



the cinema of ALEXANDER SOKUROV
figures of paradox

jeremi szaniawski

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Whatever flaws remain in the pages that follow are due to the clumsiness, stubbornness and laziness of the author, which (alas) even these outstanding academics' remarks could not help set straight.

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~~So, this is in loving memory of a man who was a source of joy and inspiration for so many former students and colleagues. Thank you, Gilbert, for your unrelenting support and faith in me, your fatherly friendship and affection, and your deep, genuine humanity.~~

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

Brussels, 11 September 2011

*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

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.

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 for 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 personality 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 the 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 radiated with a true love – if of an often suffering, compassionate kind – for its subjects: human 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 reductively 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 the 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 historical 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 our outright loat 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 understanding 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 nostalgist, 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 the 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 the 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 the 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 thesis: 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. The 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 creation 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, Christological 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 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* (*Тихие страницы*; *Tikhie stranitsy*, 1999) 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*, 2000) 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 head of Maria (*Мария*, 1978, released 1988) might be realised in *Mother and Son*. But, as we 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 of truth in 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 preconditioned 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 with 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 and 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 and 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 his 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 in 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 perenniality. 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 working 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 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 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 (1991: 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 dualist approach to life can thus be captured and represented in this image of the fold, of 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 *interstitial* 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 reintegration 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 with 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* meaning in the opaque image, or, conversely, of short-circuiting nonsense in the otherwise seemingly 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, free 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 incorporate, 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 and 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; the 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 Sokurov's duality, or in an unmasking of ideology beyond the one he professes himself (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 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-consciousness 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 that Sokurov is not preoccupied so much with *Death* or the cadaver, as many have claimed, but 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 anamorphoses

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