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On the Blurring of Lines : Some Thoughts About Alexander Sokurov

It has generally been agreed upon that Sokurov is to be considered as the « new Tarkovsky ». There are certainly numerous reasons for this *rapprochement*, and one of the most pertinent ones is that Sokurov achieves, like Tarkovsky, the creation of *dream* within the art of cinema. However, though it is too early to speak about tendencies in Sokurov criticism – there simply is not enough of it yet – it is notable that, while Tarkovsky stimulated, also through his own writings, interpretations of his « dreams » through quasi-metaphysical concepts like « dream-time » or « dream-logic », Sokurov's work seems to inspire more aesthetic-perspectival interpretations evoking the existence of dreamlike « landscape paintings », perhaps happily summarized in the word « dreamscape ». In Sokurov's films, the dreamlike ontological condition tends to be described as a « scape » linked to the metaphor of painting. Even natural sounds like wind or half-heard music (audible in *Mother and Son*), are likely to be described as an atmospheric and painterly « soundscape ». This presents a contrast with Tarkovsky whose films have never been much described as « landscapes » and even less as « paintings ». Tarkovsky's dreamlike spaces appear more as mental « zones », more or less linked to human civilization, and their theoretical elaboration seems to work better through the use of « structures » and « logic » than through « paintings » or « scapes ».

One could draw a daring parallel. Does it not look a little as if Wölfflin's old distinction between the « linear » and « painterly » style would here be reanimated, this time in the domain of cinema, Tarkovsky being the linear Dürer and Sokurov the painterly Rembrandt? Should one not say that Tarkovsky is the one who sees temporal, abstract, « lines » where Sokurov sees morphological masses like painterly « scapes », and that both reproduce these visions through the art of cinema? Unfortunately this comparison, as tempting as it is, is wrong, and I want to show here why.

Two principle things should be said about the « painterly » character of Sokurov's films. Certainly, « objects » like mist-covered mountains are typically « objects for painters », and Sokurov's distortion of images through distorting

anamorphic lenses and mirrors appears more *painterly* than typically « cinematic ». However, one should recognize that through these painterly devices, Sokurov's dreamscapes formulate a new kind of cinematic *Verfremdung* which, though working very discreetly, turns on its head a complete aesthetics of cinema. As a matter of fact, Sokurov's painterly cinema is more than the simple « postmodern » combination of traditional and avantgardist devices but it introduces an entirely new use of principle cinematic devices.

Traditionally, in cinema, the device of *Verfremdung*, of making things strange, has been understood as a manipulation of *rhythm*, *interval*, or *time*. It is because of the *rhythm* - that can be « alienated » according to the director's aesthetic intentions – that the art of cinema remains special and clearly distinct from the static art of *photographs*. Normally, for a film director, to give in to painterly devices means to come dangerously close to the aesthetics of photographs, that is, it contradicts the nature of cinema itself. Almost like a proof for this hypothesis, painterly attempts in cinema rarely turn out to be fully convincing even in our times. Greenaway and Jarman would be examples.

It is known that Tarkovsky fully agreed with the above mentioned thoughts about the obligatory absence of « painterliness » in cinema. So why and how does his « heir » manage to do the contrary without ending up in disaster ? Add to this that the last time distorting lenses and techniques similar to Sokurov's were extensively used in cinema, was in French Impressionist cinema of the 1920s. It is known how much Tarkovsky was « against » Impressionism in cinema as well as elsewhere. First, Tarkovsky did not want to manipulate time, like Eisenstein, on a purely abstract level but on the more Proustian, « concrete » one ; however, to make film into a painting would have been a sort of concreteness that would be qualified as naive, as lacking « time », or simply as lacking « style ». « Style » used to be film's rhythm and so film was never going to be a « live picture ». Then, film should not live only through the impressionistic « atmosphere » either, but through timely reality. It is obvious, though at the same time entirely enigmatic, that Sokurov attains a « dynamic » and « real » quality in his painterly images which is not simply due to the fact that « in it » objects are moving. The « pictures » really seem to have a timely *duration* though there is *nothing* like a rhythm, but also *more* than simply an « atmosphere » that has created this duration. So, what is the cinematic « style » in these « dreamscapes » ? (1)

Let me first introduce a detail. The hypothetical opposition Sokurov vs. Tarkovsky gains complexity because both directors liked the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. In some way, this preference suits both directors because in Friedrich's paintings we find the same odd mixture of simplicity and silence, the same simultaneous presence of strangeness and familiarity. Of course, Friedrich is the famous *landscape* painter, a fact which is less important for Tarkovsky but apparently more valued by Sokurov. Critics have noted Sokurov's apparent recreation of Friedrich's world in *Mother and Son* especially when it comes to landscapes. In Friedrich, landscapes appear as entirely « subjective » that means, as stated by the German Romantic philosopher Schelling, they seem to exist only for the conptemplator. At the same time it is more than surprising that Friedrich can really be compared to Sokurov. Friedrich is the painter of *clarity*, his forms are crystalline and solid, the details are often well painted, all the lines of rupture are very precise. It seems rather that what makes Friedrich's style is clarity. Spontaneously, it would thus be more logical to link Sokurov's blurred lines to Impressionist paintings and to oppose it to Friedrich.

However, I believe that Sokurov's blurring of lines is not comparable to the blurring of lines in painting, and that, for this reason, his films are not painterly in the proper sense, but that Sokurov develops a mode of expression which is genuinely cinematic. In a word, Sokurov's « painterly » dreamscapes draw more on the power of *film stills* than on that of painted pictures. In film stills, the lines can be clear and present though at the same time self-negated and absent. Pascal Bonitzer has written about these photos which are no photos: « By what does one recognize at first sight a photo taken from a film ? By the fact that the lines of the image, the fixed movements, the looks and the faultlines of the decor seem attracted, aspired by a centre of gravity situated outside of the frame and diagonal to the axis of the objective. » (*Le champ aveugle : Essais sur le cinéma*, Paris : Cah. du cinéma/Gallimard, 1982, p. 97) When Sokurov « blurs his lines » he does so in order to produce a film still. One could say that this sounds still like an allusion to Wölfflin's lines which are, in the painterly style, « enlived by a mysterious movement. » (*Principles of Art History*, NY: Dover, 1950, p. 19) Certainly, Wölfflin's « device » participates here in the animation of the frame, but one should not forget that in cinema a supplementary component is added. In cinema stills, the lines become stylistic lines, this means that, paradoxically, the picture is able to attain a temporal and spatial duration.

Let me end this short note with some general considerations of what I believe to be the place of Sokurov's art in our contemporary world, or more precisely, in our contemporary, mediatized, « image world ». Modernity is determined by a science that is systematic as much as it is « mechanistic », and the symbolizing process of images in modern industrialized society has adapted itself to the mechanistic pace of technology, making the signification of « images » more and more « absolute ». W.J.T Mitchell writes about the role of images in modern society: « The commonplace of modern studies of images, in fact, is that they must be understood as a kind of language; instead of providing a transparent window on the world, images are now regarded as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparency concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification. » (W.T.J. Mitchell : *Iconology : Image, Text, Ideology*, 1986, p. 8) In my opinion Sokurov's films especially combat this modern conception of « industrialized » images.

Criticism of mechanistic and overly systematic approaches towards reality has been developed from early times on. Mention can be made of the philosophical tradition starting with Goethe and ending with Oswald Spengler and Wittgenstein, which attributed a particular importance to the status of « images » within culture. Spengler was convinced that « those problems of art whose meaning is not at all understood, [the] quarrel between form and content, line and space, *the linear or the pictorial, the notion of style*, » are closely linked to the « increasing doubt in the value of science... ». (*The Decline of the Occident*, p. 67, my italics) A more Goethian « morphological » or « physiological » way of perceiving reality would be necessary if humanity wants to overcome the decline of science from which it is suffering. Wittgenstein, Spengler's contemporary, was influenced by Spengler as much as he was by Wölfflin. In Wölfflin he liked a particularly well developed vision of style as a supra-individual phenomenon which « depicts » rather than « expresses » the world. Not without reason, Wittgenstein would call the totality of formal elements of, for example, a sentence, a « picture » (*Bild*). Repeatedly, Wittgenstein liked to contrast the model of the painter to that of the scientist because only the painter would follow an entirely *descriptive* approach. « To compose the landscape of these conceptual relations out of their incountable fragments, as it is shown to us by language, is *too difficult* for me. » (Ed. Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 561) « I show my pupils details of an

enormous landscape in which they will never recognize themselves.» (p. 511)
 « Finally, I am a painter, and often a very bad painter. » (p. 567)

I believe that this idea of an « unconstructed » way of *depicting*, as opposed to a constructing, linguistico-semiotic, and (phonetically) expressing way of representation, is intimately contained in Sokurov's aesthetics. When Christie sees in Sokurov's films a « counter-attack against computer animation effects » he does, indeed, not go far enough. I would hold that the baroque art of Sokurov combats an entire ideology of the image invading our modern world that has been characterized above by Mitchell. Sokurov might not have drawn his approach from a Goethian morphological-physiological vision of reality, but perhaps he has, instinctively, drawn it from the Russian iconoclastic tradition (remember that Mitchell's statement is taken from a book on icons). Many of Sokurov's « painterly » images appear like inexhaustible icons whose « time » can be intuitively felt. In the Russian tradition, icons, being closely linked to the Russian conception of art, perception, and knowledge, help to perceive knowledge « intuitively ». In this sense, Sokurov's images are like dreams appearing like unconstructed pages filling themselves with content all alone. The images of old photos in *Whispering Pages*, for example, impose their notion of time upon us and enrich, like icons, our consciousness.

For these very reasons, I can hardly think of a modern image more opposed to those by Sokurov than that of the attacked New York Twin Towers, images which were, though apparently ritually repeating themselves, still not enriching but emptying our consciousness. I introduce this opposition of Sokurov's iconoclastic philosophy of the picture to that of the mediatized falling Twin Towers (which can appear as a caricature of a modern pictorial ideology), because, remarkably, Sokurov has said that he wants to « kick politics out of cinema and restore the 'rights of aesthetics' ». (Christie, p. 17) The ludic status of Sokurov's non-constructed, dreamlike paintings finds indeed its unfortunate counterpart in the Twin Towers image which attained, by turning around and around, a « ludic » but empty quality. This provides an interesting insight. The « political image » of the Twin Towers suffering from a terrorist attack, became, though never having been « officially » aestheticized, paradoxically, purely aesthetic all « by itself » (« aesthetic » is meant here in its « empty », formal sense). This is entirely opposed to the images of Sokurov because here, though everything has been consciously aestheticized beforehand, the pictures do always retain a more

than only purely « aesthetic » status. The « politics » of Sokurov's cinema is hidden in his subversive attack on the modern image ideology.

(1) Cf. Ian Christie who touches upon this paradox: Sokurov's 'Elegies' are filmic poems, in which visual rhythm - whether the staccato of rapid cutting or the sustained legato of slow motion - replaces conventional narrative. This is pure film-making - though it is never abstract - of a kind new film makers attempt. And in an era when the rate of cutting seems to be accelerating, Solurov makes increasing use of sustained shots, though he is by no means averse to abrupt changes of scale. (Sight and Sound, 8:4, 1998)