

The Politics of Film:

Captain Volkonogov Escaped and the Art of Resistance

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Abstract

Natasha Merkulova and Aleksey Chupov's *Captain Volkonogov Escaped* offers a gripping portrayal of life in Stalin's Soviet Union. This article discusses the film's evocation of an oppressive social structure and its pertinence as a stimulus and means to comprehending and critically appraising authoritarianism in contemporary times. The film pays close attention to micro-level dynamics of intimidation, fear and division, as well as their potential counters of empathy and resistance. It is this kind of social realism, eschewing the superficiality of conventional period 'costume' drama, that facilitates speaking truth to power. As such, it illustrates the potential of cinema, as one powerful form of cultural expression, to harness the historical imagination and illuminate the parallels between past and present calamities. It also suggests that resistance of violence and oppression depends on cultural engagement, and hence boycotts are counterproductive. These impede the capacity to build solidarity among the oppressed, both within and outside Russia. Forms of expression like film provide the means of mutual understanding on which such solidarity depends.

Keywords

Natasha Merkulova, Aleksey Chupov, *Captain Volkonogov Escaped*, Stalin's Soviet Union, authoritarianism, NKVD, politics, micro-level power, cultural engagement, solidarity, resistance, film analysis, and film phenomenology

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Introduction

From the first moment of Natasha Merkulova and Aleksey Chupov's *Kapitan Volkonogov bezhal / Captain Volkonogov Escaped* (2021, Russia, Estonia, France) we are among them, at work and play, a crack team of serious tough guys, and none tougher than our protagonist. They are Stalin's assassins. Then, before we can dismiss them as thugs or villains, the action draws us into their own unease,

their own vulnerabilities. Indeed, there is barely time to digest the first impression of the trusted captain (Iurii Borisov), this picture-perfect archetypal hunter, pack-leader, honed athlete, alpha male – disciplined, beautiful, at the peak of his powers. For cracks are already appearing in his aura of assured professionalism. It begins on arrival at work as a colleague falls to his death, practically at his feet, from an upstairs window. He starts a little but keeps his cool. A day like any other? Not entirely. The suicide foreshadows the way his own quiet assurance will soon morph into dark desperation. In classic Kafkaesque style, we never learn exactly why Volkonogov himself is suddenly no longer a valued cog in Stalin's machine, but preparations for an extraordinary audience with superiors are tantamount to an invitation to hell, with full attendant horrors, both known and unknown. Certainly, many are known all too well to this professional interrogator and executioner.

The tense and soon frantic opening sequences of the film represent a powerful exercise in the imaginative 'sharing' of human experience, fictionalised as it may be, in this case: having one's whole world, all one's customary routines and expectations, abruptly upended. The power of the narrative – as fictional experience – lies ultimately in the purchase it exerts on the human capacity to suspend disbelief, to embrace and even identify personally with the faux reality of the imagined and craftily visualised characters and events. Let us state at the outset that this is no politically neutral exercise; it is a vignette designed to illustrate the murderous logic of a profoundly oppressive social order, the Soviet Union in the thrall of Stalin. The film thus speaks – and eloquently so – about authoritarianism, and not any old variety, but one made in Russia (or its close associate, the Soviet Union), albeit the Russia of nearly a century ago. Given the shackles imposed by its contemporary analogue, the film represents an admirable attempt to 'speak truth to power', albeit by the circuitous route of an excursion into the lessons of a distant yet easily recognisable past, the height of Stalin's purges, what the historian Robert Conquest (1971) dubbed "The Great Terror" in order to invite comparisons with the notorious excesses of the French Revolution.

In times of war the stakes are raised, the enemy looms larger. Old yet freshly troubling questions re-emerge: How to express oneself, how to negotiate new relationships, not only with those poor souls framed in their very innocence by the ravages of war, but also with the now implacable and progressively demonised adversary – the 'clear and present danger' – and his many associates? This is the peculiar and yet hardly unusual context in which Merkulova and Chupov's Captain Volkonogov Escaped happens to find itself. War does not necessarily transform political relationships and attitudes, but it invariably throws them into sharper relief.¹ The effect is one of heightening more than transformation. Wars, as "exogenous shocks" to the social order (Ruggie 1993: 155), nevertheless become the crucibles of potential political change. However calamitous, the invasion of Ukraine represents in this regard an opportunity, not only analytically, but politically, not least for any progressive or emancipatory agenda. This is illustrated by the mixed ramifications of war for a film of this kind. On the one hand, it throws its very reception – its communicative viability – into question. Should it become part of a boycott of Russia, given this new confirmation of its already burgeoning pariah status, at least from the perspective of a broadly conceived 'West'? On the other, war turns its own oppressive spotlight upon the very substance of Captain Volkonogov Escaped, heightening its effect, relevance, and importance. This has been the impetus, among other things, for making the work the focus of the following discussion.

What follows, on one level, is a point about policy, that is, the policy of engagement or disengagement with Russia, as an international pariah, as the purveyor of tyranny at home and, not least, abroad, given the privations of what Michael Walzer (1977: 29-33) so eloquently dubbed the “tyranny of war”. This is a rather simple point, but one employing much more intricate grounds by way of support. Indeed, the grounds for advocating engagement with Russian culture, that is, with Russian artists and writers, are more important than the suggestion itself, in all its specificity. For the grounds entail an argument about the character of political struggle per se and the role played in this regard by aesthetic expression in general and film in particular. In this sense, the pros and cons – and/or appropriate dimensions – of a cultural boycott are to be used to highlight much broader questions about the operation and role of cinema. These are not primarily questions about what film is or how it works, but rather what it does: the marks it leaves on its spectators, its place within, and workings upon, the social fabric.

The film premiered at the Venice International Film Festival, back in those simpler, headier, ‘post-Covid’ days, in the autumn of 2021. By the time it had made it – just – to the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (KVIFF), in July, 2022, the “special military operation” (in the dissimulating language of Russian authorities) was well underway and with no apparent end in sight. Festival programmers must have thought long and hard about whether to screen it and then, having elected to do so, they certainly felt obliged to provide a public statement explaining their rationale. Inevitably, *Captain Volkonogov Escaped*, as a Russian made and publicly funded film, was already deeply embroiled in the turmoil and controversy surrounding the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This apparently disrupted or at least complicated what would otherwise likely have been more-or-less routine appearances on the festival circuit. Having premiered to acclaim in Venice, the film becomes, according to custom, a prime candidate for other festivals over the following year. There is little doubt that the February 2022 invasion has impeded its circulation, however.² It was screened at KVIFF nonetheless, almost a year after its initial release but, in the event, it behoved the festival organisers to provide a rationale and justification – at least partly prompted by collective objections raised by a group of Ukrainian filmmakers.

The festival’s official position was essentially that this Russian film was far from being for Russia or, more precisely, for the oppressive regime currently shaping its destiny and its foreign misadventures. According to the joint statement on behalf of the festival by its president Jiří Bartoška, executive director Kryštof Mucha and artistic director Karel Och:

Although the film is set in 1938, quite obvious parallels with the current situation can be found in its story. We believe that the film provides a fitting description of how the manipulative actions of a despotic leader can influence the mindset of the majority of the society, purposefully create enemies of the regime in the name of ideology and ruthlessly annihilate them, and how such actions ultimately lead to a national tragedy. In this sense, we see the film *Captain Volkonogov Escaped* as an indirect, but very distinct criticism of the current Russian state regime (Bartoška, Mucha and Och 2022).

The film's embrace is justified by its relevance to an appropriate political stance vis-à-vis the vicissitudes of Putin's regime. Such relevance lies in the power of the evocation of the past, and the presumption that the present-day spectator can readily identify with the experiences of bygone times because of their essential commensurability. The film, in other words, engages the historical imagination in a way that lends itself readily to transhistorical comparisons. It will be argued in the following pages that *Captain Volkonogov Escaped* illustrates the political importance of the historical imagination and the peculiar power of film in putting it to work.

The Politics of Film

In film analysis the focus is predominantly on the aesthetic qualities of cinema, with an emphasis on formal characteristics. The focus, in other words, is what films say and how they say it. Accounts of what films do, in terms of their human and social impact, are less common. The reasons for this are not hard to uncover. Films' effects are intangible, uncertain and hence resistant to rigorous analysis. Such intrinsic disincentives have been compounded by the enduring thrall of the positivist 'revolution' in American social sciences and humanities in the 1950s and 60s.³ The empiricist turn entailed in efforts to emulate the scientific rigour of the natural sciences lent itself to a narrowing of concerns and approaches. More-or-less self-conscious positivists were inclined to concentrate on what was observable and, where the lives and interactions of human beings were concerned, then this clearly meant behaviour. Speculation about the directly inaccessible mental world, as the opaque repository of all manner of obscure beliefs, motivations, and intentions, is in these terms far too nebulous for the purposes of serious scientific inquiry.

The peculiar outcome of such a point of view over the ensuing decades has been the widespread tendency to settle on some simple presuppositions about relevant motivations and intentions and their relative immutability. It is this that partly accounts for the pervasive influence of one or another form of rational-choice analysis, which more-or-less directly imitates the widely hallowed model and yardstick of neoclassical economics.⁴ It is the virtual necessity of guiding research by means of one or another form of explanatory argument that prompts the regular albeit reluctant foray into the mysterious internal world of thought and deliberation. In lieu of a long digression into the workings of positivism, it would suffice for the purposes at hand to give an illustrative example of the logic at work. The reader is encouraged to consider if other examples of past and present social-science and humanities research exhibit a similar logic.

Consider the hypothesis of conflict diversion or external scapegoating. Numerous scholars devoted considerable effort in the 1960s and 70s to verifying this hypothesis statistically by compiling large catalogues of meticulously coded examples of armed conflicts between states. This was part of the huge, well-funded, and high-profile "Correlates of War" project, initiated by the acclaimed American political scientist, David Singer, in 1963 (Singer and Diehl 1991), which has continued to generate datasets and their interpretation for over half a century (Hensell and Mitchell 2014). The attempt to demonstrate the conflict-diversion hypothesis was at any rate largely in vain, without seeming to diminish interest in the idea (Blomdahl 2017). Setting aside the thorny question of whether such an internal-to-external conflict pattern exists or not, let us consider the thinking behind the hypothesis, the necessary grounds for its formulation in the first place. Here lies the familiar rational-actor assumption. Such rational-actor presuppositions are so routine in social science as to be easily

overlooked. They are as ubiquitous as they are – usually – implicit, taken almost a priori, as an unquestioned given in human affairs. Such a tendency has hardly escaped comment, even within mainstream IR circles, most famously in the seminal and critical observations of foreign-policy specialist Graham Allison (1969; 1971).

In the case of diversion theory, political leaders are assumed to rationally (that is, systematically) pursue their self-interest (some form of egoism being a given of most rational-actor analysis). They can therefore be expected to take measures to protect themselves in the event of threats to the political order and/or their own position. One such measure with good prospects of success would be to provide distraction from internal grievances and even a scapegoat towards whom the blame might be diverted, in the form of an external enemy. The privations of fighting a war against a common foe might then also draw people together, and encourage them to downplay their own differences, not least any dissatisfaction with their rulers.

What this (and many other similar research exercises) illustrates is that informed and guarded speculation about the internal lives of human beings is indispensable to any serious inquiry into their affairs. By downplaying this tricky but unavoidable dimension of social inquiry, positivists and their fellow travellers effectively adopt the most epistemologically – and politically – conservative position possible. They thus neglect the underlying conditions of, and potential divergences from, dominant, conventional modes of behaviour, which might throw light on the prospects of present or future change.⁵

It should be emphasised that a consideration of the political effects of film does not exclude the possibility of empirical inquiry, only that any data collected, as always, will provide only indirect indicators of certain, restricted aspects of the ‘objects’ or, more properly, the subjects of interest. Empirical examinations are invariably insufficient in themselves, providing what must operate as limited clues in a broader web of meaning and explanatory narrative. A creative mental exercise of abduction is always a vital (though routinely overlooked and typically underrated) component of any scholarly inquiry, those of the so-called natural sciences being no exception. Abduction is the exercise of placing empirical clues in a broader interpretive frame: What can be plausibly extrapolated from the limited evidence at hand: what are likely or at least possible causal explanations one might reconstruct on its basis? This is the kind of detective work entailed in most serious research in the social sciences and humanities, which tends to be taken for granted.⁶

The importance and contemporary topicality of engaging in such investigation of film’s social effects cannot be overstated. There is plenty of evidence that the visual in general has deep roots within and abiding influence upon modern Western and, by imperial and neo-imperial association, ‘global’ culture.⁷ The peculiar power of moving pictures as, in Walter Benjamin’s terms, the quintessentially industrial and mechanised medium (1969 [1935]), builds upon this embedded cultural resonance of visual cues and representations. Progressive internationalisation, fuelled by industrialisation, has further strengthened the salience and power of the visual through its capacity to cut through linguistic differences and achieve a form of messaging that is potentially more culturally mobile. This has been especially important in the burgeoning realm of transnational advertising (Barber 2008).

Film in Action

Let us frame the discussion to follow by identifying the process of interest, already flagged as ‘what film does’. The first step, in other words, is an exercise in process tracing, to delineate the parameters of the chosen analytical focus (see Beach and Pedersen 2013 for an introduction to methods thereof). The goal in this regard is exploratory, to postulate, through informed and hence guarded speculation, the broad shape and direction of such a process for the purposes of further consideration – including, in principle, empirical investigation – and, indeed, correction. Such exploration begins with – and hinges upon – the intended and expected (with more or less justification) effects of the audio-visual narrative itself, in its various aspects. The craft of filmmaking, at its best, promises to achieve what it sets out to achieve. The measure and repository of good filmmaking is in essence its phenomenology, its cognitive and bodily effects.⁸ Herein lies the film’s capacity to be interesting, affecting and/or, not least, entertaining. The cinematic craftsman certainly works such corporeal levers in the relative dark – literally and figuratively – dependent on the imaginative construction of the hypothetical spectator occupying their notional theatre seat. Even more obscure are the lasting impressions and enduring power of the medium. Can it change lives, even leave a mark on society per se? Can it at least provide an indicator of more general forces of change? Here connections might be postulated, but little taken for granted, let alone demonstrated. Even surveys compiling spectators’ reported reactions (such as Ji and Raney 2016) are another form of indirect evidence, and one focused narrowly on one stage of a social process. In cases of peculiarly powerful filmmaking, the evidence of its immediate and lasting effects – and affect – can nevertheless be surprisingly compelling. Consider, for example, the veteran Indonesian assassin Anwar Congo’s delayed-effect on-screen reaction to his own crimes, having been encouraged to re-enact them on camera, in Joshua Oppenheimer’s innovative documentary, *The Act of Killing* (2012), as well as the ensuing heightened social awareness and criticism of the anti-Communist genocide of the 1960s in which he had participated. Timothy Deane-Freeman (2022: 16) makes the highly persuasive case that “[a]t the individual level of Congo’s body, and at the molar level of the social body, this is an instance of change.”

The analysis must begin, at any rate, with what the filmmaker does and more or less consciously intends, and with what degree and variety of success. *Captain Volkonogov Escaped* tells the story of a functionary of the state in its most extreme and authoritarian form, what some have conceived, not without controversy (though the controversy has faded with time and the spoils of Cold-War victory), as totalitarianism.⁹ The year is 1938, close to the apogee of Stalin’s stranglehold on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the setting, the opaque and tight-knit organs of ‘totalitarian’ law enforcement.

The captain is one of a group of fit young men working as torturers and assassins for the domestic security agency, The People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). As, one-by-one, his comrades are called in for a distinctly ominous-sounding “re-evaluation”, Volkonogov finally elects to make a run for it. For some reason, he hides a case-folder behind a pillar before making his getaway. Before long, disguised as one more scruffy civilian, he is improbably swept up in a late-night work-party to bury, ironically enough, the comrades he recently abandoned to their fates. At this point, the film, in full thriller mode, expresses its first undertones of horror, as, still more improbably, his lately departed closest friend rises from the grave to deliver a warning and a challenge. He will burn in hell

for his sins. His only possible escape is to repent and earn the forgiveness of at least one of the nearest and dearest of his many victims. Taking the warning to heart he resorts to the drastic measure of returning to his place of work to retrieve the concealed folder, only to be pursued in his effort to flee the building, and finally cornered by his armed superior, Major Golovnia. Ironically, Golovnia who, one suspects, is dying from consumption, is overcome by a coughing fit at this, of all moments, allowing his captive to slip away. Volkonogov then proceeds to track down one bereaved relative after another, while eluding his pursuers. He meets with everything except forgiveness – madness, despair, conformism, jaded indifference – until finally, when least expected, he finds one more casualty of Stalinism in the loft of a dismal apartment building...

The form is in essence classic thriller: its protagonist, the 'hero' of the story, faces conflict and a personal challenge, which he endeavours to overcome. Indeed, this is high drama of the quintessentially cinematic variety. The action-packed cat-and-mouse chase across the streets of Leningrad recalls the pacing and exuberance of Tom Tykwer's offbeat masterpiece, *Lola rennt / Run Lola Run* (1998, Germany). Here, the protagonist's flight is breathlessly interspersed with desperate encounters with those to whom, despite their universal reluctance, he appeals for help, the only help left to him in the face of catastrophe: forgiveness. There is another layer and complexity here, however, with distinctly Russian roots.

The film's formal and generic properties are belied by some key features of story content, whose unconventionality, at least from a Western perspective, promise to destabilise spectator expectations and response. First and foremost, the protagonist is essentially an anti-hero, readily despised for his part in institutionalised atrocities, hampering spectator-identification or embrace even as the action and focus encourage it. He is a far cry from the Western conventional action-hero. The film's central figure builds on Russian literary traditions, conducive to bringing him to the fore with all attendant potential for the deeply ironic and downright absurd.¹⁰ Indeed, the subject and meaning of his drama is laced with tension-confounding predictability and absurdity. The title itself drips with the irony of a place from which there is literally no escape – assuming fidelity to the totalitarian mythology. The tension is slackened then by the extinction of realistic hope. Spiritual salvation is a rather abstract goal for the muscle-toned workhorse of organised terror and is no more promising for all that. If there is a God, then we will hardly expect the poor captain to escape damnation either. The hopelessness is mesmerising and, after a while, transfixing. It follows him everywhere. On the rare occasion this is confronted directly, it resembles a statement of the obvious. A young girl, tending the bonfire of personal effects that will follow the loved-one into oblivion, comments without rancour, "No-one is going to forgive you" – the chilling but unsurprising words of the proverbial truth-telling child.

For Westerners the film recalls a further, deep-seated cultural genre, adding texture to the familiar chase-trope, though this may have limited resonance with Russian audiences. This is the chivalric trial. The true love in the case of this dedicated social outsider is naturally absent, but he endeavours nonetheless to prove his worth, like any honourable knight of the mediaeval realm, in the eyes of God. This probably inadvertent association reflects this mediaeval literary genre's resemblance, through its structural or morphological similarities (Propp 1968 [1928]), to tropes of broader reach and significance, the biblical lesson and even its still broader, pagan relative, the fairy tale, here transposed with visual panache to the quintessentially modern – and modernist – setting of interwar

Russia. As Natascha Drubek-Meyer (2023:199) puts it, the film's "protagonist must undergo several trials as he completes his mission, adhering to the classical structure of a fairy tale."

The deeply mined mythic narrative conventions combine with earthy imagery, juxtaposing squalor with apparent grandeur, to lend the film more than a little flavour of horror, in keeping with tendencies not uncommon among fairy tales. Drubek-Meyer suggests that the filmmakers may have taken some inspiration from Gogol's own classic contributions to Gothic literature, given their previous film-adaptation work in this area (2023:199). The film, at any rate, seems to channel a little of the incipient horror of the brothers Grimm and visualise that horror in a way reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch, renowned illustrator of hell, who, at the reputed dawn of the modern epoch, seemed to capture the essence, at least to modern eyes, of mediaeval brutality. A subtle yet important effect of the visual storytelling should be noted in this regard.

The *mise-en-scène* is nicely, expertly crafted with rich palette and lighting. Indeed, aesthetic considerations seem to have been paramount, without ever devolving into empty formalism. The filmmakers aim, with considerable success, to create the impression of a cohesive and atmospheric narrative universe. The film's dense, diverse referentiality, from anachronistic constructivist-style graffiti¹¹ to *Clockwork-Orange*-style uniforms (Romney 2021) (Fig. 1), lends it a timeless quality. This, I believe, has implications for the character and capacity of period drama *per se* as social critique. The painstaking attention to authenticity, paradoxically, can, and often does, create its own sense of unreality. It easily tends towards a highly artificial composite of definitively period elements, riven from their own historical context. The arch example to the point of parody would be the ITV (UK) television production of *Poirot* or *Agatha Christie's Poirot* (created by Clive Exton and Brian Eastman 1989-2013). The *mise-en-scène* of almost every shot is saturated with the Art Deco design for which the period is most noted. Similar, if milder, tendencies can be observed in a new Czech feature, *Matěj Chlupáček's Úsvit / We Have Never Been Modern* (2023, Czech Republic, Slovakia), itself billed, a little misleadingly, as a kind of detective story, and which happens to share *Poirot's* interwar setting. This is suggestive of the cultural reach of pop-culture output like *Poirot* and its associated period-drama conventions.

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NKVD comrades in uniform, not historically accurate but a stimulus to the spectator's own associations (image courtesy of AS Fidalgo)

The effect of such extreme, literal-minded historicisation is extraordinarily self-defeating, even de-historicising. The social milieu – or *habitus* – at any historical juncture is a haphazard assemblage of prevailing rules and habituated differentiated roles, together with an array of accumulated material products and environment. In the terms favoured by cultural theorist, Fredrik Jameson, drawing on Marx, to properly historicise the subject is to consider how she is necessarily embedded within a more-or-less stable but historically contingent mode of production (1984: 89-90). In the most prosaic terms, but highly relevant to constituting the visual field, older artefacts and infrastructure tend to recede without disappearing. Canals and railways persist, for example, even if, in the 'the age of the automobile', their time – their indispensability to a mode of production – is passed. The historical caricature thus has its own cartoonish unreality, erasing social-historical nuance and connection, be it

back into the foundational past or forward into the suppositional future. Such connections are the raw material of social critique, its necessary if not sufficient condition. By erasing them, the sense of the past is of something bracketed in its one-dimensionality, almost devoid of social context or content, and thus hard to relate to 'real life', to the personal experience of another time, to the experience, that is, of any historicised subject.

The anachronistic assemblage of visual elements in *Captain Volkonogov Escaped* does not provide fidelity to the lost reality of the time any more than the sort of visual index of exaggerated temporal specificity with which I have attempted to contrast it. What it does do, however, is provide an intelligible, sensate analogue of place in time. In its rich diversity it problematises past stereotypes of the past and liberates the imagination. It is possible to imagine, to be specific, a connection to times gone by, to visualise the imprint of mediaeval roots, for example, which are easily erased by the readymade paradigm of the well-oiled totalitarian machine. Just as the roots of the time are more readily imagined, so are the branches that may have grown in the interim.

Consider, for example, the uniformed appearance of the captain and his comrades (Fig. 1). This is not 'historically accurate' but the modernist style, the heavy boots and close-cropped hair, easily recall pan-European impressions of neo-Nazi skinhead gangs. Paradoxically, such self-styled neo-Nazis have themselves rifled Germany's interwar past for elements in the construction of their own, historically specific look. Strident tribal demarcation combined with aggressive in-group conduct; these have realistically recurred and are herein opened to critique. The film does so by using its historical visualisation to highlight the connections and the continuity they make possible. Note that the effect builds on wedding the material features of dress and style to the demeanour and aura of the active subject (Fig. 2). Hence, it is especially easy to see such associations between Volkonogov and contemporary subculture as he is pictured on a tram. He is the outsider, set apart, but confident and even impudent, drawing strength from his uniform and the sense of belonging and superiority it confers. Even in this still form he has a palpable swagger, testimony to the remarkable acting performance by Iurii Borisov.

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Volkonogov on a tram – his physical attitude and bearing, portrayed by Iurii Borisov, make his appearance even more evocative (image courtesy of AS Fidalgo).

Questions of authenticity aside, the quality of the visual storytelling in evidence should not be underestimated. A consummate light and shade, both literally and metaphorically, pervade the work. Here the outer reaches of both the craven and the exquisite are skirted and somehow reconciled in a jarring yet pleasing whole, even as the backdrops revolve with all the dizzying urgency of the fugitive quest. The imagery is striking. The grandeur of the neoclassical building forms the unlikely habitat of thugs and their thuggery. A volleyball gets caught up in the ornamental chandeliers. Within the luxurious chambers and ballrooms, they learn to torture and kill but also to sing and dance – and show much greater skill in the latter, more musical pursuits. The beauty of their humanity is highlighted, only to deepen the despair at the ugliness of its corruption.

At no point is this effect more powerful than in the fall from grace of Volkonogov's closest comrade, Veretennikov. We twice bear witness to his song, his 'party-piece', the Soviet-Russian classic, "Poliushko-pole".¹² The first performance is fit to awe the listener with the sheer beauty of the melody, and the brilliance of its rendition. He sings with a melancholy intensity, which speaks volumes of a resilient but beleaguered humanity trapped in a waking nightmare. His talent is noticed and later used against him. He will be forced to sing it one last time, in cruel self-parody, in a gasmask, as he is starved of oxygen and tortured to death. Thus, history repeats itself, in Marx's own immortal words, "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce" (2006 [1852]: 5).

Venality reigns over the sprawling, dismal city. Volkonogov knows he has betrayed his best friend by bolting and leaving him to his fate. His girlfriend in turn betrays him just a heartbeat later. It is easy to recognise the dilemma they share, however: the stakes are high, no-one is safe, everyone is afraid. As the fugitive races from one possible redeemer to another, the 'lucky ones' who are so far only guilty by association, a picture of society hopelessly corrupted, rotting from within, comes into stark, dispiriting focus. The film works, in other words, to make a powerful impression on the spectator, to engage the imagination, the historical imagination specifically, to picture life as it may have been lived under the thrall of Stalin. One is encouraged to picture a scenario where inherently vulnerable social dynamics of empathy and care have been pushed to their limits and all but extinguished.

There is nothing that truly qualifies as resistance in the story of Captain Volkonogov, for all his 'resistance of arrest' or the conspicuous dynamism of his flight. The barest modicum of opposition on display is in any case wholly incidental to his quest, which, on a secular level, is personal, on a spiritual one, redemptive: a peace to be made with his Maker. No true opposition is posed, just a stalling tactic to buy time needed to attend to more important matters. Resistance is lacking then, but not its familiar handmaiden, critique. The character of the film as critique is largely implicit, but no less powerful for all that, particularly in terms of its political charge – as succour and impetus to resistance of some kind in some form and in some context beyond the confines of its own narrative universe. As such, it warrants closer examination.

The bleakness of the social fabric is the masterfully painted baseline that makes any act of kindness or even warmth appear as something quite extraordinary, a shining apparition on the horizon, the vision of an earthly angel. In this way, the film highlights the quality and importance of something so deceptively simple as human connection and love. The apparition comes in the style of religious iconography near the close of the film. It represents its denouement and its core statement, albeit in visual code. It comes at the point of defeat, the virtual extinction of all remaining hope for our protagonist. He cries out in desperation in the night in the courtyard of a dreary block of flats for a victim, any victim to receive him. A whispered word alerts him unexpectedly to the queen of them all, the old woman, another untouchable, left to die in the building's loft. No-one heeds her, let alone helps her. Indeed, she is almost certainly already dead.

The loft is the scene of a strange, wordless meeting and union (Fig. 3). There he spontaneously cares for the woman in her final moments, taking her in his arms. It is an unmistakable instance of genuine remorse meeting unconditional forgiveness. What lends this its power and clarity is the unmistakable

religious symbolism, creating a recognisable Pietà motif in reverse. The most famous example is Michelangelo's Madonna della Pietà in Saint Peter's Basilica, Vatican City (1498–1499) but the iconographic practices preceded his brilliant interpretation. Indeed, some examples in the Gothic style are to be found in Russian Orthodox churches.

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Volkonogov once more seeks forgiveness, this time in a quasi-Pietà embrace with powerful religious symbolism (image courtesy of AS Fidalgo).

The conclusion of the pursuit comes shortly thereafter, with the dawn and, with a seeming nod to Hollywood action-movie conventions, on the rooftop.¹³ Volkonogov meets his pursuer (himself dying of consumption) and his own end with equanimity and an inner power which had hitherto escaped him. Here lies, if not resistance, the seeds thereof at least, a new belief that is less a spiritual certainty and more a moral and political resilience and sense of possibility, as though he has looked into the nihilist abyss and found, that is, invented – and chosen – a way beyond.

Here, the narrative arguably revisits a familiar problem and crisis of modern existence, as it has featured in Western culture. Among its most revered statements is Joseph Conrad's pioneering modernist novella, *Heart of Darkness* (1998 [1899]). Conrad expresses the individual's confusion and despair in the face of a world that simultaneously exalts her and confines her to a 'rational' iron cage whose purpose, paradoxically, knows no reasonable bounds (Weber 1965 [1919]). This is felt nowhere more acutely than at the colonial limit, where the order channels its resources of fear and violence into the task of conquest, in the formidable jungles of the Congo. Here at the limit, the unspeakable contradiction becomes a visceral affront, an implosion of meaning, exemplified by the iconic, dying words of Conrad's anti-hero, "The horror! The horror!" The repetition is important. It expresses the failure of words, the failure of thought in the face of the unthinkable. Kurtz had entered "the heart of an immense darkness" (Conrad 1998 [1899]: 130) in 'deepest' Africa. He found it again in the remote villages of war-torn Vietnam, as 'reincarnated' by Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979, United States). Volkonogov (a new anti-hero for postmodern times, perhaps) found his own "heart of darkness" in the streets of Stalinist Leningrad. By day, they laid straw in their improvised torture-chambers to soak up the blood, and cranked up a noisy old tractor in the courtyard to muffle the summary executions. By night, they loaded the corpses onto a repurposed tram. The darkness is intense enough.

Film Effects

Timothy Deane-Freeman (2022) attempts to distil a phenomenology and politics of film. His point of departure is Deleuze's account of cinematic tendencies in the aftermath of the great upheavals and catastrophes of the early 20th Century. Deleuze suggested that post-war film, especially in its cutting edge, its various 'new waves', was reacting to a breakdown of connection with the world in the sense of a social realm moving sensibly and meaningfully forward – a world of becoming (Deleuze 1986: 197-215). This could be understood as a kind of collapse of meaning, on a noetic level a "sensory-motor" breakdown (ibid.: 206). Such films, as Deane-Freeman puts it:

...express situations so complex, powers so profound, that the sensory-motor schema can no longer bring its powers of recognition to bear. And in keeping with Deleuze's broader political ontology of thought, this incapacity, this "unthinkable" state of affairs, is that which causes thought to be reborn. Importantly however, this new thought – the condition likewise for new styles of acting – is indifferent to the certainties engendered by the sensory-motor schema. Rather than images about which we can be "sure", the post-war cinema produces images which serve as the object of a tentative and nascent perceptual belief (2022: 6; emphasis in the original).

It is important to highlight what is implicit here regarding human thought in general, as well as its place and operation in a specific social-historical context. The reason 'events beyond belief' might be considered an opportunity is because of the way such beliefs operate in normal, modern, capitalist society, what Antonio Gramsci would call its "hegemonic" and hence routine operations – its "certainties" in this context (1973 [1929–1935]). Beliefs operate as habits of thought, paradigmatic assumptions about the essential inevitability and goodness of state-based political, and capitalist economic, organisation, most importantly (Cox 1981: 136). The shock of the encounter with their limits, their naked contradictions, can be the impetus to transform such habits into active thought, including the engagement of the imagination: Received beliefs give way to the suspension of disbelief that other possibilities are excluded by presupposition. Such receptivity to new suppositions and beliefs-in-the-making constitutes, in these terms, an activation of an otherwise dormant capacity for political agency. This points to the central paradox that interested Deleuze among others, that it is the realisation of absolute powerlessness and existential impossibility that activates the creative human potential to 'think again' and imaginatively reconstitute – at least in principle – the social fabric.

Such an active reconstitution of 'belief' does not occur in a bodily or social vacuum, however; new ideas do not burst into existence without context or origin. Desire and deliberation respond to the raw material of experience, of which past instruction and learning form a part, including the collective 'memory' constituted by historical pedagogy for example (Posen 1993).¹⁴ An example would be the way, through a variety of media, an understanding of the nation and nationhood, including its history or background story, emerges, which, in its key elements, is widely shared.¹⁵ What distinguishes "thought" in the Deleuzian sense is the conscious selection and evaluation of experience or, more precisely, the categorical and imaginary analogues, which constitute the cognitive storehouse of memory. In these terms, what allows the comprehension of and feeling for this cinematic narrative, is its commensurability with stored experience. The intelligibility and emotional power of the 'totalitarian nightmare' reflect its roots in and resonance with lived experience in modern mass societies almost anywhere, including the so-called liberal democracies. An example already mentioned is the recognisability of the neo-Nazi style as something widely committed to memory across broad swathes of the West and far beyond. The critique of authoritarian excess, in other words, stimulates disquiet at the authoritarian elephant in the democratic room. The human and social-historical realism of the film is the key to its power in this regard, a variety of realism much more important than the authenticity-chasing niceties of period costumes and sets.

If one is to consider the Soviet Union as a reformation but also continuation of a long-standing Russian expansion and colonisation across the steppes of Eurasia, then the picture painted by the film avoids that common error shared by Empire's devotees as much as its critics, to overrate its

coherence and unassailability, and misread Weber's ideal-type of the iron cage as a literal description of what is always a much more messy and prosaic practice. The rational project of empire or imposed universal social ideal (qua the mythology of totalitarianism) is far from seamless. It is readily explained as, and hence widely believed to be, a systematic project, but this is typically a post-facto rationalisation in habituated conformity to the conventions of rationalism. Empires and states may well arise out of a multitude of incremental decisions and improvisations, more chaotic than orderly, as Jon E. Wilson convincingly suggests in his meticulous dissection of the fitful synergy of British initiatives in India over the course of 200 years (2016).

It is at the micro-level, in the face-to-face meeting with power, that the shabby, improvised quality of the putative political machine is revealed. This is recognisable and comprehensible to most, as the analogue of the small thoughtless humiliations of the workplace or the offices of the larger institutions, for example. Here lies the empirical, less conceptual, and more historically accurate reality of the proselytised totalitarian machine. This is the realism at the core of *Captain Volkonogov Escaped*, which it shares with another unlikely genre of history (that is, the tragicomic), Armando Iannucci's *The Death of Stalin* (2017, France, United Kingdom, Belgium), and one remarkable forebear from the Soviet era itself, the granular dissection of idealised police-work and socialist project provided by Aleksei German's *Moi drug Ivan Lapshin / My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (1985, Soviet Union).¹⁶ The continuities thus punctured but hardly interrupted are as remarkable as they are absurd. Soviet military prowess was fabulously overrated in 1950s America, as policymakers constituted, through a perfect union of bombast and paranoia, the notorious 'missile gap'. Little seems to have been learned from that experience (the odd retrospective notwithstanding [Renshon 2009]), given the many years of careful, security-minded Eastward directed provocations following the end of the Cold War and the Soviet Union itself, as well as the unrealistic expectations on both sides of what Russia might hope to achieve militarily in its latest incursion into Ukraine.

Such unreality, typically dressed up, ironically enough, in the language of a self-conscious and self-satisfied political realism, is confronted by the micro-history of the kind presented in this film (among others). This is no small achievement in fulfilling the always formidable task of 'speaking truth to power.' The details, and their resonance with lived reality, however fictional or non-factual they may be, matter enormously in this respect. It is in such details that the gap between expectations and reality is confronted, the impossibility of the world is encountered, and the potential freed to bring a new world into being.

It matters, then, to get to observe the wretched way the authorities get things done and the importance of improvisation. The watchword is whatever works: A noisy tractor becomes a gun silencer; straw protects the office floor from the blood of torture-victims, trams are requisitioned to get the corpses to suitable wasteland for their disposal in shallow mass-graves. The double quality of rule and rulers in action captures the full spectrum of the true modern horror, the too-rigid routines on one side, the excessive license of the titular authorities on the other. Hence the modern is never quite as modern as it is cracked up to be. The squalor, the dirt, the ignorance and, above all, the privilege of the mediaeval live on in their dismal continuity, from one metropolitan street corner to another.

The film unlocks memories of fear-induced disdain and hostility but also the antidotes of love and courage. Such memories constitute a shared, transborder history of both oppression and solidarity. It is important to emphasise the commonalities at work at any historical juncture, whatever its own specific but hardly unique habits of mind, which, among other things, tend to emphasise difference. What is common to our time, along with fracture and division, is a widespread cultural landscape and social dynamic of suspicion and fear. This is the near-universal problematic at work in the film narrative at hand, notwithstanding the specificity of its focus on the Soviet Union on the eve of war. It is the common denominator infusing every moment until its sudden release, near the close, somewhere in the rafters of a claustrophobic block of flats, when fear is somehow left behind.

Conclusion

The Western-global empire of fear has been centuries in the making. It was the hesitations and fears of traders in India that constituted the real motor of incremental but solidifying imperial dominion. Such hesitations and fears reached an apogee in the paranoid delusions of Stalin, who established sufficient control of the Communist Party to shape the country in their image. The West, meanwhile, has turned in/security into a science. Consumer-culture, along with the medicalised, individuated concepts applied to most human problems, work together to sap the will and confidence of the individual herself to strike a path of significant "individuality."¹⁷ The deep-rooted precarious atmosphere of modern, urban society in turn feeds into the language and ethos of competing, securitised states (see Williams 2003).¹⁸

The 'executive committee' of the Karlovy Vary Film Festival were right to point out that Captain Volkonogov Escaped was actually a bold, albeit oblique attack on the Russian regime. It harnesses the human imagination to make the connections between the old and new faces of authoritarianism. Indeed, the film succeeds in ridiculing the bogus spirituality of the Russian national idea Putin has harnessed to the ship of state. It highlights the corrupting and debilitating effects of dogma as the extinction rather than the exultation of true human spirit. As such it speaks to themes with applicability far beyond the specifics of one more imperial adventure.

In the meantime, the continuing tyranny of war leaves a series of insoluble moral and political problems in its wake. The only answer to the violence and the tyranny seems to be more of the same, with all the long-term difficulties that will generate, including further cycles of provocation and fear through the continued expansion of NATO. Perhaps the greatest danger of war is its capacity for a kind of social escalation, where opposition to Putin and his regime elides into the demonisation of the Russian people. A cultural boycott plays into such a tendency. I would argue that solidarity should be sought with the victims and resisters of oppression wherever they are, not least inside Russia. Core to such solidarity is the celebration of our capacity for communication and self-expression, nowhere more in evidence than in art. Our highest expressions are our international treasures. There is never a good argument for squandering them.

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Notes

1 This may indeed be the case even before a shot is fired. Situations where wars loom on the horizon – military crises – have a kind of heightening effect, mobilising forces but also feelings, political values, and sense of self. In this way, the military conflict represents, in the words of Eric Herring (1995), both “danger and opportunity.” It should be acknowledged that such ‘bodily effects’ (to the human corpus as well as the body politic) of the military-political upheaval are largely neglected – for reasons elaborated in footnote 4. My own work in this area (1994, 1996) represents an exception.

2 An example is the apparent hesitation to release the film widely in Norway, noted by Frank Stavik (2023), Managing Director for Fidalgo Films Distribution. It remains unreleased at the time of writing, as it does in the United Kingdom, suggesting that European distribution has been generally limited. The film has now been released in France, belatedly, on 29th March this year, as the cinema portal Cineuropa – <https://cineuropa.org/film/408204/> (accessed September 12, 2023) – reports and the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) confirms: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13322726/releaseinfo/> (accessed September 12, 2023). This nevertheless represents further evidence of widespread hesitation, at best, to disseminate the film. Early French involvement in the production likely improved the prospects of French release. The film is listed as a French co-production, and a company based in Paris, Memento International, acquired its international sales rights in 2021 (Vourlias 1921). There is no evidence the film has been shown in any form in North America, beyond isolated festival screenings. Though Samuel Goldwyn Films acquired North American rights before the war (Keslassy 2021), the company now makes no reference to Captain Volkonogov Escaped as part of its retinue. IMDb reports a scattering of general releases across Europe and beyond from late 2022 onwards: Taiwan (October 2022), Netherlands (November 2022), Estonia (January 2023), Israel (March 2023), and South Korea (August 2023). Such reports may exaggerate the actual dissemination of the film. Tellingly, Norway is also included in IMDb’s listing (as May 2023). This suggests that the film has officially been ‘released’ and yet no cinemas have so far been willing to take it. In other words, the boycott may be initiated higher or lower down the cinematic food chain.

3 Hedley Bull (1966) succinctly and contemporaneously encapsulated and critiqued this epistemological turn in the field of international relations – as practised in the United States especially. For an overview of later reactions to and departures from positivism, see Jarvis (2002).

4 Space precludes a pan-social-scientific roundup. It should suffice for present purposes to note a few prominent examples. The prevalence in the field of international relations (IR), for instance, of rational (or public) choice analysis, often entailing the use of game theory, is exemplified by the study of international cooperation conceived as the generation of 'regimes' in accordance with a broadly neoliberal-institutionalist approach. See the comprehensive survey of A. Hasenclever, P. Mayer and V. Rittberger (2000). One of the preeminent IR scholars of the 20th Century, Robert O. Keohane, provided the guiding rationale and recommendation for such a direction back in the twilight years of the Cold War (1988). Its flagship work was Robert Axelrod's *The Evolution of Cooperation* (1984). According to Keohane, the merit of this kind of perspective, compared to others dismissed as "reflective", was in creating a clear and highly practical empirical research agenda (1988: 389-393). Even attempts to bridge the divide between domestic and international politics have readily resorted to game theory, notably the work of Putnam (1988) and Moravcsic (1993). Putnam, interestingly, applied a similar methodological individualism to American societal trends in his influential inquiry, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). Finally, the study of military crises (raised in footnote 1) readily characterises itself as decision-making analysis (see, for example, the pioneering game-theoretical analysis of Snyder and Diesing [1977] and the acclaimed and newly relaunched synthesis of Richard Ned Lebow [2020]), thereby begging the question of the relative autonomy of political agents, and focusing on their relative rationality, admittedly in some cognizance of its practical limitations, as highlighted by a focus on the psychology of "misperception" (Jervis 1976) or organisational frictions (Allison 1969, 1971).

5 These very omissions form the core agenda of an alternative, critical-theoretical perspective on world politics, as Robert Cox advocated with some fanfare over 40 years ago (1981).

6 A notable exception is the philosopher Roy Bhaskar's efforts to unpack the practical process of research in order to highlight its necessary (in his view) realist characteristics. See, for example, his seminal work, *A Realist Theory of Science* (2008 [1975]).

7 See in this regard the powerful, historically grounded inquiries of W.J.T. Mitchell, which trace the roots of the European cultural presence of the image and its power within Christianity's conflicted relationship to religious iconography (1986). The role and power of the image in modern painting and advertising is explored in John Berger's still influential work, *Ways of Seeing* (1972).

8 See the in-depth study of Sobchack (1992).

9 See, for example, C.P. Macpherson's (1952) critique of Jacob Talmon's account of the intellectual roots of totalitarianism (1952). See also the further consideration of totalitarianism, which follows later in this article.

10 To reference only some of the more obvious examples, there is the dark anti-hero of Dostoevskii's *Crime and Punishment* (2001 [1866]), and the absurd and even grotesque protagonists of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* (1985 [1842]) and *The Overcoat* (2014 [1842]).

11 The selection of such graffiti was a deliberate departure from literal historical authenticity on the part of the filmmakers, as they revealed in Q&A session at a screening at KVIFF in July, 2022 (De Castro 2022).

12 The song was composed by Lev Knipper and Viktor Gusev in 1933.

13 Perhaps the most famous, and certainly the least generic, example is the iconic rooftop denouement of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982, United States, Hong Kong).

14 'Memory' in this sense is used advisedly. It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage at length with the nascent field of memory studies, which has grown exponentially in recent decades, and boasts its own journal, *Memory Studies*. It will suffice for the purpose at hand to note that I share some of the reservations expressed by David Berliner (2005) that apart from repackaging well-rehearsed themes in new conceptual clothing, the 'field' has too readily conflated distinct processes observing different logics. These are, on one hand, the more-or-less unconscious generation and operation of memory at an individual level and, on the other, so-called collective memory, the constitution of shared understandings of a notionally shared past. The latter has more commonly been conceived as a type of discourse, in keeping with Foucault and other poststructuralist thinkers (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002), or, in dialogue with the field of social anthropology, as myth (Berliner 2005: 205). My interest, at any rate, lies more specifically in how memory as it is likely to operate in many individuals, as a broadly commensurate human cognitive process (see the classic work of Robert Jervis [1976] on the role played by cognition in international politics), in relation to the perception and experience of film. Such aspects are explored by Sara Jones's study of documentaries about the German Democratic Republic (2012).

15 The most thoroughly and convincingly articulated account of this remains the classic work of Benedict Anderson (1991).

16 German's work is politically notable for flouting the regime-friendly conventions of the familiar security-services drama in Soviet film and television (Rifkin 1992), in stark contrast to Vladimir Basov's immensely popular TV mini-series, *Shchit i mech / The Shield and the Sword* (1968), for example.

17 The idea of individuality is explored with no greater insight than in the classic work of John Stuart Mill (2011 [1859]: 100-133). Stuart Ewan's classic study of the heyday of mass production and the birth of modern advertising (1976) provides the perfect introduction to the capitalist culture of insecurity. He dissects with an almost forensic precision how in the United States, in the early 20th

Century, the new advertising industry sought to play on and amplify individual social anxieties, drawing on insights from the nascent field of psychoanalysis.

18 For the most penetrating historical analysis of the deep capitalist roots and continuity of turn-of-the-century securitisation, see the works of Mark Neocleous (especially 2000, 2006, 2008 and 2021). He provides a welcome counter to the now common, yet strangely ahistorical characterisation of contemporary security obsessions and excesses as exceptional, following the lead of the influential Giorgio Agamben (1995).

Bio

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