

HARD TO BE A GOD A FILM BY ALEKSEI GERMAN





CONTENTS

- 4 **Film Credits**
- 6 **Hard to Be a God**
by Jonathan Romney (2015)
- 12 **Interview with Aleksei German**
by Anton Dolin (2013)
- 42 **About the Presentation**

CAST

Don Rumata: **Leonid Yarmolnik**
Baron Pampa: **Yuriy Tsurilo**
Ari: **Natalya Moteva**
Don Reba: **Aleksandr Chutkov**
Budakh: **Evgeniy Gerchakov**
Gur: **Piotr Merkurev**
Muga: **Ramis Ibragimov**
King: **Sergey Stupnikov**
Zurab: **Zurab Kipshidze**
Arata: **Valentin Golubenko**
Arima: **Leonid Timtsunik**
Ripat: **Valeriy Boltyshev**
Don Tameo: **Yuriy Nifontov**
First Monk: **Valeriy Guryanov**
First Slave: **Yuriy Ashikhmin**
Second Slave: **Anvar Libabov**
First Slave: **Yuriy Ashikhmin**
Second Slave: **Anvar Libabov**
Kabani's Helper: **Aleksandr Seleznyov**
Rumata's Carrier: **Vasiliy Domrachyov**
Uno: **Daniil Isakov**
Kondor's Son: **Dmitriy Vladimirov**
Narrator: **Vladimir Yumatov**

CREW

Directed by **Aleksei Yuryevich German**
Based on the Novel by **Arkady and Boris Strugatsky**
Adapted by **Svetlana Karmalita** and **Aleksei German**
Cinematography by **Vladimir Ilyin** and **Yuriy Klimenko**
Production Design by **Sergei Kokovkin**, **Georgy Kropachev** and **Elena Zhukova**
Costume Design **Yekaterina Shapkaits**
Make-Up by **Olga Izvekova** and **Natalia Ratkevich**
Music by **Viktor Lebedev**
Sound by **Nikolay Astakhov**
Edited by **Irina Gorokhovskaya** and **Maria Amosova**
Production Manager **Marina Dovladbegyan**
Produced by **Ruslan Nasibulin** and **Viktor Izvekov**
Special Thanks to **Aleksei German Jr.**
A **Studio Sever** and **Russia 1 TV Channel** Production



HARD TO BE A GOD

by Jonathan Romney

“Hard to be a god...” muses Don Rumata, the anti-hero of Alexei German’s final film – to which another character brusquely responds by jamming his finger up Rumata’s nose. Such deflating farcical brutishness is typical of *Hard to Be a God*, an interplanetary drama which – in terms of cinematic ambition – is certainly gazing at the stars, but in which humanity is depicted as lolling abjectly in the gutter. This extraordinary work was shot over six years beginning in 2000, but German died in February 2013 before he could finish it, and the film was completed by his wife Svetlana Karmalita and son Alexei German Jr, in time to be premiered at the Rome Film Festival in November of that year.

Hard to Be a God is without a doubt one of the most ambitious and singular science fiction films ever made – if it can be classified as science fiction at all. If a story’s being set on another planet, presumably in the future, classifies it for membership of the genre, then *Hard to Be a God* fits the bill. It is based on a novel by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, leading lights of Soviet-era science fiction, whose *Roadside Picnic* (1972) was the basis for Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979) – another barely classifiable encounter of science fiction and art cinema. But German’s film features none of the traditional impedimenta of science fiction, and virtually none of the modern technology (from electric lights to ‘field synthesisers’) that appear in the book. The sort of technology seen in the film is of an older variety – thumbscrews, gibbets, halberds, crossbows, and the occasional device designed with violently sexual intent. A science fiction drama stripped of all remnants of futurism, *Hard to Be a God* is a medieval epic, closer in its iconography to Tarkovsky’s *Andrei Rublyov* (1966) than to his *Solaris* (1972).

German originally planned to film the Strugatskys’ 1964 novel – which he at one time retitled *The History of the Arkanar Massacre* – near the start of his directing career, in the late ‘60s. The project was greenlit by the Soviet state agency for cinema, before permission to film was revoked. He attempted again in the ‘80s, but dropped the project because the novel was being adapted in Germany (*Es ist nicht leicht ein Gott zu sein*, directed by Peter Fleischmann in 1989, co-scripted by the great Jean-Claude Carrière).

When German finally made the film, it was only his fifth feature, not counting his debut, *The Seventh Companion* (1968), co-directed with Grigory Aronov. And it capped a tumultuous



career. His war story *Trial on the Road* (1971) was considered 'anti-heroic' by the USSR regime of the time, and banned until the Gorbachev era. And his challenging black fantasia of the Stalin years, *Khrustalyov, My Car!* – as visionary in its depiction of Soviet history as *Hard to Be a God* is in its imagined cosmology – caused mass walkouts at the Cannes Film Festival in 1998. Similarly defying easy comprehension, and displaying an unabashedly aggressive attitude to its viewers, *Hard to Be a God* is a film that brazenly courts rejection, and it may prove to be one of the great misunderstood *films maudits* of its time (early reviews from Rome were largely baffled).

But this is a film in which viewers are invited to immerse themselves totally – and for anyone who does, its effects are not easily ignored or forgotten. As Russian critic Anton Dolin has enthusiastically commented, "It not only intrigues, it irritates. It not only delights, it exasperates. It will leave you not only with thoughts and feelings, but maybe a headache. Watching it may become torturous, but you may be permanently changed – although you would need to see it more than once for that to happen." And German's film is so arresting in its radical difference that you will probably want to see it more than once – indeed, you'll need to, to persuade yourself that you didn't dream it all the first time.

The setting is the city of Arkanar, on a humanoid-inhabited planet where life resembles Europe's Middle Ages. Existence there is violent, messy and grim: this black-and-white film paints its world in the widest imaginable spectrum palette of mud, dirt and squalor. Governed by a brutish overlord, Don Reba (Alexander Chutko), Arkanar is currently in the grip of a campaign to suppress art, culture and knowledge of any kind, and is patrolled by militia known as the Greys – later succeeded by an even more brutal monastic warrior order, the Blacks.

At the centre of this world is an outsider: an observer from Earth (Leonid Yarmolnik), operating under the guise of Don Rumata, an aristocratic swordfighter. His mission, supposedly, is to help this benighted planet develop a humane civilisation, but he is sworn to a policy of non-intervention. At the start, a translucent circle on screen seems to denote Rumata's POV: although the film never states this directly, the crystal he wears on his forehead is a camera, beaming what he sees to Earth. Rumata is seen by some around him – and, above all, by himself – as a quasi-god. He tries to adhere to Earth principles and to maintain the rudiments of civilisation – although the main sign of this is his insistence on wearing clean white linen. For Don Rumata is being transformed by the inhumanity that surrounds him. He has never once killed a man – but he *has* cut off 372 ears.

In the book, Rumata is a dandyish thinker, an idealist lapsing into cynicism but always ready for a Dostoevskian debate on human values. He declares, "I have come to this planet to love these people, to assist them in their task of self-development, to enable them to see the light." On screen, all that remains of his noble calling is his sense of superiority: it is implied that his own arrogant assumption of quasi-divinity is the cause of his degradation, his descent into savagery *à la* Joseph Conrad's (and Francis Coppola's) Kurtz.

Bestiality is a keynote of the film – the screen teems with goats, hedgehogs, tortoises, monkeys, ducks, puppies and more geese than you get from Emir Kusturica even at his most wayward. Dead animals – a fox, a bull – are dangled in front of the camera. One long, involved sequence shot (and this is a film that specialises in them) begins with a close-up of a donkey's penis. But humanity is simply an extension of this bestiary, hardly separated from the animal realm: a fat naked man is seen spearing fish under a boardwalk, a corpse hangs dripping with fish scales. Humans are at best amphibian creatures, just crawled out of the murk, as if humanity had jumped straight from prehistory to the Middle Ages, and will go no further.

Humans and beasts enjoy a similarly promiscuous intermingling in the work of painters such as Brueghel and Bosch, and these are prominent influences both in the worldview and the look of the film, designed by Sergei Kokovkin, Georgy Kropachev and Elena Zhukova, and photographed first by Vladimir Ilyin, then by Yuriy Klimenko after the former died from cancer in mid-shoot in 2006. Amid the multitudes of actors and extras, most of them, it seems, were cast with direct reference to the faces seen in these painters' work, notably the grotesques of Bosch's *Christ Carrying the Cross*. As in these paintings, we get a sense of a frame bursting its bounds with detail, about to spill anarchically out of the screen. German rarely clears a space onscreen to make the action more transparent: the action is a constant parade of militia toting spears, of passersby stopping to gaze quizzically at the camera, of gaping toothless mouths.

The film's world is familiar, up to a point, resembling certain instances of screen mediaevalism, but bleaker and crazier: from Russian cinema, echoes of *Andrei Rublyov*, of Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1944/48) and *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), and the Elsinore of Grigori Zoltintsev's *Hamlet* (1964). There are also affinities with Orson Welles's expressionist treatments of Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1948) and *Chimes at Midnight* (1966), while the muckiness and *Grand Guignol* knockabout put you in mind of Terry Gilliam's *Jabberwocky* (1977). There's a pageant effect to the carnage that unfolds: we might be watching *Boris Godunov* staged by Sam Peckinpah.

Shot both in Lenfilm's studios, and on location in the Czech Republic, the film is a marvel of production design, from the opening shot of a castle under snow – a Brueghelesque winterscape, and one of the rare moments that could be described as beautiful in the usual sense. With its galleries and walkways, and labyrinthine interior and exterior architecture, the design is on a level of Gothic monumentalism right out of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* (1946-59). There are exterior scenes of arresting grandeur – the camera passes through a window to reveal a vast army of helmeted soldiers stationed in the night – and interiors of terrifying enclosure, endless prison corridors, cluttered castle chambers that seem to shift and fold in on themselves before we can get any purchase on their topography.

We get to explore an entire world here, down to every dark corner – and it's a remarkably claustrophobic one. In *Khrustalyov, My Car!*, the corridors of communal Stalin-era apartments became barely navigable labyrinths in which the camera's movement and our line of sight are constantly impeded by people dashing into view, or thrusting kettles, brooms and other objects into the lens. In *Hard to Be a God*, objects similarly dangle into every available space: hanging ropes, chains, foliage, a dead fox, even a bull, or just unidentifiable fluid dripping into shot. Few films – certainly none set in space – ever made such a major principle out of gravity.

Hard to Be a God is certainly the most extreme of German's films, but it is at once a logical step onwards from *Khrustalyov* – or a leap into the void from its springboard – and a striking climax, a visionary final testament, to the director's career. Born in Leningrad in 1938, he was the son of writer Yuriy German, two of whose stories he adapted in his films. After two films set in World War II, *Trial on the Road* (1971) and *Twenty Days Without War* (1976), he made an enduring masterpiece, *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (1984). It painted a vivid panorama of life in 1930s provincial Russia, with its story about a journalist visiting his friend, a small-town police chief; the film gave full rein to German's privileging of atmosphere over plot, but implied throughout is the approach of the Stalinist purges, which form the background to *Khrustalyov, My Car!* That film revolves round the so-called 'Doctors' Plot', a notorious anti-Jewish campaign of the Stalin era, and narrates the downfall of a general banished to the gulags (he is played by the man-mountain Yuriy Tsurilo, who returns in *Hard to Be a God* as the Falstaffian Don Pampa). German's complex long takes, his technique of cramming teeming crowds of extras into small spaces, and intractable refusal to signpost either narrative or character make for an authentically nightmarish experience.

Khrustalyov's dizzying violence – all the more troubling because German's use of chiaroscuro means that we can't always tell exactly what's happening – leads directly to *Hard to Be a God*. The brutalities of the Stalinist era also leave their trace in that film, which, despite its setting, has been seen as another depiction of Russia – one suggesting that that nation has not left the Middle Ages behind, let alone the Stalin years. Published in 1964, at the tail end of the Khrushchev era, the Strugatskys' *Hard to Be a God* is riddled with allusions to Stalinism: in it, a monk has written a 'Treatise Dealing With Denunciations', referring to "total to submission to the law... [and] observation of everyone by all." But, as Anton Dolin reports, the film has also been viewed as an indirect depiction of a more recent Russia, with the film's culminating massacre widely read as a metaphor for the Chechen war, and Don Rumata as a version of Vladimir Putin. Dolin quotes an anecdote that German told him: "Putin was giving me an award, and I told him I was making a film called *Hard to Be a God* and that he would find it most interesting. Such a deathly silence descended on that room – until he stirred."

Whether you view it as political parable or visionary imagining of an infernal human condition, *Hard to Be a God* is a heroic anomaly in contemporary cinema. As many viewers will be daunted by, or horrified by, its hermetic brilliance as others will be thrilled by it. But to consider it a failed experiment, or a quixotic folly, would be meaningless because the film works on terms that are *entirely* its own: if it resembles anything at all, it's the uncategorisable, uncanny extra-terrestrial artifacts left behind on Earth by the alien visitors in the Strugatskys' *Roadside Picnic*. As much as any film can just *be*, German's film just *is*, and it must be taken – marvelled at, or rejected – on its own utterly singular terms.

Jonathan Romney is a regular contributor to the *Observer*, *Sight & Sound*, *Film Comment*, *Screen International* and other publications. He was chief film critic of *The Independent on Sunday* (2001-13), deputy film critic of the *Guardian* (1993-2001), deputy editor of *Sight & Sound* (1993-5) and film editor of *City Limits* (1989-90). His books include *Celluloid Jukebox* (BFI, 1995), *Short Orders* (Serpent's Tail, 1997) and *Atom Egoyan* (BFI, 2003), and he also wrote and directed the short films *Man Goes to the Doctor* (2001), *A Social Call* (2002) and *L'Assenza* (2013).

INTERVIEW WITH ALEKSEI GERMAN

by Anton Dolin

Excerpts from the book *German. Interview. Essay. Script*, Moscow 2013, New Literary Observer (NLO), translated by Yakov Varganov, edited and annotated by Michael Brooke.

Aleksei German asks the first question himself, the rest are by Anton Dolin.

Am I a happy man?

If you take, for example, a severely beaten human being and compare me to him, I am very happy indeed. Next to some miserable political prisoner, I am a winner. I lived easily through the rough times. I have reached the age of 72. I have managed to adapt to this state and political system. I even love this country. I received lots of awards, all kinds of badges, state prizes. It seems as though all is well. On the other hand, I perceive myself as someone unfulfilled, failed. Miserable. I can't understand this feeling. I have just been admitted to a hospital with a pretty unpleasant diagnosis: water in my lungs. They have pumped it out. Shortness of breath does not bother me anymore. But I still have a sensation of water in my body... Generally speaking, I am not a strong man. I suffer from depression. I was always afraid of death by my own hand; there were many suicides in my family. I am bewildered and lonely. Many have passed away; whom can I call nowadays? Nobody wants anything in this country. My life has passed extremely stupidly, humiliatingly so.

Do you remember when you felt absolute happiness?

Recently, I had two episodes of fainting; it's related to my diabetes. And it was happiness, as if some giant hands were snatching me up. If death is like this, I look forward to it! But in the past... I remember the happiest time of my life that will never be repeated. Late at night in our bathhouse I am reading *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* – mind you, it read like this exactly, not *Eighty Thousand Kilometres Under the Sea*. Actually, I started reading very early, when I was four, but I read things like *Cheremysh the Hero's Brother*¹.

1. A Soviet children's novel by Lev Kassil (1905-70), first published in 1938, the year of Aleksei German's birth. It's about an orphan who falsely claims to be the brother of a famous airman, but who is redeemed by acts of genuine heroism by the end.



Jules Verne came later, in Komarovo. Since I lived in the North during the war, I received a doctor's note saying that I was predisposed to tuberculosis. We were given a little dacha, which still exists. And because my dad² received the Stalin Prize our dacha's address was "Komarovo, 1". Our telephone number was also "1".

We settled down there, and those were the happiest days of our lives. There was the white snow, such as I will not see again. There was a boulder by the gate – it was when I sat there that I first learned that people have sex. My dad was writing at the time what later became our script *Torpedo Bombers*³. There was a little store in Komarovo, and a Guest House for Artists. Writers from the House visited us to take advantage of our telephone. Evgeny Shvarts⁴ typed and posted a note on our house which assigned categories to our guests: "A guest who comes during the store's lunch break" or "A guest who comes to make a phone call..." and in the end "The guests are jumping out of the windows, like dogs." Everyone was reading and giggling and spending hours with us. There was a train running past, there were drunken officers who often begged for money. Dad bought a trophy car, an Opel Kapitän.

In Komarovo there were three rooms, and in addition to them a large shed, where I have once found a helmet with a skull in it. There was a huge number of bedbugs, they were hanging like grapes. We tried to exterminate them, but later we moved. Dad was still in the military. I remember this because when our little dog was in heat all the Komarovo dogs gathered around the house and one of them bit Dad's leg, and he shot his gun at them.

You made several attempts to film the Strugatsky Brothers⁵ novel *Hard to Be a God*. But there has already been one film based on this book...

2. Yuriy German (1910-67), a popular Soviet novelist, screenwriter, playwright and journalist. Two of his son's films, *Trial on the Road* (1971) and *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (1984) were based on his work.

3. *Torpedo Bombers* (1983), directed by Semyon Aranovich, adapted by Svetlana Karmalita (Alekssei German's wife) from Yuriy German's short stories.

4. Evgeny Shvarts (1896-1958) was a Soviet writer, playwright and screenwriter best known for the plays *The Dragon* (1944) and *An Ordinary Miracle* (1956).

5. Arkady (1925-91) and Boris (1933-2012) Strugatsky were two of the most important Soviet science fiction writers, and among the most widely translated. Their 1972 novel *Roadside Picnic* was filmed by Andrei Tarkovsky as *Stalker* (1979). *Hard to Be a God* was their eighth book, first published in 1964.

When we began working on *Trial on the Road*⁶ everyone was saying "Look, there are so many wonderful films about resistance already." What they meant of course were the typical Soviet films on the subject. Yet Larisa Shepitko⁷ was filming *The Ascent* when *Trial on the Road* had already been shelved. Comparisons are inevitable: so what? We tried launching *Hard to Be a God* three times. Boris Strugatsky and I began to write the first script in 1967. He would show up, ask for a tea with hard candy, and half of the time we would spend arguing about the political situation in the world. He was highly educated, peremptory, knew it all... and everything he said absolutely did not chime with reality. Working with him was a joy, but it was hard to remain friends, though we preserved our friendship. We wrote a pretty good script, for the time. I expected to cast Vladimir Retsepter for the lead. He was a fine actor and an interesting person. It seemed to me at the time that he could do very well, although now I think he would be the wrong choice.

Did the project fall apart before the start of filming?

Yes. I was in the process of selecting my team when the military commissariat started calling me. I was not too afraid, because I was a reserve officer. But I hated the idea that they'd make me do the same thing again, which was organising concerts in the middle of nowhere, to please the battalion commanders. They kept promoting me for this reason. The previous time, I had been promoted to do a concert at an Officers' Club. I was riding a military ambulance and was wearing a sweater... To cut a long story short, I left for Koktebel, arrived, took a nap, went for a walk in the morning and saw a woman there. I don't know why she made an impression on me. It was Svetlana⁸. On the very same day, August 21st 1968, our troops entered Czechoslovakia. I immediately received a wire from the studio's Chief Editor saying that work on my script has been stopped. I asked why. His reply was "Lyosha, forget about this for good. Remember writing about some Black Order invading Arkanar?" That was the end of it. On the other hand, I met Svetlana, one thing for another...

Had you made any attempts to resume your work on *Hard to Be a God*?

Back then I received a very touching letter from the Strugatsky Brothers. They wrote about a connection they had in some magazine, a second-rate publication, not even *The Soviet*

6. *Trial on the Road* (1971) was Alekssei German's first feature as solo director. Unseen at the time, it was shelved until 1986.

7. Larisa Shepitko (1938-79) was a major Soviet director of the 1970s who died tragically young in a car crash. Her films include *Wings* (1966) and *The Ascent* (1977).

8. Svetlana Karmalita (1940-), Alekssei German's wife and regular co-screenwriter.

Screen, which they supposedly could use to push for the permission to continue the work on the film. But even if it did not work they were putting finishing touches to their new book, *Prisoners of Power*, which could make a great script. Nothing came of it. Later, when Gorbachev came to power, I learned that a film based on *Hard to Be a God* was being filmed in Kiev by director Peter Fleischmann. I wrote to Kamshalov⁹, then the head of the Soviet film industry, “How come?” He replied “We’ll get rid of the German. He’s likely a spy anyway! Go there and take the film from him.” I travelled to Kiev. There, naturally, everyone hated me. They all had their bellies full of German beer, strolled around with little German radios and loved the German director. No one wanted me there! I arrived, took a look at the set, and was flabbergasted; I have never seen such a thing in my entire life! A giant section of a town – homes, squares, alleyways, all made of some strange foil.

All of a sudden, a small man came out and greeted me: “Hello, Mr. German. I am Fleischmann, they sent you to replace me.” I said “Yes, but I was told that they have kicked you out of the country, that you did not make good on some payments.” He replied “They can’t fire me or kick me out, since I invested my own money in this production. But I would be extremely happy if you take over the production because I cannot work here. I’ll hang myself.” “Why do such a thing, look what a set you have here.” And then he went “Aleksei, imagine a horse standing here and a man on the horse swinging a sword about.” I looked carefully and realised it could not be done. They had built him some sort of Ptushko¹⁰. No good at all, impossible to use. I told him upfront that the script had to be rewritten, but he said it’s impossible, because the banks and big money were behind each scene in the script. He added, “It’s a pity, I would gladly hire you. You are such a nice person.” We spoke for a while, had a beer together and then I left.

Later Kamshalov told me: “OK, we will give you a million, go ahead and shoot your movie. We will compare the two films in the end. Let it be an experiment.” And we started writing. But then Gorbachev’s time began. Jubilation and singing all around. Tomorrow everyone becomes a democrat. The day after there is too much *kolbasa*¹¹ to eat, and the next day Sakharov¹² is freed. Even the possibility of making a film about the dark ages and a

9. Aleksandr Kamshalov, chairman of Goskino from 1987-91, was indeed effectively in charge of the entire Soviet film industry.

10. Aleksandr Ptushko (1900-73) was a specialist in special effects-heavy fantasy films, the Soviet equivalent of Ray Harryhausen.

11. Traditional Russian sausage, an expensive luxury during the Soviet era thanks to centralised agricultural planning leading to undernourished cattle.

12. Andrei Sakharov (1921-89), Russian nuclear physicist turned dissident and human rights campaigner (Nobel Peace Prize, 1975), who was in enforced internal exile at the start of 1986.

creeping Fascism seemed to be in complete disagreement with the life around us. The evil has been conquered! So we turned the offer down.

Does it look as though this story has become relevant once again?

Yes. When Putin was presenting me with an award I told him that I was working on *Hard to Be a God* and that “the most interested viewer should be you.” A deathly silence fell on the ceremony hall, until he finally moved. He will be very patient for a long time, but he will get angry when he realises that none of his reforms in Russia are ever going to work, because there are only thieves around him, and then it will begin... the second part of my film. It can’t be helped. The same thievery goes on, everyone is corrupt, universities are broken apart for wood, and slaves do not want to take off their shackles. And they are advised not to. Politically, this film is a warning. For all of us.

What is the story behind the new title, *The History of the Arkanar Massacre*¹³?

Since the news came out that I was working on *Hard to Be a God*, the TV started playing Fleischmann’s film practically non-stop. It almost felt as though they were doing it on purpose. After that, we had a fight with Lenya Yarmolnik¹⁴. He made a record, an audio version of *Hard to Be a God*. And I thought – come on, barbarians. My film will be a different one altogether! I will make, for instance, *The History of the Arkanar Massacre*, and will perhaps lose something – many people are interested in God now. I always can add *Hard to Be a God* to the playbill underneath the new title. *The History of the Arkanar Massacre* might not be the best name, but it is a good description of the events occurring in the film.

What are the main differences between your film and the book by the Strugatsky brothers?

This is a picture about a quest for answers in the world. Should one slash or be gentle, observe, help – what should one do? There is no solution; everything ends up with bloodletting, whatever the hero tries. If one refuses to kill, wants to be kind, what will come about? Almost nothing. If one is willing to kill, reforms will move ahead, but one becomes a horrific and bloody man. The Strugatsky brothers had a bit of a break since in their book there have been the communards from the prospering, happy, civilised planet

13. This was the working title of *Hard to Be a God* throughout production.

14. Leonid Yarmolnik (1954-) played the lead role of Don Rumata in German’s film.



Earth: people who knew how to do it. In our time on Earth – what communards! We can't figure it out for ourselves, in Chechnya, for example. Now, the hero is not looking for scientists to save them, as in the book, but instead is searching for some kind of answer about what to do in this world, how to stop the horror when the bookworms are getting drowned in the outhouses.

They rub them out in the outhouses!¹⁵

This happens at the beginning of the movie, when they are drowning one of the literates in an outhouse. Parallels are often taken from real life experience: for instance, a scene with a protective bracelet one must use to avoid capture by monks. I was on a train to Kiev with a damsel in 1957. There was a man with us who had just been released from a forced labour prison camp. He had been held there since 1936, for twenty-one years. He sent a letter saying that he will be wearing a Pioneer scarf on his sleeve to be recognised. We arrived in Kiev and for an hour and a half we were running up and down the station platform like crazy. He held his arm with the scarf up in the air, but nobody came to meet him. What could be done? I bid him farewell.

You have mentioned that in order for a film to work you have to see yourself, your mother and father in it. Who did you see in *The History of the Arkanar Massacre* and where?

I saw all of us. We were making a film about us all. Arkanar is not at all different from here. There is the same squealing going on, the same villainy, the same prisons, the same Blacks and Greys. We have not achieved anything. What we had in the sixteenth century we now have in the twenty-first. And Earthmen are far from the best creation.

Was your outlook in the first draft of the script just as gloomy?

It was a less philosophical and more adventurous movie. It had a different finale. Rumata was not returning to Earth, as in the Strugatsky brothers' book, but he was not staying behind in Arkanar either, as in the current version. He's been killed. But new people have arrived to the planet, a new expedition. The ending was like this: some merchants and medieval monks are walking across a modern airport, and there are strange white

15. Translator's note: this references a comment that Vladimir Putin made on Russian television in 1999 in connection with bombings attributed to Chechen rebels: "Even if we find them in the toilet, we will rub them out in the outhouse."

spaceships taking off and disappearing into the sky. But I was a different person then and believed in different things. I knew there were horrors happening in my country, but believed that despite this horror the idea should not perish, the idea was noble! And yet I recall in those years telling Volodya Vengerov¹⁶ that Lenin was every bit a killer as Stalin. There has been a horrible scandal.

The interpretation of Rumata by Yarmolnik could be anyone except a man from the Bright Tomorrow.

Rumata is a man from present-day Earth: he came from us. He is your mate. There is the same shit here on Earth. There was even a passage in the script that “on Earth they were again preparing for a new war, everyone was too busy.” There are loony bins and jails on Earth. Earth is full of idiots. But the Earthmen were dispatched to this planet because after the fires some strange tall yellow buildings started rising there. The Earthmen came to the conclusion that they are witnessing Arkanar’s Renaissance. Earth sent an expedition of thirty people to lend assistance to this Renaissance. But it’s likely there was no Renaissance there, just a hint of one. But the reaction to this hint is terrifying. All the bookworms and literates are killed. They are crawling through the dreadful bogs with their rushlights, ending up in the hands of bandits or soldiers, and everywhere is rope-rope-rope and death-death-death.

The picture looks fairly realistic. Is there no chance of salvation, even with the unlimited abilities of the celestial?

Why is Rumata is searching for Budakh, and ends up quoting our excellent phrase from *The Fall of Otrar*¹⁷: “That you and I are speaking does not mean we are having a conversation”? He is searching for Budakh because Budakh is local and he is smart, he can possibly have an idea. Indeed, Rumata can do anything, he can cut the kingdom to pieces, as we witness. I got rid of the miracles he did, like turning shit into gold. However, Rumata is not a god, he is acting. When arrangements are made to execute him, he starts to pretend that he is who they say he is, the son of a god, and this terrifies his enemy.

16. Vladimir Vengerov (1920–97), Soviet film director, active from 1951–85.

17. *The Fall of Otrar* (1990), Kazakh historical epic directed by Ardak Amirkulov, produced by Aleksei German and written by German and Svetlana Karmalita.

The demonic Don Reba from the Strugatsky book has also been completely transformed.

In my film he is a schemer of monstrous proportions. Rumata, himself an expert in medieval intrigue, cannot understand how this globe of lard has managed to outmanoeuvre him. But it is very easy to scare a medieval man, and Rumata manages to escape death, even though he is accused of the king’s murder.

While he survives, he realises that he won’t find an answer to his questions.

He finds Budakh. And then what? It turns out that Budakh is a fool and a doctrinaire who cites something very similar to the Earth’s philosophy. And he cannot get himself to piss. He is a doctrinaire, though a smart one. While he is walked to a barrel to take a bath he says “The human body is covered with tiny orifices...” Rumata does not know what to do next. None of the Earthmen know, but they have settled down in the positions of some archdukes and are doing pretty well. Rumata is a dissident. The rest of them decided “Screw this planet!” and returned to Earth, but he stayed, as a matter of fact, because he put himself in a bind: he violated the rules in the most horrible way, he has cut down half the town. And Arata, this medieval Pugachev¹⁸, had the same programme as Rumata. And in twenty minutes he also gets into the same mess: everyone is thieving, drinking, cutting each other up. It has to be suffered, but even than it fails.

So the medieval fable is directly connected with our time.

Oho-ho! Its theme is the onset of Fascism, which is, in my opinion, is threatening my country. Because when Fascism comes everything becomes crystal clear: who is to be rubbed out, and who is not. We never can do things amicably. As long as I can remember, articles came out “Vegetables are coming, packaging is in short supply.” Three days before his passing, my father asked me “Leshka, I am dying, look in the papers, I am curious, how long they will continue writing ‘Vegetables are coming, packaging is in short supply’?” Dad died in 1967, so you have an idea when they stopped writing this... Russia always had two curses: a terribly poor harvest and a rich beautiful harvest. People had to live between the two, with no difference. If it was an unbelievably good harvest, it was lauded in the newspapers for a long time and then there would be a timid report that the crops were allowed to rot for some reason. When the harvest was poor, it was just poor.

18. Yemelian Pugachev (c. 1742–75) was one of the most notorious pretenders to the Russian throne. The rebellion that he led in 1773–4 was later immortalised by Pushkin.

Something changed after the USSR fell apart?

The level of idiocy went through the roof. A large crop we, lucky us, could sell (this is the advantage of capitalism), and when the crop is poor we would habitually purchase it, perhaps our own crop from the previous year. Now, I have a question. It is understood that a farmer does not make any money when the harvest is poor. But when the crop is rich? They still don't make anything. Which future leader will tell our children about the destruction of our agriculture? We come from what our TV tells us. Can you share with the people? How would it be in an African country like Uganda? A head of the agriculture department who behaved like ours would be cooked, peppered and eaten by the rest of the government. Or, in a normal democratic country, such a minister would be sent to teach the theory of agriculture to, let's say French Guyana, where according to some agriculture does not exist. Another alternative is *harakiri*. What about us? Nothing! But someone has to be responsible for something.

Is the situation in cinema just as bad?

Governor Matvienko¹⁹ visited our studio. She summoned all the leading filmmakers. I said "Valentina Ivanovna, we are so happy you are our governor, it is wonderful, thank you so very much. But I have a little question. This has happened under different governors, truth be told, but all the people sitting here in front of you have been badly beaten. I was terribly beaten up, my son almost lost an eye, Sokurov²⁰ is still recovering, our studio's director was beaten and mugged in his own elevator. Bortko²¹ was attacked near his home; my deputy director got mugged on the street; my assistant director was nearly killed. The film director Vorobyev was simply murdered. Surely it is not a favour that you performing for us but one of your responsibilities as a government to protect us? Can you arrange it somehow? It would be great if we did not get attacked and killed. Oh, rogue cops are to blame? What a discovery. The whole country is laughing." What is it if not the Middle Ages? By the way, it is one of the responsibilities of the ruling class to protect the population. We are not in Arkanar yet, but with bands of Fascists in the streets, it is already quite similar.

19. Valentina Matvienko, Governor of St Petersburg from 2003-11.

20. Aleksandr Sokurov (1951-), one of the most internationally acclaimed post-Soviet directors. He is best known outside Russia for *Mother and Son* (1997), *Russian Ark* (2002), *Faust* (2011) and a series of films about charismatic dictators: *Moloch* (1999), *Taurus* (2001) and *The Sun* (2004), about Hitler, Lenin and Hirohito.

21. Vladimir Bortko (1946-), director best known internationally for his acclaimed television adaptations of works by Mikhail Bulgakov: *Heart of a Dog* (2002) and *The Master and Margarita* (2005).

Is it so hopeless?

One talented person, a medical doctor by profession, quite convincingly recreated a conversation which possibly has never taken place, between Zinoviev and Stalin, before Zinoviev's execution. Stalin said "I can't let you live, you are revolutionaries and will always be revolutionaries, but the revolution has long been over and become really old: it is time to build an empire. I will build an empire all right, but you will keep getting in my way, whining and plotting against me." And Stalin built a bloody but real empire. And then revolution happened again. This time it was half-democratic, half-criminal. Only very few people had any idea what to build. Like in *A Captain at Fifteen*²² they are all screaming "America! America!" and a black man says "This is not America, this is Africa." Although despite the odds we are convinced that Russia will make it. In all likelihood it won't be worse than before. It will likely be better. Or it will be if a Fascist or Communist coup does not come to pass.

I was present at the rehearsal of one of the scenes of the film and later watched a video of behind-the-scenes work. It seems that such a level of perfectionism has never been achieved not only by the national cinema but even by yourself in your previous pictures.

In the beginning I gathered my whole group and explained everything in the finest detail. Then we started building the whole thing without Yarmolnik or the other actors. The plot of the film is about this wretched medieval state where they are killing the intelligentsia, the bookworms and the literates and there comes a moment when the leading character himself turns into a beast, an animal. This was the scene you saw; we worked on it for a long time. Here is the essence of the scene. There is a quarrel, let's call it that, between the hero and his sweetheart, although it is not precisely so. The quarrel is about his trousers becoming drenched with rain. She is in a state of wild horror, she's been summoned to the Tower of Joy, aka the KGB, the monks are demanding to give her up. The hero eats his soup and says "Find me dry trousers, I will chase the bastards away." The result is that instead of the dry trousers she gets an arbalet bolt in the back of her head.

Then he crawls on a beam under the ceiling. And, like a praying mantis before it strikes, he becomes completely still. I think it will be rather impressive. It will be only for a minute. After that, the monks are breaking in, lots of them, and he jumps down with his swords.

22. An 1878 novel by Jules Verne about a fifteen-year-old shipwreck survivor who has to devise how to repair and sail the ship with the help of equally inexperienced passengers.

So I explained everything to my group and waited for the result, waited for them to show me the schematics on video. The trousers had to be hooked up on a stick so that they are blocking a view of the set, only revealing a small corner. In order to get an artistic reason for bring the trousers down slowly we do it in such a way that the golden coins rain out of the pockets. I have explained every tiny detail to them, and yet the trousers are not hanging right, they don't cover the view and they are brought down too quickly!

What about global issues that are contributing to the delays?

Other production groups were circling around my group looking for unusual types or actors. Naturally, they try to poach from us, since we have searched high and low for these types. Should I chase them with a stick? The same story with the people in my group. Some prick is launching a production next door and wants to find a casting assistant. So he tries to lure my casting assistant away. She is weeping that she does not want to leave me, but can't make enough money to buy food. Which is not true, she is earning enough to buy food, but it's her decision to make. I have no qualms with this: go if you like, suit yourself. What is most upsetting in such a situation is who they leave for. There are very few artists left in the studio, and they would not poach. The ones who steal are usually some filth. Well, if you don't mind working for them, go ahead.

One can understand the motivations of a director who, in the finest detail, incredibly carefully recreates a year, let's say 1953²³. But what is the purpose of doing this in the case of a fantastical, fictional picture such as *The History of the Arkanar Massacre*?

It is an indescribable pleasure to build a world, to become the creator of a world which has never existed. For me the most intriguing part in all of this is not even Lenya Yarmolnik, not the problem itself, but the creation of a world to the point that you believe that this world existed then and exists now. I may very well fail, but I want to invent it, create it inside me, bring it to life as a tactile world, somewhat similar to ours, somewhat repulsive. We have assembled it in the Czech Republic out of seven or eight castles. Here we take this, there that, a little street, a king's palace. I said from the get-go: "Let's try to make a film with a smell. Try to film the Middle Ages through a keyhole, as if we have lived there."

23. This is a reference to German's previous film *Khrustalyov, My Car!*, which was set at the time of Stalin's death.



This world's palpable physicality, its realistic quality is highlighted by people endlessly consumed by the absorption or discharging of various substances and fluids. They are either eating or drinking or urinating or spitting.

Somebody kept asking "why are they spitting so much?" I asked four people to step out into the yard, get in a small circle, talk about anything, but not leave. I went to check on them after half an hour and told them to step aside. I asked the guy to look at the pavement. There was 200 grams of spit there! A human being who has nothing to do spits all the time.

Despite such a level of naturalism you have not filmed the scene of the massacre.

It would be very bad. We can't do it. The Americans can do it with their highly trained extras. Here we can't even fire an arbalest correctly. That's why our arbalests don't shoot. Even the Czechs with whom I worked, as it turned out, are outstanding people in that sense. Let's say I need to hang a man. "Only a specialist can do it." The specialist arrives on a special truck, takes a long time to unload. He prepares everything, hangs some chains: "I am ready now." I come to check it out. The hanged man has a rope sticking out of the general area of his behind. I say "Wait a second, on our planet people are hanged by the neck, not by the tailbone, and the same should be the case with this planet." He waves his hands: "By the neck – no-no-no, it's too dangerous." He takes a long time (again) to unbuckle everything, packs it up and leaves. Other Czechs came to stage the scene of burning people on a stake. When their stuntman saw the raging fires with dummies and noticed one of our people squirming in a fire covered with some stuff he cried "No-no-no, I can burn only up to here" – and showed the level of his ankle.

No, there are too many conventions... I don't want conventions. We show one murder, but really powerfully.

Why was it fundamentally important for you to make this a black and white film? You'd think that an alien world, as opposed to wartime or the beginning of the 1950s²⁴, which we all remember from black and white newsreels could be shown in Bosch Multicolor.

I have a feeling that the art of film has survived to a greater degree in black and white cinema. Two crimes have been committed against this art. Just when the silent cinema become an art form, the capitalists invented sound and killed, for example, Chaplin. Say

24. All of German's previous films had been set in the USSR between 1917 and 1953.

what you like, but today his films are rather boring to watch, but earlier he was worshipped. They delivered a terrible blow to the head by creating a completely different art form. But silent cinema and sound cinema should have co-existed, like painting and photography.

But they were not quite satisfied yet. They invented colour film. Bad colour for the most part, as a matter of fact. We don't normally see colour except for the cases when some special sensor is turned on in our head. We perceive the world as black and white in our dreams and in daytime. I see the world as black and white. I only notice colours when I pay special attention to them. It seems to me that a black and white image makes some brain cells react differently and somehow see colour. For me, black and white is not an absence of colour, but more a presence of it. When the sea is filmed in black and white it appears blue and green or yellow to me. A black and white image forces your brain to add colour. Therefore the less colour used in film the better. One just has to know how to make a black and white picture. Not the same way it's been done in 1920s.

It is a different art altogether – colour and black and white cinema. Say there is a green meadow and there is a tank entering it, a different shade of green. And it fires with red and yellow and black smoke. After this the Red Army soldiers are charging, but this is hard to accomplish in colour since Russian uniforms on colour film always look fake. If we make such a storyboard for colour film it will be bad. In colour film we should do it like this: a part of a tank's track enters the frame, there are bits of dirt, a piece of shit, some flowers caught in it... It stops, we show the tank's turret, the texture, exuding oil, horrifying armor bumps, antenna spikes. A shell falls in the oil. These are two different ways to create images, two different types of cinema. Like drawing and painting, they are two distinct types of art! In black and white one has to fire differently, to love differently and to fuck differently. In a colour pornographic movie they invariably have to paint over the pimples so they do not pop out. In black and white this is unnecessary.

During the long time that you have been working on *The History of the Arkanar Massacre* you have marked several anniversaries. The last one was your 70th birthday²⁵. Have you perceived this as a certain stage, or is it only the finishing of the picture that is going to be a benchmark for you?

Russian physiologists believed that 70 years is the limit for a man's life. I have been this little boy, running, learning, then coming to the Institute of Theatre, to Tovstonogov²⁶... Here

25. German would have celebrated this on 20 July 2008.

26. German initially trained (1955-60) as a theatre director at the Leningrad State Institute of Theatre, Cinema and Music, after which he was talent-spotted by veteran director Georgy Tovstonogov, whose assistant he became for several years.

I am at his studio, and it was seemingly just last Monday...And now all of a sudden I am 70, an old man. Not a pleasant feeling, but I hope you will have experienced it too.

Is your new film a requiem for a society which has never been and never will be in Russia, or for a now-vanished cinema?

With this film of course I tried to throw down the gauntlet. This is why the work on it was so long and arduous, this is why it lost me friends. We issued a challenge with *Trial on the Road* too, politically. "Have pity for a Russian man." *Twenty Days Without War*²⁷ was a challenge to all the mendacious cinema of Ozerov²⁸ and his ilk. And now there is a challenge to the modern cinema to which a text is so important. Look, Tolstoy has to be read, not watched as a movie. It can be watched of course, but only in case it opens up a new sky over the text. Today, *After the Dance* would look wonderful, but all the rest of the Tolstoy original has to be read.

In fact you wanted to make *After the Dance*.

Indeed, I was dreaming about it. I wanted to inhabit it with all the characters from Tolstoy books, starting with Pierre Bezukhov and ending with Anna Karenina. Every one of them is philosophising, having intellectual conversations, but turns out to be a butcher. "Brothers, have pity!" was echoing over Russia then and now. But how can I accomplish this? First of all, one has to find a person who's willing to fund for the project... By the way, despite the length of time I've been taking to make this film, the production cost was rather low. We receive significantly lower salaries than people who make TV series. A circus was made out of my habit of working slowly, but in the West a great number of excellent filmmakers have taken even longer to complete their films – ten, twelve years. Who cares that the artist Ivanov²⁹ has been working on his painting *The Appearance of Christ Before the People* all his life? After all he has created a masterpiece. Next to him the artist loganson³⁰ produced many paintings, typically bad ones. I'd rather create a single piece but a good one.

27. German's second feature as solo director, completed in 1976.

28. Yuriy Ozerov (1921-2001), Soviet film director best known for large-scale war epics glorifying the Red Army.

29. Aleksandr Ivanov (1806-58), neoclassical Russian painter who did indeed take twenty years to complete his best-known canvas, many sketches for which have been recognised as masterpieces in their own right.

30. Boris loganson (1893-1973), Russian painter best known for his many Socialist Realist paintings.

Speaking of painting, it is obvious that the roots of *The History of the Arkanar Massacre* are in Bosch and Brueghel. Which one was more important to you?

Bosch is much closer to me than Brueghel. Alov and Naumov³¹ were making their *Legend of Till* with Brueghel in mind. From my point of view an awful film, though with some good moments. Compared to Bosch, Brueghel is a gentle realist. But even now Holland is not gentle, it is exaggerated, concentrated, medieval.

You spoke about a challenge you issued with your films, starting with *My Friend Ivan Lapshin*³²: to the ethical challenge you added an aesthetic one?

The cinema from the very beginning, in its transition from silent to sound, lost its independence. While the silent cinema was far from exhausted, it was cancelled by dealers who introduced sound, and cinema began to transform into a nominal art. Tovstonogov once showed me an article about a man who lived in Africa all his life, received a fine education, but never saw any movies or TV. When he came to England he went to the movies many times and still could not grasp it. I look at a woman, she looks at me: well, did I fall in love? Can only a great artist stage such a thing, or is it commonplace? In editing, a cut from a man to a loaf of bread means the person is hungry... I tried to depart from this. Why does one have to intercut all the time? I was chastised by my colleagues for the long take of Aleksei Petrenko in *Twenty Days Without War*. They were furious at me for not making any cuts in this 300-metre take: "Why show off like this? Cinema has its language!" I told them "You have invented that language."

You have rebelled against the classics!

To a point. I am a not a big fan of, for example, Eisenstein. I can't take any of his stuff seriously, except perhaps the part where the battleship is charging at us. I think that many things in his films are done poorly and he told a lot of lies. There was no execution on the steps in Odessa, the baby cart did not roll down.

31. Aleksandr Alov (1923-83) and Vladimir Naumov (1927-), writer-directors of *The Legend of Till Eulenspiegel*, based on the German folk legend.

32. German's third solo feature, completed in 1984.

By reinventing anew the language of cinema do you realise the risk of running into people who will label the film as “terribly distant from the people”³³?

I will run into such people in any event. The anecdote “Here we go again into the gas chamber” – this is about me. Not a single film of mine was received without demands to censor it, to fire me. Strange as it may seem, there are still a few decent people among the film critics out there. There is a publication called *Kinoprocess* where journalists express their point of view. I was at the top of their list for three years. Let’s say that I at my age will complete this film. I don’t give a damn what they write. They wrote such things about me... One article was titled “A Cold Deck of German, or Will Khrustalyov Bring a Car?”³⁴ I brought the car, but nobody thought to apologise. Beside all this I am from a family of a cosmopolitan father. Later it turned out that he was not really a Jew, rather the opposite. My mother was Jewish, so my father was labeled a henchman of cosmopolitanism, and what they were writing about him I cannot begin to describe. On top of that I am married to a woman whose father was killed and she was adopted by a man named Borschagovsky, from an anti-Party group of the theatre critics. In 1949, all Soviet people were puking on them. The next level would be Mandelstam³⁵.

Will they write about me one way or another? Will this picture make any money or not? I cannot tell. After *Lapshin* my whole group shunned me except for a handful of people with whom I continue to work to this day. I was a loser. Our work has always been based on the assumption that the worst will happen. I have never put my name on the scripts we were writing together with Svetlana. Svetlana was a student of Lev Kopelev³⁶. He was also fired and kept from working. So we worked as “literary negroes.” We wrote the scripts and gave them to Lev, he would pass them to Petrov, who would pass to Ivanov and then on to Nemchenko, who would get paid for it and the money would trickle down the chain back to us. This is how we made our living. We wrote under other people’s names. But life was rather merry then.

33. Translator’s note: “Terribly distant from the people” quotes Lenin’s 1912 article ‘To Gertzen’s Memory’, in which he referred to an isolated group of struggling revolutionaries. In Russia, the phrase is generally used sarcastically.

34. Although later eclipsed by the schedule of *Hard to Be a God*, German’s previous feature *Khrustalyov, My Car!* was in production for most of the 1990s.

35. Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938), Russian poet arrested by Stalin and exiled to Siberia, where he died in a transit camp.

36. Lev Kopelev (1912-97) was a Soviet writer and dissident whose works were widely distributed in samizdat editions.

So it seems that the abolition of censorship has not helped with the understanding of art?

It has become more difficult. We have been buried by Western products that are made for a specific purpose and which are not art, but that extend their rules to the art. I cannot make my films in any different way from how I make them. With *Khrustalyov* and with this new work I tried to depict our epoch, to describe my childhood. Somebody might like it, and as time goes on there will be more such people... Artists were laughed at and committed suicide. In our time, Brezhnev’s time, non-conformist artists were starving to death but were afraid to show their works to anyone. They showed them only to one another. But I don’t complain about my fate. Once I was lying in bed and counting, and it turned out that I have met many more good people in my life than bad ones. Which is a pretty rare case.

Do you find time nowadays to watch movies?

At weekends, Svetlana and I get out of the city and watch various films. Mostly old ones. We have seen *Amarcord* or Tarkovsky’s films thousands of times and know them by heart. We wonder how we are losing the art of cinema without noticing it. We watch the episode from *Stalker* with Kaidanovsky crying: what a level of mastery! Today’s cinema, ours or American, cannot achieve this. It has become a spectacle for people who are too lazy to read, so they get their texts acted out for them by the artists. This also kills the artists. Therefore I generally don’t watch modern cinema. It is quite sufficient for me to watch Bergman, a little bit of Kurosawa, Fellini’s *Roma*, Otar Ioseliani, early films by Muratova, some Sokurov. Otherwise, I hear from ten people how marvellous such-and-such a new movie is, I watch it, and it makes me sad. I follow some young directors. Our class at the Higher Courses for Directors was rather good. All graduates are working now, if they wanted to, and some are quite successful, including the interns.

Do you believe you were able to teach them something?

I bring them to my film and for two days for eight hour a day they are on my set. I tell them “Here is a scene and I don’t know how to film it, which is truth by the way, I never know how to shoot, even though everything is pre-planned by a millimetre, yet I have a feeling I don’t know. When I do know how to film, it means catastrophe for me, it always mean I’ll have to reshoot it later.” I let each of them even though they don’t have any skills yet show me how they would film the scene. Then we can start a discussion: why do it this way and not another? Generally, the most important thing in the whole teaching process

is to select people well. Everything else will work itself out. If selection is done well, you can hire them as stage hands and they will still become directors. You don't even need to teach them, they will learn everything anyway. We do it not just for them but even more so for ourselves. It is interesting for us to work with them.

What exactly is interesting?

You know, I was asked several times to become a major player, but I have never had any aspiration to do it. They offered to make me Andrey Smirnov's successor as Chairman of the Filmmakers Union, calling me from the Central Committee. After the Fifth Congress they wanted to appoint me an artistic director of Lenfilm. But I was resisting and screaming. I have been in the position of low-level supervisor several times, but I did not want to be a big one. When Golutva³⁷ asked me what I wanted, I said "Give me one room, one administrator, one accountant, and I will build you a studio." Thus we created the PIEF studio. I've seen talented kids with no hope for advancement, no one cared about them. Evteeva, who needed her? She was sitting in her basement making hand-made pictures. Or Popov, who made the film *Smile* and then disappeared. I thought they were interesting people.

How about Aleksei Balabanov³⁸? He is the most interesting of the 1990s/2000s Russian directors, and effectively your pupil.

Balabanov was also interesting. He was a documentary filmmaker and we invited him to make a fiction film. I felt his strengths from the start. We were friends with him and Selyanov in those years; I played in one of their films, recorded sound for another. Then it all ended. At one point Balabanov came to me to explain that I live correctly and he does not. He was possibly drunk. I did not like his *Brother*. The sequel I did not care for either. What can I do? I just don't like them.

What is your opinion of films by Alexei German Jr.?

With my boy I have a complex relationship. It is too good to be realistic. I have not watched any of his pictures beside the very first one, and the best, a tiny film that no one has seen.

37. Aleksandr Golutva (1948-) was the head of Lenfilm from 1986-96.

38. The most provocative and controversial of post-Soviet Russian directors, Aleksei Balabanov (1959-2013) alternated between elliptical arthouse films like *The Castle* (1994), *Of Freaks and Men* (1998) and *The River* (2002) and violent thrillers like *Brother* (1997), *War* (2002) and *Cargo 200* (2007).

Myself, I am the son of Yuriy Pavlovich German, who was incapable of writing a script. He could only do dialogue, a small scene, a plot twist. Heifetz³⁹ was writing the scripts, but Dad was convinced that in this genre of Vera Kholodnaya⁴⁰ he was an expert scriptwriter. And he tormented me by making me change something in what I was writing for theatre or film. He knew everything, and it was bad. Despite this, he was a wonderful writer. I made a suggestion to Leshka once, but he did not use it. When I suggested something else with the same result, I decided that he can come to me if he needs me. He comes often, we unspool some scene together and he thanks me profusely. After he says "thank you" for the sixth time, I realise that he does not need my help. What he does need are my actors. He shows up, observes the set and I buy it, I think he's taking pleasure in his daddy's work. Later I meet my actor in a strange costume. OK. Why should I bother him? He is successful, he wins prizes⁴¹. Many people like his pictures. He should work and I will be helping him any way I can. I love him. And, by the way, I respect him too.

Do you believe that good or bad taste can be taught?

I don't believe in it, it's an inherited quality. You can tell a person "Listen, shame on you, you've not only turned on your soul, your heart, and your liver, you've turned on your desire to be liked. Beware of it, run away from it!" Cinema, a divine art, has been passed on to people who are lazy, with empty eyes which they are covering with their hands. I would not do a close-up of Al Pacino now even as an extra. On the other hand I have this little fat actor who is trying to fly in my film, he is a terrific actor. The one who plays the king works in a provincial youth theatre. He could be a jewel of any metropolitan theatre. And Aleksandr Chutko, as soon as they showed him to me I said right away "Bring him to me at once for Reba!"

How did Yarmolnik get in this company?

I was casting an entirely different big-nosed actor in this role from the TV series *Menty*. I thought we would go all out rehearsing with him every single day during the pre-production period like we did with Tsurilo⁴² in *Khrustalyov*. And suddenly I hear that he has signed

39. Josef Heifetz, aka Iosif Kheifits (1905-95), Soviet director, best known for the Chekhov adaptation *The Lady with the Dog* (1960). As a student in the late 1950s, German worked as his assistant.

40. Vera Kholodnaya (1893-1919) was a Ukrainian actress regarded as the first authentic star of the Russian silent screen.

41. Aleksei German Jr (1976-) won the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival for *Paper Soldier* (2008), and the Best Director Nika Award for that film and the earlier *Garpastum* (2005).

42. Yuriy Tsurilo (1946-) was the lead actor in *Khrustalyov, My Car!* He also plays Baron Pampa in *Hard to Be a God*.

contracts for two TV series. I called him up: “Please forgive me, but we have an agreement with you, we are making all the costumes with you in mind, how come you...” “Oy, please forget about all this nonsense, it was my wife who has signed the contracts!...” But I have been making films for a long time and know all these tricks. “Aleksi Yuryevich, I need to fly to Omsk for ten days, there is a series there, I signed the contract a long time ago, before you...” Everything changed after this. Now you have to prove yourself in an artistic competition just like everyone else.

How did you find Yarmolnik?

I had no idea he was an actor, I swear by the memory of my ancestors. I saw a man on TV who was smiling and giving away some prizes. He had a good medieval face, such a big schnozzle. Strong, charismatic, he was wasted on TV. I dragged him in as I did Yura Tsurilo before him. It is a mystery to me why Tsurilo is not in higher demand. Recently I watched a TV series and suddenly among these dead mummies I noticed a man with familiar face who acted very well. I thought, he does not look like an actor! It was our Tsurilo.

None the less Yarmolnik, unlike Tsurilo, is considered a celebrity.

Actually, I was convinced that this was a smalltime backstage actor who would play his first major role in my film. “Please, send for him.” He arrived and I was a little taken aback by his attitude. OK, I thought, he is probably jittery because of the audition... He acted a small scene in which he says to Budakh: “My heart is full of pity.” And all of a sudden Lenya played it excellently. We approved him for the role. It was only when I spoke with our representative in the Czech Republic that he apprised me that Yarmolnik has been in sixty films and that he was a star. I asked Yarmolnik “Are you really a star?” He replied “Well, you know, a little bit.”

Was it easy to work with him?

Working with him was a pain. He always knew how to shoot everything very fast. During one of my rehearsals an administrator gestured at a clock and I immediately called an end to shooting for the day. Tomorrow we would invent something else and would resume filming the day after. When I’m rushed I cannot work any more. I had this problem even with Tovstonogov: “Leshya, why do you have everyone entering the stage from the left? Let them enter from the right!” He had to start from zero so my form would be changed but the essence remained the same... Yarmolnik harassed the wonderful DP Vladimir Ilyin explaining to him how to speed things up. This is despite the fact that I have not had any

shots done on the first take ever. Ninety percent was done on the third take. By the way, Ilyin was dying from cancer and was gravely ill.

At some point I had enough and fired Yarmolnik. Then I decided it would be an interesting film without a lead. We had some shots completed and they should be plenty. We would have a partial view of the lead, a shoulder, a hand... But it did not feel right at all, the shots were boring. We kept some of them nevertheless... The hero is less important to us than some boy who sits there taking a shit. We are not filming the hero but the world from his point of view. Eventually we reconciled with Lenya. But it was just as hard after that. Yarmolnik is a little bit flashier than the others, he has to be toned down a little, but he does not like to be toned down. Yarmolnik can certainly grow into a very big actor, but he needs a good director to obey. He did not obey me very well. If he had done, the result would be even better.

In your opinion, why there are so few decent actors appearing now?

They did not teach them in VGIK⁴³. Our son, for example, studied there and he has not been taught the art of acting at all. I don’t understand why. How can a future filmmaker not learn acting? It is like teaching a tank mechanic without showing him a tank. Though when I was an officer in the Soviet Army this was exactly the case: I was a bunker commander but was never shown an actual bunker because I had not been granted access...

The quantity of good actors depends on demand. If there is no demand, they disappear. The third point is that theatrical and film actors are two different professions. The fact that both are employing gesture, text, plastique and so on does not mean anything. If an actor is working successfully in both theatre and cinema it simply means that he has mastered two professions. Let’s say theatre assumes characterisation of any event through a gesture or body language or plastique. Cinema denies this. Here, the main weapon is the eyes. Among our actors, very few can act through their eyes. As opposed to English actors, for instance.

When you were in the jury how did it feel to judge films done by others?

I, for one, absolutely did not care for the film which in the end got a top prize, David Lynch’s *Wild at Heart*. I did everything to prevent it from getting the Palme d’Or, but it still got it. Bernardo Bertolucci was the head of the jury then. How I screamed at him! “What are you

43. The All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography, based in Moscow. Many major figures in Soviet and Russian cinema trained there, although not German.

doing to Cinema?” How we quarrelled, what a precious scene...When Bertolucci introduced me to the jury he spoke so highly of me that later he could not quarrel with me, it would be like spitting into his own face. I was both Charlie Chaplin and Montgomery. When the scandals started he yelled “You are attacking me because I am a former communist!” and I yelled at him “There is no such thing as ‘a former communist’, just like ‘a former negro’!” Then Bertolucci gave up and walked out of the last meeting of the jury. They all converged on me: “What did you do, you ruined the Cannes Festival! He won’t come back!” I said “He’ll come back. In ten minutes. Unlike the rest of you he is paid for this job!” Everyone calmed down. And Bertolucci came back. I have pushed only for one award for a pretty good African picture⁴⁴. It was completely primitive; you can find such a thing drawn on a wall of an outhouse. I met the African later “Listen, we pushed your picture for the award! Could you at least contribute a bottle of vodka?” He said “So?” and left. He has not done anything else. His film turned out so well out of helplessness.

What are your thoughts about Russian film festivals?

Russian film festivals are big business, with big money for their organisers. This does not mean I don’t respect the festival juries. More often than not they make it possible to discover, so to speak, young talents. But I sense a malarkey directed not even at me but at the government which sponsors the festival. As a result, the government can form an inaccurate impression of what is going on in the cinema. I speak about the government and not about moviegoers since in the most cases it is the government that provides employment. Furthermore, in my view, they are trying to mask the weakness of the films in competition using rather lame TV showmanship of questionable taste. The most civilised festival is Nika⁴⁵.

Among filmmakers working today who would you call your compatriots? Who is on a quest similar to yours?

Sokurov. I admire Sokurov. Some of his films are a bit off: *The Sun*⁴⁶ for example. Sasha has prevaricated there. In reality the Emperor of Japan was different. He knew full well about the atrocities and was not just tending to his aquarium fishes. But I like other films

44. Presumably *Tilai* (1990), by Idrissa Ouedraogo, which won the Grand Jury Prize, although Ouedraogo went on to make several more features.

45. Established in 1987, the Nika Awards are the Russian equivalent of the Oscars or BAFTAs. In 2000, Aleksei German won Best Picture and Best Director for *Khrustal'ov, My Car!*

46. *The Sun* (2005) is a typically elliptical portrait of the Emperor Hirohito during the final days of World War II.

by Sokurov very much. One example is *The Lonely Voice of Mar*⁴⁷. Sokurov is a live person, he lives in his Cinema. It is part of his soul. Remove it and he will die. I know no other people like him. All the foreign directors I have been told about do not interest me. Take your Trier⁴⁸ for instance. I watched *Breaking the Waves* and did not care for it. It is in pretty poor taste.

All in all, I have a feeling that everyone I loved has died. I loved Bergman, he died. Loved Fellini, he’s dead. Kurosawa is dead too. I suppose I was less fond of Antonioni. However I once met him under strange circumstances. Right after *Khrustal'ov* bombed in Cannes I happened to go with the film to another film festival, in Sicily. My film there was playing all over the place, including in an ancient circus. We were all supposed to walk onto the stage and say what we liked about this place, which was of a truly exceptional beauty. I walked onto the stage and all of a sudden saw Antonioni in the audience. I said “The thing I most love about this place is that there is Antonioni sitting in the audience and watching my film.” There was applause, he stood up... He was already very ill.

What do you think about making more films in the future?

I have absolutely lost my love for the cinema. I don’t know what I should do. I know a lot about filmmaking and can do some things better than others. I could give advice even to some very good directors, even Western directors. I don’t know what has happened to me. It could be that I got permanently tired. In addition, you cannot love something that beats you up all the time. From the first film I was regularly fired, threatened with prosecution, my mother had to plead to me on her knees to make corrections to my film. I also look with dismay at what we all have turned into today. We have practically no good actors; there is no one to work with. They all are acting the same way. Here is an actor playing a crime investigator, and he finds a way to play thirty episodes off the same smile, the same facial expression. What bug have they all caught? I would like to work with an actor who is interested to hear what I dreamt up the previous night. When I tell my dreams to current actors their eyes resemble those of a bird that is falling asleep.

Today, when I switch TV channels I always skip the movie channels. I cannot watch them. I can watch documentaries or programmes about aquarium fishes or American shows about dogs. But any new film I can only take for twenty minutes, no more than that. I am repulsed by the cinema in part because I am not attracted by cinema. Let them show me

47. Sokurov's first feature, originally filmed in 1978 but shelved until 1987.

48. This is a reference to Anton Dolin's book *Lars von Trier: Control Works* (2007).

a movie to make me cry, like I did during Muratova's *Among Grey Stones*⁴⁹.

What are you going to do if you are so allergic to cinema?

Something unfortunate happened to me. I cannot make films anymore! I just can't, though I had a few ideas – *After the Dance*, *Rothschild's Violin*, Fallada's *A Wolf Among the Wolves*. I would rather try to write something. It would also be interesting to test myself in the theatre, I have many ideas but I cannot imagine how to overcome their screaming! On Broadway, acoustics are made in such a way that the audience can hear a boy tearing a piece of paper. They have such microphones, such computers. In our theatre they always scream. And this is where the fakeness begins. But Russian cinema has also entered a wretched phase. Some lumberjacks will be bossing us and asking again "Why in your films do the Soviet people have such pale faces? Don't they eat enough?" And every conversation with them would start with "German, why do you dislike us so much?"

Lars von Trier, whom you don't like, was in a hospital to treat his depression, and then went to Cannes where his film was hissed at even more than was *Khrustalyov*. Yet at a press conference he proclaimed that he is the best director in the world. Do you consider yourself the best?

Well done, good for him! No, I don't consider myself the best in the world. I am just a good filmmaker, that's all. I am not a professional, and this is what helps me to make films. It helped that I never thought of myself as professional, never studied at VGIK. No other director taught me or nudged me or tried to stick my nose in my own shit. I am a non-professional and this is what forces me to invent my own cinema, something that is interesting for me every step of the way. My cinema is different from all others. Nobody tried this? Great, I'll try it! It didn't work? I'll flounce in a different direction. So I am standing out against the background a bit. I regard myself as an artist with a degree of irony. I just have to watch a short fragment from Tarkovsky's *Andrej Rublyov* or a bit of Fellini's *Roma* to put myself in my proper place.

If it was possible to start over, would you become a film director again?

Not a chance. I would become anyone, a stoker or a hospital nurse, but not a filmmaker.

⁴⁹ Ukrainian-born Kira Muratova (1934-) is one of the most important postwar Soviet film directors, best known for *The Asthenic Syndrome* (1989).





ABOUT THE PRESENTATION

Originally shot on 35mm, *Hard to Be a God* was supplied to Arrow as a ProRes 4444 digital file with 5.1 sound. The English subtitles that accompanied festival screenings have been substantially revised by Mark Bence and Daniel Bird for this Blu-ray edition.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by Michael Brooke

Executive Producer: Francesco Simeoni

Technical Producer: James White

Production Assistants: Louise Buckler, Liane Cunje

QC: Michael Mackenzie, Nora Mehenni

Proofing: Michael Brooke, Anthony Nield

Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling by David Mackenzie

Artist: Andrzej Klimowski

Design: Jack Pemberton

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Manon Bayet, Carsten Baiersdörfer, Alexander Beneke, Daniel Bird, Mark Bence, Pierre Boivin, Craig Brandist, Joël Chapron, Anton Dolin, Patrick Flack, Irina Gachechiladze, Aleksei German Jr, Svetlana Karmalita, Andrzej Klimowski, Farid Lounas, Valérie Pozner, Jonathan Romney, Mike Sutton, Yakov Varganov, Aleksandra Wiśniewska



A still from a deleted scene, in which Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov plays “a bookworm who is tortured. They place pieces of lard and fresh eggs on his eyes and then stick his mug into the fire. The torturer explains that when the eggs harden and the lard melts and flows into the eyes, he will be done. And Rumata walks by. It was a pretty scary scene. We kept a shot of a boy who runs by.” [Aleksei German]



ARROW

ACADEMY

FCD1145