition nostalgia.

Sokurov's cinema dives down below, then resurfaces and moves on the waters of history, like the ark in his most famous film. In it, the mournful preoccupation with loss, memory, and history, is counterbalanced by the desire to celebrate and preserve the beauty and greatness of past works of art. While clearly oriented toward the past, Sokurov's present and continuous (indeed, prodigiously prolific, verging on compulsive) artistic pursuit exhibits the necessity of continuing, till death if need be, to create in order to believe in the possibilities of this past art, and, beyond, to live. Therein lies the key to the man's prodigious productivity: stripped of his outlet, Sokurov's life would be confronted with the utter solitude that seems to have plagued him, existentially if not socially, left to contemplate with acute lucidity the many spiritual and social challenges with which mankind is faced – possibly on the verge of another deluge.²²

Ultimately, the totalising drive in Sokurov is to contain his own artistic world – to capture loneliness, nostalgia, human suffering and investigate the recesses of the human soul which we live. This may account for the most sublime moments found in the most intimate situations; for the open-ended, seemingly unfinished dimension of many of his works; but also for the fascinating combination of the inward, possibly reactionary romantic and detached *auteur maudit* (yet also *à succès*), with the figure of the humanist objectively invested in the world and deeply concerned about its future. Those were the elements resounding in *The Second Circle*: damnation, hell, human responsibility and dignity, and an uncertain open-ended future, between a gloomy feeling of apocalypse and the promise of a Second Coming of sorts. There is little wonder, then, that the director would devise his own brand of sublime in cinema to give his narrative its maximum effect of awe, revelation, and deep introspection.

The title of this chapter overtly references a similarly austere and taut film by Ingmar Bergman, and the focus on faces in this film seems a clear inheritance of his pursuit in this domain. But instead of the Swedish master, to whom I will return in chapter nine, I want to discuss Sokurov in comparison to another key European filmmaker of the second half of the twentieth century (and key practitioner of cinematic sublime), the one he professes to love the most: Robert Bresson (1901–1999). Both artists' works are characterised by 'a moral rigor completely averse to the permissive relativism of contemporary life,' (Pipolo 2010: 2) and it would seem easy to correlate Bresson and Sokurov on a variety of levels, both thematic and formal. They are both considered masters of an ascetic and austere cinema, host to narratively simple dilemmas, bearing deep philosophical implications. Their intricate use of soundtrack, their poetics of space, and, perhaps most evidently, their work with non-professional actors are other key analogies. Yet in spite of the admiration of Sokurov for Bresson, one should immediately nuance the comparison.²³

Unquestionably, asceticism and deep religious feeling inhabit both men, but while Bresson was raised as a Catholic and the subsequent education deeply informed his cinema – notably his obsession with purity and grace, but also with freedom, sin, and guilt – Sokurov freely admits to his absence of a religious education, and clearly none of the elements shaping Bresson's life and work are of much importance to him. Both men have drawn heavily from works of literature for many of their films, both having freely adapted Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. But while Sokurov (see chapter seven) strips the narrative for his *Whispering Pages* of most of its action, and yields a world that stands as the irredeemable hell of Raskolnikov's guilty conscience – a punishment without a crime, as it were – in which Sonya's meek plea to atone for what he has *done* is derided, in *Pickpocket* (1959) Bresson more closely follows the plot of the novel and posits a clear Christian promise of redemption through love and the acceptance of God's will. Conversely, there is an unmistakable perverse inclination for cruelty in Bresson – a form of revelling in the original sin, a paradoxical joy or at least complacency in the fall that comes with the loss of virginity, purity, or in acts of violence that is all but absent from Sokurov.

The use of sound is remarkable in both directors' oeuvres, but where Bresson uses sound to replace the image and complement what is not shown (for instance, in the final sequence of *A Man Escaped* (*Un condamné à mort s'est échappé ou Le vent souffle où il veut*, 1956)), Sokurov recreates a complementary aural universe, discrete from the visual plane, creating its own separate world, as it were – a late, strange inheritance of the contrapuntal ideal set forth by the early Soviet masters at the advent of sound technologies.²⁴

In terms of narration through space, Gilles Deleuze famously used the expression 'any-space-whatever' (*'espaces quelconques'*) to talk about Bresson, and the term is germane. Because his use of sound is so precise (think of the pickpocket's attempt at the race track, in which horses are never visualised, but seen in the mind's eye through the soundtrack), Bresson can use a fragmented, disjointed, sometimes puzzling

arrangement of shots that often violate the 180-degree line and rules of continuity editing. Consequently, these spaces, open or closed, become metaphorical realms in which cinema reaches mysterious, sublime heights, in spite of the modesty and sobriety of the represented locales. In his own way, Sokurov does something similar with his point of view vectorisation and the coterminous spatial representation. Far from being the mark of an amateur, these two unique approaches to film narration yield two completely different effects, connected however in the sublime emotion they elicit: Bresson's throws us into the action, *in medias res*, and makes us experience the philosophical stakes and dilemmas of his characters all the more poignantly. Instead of captivating, Sokurov's spaces convey a sedate sense of the otherworldly, the dream, of a distant memory. Their somewhat alienating use of point of view and space forces the viewer to take a reflective distance with the film, and question the very nature of the story as an epistemological object, just as they serve a most complex historical meta-commentary. Unsurprisingly, this mode of narration is most prominent in those of his films of the tetralogy, dealing with historical figures of power (see chapters nine, ten, thirteen and the post-script to the tetralogy of power).

As far as the use of 'actors' is concerned, Bresson committed very early on to his philosophy of the '*modèle*'. These individuals, clean slates unadulterated by theatrical affectations, would best convey, through their blank deliveries, stares, and automaton-like movements, the truth lurking behind the narrative. Sokurov, on the other hand, while a master at eliciting a subtle range of emotions from amateur actors,²⁵ has never purely committed to this method alone, often resorting to professionals when their specific abilities (stamina, particularly) were required.²⁶

Bresson and Sokurov also differ in their take on artistic design. Bresson's quasi-pathological obsession with control differs from Sokurov's desire to achieve an equally true and uncompromising artistic vision that instead incorporates – welcomingly – the many inescapable elements of chance and/or destiny.²⁷ Where Bresson strives to reduce everything to its essence, a strategy that extends to the very fabric of his films, bared to the bone, as it were, Sokurov does not shy away from embellishments and seemingly random incursions, often mediated through intuition. Sokurov, informed by the aberration that is the totalitarian dystopia, seems to accept the fact that a part of control must always be relinquished, that greatness can only be achieved at this price (see chapter thirteen). As Jacques Rancière has pointed out regarding the Bressonian model: '[the Model], when doing what Bresson wants, also does something else than what he wants, producing an unexpected truth which goes against the grain of the author' (2001: 162).

This final aspect leads us, in Bresson and Sokurov, to a very important trait they share on a deeper level. Both are, of course, important but also insular modernists, creating a thorough and complex artistic universe, standing in a league of their own in this respect. One could even venture an analogy in their stylistic evolution, from mobile camera movements and a metaphorical cinema to a more fixed frame with an emphasis on metonymy.²⁸ But the most important trait uniting the two men is how their films incarnate, to an unparalleled degree, a radical form of the cinematic paradox. As Rancière wrote of Bresson – and is equally applicable to Sokurov – their

cinema is constituted by a double regime of the Deleuzian movement and time image, of the double encounter of the active and the passive, the wanted and the unwanted. The former resides in the artist's effort to control the universe, and the truth of his work is elicited in the very process of its clash with the latter. As we just saw, in Bresson, Rancière argues, the work with the *modèle* instantiates a crucial encounter between absolute will (of the director) and chance (of the *modèle's* 'acting'). In Sokurov, and certainly in *The Second Circle*, we find a similar encounter, except that the Russian filmmaker embraces these contingencies when working with non-professionals. Then – and this is the second, intersecting point – this truth which manifests itself, in the non-professional's very being, beyond his and the director's will, will escape them again, whether they accept it (Sokurov) or not (Bresson).

Very importantly, Rancière notes that this ever-elusive truth is not located in the images themselves, nor in the carefully constructed sets or the countless rehearsals with the *modèles* – they are merely a basic substance with which to begin the work of art. Bresson referred to images as 'pieces of nature' (in Rancière, 2001: 160).²⁹ Truth emerges at a further stage, in the association of these images – in the editing at the physical level (the splicing together of two pieces of film) and in the intellectual effect of the connection of these images in our minds.³⁰ Both Bresson and Sokurov are masters of a seemingly disjointed style which combines and composes a whole greater than all its parts. In this – and picking up on the haptic quality in Sokurov that Lampolski has pointed out (2011, see chapter twelve) – Deleuze, and Rancière after him, read the many instances of hands, touching, and passing (or, in Sokurov, pushing, claspings, or caressing) as an allegory of this process of the artist's action on the film's montage, which would account for the visually fragmented nature of both artists' cinemas. If these hands, blindly touching rather than picking or clawing, truly organise the texture of many of Bresson's films (*Pickpocket* and *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966) being eminent examples), their role in Sokurov is no less crucial, if less often visualised. Sentience, in Sokurov, is enacted by touch as often as it is by sight. Besides, one cannot rule out the hypothesis according to which the increasing instances of touching and close-ups of hands in Sokurov's cinema (throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s) is related to a dangerous retinal detachment that could have made him go blind, the consequence of a violent aggression of which Sokurov was victim in the spring of 2000.

Deleuze wanted to see, in Bresson's cinema, the power of the interstice separating two shots and putting a space, a void between them, against the power of 'sensorimotor' chains of the classical movement-image. In my estimation, the interstice, while clearly the synthetic place where the electro-shock of the artistic effect takes place and the paradoxical tension is simultaneously enacted and resolved, is not a void – it is a third connecting instance between two images or ideas. In this sense, the greatest trait uniting the two men is this dialectical interstitial quality that I discussed in the introduction. It is precisely because of this productive use of these interstitial dialectics that Bresson and Sokurov can be considered as partaking of both Deleuze's regimes of the movement – and time-image. Yet, Rancière argues, the distinction established by Deleuze between movement- and time-image is at times impossible to determine, and the dialectic he describes can easily be interpreted as its direct opposite, thereby

yielding 'a dialectic which unifies but also weakens any attempt to distinguish, by the use of discriminating traits, two types of images and to thereby establish a limit separating a classical cinema from a modern one' (Rancière 2001: 163). For Rancière, the line is tenuous between the *mise-en-scène* of a 'hunter' filmmaker, full of direction and design, and that of the involuntary filmmaker.

However, I see, in Bresson and Sokurov, a third term, which encompasses and supersedes the Deleuzian distinction, indicating the importance of the paradoxical *rapport* (a key word in Bresson's conception of the cinema) between cinema's fundamental dualism and how dependent upon the world it is, and yet how closed and unified it appears. This concept further implies a cosmos of conflicts and contradictions, opening up onto an infinite potentiality of world-images, wherein the centrality of the human brain as a screen conceiving thought is expanded by the terms of the individual looking at the universe – and the universe looking at the individual, reuniting the human and the divine hypotheses.

I would like to end on another element uniting Bresson, the French bourgeois Catholic, and Sokurov, the Russian man born to a working class family in Soviet times, is their pessimistic outlook on history, the world and its workings. But there again, their manifestations of this similarity differ quite a bit. Bresson addressed this pessimism by articulating it more and more clearly, from the senseless yet logical deaths of Mouchette and Balthazar; to the absurd of war in *Lancelot of the Lake* (*Lancelot du lac*, 1974) and up to the unrelenting capitalist machine at play in *The Devil, Probably* (*Le diable, probablement*, 1977) and *L'Argent* (1983). By that point, the director called himself a 'Christian atheist' (Cardullo 2009: xiii).³¹ Despair, such a fraught word in Christian theology, is probably the point where the two directors' beliefs (Bresson's Jansenism as opposed to Sokurov's idiosyncratic take on Christian Orthodoxy) part ways most starkly. Sokurov – and this is why many see his cinema as escapist and refusing to address timely issues (a preposterous and superficial interpretation) – remains, in spite of all his worries about the future of European civilisation and humanity at large, attached to a form of cautious optimism, which shines, like a tiny light at the end of a dark tunnel, in spite of all – much like the ending of *The Second Circle*.

After having more or less obliquely addressed the death of the Soviet system in his three previous feature films, Sokurov would completely veer away from the socio-economic turmoil of the early Yeltsin years in Russia. This would not entail an aestheticising, dandy-ish disengagement of the issues of the day, however: by entirely refusing to address it, Sokurov would nevertheless still comment upon the destinies of his country in the early 1990s. But he would do so, in his subsequent project, *The Stone*, in the most unconventional and indirect way, reverting to a non-polemical, enshrined figure of the past: Anton Chekhov.

Notes

- 1 For the first time on a feature film, Sokurov worked with Alexander Burov instead of Sergey Yurizditsky. Burov had already worked on many of Sokurov's documentaries prior to this film.

- 2 In another bridge between various films, we see the same actor who played the star-child in *Days of the Eclipse* make this short but extraordinary cameo. Once again, the child seems wise beyond his years.
- 3 In an introduction he gave to the film at Yale University, on 4 October 2011.
- 4 In one scene, when the film-stock is slightly over-exposed so as to create a high-contrast image filled with whites, the film almost seems to reference, or unwittingly echoes the aesthetics of the underground New York avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s. In this the film would reference similarly shabby locale (the run-down apartments in the films of Jim McBride, Hollis Frampton, and the like), but in a completely different geopolitical situation, connected only by a combination of aesthetic ebullience, freedom and urban decay.
- 5 For Sokurov, however, black and white is hardly a limitation: the palette of greys, according to him, is the most remarkable of all colour variations.
- 6 From a collection entitled 'Paintings and Music', which had already served as the *leitmotif* of Sokurov's debut, *Lonely Voice of Man*.
- 7 With the exception, perhaps, of some very distant notes, muffled in the mix, overheard in the scene in which Malyanov cleans his dead father with snow.
- 8 Literally 'one does not joke with death', a pun on the colloquial 'on ne badine pas avec l'amour' ('one does not take love lightly').
- 9 *Paul Schrader*: 'In Japanese art, there is a concept of mono no aware, sweet sadness, the pleasure of endings, of autumn and seeing a dying leaf.' *Alexander Sokurov*: 'But for Russia, sweet sadness and pleasant farewells are not possible. On the contrary, in the Russian sense of elegy, it's a very deep, vertical feeling, not a delighting one. It gets you deeply, sharply, painfully. It's massive' (Schrader 1997: 24).
- 10 Weiskel uses rock music as an illustration of the principle of egotistical sublime in modern times.
- 11 Among others, Vincent Mosco has entitled his 2004 book with this term. I use it less for the implications of digital imagery and CGI *per se*, and more for the use of digital technologies as enabling new representations of the pro-filmic that Trier uses so creatively, for instance by his use of hundreds of DV video cameras to capture scenes of *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) or extreme slow-motion, shot with the Phantom camera, in the opening scenes of *Antichrist* (2009) and *Melancholia* (2011).
- 12 To use the title of the text by Sokurov about Tarkovsky's death, translated into English in *Film Studies*, vol. 1, 1999 (64–9).
- 13 The expression comes from John Locke, but in many ways the English empiricist's philosophy announces and predates Freud's theories.
- 14 Most clearly through its summoning of Caspar David Friedrich's art, his mastery of the transcendental landscape, and, through him, the whole German Romantic school which delved so deeply into the notion of death and the sublime (see chapter eight).
- 15 This trope of inert naked feet was already at work in a similarly darkly comedic short film by Sokurov, *Empire*, an 'exercice de style' in noirish cinematography,

based on Louise Fletcher's *Sorry, Wrong Number*, in which a paralysed woman (Alla Osipenko) eavesdrops on a phone conversation discussing a murder, not realising that she is the helpless person the two men want to kill that night. The two films also share eerie modulations on the radio – an absent presence which hardly alleviates the tragic fate of the protagonist.

- 16 As a child, I remember that my ophthalmologist had a picture of a fly, which he would show to amuse me, and which would acquire a tremendous aspect of relief when wearing 3D glasses. The confusion which derived from seeing a volume yet being unable to grasp it was both confusing and sensually titillating. It was a novel experience. I find Sokurov's cinema to provide this originality in the representation of depth, texture and contrast (at least when seen on 35mm), much more compelling than today's many feeble efforts of 'Digital' and 'Real' 3D.
- 17 Here I should like to direct the reader to the theses of Susan Stewart *On Longing* (1993 [1984]), especially as how they address the miniature and the gigantic, and their relationship to nostalgia, from the perspective of semiotics and psychoanalytic, feminist, and Marxist criticism.
- 18 Sokurov has oft repeated that his films are composed of separate visual and sonic entities, and that these are meant to be considered almost as separate: one could *watch* and *listen* to the films and experience them as two entirely distinct artistic works (such an experiment is particularly successful with *Mother and Son*). This speaks to the filmmaker's investment in silent cinema and the radio, more so than to the famous statement on sound issued by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov in the early thirties. Be this as it may, music and sound play a very important role in Sokurov, mutually enriching one another in a variety of ways – even through trivial material – as in the long, fixed shot of Fyodor Fyodorovich Shalyapin in *Petersburg Elegy* (*Петербургская элегия; Peterburgskaya elegiya*, 1989), over which a strange, non-diegetic but imitative soundtrack of various foley and noises counteract the feeling of constant repetition of the image (indeed its temporal loop), 'vectorising' it (to use Michel Chion's terminology). The long, enigmatic shot of Shalyapin's son (now an old man) isolated in the frame, alone and pensive, seemingly contemplating his father's career (it seems as though he is watching Sokurov's earlier film about his father and sisters, *Elegy*) along with the broader history of the twentieth century, is followed by a shot of an anonymous crowd coming and going in a supermarket. Captured from behind the counter where the customers come and collect goods, this shot seems to articulate – dialectically with the previous shot of the lonely individual – the remarkable personality against the mundane crowd at the local *univermag*. An earlier passage from Shalyapin Sr.'s diary recounted how he and Maxim Gorky, silenced by grief at Anton Chekhov's funeral, were surrounded by a hostile crowd demanding a speech from them. This account seems to underline the dialectic between silent celebrity and the populace, ultimately unfavourable to the anonymous passersby of the store. Yet, as Tchaikovsky's *Fifth Symphony* suddenly resounds, the long, bland, anonymous fixed take suddenly becomes a paean to the *photogénie* of the crowd, and

- the value of each individual life is given as much weight as that of the distinguished elderly gentleman.
- 19 Even if Rancière wrote these words about Chris Marker's documentaries, they seem perfectly fitting to Sokurov's own aesthetics.
 - 20 Weiskel's wife, Portia, underlines this dualism in the moving preface she gives to his book, published after his tragic and untimely death.
 - 21 Even if his cinema itself is constructed around the idea of flatness – as if art itself could never represent the three-dimensional complexity of philosophical thought, but was nevertheless its indispensable companion, and mode of reflection and expression.
 - 22 Among these, Sokurov is keen on singling out environmental issues, as well as the growing conflict between the West and Islam.
 - 23 'Bresson is such a great and wise filmmaker' (in Carels 1999: 74).
 - 24 The brief manifesto 'A Statement on Sound' by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov. See also footnote 18.
 - 25 Sokurov looks for the right 'personality' rather than a 'model'. See, in French, 'L'acteur chez Sokourov: une profession pour amateur' (in *Hors-Champ*, 1, 1998: 29–35).
 - 26 On this note, however, it is worth pointing out that whenever he has worked with notable stage or film actors, such as Leonid Mozgovoy (*The Stone, Moloch, Taurus, Russian Ark*), Sergey Dreyden (*Russian Ark*), Issei Ogata (*The Sun*), or Anton Adasinsky (*Faust*), they have all worn heavy make-up and are sometimes barely recognisable. Sokurov clearly aims at deflecting, much like Bresson did, the value of recognisable concepts attached to the actor.
 - 27 See Sarris, Pipolo. Or consider the anecdote according to which Bresson kept Anne Wiazemsky locked up in a room next to his during the shoot of *Au hasard Balthazar*.
 - 28 This is the evolution in Bresson described by Tony Pipolo in his book on Bresson, *A Passion for Film*. But it would be contradicted, in Sokurov, in view of the highly kinetic camera work of both *Russian Ark* and *Faust*.
 - 29 Rancière quotes from Bresson's, *Notes sur le cinématographe*.
 - 30 This reflection owes a great deal to Jacques Rancière's argument about Deleuze's movement- and time-image (Rancière 2001: 145–63), and about how they are not so much dialectically opposed as in a continuous, 'infinite spiral' (2001: 159) with one another. Robert Bresson (whose films are used under both the movement- and time-image categories in Deleuze) demonstrates the epitome of this paradox.
 - 31 'A deeply devout man – one who paradoxically described himself as a "Christian atheist" – Bresson, in his attempt in a relatively timeless manner to address good and evil, redemption, the power of love and self-sacrifice, and other such subjects, may seem to us, and perhaps was, something of a retrogression' (Cardullo 2009: xiii).

CHAPTER SIX

The Stone: No Way Home

In June of 1904, Dr. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, under the recommendations of his colleagues, was sent to a spa in the German town of Baden-Weiler. As soon as he arrived, he started writing letters to his friends and family, planning his return home. Chekhov's condition improved initially, but the reprieve was brief, and the writer's health declined spectacularly shortly thereafter. He died on July 15th of the same year, away from his beloved Russia. In his final letter to his sister, he was wondering about the best way to get home: by train or by boat.

The motifs of death and a return home, as we have seen in several examples already, are prominent in Alexander Sokurov's cinema, and can hardly be lost on any of his commentators.¹ With his 1992 film *The Stone*, his most confidential feature effort, he pursued these preoccupations to their purest and most compelling expression. The plot of the film, as in *The Second Circle* and *Mother and Son*, is minimalistic: a night watchman of the Chekhov museum in Yalta happens upon a man bathing in the writer's bathtub. The guard proves eventually too feeble to get the intruder to leave, especially as this visitor gradually assumes a resemblance to Anton Chekhov himself. The stranger visits Chekhov's house, establishes a dialogue with its rooms and furniture, puts on the writer's Sunday best, drinks old wine and dines upon the poor watchman's sandwich. He then proceeds to go for a walk in town and sits inside a grave, before returning 'home', sitting outside during a snowstorm, dining once again and finally disappearing, leaving the watchman alone.

I

Few Sokurov films better illustrate several of the aspects I attempt to delineate in the present book: these include the productive paradox, the intimate (but also murky and

degraded) sublime, and interstitial dialectics, which amount to a fully self-contained re-creation of the universe – Sokurov's 'other life', this artistic third term. Constantly posed in an in-between space: neither day nor night, always fuzzily ambiguous (images and sounds are often confusing or outright abstract, here), it is never expressed or indicated, narratively, whether the film is a dream of the watchman (or Chekhov's), nor whether the guest is an imposter or the actual writer returned from the dead.

The film's dialogue is sparse, and apart from the visitor and the watchman, only two other characters appear: a short person encountered on the street (a child or more likely a midget), and a crane, seemingly a pet living in the house-museum. This minimalism in plot and dialogue is hardly a form of screenwriting paucity, much as the film's visual style (the film is shot entirely in black and white, or, as Tatyana Yensen suggests, in 'black and grey' (2006: 177–83)) consistently using distorting filters, stretching the image vertically and flattening it to the extent of near-abstraction, unify the whole beautifully in its self-contained perfection. This story of a fragmented dialogue with the past is also reinforced by filters added to the film stock itself in post-production, furthering the impression of old-age and washed-out remoteness of the whole. This choice was hardly accidental: observing the rapid changes in post-Soviet Russia, Sokurov decided on a position of retreat, embracing a subject of the past and endowing it with those aesthetics (akin to German expressionism). The latter produced, in their own time, an idiosyncratic cinematic style reflecting (negatively) and offering an escape from their time (the equally transitional and economically troubled Weimar Germany). However, while Murnau and Pabst come to mind when watching *The Stone*² – the universe of Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), in another reference to pre-war, phantasmagorical cinema, is evoked likewise³ – the film exists as an entity of its own, its dialogue with older traditions mostly relevant insofar as it establishes some sort of aesthetic connection with a period close to the writer's life. Besides, Sokurov hardly indulges in postmodern pastiche. His treatment of the images – soft, grainy, hazy – and his use of distorting filters amounts to a product that is in no way derivative of its illustrious professed models. The images and sounds are here fully endowed with a combination of sensuousness and abstraction that are Sokurov's own.

The film is also in vibrant, if understated, dialogue with Sokurov's other works: the watchman, who has less personality and seems like much more of a ghost than Chekhov himself, appears to be none other than the character from *The Second Circle*, and is played by the same non-professional, Pyotr Alexandrov.⁴ This casting choice presents another indicator, in Sokurov, of the artist's desire to compose a unified, continuous oeuvre, in spite of the stylistic variations that often reflect the changes of the outside world, changes this cinema tries to accommodate and resist at once. Instead, Sokurov prefers to mourn and eulogise a more glorious and unified, if finally fictitious or fantastical past.

Owing to its minimalistic plot and sedate, cotton-like atmosphere, the film conveys a sense of dreamy routine, an '*emploi du temps*' of the visitor, which coincides beautifully with the central motif of the return: if Chekhov were to come back to his home, almost a century after his death, would he not, indeed, instead of sitting down and producing yet another memorable short story, play, or novella, rather spend his

time relishing the joys of the rekindled senses: touch (long-lost objects, water), smell (the clothes), taste (the dinner, and memories of more sumptuous meals) and hearing (the sounds of his world)? *The Stone* is a film about the sentience of things and dead persons, the simple pleasures of senses found again, but only for a very short while, their impermanence eliciting sadness rather than hedonistic relish.

In many ways, the emotional heart of the film lies in this sensory epiphany, and its most powerful scenes demonstrate the 'added value' of sound multiplying the power of evocation present in the image (to use Michel Chion's terminology). In one such scene, the ghostly visitor dons a tuxedo, and the smell of the fabric revives aural memories of Tchaikovsky's leitmotif from *Evgeny Onegin*. The mood of the music (a recording – with Galina Vishnevskaya as Tatyana – that is distant, echoing slightly in the mix), romantic and mellifluous yet full of longing, perfectly matches the graceful sensuality with which the visitor puts on his clothes, as a consummate, yet moderate, life-affirming being. The scene resonates also with Chekhov's prose, most clearly, perhaps, with the scene in which the male protagonist of *The Lady with the Lapdog* (*Дамa с собачкой*; *Dama s sobachkoy*, 1899) comes to his loved one's mansion in the provinces, and overhears someone playing the piano. As he listens, the music brings its score of associations, memories, and emotions, foreshadowing also the later scene in which the two meet at the local opera house. Music was of great importance to Chekhov (who knew Tchaikovsky and loved his music), thematically and poetically, and it is used in both ways in Sokurov as well: low in the mix, and almost throughout, a few notes from Mahler, looped, run in a quasi-subliminal, obsessive fashion through the subtly complex soundtrack. And at the end of the film,, it is Mozart's *Piano Concerto no. 23 in A* (1786) that *illustrates* ('accompanies' seems too weak a word) the final dinner between the visitor and the watchman. For Sokurov, the Mozart piece serves as a leitmotif of departure (it would later be used most spectacularly and emphatically in the opening episode of *Spiritual Voices*), but it is also the signature tune of a genius who died too soon – something that can be said of Chekhov as well. Further along the lines of this analogy, both Mozart and Chekhov were at once of and ahead of their time: artists who grasped the *zeitgeist* and anticipated future movements, and surely the Mozart piece used here is indicative of this, in its quality as not only a master of classicism, but also a precursor to musical romanticism, if not in structure and form, then in mood and affect.

Memory is thus a strong engine of the poetics of the film, but the predominant mood is hardly one of successful reunion with things past. And rightly so, insofar as the notion of 'return,' especially in Sokurov, is fraught from the beginning: as the French say, '*partir, c'est mourir un peu*' ('to go away is to slightly die') or the English, 'you can never go back'. Along these lines, the film poses and addresses some of its most fundamental questions: What does it mean to 'return' home to a place that is not home anymore (now a museum, a place of heritage);⁵ what are the effects of time in the process; and is it, ever at all, possible to *return*? Sokurov and Arabov seem to suggest that indeed the yearning to do so is always present, and conducive to sensorial joys – but that these are short-lived and can never truly be satisfied. There is little doubt, considering *The Stone's* time of production, that the filmmakers are making an oblique

critique of the impossible fantasy of resuming pre-revolutionary Russia values after the fall of communism, of returning to a Russian rather than Soviet home so to speak. That which has been laid to rest and buried will never really return, and if it does, out of place, artificially, in the shape of a ghost, it will not be to stay.

The stone in the film's title evokes the sentience and temporality of things and dead people as much as the cold, sad, hard and heavy qualities of the question evoked above. It is also thematised in the film by a tombstone, a motif brought forward in the scene in which Chekhov sits momentarily in a tomb, from which he retrieves a thick fur-coat which he caresses sensually. But it is not *his* tomb, as just noted, inasmuch as it is ill-fitting and unsatisfactory; if anything, the quasi-abstract, anamorphic, murky hole in the ground is less like an actual location and more like a reminiscence of the passage between the world of the living and the departed. Nothing is in its place, here; even the dead do not belong in the grave. Everything in the film, by virtue of its distorting filters, looks similarly 'de-realised' and out of place.

The film's use of lenses and filters summons another type of 'filter', of a metaphorical kind this time: that of veiled, half-forgotten memories, the universe of pre-revolutionary iconography summoned in the striking resemblance of this Chekhov-as-ghost and the Anton Chekhov of the old photographs (familiar to all in Russia and beyond): his dark wavy hair, and most of all, his nose clip glasses, the final touch the visitor adds to confirm his identity. We feel as though we are, indeed, in the presence of the ghost of Anton Chekhov, familiar and unfamiliar all at once, but certainly closer to us than any other character or element of the film: the return has become a rebirth and transfiguration, a *becoming*; it is also a reaffirmation, by Sokurov, that the past, however out-of-place, is more vibrant, relevant and benevolent than a vanishing and hazy present.⁶ Sokurov provides a truly magnificent tribute, philosophical and aesthetic, both to the period he loves and also to his own artistic powers; in so doing, he contradicts his thesis that the late twentieth century is void of any artistic relevance or major figure.

Sokurov may hardly be considered a directly political filmmaker, even if he suffuses many of his films with a pointed gaze on the modern world.⁷ In *The Stone*, at the time of a political context of urgency and rapid change in Russia, Sokurov speaks of eternity – detached, dream-like, presenting a ghost from times deemed better, with more 'flesh' than the contemporary, equally if not more phantom-like young man playing the watchman. In so doing, Sokurov reinforces eternal values over the impermanence and fleeting dimension of the events of the time. He acknowledges the delicate nature of the historical moment, however, by using the crane as a surprising, idiosyncratic symbol. In an interview, the director indicated how the bird, with its long and delicate neck and legs, served to symbolise Russia, especially in its Oriental dimension: fragile, very sensitive. Birds occupy a very important place in Sokurov's life and art (an ornithological study could be dedicated to the various, meticulously selected sounds of birds in his cinema), and here the gentle crane channels a philosophy of pacifism and acceptance: 'You must live in peace with birds, love them. They see, hear, remember everything. It is a sacred existence' (in Cazals 1993).⁸

The bird here also serves as an embodiment of a Russia that has a deep connection with Japan, a country and a culture which Sokurov admires deeply, and which

seems to feature qualities, civilisational and otherwise, that could solve some of Russia's problems, or so the director seems to suggest. This analogy is not far fetched: Sokurov had already used the bird in *Mournful Insensitivity*,⁹ a film which featured elements of Japanese culture, and would again show one in an episode of his 'Japanese cycle'.¹⁰ In one scene, Sokurov and the bird are seen in silhouette, black against white, a reference to Japanese prints (whose aesthetics also inform the visual aspect of *The Stone*). Sokurov places his hand on the windowpane, and the bird puts his foot on Sokurov's hand. The director's voice softly murmurs, 'лапки... какие лапки...' ('*lapki... kakie lapki*' ('such feet...')).¹¹

In this moment, the frailty and sentience of the animal is brought forward, as is the 'metempsychotic' analogy between humans and birds. Years later, in *Russian Ark*, the Marquis de Custine (Sergey Dreyden), looking at the hands of the spy (Leonid Mozgovoy – who plays Chekhov in *The Stone*), would repeat these words again, in the same longing, soft voice: 'лапки ... какие лапки.' Humans, Sokurov seems to imply, were all birds once: they simply have forgotten how to fly, and, perhaps, to remember. The (Oriental) qualities of delicateness, of harmony, seem to have deserted Russia. While the idealised figure of the bird, as embodied in Sokurov's crane, could not defend itself and either flew away or was killed, humans have instead developed means of violence and aggression. Anton Chekhov, thus closer to the bird than he is to the human (his intimacy with the crane in the film a strong indicator of this), must, in the end, leave this world in which he does not belong anymore – a tragic and sobering assessment of the filmmaker vis-à-vis his own historical context (the violent entrance of Russia into not only capitalism and its many abuses and excesses, but also the looming threat of war).

In the end, the film resolves none of its questions or narrative knots, exhibiting the paradox of the impossibility of the return, momentarily made flesh through Chekhov's character and through the practice of repetition and re-working proposed by the cinematic medium itself. The murky landscape, the fog, the snow-storm (the famous trope of Russian poetry reinstated here), the haze, the dreamlike imagery – all serve the purpose of inspiring in us the idea that only in dreams (and art) can we touch upon the possibility of a return to a place that was home and is home no more, where a 'no smoking' sign reminds the visitor/spectator to respectfully refrain from behaving as though he were, indeed, in the private space of the home. Because his birthplace was destroyed by a State-planned flood, Sokurov too could never go back, and in this sense his preoccupation with returning, over and over again, becomes all the more vivid.

II

At the time of the making of *The Stone*, Sokurov found himself in an ambivalent position. Barely liberated from the censorship and constrictions of the Soviet Union, the dread of late capitalism (ascribed by Fredric Jameson to the unique narrative of fragmentation and dissolution that was *Days of the Eclipse*) was already causing much socioeconomic turmoil in Russia. For the director, the implications were immediate:

following the short and vibrant *perestroika* period, he was now thrown into a context of a market economy, in which government funding was drastically cut, a fact that would jeopardise the financing of many of his films to come, and, more tragically, end the long tradition, in Soviet cinema and Russia hitherto in general, of a serious, dedicated art, replaced instead by mere entertainment – of a degenerate type trying forcibly to emulate American models, but without the means or wherewithal to even fully realise this already derivative ‘dream’.

In view of this, we understand better the number of elegies eulogising and enshrining the Soviet years that Sokurov made during this period, including the monumental *A Retrospection of Leningrad* (*Ленинградский петроспектив*; *Leningradskii retrospektiv*, 1990), a 13-hour documentary in 16 parts, made mostly with archival footage. But Sokurov also made the rarely seen *Elegy from Russia* (*Элегия из России*; *Elegiya iz Rossii*) in 1992, a fascinating poem of old age and rebirth, opening on a dying man and ending on a memorable shot of a frozen lake, the camera panning up and down to reveal a new-born child, wrapped in linen, his breathing gradually overwhelming the soundtrack. In this promise of a cycle of death and rebirth, Sokurov captured the essence of his cinema, reuniting the extremes of existence in a cogent whole. He also demonstrated, with these elegies and *The Stone* alike, that he belongs less to a tradition of Russian mysticism (as Tarkovsky did), but rather to the engrained liminal tradition of Russia at the confines of Europe and Asia, whose religion lay mostly in a profound connection with nature and its many forces.¹²

Having provisionally done his share to preserve the memory of a now bygone era, Sokurov would retreat, through most of the 1990s, in powerfully aestheticised, stylised films, the use of distorting lenses and a feeling of claustrophobic despondence nowhere better expressed than in his following feature, *Whispering Pages*; another idiosyncratic ‘adaptation’ of a Russian literary classic, and another investigation, of the most personal kind, of the workings and affects of memory.

Notes

- 1 As seen in *Lonely Voice of Man*, *Mournful Insensitivity* and *Days of the Eclipse*, and as we will see again in *Mother and Son* and *Russian Ark*.
- 2 Sokurov also mentioned Robert Flaherty as an important influence (in Cazals 1993).
- 3 Through its minimalist plot and highly painterly aesthetics, the film announces *Mother and Son* – another film in which hints of Murnau and Dreyer are felt, albeit in more oblique ways – more so than any other of his films.
- 4 Chekhov, informed by his medical background, diagnoses the feeble watchman with an iron deficiency. Sokurov mentioned that Alexandrov was a sickly person in real life. Beyond the direct biographical reference, the remark may be a broader commentary regarding the shortage of certain types of food during the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years in Russia.
- 5 This theme is especially poignant when one considers that Chekhov was buried at a considerable distance from his home, in Moscow.

- 6 Starting with the womb-like bathtub sequence, as Mihail Iampolski notes (in Arkus 2006: 184–8).
- 7 His only direct, overt political statement, *To the Events in Transcaucasia* (*К событиям в Закавказье*; *K sobytiyam v Zakavkaze*, 1990), in which Sokurov directly addresses the camera and the leaders of the Soviet Union, is also one of his shortest film, with a running time of ten minutes.
- 8 For Sokurov, a love of birds extends even further to the fact that he owned a pet crane for many years.
- 9 A film, as we saw in chapter two, deeply invested with the notion of metempsychosis, and based on George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House*, a work referencing the 'Russian manner' epitomised by the plays of Anton Chekhov.
- 10 Made thanks to the intercession of Sokurov's friend Hiroko Kojima, this remarkable cycle moves from dreamlike, hazy aesthetics (very reminiscent of *The Stone*) in its first part, *Oriental Elegy* (*Восточная элегия*; *Vostochnaya elegiya*, 1996), for which a Japanese village was recreated as a miniature in a studio, resembling Arnold Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead* (1883) and shrouded in heavy mists, to a gradually 'awakened' state investigating real places and real memories. The second part, *A Humble Life* (*Смиренная жизнь*; *Smirennaya zhizn'*, 1997), is about traditional kimono maker Umeno Matsuyoshi, and celebrates a lifestyle on the verge of extinction. The painful power of traumatic memories, including World War II and dealt with in a highly symbolic way in *Oriental Elegy*, is finally reenacted in the final episode, *dolce...* (1999). It is the cinematic portrait (its aspect ratio being that of a photograph held vertically) of the widow of writer Toshio Shimaō, Mikho, in her demented, mournful recounting of a life of trauma and death that left her daughter, Maya, mentally challenged. Overall, this constitutes one of Sokurov's most perfect, aesthetically appealing, and accessible documentary cycles.
- 11 These words echo those of Chekhov in *The Stone*. The crane's legs are directly associated with the writer's naked feet, featured prominently through the first part of the film.
- 12 It must be said, however, that a modernist mystique – that is, the belief in the essence, power, and autonomy of the work of art, with the added dimension of spirituality and belief in the transcendental – definitely unites the two men.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Whispering Pages: Death, Nothingness, Memory

As the final instalment in 'the trilogy of death and nothingness' (an aesthetic and thematically driven cycle initiated by *The Second Circle* and continued in *The Stone*), *Whispering Pages* marks a departure from these two previous projects, in the notable fact that Yuri Arabov was – at least officially – not involved in writing its script.¹ The result is that this latest film, based on 'motifs from nineteenth century prose' (and, as the end credits specify, personal archives from the period),² boasts a significantly different approach to literary sources and characters, and exposes what is quintessentially Sokurovian within his previous efforts: a fragmentary regime akin to the workings of memory, bathed in a tone and atmosphere of seriousness, and ponderous in its moralism, with a strong interest in discussions of faith.³ In general, however, the three films very clearly partake of the same project: an investigation of memory declined in three descending notes, weaving together a cogent stylistic and thematic tapestry. They are all united by a short running time and long takes, with sparse, slow camera movements, a square aspect ratio, toned down chromatic palette (see *The Stone's* black and white), and the use of various filters and distorting trick lenses (in the two latter instalments of this 'trilogy').⁴ *The Second Circle*, while intimately engaging the post-mortem, does so from the perspective of the living, entrenched in the nagging realities of formalities and bureaucracy, which smother the sacred and ritualistic dimensions of funerary rites. In *The Stone* and *Whispering Pages*, characters are either spending time with a ghost, roaming limbo, or making a fugacious escape from the beyond into the present or, as is the case here, from the classics of Dostoevsky and Gogol into a present-day, yet a-temporal, phantasmagorical St. Petersburg. In both cases, the 'present' in these films, transient and uncertain, has less substance and is more ghostly than the past.

Whispering Pages opens with a long, distorted shot of typical building facades of the Russian capital of the north, the colour a mix of sickly yellow, soon to turn to a palette of greenish and bluish greys, over the soundtrack of intense, if muffled, human activity – laughter, voices, general bustle, in contrast with the ponderous movement of the camera, slowly panning down. The main character, identifiable as Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment*, appears sitting hunched on a stone staircase leading to one of the city's canals. The tone is set for the rest of the film, which can, in many ways, be seen as a reduction of *Crime and Punishment* (from which only a few passages remain), wherein the atmosphere, the 'soul' of the novel has been preserved as though in an essence, while the plot is all but gone. This is due, in part, to the film's unfortunate production history: the German-Russian co-production met with financial issues, which led to the shooting being discontinued. As Leda Semyonova recounts (2011: 212–15), Sokurov had to edit the incomplete material at his disposal and still make it hold together.⁵ It did, and this fragmentary aspect of the film, instead of weakening it, partakes in the Sokurovian affect of a work that is hybrid or incomplete, yet serves to create a compelling whole. The filmmaker's years of practice working under the duress of Soviet censorship, prevented from shooting live footage, and still producing highly coherent and multi-layered filmic texts out of unrelated, disparate archival footage no doubt helped him in this case – his most mangled, incomplete project, at least from the perspective of its production history.

In many ways, *Whispering Pages* can be interpreted as the last hours of the unrepentant criminal soul, torn by the consequences of its crime, prior to eternal damnation. This hypothesis of course holds from the viewing of the film alone – the phantasmagorical realm echoing the internal torments of the dark soul – but would be reinforced a few years later in Sokurov's dialogue with Solzhenitsyn captured on tape in *The Knot* (Узел; *Uzel*, 1998) and *Dialogues with Solzhenitsyn* (Беседы с Солженицыным; *Besedy s Solzhetsinym*, 1998). Here, the two men discuss the separation between the trivial plots and profound philosophical implications lying beneath Dostoevsky's prose.⁶ The result of their conversations, as Alexey Gusev suggests (2006), can be seen in the filmmaker's decision to leave out the murder of the old usurer, the atmosphere of permanent crime that the film creates, the original sin that extends through the population, and the impossibility of punishment, or, more precisely, of repentance.⁷ Sylvie Rollet shares this observation:

The image of a tortured, uninhabitable space becomes central in *Whispering Pages*, as if it constituted the visual equivalent to the drama lived by Dostoevsky's characters. The sinister façades of the antiquated buildings, the dark maze of archways reduce the characters to mere elusive shadows or bodies seized in a perpetual fall. If Sokurov's universe seems even darker than Dostoevsky's, it is because *the moral conflict that tears the writer's characters has here contaminated the entire space*. The image of the post-lapsarian world can only be one of dereliction, without an outside. (2009: 68–9; emphasis added; translation mine)

The universe of the laconic Raskolnikov is thus enclosed on itself, with no promise of liberation through Sonya's love or hard labour offered at the closing of the novel, announcing the young man's spiritual rebirth. Sokurov's St. Petersburg hardly offers such possibility, as it is more of a crypt than a city, the aesthetics and architectures of the film all stamped with the notion of blockage, of no way out. There is not a single cloud, not a single tree to be seen, but only blocks of concrete, bricks, galleries, staircases, and dark-water canals. Sky-less and earth-less, this world seems to predetermine the anti-hero's rejection of Sonya's offer to kneel and kiss the earth and confess to his crime. Instead, he only retains the moment of the apprentice nihilist, cruelly deriding the faith of the soft, loving soul, confronting her with the face of a murderer.

This Raskolnikov is at once only a fragment of his literary analogue, but he is also more: a collage (or collapsing together) of the mental vicissitudes of many a nineteenth century character of Russian literature lost in the haunting Imperial city and its humid, festering atmosphere. In this sense, Natalya Sirivlya's observation that Svidrigaylov's character is present in Sokurov's Raskolnikov (1994: 299) is a tenable one: as suffering and misunderstood fallen angels, they both embody a demonic refusal to submit to any authority, and possess an insight, an intimacy, even, with the afterlife.⁸ In the end, instead of shooting himself, Raskolnikov enacts a grotesque parody of rebirth under the bosom of a statue of a lioness: trying to suck from the stone animal's slightly phallic nipple, the young man simply vanishes, dissolving into the nothingness of this mist-infused limbo. This moment reunites the Dostoevsky and Gogol classics in a curious hybrid: in Gogol's *The Overcoat* (*Шинель*; *Shinel* 1926), the sphinx appears right as Akaki Akakievich Bashmashkin has his precious overcoat stolen. Furthermore, the meek Bashmashkin is a character who barely has the strength to live, a quality with which many Sokurovian 'weak hearts' – not only in this film – resonate.

Unlike *The Second Circle* and *The Stone*, which carried some notion of warmth in spite of their similarly gloomy narratives and snowy locales, *Whispering Pages* is ultimately a despondent text, dominated by motifs of suicide, numb guilt, disappearance, and somnambulistic wanderings (by the time of its release in the West, an economically crumbling Russia had invaded Chechnya). Sokurov, never shy to expose death, talking corpses, or ghosts, delivers here the degraded version, the shade of a literary character once vibrant. As Gusev notes (2006), the cultural space represented by the literary (along with musical and painterly) masterworks of yore is the kingdom of the dead in Sokurov, an idea exemplified most fully by *Russian Ark*. The two films have more than one element in common, from their obsession with water (both as a physical and metaphorical element) and the scores of ghosts that populate both films, to their similar construction of a *mise-en-scène*, with a carefully choreographed cold frenzy of scenes involving multiple actors in period costumes, captured in long takes – and requiring professional actors, a fairly uncommon feature in Sokurov's films hitherto.⁹ If the film is mostly defined by gloomy, slow perambulations, it also features a more 'Gogolian' segment (purportedly a dream sequence) – where city dwellers walk within a timeless space and women fight over a man who takes advantage of the confusion to make his escape; in so doing, Sokurov evokes similar scenes of medieval villages and fairs from the paintings of Bruegel and Bosch. Later, a scene depicts people joyfully

jumping down into a pit, in what has been identified as a ritualistic mass suicide by some critics. Paradoxically enough, this death drive seems to be a merry one. Of course the merriments are detached, by virtue of the action itself as well as by the distance that Raskolnikov assumes, remaining a bystander and refusing to plunge down into the physical abyss, trapped in his own, metaphorical one – an eternal outsider, melancholy and detached, or worse, a prisoner of his own misdeeds and existential predicament.

The soundtrack, courtesy of Vladimir Persov, full of distant echoes and voices low in the mix, also contributes to this feeling of entrapment and detachment.¹⁰ The film's working title was *Mahler*, and music plays an important part here. In the scene in which Raskolnikov, walking like a pilgrim of some old faith, is bullied and abused by a tall bearded man on the street, we hear the by-now trademark *Rubensiana* by Otmar Nussio. In another scene, Gustav Mahler's *Song of the Earth*, mixed with the sound of water as though running through a pipe, serves to infuse the stylised images with further beauty, even as it offers little warmth. Yet the composer's dark, brilliant and tormented chords ideally match Sokurov's artistic ambitions in composing the uniquely distorted, torturous universe of *Whispering Pages*, a 'song of the dark, cold waters'.

Apart from Raskolnikov and Sonya, the film also features Raskolnikov's mother and sister in a brief scene. Much more prominently, two scenes involve the investigator Porfiry Petrovich. Yet he seems a grotesque mongrel combining the perceptive, inquisitive mind in *Crime and Punishment*, and Gogol's Akaki Akakievich – an immature, formless, feeble bureaucrat. The nod to Gogol is clear in the actor's costume, make-up, and the way in which he is lit, echoing the imagery of the Kozintsev–Trauberg F.E.K.S. adaptation of *The Overcoat*.¹¹

This is no Revolutionary Leningrad, however, but an uncertain, post-Soviet St. Petersburg, and thus the agitation and semaphoric acting style of the F.E.K.S. is replaced here with a sedate, spaced-out style and lazy delivery of lines, as if the fumes from the dark canals below were filled with adulterated laudanum.¹² When Porfiry falls into a contemplative moment, revealing a painting of antique ruins by Hubert Robert, as Sirivlya (1994: 299) has pointed out, it is a nod to Gogol's (rather than Dostoevsky's) idea of paradise as a Latin, harmonious realm, far from the cold and inhospitable city where the action (if it may be called so) unfolds. Conversely, Raskolnikov's ruminations are of hell and eternal damnation, represented in the arresting image of a ceiling covered in hundreds of old pairs of shoes – an image carrying with it the chilling vibe of the mass murders of the twentieth century. Hell is in this place already, and the staircases – such an important trope from the Dostoevsky novel – as places of wait, anxiety, and eternal uncertainty, are represented time and again throughout the film, echoing the metaphorical staircases and floors of the Beyond evoked by Chekhov's ghost in *The Stone*.

By virtue of its unfortunate production history, the structure of *Whispering Pages* is in analogy with its time of profound de-construction and tentative re-building of the Russian Federation – a time of economic and political uncertainty, of gloom and dejection. In this it speaks eminently, again, to its time, a moment of disparity, where completeness and narrative suturing (the search for a meaning amidst a dull chaos)

were still a deeply human necessity, akin to the characters of Gogol and Dostoevsky, marginal figures trying to fit in a system, and not finding their place; this, while attempting to give their existence some meaning and purpose. But without the option of faith and hope which the unexpected finale of *Crime and Punishment* procured, the completeness formed out of incompleteness here speaks more to Sokurov's ability at weaving together complex tapestries of signs and affects, and, most of all, to his unique talent at extracting the most out of the least, at squeezing out an artistic pertinence and relevance from the most exhausted, desperately hybrid material. But such undertaking, in the end, would prove tiresome and thankless, for both filmmaker and viewer.

Perhaps the best way to appreciate *Whispering Pages*, then, is precisely through the methodology the film seems to impart, in its fragmentary, hazy representations, to its source material: as a veiled memory, as though a dream. Memory is of tremendous importance in Sokurov's cinema, both in his feature films and his documentaries (and in his writing, where he often summons it through the sense of smell), where it adopts so many different guises, from the mournful celebration of a memory reaching beyond the space of memory and mediated through older people who were physically around at the moments it addresses (Shalyapin's daughters and son in *Elegy* to an actual phenomenological investigation of the memorial process, as in this latest film. Here, as Godard suggests in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (in relationship to the objects and visual motifs in the films of Alfred Hitchcock in the 'Le contrôle de l'univers' segment), it is not the narrative of the Dostoevsky or Gogol texts that we remember, but rather a set of images, a few sentences engraved in our minds forever, a general atmosphere, a sense of urgency to preserve these fragments, invested with the spirit of a time more relevant, more important, more significant than the one at which they are reminisced. In Sokurov, however, the plot serves no more as an excuse to 'take control of the universe': a cinema that comes after the 'death of the subject' re-instantiates the importance of subjectivity (but not in any postmodern way, here), bringing memory and the mechanisms of memory to the fore. The subject (Raskolnikov) vanishes under the bronze statue in the end (and here echoes are made to a further layer of Russian literary culture, namely Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*). But the museum-like space composed of fantasy, memory, and a hybrid of the two remains, much as the physical building which survives its initial architects and dwellers. They procure a reassurance of one's own survival even beyond the grave, although only of a fragmentary, incomplete kind, incompatible, perhaps, with the general sense of physical and mental integrity which seems to obsess the (Western) mind.

The question of memory is thus thematised in three moments, three layers, throughout the 'trilogy': the dead father and the trinkets as seen and experienced through Malyanov's eyes and body;¹³ Chekhov's vibrant and sentient ghost working through his own departure and the limits of his legacy (his trace) in time and space; and, here, the final stage, the most barren and jarring, while also the most indirect: the memory of the author himself, that intimate realm of memory that is neither in space or time, and yet at once is subjected by the many contingencies of the dialectical play of time and space, of wake and sleep, or, perhaps more to the point, of life and death. Consequently, memory appears closely connected to an organic entity, with a life of its own,

from birth to death and decay, and the past's existence, as mentioned already, acquires a concrete form, a more solid existence than the present, transient and ever uncertain.

Having completed this 'trilogy of death and nothingness' in quick succession over the cusp of the Soviet and immediate post-Soviet years, and having accomplished a careful investigation of one of the major motifs of his oeuvre, Sokurov would take a hiatus in his activity as a feature fiction filmmaker, probably vexed by the financial complication that prevented him from realising his full artistic vision on *Whispering Pages*. He would instead spend more time on his documentary projects, including the epic *Spiritual Voices* (1995), which would allow him to travel again to the heat of central Asia – and to be reunited with the world of the military. His return to theatrical distribution and feature filmmaking four years later, with *Mother and Son*, would enshrine him in the West as one of the world's most important living directors.

Notes

- 1 Apparently he was only accountable for a few lines of dialogue. It is uncertain, however, whether he withdrew his name from the project because Sokurov drifted so far from his source script (as he would, for instance, with *Mother and Son*), or simply added said lines of dialogue to Sokurov's own finished script.
- 2 Elements were drawn from private papers and archives, but also reference famous writers, such as Saltykov-Shchedrin, Gogol, and, most prominently, Dostoevsky.
- 3 This by no means implies that Arabov's own concerns are alien to metaphysical considerations.
- 4 All three films were shot by Alexander Burov, who had previously worked on most of Sokurov's documentaries. Unlike Yurizditsky, who favoured the anamorphic widescreen format and light-filled compositions, Burov is a master of the square, 4/3 aspect ratio and the *chiaroscuro* aesthetic.
- 5 'The circumstances of the production ... meant that a lot wasn't filmed [...] The director ... had to relinquish the original dramaturgy. Construct a new one. You have simply "somehow" to link the scenes together, "forgetting" that for various reasons this did not happen'; Semyonova, translated by Richard Taylor (2011: 213).
- 6 Dostoevsky and Sokurov have in common a poetics of ambiguity, oscillation, a certain inclination toward mysticism, a form of polyphony, a rejection of realism, and, of course, the motif of the double.
- 7 The murder of the usurer (a key point in the novel) was originally in the script – although not depicted in any graphic or physiological way – but was eventually not included, much like a substantial part of the film, due to budgetary restrictions. A scene in the film shows a gathering of men carrying what could be a body, wrapped in white cloth, out of a building that could be the location of the murder, though this is never made clear in the film.
- 8 The decadent provincial man who vies for Dunya, Raskolnikov's sister's heart and finds out about his murdering of the old usurer. After trying to use this information to blackmail Dunya, he ends up committing suicide.
- 9 With the exception of Leonid Mozgovoy's remarkable performance as Chekhov.

- 10 Persov, one of Sokurov's longest-standing collaborators, has filled many positions within the director's team, primarily as a sound engineer and designer, and has been referred to by Sokurov as his faithful handyman.
- 11 It is interesting to point out that the name of one of the make-up artists working with Sokurov on this and other films is Kozintsev, and that, a few years later, Sokurov would make a documentary about Kozintsev – *Kozintsev's Flat* (*Квартира Козинцева*; *Kvartira Kozintseva*, 1998), from the *Diary of St. Petersburg* cycle.
- 12 The 'Factory of Eccentric Actors', created in the 1920s by several Soviet filmmakers, including Grigori Kozintsev (1905–1973), and funded upon the principles of biomechanics laid out by stage director Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940).
- 13 His 'heritage', to use a term now much in currency in cultural studies, and which will growingly effect and redefine the cinema of the twentieth century, the cinema of the analog format, of 35mm (and, perhaps, the only real cinema, too). If we define heritage as one kind of presence of the past in the present, we see further the relevance of the term, in what it has in common with memory and history.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mother and Son: Time Abolished, Time Transfigured

‘One must submit oneself many times to death in order to attain life everlasting.’

– Caspar David Friedrich

In the press dossier accompanying the release of *Mother and Son* in the West, as well as in the course of numerous interviews, Alexander Sokurov exalted the bi-dimensionality and the flatness of the cinematic image, connecting it to the painterly tradition and specifically to that of the religious icon. The director argued no less that this very flatness founded the nature and dignity of cinema as art.¹ He also repeated his attachment to pre-twentieth century painterly traditions, while making disparaging comments about modernism and the twentieth century art at large. In his 1998 article ‘Le cinéma comme la peinture,’ Jacques Rancière challenged these very notions of bi-dimensionality and ‘pictoriality’ in Sokurov. Using Sokurov’s *Whispering Pages* as his case study, the French Marxist thinker aptly questioned the alleged concept of flatness in painting and cinema. He did so by demonstrating the greater proximity of Sokurov’s 1993 opus with the tradition in turn-of-the-century photographs for a flattening of space in order to move away from representational realism, rather than with the painterly tradition per se. More importantly for the current study, Rancière highlighted the contradictions of professed bi-dimensionality in the specific instance of a scene featuring people jumping down into a pit, in Raskolnikov’s dream sequence (an alleged ritualistic mass-suicide) – a shot proposing such an idea of depth and dimensionality. Rancière also posited the use of sound in Sokurov as a third dimension, complementing and complicating the allegedly flat images and frequent absence of reaction shots in his films.

While Rancière's piece discusses *Whispering Pages*, it was released in an issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma* dedicated to *Mother and Son*, and so was indirectly targeting the political rather than aesthetic position put forth by Sokurov at the time of the film's release. Rancière's agenda was to undermine the Russian director's rejection of twentieth century art by underlining how much he was, in truth, influenced by it. In other words, he aimed at debunking the proverbial 'anxiety of influence' in Sokurov, or his Oedipal rejection of the Soviet (or modernist) father. But while Rancière undeniably has a point in his oblique critique – Sokurov, like everyone else, is no island – *Mother and Son* differs in many ways from *Whispering Pages*. Though the two films clearly share a marked inclination toward anamorphic, stretched images courtesy of distorting lenses and mirrors, they are, otherwise, completely different: in theme, affect, tone, imagery, and in their treatment of time. This last element, it seems to me, is the most important, but let us first briefly discuss the others.

As is clear to anyone who has seen it, *Whispering Pages* is a vastly dark, despondent operation, one of gloom and despair, featuring a character secluded from nature, in a limbo comprised of dark buildings and stagnant waters. *Mother and Son* proposes quite a different picture: one of coexistence, of communion in and with nature (albeit a vastly indifferent, sublime nature), of characters who are reconciled with the laws of the universe and who stoically marvel at its overwhelming beauty through lush, painterly landscapes.² One film deals with the refusal of redemption following murder, and a rebellious attitude toward God; the other – while quite ambiguous in its relationship to a beyondness of things and the existence of an afterlife – proposes a peaceful acceptance of the passing of all things. *Whispering Pages* resurrects and reflects upon the heritage of Soviet cinema through the use of professional actors who can revive, albeit in a sedate, sad manner, the aesthetics of the F.E.K.S. and the semaphoric acting style made so popular in the 1920s.³ On the other hand, if connected to any older cinematic tradition, *Mother and Son* would be an heir to French cinematic 'impressionism,' evidenced by a preoccupation with lenses and manipulations of the image.⁴ The latter film also marks the renewed collaboration of Sokurov with non-professional actors: *Days of the Eclipse's* Alexey Ananishnov is featured alongside Gudrun Geyer, a German film festival director whom Sokurov met by chance (much like *Save and Protect's* Cécile Zervoudacki, met at the 1987 Locarno film festival), immediately designating her for the role of the mother in his new project.

Both films may be stylised and aesthetically controlled to the extreme, but they strongly differ in tone, affect and setting: *Whispering Pages* is, in essence, about refusing one's fate, and stems from a nightmarish, alienating, dark tradition, with an artificial, hallucinogenic urban world as its setting; *Mother and Son* embraces the inevitability of human fate, and pertains more to the realm of the dreamscape or the fairy tale, taking place in nature. For this reason, perhaps, watching the two films in succession offers such a vastly different impression of time, in spite of their roughly similar length and number of shots. Where *Whispering Pages* exerts a feeling of pressure, of excruciating length, unease, and nausea, *Mother and Son* (even more so than the similarly themed *Second Circle*) offers an impression of complete abolition of time, or, rather, its transfiguration into something different altogether.

The old notion of *ekphrasis* may be of use to the present discussion. *Whispering Pages* found both its roots and object of commentary in literature, but remained, to all intents and purposes, a film. With *Mother and Son*, the medium procuring the commentary (film) comes several steps closer to the medium commented upon (painting); it identifies and almost assumes the other's aspect and temporality, as if by osmosis. This remarkable effect is accomplished through a variety of means. First, there is the combination of short running time (under 70 minutes) with long shots and a minimum of camera movements, yielding an impression of stasis wherein the passing of time 'suspends its flight'. The minimalistic plot – a son tends to his sick mother, takes her on a walk, then brings her home, goes on another walk, and returns to find that she has passed away while he was gone – certainly contributes to this impression, as it seems to be building toward a much longer film, and ends up being, instead, a magnificently protracted short film discourse. Even if it ends in death – a logical conclusion – the film, as a script, ends *in medias res* as it were, so that the illusion of time suspended is present here as well. But beyond these considerations, and in opposition to *Whispering Pages*, where the use of painterly references does little to alleviate the feeling of long, slow passing time, *Mother and Son* also creates a different dimension and regime of time and the gaze: whereas Sokurov's previous feature was invested in the past and memory, wherein the character was trapped, *Mother and Son* offers a fascinating form of time suspended, neither past, nor present. It does so by virtue of its careful reworking of the cinematic image through its constant painterly references.

The number of painters immediately recognisable here is unprecedented in any film by Sokurov: the opening shot, with its chiaroscuro, draws upon Caravaggio (for instance the *Lute Player*, 1596) and Rembrandt (surely there are hints, here, of his *Christ in the Storm on the Genesareth Lake* (1633)).

Throughout the film, we recognise many other artists' influence: the stretched bodies of El Greco,⁵ pieta figures by Rogier Van Der Weyden or Andrea Mantegna,⁶ seascapes by J.M.W. Turner, spring orchards by Jean-François Millet,⁷ and, most importantly – the reference all critics picked up on, and upon which Sokurov keenly commented himself – the ruins and romantic landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich.

These obvious references (among others) speak to Sokurov's professed admiration for the old masters and to his disdain for modernism and twentieth century art. The two main reasons for this rejection are the loss of religiosity in modern art and abstraction, which Sokurov associates not with the emergence of cinema and photography (which make figurative art obsolete), but rather with the chaos, violence, and emptiness of the human soul left to its own devices, a chaos that abstract art seems to express. Abstract art, Sokurov suggests, is the expression of spiritual nothingness because it fails to represent the body – precisely because there is no soul for man without the word being made flesh. For better or for worse, it is such statements that are at the heart of Sokurov's controversial and seemingly paradoxical position as traditionalist/conservative thinker and his continual impulse to experiment on the level of film form. Much more interesting to the present argument is the tension, or perhaps even competition between a similar dimension in romanticism and modernism, namely subjectivity. The overt references to the school of German Romantic painting under-



Mother and Son:
echoes of Rubens and Caravaggio



*Christ in the Storm on
the Genesareth Lake*
(Rembrandt, 1633)



Landscape with Oak Trees and a Hunter (Caspar David Friedrich, 1811); sad and forlorn trees in *Mother and Son*



Mother and Son: crooked shacks – between the fairy tale and the romantic ruin



Ruins of Eldena, near Greifswald
(Caspar David Friedrich, 1824–25)



Morning (Caspar David Friedrich, 1821)



Morning fog in the pine trees in *Mother and Son*



Wanderer above the sea of fog (Caspar David Friedrich, 1818)



Mother and Son: the son takes his mother for a walk



Spring (Jean-François Millet, 1868–73)

line the importance of subjectivity in Sokurov – and its implications vis-à-vis notions of the sublime, the relativity of time in nature, and, most importantly, the project (as identified by Hölderlin) of romantic art to exacerbate the real in order to show what is hidden beyond: in this case, God. Since Sokurov envisages the twentieth century as having crucially lost this ability, we can interpret his aesthetic project in *Mother and Son* as the antidote to contemporary art (and, as mentioned above, to what the filmmaker regarded as an equally depressing socioeconomic and political environment): a blending of overtly religious traditions with ‘natural religion’ – the painterly sublime. What matters most to Sokurov, it seems, is the mystery in art, through which one can be reconnected with the transcendent, and to which the flatness of the icon is seemingly indispensable. Indeed, as Elena Gracheva points out (2006: 207–11), in Sokurov, art is what renders the invisible visible, but without stirring or breaking down the flatness of the cover that warrants the mystery’s integrity – thereby underlining the importance of bi-dimensionality in painting and cinema.

It is in order to come closer to the contemplative, absorbing regime of the icon through the secularised mystery of the romantic sublime that Sokurov decided to remove, inasmuch as is possible, the notion of time from his film.⁸ This is precisely because time, as Rancière pointed out, always implies a vector, a direction, a fourth – and therefore, third – dimension. The fixed, timeless element of cinema is the still frame – at least in celluloid film, inscribed on the physical strip. In many ways (and in this aspect, the film anticipates *Russian Ark*, *Mother and Son* offers a new approach to cinematic time by virtue of its presenting each frame to us as a painting – a painting animated with a modicum of movement, no doubt, but dominated vastly by its uncommon length and impression of fixity. But this sense of movement is also at work in the apparently fixed images of some of Sokurov’s favourite paintings. Michael Fried, in his expert study *The Moment of Caravaggio* (2010), has demonstrated the ways in which the unique character of and fascination with the baroque master derives from the tension at play between movement and immobility, or, to be more precise, between *process* and *product*. Caravaggio’s investment with violence and the moment of dying, his severed heads, his fascination with the petrifying gaze of the Medusa, and his unique skill at freezing in time the most compelling human expressions and postures – not to mention the physical phenomena such as the flickering of light or ripples on water (as in *Bacchus*, 1595) that his work inscribes – all situate the painter as being both inside and outside of time.

Remote from the mythological or violent motifs of the great master, Sokurov nevertheless opens his film with a most ‘Caravaggioesque’ image (a shot filled with effects of chiaroscuro and a piercing intensity), where we see a tension at work between process (the work of cinematography, framing, appliance of anamorphic lenses, and the work of the actors) and product (their fixed, intense attitude, yielding a cinematic moment wherein the impression of time disappears). However unwittingly, therefore, *Mother and Son* elicits a potent commentary that is both meta-filmic and meta-pictorial with the most memorable example occurring at the film’s very end: the son, close to his mother’s inert hand, slowly reveals his neck to the camera, his face by then off screen, and all his ‘facial’ expressivity thus metonymically redirected toward the



Mother and Son: stasis and tension: the son's neck tenses up as he cries for his dead mother



Movement and stillness: a fragment
from Caravaggio's *Bacchus* (1595)

neck. After a moment of stasis, and in a sudden jolt (underlined primarily by his cry of pain on the soundtrack) the son tenses up, the tendons and veins bulging in his neck. As in the Caravaggio detail above, the tension is complete between the action at play (process) and its frozen immobility (product), between spasm and paralysis, when one is so overwhelmed by emotion that the next moment cannot be articulated; when time stops.

The absence of strong temporal narrative points of reference is further enhanced by other elements: as Stéphane Bouquet (1998) has noted, the temporality of the film is already short-circuited by the a-chronology of it all: at no point is it possible to ascertain at what period the film takes place (the modern clothing of the son in contrast with the appearance of a steam locomotive), and Sokurov himself has identified the film as a fairy tale. Yet the temporal indeterminacy of the film's visuals might be neutralised by its extraordinary soundtrack, animated with the sound of the sea, the wind in the leaves of the trees, animal sounds (birds chirping and insects buzzing – those familiar harbingers of death in Sokurov's cinema), and the train's hoot in the distance. Michel Chion (1990) has demonstrated how sound, through its effect of



Mother and Son: inverted roles –
the son feeds his dying mother

added value, contributes to vectorising the image, to giving it a direction. Yet the remarkable feature of *Mother and Son* is that all its sounds, however directional, are not 'time sensitive': they can be repeated endlessly, signifying little in terms of narrative progression, so that the whole temporality of the film, be it in the wanderings in nature or even the conversations between the son and the dying mother, take place in a perpetual present, of an ever repeated routine, the universal cyclical repetition of life and death. This quality is what Fredric Jameson has identified in other Sokurov films as 'l'emploi du temps' (2006), except that in this film, the 'emploi' part is reduced to very little indeed: apart from the customary ritual of caring for the mother (injections of painkillers, feeding her, taking her for walks) it is rather a time of contemplation, perambulatory or fixed, which never seems to end – nor ever to start, for that matter. This is reiterated in the cycle of inversions proposed by the film, which is nowhere better illustrated than in its constitutive, reverse *Pietà*: the son gently tending over the suffering body of the mother, who has, in spite of her age, relapsed into a second childhood, where she indulges in capricious remarks and is lovingly carried around by her own son and fed from a baby bottle.

The 'extra-diegetic' music, usually a strong vehicle for forward momentum, undergoes a treatment at the level of the sound mix, with filters and volume modulations, which renders it distant and memory-like. Indeed, the exclusive use of classical music only contributes to the a-temporal (both past and present – in a word, eternal) 'added' value present in *Mother and Son*. In the most remarkable musical moment of the film – in the middle of the son and mother's walk – when the old woman falls asleep, Sokurov resurrects, for the last time in his feature films (at the time of writing), Otmar Nussio's *Rubensiana*, the leitmotif of *Lonely Voice of Man* and *The Second Circle*. This beautiful symphonic poem, associated previously with the idea of the voyage and bidding farewell, intertwines the temporality of the mother's dream (she wakes midway through the scene), the son's own ruminations over their fate, and the beauty of nature ('Creation, you are so beautiful,' he says, while clasping his mother and looking into the distance). In so doing, it overlaps and weakens one type of temporality – that of dream versus waking life, film as dreamscape versus film as an objective mirroring of indexical 'time'. In short, Sokurov privileges the pictorial regime, the painterly frame over the conventional movement-(or even time)-image.

Gilles Deleuze liked to compare the film as philosophical concept to a block of space and time (1983, 1985, 2004). As I demonstrated in my analogy between Bresson and Sokurov in closing chapter five, Sokurov escapes the strict and convenient distinction between Deleuzian movement- and time-images.⁹ To qualify *Mother and Son* as partaking of the regime of the time-image would simply be incorrect, or at least insufficient: each shot of the film is its own block of space and time, into which, furthered by the association and dialogues of the shots between them, a new multiplicity of spaces and times are created. One could, perhaps, play with the Deleuzian concept and speak of 'times-image(s)'. This conceptual metaphor might be best understood using the concept of the museum, as a space of multiple perambulations, multiple possible itineraries, and infinite universes contained within each painting and within each combination of the paintings through the viewer's gaze. It is very tempting to view Sokurov's film as a cinematic museum, informed by a variety of pictorial traditions. The film itself inscribes this opening onto endless possibilities within Sokurov's body of work itself, although it does so subtly: at the end of the final dialogue between the son and the mother (right as he is about to leave for his solitary walk), Sokurov inserts a shot from *Spiritual Voices* (1995), one of a valley over which a dark and threatening cloud hovers. The image, beautiful and evocative, speaks to the viewer in and of itself. However, if one takes into account the history and themes of Sokurov's epic, five-hour documentary, one can see here a whole new resonance: the theme of loneliness becomes reinforced by geographical alienation, but also by untimely death and the (im)possibility of the return. Most importantly, perhaps, the integration of a video image in a film otherwise entirely shot on 35mm, rendered seamless through the careful pictorial distortions of the image, inscribes the realm of the documentary into the cinematic frame as a work of art, and the film into one of the endless itineraries through Sokurov's 'imaginary museum'.

Yet it would seem as though *Mother and Son* hardly realises this utopia fully, on account of the obstacle constituted by its ontological sequentiality. Montage has fixed the shots in a specific order, and the film, like any cinematic production, is subject to a fixed duration, agreed upon in the contract between the filmmaker and his spectators. However, in some miraculous alchemy of sounds and images, Sokurov has managed to transcend the habitual regime of viewing and cinematic time: chronos becomes aeon, as it were, the *time of pure events*. We forget about the passing of Newtonian time, and enter the perception of relative and multiple times: cyclical time coexists with entropy, renewal with death. This can hardly be satisfactorily expressed linguistically, but the film itself delivers an answer to the phenomenological riddle constituted by the original perception (and even comprehension) of time.

Irony has it that we should use temporal markers to illustrate this: at the 50th minute, the son is standing in the meadow, and a train passes by in the distance. We don't know this yet, but a shift has taken place in his world – either his mother has died and the train and its white smoke evoke the passing of her soul, or the son has come to terms with the sad inevitability of her imminent death. In this specific shot, Sokurov seems to relinquish the special lenses and other implements of visual distortion, and delivers a more 'traditional' (if equally beautiful) indexical shot. The scene is



Mother and Son: as the train passes in the distance, we are reminded of the ineluctable passing of time

endowed with an immediate, quasi-haptic feeling of traditional cinematic time re-instituted. Such a remarkable shift emphasises further the thematic undercurrent of the scene: the reality of the passing of time, suspended so notably throughout the rest of the film, wherein death has no actual lease, is filled here with immortal landscapes and immortal people, as the closing lines of *Russian Ark* would again emphasise.¹⁰

How come, then, that Sokurov manages to impose the notion of death, ever so gently as a thin ontological veil, over the whole fabric of his film? Surely, if the impression of time can be conquered, entropy cannot. And so the many color filters, with emphasis on faded yellows and greens, simultaneously evoke sunset and dusk (as the end of life), spring (the apple tree blossoms), and fall (the golden hues). The general impression is that of sickness – of a beautiful body *attacked* by some outside phenomenon. The waxy complexion of the mother's face and hands is a manifest indicator of this, but the most important aspect sustaining this sickly affect are the visual distortions themselves, causing the illusion of hallucination or feverish vision in the viewer. In his essay 'The Truth in the Flesh,' Mikhail Iampolski (1999) emphasised

how Sokurov was an heir to the tradition found in such painters as Hans Holbein, who, in his picture of the martyred Christ, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520–1522), suggests flesh to be a greater revealer of truth than the word. *Mother and Son* is but one of the many films in which this theory finds its illustration, but the film more readily evokes another Holbein painting – *The Ambassadors* (1533), and its famous anamorphic skull in the foreground.¹¹ Bypassing modern psycho-analytical interpretations of the film, I would like to use Jurgis Baltrušaitis Jr.'s thesis (1977) that anamorphic representations, at least in their early Modern, European rendition, often have to do with death, being in their own time variations on the painterly genre of the *vanitas*.¹² By stressing the presence of death, at first invisible (or rather unrecognisable) in the shape of the distorted skull alongside all the wealth and science of its subjects, Holbein poses a reminder of things to come. Through his use of distorting lenses and mirrors in *Mother and Son*, Sokurov has accomplished yet another *memento mori*, this time much more pleasurable and fulfilling than in his previous iteration of the *vanitas*, *Save and Protect*. Indeed, instead of making it felt, this time he domesticates and postpones the anxiety of death – the very purpose of art, in the filmmaker's opinion, meant to grant us a greater acceptance of and preparation for the inevitable. It is a bold and eminently political gesture in a context of liberalised, wild capitalist economy, which jointly co-opts the death of others and represses one's own idea of mortality. If the latter is accepted, then what precedes it – life in a time of turmoil and lack of realisation – must also be less unbearable, less meaningless. For by the late 1990s, four generations of people had lived (and died) under the Soviet regime, having gone through wars, terror and the depression of a stale repressive State. When finally the regime came to an end, the disappointment of seeing more social woe brought about to most (and, which is worse, to those who probably needed most care and help, such as the elderly) by the new system was felt by Sokurov to be an addition of insult to injury. The director imparted this injustice to the cultural and spiritual vacuum of the day, and thus proposed a film that would make tabula rasa of the twentieth century and invite its viewer to another approach of cinema, of time, and existence. If the lives of many had gone to waste, at least, the director thought, they could find some solace in the acceptance of death. With *Mother and Son*, Alexander Sokurov reminded many of a forgotten function of art, and contributed to elevating cinema to the rank of high art, concocting a more potent remedy for the viewer than any comfort the son might have given his ailing mother: a glimpse into life everlasting.

The obsession with eternal life, coterminous with absolute power, would be at the core of 1999's *Moloch*. This film, the first instalment of the tetralogy of power, an ambitious cycle conceived by Sokurov and Arabov as early as 1980, was made possible, no doubt, by the absolute critical triumph of *Mother and Son*, which remains, to this day, one of Sokurov's most celebrated and best-loved films.

Notes

- 1 These thoughts were perfectly summarised in the interview Paul Schrader conducted with Sokurov (1997).

- 2 In his interview with Paul Schrader, Sokurov revealed the secret of *Mother and Son's* unique images. Many of the film's scenes were shot using a mirror, the camera filming not the actors but their reflection, onto which Sokurov would apply gentle brushstrokes to figure the clouds, for instance. The method makes camera movements practically impossible – therefore explaining the near absence of pans or tracking shots in the film, present only in the least visually distorted takes.
- 3 See chapter seven, footnote 12.
- 4 The French school of cinema of the 1920s, exemplified by the films of Abel Gance, Germaine Dulac and Jean Epstein.
- 5 The shots of the son carrying the mother on the path outside, with its stretched out bodies and beautiful landscapes, summons the imagery of El Greco, as in *The View of Toledo* (1596–1600).
- 6 The mother strikingly resembles the Virgin Mary from a series of sources, from Byzantine icons (such as the *Virgin Pelagonitissa*), Rogier Van Der Weyden's *Deposition of Christ* (1450), or Andrea Mantegna's picture of the *Dead Christ* (1490), which we saw in chapter five. The Mother also has qualities of both the mourning old woman and the dead Christ in the Mantegna, and this brilliant conflation of both figures gives even more resonance to the interchangeable nature of mourning and suffering. While *Mother and Son* offers, on the visual level, an inverted *Pietà* figure (the son clasping the dying mother), in their conversations it is the mother who pities him and mourns what his life will be after she dies. This reversible character enriches the texture of the film, also finding illustration in the way in which the mother, helpless, having to be fed and carried around, becomes her son's child. And, in his athletic frame, the son refers us to male bodies in Michelangelo's work, as the tormented, cloudy skies in the film echo, perhaps, details of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling known as 'God separating the light from the dark' (1508–1512). The film also quotes illustrious painters closer to our times: When the son opens the door of the house onto the garden's flowery fruit trees, the blue of the skies and the white of the blossoms evoke a Chagall... embedded in a Rembrandt interior.
- 7 The imagery of the sea and the white sails, while clearly a quotation from Friedrich, can also evoke Turner, whom Sokurov brings up in certain interviews as another important source of influence on his work (here, *The Snow Storm*, 1842). And of course, parallels with the French school are equally present (see Millet's *Spring*, 1868–1873).
- 8 Iampolski (2009) discusses the importance of 'kairos' (the crucial moment defining a man's fate) and frozen time, but not in relationship to *Mother and Son* (see chapters four and ten).
- 9 The French philosopher's two influential books on cinema, *The Movement Image* and *Time Image* (1983 and 1985 for the French editions, 1986 and 1989 for the English translations) discuss the nature of cinema, elaborating on Henri Bergson's theories on time and space. Deleuze rebuffs the idea that cinema is a succession of still images, emphasising rather the continuity of movement. In the first volume,

he discusses a series of films and creates subcategories to the movement-image, most prominently the perception-image, affection-image, and action-image. This cinema is still preoccupied primarily with movement and thus action, led by logic and rationality. But by the aftermath of World War II, with its score of unspeakable horrors, and the collapse of a rational, graspable notion of the universe and its causalities, the movement-image is superseded by a new category, the time-image. This second category is illustrated, among others, by Italian neorealism and the modernist cinemas of the 1960s (the French New Wave and so on).

- 10 'We are eternal people, destined to sail forever.'
- 11 Although the piece was not translated and published in English until 1999, it was originally written in the early nineties, prior to *Mother and Son's* production.
- 12 The comments by Slavoj Žižek, following Lacan, on the gaze and its disquieting implications (especially in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958)). For Lacan's discussion of Gaze in Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* (which features a famous anamorphic skull), see *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1977).

CHAPTER NINE

Moloch: Adi (and Eve): Fear Eats the Soul

‘When Germans become afraid, when that mysterious German fear begins to creep into their bones, they always arouse a special horror and pity. Their appearance is miserable, their cruelty sad, their courage silent and hopeless.’

– Curzio Malaparte, *Kaputt*

I

In a moving and telling interview conducted on Russian television in the summer of 2012, Alexander Sokurov revealed what the key to being human was in his view: to fear no more.¹ He disambiguated the statement: it had nothing to do with being fearless in a sense of temerity or daringness, but rather to have overcome fear, such a natural, but perhaps animal rather than properly human emotion.²

Sokurov’s comment serves the purpose of the discussion of *Moloch*, his 1999 feature about a day in the life of Eva Braun and Adolf Hitler, circa 1942, which marked the return to the foreground of screenwriter Yuri Arabov. While the latter had been involved in the scripts of all previous Sokurov films, his role had clearly been diminishing throughout the 1990s: the comic tone was practically all but gone from *The Second Circle*; his contribution to *Whispering Pages* was so marginal (a few dialogue lines) that his name was removed from the credits; and while *Mother and Son* was originally his screenplay, it was completely transformed by Sokurov.³ For *Moloch*, however, Sokurov adapted Arabov’s script more faithfully than ever,⁴ perhaps because it had been in the works for so many years – its inception dating back to the early 1980s.⁵ As a result, *Moloch* constitutes a sharp shift of tone from the preceding film (and also coincides with the accession to power of Vladimir Putin later that same year), recon-

necting with the histrionics and choral universe of *Mournful Insensitivity*, as well as that film's preoccupation with madness, war, and history. On the metaphorical level, where *Mournful Insensitivity* evoked an apocalyptic Noah's Ark, *Moloch* serves as a dark parody of the book of Genesis, specifically the story of Adam and Eve. But unlike the innocence – soon to be smothered by the original sin – of the biblical characters, here Eva is a languid temptress awaiting physical love, while Hitler is a demented buffoon, midway between delusional delirium and a fear of the imminent fall. It is a paranoid, scrutinised, fear-ridden Nazi Eden that Sokurov gives us to behold.

Echoes to the book of Genesis are inescapable: Joseph Goebbels makes a jocular reference to it during the meal scene, and the names of the main characters coincide almost exactly with the first humans of the Good Book. But just as the Nazi enterprise aimed, among other things, at destroying or inverting the morals and values of the Christian West – appearing close, in its project of ritualistic neo-paganism and celebration of destruction, to Satanist practices of the Middle Ages founded on the grotesque inversion of Christian rituals – so does the film rely on a constant grotesque subversion and ridiculing of traditional Nazi iconography.⁶ The interesting aspect, of course, is that Arabov and Sokurov achieve this while constantly catering to the most precise historic details: costumes, props, and locations are all from the period or recreated with painstaking detail, and most of the dialogue comes directly from Erick Picker's short-handed stenograph records of the Nazi dignitaries' ranting. To this, touches of slapstick are added, making this account of a day in Berchtesgaden's 'Eagle's Nest' almost look like an episode from the Marx Brothers (Leonid Mozgovoy's Hitler, indeed, resembles Groucho as much as he does the German dictator). Likewise, when the Führer chases Eva Braun in his underwear in a strange seduction game, grunting like an animal, we definitely feel as though we have relapsed into the madhouse of *Mournful Insensitivity*. Still, for all these trappings, *Moloch* is by no means comedy.

The term of the grotesque is important here: Hitler is aligned with Moloch, the Ammonite god described in the Old Testament, who demanded child sacrifice from apostate Canaanite followers – in short, a mythological creature with deep connections to Israel's past. As Giorgio Agamben wrote in *L'Ouvert, de l'homme et de l'animal* (2002), what distinguishes human and animal is their approach to the world. Borrowing on Agamben's theories, Yannick Lemarié (2009: 115–16) argues that Hitler's character is akin to a tick, for whom the world exists only in terms of need and body temperature; or a moth, attracted to and destroyed by the flame which will forever remain inscrutable to the insect. Hitler is thus condemned to an experience of opacity – he will never understand the human world, nor can he properly enter it.

Sokurov, however, claims to be interested in showing the dictator as a human being: 'By looking at Hitler, I want to see that man, what he has in common with us' (quoted in Lemarié 2009: 113). The answer lies in the character's fear, what makes him human in the biological sense, yet at the same time precludes his ability to become human from a spiritual perspective. For Sokurov, not all people are born with a soul – even though some, rarely, can acquire and develop one. In spite of the attractions concocted to amuse him, in spite of Eva's seductive games, Hitler knows that something is amiss. He does not know this consciously – as a matter of fact, he has lapsed so deeply into

his denial that he seems ignorant of the existence of the death camps. But he fears something nonetheless, and this fear, in turn, is the cause for his angst-ridden grimaces, his bouts of powerless fury, his regressive banter, pranks and demented remarks. On the one hand, instinctual fear is what is most sound about the Führer. And on the other, it reduces him to an animal state, while also making him appear like a grotesque, monstrous child (by virtue of his commensurate immaturity). If this hardly makes him relatable or endearing, it certainly serves to mitigate his historic quotient of detestation.

Psychologists have long since elaborated on Adolf Hitler's mental condition, drawing from the records of his many worryingly disjointed statements made in private. But instead of pathologising him outright and presenting him as an impenetrable sociopath with perverse narcissistic tendencies (which in turn beget his megalomania), Sokurov and Arabov prefer to avoid a psychological portrayal. What emerges instead is a fascinating mixture of completely impenetrable ciphers: all characters appear as narcissistic automatons, not so much in dialogue with one another as uttering stock sentences (Goebbels commenting 'In the provinces one always feels like eating, and in the city one always feels like working'), or Hitler dozing off or experiencing some psychotic absence in the middle of a conversation, having made some sexist or racist generalisation. Eva Braun's character might escape this treatment, but her own love for Hitler is equally incomprehensible and monstrous, in spite of her acknowledgment of its absurdity, late in the film. To be sure, her love is not spurred on by Hitler's mischievous and childlike side, detached from reality. Nor is it motivated by his outward appearance, or the fact that this 'zero', this empty and hysterical cipher preoccupied with the implications of absolute power, does not even seem capable of giving her sexual pleasure for most of the film. Eros and Thanatos commingle tightly here, and Hitler's ambivalent, schizoid relationship to life and death is reinstated in several instances: early in the film, he reacts with anger and disgust at the sight of young puppies. Later on, he claims to be dying of cancer and is scolded by a mother-like Eva Braun, who reprimands him as though he were a grotesque, fat and mustachioed child.⁷ In other instances in the film, an excited Hitler claims that the Reich will conquer death. This hubristic comment was given even more chilling resonance in the script, whose final images gave full lease to Arabov's love of the horror genre: in the screenplay, the young puppies are submerged in a pot of acid by elegant gloved hands. Sokurov did not need this final touch, however, to convey his message.

II

Unmistakably, this is a dark, grotesque tale, an inverted romance and parody of prelapsarian delights, set in the garden of death. But the scattered bits of comedy to be found throughout are constantly marred, not only by the historical backdrop of it all, but also by the film's form and its overall effect. What perhaps best serves the purpose of distancing the events unfolding from the viewer, more even than the imagery or the fact that Joseph Goebbels is played by a woman,⁸ is the spatial and temporal treatment of the film.⁹ Much like *Mother and Son*, this account of a day's strange routine

impresses by its compositions and the rigorous fixity of the frame: the vast majority of the shots are motionless, and the rare zooms, pans, or tracking shots are slow and discreet. But, whereas the flatness of the image in *Mother and Son* created a feeling of proximity, as though looking at paintings up-close, here the chosen lenses and mirrors emphasise depth of field and distance. It seems as though the whole film is plunged in mists, and the geometry of the Eagle's Nest, its heavy rocks and strict orthogonal lines, impose a regime of angularity and coldness. Even in the rare instances of close-ups, the muddled, washed-out, subtly varied visual palette (dominated by greys and browns, punctuated by the crimson red of the Nazi flag – but without the vibrancy of its representation in more commercial films) offers a cold, hazy image. Elaborating on the use of colour in the film, Sokurov explained that the visual dimension was meant to help 'penetrate the essence of ugliness of what these people do' (in L. Rt 1999).¹⁰ The use of muddled, brownish colour emphasises a world that is soulless and rotting, while the play with light was meant to un-differentiate the characters from their surroundings: 'For instance in the scene where Eva Braun seems to be one with her armchair ... I wanted no more separation between her body and the objects surrounding her, as though she was, in that dark corner, suspended in time, awaiting something' (ibid.). Anomie and solitude loom large here: Eva seems to have more intimacy and fun with a turntable or a trinket than with her 'lover'.

A fire is often seen crackling in the corner of the image, yet it hardly seems to warm the premises. Indeed, it is as though this cold summer day of 1942 was shown to us from beyond the grave. By the end of the film, even the characters themselves cannot escape the feeling of glacial mists weighing intangibly upon them, as Hitler wraps himself in his overcoat. But the gesture, and his avoidance of Eva's gaze, at once human and humane, defeated and loving, has more to do with the Nazis relinquishing their humanity than with the *Frische Bergluft*.

The gaze is a key term, here, and will be throughout Sokurov's celebrated tetralogy (of which this constitutes the first volume, with *Taurus*, *The Sun* and *Faust* to follow): Sokurov not only addresses the spiritual deliquescence of his characters through the treatment of colour, he also applies a very specific spatial grammar throughout the film, one of the summits of a 'poetics of space' in the history of cinema. Throughout, the point of view is articulated as though through the vantage point of nameless observers, staff of servants and maids, rather than by the main characters' themselves, speaking at once to the variable geometry and 'rhizomic' nature of history; the fragmentation of space and narration of history in the twentieth century. As Fredric Jameson brilliantly explained (2006), using Lukács' distinction in the realm of literature, this film (and *Taurus*) creates a new way of representing historical scenes: neither historical drama (except for in the presence of Hitler) nor historic novel (except for the nameless and by and large voiceless secondary characters, who share this paradoxical intimacy). Instead, Jameson explains, we are offered a new third term, a new way of envisaging the life of historical figures, through their mundane going-about, the time of their seemingly insignificant *emploi du temps*.

Much significance is thus given to the perspective of the otherwise narratively secondary staff of servants of the Eagle's Nest. Elsewhere, the effect is evidenced by

the intriguing presence of anonymous snipers spying upon the characters, including a shot of a bewildered soldier looking through his telescopic lens – another instrument suggesting an in-between space between proximity and distance – as Hitler defecates on top of a snowy mountain.¹¹ The implication here, beyond the distancing effect and giving a ‘voice’ to generally ignored instances of narration, is the absence of a private sphere of any kind for the public ‘leaders’ of this world, as Kiril Sekatski points out (2006: 244). The consequence for these characters is one of precluded sincerity. They are prisoners of the permanent gaze, forcing them to act and pretend ceaselessly. From this fact stems the false affection and grotesque courtesy of the Führer to his staff of servants and guests. His behaviour is insincere, and prompted to be so by the anonymous entourage’s scrutiny, or an absent, Id-like gaze which weighs upon the minds of these historic ‘actors’. This absent yet crushing gaze (the void left by an actual authority figure to coordinate the film’s point of view) begets the film’s grotesque atmosphere. Hitler feels this absence somehow: left without a director, a conductor, he refers in dialogue to the latter’s importance for German orchestras, and offers a parody of conducting the closing movement of Beethoven’s *Ninth* during the news-reel sequence, dancing and gesticulating grotesquely, against the music’s rhythm – he is a most terrible dancer.¹² In this multi-layered and complex image, the whole idea of the film is captured: a silhouette, scrutinised from behind the screen, joyfully and manically conducting (or, rather, *thinking* that he is conducting what is actually a pre-recorded performance, one of the great oblique points made by Sokurov and Arabov in this film) a whole ensemble to its doom. So that the exile from the Garden of Eden of the great artistic tradition brought forth by masters such as Beethoven (and which Sokurov celebrates so consistently in interviews) is not only meant as a tragedy, but as an overdetermined, purportedly inescapable phenomenon.

With its melancholy chromatic patterns and sickly *mise-en-scène*, and considering the subject matter at hand and the filmmaker’s concern with transcendence, *Moloch* seems to address the present-absent gaze in terms of the dialectical shift, analysed by Alexander Mitscherlich (1969), between a ‘society without a father’ whose narcissistic impulse had been negated during the Weimar period, and replenished in an exalted disciplinary mode so dedicated to the gaze of the Nazi regime that would, paradoxically, lead the whole nation to its doom. But the film also comments on the present – the late twentieth century – and Gilles Deleuze’s premonition (1990) that this disciplinary mode (in keeping with grotesque imagery, the mode of the ‘mole’) would be eventually replaced by the regime of total surveillance, the society of control, whereby people would gladly throw themselves in the lion’s mouth – or rather, here, the serpent’s – wholeheartedly embracing the monstrous, exactly the way the German population did in the early 1930s. From this perspective, the inexplicable love and erotic attraction of Eva Braun for the grotesque Hitler makes perfect sense: without a central gaze to locate truth, anything goes, as it were (the ultimate reckoning will only come later). In the meantime, there is little wonder that such a gaze, seemingly void of a diegetic point of anchorage and similar to the dark, hidden Id finding its locus in secondary characters, would cause much anxiety in the hearts and minds of its protagonists, when it lulls them not with unwitting *ennui*.

Fear and anxiety are however trapped inside the film like in a glass jar, unable to even tickle our own spectator's senses. This distancing effect is further emphasised by the soundtrack: in the excursion scene, the sound is mixed in such a way as to give the impression that it takes place indoors. And while the film was carefully rehearsed and shot with all the Russian actors reciting their lines in German, the dubbing only reinforces the impression of distance, and of a fake, museum-like, recreated realism.¹³ The impression given is of a world of perpetual present, of a moral allegory, not so much a *story*, with its Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end. So, in order to contradict the paradoxically entwined death and immortality conveyed by the image, Sokurov worked extensively on the soundtrack – fleeting, filled with echoes, ghostly, but also with the sound of war and explosions in the distance – to express the characters' actual mortality: 'These people think they are the masters of the world whereas the world is much more powerful than they are. The soundtrack expresses the idea of mortality, sound is born and it dies, it cannot be otherwise' (in L. Rt 1999).

Cast out of Eden, the characters portrayed in *Moloch* are left to conduct themselves and wander aimlessly at once, deprived of a destiny. This is one of the interesting ways in which one can view Hitler's capricious, demented, immature characterisation: for Sokurov, power always precludes greatness, and tyrants are never fully formed, poised between the unrestrictive magma of absolute power and the absence of any moral or aesthetic models to guide their steps. This is nowhere clearer than in the scene in which a priest (straight out of a Rembrandt painting) comes to see the Führer to beg for a deserter's life. Hitler's violent ranting summarises his inability to empathise, and the aporia that will lead the nation under his command to its doom: 'A people who worship a man dying on the cross don't want to die? How can you explain this paradox?'

After another bout of absurd ranting involving a very personal 'arithmetic of death,' in which he asks the priest how it is that millions of flies can lay millions of eggs and that in spite of all the eggs that fail to survive, flies live on, the furious Führer leaves the room. The priest then gets up and looks at the Janus statue on the heavy stone staircase's banister. The image speaks to Yuri Arabov's obsession with motifs of doubles, human lookalikes, and the uncanny – all materials that, in turn, find connection within the Germanic context. But clearly Sokurov is also interested in suggesting, beyond the obvious schizoid character of Nazism, the suspicious entanglements of the bourgeoisie and the institution of the church, an institution which historically was at once resentful and obsequiously apologetic of the quasi-Satanic regime.

III

The film's original title was *The Mysteries of the Mountain*, a title harkening back to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Undoubtedly the dark and grotesque humour of the film bears a kinship with Mann's own biting tone and subversion of realistic codes through its overwrought use of detail, biomedical and otherwise. As we know from his diaries and interviews, Sokurov's (and Arabov's as well, no doubt) admiration for the German writer is immense.¹⁴ The philosophical and structural influence that

Mann may have had on Sokurov, beyond the power of the unforgettable images he has summoned in his novels and stories, or the dimension of sacrifice of life's pleasures in favour of a heightened artistic ethos, is the modernist ability to muster entire universes – what Belgian philologist Jacques Marx referred to as the *roman-cosmos* ('the cosmos novel'). Indeed, Sokurov's oeuvre may be read as a cosmos, informed by many models, but ultimately his own. *Moloch* serves as a fine illustration of this process, in the uncanny way in which Sokurov delivers a parallel universe to the one already known – at once heavily documented and informed, probably historically inaccurate and yet bizarrely compelling.¹⁵ This is neither parody nor pastiche, however: *Moloch* is as serious as any other Sokurov film, precisely because its antics and utilisation of the grotesque are an integral part of a self-contained universe. Contained, as it were, within the interstice of two other terms entangled dialectically, and producing a third, unexpected one: another example of Sokurov's idiosyncratic appropriation of genre.¹⁶

Another important twentieth century author who serves to capture the film's spirit – although it is uncertain whether Sokurov or Arabov had any knowledge of his work – is Curzio Malaparte (born Kurt Erich Suckert, 1898–1957), who, in his novelistic accounts of the war (*Kaputt* (1944) and *The Skin* (*La Pelle*, 1949)) wrote about Nazi fears. Malaparte masterfully demonstrated how the German army, torn between the old romantic tradition of endearment and fascination with death and the neo-pagan fascist drive towards destruction, feared not so much death or suffering – which they intensely craved in their self-destructive mania – but, rather, life itself:

Suddenly he asked me whether it was true that the Germans were so dreadfully cruel. 'Their cruelty,' I replied, 'is made of fear; they are ill with fear. They are a sick nation, a *Krankesvolk*. [...] They are afraid of everything and everybody; they kill and destroy out of fear. Not that they fear death; no German, man or woman, young or old, fears death. They are not even afraid of suffering. In a way one may say that they like pain. But they are afraid of all that is living, of all that is living outside of themselves and of all that is different from them. [...] They are afraid above all of the weak, of the defenceless, of the sick, of women and of children. They are afraid of the aged.' (Malaparte 1946: 15–16)

The universe of *Moloch* is filled with this anxiety, a fear of ghosts that is never articulated but always present. The film's locale, a cold castle shrouded in mists and shadows, is a paragon for ghost stories, but there is no need for ghosts beyond the characters themselves: the alienated, hallucinated shades of historic figures, all doomed to eternal damnation and punishing scrutiny. In the long version of the film released in Russia, Hitler is seen at one point twisting like a whirligig, before angrily cursing the Creator while negating his existence all the same.¹⁷ Through his berating of bourgeois Christian models, Arabov's and Sokurov's Hitler appears naked in his rejection of life, which his ranting about conquering death attempts to disguise. Here is a demented ectoplasm, admonishing the grand image-maker for his renewed sufferings, as if there was but one thing worse than the Fall from Nazi Eden: to return there. When in the film's final scene Hitler is about to take his leave, Eva runs up to his car and reminds him that no

Moloch: inscrutable gazes –
like mother, like son?



one can conquer death. He averts his gaze, again in denial, and appears so utterly terrified that his eyes register only a blank, absent expression: a miscomprehension of life and death alike, for which the Führer can only substitute some form of primal, animal instinct that will lead to self-annihilation nonetheless.

Another Eden, another way of conquering death, would be by inverting the flow of time, by returning to the motherly womb. This nostalgia, is expressed in a particular scene, when Hitler interrupts the flow of his ranting and agitation, and pensively looks at a picture of his mother. Her face is round, inscrutable, neither ugly nor attractive, neither smiling nor sad. It expresses, by its very lack of expressivity, an epistemological abyss wherein we could locate the source of her son's evil. 'How could such a banal creature give birth to such a monster?' asks Lemarié (2009: 117). But in Sokurov's universe at least, Hitler is not quite a monster. He was loved and is still loved. He is a human being – grotesque, immature, hypochondriac, but a human being. He is the object of love, yet he himself only fears and hates. It is this mixture of emotions that Leonid Mozgovoy produces so remarkably, and which paradoxically give Hitler his humanity in this film. He is perpetually, mortally afraid of everything, in a constant *décalage* with the world. The inescapability of death and the impossibility to erase past events (history), but also the inextinguishable nature of negative and destructive behaviour in the face of these phenomena, shine forth in this extraordinary portrait, seemingly out of time and calling from beyond the grave: a magma of lost souls who were neither worse nor better than any other to begin with, but whom fear (and, perhaps, a dark and tragic form of destiny) compelled to make all the wrong choices.

The rejection and fear of life, children, and family (about which Malaparte wrote) is also present in the climax of the film. Hitler and Eva Braun meet in the bathroom, where the Führer clearly displays his refusal of a normal family life. The scene represents one of the crowning moments in Arabov's screenwriting career, which earned him (and translator Marina Koreneva) the prize for best screenplay at Cannes in 1999:¹⁸

What are you doing here? You need something? What do you want? I know what you want. Grandfather Hitler, Grandmother Hitler, Daddy Hitler, Mommy Hitler. Daughter Hitler, Sonny Hitler. Cute little boy. All Hitlers! A whole Hitler family! All stinking, snoring and burping at the same table! They

burp! They line up for the shit house. They scratch. They pick at their teeth and noses. You want some calm? Hmm? A cosy home? Comfy seats? Home-style soup? Matching pyjamas? Herbal tea in the evening, yes? Church on Sundays? Guzzling beer under a tree? Chomping on sausages? Sausages! Guts with fat and spices! With cheese! Think about it. With cheese! No calm! No soup! No pyjamas! The whip will fall! The whip for all beasts! I won't allow calm! I will lash out again! Thirty years! Forty years! Until the beast finally becomes human! Let's go! Forward! No more waiting! Because the sky is so close! The sky is so close!

The conflation of hubris and a morbid wish for vacuous discipline with a refusal of family life and simple happiness looms large in this brilliant monologue, which is resonant with a far larger picture that remains to be historicised. Indeed this passage constitutes, in its own stereotypical and grotesque terms, a simultaneous celebration and rejection of what is traditionally considered (by Germans themselves) to be constitutive of Germanic cultural production (which we may refer to here as the 'German soul'): on the one hand, there is the philosophical idealism of Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, etc., from which stems the idea and importance of an education (spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic) that transforms the individual into a full personality; on the other hand, we find the opposing force in a vast network of associations, the mythological hero or the 'superman' – an inheritance from Medieval lore (the *Nibelungen*, from their medieval representation to the romantic melancholy of Wagner's *Ring* cycle), formulated most memorably by Nietzsche, but also present, of course, in the myth of Faust.¹⁹

German culture and ideology have thus been greatly influenced by this dual notion: the bourgeois ideal on the one hand, hard-working, wholesome and inescapably leading to ennui; and its counterpart, the importance of the fantastic, metaphysical pessimism, and megalomania, a combination which may account for the ponderousness and melancholy, and one that often leads to violent outbursts (the latter is combined with a discreet humour of desperation that is present in modern German culture, and which is perfectly captured in Hitler's monologue). In short, one can say of German culture that it is a rather unique mixture of the rational and the irrational (which culminated perversely, as is needless to remind perhaps, in the Nazi system and ideology). Following World War II, German culture seems to have veered away from this inclination for the 'mythological melancholy', developing an outright hostility for myths, which led to an important democratisation of art, and to what constitutes today's mass culture in Germany. But it is reasonable to assume that the repressed mythological and fantasy of 'grandeur' will not lay repressed forever, and that, bound to re-emerge, it may out-live the ideology of (bourgeois) Enlightenment with which it shaped most of the country's national identity – which, perhaps better than any other consideration (including Russia's age-old fascination and fear of the Germanic 'tribes') justifies the existence of the film and accounts for its momentous relevance.

As the camera tracks away from the ranting Hitler, we become gradually conscious of the dual nature of his 'performance' – initially meant as a response to Eva's aspirations towards a more traditional relationship, it becomes a completely self-centred

narcissistic demented psalm to his own nihilistic views. This long speech also serves as a symbolic wall that Hitler erects between himself and the outside world, against any form of human intimacy. As Iampolski has pointed out, he is 'simply unable to get rid of the symbolic' (2011: 111). As a consequence, Hitler has become the prisoner of this symbolic fortress made of his own delusions. Elaborating further, Iampolski notes the following:

Sokurov shows Hitler in his private residence, which resembles an old Roman church – in a parody of Wagnerian demigods. His pretension to transcend humanity, however, makes him completely grotesque. His hideous vanity paradoxically makes him human, and thus tolerable and even loveable for Eva, who is unable to love a purely symbolic figure. The film has a clear Christian background: it claims that a god can be loved and worshipped only if he has the humility to become human; otherwise divinity becomes an artificial monster – Leviathan or Moloch. (2011: 111–12)

Grotesque monster or pathetic human being, Hitler wins – or so it seems – for now, that brief moment in time, an insignificant sliver in historic terms, that nonetheless possesses enormous repercussions.

Hitler's 'fearless' outburst may not only serve the purpose of isolating himself from the real world and subduing Eva, as she hands him the gun she had pointed at him earlier in the scene. It is also some sort of grotesque love call, a parapractical foreplay: as this fat Hitler in his underwear bends down to stash the weapon away, she kicks him in the rear and begins a chase which will end in the couple's stupefying reconciliation and the commensurate (off-screen) sex – another peculiar third term, this time in the erotic realm, between inexplicable love and original sin. In an ironic moment that revives the sarcastic associations of some early Soviet montage, although in a spectral way, Sokurov ends the scene with slow-motion footage of a pilot (seen earlier in the newsreel sequence), looking through a visor, smiling, unleashing bombs from his plane. The pilot's smile and his intense, somewhat demented look, point at a murderous form of voyeurism. In this way, the montage can be interpreted as a conflation of lust and irrational desire with the horrors of war. More obliquely, perhaps, the scene seems to speak to the ancillary connections of power and cinema, of warfare and entertainment (how the former benefits from the technological advances of the latter, before serving as a tool of military propaganda). This also correlates the scene to Sokurov's disdain for vulgarity and simplicity in assuaging the audience's tastes with sex and violence (the anthemic 'girl and a gun'), these eminent tropes of all mass (entertainment) cinema, which bespeak how the latter and the wars of the twentieth century are consubstantial phenomena. The thesis is hardly new, but it acquires an important moral dimension in Sokurov's universe: his *idée fixe*, that a work of art is an important thing that cannot be treated lightly, whether by the artist or the audience, comes across quite clearly.²⁰ Pitted against this idea in a negative dialectical gesture, Hitler's and Eva's frolicking serve as an indictment of the levity and lack of responsibility in the face of growingly disquieting manifestations that led to millions of deaths, stripped here of its glamour

and captured in all its ugliness. This is no laughing matter, and the monstrosities of the past on the screen are indicative of a responsibility shared by all: if we all know carnal desire and partake in the society of consumption and entertainment, we can all, too, lapse into monstrosity and war.

Consequently, the association of fictional and newsreel footage also resonates with Sokurov's belief that cinema must always engage moral issues. In an interview, the director declared that 'Social and political problems should be dealt with by the press, radio, and television. Unfortunately, everywhere in the world the spectator is being cheated on. He is being lured into the cinema ... to watch banal newspaper articles, or TV shows. [...] The cinema is too powerful a means to be used in such a way. [...] It brings about no spiritual dimension, no revelation of human secret' (in Challand 1990). Rather than merely conveying information under the form of pseudo-art, cinema should be the repository of deeper, more complex workings of thought, but also of the soul. It is not only meant to probe the philosophy of our century, as suggested by Deleuze or Godard, and certainly not as a pure form of aesthetic, dis-informed distraction. With cinema, Sokurov strives to convey a view onto another world (here, again, we think of the 'cosmos' suggested above) that is also intended to serve as a 'therapy for the soul'; 'Fiction is therapy, documentary is surgery. And both must heal – and be used delicately and carefully; the healing process, to put it another way, can be sometimes very painful, with the artistic dimension meant as an anesthesia' (in Challand 1990). In *Moloch*, we encounter a deeper (if muted), and therefore more unpleasant form of shock therapy of the soul in Sokurov's corpus: a film which seemingly ridicules its subject on an aloof, icy mode, yet pinches some nerves left alone in any spectator's usual audiovisual experience.

IV

Since I have already dealt with *Fear Eats the Soul*'s Rainer Werner Fassbinder in chapter two, since this chapter discusses fear, and a cinema filled with moral urgency, and since he was, in his young age, in the throes of fascination with the Nazi regime, the director I wish to bring up here is Ingmar Bergman.²¹ Plagued by phobia, neurosis, hypochondria, and by all accounts a difficult person, Bergman, the major artist, nevertheless managed to transcend himself – and audiences worldwide – by keeping, as he would have it, his 'demons' at bay.²² 'As long as I am in the studio or theatre, I control the universe. And so the demons are automatically under control. I mean, the passions are under control' (in McNab 2009: 190).²³ Bergman tried to rationalise the importance of these passions, fears, and anxieties by representing them as grotesque entities, both dangerous and indispensable. But his characters fall prey to the absence of control, specifically in a godless, cold, and lonely world, devoid of any form of transcendence – and echoes of which we find in *Moloch*.

Bergman is much less often brought up in discussions of Sokurov than Tarkovsky, Eisenstein, or Bresson. In spite of holding the Swedish master among the greatest filmmakers who ever lived,²⁴ and praising him for his role in creating the foundations of a genuine autonomous cinematic language, Sokurov has declared not feeling a specific

kinship with him, considering his culture and sensibility to be entirely different from his own (2012).²⁵ Nevertheless, upon scrutiny, not only is Ingmar Bergman's influence very much present in Sokurov's cinema, they may also share more in common than the Russian director wants to acknowledge.

Thematically and formally, many of Bergman's techniques have been, in one way or another, investigated by Sokurov: perhaps most prominently the use of the close-up. As Gilles Deleuze pointed out (1983: 141–3), Bergman is the director, historically, who insisted most on the fundamental link between cinema, face, and close-up, going so far as to burn/erase the face, taking what Deleuze called affection-image to its very limit. Sokurov is a master of the close-up as well – both visual and aural. The Russian director also investigates other areas of the human body, investing them with as much liminal expressivity – sometimes to the point of abstraction – as Bergman did. Even more directly, his practice of shooting two people facing the camera and talking to one another (in *Save and Protect*, *Father and Son*, etc.) owes unquestionably to the Swedish master. Here, the close-up endows people with a ghostly quality, on the verge of monstrosity, nearing themes of madness and the grotesque, but also faith, which thematically inhabits both directors' cinemas.

The motif of the island, so dear to Bergman, has also been appropriated by Sokurov, and with it, the distant sound of boats (think of the closing scene of *Scenes from a Marriage* (*Scener ur ett äktenskap*, 1973) and the opening of *Russian Ark*). Both men have made at least one film featuring the word 'sonata' (*Autumn Sonata* (*Höstsonaten*, 1978); *Sonata for Hitler*, *Sonata for Viola*), and when his turn came to direct a stage production (in this case, Mozart's *Requiem* (*Моцарт. Реквием*, 2004)), the close-ups of faces Sokurov captured in the audience at the beginning were a clear quotation of the first minutes of Bergman's cinematic version of *The Magic Flute* (*Trollflöjten*, 1975). Sokurov indeed would reprise this homage in showing the faces of spectators ahead of a Rostropovich performance he filmed in 2005 for *Elegy of Life* (see chapter fourteen). Likewise, the apparently arbitrary switches in colour schemes in Sokurov (between colour and black and white) can be traced back to *The Passion of Anna* (*En Passion*, 1969), and *Alexandra* can be regarded as Sokurov's *Wild Strawberries* (*Smultronstället*, 1957), to which it bears many similarities. Nonetheless, the fact that Sokurov so frequently quotes Bergman confirms no more than his appreciation and admiration for the master's work – in much the same fashion that he would honour Tarkovsky's inspiration.

More broadly speaking, what Sokurov seems to inherit from Bergman is a tendency to invent new techniques and cinematic effects while retaining a very recognisable touch. The two filmmakers also exhibit strong contradictory energies, productively set in conflict (the luminous, the elated, the mellifluous, the open, and the rectilinear against the cringing, the arrested, the brutal, the enclosed) and yielding compelling artistic universes. The conflicted nature of their life and art – the irritability, outbursts of anger, and difficult character coupled with a most affable, delightful elegance and worldliness – underline a tension that is not merely artistic, however. I want to suggest that these conflicting energies may have to do with their difficult relationship with their parents, and to their sexuality. And here our discussion of fear must turn into

a more personal idea, that of fear as the product of a deep-rooted rejection and self-loathing – and as an engine of repression.

Sokurov has only rarely discussed his past (where he has, we feel the tenderness and great love for his mother, a woman from a modest, working-class background, but who nonetheless instilled her love of art in her son), and, contrary to Bergman, he is not keen on addressing the question of sexuality (this, of all things, can certainly be imparted to the wild cultural divergence with regard to the topic in Northern European and Russian cultures). Very clearly, for the Russian director, it is not only a private and very serious subject (at least insofar as eroticism remains connected with love), but also a painful one: Sokurov candidly admits to his great unhappiness at having never found a significant other. Ingmar Bergman, on the contrary, led a life marked by many romances, ending in later years with his wife Ingrid.

Following the thread of this tension found in both Sokurov and Bergman, we may point out their comments pertaining to a deep-seated dualism in their lives and works (see the book's introduction for Sokurov; and, for Bergman, this comment about his *Hour of the Wolf* (*Vargtimmen*, 1968): 'There is within that film a consciously formal and thematic disintegration. [It is] about a deep-seated division within me ... [it] is important since it is an attempt to encircle a hard-to-locate set of problems and get inside them' (1990: 28)). This 'deep-seated division' which Bergman discusses is of particular interest here, especially as it refers to one of his films most unambiguously addressing the dilemmas of creation, but also the repression of homosexual tendencies – a motif which I contend is key in any discussion of either Bergman and Sokurov, and which is rarely, if ever, addressed in either director's case. Without going into any further detail or speculation, let us briefly consider the two men's own rather strong discursive blocking off of the topic.

There is little doubt that their respective milieus (bourgeois Sweden and Soviet Russian working-class), their authoritative fathers' profession (a Lutheran minister and a military officer) and the resulting upbringings may account in large part for the two filmmakers' discursive resistance to homosexuality: as we have seen in the book's introduction and will again in chapter twelve, Sokurov has always and rather unambiguously negated the homosexual hypothesis with regard to his life and cinema; in his autobiography, Bergman omits a few important romantic interests, but does dedicate a passage to his gay personal assistant, Tim, sadly fallen into 'decadence' (2007: 195–196).²⁶ He then forcefully rebuffs the hypothesis that he could have been, in the early stages of his career in the theatre, the 'new faggot' of Ragnar Hyltén-Cavallius, a flamboyant homosexual nicknamed 'Fiametta' (2007: 214). There is a strong and manifest divide and dissonance, however, between the filmmakers' discursive dissociation from homosexuality, and the manifest profusion of homoerotic motifs in their films – rather explicitly gay or lesbian in Bergman (*Persona* (1966), *Hour of the Wolf* (1968), *Cries and Whispers* (*Viskningar och rop*, 1972), *Face to Face* (*Ansikte mot ansikte*, 1976), *From the Life of the Marionettes* (*Aus dem Leben des Marionetten*, 1980)); or non-explicit in Sokurov (*Days of the Eclipse*, *Confession*, *Father and Son*). If the matter seemed indeed of such little interest to them, why then have so much investment with the topic, and the various motifs with which it correlates?

Both Bergman and Sokurov, each rather conservative social thinkers, are clearly concerned to stay within boundaries of elegance, decency, seriousness, and a form of morality; adhering to strict rules and belonging to a tradition – literary, cultural, and otherwise – while constantly transgressing such rules in their art. Homosexuality, in Bergman, can be viewed as an unwanted, rejected key to bliss and individuation, as much as a threat to the artist's own persona. For Bergman, theatre and cinema were always therapy – and it is interesting to note that he conceived of the two in spousal, heterosexual terms, in his famous quip: 'Theatre is my wife, and cinema, my lover.' Alexander Sokurov, on the other hand, views cinema not as a therapy for himself, but as a gift to others, the audience. It is a much less individualistic, more messianic role that he seems to attribute to himself, in the Russian tradition: as an agent of a greater entity, whom he must pass on, at the price of solitude and unhappiness (see introduction). *Father and Son* puts forth the claim that a father's love crucifies, whereas a son's love lets itself be crucified, acknowledging that the exact meaning of these lines remains obscure. Here, as an analogy, the mission of the artist crucifies, and the artist lets himself be crucified by this very mission. No wonder, in such a context, that Bergman would address these issues more candidly, as opposed to Sokurov's ascetic wall of silence and denial. The price to pay is high: a life of solitude, only partly attributable to the genius of unique minds, alone on their island, physical or metaphorical.

What this discussion seeks to unearth, however, is not the closeted nature of either Ingmar Bergman or Alexander Sokurov, but rather the very concrete tension which belies their unique and remarkable representations of sensuality, and how the latter informs and transcends their cinema, combining it with the intellectual, spiritual and philosophical considerations to be found therein otherwise (and the corollary reputation of ponderousness and seriousness of the two filmmakers in the collective imaginary).²⁷ From this perspective, one of the most beautiful and arresting scenes in the Bergman canon is that of the dream recollection in *From the Life of the Marionettes* (a film in which the male protagonist is a repressed homosexual driven to kill by his sexual frustration, unable though he is to confront and accept the truth of his desire), in which two bodies, shot in a splendid overexposed black and white, indulge in an act of lovemaking that is also a homicidal act, wherein 'the fingers can see', touch replaces the sight, and the senses supplant the intellectual paradigm. Bergman's artistic essence lies in the sensorial, sensual appropriation of imagery and motifs of love, eroticism, and joy – *affection-images*, precisely – that overflow and destroy: instances of love that are also murder. This cinema posits both anger and love towards life (and the mother), and the opening of the self towards new physical and spiritual possibilities through exploration of the darkest (or most private) corners of the soul. Much the same can be said of the similarly extraordinary love-and-death scene between Faust and Margarete in Sokurov's *Faust*, to which I shall return at length in chapter fifteen. There, Sokurov similarly summons the whole gamut of senses to create an aesthetically gorgeous (but hardly erotic in any traditional sense) celebration of the impenetrable and torturing mystery of human desire and sexuality.

Poised between a vibrant eroticism and the gaping abyss of death, Ingmar Bergman's and Alexander Sokurov's films manage to capture the ineffable, totalising essence

of life itself, in all its contradictions, senselessness, complexity, and ultimate beauty. Knotted tightly, they speak truth through the *art-ifice* – for confronting and speaking it otherwise might have put the artists' creative demons to rest for good.

Notes

- 1 The 200th episode of television talk-show *На ночь глядя* (*Na noch' glyadya*), on Russia's First Channel, hosted by Boris Berman and Eldar Zhandaryov (tx 1 June 2012).
- 2 The religious (if not Christian) undertones of this comment are evident.
- 3 In the original treatment, the mother appeared as a vampire-like, selfish being who forced the son to dedicate his whole life to caring for her, and the film ended in the death of both characters.
- 4 The only notable difference is the elision of the very final scene of the script.
- 5 It is precisely around that time that he made one of his shortest films, *Sonata for Hitler* (*Соната для Гитлера*; *Sonata dlya Gitlera*, 1979, released 1989) a montage of newsreel footage set to a flute concerto by Bach and the dark dissonant chords of Penderecki, playing with an imagery of hands and feet and establishing a strange associative logic between everyday gestures and their implications in the frame of Nazi rituals. The film also broaches the dimension of the individual versus the collective, and, through temporal loops, captures a seemingly pensive Hitler, sitting and rubbing his hand, as though frozen in prayer, reflecting, perhaps, on the throes of eternal guilt. Just a couple of years later Sokurov would direct *And Nothing More*, his montage film about World War II, which again featured substantial footage of Hitler, including material that offered a different angle on the usual iconography representing the Nazi leader.
- 6 This, along with the centrality of the Jewish extermination, were the two specific novel aspects of the Nazi regime. Many others, including the theory of the *Lebensraum*, were derived directly from older German regimes, as Shelley Baranowski has illustrated in her *Nazi Empire* (2011).
- 7 A nod, no doubt, to Chekhov's – also played by Mozgovoy – alleged dying words: 'Ich sterbe.'
- 8 Irina Leonidovna Sokolova, although the official credits give the masculinised pseudonym Leonid Sokol who had played Malyanov's sister in *Days of the Eclipse*.
- 9 For an in-depth close reading analysis of the spatial representation in *Moloch*, *Taurus* and *The Sun*, see my article in *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* (2007).
- 10 Translation mine.
- 11 Hitler, at this point having dismissed Eva Braun, allegedly seeks to 'be alone and etch this scenery in [his] mind'.
- 12 The real Adolf Hitler hated dancing, certainly a point of interest with regard to the character, at least from a psychoanalytical perspective.
- 13 A sensation even stronger in the Russian over-dubbed version, where Leonid Mozgovoy recites the actor's lines over the German original, a convention quite impossible to stomach for Western viewers.

- 14 I will not elaborate here on the two men's long dissimulated homosexual proclivities, even if the parallel is most tempting.
- 15 As Denise Youngblood, who analyses the first three films of the tetralogy from a historic perspective (2011) has pointed out, the temporality of these films does not match official accounts. But that is precisely because Sokurov is hinting at different temporal dimensions, and looking to unearth different types of truth about his infamous protagonists.
- 16 An intuition Fredric Jameson and this author had concomitantly in 2005: while Jameson wrote about the third term, which escapes the categories of historical representation laid out by Lukács, I presented a talk at Pittsburgh University on 'trans-modernism' in Sokurov's *Moloch* and *Taurus*, where I argued that the cinematic treatment of time and space in these films escaped traditional modernist or postmodern categorisation.
- 17 Longer than the theatrical release, this version, with a dubbed voice-over in Russian by Leonid Mozgovoy, adds a few sequences:
 - The majordomo is seen exercising in the middle of a room (something Hitler refers to early on as he arrives at the castle).
 - Eva throws flowers into the fireplace, right before going into Hitler's office and putting on the record with military music.
 - Bormann is seen in the kitchen, inspecting the work of the chef and the cooks, while Eva does her own gymnastics. In the scene in which Hitler declares that he will wage war on Italy, there is a very expressionistic shot of a worried Goebbels, which was not retained in the international version.
 - The picnic scene is expanded: Hitler plays a trick on Bormann while he is asleep, by putting a hedgehog on his face. The Russian video release of the film is divided into two one-hour episodes ('series,' as the Russians call them), and the film is interrupted right in the middle of the picnic, just as the characters prepare to dance. In the theatrical version, the shot of Bormann smelling his hands and looking disgusted was unaccounted for – here we understand that it is because of the hedgehog, and possibly because of the smell of Hitler's faeces (we saw him bury them in the snow earlier on).
 - The most important scene that does not appear in the theatrical international version sees a languid Eva awaiting Hitler after the priest's visit, and the Führer, in the grips of a psychotic fit, going round in circles and howling, before sitting, calming down and addressing the Lord: 'You don't exist, there is nothing out there! Nothing! Nothing!' This scene is immediately followed by an additional instance of soldiers spying on Eva, looking at the landscape.
 - The penultimate scene, in which Eva comes out of the elevator and moves through the tunnel to say goodbye to Hitler is slightly longer than in the international version.
 - In general, the Russian two-hour version of the film emphasises the longing of Eva, her desire to be with her lover, whom she had been waiting for in this gilded prison. However, it is the scene in which Hitler angrily berates God that is most significant in terms of articulating Sokurov's philosophy.

- 18 Marina Koreneva is a Germanist, a research fellow at the prestigious Pushkin House in St Petersburg, and an experienced translator. Even though she is only credited for having translated the dialogues of *Moloch* (and *Faust*), her role in the success of these films can not be downplayed: her extensive knowledge of German culture and literature helped inform them, providing them with a unique plastic and poetic quality. She also proved instrumental during the shoot of *Russian Ark*, serving as an interpreter between Sokurov and cameraman Tilman Büttner.
- 19 The idea that Humboldt theorised and which had such a great impact on what we may refer to as bourgeois intellectual culture since the eighteenth century in Germany. Sokurov himself picks up on this idea in his thesis about the human soul, which to him can be grown, developed, educated – even, albeit rarely, in the case of individuals who were born without a soul.
- 20 One thinks, here, of Jean-Luc Godard, Paul Virilio, and the Frankfurt school, among many others.
- 21 At the age of 16, Bergman was sent for a summer to Nazi Germany. He recalls the infectious and irrational enthusiasm he experienced at the sight of a Nazi parade in his *Magic Lantern*, chapter 10 (2007: 119–32).
- 22 Bergman famously mentioned, for instance, having an irrational fear of birds – unlike Sokurov, who loves them.
- 23 It is interesting to note that, even during his atheistic period, Bergman continued to believe in the existence of demons, even beyond the symbolic dimension. As he moved back to a more Gnostic mode, the demons became less and less figurative – but no less palpable – as the forces of evil loom large in the darkest parts of *Fanny and Alexander*, for instance. Similar demons are seen in one of the final scenes of Sokurov's *Faust*, after his fateful night with Margarete.
- 24 Bergman, in turn, was not short of praise for Sokurov, as the quote on the sleeve of the American DVD release of *Moloch* attests: 'Alexander Sokurov breaks every rule, on every level.'
- 25 The other person who achieves this, for Sokurov, is Eisenstein. We saw the reference to *Strike!* in chapter one, and *Taurus* and *Russian Ark* constitute, in an inverted way, jabs at Soviet montage (see chapters ten; eleven).
- 26 Bergman evidently had a lot of affection for Tim, who was a useful personal assistant to him. He commended the young man's monogamous relationship with a married man, but criticised his descent into polygamy after the affair fell through as 'love and closeness turned into lechery' (2007: 195). Bergman comments thus on Tim's death: 'A good death for a little man who was much more afraid of merciful death than bestial life' (2007: 196).
- 27 'In Bergman and Sokurov, the apparent desire to separate oneself discursively is contradicted by the many instances of queerness, further complicated by their problematic relationships with authoritative fathers and fear of humiliation/disappointing them, helping to yield a most remarkable oeuvre, throughout the course of a distinctly complex life'. Such would be the basic Freudian assessment.

CHAPTER TEN

Taurus : 'Father, where art thou?'

‘Из всех искусств важнейшим для нас является кино.’ (‘Of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important.’)

– V. I. Lenin, 1919

I

With *Taurus*, Alexander Sokurov delivered the second instalment in his tetralogy dedicated to men of power (and to power itself) and, in their close temporal proximity, *Moloch* and *Taurus* resonate with one another on a variety of levels. But whereas *Moloch* showed us Hitler still at the height of his power (though a few short weeks before the Nazi defeat at the Battle of Stalingrad), *Taurus* presents us with a crippled Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, his right side paralysed following a stroke.¹ Themes of solitude, alienation, and madness, which loomed large in *Moloch*, are all prominent again here, but in a different, mellower, more melancholy mode – fear and desire have abandoned the screen. Lenin appears as a pathetic, feeble creature (though not without his outbursts of anger), treated with disrespect by his entourage: in the very first scene, we see the most revered hero of the Bolshevik revolution, lying naked in bed, scolded by a soldier for attempting to read a newspaper, or, at least, for holding onto it.² The soldier slaps Lenin's good hand and takes the newspaper away from him, as though he were a child. In another room, Lenin's sister Masha faintly smiles, reflecting on the irony of it all.

Hitler was portrayed as childish and immature in *Moloch*, but here, the qualification is even clearer (and appropriate) because of the main character's growing helplessness. Throughout the film, he plays mischievous tricks and pranks on his entourage, but is never more childlike than in his efforts to still accomplish simple acts (putting

on a shirt, walking down the stairs) by himself. 'By myself' ('Я сам!'; 'Ya sam!'), he keeps repeating, like an angry mantra, as though still clinging to the fantasy of autonomy. The latter is completely abolished by the end of the film, when following his third stroke, Lenin loses the capacity for speech and can barely move, so that he must be carried, wrapped in linen and pushed around in a wheelchair.

Variations on similar themes are expressed in the formal differences between the two films: whereas the explosions of Beethoven's and Wagner's Teutonic music, along with the angular, brown and grey stone-hues of the Eagle's Nest architecture seemed to weigh down *Moloch*, *Taurus* is characterised by a more fluid, almost liquid *mise-en-scène*. More frequent, floating camera movements reveal, by virtue of the slightest high-angle shot, patches of emptiness on the floors of the rooms and terraces, which given the film's darkly greenish-blue palette, almost makes it seem as though the world of *Taurus* was shot in an aquarium.³ This 'liquid' impression is only reinforced by the fact that the film was shot (by Sokurov himself, atypically serving as his own cinematographer/operator) using very specific filters and lenses, adding a softer, blended quality to the image. Andrey Sigle's music, a set of variations over themes by Rachmaninov, underscores this sickly softness. The dialogue itself, however, sounds very crisp in comparison to the soft image. Almost too clean, it evokes a television sitcom. This could have been done in an effort to render Lenin's mumbling intelligible. But the *décalage*, again, between image and sound, invokes an uncanny and paradoxical proximity between the audience and these ghostly characters.

In spite of not featuring any animal presence until its penultimate shot (a fairly rare quality in the Sokurov/Arabov canon), *Taurus* proves every bit as grotesque as *Moloch*. The Russian title itself, *Телеу* (*Telets*), carries the notion of the animal, both mythological (the Taurus constellation, the Minotaur and its maze) and referential (a calf). This title helps us understand the film's meaning: Lenin was born on 22 April, making him, according to the laws of traditional astrology, a *Taurus*. Viewed from this perspective, the film is about destiny as set forth at birth, about the Sokurovian circles of fate, existence, and becoming. The word телеу also literally designates a calf: a potential sacrificial animal, as well as a young being aspiring to become a bull. From this perspective, the film, although recounting the last days of an old man, is about potential and aspiration. Lenin, instead of being the accomplished steward of Marx and revered *éminence grise* of the Bolshevik revolution, appears as a man with manifest but unrealised potential, ending as an immature, not fully formed being, much like his revolutionary project – totally defunct by the time the film was made. Likewise, a mythological, tragic reading can be applied to the film: Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, the man, having tried to become a demi-God – the prophet to Marx's gospel, as it were – is punished in his old age for his hubris. Not that the man himself would have endorsed such a reading. His atheism, much like *Moloch*'s Hitler, appears in Sokurov as an aporia, not the least cause of these men's mental shortcomings.⁴ Their efforts at negating the Divine are constantly challenged by the sublime of the light and landscapes surrounding them, the somewhat oppressive beauty of creation and its ultimate mystery. Consequently, when they speak to God, they address an entity that, in their own words, is not there, does not exist. But why, then, address it at all?

Tragic as failure and death might be, Lenin's approach is less nihilistic than Hitler's, and is not without its moments of levity. There are the antics customary in Arabov's scripts, but also an almost peaceful scene during which Lenin, senile but philosophical, sitting with Nadezhda Krupskaya among the tall grass of the Gorky meadow, asks, half-serious, half-ironic, how and if life will go on after his death. Krupskaya, lost in thought, barely listening to her husband's musings, absent-mindedly replies that 'everything will remain the same'. Lenin's reaction is ambiguous: poised between self-pity and a peaceful resilience in the face of the inevitable. A little later, he prolongs his philosophical muttering while she comments upon her torn stockings. The base materiality of the situation seems too much for the old cripple, who attempts unsuccessfully to escape through the meadow before collapsing and eventually being carried back to the car by Pyotr Petrovich, a strong blond soldier who serves as both caregiver and jailer. The whole film is ultimately just that: the terrible and pathetic ordeal of a man trying to escape. Throughout the film, the character yearns to escape his paralysed body, his golden prison of the Gorky manor, his life, and, the most impossible of all, death itself. In a couple of instances (including a conversation with Stalin), Lenin asks for poison, purportedly in order to commit suicide. But however humiliating his life has become, and however fading his once sharp mind, his plea is not a sincere one: it is a pose taken up precisely to put death at a distance. So long as the cause of death (here, suicide) can be located and identified – and thus denied to the old leader – it can be kept at bay.

The mild, mawkish and morbid texture of the film grows only more oppressive as the length of the film stretches 'dead' time to its limits. Notwithstanding all of Lenin's ranting and agitation, nothing really happens in *Taurus* – the time of action is long gone, and the (revolutionary) mountain gave birth to a monstrous Bolshevik mouse. Just as in *Moloch*, all the characters are ghosts, eerily suspended in greenish hues. When Stalin pays the old leader a visit, for all the embraces, voluble dialogue, and intimate close-ups, we feel totally detached from the proceedings. As things are, the false, hypocritical affection displayed by the sinister *batyushka*, this blood-curdling 'Father of the People',⁵ is only reinforced by the use of close-ups, revealing the pockmarked, dummy-like complexions of the two men. Under layers of heavy make-up, the actors appear less as human beings than as soulless mannequins or mummies, in all their ugly,



Taurus: Stalin and Lenin – more mannequins (or mummies) than men

decaying materiality. And this is precisely the fate that would meet the two leaders: their embalmed bodies lying side by side in the Kremlin for a number of years, until the abolition of the personality cult of Stalin would leave Lenin the only Soviet idol to revere. Only a few years after the film's release, however, Lenin's corpse would also be removed, allegedly because of its advanced state of decay.⁶

The inglorious fate of the false idols, embalmed cinematically by Sokurov through his estranging treatment of the image, is not, however, without its glimmer of hope for the old Lenin. His German doctor suggests a cure for his failing mental abilities: to multiply 17 by 22 – a rather simple mental calculation which, however, neither the old leader nor his wife can solve. The conundrum is not to be taken at face value, of course, but in terms of its numerological symbolism: 17 is the Soviet 'golden' number, and the apex of Lenin's revolutionary scheme. 22, in turn, is both his birthdate and the year of the 'beginning of the end' – the year of his paralysing first stroke which was to prevent the 'intellectual athlete', the Marx *exegete* and illustrious graphomaniac, from reading even simple newspapers; 17 by 22, then, becomes the sum of a life, the multiplying of the highest and lowest points, and it seems as though Lenin cannot, or does not want to find the sum of his existence.

As irony would have it, it is not the brilliant, scintillating mastermind of the revolution, with the help of materialistic dialectics, but rather a crippled creature close to the vegetal state who will, in the end, come to some sort of realisation and deeper understanding of life and the irony of fate. After Stalin's visit, Lenin's mental condition seems to degrade further. As he limps past his own reflection, he wonders who the man in the mirror is. Hen then exclaims, reassured: 'Oh, it's you.' The subject, fragmented, falls to further deterioration as, during dinnertime, Lenin asks his wife who the visitor – Stalin – was, to the table's amusement (though it is never clear whether they laugh at what they take to be a prank or actual senile dementia). At first touchingly confused, trying to piece together the jigsaw puzzle of his collapsing memory, Lenin rants about Lafargue and Feuerbach. A moment later, he asks why, while the nation is starving to death, they sit there in such luxury. Told that all this does not concern him, as it was all *expropriated* (a euphemism with official ring for the more direct 'stolen'), Lenin eventually erupts in one final outburst of helpless rage. Smashing the china on the table (with the cane offered to him by the politburo, no less), he is eventually restrained by a group of soldiers, who throw white sheets at him in order to blind and subdue him. The following final three scenes are among the most memorable in the film: Lenin, confronted by his dead mother, is beckoned to join her in death. However, he refuses the invitation, and is brought 'back' to life, in a grotesque parody of rebirth, by emerging naked from a bathtub that is seemingly filled with a putrid, dark, and stagnant water, surrounded by a group of male nurses and soldiers, half indifferent, half mocking.⁷ But this humiliating homosocial cleansing ritual is all at once birth *and* death: extreme unction applied not by a priest but by a score of anonymous minions – Lenin's children of the revolution.

The very last scene reveals Lenin at the final stages of his life: by now aphasic following his third and penultimate stroke. Almost completely paralysed, he sits in the park with his wife while the birds of spring sing all around, indifferent to the ailments

of mankind. In his eyes, we find the ambiguity conveyed by pictures of the real crippled Lenin: apparently demented, idiotic, they might also express a form of bliss, of reconciliation with nature.

In the distance, a train whistle blows – rhyming with the film's opening shot as customary sonic psychopomp in Sokurov's universe. This sound comments upon the total absence of becoming, of real events, between these two moments. Suddenly, a long awaited phone call from the Central Committee rushes Krupskaya back home. Left alone, completely helpless, Lenin painfully gets to his feet, and howls a strained, animal sound. The only answer he receives is that of cows lowing in the meadow. Looking at the skies and reduced to a sub-animal, vegetal state, he smirks, his face half-paralysed, as he seems to become reconciled with the inevitable – a powerless, pathetic, yet in the end human, being. In the distance, thunder is heard, and the storm of history seems to brew again. Mikhail Iampolski (2009) has offered two non-contradictory interpretations of this final scene: either Lenin, at the very end of his life, experiences a form of transcendence, and, as the sacrificial calf, is accepted by God, *in extremis*, at last at peace and one with nature; or, his smile indicates nothing, and is just as meaningless as the rumbling of climatic manifestations in a godless world. This scene, thus, is not inscrutable; rather, its rich ambiguity endows it with many possible meanings.

II

In the end, not much seems to have transpired in the course of *Taurus*, hardly more than had unfolded during the 24 hours of *Moloch*. Why, then, is Sokurov interested in these 'dead times'? Iampolski has noted that this investment in 'timescapes of insignificance' (2009: 40) is felt most in his films about political figures: an excellent example is provided in his *Soviet Elegy* (*Советская элегия*; *Sovietskaya elegiya*, 1990) in the memorable shot of an immobile, blob-like Yeltsin, seated at his kitchen table, with his hand on his face. All these historic figures – Yeltsin, Hitler, Lenin – are thus captured while they are 'outside of time's historic movement and plunged into a temporal a-significance' (2009: 40). Iampolski is right in pointing out that this disengagement from the scene of battlefields and key historic moments (speeches, dramatic flights, auspicious encounters) is concurrent with the director's professed lack of interest in politics. For Iampolski, Sokurov's cinema is a cinema of disparity arranged according to the intersection of lines of necessity, where the determinism of the real is presented as the result of an absolutely unpredictable chance (see the discussion of fate and destiny in chapter four), in a place where these two worlds collide. History is thus presented as a series of accidents, and Sokurov conceives of chance as the irrational encounter of two deterministic series subjected to a rigorous necessity. It is at the crossing of these lines that action should or should not be taken.

Here is what Aristotle called *kairos*, the opportune moment when past and future are separated and a man's destiny is reconfigured, or lost. For Hegel, Iampolski writes, a historic figure's greatness has nothing to do with personal inclinations or psychology, but with the ability to seize the right moment. The historic figure becomes a person, with their idiosyncrasies and psychological quirks, only once they have lapsed out

of the historic moment that defined their greatness. This is precisely why Sokurov extracts Hitler and Lenin from their historical moments: not in order to draw a realistic psychological portrait, but rather to show that these characters, once removed from their defining moments, are not 'at home' anymore. This is particularly true of Lenin, as well as of Chekhov in *The Stone*: both are ill at ease in environments that are more akin to a museum (or a hospital) than a home.

Lampolski elaborates on the meaning of *kairos*: '[It] consists in a break with History, with the narrative, in an omission, a disappearance of the temporal series subjected to discursive and causal relationships. Since meaning is always general and recurrent, *kairos* is located beyond an articulated meaning' (2009: 44). This break and lack of historic readability (the latter being possible only if a sense of direction is preserved) also accounts for the insignificance and nonsensical instances with which these films are replete. In cinema, Lampolski argues, this *kairos* occurs in the 'magical' moment when the camera meets the characters, as well as in the editing. The filmmaker, much as the sophist or the politician, organises the *kairos* and thereby manipulates time. 'For Sokurov, to understand a character means to take him out of the chronological, historical, narrative and even discursive sequence. As long as he is included in one of these sequences, he parasitises the serial inertia that has no direct relationship with him' (2009: 44). The essence of the man can only be captured outside these temporal lines, at that moment he is also confronted with the void, with nothingness. Hence the Hitler of *Moloch* is reduced to a fearful and hateful creature – not only the essence of xenophobia, but of a whole ailment of the soul – and Lenin, in *Taurus*, to this unfinished, barely formed creature, almost unable to move and talk.

Yet, however much Sokurov may profess disinterest for politics, his investment in figures such as Lenin seems to complicate the assertion in typical Sokurovian paradoxical fashion. And it is in the film's form and spatial representations as articulated through the characters' gaze(s) that this is felt most clearly. Indeed, if *Moloch* and *Taurus* look, feel, and sound entirely different, they do nonetheless share the device whereby their isolated universes are divided into two groups: the protagonists (here Lenin, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Masha, the German doctor, and Stalin) and the head-of-state's entourage and staff of servants. In both films, the latter constantly seem to carry an important weight of the narrative gaze. They eavesdrop, spy through half-open doors, or appear in a corner of the image, providing constant reminders of the impossibility of 'private' life for these public figures of power, regardless of whether they are at the height of their power or dying relics. The consequence, naturally, is a multiplicity of points of view, which turns these spaces into genuine mazes, further commenting upon the nature of 'historical' narratives as complex, multi-layered, and epistemologically uncertain entities. In this sense, the shot of Lenin in the foreground, brooding while someone looks at him from a half ajar doorframe, seems to be a matrix of this whole paradigm: the already-fading mind of the great leader, observed from afar by an unknown servant. In this cinematic representation the viewer is confronted with a composite of historical fact and fabrication, informed by the many years of practice of fiction and documentary film by Sokurov, his life-long investment with history, and the many questions and possibilities therein.

The film's puzzling regime of points of view defines the 'poetics of space' in the tetralogy's second instalment: disrupted lines of gazes suggest the absence of genuine rapport between historical figures (Lenin and Stalin); this strategy bespeaks the profound divide and misunderstanding between Lenin and Krupskaya (especially in the scene in the meadow), while also reflecting the dissolution and fragmentation of Lenin's mind. Further, this *mise-en-scène*, which constantly breaks the rules of traditional commercial cinema (most notably by deconstructing the 'sacrosanct' 180 degree rule), speaks to us as a meta-commentary of its own history. It does so on a variety of levels, including on that of spectatorial expectations, which traditional continuity editing entails. When we expect a character to enter the shot from the left and they do so from the right (as is the case in the scene on the balcony between Lenin and Stalin), Sokurov's film does not only go against the grain of a stylistic rule – it short-circuits a whole system, a whole *doxa*.

On the one hand, the *mise-en-scène* of *Taurus* and its articulation of point-of-view also seem to reference similar strategies in European silent cinema. One thinks, for instance, of the famous scene taking place backstage in G. W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box* (*Die Büchse der Pandora*, 1929), where the exchanges of glances between the proprietary and lecherous Dr. Schön (Fritz Kortner), and the impetuous Lulu (Louise Brooks), were constantly contradicted by the direction in which the characters were looking. This total disregard for the rules of continuity editing laid out in Hollywood cinema by Griffith and his followers, negatively emphasised the object of the scene (looking and 'to-be-looked-at-ness'), announcing the *mésalliance* between Schön and Lulu, stigmatising the fraught nature of the gaze and promising the characters' undoing.⁸ On the other hand, and more to the point, one thinks, with *Taurus* and its Russian setting, of Lenin's legacy and his famous claim to Lunacharsky, 'You must remember that, *of all the arts*, for us the cinema is the most important.'⁹ Lenin's dictum paved the way for all the brilliant experiments of Soviet cinema (of which Sokurov, in a way, proved a late, unlikely and rather ungrateful and rebellious offspring).

In this sense, Sokurov's film discreetly parodies the ideology of materialist dialectics, which directors such as Eisenstein and Pudovkin strived to implement in their use of montage. Take for instance the barter over the silver fox's fleece in Pudovkin's *Storm Over Asia* (*Потомок Чингисхана*; *Potomok Chingizkhana*, 1928), where the gazes were not arranged according to a verisimilitude of space, but rather according to a dialectical opposition between the righteous and the dishonest merchants. The treatment of space through the gaze of characters in *Taurus* pokes disenchanting fun at the rules and quasi-mathematical meaning in the Soviet school of montage and its score of vigorous and heroic archetypes. Instead it produces a deliquescent representation of a dislocated world, the early 1920s, as seen from the disillusioned vantage point of the twenty-first century. This is the film's most important formal meta-commentary: its fragmented and 'de-sutured' cinematic grammar and overall visual aspect speak to a dissolution in the social bonds that were taking place in the early 1920s, as Sokurov had already shown in previous films.

Overall, *Taurus* expresses history as some sort of murky patchwork articulated by a series of gazes with multiple geometries, whose ultimately gloomy and dislocated

representation seems in analogy with a despondent view of past and present: a world of demented wax puppets inside a jar rather than a landscape filled with human beings and human destinies. With this small, intimate film, Sokurov made a scathing jab at the iconography of the Soviet Union: we find ourselves at an incalculable distance not only from the heroic Lenin figure of Eisenstein's *October*, but also the later films of Mikhail Romm and Sergey Yutkevich, in which the leader appears *in his moment*. Then again, the iconoclastic act of deconstructing the notion of socialist realism (one can speak, with this film, of 'poetic naturalism') is not without its humanistic dimension. Therefore, if Lenin receives his comeuppance again and again throughout the film, it is not as though Sokurov condemns him indiscriminately. What is condemned through Lenin's ironic decline is the grotesque cult of his personality and its hubristic, neo-religious implications in a system officially negating the Divine hypothesis.

Looking at Sokurov's career as a whole, it is as though *Moloch* and *Taurus* serve, in their representation of secluded, mentally and spiritually decrepit men of power, as a transition from the intimate narratives of the Yeltsin years to the grand spectacle and celebration of Russian Imperial history... and reinvigorated imperialist political agenda that followed Vladimir Putin's accession to power. This Sokurov would do while pursuing his investigation of the relationship between history, art history and the museum, while also eliding entirely the 'dark episode' of the Soviet period. Instead, he would focus on an unabashed – and just as problematic – celebration of pre-revolutionary Russia, with his *Russian Ark*.

Notes

- 1 Denise J. Youngblood has underlined (in Beumers, Condee 2011) that Lenin would not have moved to the Gorky manor so early, illustrating that Sokurov and Arabov concern themselves less with actual historical facts than with a certain truth they wish to extract from the characters portrayed.
- 2 Following his stroke, Lenin was formally forbidden from reading.
- 3 Just as in *Platonov*, where the world's materiality remains intact as long as it resists thought, so does this deliquescent, melting world appear in tune with the dissolution of the individual's (Lenin's) and the global project's (communism's) thought.
- 4 Was the historic Hitler an atheist? While I would hold onto this view, in line with the analogy between Nazism and Satanism, the claim is eminently debatable: Hitler was brought up a Catholic, believed in religious schools, and once wrote that he was 'doing God's work'.
- 5 Sokurov refers to Stalin as a 'vulture' (стервятник; *stervyatnik*) in an interview on the Russian DVD of the film (Lenfilm release).
- 6 While it has since been replaced, one wonders how much of the real Lenin is left, as the state of decay of his body, by the early 2000s, had reached a worrying level.
- 7 A similar 'rebirth' is at work in the beginning of *The Stone*.
- 8 More cynically, one might simply attribute, this disregard for the basic rules of continuity editing, already formulated quite firmly by the late 1920s, to a cine-

matic 'illiteracy', rather than to a systemic resistance against the system of 'invisible, transparent' editing coterminous to the workings of capitalism in America. The truth probably lies somewhere in between the two propositions.

- 9 Quoted from a conversation with A.V. Lunacharsky, in the *Complete Works of V.I. Lenin* (fifth edition), Vol. 44. p. 579. On 27 August 1919, the Council of national Commissars of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (РСФСР) adopted a decree about the nationalisation (via so-called 'expropriation through grants') of the film industry. From that day on all the photographic and cinematographic trade, industry and movie theaters of the RSFSR passed directly under the authority of the People's Commissariat for Education.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Russian Ark: Imperial Elegy

‘Everyone knows the future. It is the past everyone has forgotten.’

– Alexander Sokurov

As a child, Alexander Sokurov made early acquaintance with uncertainty and suffering in a surgical procedure that took part of his leg. The intensive surgery, along with a lengthy convalescence, introduced the young Sokurov not only to excruciating pain, but also to the profound, imaginative joy of high art: it was the classical music he could hear on the radio that helped the director through his illness and recovery process.¹ And it is thanks to his great loves – literature, painting, music – and the faith they gave him in Art, that Sokurov managed to endure the many years of humiliation under the Soviet regime. Art had given him strength.

Overcoming his hardships endowed Sokurov with a keen and compassionate interest for other people and their predicaments, be it social, political, psychological. Throughout his career, and in parallel to his pursuit as a fiction filmmaker, Sokurov devised his cycle of elegies, several of which were already broached in the preceding chapters. Derived from the Greek word *elegeia* (ἐλεγεία), the elegy is the literary and lyrical genre meant to mourn the dead. It is therefore often sad, plaintive and melancholic. Yet in its function – reminiscing about the past when the object of mourning was still alive – the elegy also redeems and captures, from under its mournful tone, those moments of beauty and life, fondly remembered. Half poetic diaries, filled with the director’s ruminations and observations in his customary voice-over, and half documentaries, Sokurov’s elegies are dedicated to a variety of subjects (famous and anonymous people). They devise a highly personal and introspective vision of history,

perfectly fitting the description above, in tone and in the moments they choose to illustrate – and in how they focus specifically on an interrogation of man's spiritual condition.

In 2001, Sokurov released yet another instalment in the cycle. Entitled *Elegy of a Voyage*, it documented and commented upon a trip from Russia to the Boijmans-Van Beuningen museum in Rotterdam, whose collection the director was to showcase with the film.² The intimate and remarkable film highlighted Sokurov's love of paintings – and the characters therein, 'eternal people'. This was an appetiser for a far more ambitious project: later that year, after countless hours spent in museums all over the Soviet Union, the Western world and the East – and driven by his endless love of high art – Sokurov walked across the many halls of one of the world's greatest museums, despite his limp, and produced the first ever single-take feature film in motion picture history.³ The utopian dream of a child who might easily have died or never walk again led to one of the great utopias in the history of the cinematic medium.

I

At the core of every museum and cinematic project lies a similar utopian drive. It consists of conflating a diverse set of temporalities within a block of space and time, and infusing them with a new life. Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* represents the apex of this drive.

Originally conceived as another instalment in the documentary cycle of elegies, this time a commission by the Hermitage State Museum to showcase its prestigious collection, Sokurov's project, originally relatively modest in scope, grew into a most extravagant cinematic accomplishment. No discussion of this film seems to be able to circumvent the technical feat at its core, and the present chapter will be no exception: shot in one uninterrupted 86-minute take, traversing 36 rooms and halls of the Hermitage, it required four years of development, over 1,000 actors and extras, 22 assistant directors, and countless technicians. This staggering single mobile take was made possible through new digital technologies, as well as the use of the Steadicam.⁴ The film was shot on December 23, 2001, and wrapped at its fourth attempt, after three false starts aborted after a few minutes of shooting.⁵ Upon seeing the raw footage, Sokurov was reportedly devastated, but most of the glitches and imperfections were addressed in post-production, and the film 'restored' to its intended visual splendour.

Sokurov gives directions
to steadicam operator
Tilman Büttner



Russian Ark premiered at Cannes in 2002, receiving mixed reviews, as one could have expected considering the gigantism of the enterprise and its somewhat ambiguous message.⁶ Since the film's epic production history can be seen or read about in many sources, I shall not dwell upon it any further.⁷ As Michael J. Anderson underlines, 'the fact that *Russian Ark* is comprised of a single take might give one the wrong impression: that the picture is primarily a technical tour-de-force' (2008),⁸ a misconception which the publicity surrounding the film naturally exacerbated.⁹

Of course, this is not to say that one should downplay the important role of the single-take, near-seamless, gliding aesthetics of the film, including on the symbolic level.¹⁰ There is, beyond the foolhardy nature of the project, something extremely poignant in the poetic image it summons, and which Sokurov has brought up himself: shooting a film 'in one breath', which lends it the fragile quality of a burning flame, flickering in the tormented winds of the contingencies of cinematic production, threatened with extinction at every corner, bringing it closer to both the theatrical and symphonic performance, where the slightest mistake could doom the whole enterprise.¹¹ Almost subconsciously in experiencing the film, the viewer is aware of this vulnerability, on a double level: on the one hand, technically-savvy viewers, imagining the production history and process, seek and anticipate the many moments at which an inappropriate glance, an undelivered line, or an actor or technician stumbling across the field of view would ruin the whole experiment. On the other hand, the fleeting, precarious nature of it all probably reinforces the feeling of sadness that pervades the film – the spectacle of something flamboyant and full of bravura that has ended and will not return.¹² Style and content go hand in hand in Sokurov, but it is the dialogue of the film with history which *Russian Ark* constitutes (and, as is the case, what it leaves out of said dialogue), and its utopian project, which is most significant.

As so often in Sokurov, personal and simple emotions predominate within a complex and ambitious philosophical frame. The central metaphor, contained in the title, posits the museum as an ark containing European civilisation.¹³ It rocks back and forth on the murky (and often destructive) waters of history, this alternating movement epitomising the author's concern with the past and the present, with a will to enshrine the former (and also to re-constitute it), while allowing the West's artistic legacy to survive in its uncertain voyage into the future.

Russian Ark thus serves to illustrate the paradoxical wholeness of Sokurov's cinema, torn between past and future, movement and stasis, fragment and totality. The museum and the ark both aim at some idea of the total, or at least at a harbouring of a representative multiplicity of heterogeneous fragments.¹⁴ Even if pieces are missing, the result gives no less an impression of self-containment and fullness. Of course, the museum and the ark are also alternate or declassified homes: ancient palaces or boats meant to preserve life when there is no longer any land on which to thrive, thereby suggesting Sokurov's powerful sense of nostalgia. Reflecting the rocking and uncertain course of the ark, the present chapter shall attempt to chart these many important themes, which compose the film's unique fabric, and assess its place within the new political landscape of Russia in the early 2000s.

II

As seen through the eyes of an invisible narrator (Sokurov himself, his voice resonating in the film as it usually does in his elegies, but atypical of his feature fiction films) and his companion, the French and Russo-sceptic Astolphe, Marquis de Custine (Sergey Dreyden), *Russian Ark* invites the viewer on a voyage through three hundred years of Russian Imperial history, with a few hints here and there of the post-Soviet period.¹⁵ The film, however, obliterates almost entirely the Soviet period, a project of deconstruction already seen at play in the previous chapter. Much as in *Taurus*, the precision of historical reconstruction is in conflict with actual historic data: throughout the film, Custine's real-life accounts of his travels through Russia (1839) include references to events he could not have seen, positing him as a metaphorical 'voice of the West', fueling the dissonant dialogue between a critical perspective on Russian culture and the narrator's 'true Russian' voice.

Custine, whose father and grandfather both lost their heads to the guillotine of the French Revolution, travelled east to document and rehabilitate the values of monarchy. Horrified by what he saw in Imperial Russia, he quickly demurred and produced a scathing account, denouncing Russia as a country devoid of any real history or historical progress, under the yoke of an autocratic and repressive regime. The fact that the two main characters are constantly shadowed by a discreetly ubiquitous spy – played by the no-less ubiquitous Leonid Mozgovoy – is but one of the indicators of the problematic aspects of such an autocratic, controlling (or, in Foucauldian terms, sovereign *and* disciplinary) society, to which I shall return later on.

Russian Ark: the Spy
(Leonid Mozgovoy) and
Custine (Sergey Dreyden):
friends or foes?



Commingleing
temporalities: Custine
encounters modern-day
visitors of the Hermitage
(including Sokurov's
friends, actor Lev Eliseev
and medical doctor
Oleg Khmelnitsky)



These three characters (the narrator, Custine, and the spy) truly serve as running threads throughout the various halls of the Hermitage, where they witness historical figures (Peter I, Catherine II, Nikolay I and II, and their entourages, but also Alexander Pushkin, his wife Natalya Goncharova, and her lover: the man who would kill Pushkin in a duel, the forlorn Georges Charles de Heeckeren d'Anthès (1812–1895)). They also interact with contemporary visitors of the museum (including acquaintances of the director, playing themselves), in a temporal potpourri. The limits between these universes are hardly set in stone – at times the characters speak and interact freely with the historical figures. The lack of fixed rules, the lapses between moments of interaction with actors and moments of ghostliness in which they are unseen by the historical figures, reinforce the arbitrary, dreamlike feeling provoked by the film.

Considering the implications of acting for such an uninterrupted duration – and without the option to forget one's lines or marks – a word should be said for the remarkable performances of lead actor Dreyden, as well as for Mozgovoy. Both men are stage actors of note, and it is obvious that no 'simple' screen actor could have pulled off the remarkable feat of achieving such physical intensity and perfect timing together with such apparent ease. In many ways, the apparatus at play had the actors in familiar territory: the acting of *Russian Ark*, with its accent on precision in timing, line memorisation, and athletic stamina, evokes the world of the stage rather than that of cinema. Indeed, the film constantly refers to the theatre through the metaphor of life as a stage and masquerade. A recurring group of actresses wearing masks is seen throughout the film, and one of the early scenes, shot in the Hermitage's theatre, features a performance of a play for and by Catherine the Great herself. This stressing of the theatrical dimension in the film is hardly a coincidence. Indeed, it derives from Custine's observation about Russia in his book. There, as Mikhail Iampolski reminds us (2006: 278), the Frenchman noted, with plenty of irony, the waltz of the servants and officials at the imperial court, and how it resembled a constant dress rehearsal, endlessly reprised with each day, and in which it was never quite clear who played which part exactly. In this frame, it was the czar who appeared as the ultimate *metteur-en-scène* of this never-ending production. Sokurov, aware of this to the point of self-consciousness, yields a moment of welcome levity in the film (right after the old Catherine runs into the distance in the snow-covered courtyard), in which Custine-Dreyden, having been asked by the masked actresses whether he wrote the book they hand him (which we



Russian Ark: constant rehearsal: the film references history's (and its own) theatricality

must assume to be his own Russian recollections), points playfully at the narrator-Sokurov, saying: 'Me? Not at all! It's him, he wrote it all!'¹⁶ So it is that the theatrical association the film posits with the Hermitage complicates the nature of the depictions we are given to witness. Numbed by the beauty and hypnotic quality of the film, we marvel at the *défilé* of careful historic detail and feel puzzled when asked to assess the value of it all, as though in a maze of space and time. But Custine's critical account is thwarted by Sokurov's potent nostalgia for this bygone era.

III

Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli reminds us in her historiographic study of the film that the etymology of the word *nostalgia* derives from the Greek *algos* (ἄλγος: pain, ache; and by extension, desire, lack) and *nostos* (νόστος: home) (2005: 18), which together mean a desire to return home – a fundamental trope in Sokurov, as already demonstrated on repeated occasions, even if the home must be an imaginary re-creation. The irrigation plan that submerged Podorvikha, Sokurov's birthplace, can of course be interpreted as the main source behind the imagery of deluge and ark that the film instantiates. That is, Sokurov's home was wiped off the map by a communist project, and in turn he leaves the Bolshevik past under water, taking on his ark only those elements that predate it.

The word *nostalgia*, in its very nature, implies a movement (mental or physical) and a clear locale: the hearth, the home. As is so often the case in his cinema, the form that Sokurov decides to adopt in *Russian Ark* (here, the aesthetics of the long take, in almost perpetual motion, inside a palace that served as the Russian imperial family's hibernal dwelling space) befits its emotion and expands upon it: the notion of a film 'in one breath' being akin to a very long, unpunctuated sentence, a stream of consciousness. But beyond the *exercice de style*, the idea of the single take is also that of continuity, Russian history uninterrupted up to 1917 and the Bolshevik revolution. This, we could say, constitutes the conscious, avowed conceit of the film. But at the same time, there is the dreamlike quality of the uncanny Steadicam camera, yielding an almost weightless, disembodied floating motion, which in turns evokes the less explicitly critical, more instinctual logic of dreams. This is what Jamey Gambrell refers to *Russian Ark* as 'a seamless, richly layered *dream* of art and history' (2003: 31; emphasis mine).

If we wished to invent, as in chapter eight, another Deleuzian-inflected category, for this film, we could call this the dream-space and -time image. And indeed, Sokurov has produced a perfectly sealed block of cinematic time and space, within a space of many temporalities (the museum), 'a film in *real* time about *unreal* time, where the past is always the present' (Gambrell 2003: 31), and vice versa.

Staying with Gilles Deleuze's typology, if one wished to place the film more on the 'movement-image' side rather than the 'time-image',¹⁷ one would be confronted with a series of irreconcilable aporias. Regardless, this may be the right place to discuss the legacy of Deleuze and the implications of the two terms. The movement-image, for the French philosopher, would be organised according to the logic of the sensori-

motor scheme – an image conceived as part of a natural, causal, and logical system that replicates natural movements and actions in nature. The time-image, surfacing immediately following World War II and epitomised by neorealist cinema, would contradict and break away from this logic, privileging instead what Deleuze calls ‘op-signs’, images of pure optical and sound situations that do not necessarily lead to actions. This would lead to the notion of crystal-image, in which each image is taken independently as opening up on its own infinity.

Closely correlated in film theory to the notion of the crystal image, and inscribed, like a ghost, in the film, is the figure of Federico Fellini (1920–1993).¹⁸ There is no escaping the comparison between the nostalgic effects of the Italian master’s, whose final descent of the stairs by the film’s entire cast of 8½ (1963) is quoted quite literally in the final scene of *Russian Ark*. Likewise, no character in the Sokurov canon is closer to a Fellinesque entity than Dreyden’s Custine, both a clown and a philosopher, playful and brooding. Besides, Gilles Deleuze has elaborated at length (in *Cinema 2*) about the fundamental importance of the boat, the ship (and so, of course, the ark) in the universe of Fellini, and thus the choice of this trope eminently called for a reference of the Italian director.

Both a vessel and a circus ring, divided and dual in nature, the boat is poised between past and present. In their dialectical dealings with these conflicting temporalities, the otherwise quite different Sokurov and Fellini are quite similar. In order to approach Fellini’s particular approach, Deleuze elicits a variation of the crystal-image: the French philosopher sees how all purely optical and sonic images are ‘seeds’ which can crystallise in a myriad of individual crystals (like a set of alveoli). But then, all the seeds coalesce into an endlessly growing crystal (1985: 118). Here we can see a clear parallel with Sokurov’s totalising and enfolding mechanism, whereby all the disparate elements are reunited into a whole. The difference between Sokurov’s interstitial fold and Fellini’s crystal, however, is that the latter features no crack through which one could escape and attain life (although it doesn’t freeze it, either, like a perfectly formed and finite crystal), as opposed to the constant, funnel-like open-endedness, which all of Sokurov’s films propose. Yet much like Sokurov’s unlikely organic, physiological fold, Fellini’s crystal is also animated with a life of its own, although of a mineral kind: in its constant expansion, it crystallises all it touches, and its seeds give everything an endless power of growth. This is particularly clear in *ROMA* (1972) and *Amarcord*



Russian Ark: echoes of Fellini’s 8½ – the whole cast comes walking down the Winter Palace’s main stairwell (with Alexander Pushkin and Natalya Goncharova in front)

(1973), where the director's childhood memories are crafted into a fully staged spectacle that nonetheless fully retains the spontaneity of youth (1985: 119). It is this vital spontaneity which seems to be missing somewhat from the atmosphere of *Russian Ark*, even if Dreyden, again, allowed himself a couple of welcome moments of improvisation here and there, as in the scene where he throws a snowball at the narrator.

Deleuze suggests that *Salvation*, in Fellini, can only be on the other side of the crystal, where the multiple pasts are being preserved (1985: 121). The two aspects, the passing present which goes into death, the past which is *preserved* and retains the seed of life, ceaselessly overlap, cross over each other (1985: 122). Even though Fellini preserves the spectacle and the recreated world (always superior to the archival, the document), distinct from Sokurov's 'other life' (a composite of staged reality and documentary account), the two men have a similar relationship to this idea of a past that is more potent than the present. And one of the key terms to our discussion of *Russian Ark*, correlating Fellini and Sokurov most closely, is preservation, restoration. As the Russian director puts it:

Early on, I became well aware that the task of art is to maintain some old chain, to repair its individual units, endlessly repeating this same action, over and over again. (Sokurov 2012: 306; translation mine)¹⁹

No other fiction film by Sokurov better thematises this role, this necessity, for the artist, to maintain the chain of tradition, which is indispensable to the survival of civilisation. This commitment to the arts in the director may be considered reactionary. Yet it acquires a moving resonance in view of the way the current corporate world has been willing to sacrifice the arts, not only in the compromises of the audiovisual industry as instruments of manipulation and power (which they always were), but also in its outspoken contempt for and gradual sacrificing of the Humanities, without which, however useless they may seem, no democratic (and, further, human) society can exist. The more troubling aspect to Sokurov's messianic view, of course, has to do with its subtext, expressed in the film, namely that this salvaging of Western civilisation can only come, at this point, from Russia (with Europe having lost its own instinct of survival and potential for rebirth, and existing only as a geopolitical entity co-dependent on the greater military powers that be).

For Sokurov – and this is an opinion he has repeatedly stated in his films and in interviews – the West was the place where all the most important art was once produced, but is now in decline. Russia, to the contrary, survived the dark age of communism and might, by virtue of its never-extinguished appreciation for the legacy of Western art, but also thanks to the strength of its national soul and faith – the delicate heritage of Western Christianity, Russian religiosity, and Eastern spirituality – serve as the redeeming ark where European culture will remain intact, while another historical deluge, which has yet to occur, drowns the decadent old civilisation. It is not the apocalyptic tone, however, but rather the loving, familial relationship to Western European culture that is expressed in the sense of kinship, under the verbal skirmishes, between the narrator and Custine. The latter remains, against the odds, the 'friend',

the only one truly capable of understanding how the narrator/director really feels.²⁰ What connects these two is a status of eternal outsiders and art-loving humanists, cultivated and outspoken, with a critical gaze on the establishment, however different their backgrounds and views may otherwise be.

Returning to the motif of preservation (and conservation, its corollary in the context of the museum), it is alluded to by Custine in derisive terms, when the Frenchman evokes the smell of formaldehyde that seems to pervade the museum (smell is an important sense in Sokurov, given how it connects closely to memory). This 'preservative' or embalming function of the film can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand it is an ark, a safe haven floating on the tormented seas of history, preserving the treasure of a civilisation. On the other hand, it may serve as a much less compelling discourse of the aforementioned faith in Russia's messianic role: that the salvation of the west (of Western civilisation at large) comes through a *Russian* ark, a mission that has legitimated, ironically, a great deal of the exactions under the Imperial and Soviet regimes alike, which Sokurov alternately – and somewhat inconsistently – praises or condemns. Be this as it may, Russian culture, as it is informed by the momentous legacy of European culture that it preserves in the walls of its museum/ark, is destined to 'sail forever'.²¹

Next to the term of preservation, we find, in any museum or archive project, the term restoration. Here, the distinction between the two terms may be of use. Philip Rosen (2001) identifies the fundamental difference between the two forms vis-à-vis their relationship to history. While restorationists believe they can isolate the past and view it in the present as a fixed moment in time, preservationists see time as a continuity, which can neither be broken, reversed, nor manipulated. In the first approach, historical past is made knowable through the scientific methodologies of historical inquiry. In the second, emphasis is placed on the gap between past and present, making any knowledge of the past a matter of complete conjecture. Consequently, restorationists would remove all traces of modernisation when 'restoring' a building or a work of art, seeking to return it to its original splendour. Preservationists would instead allow the various stylistic strata of successive periods to remain visible, while structurally securing the object for the future. Ultimately, the impetus for preservation and restoration is the same, namely to recuperate a 'spirit of the past'.

Ideological concerns cannot be divorced from the project of historical reconstruction, 'objectivity' being in 'the service of subjectivity', whether it is an act of preservation or restoration (Rosen 2001: 67). If, for the sake of the present argument, we wished to stay on the theoretical level and keep the two separated, we would see how *Russian Ark* operates on both levels: it seeks to preserve the legacy of European art, however symbolically; while it also restores Russia's imperial history, with all the pomp it implies and historical echoes contained in the term when it comes to royalty. This it did precisely at a time when Russia was keen on reviving its long repressed patrimony, witnessing the resurgence of the Orthodox church and, even, the project of canonisation of Czar Nikolay II.

As Nancy Condee points out, the film is paradoxically pitted against a clear re-montage of the history it recounts: 'This directorial decision performs a curious inversion:

history is subject to montage, but the film is not' (Condee 2011: 162). The seamless one-take camera aesthetic, then, may be seen as the brush and glaze of the restorationist, meant to remove the cracks and blotches which tarnish the original *tableau*.²²

The main crack or blotch the film erases, of course, to restore Russian history to an illusion of grandeur and fullness, is the Soviet period, barely alluded to as a 'very sombre period' in the film. In line with this, Dragan Kujundzic argues (2004) that Sokurov's choice of the one-take camera movement can be read as an overt reaction against the great tradition of cinematic montage championed by Dziga Vertov and Sergey Eisenstein. More so perhaps than a formal jab at practices of Soviet cinema (complicated by the lineage one can detect in Sokurov with the films of Alexander Dovzhenko and Boris Barnet), however, one can interpret the use of the one-take aesthetic in other terms. Of course, one could point out the director's own professed reasons, in accord with his constantly renewed experimental thrust: Sokurov himself repeated several times that, by the time he conceived of the film, he had grown weary of montage in general, thus prompting his desire to make a film that would be montage-free.

But the process of an 'invisible montage' in the film is far more interesting not in what it manifestly leaves out (the Soviet years) as in what it discreetly elides, namely substantial episodes of the Romanov dynasty: atypically, the director seems little concerned with the fates of those who perished under the czars' regimes. Even more symptomatic, perhaps, is his dispensing with Alexander I and II, who are generally considered the more liberal Russian emperors. And while Sokurov evokes in passing the fire that burned down the Hermitage in 1837, he seems at odds with the recollections of Custine, who points out the many lives of those workers who died in trying to reconstruct the palace, simply to restore it to its former glory as rapidly as possible. But what, Sokurov seems to suggest, do the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of workers mean in the face of the greatness of the achievement ahead? The implication is that the Hermitage's existence, and moreover, its resilience through repeated adversity – most notably the infamous blockade of Leningrad by the Nazis, which cost the lives of one million of the city's residents – matters more in itself than the personal achievements of individuals, a quintessentially Russian view, and one which at one and the same time contradicts Sokurov's professed humanism.

However much one tries to ignore it, or give the director the benefit of the doubt, there is something of this rather disturbing, grand-Russian ethos in Sokurov's enterprise, which would only grow through the 2000s: his vision, as it were, of Russian culture as a crucible of art and history that is essential to the survival of a whole nation (perhaps, even, to the survival of humanity at large, if only in the sphere of the spirit), underpins the mythological representation of the Great Russia. Mostly pre-Soviet but also, and even more disturbingly so, of the new Great Russia, as the presence of Valery Gergiev, who appears conducting the Mariinsky Theatre's orchestra in the final ballroom sequence, suggests. One myth (an ark of culture and art) founds another myth: that of the greatness of a powerful Russia, and the promise of its regained grandiose status, presumably lost during the dark years of the Soviet regime. And this partakes, no doubt, of the post-Soviet *zeitgeist*, especially since Putin, and his unabashed cult of personality, took the country's reins. As Thomas Campbell points out:

Today's Russian culture – lowbrow, middlebrow, and highbrow; political as well as artistic – is a culture of big names, big money, broad gestures and spectacular events; of massed forces and top-down discursive control. It is the culture of Putin and Pugacheva, of Gergiev and Piotrovskii, a culture of generals where even a superb chamber artist like Sokurov is moved, for some reason, to reflect on the lives of 'great men' like Lenin, Hitler, and Hirohito.²³ (Campbell 2005)

This restoration of Russia to its Imperial splendour, minus all barbaric aspects of the Romanovs' autocracy, and brushing under the rug of the Soviet period, explains the means invested into the production of *Russian Ark*. They would no doubt have been much more modest, had the film been solely about the celebration of great artists of the past, as the less bombastic (and perhaps ultimately more poetic) *Elegy of a Voyage* attests. Likewise, and if one wants to be most critical of the film's ideological agenda, its one-take aesthetic counteracts the act of erasure of the less glorified past, Sokurov's quasi-fetishist investment with fragment and the disparate replaced here by a seamless epic.

More even than a gesture meant to erase the Soviet barbarity (and the school of montage of the early Soviet years, cf. chapter ten), this smooth, gliding aesthetic would then come across as some distinctly Russian but overdetermined and hypertrophied expression of capitalism's favoured cinematic mode, the ideological 'transparence' of continuity editing (the latter, while of course resorting to cuts, always tries to immerse the spectator and to make them forget the interruption represented by each cut). This, then, would be a formal analogue to the emergence of Putin's Russia as a major player on the geopolitical scene, as brutal as its American counterpart.

As we saw in the book's introduction, Sokurov's conception of the cinema as a door onto the 'Other life' carries with it a responsibility of the artist vis-à-vis his audience.²⁴ Even if *Russian Ark* is probably the closest, in the director's corpus, to a piece of cinematic entertainment, its sedate affect thus may be a deliberate effect to preclude a vapid *readerly* enjoyment on the part of the viewer. Should the film, nonetheless, like the director's previous efforts, be considered a true modernist work? To be sure, the film is preoccupied with the artist's subjectivity, but the claim is less tenable when it comes to its commitment to the autonomy of the work of art. Of all of Sokurov's films, this one seems to be the most directly affected by the shift in Russia to late capitalism.

Further, with its rather straightforwardly nostalgic evocation of the past and its pastiche-like reference of Fellini, one would be tempted to align the film with the post-modern idiom. Clearly the productive contradictions at play inside Sokurov's art are here reinstated in a far less interesting manner, between the director's powerful vision of art and its autonomy and the film's marketing – the superficially nostalgic showcase of Russian history. The latter, for that matter, proved useful to Sokurov in the very least insofar as it was his first commercial hit (all things being relative), even enjoying successful runs in select theatres in the West.²⁵ Surely the audiences were treated to an unusual kind of period piece, and hopefully the film served (as it did to me) as an easy

introduction into Sokurov's otherwise far more challenging and interesting cinematic universe. And if, indeed, the dialectical battleground from which the film emerged entailed the maintaining of aesthetic integrity over financial compromises, one can consider *Russian Ark* still a very successful operation indeed. Here, as everywhere else, the paradoxical nature of Sokurov's oeuvre and the man's intelligence allow, more often than not, for a co-existence of the lofty ideal and the pragmatic compromise that any cinematic undertaking implies, in its ancillary association with the world of money and government.

Yet however tempting this postmodern, late capitalist (and somewhat conspiratorist) view may be (and however unquestionable the dangerously nationalistic political turn of Russia since the early 2000s), it is problematic and reductive in two ways: first, it would be preposterous to align Sokurov's agenda with the Russian government's. As I shall elaborate in chapters twelve, fourteen and fifteen, Sokurov may have a very clearly nationalistic view of the role of Russia, which overlaps with Putin's, he stands by just as steadfastly to the idea that political and financial power should always be subservient to the arts and Humanities, and not the other way round. Secondly, it would completely obfuscate the film's undeniably fascinating meta-commentary on history and its interplay with the arts.

None of the considerations above, regarding *Russian Ark* as Sokurov's 'blockbuster' (his 'palace in wonderland', to quote MacNab's ironic title (2002)), should let us forget its nostalgic and melancholy mood, and the fact that it is, first and foremost, an elegy. Historicising it as such, we can see far more subtle aspects of the film, including in what it has to do with cinema as art and technology. But the most important conceit here is purely cinematic: the film articulates a gap between the cinema of yesterday (35mm) and tomorrow (digital), showcasing both at the Cannes festival, where the film was projected both from a digital projector and from a 35mm digital intermediate print transfer. As Tony Pipolo (2002b) pointed out, Sokurov's project generates nostalgia for the future of the other life of film, where the actual distinction between digital and analogue will have been forgotten, and where also, perhaps, the very emotion promised by art will have been altered beyond recognition.²⁶

Likewise, if the film portrays a glorified Imperial Russia, it may be actually said to serve as the antidote to its own brand of celebratory (and restorationist) drive, and to the growing authoritarian tone in Russia at the time of its release. Even though Sokurov may not be a champion of political correctness (especially from a Western perspective), he is anything but an open advocate of tyranny or totalitarianism. And so the carefully rehearsed, orchestrated *mise-en-scène* of the film reconnects it with the constant 'dress rehearsal' Custine spoke of with regard to the Czar's court. As Mikhail Lampolski (2006) has argued, the suspended nature of the one-take aesthetic, as well as the very freedom imparted in the final result of the film (directing so many extras being all but impossible), precisely excludes the notion of total control and directorial tyranny. Oblique as it may be, Sokurov's comment on the nature of control and coercion (already mentioned, again, in the figure of the spy) is inescapably present throughout the entire film. Likewise, his character-narrator may have his ideas regarding what Russia is or should be, but he is defined by a lack of agency. Although

Sokurov-as-author shapes this collage of Russian history, Sokurov-as-narrator seems incapable of inflecting upon his environment, other than in his conversation with Custine (who oftentimes antagonises his ideas). Time and again, he and Custine are chased from various rooms of the Hermitage (a critique, no doubt, of arbitrariness and blind authority), shadowed by the spy. This device reminds us of the control and repression apparatus that has characterised the various Russian regimes, and, further, may comment upon any form of organised system of authority. So that, as hinted earlier on, the film cleverly proposes the interpretive means through which its endorsement of (and sponsoring by) the contemporary government and its political agenda can always be deflected or mitigated.

IV

What is certain, is that *Russian Ark* is far too strange, alienating and distant to be considered mere propaganda (if it was intended as such, it failed). As Geoffrey McNab notes: 'One will have retained the odd sensation of being caught in the characters' exhilaration, but always, being kept at a distance' (2002: 20). The ark, then, transforms into a wonderful showcase, an aquarium almost, which we can observe carefully but never truly penetrate. There is something slightly unnerving about this sensation of being kept at bay from the events and emotions at stake, especially when we understand that we are watching the 'binding resin keeping the ark of civilization afloat' (Gambrell 2003: 29), as though Sokurov were resolutely excluding his audience – a lost generation, as it were – from the cruise itself.

We can clearly discern a contradiction in terms here, with the image of ark as both aquarium and floating object. And this may have to do with the anti-rationalistic, messianic drive of Grand-Russian nationalism to save the art and cultural heritage of this world (the Hermitage collection serving as an elegant, if forceful, metonymy) from its tendencies to over-rationalise and to drift away from spiritual life and religion, as it moves towards a more totalitarian (read 'Leftist,' 'secular,' 'politically correct') mode of thought – in this sense instituting another dogma or authoritarianism. No wonder, then, that many people were somewhat alienated by the film, even beyond the peculiar nature of its style and form. The floating, seamless, disincarnated movement provided by the Steadicam technology evokes the ghostly world of its inhabitants, but also instantiates the invitation to the voyage to take us away, while never including us entirely.

In spite of his rather essentialist views, Sokurov is aware of the many contradictions his cinema, and this film not least, instantiate. And so the film's formal and thematic peculiarities befit his peculiar take on history – a curious blend of Russian reactionary nationalism, subtle analytical and critical thinking, and belief poised between the deterministic imperatives of fate and chance. The forward camera movement can be engulfing and neutralising of critical thought; it is also a march forward that criticises itself by the fact of its very being. While this type of forward tracking shot dominates as it follows Custine through the halls, it is important to note that the film is bookended by two backward camera movements. The latter is especially conspicuous,

when the guests of the ball walk down the large staircase and out of the frame, as the camera pulls back and films their somewhat closed and sad faces. One must stress the importance of the unique and therefore uncanny nature of this one-take venture, rendered even more strange by instances of dolly forward and simultaneous backward zooming, which creates unnatural and de-familiarising optical distortions in the background. It would be overly formalistic, however, to impart strict and simplistic meanings to given camera movements and directions in the film.

And yet, for all the kinetics at play here, history is not in movement in *Russian Ark*. As Lampolski has noted (2006), history in the Hermitage's halls has no possibility of movement; it is enclosed on itself. Instead of *tableaux vivants*, what we see here (and the eerie, pinched piano strings on the soundtrack by composer Sergey Yevtushenko are but one indicator of this) are rather *natures mortes*: pictures of the dead, frozen in the past. This frozen character might be connected with observations made by Custine himself in 1839: Russia, for the French diplomat, was an ahistorical entity. Past, for Custine, was never irrevocable in Russia, as it could always be revisited, indeed re-made. And St. Petersburg, of all places, was to Custine the most ahistorical of places, having no roots, either in history (at the time it was one of the youngest cities in the world, as it had been founded by Peter I in 1703), nor on the earth (having been built out of the Czar's megalomaniac drive on the inhospitable marshes and quagmires of the Baltic gulf). We can thus perceive a homology between the museum and the specific history of Imperial Russia – that constant dress-rehearsed play, never fully realised, always slightly amiss. This world of the czars is like a frozen scene in the paintings of the museum, isolated in history.

It is deliberately that Sokurov goes against the grain of the theory of history as perpetually mobile, capturing instead a glorious and celebratory snapshot of a fantasised past. *Russian Ark* was, after all, initially meant as an elegy – the genre to mourn the dead. Not a celebration of the grandeur of Imperial Russia, but a sad song to its extinction. The difference may seem thin, but it is noteworthy, and meaningful.

So, while it does surely lend itself to a reading in terms of a celebration of a new emergent Russia in the guise of its pre-revolutionary grandeur, the film comes across, rather, as a soliloquy of Sokurov with a past which only remains alive in art. This lack of possibility of genuine dialogue founds the film's general melancholic effect, and it is thematised in the film itself, by the blindness of some characters;²⁷ by the fundamental disagreement on the role of Russia vis-à-vis the West as understood by the narrator and by Custine; and by the sibylline nature or general detachment of various actions and exchanges. Likewise, the production history of the film, and a subsequent controversy over the role of the German cinematographer, Tilman Büttner, indicates the chasm existing between the Russian and Western perspectives – beyond the actual universe of the film.²⁸

But it is neither the imperialist enthusiasms, nor the mitigating philosophical considerations which the majority will remember after watching *Russian Ark*. As is so often the case in Sokurov (and his elegies), grandeur is met with a mawkish, sorrowful tenderness, best embodied in the final scene following the grand ball, in which a pensive Custine vanishes, staying behind as the crowd exits, and the narrator and the

spy call to him as though having lost a dear friend. The cult(s) of personality and the celebration of an 'Eternal Russia' are thus somewhat muffled by the narrator's sentimentalism, and the director's even more formidable sense of nostalgia. This longing for the past – but also for a present, the impermanence of which transforms it constantly into history – seems to invade even the uncertain future.²⁹

'By the time the film concludes,' Anderson notes, 'it is less the technical bravura that is in evidence, than the melancholic mood that permeates the nobility's final exit from the Winter Palace' (Anderson 2008). This overwhelming emotional weight accompanying the film's final moments confirms *Russian Ark's* elegiac status, which in this case pertains to the passing of high Russian and European culture. *Russian Ark* eulogises not only the pre-Revolutionary Russian history that is given 'life' by Sokurov's cast of thousands filling the grand hallways and ballrooms of the Hermitage, but also the beauty and majesty of this waning civilisation.³⁰ Sokurov does not so much salute the new emerging Russia and celebrate its glorious past than he sadly enshrines and mourns the latter as irretrievable, before sadly exclaiming: 'Farewell, Europe'.³¹ After the party guests have departed, what remains is the ark itself, a depository of Europe's high art tradition, stranded for some reason on this land of marshes – which threatened to fall on several occasions, and never did. This historical resilience and vitality may comfort the director in the idea that there, indeed, is something (the sacred relics of another world) at least that may be salvaged – while others are definitely under threat.

V

As I argued in the introduction to this volume, there is, in Sokurov, an interstitial dialectic at play between memory and history, one substitutable for the other as a world of imagination, of nostalgia for an impossible space. The most important driving force for Sokurov in making *Russian Ark* was the celebration of a past he never experienced – not a real past, thus, but the dreamt past of a child whose imagination was once larger than the frames offered by a bleak hospital room, and, beyond these recesses, the society of his time. Even from early in life, these confines made him want to reach out for more – and what better place to do so than one of the richest museums in the world? After all, the director admits freely that *Russian Ark*, is, above all, a 'fantasy'. But it is a fantasy with a purpose nonetheless, an artistic mission. Very clearly, in a context in which big money and unscrupulous politicians, real estate and industrial Russian tycoons could very easily wipe the (unprofitable) past from a country traditionally so attached to celebrating it (even if in sometimes adulterated forms), the primary concern of Sokurov is to keep the ship of memory afloat.³² In this sense, he is more a preservationist than restorationist, after all. The romantic nature of his project, however utopian, of preserving and restoring a glorious past once smothered in the ashes of history, elevating and equating it with the great works of art of Western civilisation, commends admiration for the sheer conviction that carried it through, even though the ship has yet to dock someplace – unlikely to reach its Arcadian shores, for much like these revived tableaux, they never were.

In *Elegy of a Voyage*, his ‘rehearsal’ for *Russian Ark*, Sokurov (similarly the main character and narrator of the film) stops in front of a painting by Dutch master Pieter Sanredaem, feeling profoundly at home, almost becoming one with the painting. In an interview, Sokurov evoked the logical conclusion of this quest: ‘I seek, from Russia to the furthest corners of Western Europe, something in the eyes that I encounter, joy, solace. But I only find what I am looking for on fragments of old paintings’ (De Baecque 2001). At the end of this sumptuous indulgence that is *Russian Ark*, Sokurov inscribes himself among these figures, these ‘eternal people’ destined to live and sail forever on the waters of history.

As with all of his cinematic output, the Russian director may be facing the past and speaking to a world of ghosts, but he is moving toward the future of his medium. An overt opponent of violent revolutions and a proponent of evolution, Sokurov knows well that it is by learning the lessons of the past that one might be able to avert the repetition of mistakes and, perhaps, build a wiser future – even if sadness and pessimism seem to have the upper hand in his universe. Having concerned himself more or less directly with dark matters of ‘history’ in his three preceding features, Sokurov would let these recede into the background and probe the nature of a wiser, better (although equally escapist and fantasised) world, but on an entirely separate and intimate plane, in his following and perhaps most personal and profoundly revealing feature, *Father and Son*.

Notes

- 1 ‘Russian and European symphonic music was of great importance for me. When I was young, people my age were fascinated by the Beatles and I didn’t even know who they were. It was much more important to me to acquire the latest recordings of Benjamin Britten. I had absolutely no interest in pop music that had people my age so excited. Classical music was almost as vital to me as the air I breathed.’ Interview conducted by Kirill Galetsky, published in *Cineaste*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2001, and in French in *Images Documentaires 50/51*, 1st and 2nd trimester, 2004. Elsewhere, in a June 2012 t.v. interview on the Russian talk-show *на ночь глядя* (*Na noch’ glyadya*), Sokurov confessed that the work which changed his life, when he was a child, was Tomaso Albinoni’s *Adagio*.
- 2 Surely *Elegy of a Voyage* stands as a clear contradiction to those who see the imposition of tyrannical, absolute control in Sokurov. Informed by his belief in the contingencies of intersecting ‘lines of fate’, the documentary strays from its goal (the Boijmans-Van Beuningen museum) and focuses on the titular voyage instead, dedicating a substantial part of its running time to a completely random encounter with a strange young man. Looking somewhat illuminated or mentally challenged, met in a roadside café by the crew, he engages in a conversation with Sokurov which we cannot hear. We are only given to experience this private encounter with this other wandering soul through the image and the director’s recounting of his own ‘understanding’ of their dialogue, possibly in a language Sokurov could not literally understand.

- 3 Next to classical music, Sokurov places his artistic allegiance in classics of literature as well as painting, especially the work of Rembrandt, Rubens, El Greco, Van Dyck and so on.
- 4 Invented in 1976 by Garrett Brown, but never hitherto used to such formidable lengths.
- 5 This take was likely final, time and light being in short supply on this winter day – one of the shortest days of the year in a northern city that receives very little sunlight in the wintertime, in any case.
- 6 At the time of the premiere, the film was deemed mediocre by Jean-Michel Frodon (*Cahiers du Cinéma*), merely ‘of interest’ by Gavin Smith (*Film Comment*) and Jan Lumholdt (*Filmhäftet*), but excellent by Gioca Nazaro (*Filmcritica*) and Jan Dupont (*International Herald Tribune*). The poll reprising these ratings and opinions can be found in issue 211 (July/August 2002) of *Film Comment*. Subsequently, upon its American release, the film gained increasingly wide appraisal and recognition: In a later *Film Comment* poll (issue 212, September-October 2002), Manohla Dargis, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Roger Ebert, and J. Hoberman deemed it excellent, and *Art in America*’s Jamey Gambrell gave it an accolade, calling it a ‘compelling meditation on History, memory, time and art’ (p. 29). In Russia, the film has polarised critics, some praising its philosophical depth and artistic commitment, others sneering at the high kitsch it epitomises, its questionable ideological agenda (a criticism widely reprised in France), and the vanity of its technical accomplishment. As time goes by, the film is increasingly considered a modern classic.
- 7 There is the compelling and elegant ‘making-of’ of the film available on the U.S. release of the film on DVD, but also various reports from the 2002 Cannes festival, where the film premiered and where, in spite of not getting any prize, its phenomenal production history was one of the big attractions of the festival. See Hoberman, McNab, or, in French, Tesson.
- 8 Anderson’s perceptive review of the film informs one of the conceits of this chapter, namely that Sokurov’s film serves as both ‘elegy’ and ‘eulogy’ of Russian history.
- 9 On the other hand, such publicity also allowed it to become probably Sokurov’s only film marginally famous outside of Russia and cinephile circles.
- 10 In his piece ‘Crowd Control: Anxiety of Effluence in Sokurov’s *Russian Ark*,’ José Alaniz lists all the various ‘fumbles’ in the film (2011: 155–75).
- 11 Sokurov had been thinking of making a film in one take already in the mid-1980s, but it was impossible prior to the arrival of digital technology. He confided to me that everyone was telling him not to embark upon such a project, that it was pure madness. Today, he is extremely proud of having pulled off the unlikely feat.
- 12 This poignant image is not unlike the delicate flame carried across the pool at the end of *Nostalghia* (1983); Sokurov used this image in his *Moscow Elegy*, which was dedicated to the memory of Tarkovsky.
- 13 The image of the ark is already intimated at the very beginning of the film, when, still in the darkness of the black screen, we hear the sounds of a harbour, and a boat’s powerful, almost painful whistle.

- 14 This applies particularly to museums, which strive to achieve a sense of representative completeness, at least in their Western expression (The Hermitage, the Louvre, the British Museum, or the Met). Other medium-sized or smaller collections often follow suit. Yet in many ways Sokurov's museum is more akin to the Isabella Stewart Gardner collection in Boston, arranged according to the director's personal taste, and not catering to any particular chronology or methodological order.
- 15 The film opens on darkness. The voice of the narrator first says, 'I open my eyes and I see nothing.' This is akin to birth, or awakening – the world emerging from some chaotic magma and taking shape before the narrator's very eyes. The question of the dreamlike, unreal quality is then further emphasised – is this a figment of his imagination, a dream, or an actual action that he is witness to? The remark of blindness also relates to the very genuine threat of retinal detachment that followed Sokurov's attack by hoodlums in 2000, which required repeated treatments and plagued Sokurov considerably into the mid-2000s.
- 16 Indeed, Sokurov was the main author of *Russian Ark's* script, not working this time with his usual screenwriter, Yuri Arabov. Yet this is hardly a Brechtian moment of breach of the fourth wall. The 'fourth wall' in the film is both open and closed throughout, since it is literally embodied by the ghostly presence of the narrator/Sokurov (the distinction between the two entities is never made clear, and in this the film resembles Sokurov's documentaries, in which he often partakes in the action and narrates it with the same mild, yet often probing and ironic voice).
- 17 See also chapter eight.
- 18 Sokurov worked on the sound design and syncing of Russian dialogues of Fellini's *And the Ship Sails On* (*E la nave va*, 1983). *Russian Ark* clearly references 8½ in the final stairwell sequence, along with *Casanova*, *Amarcord*, and *And the Ship Sails On* in the locale, the abundance of cast and details, and the somewhat fragmented and anecdotal nature of the film's segments.
- 19 'Я хорошо и рано понял, что задача искусства – поддерживать в сохранности некую старую цепь, ремонтировать ее отдельные звенья и повторять все время одно и то же, одно и то же.'
- 20 It is not useless to note here, in view of my broader thesis, that Custine was a notorious repressed homosexual, whose mother, Delphine, forced into an early wedding in order to put an end to her son's tendencies.
- 21 And, of course, in many ways Noah's ark was the first collection, the first zoo, the first museum in history, if of a very totalitarian kind, under the most dire of circumstances.
- 22 But the film itself was also subject to a 'restoration' work of sorts, on the second degree: the very elaborate post-production process of the film (thousands of instances of digital enhancement, colour grading, focus manipulations to create or alter the sense of depth, and so on) evokes the work of restorationists. Although in this case, of course, the process is not of restoration, but of production of the cinematic artefact itself.
- 23 Much like the Bolshoy to Moscow, the Mariinsky is the reference theatre of St. Petersburg, boasting its most prestigious performances of ballet, opera, and

symphonic music. Valery Gergiev, who appears in the film, is the theater's general director and artistic director, as well as principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra.

- 24 For a further discussion of the 'Other Life' in Sokurov's own terms, see the book's introduction, my interview with the director (2006), but also Tony Pipolo in *Film Comment* (2002a and b). Or, for a briefer consideration: 'Fellini's films give a new conception of the world, or even engender a new world. Cinema should not reflect real life. It must not be a mirror, good or bad. It must engender a new life, completely different from reality' (in Challand 1990).
- 25 'Historic narrative without the history,' to make a pun on Jameson's 'surrealism without the subconscious' (1991).
- 26 In the sense that the progress of High Definition will, ultimately, offer an image quality which will supersede the precision of 35mm, but will probably also, in spite of its attempts to imitate the latter (artificial generation of grain and flicker effects and so on), provide an image of a different nature altogether. Even in the event that it will still be projected through the physical body of film (through the technology of imprinting audiovisual material, shot digitally, onto a traditional film reel), something of the nature of the photographic image will be lost, and retrieved only in film archives and museums.
- 27 Or conversely, by the ability to see of those actually physically blind, but cheated by those who 'see'.
- 28 Cf. Alaniz (2011) especially 165–69.
- 29 When Custine meets two of Sokurov's real-life friends, an actor and a doctor, he complains about their smelling of formaldehyde. Although they are, unlike Custine, contemporaries of the film's shoot, they too will lapse into death and oblivion, with art and symbolic forms appearing as the only means of redemption – something of which Sokurov is almost painfully aware.
- 30 Again, in Sokurov nothing is ever simple and fully straightforward – much like the winding patterns, sometimes hesitant, sometimes assertive, of his camera in the film. Nostalgia collides with philosophical substance looking into the future, and the ongoing dialogue between Custine and the narrator is productive in the conflicted views they propose, but also in their enigmatic, somewhat Socratic reflections, followed immediately by very clear statements. In this view, Sokurov, for all his professed Grand-Russian nationalism, can never be viewed as a plain reactionary. There is always an element of paradox, formal or thematic, which complicates the fabric of each discursive element in the film. This unique – and far more complex than many would have it – use of paradox is one, but not the only, important contribution of Sokurov to film and film theory, beyond the many stylistic and formal experiments, idiosyncrasies, and innovations in his cinema.
- 31 The sentence itself (which Sokurov would reprise, in a similar context, in his *Elegy of Life*, cf. chapter fourteen) might be interpreted as a Freudian lapse, but there are rarely such easy 'mistakes' in Sokurov. The filmmaker clearly alludes, here, to the contemporary drifting of Russian culture from Europe, following its founding Czar's open model for the building of St. Petersburg (Dutch and Italian influ-

ences, particularly). In a context of almost erotic flirtation over gas and other sources of energy between European countries (such as Schröder's Germany with Putin's Russia), after years of cold war and post-communist chaos, this statement might surprise. But Sokurov, as an individual, certainly laments a certain loss of tradition and manners (borne from the idealised European models) in Russia, replaced by the priorities of market economy and 'coca-colonisation', in which English has replaced French as the *lingua franca* of business and diplomacy, and the Russian 'soul' itself seems to be fading away.

- 32 Sokurov's many years of civic activism as an advocate for the protection of historic sites and buildings of St. Petersburg must be stressed here.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Father and Son: Beyond Absolute Intimacy

‘I hear the word “homoerotic” [...] In Russia, it is hard to see such associations. I believe this is the outcome of the impasse facing European society, which is looking for a single element that can be reduced to an interpretation... Don’t try to put your own complexes onto the movie. Let it live! Please! Homoerotic? For the movie you have seen, there’s no such low meaning. In a cruel world, nothing can be accepted but a homoerotic view. I don’t see a place for it. I’m not interested in discussing it.’

– Alexander Sokurov

At the time of its Cannes premiere, the oneiric and sensual *Father and Son* mostly attracted questions pertaining to Sokurov’s oft-suggested but never officially declared homosexuality. This was at once reductive, politically fraught, and to the point: the artist, after all, had already produced several films with strong undertones of queerness, privileging the representation of athletic, youthful, and often naked male bodies, invested with an unmistakable erotic charge. Furthermore, it was well known in private circles that the man was celibate and had often complained about his loneliness. None of this, of course, means that Sokurov is a homosexual – and it is (or it should be) irrelevant whether he is or not. But the director’s sheer resistance to the subject, clearly considering it anathema, as the quote opening this chapter attests, definitely raises a few questions.¹

If one is to be fair, Sokurov’s aggravation may have been provoked not only by how painfully relevant the question presented at the press conference was, but also by its glib and superficial nature: to address *Father and Son* in terms of its queer representations seems to be the most facile, commonplace, and obvious approach to the film. From its opening scene, it seeps with a powerful charge of homoeroticism, even in

the display of mundane exchanges or youthful camaraderie; it is bathed in hues that connect it to at least one major landmark of queer cinema,² and it has been embraced and appropriated by the gay community, irrespective of the director's own opinions vis-à-vis the subject.³ And yet: not only is homosexuality a taboo subject in conversations with Sokurov (and, by and large, in Russian culture, be it official or traditional), it also is entirely absent from Sokurov studies in general, for reasons I touched upon in the book's introduction, and will shed more light on momentarily.

Besides pure and simple obliviousness to the question of queerness and homosexuality in Sokurov or lack of interest in the question – Fredric Jameson is a good case in point – critical circles have adopted two general attitudes vis-à-vis the question:⁴ on the one hand, as we just saw, there are those who stress this component of the oeuvre, underline it as a form of repressed tendency, and, more spuriously, criticise Sokurov's refusal to identify as queer as a form of homophobia.⁵ Little more can or should be said to elaborate upon this position. On the other hand, we find the tendency by critics and scholars close to the filmmaker to altogether repress the allegations themselves.⁶ Both attitudes are problematic: naturally, if we accept the definition whereby queerness/homosexuality is a matter of positionality, Sokurov's own clear refusal to identify as a gay or queer filmmaker tightly seals the debate on one end of the argument, at least until the director will decide to open the discussion himself. For now, this seems unlikely: in an interview from 4 February 2008, published on his own website, Sokurov more or less diplomatically separated himself entirely from any possible association with a homosexual worldview (all the while acknowledging its legitimacy) by stating the following: 'Homosexuality, in my opinion, is no disease, it is a different constitution of the human soul and body, and this "difference" is the result of a process of development of the human soul as unique, and sacred, as all other forms of existence.'⁷

The uncomfortable (and parapractic) position Sokurov adopts vis-à-vis homosexuality (namely, to consider it a discrete, 'other' structure of the human soul, entirely distinct from his own) can find its root in a variety of factors: his own ideals of love and family, his engagement with religion and faith; his upbringing and, therein, a residual form of the old Russian/Soviet brand of prudishness (when it comes to verbalising sexuality, and vis-à-vis verbal indecency in general);⁸ and perhaps the actual and very real concern for his own safety, considering the rampant homophobia in Russia, recently given a disquieting new expression in Putin's infamous 'anti-gay propaganda' law.⁹ But it may also, less evidently, have to do with the director's investment and entanglement with structures of power, something I will return to in due time.

Sadly, however, it seems as though some of the critics' remarks and comments about the film served more as a whip to punish Sokurov for his fabled essentialist and conservative positions rather than trying to empathise with the plight of a man whose sensibility may have gone against his own values and belief-system, producing a remarkable oeuvre but also yielding a life of great loneliness. And it is of course extremely dubious that the normalisation and greater acceptance of homosexuality in the West (inversely proportional to the increase in proto-fascist homophobia in Russia) will do anything to solve the problem; simply because it is, just as Sokurov himself, far deeper, far more complex and with much farther-reaching implications than the glib

liberals and supporters of 'tolerance', who seem to own the reins of political correctness and the media in our late capitalist moment, want to admit.

This chapter will be the place to carry out what the intellectual short-sightedness (or dishonesty) of the liberal media, and the curt work of denial by the director, precluded; namely an open-ended, productive reading of the queerness to be detected in *Father and Son*, as it relates to its other undeniable qualities, namely its investment with the transcendental; to patriarchal society and to power in general. Then I shall uncover what these elements have diverted attention from with regard to the film, namely its far more problematic political (un)conscious, reinscribing all previous terms into a dialectical (and paradoxical) whole.

I

On the strictly narrative level, *Father and Son* may be read as a fairly straightforward heterosexual narrative: a young military academy student, Alexey, lives with his father, a freshly retired soldier and still a young man – there are only twenty years separating the two. Alexey's girlfriend decides to break up with him because he does not seem ready for an adult romantic life, living with and being too close with his father.¹⁰ 'Why can I not love you both?' he asks. His question remains unanswered, just as the suffering of two of his friends will not be resolved, whether it is Fyodor, whose father – also a soldier – went missing, or the meek neighbour Sasha, who longs to move in with Alexey and his father.

The film's and its author's sensitivity is thus poised between the indiscriminating, powerful, overflowing love for the parent, and the contradicted erotic involvement with the female figure, the heterosexual partner.¹¹ Between these apparent opposites lies the vital, ebullient, erotic charge of love and life itself. The whole film, shot partly in Lisbon, bathed in beautiful sunset hues (evoking the paintings of Andrew White), is strongly informed by dreamlike aesthetics, and thus the affects and impulses are negotiated and displaced in ambiguous ways: the aloof nature of Alexey and the girlfriend's interactions and the physical proximity and tension with the father may thus serve as inverted terms.¹² But with its representations of the muscular, hairless male body verging on the sacred, exalting bonds of friendship and camaraderie between young



Father and Son: ambiguous embraces? – a revisiting of the Pieta figure

adults on the verge of manhood, fighting and clasping each other in what sometimes constitutes yet another Sokurovian revisiting of the *Pietà* figure, the film's sublime derives from its ambiguous position between the dream, a 'de-realised' realism, and the outright allegorical.

The uncanny, oneiric quality of the film is never more allusive in its 'soft disruptions' than in Alexey and Fyodor's walk through the city streets and ride on the tramway, as seen through Sokurov's trademark use of distorting lenses. In this sequence, the Portuguese physiognomy of the driver and his uttering of clearly dubbed lines in Russian create a wonderfully mellow, otherworldly universe, familiar yet strange. The interaction of Alexey and Fyodor, midway between distrust and brotherly love, is expressed, like many other 'divergences', by the rails of the tram running parallel to one another before straying in two different directions – much like the paths of a son and a father. The film is in many ways about this promise of separation, and the conflict of dialogue and alienation, of worlds that coexist and collide or join harmoniously (as in the camera movement panning away from Fyodor marvelling at an old house's large door to an airplane flying over modern building across the street). When Fyodor explains that his mother chased his father away when he started drinking following the war, Alexey's reaction is categorical and uncomprehending, from the perspective of patriarchal society as much as from that of absolute Love. Later on, before parting, the two young men evoke the Hermitage, and Rembrandt's painting of the *Prodigal Son* – hinting, beyond the surprising acculturation of this soldier who seems at times to be still a child, at the dimension of a son's ungratefulness and the limitlessly forgiving love of a father (and vice versa). Fyodor then takes his leave, Alexey looking at a staggering view of the city, all cream and vanilla skies, both realist photograph and romantic painting.

Concurrent with the theme of parallel, converging, and diverging lines in the film, the use of Lisbon is particularly germane: the beauty of the city at sunset, as seen from a glorious vantage point against the backdrop of a pink ocean, is counteracted by the peeling paint and poverty of some of the streets the young protagonists traverse. Likewise, the extraordinary beauty of the images, soft and golden, verging on kitsch, serves as a counterbalance to the bleak world outside the film's diegetic boundaries, never showed but alluded to, with its past of wartime trauma and death, and Alexey's constant wavering between anxious dreams in which he kills his father and his daytime concern about him – in spite of the man's apparently excellent health, as an x-ray of his chest indicates.

In its themes, *Father and Son* no doubt expresses the complex relationship Sokurov has had over the years with his father, Nikolay Alexandrovich (a World War II veteran), who died in 2003. The two men, in the filmmaker's sparse account, had a difficult relationship as this rare, laconic anecdote, expresses: 'My father has seen my films about the war, and he has never said a word about them to me' (in Sandler 2008: 137). Surely Sokurov's investment with the military and his fascination with male discipline can be attributed, at least in part, to this tense and unresolved relationship with the father, possibly aggravated by the man's taut and silent looking down upon his son's many talents and course of life.

Through his father, and the fact that he grew up in a military household, Sokurov naturally developed a keen insight into the world of soldiers and military bases, a milieu he addressed in many films prior to *Father and Son*. Yet this latter film combines most closely the sociological and psychological stakes of Sokurov's experience growing up, including the geographical displacement his father's function entailed – which may account for the recreated geography (between Portugal and Russia) of the film's locale. Yet this remarkable composite environment in the film, the implications of which I shall return to in this chapter's closing, was not what struck most viewers, who focused instead on its representations of male bodies and their interactions in the film.

The precedent, the 'laboratory' of audio-visual ideas predating *Father and Son*, is *Confession* (*Повинность*; *Povinnost*, 1998). This bizarre four-hour hybrid 'documentary' portrays a (real) group of sailors on a boat in the Barents Sea, while a fictional captain (played by Sergey Bakay) ruminates about the nature of his role and the meaning of routine – and what the young men under his command truly yearn for. Some of the passages are drawn from literary sources, such as Chekhov's *Gusev* (1890), a tale which similarly features a discharged soldier on a boat; others are typical *Sokuroviana*, immediately recognisable in style and prosody.

Most of the footage of *Confession* is undistinguished: the cinematography is muddled, with the constant use of superimposed footage of snowflakes looking like a cheap video effect. But it does serve the purpose of underlining the idea of dullness and endless repetition that governs the life of these young sailors. Sokurov spends protracted amounts of time filming their slender, hairless bodies, as they shower or undergo medical inspection, while the captain ponders whether he could ever have a genuine relationship (without really specifying the nature of said relationship) with any of those who come and go on his ship. He then asks an interesting question: 'Do these young men really want to break out of their everyday routine of tending to their clothes and bodies, awaiting a cataclysm; or are they, indeed, profoundly domestic creatures, yearning for this endless routine?' The question is noteworthy insofar as it exposes yet another powerful paradox in Sokurov, drawing here on the interrogations the director poses about the role, purpose, and goals of the military (here in the barren, Arctic environment, sometimes reduced to the laborious and monotonous task of bringing coal to small Northern villages in the winter). Similar questions



Sailors undergo routine examination (*Confession*)

were already addressed at the antipodes of the Russian 'empire' in *Spiritual Voices*, at the outpost of the Tajik-Afghan border. But the secluded, tightly regimented microcosm of the boat is stripped of the austere sublime that was present in the central Asian landscape. There, an actual permanent yet invisible threat of coming under fire from enemy attack is both present and felt, but aboard the ship of *Confession*, angst is replaced by simple *ennui* and a maddeningly repetitive routine. Yet it is, paradoxically, the same routine that keeps the sailors sane and the ship afloat.

This paradox, and the profound tension it suggests between sexual activity and inaction, drives *Father and Son* with a titillating, troubling force. Running as an undercurrent to its sugar-coated images, the film's celebration of homo-social complicity is nevertheless inescapable. In this warm yet melancholy tapestry of love and yearning, the proximity of the father and the son's athletic bodies is pitted against the distance (physical, psychological, and philosophical) between Alexey and his former girlfriend, along with the glaring absence of a mother figure.¹³

The film thus proposes a world of male closeness and female distance, which is both the inversion of the worldview Sokurov has vis-à-vis male interactions in the real world, and a confirmation of his actual views on women. For him, women are closer to nature, superior beings who do not need language. Conversely, men, who are at once alienated from and attracted to women, are forlorn creatures in desperate need of the symbolic. The latter serves as a buoy to cling onto and prevent drowning in a hostile sea, in a constant struggle for survival. In such a world, and in spite of their attachment to language, as the director told me somewhat bitterly, fathers 'never leave a trace' (2006).

In view of this, *Father and Son* is inescapably a paean from Sokurov to the relationship he wished he could have had with his father – where the bond and trace that were never present in real life could be instantiated. The film is thus, on the one hand, a vibrant lyrical poem to the beauty of the male body and the utopia of an unproblematic and blissful Eden of homo-social intimacy, where fathers would never have to go away or be left alone in limbo, as the very notion of 'fathers' and 'sons' would simply vanish into pure love; and on the other hand, a symbolic recreation and reconciliation with the father, and a de-eroticised celebration of fatherly and filial love. This is precisely one of the reasons why the film elicits in many people such a conflicted reaction. Viewers with homophobic prejudice or repressed homosexual inclinations will be exasperated or even reject violently the tonal and textural celebration of homoeroticism that fully inhabits the film, whether in the proximity of muscular bodies, their military uniforms or leather coats (also emphasised and rendered even more present by sonic close-ups of the sound of rubbing leather), or the intermingling of sweat in the struggle and wrestling scenes. With the heterosexual option entirely evacuated, the channelling of the film's erotic impetus into images of the male body alone will logically alienate these viewers, to whom the line 'A father's love crucifies, a son's love lets one be crucified' will evoke Saint Sebastian's homoerotic ecstasies, his body pierced by phallic arrows and spears, rather than Christ's Passion at Golgotha for the redemption of mankind. At the same time, however, the indisputably vibrant, profoundly religious proximity and celebration of filial and fatherly love

to be found in the film will appeal to viewers whose profiles might overlap with the one just mentioned (through, say, a conservative set of beliefs (be they Christian or not)) who celebrates Love and spiritual fervour, yet rejects its expression in the shape of homosexuality.¹⁵

II

In a recent piece, 'Truncated Families and Absolute Intimacy', once again exhibiting his familiarity with and unique insight into Sokurov's corpus, Mikhail Iampolski (2011) goes against the grain of a queer interpretation of the film. Masterfully sweeping through most of Sokurov's career, the scholar makes a series of brilliant points, adopting a structuralist and psychoanalytical approach. First, he demonstrates how, in many of Sokurov's films, the usual triangular family structure is replaced by a dual structure (father-son, mother-son, grandmother-grandson and so on). This reduction, Iampolski argues, is extremely significant. While the triangulation is indispensable to the realisation of the Oedipal scenario and prohibition of incest (the father serving as embodiment of the Law and interiorised as the super-ego), Sokurov's dual structure prevents the realisation of these processes, entailing a collapse of the 'traditional' social configuration, and reflects the director's utopia of pre-Oedipal intimacy. This 'deep visceral desire to restore the idyllic fusion between children and parents' (2011: 109), identified by Iampolski, expresses the desire, ubiquitous in Sokurov, that I have identified as the will to go back into a recreated, fantasised past. But, Iampolski elaborates, the uncompleted-ness of Oedipal processes is also what explains why children in Sokurov's films do not or cannot have relationships with a person of the other sex, living in a world of 'innocence', the 'kind of eroticism we can detect in these films [being] an attribute of early child-parent relations rather than of adult sexuality' (ibid.). Thus the fluid, polymorphous interactions, full of role reversals, are made apparent in the infantilised dying mother in *Mother and Son* and in the ambiguity between father and son in both *The Second Circle* (both dead father and son have Pyotr Alexandrov's face) and *Father and Son* (the age difference between the two practically transforms them into brothers).

Taking his discussion into Lacanian territory, Iampolski shows how this aspect of Sokurov's cinema can be read in terms of the Symbolic – and its collapse. Specifically, these scenarios serve as a response to the collapse of the symbolic power in the 1980s to early 2000s in Russia. The alternative to the distress caused by this disappearance of the symbolic father is just such a utopian scenario of absolute intimacy, wherein the symbolic is no longer needed. The potential caveat, however, is that this relationship with the Other can easily become an escape into a narcissistic fantasy of doubling of the self, an alienation into one's own double, where the flight from the Symbolic is replaced by a form of hallucinatory psychosis. The immediate corollary, Iampolski adds, would be a lapse into the Imaginary, in which these characters would immure themselves. Thus – and this is one of the very best suggestions ever made regarding Sokurov's stylistic evolution – the signifier is reshaped into the anamorphic, distorted, painterly universe so prevalent in Sokurov since *The Stone*, which coincides with the early post-Soviet era and factual demise of the father/authority symbol.

Sokurov has developed a special interest in the pictorial treatment of space, which is in my opinion directly related to his fascination with the structure of the Imaginary. This special treatment of space becomes central for his poetics in *The Stone*, *Whispering Pages*, and particularly *Mother and Son*. Sokurov's space is often distorted and flattened. Distortions serve to better embed figures in space; frequently they are not shown as freely moving in a neutral three-dimensional volume, but – thanks to a mutual distortion of figures and their surroundings – they are inscribed into space as if onto a surface. In this way figures lose their autonomy in relation to the space that contains them. Space and figures are amalgamated by the same energy of alteration; they are not mutually autonomous. Such treatment transforms space into a kind of womb that keeps figures wrapped in its folds. (Iampolski 2011: 114–15)

This effect encapsulates the unreal, utopian dimension of these representations, this 'reshaping of the signifier' being immediately connected with the collapse of the symbolic.

In the second part of his piece, Iampolski directly addresses *Father and Son*. While he acknowledges a 'vague homoerotic sensibility' to the film, he dismisses the assertions of homoeroticism between the father and the son as 'extravagant' (2011: 116), and dedicates the rest of the discussion to a continued investigation of the film in Lacanian terms. Of particular interest are Iampolski's religious analogies, where he comes to terms with the contradiction in approach between religion and psychoanalysis, with the figure of the father (the Law) becoming Love, and thereby reaching its fulfilment.

[This is a] reversal of the Lacanian model in which the Imaginary is gradually replaced by the Symbolic. According to the psychoanalytical *doxa*, the verbal, the separation comes after the visual and the proximity. In Christology Love – the conjunction of bodies in absolute proximity – comes after the negation of the verbal, the Law. The negation of the Law (the death of the father) opens the way for the non-distinction between father and son, their total fusion. It is [a] reversal of [the] process of maturation described in psychoanalysis. (2011: 118)

Sokurov's tale, thus, becomes one of the negation of the Law, with the two fathers described here (Alexey's father and Fyodor's missing father, Kolya) having left or rebelled against the military. In this 'parable', the military is equated with the Law, which can also become a monstrous Moloch when it sends its soldiers to an unnecessary sacrifice. The soldier-father's fulfilment, however, does not come through revenge, but through becoming pure Love, and becoming his own son (or Christ, as it were), so that all distinctions between father and son vanish. This model is very different from the substitution, in triangular structures, of the son for the father, through the name-of-the-father.

Instead of symbolic exchanges and the permutation of roles defined by a triangular structure, Sokurov insists on sacrifice, self-annihilation, and tragic existential gesture. Humanism in society is mostly verbal and belongs to the

realm of signifiers. Sokurov criticizes society precisely because it is unable to overcome its purely symbolic foundation and reach to existential plenitude in human relations. (2011: 119)

Finally, Iampolski closes his piece with a point about the non-sexual but corporeal reality of relations in Sokurov, arguing that this is a cinema wherein the caress is of fundamental importance. According to Emmanuel Lévinas, 'the caress transcends the sensual' (1990: 288). The caress transcends (because it does not grasp anything), goes beyond representation and triggers a regression towards an animalistic or infantile stage. This returns us to the escapist dimension from the Symbolic in Sokurov, speaking to his 'utopia and neurosis' (Iampolski 2011: 120) – a cinema less preoccupied with representation than with an 'emotional flow of diffusion and interpenetration that Sokurov's characters experience themselves' (ibid.). Hence the importance, repeatedly stressed throughout the current text, of caressing images and sounds (whispers, murmurs) in Sokurov, a cinema that is as much visual and aural as it is haptic.

Certainly *Father and Son* opens with an intensely haptic dream and waking scene, in which the characters clasp each other; as in Bergman's dream scene in *From the Life of Marionettes* discussed in chapter nine, 'the fingers can see'. Verging on abstraction through close-ups and distortions, many of the scenes involving men touching each other in this film are rendered powerful and ambivalent in their evocations. The issue with Iampolski's piece, then, is that it does not acknowledge the film's powerful erotic charge and its openness onto a homoerotic hypothesis – perhaps because the latter is vehemently rejected by Sokurov, firstly because it could lead to a limited interpretation, and secondly because of Sokurov's relationship to faith and its corollary taboos evoked in this chapter's opening. In late remarks such as 'a gesture of indeterminate eroticism that is always accompanied by a deep anxiety of death' (2011: 120), Iampolski only reminds us of the heightened scenes in which this 'indeterminacy' seems awfully determinate indeed, if only in its resurrection of the old Freudian association between Eros and Thanatos.

To be sure, the gentle caresses of the son to his dying mother in *Mother and Son* were hardly eroticised. But when we hear the heavy breathing and sensual panting of two men, and then discover their muscular, beautiful and virile yet hairless bodies holding each other in the opening of *Father and Son*, there is little doubt as to what these images contain, and what is included in the Sokurovian utopia of proximity and intimacy. Again, Iampolski is correct in noting that this should not be the only central point of discussion of the film, as it draws attention away from the many other rich and intricate elements to be found therein. Perhaps the more interesting question vis-à-vis Iampolski's approach is the way in which he goes about it: dealing dismissively with such an important aspect of this film (and of Sokurov's oeuvre) is only bound to prompt, in keeping with a psychoanalytical imagery, a return of the repressed. The latter may thus threaten to drown the discussion of the film under its queer dimension – as it did in the case of the film's press conference in Cannes. The best course – for members of the discussion as well as for the director himself – would thus be to

acknowledge and accept the manifest (not *vague*) homoerotic tension which opens and inhabits this beautiful film, and move on with an analysis that incorporates and goes beyond this aspect.

III

As with many other elements in Sokurov, homosexuality is *sublated* into a greater dialectical whole, cancelled out narratively and retained or displaced into networks of allusions and textures: it is never an end in its own right. In this sense, Iampolski is right that there is no explicit or even implicit sexual interaction between the father and the son. The homosexual desire is never literalised or enacted. Still, it is infused throughout the film and accounts for the dramatic difference in *mise-en-scène* between the scenes involving homo-social and heterosexual interactions. In scenes involving the male characters among themselves, proximity is reinstated through not only clasping and caressing, but also in vigorous bouts of wrestling, whether at the military academy or at the protagonists' apartment. In these moments, the close-ups and the faster cutting almost seem to create a new body out of these young men – the ultimate form of intimacy.¹⁶ On a symbolic level, the scene in which Alexey wraps the x-ray of his father's chest around Fyodor's face, however alienating it looks, is another overdetermined indicator of male intimacy.¹⁷ The x-ray is a metaphor for total visual penetration, a literal seeing through the father, and Alexey, by forcing it at maximum closeness to Fyodor's face (so close, indeed, that he could not possibly see it), implies that to understand the father, and to come to terms with his disappearance or death, can only be achieved through total physical proximity and love, which Iampolski writes so eloquently about.

Conversely, the scenes involving Alexey and his former girlfriend show a complete remoteness. Only in one shot of the film are the two seen together, and even then, there are strong thresholds separating them. In the first scene, she stands outside a window of the academy, and Alexey talks with her through the window, only slightly ajar, precluding physical contact. In the second scene, she is standing on the balcony of her apartment, unreachable, while he looks from the street below. The dynamic of faux shot-reverse-shot in both these scenes gives, as Sylvie Rollet has observed, the impression that these two worlds (Alexey's and the girl's) never meet, like 'water trapped between two glass panes, never belonging in the same world' (Rollet 2009: 68).



Physical thresholds constantly keep the girl and Alexey at a distance (*Father and Son*)

At one point, Alexey mentions a dream in which their son appeared, but the child is never visualised – even in the dream itself. His presence is known, felt, but not articulated through the senses. And the girl is prompt to dismiss this ‘image’: ‘You never wanted a child... you always were so careful.’ Even when Alexey asks for her necklace and puts it against his cheek, feeling her warmth, it seems as though he is content to bury the relationship and leave it to this memory of a warm, now disincarnated touch, neither male nor female. What triggers his interest, however, is the ‘other man’ – he repeatedly inquires about his identity, which the girl refuses to reveal. Alexey seems more troubled by the fact that she is seeing someone else than by the fact that he can no longer be with her. The psychological immaturity suggested by Iampolski seems to be one of the causes behind the end of their relationship, but this is taken to be a general problem between men and women, as the young woman states that ‘women are always older’. Tellingly, when she pronounces the word ‘women’, Alexey repeats it, as if misunderstanding it, or even unfamiliar with the concept. At no point does intimacy between them seem a viable option, or even made believable, not only through the *mise-en-scène*, but also by the lack of chemistry between the characters, and by their acting (or lack thereof).¹⁸

Iampolski – and the girl – argue that intimacy between these two is rendered impossible by the overly tight ‘couple’ formed by the father and the son, so tight that there is no place for a third party to be included. As long as the bond with the parents has not been severed, no full, complete romantic relationship can be undertaken. This is true (and perhaps gives us a real-life clue to Sokurov’s own celibacy), but it does not account entirely for the lack of heterosexual intimacy here, either. Why, indeed, would absolute intimacy be attained by men alone (or by mother and child, with no sexual intimation), while women as heterosexual partners are left to be distant, mysterious creatures, brooding and remaining unreachable or, conversely, laughing and running away from men (as the other female characters seen in *Father and Son* appear)? To be sure, one can argue, again quoting Lacan, that ‘*il n’y a pas de rapport*,’ and that not only those of the opposite gender, but indeed all people are ultimately unreachable for us once we have stepped into the Symbolic realm and detached ourselves from the Real. Why, then, in Sokurov’s non-historical narratives, is the heterosexual scenario – even as an Imaginary, fantasised, hallucinatory option – never realised, or doomed to failure and death, as in *Lonely Voice of Man* or most tellingly in *Faust*? Here we can intuit one of the reasons why the legend of Faust has preoccupied Sokurov for so many years, especially in the Goethe text and Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus*, which have both, since the early 1980s, been on Sokurov’s adaptation wish list. As an artist and thinker, Sokurov himself comes closer to Mann’s than Goethe’s character. As Hildegard Drexler Hannum points out:

Neither knowledge nor worldly power nor pleasure of any variety serves as inducement for Mann’s hero, Adrian Leverkühn. Nor is it for the sake of enhancing his experience of life that he concludes the pact with the devil [...] Indeed, Goethe’s *Faust* is revoked by Mann even as Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* is revoked by Leverkühn. The pact brings no change in Leverkühn’s outer life as

it does for the previous Faust figures, for it is entered upon for the sake of his work – i.e., the work of art – and to the detriment of his life. Instead of a series of adventures, there is essentially an intensification of suffering that leads to a heightening of Leverkühn's creative capacity. (1974: 290)

Indeed, Sokurov (who has claimed that the influence of Thomas Mann on his career was unmatched by any other literary figure) has focused his entire life on the achievement of this singular goal, namely an ever-deeper artistic accomplishment. Both he and Leverkühn share the same 'fate of diseased genius, heroic suffering, extreme isolation and ... questionable-ness of the work when translated in political terms' (Hannum 1974: 294). The dimension of self-sacrifice and questionable ideological re-appropriation, which is of interest here, can also be related to Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of *amor fati*. The Latin expression designates the willing choice to embrace the way that fate has willed. It is, Hannum argues, 'essentially an intensification of suffering that leads to a heightening of Leverkühn's creative capacity need to sacrifice the possibility of human happiness for the sake of his art' (1974: 294); this indeed is an aspect already found early on in Mann's *Tonio Kröger* (1903), an early tale of latent homosexuality. Both Thomas Mann and Alexander Sokurov could thus have elected to sublimate their homosexuality through their art, embracing the devil's prohibition from the original *Faustbook*: 'Du darfst nicht lieben'; 'You must not love.'

Confronted with such tragic interdiction (imparted not by the devil, of course, but rather by Russian/Soviet *doxa* or the director's super-ego), Sokurov, like so many artists before him, may thus be channelling his libidinal investment (with the military, with the male body) in symbolic representations. This, historically, allowed for artists to address and symbolise their own sexual proclivities without naming them (and whether sublimating them or not), all the while elevating them with the notion of a carnal love of God for men. After all, this only correlates Sokurov's cinema further with the magnificent works of Caravaggio or the Florentine school that he so reveres and quotes very self-consciously, as, again, in the memorable image in the opening of *Father and Son*: two athletically built men wearing little else than skin-coloured undergarments, clasping each other in an inescapable reference to the figure of the Pietà.

The combination of these terms leads me to the transcendent, the key corollary for Sokurov's erotic inscription. The intense textural, tonal erotic and sensual vibrancy, its élan vital, counteracts its morbid and grotesque representations and finds its relationship to the Divine and its creation. Any assessment of Sokurov's cinema that will not take this hypothesis (namely, that (homo)eroticism is closely related to the transcendent, of which the grotesque is only a peripheral element) into account must remain incomplete. And it remains so because of the unwillingness on the Left to address the transcendent and essentialist discourses, and on the other end by some critics' reluctance to address either term in relationship to Sokurov (for ideological or pragmatic reasons – namely to avoid opening the proverbial 'can of worms'). This missing link (of homoerotic and religious imagery) in Sokurov's study may explain the unexplored zones and fragmentary aspect felt and found in many pieces written about him, which nevertheless, as in Condee's recent *The Imperial Trace*, often end with a

reference to Sokurov as some sort of conjurer ('[Sokurov's] job – through that most visually dynamic medium available to us – is to make that invisible and immortal seen, holding up the lens that would refract some small amount of light in such a way, as in a séance, that we may dimly see the figures from the other side.' (Condee 2009: 183)); or, as in the case of Paul Schrader, inscribe Sokurov into the tradition of the transcendental filmmaker, but without accounting for its powerful sensual quality:¹⁹

Sokurov's films define a new form of spiritual cinema. Sokurov mixes elements of Transcendental Style – austerity of means, disparity between environment and activity, decisive moment, stasis – with other traditions: visual aestheticism, meditation, and Russian mysticism. (Schrader 1997: 20)

We saw, in chapter five, how the sacred is articulated and can be read in terms of the sublime in Sokurov, and we see, here, how it relates to the realm of sexuality. And this, in turn, leads us back to the (overdetermined) figure of the father, and its thematic corollary in Sokurov, namely the military. What is important and revealing, here, is not just that the erotic is related to (and sublimated in) the transcendent and religious imagery, but also that this social and political form that the transcendent assumes is made more acceptable to the sensibilities (or smuggled unbeknownst of them) of conservatism, religion, and traditional culture. Yet Sokurov's representations still manage to unsettle such a reading.

IV

Much like Sergey Eisenstein in his day, Sokurov has had a problematic relationship, to say the least, to confronting his libidinal investment with the male body, however prevalent its textual representations alongside religious symbolism and iconography in their cinema. Eisenstein (whose beautiful pornographic drawings go a long way to accounting for a homoerotic fixation) did, for a while, undertake psychoanalysis during his stay in America, which yielded conclusions that he promptly rejected, deciding instead to plunge himself into his work with an even more acute energy. The same applies to Sokurov, whose indefatigable and ascetic work ethos can be read as a constant channelling of drives or preoccupations he has no desire to embrace, at least publicly.²⁰ Yet the fact that the filmmaker refuses to discuss homosexuality at any length (this is his right – that he might condescend toward the concept, is more problematic), it is equally clear by now that parts of his cinema can be understood, in more than one way, as works of queer art (at least from an external, Western perspective, which this book fully assumes). This is not merely because of their depictions associated with homoeroticism, but also because of their frequent bizarre and experimental nature – their *queerness*, literally.

The concept of 'queer' seems the most productive word that integrates idiosyncrasy while still recouping the concept of homoeroticism, and allows me to provide a course that is not the same as the other positions I described above and distinguish myself from them.²¹ It is also important to restate how this chapter is only very marginally

concerned with (normative) homosexuality in Sokurov per se, or whether *Father and Son* is a 'gay film' or not. Nonetheless, I want to attend to the film's sensual and erotic charge as carrying a meaning that takes us farther from a discussion of the filmmaker's purported proclivities while still retaining its imagery. This is specifically the reason why queerness is of particular interest, here, and even if the term may seem fraught within the context of Russian culture (and vis-à-vis its definition(s) there), it is the next (but hardly final) step in my approach – and my attempt at explaining Sokurov's own idiosyncratic oeuvre.

Of course, it should be clarified right away that the umbrella term of queerness does not limit itself to a discussion of homosexuality, nor does it even have to include it: one can be queer without being homosexual (and, conversely, homosexual without being queer). For instance, if we decide to follow the lead proposed by Lampolski, we can see *Father and Son* as being about male heterosexual adults re-enacting a world of childhood, innocent and playful. The image, then, is not primarily homosexual (although that would be negating the (homo)sexuality of children, which would be equally fraught, but this is an entirely distinct discussion altogether), but it is, for all intents and purposes, queer, in a carnivalesque or grotesque sense. And if we accept Teresa de Lauretis' claim that queer theory is always a critique of a position rather than a position itself, less an identity than a critique of identity, then Sokurov – whose insular, unique positionality qualifies as what is at odds with the normal, the 'legitimate', the dominant – need not be homosexual to still qualify as quintessentially queer. Let us then briefly consider how his cinema itself can be correlated to other expressions of queerness in film.

Because of their social anticonformism, a substantial number of queer filmmakers, irrespective of their sexual orientation, were attracted by and shaped the underground and experimental scene of American cinema as early as the 1950s, from Maya Deren to Kenneth Anger and Jack Smith to Andy Warhol.²² If we consider Sokurov's own counter-cultural struggles of the late 1970s and early 1980s in the Soviet Union, and view his daring interpolations of documentary and fiction filmmaking as an expression of experimental cinema, we can see some points of convergence here.²³ Even though Anger's and Sokurov's films could otherwise not be further apart, what emerges through their films, in the realm of the aesthetic, is the redeeming value of the beautiful, muscular, youthful male body among the corpses, refuse and the abject. In this sense, however indirectly, through his unconventional representation of an eroticised male body, Sokurov can be said to interrogate categories of sexual orientations and disrupt (or at least interrogate) the normalising tendencies of the sexual order, especially with *Father and Son*.

Along the same lines, to the profusion of male imagery (as a rousing, positive scopic impulse) Sokurov constantly adds the grotesque (as the indirect expression of the dark, negative aspect he seems to see, and reject, in non-heteronormative inclinations). The most heightened instances of the grotesque in his films are often irreverent and verging on camp, but these are systematically counterbalanced by elevated, spiritual, contemplative occurrences. While the latter are far less commonly associated with queerness, they can be tied to the Emersonian tradition, as embodied in the half-sedate, half-electrifying

beauty found in the works by openly gay filmmakers such as Robert Beavers or Nathaniel Dorsky. More specific to our present discussion, it is useful to point out that queer filmmaker (we would call him 'experimental' if he himself did not reject the term) Fred Camper (2002) has embraced the queer dimension of *Confession*, viewing the captain in the film as a homosexual incapable of consummating his love for his sailors on account of their ever-fleeting presence on his ship, thus founding his existential solitude.

Queerness's nature as fluid, adaptable and changeable, yet always connected by its outsider's position, is homologous to Sokurov's own place on the map of contemporary filmmaking. Even if we look at the Russian director not anymore as an underground, daring experimenter, but as the established figure of art cinema he has become, we can still connect him with the international network of equally lionised queer filmmakers such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Derek Jarman, Gus Van Sant, or even Todd Haynes. In their works, however different otherwise, one could see the emergence of certain connecting motifs beyond the male body: a peculiar, probing gaze cast on modern society (and, oftentimes, the latter's deep-seated intolerance which leads to the ill-adapted individual's inhibition or implosion), social and existential solitude, the quest for identity, the aesthetic of the long take, the investment with the painterly, and the integration of documentary aesthetics within the fabric of the feature fiction film.

And yet, even if we detect clear elements connecting Sokurov to queer schools, both in the underground and mainstream art cinema, it is clear that he does not fit in either comfortably (he is queer even to queerness, as it were – an outsider playing exclusively by his own rules). He even could not be (nor does he want to) aligned with Leningrad's own underground scene and the necrorealist film school, formally and geographically close to his cinema (but with a stronger humorous and anarchic feel).²⁴ As I evoked in chapters one and two, Sokurov is the 'dominant meander', he is pitted between the queer, experimental and bizarre and the artistic, official, beautiful.

Position/positionality: here is our key term with regard to queerness. As far as its broader political agenda goes and is defined by Eve Sedgwick (*Epistemology of the Closet*), Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*) or Michael Warner, queerness does not refer to anything in particular – it is an identity without an essence – and is eminently fluid. Yet the term 'queer' (which demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative (see Halperin's *Saint Foucault*)) could only be applied to Sokurov in spite of himself: ultimately, while queerness encompasses a broad range of phenomena, it also somewhat requires the person in question to embrace one's queerness.²⁵ And even if his anachronistic beliefs and essentialist discourse can be considered one of Sokurov's queerest qualities – the occasional radicalism of his statements would still come across as parochial and reactionary to the queer community as it positions itself in this early twenty-first century, and its purported Leftist, progressive agenda. Sokurov is probably at an equal remote from American alternative culture and Pussy Riot as he is from today's Russia's mainstream and the Orthodox Church. At best, then, in order to partly capture the indisputable strangeness of his cinema, we can attest to the 'queer vibe' in Sokurov, the way in which his constant outsider's status will always, however tangentially, associate him with the fringes, and therefore with a form of queerness. The artist,

however, will never be reduced to a category: the many irreconcilable tensions in the works of this man endow his vision with the richness of pragmatic contradictions. Likewise, as he pursues, on his own terms, a subtle investigation of his own non-hetero-normative sensitivity, Sokurov embraces the hetero-normative past through some very specific models (the high culture predating the twentieth century). The whole discussion above, however incomplete, has allowed us to move on step further. It now calls for a supplemental element to anchor it all in.

V

Intimations of homosexuality, sensuous representations, the father figure and its correlation to discipline, the military, religion and the sacred and high art: here are our prime



Hyppolite's clubfoot in *Save and Protect*



The feet of the dead father in *The Second Circle*



Snegovoy's feet stick out of the stretcher as his body is carried out in *Days of the Eclipse*



Dr Knife, about to dissect Mangan's foot in *Mournful Insensitivity*



Chekhov sensually rubs his feet in *The Stone*



Denis's feet in *Alexandra*

ingredients for a fuller argument in search of a properly idiosyncratically queer sensitivity in Sokurov's cinema. Yet how do we reunite the elevated referencing by Sokurov of the tradition of religious art and the transcendent, and queerness and the grotesque? As will seem sacrilegious to some, no doubt, the textual locus where all these elements and tendencies meet is the (naked male) foot. There is an inordinate number of them in Sokurov's cinema (especially if we note the rare instances of female feet), this fixation with the lower part of the body, often emphasised by the use of close-ups, denoting far more than mere homosexual libidinal investment with the military.²⁶

The recent *Faust* opens on a close-up of a cadaver's tumid penis and shortly thereafter captures the corpse's feet as well, but never shows its face. Faust's assistant, Wagner, who repeatedly states that he loves his master and wishes they could always be together, wonders whether the human soul, which Faust so compulsively looks for, is not located in the foot, which is 'filled with such vital energy when one is frightened'. Even if Wagner is an inept (and ignoble) character, his remark – and the emphasis it places on the foot – cannot be discarded as mere idiotic banter.

As has become common lore, Sigmund Freud has analysed the connection between the foot-fetish and the primal encounter of the infant boy, with his mother's feet, which would naturally be at the eye-level of the child crawling on the ground. In Sokurov, however, we may infer the significance of the prominent male feet, and, more specifically, the feet of the father, as in a shot from *Father and Son*: as the father runs on the house's roof, the camera focuses on his strong, muscular feet. The primal affect, thus, would be founded in the feet of a paternal military figure.

As we have seen repeatedly by now, the figure of the soldier is one of the recurring tropes in Sokurov's cinema, and there is, at least in *Days of the Eclipse* (1988), a striking vertically distorted silent shot of soldiers running, shown from the ground, emphasising their boots trampling the street, chasing Gubar, the renegade. Another short dream sequence illustrates a similar moment in *Father and Son*, running against a background of birch trees (seemingly straight out of *Mother and Son*). Tellingly, in these examples in which military men are seen running toward the camera, they are associated with anxiety and death, or a nightmarish impending doom, so that the father (or his metonym) is the source, again, of conflicting emotion: fear and attraction, terror and arousal. This can be correlated, through the Freudian grid of interpretation, to the confusion in childhood between sexuality and violence (see Wood 1969, Hubner 2007).

Likewise, the naked male foot carries many implications of death, decay and violence, as we can judge from the illustrations: in *The Stone*, even if Chekhov pleasurably touches his feet as an indicator of sentience, he himself is a ghost returned from beyond the grave; in *Mournful Insensitivity*, Dr. Knife investigates through the foot whether Mangan, plunged into a death-like sleep through hypnosis, is really dead; the rotting clubfoot of Hippolyte in *Save and Protect* underlines the aberrant, protruding, and disturbing nature of the leg's ending; and in *Days of the Eclipse* and *The Second Circle*, the male corpse's feet, sticking out from under the cover, appear as quasi-phallic, obscene indexes of the physicality of death, correlating erotic erection with rigor mortis.

I want, however, to immediately complicate the direct association of male foot imagery with homosexual libidinal investment and death by arguing that, perhaps, the

representation of naked male feet is not only some sort of displaced fetish in Sokurov, insolently re-emerging like a symptom throughout his cinema, but also that it has literally to do with a past trauma – Sokurov’s amputation following his bout with tuberculosis (this is particularly resonant with the amputation of Hyppolite’s gangrene-ridden clubfoot in *Save and Protect*), correlating this experience with the inert quality of most of the representation of naked feet in Sokurov. The extensive surgery had required him to lie in bed, leg extended and immobilised, for several weeks. Informed by this traumatic experience, the young Sokurov was (in his own testimony) ostracised by his social and psychological differences and his physical deformity, which afflicted him with a limp. This experience alone can hardly account for homosexual proclivity, but it does account for a unique, solitary, acute, and somewhat mournful gaze on the world, an experience of artificial repression, which would in no small part inform Sokurov’s work. The inert male foot (as most of the examples show) would then be correlated with Sokurov’s own experience of death in life, his leg paralysed by the surgery, a desensitized appendage to his body, the estranging spectacle which might indicate a more profound root for these representations. The foot’s ambiguous shape and function, thus, symbolises as much the sacred as it is also a sign of death, mortality, difference – and the two are eminently reunited in the idea of sexuality and queerness/the grotesque. Which is not to say that Sokurov’s cinema is the way it is merely because of these psycho-biographic elements alone. Rather, all the preceding analogy illustrates my larger point about both the problem of either discounting personal sexuality or slotting it into a box (which at this point largely places it within a particular normalising ‘movement’, and thus de-queers it, so to speak).

Staying with the motif of the foot, in how it connects with death, deformation and ambiguity; and bearing in mind Sokurov’s investment with art history (particularly with the great religious paintings of the late Middle-Ages and early Modern period), two examples must be broached; both are pictures of the dead Christ: the first is a work by Andrea Mantegna (*Lamentation of Christ*, c. 1480) and the second is a piece by Hans Holbein (*The Body of Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1520–22).

In these two works, Christ’s feet are extremely prominent. In Mantegna, they occupy the front of the painting, creating an arresting spatial dynamic: we see Christ’s body lying, slightly foreshortened, as though his body were still suspended above us on the cross, with the viewer *underneath* the painting. In Holbein, the shape of Christ’s emaciated face rhymes with the large feet, so that again the vectorisation of the gaze is uncertain, and we know not exactly where we stand, nor on which part of the image to focus our sight. This inter-changeability of Christ’s feet with his face echoes the suggestion that feet have the same importance and value as faces in Sokurov’s cinema – correlating it again with the grotesque, but also reversible and contradictory nature of Sokurov’s cinema I have laid out in the book’s introduction.

The protruding feet can also be viewed as standing in for the male sexual organ, in their erect, almost insolent presence when the body lies horizontally. This somewhat grotesque, metamorphic hypothesis cannot be downplayed: naked feet, as Georges Bataille demonstrated both in his journal *Documents* and in his short story ‘Les Pieds maternels’, (from *Blue of Noon* (*Le Bleu du ciel*, 1935; published 1957)) have always



*The Body of the Dead
Christ in the Tomb (detail)*
(Hans Holbein, 1520–22)



*The Lamentation of Christ
(detail)* (Andrea Mantegna,
c. 1480)

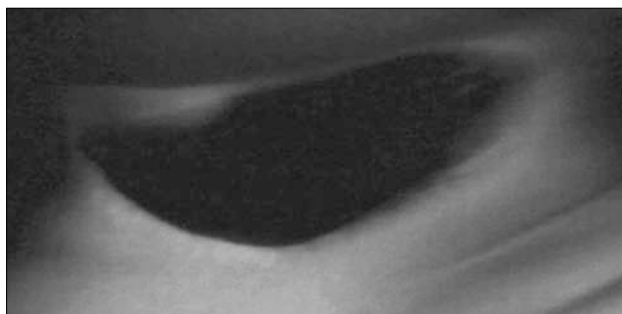
had a paradoxical and obscene dimension in Western culture. In Sokurov's *The Second Circle*, the female undertaker scolds the son for not covering his father's feet, as though there would be something disrespectful or indecent about burying a dead person with their feet visible. Georges Didi-Huberman, who has dedicated an entire book to the intricate analogies laid out by Bataille and his *Documents* surrealist circle, *La Ressemblance informe* (1995), has also written beautifully about the dimension of the apparition ('Le Phasme'), the blotch ('Fra Angelico'), and the obtuse, ambiguous shape. In Sokurov, many instances are visibly in direct dialogue with the motifs analysed by Didi-Huberman: shadows and silhouettes, figures lost in mists, snowstorms, dark tunnels, etc. Likewise, the inert foot may, in Sokurov, be an unknowable yet familiar blob, part of the body and yet somehow alien to it, certainly liminal in its extremity, being the part that is furthest from the face. It may also be understood as standing in for a certain principle of uncertainty, in line, again, with Sokurov's investment with the grotesque, but also with religious imagery. This foot would, in its death-like paralysis, offer a symptom of pathetic suffering, and thus of the Passion. In his own analysis of Medieval paintings of crucifixions, Didi-Huberman writes: 'It is the dis-figuration

itself that supports the whole event of the image. It neither names nor describes ... but it invokes. [...] It even begs' (2001: 245–6).

As Rollet points out, the tension that we find in Sokurov's representation of the body has to do with what she calls the 'drama of resemblance' (2009: 69). Indeed, if God created man in his image, following the Fall, the Incarnation of the Word of God (his Son), can alone ensure mankind its Redemption. This event of 'Word made Flesh', however, is coterminous with destruction of the Flesh, epitomised in the Passion and Crucifixion. In the meantime, mankind, awaiting the end of days, is left wandering aimlessly, in a 'region of dissemblance' (Didi-Huberman 2001: 250). We see clear parallels here with Sokurov's own disfigurement, and with his deep understanding of the relationship of death, suffering, and abjection in the flesh. In his spiritual sensitivity, the director must be aware of the profoundly carnal dimension of Christianity (especially in the Orthodox church), where incarnation is inextricably tied to death. This motif of the foot, then, seems to be at the source of the aesthetic presence of the body in Sokurov. The path to the soul goes through the body, with the foot providing a point of entry.

In Christ's perforated feet, one can also see a strange new bodily orifice, perhaps interpretable as a female sexual organ or more likely an anus, and so the connection between the resurging tropes of the father and (homo)sexuality is strengthened further. The bodily grotesque and the sacred become closely entwined, homosexuality sublimated or evacuated through religious or aesthetic ecstasy. Such ambiguity is strongly at play in the opening shot of *Father and Son*, where Alexey's gaping mouth (appearing toothless) can clearly be interpreted in terms of some non-descript organic crater, or possibly a sphincter. It thus re-inscribes homoerotic imagery in the film not only in its erotic tension, but in a strange, distorted and nightmarish vision of the bodily grotesque, bespeaking, far more clearly than homosexuality, a form of indeterminacy and confusion – confusion of bodies, genders, affect (should one be intrigued, troubled, revolted, enticed by the opening dream scene of *Father and Son*?). This, in turn, symbolises Sokurov's own peculiar position within the world. But the term 'confusion' need not be taken as a lack of lucidity on the part of the director, who may be very well aware of all these implications, electing to negotiate them through these representations while still precluding their discursive articulations, elevating the purpose of it all above each separate element of the discussion – save for the legacy of high culture/great art.²⁷ As such, it partakes of the director's project – another way to envisage human interactions, in another world – to create the 'other life' through his cinema. What is

Father and Son: the son's
mouth moaning in anxiety,
a grotesque recreation of
a new bodily orifice



certain, at any rate, is that a queer grid of interpretation leaves a set of questions open as to how to read the scene (and the film), that may otherwise remain unaccounted for, or simplistically, reductively derided.

VI

The tension between the corporeal and the spiritual, the flesh and the soul, and their grotesque, bizarre interpolations, as illustrated above, always plays a key role in the dynamics of Sokurov's art and life, the two mutually informing one another. But it has also served his perpetual questioning of issues pertaining to destiny and existence, yielding the richly hybrid, multi-layered and contradictory fabric of his art. All these may be said, like Wagner suggests in *Faust*, to coalesce in the foot, this locus of resemblance and dissemblance, of familiarity and uncanny, of attraction and abjection. The foot, in Sokurov, correlates to life and death as much as it does to the father and to God. And thus the relationship to the father become ambiguous, much as the identity and target of this affection becomes blurred: from the biological father to God, from God to the fatherland: a fantasised, romanticised idea of Russia, against the director's antagonistic stance vis-à-vis (and fascination for) the power the country has always represented.

I have clearly laid out all the important elements to the core of this chapter's discussion. In this process, a growing complex of questions has arisen, far exceeding the homoerotic imagery in Sokurov. The time has come to dialectically reunite all these elements, whereby the most important aspect of Sokurov's investment with homoeroticism will emerge. We have seen how the erotic is connected in the director's films to the spiritual and transcendent, as a means of both sublimating it and making it acceptable. This aspect, however important, remains fairly commonplace and well established. What complicates matters here is that this intersection of eroticism and spiritualism is combined with other terms: traditional 'high culture' (classical painting), but also official culture, in the guise of the military (and the father as the figure of authority and dispenser of the Law). The first observation we deduce from this, then, is that the spiritual (as is often, but not always, the case) is bound up with 'paternal' and even authoritarian notions of culture and politics. This is further complicated by the fact that Sokurov's brand of eroticism, at least insofar as it is denied a real connection to the other gender, is homoerotic.

Homosexuality is generally considered an inadmissible practice (or at least a taboo subject) in patriarchal culture and politics, and this is particularly the case in Russia. At the same time, power entertains widespread fantasies, activity, etc. that involve homosexuality.²⁸ Considering this, Sokurov reveals at least two things: his representations suggest something about the inherently homoerotic elements in all patriarchal institutions;²⁹ and, in direct line from the former proposition, the director's textual output (his films) and his discursive stance (his interviews, etc.) shed light on how his rejection of all forms of power may be correlated to his own problematic relationship to homosexuality.

This phenomenon accounts, as much as Sokurov's own education and beliefs, for the absence not only of hetero-normative, but also of normative homo-sexuality in his cinema, which are replaced by queerness (and the grotesque). This we can also correlate to

the tension at work in being in and of the world of power: Sokurov is both the hounded, underground artist on the fringes; and the nation's most celebrated filmmaker, a celebration, it is worth noting, which has only grown as the backlash against homosexuals has increased. The queerness (and the grotesque) in Sokurov are thus both a product and an effect of this complex relation: both the rendition of a repressed yet covertly entertained sexual impulse, as well as the dialectical movement in which institutions of power draw upon a homoerotic drive that may ultimately threaten to undercut or undo them. This appeal of homoeroticism, which Sokurov discursively separates himself from and which power explicitly forbids in Russia, turns queerness into a double-edged sword: both the product (as a return of the repressed, a sort of monstrous, constructed child, like the homunculus in a jar in *Faust*) and a force to undermine power (as exposing its inherent contradictions). This ambivalent entity seems to be at once perfectly incorporated and discursively repressed by Russia's culture.

Here we may at last understand the sheer weirdness/queerness of Sokurov's cinema in all its implications, and why he himself fails to address it: Sokurov does not see anything homoerotic or queer in *Father and Son* (or probably in all his cinema, rife as it is with these instances), because he doesn't really see it as being about homosexuality, at least not as it is usually constructed. Again, this is due to the fact (which these films obliquely underpin) that homoeroticism is highly bound up with culture, the state, and power (in Russia and elsewhere), that it must remain repressed or unspoken, and yet somehow re-emerge, at one level or another. As a consequence, Sokurov may have himself (and others) believe that he is really dealing with high art, culture, the state, religion, power, and that homosexual readings of his films (see Cazals 1993) are not only irrelevant, but also inaccurate.

While indeed such readings may be reductive, as we see certainly they are anything but irrelevant. This, however, must be complicated in turn by my personal belief that Sokurov remains privy to these implications, even if he would never articulate them as such – which explains his often contorted answers in interviews, and his heavy reliance on an essentialist discourse. It is a method which provides depth while also burying the lead. But in so doing, it opens up new avenues, and Sokurov's cinema, often frustrating but also exciting and darkly illuminating, redeems the ideological pitfalls and the false leads. All these elements produce a huge set of paradoxes which are tightly bound, folded together. The reader will now better understand my insistence on the concept of 'interstitial dialectics' I laid out in the book's introduction (and my less than innocent reprising of Foucault's concept of the fold), wherein contradictions and paradoxes are reunited into an intriguing, productive whole. It also inscribes homoeroticism (and queerness) as one of the elements constituting the vast tapestry that is Sokurov's art – one that should neither be negated, nor that should be interpreted in simplistic terms, for instance qualifying *Father and Son* as a 'gay film'.³⁰

VII

Now that we have established the intimate connection between homoeroticism, queerness, patriarchal society and power in Sokurov, let us close this chapter by looking at

the film as a more global (if equally personal) dialogue with Russia's history and its romantic imaginary, always retaining our concept of Sokurov as a keen, if oblique and elusive, political commentator. On the one hand, the film represents a sentimental, romanticised (and somewhat maudlin) view of the world; and, on the other, a far more serious symbolic discussion of Russia's (actual or ideal) geopolitical role. Sokurov's dreamlike aesthetics contribute to both, in a blissfully complex of paradoxes.³¹

On the surface, manifestly, *Father and Son* is a sentimentalist and apolitical film (or political only in its escapism). It is a film, in the director's own words, about love, in many forms. This love is taken to be so strong it overflows, expressed in all its excessive aspects – including Slavic prodigality: the athletic beauty and youth of the protagonists, the soaring romanticism of the music, and the postcard quality of the images. But these feelings are contradicted, never fully realised. All things appear ultimately frozen in a perfect moment in an idealised recreated time, like one of the pre-war photographs the father looks upon in the film. Thus the film is primarily poised between two intense affects (erotic love and desire, correlated with the notion of adulthood; and non-sexual, filial love and regret, correlated with the world of childhood), which seem unabashedly egotistical, but which nonetheless, much like its landscapes, stretches out and calls to the souls of his kin, his brothers.

If we retain this grid of interpretation of the film as escapist, the desire by Sokurov to open it with a dream scene, and to thereafter compose a patchwork, surrealist compound of a city out of the streets and landscapes of Lisbon and the unreal, studio-built apartments and rooftops, permanently plunged in the golden hues of St. Petersburg's White Nights, makes perfect sense: the director is dealing with a utopian elsewhere that yet is homely, and where a certain mode of life, a certain type of relation, a proximity between younger fathers and older sons, and, further, between all men, can thrive, but only as an imaginary realm. Like the south-western European and the Russian Imperial northern capitals, reunited by the power of the cinematic medium, the weathered father and the younger, softer son come closer, clasp, embrace, and establish a dialogue otherwise unlikely and more often than not made impossible by generational and experiential gaps.³² And while the film is entirely in Russian, there is something about the warm hues and the nostalgia of the seaside Portuguese city that is replicated in Andrey Sigle's elegiac score. A rather compelling pastiche of the opening chords from Tchaikovsky's 'Ну заболталась я'; 'Nu zaboltalas ya', from the opera *Evgeny Onegin*, it evokes, when combined with the images of Lisbon, the enchanting, soft and sibilant sonority of Portuguese. And in the music's romantic nostalgia, we find another interpolation of Russian and Portuguese cultures: of all Latin national traits, it is *saudade* which most resembles Slavic/Oriental *toska* (тоска). Both are form of sad yearning and mournful delight, almost to the point of getting lost in this introspective plunge into one's own (apocryphal) memories of lost paradises.

The film's shift from desire and longing, which is always cut short and turns into lack and sadness, in turn prompts nostalgia for this Edenic, imaginary fantasy (the realm of brotherly love evoked above) in all its fullness, an utopian Eden. But the composite, hybrid nature of the city I just mentioned precludes, as so often in Sokurov, the possibility of actually, physically traveling there. It is merely nostalgia for an imagi-

nary world we are given to witness here, dreams of patriarchy as juvenile sentiments of longing for the father. This idea is expressed, albeit, again, in an oblique way, in the scene in which Alexey and one of his friends, Sasha, beckon Fyodor, the fatherless son, to join their perilous game on a plank, stretched across two buildings, and conquer his fears of falling – establishing, here again, a bridge, a connection, and the rite of passage implied by this ‘high-jink’. Filled with a suspense which resonates with sexual tension, the scene includes an intense moment of ambiguous stasis where Alexey tells Fyodor, crouched in a precarious position on the plank, to be fearless. Yet the episode, which thankfully yields no casualty, reaches no climax, interrupted by the father, who angrily calls the young men back inside. There, a fight erupts between Alexey and the father, which quickly turns into a virile bout of wrestling which also involves Sasha and Fyodor.³³ The homo-social tension, as often in the film, remains unresolved, as the struggle quickly ends and none of the characters seems to be holding grudges.

It is in instances such as these that the film brings out its ‘hidden’ aspects (the homoerotic and utopian ones), providing a critique along with their idealisation. It is thus not by chance that this scene be accompanied by a highly reflexive moment: while Alexey and Fyodor risked their lives in this playful yet dangerous rite of passage, Sasha looked on anxiously from the safe recess of his apartment, fearing for his friends’ lives. This distance from the thrilling but never malicious play between Alexey and Fyodor; and Sasha allegorises the distance between the dream, fantasised world, and reality. It is as if the window between them were a direct analogue to the cinematic screen – a world we can only experience vicariously, however much we wished to become part of it, and which inevitably is cut short – either by the Law (the father who interrupts the dangerous game) or the end of the film, or awakening from a dream.

The scene I just described captures well the dual nature of the film: between oneiric oblivion and painful self-consciousness, between playful and inconsequential banter and far more serious implications (the anxiety of death which is said to pervade it). And the fact that third parties (established or anonymous characters), peep at the characters unbeknownst to them, reminds us of the spatial and point-of-view poetics of the tetralogy of power, and thus hints at the more complex, historical implications of *Father and Son*.³⁴

Let us then consider the film for its much more important and relevant facets, historically and globally, namely its take on the military, war, and Russian imperialism.³⁵ Therein lies the fascination and, if not celebratory then at least intrigued gaze that Sokurov casts upon the complex issue of other nations’ military conquest. In this, the fact that the film is partly set in Portugal is telling beyond its picturesque décor. It also claims the popular imaginary associations of the most brilliant discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: a relatively small yet brilliant civilisation of exceptional sailors and engineers, founders of several colonies bustling with history and a policy of mixing blood with the local populations – something very different from other European colonising countries such as Spain, Britain, France or, later, Belgium. All this is an indirect way, to be sure, of referencing Russia’s own Imperialist (and Orientalist) fantasies, as seen, for instance, through the conquest of the seemingly impregnable Caucasus (it spanned nearly five decades, between 1817 to 1864, being the longest running

military conflict in Russian history). This extenuating war, and it is surely the way Sokurov first came to learn about it, was decried in such literary classics as Lermontov's *A Hero of our Time* (*Герой нашего времени*; *Geroi nashego vremeni*, 1840), Tolstoy's *Haji-Murat* (*Хаджи-Мурат*; *Khadzhi-Murat* 1904) and *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (*Кавказский пленник*; *Kavkazskii plennik*, 1872). Yet the critical eye these classics shed on the conflict and its influence, and the times to which its romantic imagery belongs is now long gone, the ugliness and barbarity of the conflict having receded in human memory, unlike their glorious locale: the proud mountains of the Caucasus (as exalted in Pushkin's poem *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (*Кавказский пленник*; *Kavkazskii plennik*, 1820–21)). This idea (that the past, somehow, is better than the present, because it operates a natural selection of sort) is located, in *Father and Son*, in the glorious architecture of yore, against which contemporaneous elements (here, the strange, almost disruptive, appearance of an airplane, or the presence of a forlorn computer in a corner of the screen, or the electro-infused remix of Tchaikovsky heard on a portable radio) comes across as quaint and derelict, like Portugal (and Europe) itself, having less presence than the nostalgic past, and continuing the escapist project laid out in *Russian Ark*. The interesting aspect, here, is how the film uses its dream-like aesthetics to create not only a spatial compound, but also a strange a-chronology: pitted between past-ness and nostalgia, and the yearning for a better future, a surprising marriage of tradition and modernity. And yet, as so often with Sokurov unity is achieved out of disparity and we accept this new – genuinely new – historical time. In this sense, the film plays both with Foucauldian heterotopia and plain *ungleichzeitigkeit* (i.e., the idea that history is always a smoothing out of its very a-synchronicities).³⁷ And so memory (or, here, the dream-world) becomes the most vibrant (if fragmented) realm, where the father and the son will best communicate. All this bespeaks the fact that the grand undertakings of yore can only exist in these dreamscapes or in the past. Probably, if we follow Sokurov's oft-professed beliefs, because of the divorce between the physical and the spiritual in our modern world; but also because, in order to become epic, militaristic feat or grandiose, dashing enterprise of discovery and risk-taking, any military enterprise needs first to go through the sift of history. Otherwise, unexpurgated in its excruciating present-ness, it is mostly composed of unfathomably violent and incomprehensible combat; or of the endless, numbing wait in caserns and camps.

The director's scepticism for the present (or his concerns about the future) does little, however, to undermine the film's very real (if allegorical) inscription within a form of romantic nationalist idiom – quite the contrary. Informed both by Sokurov's experience growing up in a military household and the love of Russian culture he acquired there, the film's dialogue between the father and the son carries a very specific ideology, between unresolved interpersonal conflict and sense of guilt, nostalgia, love, and resentment. It is an analogue, no doubt, to the similarly complex and nuanced relationship that the director has to the military (and its past, present and future). This is not to suggest, however, that Sokurov's own romanticising of the nineteenth century glamorises war, at any point in history. Yet he must reconcile his own distaste for power, violence, abuse, bloodshed and war, with his belief that the military partakes of the grand Russian project, of this ark meant to preserve European civilisation. As such, the

evil of war (when the Law becomes Moloch, as Iampolski puts it), however lamented by the filmmaker, remains a necessity, but of a sacrificial kind. This is where the image of crucifixion mentioned in the film resonates with its military background: if soldiers die on the battlefield (or in a random and treacherous attack, such as in the one on the camp in *Spiritual Voices*), they become martyrs. But their life in the casern, the senseless routine of it all, is also a form of subdued martyrdom as well. In this existential predicament, Sokurov elevates soldiers to modern-day figures of the tragic and absurd, between Sisyphus and *Waiting for Godot's* Estragon and Vladimir. But this condition can serve as a metaphor for human condition as a whole. And these men fulfill a function that is just as fundamental to the nation-state (and therefore, Sokurov seems to say, to the maintenance of civilisation) as any other legitimate professional body.

As Iampolski has argued, the aesthetics of distortion to be found in Sokurov's films, from *The Stone* through *Faust*, were meant as a critique and retreat away from the Symbolic and society (into the 'realm of existential plenitude in human relations' (2011: 119)), away from a Russia without a clear direction or leading figure. The continued use of trick lenses and distortions by the director, well into the Putin years, would indicate a lamenting stance toward a Russia still left fallow and drifting, without a just leader to conduct its conquest in a just manner – hence the father's parable, in the film, about the renegade soldier. So it appears that Sokurov still awaits a better, more just Russia. If we envisage *Father and Son* not as mere fantasy and fairy tale, but as an embellished view of an actual possible scenario, then the film's narrative seems to suggest that this brave new world would still include warfare and injustice. It then begs to ask whether Sokurov can ever be satisfied with any political system, other than the realms he proposes in the 'other life'. And if so, in such a world of greater proximity, understanding, and possible brotherly love, what would be the value and importance of the military, which the director clearly views as an indispensable, formative element of civilisation?³⁷

There would be nothing wrong with Sokurov's humanist sympathy for the plight of simple soldiers, and there is no denying the importance of the military to the economy of any modern society, were it not complicated by some of the director's other beliefs. Far and away, one of the most important and problematic aspects of Sokurov's discourse (but also that which gives his views such strength and allow for the transmission of his artistic vision with such inflexible fortitude and purpose) from the vantage point of a Western, late capitalist perspective, is his fixation on the idea of Russia and Russianness as some superior form of national identity and destiny.³⁸ During an interview on the television show *Na Noch' Glyadya* (a popular show on the First Channel hosted by Boris Berman and Eldar Zhandaryov), when asked the strange question 'What is intelligence?', Sokurov replied 'The Russian man.' To this, Berman (who is Jewish), visibly alarmed, demanded that Sokurov be more specific: did he mean 'Russian' by citizenship, or by ethnicity?³⁹ Sokurov had to rectify that he meant 'citizenship', therefore at least eliding the ethnic, Slavophile bias from his answer. Sokurov's pride in being Russian (and yet his repeated comments, elsewhere, that he is not a specifically Russian artist) is not the least of the anachronistic traits in this great artist. But it certainly leaves one wondering about the full meaning of *Father and Son's* bizarrely displaced and recreated geographic and temporal landscape. What

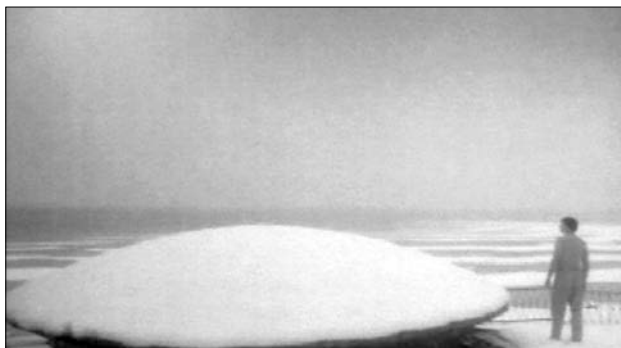
is more important here? Is it the inherent ambiguity of dreams, or their displaced messages and meanings?

If the dreamlike aesthetics cancel out opposites, smoothen asynchronicities, render a recreated, patchwork-like world homely, then, too, they could serve to make more acceptable any ideology, including the nationalism just mentioned – one of cinema's purpose as a tool of propaganda. That this term should emerge in the context of such a peculiar film as *Father and Son* may of course be surprising, but I will show how Sokurov's subsequent film dealing with the Russian military, *Alexandra*, developed this function further, its growth denying its potential. In the meantime, the queer beauty of the film transmits its romantic and nationalistic views along with its potent nostalgia and overflow of familial affection onto the viewer. It is a composite of nationalist discourse and homoerotic titillation, folded together, which cannot be separated. The oneiric aspect of the film contributes to this effect, precisely in the manner of a displacement: working it through and into our minds on a subconscious level, as it were. Like a dream, we experience *Father and Son* as a vivid but somewhat incoherent and possibly alienating experience, filled with powerful affect and emotions, yet which we can't quite piece together upon awakening. And yet the film has inscribed, however surreptitiously, a number of unforgettable images, sensations, thoughts and affects in our minds – like a subliminal message: the great melancholy and anxiety of a society without a father.

Opening on a nightmare scene filled with sexual tension, the dream within the dream that is *Father and Son* ends with another eerie sequence, the father standing on the roof, under the snow, in a dialogue with Alexey, asleep and naked. 'Are you far from me?' the son asks. The father says no, but adds that they cannot be together. The two men are close but separate, living in two different worlds, yet still somehow connected. But, as the film claims, 'A father in the end is always alone. All will outlive him.' The father, it is understood, is trapped in his own realm, he will not remarry nor return to the symbolic world – he is doomed to gaze upon a lonely, melancholy snow-covered ocean, left behind, while the son, perhaps, will awake and go on with his life in a real, thankless world. As the father says to his son: not all questions have answers. Not all questions are asked, either.

Father and Son's oneiric fabric and texture blurs the line between fantasy and wish-fulfillment and a political unconscious. Drowning its sexual, religious and political

Father and Son:
the father, left behind,
contemplates a melancholy,
snow-covered landscape



implications in layers of golden hues and mellifluous tunes, it refuses a direction, opening on a distorted, amorphous entity and dissolves into beautiful nothingness – the world as seen through the eyes of the dead father, as it were. In order to symbolically defer the inevitable, the film chooses to reach no climax. And so it genuinely surprises and titillates as an ever-repeated foreplay, a game of cinematic seduction through mourning and yearning, conveying its powerful affect and ethos by hints and gentle audio-visual caresses. This, beyond the avert reaction to its queer dimension, explains why the film never fails to elicit a reaction in its viewers, whether deemed awful or remarkable. For Sokurov, fathers are always forgotten and never leave traces: in analogue to the way it impresses and insinuates itself in our minds, a bond is established in this film, through the utopian or reconciliatory bridging of blood-ties and male intimacy – till human voice wakes us, and they drown.

From the eternal sunset of *Father and Son*, and its lush score of emotions and intimate affect covering up its far more disquieting political message, Sokurov would return in 2005 to a more overt investigation of history with the third instalment of his tetralogy of power, set this time in the country of the rising sun, and depicting the crucial hours of Hirohito's abdication: that is, the film many critics hold to be the director's unsung masterpiece, *The Sun*.

Notes

- 1 When not confronted uncomfortably with the issue as some sort of covert aggression, Sokurov has pointed out that the homosexual interpretive key to a reading of his films (specifically regarding the line 'It will be difficult for me to live without you' in *Days of the Eclipse*) would be misguided: 'It is not necessarily a homosexual expression, and to use this interpretive key to understand my work is inaccurate' (Cazals 1993; translation mine). And indeed homosexuality, in his work, is never manifest in the script or narrative itself.
- 2 With its orange, sunset colors and seaport environment, but also the tension between male characters it depicts, the film is reminiscent of Fassbinder's *Querelle* (see also chapter two).
- 3 The queer dimension of the film became a 'closeted' item with gay critics. Armond White is a good example of this tendency: clearly embracing *Father and Son* as a homoerotic text, but arguing for the film as being about love as gender neutral and spiritual at its core, in respecting Sokurov's desire to not discuss the issue in terms of 'western commercial vulgarisation'.
- 4 This is not to say that Jameson is blind to these aspects. But he glosses over them in his discussion of *Days of the Eclipse*, discarding the allegations of homosexuality between Malyanov and Vechevsky (cf chapter three). Yet even he alludes to ambiguous passages in *Father and Son* in those terms: 'various kinds of adolescent highjinks and exercises punctuate reflexive scenes replete with lingering glances and pregnant silences.' I would think that, at this juncture in history (the aforementioned spectacular rise in gay rights and claims, and outright disproportionate attention granted to it in the media as opposed to a dialectical resistance to it in

Russia and other parts of the world), even from a strictly sociological or Marxist perspective, discarding the psycho-biographic and personal aspects of an author's work becomes slightly problematic. The time has come to reflect upon homosexuality as discourse (if not certain forms of homosexual desire) as another expression of late capitalism. If this hypothesis were to be true, then Alexander Sokurov's cinema could be interpreted as both an additional fragment of the ever-growing mosaic of queer culture as commodity, as well as an alternative discourse broaching both aspects of Western acceptance and celebration of queerness and its repression in Russian official discourse.

- 5 This latter element has become one of the most commonplace, dangerously dogmatic, and all-too-often patently false argument used by the least sophisticated pro-queer thinkers to deride any form of resistance to the general LGBT political agenda – a primal and vulgar prejudice used as a reaction against equally vulgar homophobic sentiments as fear of one's own genuine sexual identity. As is so often the case, two forms of dangerously reductive and intellectually dishonest ideology rub one against the other.
- 6 Mikhail Iampolski is a perfect case in point of this lacuna vis-à-vis queerness in Sokurov studies, as we will see later in this chapter.
- 7 'Гомосексуализм, по моему мнению, это никак не болезнь, это другая конструкция человеческой души и тела и это "другое" есть результат процесса развития души такого же уникального, божественного, как и все прочие формы существования.' (http://sokurov.spb.ru/isle_ru/gl_ltr.html). It is worth noting that, true to the director's complexity and paradoxical nature, this statement could, when taken out of context, be interpreted in exactly the opposite terms it was meant to express.
- 8 Of course, to this distaste for vulgarity and art of the ellipsis, the anticonformist or underground communities, equipped with the astounding numbers of slang words surrounding the lexical sphere of sex – the Russian мат (*mat*), as inventive as it is foul – have produced a literature which would humble (or make them blush) the most daring Western provocateurs.
- 9 A law as populist and preposterous as its object's definition is unclear.
- 10 Tellingly, she is not given a name, unlike the male protagonists of the film, referred to only as 'the Girl' in the film's cast list.
- 11 For a discussion of Sokurov's view of women as unreachable, superior beings who are closer to nature and whose essence is higher than men's, see chapter one.
- 12 The choice of Lisbon has to do, on the pragmatic level at least, with Paulo Branco's involvement with the project.
- 13 She is referred to at a point in the film when Alexey, eyes closed, asks his father, 'Where is Mom?' The father remains silent.
- 14 Conversely, the proximity with his mother was emphasised, and Sokurov has repeatedly professed his great love for her, always talking about her in terms of old age and poor health – a frailty contradicted by the strong, indomitable bond of affection between the two (and the fact that she is still alive as I write this). Sokurov has repeatedly expressed his feeling of blessing for still having his mother

- so late in his own life, but, at the same time, he underlines the fact that this blessing is constantly threatened with extinction.
- 15 *Father and Son* (but also other films such as the documentaries *Confession* and *Spiritual Voices*) sacralises the daily routine of military men, while highlighting their loneliness. It is then somewhat strange that the director should discursively use and pit transcendence and queerness one against the other, when their combination is such a major feature of his cinema, as this chapter demonstrates.
 - 16 A word should be said here for the truly electrifying use of montage in some moments of this otherwise mellow, hypnotic film, especially in the shifts from one plane of reality (the explicit dream scenes, seemingly set in the landscape, with its solitary birch tree, of *Mother and Son*) to another (the diegetic space of the film's waking-time). In one such transition, after Alexey has fallen asleep in his father's arms, we see the two men running, obviously afraid, from some looming threat. This brief image cuts straight to a shot of the father lifting weights on the roof (wearing what is now referred to in fashion as a 'wife-beater' and certainly popularised in gay magazine imagery), as though a hero of poetic realism had been plunged in a dye of Turner's paintings. The result brought about by this sudden, unexpected association is nothing short of miraculous, another wonderful example of the sublime Sokurov can elicit with the most subtle effects – here, a simple cut.
 - 17 A picture in the protagonists' apartment featuring an anatomical man speaks to this preoccupation with intimacy ('to go beyond the skin'), much as it does to the religious associations of sacrifice and martyrdom in the film (flaying, torture, etc.) and the question of the flesh and death in Sokurov.
 - 18 Indeed the use of non-professionals in Sokurov makes this scene fascinating in its utter detachment. Alexey Neymyshev gives the impression of being a completely detached simpleton. When I met him in July 2006 (he was spending time at Alexander Sokurov's apartment while the latter was shooting *Alexandra* in Chechnya), I was horrified to meet just that: an athletic, golden-haired, inarticulate, and somewhat egocentric individual, apparently pursuing a joint career in music and football. Sokurov cast him again in *Alexandra* and in *Reading from the Book of Blockade*, in which he was quite incapable of reading a simple passage without making basic pronunciation mistakes, representing one of the few questionable choices in this fascinating document of one of Russian history's many painful episodes.
 - 19 Of course it is highly telling that Schrader, the author of so many scripts and films dealing in psychosexual aberration (*Obsession* (1975), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *The Canyons* (2013)) and representations of homosexuality correlated to violence (*Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1990)) would be drawn to discussing this idea of 'transcendental cinema' (see his *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu-Bresson-Dreyer* (1972)).
 - 20 It is of the utmost importance to stress that there is no sensationalist aspect or 'dirty secret' disclosure to this assertion. I by no means want to hurt Sokurov by underlining the homosexual aspects of his art, nor do I believe that it could suffer from such an approach, even in the current political climate in Russia. On

- the contrary, we can only gain a greater and better understanding of Sokurov's cinematic universe if we take this fundamental element into account.
- 21 It is important to specify here that I understand the term queer in a broad sense, which is different from the way it has been appropriated or is perceived commonly in popular culture. If I may freely use queer in that sense ('the queer community') and the other (queerness as a form of difference from the dominant), it is because the two, in this discussion, are not mutually exclusive, even if they do not entirely overlap necessarily.
 - 22 Conversely, a great number of Hollywood actors who were quite flamboyant homosexuals in private did not carry the queer label. Think of James Dean.
 - 23 Note, also, the rare but unmistakable instances in Sokurov's cinema (the overexposed scene in the tiny hallway in *The Second Circle*) are evocative of the New York underground scene of the 1970s (the run-down midtown Manhattan apartments shot in black and white in the films of Hollis Frampton or Jim McBride being not this remote from the squalid Soviet tenement).
 - 24 During the *perestroika* years, Sokurov got to run his own *masterskaya* (workshop) for novice filmmakers at Lenfilm. Yevgeny Yufit and the other members of the necrorealist movement were involved in the *masterskaya*. It is there that Yufit actually got the chance to shoot his first real film, *Knights of Heaven* (*Рыцари поднебесья*; *Rytsari podnebesya*, 1989). This is what leads necrorealism scholar Thomas Campbell to consider Yufit a 'wayward pupil' of Sokurov. But in spite of the many antics in his films involving naked men, Yufit actually has a much more straight aesthetic, and with a completely different approach (far more derisive, playful and entertaining) than Sokurov's serious stance vis-à-vis cinema. This is not to say that Yufit's films are not equally invested in a political critique and allegory of societal collapse, but far less subtly or obliquely than Sokurov's cinema.
 - 25 As Michael Warner has shown, it is less an identity than an embodied critique of identity, and essentially an anti-system in its inception – an anti-system stance Sokurov has exhibited often in interviews.
 - 26 The sole truly notable example in this category being ballet dancer Alla Osipenko's feet in the short film *Empire*.
 - 27 In the director's utopian desire, and correlating it once more to the foot in religious imagery, we find the coexistence of humility (as in Ford Madox Brown's painting *Jesus Washing Peter's Feet* (1852–1856)) with suffering and sacrifice, notions that certainly determine the path of the artist as laid out for and articulated by Sokurov himself, in terms of unrelenting pursuit of spiritual life through an ascetic work ethos.
 - 28 Next to the preposterous anti-gay propaganda law mentioned earlier, we could see, in Vladimir Putin's ostentatious cult of the body and display thereof in a variety of poses as a form of queer spectacle; recent examples in Western Europe's far right politicians revealed a combination of populist or proto-fascist discourse with acute homosexual activity, whether overt (Netherlands' Pim Fortuyn) or hidden (Austria's Jörg Haider). The over-inflated rhetoric (and the reactions to

- it) surrounding gay marriage in the USA or France are other examples, from the other end of the spectrum, of this broad and complex phenomenon.
- 29 Taken to its literal expression in the ancient Greek practice of pederasty – a formative activity conducted between older men (the erastes) and young teen-aged youth (the eromenos) – but to be found in a variety of expressions elsewhere.
 - 30 I would like to thank my friend and colleague Michael Cramer for his assistance in penning this final section, bundling together all the discrete analyses I had conducted previously.
 - 31 Sokurov had shown his interest in the dream-world of the military in a short film made with footage from *Spiritual Voices: A Soldier's Dream* (Солдатский сон; *Soldatskii son*, 1995).
 - 32 Indeed, this is media specificity at its best: few, if any, other art form could achieve this effect of strange seamlessness, and none with the same dreamlike impression.
 - 33 A strange *remue-ménage à quatre*, to the weird tune of a Tchaikovsky techno-remix, again from *Evgeny Onegin*. The use of Tchaikovsky, if anything, perfectly taps in to the exalted and nostalgic sense of loss of the film, as well as, through the composer's biography, the network of references to repressed homosexuality. The composer's music is heard once more when Alexey turns on his radio, and a piano reduction of the piece 'Слыхали-ль Вы За Роцей Глас Ночной' (*Slikhali-li Vy Za Roshchey Glas Nochnoy*), again from *Evgeny Onegin*, is heard.
 - 34 This is why, while *Father and Son* clearly belongs with *Mother and Son* (the film title's font; the visual distortions; a passage of the 1997 film's soundtrack heard on the radio in the protagonists apartment; and of course the notion of the passing of a parent), the former film also bears many kinship with *Alexandra*.
 - 35 Jameson senses too that therein lies one of the most important aspect of the film (2006), identifying the father, for his part, as a veteran from Chechnya. This specification, it seems to me, is unnecessary, considering the film's strong parabolic and allegorical nature.
 - 36 For more information on the term *heterotopia*, see Michel Foucault's *Des espaces autres* (*Of Other Spaces*, 1967) in which he discusses (appropriately to the present film and its postmodern implications) an epoch in which places and spaces function in non-hegemonic conditions, and provides a series of different heterotopias. The term *ungleichzeitigkeit* ('non-synchronicity' or 'non-synchronism') was coined by Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch in his book *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (*Bequest of this Time*, 1935) with its criticism of rising Nazism.
 - 37 I shall return to the consequences of such a worldview, both pragmatic and romanticised (and Sokurov's relationship to Russia's military politics), in chapter fourteen.
 - 38 In his book *V tsentre okeana*, Sokurov associates the first realisation of his Russian-ness during his first visit to Moscow (he and his family had hitherto lived in Turkmenia): standing on a balcony at night, taking in the smells of the city (especially that of lilac), he is surprised by his mother who, putting her hands on his shoulders, says to him: 'This is your homeland, Russia. You are Russian' ('Это родина твоя – Россия. Ты – русский' (Sokurov 2012: 8)).

- 39 In the Soviet Union, people were categorised not only according to citizenship, but also ethnic background. While this practice is now defunct in Russia (there's no more mention of *natsyonalnost* in people's passports), they are still asked to identify their identity if and when they fill out census forms (much as they do in America). This is self-identification, and one can chose more than one ethnic group or even make up (write in) their own if the ones on the list don't suit them. But even without the evil old Soviet practices, ethnicity remains an important category, while citizenship is still poorly understood – hence the absurd view that people from the Caucasus or, as in a recent stunningly stupid court case in St. Petersburg, from Tuva, aren't Russian citizens.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Sun: Iconoclastic Humanism

I

Alexander Sokurov's third instalment in the tetralogy of power, *The Sun*, focuses on the crucial hours preceding the abdication of Japan in WWII and the relinquishing, by Emperor Hirohito (Issei Ogata), of his divine status. Separated from his family and awaiting the decision of the American victor, the meek, timid man is still treated as the descendent of the Goddess of the Sun by his suite of servants, as he goes about his daily activities: he gets dressed, meets with his distraught general staff, indulges in his passion for ichthyology, writes a letter to his son. The outside pressure takes its toll on him, however, as he contemplates the consequences of the war, first in a dream of the destruction of Tokyo, and then as he is taken for a ride through the ruins of the city by the American military. Finally, he is confronted by General Douglas MacArthur (Robert Dawson), who is to decide whether to have the emperor hanged or not. While the outcome of this encounter is well-known, the director sheds new light on the two men's interaction and its consequences.

In a piece on the first three films in Sokurov's tetralogy of power, Stephen Hutchings (2011) argues that these strive mostly toward a form of proximity and embodiment, which accounts for the humanising gaze they throw on their historical characters. This embodiment, however, is never fully realised, thus accounting for the morose, ghostly atmosphere in these films. I would argue that while Hutchings' account largely holds true regarding the first two instalments of the cycle, in *The Sun* and its portrayal of Hirohito, a somewhat different reading might be in order.

If *Moloch's* Hitler displayed only dim signs of humanity, eventually all but lost in the maze of hubris and the madness of his character; and *Taurus's* Lenin only recon-

nected with 'those simple values' that truly matter at the end of his life; with *The Sun*, Sokurov proposes a greater proximity with and a brighter outcome for his central historical *personage*. In this curious (and curiously riveting) portrait of the Japanese emperor, Sokurov took the opportunity of applying to feature fiction form the many elements congenial to his art and philosophy that he had encountered in his contacts with Japan, and the remarkable documentaries he made there: *Oriental Elegy*, *A Humble Life*, and *dolce...*. The affection and feeling of closeness that Sokurov felt for Japan is made palpable in this trilogy (see also chapter six), made with the help of his friend Hiroko Kojima. The Japanese cycle was not merely a heartfelt and emotional journey, however: in preparation for *The Sun*, and all the while working on another feature effort, Sokurov spent no less than seven years doing location scouting and meeting key individuals in Japan – including the remaining survivors of the emperor's former entourage.¹

Informed by this time spent studying and immersing himself in Japanese culture, the beauty of Sokurov's audiovisual compositions acquire a sensual sheen in this film, and his attachment to detail is chiselled like a Japanese *netseke*. Most importantly, the customary duration of his takes acquires an arresting, contemplative, hypnotic quality: its slowness, considered at times heavy in some previous films, is never felt as such here, a quality attributable to discreet but perfect editing.

However, it is the collaboration with Japanese stage actors, and particularly with Issei Ogata that constitutes the film's most memorable aspect. Sokurov himself praised the actor's work, which combines, in the Japanese theatrical tradition, a holistic approach – quite different from Western acting schools – with rigour and 'inner strength'.² Ogata's work contrasts with Leonid Mozgovoy's interpretations of Hitler and Lenin, primarily because in the Russian actor's case, the characters were never meant to be viewed literally as the historical figures portrayed. Given that the many filmic documents of their speeches and public appearances short-circuited this possibility, Sokurov opted for a different, more grotesque, approach. In the case of Hirohito, however, whose image is much less in currency, the idea of coupling the actor's performance with a believably 'historic' account emerged, and the grotesque qualities are toned down in exchange for a form of light, touching awkwardness. In the part of a stiff but gentle man, protected from the horrors of the war in the confines of his house-bunker, escaping into natural sciences or a photo album stocked with movie stars of the period (Chaplin, Marlene Dietrich, Humphrey Bogart), and two pictures of Hitler, Ogata endows his character with an odd yet compellingly dignified clumsiness. And while it is important to underline the fine acting, one should also praise the courage of a man who, taking upon himself the role of Hirohito, transgressed a particularly sensitive taboo in Japan.

The Sun is somewhat surprising and unexpected to the Sokurov fan in the sense that, while inscribing itself within the tetralogy of power, it manages to break with a certain tendency in Sokurov to portray madness and alienation. While departing from an aesthetic of disoriented spaces (where the point of focalisation was always uncertain from one shot to the next, reflecting the characters' debilitated minds and the intricacies of historical perspective) which the first two instalments exemplified, the film remains consistent with both *Moloch* and *Taurus*. Indeed, as in both earlier

features of the tetralogy, Sokurov avoids representing the grandiose, the fundamental, the memorable, the 'Historical'. In this case, he elides Hirohito's capitulation and his relinquishing of divine status, in a famous and sacrilegious radio broadcast. What had already been said, proclaimed by history, did not interest Sokurov as much as the 'private' life of the historic figure. As in *Moloch* and *Taurus*, again, Sokurov reveals an undeniable sense of humour – and this time, to genuinely amusing effect – for instance when Hirohito claims very seriously to one of his servants that he only differs very little physically from the common mortal man. Even better are the scenes involving a gift from the Americans to the captive emperor (a box of Hershey's chocolate), stirring both greedy curiosity and fear of poisoned food among the emperor's servants.

This opening up to a humorous approach speaks volumes about the degree of comfort and affection that the director felt towards the culture he was portraying. Indeed, this admiration of Japanese history and the portrayal of Hirohito's position may lead the director to an overly accommodating portrayal. In *Moloch* and *Taurus*, the horrors perpetrated under Hitler and Lenin are never addressed, and the characters somewhat humanised – though it remains very clear that Sokurov still finds them to be wretched, incomplete people; their spiritual fallibility, one that led to the death of millions, is echoed indeed in the film's cold or sickly atmospheres. Hirohito, on the contrary, seems entirely exonerated from the weight of the Sino-Japanese conflict and Pearl Harbor. Sokurov has repeatedly argued in interviews that Hirohito had no say in the attack on Pearl Harbor, even if historical resources (see Youngblood 2011) clearly show that he did and approved the operation. This point might remain subject to debate, however, considering the role and power of the military in Japan during World War II: it was so overwhelming that the actual executive power of the emperor might have been very modest indeed.

If Hirohito can be exonerated of guilt in the bombing of Pearl Harbor, there is no historical excuse for Japan's invasion of China under his auspices in the 1930s. Yet there too Sokurov justifies the operation, while acknowledging the horror of this bloody war, in which over a million Chinese civilians were butchered by the Japanese invaders. For Sokurov, this conflict was the direct consequence of technological progress, initiated by Japan in the late nineteenth century in order to modernise the country, as a reaction against Europe's pervasive colonising policies throughout Asia. Much as the Nazi war machine inevitably led to the bloodshed of World War II, Sokurov contends, so Japan had 'no choice', economically and politically, but to attack China and give Europe a clear signal that it would not tolerate the colonisation of its territories. Sokurov in fact correlates the strange alliance of Hirohito with Hitler's Germany to the fact that the Japanese emperor saw, in the Nazi agenda, a power that would slow down the progress of Europe's colonies in Asia, at least for a while. As Sokurov further underlines, this 'alliance' with Germany was relative: Japan turned a blind eye on the Nazis' pleas to invade Russia's Eastern front in the crucial winter of 1941–42, which would almost certainly have caused the fall of Moscow (Stalin having called all his Eastern regiments back to protect the Soviet Union's capital). Sokurov interprets this refusal to aid Hitler at such a crucial moment as a sign of Japan's distrust of the Nazis, and its desire, ultimately, to see the axis lose the war (but not without causing sufficient collateral

damage as to weaken the West and the Soviet Union). Clearly, the atom bomb and its consequences on Japan were not part of this calculation. But considering the destructive technological advances of the West in those years, and the consequences of the global conflict on Japan's military and national autonomy, the country nonetheless made a remarkable, if adulterated, recovery from its traumas.

None of the above legitimates a glossing over of Japan's war crimes, but demonstrates how much Sokurov wished to produce a redeeming – justifying if not exonerating – narrative that would place Hirohito in an entirely different league from Hitler and Lenin. This distinction was made because – and this is a crucial point in the tetralogy of power – Hirohito stopped in time, saving not only his life, but also that of millions of Japanese soldiers and civilians. Naturally the use of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki would have been a sufficient deterrent for any nation, but it is also true that the Japanese military itself (who had a force of four million soldiers, many of whom were quite willing to die for their country) was ready to fight until the very last man. The attempted *putsch* of 1945, during which many Japanese politicians were murdered by the military, indicated as much. Anecdotal though it may seem in view of the atom bomb's deterrent effect, Hirohito's natural sense of reserve but also worldliness – he spent months in Europe and adopted some Western habits – might have contributed to saving his country from further bloodshed and destruction: he could see the blind alley at the end of ill-placed honour, and to him 'betraying' his nation by abdicating represented the more noble course. By thus jettisoning age-old traditions and values, Hirohito indeed emerged at the vanguard of a progressive brand of realpolitik.

For reasons that are his own but serve the purpose of the narrative's dramatic arc, Sokurov rearranges the dates in his film, synchronising Japan's surrender to the Allies with Hirohito's relinquishing of his Divine status (which actually took place on 1 January 1946, months after Japan's surrender). While still the Divine Emperor,



The Sun: American journalists take pictures of a congenial Hirohito, under the stupefied gaze of the emperor's suite

however, he is subjected to humiliating rituals by the naïve and boorish American troops. In a highly ironic episode, mistaking their target at first, American journalists manifest their jarring enthusiasm for this puny and timid emperor: 'He looks like Chaplin, hey Charlie, this way for the picture,' they cry, under the gaze of a Russian soldier and the mortified imperial suite of servants (the latter, shocked by the irreverence of the photographers, try in vain to keep them from getting too close to Hirohito). The emperor, however, plays his part graciously, and it is impossible to ascertain whether he does so out of sheer inclination for this slightly humiliating, but ultimately innocuous, exercise, or out of a renewed sense of diplomacy.

One of the film's great strengths resides in its avoidance of any kind of glorification or vilification of its subject. Yet by breaking the taboo of the representation of the Japanese emperor, in line with his discursive attempts at legitimating Japan's wartime politics, Sokurov pays homage to Hirohito. He does so by showing his protagonist as more fallible and more humane than he might ever have been. The Russian filmmaker 'abases' the living god, descendent of the almighty god of the Sun, to the figure of man (and a rather frail one), but elevates the value of life over the cult of death: 'My goal was to show the humane character of the emperor. A statesman who preferred political humiliation to the death of human beings.' What can be primarily seen (at least in Japan) as an iconoclasm becomes a vibrant humanism, while the ambiguity remains: is this the 'real' Hirohito, or another figment of the filmmaker's imagination, plunged into a historic milieu? This tension between the 'fictional documentary' and 'pure fiction' is at the core of what is no doubt the most intriguing aspect of the film: its way of dealing with historical representation, both with a sovereign rigour and credibility, and yet a creativity felt in every single frame (and in the poetic license taken, here and in the earlier instalments, with regard to chronology). The result is one of historical reconstruction, which, like the acting, uncannily mixes extreme precision in the most minute detail with a global sense of artifice. *The Sun* is simpler, purer (it avoids the director's typical distortions, the length of his shots seem more traditionally 'justified') and perhaps more complex (for instance the relationship to history, addressed here with fewer formal detours) than Sokurov's previous works. Formal preoccupations push towards a certain aestheticism and stand at odds with the filmmaker's sense of moral duty, which consists in treating important, fundamental subjects. This can be seen as another Sokurovian paradox, and this tension is again a highly productive one.

In the case of *Moloch* and *The Sun*, the action takes place during World War II. Both leaders had already been investigated by Sokurov many years earlier, in his feature documentary *And Nothing More* (1982). Comprised mostly of archival footage from the war, it is a highly compelling (if incomplete) account of the events that shook the world between 1939 and 1945. One of the original traits of this film is its portrayal of the relationship between arch-nemeses Churchill and Stalin. *And Nothing More* asks whether Churchill's hatred of his Soviet homologue might not have tainted his opinion of the Russian people as a whole. In a rare use of intellectual, dialectical Soviet montage, Sokurov opposes and deconstructs a passage where he quotes Churchill on his worries about the Bolshevik threat for the democracies of Western Europe, combining

it with gorgeous footage from his documentary *Maria*, showing the Russian female peasants in the fields, hard working and life-loving. Sokurov also makes use of overlapping montage of the leaders of the time with scenes from musicals and tap dancing to point to the war as show business and spectacle. In doing so, he seems to emphasise the problematic aspect of turning a major historic event into a single, streamlined narrative, imbued in particular with pathos and Manichaeism.

With the tetralogy, Sokurov put those earlier concerns and preoccupations into fictional form, resulting in a series of films at once documented and thoroughly fictitious and stylised (again, as opposed to Hitler and Lenin, there are practically no historical sources on Hirohito). Armed with less documentation, Sokurov freely admits to having let imagination and creativity take certain precedence in this third instalment. In doing so, he managed to create a feeling of both distance and proximity with the character, and to give us an experience of the historical film as genre, as Fredric Jameson observes (2006), in a new way – both as a document, with the moral charge that it implies, and a perfectly crafted work of fiction. As one will have already deduced from the exonerating comments included above, Sokurov's more benevolent treatment of Hirohito might have to do with his positive prejudice – one of respect and commiseration – for Japan. In *And Nothing More*, he avoids representing the events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki through footage of nuclear mushroom clouds. He simply shows a series of people disfigured from the bombings, ears fallen off, faces melted, and states, calmly: 'Japan, this country of amazing inventiveness and tradition, was the first to get a taste of the 21st century.'³ Here, as elsewhere, Sokurov is consistent in his representation of the Japanese people as bridging tradition and modernity, with a talent for adapting to novelty without compromising their core identity: a people that, while keeping a foot in the past, is always ahead of everyone else – even when it comes to experiencing the very worst.⁴ In this sense, it would not be far-fetched to argue that Sokurov's feelings of kinship for Japan and Japanese culture have to do with his own position in the film world, in the oft-repeated image of the Russian director as vanguard experimenter staunchly attached to pre-20th century tradition and art.

II

Intuiting and reinventing the private life of Hirohito with a positive prejudice, *The Sun* sails adrift from the theme of death, often central in Sokurov. A centrifugal force in his previous films, death here becomes centripetal. While it literally haunted the two earlier instalments of the tetralogy (insinuated in the slowness of the shots, the deliquescence of actions undertaken and then abandoned), it is here dealt with frontally, but without the same haunting power. Contrary to Hitler and Lenin, who had nothing but their own death and decay in mind – which prevented the viewer from feeling any real kind of sympathy for them – Hirohito simply seems disinclined to lose his life, but envisages the possibility with dignity. Although unhappy and lonely, he is in sympathy with his defeated nation, an emotion encapsulated in the poignant and simple tone of the letter he writes to his son. This scene is particularly relevant in view of Sokurov's oeuvre and philosophy of history, where father figures, biological, spir-

itual and political, are of paramount importance and significance, and their absence or death, of dramatic consequence, to the point where they appear favourable to an absence of father figure, however authoritative or monstrous. But the real father figure, it is understood, is just. Ultimately, the real leader leads his nation not into chaos (like Hitler), but to restoration and rebirth to a new dawn in human history.

Before the dawn must come night – and a highly scarring one at that. The nightmare of the bombing of Tokyo by a score of flying fish grotesquely interconnects the film with death and the trauma of war: '[Hirohito] is immediately beset by a surreal nightmare in which images of the bombs descending upon Japan mutate into fishlike creatures swimming through walls of flames. The emperor's subjective indulgences – a function of his estrangement – are bound up with the terrifying consequences of the inability to take account of the effect of his actions' (Hutchings 2011: 149). Hirohito,



The Sun: taken to the
American headquarters,
Hirohito discovers
a ravaged Tokyo

having had the nightmare of the bombing of his city, is taken for a ride from his residence to the American Headquarters. On the way, he is humbled in two ways: comically dwarfed by comparison to the tall Caucasian soldiers escorting him; and tragically by the horror that he feels at the sight of Tokyo in rubbles, and the suffering of its survivors.

As Hirohito, removed from the safe confines of his home, witnesses, awestruck, the spectacle of the bombed streets, of people fighting for a blanket or a bit of food as American soldiers indifferently pass by, his perspective is superimposed over ours. A tracking shot from the perspective of the car onto the ravaged city becomes – to quote the famous Godard line regarding Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) – a real matter of morality: the spectator's morality. What we see is understood to be a reconstitution: shot in Russia rather than Japan, Sokurov's set-up is a conspicuously carefully crafted and choreographed bit of filmmaking. And yet, the documentary detail tricks us, and we understand that we are also looking at a document, both pictorial and photographic, a *mise-en-oeuvre*, so to speak, of these dreadful yet striking black and white pictures from the war which are, for most of us, the only remaining traces of the cataclysm. These images are imbued here with the cinematic medium's power to deceive, but also to capture the real, twenty four times a second – the moral implication of which cannot be lost on a filmmaker as preoccupied with ethics and conscience as Sokurov.

As Jameson notes (2006), Georg Lukács distinguishes two ways of viewing history in literature: the historical drama (taking the historic figure as the centre) and the historic novel (having an anonymous hero find himself at the centre of history, for instance seeing Napoleon walk past his window). The films of Sokurov do not fit either category, Jameson argues, in line with the hypothesis of the third term laid out in this book's introduction. Yet a film such as *The Sun* remains just as compelling as (if not more so than) a historical account. This is partly explained in the filmmaker's words: 'If the film is based on the principle of the story, the narrative (and history, it is understood, is also a "story", at any rate a narrative), it is not art. Art is the other life: that's what I call it, the "other life". It has certain points in common with our life, but no direct and real relationship with the latter. Let's say that one can conceive some indices of relation, but they are never real ones' (in Szaniawski 2006). This interstitial space, which we are given to behold, between fiction and documentary, is perhaps the passage towards what Sokurov calls the 'other life'. Not the other life of the great figures of this world, romanticised and magnified, nor looked at from a distance by a more modest party; but rather our position, as audience, is satisfying in the sense that we experience radical proximity and intimacy with the figure, while also being alienated from it. This peculiar space, paradoxical as it is, is probably the best single definition and way into the symbolic but also spiritual realm of the 'other life', the quintessential expression of the Sokurovian utopia, mediated as a communal experience through the medium of cinema.

If there should be only one drive and motivation to extract from Sokurov's utopian project through cinema, it would be, as already discussed in chapter eight, to alleviate one's sufferings and prepare one for death. In confronting the inescapable absolute

necessity of one's own mortality, an occurrence so overwhelmingly prevalent during the war and under Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union, Sokurov also proposes a properly anti-capitalistic rhetoric, going against the grain of individualism and the fantasy of immortality proposed by a society of spectacle and reification. This in turn closes on itself the contradictory fold found in Sokurov's cinema in the constant preoccupation with death and its many embalming and preserving drives. The repetition of a same narrative (the inescapability of death) is told within one and the same totalising myth, but through two different cultures, at once alien and closer than they would have it (the American West and the Russian-Soviet bloc), both through its common rooting in European culture. And they are mediated through a third term, here the case of Japanese history and its entanglement in World War II. As much lie and fabrication as it holds the specific truths necessary to its own societal functioning, the constitutive myth of that grand and traumatic event which reshaped the geopolitical map of the second half of the twentieth century is thus addressed in ways that resonate with each other fascinatingly, in the dialectical interplay of Sokurov's *The Sun* and the recent American film, Peter Webber's *Emperor* (2012).⁵

If one leaves aside the consideration whereby Sokurov's film is a true work of art while its American 'counterpart' is at best a work of solid craftsmanship, positing the two films next to one another tells us a lot about their respective authors' (and Hollywood's) take on the Japanese third term. Unsurprisingly, the truth emerging from each film is completely different in spite of its apparent similarities, and what is left unsaid speaks volumes about the films' respective agendas: *The Sun* chooses to follow Hirohito himself as a protagonist, eliciting the truth of the Emperor's personality and motivations from within, through his everyday, mundane actions; while *Emperor* adopts mostly the perspective of Brigadier General Bonner Fellers (Matthew Fox), an American specialist of Japanese culture, whose mission it is to determine whether Hirohito should be held responsible for Japan's crimes (more precisely: his foreknowledge and approval of Pearl Harbor), and accordingly whether he should be hanged. The typical story of investigation and reconstruction of the American film covers the actual socio-economic and political stakes of an otherwise highly symbolic execution, while Sokurov prefers to not give a clear answer as to the reasons behind General MacArthur's magnanimity. The American film presents humanism from an ethnocentric perspective (the nobility of that who is open onto other cultures – here literalised rather heavy-handedly by the romance between Fellers and Aya, his Japanese sweetheart, herself an adventurous soul who broke with tradition and came to the US to study), and attributes the ultimate salvation of Hirohito to a mix of Fellers' lofty and romantic sentiments (love, forgiveness) and MacArthur's flair (the casting of Tommy Lee Jones in the role, as a dour but perceptive man, proves as accurate as it is painfully overdetermined). All this, of course, serves as a rather unrefined call for a representation of America and Japanese societies as lovers, lost and then found again, bound to learn from each other, although probably significantly more to America's favour. Sokurov's film, all the while, leans more on the idea that a man's destiny can remain in his own hands, if seized at the decisive moment (another good example of the *kairos* concept proposed by Iampolski in relationship to Sokurov's cinema, and discussed in chapter ten). Ironically enough,

however, both films insist on the necessity of love – romantic in the American film; familial in Sokurov's.

In order for the audience to believe in Hirohito as a genuine and loving subject, *The Sun* must live up to the occasion and persuade us, in its interplay of intimacy and alienation, that this was precisely the way in which Hirohito acted and talked, the way in which his lips twitched, giving him the countenance of a lost and scared child, but also the surprised look of a fish taken out of water, gasping for oxygen – echoing his ichthyologic and oceanographic interests. We believe that this was the exact way in which his servants helped him to dress and served him with refined meals. And it is in this way eventually that this gentleman, *imperial*, tiny but straight up, very dignified – half-child, half-living divinity – dismantled with a total absence of malice the hatred and contempt of the American invader, gaining his clemency and even earning his respect. It is a recreated truth which does not try to hide its processes; but the truth of art, Sokurov seems to argue, becomes historical truth. In *Emperor*, conversely, the historical detail merely serves to disguise the fallacy which consists in glossing over the very simple explanation behind Hirohito's survival, at least from a pragmatic and egotistical perspective: his execution would have been counter-productive for the Americans, much as it would probably have undermined General MacArthur's bid for the presidency (eventually an unsuccessful enterprise anyway).

As General MacArthur reportedly claimed: 'Hirohito was a true gentleman, the first Japanese gentleman I met.' The implications and ambiguities of this assertion remain, of course, subject to another discussion – who knows whether Sokurov's Hirohito, interpreted as a guileless half-child, was not, in truth, a cunning politician who managed to find a common language (other than English, that is) with the American victor, or, conversely, played dumb to save his skin? This question is elucidated in neither Sokurov's nor Webber's film, as if an epistemic doubt had to remain at the core of any historical narrative in order for it to remain directional and cogent – because its part of *mutos* is always indispensable to disguising its underlying implications, whether they be of an anthropological, sociological or psychological nature. But it is also, in *The Sun* as well as in the broader tetralogy, a matter of perspective and history's variable geometry, a constant preoccupation articulated through points of view and spatial representation: much as in *Moloch* and *Taurus*, flocks of secondary characters, mostly the Japanese emperor's staff of servants, momentarily polarise the perspective, sometimes to a welcome comical effect. This juggling of spaces, disorientated through the articulation of undefined or un-locatable points of view, is best illustrated by the second and decisive encounter between Hirohito and General MacArthur. The latter has just dismissed an interpreter who refuses to translate the general's questions, considering them an infringement on Japanese imperial etiquette. Nevertheless, the interpreter will spy on the meeting at one point from behind the door, conveniently left slightly ajar. The question, which does not pose itself immediately, then arises: where does this door find itself in the space of the palatial room?

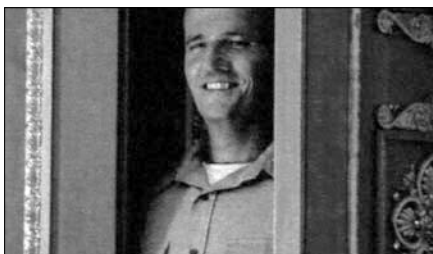
After it becomes apparent that the emperor speaks English quite well and that the two men can converse without the intercession of a third party, MacArthur, appar-



The Sun: the dismissed interpreter spies upon Hirohito's encounter with General MacArthur

ently in order to run some errand, leaves Hirohito (while the emperor is in the middle of a sentence) alone in the large room where their meeting takes place. Although we have become aware of the dimensions of the room (owing to camera movements and tracking shots which do not – technically – complicate our understanding of spatial reference points), Sokurov's disoriented spaces come into play yet again: as Hirohito awaits the general's return, we are convinced, just as the emperor is, that he is alone in the room, and that no one is watching him. Hirohito even allows himself a little dance under the bemused eye of MacArthur, who observes him through the half-open door. Judging by traditional, received Western rules of cinematic 'suture' and transparent continuity editing, our sense would be – assuming that MacArthur is, indeed, standing in the same door as the interpreter – that the door is located across the room, on Hirohito's left. We would locate this door away from Hirohito's gaze, which would legitimate the slightly undignified, or at least private, behaviour of the emperor, but it is unlikely that we would locate it *behind* him. So, unlike the emperor, we know that he is being observed, but can only intuit the direction from which MacArthur's gaze originates – and, as it turns out, wrongly so. Indeed, as MacArthur emerges from behind his guest, our perception of an apparently referential, 'logical,' oriented space is shattered once more. Whereas we thought we had identified with the gaze of the interpreter and MacArthur, the realisation that we had indeed not provokes a momentary disorienting effect, a fleeting sublime sensation of having lost one's footing for a second.⁵ This dislocated 'peeping tom' exercise, which features prominently in *Moloch* and *Taurus* as well, refers us back to the classics of early cinema – of a pre-Griffithian, pre-*découpage*, pre-continuity editing medium, where the rules had yet to be invented in order to be broken. History thus recoups the private history of a medium that belongs to the same century as the leaders depicted in the tetralogy. In view of the much more positive outcome and treatment to which Hirohito is submitted, the jumbling of cinematic perspective in *The Sun* has to do with the liberating potential of the cinematic medium, and the likewise empowering possibilities of an informed 'shift in point of view'. But this question obviously calls for various other, multilayered answers, replete with contradictions – not unlike Sokurov himself, or historical phenomena more broadly.

As the form of *The Sun* suggests, chances are that the historical truth behind the pardon granted to Hirohito lies somewhere in the middle of a hypothetical battlefield, instead of in *Emperor's* clear-cut conclusions (matched by the film's absence of any



The Sun: thinking he has been left alone, Hirohito is actually observed by MacArthur; but where does the gaze of the American general come from?



genuine *mise-en-scène*, other than the classic continuity editing, glossy and comfortable to follow, meant as capitalism's vehicle to lull the spectator and smuggle in its ideology). As for Sokurov's personal homage, if it stemmed at least partly from his gratitude to Hirohito for not sending his troops to invade the Russian Eastern front at the time when the Soviets were struggling most against the Nazis, it would be hard to believe that the Russian director saw the lack of initiative of the Japanese emperor to attack the Soviet Union as an indication of some deep-seated humanism. It was much rather a strategic move combined with a possible lack of the military wherewithal to actually engage in combat in the Soviet Union. The clear sympathies of Sokurov for Hirohito is of course a metonym for the idea, already broached in chapter six, according to which Russia's spiritual salvation and rebirth could be accomplished in the rapprochement with Japan, with its art, culture, discipline and hierarchical system, in order to revive

Russia's long repressed Oriental side and philosophy. Regardless of historic 'truth' and pragmatic considerations, or overt and covert sympathies and aspirations, *The Sun*'s fervour to depict its leader foremost as a human being, and his country's plight as a universal (but never undifferentiated) predicament definitely constitutes one of Sokurov's most vibrant accolades.

III

Beyond thematic implications and cross-cultural entanglements, beyond the formal play with gaze and spatial representation (a sort of codified laboratory from which Hirohito, led by love, will find the exit), how else does Sokurov's film confront us with its 'third' approach to the historical genre? *The Sun* proposes a new approach to temporality: what difference can we conceive between the day of *Moloch*'s action and the several months of *Taurus* and *The Sun*? All these films seem articulated around the same depiction of 'dead time', of this banal *emploi du temps* about which Jameson writes. But the difference is that while there was something definitively morbid about the hours of Hitler and Lenin, in *The Sun*, Sokurov seems to imbue every action – Hirohito eating, Hirohito being slowly dressed by a servant, Hirohito looking at a photo album or writing a *haiku* – with an important, meaningful, indeed sacred quality. It is ultimately the difference between cultures that have grown detached from the ritualistic quality of everyday actions (such as consuming meals) and that insular culture that has managed to preserve it, in spite of all. 'Everything matters: it is a panorama, a fresco [...] The most serious issues are composed of the simplest things' (Sokurov, in Arkus 2005: 145).

The Sun thus deviates from the theme of power, which seemed to be central to the tetralogy. Instead it touches upon what, according to Sokurov, is the real element connecting the four films of the cycle: 'For me, it is very clear that there is no devil. There is God, and there are human beings. And there is no lower limit to which a man could abase himself. Why? That is another question. And why do we allow it? That's yet another one' (2005: 146). In other words, to what extent is one willing to sell – or on the contrary, not to sell – one's soul. This question will resonate and find its logical completion in the fourth volume of the tetralogy: an adaptation of the legend of Faust. In the meantime, Hirohito opts for the second choice – life over power, soul over damnation. And, fortunately for him, he will not have to pay the high price of defeat, as is underlined in the film's final sentence: the official who reads the speech of capitulation and relinquishing of his divine status by the Emperor on his behalf commits ritual *hara-kiri* shortly thereafter. The great man's 'greatness' is thus doubly sacked: for losing the war, and for refusing to pay the ultimate price for it. This could be a tale of humiliation, were it not Sokurov's conviction that human life matters more than even the most important principle, because it can, as in the Goethe text, all be redeemed by Love. After the emperor has been informed of the official's suicide, the empress (Kaori Momoi) takes him by the hand and leads him to be reunited with their son. A finale, among the most discreetly sublime cinema has offered us in recent years, and which, courtesy of brilliant (although apparently

clumsy) editing, produces, yet again, an interstice, an *entre-deux*, between continuity editing mistake and doubling of the 'magical' moment, offering a return to certain practices of early cinema (the repeated actions of Edwin Porter), which may allude to a certain *enfance de l'art* and the not yet jaded eyes of the cinematic spectator before this miraculous trick. In so doing, Sokurov no less than opens the medium for a new, formally adventurous century of cinema.

The end justifies and enlarges the film, as Sokurov states: 'In the end, the most important [aspect] to me, and that's the reason why I do each one of my films, is its *denouement*. And I build my films like an inverted pyramid. Because the end must be open, wide, full of meanings. The beginning is narrow; and the end – full of meanings, of openings' (in Szaniawski 2006). In this sense, the film reaches its goal perfectly, with its focus on a face, the face of the empress, which is no more, no less, than a human face. But it also opens up and comprehends the sorrow and grief of historical (ir)responsibility through its magnificent final shot: the ravaged city, seen from above, under a blinding and majestic white sun. *The Sun*, after projecting us into the Sokurovian 'other life', in the end brings us back, properly troubled, having faced this curious act of historical iconoclasm that praises and affirms life and man before all. It is a form of light we can watch for two hours, and beyond, without ever burning our eyes.

While the tetralogy had yet to come to a close, with this film Sokurov completed, at least provisionally, another cycle: his own cinematic archipelago dedicated to the culture of Japan he so admires, with *The Sun* standing as its main island. Much as he saw Japan as greater than the sum of its internal subcultures and ethnic groups, so does this unit resonate with his body of work as a whole – growing, island by island, at times vastly different, at times very much alike, all united in one powerful and autonomous artistic voice. And yet, no man is an island, and Sokurov's desire to promote himself as an insular, unique figure, both in his thinking and in his work, is contradicted by the many arrangements and obligatory associations that cinematic production entails. His subsequent feature film, *Alexandra*, would capture this paradoxical stance yet again, with its highly personal story of an old woman journeying into an unknown and potentially hostile land, which is also one of Sokurov's most paradoxically overt endorsements of Russia's imperialist politics.

Notes

- 1 Kojima was credited as international project coordinator on *The Sun*. See the long, excellent interview of Sokurov conducted by Lyubov Arkus (2005).
- 2 Sokurov related this inner strength and discipline to a remark Kojima once made to him: 'In Russia, the ocean is inside, and in Japan – it is all around us.' The image, of course, was not to be taken literally, but as a metaphor for two very different cultural approaches to rigour, concentration, and rationality. These, Sokurov thought, were embodied in their most pure form in Japanese culture, as opposed to Russian prodigality and sense of excess, the latter being connected to the apparently boundless limits of its territory, as opposed to Japan's insular mentality (Arkus 2005: 137). There is little question that Sokurov, with his

intense, ascetic work ethos and his frequent use of the trope of the island, would be delighted by this shared dimension in his work with Japanese professionals.

- 3 Even if the delivery is calm and Sokurov's voice almost blank, we can feel, here, the depth of his sympathies for Japan.
- 4 The recent (and wildly under-documented) events at Fukushima, and their as of yet unresolved dramatic consequences, may soon give a substantial part of the world a taste of the consequences of nuclear power gone out of control.
- 5 The result is twofold. On the one hand, as viewers in the theatre, we cannot know whether we identify with MacArthur or not; on the other hand, we are obviously sharing in his 'scopic' impulse and voyeuristic act of watching the emperor in the very intimacy of his behaviour when he thinks he is alone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alexandra: The Return to Neverwas and the Ambiguity of Romance

Through 2005, Alexander Sokurov followed Mstislav Rostropovich (1927–2007) and Galina Vishnevskaya (1926–2012) for *Elegy of Life*, a documentary commissioned by the cellist to celebrate the couple's 50th anniversary and their contributions, past and present, to the world of classical music.¹ Through their extraordinary life stories, they are presented as musical royalty of sorts – a metaphor Sokurov uses in his customary voice-over narration when he refers to Vishnevskaya as a 'Czarina', and one that is later reiterated in visual terms, through the couple's palatial Moscow house, carefully restored from small, run-down Soviet units to its pre-revolutionary splendour. But the most overt illustration of this concept of 'royalty' transpires in the dinner for the couple's golden jubilee, at the Metropol hotel in Moscow. In a huge gala room, they sit at a table with queens (of Spain), dukes (of Luxembourg), princesses (of the Netherlands), and former heads of states and their spouses (Boris Yeltsin, Bernadette Chirac), while servers (one per guest) dressed in eighteenth century livery tend to this aristocratic menagerie.

Boris Yeltsin and Galina Vishnevskaya during Rostropovich's and Vishnevskaya's golden jubilee (*Elegy of Life*)



The kitsch of it all seems to escape Sokurov, who seemingly wallows with relish in the kinship of the 'greats' of this world and equates them with his celebrated elderly – yet hardly diminished – subjects. Rather than smelling the pretences of a sycophant catering to the needs of a work of commission, one can intuit that Sokurov's attitude is sincere, as his allegiance to pre-revolutionary Russia might indeed suggest. However, there is something awkward in this otherwise remarkable documentary, the celebratory tone of which Sokurov seems to be unequipped for. One feels a bit embarrassed by the passages commiserating with Vishnevskaya and Rostropovich's past hardships. To be sure, there is Vishnevskaya's experience of the Leningrad blockade, and the tragic tale of the loss of her firstborn infant son during that dark period.² Then there are the many years spent by the couple in exile, in the company of the Solzhenitsyns. But the two narratives – present splendour and past suffering – seem ill-fitting. The general facture of the documentary – a combination of professional video capture (four cameramen worked on the shoot) with extremely amateur-looking, home-made editing effects, compiled in a whimsically jumbled temporal structure (the only truly Sokurovian trait here, aside from the hybridity of the finished film) – only reinforces this ambiguous, somewhat contradictory feeling of a coexistence of two alien worlds. For all of Sokurov's efforts, it is hard to sympathise with the 'plight' of stateless yet stately millionaires.³

Yet none of this diminishes, in any sense, the charisma of the protagonists, or the loftiness of their various humanitarian enterprises and foundations – which the film advertises, however discreetly. Rostropovich appears as the joyful and life-loving avuncular virtuoso, intensely sympathetic and keen on jocular anecdotes; while Vishnevskaya, all seriousness, impresses with her brooding yet profoundly respect-inspiring composure. Through the longevity and experience of its main subjects, the documentary covers a wide range of themes dear to Sokurov: history (especially World War II), great art (Shostakovich and Prokofiev were mentors of Rostropovich, and commended his unique talent), and notions of blood-ties and genealogy are all investigated here.

During an interview, Rostropovich elaborates on a variety of fascinating networks of influence between various composers, based on their personal tastes, likes and dislikes.⁴ This, in turn, leads to the important notion of transmission – the love of art communicated to listeners, but also to performers, as in Vishnevskaya's school for lyrical singers. This desire to transmit, or the will to a compelling and lasting legacy, is of course at the heart of the documentary's enterprise, but also Sokurov's life as a whole, so that the film allegorises its author's own pursuits. This inflexible path to artistic verity, Sokurov seems to suggest, must be undertaken coterminously with the rigorous conduct of one's artistic ethos and career – and its potential jeopardy, real or imagined. And so death, lying unavoidably ahead, must be met with dignity. These sadder, darker elements actually accumulate as the film progresses; so much so that, by the end, the title of 'elegy' feels at last like an appropriate label. Again, the mellifluous music is met with more sombre undertones: we learn that Rostropovich's premiere concert is his final one. In hindsight, we realise that he must have known that he was afflicted with stomach cancer, of which he would die in the spring of 2007 – less than two years after his final concert. This, no doubt, prompted the musician to ask Sokurov to direct the film.

The Russian director seizes the opportunity of the film to address more global issues. Metaphorically perhaps, Sokurov reflects on the no less tragic fate of a dying Europe, reviving the ideas he had already amply illustrated in *Russian Ark*. In his view, the attachment of Europeans to the great culture of the past (here, in the guise of music, with the Vienna concert hall as its temple) is what warrants the endurance of their civilisation. But as the concert ends, the director bids farewell to a land drifting away from Christianity and its glorious cultural past.⁵ The final section of *Elegy of Life*, centred on Vishnevskaya, evokes the trope of the dead child already mentioned, the unrealised potential (a theme prominent in Sokurov since his documentary *Maria – Peasant Elegy*), and includes sequences from the 1966 film *Katerina Izmailova* (*Катерина Измайлова*, directed by Mikhail Shapiro, based on Shostakovich's opera *Lady MacBeth of Mtsensk*). In the latter, the titular character played by Vishnevskaya throws herself with a rival and drowns with her in the tormented and murky waters of the sea, which Sokurov endows, in typical fashion, with a metaphorical quality having to do with history and fate.

By the end of the film, destiny becomes the central trope, and it is Vishnevskaya, not Rostropovich, who emerges as a Sokurovian 'personality'. Indeed in her strength, charisma, perfectionism, and loneliness, Sokurov identifies far more with the darker, brooding lady than he does with her husband: he recognises a kindred soul. Much as with Cécile Zervoudacki and Gudrun Geyer, the encounter soon led to a feature film.

In the summer of 2006, Sokurov and the 80-year-old Vishnevskaya travelled to the heat of the war-torn Chechnya for the purposes of their film. In *Alexandra*, Sokurov yields his most accessible work, classic and legible in form, and narratively simple: Alexandra Nikolaevna (Alexander Nikolaevich Sokurov's feminine alter ego) is a woman who has seen it all. Following her husband's death, at the dusk of her long, hard, unhappy life, she takes an unlikely trip to a Russian military camp near Grozny, to visit her grandson Denis, a soldier – in an attempt to reconnect with a sense of family and long-repressed love. In the course of said visit, the dour yet nurturing woman discovers the everyday life of soldiers outside combat (as had already been the central topic of films such as *Spiritual Voices*, *Confession* and *Father and Son*).

The film is a simple story of familial love and friendship, set against the backdrop of war and suffering. Yet for all its simplicity, *Alexandra* is riddled with paradox: atypical for Sokurov in its formal conventionality, it is still a most intensely personal effort in its thematic preoccupations. And, in spite of its narrative straightforwardness, it is also one of the director's most ambiguous films, at least as far as its political message is concerned. In this project, much as in *Father and Son*, Sokurov combines the fairy tale/blood ties dimension expressed in *Mother and Son* with the historic intricacies of the tetralogy, joining the warmth and immediacy of human emotions with a potent historic narrative, all embedded in myth and bathed in the ambiguity of Romance. Therefore Alexandra is much more than just an old woman, or the director's alter ego in search of an ever-elusive happiness. The highly significant choice of casting Vishnevskaya for the role, and using her as an emblem for Russia, would presage, again, Sokurov's problematic nationalistic agenda.

The twofold project of this chapter, then, will be, on the one hand, to see how Sokurov identifies with his protagonist on her quest for love and home; on the other hand, it will investigate how Sokurov produced a deeply compromised film at precisely this moment – both after such a run of festival successes, and of course within the political context of modern day Russia. This will lead to the question: could Sokurov in some sense be conspiring with the Putin administration to advance his position within the Russian arts – and ultimately to give himself more freedom with his future project(s)?

I

First and foremost, *Alexandra* tells the story of a nostalgic, lonely and restless soul, yearning for a place to finally find love and peace. The very opening of the film combines the notion of return with a never before visited destination: a return to ‘neverwas’. Indeed, the war-torn country to which the old and wise Russian woman travels reminds one unmistakably of the Tajik-Afghan border of *Spiritual Voices* – this inhospitable land deflecting the idea of a return, yet belied by the fact that Sokurov went there twice in 1994. He, the lonely, restless, nostalgic soul, did so in order to complete his documentary, of course, but also to complete a spiritual journey alongside the military men of the border station, a no-man’s-land on the edge of danger and death, plunged in a profoundly exhausting, nervous sense of boredom and solitude.⁶

All these affects are present in *Alexandra*: foremost the heat, weighing on the semi-arid and hilly landscape, nearly identical to the Tajik-Afghan locale. Reprised, also, are run-down or destroyed buildings, the use of sepia filters, and the rough, masculine presence of the military. The gaze cast by the soldiers upon the ‘intruder’ are almost identical in the documentary and the fiction film, with their hounded or despondent countenances. In this barren realm, Sokurov finds an ideal locale for the singular loneliness of the Russian soul, ever lost and ever probing borders, to explore aimlessly, under the scorching sun or in nocturnal perambulations, thrown into an alien, rough, hostile yet oddly beautiful land. It is a very Sokurovian gesture indeed, to find the concept of return reach its full potential in a place to which one never went – a place of no home, and no return – yet one also associated with a sense of homeliness, memory and blood-ties.



Young Russian soldiers, between documentary (*Spiritual Voices*) and fiction (*Alexandra*)

So it is that through his fictionalised character, the director returns to a situation he knew, both as a child (growing up on Polish and later Turkmen military bases, familiar with the world of masculine military discipline) and as an adult (on the long and difficult shoots of two of his longest documentaries). This is the closest to home Alexander Sokurov could ever get, in the military environment he grew up in, the quintessential 'return home' thwarted for him by the flooding of his birthplace, and realised only through the filmic manifestation of his heroine. Alexandra's visit, unsurprisingly, ends in inconclusive, imperfect, yet poignant interactions as, after three days spent at the military camp, the old woman must return to her 'real' home. As she does, we share in her feeling of forlornness and loneliness – as this proverbial *babushka*, a staple of Russian culture, stoically pulls her cart among the rubble and tanks, a world taxed by war and destruction, yet, again, strangely home-like. In the end, both the dreamed, fabled, exotic locale of the south and the actual, northerly Russian home appear as unreachable: as long as they live, there is no way home, for the eternal outsiders, the constantly wandering bearers of the Russian soul.

II

The film's quasi-allegorical, narrative simplicity may be due to Yuri Arabov's absence from the project. As a result, elements of the bizarre and the grotesque that usually infuse the fabric of Sokurov's oeuvre are all but gone, in spite of the darkness implied by the film's background. This is no simplistic story, however, and the implications, political and otherwise, are manifold. This poignant film is located in a clear, referential and contemporaneous setting, and resonates with the many complex echoes of war and geopolitics. The many instances in which soldiers, intrigued or starved for the reassuring contact with a real Russian grandmother, eavesdrop or peep at the elderly intruder sends us back to the regime of gaze observed in the tetralogy of power. Still, the tone of this film is of a less cold, distant nature: Alexandra is no grotesque dictator, for all of her charisma, and looks upon as much as she is looked at, so that there seems to be a genuine reciprocity here, a message of human equality and just distribution of the gaze among all parties.

Fascinated and intrigued by the elderly visitor, the soldiers suddenly open up, shedding the inflexibility of military protocol and embracing this opportunity to engage with a figure who is at once a respectable grandmother and a Russian female figure – a rare occurrence for these recruits. As a result, the young men lapse into playful banter and ask for treats and cigarettes, in addition to bringing out their long-shelved gentlemanly attentions, which, in their clumsy efforts, come across as touching. When they prepare a dinner for Alexandra, they draw visible pleasure and fascination from the exotic and incongruous spectacle they have staged themselves. As their unlikely 'actress' fulfils her quaint part, the parody of domesticity falls directly between *Moloch's* and *Taurus's* meal scenes and *Mother and Son's* filial affection.

So it is that *Alexandra* inhabits an ambiguous position in the geography (or body) of Sokurov's filmic universe. It can, by virtue of its apparent transparency, appear as an innocuous story of love, solitude, and personal suffering; but it can also be yet another

Alexandra: soldiers arrange
a meal for their elderly
visitor – a parody of
domesticity



reflection on the nature of power, violence, and the holocausts of history. This second dimension is never clearly articulated, remaining in the background. In spite of its apparent historical referentiality, the film never historicises, never unmasks. To the contrary, in fact, *Alexandra* may indeed simply be read as another fairy tale, or worse, a myth of problematic ideological implications: from 'neverwas' stems the tension of a fiction film, a fabrication, inscribed in a very real and topical historic frame.

The combination of fantasy and reality, of documentary and 'fiction' have consistently proved staples of Sokurov's cinema, with their boundaries characteristically blurred. The problem of such dualism arises when these very boundaries become undistinguishable, to the point that we reach the degree zero of irony – or, as would be the case, the highest degree of irony (the film, as in the dinner scene just evoked, is not without its humorous moments). Conversely, the apparent political 'degree zero' of the film bespeaks a potent ideological charge, all the more potent as it is fully ambiguous and reversible. One can absolutely not tell what is meant here to be taken at face value, and what is not: *neverwas* becomes 'always is', but the exact nature of the verb remains shrouded in indeterminacy – the fairy tale encroaching upon the territory of *realpolitik*.

Indeed, while *Alexandra* herself serves as a figure for Mother Russia, so does the shadow of Putin's politics play the role of some dark Id inhabiting the film's unconscious. In this sense, the absent presence of Russia's imperialist grip on Chechnya is felt everywhere in the film, however parapractically. It goes a long way to show how much power Vladimir Putin has, that even an independent and artistically uncompromising artist such as Sokurov be influenced by the new Russia and its display of power.

Perhaps in order to escape the outright damning compromise with this power, Sokurov devised a doubling of the narrative structure for his film whereby the microcosmic and the macrocosmic are technically set in dialogue with one another in *Alexandra* – in such a way as to generate a constant ambiguity and avoid outright aporia. This obvious poetics of personal and global suffering, serves an almost strictly structural, mythical role of dissimulation of inherent contradictions, much in line with Claude Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the stories of St. John the Baptist and Jesus Christ: the double narrative serving to conceal the impossibility central to the mythical text. Sokurov operates in a similar fashion with this film, using *Alexandra's* and the soldier's personal woes as a way to both align them with the Chechen population but also to obfuscate



Galina Vishnevskaya as Alexandra: Sokurov's alter ego, endowed with the opera singer's charisma

the fact that insufficient weight is given to the latter in view of the former. Focusing primarily on his protagonist and alter ego, the director endows her with a legendary, mythical sheen: a strong, still seductive woman and protective grandmother, old and close to death, yet immortal – one of Sokurov's 'eternal people'. The opening, in this regard, is foundational, and speaks to the intertwining of Sokurov's documentary and fictional practices: in spite of her modest clothing and grey hair, Alexandra appears as the imposing, stately, charismatic, imperious *czarina* we saw in *Elegy of Life*. At once queen and simple woman, a paragon of the traditionally feminine virtues of Russian resilience, dignity, and strength, the character is magnified by a camera movement and the wind blowing behind her – all worthy of a Sergio Leone operatic western.

The opera is present likewise: in the background, low in the mix, we hear, as though in the form of a distant memory (harking back both to the times of youth and Stalinism), a snippet from an aria sung by the young Vishnevskaya.⁷ Double in nature, therefore, with both real-life former prima donna and anonymous fictional *babushka*, Vishnevskaya's Alexandra embodies, in many ways, Roland Barthes' definition of the myth and its implications vis-à-vis bourgeois consciousness: she connotes rather than actually denotes, and as such one can never take her as a real, wholly believable character. She is an archetype of uncertain, compounded genealogies, a fantasy entertained by her maker and by many viewers, both in Russia and abroad. Yet at the same time, viewed from the 'fairy tale' perspective, in her severe yet loving touch, she can be envisaged as a secular substitute for the Virgin Mary – something contemporary Russia might require, but has no real room for, given the powerful role of the Orthodox Church and distrust for the failed secularised models of the past, as well as the failing substitutes proposed by Putin's 'democracy', and its stifling grip on more liberal models.

Beyond the moment of amazement at the archetypal apparition, however, Alexandra becomes a dispenser of good popular wisdom, and thus the film moves from archetype to stereotype. Some of these instances are manifest: Alexandra's teachings; the comments by the soldiers about the greed of modern Russian women as 'glued to TV and thinking only about money'; or the comments by Malika, a local Chechen merchant, that 'men are enemies, women are sisters'.⁸ Others are covert, giving Sokurov full lease to recreate a mythology of the military locale and figure in the process. He composes a strange, spatially puzzling camp wherein anonymous tents and pathways

made of logs seem to compose a slightly confusing, but never threatening maze – something to which the flattening qualities of the image contribute: Sokurov represents a world that is at once hyper-realistic and yet slightly off. To the customary sepia hues, the director adds a subtle flatness to the image – not quite blatantly distorted, turning the camp into a reassuringly shallow, oddly hospitable realm. While the elderly visitor has a difficult time locating her grandson's tent – they all resemble each other and are connected by generic networks of wooden beams – she can always count on a soldier or officer's guidance to find her way in this phantasmatic Sokurovian recreation of a masculine womb, or of paradise lost. There, alas, ends the experimental aspect of the film. While no one ever doubted that Sokurov was perfectly capable of making a traditional, continuity-editing styled film, one should by all means adopt suspicion at its emergence in the fraught context of the Chechen war – yet unresolved at the time of the shoot.⁹

In this context, and as though to move the viewer's attention away from the film's experimental aspects, the director depicts a series of moving characters: various types of soldiers, from the young recruit and mercenary to the strong, noble and square-jawed officer, all won over by the imposing dignity of their unlikely elderly visitor. This womb-like microcosm (in line with the ideas of flatness and 'invagination' laid out in the introduction and developed in chapter twelve), set in the middle of a war-torn country, seems to keep outside dangers at bay. Violence is sublimated: Denis's body is covered in bruises and scratches which appear as stigmata of sorts. The analogy is nowhere clearer than in an overtly Christological, overhead shot of his naked feet (see illustration in chapter twelve). Filth is elided: it is referred to lovingly as a 'strong smell', and while Alexandra constantly encourages the soldiers to take showers, the somewhat dismal conditions of the base are never viewed as sordid; the soldiers are imbued with a meek, defenceless, sympathetic quality, their grimy bodies, particularly at rest, comparable with those of innocent children taking a nap after having played in the dirt.

To be sure, these 'angels' are thrown into a strange land, filled with violence and violent death, which they do not quite comprehend. The all-knowing yet inquisitive Alexandra, constantly on her quest to understand and discover, must extend herself to this outside world, under the pretext of purchasing some goods for the young recruits,



Alexandra: soldiers are often portrayed as children in Sokurov's cinema

but truly to establish a dialogue between the invaders and the local civilians. At the local market she meets the uncouth, rebellious Chechen youth, viewed with a critical eye by the wise and good Malika, whose *weltschmerz* is the exact analogue to Alexandra's. But as they befriend one another, the two elderly women discover that in spite of their similarly difficult lives, they differ in their approach to family and the will to travel, Malika lacking the Russian soul's existential wanderlust, perhaps because she knows that 'her own' people will never let her down.

As Alexandra elects to return to the camp, she is introduced to Ilya, the slender and wide-eyed Chechen young man who will escort her back, and who will receive, in the process, her teachings about the necessity of wisdom.¹¹ Sokurov's talent as a screenwriter (and also as a diplomat, a possibly unexpected quality in this famously difficult and outspoken man, yet which he uses in a most personal and overall rousing successful way) is to deflect the potential for offensiveness in Alexandra's somewhat patronising imparted wisdom – the occupier telling the occupied what and how to think – by virtue of embedding it within the experience of another woman, set in a very different locale, but also by making it sound, in Alexandra's stern but wise voice, as a genuinely benevolent piece of advice for Ilya and the Chechen youth as a whole. The problematic dimension and implications of her statement to Ilya reflect the complexity and rather insoluble set of questions at the core of the Chechen war, but also obfuscate the generally negative and ruthless politics of Yeltsin's and Putin's administration in this long and generally under-reported war.¹²

The Chechen wars finally (or at least officially) came to an end in 2009, with a renewed pledge of fidelity to the Russian Federation from president Ramzan Kadyrov (b. 1976), a former anti-Russian rebel himself, alleged psychopath, and the son of Chechnya's former president Akhmad Kadyrov (1951-2004). Yet in spite of seeing the rebuilding of its capital city and the improvement of its country's economy, Kadyrov's regime, in line with many dictatorships of the Middle-East and Central Asia (sponsored more or less covertly by either the U.S., Europe, China, the wealthy (and theocratic) Republics of the Middle-East, or Russia – or even a mix of all five), remains characterised by corruption and sustained bloodshed. In short, the power of nepotism ultimately defeated the upstart aspirations of the Islamist 'terrorists' – evil pitted against evil.



'Ask God for intelligence'
– Alexandra's advice to
Chechnya's youth

By 2006, when Sokurov was shooting his film, the situation had not yet been resolved, and while the victory of the Russian troops was already quite certain, it is hard to discern which 'evil' the intelligence promoted by Alexandra should be more actively used to fight against, and what sorts of compromises should derive thereof. As Ilya walks Alexandra to the camp, she barely thanks him, bringing the idle soldiers the packs of cigarettes and cookies she has promised them, while leaving Ilya, this 'other', to his own devices. The *mise-en-scène*, however, as so often in Sokurov, provides nuance: Ilya is shown on repeated occasions isolated in the shot, a noble symbol of freedom and loneliness moving into the distance, a most sympathetic young man with an uncertain (and therefore still open) fate.

The problem, it seems, in interpreting the real message behind Alexandra's words of wisdom and Sokurov's *mise-en-scène*, is that the film never makes a real point of exposing its mythical dimension. While it does not attempt, in the filmmakers' own words, to be a realistic account of the war – in the first place, such a visit to a military camp by a simple civilian would be completely out of the question – it certainly boasts the most transparent, 'televisual' style of *mise-en-scène* and editing in his corpus, and is very 'realistic' in every other aspect: shot on location, with real props and costumes, with a quasi-documentary, crisp soundtrack, miles from Sokurov's usual play with soundscapes and sonic filters. Yet, upon further scrutiny, this apparent attempt at transparency, rather than strengthening the film's realistic fabric, is somewhat deconstructed by those very moments when it does, indeed, lapse into outright documentary detail, showing real privates preparing their weapons, or the incongruous, yet real image of a grandmother handling a machine gun or sitting inside a tank. This defamiliarising effect, however, must be lost on most viewers, and so, by and large, *Alexandra* comes across as a believable account of the situation in Chechnya, at least for a gullible or misinformed Russian and Western audience. One could argue that this audience, limited in number and level of education by Sokurov's reputation as a difficult art-house auteur, does possess the necessary tools to decode and appropriate the film's text in a critical, writerly rather than readerly fashion. But, at least in Russia, Sokurov has grown, during the Putin years, from the position of maverick auteur to a genuine moral authority, and the broadcasting of a selection of his films has multiplied on national channels, giving a film like *Alexandra* a much broader potential domestic audience.¹³

III

So it is that Sokurov's status and reputation could have served to smuggle spurious ideology through the film's televisual, transparent form, so atypical for the director, rather than to offer a 'digestible', easy introduction to his cinema (even if we accept the hypothesis whereby Sokurov deliberately made a film that would neither compromise his artistic expression nor stray too far away from the 'official' discourse desired by the Russian government – the film's main sponsor, after all). By making the regime of characters' 'peeping' a friendlier, more 'democratic' one by virtue of Alexandra's returned gazes, and by generally obeying the 180-degree rule, Sokurov offers a narrative tacitly inclined towards the politics of Putin. The film's triumph and moral pitfall,

then, is that it can easily deflect any head-on criticism of subservience to the regime. For instance, the view according to which *Alexandra* is about the war, certainly propagated in reviews of the film (especially in France) at the time of its release, has been challenged by Sokurov authority (and long-time expert of Soviet and Russian cinema) François Albera.¹⁴ Accurately deriding the critics' opinion that the film addresses the war as superficial and overly 'immediate', for Albera the film deconstructs Russian imperialism, through the introduction of the heterogeneous element that is the old Alexandra into the military milieu: a mother, grandmother, woman – an outright anomaly by all means in this otherwise homogeneous male environment, thrown off and disrupted in its rituals and values through this presence. In her bonding with Chechen women, Albera goes on, Alexandra also proposes a better model, that of empathy. Surely Albera's view weakens the assessment of the film as covertly endorsing an imperialist agenda, but it remains overly utopian and incomplete.

While *Alexandra* seems to offer such a fair assessment of the situation in Chechnya on the surface, by introducing this unusual elderly feminine presence into the military and somewhat acknowledging the local population's hardships, it still is insufficiently fantastical to be divorced from its environment, closer, as I argued, to the Barthesian mythologie than a fairy tale – precisely by turning the 'myth', the lie, into a seemingly natural phenomenon, enhanced here by the quasi-documentary dimension of the film. As a consequence, the presence of the Russian troops in Chechnya appears as a possibly problematic, certainly complex, and definitely inescapable phenomenon, almost as though imparted by Fate, or the hand of God. Naturally, nothing is all black or white in Sokurov's film, and one commends, as usual, the subtlety with which he avoids any form of Manichean treatment. But the tone of the film seems, again, to posit the inevitability of the situation in the region, in need of stability, ideologically reflective of the Russia of the Yeltsin years and the first Chechen war, thus reinstating and legitimating the long tradition of Russian imperialist ethos.

However unpalatable the assessment may be to all advocates of Sokurov, and to the director himself, no doubt, *Alexandra* covertly partakes of the great project orchestrated in the Russian media to subdue the idea of unfairness of the invasion of Chechnya, or of war having disrupted and shattered the lives of an entire population for the past ten years. This is not to say, however, that Sokurov would in any way defend the terrible atrocities which befell the Chechen population, which Russian soldiers sometimes candidly admitted to committing, and which were never genuinely addressed by the Russian authorities, whether in legal terms or in the popular arts. In going on the field where the trauma was still happening, Sokurov did at the very least contribute to the visibility of the war in Chechnya. This participative, physical undertaking may be ideologically fraught, is still far more commendable than the indifference with which the world witnessed the conflict, or found out about the suspicious deaths of journalists trying to challenge Russia's official versions, or the exoneration of war criminals, as in the Budanov case. The question, of course, remains whether this was Sokurov's primary intention, or an excuse for the problematic ideology his film otherwise intimates: while a score of films were released over the years in Russia about the issue of the war, these primarily focused on patronising the local civilian

populations, while emphasising the hardships of the Russian soldiers, these new 'prisoners of the Caucasus,' confronted with a mad, incomprehensible situation (as in Andrey Konchalovsky's *House of Fools*, (Дом дураков; *Dom Durakov*, 2002). These films de-emphasised the responsibility of the Russian side (Vasily Todorovsky's *My Step-Brother Frankenstein* (Мой сводный брат Франкенштейн; *Moy svodny brat Frankenshtein*, 2004) a case in point) or, worse still, implied, however subtly, that the war itself was the product of the Chechens' foolishness. Sadly enough, this is the case of *Alexandra* as well.

IV

The main question, to which a clear and definite answer cannot be given, is this: is Sokurov, in spite of his professed hatred of violence and war, and his distaste for the brutal expression of imperialism represented by Putin, endorsing the grip of Russian culture over the Islamic aspirations in Chechnya? This is not inconsistent, after all, with Sokurov's oft-repeated and even greater concern with revolutions, and any form of deep civilisational shift. And surely the 'greatness' of Russian culture and civilisation (the land of Pushkin, Tchaikovsky and Repin) could not yield to the uncertain project of independence of jihadist upstarts. The next question we may ask then, immediately connected to this, is: is Russia drifting away from a just path under Putin, or is Putin merely the boorish, martial and public expression of an age-old Russian political ethos, shared by Sokurov?

We know, by this point, that nothing can be strictly straightforward with Sokurov. As such, the reason for the film's veiling of its ideological device under pretences of transparency speaks to his constantly complex and contradictory drives, some laudable, some possibly less so. Myth, as we know, always has its darker implications: here it embraces a certain imperialist discourse, while eschewing the notion of collective Russian guilt. If Sokurov was fiercely critical of the irresponsibility of those in power in interviews connected with the releases of *Moloch* and *Taurus*, he seems to defend the Russian presence in Chechnya. In doing so, however ambiguously, he does at least partly endorse Putin's and Russia's agenda in crushing 'independence drives', mostly by showing the plight, exhaustion, and suffering of the young soldiers, through their social predicament, existential solitude, and uncertain futures (beyond their military commitment). Indeed, few directors are more familiar with the everyday lives of soldiers, or can better speak to their simple humanity. But the intrinsically violent aspect of the military can hardly be elided, and as a consequence of his protracted treatment of the military side, Sokurov leaves little voice to the local civilian populations. Some of the unruly young soldiers, even if they offer help to Alexandra, carry with them the mysterious smile and potential threat inherent to any 'barbarian'. Early in the film, a mysterious, unsettling snippet of a scene shows two Russian soldiers lured by an inviting pair of hands, sticking from behind a rusty gate. Intrigued, the soldiers come closer, before being suddenly dragged into a deadly trap. Metaphorical as though it may be, it is not by chance that the beginning of the film carries this sense of lurking danger, and continues the Western Imperialist vilification of Muslims as a

dangerous, constantly plotting and unpredictable Other, which at best must be kept in check. The friendly 'others', on the other hand, such as the older women met at the market, represent the positive value of solidarity, and announce a friendly cohabitation and commerce between Russians and Chechens. The latter will get by and will be fine, we are assured, thanks to their wholesome ancestral values of family and mutual aid. But at what cost? Even by conservative accounts, a third of the Chechen population has been displaced, gone missing or perished during the lengthy years of the conflict.

It must be repeated, Sokurov does not negate the disturbing potential for violence of the occupying force. He questions the duality of the military as a compound of individual meek young men and a ruthless collective machine of destruction, and addresses the nature and pitfalls of unquestioningly fulfilled duty. The film does reveal the ruins of a town on fire, blazing far away in the landscape, which may further emphasise the horror of war and suffering of the Chechen populations. Yet with its accents of Smetana and Tchaikovsky, Andrey Sigle's score reinforces the romantic, legendary, definitely sentimentalist dimension of it all, and locates the real plight – the plight of the soul – on the Russian side, imbuing the images of ruins and burning land with a strange, remote, contemplative beauty. This beauty is, somewhat paradoxically, lost on the Russian recruits, trapped in the dull but secure recesses of the camp. In this sense, the film is probably much more an ersatz reproduction of Hollywood cinema than its author would like to think. And with his trademark disparity and hybridity repressed to a very significant degree, consciously or not, it does speak to the formal modes of capitalism as expressed in cinematic grammar (the transparent, quasi-invisible aesthetic regime of continuity editing), and its heavy baggage of ideological manipulation and surreptitious propaganda.

If Sokurov's own allegiance to Putin's politics remains ambiguous, what has emerged clearly, at this point, is the alignment of all powerful Imperialist nations (Russia and America specifically) in how they address the threat posed to their sovereignty by the dangerous and blood-thirsty 'other', or legitimate the colonialist project. This bespeaks the sobering assessment whereby, in an age of global capitalism, it has become nigh impossible, even to a filmmaker of the artistic power as Sokurov, to escape the culturally paternalistic models set forth by Hollywood, and smuggled in its typical stories and style. It is disheartening indeed to see how *Alexandra* does not fare much better, in this respect, than films such as *The Color Purple* (1985), *Amistad* (1997) or *The Last Samurai* (2003), not to mention recent films about the war in Iraq. In all these films, filled with maudlin sentiment to be found also in *Alexandra*, the viewer is given a narrative explaining the redeeming values of the good other, threatened by the corrupting influence of the evil other, and, first and foremost, the distinction between the good (in narratological terms, the hero or positive adjuvant, depending on which position the narrative assumes) and bad representative (the villain) of the Imperialist power (America and Russia here are synonyms). The final goal of said didactic explanation being to convince the viewer of the reasons why one should ultimately trust the positive character in order to miraculously resolve all political contradictions, and promise a reconciliation between the various (and variously noble) entities of good will and faith. *Alexandra* does not operate much differently, although it remains more

subtle and open-ended than the Hollywood fare I just mentioned. The way, however, in which the film imposes a passive and deterministic conception of Russia's political action in Chechnya, reinforced by its paternalist cultural subtext, is completely at odds with the usual chance-inflicted and far more complex workings of history found in Sokurov's thought, as developed, for instance, in the tetralogy. Instead, *Alexandra* precludes political critique and substitutes it with a moral commentary, which is, furthermore, a moral valorisation of the (good) Russian soul. This is not entirely surprising, coming from Sokurov and knowing of his beliefs, but it is ill-fitting given the context of the film.¹⁵

What may redeem Sokurov, however, is precisely the accent he puts on the spiritual, and his pursuit of a humanistic ideal. In this sense, he might be articulating a discourse in absentia, thereby implying that the film's a-politicism is its starkest condemnation of politics (as a tool of power and capitalism), which can never solve properly the dramatic issues they have provoked: while he does not point to the uselessness or meaninglessness of the military enterprise or Russian imperialist ethos, the director certainly suggests that it will not solve anything from a perspective of the human soul. The soldiers live and die senseless, brutal existences in a sheer spiritual vacuum; for all her strength and wisdom, Alexandra cannot bring happiness to herself, let alone to others.

In the final dialogue between Alexandra and Denis, both characters divulge their deepest emotions, pouring out their grudges and feelings of unhappiness. The fundamental problem seems to reside in the lack of love dispensed between family members, starting with the cold authoritative father. But this term reinstates the nagging paternalistic subtext of the film, even if the patriarchal model might be exchanged for another one. Returning from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic, in the absence of a just Father figure, Sokurov seems to advocate an adult, intelligent exchange of love and care between nations – the elderly, stately mother Russia and the unruly Chechen child, tempted with fanaticism and straying from a path that may be neither right nor happy, but that *means* well. As Malika, the most sympathetic and understanding character in the film, states: 'All the opportunities in my life came from Russia.'¹⁶ Shortly thereafter, in the film's closing scene, Alexandra is walked to the train by her Chechen female friends (a young woman, Zulay, Ilya's mother, and Malika), where



Alexandra: the utopia of female bonding

they part on a moving note, clasping each other in an almost ritualistic circle of female bonding.

This final embrace would even match the height of kitsch and schmaltz in Hollywood drama, were this celebration of sisterhood and matriarchy not counteracted by the certainty that this model will not be realised, and that friends must part ways forever – as signified by the longing gaze of Alexandra in the distance, and Malika's sad refusal to look on and wave goodbye. These old women will most likely never meet again, and the fates they contemplate, for themselves and for the world surrounding them, are not of an uplifting nature. So it is that Sokurov's customary, sobering pessimism emerges: *in extremis*, yet mellowed by the film's overall affected humanistic treatment.

V

Returning to the motif of love and strong bonds between family members, it appears that Sokurov's choice to turn *Alexandra* into an unlikely romance between a grandmother and her grandson (to veer away from the far more habitual Russian Romance, namely the myth of a Caucasus which needs to be conquered in order to be freed from Barbarian dominance) was used not so much for its potential for immediacy in emotion, but for its less readily known side, namely its ambiguity. The latter should not be reduced to the obvious associations of love and death, of Eros and Thanatos, which have become such commonplace staples of the genre. Rather we must read the ambiguity as the undecidable border between affection and resentment, love and loathing, that characterise any human relation. In turn, if we accept to look at the latter, we can at least think of Sokurov's honest effort at refusing to cut out a fully black and white image of the romantic image of Russia's imperialist agenda, associated in this sense with a form of inevitable drive and desire (and, as mediated through Alexandra's and Denis's poignant interaction, the taboo of incest), as irresistible as it is problematic. Ambiguity, such a staple of richness in art cinema, is used here in fascinating and fascinatingly problematic ways.

The interpretation above will seem far-fetched to some. In order to find a common ground for both the detractors and proponents of the film, let us settle on the following: as Alexander Sokurov's sentimentalist opus, *Alexandra* is a beautifully crafted, moving film, simple and clear in form, and led by the spectacular presence of Galina Vishnevskaya. As an item of mild propaganda, it serves as an interesting expression of the mechanisms of co-option in capitalist Russia in a strange and unexpected dialogue with Hollywood models, both equally entangled, in ancillary fashion, with their respective governments and war machines, and both lost on the conscious, critical mind of the vast majority of their viewers.

In a similar conciliatory spirit, one could also say that Sokurov produced a work (with governmental funds) which congenially addressed his preoccupations and favoured themes and tropes (most clearly the spiritual condition of men and women and the world of the military), which simultaneously critiqued (however obliquely) and catered to Russia's political agenda, as it was pre-empting on the end of the war and initialising a period of symbolic 'reconciliation' with Chechnya.

It goes without saying that Sokurov restated his artistic and intellectual independence after *Alexandra's* release, against the questions of those who, however respectfully, suggested the inadmissible compromises the film might constitute. Yet this does not provide an answer to our final question: had Sokurov, in making *Alexandra* an item hospitable to Putin's politics, not made a tacit pact to realise his long-delayed grand oeuvre? What we know is that, after this highly acclaimed effort, the director would receive a staggering (by his own standards, and by those of any European art-house film) €8million, in large part from the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation under the auspices of Vladimir Putin, to produce his next feature, *Faust*, with which I close this exploration of the director's oeuvre. This fourth and final instalment in the tetralogy of power – the story of a man who sells his soul to the devil – would definitely enshrine Sokurov in the eyes of the West as a major figure of art cinema.

Notes

- 1 Rostropovich, arguably the most famous cellist of the twentieth century, is shown rehearsing Krzysztof Penderecki's latest sonata for cello, to premiere in Vienna, June 2005, under the direction of Seiji Ozawa. Vishnevskaya, an opera singer who had retired from performing in 1982, yet still a vibrant presence in the Russian musical scene through her school for lyrical singers, is shown at work with her students. Both musicians, although in their late seventies, appear as still very much active, in their unique and highly different talents, personalities and legacies, at what we inescapably perceive to be the twilight of their lives.
- 2 This theme foreshadows Sokurov's 2009 *Reading from the Book of Blockade*, a remarkable documentary in which inhabitants of St. Petersburg of all ages and professions, read passages from the famous collection compiled by Adamovich and Granin.
- 3 At one point, in a bizarre effort to elicit a sense of uprooted-ness with his central subjects, Sokurov displays Rostropovich's Monaco passport, explaining that the couple never accepted their Russian passports after the fall of communism. Clearly, anyone with a modicum of familiarity with European fiscal systems will have evacuated any romantic reasoning behind this choice.
- 4 In an interview conducted at his home, Rostropovich evokes his contacts with Prokofiev and Shostakovich. To the latter's love of Mahler, Rostropovich points out Prokofiev's *bon mot*: 'All musical students seem to suffer from a strange disease, these days – Mahleria!' Likewise, he underlines Benjamin Britten's greater love of Schubert than of Beethoven, and how the British composer was close to Shostakovich, while Prokofiev corresponded more, in his music, to Olivier Messiaen.
- 5 This taps into the pessimistic and apocalyptic mode that has defined Sokurov's films from the beginning, and evokes the finale of *Russian Ark*.
- 6 By Sokurovian standards, the film appears almost dull in terms of *mise-en-scène*. Its cinematography never resorts to distorting lenses and there are no protracted, purely contemplative shots. The fact that the film was shot digitally also lends an inescapable flatness to the image. The plot is almost traditional as well. All

this contributes to Alexander Sokurov's manifest attempt at traditional, commercial cinema (unsurprisingly the film was his most celebrated by the mainstream, middle-to-low-brow media, both in Russia and in the West), which of course renders its underlying message all the more suspicious.

- 7 The major part of the film was shot during the summer of 1994, but Sokurov returned to the military base and spent a few more days in the winter there, including New Year's Eve. The documentary seeps with the unadulterated love, respect, and affection borne by Sokurov for these young soldiers, and is tangible in its sympathy for their material predicament and existential condition. Yet the film also celebrates the philosophical potentials for the informed soul, and for time spent in a barren wasteland that is also the edge of a dangerous precipice – death lurking and poised to strike at the most unexpected moment.
- 8 The song heard sung by Vishnevskaya is 'У Рябины' (*U Ryabiny*), composed by Georgy Nosov, recorded in the late 1940s.
- 9 This echoes the yearning, in Sokurov, for a 'brotherhood of man' which I elaborate upon in chapter twelve.
- 10 For a fully documented insight into the Chechen war at odds with the official Russian propaganda, see Tony Wood, *Chechnya, The Case for Independence* (2007). Wood's theses are also brilliantly laid out in his earlier New Left Review post, *The Case for Chechnya* (2004). <http://newleftreview.org/A2533>
- 11 The most overt political statement in the film occurs when the old Alexandra is walked back to the camp by Ilya, who asks her, 'I know this does not depend on us, but please, give us back our freedom – we won't be able to hold like this forever.' She answers, 'Oh, my young boy, if everything was so simple. You know what an old Japanese woman told me once? What should one ask God for, first? Ask for intelligence. Strength does not lie in weapons.'
- 12 When it did not cost the lives of journalists, as in the case of Anna Politkovskaya's assassination.
- 13 However much Sokurov considers that his visibility on public networks remains still glaringly insufficient.
- 14 In Albera (2009), but also in a correspondence between Albera and myself.
- 15 I want to thank my friend the political philosopher John Pitseys, for his useful insight with respect to the parallels between paternalism in Hollywood films and *Alexandra*.
- 16 At the time of the film's release, the slogan throughout the country was: Россия – страна возможностей (*Rossiya – strana vozkhmonostey*); 'Russia, the land of opportunities.'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Faust: Sokurov Waltz

‘Den lieb ich, der Unmögliches begehrt’

– Goethe, *Faust II*, verse 7488¹

In 2011, Alexander Sokurov, hitherto accustomed to accolades and respect from the highbrow critical sphere, often selected in the most prestigious Western European art festivals, but rather absent from their lists of prizewinners, finally enjoyed consecration – and a modicum of public attention outside of Russia.² His *Faust*, winner of the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, is a free adaptation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s (1749–1832) eponymous book, and constitutes an achievement as massive and impressive as it is strange. Much as was the case for his Locarno triumph with *Lonely Voice of Man*, which served as the flag bearer of a resurgence of art cinema in *perestroika*-era Soviet Union, *Faust*’s anointing also brought with it political undertones, that made its relatively unexpected receipt of the Golden Lion much less strange than first meets the eye. The film, financed in great part with Russian government funds and under the auspices of Vladimir Putin (at the time *merely* the country’s prime minister, but always its unquestionable strong man), was meant by its backers to promote the rapprochement and dialogue between German and Russian cultures. Such a grand project, rife with nationalistic and political implications also closes Sokurov’s tetralogy of power, ironically highly entwined with the historical echoes of this ‘dialogue’ between the two cultures. In light of the above, the film does not only reflect some of the director’s most personal preoccupations: its narrative also mirrors the circumstances surrounding its pre-production.

Alexander Sokurov’s fourth and final instalment in the tetralogy of power tells the story of Heinrich Faust (played by Austrian actor Johannes Zeiler), an impoverished middle-aged scientist and scholar on a quest for absolute knowledge. Driven to pawn



Faust: following Valentin's funeral, Faust escorts Margarete through the woods, while Mauricius keeps the young woman's mother occupied

some of his belongings, he meets the local usurer, Mauricius Müller (portrayed by Derevo Theatre Troupe founder Anton Adasinsky), a mysterious and grotesque figure who seems to possess magical talents. Starving and depressed by the apparently unsolvable problems posed by the mysteries of the human soul, Faust asks his assistant, Wagner (Georg Friedrich), to provide him with a sleeping potion to kill himself. Instead, Mauricius, who pays Faust an impromptu visit, drinks up the potion and survives its lethal effects. From that moment on, the two men become inseparable, Faust constantly challenged by Mauricius and probing the usurer's mysterious knowledge in turn.

During one of their walks through the medieval town where most of the film's action takes place, Faust accidentally stabs Valentin Emmerich (Florian Brückner), a young soldier leading a dissolute life. Following the accident, he becomes fascinated with the beautiful Margarete (Isolda Dychauk), Valentin's younger sister, whom he first spots in a bath-house filled with women doing laundry, and escorts home following her brother's funeral. Through Mauricius's intercession, Faust manages to provide Margarete's mother (Antje Lewald) with money, but when he confesses to Margarete to having killed Valentin, it seems as though the young woman will be lost to him forever. Mauricius seizes this opportunity to offer Faust a night with the young and beautiful girl, in exchange for his soul – a contract the scholar must sign with his own blood. Following the fateful night, in the course of which Margarete's mother is mysteriously killed with yet another sleeping potion, Faust and Mauricius flee to an unknown and strange land, where they meet the ghosts of damned souls (including Valentin's) and marvel at a geyser.³ Ready to move on, Faust quickly grows irritated with this spectacular but repetitive geophysical phenomenon. When he finds

out that Margarete will most likely be accused of her mother's murder, he tears his contract to pieces, throws Mauricius down into a ditch, and casts heavy stones at him. Although Mauricius survives the ordeal, Faust is now left to fend for himself alone in a sublime and barren land of snowy mountains and glaciers, led by his unquenched thirst for knowledge. The voice of Margarete, which may or may not be the voice of love, asks him, 'Where are you going?' Faust replies, 'Over there! Farther and farther!' then disappears into the distance, on his eternal quest.

Since the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in Russia, the cinema of Alexander Sokurov, once such a private chamber affair, had grown proportionately bigger and bigger, both in scope and ambition. With this, it has also lost the free-spirited and boundary-free, if sad, élan of his earlier films, for all their technical and budgetary limitations. This was already in evidence in the otherwise intimate and apolitical *Father and Son's* indirect but present reference to war and the mournful relinquishing of past Russian history (as suggested by Fredric Jameson), a nostalgia with historical and political overtones amplified and epitomised in the technically admirable but ideologically questionable *Russian Ark*, the covert apology for the Russian invasion of Chechnya in *Alexandra*, as well as in the tetralogy of power: *Moloch* (about Hitler), *Taurus* (about Lenin), *The Sun* (about Hirohito), and of course *Faust*.⁴ However, this final work serves both as a departure from the earlier, private films as much as it constitutes a summation of all that preceded it. Sokurov's cinema was always rife with grand, ponderous topics and motifs (history, death, the question of existence, the human soul and its destiny), but their realisation was precluded by the ideological constrictions of the dying Soviet Union, and thereafter, by the financial restrictions of the troubled post-Soviet years. Unable to give these subjects their fullest, most spectacular expression, the Russian auteur opted instead for a sublime, if sedate cinema of decay, of slow and contemplative temporalities, of which *The Second Circle* serves as the epitome.

With *Faust*, however, his most expensive (and, in many ways, most expansive) project, Sokurov not only crowns the tetralogy and its exploration of the nature of power and the price of the human soul, but also his career itself. Much as it offers a catalogue of human shortcomings throughout its narrative, *Faust*, in the dream-like fashion evoked above, seems to revisit Sokurov's entire oeuvre: from the fairy tale environment of *Mother and Son* and late medieval imagery found in *Whispering Pages* to the apocalyptic considerations of *Mournful Insensitivity*; from the uncomprehending relationship with the father to the fascination with the military; from the obsession with death and funerary rituals (*The Second Circle*, *Save and Protect*) to the difficult, pessimistic celebration of life and beauty (the 'star child' from *Days of the Eclipse*); from the idiosyncratic literary adaptation and appropriation (Platonov, Shaw, Flaubert, the Strugatsky Brothers, Dostoevsky, and now Goethe) to the minimalistic original script (*The Stone*); and finally for its profound investment with the grotesque and animal imagery.⁵ Seemingly atypical of Sokurov's cinema, *Faust* thus constitutes his *meisterwerk*, the summation of all his obsessions, a film as excessive as it is essential to understand its maker's preceding oeuvre. It is so in all the ways listed above, but most importantly in how it captures, both in content and in form, the nature of dialectics

between a mythical and historical time and space, yielding the most evident example of what Sokurov calls 'the other life'.

One is bound to feel a bit dizzy when confronted by such a replete and unusual universe, with a work filled with such complex and often seemingly contradictory elements, embracing so many themes and ideas at once. This philosophical and intellectual totalising flavour to the subject investigated in this vast, multi-layered work (much as imperialism inhabited *Russian Ark's* project) can hardly be digested in just a couple viewings, especially as Sokurov summons synesthesia throughout the film in order to convey this notion of totalising drive: smell (the cadaver whose dissection opens the film, Mauricius's flatulence, but also Faust smelling Margarete as though she were a 'rose garden'), touch (tussles between characters trying to move through exiguous spaces, the earth thrown on Valentin's coffin) and even taste (the hungry characters ravenously feeding on berries or cookies, but also a reference made to burdock) are compellingly felt through the treatment of sound and image, both texturally modulated and enhanced by digital technologies, in a baroque sensory onslaught seldom encountered in cinema, or any other art.⁶

If the resulting plentiful and rather tiresome film does not entirely lose the viewer, it is because it is inhabited by a powerful feeling of movement. To borrow the words of French philologist Claude David about the Goethe play, everything here is 'movement and invention' (1995: 22), as if almost out of some dark compulsion or necessity. The camera constantly glides and dollies in various directions, and the characters are constantly on the move as well. While this feature may be less immediately striking than the painterly references on offer here, movement is unquestionably the fundamental feature of the film. It is, after all, the ontological essence that distinguishes cinema from photography and which regiments its temporal unfolding. It is also what unites and ties all the elements of this film together, as if in a whirlwind, a passionate kinetic drive expressing Faust's unquenchable thirst for transcendental knowledge, as well as all the other energies driving this restless world: desire, lust, greed, passion, anger, love (and their negative expression, the seven deadly sins, all instantiated here but never didactically so) – in short, life itself.

In the following chapter, I would like to illustrate how this film, possibly Sokurov's grand oeuvre, utilises movement everywhere to convey its many dialectical offerings, as though in a breathtaking, devilish dance: a dance of thoughts and affects, of mind and spirit, of Sokurov and Goethe, of Russian and German cultures, of cinema and the other arts, and, finally, of the artist and power, something the film's very existence, from its production history to its critical triumph, exhibits.

I

Goethe was twenty-five when he penned the *Urfaust* (1771–75, the primitive and long-lost version of *Faust I*). He was almost sixty when his *Faust I* was published, in 1808. He completed the final revisions to the long poem that is *Faust II* on 29 January 1832, just a few weeks before his death (on 22nd March). Alexander Sokurov, in an uncanny act of mimicry between author and director already observed in his debut

Lonely Voice of Man (which he directed in his mid-twenties as well) was himself in his late fifties when he embarked upon the shoot of his adaptation of *Faust*, which had preoccupied him and screenwriter Yuri Arabov for over three decades. To be sure, to tackle such an oeuvre demands the maturity that only years of experience, passing trends and ideologies, can bring: the work of a lifetime indeed.

Few national myths are as strange and mysterious as Goethe's *Faust*, a work which blends the philosophical and the bawdy, the sacred and the profane, which combines the loftiest philosophical dialogues with the most mundane and excessive melodrama (Margarete's tragic fate), interspersed with episodes of songs and spectacles of drunken soldiers and witches. Moving through practically all genres on record, from the refined speech of romance to the vulgarity of the farce, in verse and prose, with long monologues and musical moments, there is little wonder that this sublime hodgepodge of a book would appeal to Sokurov – the master of disparity, as well as the master of the obliquely historicised narrative.⁷

From the summary of the film above, the reader familiar with Goethe's *Faust I* will recognise certain episodes and the general arc of the narrative, but also identify the filmmakers' licence in the freedom taken with the source play, a score of inventions and omissions. For those who have not seen the film, while my summary faithfully recounts its course of events (with a few minor elisions), it hardly does justice to its atmosphere and affect, what should be properly identified as its oneiric fabric. Seldom has a film been so close to a dream, and so *Faust* appears not so much as an adaptation of a text as a cinematic expression of an artist's dream of a text, mulled over for years and re-emerging in this most unique (and often puzzling) form.⁸ The latter makes the narrative flow in a manner that is both causally plausible (within its own universe) and yet feels somewhat absurd, segueing from one realm to another, as in the logic of a dream, yielding a vast universe which yet feels strictly contained within the boundaries of its own promises of inescapability. It may be its most cogent connection to the play's many spatial and temporal jumps (and its profusion of disparate elements): the perambulatory nature of the characters' quest lends itself beautifully to this quasi-picaresque string of unrelated events and intriguing images.

As elsewhere in Sokurov, the film is strongly preoccupied with death, precisely because it is preoccupied with knowledge. From the Platonovian plunge of *Lonely Voice of Man*'s ZAGS employee into the world 'down below', the realm of death has always appeared as a harbinger of revelation, however potentially negative. *Faust* is no exception, with its many instances of penetrations and descents into caverns, caves, grottos, and wells. This movement downward climaxes in the spectacular – and almost too beautiful – scene in which Faust finds Margarete peering into a lake, as though contemplating suicide, and the two plunge and disappear in slow motion into the deep blue water, in a sublime image of unresolved sexual tension and blissful disintegration, love and death intertwined more than ever. The scene is pitted between hellish realms and mask-donning demons, yet another idiosyncratic rendition of the play's score of demonic creatures, during what collapses the night of love with *Walpurgis nacht*.

Perhaps the long and climactic episode evoked above serves as the best example of a dialectic of the corporeal and the spiritual, of the affect and the intellectual, in *Faust*,

in the contrast between what will remain its most memorable scene and what immediately precedes it: following Faust's signature of the contract that binds him to Mauricius, he is taken by the evil usurer inside a strange, womb (or rather cloaca)-like cave, where the two men, digging inside an abject compound of soiled fabric, go in search of gold to corrupt Margarete's mother. There, Mauricius farts horribly, as per his habit often referenced in the film. This grotesque and abject episode (which also constitutes one of the clearest and most unpleasantly literal instances of the 'enfolding', 'invaginating' imagery I ascribe to Sokurov's cinema – as well as a rather comical eroticising of the worm or rectum-like sack in which the two men uncomfortably wriggle) only reinforces the lofty and glacial beauty of Faust's and Margarete's plunge and 'night of love'.⁹ The shift in chromatic pattern (from warm and brownish hues in Mauricius subterranean lair to the blue and cold of the water and Margarete's pale complexion), the dreamlike logic in the way these two scenes segue into one another, all contribute to capturing, in cinematic terms, the association of the basest with the most sublime. In this, Sokurov cinematically re-imagines Goethe's tapestry of the human soul.

These scenes, which are bound to remain engraved in the viewer's memory as among the most unique ever encountered on film, help us to understand Sokurov's interpretation of Goethe's dialectics as mediated through the combined expression of the two most important elements of the film combined: the painterly and the dynamic. This combination is ubiquitous in the film, instantiated from the film's opening, a CGI aerial shot of the city that recreates Albrecht Altdorfer's *The Battle of Alexander* – one of Sokurov's long-standing visual obsessions, in which the presence of a celestial mirror, rocking in the skies, alludes to the dialectics everywhere at work in the source text.¹⁰ This pendulum-like movement captures and crowns Sokurov's investment with the complicated history of Germany and Russia, so present in many of his films (*Sonata for Hitler, And Nothing More, Moloch*), an investigation, among other things, of the reasons behind the catastrophe of Nazism and Stalinism.

II

Faust was first and foremost financed to highlight the points of convergence of and attempts at reuniting German and Russian cultures – a process revived since the 1990s onward. It does so from the most superficial to the most profound level, yet we will see that ultimately, the film is also a quintessentially 'internal affair'. First of all, the film's desire to address German culture from a Russian perspective is evident in the source text it adapts, and in being shot in German. Besides, the fascination of Russia for German dialectics in Sokurov's (and Arabov's) artistic universes was often manifest, and explodes here in many motifs of doubling, so prevalent in German imagery and mythology (and epitomised in *The Student of Prague*, itself a favourite motif from film art): from the celestial mirror (the very notion of the looking glass implying the idea of doubling) as well as in the two moons looming over the CGI landscape (incidentally, the two orbs are absent from the Altdorfer painting referenced here) to the many doublings and *doppelgänger*s encountered throughout the film. Wagner is a degraded version of Faust, a mediocre, immature, and egotistical allegory of science and petty

individualism against Faust's more thorough and transcendental approach to knowledge.¹¹ A pathetic Wagner will try to usurp Faust's identity, after his love has proved unrequited and his master has left him behind, busy with his new acquaintance with Mauricius and enthralled by the young Margarete.¹² Faust and Margarete seem to share an identical distaste for their ageing, smelly, overly made-up mothers, as well as a certain identity in their – at least professed – belief in the value of truth.¹³ Mauricius, who can be seen as Faust's evil twin, also has an assistant, Ferdinand. When first introduced, the two men's voices overlap, and for a moment Ferdinand seems to introduce himself as his master, their identities blurred, uncertain. Doublings can lead to patterns of misrecognition, as in Mauricius's false miracles (wine pouring out of the wall), or when Margarete fails to identify her dead brother. It is not by chance, then, that this central motif of doubling and its dark, confusing implications should be explored in a film representing one of the most idiosyncratic devil figures in film history.

Close to the motif of the double by virtue of their shared uncanny dimension, we find Sokurov's and Arabov's taste for the grotesque echoing the fantastic instances of the Goethe text: we saw in chapter two that Mikhail Iampolski has associated the grotesque associations of *Mournful Insensitivity* with Sokurov's interest in Oriental philosophy and the idea of reincarnation/metempsychosis. But the grotesques in *Faust* are of a different nature. They rather express the liminal, in-between quality of the animal, at once alien and familiar to us, much as the two cultures embraced in the treatment of Faust, the fascinated but ultimately mis-comprehending gaze of one toward the other, and the perpetual questioning it entails – much as these grotesque occurrences provide disconcerting and disrupting episodes and symbols in the film, which furthermore portrays a world from which all clear boundaries have been erased, and the dream (or nightmare) logic, coterminous with its own brand of ambiguity, reigns supreme.

In the course of Faust's well known wager with the devil and quest for satisfaction, we encounter a number of surrealist intrusions: a woman laying and promptly devouring an egg (the likely offspring of her bestial alliance with a bird); a monkey on the moon;¹⁴ the incongruous and highly symbolic presences of a stork under an archway and a rabbit inside a church; a homunculus in a jar, a borrowing from *Faust II* as much as it evokes David Cronenberg or Stuart Gordon (or rather Yuri Arabov's love of the horror genre and the bodily grotesque); and a Gogolian Russian character encountered in the middle of a Germanic forest, riding a coach on his way to Paris and begging his driver Selifan for his oriental caftan.¹⁵

None is more grotesque, of course, than Mauricius himself. When he undresses at the bath, revealing his mangled misshapen body with a penis growing out of his lower back, his monstrous physical appearance reaches at least a common note with his lewd personality – purportedly the devil's – and the flip side of the fascination and seduction he enacts upon Faust, in spite of his stench and physical appearance. Etymologically opposed to religion – which 'religates', connects, unifies – we understand the devil as that being which divides, makes dual, double. Here too the film-makers are structurally faithful to the (negative) dialectical pattern laid out by Goethe, for whom Mephistopheles, he who negates all things, is actually given the mission by

God to stimulate humans. In Faust's theology, the devil is thus put in the service of God: whatever his action, whatever his desire, he ultimately contributes to the will of God, and, consequently, does good against his own will. But Sokurov and Arabov carefully diverge from this properly theological affirmation of God's all powerful design in favour of a more human, fallible figure, in a possibly godless world. At once human and animal, subject to emotions, and vile drives, Mauricius stands as one of the most interesting representations of Mephistopheles: neither evil nor good, Sokurov's devil is the engineer of division, and a veiled metaphor for capitalism.¹⁶ Perhaps Anton Adasinsky, in his remarkable composition, has given those on the left of the political spectrum the most delightfully detestable, and at once accurate incarnation of what has often been referred to as 'capitalism with a human face', or, conversely, and more stereotypically, its effects on human physiognomy. Mauricius is, after all, a money-lender, a usurer by profession, and a pragmatic materialist at heart: to Faust's quote of the gospels that 'In the beginning was the word,' he quips that 'In the beginning was the deed.'¹⁷ In a world purportedly torn by war (many forlorn soldiers stroll about town) and where everyone seems to starve in spite of retaining servants and spacious interiors, *Faust* prolongs Sokurov's preoccupation with the importance of returning to more rigorous moral standards in order to redeem a world – our world – slowly dying while wallowing in apparent material comfort.¹⁸ An interloper and equivalent of the Freudian Id in his attempts at changing the course of things, Mauricius is hardly bothered by the super-ego inhabiting the film, Faust's aloof and estranged father (played by Icelandic actor Sigurður Skúlason, in another instance of rhyming and doubling between these opposed, partly rival characters), a doctor of medicine whose methods seem closer to charlatanry than actual Hypocratic vocation.¹⁹ In one scene, he is seen



Mauricius: 'capitalism with a human face', with inescapable echoes of Hieronymus Bosch and fifteenth-century Dutch painting

angrily chasing the usurer, cursing him and threatening to beat him up. The reasons for this hatred, as so many other instances in the film, are left unaccounted for. Perhaps Mauricius was the cause of the disease which befell the town, and which the father had to cure, or perhaps the two men entered a deal of their own in the past, which turned out to be unfavourable to the father.²⁰

The image of the devil in this film owes a lot to its makers' cultural background: the usurer, of course, is usually reviled in Eastern European culture, with its most famous figure found in the old woman in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. In the rage Mauricius inspires in the dour father, we may thus see a reflection on the stereotypical hatred of gentile populations in Eastern Europe for the figure of the usurer – and, further and with more painful implications, the 'Jew' and the strictures of anti-semitism – a phenomenon that remains significant within the Eastern European context.²¹

Though Mauricius might be a demonic creature, his emotions are no less human for all that. Libidinally invested, sensuous (hints of bisexuality pervade his lecherous character, who loves nothing more than to lead on and corrupt, again a compelling expression of the Id), his close connection with Faust echoes the protagonist's love for Margarete, and is doubled by Wagner's obsession with his master. There seems to be a friendship, or even a form of romantic investment for Faust, identifiable in Mauricius's gaze, and his libidinal or fetishist desire for Faust's soul. The whole operation conducted by Mauricius indeed concludes in having the two men together, alone, in a mysterious land of damned souls.

The homosocial, romantic intimation is not unlikely, and can be related to a classic of French eighteenth-century literature, *The Devil in Love* (*Le Diable amoureux*, 1772), by Jacques Cazotte (1719–1792).²² There, the devil first appears to the human protagonist in the form of a lovely female dog. Goethe may have known of Cazotte's tale and thereby included the apparition of the devil in the shape of a poodle in his *Faust I*. In the film, reference is made to this passage when Faust berates Mauricius for 'whining like a wet poodle', and indeed Mauricius whimpers when Faust bites or abandons him. But whatever his attraction to Faust, his design and intent remain of a dark and destructive – or at least divisive – nature. Returning to the macrocosmic, historical reading, in Mauricius's attachment and desire to both corrupt and care for Faust, we recognise hints of the troubled historical relationship between Germany and Russia, a charged love-hate interaction, but where the attribution of nation per allegorical figure seems ambiguous at best.

In the motif of the double, the grotesque, the erotic attraction, we see only the most literal, philological aspect of German dialectics as expressed by Russian artists. The truly cinematic emergence of this dynamic dialogue, philosophy made art, is most vividly replicated in the film's form, between the *perpetuum mobile* of the camera's movement and the painterly aesthetics, with which the filmmakers endow each image. Never has Sokurov's cinema been more robustly dynamic, in perpetual motion, both by virtue of the movement of the camera – second only in this respect to *Russian Ark*, which was more ponderous for its ghostly nostalgia – and by the activity within the image and the soundtrack. But *Russian Ark* was a flow, its dialectical potential neutralised somewhat by its one-take and linear aesthetics. In *Faust*, the Steadicam constantly moves among

the characters, gliding along the narrow streets of the mythical town, a floating, slightly uncanny sensation reinforced by this specific technology, but it is further *dynamised*, *dialecticised* by the film's relatively quick editing, reinforcing the idea of contrary motion when two camera movements going in different directions collide. The subsequent effect is one of a carefully crafted choreographic wonder, a *danse macabre* of light and shadow, wherein the latter always threatens to conquer the former.

Faust thus captures the essence of German dialectical philosophy, as it literally *is* philosophy in motion, with its implication of synthesised contradictory movements, often evoked here by tracking-shots going in different, opposite directions and collated through editing. The same feeling of contrary motion is experienced between whole scenes, moving from the seductively beautiful to the grating. Here cinema, by virtue of its unfolding and its simultaneous enfolding, is the philosophical expression of a dialectic of the soul, creating this impression that everything floats, and that Faust's soul progressively grows larger while it also falls apart – attaining a higher level of consciousness.²³ However one may look at it, the film embodies, in form and content, the interstitial dialectics at play in every corner of Sokurov's universe, the magic of his art operating in the interstice between these opposed movements and affects.

Movement not only possesses the camera; it is at work in the characters as well. Each scene, when it is not teeming with dozens of extras, captures Faust in his existential restlessness: jumping, climbing, running, not pausing even for a meal, which he devours rapidly, moving from the kitchen to the hallway. His large nose – Johannes Zeiler's most striking feature – only reinforces this impression of a constantly peripa-



Faust: 'Du darfst nicht lieben'; 'You must not love' – Faust only finds out too late that to love Margarete is to doom her

tetic, searching soul, in a most physical sense, sniffing around like a dog digging amidst dead leaves in search of the valuable black truffle: the search for transcendental knowledge denied to the rational mind. Likewise, Mauricius, in his grotesque, sensuous gait, perpetually crawls and bends, evoking the amphibian or the reptile, his dark glassy eyes constantly on the lookout for a mean trick to play.²⁴

Compared with these Sokurovian creepers, Margarete seems an ethereal, almost ghostly entity, her juvenile, thin frame and pale complexion only enhancing this impression. Much as in the play, Faust is fascinated and arrested by the purity and unattainability of this angelic being. She alone seems to calm the scientist's agitation, if only temporarily. Yet, as so often in Sokurov, no such thing as heterosexual love can occur. By spending a night with Margarete, Faust dooms her, and yet remains unsatisfied, as he has not truly managed to penetrate the mystery of the female body, epitomised by the close-up of her pubis, wherein lies enclosed forever the unfathomable miracle of life. Be this as it may, the greatest, most cinematic moments of the film unquestionably remain the physical interactions between the two characters: first, at Valentin's funeral, Faust discreetly touches the young woman's hand, and she looks at him, lips pursed, in a mixture of contempt and furious passion; later on, he pretends to be Margarete's confessor, hidden from her gaze by the safe recess of the confessional's grille; later still, the two confront each other, face to face, in Faust's study. There, Sokurov's trademark distorting lenses (here, a very specific lens with inverted perspective) transfigure both actors, Faust's nose suddenly reduced to more human proportions, and Marguerite's countenance – flattened, widened, illuminated – resembling nothing so much as an icon. But this round face also echoes the moon that in the film's closing will speak to Faust in Margarete's voice, or perhaps Faust's homunculus stolen by Wagner²⁵ – an important reference to the Goethe text, but also an oblique, grotesque rendition of Gretchen's dead child.²⁶ Here, in the murder of Valentin, we also see Sokurov at his most Dostoevskyan; indeed, the shadow of the great Russian writer, and particularly *The Brothers Karamazov* (itself strongly influenced by German idealism), looms large over not only the scene but the entire film: 'In that moment, truth became a lie and the lie became truth.'

III

Faust is thus the fruit of a German ur-text as negotiated through a Russian perspective. In the preceding section, we have mostly lingered on the first of these two elements, namely German culture and dialectics, as expressed not only in text, but also in form. But if German culture and 'Germanity' are the central idea addressed by the film, the formal dance before our eyes necessarily asks for a partner, an antithetical entity which in this case will be, naturally, Russian culture. Though, for the sake of this argument, we will have to proceed in broad, essentialising brushstrokes, the reader shouldn't take these for anything other than the received stereotypes of the perspective cast by Russian and German cultures upon themselves, no less pervasive in the subconscious of these nation's popular cultures for all their glaring generalisations. As such, we may agree that one of the staples of Russian culture is its messianic vocation, wherein the artist (of which the

writers of the golden age especially, from the great poets of romanticism, Lermontov and Pushkin, to the massive literary achievements of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, seem to hold the most memorable place) fulfils a function akin to that of a prophet (as epitomised in Pushkin's poem by the same title), or at least that of a missionary, which are the foundations of what we may refer to as Russian idealism. This is fairly distinct from Germanic idealism (as we already touched upon in chapter nine) and German cultural identity, shaped on the one hand by the idea of idealism and the belief in an education of the individual in a full personality (as theorised by Humboldt), an inheritance of the Enlightenment so fundamental to bourgeois culture; and on the other, by the dark, moody themes of supermen and heroes (as epitomized in Nietzsche's writings), but also present, of course, in the myth of Faust.

What is interesting is that *Faust* constitutes the German ur-text precisely because it contains in itself all of these influences, and the dialectical tension between these two main opposing poles, a dialectics of a most interstitial nature as I hope the reader sees – the dialectics of the dialectics, as it were, the term carrying vastly different networks of association depending on whether they are envisaged from a German or Russian perspective.²⁷ And this is whence Sokurov's Faust (and his Mephistopheles) springs forth: neither German, nor Russian, nor even the mere collation of both expressions and interpretations. For what do we discern in the protagonist's ultimate rebellion and flight into the ice-cold infinite at the end? Is this an expression of Russian spiritual optimism, or a nostalgia and yearning for salvation (expressed here through science led by love), or, rather, a dark, nihilistic object, without a proper goal?²⁸ Or yet again, a latter-day expression of anarchy, darkly renouncing any form of institution and authority, for its disillusionment with the realities of life (and the treacherous rules of market economy)? It is at once the sum of all these elements, and more than their sum, a mixture of reason and fanatic individualism, of fatalism and religious ecstasy.

The film also presents a strong dialectic of body and spirit: early on the film reveals a close-up of a corpse's genitalia. Faust and Wagner are trying to locate the human soul in the dead body, which instantly evokes early surgical works painted by Rembrandt, as well as, again, Mantegna's dead Christ. As the body is lifted vertically onto its slab, its innards gushing out through the open abdomen, the physicality of the cadaver, its sheer lack of spirituality and its banal, heavy presence are communicated in all their materiality. And whereas in Goethe's book Faust was saved from committing suicide by an Easter procession, here the merry celebration is replaced by not one, but two funerals. In each case, the hearse and score of mourners in black are accompanied by the mysterious figure of Agathe (Hanna Schygulla), a sibylline cameo and an alleged Death figure who also claims to be Mauricius's wife. All characters in the film, for that matter, fulfil eminent allegorical functions: Margarete is associated with youth, purity and virginity (and stands as an ideal which can only be reached at the price of being smothered); Faust is the blind and frantic search, both intellectual and sensual (for science, for knowledge, for love), and Mauricius stands for the corrupting powers of money, and the power it procures.

Not only the dialectic between the spiritual and the corporeal, but also that of the individual and the collective is over-determined in *Faust*: while the protagonists

struggle with their internal dilemmas, they seem to do so as well with the groups surrounding them, adding to the sobering portrait of early modern society offered by the film, incidentally in a realm that is not historically accurate, but may, by and large, be identified as the turning moment when European society finally lapsed into capitalism. The question which arises, then, is that of directionality: is there a *telos* to the quest upon which Faust embarks, an idea of dialectical progress which German philosophy, and especially Hegel's, of course, support, in our late capitalist (and Putin's authoritarian Russia's) framework? In a letter (dated 28th March 1827) to Eckermann, about the scene in the witch's kitchen in his play and where the characters discuss witchcraft, Goethe wrote the following: 'Here is a passage where thought does neither move forward nor make progress; this obscure language is motionless, it turns in circles' (Grappin 1995: 213). Capturing at once the circular movement of the dance, or Hitler's whirlingig-like rotation in a deleted scene of *Moloch*, the tetralogy may capture the dead-end which befalls the men of power, those dark conjurers which only lead men to their doom. Yet their destructive misdeeds have propelled history forward. But what, then, of the workings of capitalism and its promise of progress? Is it not, in our period, trapped itself in a dead-end logic (namely the constant necessity for growth and consumption, confronted with the objective limitations of our world and short-circuited by the logic of crisis?). Where does this logic go and take us, where does Faust's endless quest lead him? While there are many solid hypotheses on the macrocosmic level to this crucial question (where the oneiric quality of the film is in tune with its political unconscious), it is on the territory between the individual and the collective, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic, that I would like to conclude the investigation of the dialectical dance that is Sokurov's *Faust*: the interplay of cinema and the other arts, and the entanglements of the artist and power.

IV

We now need to probe deeper, beyond the film's form, text and affect, and discern another dance at the heart of its inception and realisation, one of a far more private, but also disquieting nature, a dialectical tension and dance between two superstructures: art and power. Surely the film serves as a vibrant testament by Sokurov to what we may consider the religion of art, and the aesthetic foundation of his cinema, which is at once the sum and the constant derivation (yet here transcended) of the three great 'parents' in Sokurov's genealogy of cinema, already investigated at great lengths throughout this book: literature, painting and music.

Sokurov never shied away from belittling cinema's importance when compared to these three arts. When discussing the grand project that is the tetralogy, the director consistently stressed the fact that the four films should never be regarded separately – that they are, indeed, like four chapters of one book. The connection is not obvious, but that is the way Sokurov intended it from the beginning. Again, four different fragments combine to create a highly superior autonomous whole – a portrait of the human soul, in history and beyond, within a new form that Sokurov calls 'audiovisual literature' (in Arkus 2005: 146). Although most of Sokurov's usual associates were

not involved on this film, it consecrates his career-long partnership with screenwriter Yuri Arabov, who is the genuine co-author of the tetralogy. Together, and with Marina Koreneva (a scholar who worked on the German adaptations of *Moloch* and *Faust*), it is not an exaggeration to claim that they have reinvented screenwriting. Indeed, the film's script and its structure evoke a novel rather than a traditional cinematic treatment.²⁹ As a result, we are confronted with a vertiginous work combining the depth and multiplicity of characters of a realist novel, the dynamic flow of a romantic symphonic piece, and the lush visual richness of a Dutch Golden Age painting, all imbued with Sokurov's own phantasmagorical taste and the combined philosophical musings of Goethe and various philosophers who have probed issues of free will, destiny, and death. In the process, Sokurov has, perhaps excessively, achieved a baroque cinematic work entirely informed by the three arts he so reveres. He has also produced one of the most original films ever made, and possibly opened the way for new avenues of cinematic production, even if it is unlikely that this idiosyncratic incarnation can be emulated with ease.

For better or for worse, however, Sokurov's professed love of literature will never shine as brightly in the remembrance of his cinema as his investment with the painterly, if only because of the more immediate nature of visual arts. It is a mixture of classical cinematography and new digital image doctoring that achieves *Faust's* conspicuous painterly quality, reflecting the director's lifelong investment with the great masters of Western art. Here, through Sokurov's (but also cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel's) efforts, we witness the resurrection of the golden age of the Dutch and Flemish schools, albeit in a somewhat morbid fashion: to Rembrandt's *chiaroscuros* (the scene in the tavern springs to mind) and Vermeer's diffuse lights, Sokurov adds the interiors of David Teniers and Martin Drosling.³⁰ In Margarete's pale complexion and delicate features, we unmistakably recognise the art of Anton Van Dyck. The grotesque or mythological allusions evoke Rubens, and the universe of the film teems with characters evocative of Bruegel's scenes of small city life, as well as of Jacob van Ruisdael's landscapes. In the uncanny figure of Mauricius and his trickster spirit, it is Hieronymus Bosch and his many followers that are referred to most recognisably. The film thus blends a rather realistic universe with a detached, dreamlike realm of witchcraft and the fantastical. Likewise, it composes a strange and endlessly beautiful temporal tapestry of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early nineteenth centuries, and combines the décor of a medieval central European town (the film was shot partly in the Czech Republic) that seems to spring forth out of a rocky mountainside with the lunar landscapes of Iceland.

Third in the triad which governs cinema according to Sokurov is music. While he used many works of the classical repertoire in his earlier films, *Faust* bears the mark of his relatively recent association with producer and composer Andrey Sigle. The role played by Sigle cannot be underestimated in the recent turn, aesthetic and political, taken by Sokurov's cinema. Facilitating access to larger budgets, Sigle also imprints his own artistic presence by replacing Sokurov's trademark use of pre-existing classical tunes (Nussio, Wagner, Mahler, Mozart, Chopin) with his own brand of nineteenth-century-inspired orchestral music. The neo-romantic pastiche of Tchaikovsky

and Smetana, which had bathed the sonic landscapes of *Alexandra* and *Father and Son* (whose central musical *leitmotif* is reprised in *Faust*, incidentally), is expanded here with stylistic hints to Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, but also a hodgepodge of Bach, Strauss, Liszt, Beethoven, Wagner, and Brahms (for the sake of emphasising the Germanic quality of the film, alternating the flamboyantly bombastic and the darkly evocative). In many ways, this is Sokurov embracing a spectacular, 'Hollywood-style' scoring, consecrating the taste for kitsch that was always present in his cinema, albeit in a muted, subdued manner until the 2000s, reflecting the turn in Russian culture ushered in by Putin's reign and project of re-establishing Russia as a major imperialist force and geopolitical player, with its own recognisable voice and aesthetic idioms attuned to the government's rekindled and pointed authoritarian and populist ethos (including the cult of the leader's personality). This sobering consideration notwithstanding, kitsch must not always be the nightmare dreaded by Clement Greenberg.³¹ As a matter of fact, Sokurovian kitsch can be understood as quite elevated, especially as it coexists with a genuine modernist ethos. This correlation can be located in the complexity and richness of the work, the assertive aesthetics of breaking with past forms, and an aim at the autonomy of its essence with which each shot is imbued. Surely this combination of high kitsch and high art seems contradictory, but this is where Sokurov's and Arabov's mutual obsession with dualism and the paradoxical comes into play.

These three great idioms – literature, painting, music – which Sokurov channels in his film, are themselves in a dialectic dance with another great entity, namely power, financial and political (cinema being the most expensive and political of all the arts, of course, even in the case of such an otherwise private and remote artist). Therefore, we must necessarily view the kinetic waltz agitating the film's aesthetics, its uneasy restlessness, as caused by more than just Faust's scientific inquisitive mind or Mauricius's drive to keep things going and trick those he keeps under contract. *Faust* is an allegory of knowledge and power: of how the former relates to the latter, and of how the artist relates to the figure of power. As such, and however much the director has played down this association, the film can be read as the interaction between Sokurov (the artist) and Putin (the realpolitik), an essentialised and allegorised, and therefore easily graspable, contrivance encountered by most financial cinema, to one degree or another (cinema's constant ancillary dalliance with power, as it were). This power dynamic is expressed in various manifest ways, be it in the interdiction of certain types of films under the pretext of financial profit or ideological censorship or, conversely, celebrated under the guise of dithyrambic promotion and unexpected celebration at film festivals. In view of this, Faust's restlessness and desire for flight, as well as Mauricius's ambiguous mixture of trickery and affection acquire a very immediate and transient quality.

The problem, under the neo-romantic pomp of Sigle's score and the anaesthetic beauty of the digitally touched-up imagery, is thus the preoccupying ideology lurking behind this bright kitsch banner – what I would refer to as the messianic grand Russian discourse in Sokurov, heavily endorsed by Vladimir Putin. As the producers freely confess, the film speaks to the Russian Federation's desire to see a *rapprochement* between Western and Russian cultures, and specifically how the latter can inform,

and perhaps, further, redeem the former – hence the metaphor of the ark in Sokurov. The tasteless aspect of this, naturally, has to do with the not-so-distant echoes of the Ribbentrop-Molotov agreements, and the deadly attraction between Germanic and Russian cultures, more mildly expressed in the dangerously nepotistic alliance (and dalliance) between Putin and former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder.³² It is in this oblique catering to Putin's *realpolitik* that *Faust*, but also its predecessor *Alexandra*, strikes a dissonant chord.

As already discussed in chapter fourteen, it is interesting that the two latest features by Alexander Sokurov proved to delve into an allegorical, mythological realm, akin to the fairy tale. *Alexandra* is a very moving, beautiful, endearing story of the sentimentalist type, of which *Faust* is the epic, darker, legendary pendent. However, as seen throughout this book, Sokurov never was an apolitical crafter of fairy tales, and the politics running beneath the films carry, unfortunately, the discreet yet unbearable stench of imperialism (and, in *Alexandra*, the legitimization of military invasion), something to which Sokurov could in no case have been oblivious. At the time of its release, Sokurov, in the official press conference held in Moscow, perhaps for the first time in a public event, began to praise, however timidly, Vladimir Putin and the Russian government for its support of the film. A few years later, and in spite of an economic crisis that, as in the early 1990s, severely reduced the financial resources of Russian cinema, Sokurov went on to complete his tetralogy for a budget of €8million (mostly through governmental funds of undisclosed origin), by far the highest he ever enjoyed for a film production. Earlier on, *Russian Ark* had been made possible through similar support from important State institutions, such as the Hermitage Museum and the Mariinsky Theatre. At the time of *Faust*'s release, Sokurov commented on the context that led to this auspicious intervention 'from above', when, hit by the economic downturn during the pre-production of the film, he turned to Putin (the two met at the president/prime minister's country estate): 'I told him, if I don't have this opportunity to make this film, it will never happen. A few days later, I was told that the amount I needed was going to be allocated. How and why it happened I don't know. Maybe because he has a very clear idea of German culture and history. I don't think it was because of me. I've never demonstrated my loyalty to his party' (Rose 2011).

After the film went on to win, against all odds for those who do not quite comprehend the meaning and ways of festival politics and want to believe in an ideology of arts for arts's sake, the Golden Lion in Venice, a delighted and grateful Sokurov had nothing but good things to say about the government and Putin. Naturally his elation at receiving such an award would explain this act of basic courtesy. And it is not as though Sokurov ever displayed public subservience to Putin; on the contrary, he often publicly lamented the new policies implemented in St. Petersburg and Russia as a whole. He also declined to support Putin's 2012 campaign for his presidential re-election. But viewed from a cynical, critical perspective, it seemed like it was not only Faust who wagered his soul at a hefty price. In more ways than one, Sokurov's early ethics of resilient filmmaking, at all costs, had shifted in emphasis, acquiring a much less heroic, engaging sheen. It is not at all uncommon for former great mavericks to become co-opted by the systems that formerly provided the adversity of which they

were able to overcome and indeed thrive. For a time, it seemed as though Sokurov could escape this rule and consistently and efficiently avoided such a turn; but, as of *Russian Ark*, one felt that his discourse had begun to shift towards the mainstream. Sokurov too was no island, or, perhaps, the gradually warming late capitalist sphere had caused the seas surrounding it to retreat, or drowned it, causing it to mingle with the rest of culture industry's dark ocean.

In interviews following *Faust's* triumph, Sokurov made a point of resuming his unabashedly independent persona. Asked whether he would make a film about Putin, he did not shy away from using the same terms as when asked the same question about Stalin (within the frame of *Taurus*):

I will never make films about people like Putin because they're not of interest to me [...] When I met him recently, he asked if I was going to dub *Faust* into Russian. Reading between the lines, you could see these words as a sort of order. But I wasn't afraid to say no to him. The money allocated by him was the state's, not his own. I don't know whether he has any money. According to his official salary, he shouldn't have any money. I can only be responsible to my audience, that's all. (Rose 2011)

The combative response relevantly replicated the attitude of Faust at the end of the film, denying the devil his wager and moving on with his quest, alone. Regardless of whether Sokurov's repartee is a mere pose, or whether there is more truth in the gratitude and allegiance to the Russian authorities he exhibited after being awarded the Golden Lion in Venice, beyond the philosophic and humanistic teachings of the tetralogy, *Faust* definitely smuggles a didactic message, the murkiness of which does little to conceal its dogmatism.

We can perhaps intuit that the dynamic, kinetic, gliding, agitated nature of the film's *mise-en-scène* and affect may have to do (as much as it does with the constant dialectical dance of the historical and the scientific, in replicating the protagonist's inquisitive mind) with a form of restlessness, the discomfort of the filmmaker who has dealt with persons with whom it is better not to do business of any kind. In light of this, Faust's refusal to honour his contract with the devil at the end of the film could perhaps be read as the expression of Sokurov's oft-repeated distrust for power, and his ultimate disbelief in the possibility to escape from the dark, demonic implications of pacts with absolute (and absolutely corrupting) power. Yet one cannot help thinking that neither Faust nor Sokurov can truly escape their engagements, and are still entangled with a dangerously powerful and ruthless authority. For someone like Sokurov, who (perhaps less than his own legend has it) suffered from a variety of ruthless expressions of dogmatism, from late Soviet bureaucracy to homophobia to neo-fascist aggression, this may seem a strong paradox.³³ But then again, this is what his cinema, one of the most unique and original in our currently depopulated cultural sphere, has always been about – excessive, impossible challenges, somehow always overcome, for better or for worse. *Faust* occupies a distinguished place somewhere between polar opposites, set in this paradoxical movement, perpetually alternating between positive wonder and a

feeling of nausea, Sokurov's *Mephisto Waltz*, so dizzyingly virtuosic it becomes impossible to determine who is – or, more precisely, thinks he is – leading the dance.

Notes

- 1 'I love him, who craves the impossible.'
- 2 *The Sun* was shunned by the Berlin jury in 2005, to the director's chagrin – as he had been, allegedly, promised an award there and stayed until the awards ceremony, only to leave Berlin empty-handed, a humiliating circumstance in any case. However, Sokurov has received many awards in Russia, and among his international distinctions are included also a distinction from the Vatican and his inscription in a list of 'the hundred most important directors'. Yet *Faust* was, indeed, his first major award at a major European art cinema festival, since the triumph of *Lonely Voice of Man* at the 1987 Locarno film festival.
- 3 While most of the film's exteriors were shot in a medieval town in the Czech Republic, the final sequence was shot in Iceland.
- 4 As in *Moloch*, some of the actors in *Faust* were non-native German speakers, reciting their lines in German, and then dubbed by native German actors.
- 5 The son quotes a few lines from Boris Pasternak's translation of *Faust* (from the encounter of Faust and Mephistopheles) in *Mother and Son's* opening scene.
- 6 During the walk through the forest, following Valentin's funeral, Faust escorts Margarete (while Mauricius keeps her mother company), reference is made to burdock. According to Lev Tolstoy, the plant prompted the desire to write, its character and resilience associated with 'life to the end'.
- 7 *Faust*, in this sense, appears as the germane source text: the historical figure it bases its legend on was closely related to the religious conflicts of the sixteenth century, and the play itself, written after the decline of German sentimentalism (for which nature and human reason were one) resonates in many ways with the development of the bourgeoisie, modernity and capitalism in Germany in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, a period where man, as Adam and Eve cast out of Eden, was excluded from the natural order, thereby calling for this transition and new doxa. Yet *Faust*, as appears clearly from the narrative itself if not from the scope of its vision, is also a proto-romantic text *avant la lettre*, perfectly fitting Sokurov's own blend of the intimate, universal and personal and the historical (meta-) commentary.
- 8 The scene of Margarete's first appearance, invented for the needs of the film, is a prime example, while the scene of Margarete's confession and Mauricius's corruption of the Pater Philippe (Joel Kirby) in the church develops a passage merely alluded to in the play.
- 9 Its patchwork texture seems to reference the seams and stitching, which characterise the fabric of Goethe's text itself, however much the writer had tried to make his play into a seamless whole, where early and late episodes would read homogeneously (as a letter he wrote to Wilhelm von Humboldt, a few days before his death, attests).

- 10 This opening scene realises a thirty-year-old ambition of Sokurov: to create an aerial shot that would recreate Albrecht Altdorfer's *The Battle of Alexander*, originating from the skies above and gradually dollying downward. See Popov (1994: 125): 'Человек соотносится здесь с космическим масштабом' (*Chelovek sootnositsya zdes s kosmicheskim mashtabom*); 'Man is related here to cosmic proportions.' The opening scene, similar to but more weightless than the opening shot of *Days of the Eclipse*, uses CGI for an even more vertiginous plunge, descending upon eerie medieval landscapes that seem to belong in an episode of the *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings* series rather than a Sokurov film.
- 11 Wagner is clearly a derided caricature of twentieth century rationalism mixed with individualistic bigotry: a telling example occurs when Faust interrogates the opening sentence of John's gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word.' Wagner immediately rectifies with his own self-centered vision of the world: 'In the beginning was the I!' Wagner also locates the human soul in the foot and asserts that 'God doesn't exist, but evil does.'
- 12 Even if Wagner's love is never articulated in sexual terms, it speaks again to Sokurov's ambiguous investment with queerness: when Faust decides to commit suicide by drinking the hemlock potion, Wagner starts painting his nails – 'the latest fad from France,' a gesture Faust immediately violently rejects, as though it were vacuous vanity or, rather, unmanly.
- 13 Faust's mother is absent in the original play.
- 14 No doubt this provides an indirect reference to the play's depiction of apes living in the witch's kitchen.
- 15 If the film's originality partly lies in these outbursts and interruptions, they do not help the progression of the story, nor the already unusual tempo and rhythm of it all. As a result, and for all its agitation, relatively fast cutting, gliding camera movements, multiple characters, and diverse scenes, *Faust* feels bountiful to the extent of ponderousness. It is one of Sokurov's most poorly paced and consequently difficult films to watch, second only in this respect to his little-seen and equally protracted *Save and Protect*. But its various extraordinary features redeem the film and render it a valuable cinematic experience, enriched and heightened – as is always the case with Sokurov – with each subsequent viewing.
- 16 Mauricius's remark that 'in the future, death will disappear' might be read, more than as a reference to Kingdom Come, in terms of capitalism's efforts to obfuscate the notion of mortality in order to stimulate mindless growth and consumption – thereby negating the Roman Catholic motto *Memento mori*.
- 17 These words are borrowed in Goethe from the beginning of Luther's translation of the Gospels according to St. John: 'Im Anfang was das wort.' As Pierre Grappin (1995: 209–10) informs us in his notes to the French edition of *Faust I*, Herder, in his *Erläuterungen zum Neuen Testament*, published in 1775, had made an amendment to this translation, which announces the one made by Faust in the play (and by Mauricius in the film): "Thought! Word! Will! Action! Love!" Faust/Mauricius might only retain the deed ('Im Anfang war die Tat'), but the play retains Herder's proposed sequence. As for the film, since it posits a possibly

godless world and hypothesis, it may conclude on 'action' – Faust's unending quest, replicating mankind's aimless and inescapable destiny. Where it emerges that the play and the film diverge strongly in their telos, therefore putting into question the dimension of their respective dialectics: Goethe's and Sokurov's; the eighteenth and the twenty-first century's. Grappin also reminds us a revealing passage from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (book VIII, chapter five), where the writer opposes spirit and action, the former, in the shape of intelligence, broadening our horizons and paralysing, while the latter animates us but also limits us. The closing scene of Faust intriguingly combines these two considerations: is Faust's reaction against Mauricius the product of action, or intelligence? Is his flight into the endless snowy expanses rather the product of the former, or the latter, or both?

- 18 Mauricius's profession, and the multiple references to him as the devil by furious customers, might at least partly inscribe the film in an earlier period, namely the Inquisition, when the Church seized a substantial amount of capital by burning people on account of witchcraft (i.e., pacts with the devil), many of whom were Jewish. Through this oblique reference, and the strange presence of Hasidic Jews outside of Mauricius's house on Faust's first visit to him, we can intuit a discreet, if present, suggestion of Sokurov's (or, more broadly, Eastern Europe's) complicated relationship to issues of Judaism. If Mauricius is to be read as a secular Jewish usurer, then identifying him as the devil could be read as a mark of covert anti-Semitism.
- 19 In the play, he is merely alluded to, having, many years earlier, cured the world from some dreadful disease, a feat to which Faust owes his own prestige in the eyes of the townspeople.
- 20 Faust's father, who is only mentioned briefly in *Faust I*, was indeed a doctor, fabled for having fought against epidemics, but who also dabbled in speculation over elementary mysteries. According to the tradition, however, as it appears in Spies' *Volksbuch* (1587) Faust's father was a peasant. Returning to the film, on a closer psycho-biographical reading of the Faust-father relationship, if we decide to read Faust as a proxy for Sokurov, the inflated role of the father figure in the film can reflect on Sokurov's father himself, estranged and disapproving, feared and respected, one of the important reasons for the artist's idiosyncratic characterisations. In this way, the father and Margarete appear as doubles, too, and the director's take on heterosexual love acquires a more complex and profound dimension – veering away from repressed homosexuality to a fundamental solitude which precludes any possibility of romantic happiness, irrespective of its orientation.
- 21 And the reverted stance of many Jewish people against Slavic populations – by and large perceived to this day in the reductive stereotype of pogrom-wielding peasants in the popular Western consciousness.
- 22 Coinciding thereby with the first recorded year of Goethe's writing *The Urfaust*, an earlier version of the play.
- 23 Ironically enough, but certainly not unexpected in Sokurov's realm of reversible and interstitial dialectics, this impression of gradual crumbling of the soul

of the protagonist, replicated in the film's gradually puzzling structure, could be used both as a form of artistic accomplishment (the perfect analogy of form and content) as much as a criticism (the risk of losing the viewer in such a maze with moving walls and unstable ground).

- 24 A sardonic-looking Anton Adasinsky brings the indispensable physicality and stamina of the mime and stage actor to this part, much like Sergey Dreyden had as the Marquis de Custine in *Russian Ark*.
- 25 Although he contends otherwise, it is my intuition that Sokurov shot more material for this film than ultimately appeared in the international 2011 release. For instance, scenes in which Wagner steals Faust's homunculus, probably created by Mauricius, are missing.
- 26 In turn, the scene with the homunculus seems to be borrowed from *Faust II*, with its representation inside a jar and pathetic fate of crashing down on the ground a possible foreshadowing which the ending of the film may, in a way, instantiate.
- 27 It must be distinguished in at least two main points: first of all, dialectics are to German culture a quintessential, quasi natural idea, expressed in the people's lives and their way of thinking. It is an intellectual and cultural expression, and here three important names should be brought up: Hegel, Marx and Brecht, naturally. For Russia, dialectics seems like an alien ideology, imported by 'cosmopolitan' intellectuals and literally imposed on the masses, who never truly took to its meaning and implications – though they were accepted in a fatalistic way by a population left exhausted by the excesses of war and the Czarist regime. What Lenin, Trotsky (or Mao in China) did on the political plane with dialectics – namely its reception, transformation and ideologised interpretation – is an entirely different way of perceiving and experiencing the very concept, and leads us to the historical expression of this, which can be schematised in terms of the centrifugal and the centripetal: it seems fair to say that dialectical materialism is not a far cry from realising the absurdity of the dual bourgeois/superman fantasy which culminated in National Socialism – at least in terms of the death tolls inflicted in the name of both ideologies. Although in the raving madness of Nazism the destructive drive was primarily oriented outward, while in the vast Russian territories, it went on to cause more deaths within its borders. This distinction has to do with the Russian resignation or submissiveness of the individual in the face of destiny or a higher entity/being, whereas the stereotypical Germanic aspiration is rather to question (to 'protest' in the theological sense) divine order, since the latter is considered insufficient and deficit-inducing), or even to take the place of that order.
- 28 In line, again, with the messianic role imparted to art in Russia, itself strongly correlated with the cult of the image/icon in Russian Orthodoxy).
- 29 If one were to try to make sense of *Faust* from a 'proper' screenwriting perspective, the film's title would emerge as a false isotopy, Faust being, ultimately, merely the tool of the devil in his quest to destroy Margarete (and the purity/innocence she represents). But naturally the film's script is much more than a traditional one, and should not be read as such – much as the rest of Sokurov's films, for that matter.

- 30 An unlikely, if auspicious, sidekick – Delbonnel having previously shot films such as *Amélie* (2001), *Across the Universe* (2007), and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2009).
- 31 The famous art critic and champion of modern art dreaded the possible lapsing of art into a coopted, kitsch form: an unauthentic art parading as such.
- 32 At no point should the reader assume that this author, in his severe stance against Mr. Putin and his politics, favours the regime or ideas of the other leaders of great powers and opponents, covert or overt, deeming all equally dangerous and ultimately anti-democratic. The embarrassing and unabashed flirtation between the president of the USA and a filmmaker such as Steven Spielberg (and Hollywood) is another case study which would rightly deserve inquiry, but this is not, obviously, the place to do so.
- 33 As mentioned earlier, the filmmaker was heavily beaten by hoodlums in the early 2000s, nearly losing his eyesight in the process. Sokurov himself claims that his eye problems were not related to this event at all, but to an injury sustained while shooting *Spiritual Voices*.

POSTSCRIPT

On the Poetics of Space in Sokurov's Tetralogy (Moloch/Taurus/The Sun/Faust)

Through the course of this book I have noted how, in all of his films that are invested explicitly with history, war and power (and especially *Mournful Insensitivity*, *Father and Son*, *Alexandra*, and, of course, the tetralogy), Alexander Sokurov has integrated scores of secondary characters spying or eavesdropping on the protagonists. The sole function of these 'secondary' vectors of vision seems to be a polarising of the perspective for a scene or two. This, in turn, has informed a very specific poetics of space, which is most fully integrated and developed in the tetralogy. In this short postscript, I would like to summarise the implications of this fascinating articulation of film grammar and point of view, which reflects upon and emphasises a new way of perceiving a story, as well as the *moral* stakes it entails.

Cinema has always thrived on the notion of the scopic impulse – the desire of any person to look at another person – and Sokurov knows this well. But cinema is also founded on conflict and ambiguity. In his distaste for traditionally sensationalist, causal, and 'banal' screenwriting, the director (along with Yuri Arabov) has always substituted traditional conflict as an engine of narration for more puzzling contradictions and paradoxes. Rarely disambiguated, these deep ambiguities serve highly original narratives, which we can interpret as interpolating more or less loosely connected 'fragments of fate', dialectically *sublated* into a greater whole and project.

Within the films of the tetralogy themselves, this combination of fragments of fate is held together, on the surface, by the dynamic nature of the *mise-en-scène* and the intricate network of characters; and on a more profound level, by the fundamental philosophical questions the films raise vis-à-vis human nature and history. What results is a dialogue between form and content, and the fundamental unifying theme of the

cycle (and, perhaps, of Sokurov's cinema as a whole), namely the human soul (and, as he defined it in interviews in 2013, male psychology and character).

Throughout the chapters on the first three instalments of the tetralogy, *Moloch*, *Taurus*, and *The Sun*, I have repeatedly illustrated how scores of secondary characters constantly look upon or peep at the spectacle constituted by the protagonists. In *Faust*, the main character's hubris serves as the force that polarises and draws the cinematic perspective astray. The harmonious construction of the universe is shattered in a world where characters reject the Divine or transcendent hypothesis, priests are easily corrupted, the Devil rubs himself lasciviously against statues of Christ or the Virgin Mary, fathers deny food to their children, and the latter hate their mothers.¹ This moral maze only rarely finds a central point of attention, which, arguably, could be the purity embodied by Margarete. But even she fails to freeze the kinetic drive of the film (expressing the protagonist's quest for knowledge) for too long. Once he has consummated his 'night of love' with her, Faust abandons the young woman, moving on with his quest and unquenchable thirst for an ineffable – and elusive – epiphany.

Upon multiple viewings of the tetralogy, we constantly discover new elements, new ventures, new reflections, because these films offer as many viewings and visions as points of views (points of entry, so to speak). This might be Sokurov's most significant achievement: to have yielded a cycle as complex as a novel by Dostoevsky or Thomas Mann, which, with their scores of characters, prove that story and history are a matter of perspective, converging towards and then jerking abruptly away from the 'central' figures. Perspective thus belongs to the filmmaker, the secondary characters, but also to the viewer, poised between contemplation and the critical inquiry of these disorientated realms, whose main force is to arrest one's attention, particularly when one has grown so accustomed to transparent 'historical' narratives. But history, distorted by various interpretations and ideologies, never ceases to appear as an opaque epistemological object. Its geometry is more or less fluid, and, like Sokurov's films, it invites new and repeated viewings, offering new experiences each time in return.

So it is that, next to the properly theological implications of this distinctly Sokurovian jumbled spatial and visual grammar, we find in *Faust* notions that had already featured prominently in the earlier instalments of the tetralogy: namely the questioning of privacy for historical figures, at the beginning of the disciplinary and surveillance-oriented society (and its implications vis-à-vis the cinematic and video camera apparatus). But in their tearing out of the traditional cinematic 'suture', these films also offer a new view onto the world and the human body, exploded and recomposed, as it were, in Sokurov's 'other life'.

The films thus doubly encounter the layers of the 'other life', foremost in their estranged, phantasmagorical worlds, climaxing in the barren and beautiful Icelandic landscape meant to represent the land of the damned souls in *Faust*. It is there, as the protagonist runs towards an endless, snowy, mountainous expanse, that the film and the tetralogy end on a rich and ambiguous note, from the base spiritual level of the fearful and hateful Hitler in *Moloch* to the clear metaphysical plane achieved in the (fictional) person of Faust. Power, Sokurov has argued many times, precludes greatness, and that is why the greatest, noblest character in the tetralogy is also its most

puny: Hirohito, who relinquishes absolute power and embraces life and love. Hitler is doomed, that much is certain, and Lenin is pathetic in his late and uncertain realisation of his own vanity. As for Faust, his flight and will to 'power' has less to do with the acquisition of absolute knowledge, as with a typical hubris: his constant will to probe the matter deeper, to further his quest of absolute(s). Yet the use he will make of this restless energy is uncertain, much like the hypothesis of love for which he seems as yet unprepared. And so, his soul is doomed to roam a limbo of sublime, endless landscapes and loneliness. But the film suggests that there might be a possibility of finding one's way through this vast expanse, under the condition that human knowledge, attuned to the necessities of the soul, will stay away from power and its implications: if the play ended with the voice from above (the Lord's, no doubt) redeeming the sins of Margarete, the film ends with the young woman's voice asking Faust where his quest leads him. The answer is the key to all human (and artistic) pursuits: 'further', refusing to stop, where the film's most modern aspect (its self-reflexive nature) shines forth like an eclipsed epiphany, the unreachable horizon of human pursuit.² But this ending also reflects a 'false path', that of a man who abandons simple happiness, leaves the woman he seduced behind, and is condemned to loneliness. The epiphany and promise of joy was within reach, and man chose to ignore it. For fear of death, no doubt – this human fear which capitalism has both tried to obfuscate and therefore instilled in the deepest recesses of our minds.

Leaving spiritual, moral, and metaphysical considerations aside altogether, and returning to a historicising reading of the tetralogy, we must elucidate the cycle as a whole in the light of the traumatic interpolation of Nazism and Stalinism, of the complex stakes and effects of World War II: *Moloch* initiated the cycle, addressing the drama at its manifest core, Adolf Hitler and his entourage, the demented group behind the ideology of Nazism; *Taurus* dealt with the unfulfilled promises of the Bolshevik revolution, and featured Stalin in a memorable scene, the scheming 'vulture', filled with affected courtesy and false affection which only emphasised the horror of his many misdeeds; and *The Sun* offered a perspective on the solutions embodied by Hirohito's choice to relinquish his divine status, and pointed at the ambiguous motivations behind the decision of General MacArthur to spare the emperor. *Faust*, even though not immediately related to the history of the twentieth century, paradoxically inscribes history both as the ultimate horizon of inquiry, as well as makes it subservient to a history of the human soul in which the metaphysical governs over considerations of the collective and the historical. It is a most complex dynamic, and Sokurov has explained that his cinema can be divided into the films of simple emotions and affects (such as *Mother and Son*) and those with profound and multi-layered implications (of which the tetralogy would serve as the prime example). And yet, here too the clarity of emotion remains full: in light of the four films, it becomes apparent that Sokurov and Arabov were working toward an elucidation of the history of the human soul and male character, but also toward what we may refer to as the soul, or essence, of history, under the auspices of the dramatic alliance and strife between German and Soviet powers. So too were they exploring the interpolations and cross-influences of German and Russian cultures as well as their influence on the fates of millions.

The unresolved and constant dance of the material/physical and the immaterial/metaphysical, the authors seem to imply, were already present in Sokurov's documentary about World War II, *And Nothing More*. Made with archival footage, sometimes quizzically integrating excerpts of television entertainment broadcasts into the more traditional wartime newsreel material, the film posited the indeterminacy of primacy between history and that which exceeds it. The documentary's subtitle, *Tertium non datur*, professed the absence of a third term (positing the West and capitalism against the Eastern bloc and Stalinism), which yet yielded a most unique idiom able at once to re-tell history from a new perspective (neither Lukácsian historical novel nor historic drama, as Jameson has shown), integrating the various former elements of the equation, and offering Sokurov's earliest ideological laboratory for what would become his complex interpretation of history and the gaze in the tetralogy. This, as much as any other factor, as the cycle's political unconscious, accounts for its aesthetic treatment of point of view, the formal expression of this dialectical tension in Sokurov between a space and time that is historical and referential, and a space and time of the a-historical, the mythical, a time and space of the soul, the spirit, or the unconscious. Not only a new way of envisaging the historical narrative, but also a properly unique expression of making human existence and its tragic yet inescapable absurdity somewhat redeemable through the workings of conscience – through the workings of the human soul.

In closing, let us summarise the major points of the discussion of the poetics of space in the tetralogy investigated throughout this book. Sokurov devises bizarre and unique articulations of gazes (clearly deliberately and consistently), which violate the rules of continuity editing, jumping over the 180 degree line, etc. The point-of-view shots are distributed among a score of narratorial figures: main characters (expressing their inner and outer perspectives, their wakeful thoughts and discussions and their dreams, nightmares, and reveries); secondary characters (extras usually unaccounted for in traditional cinema: soldiers, servants, etc.); and an 'id'-like gaze expressed through surveillance apparatuses (especially the rifle visor in *Moloch*, but also the inquisitive, suspicious, and often miscomprehending gaze of countless secondary characters, such as Faust's cook).

Having observed these articulations, we may deduce a series of provisional conclusions regarding Sokurov's play with traditional cinematic grammar and representation, beyond the filmmaker's own idiosyncratic philosophy and modernist approach to cinema:

- i) it constitutes a play with traditional cinematic representation, harking back to less uniformly (or universally) respected rules of the gaze in 1920s European cinema (sometimes breaking away from proper 'grammar' or literacy, even in the case of otherwise very capable directors – one thinks for instance of the famous examples in Georg Wilhelm Pabst's *Pandora's Box* (1929) or Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932)), coupled with a reflection on the ideological/discursive aspect of these gazes in Soviet films (Eisenstein, and particularly Pudovkin);
- ii) it is meant to replicate the dislocated, schizoid, or regressive minds of the characters and the universes in which they evolve;

- iii) it is analogous to the fragmentary nature of memory in Sokurov;
- iv) it is a critique of more traditional historical narratives (here I refer the reader back to the thesis laid out by Fredric Jameson in 2006, but apply it myself to *mise-en-scène*), proposing a new way to conceive of the genre;
- v) it is a humanistic/humanising process whereby narrative agency is distributed as evenly as possible, among staff of servants, etc;
- vi) it has to do with the opaque self-scrutinising of the characters (narcissism) and offers a meta-commentary on history as an attempt to produce a form of master narrative (struggling between a collectivity and individual gazes), ultimately defeated by a form of entropy.
- vii) lastly, it is, as Mikhail Iampolski (summoning the concept of *kairos*) suggests, an articulation of a worldview where lines of necessity meet with lines of destiny. The films' articulations of point of view thus express how Meaning is formed when thought, somewhat randomly, touches an otherwise indifferent matter – hence the obscure *telos* leading up to *Faust*.

Sokurov, however, has deftly argued that the tetralogy is not so much a straight line as it is a circle, which revolves around the same question (namely, for him, the consequences of male psychology, character, and will to power in all aspects of life). Picking up on the director's own words, we can use this vision of circularity in relation to history. The latter, according to Sokurov, always goes in circle, a motif found time and time again in his cinema, from the wheel that the workers operate to pull a boat in *Lonely Voice of Man* to the evocation of history as a circular pattern of repetition in the closing narration of *Reading from the Book of Blockade*.³ But the circle is also to be found as an expression of the ambiguous in-directionality of power, as evoked in the circular dead-end of Hitler's whirligig movement in *Moloch* and *Faust*'s general implications vis-à-vis dialectics and capitalism. In *Moloch* and *Taurus*, the protagonists, while admittedly atheists, address God in confused or angry terms. This aporia is what keeps them prisoners of their own vicious circles.

In my opinion, this seemingly trite example sums up Sokurov's hierarchical order and his subservience to the transcendental – his existential humility in front of the Creator – as much as it does his ethos of resistance toward what he calls 'modernity' – whose novelty can be rendered extremely relative in view of a profound knowledge of history, or, if one is inclined to endow Sokurov with such skills, with the gift of foresight or hindsight, since history, in his own worldview, is indeed circular, bound to repeat itself, over and over again, much as the mistakes of every character in the tetralogy, and from which we are invited to learn the indirect and manifold teachings.

Notes

- 1 We recognise here the binomial familial pattern identified and articulated by Mikhail Iampolski (2011): although references are made to the other (dead) parent, Faust only has his father, and Margarete only her mother. But in this case, the implica-

tions are quite different from the 'retreat into the pre-Oedipal Symbolic' realm that Lampolski sees in films such as *Mother and Son* and *Father and Son*.

- 2 Jameson asks the question in terms of survival of an almost extinct tradition of cinematic modernism: 'Is Sokurov ... the last modernist, the last great modernist auteur? If so, he is generationally very belated indeed' (2006: 10). Jameson points out two fundamental aspects of Sokurov's films in this context: 'his untimeliness, and also – what Sokurov has in common with all these artists and what would seem to account for our lingering impression of a modernist survival – his commitment to the idea of "great art" and its autonomy' (ibid.).
- 3 'Прошлое всегда крутится вокруг нас в спирали – то ближе, то дальше. Но всегда рядом' ('The past always spins around us in a spiral pattern – closer, then farther, but always there') (Sokurov, in the voice-over to *Reading from the Book of Blockade*).

CONCLUSION

The (Im)Possibility of an Island

The motif of the island inhabits the life and works of Alexander Sokurov, from the name of his website and the television show he hosted in the late 1990s (*Остров Сокурова*; 'Sokurov's island'), to his love of Japan, his distinctive physical appearance, idiosyncratic personality, and the unique, insular quality of his cinema.

In 2009, Sokurov published a book in Italy, released in Russia in 2012. The book, whose title (*В центре океана/V tsentre okeana*; 'In the Centre of the Ocean') also speaks to the insular motif, is straightforward in expression, and extremely deep and deceptively simple in content. This poetic memoir (at times one is strongly reminded of Ingmar Bergman's *Magic Lantern*), which includes short scripts, fragments of correspondence and entries from the director's diaries, strikes us, as Paola Volkova underlines in the Russian edition's post-face, as an internal monologue – a monologue of the artist with and about himself and, maybe more importantly, with posterity. Sokurov indulges in this exercise with skill, conveying his deep sense of seriousness and asceticism while also coming forth as a brilliant sensualist, and combining the perceptive insight of an old and experienced person with the enthusiasm and opinionated stances of a child. Prime emotions and essentialist statements thus coexist with deep and grim philosophical considerations: Sokurov's voice, rich with allusions and pregnant with a deepest sensibility, remains the same from screen to page, and resonates in our heads as powerfully as his narrations do in his many cinematic elegies and *Russian Ark*. *V tsentre okeana* leaves the (Western) reader elated and exhausted, endeared and irritated.

The book not only draws on a variety of written media and sources, it also covers a very wide variety of topics – reflecting once again the director's unique ability to integrate disparity into an organic whole. One of the poetic tools unifying this whole is the importance of the sense of smell – so eminently connected to memory, yet so

difficult to express in cinema – which the author summons in many passages of the book. Sokurov's evocation of these nostalgic and heightened synaesthetic moments – for instance, the smell of lilac in Moscow or jasmine in Japan – ushers the reader into a private and intimate universe of recollection and revelations, in which more mundane and public themes such as friends, family, love, and art, but also power, human relations, the military, or even death and homosexuality, are all tackled. It is a work of great earnestness and poignant immediacy, where Sokurov can comfortably clarify his position on certain key, recurrent themes. His well-known disparaging position on cinema (and the film world) is restated: filmmaking is merely a craft, a remarkable craft maybe, but not on par with the other great arts (literature, painting, music); the history of cinema carries some very dark and dangerous implications – not least a closeness to totalitarianism which precludes its greatness. As for the great names of the Seventh Art, such as Sergey Eisenstein, Andrey Tarkovsky, Michelangelo Antonioni, or Ingmar Bergman, Sokurov takes the opportunity to distance himself from them as potential sources of influence.¹ Cinema, Sokurov explains, is a very young, immature form of expression, and all directors remain students groping in the dark, trying to achieve some form of artistic expression, trying to found the language of this medium.

Naturally, moral questions, such as that of the artist's conscience, remain at the core of the book. 'The question of questions' is the title of a short chapter ('Вопрос вопросов'), in which Sokurov asks: 'Where to find strength, in order to live according to honour?' ('жить сообразно чести') (2012: 18). One of the director's great and simple teachings is contained within these few pages: the importance of finding a clear and simple answer to one's questionings of the soul.

The book features several scripts, in literary form, including that of *Alexandra*. Reading it, one gains a better insight into the proper and nobler implications of the film's story: deprived of its suspiciously transparent cinematic form, the narrative allows the reader to focus on the senses, on the community of human beings – irrespective of their national or ethnic belonging – and the tragedy of war, rather than on an exoneration of the Russian military and a paternalistic stance by its elderly Russian protagonist. Perhaps this beautiful story of lonely souls should have always remained in written form alone. From *Alexandra*, and its memorable female characters, Sokurov elaborates at length upon his admiration of women in several passages. But the chapter is followed immediately by a mysterious fairy tale, 'A Fossile' ('Ископаемое'), about two young men living in a forest, their grotesque and tragic encounter with a monstrous bird, and its bloody aftermath. In closing this chapter, Sokurov restates one of his most important anthems: 'Lucky those close to us, who died before us...'

The middle section of the book is dedicated to Sokurov's elegies – *Elegy from Russia*, *Elegy of a Voyage*, *Oriental Elegy* (where the smell of jasmine replaces that of Russian lilac, and where the Japanese woman cited in *Alexandra*'s most problematic passage is referenced), *A Humble Life*, as well as entries from Sokurov's diaries dating from the period when he set out to shoot *dolce*... There, the simple narrative/descriptive dimension gives way to more personal insights, especially powerful when the director shares his stark indictment of war:

I hate war, any type of war. War is merely a disgusting monument to human stupidity, malice, idleness. War begins when the people who have to think (people in power) cease to do so, or do not know how to do it, or do not want to do it, that is – they *think* they don't. Or when they are revoltingly vicious. It's sad, but already many millions of people do not want or do not know how to think any more. [...] Military History never smells of feats, only of carrion. (2012: 177; translation mine)²

The question of morality and history recurs throughout the book, like a mournful plea for more humanism. The central preoccupation, here, is unquestionably the fate of the human being. Even though we were all created by God, Sokurov tells us, humans are the measure of all things that we, as humans, can perceive or reach. Problems between people have less to do with a shortage of love – more often than not they are due to an excess of love, and our inability to deal with it. This well-known motif had already been presented with striking clarity in *Lonely Voice of Man*. And yet, Sokurov says: what a human being needs is simply another human being. In that respect, the tale of *dolce...* is a particularly poignant one, where a Japanese widow, having lost her mind, lives with her mentally retarded daughter, their tragedy as much a product of the horrors of World War II as of an excessive, intolerable *tenderness...*

Ending his revisiting of the elegy cycle, Sokurov moves on to a selection of entries from his working diaries. He describes the photographs in his study, which feature close friends and collaborators: his beloved mother, his screenwriter Yuri Arabov,³ his former mentor at Gorky television, Yuri Besspalov (whom he holds to be his only teacher in cinema), Andrzej Wajda ('the master of masters' (2012: 193)), Alla Osipenko, Andrey Tarkovsky, Boris Yeltsin, Pope John-Paul II, but also Lev Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Fyodor Tyutchev, Robert Bresson and Dmitri Shostakovich as a child.

It is here also, in the intimacy of his study, from his working diaries, that Sokurov celebrates the lives and works of two of the greatest 'craftsmen' of cinema, Antonioni and Bergman.⁴ He also lays out his ideology about women, and warns against the fraught nature of cinema as a false religion, indicting the dangers of violence and male psychology, as well as the hubris of men to try and 'synthesize feminine nature, [and thereby] nature itself'. This question, Sokurov tells us, is worthy of Rembrandt himself (2012: 212).⁵

The chapter follows with a combination of very critical considerations of a rather pedestrian kind (the corruption of cultural politics even at the level of prestigious art film festivals, the dead-end cinema finds itself in because of its entanglements with money and politics) with fascinating philosophical ones (about space and time, particularly). The text then segues into a summary of Sokurov's theses from his teaching at the Faculty of Philosophy in St. Petersburg in the late 1990s, where questions of creation, talent, and the human soul are at the forefront, and where Sokurov ends with this consideration: while artists can be great philosophers; philosophers seldom, if ever, are artists. But the artist is blind, his life is a curse, while the philosopher is clairvoyant. The director then proceeds, in very broad brushstrokes, to align classical form as the favoured medium of totalitarian regimes, and modernism as that of democracies. In

closing, somewhat ironically, he adds: 'But this, you understand, is just a hypothesis'; 'Но это, как вы понимаете, скорее гипотеза' (2012: 257).

Following a short chapter where he comments upon Italian pictures sent to him by an acquaintance, Sokurov restates his rejection of violence in his long chapter about Eisenstein ('Руки. Размышления о профессиональном развитии'; 'Hands: Reflections on One's Professional Evolution'). Starting with violent images in *Strike!* and looking at Eisenstein's erotic drawings, Sokurov discusses the connection between power, violence, and (homo)sexuality. Same-sex relationships, 'hyped out of nothing' (раздута из ничего (2012: 273)), will never prevail over heterosexual love, Sokurov writes, before proceeding with yet another passage idealising women, whose universality, vulnerability, and unfairly attributed secondary place in relationship to male nature inevitably generate conflict.⁶ Later, the director returns to the theme of homosexuality, asserting once again the secondary, incomplete nature of the flesh vis-à-vis matters of the soul: 'I do not understand why there is such a special emphasis on the theme of homosexual love. Is love itself, whatever its orientation, not a far greater problem?' (2012: 290)⁷

Returning to the chapter's central subject, Sokurov states that all of Eisenstein's characters, whether male or female, are essentially male because of their aggression, their violence. And since his art is devoid of femininity, it is also devoid of soul. But the length which Sokurov dedicates to the dimension of violence and aggression (the image of the child suspended above the void in *Strike!*) in Eisenstein speaks of his preoccupation, and perhaps fascination, with the issue, returning us to the entanglement of power, violence, and homoeroticism, and their simultaneous presence in and rejection by the director, analysed in chapter twelve. 'Руки' seems less problematic in its elucidation of the ebullient nature of Eisenstein's erotic drawings, in which Sokurov sees the artist's desire for freedom, which he never enjoyed. The title of this section then becomes clear. The great Soviet master always had his hands tied: he was a prisoner of both the totalitarian regime he lived and worked in, as much as of his own rejection of the historical, pre-revolutionary tradition. Cinema's hubris is exposed: its contempt for the past, its will to perpetual and radical change, as expressed in the practice of montage. In turn, this explains Sokurov's own professed dislike of montage, its brutality, and its ideological implications.

The unenthusiastic tone vis-à-vis cinema which Sokurov propagates through his book hardly abates in the final chapter entitled 'My Place in Cinema' ('Мое место в кино'), where Sokurov restates, once again, that cinema is merely his job, and that he harbours no particular love for the medium – quite the opposite.

While it may seem to the reader that *V tsentre okeana* is an overly inflated affair, it is important to restate the genuine feeling of humility which emerges, beyond the awareness of the director's own importance, from this internal monologue, this sad but beautiful soliloquy that also becomes a dialogue with us, more importantly than with eternity and posterity. Sokurov reminds us that we do not need the latter, but that without our fellow humans, we are nothing. In the process, the book confirms not only that the director's is an outstanding and resilient voice going against most prevalent discourse, but also that he applies the same method of folding disparate elements

together and imposing this new idiom in his book as he has done in his cinema, with light, like the scent of lilac, seeping through the seams, the interstices, and suffusing us with sensation and emotion.

Sokurov's entire oeuvre is thus constructed like this body, this island, or an archipelago, perhaps, where interconnectedness is the key term, even if at times the various isles are only associated by a distant memory, a fleeting smell, a resilient nostalgic thought. As mentioned in the postscript, the idea of circular time is very important to Sokurov, as much as the notion of film cycles. Yet it is a most unique and personal conception of the cinematic cycle that the director has devised, who has always done things on the margins of the mainstream, 'para-doxically'. The image of the island is thus a most becoming one, bespeaking both solitude and sadness, but also the proud beauty of what stands above the indiscriminate and seemingly endless expanse of water, and which can serve as a haven for the lost.

And yet, as John Donne taught us, no man is an island.⁸

As this book set out to demonstrate, Alexander Sokurov is as much a unique and full individual as he is a paradoxical figure, a man of conflict and of dialogue, an artist of international scope and a quintessentially Russian man. Throughout his career, he has been the maverick close to power and the 'underground state filmmaker', embracing the roles of both the *auteur maudit* and the official director. He has been both inside and outside the system, a player and an outcast, a beacon and a marginal figure, and, most surprisingly, he has managed to be both (at least in how he has been perceived) through the latter part of his career.

This paradoxical, dual, contradictory nature is coextensive with Sokurov's medium of (disgruntled) choice: cinema, as was one of Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du Cinéma's* central theses, is the realm of the constant conflict between the image and the narrative. But while Sokurov's characters – and he too, no doubt – yearn for a prelapsarian Utopia mediated through the trope of the old photograph or work of art, his cinema does actually realise part of Godard's own utopia, that is, it offers a genuine autonomy and power of evocation to the image without the *a-priori* of the plot.⁹ In Sokurov, plot and narrative are sublated and incorporated within a broader philosophical and historical regime (something his background as a historian no doubt informs), expressed in hazy, distorted, remediated images that signify both past and present. This is not to say that plot or script are of no importance – quite the opposite. His collaboration with Yuri Arabov has laid the groundwork for a highly developed philosophy that will continue to yield rich, evocative, profound representations. Once this has been realised, however, the plot itself becomes secondary, a tool that has been superseded – which explains the great liberties that Sokurov often takes with rewriting or re-inventing the plot of his films while on the set, sometimes to his screenwriter's avowed dismay.¹⁰ If he repeatedly states his dislike of cinema and discontent with the medium, he is nevertheless a prolific practitioner of it, and one could be at a loss trying to elucidate this conundrum, lest we reach for the recesses of compulsion and masochism as central traits of character – an unlikely and most undesirable course.

In October 2013, Sokurov began shooting his latest feature film, *Francophonie*, set mostly in the Louvre. It is another fictionalised documentary involving his beloved

museum world, this time about Jacques Jaujard, director of French National Museums during World War II, and his counterpart from the Nazi Kunstschutz, Count Wolff-Metternich. As often with Sokurov, the film is being made with German support, apparently with substantial help from none other than Wolff-Metternich's family. This happens just a couple months before the release of a Hollywood film with a very similar theme, George Clooney's star-studded *The Monuments Men*, which the film blurb on the Internet Movie Database describes as follows: 'In a race against time, a crew of art historians and museum curators unite to recover renowned works of art stolen by Nazis before Hitler destroys them.' We can freely assume that this film will not shed the most flattering light on French-Nazi *ententes cordiales* during that period. And it is also difficult to believe that the production of both films at almost exactly the same time, and in this order, has to do with mere coincidence.

Sokurov, however, claimed that the project is entirely his own, and in no way a commission. Let us not elaborate any further on this. Cinema has always been an expensive medium and the livelihood of all artist demands its own arrangements. If Sokurov is no island and his cinema did not always manage to avoid some compromises, what remains – the oeuvre – commands, by and large, our renewed attention and respect, and each of his new projects will be awaited with curiosity. Also, whatever the ideological stakes, there is little doubt that Clooney's film will pale in comparison with Sokurov's, just as *Emperor* was thwarted by *The Sun's* accomplishments. The rest, no doubt, will remain a matter of speculation to us, ordinary people.

The rich ambiguities, the impossibility of defining or pinpointing Sokurov, his paradoxical *mystery*, is what accounts for his power of fascination, and for the appeal and depth of his cinema. I hope that this book will have amounted to this conclusion at least: that no man, indeed, is an island, but that, as far as the world of cinema is concerned, Alexander Nikolaevich Sokurov has come as close as is *humanly* possible.

Notes

- 1 Only Alexander Dovzhenko, Robert Bresson, and Andrzej Wajda seem to deserve a genuinely praiseful assessment – and only in passing – in the book.
- 2 'Войну ненавижу, ненавижу любую войну, война – это лишь отвратительный памятник человеческой Глупости, Злобе, Лени. Война начинается, когда люди, которые должны думать (люди, наделенные властью), перестают это делать, или не умеют это делать, или не хотят это делать, то есть – думать' не хотят. Или когда они отвратительно порочный. Грустно, но не хотят или не умеют думать уже И многие миллионы [...] от военной истории всегда пахнет не подвигом, а мертвечиной.'
- 3 'Yura is by nature a completely different man [from me]. He likes Hollywood cinema, rock music, which I cannot stand. He is a sober man, well-educated and uniquely gifted'; Юра по природе человек во многом другой. Ему нравится голливудское кино, рок-музыка, которую я не переношу. Он человек трезвый, хорошо образованны И уникально талантливы.

- 4 'Бергман все же пытается проникнуть внутрь яйца... Антониони действует совсем бескровно – ходи вокруг яйца, наблюдает за ним'; 'Bergman is trying to get inside the egg... Antonioni operates without drawing blood, he goes around the egg, he watches it' (2012: 214)
- 5 'Когда мужчина начинает создавать произведение искусства и в его сюжет или в композицию попадет хотя бы маленькая женская ручка, мужчину перестает интересовать Бог и всякие там сознательность и целеустремленность. Начинается хаос борьбы с так называемую красоту, совершенство. Женское тело, запах женщины вытесняют, изгоняют из произведения искусства Бога. Правда, то из художников, кто умнее, пытаются спрятаться за написание, как им кажется, одухотворенности состояния женского тела, превращая его в персонаж, – вручают ей пышнотелого младенца и предлагают вечно бродит по искусству с этим несостоявшимся ангелом на уставших руках. Но способен ли мужчина синтезировать женскую суть, самую природу? Вот это вопрос даже для Рембрандта...'
- 6 сама универсальность женской природы и уязвимость, второстепенность по отношению к мужской природе уже создает конфликтную зону.
- 7 Я не понимаю, в чем особи акцент темы гомосексуальной любви. Разве сама любовь, как угодно ориентированная, нет большая проблема?
- 8 Aleksei Jankowski used Donne's poem as the 'monument to the dead' in his exhibit 'The Brave Ones' in Brussels, which opened on 11 September 2013, and is dedicated to the fates of artworks and objects stolen, destroyed and misplaced during the Iraq War.
- 9 As was the case for objects in Hitchcock, in Godard's 'Le contrôle de l'univers' section from *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*.
- 10 See Arabov (2011: 203–6), 'The Director Becomes Author'.

POSTFACE

Alexander Sokurov came to Brussels in September 2013, not only for the Belgian premiere of *Faust* and the retrospective of his oeuvre (in a variety of venues in Brussels, including the Royal Film Archive), but also in order to open Aleksei Jankowski's exhibition 'Les Courageux' ('The Brave Ones').¹ I had the honour to serve as Sokurov's interpreter with the press and the public during his visit in my hometown. It was wonderful to be able to spend time with him, to clarify certain points and to elicit his comments during our interview together, eight years after the first one – thus symbolically and germanely bookending my work on his cinema. It was especially important to come closer to the man, and to discover more about his unique personality, which blends an acute, penetrating, and refined intelligence with a form of rough simplicity. Sokurov, this extraordinary artist and mind, combines the qualities of a simple, uneducated Russian man with the suave sophistication of a socialite: he is at times cheerful and affectionate, at others dour and mournful. He can be as cordial and agreeable as he can be irritable and blunt. The sensitivity and insecurity he conveys while visiting unfamiliar places stands in stark contrast with the indomitable power of his mind and ideas. All speak to his vital strength, sensitivity, and generosity, and I am convinced that it is a total misunderstanding to celebrate the man for his artistic prowess while criticising him for his conservative views – or, which is the same, pretending they don't exist. When I met with Andrzej Wajda in the summer of 2008, he pointed to what many other observers had previously remarked: Sokurov's unique, rare way of lecturing, filled with ideas and truths that are anything but out of place in our period of philosophical carefulness and political correctness. Yet, in his assertiveness, Sokurov actually announces, as a quintessentially Russian artist convinced of the importance of his mission, and at the cost of an occasionally sententious disposition, an age when,

perhaps, humanity will not be given the benefit of the doubt, or of critical thought, anymore.

Likewise, it is clumsily mistaken to expect Sokurov to be more hospitable to the homoerotic dimension that seeps through every pore of his cinema. His reluctance to address the subject goes hand in hand with its overwhelming presence: it is the whole of Sokurov's life experience, personality, tastes, and opinions, in all their contradictions, conflicting drives, and energies, which alone can inform and account for the abundance – aesthetic, philosophical, psychological, sensorial – to be found in his output. The latter forms a tightly-knit ensemble whose hazy, soft images, hybrid in origin and often seemingly evanescent, nevertheless compose a most cogent tapestry.² This tapestry, it has to be said, is as strange, unpredictable, recognisable, unique, immersive, and alienating as the man himself.

I realise that this book may have yielded an image of Alexander Sokurov (namely, that the director is indeed an apt cultural politician and disingenuous individual parading under the guise of the hounded 'artiste maudit' only to better serve and advance his agenda) that will contradict the thesis that I defend in the present postface: that Sokurov is overall a rather uncompromising, decent figure. While I have accumulated much evidence to undermine the latter, to favour the former hypothesis would be most unfair. First, any filmmaker vying for national relevance and international recognition (especially in a country such as Russia) needs to be an apt politician and diplomat, one way or another. And this is particularly true of directors with uncompromising artistic visions, whose cinema is anything but commercial. Robert Bresson, Sokurov's favourite director, had to spend most of his career chasing funds from wealthy private investors. It was a difficult and unpleasant undertaking, but it was done in the name of a vision, which has given us some of the greatest films ever made. Things are no different with Sokurov. To be sure, he benefits from the devotion of some faithful collaborators, and must hone in on the networks of producers and investors for each new project. But I also know that he has often refused to make compromises to his films, jeopardising some future collaborations in the process. As my friend Sergey Dreyden once put it, 'you can reproach a lot of things to Sokurov, but one thing is for certain: he is a whole personality' – his artistic integrity can scarcely be questioned by anyone.

Secondly, and adding on the previous remark, I have met a fair share of major directors and artists in my life, and can easily say that Sokurov is among the most compelling and earnest ones – almost to a fault, at times. Regardless of how difficult he can be in the eyes of some, regardless of the compromises we can see in films such as *Russian Ark* or *Alexandra*, Sokurov emerges as a major positive and laudable figure, not only as an artist (that much is quite obvious), but also as a public figure. Regardless of his capacity to grate our Western sensibilities with his alignment with a Grand Russian ethos, he has also shown courage and boldness in criticising aspects of Russia's political life. Even if he claimed, in March 2013, to put an end to his civic actions in St. Petersburg (following the furthering of real estate projects defacing St. Petersburg and the closing down of Lenfilm), he has played such an important role in this vicinity that it is certain that his efforts for the preservation of the arts and the patrimony of the past, as

well as his commitment to promote ambitious and courageous art, will continue into the future. As for his position on major geopolitical issues such as the tension between the West and Russia over Syria, the director has stood by his rhetorical guns. However unfortunate his alignment with Putin's agenda in this instance, Sokurov can scarcely be criticised in his defence of a peaceful resolution of this conflict – or any other one, for that matter. Ambiguities in the fraught intersection of arts and politics will remain, as they always have. And while they are always inseparable to a certain extent, we are dealing here with an oeuvre rather than its author's public opinions. In this sense, and however one looks at it, Sokurov's artistic legacy resembles not an industrial back lot littered with governmental refuse and toxic waste, but a beautiful and strange island – that much is quite certain.

What remains to be addressed, then? The 'unmaskings' of this book, and its many contradictions certainly speak as much to my personal complexes and obsessions (as any book does) as they do to Sokurov's oeuvre, which simply cannot be reduced to a single analysis, and certainly not to this one. I hope, however, that in spite of its shortcomings, this book will have voiced what many thought but preferred not to tackle; celebrated the author for his unique talent and personality; and provided useful information and an original perspective on this fascinating and endlessly rich filmography.

Notes

- 1 'Les Courageux' deals with the destruction and loss of art patrimony following the war in Iraq, and the people who tried to oppose the looting. Sokurov also narrates Jankowski's film *We Need Happiness* (2011). It is important to underline, however, that Sokurov himself did not direct this documentary, unlike what is indicated in certain sources, including the International Movie Data Base.
- 2 Sylvie Rollet expresses a very similar view: 'All is happening as if thus was constituted a great chain of fragile images, threatened with disappearance, each unique and which, however, brought together, look alike, picturing something like a common world' (2009: 72; translation mine).

ADDENDUM A

*Interview with Alexander Sokurov, 2005*¹

In July 2005, while staying in St. Petersburg, I had the privilege of meeting with Alexander Sokurov. A visionary figure, Sokurov is a man of great sensitivity and generosity, whose gentleness and existential solitude have prompted a beautifully contemplative oeuvre. In this interview I was able to elicit his comments on the formal aspects of his cinema and also its major concepts, such as film as art and its debt to the higher arts of painting, music, and literature; the concept of the other life; and montage and the instance of narration and focalisation in his films.

Jeremi Szaniawski: *The Sun* (2005), your latest film, is a remarkable study of the critical hours that preceded Hirohito's surrender. The film was conceived in troubled conditions and did not receive its anticipated acclaim at the Berlin Festival, where you did, nonetheless, and uncommonly for you, remain until the very end of the award ceremony before leaving empty-handed.² Do you consider this an injustice?

Alexander Sokurov: It was a painful episode for me, one I don't wish to talk about.

JS: One knows your admiration for Bergman, Eisenstein, Griffith, Fellini, Flaherty. What about Dreyer?

AS: His films were introduced to me by Mikhail Iampolski, whom you probably know, one of the great intellectuals and critics of Russian cinema, who's had a tremendous influence on me and who has, alas, left Russia.³ I miss him greatly. Yes, Dreyer was a great artist and was one of those who developed and influenced what is called innovative cinema these days. All of that was already present in Dreyer's cinema. The same applies for authors, such as Jean Vigo with *L'Atalante* (1934) and Alexander Dovzhenko in his own time. These directors invented their own means of expression

for the cinema they were developing at the same time. The same can be said of Tarkovsky. So, yes, undoubtedly Dreyer is a great and indispensable figure of cinema.

JS: A striking feature of your cinema is the dimension of de-realised realism, an eminently oneiric dimension. For this reason I evoke Dreyer. As far as I am concerned, I see more than one similarity between the oneiric universe of Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932) and the worlds that you depict in your films, notably in *The Stone* (1992) or, in a different way, the fogs and phantomlike figures in *Taurus* (2000) and the hallucinated moments in *Moloch* (1999).

AS: Yes, I have indeed seen *Vampyr*, but I want to be very clear here: the fact of the matter is that the films I've seen have not had a particularly strong effect on me. They haven't had a great influence on my work. I never especially liked cinema, and I don't particularly like it any more now; I like it perhaps even less. For me, the strongest sensations in the arts are always produced by painting and symphonic music. No aspect of my films, visual or otherwise, come from cinematic influences; they come instead through the influence of these two art forms. I think that cinema, in the contemporary sense, is quite backwards and evolves only very minimally. On the plane of technique and dramaturgy, however, it does evolve. And only under the influence of American scriptwriting.

JS: Really? How do you evaluate American cinema?

AS: For me, American cinema has very good screenwriters, average film-makers, and generally mediocre actors. But American screenwriters have very good ideas.

JS: You are probably referring to their writing techniques, which are very codified and institutionalised: books with 'screenwriting recipes', script doctoring workshops, and so on.

AS: Yes, it's remarkable. If American scripts fell into the hands of Russian or, say, European filmmakers, it would make for exemplary work, including films like *Star Wars* (1977). Think of Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) and its American equivalent (2002). The difference has nothing to do with chance. It's a genetic difference. Cinema as art is not an American idea, it's not American cinema's destiny. It's the old world that carries this idea of art, and the new world has a harder time with this ancient conception, consequently producing an art that is less compelling because its genesis and its history aren't as fundamental. Because there is no history there in the genetic sense of the term.

JS: To change the subject, I know that you are about to stage an opera very soon (Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (2007)). This is your first incursion into this field, at the ripe age of fifty plus years. Why now?

AS: This is true, I have never done any theatre or opera before. I came close to it with my documentary on Mozart's *Requiem*, but that was it. It's the experience on *The Sun* that really gave me the desire to work with stage actors.

JS: Yes, I know that you were very happy with the work of Issei Ogata, the actor who plays Hirohito and who does indeed come from the theater. Their methods suit you, correct?

AS: Yes, they are remarkable actors, very sensitive, very sharp. Their personal relationships vis-à-vis the filmmaker are very different from what you generally encounter

in the West. They have a particular way of listening; they don't think too highly of themselves. Most of all, they are not egotists or self-absorbed or filled with ill-placed pride. For them, it is first of all very important to embody an idea. They go so far as to forget their own selves. This is unthinkable in Russian or Western cinema, where the spectacle is more important than the idea, where the actors seem to be looking at themselves from a distance because of the way Stanislavsky's method has evolved, giving them this self-centered approach. What impressed me and surprised me is the great mastery of the Japanese actors. They are peerless artists, great professionals. The actor who plays Hirohito has a great inner strength. And working with him has given me unprecedented satisfaction. Each time I would ask for something, I did not have to give too many explanations. He would ask, albeit rarely, one question or another, always very concise, and then he would perform, and the way he did it was exactly what I had wished for. It was more than a relationship of listening. It was a relationship of mutual understanding.

JS: To come back to what you were saying about contemporary American screenwriters, I must confess that my feeling is that everything has become terribly predictable. Once the first ten minutes of the film are over, in accordance with rules taken from 'cinematic cookbooks', you can predict everything that's going to happen. And I am talking here about the best films only, those that do follow a certain structure and yet avoid the nonsense that generally characterises the blockbusters. Your cinema eludes this kind of predictability. To my mind, Western cinema and the American one in particular lack, by contrast, a soul, spontaneity – artistic vision, in short.

AS: Yes, I agree with you in general, but we are talking strictly about screenwriting techniques. As an art, American cinema has existed really for a very short period of time. In the thirties, there were mostly European filmmakers; then came Orson Welles; and then the sixties, when this work had a great influence and also a strong connection to drama. And in the presence of a very powerful American theatre, I can see that filmmakers nonetheless don't take the responsibility that should be theirs to work with this important tradition of American dramaturgy. It's a cinema that is totally subordinated to economic and commercial imperatives.

JS: As early as the twenties, Jean Epstein was comparing cinema to a two-hearted creature: one tends toward art, the other toward commerce.

AS: Of course. It's the nation that makes the cinema. The nature of American cinema, the whole culture, all is impregnated with the cult of money.

JS: Whose banknote reads 'In God We Trust'.

AS: Naturally.

JS: The reification imposed on the work of art in a context of late capitalism does not leave much room anyway for an artistic cinema, one without commercial ambitions. This makes me say that your cinema joins or founds, even, a tendency toward the resurgence of modernism. I am thinking about your filiation with the great modernists like Bergman and Fellini, but also *Mournful Insensitivity* (1982), a film somewhat postmodern formally but modernist in content, and one that reminds me of the best Godard. Your cinema provokes a feeling of originality, of novelty, of the unusual that sends me straight to Max Ernst, who said that the proper role of

art, and modern art *a fortiori*, was the renewal of the feelings of novelty we experience in our childhood. In your films, not just the endings but every frame even is unpredictable, and your work is anything but banal. Besides, one can point to the importance of concepts such as conscience, the absolute, your attachment to deep, interiorised, philosophical, or even mystical cinema, reinforced by a distanced realism that I evoked earlier on – an *Unheimlichkeit* – through your use of distorting filters and your surprising shot angles. It's a cinema that cannot be taken straightforwardly; it needs to be worked on, explored in its philosophical and overdetermined content. I also see, in the element of nature and the sublime in your films, the inheritance of a romanticism purportedly eliminated by the advent of postmodernity. The beauty of nature goes beyond the limits of consciousness and provokes a feeling of stupor and contemplation, verging sometimes on madness. Hence, in your films we have this unpredictable aspect; we have actions that are not subordinated to given dramatic rules. Moreover, thematically one finds in your films certain traits typical of modernism: alienation, solitude, incommunicability, the search for transcendence, revelation. This, of course, remains just my own personal opinion. How do you view all this? And how do you position yourself in relationship to this movement of a return to 'another' modernism?

AS: This is a very difficult question. First, I try to make films knowing what I have to do. As I would put it, the way I proceed is the following: I do what I have been thinking about, reflecting on for a long time, or I do what provokes in me a sensation, a very deep and concrete preoccupation. In this sense, the tetralogy (*Moloch*, *Taurus*, *The Sun*, *Faust*) is something I have been thinking about for a very long time. Meanwhile, films such as *The Stone*, *Mother and Son* (1997), and *Father and Son* (2003) call for a whole set of emotions that seem to me to be very simple, but fundamental and personal. This is my feeling. So, to claim that by doing a film I interrogate myself about a system or a current within which I would inscribe myself – no, it's not a fundamental preoccupation. It was very unpleasant for me for instance to learn that Lars von Trier had come up with the Dogme 95 manifesto: the theory, the Vow of Chastity, and all the rest. It goes without saying that this group was made of serious and competent filmmakers. But I could not help thinking about the Soviet period, of socialist realism and the denunciations, the defamatory speeches and condemnations of filmmakers working in the twenties. This is a path that leads nowhere.

JS: Don't you think that there is, in the Dogme 95 manifesto, a great dose of irony that was lacking in the socialist realist manifestoes? That it was a skillfully led *coup de pub* that, on top of everything, spotlighted new ways of making cinema 'differently', to find a new way?

AS: If the author has a strong personality, he will find his own truth and his own inner voice. If he cannot formulate himself entirely, he will seek refuge in manifestoes or systems. I can tell you that films such as *Mother and Son*, *Father and Son*, and *The Stone* are films about excess. About love, for instance, when there's so much of it that you pass over into excess. This is one point of view. But on the other hand one could claim that these films talk about death, about so many other things. So many difficult feelings, frightening, yet human feelings. So, to say that I consider myself or feel

like the part of an aesthetic current – no, of course not. When I solve the question of construction, of the dramatic structure of my film, I make recourse to one voice only, one inner principle. And this is neither a dramaturgic principle nor a system; it's not even an aesthetic principle. I realise that each film is totally different. My inner mission, my task, is to make each of my films different from one another, to not do one and the same thing all the time. It's a question of founding, of fundamental principle. All must be varied, all must be different. But, in the end, the most important to me, and the reason why I do each one of my films, is the *denouement*. And I build my films like an inverted pyramid. Because the end must be open, wide, full of meanings. The beginning is narrow and the end full of meanings, of openings.

JS: Do we find a certain truth in art here?

AS: You find all sorts of things. Anyway, you should find all sorts of things here. In general, when I receive a script, I don't find that open ending, this conclusion. It's not on the page, it cannot be expressed with words. And it is my goal, as a filmmaker, to bring this ending, this opening, this overture. And I strive to find and to learn this overture, this grandeur that is found, precisely, in painting. In El Greco, in Rembrandt. Ask yourself about their finalities, their themes. Take Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* (1662). What is it? Is this the illustration of a biblical parable? Of course not. Not only. And so it is very important for me that the ending enlarge all the rest of the film. The distinction between the world of my films and the world of the scripts on which I base them is that these are two totally different worlds. They are distinguished by their subject. I add a scene, I modify others and also the settings because life in the film is another life. If the film is based on the principle of the story, the narrative, it is not art. Art is 'the other life'. It has certain points in common with this life, but no direct and real relationship with it. Let's say that one can conceive some indices of relation but that these relations are never themselves real.

JS: Does man, confronted with art, find himself in a different world?

AS: It's not so much what's going on beyond art, behind the scenes of art. Art creates a different world. You have to make a film in such a way that it might overcome its own condition, its frame and become another film – another life. Remember the finale of *Russian Ark*, when they all come down that large staircase. This goes beyond art. We go out of life, with all its analogies, its representations; we see a whole people walking towards death, towards nothingness. Of all these people on this big staircase, no one will remain alive, not a single soul. That's art. That's the other life. It does not always work. We've seen it in Welles, in Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934), in *Strike!* (1925) and that's the only Eisenstein film where it is actually happening. Tarkovsky, in *Andrey Rublev* (1969), might have succeeded; I'm not sure, maybe he succeeded after all. In Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930), too. In Bergman.

JS: *Persona* (1966)?

AS: *Persona* and *Fanny and Alexander* (1982). Bergman is the greatest. He singles himself out in the sense that he cultivated and aggrandised the cinematic art like a tiny tree that he planted and then nurtured. His first films did not lead one to suspect that he would be so great. This tree grew, thanks to his experiences in the theatre and in painting. To me he is the progenitor of cinema, he is probably the only filmmaker who

has formulated cinema's alphabet, named the letters of cinema, albeit only the first three or four. This is still a huge contribution, an example for others to follow.

JS: It's like von Trier who, in his interview with Stig Björkman, evokes the fact that, for him, cinema is only at the stage of cave painting and that we're about to come out of the cavern.

AS: Yes.

JS: That's rather an optimistic stance!

AS: Yes, optimistic alright, but that doesn't mean that we are going to make it! You can swim in the sea, in sight of the shore, and drown all of a sudden before reaching the land – filled with the optimism and faith that you were going to reach it! It's a question of freedom and, most of all, will. If we know that there is no alphabet, no cinematic grammar, we can try to articulate one. It's the same with a child. It's not enough that the child be born; it needs to be educated, the rules have to be taught to him. Otherwise he'll become a savage, a monster. The fact that he was born among humans does not mean that he will become a man. And the same applies for visual manifestations appearing within the frame of art; they are not automatically art. Cinema, having become commercial matter under the influence of the Western market, yields only a small percentage of honourable films. On the one hand, we have the great and unique and, on the other, a vast number of totally uninteresting productions.

Let me come back to your earlier question. It is important for me sometimes to know in what spaces, in what landscapes, in what world I evolve professionally, in what theoretical frame, to know in what professional and technical frame I find myself. It seems important to me to understand concepts such as modernism, transmodernism. A captain on a boat must know the vocabulary, know what's going on, the streams, the light. He does not have to go north, but he cannot ignore the fact that there are cardinal points, points of orientation. Otherwise, thinking that he's going north, he'd go south and would get lost.

JS: And sometimes they are looking for India and find America.

AS: Yes, and this is of course a very pertinent remark that you've just made. It's characteristic and symptomatic, and it is a typical trait of art. Because an author, an artist, does not always know in which direction he's going. Indeed, he cannot know. Remember Pushkin, who used to say about his hero that he lives his own life. The same can be said of Faulkner's prose, which goes like the flow of a river. If the width of the page allowed for it, he would write a kilometric line, carried by this flow. One would need to stop him, and he would write a new line the same way. It's typical of art. The nature of art has a lot to do with intuition. If the work of art possesses an artistic nature, then many of its acts and its formal evolution are based on intuition.

JS: Or chance.

AS: Rather, intuition. Take, for example, my film *The Stone*. I never met Chekhov, as you can imagine. And yet the hero of the film, by the grace of God, finds himself in the house of the writer and sees his illustrious host has come back among us for the duration of the film. You can imagine the moral implication of such an enterprise. When I give my actor instructions, I don't wish to leave space for chance. The actor has to move very precisely in a particular way, put his hand like this, at this particular

height, and so on. It is fundamental that this feel that I have for the character be crystallised in the faithful expression of a truth of his existence. It's human experience, very concrete, and I want to represent it totally: the gestures, the clothing, the smell of his shirt, his smile, his tastes, his intuitions, his passions, his inner drives, his physiology, everything, and you have to do it that way. And, when it is done this way, it does come to you. It's the feeling of being right, of being in truth. And I have often surprised myself by knowing these things intuitively.

Once, I went to talk to the curator of a museum that held in its collection Chekhov's shoes. I attempted to describe the shoes as I saw them in my imagination. And when I opened my eyes, I saw an expression of amazement on the face of my interlocutor. The shoes were exactly the way I had described them. It's intuition. It starts with the knowledge of photos that I've studied, his letters, his biography – I mean his secret biography, not the official one – and also, in our being the same age, I am able to identify with him.

JS: This is therefore a question of deduction as well. And deduction leads me directly to the question of montage. The latter is a fundamental aspect, albeit not a highly visible one, of your films. I would like to talk a bit more about *The Sun*, whose montage is very peculiar and, I would say, in its deviations from conventionality, finally as discreet as it is unorthodox. Let's take for instance the scene of Hirohito's meal, where you use a series of quick and very short, almost sensual dissolves. We encounter them here and there in some other of your films, and it always has a very surprising effect.⁴

AS: Yes, it's a very soft montage.

JS: What did you intend? Why this punctuated and unusual usage of the dissolve, in this form, at this apparently anodyne moment of the film?

AS: It's a question that demands a very long conversation, but I shall try to answer it briefly. I am disappointed by montage as such. The physical senses provoked nowadays by montage seem very primary, primal, and, to speak frankly, it irritates me. I don't like montage, and this has nothing to do with the fact that I made *Russian Ark*, after which I came back to montage cinema, as you know. A film in one shot cannot be an absolute model. Such a model would not be correct, since the intellectual nature of cinema is based on literature, and literature is montage, a montage of words. In the word itself one finds montage, always. The pairing of two words reinforces their meanings, and the incorrect association of two words can make them incomprehensible, make them into something universally common or unknown. The same happens with montage. I therefore do not speak about montage as an absolute, but montage as we see it every day, and which interests me but very little. And I am speaking less about the rational nature of montage, where all is clear, than I am of the physical nature of montage in its representation, in the association of images, I would even say the electrical nature of montage. Why this almost electrical effect in the association of two images? Is it possible, on the scientific level, to observe the furtive association of two frames, to analyse them and say what's going on? It's a fascinating riddle. What goes on in the association of two images in front of our very eyes? What is this explosion, this conflagration? I am ready, therefore, and I intend, in my own artistic pursuit, while I

have the opportunity, to do certain experiments in the domain of technique, notably with montage. And, for the scene in question, I did not want a sharp cut. I wanted a soft dissolve. I did not want this explosion, this contrast.

JS: You claim not to like montage. However, one knows your admiration for Griffith and Eisenstein. What is your relationship towards the montage of attractions?

AS: The idea of the montage of attractions is a very speculative one. It comes from the great filmmakers that you mention; let's add Pudovkin and Dovzhenko, roughly speaking. It has turned cinema into a commodity. Cinema becomes commodity because this montage of attractions is the simplest and most primary device that can be found. What is simplest pleases the largest number. Sweet is the easiest way of flattering the palate. Everybody knows what is sweet. The same can be said for cinema. As far as I am concerned, I am trying to show that there are other ways. In any case, this provokes in me a great preoccupation and even a great fear for the future of cinema and for my cinema in particular because I haven't yet found an answer to these questions in relation to the nature of montage. And it's a very difficult question. Do my other filmmaker colleagues ask themselves this question? I have no idea, inasmuch as I have, with the notable exception of Andrzej Wajda, no professional contact with serious filmmakers. And so I don't really know. Maybe one day this question will be answered, with the help of means that haven't been invented yet. But for the time being the problem exists and it remains intact.

JS: Does the fact that you carry out these interrogations on the deeper nature of montage seem paralyzing to you on the creative level?

AS: Yes, because the film in one shot like *Russian Ark* and the professional discovery that it constituted are no real discovery in themselves anymore. Our world is based on this type of reasoning. We still don't know how the vast majority of things operate, but, allegedly, nothing new can be done or found.

JS: So, basically, this is what stimulates your art, what drives you to renew it from film to film, to move forward and to innovate.

AS: The fundamental question is how? I would say that for me the object of my quest lies in that question. When we started working on *Russian Ark*, everybody said it was unrealistic, impossible to do, that one-shot sequence in the Hermitage. All my colleagues said that it was madness. And the first thing they said to me was that, nowadays, everybody is used to montage, that the viewer will become disengaged with the film because of this one single continuous shot. Try to imagine a novel without a single period or comma.

JS: This has been done, too – by Joyce or Guyotat, among others. And there is still a montage within the feature-length shot of *Russian Ark*; I would even say that it is quite clear, with the separation of rooms, periods, and episodes. These are threads that are woven together in the end by the narrator and his guide, the Marquis de Custine (Sergey Dreyden).

AS: Yes, but that's not what I mean, although you are right, of course. What I am talking about is the question of how. That's the fundamental question, the initial step. I don't believe in revolutions in art. I only believe in evolution. For a great cinema, even in its initial stages, one needs great photography and great literature. And I am

not even talking about symphonic music. One must therefore understand how the art in question operates.

JS: To master all the facets of such a symbiotic and hybrid medium? Seize the image – the pictorial dimension – and the tempo, the movement, the symphonic dimension.

AS: Of course. You are in front of the frame, this image, and it starts to move. It's miraculous. And I am not even talking about sound. Ultimately, cinema is nothing but the product of these forms of art. It takes the model of the narrative thread from literature, but distinguishes itself through its continuous and temporal nature. The latter is of course inherited from music, whose flow unrolls like the images on a screen. And these images, of course, are brought to us through painting and photography. It is formidable and very depressing at the same time to say to oneself that this art is so hybrid and so difficult to seize. And it takes time, always.

JS: I find a parallel between Eisenstein's paranoid spaces in *Ivan the Terrible* and what I call the deliquescent or debilitated spaces in *Moloch* and *Taurus*. Many cuts in these films can naively evoke a strange or inept cinematic grammar. For an inexperienced viewer, it may seem odd. For someone used to the rules of classical montage, this violated scale of shots, these axial jumps simply seem awkward.

AS: Yes, yes.

JS: Of course, this innovative and daring arrangement of shots tends to evoke the moral and intellectual decrepitude of the films' protagonists, creating a factual homology between their interiority and the *mise-en-scène*. In this sense, the shots representing Eva Braun and Nadezhda Krupskaya seem more 'conventional' in the articulation of the scale of shots. The apparitions of Hitler and Lenin, or Stalin, on the contrary, are very disturbed, if not disturbing. I am thinking of the shot where Lenin is in the bathtub; we don't know who's watching, who's polarising the focalisation, if we are in referential or subjective mode. Then, a soldier enters the frame, coming from the direction of the camera. This shot follows directly a vision in which Lenin sees the ghost of his dead mother. This mix of perspectives is quite confusing. I wanted to ask you, in these two films in particular, and beyond and before montage, since it seems evident that that's the core of this issue, what is the point of view, the pole of focalisation that you adopt, as a director?

AS: You have just touched upon one of the most difficult questions in the world of cinema and in that of cinematographers in particular.⁵ I always ask myself who's looking. Where is the point of view? At the level of elaboration of the frame, I ask my collaborators and my assistants, whose eyes are these? I am thinking aloud, whose eyes? And then I realise that I am constructing everything with my own. Sometimes, I move towards compromise, and to prevent the creation of a world that would be totally absurd or closed I play tricks; I assume the perspective of a character. And each time that I do so, I realise that this is only a detour, a roundabout connection with my own perspective as an author, with my point of view. In the beginning, I could not provide a precise answer for this question of point of view. And then I told myself that my proximity to the characters allows me to take their perspective. I am sitting next to them, they vanish, our gazes merge. My internal point of view cannot *not* be true.

So it is toward it that I move. And besides, as a director, I allow myself to construct my frame, as a function not only of the relationships among the characters but first and foremost of the artistic imperative. If I construct my frame simply as a function of a certain realism of action, as a matter of verisimilitude, I can tell that my art suffers from it. Take the scene in which Lenin and his wife look at each other during the picnic in the meadow. I can of course make a classical shot-counter shot, but this does not interest me because it is not possible. It is not Lenin who's looking; he is not there at that moment. When I compose my frames according to the rules of my gaze, I endeavour to observe my artistic imperatives with a very precise goal. The frame should be a work of art. The aesthetic and artistic tension must be transmitted to the spectator. My artistic needs and imperatives: that's what matters most. All is subordinated to my inner tensions and to art. Here is an example. I frame my characters sitting at a table.⁶ My inner feeling is that the make-up and the light are not correct, although they respect the whole, the logic of the scene. I decide, however, for the sake of the shot, to modify them. This decision must not be made in relation to the subject of the scene or to tradition, but out of the artistic intuition in me inspired by painting. Such a decision is only to be made when taking the author's perspective.

JS: All is defined in advance, with a detailed synopsis?

AS: Practically, yes, even more so since we were using a brand new lens for *Taurus*, one that did not exist before. The light, everything had to be carefully planned. But one cannot make films only like this; each film has its own rules, its characters, its subject matter. Each film is unique.

JS: Of all your films, my favourite, even if it was less appreciated by the critics in general, is *Father and Son*, which I have seen, indeed, with my dad. Although he did not like it, I on the other hand was enthralled by the beauty, the oneiric and sweet poetry, the sensuality, and the juvenile enthusiasm that emanate from it. And it's a film full of love. Of course, *The Sun* also closes with love. But, here, it's different. Cinema is not only intellect and determining artistic schemes, it is also feelings, visceral matter. I find that only a few films express this feeling with so much sensitivity. This does not reduce its intellectual reach – far from it, actually.

AS: I want to tell you that your reaction is very important to me because a lot of people refuse to understand *Father and Son*. They don't understand it, and this scares me. They see things that I did not want to express. There are things that the collective conscience hasn't yet reached. It's too early to do a film like this, to show it. In music and in painting, things are less concrete. Music resonates, to be sure, so the relation is not exactly figurative. But its contents don't reach you in the same way as in cinema. Cinema's relation to the viewer is active and concrete. The relationship between the destinies of men seems fundamental to me. The dialogue about the destiny of the father seemed particularly indispensable. The tradition of the relationship between man and woman in art and in culture is, in general, rather strange. For narratives dealing with women we have, eminently, love and beauty, and artists exploit these themes. But where does the theme of the woman as such go? What about her destiny? One exploits the theme of the stereotypical woman, and it gives you a woman expressed more in terms of an object than a human being. And it's

even more true with man. What the mother is, we more or less understand. For the father it's more complicated. The destiny of the mother is, to a certain extent, well known to us, but the father's destiny remains a thoroughly unexploited theme and generally appears only in a negative or passive light, in the background. And I think your father's violent reaction to my film has to do with his intuitive, internal understanding that his place in life does not have much importance and that he perhaps doesn't matter. And this, moreover, concerns a direct relationship between you and him. Both in private life and in artistic tradition, fathers don't have much of a destiny. Mothers do, a bit more. Take, for example, our own personal destinies. My father passed away last year, from a long and painful illness. My mother is still alive, very old, but I realise how great her importance is, much more so than my father's. And why not my father? Of course, it's the mother who brings us into this world, but still, as a child, as a young adult, I could have been much closer to my father. In the end, he's left with nothing, and we don't get anything from him. I see this theme everywhere. In Russia, in Europe, in Japan. It's a question I have been asking myself for quite some time. I arrive at the conclusion that a man as such has no real influence on his son's personal life, if one really thinks about it. And this is why, for *Father and Son* as for *Mother and Son*, I adopted a fairy tale-like discourse. It's a narrative that's both universal and extremely rare and strange. It begins to resemble a mythological text while being almost unique. From another perspective, I deliberately moved the ages of the father and the son closer together, to show that they can still understand each other. It's totally possible in everyday life: take a father who's thirty-five and his eighteen-year-old son. The soul's life, the emotions of the son do not seem to interest the father. The same applies for the mother and her daughter. I'm talking about the life of the soul, of feelings and emotions, not about spiritual life, if you see the difference. Your father can be close to you spiritually, but not on the strict plane of the soul. Your father felt that he had no proximity to you, that he could have given you so much that he didn't. He felt it intuitively. And in my film this gift is passed on, taken up, although in an imperfect manner, but still...

JS: Few people can analyse the film intellectually. Many were made ill at ease by what you've just evoked, but also by the physical presence of the two men, even though, concretely, the film does not deal with erotic relations between the father and the son. You reacted harshly to these allegations of homosexuality during a press conference. I find it a shame that critics gave so much importance to Freudian, homosocialising readings of the film when it is so many other things. You mention the anchoring of your films in another reality, but also here in this reality. Were you thinking about intergenerational relations today? Historical subtext, whether symbolic or not, has always been a major part of your cinema, certainly in your documentaries but also in your feature films.

AS: *Father and Son* deals with the global situation and particularly with what is going on these days in Russia, where, following political and social changes, the role of men has changed a great deal. Since it is virtually impossible for a man to reach a decent level of life and sustain a family with a regular and honest job, most Russian men have become bandits. I am talking about active crime and on a rather large scale.

Let's say that between the ages of twenty and forty the majority of Russian men engage in semi-legal or totally illegal activities. This gives you millions of criminals, and it is because the masculine type has changed. This aggression, this violence...⁷

JS: This all correlates, obviously, with the savage emergence of capitalism and corruption in Russia. You also present in your films a rather alienated, although bitter-sweet, portrait of the relationship between the young hero and the young woman he's in love with. Their two encounters, although beautiful and touching, are dealt with without depicting direct physical contact; they are separated by a window or a balcony.

AS: This problem of incommunicability is directly correlated to the global problem that we discussed a minute ago.

JS: What destiny for these fathers and what models for these sons then?

AS: They will be mixed and diverse, of course.

JS: To come back to something more poetic and optimistic, there's a little proverb that says, If you want to grow, take your son on your shoulders. It just so happens that it's the poster of your film!

AS: Of course. I did not know this proverb, but it's very beautiful, and it speaks to one of the most touching scenes of the film. The father and the son are together on top of that dome, and they could fall down at any moment.

JS: Speaking of roofs, I also liked the fact that you mixed the streets of Lisbon and the roofs of St. Petersburg. The idea might not be new, but the result here is particularly efficient and contributes in a great way to the oneiric atmosphere of the film.

AS: Yes, it's a way of reflecting the fact that we live in a world that is more and more international. You see people of all nationalities these days in St. Petersburg.

JS: To conclude, after *Moloch*, *Taurus*, and *The Sun*, what will be the film that will close your tetralogy?

AS: If it gets to be made, it will be a film about the Faust legend, inspired by Goethe and Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*.

JS: And which therefore will not deal directly with a real historical figure of the twentieth century?

AS: The theme of power and its implications is of course very important in this tetralogy. But in thinking about what should be the last instalment, you must take into account that we're talking here about something else, although it is related. The fundamental question, indispensable and central to the tetralogy is in my view the following: At what price does a man choose to sell – or on the contrary, not to sell – his soul? That's what these films talk about, most of all, and the consequences that ensue, of course.

Notes

- 1 This interview was originally published in *Critical Inquiry*, 33, Autumn 2006, thanks to the generous intercession of Fredric Jameson. My heartfelt gratitude goes to the following people, without whom this interview would not have been possible: to Maja Nemere, Tanya Venetsianova, and Yuli Koltun for introducing

me to Sokurov's films; to Lyubov Arkus for setting up our meeting, and finally to Alexander Sokurov himself.

- 2 Threats were made to Sokurov during the shooting of the film for having dared to represent the figure of the Japanese emperor.
- 3 Lampolski teaches at New York University.
- 4 As in the first encounter between Nikita and Lyuba in *Lonely Voice of Man*, for instance.
- 5 Sokurov did his own cinematography for *Taurus*, and it is quite likely that he did the job, to a greater or smaller extent, on all his films, even in the presence of a credited director of photography.
- 6 There are many scenes depicting meals in both films.
- 7 This is violence to which Sokurov was a victim himself, and whose tragic and ironic consequence for the filmmaker might be partial or total loss of eyesight.

ADDENDUM B

Interview with Alexander Sokurov, 2013

Part One

Jeremi Szaniawski: Alexander Nikolaevich, it's been eight years since we last met. I have a mountain of questions for you.

Alexander Sokurov: Alright, let's start digging into that mountain!

JS: Your latest feature film, *Faust*, is another jewel in your cinematic crown. You told me you were working on it when we parted ways that day in July 2005, in St. Petersburg, and now the film is here. It won the Golden Lion in Venice, and it premieres at long last in Brussels.

AS: Yes. It was a long and difficult process.

JS: Let's get this one out of the way: we know that Vladimir Putin supported the project in great part. This raises a lot of questions. Can I have your side of the story?

AS: Of course. I have never been a supporter of Putin. I refused to support his presidential campaign in the past. However, in Russia, the government has allocated funds to support the arts. So in 2008, when he was the prime minister, and funds were extremely scarce because of the economic crisis, I went straight to him and asked him for his help. We met at his residence, near Moscow. I was well prepared for this meeting – I brought sketches, drawings; he was very well prepared too, he'd read a version of the script. It all happened quite quickly.

JS: How do you explain this?

AS: I don't know. I think it's because Putin knows German and he knows German culture very well. I think he understood the importance of a larger conception of the arts.

JS: Did he like the film?

AS: I don't know. We didn't talk about it. My feeling is that he didn't like it one bit. But he is a very reserved man. I knew Boris Yeltsin very well. He was a most open man. Almost overly so. Putin is completely different. But he is a very serious man.

JS: Were you not concerned that he would demand something in exchange for this financial support?

AS: Vladimir Putin is not the type of man who will blackmail you. He is not primitive. He has many reasons to hold grudges against me. I am very critical of the politics in my country. He could destroy me. He doesn't do this. Why did he give money for this film? This remains a mystery to me.

JS: What is your take on the geopolitical struggle over Syria?

AS: I think Putin made the right proposal: that Syria hand over its chemical weapons. When the Iraq War started, I and many other artists wanted to appeal to the American government, to tell them not to bomb this country. It's such a crucible of history and culture. This war caused such consequences ... the museums were burned, sacked and robbed ... the archeological sites, too. To bomb Syria would be a disaster: this country has such rich history, both visible and invisible, under the ground. It would be a great mistake to bomb this country.

JS: Many people have asked you this already: why end the tetralogy with a fictional character, when the first three films dealt with historical figures.

AS: Well, first of all, it's not the tetralogy's final point. The film is chronologically the final instalment, but otherwise, the tetralogy is a circle. There is no starting or ending point *per se*. You open on *Moloch*, go full circle, and you will end on *Moloch*, going through *Taurus*, *The Sun* and *Faust*... It's a vicious circle, too, a circle of evil, of vanity. Secondly, Faust may be a legendary figure, but he was originally a real character. A mystic, a charlatan! In the sixteenth century, he was just that, a petty ruffian. His name means 'fist' in German, after all... In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, his story grew, creating more and more interest... plays were written, books... And Goethe turned this figure of gossip and great fascination into an intellectual, an adult man, but who nonetheless will commit the most trivial of crimes. He uses Margarete, much as Hitler, Lenin or Hirohito used their people, and moves on. In what way is Faust different from these dictators? Each in their own way have been basely exploitative. They thought they were free of moral boundaries. It's about the evil and damage that these men committed. The historical dictators caused millions of deaths. Faust abandons Margarete. They are all immoral. But they are prisoners of the circle. And they are all unhappy people.

JS: Do you equate Faust with these dictators who led millions of people to their deaths?

AS: Faust is a scoundrel. He leaves this young woman – he abandons her. It's a crime. It doesn't matter if the crime is personal or historical.

JS: So when we hear her voice at the end, he runs away from her, he is not guided by her?

AS: Of course not. She is in the heavens, she's gone. He is interested in other things. You see, the tetralogy is about the human being: all the characters, Hitler, Lenin, Hirohito... Who are they? They are all human beings, and mediocre ones, at that. We have

few representations of Faust – the man. We don't know much about his life. And I wanted to make a real man of flesh and blood out of him as well. Furthermore, it's about the male, the problem of male psychology. The masculine drive to take power upon oneself, responsibilities, culture ... and this responsibility comes with dramatic consequences. And to what avail? It doesn't matter who you are talking about. It can be Faust, or Hitler, or a chancellor, or the Pope... All men are guided by impulses, by their character. They often make their decisions irrespective of their counselors, they act based on this instinct, this character. I saw that with Boris Yeltsin.

JS: So the central theme is the evil caused by basic, psychological male tendencies?

AS: Yes. I am not saying that power should indiscriminately be handed over to women, of course. But I wanted to turn Faust into a man of the early nineteenth century and to put all these burdens on his shoulders, all the sins of the men who caused such ills – ills which we witnessed in the twentieth century and will again in the future.

JS: Some sort of banality of evil, as it were.

AS: Yes. These men, who are merely human, who are insects in the grand scheme of things ... they are meaningless, they are nobodies, they could be easily replaced ... and yet they caused such gigantic traumas. Hitler with Nazism ... Lenin who drove the idea of socialism into a dead end ... Hirohito who led the Japanese people in their belief that they were a superior nation ... like the Nazis... All this aggression, this violence, these millions of victims. Violence never solves anything.

JS: I feel as though all these ideas have been brewing in you for a very long time. And you first make mention of the *Faust* project in the early 1980s...

AS: Indeed. The first idea was to make a film that would combine Goethe's *Faust* and Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. But it was not feasible, for various reasons, technical, financial... These great artists have shown us a man of the future. Goethe's oeuvre reached far into the future. We see that all the questions that this phenomenal play presented have yet to be answered, the issues it deals with are yet unresolved. Goethe is the Michelangelo, the Leonardo of our time. There is everything in this play. And without Michelangelo or Leonardo, there would be no Goethe. Without Goethe, there is no Russian literature. It's very important for an artist to feel, to understand this legacy. Goethe is still our contemporary. I hope that we will see the emergence of another great writer, another great figure, who will pick up Goethe's project and help project these ideas further into the future.

JS: What I see connecting the four protagonists (and Stalin) is a flawed creativity. They are flawed artists, or great and frustrated lovers of art.

AS: This is normal. It is understood. Every totalitarian State needs art. Dictators understood this very well. This is why every totalitarian regime has such a strong film industry. It's a means of controlling the people. A democratic nation and government could exist without art. A totalitarian regime, never.

JS: Are you nostalgic for the time period you describe in *Faust*?

AS: As far as the ways of life go, absolutely not. Imagine a period when, as soon as the sun sets, people would barricade themselves in their houses, and await dawn in

fear of some aggression. No police, no means of regulating crime ... there were bandits everywhere, robbing and murdering people. It was a dreadful period to live in, as far as daily life was concerned. However, there was a huge community of arts at the time, art had a much more important place in people's lives. Today, we have comfort, but art suffers from it.

JS: You put a lot of care in the historical reconstruction of the first three films of the tetralogy. But this everyday life is reflected well in *Faust*, too, where remarkable historical details coexist with fantasy and grotesque characterisation. Were you inspired by the Dutch and Flemish schools to realise this? Bruegel, Bosch?

AS: Not really, I sought most inspiration in simple German paintings of the first third of the nineteenth century, which describes everyday life. All these tiny details. We went to the greatest lengths to reconstruct this. We even found rolls of fabric, two hundred years old, which we used for our costumes. These rolls of fabric, still good to this day, were lying around and people had forgotten about them. We were able to bring this back to life. We reconstructed three medieval towns, all the interiors, it was a huge undertaking...

JS: To be sure. But I saw so many echoes of Dutch and Flemish paintings ... in the lights ... or Mauricius. He is straight out of a Flemish grotesque portrait!

AS: Maybe, maybe ... these things, these influences have been trickling down into my soul for so many years... But the main reference and source of inspiration was this German common painting, not the great masters. The works of craftsmen who observed and recreated the simple, everyday life of their time.

JS: Technologically speaking, with each film you try to come up with new lenses, new methods ... this is very striking in *Faust*...

AS: Yes, we used a unique lens – a very large one (he gestures to about the size of a large tv screen). It creates inverted perspective. It is very difficult to operate, and there is only one model of it in the world. We used it in the scenes between Faust and Margarete ... when he confesses to the murder of Valentin...

JS: Yes, their faces are strikingly distorted.

AS: ...and in the bedroom scene, after they fall in the water.

JS: This scene is among the most beautiful and strange moments in the history of cinema.

AS: It doesn't happen just like this. The film leads you to this moment. It is a whole.

JS: Indeed. The whole film, not just this extraordinary scene, is very oneiric. It's almost as though the play had been digested through the subconscious and recreated as a filmed version of that dream. Was this already in the script you wrote with Yuri Arabov?

AS: I must mention here the role of Marina Koreneva, a translator from German, a scholar at the Pushkin House, with whom I've had the honour of working for many years. She is a great specialist, a great, extraordinary human being, a blessing. She helped me so much on this film. If she is not credited for the scripts of *Moloch* and *Faust*, it's for contractual reasons. She really did co-author these scripts, and if these films sound as well as they do in German, it's thanks to her. I could not have done this

alone. I was terrified, I felt weak in the knees, knowing I was going to tackle Goethe for this film. I said to myself: how dare you tackle this ... how dare you? During the shoot, I was very afraid, because the conditions were difficult. One rule is universal: whatever the preparation, whatever the means, you never know how a film is going to turn out. She helped me through it. I am ashamed that she has to work in cinema. Someone of her level, her talent. She does it to earn some money. One has to do this. She is supporting her family. She is a great human being. Her contribution, her input into these films, it's huge. Yuri (Arabov) doesn't understand this: it's not merely about translating the script into another language. It's more than language. It's a birth of another quality, new dialogues, new subjects. We work with the sounds of the language. And when we actually did the sound side of the film, we changed the dialogue further. We actually returned to the original text. In several instances we did not use Arabov's script at all. And we brought back a lot from Goethe, with Marina's assistance. And if I did not have a person of such a high level of culture and education by my side to do so, it would not have been possible. I repeat: she is an exceptional human being. I regret that she has to work in cinema, this world of lazy people. It's sad and I am ashamed by it. She should be a translator of great literature, a professor in the best schools, with the best conditions.

JS: Help her, then.

AS: I am not from that milieu. All I can do is hire her on my films. Translators have a huge and underrated role in Russian culture. They founded Russia, in a cultural context – giving us the literature from France, England, Germany, Italy... They founded us as a nation of culture.

JS: And they mastered this art. Few people can translate Shakespeare. But Pasternak did it.

AS: The language is more than the language. It's the soul, the national identity of a whole people. I know that German may sound tough, heavy... It bears the seal of Nazism... But when we return to Goethe, it's a completely different period, a different story. We can only bow in reverence and use the one language that can best express this unique text.

JS: There are some sibylline moments in the film that are at a great remove from the play, and perhaps even from Goethe. I feel as though the scene with the homunculus, this curious borrowing of a motif from *Faust II* springs forth out of nowhere... Did you shoot any material that you did not include in the film, where we would have learned more about Wagner and the homunculus?

AS: Not at all. It's all in the film as you see it. Wagner spies upon Margarete, Faust... You can see what's going on there.

JS: Still, we don't quite understand this episode. Wagner has somewhat fallen by the wayside, and there he is, with his homunculus which we assume he stole from Faust? He is also trying to usurp his identity, as it were? The tone of the scene is hard to understand.

AS: (growing irritated) You don't need anything else. All is in the film. He looks at Faust, follows him like a shadow, eavesdrops on his conversations with Mauricius. Mention is made of the homunculus between them. It's all there.

JS: I felt like it was a separate aspect, it made the film veer into a different genre...

AS: Because it is a different thing. It's really different. It's different now as it was then. It was not possible. This idea, to create life artificially, was in currency in the early nineteenth century – it was an obsession, it had a value.

JS: What about this coach that Faust and Mauricius encounter in the woods?

AS: That's to do with the idea that Westerners had of Russians traveling to Europe in the early nineteenth century. People with money, merchants. This is a Russian merchant, traveling to Paris with his servant (Selifan). And this merchant is bored, he drinks all the time, and, as was the habit, he likes to invite people into his coach, to talk with them, because he is so bored. He tells his servant: 'If you see some interesting or elegantly dressed people, invite them over. We'll sit, drink, talk together.' It was characteristic for these times: people wanted to communicate with one another. And Mauricius does take Faust into this coach to put him in yet another unpleasant, uncomfortable situation. They start a fight, etc. It's a provocation.

JS: You worked on this film with Bruno Delbonnel, which was a surprise to many. The result in the film is startling. Would you like to talk about this collaboration?

AS: Bruno Delbonnel is the very finest expression of Western European culture: he is quiet, tolerant, patient, hard-working, and very well educated. His taste is exquisite. 'Maestro' is too weak a word to describe him. I'd wanted to work with him since *Father and Son*, on which he couldn't work in the end. We had this professional attraction since then. It was a dream come true for me to work with him. He fulfilled all the tasks I laid out before him, and to the best effect.

JS: Are you working with him on your new project?

AS: I am, and this fact gives me great pleasure and confidence.

JS: Can you tell me more about it?

AS: We are shooting in the Louvre, it's the story of Jacques Jaujard, who was curator of the museum during World War II, and his rapport with [Wolff-]Metternich, a Nazi Germany officer who was in charge of culture. But the film will also include episodes with historical characters, such as Napoleon. It will combine fiction and documentary footage.

JS: What did you think of Brussels' Museum of Fine Arts?

AS: It's a beautiful building, a beautiful collection. But it's very small, very humble compared to the Hermitage or the Louvre collections.

JS: Belgium is a small country ... and we have several museums of fine arts in this city alone. You should come back to visit them.

Part Two

JS: Alexander Nikolaevich, we talked at length about *Faust*, and now I would like to cover other aspects and moments of your career. There's a question I've always meant to ask you: in several of your films, you show characters moving around tiny buildings – models that you use as sets for your long shots. You find this in *Days of the Eclipse*, *Save and Protect*, *The Second Circle*, most notably. What is the meaning behind these occurrences?

AS: It has to do with two things, mostly: first, there's the graphic, picturesque aspect. It has to do with perspective, with a certain painterly tradition. We find this in some painters, in Russian painting, in Chagall... The characters appear as larger than their surroundings, it is not realistic. The other aspect has to do with the psychology of the characters: they feel empowered, they feel larger than their surroundings.

JS: Empowered? I can see the trepidation of Emma as she sees her lover and moves toward him; but I don't see how Malyanov, the character in *The Second Circle*, who seems feeble and powerless, could feel in the least empowered...

AS: Well, he returns to his hometown. His father was sick, now he is dead. We understand, looking at his trinkets, that he probably was a man of power in the town. Maybe he worked in a prison, or a camp. He was a violent man, and now he is dead. Malyanov represents a new possibility. It's a new world out there for him.

JS: Speaking of Malyanov, tell me a bit about the non-professional actors you chose for this role, in *Days of the Eclipse* (Alexey Ananishnov) and *The Second Circle*, *The Stone* (Pyotr Alexandrov). We know how you met with Cécile Zervoudacki, we know how you met Gudrun Geyer (both times at film festivals), but tell me about your encounters with these two men who play such an iconic character in your cinema.

AS: Both times, they were people from my surroundings. Friends of mine, a Leningrad family – a physicist and a biologist – had a son, and Alexey Ananishnov was friends with him. I invited them all over for dinner. Alexey was always an interesting young man. He studied physics and mathematics at Leningrad University, I think. Then he helped out on *Mournful Insensitivity*, when we were completing and restoring the film. He was very eager, he worked for free. I saw him grow, and eventually, when I was preparing *Days of the Eclipse*, there were many question marks about who I would cast for other roles – but as far as Malyanov was concerned, I had absolutely no doubt that it would be Alexey.

JS: Because he has this vital force? Because he is good-looking?

AS: Yes, the life force. He is not that good-looking – his face is fairly common. He has a great, a unique inner dimension. It's always about this attraction for the internal side of the person, that's what I feel and compels me to cast them in my films. He is a bad actor, but he can work with his soul. He is a wonderful human being. He is reliable, patient, resilient. He knows how to work hard. I had to adapt my filmmaking for his abilities as an actor. I did not demand from him what he could not achieve. But whatever I asked him to do, he set his mind and will to achieve it as best as he could. He is very successful now, he speaks fluent English, French, he works in business, is head of a big company for the North-West. He is a strong businessman, he was offered a position at a high-up position in Canada, but he turned it down. The people he worked with earlier all moved to Canada. But he had to stay in Russia. He has grown into a real, adult man. But somehow he stayed the same as he was when I first met him.

JS: I feel as though things were different with Pyotr Alexandrov?

AS: Yes and no. As far as the encounter is concerned, it's the same type of story. He was also an acquaintance. My friends are generally not from cinema. Pyotr was the son of friends, also a student. The situation with him was more complicated, because

he was gravely ill. In a way, *The Second Circle* was a rehabilitation, a recovery for him. It was difficult to get him to do anything compelling, from an acting standpoint. But he didn't have to do much. His tasks in the film were simple: he just had to be himself. However, it was difficult in *The Second Circle*, and it got even more difficult with *The Stone*. He couldn't do it any more. It took huge amounts of effort to get the desired effect.

JS: In a way it worked out: his feeble character has less personality than Chekhov's ghost, that's very compelling.

AS: If you say so. I had to do it. It was a necessity.

JS: It worked out.

AS: Things can work out if you work with an actor. If it's not an actor, you have to do everything yourself. You have to get there yourself, as a director. There is no chance.

JS: I see that you have re-cut *Save and Protect* and *The Stone*. I feel as though the former definitely needed some work, but *The Stone* seems like such a gem to me.

AS: Yes, it's also one of my favorite films that I made. Don't worry: you will not notice the changes.

JS: We talked about your very latest film at length, but I would like now to return to one of your earliest films, perhaps your first mature work: *Maria*.

AS: Well, I first shot it as a documentary for the Gorky television. At the time it was called *Лето Марии Войновой*, 'The Summer of Maria Voynova'. I went to a *kolkhoz*, far from the city. We found this woman. I was touched by her hard labour, her dignity. But the film was considered anti-Soviet and was shelved.

JS: It's really baffling. The images exude such beauty, such lyricism. Did you shoot these images yourself? The young boy on the horse?

AS: Well, we were lucky in the sense that the weather was very sunny. We were working with Soviet filmstock, it was quite unstable... The images could have turned out much worse than they did. I had a cameraman with me, Vladimir Krasikov. I can't tell you which footage he shot and which I did. What I can tell you, however, is that Vladimir had a penchant for the bottle... As soon as we arrived in that small *kolkhoz*, he started drinking.

JS: Alcohol as a tragedy is inscribed in the film's darkest moment...

AS: Maria's son was crushed by the car of a drunken neighbour. Maria wanted to have another child. She couldn't. This life of hard, excessive labour had destroyed her ability to bear a child. She ended up committing suicide; that's when I drove back there and shot the second part of the film, which we released in 1988 as *Maria*.

JS: You seem to indict the Soviet system for this woman's miseries, but in the film I felt like it was rather the husband who was the greatest factor of her unhappiness.

AS: It's a combination of all things. The husband drank, he cheated on her, it's very typical.

JS: 'Кому на руси жить хорошо?' ('Who can live well in Russia?'; a verse from Nekrasov).

AS: Well, no, this happens everywhere in Eastern Europe; Slovaks, Poles, Hungarians... The life of peasant women there was very difficult. And on top of this you had

the fact that the *kolkhoz* structure in the Soviet Union was even more demanding, tougher ... which made life even more difficult.

JS: Barring the rampant alcoholism, I am amazed by peasant people in these countries.

AS: Those who lived in the countryside were good. They lived in these small villages, they remained the same, they saw few things, few novelties. So when someone came from the city, they were ready to host him, ask him questions... After all, they understood this visitor was not here for long, wouldn't cause trouble or bore them. It's a different world view. I love small town folk.

JS: That is very clear from your films.

AS: During my stay in Iowa, I stayed with different farmers. They were wonderful. I don't make a distinction between a Russian and American farmer, or between a Russian or Chechen peasant woman. They have a unique human position.

JS: It's the relationship to earth, to labour.

AS: It's a unique human position they all share.

JS: But there is, however, the danger of boorishness ('*khamstvo*').

AS: Always, always. It's a low cultural level. You need something to be attached to.

JS: It's a question of the soul?

AS: Culture, human culture, not intellectual culture, is something that is inherited, it's genetic. See, my older sister is like my father. And I am more like my Mom. I am milder, softer, my sister is harsher, tougher, too categorical. And you can tell right away. It's in the personality, it's inscribed in your genes. And all moral qualities are transmitted as well. Because culture is not transmitted genetically, you need to teach it all over again each time. But character traits, patience, delicateness, they are genetic.

JS: What is your relationship to astrology?

AS: It's excellent. I have a lot of consideration for astrology.

JS: You are a Gemini by the Chaldean horoscope, and a rabbit by Chinese horoscope.

AS: I didn't even know about the Chinese horoscope.

JS: The rabbit, in this lore, is very creative, charismatic, clever, hard-working, sensitive, but also pessimistic, a bit fearful, bashful, overly cautious or distrustful at times, notoriously conservative and insecure – which in turn explains their dislike of change. Especially when it comes to interpersonal relations.

AS: Perhaps ... I know, at any rate, that I am a typical Gemini. I see a lot of these traits in me. But I trust this. Because I tried to understand what it all means: all these signs that horoscope talks about, it's information, gathered over a very extended period of time – thousands of years of information. It's not something made up. There's a regular resurgence of patterns.

JS: You have worked with many cinematographers over the years. You mentioned your joy of working with Delbonnel, and the less felicitous relationship with Krasikov. I would like you to tell me about the other cinematographers you've worked with, since the visual component is such an essential part of your cinema. I recall the anecdote that Sergey Yurizditsky smuggled the copies of *Lonely Voice of Man* from VGIK, and slept on them under his mattress to save them... He shot some of your greatest films.

AS: Well... Of course he was a man of great potential, but he lacked the discipline, he had many flaws... He was neglectful. And he drank a lot.

JS: You can tell this from his work: it's startlingly beautiful, but at times you almost feel a dejected hand. Moments of genius...

AS: No, no genius. Do you remember the scenes in the market place in *Lonely Voice of Man*?

JS: The footage in black and white, when Nikita regresses to a quasi-animal state? It's extraordinary.

AS: A cinematographer from Gorky television, Anatoli Baryshkov, came to our help and shot this scene. As a matter of fact, Gorky television helped me more than Lenfilm on this film. You know, the difference between VGIK and, say, the Polish school of Łódź, is that the technical formation of cinematographers was very, very weak at VGIK. And these chaps were drinking all the time... And they misbehaved. They were not formed technically. The Polish school of cinematographers is extraordinary.

JS: What about Alexander Burov? I love his work on *The Second Circle* and *The Stone*. He is probably the cinematographer you've worked with on most films.

AS: I was asked to make a film by the documentary section of Lenfilm, about the work of figure skaters. I saw this opportunity to ask my student, Sasha Burov, to gain his spurs on a real project. When Sasha came out of VGIK, he didn't know anything. Nothing! But he was hard-working and resilient. So, in order to help him, I thought of this film as a special exercise. It had to feature everything: pans, close-ups, handheld camera movement, etc. It was his special school. I wasn't too pleased with what he came up with, but we edited it together all the same. Anyway, few people have seen the film – it didn't pass the board of censorship. The version you saw is just an underground little thing.

JS: Was it done in a dejected, derisive way?

AS: A little bit, yes.

JS: Still, I think it's a great little film. It's fun. And I like the parallels between ice-skaters and the footage of butchers in the market place, all these faces of people from Central Asia ... this ethnic material announces *Days of the Eclipse*.

AS: That is true. But as I said, I did this project for Alexander Burov. He became a very good executant. Very honest, a very good craftsman. Unlike Yurizditsky. Yurizditsky had greater potential, but Sasha is precise, and honest, professionally speaking. But he too started drinking – and we ended our relationship for this same reason.

JS: You don't work anymore with Leda Semyonova. But I surmise it's for different reasons.

AS: Indeed. Leda was a great professional partner, but when we moved from analogue editing to digital editing, she just couldn't handle this transition. It was too late for her. It was on *Confession*. It was a very difficult film to edit. But Leda is very dear to me.

JS: I wonder what it was for her, working on films with such long, extended shots... It's difficult because this aesthetic seems to diminish the importance of the editor. And yet, her role was no doubt crucial.

AS: Of course.

JS: When we saw Boris Lehman together the other day after your masterclass at the Royal Film Archive (Cinematek), he told you that you both made 'slow cinema', and you said that you don't anymore. *Patience, Labour* was a precedent, but I would like to ask you about your probably least well-known film, *Автомобиль набирает надёжность* ('Cars are Gaining Reliability'). It features some really fast cutting as well.

AS: Yes. This film was made while I was at Gorky television. I had this love of cars, planes. It's not about their designs or bodywork, it's about the mechanisms, that fascinates me. I wanted to make a film about this, the speed, the cars. A dynamic, robust film. And I first noticed then ... I was in love with Honegger. He had a great work called *Pacific 231*. It's about a locomotive, a train. I used this music in this film, as well as other pieces. Here I would like to mention the man who was perhaps my one and only master: Yuri Bespalov. He is still alive, he is very old now. He taught me a lot while at Gorky. I owe him a lot.

JS: How about Alexander Zguridi?

AS: Zguridi let me do my thing at VGIK. But I consider Bespalov to have been my only real mentor.

JS: We mentioned Burov, Yurizditsky, Delbonnel: let's talk about your remaining cinematographers: Alexey Fyodorov, Alexander Degtyaryov, and Anatoli Rodionov.

AS: Fyodorov: a man of great competence, from Moscow, and who studied at VGIK. We first worked together on *Mother and Son*. I needed someone to assist me in this undertaking, someone who would help me realise my vision. Because we had all this painting business going on, the mirrors, the distorted perspectives, images shot through multiple layers of glass ... I needed a great technician to assist me. He is very calm, restrained, patient. This film was a painstaking process, so it was indispensable to have him with me. I hope to work with him again. He is from Moscow, he lived in St. Petersburg, but then his mother's illness forced him back to Moscow. We worked together on the Japanese elegies, the documentaries about Dostoevsky's monument, Kozintsev's apartment, and the last part of *Spiritual Voices*. He is my type of person: restrained, discreet, very professional.

JS: In your book, you mention that one of your cinematographers disappointed you deeply. Who was that?

AS: That's Anatoli Rodionov. Same problem: alcoholism. It's a disease. He would show up on the set while not sober. He is a well-educated man, he taught himself a lot, he has taste, he is honest. But two bottles of beer and down you go. It's a double tragedy: his wife, Zhanna Rodionova, who taught me make-up and with whom I worked many years, was close to me. We both suffered from Anatoli's behaviour. She died in 2012. She was a great master, a true, great professional. I don't know what Anatoli will do now. I loved him very much, I had a lot of consideration for him. But I was the director of the film, I was in charge of the project, and I had to show him the door. It's a great pity.

JS: Apart from Delbonnel, who didn't drink, then?

AS: That's a good question (he laughs). Hm... Me. Myself.

JS: That I know.

AS: Let me think. Well, Fyodorov, whom I already mentioned, and Sasha Degtyaryov, who worked on the Solzhenitsyn documentaries, *Reading from the Book of Blockade*, *An Example of Intonation*. He is an ideal man in that sense. I tried to drag him into cinema but he was afraid of it. He was used to video and digital formats, he wasn't used to film stock ... he thought he wasn't sufficiently experienced for cinema. He is modest, timid. But I love him very much.

JS: Moving away from cinematography *per se* ... but staying with the image. I've always wanted to ask you a question: these perspectives in the tetralogy, in *Alexandra*, in *Father and Son* ... these characters who look on at the others ... does this have to do with a certain vision of history, with surveillance society?

AS: Not really. It's all very simple. We are always under someone's scrutiny, we are constantly being evaluated. We are hardly ever alone, not looked at. And these people who look at you, they take something away from you: some emotion, etc. It's about the desire to look at other people. We all have this desire. A human being only needs another human being. It's about this yearning. A human being will always derive some interest from looking at another human being. And at the same time, in terms of filmmaking, it's about an ideal cinematic phrase, an ideal montage phrase. This image will have its place, it always finds its place. We will see this again in my new film. It's not the realm of art, it's an observation of the world. There is no complicated concept here, heavy theory or philosophy. These individual elements have no meaning in and of themselves, as individual motifs. It's as a whole that they acquire a resonance. Tarkovsky used to yell – yell! – at people when they would ask him about the dog in *Stalker*. He would get mad at them, call them names. He really didn't like audiences, by the way. 'A dog is just a dog. A dog walked by. That's all.' And you transform this, you turn it into something it's not, like winding noodles around a fork. It's only noodles! Don't go too deep into it.

JS: Are you saying that these details have no meaning in and of themselves?

AS: No, they do have a meaning, but it's not about the dog alone. All these things are connected. It is about the whole thing. I beg of you, don't complicate things. Let's talk about things in a simple manner. It's a myth that theoreticians of cinema have come up with: that everything has a meaning. An individual frame most often does not have the meaning these theoreticians endow it with. People who earn money taking the films of Eisenstein apart ... frame by frame. They are making this up! Eisenstein was laughing at people who took his theories seriously as scientific works. But he had to come up with these theories, he could not do otherwise. It was the birth of montage. Montage was the most important thing back then. He had no other possibility. But now, you find university professors who build entire cities, megacities of ideas around this concept. They make this up – it was not there. It's a form of speculation. It's like people who speculate over their past, their tragedies... Making money over past events.

JS: If it's done cynically, exploiting a human tragedy is deeply immoral. I see a lot of that around. Not least in the film world.

AS: Very often. Speaking of which, German journalists asked me if I wasn't worried about the fact that I made my 'devil' a Jewish man in *Faust* – a secular usurer. I asked

them 'why?' They said: 'Well you clearly picked a Jewish actor, and made him to look repulsive in the film.'

JS: I think you deflect that somewhat by showing his own relationship to Jewish people in the film – he negates this legacy, refuses to identify with them, their language, their faith. He's the fallen angel in that sense.

AS: That's what I told them.

JS: And his ugliness derives from his greed; I call him 'capitalism with a human face'. Adasinsky created an amazing character, by the way.

AS: He is a very good actor. Very good.

JS: You were very close to Tarkovsky. Did you talk about cinema with him?

AS: I never talked to him about his cinema. He liked to talk about my films. I, never. He was very close, very dear to me. I remember when *Stalker* came out. I was not too impressed by it. He was older than me, too, twenty years my elder. It was not my place to say such things to him.

JS: What were your grievances?

AS: I thought he was repeating himself – and I thought he was too political. I thought it was such a shame for such a great artist to bring his art down with petty political discourse. Who needs this?

JS: When he left the Soviet Union, did you miss him?

AS: Of course. Terribly, painfully so. We exchanged letters – through journalists, diplomats. They would smuggle them across the border. We talked on the phone a couple times, but it was very difficult because all conversations were tapped.

JS: How is your project *Two Brothers and a Sister* developing?

AS: Not much so far.

JS: Do you already have a source idea, a visual model?

AS: I have a painterly model, yes. But I am yet to find a proper dramaturgy.

JS: Can you share what painterly model you have in mind for this project?

AS: No, I won't say (laughs). I will keep it a secret for the time being.

JS: We all need our secrets. Do you need an artistic model before you embark on any film?

AS: Absolutely. I can't do without that. On *Mother and Son*, it was very clear: Caspar David Friedrich. I went to Germany, I went to a museum and I saw a Friedrich painting. And I just sat there, on the floor. I was awestruck. I couldn't do anything else that day, the emotion had been so strong. But I had found my guide, my inspiration. There was no literary inspiration for that film, I asked around but we didn't find one. But the pictorial inspiration was there, and it helped me to realise the project. Besides, and to our great joy, the landscapes Friedrich had painted were still there, untouched. It was amazing. Otherwise it would have been impossible. For *Father and Son*, there was not only a pictorial (the paintings of Andrew White), but also a musical inspiration: I wanted to make a variation on Tchaikovsky's *Evgeny Onegin*.

JS: Because of the tragic friendship between Onegin and Lensky?

AS: It's a variation. I needed this music. I need this source before I start working.

JS: Andrey Sigle is a worthy sidekick in this sense: he not only produced your films, but also wrote the scores for *Taurus*, *Father and Son*, *Alexandra*, and *Faust*.

AS: Yes, and he has a greater potential than what he does so far, but he is too busy with his business ventures, he is very entrepreneurial. In order to realise his full potential, he would have to step aside from business life. In the meantime, he needs guidance, models for his music. Themes over which to compose fantasies. On *Taurus*, it was Rachmaninov; on *Father and Son*, Tchaikovsky, as I just mentioned; On *Faust*, it was Bach and the German musical culture (Beethoven, etc.). But I missed music for a couple scenes, so I actually recycled a fragment from the score for *Father and Son*, for the scenes with the homunculus, and the scenes we shot in Iceland, when Faust meets with Valentin and other men by the water stream... I needed music for these scenes. I am wary of putting a contemporary composer one on one with the film.

JS: What about Yuri Khanin, who wrote your scores for *Days of the Eclipse* and *Save and Protect*?

AS: It's a difficult question. We don't keep in touch. On a human plane, we all moved away from him. He did things that were not decent. He demeaned and offended the sound engineer on these films.

JS: But his music is good. Don't you pay homage to him in *Save and Protect*, when a character says 'Khanini's music elevates the soul', during the opera scene?

AS: I have to tell you that in artistic production, moral qualities have a huge value. yet there are many examples of great artists who were terrible people, scoundrels.

JS: Was Hitchcock a scoundrel? Or Meyerhold?

AS: I don't know, I have no idea. I didn't know them. I think there was a lot of arrogance in Meyerhold... Khanin was a young but dirty man, in terms of his actions.

JS: Still, what a score he wrote for *Days of the Eclipse*...

AS: I had to give him indications. I told him exactly what I wanted. When you work with a genuine artist, you can trust them. You have to. But when you work with people who are talented but not complete on the artistic level, you must follow them, give them guidelines... It can be tiresome.

JS: In terms of pre-existing music, one cannot but ask you about *Rubensiana*, the piece by Otmar Nussio which you use in several of your films, and to great effect.

AS: I love this piece. I had a record of it, under the direction of Gennady Rozhdestvensky. When I heard it, my heart stopped, it's such a beautiful piece. It's a very old piece. I love this piece. It is open, heartfelt, penetrating.

JS: Yes, and very soft at once. It's a haunting piece. It has suffering, yearning, beauty in it... It's very lyrical, romantic.

AS: Yes. It has no less grandiose dignity than the works of Mozart and Haydn. A lot of great music has been lost. I feel like there were far more great composers in the eighteenth century than we know.

JS: But I was under the impression that Nussio was a twentieth-century composer, that the piece was written in the mid-twentieth century.

AS: It doesn't matter when the piece was written: the soul of its author, as expressed in this work, is in touch with this sacred time it evokes.

JS: Alexander Nikolaevich, in closing, let me ask you this: you have such an extensive filmography, such a remarkable career. A lot is still ahead of you, but, looking back, what are your feelings?

AS: I simply can't believe it. I look at my filmography and I can't believe I made so many films. It's too much. It's too high a price to pay. You spend your whole life trying to achieve a level of mastery ... and then you realise you're old, that life has passed you by. That it's almost over. It was a mistake. I understood this too late. When you are young, you are so eager to do things ... you are blinded by ambition, arrogance ... I so wished someone could have forewarned me ... but no one did. And when I see young aspiring directors – and I know very well they will never become successful professionals – I should tell them 'listen, don't waste your time, your life is elsewhere'. But I don't dare tell them. They wouldn't listen.

JS: You call your artistic career a mistake?

AS: Yes. And it's become my life path. Real life has more value than the other life, the life of art... We were given life to live, and to live it happily.

JS: So you are telling me that you passed by this 'real life'?

AS: Yes. Things could have been different. I've always loved airplanes. I could have become an engineer ... maybe I would have made airplanes myself ... but I am afraid of heights ... it would have been an airplane that would have flown very close to the ground, or made leaps, like a spider (he laughs). I could have become a historian, or a doctor. I could have had a family.

FILMOGRAPHY

Самые земные заботы (Gorky Television, 1974)

Cinematography: A. Baryshkov

Screenplay: V. Ternovoy

Team: N. Khibka, V. Zashivalov,

L. Votyakov, G. Strelnikova,

A. Komygin, I. Kuznetsov

Автомобиль набирает надежность
(Gorky Television, 1974)

Cinematography: G. Babushkin

Screenplay: V. Skolotov

Позывные РИИИ (Gorky Television, 1975)

Cinematography: V. Aladin, V. Zelinsky

Screenplay: Y. Bepalov

Sound Design: V. Zashivalov

Лето Марии Войновой (Gorky Television, 1975)

Cinematography: Vladimir Krasikov,

Alexander Sokurov (uncredited)

Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov

The Last Day of a Rainy Summer –

Последний день ненастного лета

(Gorky Television, 1975–78)

Team: N. Dorozhnova, A. Sokurov,

V. Ternovoy, A. Bepalova, I.

Zhuravleva, S. Sinyugin, V.

Chechetkin, A. Khazanov

Lonely Voice of Man – Одинокий голос человека (VGIK/Lenfilm, 1978–87)

Cinematography: Sergey Yurizditsky,

Anatoli Baryshkov (uncredited)

Screenplay: Yuri Arabov, based on stories by Andrey Platonov

Production Design: Vladimir Lebedev,

Lutsia Lochmele

Sound Design: Irina Zhuravleva (1978),

Vladimir Persov (1987)

Editing: Alevtina Bepalova (1978),

Leda Semyonova (1987)

Music: Krzysztof Penderecki, Otmar

Nussio, A. Burdov

Starring: Tatiana Goryacheva,

Alexander Gradov, Vladimir

Degtyaryov

Maria (Peasant Elegy) – Мария (LSDF, 1978–88)

Cinematography: Vladimir Krasikov,
Alexander Sokurov (uncredited,
1975), Alexander Burov

Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Mikhail Podtakuy
Editing: Leda Semyonova

*Sonata for Hitler – Соната для
Гитлера* (LSDF, 1979–89)

Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Music: Krzysztof Penderecki, J. S. Bach

The Degraded – Разжалованный
(Mosfilm/with the participation of
Lenfilm, 1980)

Cinematography: Sergey Yurizditsky
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Production Design: Yuri Kulikov
Sound Design: Igor Vigdorichik
Music: Alexander Mikhailov
Starring: Ilya Rivin, Victoriya
Yurizditskaya, Irina Sokolova

*Sonata for Viola. Dmitri Shostakovich
– Альтистая соната. Дмитрий
Шостакович* (LSDF, 1981)

Directors: Semyon Aranovich, Alexander
Sokurov
Screenplay: Boris Dobrodeev
Cinematography: Yuri Alexandrov, Yuri
Lebedev
Sound Design: Evgenya Belyaeva

And Nothing More – И ничего больше
(LSDF, 1982–87)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov,
Lev Rozhin, Lyudmila Krasnova,
Alexander Grachev
Screenplay: Anatoli Nikiforov
Sound Design: Mikhail Podtakuy
Art Director: Sergey Debizhev

*Mournful Insensitivity – Скорбное
бесчувствие* (Lenfilm/icw Film
Makers, 1983–87)

Cinematography: Sergey Yurizditsky
Screenplay: Yuri Arabov, based on the
play by George Bernard Shaw
Production Design: Yelena Amshinskaya
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Leda Semyonova
Starring: Ramaz Chkhikvadze, Alla
Osipenko, Vladimir Zamansky,
Tatiana Egorova,
Victoriya Amitova, Irina Sokolova,
Dmitry Bryantsev, Vadim Zhuk

Evening Sacrifice – Жертва вечерняя
(LSDF, 1984–87)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Mikhail Podtakuy
Production Design: Sergey Debizhev
Editing: Larisa Solovtsova

Patience Labour – Терпение труд
(LSDF, 1985–87)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov
Screenplay: Irina Yefremova
Sound Design: Sergey Litvyakov

Elegy – Элегия (LSDF, 1986)
Cinematography: Alexander Burov,
Lev Rozhin, Lyudmila Krasnova
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Nina Vinogradskaya

Empire – Амнир (Lenfilm, 1986)
Cinematography: Sergey Sidorov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Production Design: Sergey Bolmant,
Sergey Debizhev
Sound Design: Kirill Kuzmin, Vladimir
Persov
Editing: Leda Semyonova, Lidia
Volkova, Nina Aleksandrova

Music: Giuseppe Verdi
Starring: Alla Osipenko, Ilya Rivin

Moscow Elegy – Московская элегия
(LSDF/Filmmakers' Union,
1986–88)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov,
Alexey Naydenov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Alexey Pugachev,
Vladimir Persov, Mikhail Podtakuy
Editing: Lyudmila Feyginova, Tatyana
Belousova, A. Zhikhareva, Leda
Semyonova, Lidia Volkova

Days of the Eclipse – Дни затмения
(Lenfilm, 1988)

Cinematography: Sergey Yurizditsky
Screenplay: Yuri Arabov, Pyotr
Kadochnikov, based on the
novella by Arkady and Boris
Strugatsky
Production Design: Elena
Amshinskaya
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Leda Semyonova
Music: Yuri Khanin (original score),
A. Shnittke, folk music
Starring: Alexey Ananishnov, Eskender
Umarov, Irina Sokolova

Save and Protect – Спаси и сохрани
(Lenfilm, commissioned by the
Videofilm Corp, 1989)

Cinematography: Sergey Yurizditsky
Screenplay: Yuri Arabov, based on the
novel by Gustave Flaubert
Production Design: Elena Amshinskaya
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Leda Semyonova
Music: Yuri Khanin
Starring: Cécile Zervoudacki, Robert
Vaab, Alexander Cherednik

Soviet Elegy – Советская элегия
(LSDF, 1989)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Leda Semyonova

*Petersburg Elegy – Петербургская
элегия* (LSDF/Centre of Creative
Initiative LO SFK, 1990)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov, Tatyana
Smorodinskaya
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Leda Semyonova

*To The Events In Transcaucasia. Newsreel
No. 5, Special Issue. – К событиям
в Закавказье. Ленинградская
кинохроника № 5. Спецвыпуск*
(LSDF, 1990)

Cinematography: Mikhail Shnurnikov,
Alexander Burov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Leda Semyonova

A Simple Elegy – Простая элегия
(LSDF/Centre for Creative Initiatives
LO SFK, 1990)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Raisa Lisova
Music: Mikalojus Čiurlionis

The Second Circle – Круг второй
(Centre for Creative Initiatives
LO SFK/Cinema Club Mirror
(Sytyvkar)/Film studio Troitsky
Most (Lenfilm), 1990)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov
Screenplay: Yuri Arabov
Production Design: Vladimir Solovev

Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Raisa Lisova
Music: Otmar Nussio
Starring: Pyotr Alexandrov, Nadezhda
Rodnova, Tamara Timofeeva

A Retrospection of Leningrad
(1957–1990) – *Ленинградская*
ретроспектива (1957–1990)
(LSDF, 1990)

Compiled by Alexander Sokurov

An Example of Intonation – Пример
интонации (Centre for Creative
Initiatives LO SFK, 1991)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Leda Semyonova, Irina Kiseleva

Elegy from Russia – Элегия из России
(Cinema committee of the Russian
Government/Lenfilm/LSDF, 1992)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Leda Semyonova

The Stone – Камень (International
Studio of Perm/Lenfilm, 1992)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov
Screenplay: Yuri Arabov
Production Design: Vladimir Solovyev
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Leda Semyonova
Music: P. I. Tchaikovsky, Gustav Mahler,
W. A. Mozart

Starring: Leonid Mozgovoy, Pyotr
Alexandrov

Whispering Pages – Тихие страницы
(North Foundation/Eskom–film/zero
film (Germany)/Lenfilm, 1993)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov

Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Production Design: Vera Zelinskaya
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Leda Semyonova
Music: Gustav Mahler, Otmar Nussio
Starring: Alexander Cherednik, Elizaveta
Koroleva, Sergey BarkovskyThe

A Soldier's Dream – Солдатский сон
(Severnny Fond, 1995)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov
Sound Design: Sergey Moshkov
Spiritual Voices – Духовные голоса
(Eskomfilm/Lenfilm/Roskomkino/
Severnny Fond/Pandora Co. Ltd
(Japan), 1995)

Cinematography: Alexander Burov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Sergey Moshkov
Music: W. A. Mozart, L. van Beethoven,
Olivier Messiaen, Richard Wagner,
P. I. Tchaikovsky, Toru Takemitsu

Mother and Son – Мать и сын
(Roskomkino/Severnny Fond/zero film
(Germany)/Lenfilm, 1997)

Cinematography: Aleksey Fyodorov
Screenplay: Yuri Arabov
Production Design: Vera Zelinskaya
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Leda Semyonova
Music: Mikhail Glinka, Otmar Nussio,
Giuseppe Verdi, folk music.
Starring: Gudrun Geyer, Aleksey
Ananishnov

Oriental Elegy – Восточная элегия
(Severnny Fond/NHK/Lenfilm/Sony
Corporation, 1996)

Cinematography: Alexey Fyodorov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Yeshinori Kawabata,
Sergey Moshkov
Art Director: Vera Zelinskaya

Hubert Robert. A Fortunate Life – Робер. Счастливая жизнь (Studio Ermitazhny Most, 1996)
 Producer: Andrey Deryabin
 Cinematography: Alexey Fyodorov
 Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
 Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
 Editing: Leda Semyonova

A Humble Life – Смиренная жизнь (The Japan Foundation/Severny Fond/Pandora Co. Ltd (Japan), 1997)
 Cinematography: Alexey Fyodorov
 Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
 Sound Designer: Sergey Moshkov
 Editing: Leda Semyonova

The St. Petersburg Diary: Inauguration of a Monument to Dostoevsky – Петербургский дневник. Открытие памятника Достоевскому (Studio Nadezhda, 1997)
 Producer: Svetlana Voloshina
 Cinematography: Alexey Fyodorov
 Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov, Alexandra Tuchinskaya
 Sound Design: Sergey Moshkov
 Editing: Leda Semyonova

The St. Petersburg Diary: Kozintsev's Flat – Петербургский дневник. Квартира Козинцева (Studio Nadezhda, 1998)
 Producer: Svetlana Voloshina
 Cinematography: Alexey Fyodorov
 Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
 Sound Design: Sergey Moshkov
 Editing: Leda Semyonova

Confession – Повинность (Studio Nadezhda/Roskomkino/with the participation of Lenfilm, 1998)
 Producer: Svetlana Voloshina

Cinematography: Alexey Fyodorov
 Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
 Sound Design: Sergey Moshkov
 Editing: Leda Semyonova

Dialogues with Solzhenitsyn – Беседы с Солженицыным (Studio Nadezhda, 1998)

Producer: Svetlana Voloshina
 Cinematography: Alexander Degtyaryov, Alexey Fyodorov
 Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
 Sound Design: Sergey Moshkov

Dialogues with Solzhenitsyn – Узел (Studio Nadezhda, 1998)

Producer: Svetlana Voloshina
 Cinematography: Alexander Degtyaryov, Alexey Fyodorov
 Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
 Sound Design: Sergey Moshkov

dolce... (Studio Bereg/Quest (Japan), 1999)

Producer: Yudji Kogure
 Project Manager: Hiroko Kojima
 Cinematography: Koshiro Otsu
 Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
 Sound Design: Sergei Moshkov
 Editing: Alexei Jankowski, Sergei Ivanov

Moloch – Молох (Lenfilm/zero film (Germany)/Fusion Product with the participation of Fabrica, ARTE/WDR, Filmboard Berlin/ Brandenburg GmbH, Fondation Montecinemaverita, 1999)
 Producers: Victor Sergeev, Rio Saitani, Tomas Kufus
 Cinematography: Aleksey Fyodorov, Anatoly Rodionov
 Screenplay: Yuri Arabov, translated into German by Marina Koreneva
 Production Design: Sergey Kokovkin

Costume Design: Lidia Kryukova
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov, Sergey Moshkov
Editing: Leda Semyonova
Music: Richard Wagner
Starring: Elena Rufanova, Leonid Mozgovoy

Taurus – Телец (Lenfilm/Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation/State Committee of Cinematography of Russia, 2000)

Producer: Victor Sergeev
Cinematography: Alexander Sokurov, Anatoly Rodionov
Screenplay: Yuri Arabov
Production Design: Natalia Kochergina
Costume Design: Lidia Kryukova
Sound Design: Sergey Moshkov
Editing: Leda Semyonova
Music: Andrey Sigle
Starring: Leonid Mozgovoy, Maria Kuznetsova, Natalia Nikulenko, Sergey Razhuk, Lev Eliseev

Elegy of a Voyage – Элегия дороги (Idéale Audience (France)/Studio Bereg/The Kasander Film Company (Holland), 2001)
Cinematography: Alexander Degtyaryov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Sergei Moshkov
Editing: Sergei Ivanov
Music: The soundtrack comprises music by Glinka, Mahler, Slonimsky, Tchaikovsky, and Chopin, rendered electronically by Sergey Moshkov

Russian Ark – Русский ковчег (The State Hermitage Museum/Studio Ermitazhny Most/Egoli Tossell/Film AG production/Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation/Fora–Film M/Celluloid Dreams, 2002)

Cinematography: Tilman Büttner
Screenplay: Anatoly Nikiforov, Alexander Sokurov
Production Design: Yelena Zhukova, Natalia Kochergina
Costume Design: Lidia Kryukova, Tamara Seferyan, Maria Grishanova
Sound Design: Sergey Moshkov, Vladimir Persov
Music: Sergey Yevtushenko (original score); M. Glinka, P. I. Tchaikovsky, H. Purcell, G. P. Telemann.
Starring: Sergey Dreyden, Leonid Mozgovoy, Alla Osipenko

Father and Son – Отец и сын (zero film (Germany)/Nikola–film/Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2003)

Producers: Thomas Kufus, Igor Kalenov
Cinematography: Alexander Burov
Screenplay: Sergey Potepalov
Production Design: Nataliya Kochergina
Sound Design: Sergey Moshkov
Editing: Sergey Ivanov
Music: Andrey Sigle (after themes by P. I. Tchaikovsky)
Starring: Andrey Shchetinin, Aleksey Neymyshev, Aleksandr Razbash, Fyodor Lavrov, Marina Zasukhina

The Sun – Солнце (Nikola–film/Proline Film/Downtown Pictures (Italy)/Mact Productions (France)/Riforma Film (Switzerland)/with the support of Federal Agency for Culture and Cinematography of Russian Federation/RAI Cinema (Italy)/Istituto Luce (Italy)/Centre National de la Cinématographie (France)/with the participation of: CTC Television Network, Lenfilm studio, 2005)
Producers: Igor Kalenov, Andrey Sigle, Marco Muller

Cinematography: Anatoly Rodyonov
Screenplay: Yuri Arabov
Production Design: Elena Zhukova,
Yuri Kuper
Sound Design: Sergey Moshkov
Editing: Sergey Ivanov
Starring: Issei Ogata, Robert Dawson,
Kaori Momoi

*The St. Petersburg Diary: Mozart.
Requiem – Петербургский дневник.
Моцарт. Реквием* (Studio Bereg/Sterkh
Film Company/RAI 3 (Italy), 2005)
Cinematography: Alexander Burov,
Anatoly Rodionov, A. Gusev,
E. Goncharuk
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Sergey Moshkov
Editing: Sergey Ivanov

Elegy of Life – Элегия жизни (Studio
Bereg/Sterkh Film Company/Svarog–
Film/with the financial support of
the Federal Agency of Press and Mass
Communication, 2006)
Cinematography: Yegor Zherdin, Kirill
Moshkovich, Mikhail Golubkov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov
Editing: Sergey Ivanov

Alexandra – Александра (Proline–
film/Rezofilm/with the support
of Federal Agency for Culture
and Cinematography of Russian
Federation/Centre National de la
Cinématographie (France), 2007)
Producer: Andrey Sigle
Cinematography: Alexander Burov
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Production Design: Dmitriy Malich–
Konkov
Costume Designer: Lidia Kryukova
Sound Designer: Vladimir Persov

Editing: Sergey Ivanov
Music: Andrey Sigle
Starring: Galina Vishnevskaya, Vasili
Shevtsov, Raisa Gichaeva

*Reading from the Book of Blockade –
Читаем блокадную книгу* (100 TV,
2009)
Producer: Oleg Rudnov
Director: Alexander Kladko
Cinematography: Alexander Tarin;
Konstantin Bochin, Mikhail
Goloubkov, Dmitry Egoshin, Victor
Konovalov, Andrey Lubek, Valery
Morozov, Alexander Sootkovetsky
Set Design: Julia Sooproom
Sound Design: Nikolai Almaev,
Vyacheslav Arhipov
Editing: Tatiana Orlova

Intonation – Интонация (100 TV,
2009)
Producers: Oleg Rudnov, Andrey Sigle
Cinematographer: Alexander Degtyaryov
(Kirill Goretski, Anatoli Gruzdev,
Sergey Klyutch)
Screenplay: Alexander Sokurov
Sound Design: Vladimir Persov, Makar
Akhpashev
Editing: Sergey Obukhov

Faust – Фауст (Proline Film, 2011)
Producer: Andrey Sigle
Cinematography: Bruno Delbonnel
Screenplay: Yuri Arabov, German
dialogues by Marina Koreneva
Production Design: Elena Zhukova
Costume Design: Lidya Krukova
Editing: Jörg Hauschild
Music: Andrey Sigle
Starring: Johanes Zeiler, Anton
Adasinsky, Isolda Dychauk, Hanna
Schygulla, Antje Lehwald

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