Exhausted Stereotypes

Representations of Russia in Andrej Nekrasov's

Love is as Strong as Death

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1.

THE GOTHENBURG FILM FESTIVAL is held annually in January and each year the Swedish Television's film department buys and broadcasts one film considered to have high quality but unlikely to be distributed by commercial film houses. In January 1998 the film bought and broadcast by the Swedish Television was a Russian debut film by Aleksej Nekrasov, *Love is as Strong as Death,* made in 1996.[1] The president of the Gothenburg Film Festival, Gunnar Bergdahl, amongst those to select the film for television, said the following by way of introduction:

> In general we know far too little about Russia, what happens there, what it looks like, how people live there [...] I don't mean just the superficial news items one happens to read, but what a film can give, the surroundings, the atmosphere, one could almost say the smell of the place [...] this is a film about the breakdown, about moral collapse in Post-Soviet society, with St Petersburg as its setting [...] it is a magnificent film within the Russian film tradition...

Let us take this introduction and the broadcast by the Swedish Television to be a gesture of approval towards the work which is explicitly given the status of quality film and interpreted as a genuine and valid representation of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The introduction further places the film in the great Russian film tradition.

[1] *' Sil'na kak smert' ljubov'* (Love is as Strong as Death). A film by Andrej Nekrasov from 1996. Fresco Films / KINOKOMPAN1JA 'RA'. Ca 1 hour, 37 minutes. Actors: Aleksandr Ćered-nik, Tat'jana Koroleva, Aleksandr Slaskin, Vladimir Eremin. Original music by Andrej Sigle.

My own viewing confirmed this evaluation and with enthusiasm I passed the video on to a small number of colleagues and students. Their reactions revealed an interesting disparity, for while Swedes and other Scandinavians, with an interest in and at least some firsthand knowledge of Russia, found the film interesting, the few Russians I was able to discuss it with tended to dismiss it with a measure of emotional distaste; they implied that it was pretentious, clichéd, speculative, cheap. One Russian colleague interpreted the film as a statement laying claim to the superiority of Russian over a debased Western culture, an exaggerated plying of 'The Russian Idea'; she quoted the lines where love in the West is dismissed as 'merely words, a mixture of orgasm and art-criticism'.[2] A second Russian colleague was critical for exactly the opposite reason, interpreting the film as a misrepresentation of Russia of today; through the eyes of the young expatriate, returning from sixteen years in the West, Russia appears to consist of mafia muggings and political intrigue; this is unjust since the young expatriate is himself decadent and morally weak having betrayed the woman he loved; what right has he to judge a country he chose to escape?

Without any pretensions as to statistical validity, I propose here to discuss why the film might be offensive to Russians, while appealing to Western viewers. The discussion will focus on stereotypical representations of Russia and Russians, particularly in relating to the West. For *Love is as Strong as Death* is a film blatantly concerned with Russianness now, today, in the 1990s and it abounds in stereotypes In gauging the value of these, it will be necessary not only to identify them but also to ascertain whether they are presented as desirable or not desirable; whether they champion or decry Russia; whether they are hackneyed or given a new significance by means of irony for example. An important question will be whether the viewer is expected to recognise and accept or to recognise and reject the representations of Russia which the film offers. Let us not overlook the fact that the film was produced in Russia with presumably a Russian audience in mind; it is a self-portrait, the stereotypes coming from within and not imposed from without by the prejudiced eyes of foreign beholders. Nevertheless it is significant that the protagonist, Aleša, returning from sixteen years abroad, opens for a perspective of

[2] See discussion on p 101.

'Western eyes'; albeit these 'Western eyes' are perceived from within Russia.[3] Throughout the film Aleša's foreignness provokes the people he meets; discussions of the West tend to include him in the 'you' *(vy)* of the West.[4] For example:

1. The police inspector Maksimov conducts his first interview with Aleša as follows :

Maksimov: Why do you live abroad ? Is it because of your work ?
Aleša: It's because of life.
Maksimov: How long have you lived there?
Aleša: Sixteen years.
Maksimov: And now you've been given this welcome ... by your native country *[na rodinu]* ... My neighbour has gone abroad . I could never do it. I couldn't even be without my criminals ... I belong here so to speak—that's all there is to it *[svoju kak govoritsia ... nicego ne podelaes\ {After a pause, -with embarrassed laugh:)—Do* you have a cigarette?

2. At the Police Station, Aleša is rescued by the kind Natasa.[5] Natasa takes Aleša back to her communal flat and whispers to her roommate that the 'foreigner' has arrived. The roommate speaking English with a comically marked Russian accent and monotone intonation says: 'How do you do my name is Julija.' Then switching to Russian:

Julija: You foreigners want to see us in the shit.
Aleša: I am not a foreigner.
A little later in the conversation:
Julija: Why did you go abroad ? For freedom ? *Aleša:* Yes, you don't believe me? *Julija:* Yes, you've got honest eyes.

2.

The film is based on a complex intrigue which at first appears to have a political cum mafioso type plot involving crime and corruption, politicians, a powerful TV-journalist, an honest but powerless police

[3] Much has been made of the creation of other cultures by Western European culture, see Said 1978; Wolff 1994. In the case of Russia however, it would appear that the Russians themselves, from the time of Peter I onwards if not before, have themselves been concerned with their relation as part or not part of Europe and that they themselves have contributed to stereotypical self-representations, see Møller 1997.
[4] Borisov talking to Aleša about love says: 'For you over there... *[U vas tam...]'.* See discussion p 101.
[5] Perhaps herself a stereotype of the Russian woman as a good Samaritan.

inspector. Intertwined with this plot is another which concerns a family (father and son) and a love story. At a first viewing it is almost impossible to fit the pieces together. Consider for example, the prologue to the film, which is presented like a riddle in short and unconnected fragments, interspersed with the credits, and accompanied by a complicated play of sound effects :

A hand posts an airmail letter into a letter box. (Silence) /8 sec./

PANORAMA SHOTS OF ST PETERSBURG *Water lapping against the shores of the Neva; movement of water and sky; a view of the Admiralty Spire and St Isaac's Cathedral over a broad expanse of the Neva; the modern city with lorries, a broadcasting transmitter; typical St Petersburg streets and house facades; a stormy sky, dark-blue dawn becoming lighter.* (Music: Alessandro Stradella, 'Pietà Signor' ('Lord, have mercy upon us') sung by Beniamino Gigli) /1 min. 5 sec./

TEXT FORTIS EST UT MORS DILECTIO

COURTYARD WITH CAR *Man approaches, unlocks, gets in.* (Stradella) /25 sec./

Car explodes. (Stradella cut out by sound of explosion, gradually returns) /38 sec./

NAME AND TITLE OF FILM (Bells tolling)

TEXT Actors: Aleksandr Ćerednik, Tat'jana Koroleva, Aleksandr
Slaskin, Vladimir Eremin
A film by Andrej Nekrasov

(Strange sound effects —disrupted electronic sounds. Bells still heard[6])

MORGUE *Dead body, identification by young girl.* (Strange sound effects—disrupted electronic sounds. Bells still heard) / 5 5 sec./

TEXT Credits...
Original music: Andrej Sigle
Sound effects: Kirill Kuz'min

MYSTIFYING SCENE *Woman seen in half-face from behind man; her voice addressing 'husband'. Appears to be therapy in psychiatric clinic; 'husband'picks up an iron and holds it.*

Woman: I thought he wanted to kill me /2 min. 3. sec. with titles interspersed/ *Doctors diagnose paranoia* (Bells tolling) */6* sec./ CREDITS INTERCEPTING THIS LAST SCENE[7]

[6] Both the tolling bells and the electronic sounds associate to Tarkovski;'s films; *Andrej Rublev* has irregular bells tolling through the prologue and credits.
[7] Total time of this prologue with titles is 5 min. 19. sec.

On the second viewing the pieces fall into place and the love theme denoted in the title comes to the fore, while the political theme (mafia, corruption etc) withers and takes its place on the level of 'typical representations of Russia in the 1990s'. It is now clear how the political and the love story are intertwined, what has happened, who is guilty of what, who is related to whom etc. The intrigue is basically a love story and it involves three men and one woman: Aleša Serov who left the USSR sixteen years ago to find freedom in the West; his friend Andrej Borisov who has remained in St Petersburg as a 'progressive', critical journalist; Aleša's father Aleksandr Aleksandrovic Serov who had lost his position in Soviet Society owing to his son's defection but is now riding high as a leading 'democratic' politician advocating market economy; and finally the woman that all three love, Ol'ga. When Aleša left the Soviet Union he deserted his love, Ol'ga; Ol'ga is now in a psychiatric hospital. By the end of the film we understand that Ol'ga was seduced or raped by Aleša's father Serov Senior, and that she gave birth to a daughter, Maša; Aleša's friend, Andrej Borisov, married Ol'ga and has brought Maša up as his daughter.[8]

The film is set in St Petersburg; it begins and ends with expressive shots of the city and the Neva, the waters lashing against the shore in the vivid blue light of dawn. On both occasions these shots are accompanied by the Stradello aria, 'Pietà Signor' ('Lord have mercy upon us') sung by Beniamino Gigli. The presence of the city is intense, visually and culturally significant. On the whole (although not exclusively) it is a nineteenth-century presentation of the city and it activates the traditional cultural myth of St Petersburg.

3.

The film has two themes : first, as the title quotation from *The Song of Solomon* viii.6 indicates, it is about love (erotic love, passion, betrayal, jealousy and pseudo-incestuous relationships): 'Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is as strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame.' The love theme is given a tragic twist through continual references to *Hamlet*, the first of which is

[8] SYNOPSIS. At the beginning of the film it appears that Borisov in his role as critical journalist has been killed by a car bomb; Serov Senior accuses his political rivals of the deed. Masa has identified her 'father' at the morgue. It soon turns out that the man killed was an unfortunate car thief and that the bomb had been placed in the car by Borisov himself in a tentative plan to kill himself and his wife, Ol'ga; Borisov is suicidally unhappy knowing that, although she is his wife, Ol'ga has never loved him as she loved Aleśa. After the explosion of the car bomb, Borisov goes into hiding in a small cottage near the fortress where in their youth the three friends, Aleśa, Andrej Borisov and Ol'ga, had filmed an amateur 'production' of Hamlet: black and white excerpts from this recording are shown on four occasions. Aleša, arriving at the airport from Helsinki, has heard that his best friend the journalist Borisov has been killed by a car bomb. On the way from the airport he is beaten up and robbed and left unconscious in the snow. Having gained consciousness he goes to a police station, and is questioned by the police inspector, Maksimov. As a result of his injuries, Aleša is suffering from short-term amnesia and does not remember why he has returned to Russia. The daughter Masa acts both as an instigator of the action and as a detective of the love tragedy. It is she who has written to Aleša abroad and asked him to come to St Petersburg (the very first shot shows the letter being posted). She has found a letter sent by her mother fifteen years ago to Aleša, but returned with addressee unknown, and found and hidden by the jealous Andrej Borisov. Masa knows who her father is and who her brother is. Nevertheless she does not know or understand the relationships that have lead to the love tragedy; she is in a way innocent as Aleša too is innocent. As a background to the love story, the political intrigue—between politicians and the media, between the mafia and the police inspector—plays itself out. The film builds on a generational and political Father and Son conflict and Aleša is persuaded by the powerful TV-journalist Kustov (played by Andrej Nekrasov himself) to betray his father on television. Father and son are later reconciled. Aleša has discovered that Kustov is criminal and promises evidence to the police inspector. The police inspector is brutally murdered while reading Ol'ga's letter; thus the mafia are in fact active in the plot. Masa reveals to Aleša that they are brother and sister. The film ends with shots of St Petersburg and the Neva and with Ol'ga's voice reading the letter with the explanation of the title of the film, *Love is as Strong as Death*, which she has read in Master Eckhart's sermon.

when Aleša gives the name of his former love, Ol'ga, as Ophelia. Secondly the film is concerned with representing Russia and it achieves this by running the intrigue through a veritable maze of familiar stereotypes of the specifically Russian. The stereotypes are legion and we shall be concerned with them throughout this analysis. Before discussing the more significant I shall mention just a few of the lesser ones to give an idea of their density:

1. At the Police Station Aleša is asked to give a description of the man who attacked him. He answers with irony: '...light-brown hair, an open Russian face. An honest expression'. In fact the one character in the film who does have a genuine 'open Russian face', is the police inspector Maksimov. He is sincerely disturbed by the crime, ashamed of the state of his country and in awe of what he believes to be Aleša's superior knowledge. All in all a decent Russian soul.[9]

2. The mental clinic is shown on several occasions. Three times Maša attempts to bring Aleša to meet her mother. Each time the doctors,

[9] Julija finds Aleša's eyes honest. See P93.

their faces almost caricatures, thwart the attempt. Possibly this is not a solely Russian stereotype but, with its insistent Kafka-like atmosphere, stands for mental clinics and institutions everywhere. However, given the sinister history of Soviet psychiatric clinics, the scenes seem to point to a nastily Soviet representation of imprisonment and abuse of power.

3. The Holy Fool who taunts and helps Aleša find his way around the graveyard is a typical Russian representation.[10]

Certain scenes in the film are tautly realistic and it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between effective realism of contemporary life and stereotype. Exaggeration and gentle satire is a device of realism assuring that we recognise the typicality of the representation. At some point the typical may become a regular stereotype, presumably at that point where the typical outlives its immediate context. One scene which has this quality is the one in the communal flat. The kindly Natasa has taken Aleša home; she leads him down a cavernous long corridor mumbling about her 'active' roommate; they enter an overcrowded room, pop music blaring, and the camera focuses close up on Julija (pronounced *Yulia)* who with her blasé vulgarity, her empty urbanity, her haughty indifference to politics (T don't care about politicians. Any more than I care about the Chinese. I'm not paid to have opinions.'), her red lips and later her tumbling and giggling antics with her boyfriend under the heaving blanket gives an intense and amusing rendering of one of the ways life in Russia strikes foreigners (in this case, Aleša). Another such scene is the one in the police station with its medley of characters all forced into the tiny space of the waiting room with its squeaking door continually opening and shutting: Aleša with his battered face and dead-white shirt, the lolling drunkard in a bright red woolly hat who stumbles about complaining loudly that he wants to go to sleep *(Ja spat' chocu),* the long-suffering women caring for the men.

[10] In Tarkovskij's *Andrej Rublev,* this Holy Fool is a woman. One of her visual marks is the cold-sore she has on her lip. In *Love is as Strong as Death* Aleša's sore-covered face brings Tarkovskij's holy fool to mind. In fact visually, there is much of the saintly look of Andrej Rublev (played by Anatolij Solonicyn) in Aleša's appearance. In *The Minor,* too, there is a red-haired girl who fingers a sore on her lip.

Thus the film alternates between tautly realistic, even comical, scenes and outright stereotypes. Rather than making statements, it appears to be posing questions, first and foremost: What is Russia today and how does it manifest itself? Will the traditional stereotypes do? Are they still valid? Do they give us a recognisable representation of Russia today, an adequate self-portrait? And we who look at Russia today from beyond its borders as foreigners, through this cinematic representation, are we to recognise a Russia we have already got taped on our mental map, or are we to be surprised, confronted with something new? The different responses to the film lie in the answers to these questions. My suspicion is that amongst my Russian colleagues was at least one who is sick to death of anything that smacks of the Russian idea; and equally one or more who would like to see traditional Russianness presented anew, unsullied, in tact and without obvious exaggerations. And perhaps our foreign approval of the film lies in this that it gives the pleasure of recognition; for of course we have all met our Julijas !

4.

In the following I shall present a number of scenes in greater detail at the same time touching on the associations and subtexts which they activate in order to give the film its complex meaning.

4.1 Aleša arrives at airport[11]

A young man with longish fair hair, a dark overcoat and a green scarf which picks up the colour of his hair, arrives from the West at St Petersburg airport. He speaks Russian. A friendly customs official examines his luggage and, on finding a laptop, asks whether he is a business man needing to count his money. Aleša replies, T'm a journalist' and the Customs official says, 'My sympathies. Be careful'.

The camera follows Aleša out of the building focusing the back of his head at the centre of the screen; beyond is the view from the entrance to the airport spread horizontally in front of Aleša, his first glimpse of Russia for sixteen years; parked cars, winter-bare birch

[11] Time of sequence 4 min. 57 sec.

trees, a thin coating of snow on the ground. The camera pauses for a moment of stillness before cutting to a facial frontal view showing Aleša pausing to take his bearings, somewhat lost, as he returns to an unknown world. The entire scene is accompanied by piano music; melancholy in tone and played loudly, it lends emotional intensity to the scene. A man approaches to ask Aleša if he needs a taxi to which Aleša replies 'yes', though apparently in confusion. They enter the 'taxi', which leaves to pick up another man. As the 'taxi' proceeds into deserted surroundings, Aleša starts to shift uneasily in the back seat, the scene accompanied by the harsh tones of a troubadour-type song which appears to come from the car radio.[12] The mugging takes place and Aleša is left unconscious, lying on his stomach, in a deserted, slightly snow-covered wasteland, robbed of his overcoat and in a conspicuously white shirt. A cut to a later time shows Aleša now lying on his back looking up at the sky. The film gives a close-up of his head, the shot angled slightly from below; the face is bloodied and the longish fair hair now tousled and, encased in snow and frost, associating to a 'wreath of thorns'. Aleśa lifts his head and regains consciousness.

The visual effect of this scene is to associate with a crucified Christ. The long hair which my Russian colleague found effeminate and distasteful, is at the same time Christlike; the over-sensitive face reminds us of Andrej Rublev in Tarkovskij's film, and in general to a nineteenth century Dostoevskij character, tormented and suffering.[13] The most specific association is to Prince Myškin from *The Idiot.* Like Myškin in Dostoevskij's novel, the protagonist of the film has arrived in St Petersburg from 'another world'. Myškin arrives by train from Switzerland where he has been convalescing after a mental illness which had rendered him totally infantile; Aleša arrives by plane from Helsinki (probably from Sweden) where he has spent sixteen years in the freedom of the West writing plays and articles on the theatre. The mugging on the way from the airport introduces another stereotype, Russia as the land of danger in the East, in its Post-Soviet version as a mafia-infested country of crime where no unprotected visitor goes safe. As a result of the mugging, Aleša suffers amnesia and cannot remember why he has come. Thus the crime stereotype

[12] 'Dašen'ka' by Sigle, words by Andrej Nekrasov.
[13] It brings to mind illustrations, theatrical and cinematic renderings of Dostoevski's heroes.

ingeniously opens the way for the mystery device on which the plot depends. At the same time it allows Aleša to assume his Myškin-like role; just as Myškin in *The Idiot* is innocent, unknowing of the world to which he comes, so too Aleša is lost, 'innocent' and sees the world to which he comes as unfathomable. Aleša like Myškin is an intruder. The association to *The Idiot* has been 'prepared' by the St Petersburg landscape given in the first few moments of the film.

The Dostoevski) associations go beyond *The Idiot.* Aleša's pacing of the streets of central St Petersburg, his lying in wait outside the house where now Maša lives, not least the scene in which he climbs the stairs and rings her door-bell and waits outside listening through the door, associates to RaskoPnikov in *Crime and Punishment.* Whereas Raskol'nikov is driven by fever and crazy ideas, Aleša is driven by his sense of perplexity and need to understand what has happened to his friend, Andrej Borisov, and his love, Ol'ga, and to visit his father.

Finally there is the explicit association to the theme of *Father and Son* with generational, emotional and also political enmity. The police inspector struggling to understand why Aleša has returned to Russia suddenly has a brainwave: he talks to his wife about the three great works of patricide, *Œdipus, Hamlet* and *The Brothers Karamazov* and cries out triumphantly: 'He's come back to murder his father.' To the relationship of father and son we shall return later. Finally, at the risk of overinterpretation, I point to Aleša Karamazov as the saintly namesake of our protagonist.

4.2 The first meeting between Aleša and Andrej Borisov[14]

Aleša is brought by Maša, in mysterious circumstances, to a fortress just outside the city. There he is to meet his friend Andrej Borisov, who has after all not been blown up by the car bomb. The two former friends spend the evening and night together. They discuss Serov Senior, Aleša's father, and other heart to heart matters. Borisov drinks and talks, becoming continually more scornful and cynical. Aleša, at first open-hearted, becomes more and more passive and silent; Maša listens from outside the conversation, often standing in another room. Borisov becomes intoxicated and speaks aggressively

[14] The scene is shown in two sequences of 9 min 29 sec. and 7 min 9 sec. respectively.

about the West his facial expression, shown in close-up, increasingly more unpleasant. It is now that he talks scathingly about love in the West saying that '...for you over there, love is only a matter of words. You've got a stomach, some have brains ... genitalia ... but an organ responsible for love—that has withered away, not needed ... love is a mixture of orgasm and art criticism...'. As he says this his face is distorted by an ugly twisted smirk and the camera switches to Maša who listens to the conversation from outside the room; her face is intensely blank and after this final remark, she abruptly leaves while the camera remains trained on the blank wall against which she had been standing. She goes out of the cottage and down to the water's edge shortly followed by Aleša.

The 'orgasm-art criticism' remark is highly quotable and it is likely to be brought up in any discussion of the film. How should we interpret this remark? Is it a statement made by the film about love in the West? Or is it a remark attributed to a stereotypical Russian intelligentsia, a hackneyed view of Western inferiority and Russian superiority, a view which the film represents with irony ?

Quoted out of context this judgement on the West could well be understood as a stereotypical reiteration of the spiritual superiority of Russia to the West. In the context of the film, however, the words are spoken by an inebriated and unpleasantly cynical Borisov. Moreover, Aleša's passivity, and even more so Maša's blank but pained expression as she listens give the stereotype an ironic twist so that instead of taking it at face value we may understand it to be a Russian prejudice; the kind of talk, talk, talk that the Russian intelligentsia, with a bottle of vodka between them on the table, love to harp on about. The following shot of Maša leaving her position against the wall and walking slowly down to the water, to be followed by Aleša, suggests a non-stereotypical representation of a new and lost generation. Maša aged fifteen and Aleša returned from the West are without talk; they watch and try to make sense but the jargon of the intelligentsia has no meaning for them; they have no ready-made understanding, let alone expressions for the same.

4.3 Aleša and the police inspector discuss love, leaving the fatherland. What is Russia?[15]

In a later scene a similar conversation takes place this time between Aleša and the police inspector, Maksimov. Maksimov with his 'honest, Russian face' is concerned with the crime with which he cannot come to grips; he is naively fascinated and 'impressed' with Aleša. In bed at night he pesters his wife; ashamed of the state of the country to which Aleša has returned, he tries to work out why Aleša has come back and how he could have left in the first place. Now parked in his van he pulls Aleša into the car to talk to him. He wants to talk to Aleša about Russia in relation to the West: 'We have so much to learn', he says reaching for the copy of Freud lying on the back seat, and adds: 'it is convincing but something is missing'. Aleša replies immediately and oracle-like: 'Die Liebe. In Love is the source of the greatest joy and the greatest suffering; in the West they have tried to operate away the suffering, but in Russia there is no love without suffering.'

Aleša thus confirms Borisov's view, using the very same metaphor of an organ operated or withered away. True to his Dostoevskij-like appearance, he confirms, not cynically like Borisov but with an air of sanctity, the stereotype of Russian suffering.

> *Maksimov:* Has the West triumphed over Russia?
> *Aleša:* What is Russia? —an unspoken thought, a dream. And if reality is able to overcome a dream, then Russia has no chance. *(Then, in exasperation as he leaves the car:)*—Why have you got it into your head that I have anything to teach you ?

The same conversation as between Aleša and Borisov is now repeated between Aleša and the police inspector, but Aleša takes another position. The inspector looks to Aleša for guidance and Aleša apparently preaches the superiority of Russian to Western love. Specifically he repeats the stereotypical insistence on the value of suffering, familiar from amongst others Dostoevskij, the image of Aleša as a crucified Christ, not to be forgotten. But to the stereotype is added a disaffection: What is Russia—why have you got it into your head that I have anything to teach you. The stereotype of suffering is still advocated but without real conviction.[16]

[15] Time of sequence 1 min. 45 sec.
[16] Aleša does have a tendency to preach. See for example the scene on the stairs with Nataśa when he talks about truth which each individual chooses, not with one's mind but instinctively.

4.4 The scene with Maša: sister or bride ?[17]

Maša reads a poem signed 'Ophelia' which jolts Aleša's memory. Maša asks Aleša to switch off the light, she takes off her jumper and, sitting with naked breasts facing him, she recites the words: 'sister or bride?' quoting her Egyptian folklore. Aleša realises that Maša and he are siblings and he embraces her.

Although Maša quotes from her absorption in Egyptian folklore, it is interesting to note that the *Song of Solomon* from which the title of the film is taken contains many references directly expressed in this scene: the ambiguity of love between unwitting siblings, the ambiguity of sister and spouse; the embrace between brother and sister; a little sister with naked breasts:

> Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck, (iv.9)
>
> How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse ! [...] (iv.10)
>
> I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse [...] (v.1)
>
> O that thou wert as my brother, that sucked the breasts of my mother! When O should find thee without, I would kiss thee; yea, I should not be despised. (viii. i)
>
> I would lead thee, and bring thee into my mother's house, who would instruct me: I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate. (viii.2)
>
> His left hand should be under my head, and his right hand should embrace me. (viii.3)[18]
>
> We have a little sister, and she hath no breasts: what shall we do for our sister in the day when she shall be spoken for? (viii.8)
>
> I am a wall, and my breasts like towers: then was I in his eyes as one that found favour, (viii. 10)

Maša is the character in the film who weaves together the family, who solves the mystery; she is the one who has summoned Aleša back to Russia. Maša does not refer to *The Song of Solomon* but it is Maša who has retrieved the letter in which Ol'ga writes to Aleša that 'love is as strong as death'. Ol'ga quotes this through a sermon by Master Eckhart and the film ends with Ol'ga's voice reading the letter as a reference to something she has read in the sermons :

> Death takes away amongst other things these three:
> 1. material possessions and marks of honour
> 2. spiritual blessings, prayers, meditation and virtue

[17] Time of sequence 2 min 54 sec.
[18] This is in fact the position in which Aleśa holds Masa as they fall onto the bed.

> 3. the chance, the hope of being able to atone for one's sin. And all this *{the voice continues)* love does too, because love like death is the parting of the soul from the body; but this happens only when death kills, not when it merely weakens.[19]

Pretentious it may be, but nevertheless this subtext of Master Eck-hart and *The Song of Solomon* elevates the love between brother and sister and dissolves any suggestion of incestuous love that could otherwise appear 'cheap', 'decadent', or some kind of postmodernist indulgence. The circle of relations of love, of passion between man and woman and parental love between parents and children, is brought full circle and in their joy at finding one another Aleša and Maša come to rest. The traditional Russian family of Fathers and Sons is now replete with a mother and a sister; what was threatening to become an Œdipal horror story has been resolved into its basically straight parts.

4.5 Aleša's reconciliation with his father[20]

Aleša confronts his father on three occasions. For both father and son the relationship is one of love-hate. Aleša has despised his father for his Soviet attitude and has told Borisov that for him, Aleša, the concepts of freedom and human rights are more than just words. Now he thinks that his father, playing the democratic Post-Soviet politician, has changed, 'and for the better'. Borisov is cynical (with a sneer, 'Dear Aleša, Homo Sapiens is on the way to becoming Homo Mafioso') and tells Aleša that his father seduced or raped Ol'ga sixteen years ago and is responsible for the fact that Ol'ga must spend several months each year in a mental clinic. To the political tension between father and son is now added that of sexual rivalry, a theme once again familiar from *The Brothers Karamazov.* Aleśa storms in to accuse his father and is himself accused of wrecking the family's life:

> *Aleša:* You are not worthy of my greeting. What did you do to Ol'ga? *Father:* I shall answer before God and so will you. For your egoism. It was you who ruined our family. Freedom suited you better! That you ruined me and caused me to have a heart attack I can accept. But what about your mother's death ? Was that a secondary effect of the battle against totalitarianism?

[19] Earlier Aleśa and Borisov have discussed a passage from the Church Fathers where death was said to take away the possibility of atonement.
[20] Time of sequence 3 min. 9 sec.

At this meeting Aleša notes that his father is in possession of the pipe of which he was robbed during the mugging. This pipe is proof of the fact that Serov Senior does in fact have connections with the mafia.

In a later scene a reconciliation takes place between father and son. Aleša now knows that Maša is his father s daughter with Ol'ga, that Maša is his sister. He threatens his father with a pistol. The father is shown from a side-view sitting in a chair with a small cut-out paper angel swinging to and fro about his face. As the accused he asks for the chance to speak. He asks for forgiveness and for a miracle; that Aleša should embrace him. Aleša embraces his father and the camera switches to an angle behind the father, Aleša's head in view and with the pistol dangling in the embracing hand. The reconciliation is ambiguous. It is after this scene that the interview with the perfidious Kustov, in which Aleša betrays his father, is broadcast. Both father and son watch the programme with pain, from their separate apartments. Soon afterwards the father is shown dead on the floor in his flat, presumably from a heart attack.

Notwithstanding Aleša's role as stereotype Christlike figure, the conflict between father and son is not resolved in his favour. Both father and son have committed acts of betrayal and both are losers. If we were to push this familiar conflict to an interpretation to be found in the film, it would have to be seen as a non-scoring match: no goals—no winner. And this will be my conclusion; that the film upholds neither the older nor the younger generation, for the older generation is corrupt and exhausted, but the younger generation too is without options and therefore also in a state of debilitation.

4.6 The Hamlet reference

References to *Hamlet* are frequent and explicit throughout the film. In their youth the friends Aleša, Ol'ga and Andrej Borisov had filmed a mimed version of *Hamlet*, which they had set up at the fortress, the text being recited by professional actors on a tape-recorder. Borisov has smuggled a copy of the film from the institute and he and Aleša watch it out in the cottage. The Hamlet film is inserted in black and white sequences on four occasions, allowing us to see the three friends as they were more than sixteen years ago. These excerpts are concentrated on the love between Hamlet and Ophelia. The two longest scenes show the following:

1. During the long soliloquy 'To be or not to be...' Aleša miming Hamlet stares at Ol'ga miming Ophelia. They appear to leave their miming/acting roles and instead become absorbed by their own private love, while the recited words from the tape recorder continue as a background. Thus Hamlet's anguish is left behind as the actor miming Hamlet falls in love with the actress miming Ophelia.
2. Aleša miming Hamlet and Andrej Borisov miming Horatio[21] stand together on Ophelia's coffin sunk in the grave. They fight violently with one another, Horatio with his hands in a strangling grip around Hamlet's neck, until eventually one of their feet is seen to tramp through the coffin. Although this scene appears to be a cut from the recorded *Hamlet*, it is not explicable in term of Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* It is unclear as to whether this scene merely takes place in Aleša the actor's mind.

On several occasions the friends Aleša and Borisov communicate with one another through quotes from *Hamlet*, particularly when they are near the fortress. Maša too, supplying the part of her mother, communicates with Aleša through quotes from and references to *Hamlet.*

Hamlet is explicitly interwoven with the film and it connects the protagonist Aleša with the Hamlet theme in Russian literature and culture.[22] To the image of decadent expatriate returning from the West and the Christlike appearance presented above can now be added a visual association to Hamlet actors in Russian theatre and cinema, particularly to Smoktunovskij's role in the film from 1964. The association underlines the conflicting aspects of Aleša's role in the film: his suffering and sacred appearance; the betrayal of his love; his passivity and inability to act; his concern with his relationship to his father.

[21] Whereas Aleša as Hamlet is easily recognisable, I am not as sure of Borisov's features in the actor Horatio.
[22] See, for example, Rowe 1976.

5. Russian film tradition

In his introduction to the television broadcast, Gunnar Bergdahl placed *Love is as Strong as Death* in the great tradition of Russian Film. I believe that this evaluation was legitimate and will try to indicate how this film is typically Russian, and greatly so. In order to concretise the Russian film tradition I shall have two specific films in mind, Andrej Tarkovskij's *Andrej Rublev (1966,* USSR release 1971) and Elem Klimov's *Come and See* (1985).[23]

The traditional features have to do both with the themes of the films and with their cinematic articulation. The themes of the films are at once existential and historical, concerned with good and evil as universal themes but also as a part of a specifically Russian history. Both films focus on human suffering and on human cruelty. In different ways the protagonists of the two films, the monk Rublev and the teenage boy Flera, endure prolonged suffering which is given a unique expression but yet suggests a fate shared by many.

True to the earliest tradition of Russian film, both Tarkovskij and Klimov exploit the medium of cinema; not for one minute do we as audience forget that we are watching a film; we are not tempted to slide into a seductive fictional (say Hollywood) world and escape facing the film with its theme and meaning. Both films, *Andrej Rublev* and *Come and See*, contain cruelly realistic scenes, scenes of violence, of physical discomfort, but the total effect is not realistic in the sense of 'suspending disbelief; it is never speculative, thrilling, offering an all-absorbing experience so 'real' that we may forget to think about what we see.

This is achieved through the cutting, the camera shots and the sound effects etc which combine to present a world and its details 'made significant'. We could quote many a shot from these two films and show them as being truly realistic, and yet any realistic glimpse will always be more than realistic, lifted to a level of symbolic significance. In *Andrej Rublev* we may recall the abrupt cut, preceded by its sound, to the scene when Rublev hurls daubs of paint on the white walls where he has been painfully unwilling or unable to start painting the frescoes of The Last Judgement; or the scene when Bo-riska slides down the steep muddy bank suddenly to realise that this

[23] Like *Love is as Strong as Death, Come and See* has a biblical title. *Andrej Rublev* was originally called *Passion According to Andrej.*

mud is the clay which will be right for the casting of the bell. In *Come and See* we may recall the scene where the young new recruit Flera and the deserted girl Glasa discover one another crying in the woods; gradually the sobs are transposed into laughter and Flera takes off his boot and slowly pours out the water that has accumulated there. And yet—and here is an aspect particularly true of Tarkovskij's films—the total significance of the film is difficult to comprehend. On the one hand we are made to feel that each detail has a significance beyond itself, and on the other the significance of the whole remains elusive, not readily available to intellectual analysis.

In both *Andrej Rublev* and *Come and See* as in many other Russian films, the camera gives long close-up shots of the facial expression of the central characters. As audience we are prompted to examine the human emotions, the spiritual state of the character before us. The camera pauses at length on a face, as though the facial expression will reveal an inner response, an emotional, moral or spiritual state. The device is used throughout *Love is as Strong as Death* and suggests once again that no action is as absorbing as the moral state which prompts it.

A similar device is that of marking the human characters as foreground and projecting them against a static, two-dimensional background; Russian films typically evoke associations to two-dimensional paintings. The human beings become the significant focal point in a non-human world.[24] Even when the camera follows the character into a clearly three-dimensional background, it focuses on the human and leaves the surrounding scenery to be walked through. Examples from *Love is as Strong as Death* are many: Aleša leaving the airport building; Aleša travelling in the 'taxi'; Maša walking through the streets and courtyards of St Petersburg. We can contrast this device to that of a modern action film where the camera shows the heroes clinched in physical (not moral) action, in the throes of overcoming all physical hindrances around. As central perspective in visual art invites its viewer to enter into the picture so many modern films 'swallow' their audiences, drawing them into the physicality of a screened world and leaving little room for contemplation.

[24] I have noted shots focusing on the back of Aleša's head. These too are reminiscent of shots from *Andrej Rublev*.

A shot that has become emblematic of Russian film is that of the camera, reproducing the gaze of the protagonist as it sweeps upward through the trees to contemplate the sky beyond (often in a circling movement which the camera can achieve but hardly the human eyes which were its starting point). This shot occurs (for the first time ?) in *The Cranes are Flying* (Kalatazov 1957), as Borja falls to the ground after being fatally shot. It then becomes a permanent trope.[25] In *Love is as Strong as Death* the symbolic shot occurs on several occasions: Aleša recovering consciousness after the mugging; at the meeting between Aleša and Maša after the pursuit through St Petersburg's narrow streets and courtyards; finally, with the camera once again focused on the back of Aleša's head, at the scene where he visits his mother's grave. On two occasions the visual flight upwards is accompanied by the flight of birds,[1] once almost subliminally. The birds' flight is a quote from *Andrej Ruhlev* where it occurs in the Raid episode during the high-angle shot of the church being looted and burned from without.[26] To a film-viewer attracted by modern Western films these typically Russian devices may seem laboured, pretentious, particularly for a viewer not in sympathy with the total import of a film.

6. Conclusions

'Chaos in the country and chaos in the head' says Maksimov self-deprecatingly to Aleša in the scene presented above (4.2). This remark could well be the motto for the whole film. The film asks the time-old question: What is Russia? How does Russian relate to Western culture ? After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia finds itself once again at one of those fatal junctures of its history, one of those revolutionary turn-abouts (see Lotman & Uspenskii 1985). From

[25] In *Come and See* the scene between Glasa and Flera in the forest ends with a rare moment of joy as the two teenagers shake the rain from the huge trees, Flera washing himself in the shower and beating himself dry with birch branches. Elisabeth Hemby-Elmfeldt (1994) interprets the entire scene of Flera and Glasa in the forest as an expression of Klimov's natural philosophy: Nature and Russia are opposed symbolically and mythologically to the cruelty of war. The trope is present in Tarkovskij's *The Mirror.*

[26] Significant scenes with birds occur in *The Minor;* in *Andrej Rublev* we have birds in the church as the fool enters as well as the scene with the young Rublev and Kirill, each beside a lonely tree ('The Bell').

history we have learned that revolutions lead to continuity under a new rhetoric. But for those caught up in a moment of that history, there is the hope of partaking in real change.

Nekrasov in this film seems to be taking stock by giving his film the run of all available representations of Russian culture. The stereotypes abound and yet none of them is offered as a final answer, a model to follow. Quite the opposite: the stereotypes are old, hackneyed, exhausted of meaning. A set of parameters emerges plotting a scale between those who think they are in the know to those who know they are not; a scale between cynicism and innocence. The members of the 'old' society are in the know: Serov Senior as the father generation, but also Borisov with his tired intelligentsia gestures and talk are both cynical. At the other end of the scale is Ol'ga in the psychiatric clinic and above all Maša. Maša is only sixteen, she is the living result of the tragic love drama the truth of which she is trying to unravel. The film shows her in numerous close-ups, her teenage face beautifully unspoilt and vulnerable. Hers is the future and the uncertainty of that future is what the film finally brings into focus. Maša as a representative of the generation just now reaching adulthood tries first to understand her own past. She is most often seen outside a conversation, outside a room in a state of listening, trying to understand. At one point she cannot bear what she hears and places earphones over her ears to shut out the words of the adult world, which gesture confirms her vulnerability.

On this scale Maša knows least and has greatest innocence. Thus she listens and watches, but finds no clue, no model. What she finds is her brother, the Myškin of the 1990s. He too is innocent, though less so, than she is. They have one another and not much more. Apart from the bond between the brother and sister, who have found one another, there is not much joy in the film. It is extremely pessimistic. My interpretation has been that the stereotypes are not to be considered as valid representations of Russia in the 1990s, on the contrary: these stereotypes have exhausted their meaning. New representations, new ways of seeing Russia are needed. The film does not uphold any image of the 'Russian Idea'. As one of my students pointed out, the aria 'Pietà Signor' ('Lord, have mercy upon us') by Alessandro Stradella, sung by Beniamino Gigli, is a genuine cry for help. The combination in the beginning and end of the film of the views of St Petersburg and the Neva in a blue dawn light, to the accompani-

ment of the Italian music, frames the film in beauty and passion, a beauty and passion which I interpret as honestly experienced, neither sarcastic, nor kitsch. The fact that Nekrasov chooses a Latin version of 'Lord, have mercy upon us', and not the Russian Orthodox *'Gos-podi, pomiluj',* could be significant. The title of the film is reproduced in Latin and not Church Slavonic: *Fortis est ut mors dilectio.* This is presumably because it is quoted not directly from the Bible, but from the sermons of the Church Fathers, again a source from Western rather than Orthodox Christianity.

The choice between the secularised West and a Holy Russia, the eternal dispute between Westernisers and Slavophiles, has been annulled. Even that is a stereotype which has lost its meaning.

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