Chapter 4

INTERTEXTUAL VISIONS OF THE POTUDAN

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Intertextuality necessarily complements our experience of textuality. It is the perception that our reading of the text cannot be complete or satisfactory without going through the intertext, that the text does not signify unless as a function of a complementary or contradictory intertextual homologue, writes Michael Riffaterre. The given inherent tension of Riffaterre’s intertextual homologue, for it can be both complementary and contradictory, is clearly at play in Alexander Sokurov’s debut feature film. Intertextual voices permeate The Lonely Voice of Man and create a remarkably complex polyphony of a literary-cinematic kind. Intext for Sokurov is a crucial means by which he realises a filmic vision and all of his subsequent projects continue to apply this approach with ‘borrowed’ artefacts coming from all domains of art: cinema itself, literature, music, architecture, theatre and painting.

One can discern two dominant intertextual threads in the film: the obvious textual one is Andrei Platonov’s ‘The River Potudan’ (‘Reka Potudan’), the second is Andrei Tarkovsky’s Mirror [Zerkalo, 1975] which functions as a more concealed but equally essential intertext of a visual kind. Sokurov engages with the two in a sophisticated manner – he complements and contradicts his predecessors. While the intertextual tension is almost unavoidable in the case of Platonov, for transference of material from one medium to another is never a straightforward process, the influence of Tarkovsky is more problematic. Indeed, the ‘anxiety of influence’ is already evident in Sokurov’s following words: [Tarkovsky] used to say that there is some kind of continuity between us. I’m not sure about this; in human terms he was very close to me, he was more important to me as a man than as a director. However, the fact that Sokurov stresses gratitude rather than influence is consistent with the complementary and contradictory nature of intertextual homologue. As a result of this tension,
the director creates a highly original amalgam, which emerges as a self-sufficient discourse. A theme of spiritual search in spatio-temporal mazes, which is prominent both in Platonov’s short story and Tarkovsky’s 1975 feature, is unequivocally advanced by Sokurov.

Liviya Zvonnikova – a Platonov specialist and one of the director’s consultants on *The Lonely Voice of Man* – recollects: ‘From the first conversation with Sasha [Sokurov] it became clear to me that the film’s conception had taken shape and its visual strategy has been thought through. The time and space of the Platonovian universe were the points of concern’. It is remarkable that neither the plot of ‘The River Potudan’ nor its protagonists are mentioned. Instead, Zvonnikova emphasises the more abstract spatio-temporal categories of the Platonovian universe. The scriptwriter of the film, Yuri Arabov, also employs a lexicon charged with references to space and time and highlights that the adaptation was developed through its spatio-temporal coordinates:

I began to reflect and speculate about how to make a screen adaptation. I decided that the most elementary metaphor of time can resolve the problem of cinematic dramaturgy, which demands at least linear structure and clarity of plot. I imagined that the action takes place in a very small place, on islands of a river in flood. Perhaps the Potudan river. The river, the islands, wandering through streets, which suddenly terminate, submerge into the water and reappear from the water – this, in my opinion, resolved the issue of entering Platonov’s rhythm, his prose.

Time, according to Arabov, regains its conventional Heraclitian metaphorical manifestation – its flow becomes the flow of the Potudan. Moreover, this reservoir of time is clearly spatialised – the narrative leaps of Platonov’s prose are handled through mazes of streets, which, in addition, were supposed to disappear from time to time in the river’s waters. The text of the short story is thus conceptualised and turned into a certain spatio-temporal model, which subsequently defines the overall representational strategy of the film.

It is no coincidence that Platonov’s short story itself yields to an interpretation preoccupied with the categories of space and time. The diegetic role of the four seasons, as a calendar time manifesting itself through space, and the persistent presence of the river Potudan itself, as a spatialised flow of water-time, are poetic markers with transparent spatio-temporal intentions. These already innate textual features reverberate in the film with a new force – Sokurov advances them by means of a slight distortion and re-interpretation.

The visual plane of *The Lonely Voice of Man*, on the other hand, is inspired by Tarkovsky’s most experimental project – *Mirror*, completed three years before Sokurov started conceiving the idea of ‘adapting’ Platonov for the screen. Tarkovskian visual echoes are scattered throughout the film. This becomes evident from Sokurov’s use of the documentary material and his visual interplay with reflecting surfaces. However, the most striking
connection between the films is the role of literary quotations in the process of spatio-temporal ‘displacement’.

The four poems by Arseni Tarkovsky and the opening lines of Dante’s The Divine Comedy contribute to the highly unstable narrative of Mirror. The spatio-temporal models elaborated in the poems’ texts allow Tarkovsky to rupture the traditional preoccupation with linearity that characterises mainstream narrative cinema. The themes of immortality (as opposed to human finitude) and of miraculous other space (as opposed to the space of the everyday) pervade the recited poetic lines and shape the film’s semantic plane. Moreover, all the visual sequences which accompany the texts contain the same motif – human movement. The protagonists ‘aimlessly’ traverse various topoi and these advances in space also allow them to cross the temporal flow. The five episodes which accommodate Arseni Tarkovsky’s and Dante’s words are all either historical or individual memories and they do not coincide with the narrative ‘present’, situated in Moscow of the 1970s. The visualised poems constitute a spatio-temporal displacement in terms of their semantic input and formal artistic function.

In a similar manner, Platonov’s text provides themes of spatio-temporal displacement which are cinematically enhanced. The notion of memory and consciousness, so persistent in the story, finds its place in the dialogue of the film and is also advanced by means of documentary footage, which opens and concludes The Lonely Voice of Man. Furthermore, photographs combined with mirrors and other reflecting surfaces turn a seemingly unremarkable passage from ‘The River Potudan’ into a highly sophisticated mise-en-scène – one of Sokurov’s most accomplished cinematic moments. Other themes and motifs, such as alternative states of consciousness (Nikita’s delirium) or alternative topoi (Nikita’s trip to the liminal space of the marketplace), also receive a congenial visual treatment. The director’s screening of Platonov’s text easily transcends simple adaptation – the literary predecessor becomes a ‘mere’ intertextual source.

How would the Heraclitian river, into which one cannot step twice without it changing its state, look in a typical Russian landscape? Its waters would certainly freeze in winter and this would make the river’s surface appear more stable. However, spring flow of ice or ‘opening’ of rivers would intensify a sense of flux and movement. One might argue that Platonov’s Potudan is this displaced Heraclitian river – the reservoir of universal time which altered its location from the temperate Mediterranean terrain to the severe Russian landscape and which also reveals Russia’s Varangian and Greek roots.

Platonov critics disagree about the semantic origin of the river’s name. Vakhitova, for example, claims that Potudan’ derives from the Russian word potuda (up to that place, up to there) and this fact highlights the river’s liminal nature. Another view holds that the river was used as a spatial marker, which performed certain practical role – it delimited a territory. That is, one of the river’s banks functioned as a place where Mongol conquerors collected an impost (dan’ in Russian) from their Russian subjects,
hence, *potu-dan* (whereon-impost). In both cases the river’s name reflects its ‘spatiality’. The Potudan, in the same fashion as its mythical Greek counterpart, the Styx, functions as a divider between two worlds: sacred vs. profane in the first case, and domestic–familiar vs. uncanny–other in the latter. These manifest spatial qualities, combined with the traditional Heraclitian metaphor of river as a flow of time, make Platonov’s Potudan a prominent spatio-temporal entity within the short story.

It is difficult to overestimate the narrative function of the river. It gives the title to the text and becomes one of the main protagonists. In the following passage the river is clearly introduced in the latter role:

> And so they were friends, patiently, almost all the long winter, tormented by anticipation of their approaching future happiness. The Potudan river also hid under the ice all winter, and the winter crops slumbered beneath the snow. Nikita was calmed and even comforted by these processes of nature: it was not only his heart that lay buried until the spring.8

After Nikita finds himself incapable of consummating his relationship with Liuba, he decides to commit suicide by drowning himself in the river. From this point on, the Potudan regulates the narrative flow. Platonov persistently makes it present: ‘The Potudan river had begun to stir. Twice Nikita went to its bank, looked at the now flowing water and decided not to die so long as Liuba could still put up with him; when she stopped putting up with him, he would have time enough to end his life – it would be a while yet before the river froze again’ (236). Nikita’s intentions, which are never fulfilled, are reflected in Liuba’s attempts to end her life when her husband leaves her – she comes to the river every day to look for Nikita’s body and then decides to drown herself. The woman enters the Potudan as if it were the mythical Lethe, whose waters deliver complete forgetfulness. However, instead of oblivion the cold waters of the river cause a death-defying illness: ‘Blood often comes from her throat: she must have caught a chill when she was drowning’ (243).

Sokurov reinforces the role of the Potudan and water in general. His notes contain a remarkable entry, which presents the river as an obstruction: ‘A boat on the river – a man is rowing, he is tired, he lies down in exhaustion on the boat’s floor, the boat drifts, it is carried together with the enervated rower. This occurs several times. Finally, the tired boat is carried ashore. Fedor (Nikita), having failed to cross the river, comes out on the bank, the boatman, irreparably tired, sits on a bench, the oars dipped in the water...’.9 ‘The flow of the time-river seems to be impassable, and the protagonist and his fellow traveller are bound to remain where they are, as if they have entered a world without progress or culmination, such as depicted in the Old Testament: ‘All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again’ (Ecclesiastes 1:7). The current of the river does not function in this case as a flow of linear time since it makes any progression or movement impossible – instead a vision of time as a looped cycle is introduced.'
In addition, the river appears to act as a metaphysical and omnipresent background: in several episodes of *The Lonely Voice of Man*, the Potudan functions as a reservoir of sacred knowledge. This role, however, is assigned to it by means of another intertext – a small episode from Platonov’s novel *Chevengur*. The passage describes a fisherman who wants to learn ‘the secret of death’ and decides to drown himself in a lake because he believes that fish, which stand ‘between life and death’, already possess the sacred knowledge and he strives to reach its domain. In Platonov’s own words: ‘Secretly he did not believe in death at all. What he really wanted was to have a look and see what was there: it might be a great deal more interesting than life in a village or on the shore of the lake; he saw death simply as another province, situated beneath the sky, as if at the bottom of cool water, and this province attracted him’. The lake in *Chevengur* becomes the river Potudan by means of a cinematic trick. A curious civil servant (or ‘commissar’, according to the director’s notes), who registers the marriage of Liuba and Nikita, acts as a fisherman in Sokurov’s adaptation of Platonov’s story. He drowns himself and, crucially, comes to the surface of the water unlike the man in *Chevengur* who is found dead. The disappearance in the water and the consequent re-emergence are separated in the film’s narrative – the dive to gain the sacred knowledge takes place in the middle of the film (in the course of Nikita’s escape to the market) while the return from the domain of death takes place at the end (after Nikita’s return). This narrative ‘loop’ is not coincidental and reflects the general cyclicity which the director seems to advance.

The film opens with a documentary image of a river (probably the Neva) followed by images of a dockyard with peasants performing a repetitive task of moving a wooden wheel while standing on barges – ‘haulers,
rotating the enormous wheel of life’. It closes with identical images where water, in all its photogenic glory, dominates the screen. The cyclicity of this scene is not accidental, either. The vision of time in the film is clearly cyclical. For instance, the four seasons (the definitive natural cycle) influence the narrative progression – the development of Nikita’s relationship with Liuba is reflected in close-up images of earth (it is covered with first snow when the couple marries; it is buried under snow when Nikita’s impotence is revealed, while the protagonist’s departure is marked by receding snow).

The motif of return in general and cyclicity as its outcome are central to Platonov’s poetics. Departures and returns, disappearances and reappearances, partings and encounters prominently reverberate in each of Platonov’s major texts. ‘The River Potudan’ is no exception; the short-story is replete with references to cycles in a mundane and metaphysical sense (for instance, ‘The old man was seeing life come full circle for the second or third time’; 231). The very first passage describes the return of Red Army soldiers (and Nikita is just one of them) who have experienced some kind of transfiguration – ‘They walked with faint, astonished hearts, recognizing again the fields and villages along their path’ (213). This return is also accomplished with ‘the world’s time’ as its prevalent background: the time ‘went on as usual, far in the distance and following the sun’ (214). The story ends with Nikita’s own return to Liuba which is vividly described in the text (‘Nikita left the town and began running along the deserted highroad. When he felt exhausted, he dropped to a walking pace for a while, and then ran again in the free, weightless air over the dark fields’; 244) and which receives a congenial treatment in the film.

Sokurov depicts Nikita’s return by means of a close-up of the protagonist’s face. Since the camera is placed below his face and creates a sense of motion (most likely it was carried by the actor himself), the spectator co-experiences the hasty return – he or she literally faces gasping Nikita with the ‘jumping’ horizon in the background. The slow-motion effect makes the experience of movement even more acute: every slight spatial advance is glaringly endured since the passage of time is slowed down. Furthermore, the colours of the sequence are somewhat bleak and distorted and clearly contrast the black and white ‘death’ market sequence. They also herald the forthcoming reunion of the lovers which is conveyed through a series of pacifying (for the viewer) window still-lives of Liuba’s home in warm natural colours. At the end the protagonists are absent from the camera’s ‘field of vision’ but the viewer hears their voices. Thus, Nikita’s ‘lonely voice’ finds a ‘response’ – he is reunited with his cherished interlocutor.

The flow of time, looped in historical cycles, is a predominant theme of Mirror and it clearly served as a reference point for some of the core artistic devices in Sokurov’s debut film. Andrei Tarkovsky’s feature has some claim to be called a definitive exploration of space and time – memories of childhood and historical events are presented through the spaces associated
with them. Due to the constantly shifting identities of the characters, the notions of space and time as such become the main protagonists of the film.

Like Mirror, The Lonely Voice of Man explores a theme of spiritual search in spatio-temporal labyrinths. However, in contrast to Mirror, the film is not preoccupied with historical time and individual memories mixed with dreams. Instead, it offers a vision of time as a mythical circle and the other space it explores is not a childhood dream of Tarkovsky’s project but a more general domain of death. The commissar’s dive into the Potudan, Nikita’s delirium and his departure for the market with the consequent re-emergence are all liminal experiences and they constitute a direct meditation on the theme of death.

The use of documentary material, photographs and manipulation of cinematic image by means of reflecting surfaces in Mirror and in The Lonely Voice of Man are among those devices which help the directors to address the themes of eternity (as opposed to human finitude) and of the mysterious other space (as opposed to the space of the everyday). Moreover, these very devices, quite experimental at the time of making of the films, make the two projects unique in terms of breaking conventional narrative techniques alongside Alain Resnais’s classic Hiroshima mon amour (1959), which also relies on documentary chronicle in order to reveal the human devastation and disorientation after the war. Interestingly, all of these films follow Gilles Deleuze’s taxonomy, which suggests that the emergence of ‘false continuities’ in post-war cinema makes the cinematic body not a spatial entity but ‘the developer [révélateur] of time’.\textsuperscript{17} The notions of, and the relationship between, space and time are drastically reconsidered in the three films, all of which deal in some sense with post-war shock. The documentary material they utilise is a clear and literal illustration of this traumatic experience (Hiroshima after the nuclear attack in Resnais’s film, devastated Berlin in Mirror, and a more abstract vision of workers’ hard labour in Sokurov’s film). These black-and-white sheets of the past lie at the centre of the discontinuous narratives presented in the films.

The Sivash Lake sequence is the longest, and probably the most memorable documentary insertion in Mirror and it has clear affinities with the aesthetic strategy in The Lonely Voice of Man. The footage, shot by an anonymous cinematographer, depicts the inhuman efforts of Soviet troops during Second World War fording the shallow bays of the Sivash in harsh weather conditions. The slow-motion effect and the elevated tone of Arseni Tarkovsky’s poem ‘Life, Life’, which accompanies the sequence and contains prominent ‘fluid’ time-metaphors (for instance, ‘We are all already on the shore of the sea, / And I am one of those who pulls in nets, / When immortality swims by like a shoal’), make the lake a reservoir of time – a Heraclitian river. The soldiers are depicted here as if struggling with (historical) time – they laboriously move through it.

The fact that the ultimate goal of the soldiers – the other bank of the Sivash – is not made visible in the sequence adds further ambiguity and allows the episode to remain open-ended. The crossing of the waters by the army becomes a doomed act, which is destined to continue into eternity.
The black-and-white footage emerges as an illustration of the impossibility of reaching the desired shore, it depicts merely ‘aimless’ movement. The postponed resolution, due to the absence of the classic movement-image narrative linearity, presents a direct image of time. The episode does not aspire to offer narrative input since most viewers are not aware of the historical background of the chronicle and do not know why, where and when or even whether the soldiers accomplished the crossing.

The doomed boundlessness of the Sivash sequence finds its reverberation in the documentary chronicle employed in *The Lonely Voice of Man*. Sokurov makes use of several discrete pieces of footage and some of them function as recurring motifs in the film. But what is more essential is the fact that most of them depict a certain repetitive motion; for instance, workers rotating a wheel on a barge (the sequence appears three times in the course of the film), or men working at a machine unit and performing once again a circular movement, or finally loggers uprooting and rolling over trees. The modernist cyclicity of human labour is an obvious refrain in the film. The repetitiveness of the movements, which are always presented in slow-motion, makes their duration (that is, time) more manifest. The director touches upon this issue in his notes:

*CHRONICLE!* A passage from the chronicle – people going around in a circle. A tone of dark blue evening. This is the continuous, endless work of tired people on the river. In fact, it can be both a morning and a day job. This is a symbol of time, not historical, but physical time. The circle can be edited with Nikita. He either passes by, or walks along the bank of the Potudan and looks at the people on barges as if from above, from a hillock.  

The final version of the film does not contain images of Nikita passing by the river. Thus, the presence of the documentary chronicle is not motivated by narrative developments and remains ‘artificial’. The real worlds of the documentary material are fused with the fictional plot of the film adaptation of Platonov’s short story. Their spatio-temporal patterns do not coincide and the resulting disjunction leads to a complex amalgam of different spaces and times.

The same effect is achieved by the presence of numerous photographs in the film. While in *Mirror* a protagonist (the narrator’s wife) is depicted only once while she is looking at her own and her former mother-in-law’s photographs, the abundant quantity of photographic images in *The Lonely Voice of Man* is striking. They come as individual images and album sets and the camera unhurriedly lingers over them. Both Nikita and Liuba spend a substantial amount of time leafing through images of distant relatives or even complete strangers. These episodes again follow Deleuze’s description of the direct time-image, which gives access ‘to that Proustian dimension where people and things occupy a place in time which is incommensurable with the one they have in space’. Photographs are memories in the first instance and the notion of memory, which displaces the narrative flow mostly dealing with the present, is extremely prominent in Sokurov’s film.
The viewer also spends a great amount of time inspecting various vignettes and group photographs with the help of the camera’s unhurried tracking of the black-and-white images. At the same time photographs are used not just as an abstract conceptual device but also as a narrative means. One of the central episodes of the film – Nikita’s recollection of his first meeting with Liuba before the war – revolves around photographic images.

It is notable that Platonov’s original text does not contain a single reference to photographs. In ‘The River Potudan’ Nikita reminisces about the image of Liuba while she is reading a book (his father comments on that with some admiration ‘And as for the daughter! She’ll probably go to college’; 218). In the film, Liuba leafs through a photo album – she performs an act of recognition and remembrance by examining people’s faces. While she is doing so, Nikita attentively and, no doubt, lovingly looks at her. However, the most important aspect of this scene in the film is that it is itself a memory. Nikita remembers his first encounter with Liuba and a photo album prompts this act of recognition. The photographic image functions here as a temporal rolling ball – a memory within a memory, an act of remembrance within an act of remembrance.21

Furthermore, in addition to photographs there are mirror reflections, which also participate in the act of remembering.22 A reflection can be considered an instantaneous, fleeting photograph, which literally takes place on a mirroring surface. Nikita’s act of remembrance of his first encounter with Liuba actually happens through photographic images mixed with present and past mirror reflections. Furthermore, the semantic richness of the episode is enhanced by a deliberate confusion between real objects and their ‘mere’ reflections.
In general, a mirror reflection on cinematic screen can occupy two planes: derivative, as a real object’s framed reflection, or ‘actual’, as an object which is essentially a reflection but the viewer cannot discern this fact since the mirror’s frame is ‘hidden’ away from the camera’s field of view and reflection is taken for a real object. This feature in fact reflects cinema’s general mechanism: a process of registering, animating and projecting reflections acquired with a camera on the all-pervading ‘mirror’ – the cinematic screen. Sokurov exploits this inherent cinematic quality by extrapolating the past onto the present or vice versa through presenting a complex interplay between the protagonists and their mirror reflections in the scene mentioned above.

The episode starts with (1) a shot of Nikita’s framed reflection in a wardrobe door; (2) the camera then moves to the left and reveals the sleeping Liuba; (3) this is followed by a cut to ‘real’ Nikita looking at Liuba; (4) a cut to the wardrobe mirror again but this time the viewer finds there a blurred reflection of Liuba, several years younger leafing through a photo-album, and the young woman gradually comes into view in focus; (5) and, finally, a cut to young Nikita standing in a door-frame. This eloquent interplay of reflections, frames and snippets of ‘real’ reality leads to the memory episode – the abortive courting of Liuba’s mother by Nikita’s father. It concludes with a similar complex amalgam: (1) Nikita in the door-frame looking at Liuba and making eye contact with her; (2) the reflection of Liuba with the photo album in the wardrobe door which gradually blurs away; (3) then the camera explores various photographs; (4) and the sequence ends with a shot of Nikita leafing through a photo album himself in Liuba’s present room where she is sleeping. The whole episode is a cinematic ‘epiphany’ of the notion of memory and it materialises through photographic images and mirror reflections.²³

In spite of the absence of photographs and mirrors in ‘The River Potudan’, the theme of memory in Sokurov’s film in general is inspired by Platonov’s text and developed further by the director. The latter unambiguously makes the following entry in his notes: ‘Memory is Platonov’s energy, his electricity’.²⁴ ‘The River Potudan’ is permeated with memory-related imagery. The following three passages, which appear on three consecutive pages of the short story, all describe a certain progression in the relationship between Liuba and Nikita and this progression is reflected by means of nouns and verbs related to the notion of remembrance:

Nikita went up to her and looked at her carefully, for she had been precious to him even in memory: Had all of her truly been preserved?

‘You don’t remember me?’ asked Lyuba.

‘Yes, I do,’ answered Nikita. ‘I haven’t forgotten you’.

‘One should never forget,’ smiled Lyuba.

‘You won’t forget me now?’ Lyuba asked as she said good-bye.

‘No,’ said Nikita, ‘I’ve no one else to remember’. (220, 220, 222, emphasis added)
The bond between Nikita and Liuba certainly does not manifest itself in a passionate sexual attraction but by tender ‘energies’ of remembering. Nikita’s final return is prompted by a sudden memory of Liuba – the brief dialogue with his father extracts him from his emotionally and physically mute state, in which he ‘had forgotten how to speak’ and his heart ‘had grown unused to feeling’ (243). Nikita runs to be reunited with his wife and obtains a ‘cruel, pitiful strength’ (245) which is necessary to consummate his marriage. This force is unambiguously connected with the notion of memory in Sokurov’s diary: ‘I remember them, you remember me, they will also remember you – this a chain of existence which preserves its matter. But this gentle innermost force is a weak force’.  

In addition to the general theme of memory, the recurring visual motif of a wood is another predominant theme of Sokurov’s film which appears to be inspired by _Mirror_. Tarkovsky’s otherworldly wood sequence appears several times in sepia with a slow speed of projection. This feature allows the director to emphasise the movement of bushes gently swaying in the wind, and to create the impression that the viewer is sleep-walking through the scene. Moreover, the opening lines of Dante’s _Inferno_ quoted in the film (‘Midway in the journey of our life / I found myself in a dark wood’) function as an allegory of spiritual confusion. The importance of the wood is further highlighted at the very end of the film. The camera follows the old Mother with her small children into the field and then gradually withdraws back to the wood. The Dantesque wood reappears for the last time though in a different light (in both a literal and metaphorical sense). The scenery is shot in twilight and presented at the normal speed of...
projection. The allegory of the wood, in some sense, becomes a reality – it materialises in its full glory.

The wood of _Mirror_ is transported into Sokurov’s film as a visual quotation: in addition to several recurring grove-wood sequences, a wood shot in sepia and in slow-motion, almost identical to that of _Mirror_, appears in _The Lonely Voice of Man_. In both films the topographical otherness of the wood is underlined. However, the drastic difference lies in the fact that Tarkovsky’s wood delineates the space and time of childhood and the mundane world, while Sokurov’s grove is a liminal life-death point. Nikita meets Liuba after his return from the war: the two are shown in flickering light of swaying branches and this creates an invigorated mood. Nikita then carries a coffin for Liuba’s friend Zhenia through the grove and meets Liuba there. Immediately after that, the protagonist enters the domain of death: he becomes ill and his delirium takes him to another topos – that of death (images of a slaughter-house function as a disturbing death sequence). His recovery is accompanied by a shot of an empty alley in the grove after rain. The depiction of Nikita’s fear of intimacy with his wife is interpolated by three cuts to the grove, in which Liuba seems to bid farewell and to leave Nikita. After the last cut, Nikita abandons Liuba and the camera registers his departure – the protagonist leaves the wood and enters an open field.26

Nikita’s departure is accompanied by the soundtrack of his delirium in which he asks Liuba whether he is going to die or not. This clearly colours his departure in deathly tones. Indeed, the final destination of his escape is the market – the ultimate domain of death in _The Lonely Voice of Man_. The dead animal imagery appears twice in the film and it directly connects Nikita’s delirium as a liminal death experience with the market place as a site of execution. The infernal inhabitants of the market place (a stall keeper and his wife) and their ‘victims’ (slaughtered animals) are all shot in black and white with slow projection and the sequence is accompanied by disturbing atonal music. The viewer is bound to have a feeling that he or she is entering another realm, which drastically differs from the everyday world. This feeling is to be overcome during Nikita’s run, which, as discussed above, functions as a boundary-transcending moment. The life-asserting message is delivered in Liuba’s home when Nikita finally consummates their marriage and the outside world is presented in pacifying colours.

What unites Platonov’s ‘The River Potudan’, Tarkovsky’s _Mirror_ and Sokurov’s film is a rejection of ‘normal’, profane, linear time. Instead, the artists put forward the notion of ‘abnormal’, sacred, discontinuous non-time, whose periods, according to Mircea Eliade, comprise ‘a succession of eternities’ and do not participate in a historical progression of events. This sacred non-time ‘appears under the paradoxical aspect of a circular time, reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mythical present that is periodically reintegrated by means of rites’27. Space as such actively participates in the process of overcoming the linearity of ordinary time. Spatial coordinates constantly shift and do not function as a means to deliver the linear progression of time – they lie beyond the categories of beginning and end.
Sokurov’s debut film can be considered as a participant in the universal artistic cycle. The presence of the mentor (Andrei Tarkovsky) and the insider-consultant (Platonov’s late wife Maria Alexandrovna, who is believed to be a life-model for the character of Liuba) is well documented and was crucial in the process of the development and completion of the project. _The Lonely Voice of Man_ thus becomes a relay baton in the aesthetic race. Discourses are borrowed from the predecessors and the resulting intertextual homologue with its complementary and contradictory tensions is re-enacted in another space and time.

**Notes**

5. There are also obvious correlations with Eisenstein’s _Strike_ (e.g. the documentary material from a slaughter-house or the general man-machine interaction). However, the aesthetic end in Sokurov’s case is of a different order than in Eisenstein’s classical montage of attraction film: the borrowed chronicle does not participate in a dialectical clash between shots followed by relatively stable and always politically-charged meaning. On the contrary, it disrupts the narrative flow and tends to confuse the viewer.
6. On the obvious level _The Lonely Voice of Man_ contains an unambiguous dedication: ‘In memory of Andrei Arsen’evich Tarkovskii with gratitude for his concern with the fate of the film.’
12. Platonov, _Chevengur_, p. 27.
13. This dive into death can be linked with a number of ‘black’ cut-ins (cinematic dives into nothingness – the blank screen) in the film, which actually opens with one of them. The device is employed in other films by Sokurov and most prominently in _Russian Ark_ where credits are followed by almost thirty seconds of a completely black screen. This passage of darkness is accompanied by the narrator’s voice over, which admits to a sense of disorientation and loss.
14. This technique is associated with Artavazd Peleshian’s ‘distance montage’.

18 Sokurov, ‘Odnokii golos….’, p. 35.


20 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 37.

21 Strikingly, when Henri Bergson (*Creative Evolution*, London: Macmillan, 1960, p. 323) describes the ‘mechanism of our ordinary knowledge’ he uses an analogy, which unequivocally brings together cinema, photography and memory: ‘the film of the cinematograph unrolls, bringing in turn the different photographs of the scene to continue each other, that each actor of the scene recovers his mobility; he strings all his successive attitudes on the invisible movement of the film. The process then consists in extracting from all the movements peculiar to all the figures an impersonal movement abstract and simple, movement in general, so to speak: we put this into the apparatus, and we reconstitute the individuality of each particular movement by combining this nameless movement with the personal attitudes. Such is the contrivance of the cinematograph. And such is also that of our knowledge. Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially. We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality, and, as these are characteristic of the reality, we have only to string them on a becoming, abstract, uniform and invisible, situated at the back of the apparatus of knowledge, in order to imitate what there is that is characteristic in this becoming itself. Perception, intellection, language so proceed in general. Whether we would think becoming, or express it, or even perceive it, we hardly do anything else than set going a kind of cinematograph inside us’ (Bergson, pp. 322–23).

22 This fact clearly links Sokurov’s film with *Mirror* where the prominence of the mirror metaphor cannot be overestimated since it is already in the title. There are multiple mirrors in the film, which produce different types of reflections with different textures. Even the very first shot of the film presents Ignat curiously looking into the blank screen of a TV set in whose grey surface a reflection of a room setting is visible. Increasing sensitivity to the mirror as a physical object culminates in the wall of mirrors towards the end of the film in the scene where the author dies (his death symbolically signified by the gesture of freeing a bird). At least eleven mirrors of different size and design are placed on the wall purely as aesthetic objects – as elements of the room’s decoration. The latter reveals the autobiographical nature of Tarkovsky’s film – it can be compared to an act of contemplating one’s own image in the looking glass.

23 Documentary chronicle and photographs are all faithful projections of real events and real people. Their use in cinema, one of the most mimetic arts, creates a complex effect: a staged (that is, fictional) but veracious reality is infused with a hint of a real reality – historical facts recorded on film. However, these snippets of real reality, in the cases of Tarkovsky and Sokurov, obliterate the narrative unity – their presence is not justified by linear narrative progression and they are never fully intelligible. As Žižek puts it, imposed documentary material serves ‘merely’ ‘as the texture of multiple narrative lines’. These reflections lead the critic to embark upon fundamental questions about
art – he proposes a certain pre-mimetic condition where the artistic realm is approached not by means of imitating nature but by pointing to something which is already there and naturally creative: the viewer has to ‘discern the fictional aspect of reality itself’ (Slavoi Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory*, London: BFI, 2001, p. 77).

25 Sokurov, ‘Odinokii golos…’, p. 34.
26 In addition, a shot of tree crowns appears when the commissar explains why he wants to try to ‘live’ in death. It is then followed by the chronicle depicting workers cutting and rolling over trees.