

TONY WOOD

TIME UNFROZEN

The Films of Aleksei German

‘THIS IS MY DECLARATION of love for the people I grew up with as a child’, says a voice at the beginning of Aleksei German’s *Moi drug Ivan Lapshin* (*My Friend Ivan Lapshin*). There is a pause as the narrator struggles for the right words to express his feelings for the Soviet Union of the thirties; when they come—*ob”iasnenie v liubvi*—it is with a strained emphasis on ‘love’. The film, released in 1984, is set in 1935 in the fictional provincial town of Unchansk, where a young boy and his father share a communal flat with criminal police investigator Ivan Lapshin and half a dozen others. It weaves together elements from the director’s father Iurii German’s detective stories and novellas of the same period: a troupe of actors arrive to play at the town’s theatre; Lapshin tracks down a gang of criminals trading in human meat; a friend of Lapshin’s, Khanin, becomes unhinged after his wife dies of typhus; the spirited actress Adashova falls in love with Khanin, and Lapshin with Adashova. The authorities are largely absent: it is a film about people ‘building socialism’ on a bleak frozen plain, their town’s one street a long straggle of low wooden buildings beneath a huge white sky, leading from the elegant stucco square by the river’s quayside out into wilderness. There is a single tram, a military band, a plywood ‘victory arch’ of which they are all proud—‘My father’, the narrator recounts, ‘would never take a short cut across the town’: he always went the long way round, under the victory arch.

The film holds hope and suffering in the balance. Adashova proudly boasts about what the 1942 production quotas for champagne will be; Lapshin declares, 'We shall clean up the earth and plant a garden, and we ourselves will live to walk in it'—just as the hacked-up corpses hidden by the meat-traders are loaded onto a truck. The film is full of such alarming details and ill omens: dubious meat, which retains the headline offprint of the newspaper it was wrapped in ('WE REJOICE') even after it's been cooked; febrile explosions of rage over spilled paraffin; flocks of crows cawing across the sky. There is a mismatch between the optimism of the characters and what we know of subsequent events. 'I'm going on a course', Lapshin says towards the end of the film, and his words are left hanging in the air. These are people whose faith in the future remains intact, but whose betrayal is imminent. German has said that his main aim was to convey a sense of the period, to depict as faithfully as possible the material conditions and human preoccupations of Soviet Russia on the eve of the Great Purge. It is for this world, for these people that the narrator struggles to declare his love—unconditional, knowing how flawed that world was, and how tainted the future would be. German compared the film to the work of Chekhov, and one can see in it a similar tenderness for the suffering and absurdity of its characters.

Loosely episodic, the film is remarkable in its resistance to linear narrative: dialogue is often drowned out by senseless chatter or the clanging of buckets; our view of important characters is frequently blocked by figures crossing the screen. In its cinematography, *Ivan Lapshin* consistently refuses to accept established priorities: as though every element of each shot must be allowed its meaning. The camera often enters the room behind characters' backs, like a guest, or at elbow-level, like a curious child. There is no sense that the scenes are choreographed or pre-arranged, but rather a feeling that the camera, wide-eyed, is capturing what it can of a bewildering world.

All German's films focus on moments in which history and myth have become entangled, if not dangerously indistinguishable. He has described his films as '*antipotochnye*', 'against the current': disrupting certainties and undermining convenient truths.¹ The Stalin era, his principal subject, is the period of his own childhood and youth.

¹ Interview in V. Fomin, *Kino i vlast'*, *Sovetskoe kino: 1965–85 gody*, Moskva 1996, p. 200.

Born in 1938 in Leningrad—the same generation as Tarkovsky and Mikhalkov—he grew up in a milieu frequented by leading cultural figures of the time: Kozintsev dropped by regularly, the playwright and fabulist Evgenii Shvartz was his ‘uncle Zhenia’, and even Akhmatova was seen on occasion at the Germans’ flat on the Moika. German graduated from the Leningrad Institute of Theatre, Music and Cinematography in 1960 as a theatre director; it was not until the mid-sixties that he made the shift to scripting films, during the extraordinary rebirth of Soviet and East European cinematography—influenced in part by Italian neo-realism but also by the French New Wave—that came with the Khrushchev thaw. In career terms, German made the move just too late. By the time he had scripted *Trudno byt’ bogom* (*It’s Hard Being God*, 1968), based on the Strugatskii brothers’ science fiction novel, and *Ivan Lapshin* (1969), Brezhnevite conformism had set in; neither film could be made.

Questioning wartime myths

German’s first feature, *Proverka na dorogakh* (*Trial on the Road*), was finally shot in 1971; in retrospect it seems almost incredible that it was filmed at all. Soviet, indeed, Russian identity since World War Two had been founded on that bitterly won victory: the march to Berlin did more than any cult of personality to legitimate Stalin’s rule. German’s film undermines the fable of unwavering heroism and loyalty that sustained the self-perception of whole generations of Soviet citizens. A former Red Army lieutenant defects to the Nazis on ideological grounds, then decides to switch sides again to defend his homeland. The partisan brigade who capture him are suspicious and test his loyalty in a series of operations behind enemy lines. The motivations for the main character’s actions are barely discussed: questions of treason, of ideological as opposed to patriotic commitment are left largely unaddressed, and there is an uncomfortable sense of futility lurking behind any seeming acts of heroism. *Proverka na dorogakh* was shelved until 1986 because, according to internal memos of the state film agency Goskino, it ‘distorts the image of a heroic time’—‘the people it depicts could only have lost the Great Patriotic War’; the subtext being that German’s film ‘makes us someone other than who we want to be’.²

² See Julian Graffy, ‘Unshelving Stalin: after the Period of Stagnation’, in Richard Taylor and Derek Spring, eds, *Stalinism and the Soviet Cinema*, London 1993, p. 218.

The production of his second film *Dvadsat' dnei bez voiny* (*Twenty Days without War*) was less problematic. Made in 1976, it was released after only six months' delay although again, it looks aslant at a crucial Soviet story: the siege of Stalingrad. German has described it as 'an anti-romantic melodrama' with 'anti-beautiful' heroes. The middle-aged Lopatin has twenty days' leave from the battle and spends it in Tashkent. He visits his ex-wife, signs divorce papers, meets up with friends and becomes involved with another woman; then his leave is curtailed and he is sent back to fight. We see nothing of Stalingrad itself. As is frequently the case in German's work, plot is minimal, the emphasis instead being on the portrayal of a mood. Perhaps more importantly, neither characters nor events are typically heroic. Lopatin is part of an army that has begun to turn the tide, yet throughout the film he looks dog-tired, and smiles only briefly flit across his face.

Filming on *Moi drug Ivan Lapshin* finally began in 1979 and finished in 1982. Although the first screening was greeted with a standing ovation, the film was immediately attacked from within German's own studio, Lenfil'm—an article in the studio's newspaper called it a '*gadkaia kartina*', a 'disgusting film'. An official of Goskino informed him that everyone knew 37 and 38 weren't good years, but he shouldn't destroy all people's illusions—'leave 1935 alone'. German was then told to re-shoot half of the film, and when he asked which half, the head of Goskino replied: 'Either. Leave half of your crap and do half as we want you to'.³ Fortunately, due to lack of finance and the director's protestations, the re-shoot never took place. After prolonged debates within Goskino, the film was released in 1984, to critical acclaim and even a certain commercial success.

Gorbachev's accession signalled a turning point in German's career. The Conflict Commission established in 1986 by the Cinematographers' Union at last sanctioned the release of *Proverka*, along with over seventy other 'shelved' films, including such masterpieces as Aleksandr Askol'dov's *Komissar* (1967) and Tengiz Abuladze's *Monanieba* (*Repentance*, 1984). In 1987, *Lapshin* was voted the best Soviet film of all time in a national poll of film critics, ahead of anything by Eisenstein, Pudovkin or Vertov. German's film is in many ways a precursor to the series of films of the *glasnost*' period that return obsessively to the era

³ *Kino i vlast'*, p. 206.

of Stalin—much as one of the characters in *Repentance* keeps exhuming a small-town tyrant. It encapsulates the issues that were to haunt the Soviet Union until its demise, and continue to resurface in contemporary Russia: how are we to retell our history without disgracing our forefathers, magnifying them out of proportion or simply deleting them from the record? Which memories should we claim as ours? German himself was now occupied with an experimental workshop at Lenfil'm, set up in 1988, which saw the emergence of a new generation of Soviet directors—among them Aleksei Balabanov, whose 1991 debut feature *Schastlivye dni* (*Happy Days*), based on motifs from Beckett, German produced. Balabanov went on to make *Brat* (*Brother*, 1997) and *Pro urodov i liudei* (*Of Freaks and Men*, 1998).

Shooting started on German's latest film *Khrustalev, mashinu!* (*Khrustalev, my car!*, 1998) in 1992, but with the collapse of the Soviet Union there was a new series of problems to confront: US backers pulled out when the director refused to concede to their demand that Stalin be played by an American. The film is set in early 1953, at the time of the so-called Doctors' Plot. On January 13, as Stalin lay dying, the state news agency announced that many of the country's leading medical authorities had been arrested as spies responsible for the deaths of prominent Soviet politicians and generals: in the pay of 'Joint', a CIA-funded Zionist organization, or else of MI6, they had conspired to undermine the health of the nation's leadership.⁴ That Beria may have speeded Stalin's death has been widely conjectured. Whether through Beria's machinations, Stalin's paranoia or, more likely, Beria's manipulation of the latter, key members of Stalin's close entourage were sacked in the months just prior to his death. Poskrebyshev, his personal secretary of twenty years, was fired in November 1952; the chief of Stalin's bodyguards General Vlasik—also in his post for twenty years—was replaced in December 1952 by one of Beria's men, Vasilii Khrustalev. It is from this peripheral player in the drama of history that German's film takes its title. We see Beria at Stalin's bedside, shouting at a nurse for not changing

⁴ The arrests came after a five-year wave of the most vicious anti-Semitism, begun around 1948, at the start of the Cold War. Jews were attacked for being 'rootless cosmopolitans' disloyal to the achievements of the USSR, and dismissals of Jews from their jobs and the denigration of Jewish contributions to science and culture took place in much the same tenor as they had in thirties Germany. On 12 August 1952, all but one of the twenty-five members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, which included leading scientists, writers and actors, were executed.

the Generalissimo's sheets, urging the doctors to make Stalin break wind, and briskly closing the old man's eyes when he has rattled out his last breath. After the sobs and murmured laments of the housekeeper, we hear Beria's voice as he opens the door, shouting—with, according to Stalin's daughter, 'the ring of triumph unconcealed'⁵—'Khrustalev! My car!'

Strategies of disorientation

Again, the plot is elusive—events are hinted at rather than laid before us. Klenskii, a leading surgeon, goes to the hospital where he works and in one room discovers a double of himself. He realizes that his own arrest must be a part of some as yet unknown murky dealings, and he flees to the countryside. Klenskii is caught but—after undergoing horrific treatment by his captors—is then suddenly spirited back to Moscow to Stalin's deathbed, where the leader lies prone after a cerebral haemorrhage. He is dying an ignominious death, in soiled bed linen and with next to no medical attention. Beria's summoning of Klenskii is clearly a token gesture, since it is already too late. German's film has none of Beria's reported ring of triumph; it is not a celebration of the death of Stalin, but rather a brutal, farcical exploration of the lives of a series of characters at a particular point in time. There is Klenskii, his wife and mistress, his family, their neighbours, his wife's Jewish relatives who have to be hidden; there is a worker at a fur-coat shop who, at the beginning of the film, happens to stroll past as the NKVD are lying in wait for an unknown suspect, and is carted off to Siberia. And there is Klenskii's son, a young boy whose grown-up voice (as in *Ivan Lapshin*) we hear at irregular intervals in the film. But again, the boy is not witness to everything that happens, and the film is not told exclusively from his point of view; although several scenes are shot with hand-held cameras below eye-level, suggestive perhaps of a child's perspective, these also have the effect of denying the camera any authority over proceedings, any sense of control.

This strategy—developed in the earlier films—is carried to an extreme in *Khrustalev, mashinu!*: throughout the opening sequences, the viewer is left with a growing sense of unease at not knowing what is happening, whose perspective it is being viewed from, what relevance these

⁵ Svetlana Alliluyeva, *Twenty Letters to a Friend*, London 1967, p. 15.

scenes will have later in the film. This unease builds into a form of narrative panic, as the camera stumbles into dimly lit interiors without explanations or establishing shots, as we meet more and more characters whose importance is unclear, as our hopes that a plot will establish itself are continually disappointed. The film unfolds as a series of farcical situations, full of comical snippets of dialogue and grotesquerie, but the comedy is often lost under the weight of the viewer's need for sense, and under the increasing atmosphere of threat, of the possibility of a descent into untrammelled brutality. The senselessness and the shadow of violence mark a daring but brilliant attempt to depict the paranoias of late Stalinism. Indeed, the film's logic is that of a hallucinatory, delusional condition, bordering on hysteria. Plot, events, the chain of causes and consequences are all secondary to the evocation of a frenzied imaginative state.

As if in echo of this dislocated imaginary, German shifts between a variety of registers. There are moments of crude realism—the harrowing scene where Klenskii is sodomized by his captors in the back of a van—which seem to belong to the Russian genre of *chernukha*, literally 'black stuff': a realism mired in the grime, sludge, sweat and swearing of daily life. Film such as Vasiliï Pichul's *Malenkaia Vera* (*Little Vera*, 1988) and Vitalii Kanevskii's *Zamri, umri, voskresni* (*Freeze, Die, Be Reborn*, 1990) are prime exponents of *chernukha*, and are clearly influenced by German. Kanevskii was, in fact, German's protégé in the late 1980s; his aesthetic of *brak*—amateurish or clumsy workmanship—makes an appearance at the beginning of *Ivan Lapshin*, as we hear the narrator cough and the sounds of equipment being set up. Both here and in his earlier films, too, German owes a debt to Italian neo-realism, and to Russian responses to the neo-realists such as Andrei Konchalovskii's *Istoriia Asi Kliachinoi* (*Asya's Happiness*, 1966).⁶ The dialogue is full of contemporary slang and snatches of popular tunes, with a rough, improvised quality accentuated by the frequent overlappings and the intrusion of extraneous noise and voices. German has also made extensive use of non-professional actors, another neo-realist practice.

There are, however, moments of absurdity and burlesque in *Khrustalev, mashinu!* that seem to appeal to a different cinematic tradition. In this

⁶ This film was also not released until 1986, but as a well-connected employee of Lenfil'm, German would have been able to see it—even though it was 'on the shelf'.

connexion, it is perhaps interesting to note that German considers Fellini ‘cinema’s only realist’.⁷ This last remark was made with reference to *Roma* (1952), a city which provides a coincidental link to Gogol’, whose deranged, dislocated Russia clearly influenced German’s latest film. (Indeed, its working title was *Rus’-troika*, a nod to the last lines of *Dead Souls*.) There are also moments which hint at allegory—Klenskii is attacked by a band of children who beat him with sticks, a brutalized and brutalizing new generation, Stalin’s progeny. But frequently, German’s shots have an otherworldly beauty, a composed lucidity which challenges any intricate symbolic reading. Near the beginning of *Khrustalev, mashinu!*, a stray dog lopes silently down a snow-covered street; a bleak, bleached white expanse stretches before Lapshin as he promises to clean up the earth and plant his garden. This is the lingering camera of a director taking pleasure in the shot as an aesthetic object in itself—shades of Tarkovsky, perhaps.

Between thaw and fall

German comes from a generation of filmmakers unable to make their reputations (as Tarkovsky did) before the liberalization of the Khrushchev years evaporated under Brezhnev; witnessing, as students, a burst of cinematic creativity that they were not allowed to carry forward. Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* apart, the late 1970s are more known for likeable comedies than for films of great import. The comparison with another near-contemporary is instructive: German and Nikita Mikhalkov (*The Barber of Siberia*, *Burnt by the Sun*) both come from well-connected families of the Soviet artistic elite—Mikhalkov’s father wrote the lyrics to the Soviet national anthem, German’s breakfasted with Stalin at least twice—yet where German chose to be *antipotochnyi*, Mikhalkov’s films have been lush and uncontroversial: Western money has flooded in. German’s hardships and professional struggles have been one result, a career caught between the more open, experimental wave of the sixties and the harsh realism of the perestroika years. Paradoxically, German’s films properly belong to this period in which they could not be released: a bridge between two phases of Soviet filmmaking. They both refer to and prefigure a range of stylistic devices and strategies, rarely seen in the work of one director: each frame of *Ivan Lapshin* is loaded with potential meanings and suggested histories that emerge differently with

⁷ Interview in *Iskusstvo kino*, 8, 2000, p. 12.

every viewing; *Khrustalev, mashinu!* is now gaining a reputation as a misunderstood classic. German's current project—the adaptation of the Strugatskiis' *Trudno byt' bogom* that he first scripted in 1968—continues his engagement with difficult areas of Russia's past. Two observers from earth visit a planet similar to their own in mediaeval times, and find themselves constantly tempted to intervene and change the course of events. The book was a talisman of the Soviet thaw of the early sixties; it was the invasion of Czechoslovakia that put an end to its filming then. In returning to it now German has the possibility of commenting not only on the Prague Spring but perhaps also on Russia's present 'intervention' in Chechnya.

But although his films abound with real details and concreta, German does not see himself as documenting or reporting events. When he portrays the past it is always as a morass of anecdotal details and forgotten objects, forcing us to recognize its complexities and confusions. There is a continual denial of certainty in German's films: definitive explanations of the 'real' are undermined in a way that reveals to the viewer the impossibility of ever remembering anything totally—along with the hazards of forgetting even the smallest of incidental details. Indeed, it is often these that speak most powerfully in German's films: champagne quotas never to be reached, empty plains that are left unplanted, the stray dog in the snow-covered street.