



UTOPIA IN THE MUD

Nature and Landscape in the Soviet Science Fiction Film

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Judging Nature

In Ivan Efremov's utopian novel *The Hour of the Bull* (1968), the heroine, a citizen of the perfect society of the future, declares: 'Only man has the right to judge nature for the excessive suffering on the way to progress' (Efremov 1988: 422). Nature is an enemy to be subjugated, mastered and 'judged'. And yet the utopian world she inhabits is not a high-tech landscape of sterile towers but a pastoral of unspoiled greenery, a 'marvellous garden' (ibid.: 175). This strange duality encapsulates a problematic relation of nature with the ethics and aesthetics of socialist realism. On the one hand, nature is regarded as the wellspring of human creativity, occupying the empty spot of divinity in the millenarian narrative of Soviet history. On the other hand, nature is hostile and amoral and its conquest by humanity is a necessary prelude to the Communist utopia. Nature is both an ally and an adversary; both God and Satan.

This duality permeates Soviet civilisation throughout its history.¹ Ambivalence towards nature is inextricably linked to the fraught and contradictory image of the utopian subject, the Soviet New Man, whose creation is the regime's ultimate goal.² Nonhuman and human nature alike are to be 'judged', conquered and transformed. And yet, this transformation is never quite successful; there is always a material remnant that resists its ideological appropriation. With regard to the subject, this remnant is the stubborn corporeality of the body; with regard to nature, it is the persistent physicality of the landscape. Subject and nature become enmeshed in a relation of mutual mirroring, standing for each other within the Soviet imaginary.

In this chapter I will analyse these articulations in one particular genre of Soviet cinema: the science-fiction (SF) film. Despite its ostensible marginality, the genre of SF reflected the underlying ideological structures of mainstream Soviet literature with unusual clarity because it was not bound by the latter's temporal and spatial limitations. Similarly, SF

cinema was highly symptomatic of the trends in Soviet visual culture as a whole. While the number of SF films made in the USSR was relatively small compared to other cinematic genres, such as the historical epic, the industrial drama, the war movie and the comedy, they constitute a fascinating corpus, which illuminates what Foucault (1974: x) calls 'the epistemological figures' of Soviet culture as a whole. They are particularly useful in relation to representations of nature since the setting (the fictional world of the text) constitutes the artistic dominant of the genre of SF, both in literature and in cinema (Suvin 1979).

Soviet SF reached its peak in the period of the Thaw (the 1960s) when, liberated from the excesses of the Terror, the utopian impulse sought new forms of expression: '[D]uring the first two decades after Stalin's death, Soviet filmmakers produced innovative works that revived the avant-garde spirit of the 1920s and revolutionised the visual and narrative aspects of film art' (Prokhorov 2001: 7). Several important SF films, to be discussed below, were part of this general cinematic renaissance.

As opposed to the preceding decades, the 1980s was a period of widespread decadence and anxiety caused by the war in Afghanistan and worsening economic conditions. Yet at the same time, the easing of censorship in the perestroika created the conditions for some of the most interesting Soviet films ever made, which summed up, bitterly denounced and occasionally attempted to revive the seventy-year long failed utopian experiment.

Throughout all of these permutations, Soviet SF cinema grappled with the paradoxical role of nature. On the one hand, Soviet technological utopia was premised on its control of the natural world. On the other hand, it derived its legitimacy from the natural law as revealed by Marxism-Leninism, which saw itself as a materialistic philosophy rooted in the scientific knowledge of reality. The goal was synthesis: 'Asserting control over nature could be understood as a synthesis of nature and culture that, thereby, produces a new entity, an achievement of real quality' (Margolit 2001: 30). But this synthesis could never be achieved because of the mute recalcitrance of nature, the dumb resistance of the material world, which no matter how sternly judged and fervently wooed, refused to be transformed. And thus utopia remained permanently stuck in the mud.

From Steel to Flesh

As opposed to pre-revolutionary agrarian socialism, Bolshevism was resolutely urban: '[A]fter 1917, cities were welcomed as the training

grounds for producing the armies of model citizens' (Kotkin 1995: 18). As popular writers Ilya Ilf and Evgeni Petrov wrote in 1932: '[T]ogether with cobbled pavements, human cobbles disappear as well. As the city is being perfected, so are its inhabitants' (1981: 27). In the period of Russian constructivism (1919 to 1930), the landscape of the future was a cityscape of glass towers, standardised mega-blocks and modernist efficiency, inhabited by the purified and transfigured Communist Elect: the new socialist subjects of the technological age, whose streamlined psychic architecture would be shaped by the stark, functional lines of their environment (Stites 1989: 52).

During high Stalinism (between the mid 1930s and mid 1950s), the constructivist man-machine is transformed into the iconic figure of the blond, muscle-bound, preternaturally productive and ideologically pure Soviet subject: the 'healthy, virile and handsome' forerunner of the utopia (Kaganovsky 2008: 6). But this shift towards a more organic image of the New Man brings with it a concomitant emphasis on the vulnerabilities of the flesh. The strange obsession with maiming, illness and disability evident in such Stalinist classics as Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel was Tempered* (1935), is interpreted by Kaganovsky (*ibid.*: 7) as a compensatory 'response to the narrative of "extravagant virility" produced by Stalinist art'. But it can also be seen as an expression of the anxiety of the natural: insofar as the human body is gradually removed from its identification with the glass-and-steel cityscape, it becomes prey to those very forces of nature that the Soviet utopia sets out to harness and subjugate.

This dynamic can be seen in one of the early Soviet SF films, *Space Flight/Kosmicheckiy reis* (1935). The black-and-white silent movie depicts the first flight to the Moon of a motley space crew consisting of a bearded scientific patriarch (modelled on the revered pioneer of space exploration Konstantin Tsiolkovsky), a young woman assistant and a boy stowaway. The film starts with panoramic shots of a monumental city of the future, recalling Boris Iofan's never-realised project for the Palace of Soviets – the monstrous tower topped by a hundred-metre tall statue of Lenin. But as the action shifts to the crew, such mundane and intensely physical needs as a warm pair of boots for walking on the Moon's inhospitable surface become paramount, while the unorthodox physiques of an old man, a woman and a child create an implicit contrast with the absent 'healthy, virile and handsome' New Man. The moonscape, rendered through a stark accumulation of sharp angles and flat surfaces, similarly contrasts the majestic sweep of urban technology at the beginning of the film. It is an image of both menace and indifference, resisting appropriation to the optimistic narrative of

the conquest of nature. As opposed to the iconic cityscape, it has no signifying role; it simply *is*.

The Conquerors and the Conquered

The conquest of nature became the buzzword of Stalinism. The country's rapid industrialisation made any large-scale project seem possible and the 'reorganisation' of the landscape was seen as a necessary prerequisite for building a utopian society. Many such projects were not only ecologically destructive but patently useless from an economic point of view. They functioned instead as techniques of ideological self-fashioning, in which the Soviet subject and the Soviet terrain would be transformed together.

Boris Groys has argued that Stalinism fulfilled the aspirations of the avant-garde to build Communist society 'as a total work of art that would organise life itself according to a unitary plan' (Groys 1988: 23). But it is an artwork in a style quite different from that of constructivism. In the 1930s, modernism was denounced in the name of socialist realism, which created what J. Hoberman called 'a purely ideological landscape' of monumental buildings and oversized statues (Hoberman 1998: 16). If 'under Stalin . . . the life of society was organised in monolithic artistic forms', these forms were neo-classicism and the imperial baroque (Groys 1988: 9).

The way in which spatial practices (to use Henri Lefebvre's [1993] term for cultural utilisation of space) and techniques of subjectivity dovetailed in the transformation of nature is epitomised by the city of Magnitogorsk (the Magnet Mountain), founded in 1929 to exploit the iron-rich zone near the Ural Mountains. The city was simultaneously a major industrial project and a model urban environment. Its founding principle was architectural uniformity that was supposed to generate the corresponding uniformity of mindsets and lifestyles. In actuality, the city became a polluted hotchpotch of overcrowded barracks, mud-huts, apartment blocks and labour camps. The incorporation of labour camps and penal settlements into the city fabric indicates an important element in the Soviet utopian project. The space of terror in Stalinism was not hidden but rather displaced; situated within the normative space of society but wrapped in a heavy mantle of euphemisms, doubletalk and silence. These camps were scattered throughout the country but united in the popular imagination, collectively known as the Zone. This shadowy geography of camps and prisons existed within the official geography of the Soviet Motherland;

and since the inmates of the labour camps were employed in heavy physical labour, the Zone became conflated with the transformation/domination of nature itself.

The work of the most important Soviet SF writer of the 1930s, Grigorii Adamov, provides a perfect example of this conflation between the domination of nature and the Terror. Adamov wrote three novels, *The Conquerors of the Interior/Pobedityeli nedr* (1937), *The Mystery of Two Oceans/Taina dvuch okeanov* (1939) and *Banishment of the Ruler/Izgnaniye vладыki* (1941–1946). Each novel depicts the conquest of a hostile natural environment: the underground geothermal springs, the depths of the ocean and the far reaches of the Arctic respectively. In each novel, the hostile environment is successfully subdued and harnessed to the service of the Soviet Motherland. But despite the fact that natural obstacles – earthquakes, sea monsters, bitter cold – provide enough dramatic tension, each novel adds a subplot of a fight against spies and saboteurs that claims the life of a sacrificial victim: a child or a teenager. Through this ‘collaboration’ with the enemy, nature becomes an active, albeit malevolent, force. The fact that its primary victims are children indicates a shift in the symbolic valence of childhood: it is identified not with pastoral purity but rather with civilising energy, which opposes the supposedly backward pull of nature.

Adamov’s most popular novel *The Mystery of Two Oceans* was made into a film in 1956. Produced after Stalin’s death, the film still reflects the ideological configurations of the Terror. It opens with shots of sinking ships, which smoothly fade into a dark paranoid scene of enemy agents (who in this Cold War era are American spies rather than the anonymous saboteurs of the original novel) plotting further destruction in a Moscow apartment.

The Mystery of Two Oceans is an exception, as there were few SF films made during the Stalinist period. Margolit (2001) argues that the disappearance of landscape in the Soviet films of the mid 1930s was connected to the regime’s attempt to eliminate all spontaneity from its representations of space. However, it is arguable that the ‘humanisation’ of nature, whether positive or negative, does not so much disappear from Soviet cinema as become taken for granted, shifting into the background as the struggle with the enemy assumes a more overtly violent form. But nature-as-enemy reappears in the post-Stalin period of the Thaw, just as does its double, nature-as-ideal.

Landscape in Exile

Rosalind Marsh (1986: 137) links the 'new wave of Utopian science fiction' in the 1950s to the debunking of Stalinism by the twentieth Party Congress, but, in fact, the genre's 'heroism, socialist humanism and unlimited faith in science' were a direct continuation of the Stalinist episteme. While the political upheaval of the Thaw is not to be underestimated, it did not transform the underlying structure of Soviet civilisation. The concrete name of the Leader simply became the abstract Name of the Father, to use a Lacanian metaphor, but the main principles of Soviet utopian aesthetics remained the same. Still, the masochistic process of self-conquest and self-fashioning was toned down in favour of highlighting its spectacular result: the New Man in all his glory. And similarly, the laborious and violent process of the conquest of nature was overshadowed by the display of its utopian result – the fully 'humanised' landscape of the future. The war with nature was over: '[T]he Thaw in film begins not by returning rights to man but rather, by returning these rights to nature' (Margolit 2001: 34). However, this humanisation was merely a more insidious version of the Stalinist ethos of conquest, as it robbed nature of its own essence.

The armistice with nature finds its expression in what is probably the most popular work of Soviet SF, Ivan Efremov's *The Andromeda Nebula* (1957). Efremov and somewhat later the brothers Arkadii and Boris Strugatsky, were responsible for the unprecedented flowering of Soviet SF literature and cinema, making the genre gain 'greater popularity in the USSR than in almost any other country in the world' (Marsh 1986: 138).

The Andromeda Nebula is a fully fledged utopia, set thousands of years into the future, when humanity has completed the conquest of nature and has transformed itself. Wild nature has been tamed and normalised, while disease, physical imperfection and racial difference have all been eradicated. The future utopian subject is a Communist *Übermensch*, biologically superior and mentally liberated, having transcended the petty divisions of nationality, language and ethnicity. The uniformity of the human physical type across the globe is paralleled by the uniformity of its tamed and humanised landscape. Ecologically, anthropologically and architecturally, the entire planet has become a single homogenised space. All the cities are essentially the same, perfectly designed and perfectly executed, with no heterogeneity, variety or waste. The only vestiges of natural landscapes are parklands and gardens.

However, the novel opens not on this utopian Earth but on a hostile black planet orbiting ‘an iron star’ where the stranded crew of the spaceship *Tantra* is attacked by giant starfish-like creatures. Exiled from the utopia, wilderness retreats into outer space where it plots against humanity. This zone of rebellious nature outside the boundaries of utopia is, once again, conflated with the carceral Zone. This conflation is clear from the fact that the only remnant of wilderness on Earth itself is a prison colony where the deviant, the lazy and the maladjusted are banished, to live out their ‘quiet years’ in subsistence farming (Efremov 1959: 260). Nature is both prison and prisoner; the enemy to be exiled and the space of exile itself.

In 1967 *The Andromeda Nebula* was made into a movie, which tried to reproduce faithfully both the message and the aesthetics of the original. The film is marked by two complementary visual strategies: rapid shifts between the sunshine-drenched views of Earth and the darkness of space; and the extensive use of close-ups. The physically perfect and yet still recognisably human faces of New Men (and Women) of the future are set off by the postcard-perfect landscapes of white beaches and snow-capped mountains on the tamed home planet. The landscape of the future is a Communist pastoral, regaining a sort of prelapsarian innocence through being tamed and regulated by man. The planets of the ‘iron star’ and their savage creatures, on the other hand, are the dark side of nature as constructed by Soviet ideology – not merely dangerous but purposefully evil.

Another interesting moment in the film is the encoding of time through space. The sunny Earth is the future; the dark space is the past. Because history comes to a halt in the perfection of utopia, the flow of time becomes frozen into divisions in space.

However, the film is much less successful than the book in embodying a vision of the Soviet utopia. This is partly due to the technical limitations of the visual medium, which highlights less than eugenically perfect faces of the actors. But another reason cuts to the very heart of the Soviet dilemma with regard to the representation of nature. The scenes set on the dark planet are far more compelling and exciting than the wooden placidity and obligatory goodwill of those set on Earth. In fact, the chief lure of *The Andromeda Nebula* and other SF films of the period was the excitement and adventure found in confrontation with nature-as-foe. Since onscreen violence was not encouraged (with the exception of Second World War and Civil War historical epics), struggle with nature provided the only legitimate pretext for thrills.

Thus, even representations of the utopian future could not escape the ambiguity of nature. Exiled and disavowed, wilderness returned

as the necessary Other of humanity, suborning the very core of the utopian project. The neat dichotomy of humanity/nature was undermined by its own unstable dynamics, as the poles bled into each other. Landscape became the locus of Soviet humanism's battle with itself, and the subsequent cinematic and literary attempts to escape this dilemma by erasing the negative image of nature and finding in it a source of value became infected by the same ambiguity.

Pastoral in Space

This ambiguity becomes central in what is undoubtedly the Golden Age of Soviet SF cinema – the 1960s and 1970s. Probably the most critically acclaimed product of this age is Andrei Tarkovskii's *Solaris* (1972), based on Stanislaw Lem's novel. Technically accomplished and overloaded with mystical and religious symbolism, Tarkovskii's *Solaris* indicates a new development in Soviet utopia: retreat from the technological future back into the pastoral past. This past, however, is as imaginary as Efremov's Communism and as ideologically saturated. While dissident in the narrow sense of running foul of censorship regulations, Tarkovskii's films are nevertheless part of Soviet civilisation, expressing its underlying tensions. *Solaris* in particular seems to be torn between an elegiac nostalgia for some lost unity of humanity and nature and insistent humanisation of the landscape. The result of this artistic and ideological tension is a symbolic muddle.

Lem was highly critical of Tarkovskii's *Solaris*, which he felt distorted the novel's concern with the Other into preoccupation with the Same: 'I have fundamental reservations to this adaptation . . . As I told Tarkovsky during one of our quarrels – he didn't make *Solaris* at all, he made *Crime and Punishment* . . . Because there exists the Ding an sich, the Unreachable, the Thing-in-Itself, the Other Side which cannot be penetrated' (Lem cited in Bereś 1987).

Lem's point in the novel was precisely to represent the intelligent Ocean of Solaris as the opaque and impenetrable 'thing-in-itself' whose interaction with humanity could not be reduced either to moral dilemmas or to religious scruples. Tarkovskii, however, transforms the Ocean into an omnipotent (and largely invisible) judge of the characters' moral lapses, subordinating the alien planet to their emotional and spiritual quests. Nature is drawn within humanity's circle, reduced to a sympathetic mirror of its concerns. The film performs a sort of symbolic colonisation of its fantastic landscape.

The last scene of the film, in which Kelvin returning to the station finds it transformed into a replica of his childhood home and kneels before his father in a reenactment of Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*, encapsulates the film's symbolic conquest of the stubborn alterity of the nonhuman landscape. And yet this scene also reflects the ambiguity of any such conquest. Who or what is the entity that 'forgives' Kelvin? Tarkovskii's Christian iconography sits rather awkwardly within the film's SF framework, which focuses in on the impenetrable difference of the alien landscape.

SF cinema of the Thaw sometimes does, however, reimagine nature as mysterious and sublime. The 1969 film *The Mysterious Wall/Tainstvennaya stena*, though not as artistically accomplished as *Solaris*, can be seen as an interesting counterpart to Tarkovskii's humanised landscape. In the film, an enigmatic and impenetrable wall, appearing out of nowhere, isolates a band of scientists in the Siberian wilderness. Much like the crew of the *Solaris* station, they experience flashbacks through which the presumed alien intelligence behind the wall is attempting to communicate with them. The emphasis in the film, however, is not on the (rather trivial) content of their memories but on the opaque nature of the aliens. The wall is embedded in the stark Siberian landscape, whose icy beauty serves to underscore its metaphysical otherness. If nature speaks to humanity at all, its language is incomprehensible and its goals are its own.

The Zone Strikes Back

As the Soviet Union begins to fall apart under the onslaught of economic hardship, ecological disasters and ideological fatigue, SF films respond to the situation. Two main responses can be identified: stressing the hostility and intractability of nature, or retreating into pastoral nostalgia. Tarkovskii exemplifies the second trend but the first was equally widespread. It can be seen in two popular films of the late 1970s and early 1980s: the 1979 *The Dead Mountaineer's Hotel/Otel u pogipshego alpinista* and the 1985 *Day of Wrath/Den gneva*. The films are significant for two reasons: both are based on well-known SF texts; and both are set in fictional Western countries, reflecting the regime's greater openness to the West. But just as the capitalist enemy becomes more human, nature becomes more malevolent, absorbing many of the former's ideological characteristics.

The Dead Mountaineer's Hotel was based on the Strugatsky brothers' popular novel of the same title (they also wrote the screenplay). The

novel is an alien invasion thriller, set in an isolated alpine hotel. The formula, familiar from many Western movies, such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, was new and exciting to the Soviet public. The film capitalises on this newness, underscoring the noir elements of the plot, such as the chain-smoking detective, the exotic femme fatale (who turns out to be an alien robot) and the sense of claustrophobia and menace. Visually, the film alternates the dark interiors of the hotel with the brilliant whiteness of the snow and ice outside, the two combining to create an ominous setting, in which civilisation and wilderness are equally threatening, generating an overwhelming sense of unfocused and pervasive malevolence. The fact that the movie was made by the Estonian studio Tallinfilm and dubbed in Russian underscores its departure from the aesthetic and ideological norms of Soviet cinema.

The Day of Wrath was based on a story by the talented SF writer Sever Gansovsky, which describes the artificial creation of a race of intelligent bears who escape from the laboratory and rampage through a rural region of (probably) America. The story is a tight apocalyptic meditation on the dangers of meddling with nature; a theme that becomes increasingly prominent in Soviet SF as the extent of the devastation wrought by ecological megalomania becomes evident. Artistically, the film is less successful than the story but it underscores the underlying fear of eco-apocalypse: nature is malicious and vengeful and it pays back tenfold for the damage inflicted upon it.

The connection between the natural wilderness and the carceral Zone, implicit in the Stalinist rhetoric of space, is made quite clear in *The Day of Wrath* (saved from the wrath of the censor only by the fig leaf of its pseudo-American setting). The wild region where the mutated bears terrorise the poor and helpless population is a thinly veiled allegory of the Gulag. But its sublime beauty, emphasised by lingering shots of waterfalls, mountains and wooded canyons, conflates the immorality of the Terror and the amorality of nature. The same conflation is articulated in the parallels between the opening scene, in which a bear is being vivisected in the lab, and the subsequent discovery by the protagonist of the same lab used by the bears to vivisect humans. Neither in the story nor in the film are the bears represented as victims; rather, they are inhuman avengers, coming back to wreck havoc upon civilisation as payback for its attempt to master and transform nature. Despite the rise of eco-awareness, nature is not valorised. The enemy may have been recognised as too strong to conquer, but it is an enemy still.

The Motherland's Embrace

The rise of Russian nationalism in the late 1960s and 1970s as an alternative to Communism had a profound influence upon both literature and cinema. The so-called village school of Russian writers extolled the lost virtues of the rural countryside and Orthodox Christianity, occasionally sliding into xenophobia and anti-Semitism, yet also encouraging eco-awareness. Nationalism made a strong connection between the Russian landscape and the pre-revolutionary past.

The 1973 film *Sannikov's Land/Zemlya Sannikova*, based on a pre-revolutionary SF novel by Vladimir Obruchev, is simultaneously a lost world adventure, in which a group of free-spirit vagabonds discover a miraculously fertile land beyond the Arctic circle, and an elegy for a romantic past of dashing officers, intrepid explorers and gypsy songs. Set sometime in the late nineteenth century, the film is an imperial fantasy of exploring the primitive, much like H.R. Haggard's romances *She* (1887) and *King Solomon's Mines* (1885). However, made a hundred years later than its British counterparts, reflecting the twilight of the Soviet empire, the film is pervaded by a sense of nostalgia. The sets of small-town pre-revolutionary Russia merge with the pristine landscapes of the newly discovered land as an image of what has been irrevocably lost. When the land is devastated by an earthquake, its fragile beauty destroyed, the implications of the approaching social earthquake for Russia are clear.

The Final Reckoning

Just before the final collapse of the Soviet regime and disappearance of the Soviet utopia both as an ideological structure and as a literary and cinematic genre, one of the most thoughtful examinations of this utopia made it to the Russian screen. S. Rybas' *Mirror for the Hero/Zerkalo dlya geroya* (1987) is a reckoning with the dream of conquering nature, which eschews both facile apologetics and equally facile condemnation. It is also an elegy for the aborted New Man, which rediscovers the recent past of Stalinism in all its complexity, while showing the human and ecological cost of the utopia beyond the clichés of the Gulag.

The film starts with a confrontation between a father and son in a mining town in the USSR's coal country of Donbas. The father, an old engineer, is bitterly disappointed with his son Sergei, a 'hollow man' whose lavish (by Soviet standards) lifestyle and successful academic career cover up the absence of any ideals, such as motivated the father's

generation during and after the Great Patriotic War. To teach Sergei a lesson, his father reads to him his own fictionalised account of the dismantling of an ecologically damaging dam and return of huge tracts of the holy Russian soil to their pristine state. The irony, of course, lies in the fact that such dams were an integral part of the Stalinist conquest of nature, whose feverish patriotism the father finds so sorely lacking in the last Soviet generation. This irony is not lost on Sergei who blames his father's utopian enthusiasm for his own apathy. After a heated exchange, Sergei storms out, wanders to a rock concert and meets a slightly older engineer Andrei, who has just been released from prison where he served time for the collapse of a coal mine under his supervision. The two are miraculously transported back to 1949 where they have to relive the same day over and over again – 8th of May, one day before the celebration of the victory over Nazi Germany, the most important commemoration in the Soviet calendar.

The film avoids the most obvious paradoxes of the situation: it is neither *Back to the Future* nor *Groundhog Day*. Even though both protagonists meet their younger versions – Sergei encounters his girlish mother pregnant with himself and Andrei becomes a mentor to his own child-self – the emphasis is on the exploration of the collective rather than the individual memory and trauma.

The paranoia, poverty and repression of the postwar years are shown realistically. There are endless images and posters of Stalin on every street corner; mutilated war veterans are roaming the streets; life is hard and shabby. And yet the film also insists on the genuineness of the utopian fervour that motivated the Soviet people in 1949. Stalinism is not an imposed doublespeak but a real faith, whose rituals are intertwined with the townspeople's everyday struggles and pleasures. The fight for increased coal production is simultaneously an unrealistic demand from above and a popular initiative from below. The utopian goal may be unreachable but the utopian impulse is unquenchable.

The beautifully recreated landscape of a Donbas town that plays a central part in the film's visual poetics reflects this duality. It is horizontally divided into the idyllic rural township with grassy streets and blooming cherry trees above ground and the dark, dripping, rat-infested mines below. But this horizontal division hides a deeper interdependence: the town depends on the mines for its survival. Similarly, when Sergei hops on the train to go to Moscow, the live action gives way to a montage of sepia-coloured photographs of the era, expressing the same ambivalent combination of nostalgia and rejection.

The ultimate question the film poses is of the nature of the past. Can it be changed by being reimagined or relived? Or is it a dead weight

on the living whose influence, as Sergei tells his father in the opening scene, destroys his capacity for experiencing the present? Sergei and Andrei argue this point as they realise they are trapped in the endlessly recurring day. Sergei sees the past as 'a book or a movie' and its inhabitants, including the younger avatars of his parents, as zombies, impossible to reason or communicate with. Andrei, on the other hand, comes to believe that if they can make this one day 'the way it should be', they can escape the nightmare of the past. For him, it means causing the closure of 'mine number nine', whose catastrophic collapse in the future will have caused his imprisonment. Finally, despairing of convincing the authorities, he blows up the mine, while Andrei confronts the security officers who are about to arrest his father. Both are then returned to the present whose landscape (including the interior of Sergei's father's house) we recognise as the direct continuation of the landscape, both literal and metaphorical, of 1949.

Mirror for the Hero pushes the boundaries of Soviet cinema as far as they would go. After the historical rupture of 1991, the new Russian cinema and literature adopt a different idiom, interrogating the past (if at all) from the standpoint of post-utopian disillusionment. But *Mirror for the Hero* refuses simply to discard the legacy of the failed utopia, burrowing through the layers of Soviet history in search of a viable national and social identity. This identity is no longer the New Soviet Man whose shabby afterlife is embodied in the bitter old age of Andrei's father. But nor is it the Westernised yuppie lifestyle of Sergei himself, which is depicted as empty and alienated. Even nativism proves an inadequate prop; despite some idealisation of 'the common man', the drunkenness and brutality of rural life are not masked as they are in Tarkovskii's films. Eventually, *Mirror for the Hero* remains mired in its own irresolvable ambiguities, which are also the ambiguities of Soviet civilisation on the verge of dissolution.

Nature in Soviet SF cinema, as in Soviet cinema in general, is neither an antagonist nor a protagonist. Nor is it the repository of humanist values, antithetical to the oppressive regime, as the simplistic reading of Soviet history would have us believe. Rather, nature and the landscape become overloaded with so many contradictory meanings that they deliver mutually exclusive messages. Nature is the enemy to be conquered and the universal mother to return to; it is an image of the pastoral past and of the equally pastoral future; it is humanity's mirror and its Other. One might argue that such contradictory inscriptions of nature are part of any discourse, since nature is what culture makes of it. But in Soviet discourse, the ambiguity of nature is inextricably connected to the very ambiguity of the Soviet utopian project of the

creation of a new society and the New Man. Nature functions in two distinct modalities within this project, both legitimising and opposing it. And these two modalities cannot be reconciled, ideologically, narratively or visually. Nature in Soviet cinema was not a site of the intelligentsia's resistance to the regime. Rather, it was the last refuge of the unintelligible.

Notes

- 1 I will refer to the seventy-three years of the existence of the Soviet Union not as a historical 'mistake' of an oppressive tyranny but as a cultural and social entity with its own distinct articulations of such basic concepts as humanity, nature, time, space and so on. Perhaps the best way to describe this period is by using Foucault's concept of the episteme (1974). However, I will refer to it as 'civilisation', to emphasise both its all-encompassing character and its dynamism.
- 2 For more on the New Soviet Man, see Kaganovsky (2008) and Gomel (2004).

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