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To Auguste and Louis,
and many others . . .

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used to flock to see Fairbanks' adventures and Pickford's sweet stories in the 1920s. Later, the "trophy movies" captured in Germany after World War II were released on the Soviet market, and a whole generation of teenagers was conquered by the charismatic Tarzan-Weissmuller. The 1970s witnessed the craze for Indian movies. As the USSR pursued a friendly foreign policy with Third World countries, Indian tales of love and death with exotic princesses, handsome warriors, dazzling palaces, and fancy gardens hit the Soviet screen and the imagination of the mass audience. The idea of creating "movies for the millions," in the 1930s, rested on the success of foreign blockbusters. The Minister of Cinema, Boris Shumyatsky, who launched the campaign to conquer the masses with national productions, demanded features combining the entertainment quality of American film with domestic subjects and ideology. Some were successful, such as the adventure *Chapayev* and the musicals of Grigory Alexandrov.⁸⁹ The formula proved viable in the hands of skillful filmmakers and produced good results until very recently – as noted, *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*.

What is new in the blockbuster of the glasnost period is the absence of ideology. These films have switched from a position of subservience to government policies to social criticism and political opposition, or at least neutrality. They have also lost the foundation of dogmatic certitudes, which results in a sense of disorientation and the impossibility of a happy ending. The current mood (that can be called post-glasnost, by analogy with post-modernism) has inevitably affected the narrative form, which often seems to be burdened with contradictions, exaggerations, clichés, and self-reflexive devices. At times this treatment is deliberate and engages the viewers in a playful dialogue. At times, it is the reflection of a certain confusion in the director's mind. The viewers are not invited to "play," they are asked to identify and empathize.

8 Peering into the future

The filmmakers of glasnost have been able to restore the past and record the present, but they have been less successful in predicting the future. With the political pendulum swinging back and forth from left to right, the economic system collapsing under the pressure of half-hearted reforms, and the entire country bursting at the seams with national rebellion and popular unrest, the future looks very bleak. Most films of this period do not have a perspective, or if they do, it is a catastrophic one. After seventy years of utopian projections and bountiful economic plans without foundation, frustration, disillusionment, and even despair have set in. It is true that without a memory of the past there can be no future. And that is why the historical "blank spots" were quickly filled in. But it is equally true that without a belief in the future past and present have no meaning. Having lost faith in the ideology, with its promises of a materialistic paradise, a few filmmakers look for substitutes. Some turn to religion. But even so, they are unable to find spiritual solace at the end of the road. What they foresee are the horrors of Armageddon. Others avoid mysticism and work out a sci-fi model of a dreadful future society, flipping the utopia upside down. Still others, resort to escape into an aesthetic dimension – the dimension of the absurd, the carnival of life. In a nutshell, the glasnost films conjure up the future through the prism of carnival, dystopia, and the Apocalypse.

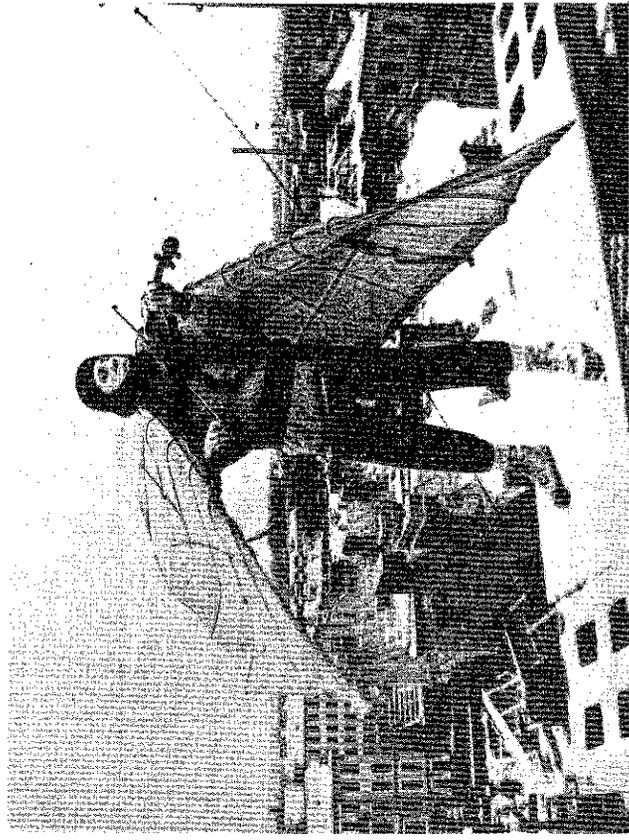
Carnival

Carnival has a special connotation in literary theory. It describes both a style and a strategy. The style is rich, ornate, baroque; the strategy is subversive. The term was first applied to the grotesque mode of writing, but cinema has borrowed it, together with other literary terms, definitions, and concepts.¹ In a grotesque narrative, the events are presented as being normal, and the settings suggest the ordinary

world. But characters, events, and places stand in an absurd relation to each other. While the trivial is blown up to hyperbolic proportions, commonly accepted values are trivialized. Normal relations are, therefore, upset, logic is destroyed without justification, and the natural order is subverted. The effect is unsettling because it leaves the viewer without parameters for a "correct" reading of the text. It creates a semantic vacuum which challenges established worldviews. Russian literature and theater have a long and brilliant tradition of works in the grotesque mode. It was perfected by Nikolay Gogol and perpetuated through one and a half centuries, notwithstanding official frowning. For Soviet cinema, however, this mode is largely new, although there were some precedents. In the 1920s, several films were produced by the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS), headed by Grigory Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, and over the years there have been some isolated cases, such as Medvedkin's *Happiness* (1935) and Ryazanov's *Garrage*. But a grotesque trend never got a foothold on the screen. It was regarded by the censor as irreverent, destabilizing, and therefore inadmissible for mass consumption. The official establishment that favored the comfortable, supportive mode of Socialist Realism, addressed the subversive challenge with ruthless repression. Only now, the grotesque vein has begun to find its legitimate cinematic expression.

The most conspicuous builder of the grotesque carnival on screen is director Yuri Mamin, a former student of Eldar Ryazanov. His directorial career started in the new era, in 1986, when he was jolted to fame by the satirical comedy, *Neptune Festival*. This funny short does not deal with the future, but is an interesting starting point in view of the two following films, *Fountain* (1988) and *Sideburns* (1990). Together, they complete a triptych of a sort, that shows Mamin's progressive disillusionment with the direction of the new course. In the four perestroika years, Mamin's humor moved from farce, to grotesque, to chilling sardonic laughter.

Neptune Festival is set in a remote Siberian village. The film poked fun at false patriotism, as the village folk set up an absurd competition with a group of Swedish visitors. The contest consists of plunging into an ice hole in the frozen river, with allusions to the famous battle on the ice from *Alexander Nevsky*. The nationalistic spirit of the contest is bombastically sustained by Prokofiev's score. The effect is hilarious. But Mamin's vision, from the very first film, went beyond laughter. "Such false patriotism has led to absurd situations that have



29 *Fountain* (1988) directed by Yuri Mamin

become rather common in our life and do not seem funny anymore," the director said. "Satire often borders on drama and even tragedy. But to laugh at our setbacks is a way to overcome them."²

This may also apply to Mamin's next film *Fountain*, like the previous one produced by Lenfilm studio, with a script by Vladimir Vardunas. But unlike *Neptune Festival*, *Fountain* does peer into the future and leaves the viewer with a disturbing feeling of impending disaster. The hero is an urban collective, the tenants of an ordinary Leningrad building. But what is ordinary in real life may look quite extraordinary in an aesthetic setting. The effect is achieved mainly by means of hyperbole. Normal situations are exaggerated to an absurd degree. The viewer, by accepting the absurd as part of the ordinary world, will eventually perceive the familiar world as being absurd. The tenement is so run down, due to years of neglect, bad administration and lack of basic maintenance supplies, that it is about to collapse. What started as a hairline crack in one of the main walls has rapidly progressed, turning into a menacing rift that runs from the foundation to the roof. The roof has already given way on one side, and the house committee is taking various measures to support

it. First they try to reinforce it with placards of official slogans discarded to the attic (*POWER IN THE USSR BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE*, and the like). But these turn out to be too weak. Then, they find a threesome of drunkards who (peculiar Atlases!) agree to sustain the roof on their shoulders for a shot of alcohol by the hour. To complicate matters, due to a banal accident, the tenement suffers a water cutoff and a power failure. Chaos ensues, and the only way out is into the fantastic. The elevator, suddenly activated by a short circuit, shoots up . . . up and away into space, like a rocket, carrying one astonished old man who was accidentally stuck inside. The end.

Fountain's fantastic ending, however, is not an escape into fantasy. It is a confirmation that the events that unfolded throughout the film, for all their apparent normality, were no less extraordinary than the fantastic ending itself – a device Gogol used successfully in works such as *Dead Souls* and *The Overcoat*. Moreover, the character of the old man is an important ingredient of the film's dramatic strategy. A visitor from a Kazakhstan village, he is an alien in the tenement. Coming from a different culture and a non-industrial society, he is appalled by the urban way of life, and what seems normal to the building dwellers looks like an aberration to him. Although this character has a small role, it is his point of view that leads the spectator through the film and accounts for the absurdist atmosphere of the action. Within the general metaphor, there are also allusions to the irresponsible ecological exploitation of the Central Asian regions by the government, and to the eventual destruction of those cultures.

Soviet critics have noted that the tenement is an obvious visual metaphor for the country itself, in dire need of restructuring, if not already beyond repair.³ And the problem is not only with the physical premises, they said, but with the "human factor" that inhabits them. This tenement, instead of being a catalyst of the social fabric, divides the individuals into separate units. It is a sort of Tower of Babel where people speak different languages and act at odds with one another. They insulate themselves from the tragic reality within the walls of their tiny apartments, and in those mouse holes they create their personal little worlds. One family has a flower business; they cultivate tulips under plastic sheets, in stacked wooden boxes that have taken up virtually every inch of the living space. One floor above, a World War II veteran polishes his medals to a perfect shine day after day. And the composer who lives on the top floor seeks inspiration for his next symphony by donning an Icarus costume and taking off daily for a flight over the courtyard. When disaster hits,

these oblivious creatures are quite unprepared and become victims of their own doing. In the end, as civilization breaks down, the tenants of the condemned building find their own fantastic solution to an unsolvable situation. They build a bonfire and begin to dance in circle to the rhythm of primitive folk instruments. It is a sort of an ancient propitiatory rite, a leap into the irrational. It is, above all, a grotesque affirmation of life in the spirit of the carnival.⁴

Dystopia

Mamin's latest film does not qualify as carnival. Rather, it has the icy, surrealist quality of a dystopian world. Gone are the masks of the bacchanalia, swept away with machine-like efficiency by a new superior breed of vigilantes. In Soviet literature there are few models of dystopia, a vision of the future subject to strict censorship, but one stands out as a classic of the genre, on the same level as Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*. This is Evgeny Zamyatin's *We*, banned when it was written (1921) and never published in the Soviet Union until 1988. In cinema, although utopia abounded, there were no examples of dystopia before the era of glasnost.⁵

Sideburns is a satire about Soviet reality of the 1990s, a warning that perestroika has already generated its myths, stereotypes, and aberrations. It is a projection into the next decade, showing the totalitarian mood and the unrelieved violence of *Clockwork Orange* memory. Beneath the surface, the film probes into the nature of dictatorship, the psychological root of power, the moral imperative, and the degeneration of the social utopia. In *Sideburns*, Mamin's satirical whip castigates Russian nationalism and the exploitation of cultural traditions for political purposes. Two groups are pitted against each other. On one side are the free-wheeling, hedonistic punks, called "Cap-pella," lost in an orgy of sex and sound modeled on Western clichés. These are grotesque masks that would be at home both in Fellini's *Satyricon* and in a "Pop-mechanics" happening. They are ludicrous, gross, and repulsive but, ultimately, they are harmless, like a species on its way to extinction. On the other side, are the fanatic guardians of law and order and of pristine Russian values, called ASP. The acronym stands for the name of the nineteenth-century poet Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin, a symbol of high civic ideals to every Russian. They sport a portrait of the poet on their flag, and wear frock-coats, like the contemporaries of the Decembrists, but in reality they conceal a petty dictator's soul under their sideburns, starched

30 *Sideburns* (1990) directed by Yuri Mamin

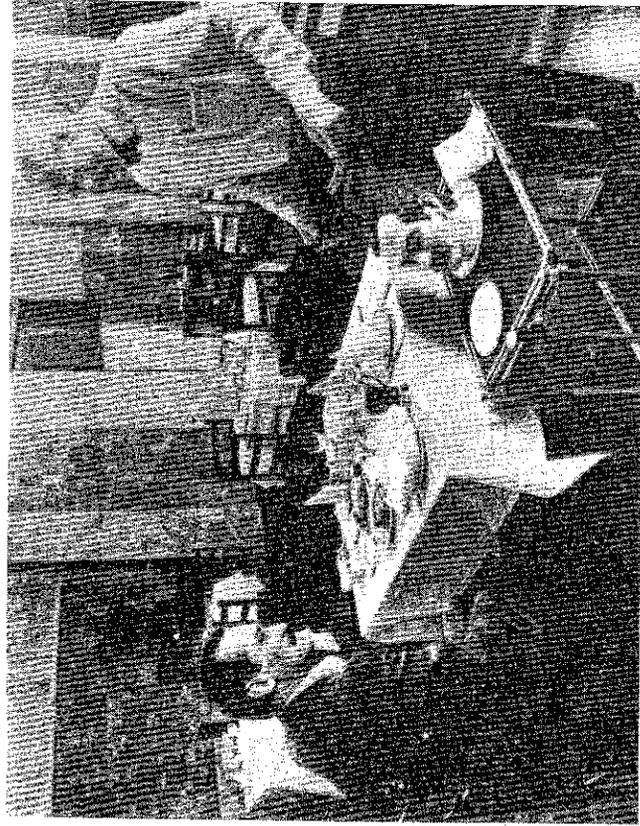
collars, and bow ties. In a revealing scene, two ASP leaders transform a bust of Lenin into a bust of Pushkin by remolding the clay. The group soon turns into a paramilitary force, skillful in deadly martial arts techniques; and, with the blessing of the authorities, it cleans up the "Cappella." ASP eventually becomes so menacing as to be a threat to the authorities themselves. In a police ambush, all ASP members and their leaders are captured and stripped of their power: their bushy sideburns are shaved together with their hair. But, like a monster with seven heads, the group rises again. This time, the skin-heads are clad in yellow blouses, and shout Mayakovsky's poems. The film does not offer any alternative, only an eternal recurrence of the same totalitarian spirit under different guises and in different garb.

Sideburns may have bruised some sensibilities among right-wing cultural associations, such as the notorious "Pamyat," because a boycott was organized to block domestic circulation. This is one of the first examples of censorship by money power, rather than by Goskino's dictate. Goskino, actually, promptly released the film in the spring of 1990 and sent it to festivals abroad, with Sovexportfilm handling foreign sales.⁶ At home, however, circulation was stalled. According to Mamin, a front organization by the name of "Orfei"

bought the picture from Lenfilm for 2 million rubles, only to keep it in the closet. "Orfei" is not concerned about recouping the money — "a sign," said Mamin, "that they have already been paid off by some high-positioned authorities."⁷

In *Zero City* (1989), by Karen Shakhnazarov, dystopia is conveyed in the form of a personal nightmare. The action is supposedly set in our days, with a few flashbacks in the retro style. But the emphasis is on the search for a breakthrough into the future, which does not seem to exist. Without being solemn, the film raises the ontological question: do we still exist?

Zero City is a good combination of a popular genre — the thriller — with cultural clichés, political kitsch, ideological satire, and Kafkaesque surrealism. An engineer from a Moscow factory, Alexei Varakin, arrives in a provincial town on business. It is early morning and the town is deserted. Straight from the railroad station he goes to the office of his destination, and here he is greeted by a stern receptionist sitting at her typewriter with businesslike importance. A normal situation by all standards, except for one detail: the receptionist is completely naked. Neither the woman nor the young executive that brings in some papers seem to pay any attention to this fact, and before Varakin can recover from the shock he is shown into the director's office. But even the director, when "warned" about the strange occurrence, treats it with matter-of-fact indifference. The business conversation aggravates the hallucinatory atmosphere, with the director promising to refer Varakin's complaints to their chief engineer who, as it soon turns out, has been dead for two years. But this is only the beginning of Varakin's unsettling adventure. The narrative unfolds in the realm of the absurd, without however progressing, and the unhappy Muscovite eventually gets enmeshed in a plot involving murder (or was it suicide?), mistaken identity, and political intrigue. As he is forced to eat a cake in the effigy of his own head and, later, perform a dance at the local Elvis Club of rock-and-roll fans, the fear of being lost in a nightmarish world mounts together with the desperate need to escape. But there are no trains from the town's station, and the only existing highway ends abruptly in a thick wood. The hero is trapped, and not only physically. He is caught in a vicious circle of events that are beyond his understanding, and yet make perfect sense to the uncanny inhabitants of Zero City. But what kind of city is this, after all? The viewer becomes progressively aware that this is a city without coordinates, a zero on the

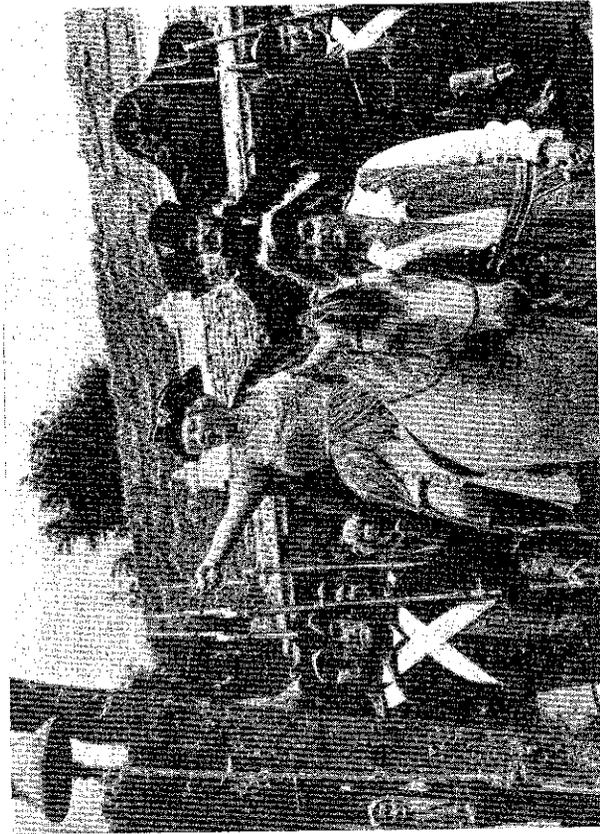
31 *Zero City* (1989) directed by Karen Shakhnazarov

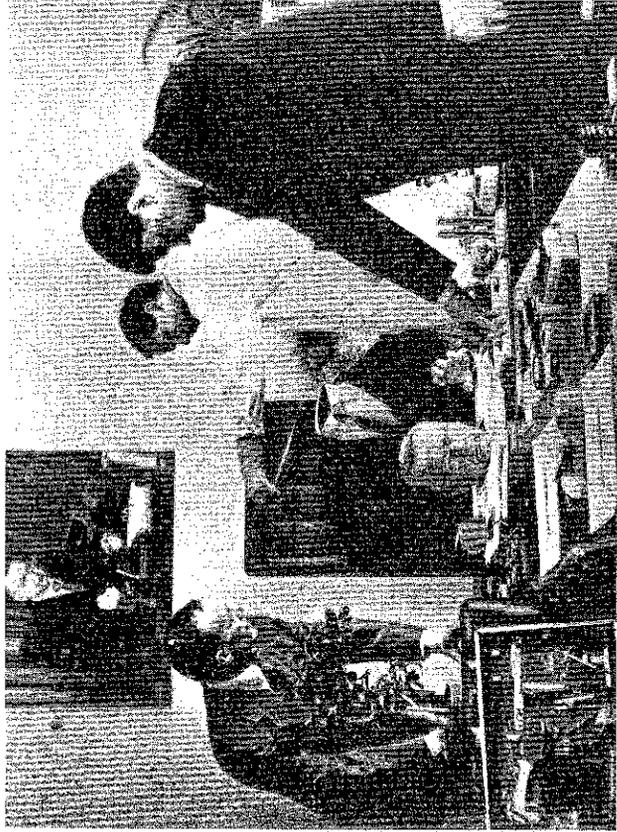
world map, existing only as a visual expression of Varakin's inchoate fear. On the other hand, Varakin's predicament is absolutely real and, what is worse, it is shared by millions of Soviet citizens. The whole country, the film suggests, may very well end up in a big, round zero. Significant in this respect is the sequence of Varakin's visit to the Historical Museum. He is taken on a tour of an exhibition that looks like something between a diorama show and a waxworks. It is a journey through Russian-Soviet history; actually, a grotesque parody of it. Events and figures are placed in phony contexts, chronology is distorted by odd juxtapositions, and cheap embellishments-cum-hyperbolic-ornaments degrade history to the level of a fairground attraction. Stalin in a white uniform, surrounded by the symbols of his empire, is now a wax mannequin in the museum, but his ghost still lives in the soul of the town's public prosecutor, nostalgic for the law and order of the good old days. This, however, is not the most ominous manifestation of the ghost's survival. More disturbing is the fact that Stalin left behind a trail of living dead – the entire town's population is a community of puppets with dead souls. They support perestroika and hail the latest trend of openness for the

simple reason that this gives them the freedom to inaugurate the first rock-and-roll club in town. Obviously, in *Zero City* history is dead, and so is the collective memory of the past. In the end, the hero is left floating in a small rowboat in the middle of a lake, shrouded in a thick fog. Because where there is no past there cannot be any future.⁸

In the film *It* (1989), by Sergei Ovcharov, history is not just a theme but the main protagonist. In his previous films, *Believe It Or Not* (1983) and *Lefty* (1987), Ovcharov worked with the material of national folklore and folk storytelling. *It* is based on the nineteenth-century satirical tale, *History of a Town* (1870), by Salykov-Shchedrin. The novel was a survey of Russian history compressed in the microcosm of a provincial town, whose bosses and bureaucrats were poorly disguised parodies of Russian monarchs and dignitaries. Thanks to the liberal policy of Alexander II, the czar whose reforms have been compared to Gorbachev's, this biting satire was not blocked by the censor.

The film's commentary follows the literary text verbatim, but characters and events are manipulated in order to accommodate contemporary history, with a projection into the dystopia of the twenty-

32 *It* (1989) directed by Sergei Ovcharov

33 *It* (1989) directed by Sergei Ovcharov

first century. It starts from the very beginning, with the legendary Ryurik, the founder of the Russian state, and proceeds through the centuries with preposterous cameos of successive sovereigns and empresses. Up to the fatal 1917, the tone is farcical, the action is sheer buffoonery. Then, the slapstick gradually fades into the grotesque. Laughter becomes uneasy, and finally sinister. The character of Lenin fades into that of Stalin, then Beria (here there are already cinematic quotations from *Repentance*), and then Khrushchev. This line of continuity is masterfully established by actor Rolan Bykov, who plays all four roles. With the progression of the fatal chain, the mood becomes more and more pessimistic. Next comes a hybrid character, loosely associated with Brezhnev, whose mental and moral disarray is reflected in his dismembered body. Reminiscent of Méliès' old tricks, the leader's head sits on the desk all by itself, letting out an incoherent slur, or is sent to the repair shop for a quick fix. Finally, the "nice guy" takes over. Good-looking, neatly dressed, well-intentioned, tolerant, he is a liberal and a democrat. But his laissez-faire policy is ineffectual. Soon things get out of control, crime and violence cause social and political chaos. The leader, his handsome features

hardened into a stone mask, turns into the enforcer of law and order who leads the country into the next century – a wasteland, ecologically devastated, populated by a regimented and dejected humanity, a surrealist brave new world.

Is this *It*? Not exactly. *It* seems to refer to a vague but terrifying menace, a curse on the Russian destiny. Whatever the title may imply, a hint is given in the last paragraph of Saltykov-Shchedrin's tale, which concludes the film: "Filled with wrath *It* dashed off, storming over the earth, rumbling, droning, and groaning . . . *It* was approaching, and as *It* got closer time came to a standstill . . ." ¹⁹

Apocalypse

One situation that is often associated with the Apocalypse is war. Not in conventional Soviet war movies that stressed patriotism and victory, but certainly in Western films of the past two decades (Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, for example). At the very beginning of perestroika, however, one such film appeared in the Soviet Union as well. The year 1985, the fortieth anniversary of the victory in World War II, called for an extraordinary number of war movies. Most of them were mediocre productions, others were spectacular but shallow, but one was worthy of note, *Come and See*, by Elem Klimov.¹⁰

This film is based on an actual event, and depicts the brutality of the Nazi invaders in the Belorussian village of Khatyn. The script is by Ales Adamovich, a vocal pacifist, and now a deputy in the People's Congress. *Come and See* was awarded the first prize at that year's Moscow International Film Festival, and has attracted millions of viewers in the Soviet Union. The sparse American audiences who saw it were profoundly disturbed; they either loved it or hated it. Indeed, this film does not allow the viewer to remain indifferent. The viewer's senses are relentlessly assaulted by the powerful camera work, combined with striking imagery, a harrowing soundtrack, and even a palpable illusion of smell. The medium itself, more than the narrative, conveys the horror of the war by taking the viewer through a painful physical experience. This is supposed to parallel the ordeal of the film's protagonist, Flyor, who is able to preserve his human dignity amid violence and destruction. But, while focusing on violence and brutality the film is intended to transcend the physical experience and raise the viewer into the realm of spiritual values. Evocative in this respect is Mozart's cathartic *Requiem*, underscoring the final camera tilt toward the sky. *Come and See* portrays the war in

order to spread a peace message. In line with the Soviet policy of arms control, the film with its apocalyptic title warns the viewer about the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. Klimov himself made that connection: "After the première of the film . . . a Japanese film critic told me: 'Your Khatyn is our Hiroshima.'"11

This theme is treated more directly in *Letters of a Dead Man* (1986), by the young director Konstantin Lopushansky. The film portrays life in an underground shelter after a nuclear explosion. The dominant brownish coloration corresponds to the somber emotional tone of the movie. The central figure, a scientist (played by Rolan Bykov) who feels he has contributed to the destruction of mankind, carries the philosophical theme throughout the film. Contrary to positivistic logic, this ex-scientist believes that although the genetic base of life has been destroyed, the human spirit will survive and be able to regenerate itself. A tenuous affirmation of hope is crystallized in the image of the Christmas tree, which the scientist builds from fragments of scrap metal for a group of traumatized children condemned to die in the nuclear winter.

By the time Lopushansky made his second film he had gained some degree of fame among an international elite of film connoisseurs. *Visitor to a Museum* (1989) won the prize for best direction at Moscow Film Festival, but like its predecessor was ignored by mass audiences. *Visitor* is a futuristic fantasy ("a realistic projection," the director argues) about the destruction of our planet.¹² While in *Letters* life came to an end because of a nuclear explosion, in this film the cause of life extinction is ecological disaster. On an earth disfigured by dead oceans, extinct animals and plants, polluted air, and exhausted soil the last survivors are hopelessly aware of their own doom. Many of them, biologically affected by the devastation of the environment, are mutating into subhuman creatures and kept in reservations carved out of industrial dumps. The horror of this underworld is not in sharp contrast with the world on the surface. Here, too, life is hellish. It is only one infernal circle higher, and already caught in a downward spiral that will precipitate it to the bottom of the abyss. Lopushansky's apocalyptic picture has an unapologetic religious underpinning. The director said that he "wanted to continue the philosophical-Christian tradition of the national culture" and address the issue of "sin and retribution." The aesthetic fabric of the film, while engaging the viewer in the free game of image association, underlines and reinforces the main idea: excessive pride in



34 *Visitor to a Museum* (1989) directed by Konstantin Lopushansky

reason led mankind away from God. The pursuit of scientific-industrial progress without a parallel spiritual development proved to be self-destructive. At the end of the road, when the truth becomes apparent, it is too late to reverse the fatal course. The transient sinner, the "visitor," ridden with guilt, can only let out a helpless and terrified cry.

Apocalyptic are also two films by Alexander Sokurov, *Mournful Indifference* (1987) and *Days of the Eclipse* (1988). *Indifference* is based on Bernard Shaw's play, "Heartbreak House," and the impending cataclysm here is the breaking out of World War I. Sokurov was certainly aware of the subtitle Shaw gave his play, "A Fantasy in the Russian Style on an English Theme," and the director endowed the drama with the resonance of Russian echoes. One cannot avoid mentioning Chekhov. The film conveys the feeling of a doomed society playing at being alive, rather than living a full life. Alienated from each other and the world, the characters are "indifferent" to their own predicament, which is resolved in a final thunderous explosion. Sokurov's style is "modernistic," in his own words, mixing fiction and documentary footage, and creating visual and aural paradoxes. World War I newsreels are interwoven with the fictional action, and Shaw himself appears next to his characters. The censors, apparently,

saw allusions to contemporary Soviet society, disguised under the cover of another time, another place, and the film was first rejected on ideological grounds. Objections were also raised because of the "difficult style," and as a result the film was edited in the underground. When it was eventually released, and presented at the Berlin Film Festival as the USSR's official entry, it found its admirers among a small number of art film lovers, but it played to semi-empty houses in the commercial theaters. Sokurov was saddened by the many letters of protest he received from the average moviegoers; in a few towns "the population demanded that the film be removed from the screen."¹³

Days of the Eclipse is the first film Sokurov was able to make without controls and regulation. A true child of glasnost, *Eclipse* has a refreshing look, both direct, like a rough documentary, and elusive, like lyrical poetry. The film is loosely based on a suspense novel, *A Billion Years Before the End of the World*, by the famous science-fiction writers, the Strugatsky Brothers, who had also inspired Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. In the film, the end of the world may be far away, but is certainly implied. It casts a metaphysical tinge on the characters and setting, notwithstanding their palpable texture. The line between matter and spirit, real and surreal, manifest and subconscious is too thin to provide a rational demarcation. Often the divide is simply erased, without warning, and the viewer is thrown into another dimension.

The film's form suits the philosophical theme. The hero, a young doctor named Dmütry Malyanov, devotes his research to proving that physical health depends on a person's spiritual well-being – in other words, on the correspondences between the body and the universe. To pursue his research, Malyanov retreats to a dusty village in Central Asia, lost in the middle of the desert, where disease abounds among the natives who live in poverty and ignorance. By his looks, Malyanov is an unlikely scholar. Played by non-professional actor Alexei Ananishnov, the hero, with longish blond hair and tight jeans would seem more at home in a rock group. But Malyanov is perfectly comfortable in the stuffy room he occupies, cut off from civilization, surrounded by loneliness, fear, and death. There is practically no action in the film, except for the hero's everyday occupations – writing, strolling in the village or in the desert, pausing to sense the mystery of nature in the sun and the sand. He also meets with a gallery of strange characters, from a young Tartar, whose family was deported there under Stalin's terror, to a "real" angel-boy from the outer world, who spends a night under his roof. There is something

fatal about Malyanov: most of the people who are attracted to him end up tragically, as if they came too close to the truth. The feeling of an occult danger permeates the atmosphere, following the hero from place to place, from one encounter to another. But the threat is not so scary in its manifestations as it is in its mysterious causes. Through spectacular photography, arresting camera handling, sound mixing, and color manipulation, Sokurov gives a cinematic expression to the inexpressible. This is cinema at its best.

Sokurov's next film, *Save and Protect* (1989), if not apocalyptic, is certainly about death. Loosely based on Flaubert's novel, *Madame Bovary*, the film is not concerned with the amorous occupations of a provincial lady, but with the essence of her earthly journey toward the grave. Sokurov "shrouded the story of unhappy Emma in the funereal metaphor of the Depart, the Demise, the End."¹⁴

Parallel cinema

At times of transition and instability, virtually every culture produces its own avant-garde, a movement whose artistic credo is projected into the future. The glasnost era has witnessed the emergence of a new Soviet avant-garde, known as "parallel cinema." These young filmmakers, all under thirty, operate mainly outside the film industry and finance their works from private sources. The parallel films are shorts (any length between one minute and forty-seven minutes), made with primitive means and considerable skill. The most common format is 16 mm. film, but 35 mm. and video are also used occasionally. These outsiders, not unlike the rebellious artists of the historical Russian avant-garde (1910s–1920s), believe that they are breaking new ground. They regard their films as experimental workshops that will bring about cinema's aesthetic rejuvenation. Unusual for an avant-garde, they are not in an adversarial position *vis-à-vis* the officialdom. Rather they are following a distinct but "parallel" way, keeping aloof from society and avoiding confrontation – the reason being that they think there is no culture to oppose, culture is simply dead. Like all "children," they are critical of the "fathers." "Dependence on the mass subconsciousness killed the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s," wrote parallel critic, Sergei Dobrotvorsky. "Today's reformers are cutting off all ties with tradition, are turning to the archaic experience, and with magnificent ignorance are reinventing the language." As befits a true avant-gardist, our writer stresses the movement's messianic call. He sees the main strength of

"these uneducated, provincial dilettanti" in their new way of thinking, "which is nothing less than the long overdue encounter of the Lumière Brothers with God."¹⁵

Like the rock culture, parallel cinema was born in the underground. One of the leaders, Gleb Aleinikov, wrote that at first the underground movement wanted to represent an "alternative" culture, opposed to the official one, but it soon came to the realization that there was no real alternative, since "the humanistic sphere of social life turned out to be deideologized to the point of losing the capability to participate in the process of the formation of culture." The task of the underground then became the formation of "a true national culture, which would unite artists of many different orientations."¹⁶ The first experiments in parallel cinema began in 1984, both in Moscow and Leningrad. By 1987, the underground volcano, activated by the glasnost earthquake, erupted and spilled on the surface its hidden treasures. Parallel cinema was confronted with two choices: either disband, or take up a new status. "We chose the second alternative, and started our peculiar cinepolitical activity," Aleinikov stated.¹⁷ In 1988, various parallel groups united to form the Leningrad Independent Kinoacademy, for the preparation of film directors. Then, another similar institution appeared, the Free Academy, that consists of the Leningrad Free University and the Moscow Free Lyceum. These solemn names are used to disguise rather modest operations. But the intentions behind them are serious. These institutions represent a trend called "new culture," whose goal is to provide "the humanistic knowledge that cannot be acquired in our school system."¹⁸ The parallels also have an independent magazine, *Cine-Phantom*, with headquarters in Moscow. Its founders, Igor and Gleb Aleinikov, have established the official birth date of parallel cinema in 1987, when the magazine began being published in typewritten form.¹⁹ The magazine also sponsors festivals of parallel cinema. The first Cine Phantom Fest took place in Moscow (November 14-21, 1987), and featured twenty film directors. The second took place in Leningrad (March 3-5, 1989), with fifty directors. A program of parallel films was included in the 1989 Moscow International Film Festival, and afterwards toured abroad.

There are two distinct currents in parallel cinema, the Moscow school, that consists mainly of the works of the Aleinikov brothers and Pyotr Pospelov, and the Leningrad school, represented by Evgeny Yufit, Andrei Myortvy, Evgeny Kondratyev, Oleg Kotyolnikov, Boris Yukhananov, Vadim Drapkin, and others. The aes-

thetics of the Moscow school have been influenced by conceptualist art. "The Muscovites concentrate on pure expressiveness, experimenting with form, searching for new language possibilities . . . Their works represent a complicated synthesis of 'direct cinema,' conceptualism, and meditation with elements of *sots-art*." The Leningrad aestheticians are all the opposite. "Leningraders are more inclined to use comics, *épitafage*, shock therapy of the social consciousness . . . They repudiate all sense altogether, raising absurdity to a high degree of the absolute."²⁰ It is not by chance that this mode emerged precisely in Leningrad. Today's artists have a good model in their local culture. The roots go back to the absurdist work of the Oberiuty, who continued to operate until the mid-1930s as the last bastion of the agonizing early avant-garde.

The main trend of the Leningrad school is "necrorealism," also common to literature, painting, and pop music. It is a bizarre concept that delights in necrophilic themes and images with a surrealism of detail and an irreverent playfulness. But it has a serious purpose: to study the body after the soul has left it. The inspiration came from the official speeches and the solemn ceremonies of the Brezhnev days, from "the empty words pronounced by decorated 'zombies' on towering podiums." Therefore, "in the lower depths of unofficial culture the epos of late stagnation was born. It was heroic idiotism. A somber, tragic art, permeated with bold black humor."²¹ The inventor of the term is Evgeny Yufit, who practiced this style in his films, *The Stretcher-bearers Werewolves* (1985), *The Logger* (1985), *Spring* (1987), *Suicide Boats* (1988), and others. Another exponent of necrorealism is Andrei Myortvy (pseudonym of Kurnoyartsev), whose film *Mochebuitsy-trupolovy* (1988) is already a classic. The title is untranslatable. As for the content, the editor of *Cine-Phantom* confessed: "Unfortunately, it was impossible to find any materials in our files that would offer an interpretation of the brilliant work of Andrei Myortvy . . . His great talent is still a riddle for our experts."²² Nevertheless, these films preserve a tenuous narrative, and feature some sort of characters - though none that one would love. "These are wretched monsters, phantoms of communal flats and city garbage stocks. They are necrophiliacs and corpses. They are idiots, cretins, degenerates, curs, mongrels," says Dobrotvorsky. He also warns us not to confuse these creatures with "the zombies of commercial cinemas," because these are the representatives of a political idea. Necrorealism is "an attitude toward a distorted world," suffocated by a totalitarian system that still exists, a world of corpses without a

soul, a world of walking dead.²³ Necrorealism notwithstanding, Yufit was one of the few among the "parallels" to make a film within the framework of the state industry. *Knights of the Skies* was produced by Lenfilm in 1989. This film looks like "a hooligan, combed and dressed up for a special occasion."²⁴

Evgeny Kondratev is one of the most prolific authors. He started out with films that were an assault on common taste (for example: *Assa*, 1984; *Necrorealism of Yufit*, 1985; *I Forgot, the Idiot* . . . 1986-87)²⁵ and that later turned into polished exercises of a meditative artist, especially *Daydreams* (1988) and *Fire in Nature* (1985). His film *Lenin's Men* (1989) was noted at the Leningrad festival. It is a film about love as a global phenomenon, which includes homosexual relationships. Oleg Kotyolnikov, who is a painter besides being a filmmaker, relies on the mechanical manipulation of film. He uses the old avant-garde technique of scratching into the film's emulsion and drawing directly on the photographic image. Boris Yukhananov is a stage director, a theoretician of dramatic art, and a video artist. His video works are at the same time dynamic, because of his reckless camera, and static, because he rejects the concept of montage altogether. Best known among his films is *The Mad Prince Fassbinder* (1988). Another video artist is Vadim Drapkin. His works have a lyrical bent, as the titles suggest: *Music for the Soul* (1985), *Our Dreams, or Inner Reality* (1987-89), *Music No. 4* (1989), and others. The picture would not be complete without mentioning the film group CHE-PAYEV. The name itself is intriguing, because it combines the legendary Che Guevara with another legend of Soviet history, the movie hero Chapayev. The group was organized in 1988 with the task of conducting "theoretical research in the area of contemporary cine-mythology, and also of conducting practical propaganda of the total Chepayevan idea."²⁶ The main figures in the group are screenwriter and theoretician Olga Lepeskova, and director Alexei Feoktistov. The group has already a long filmography. Among the titles are: *Gift to an Unknown Muscovite* (1988), *Battle for the Fleet* (1988), *Symmetrical Cinema* (1988).

In Moscow, the Aleinikov Brothers steal the show. But another Muscovite is also worthy of note. Pyotr Pospelov won the Leningrad festival with the film *Reportage from the Land of Love* (1987-88). Official critics that attended the festival praised the film for being professionally mature and at the same time refreshingly avant-garde.²⁷ An unofficial critic described it as "an open text, like the reality it portrays." She writes: "It is one possible variant of reality, acted out and not realized."²⁸ The Aleinikovs specialized in sots-art films which show a

clever manipulation of the medium and the canonical themes of Soviet propaganda. In *Tractors* (1987), they make fun of the myth of collectivization and its cinematic icons, and in *Postpolitical Cinema* (1988), they splice together portraits of Lenin and Eisenstein. But in the latter, they go beyond politics and focus on insignificant episodes of everyday life, offering a glimpse of postpolitical existence as a restful pause for the exhausted viewer. Among the many films by the Aleinikovs are: *The Cruel Male Disease* (1987), *End of the Film* (1988), *Typist* (1988), and *Someone Was Here* (1989). The latter was produced by Mosfilm. This, together with other instances of participation in the frame of the official establishment, is an indication that parallel cinema is now entering a new phase, gradually shifting into the mainstream.

The question has been raised about the fact that parallel filmmakers are now taking part in television programs, write articles in official magazines, and use studios to produce their films. Gleb Aleinikov answered that this does not threaten the independence of parallel cinema, or change its nature. "Parallel cinema is no longer an underground movement," he explained. "We collaborate with the mass media because they invite us, and we are glad of the contact: it is a means to reach the audience . . . Parallel cinema does not polarize the film world, but broadens it."²⁹ The official film establishment, which has become more flexible in its new structures, has opened the doors to the newcomers. Unlike the movement of the 1920s, that was rejected and finally destroyed, these artists are being integrated. There is already a drain of talent away from the avant-garde into the film industry. It seems that the former underground, after coming to the surface, is determined to securely lay its steel tracks, and become officially parallel. Or, as it has been noted, parallels may even cross in contemporary geometry.³⁰