

In the Soviet Orbit:

Sokurov's 'Lonely Voice'

By Amos Vogel

The emergence on the festival circuit of an abundance of new or previously banned Soviet films simultaneously signals the creative pre-eminence of Russian film and the Soviet state's profound ideological crisis. Soviet film's most creative talents, jettisoning the ossified formulas of Stalinist socialist realism, resemble early Soviet filmmakers' fusions of modernist forms and radical content, but in place of revolutionary fervor, they explore a new humanism, rooted in personal morality and the battle against hypocrisy, corruption and bureaucracy.

An impressive thematic and stylistic variety has been revealed—from documentaries that expose the previously unmentionable to features that deal directly with tragedies of Stalinism, Soviet society's backwardness, tensions within the ruling stratum, and inter-generational conflict.

Amidst a proliferation of aesthetic approaches, an ancient predilection for mysticism and metaphysics has re-emerged. Hitherto exhibited most notably by Andrei Tarkovsky, this tendency represents a concerted dissent from official dogma. The possibility of mysteries perhaps never amenable to rational human comprehension is now being raised.

Carrying the Tarkovsky torch is Alexander Sokurov, a major new talent, discovered in the West by the Berlin International Film Festival's Forum of Young Cinema, indispensable showcase for international independent, third world and avant-garde cinema.

Sokurov's first feature, *The Lonely Voice of Man* (1978-87) was banned for almost ten years. Freely inspired by two stories of the long suppressed Soviet author Andrej Platonov, the film's melancholic recreation of his non-narrative experimental style charts the failed relationship of a disturbed young



Alexander Sokurov.

veteran of the 'Twenties' civil war and an unorthodox young woman.

Almost Dostoevskian in its overheated characterizations, fervid episodes and emotional outbursts, the work is permeated by despair and flashes of hope. It is difficult, slow, disjointed and requires concentration. Discordant montage, sudden intrusion of documentary materials, non-realist use of color, varying film speeds and a shockingly atonal, expressionist soundtrack validate Sokurov's stylistic fragmentations. It is to their credit that the new leadership of the Soviet Filmmakers Union recognized in Sokurov's despair not counter-revolution but a lacerating search for truth.

Born in 1951, Sokurov worked in TV for seven years before entering the State Film School where he began *The Lonely Voice of Man* as a thesis film. Extending the work to feature-length, though only granted funds for a 20-minute film, he found it rejected as "formalist, in the spirit of pre-revolutionary philosophy," and spent years hiding the negative after it was

ordered destroyed. Admitted to Lenfilmstudio after Tarkovsky lobbied for him, his film proposals were roundly rejected. The Leningrad Documentary Film Studio approved several documentary films, and finally, Lenfilms reluctantly agreed to his production of Shaw's *Heartbreak House*, only to stop all production after viewing the rushes; simultaneously, several of his documentary films were denied exhibition.

Since Gorbachev's accession, the new leadership of the Filmmakers Union effectively rehabilitated Sokurov in an official letter, praising his work's "serious, artistic character, opening new roads to film art" and thanking him for "his courage, unwillingness to compromise and adherence to his principles."

Days of the Eclipse (1988) demonstrates the maturation of Sokurov's poetic style. Receiving official favor and financing for the first time, Sokurov makes no concessions to popular taste. Inspired by a science fiction allegory, *A Million Years Before*



The Lonely Voice of Man: a lacerating search for truth.

the Apocalypse by Arkady and Boris Strugatski (authors of Tarkovsky's *Stalker*), *Eclipse* is a messianic rumination on Soviet society. In the book, a mysterious extra-terrestrial force disrupts all Earth research it considers dangerous; in the film, this allegory of an omnipotent state arrayed against isolated individuals is transformed into a phantasmagoric tale of a young doctor, relegated to a godforsaken part of Asiatic Russia (where Sokurov spent his school years). In an atmosphere of stagnation and desultory fear, unknown powers interfere with his research, which his friends urge him to abandon. The East German film scholar Oksana Bulgakova's superb essay in the 1989 Forum program notes explains what is unclear in the film's hastily created subtitles (the Russians, so forthcoming these days, failed to provide a subtitled version): the doctor's research hypothesized that the low mortality among Jehovah's Witnesses exiled to the town derived from their belief in God.

A series of disconnected, mystifying vignettes acts as scaffolding for the doctor's spiritual search. He must choose between compromise, submission or a probably hopeless battle. The town emerges as a microcosm of Soviet society, with Crimean Tartars and Volga Germans (both deported by Stalin to Asia), religious fanatics, and soldiers on their way to Afghanistan, all thrown together with the native population in an atmosphere of despair. From the beyond, a dead friend (pressured into suicide by these mysterious forces) admonishes him to respect the limits lest society's guardians come to impose order; an abused young boy myste-

riously appears and tearfully relates his persecution "because of the doctor's research"; a sister arrives in accord with a telegram he never sent; an eclipse impends.

The film's narrative is perverse, maddening, idiosyncratic, its style a perfect expression of its content. It lacks a beginning and an end. An unmoving camera indulges in frequent long shots and long takes, with deep-focus action on several levels; at other times, it moves ceaselessly. The images, in brown sepia or muted, beautiful colors, are frequently spectacular; in one scene, the young doctor, leaning on a window sill from inside a house, is seen from the outside in long shot; he suddenly and violently somersaults backward, leaving the window empty. Only someone fully awake to the magic

powers of film could have envisioned such a shot. Finally, the transitions from scene to scene are abrupt and—lacking establishing shots—deliberately disorienting. In this film, the passive spectator has been abolished.

The soundtrack, according to Sokurov, must never simply illustrate visual action; it is a separate entity, "for pure sound ultimately stays with the audience even when images are forgotten." Thus Sokurov chooses Juri Chanin, a young avant-garde composer who, in addition to powerfully atonal elements also utilizes bits of a Catholic Mass, Turkmanian, Asserbidshanian, Armenian language fragments and German songs.

Oksana Bulgakova correctly refers to the film's apocalyptic nature and its significance as a cultural-political phenomenon of the first order. Sokurov, at a September 1988 press conference in Riga refers (almost in passing!) to "the collapse of the Soviet state;" it is with this realization that he develops a work of cosmic, existential angst, alternately political and metaphysical, desperate and deliberately mystifying.

On the evidence of his work, it is tempting to criticize Sokurov as a mystic, if not an obscurantist. Similar accusations were levelled at Tarkovsky, and while a conscious longing for a god suffuses their work, it is more appropriate to view this as a symptom of the system's ongoing ideological crisis, perhaps but a stage in the painful creation of fresh value systems for a future in which bureaucratic-technological totalitarianism has been supplanted by a new 21st-century humanism. ☸



Soviet Cinema wakes up in The Lonely Voice of Man.