

Loyalty by obfuscation: Aleksandr Sokurov's *Days of eclipse* vs the Strugatskii brothers' *A billion years before the end of the world*¹

Andrei Rogatchevski

Abstract. This article seeks to rectify two misconceptions that have been following Aleksandr Sokurov's award-winning sf film *Days of Eclipse* (*Dni zatmeniia*; USSR 1988) almost since its release. The first is reflected in the claim that the film – with its odd mix of enigmatic fictional scenes and documentary footage that would not look out of place on a visual anthropology course – is not only difficult to fathom but downright 'anti-explicatif' (Ostria 59).² The second has been expressed in a statement that *Days of Eclipse* 'has altered everything but the names of the principal characters' (Moskvina 45) in the Strugatskii brothers' story it has adapted, *A Billion Years Before the End of the World* (*Za milliard let do kontsa sveta*, 1976-77; see Strugatskie 1988: 3-148).³ Even Boris Strugatskii himself said of the film that, 'significant, powerful and *sui generis* exceptional' as it may be, it is 'far removed from both the original book and the last version of the authors' script' (Strugatskie 2001: 648). I will argue that there is enough left of the source material in the film to help the viewer make sense of it – especially if the viewer has a prior knowledge of the source material. I will also try to explain why Sokurov has opted for obscuring the Strugatskii's message as his book adaptation strategy. Finally, I will attempt to categorise Sokurov's approach to film adaptation in the context of some of his other films, as well as some Strugatskii-related films by other directors.

Days of Eclipse has been described as a set of 'mysterious circumstances, in which the investigators cannot yet even grasp what a clue might consist in, let alone the nature of the events to be clarified' (Jameson 103). Still, it is fairly obvious that the film depicts a situation familiar to many creative individuals (including scholars and scientists), who often feel that the world has conspired against them to put paid to, or slow down, their artistic and intellectual pursuits. Somewhere in late Soviet Turkmenistan, several people – the military engineer Snegovoi, the army officer Gubar', the medical doctor Malianov and the geologist Vecherovskii, among others – are repeatedly subjected to pressure from an unknown powerful force, possibly a supercivilisation, wishing them to stop whatever they have been doing. The obstacles put in their way range from mere distractions (such as an unexpected long-term visit of a relative) and bribes (a frozen lobster arriving in a parcel from a mysterious benefactor, at a time of food shortages, in oppressive heat) to emotional blackmail and potentially harmful natural phenomena (Malianov's writing causes physical pain in a little boy and leads to a sudden full solar eclipse). Sinister deaths also play an important part (Vecherovskii's dog is smashed across the wall in his house as a warning to him,⁴ and Snegovoi commits suicide). Unsurprisingly, most people concerned give up their quest (the history teacher Glukhov evidently falls into this category and is trying to convince Malianov and Vecherovskii to follow his example) but at least one of them (Malianov) is bravely (or perhaps foolishly) determined to continue, come what may. *Days of Eclipse* can be understood as a paean to the chosen few who are prepared to sacrifice anything in order to

¹ All translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise. I would like to express my gratitude to Ekaterina Rogatchevskaia (London) and Svetlana Bondarenko (Donetsk) for providing access to a number of important bibliographical sources.

² If critics find any logic in the film, it is the 'logic of a nightmare' (Trofimenkov 130).

³ Cf.: *Days of Eclipse* 'reveal no trace whatsoever of their literary source' (Pereslegin 602).

⁴ The dog's body becomes so deformed that one scholar could only identify it as a 'weird dead animal' (Graffy 85), and another, as a 'dark, charred and purulent patch' (Szaniawski 61).

see their creative processes through.

[Days of Eclipse. Krupnyi plan. 2004 – the “Under pressure” still]

The film was shot in the Turkmen town of Krasnovodsk (now Turkmenbashi), where Sokurov grew up. By his own admission, when he ‘read the Strugatskiis’ tale, somewhere in my subconscious it aroused memories of that particular world where people of different nationalities lived, but where there was a complete cultural vacuum, which could reduce even the most unassuming person to despair’ (Graffy 77, qting Andreev 20). Even though the town is inhabited by Armenians, Azeris and Buryats (whose speech, incidentally, is not translated), the local populace is mostly represented by the numerically dominant indigenous Turkmen, who tend to appear on the screen ‘as sick and feeble as the survivors of Auschwitz, grinning toothless at the apparatus, sitting against the mud walls in emaciated inanition, a population of in-bred freaks and mutants’ (Jameson 93) – in clear contrast to the Russian minority (eg Snegovoi, Gubar’ and Malianov), distinguished by superior physical and/or intellectual features.⁵ As if to avoid potential accusations of Russian nationalism (if not white supremacy), it is revealed that Vecherovskii is an exiled Crimean Tartar (adopted by the exiled Volga Germans).⁶

In fact, ethnicity is not at issue here. In an interview, Sokurov referred to the area where the film was made as having ‘no stable, established cultural situation [...], everything is mixed up. The Russian does not understand that he is Russian, the Turkmen that he is Turkmen. Not a single one of the national groups has the chance of realising itself fully here in its spiritual, national substance. And everything exists in parallel, in conditions of senseless interaction and mutual pressure – we tried to convey all this in the film’ (Graffy 77, qtd Popov 79). *Days of Eclipse* is therefore not so much about ethnic inferiority or superiority but rather about obstructions that are mounted by a conventional milieu to impede the progress of an exceptional individual towards self-fulfilment for the sake of the common good. Racial and ethnic features serve here as easily digestible visual means of demonstrating how different certain individuals are from their surroundings. Malianov, Gubar’, Snegovoi and Glukhov clearly stand out from the natives by virtue of being white Europeans (Glukhov, however, has married an Asian – a possible illustration of the fact that he has succumbed to the milieu’s pressure and resigned to his fate).

An unspecified Central Asian setting as a visual equivalent of a conservative environment, with an additional benefit of providing a background that throws the central characters’ special status into sharp relief, was first employed by the Strugatskiis in their own script version of the novel, called *The Day of Eclipse* (*Den’ zatmeniia*, see Strugatskie 2001: 245-305).⁷ In the end, the script remained unused by Sokurov (who had had a regular scriptwriter of his own, Yuri Arabov⁸) – but the director had obviously read it, as some of its components made its way to the film (eg the frozen lobster which had replaced a boxful of alcohol

⁵ Even nameless Russian soldiers in the film read *The Guardian* newspaper and recite Horace in Latin from memory.

⁶ And not the other way round, as Jameson mistakenly claims (96). Cf.: ‘Sokurov must have known what kind of wounds he may disturb portraying Russians as heroes, and non-Russians, as a hostile environment’ (Moskvina 50).

⁷ In the novel, the action takes place in Leningrad (and not in Moscow, as Jameson [93] and Sirivlia [39] state).

⁸ Incidentally, Arabov had to make substantial alterations to his own *Days of Eclipse* script after the film crew’s trip to Turkmenistan: ‘The Asiatic material was so powerful and so metaphorical that it did not need a “fantastic” prop in the dramatic structure. For this reason, all the monologues and dialogues had to be corrected accordingly – simplified, made more down to earth’ (Arabov 2011: 203).

mentioned in the book).⁹ *The Day of Eclipse* is rarely if ever invoked in discussions of Sokurov's adaptation, yet it can be helpful in determining what the Strugatskiis themselves thought should and should not be modified in their own original text in transition to the big screen. A comparison of the Strugatskiis' novel and script, on the one hand, and Sokurov's film, on the other, will enable us to decide how far, and possibly even why, Sokurov deviated from his literary source. Let us start with the novel.

A Billion Years Before the End of the World – translated into English (as *Definitely Maybe*, 1978; expanded second edition 2014), Czech, Estonian, French, German, Hungarian, Japanese, Polish and Swedish – is about a randomly connected group of people (some of whom happen to know each other socially) on the brink of various scientific discoveries. The names of those involved (Malianov, Gubar', Weingarten, Snegovoi, Glukhov and Veчерovskii) will mostly be already familiar to readers of this article, even though their occupation in the book may not necessarily be the same as the one attributed to each of them in the film (Malianov, for instance, is not a medic but an astrophysicist). All the group members are pressurised into dropping their research. The pressure is most likely applied by a secret community of specialised knowledge protectors (not dissimilar to the KGB; the legend of the Nine Unknown Men is alluded to¹⁰). The community's mission is to preserve the globally existing equilibrium of mind and matter, by preventing major scientific breakthroughs and thus as far as possible postponing the end of the world, which the breakthroughs are expected to hasten as they tend to upset the equilibrium, or homeostasis, by striving to 'change the nature of nature' (Strugatskie 1988: 105). The researchers' reputation, families and even life are in danger. The choices they make under pressure also vary if compared to those known from the film (Malianov, for example, does give up in the end, for the sake of his family's safety).

Stylistically, the novel is partly structured as an esoteric text whose cultural references, ranging from the Russian satirists Khemnitser and Averchenko to Guillaume Apollinaire and Akiko Yosano, as well as Graham Greene's *Comedians* and *Our Man in Havana*, are quite demanding for the average reader. Moreover, sometimes they are almost impenetrable for anybody outside an initiated minority, because some of the quotes used (such as those by the mathematician Yury Manin who served as a prototype for Veчерovskii¹¹) have not even been published.¹² In accordance with the novel's overarching theme, such references indicate that there is a body of knowledge that already exists but is yet to be attained.

Unsurprisingly, the script sheds many of these references or replaces them with something more accessible, as cinema presupposes a wider audience. References

⁹ Sokurov was familiar with the brothers' script since the earliest stages of its development (the director was assigned to the project in January 1981 by the Lenfilm Studios, which also contracted the Strugatskiis and the actor Petr Kadochnikov [1944-81] as co-scriptwriters). These are Boris Strugatskii's recollections about working with Sokurov: he 'was willing to compromise. It was not hard to convince him to change his mind. [*Day of Eclipse*] was having prolonged and serious difficulties with getting an approval from the powers-that-be. Idiotic questions and recommendations were coming thick and fast: "What kind of research are the scientists engaged in? Why is the supercivilisation so aggressive? [...]" Gnashing their teeth, the authors [...] had to alter a number of scenes in their entirety. The film director remained calm and collected' (Strugatskie 2001: 647). For Sokurov's own preliminary working notes to what later became *Days of Eclipse*, see Sokurov 2006.

¹⁰ For more on this secret society, allegedly established in 270 BC by the Indian Emperor Ashoka, see Mundy 1924.

¹¹ The philosopher Nikolai Fedorov (1829-1903) has been named as another possible prototype, see Howell 120.

¹² For an incomplete list of these references, accompanied by a critical apparatus, see *Kommentarii*.

become fewer in number and easier to identify and relate to (quotes from Dostoevsky and the poet Nikolai Gumilev are among them). Besides Dostoevsky,¹³ Chekhov is also referenced, because the dialogue in the script is reminiscent of Chekhov's plays: little is revealed directly – the conflict is concealed in the undercurrent. Another notable characteristic of this script is to maximise the visual opportunities: thus, Gubar' is transformed from a person affected by the pressure into a ginger hunchback sent to Malianov to scare him by disappearing now and again – and the concept of the end of the world is expressed through the image of a solar eclipse, which the new title points towards.¹⁴

The same image and almost the same title have been adopted by Sokurov as central for his film, whose dialogue can also be termed Chekhovian. Furthermore, the film reinstates esoteric references abandoned in the Strugatskiis' script, even though they are mostly relegated to the soundtrack in untranslated languages, including German, English and Italian (in the radio broadcasts that the viewer can hear).¹⁵ The already mentioned scene with a soldier reciting Latin verses by heart, and a traditional Turkmen wedding ceremony which the ordinary viewer knows no more about than s/he does about Horace, clearly belong to the same category. And so does a mention of an unspecified 'film by Aleinikov', recalled by Malianov's sister when she and her brother see a stray python. The Aleinikov brothers, Igor' and Gleb, whose films are as unfamiliar to the general public today as they were in the late 1980s, were exponents of the so-called 'parallel cinema', which tried to elevate home videos to the status of independent art house filmmaking, in defiance of the official film studio system and censorship.¹⁶ The 'parallel' filmmakers specialised in creating a 'schizophrenic and absurd world based on the principle of arbitrary improvisation' (Moskvina 52). This definition may to a certain extent be also applied to *Days of Eclipse*.¹⁷ Given that this was Sokurov's first full-length feature film not suppressed by censorship (not to speak of many 'shelved' documentaries), at that point in time he must have identified with 'parallel' (ie underground) filmmaking closer than may have previously been assumed. Yet another major figure of 'parallel cinema', Yevgeny Yufit, trained with Sokurov in 1988-89. Yufit's characteristic trend, the so-called 'necrorealism', uses death as a 'comprehensive organising metaphor for an entire approach to visual representation' (Alaniz and Graham 8).¹⁸ As one expert puts it, in Yufit's films, 'the *necropeople* we see on the screen are simultaneously alive and dead' (Mazin 36). Sokurov is not exactly preoccupied with, say, vampires and zombies (the joys that Soviet cinema – and Soviet culture in general – had by and large missed,

¹³ In this permutation of the story, Malianov gives up his research after being successfully manipulated by a boy stranger who claims that he would be punished if Malianov persists with his studies. In Dostoevsky-like fashion (cf. *The Karamazov Brothers*, Part V, Ch4), Malianov decides that his scientific results are not worth a child's tear.

¹⁴ Other changes in the plot are relatively superficial: Weingarten disappears from the script completely (some of his lines are transferred to Malianov); Malianov is divorced and succumbs to the charms of a witch called Lidochka, sent to distract him from research; and Snegovoi, Glukhov and Vechevskii largely remain as they were in the book: Snegovoi commits suicide, Glukhov gives his research up and Vechevskii soldiers on, gathering other people's 'dangerous' studies in his flat.

¹⁵ 'In *Days of Eclipse*, it is the soundtrack that provides powerful artistic means facilitating the enlargement of the spacial-temporal boundaries of the frame, and takes the action beyond the limits of today's problems, to the level of mankind's concern over the destiny of our entire civilisation' (Egorova 84).

¹⁶ For more on 'parallel cinema', see, for instance, Aleinikov. For some of the Aleinikovs' shorts on DVD, see *Tractors* (original title *Traktora*; USSR 1984-87). Karmen Video Drugoe Kino 2005. Region 0. 1.33:1.

¹⁷ 'I don't understand' is the film's recurrent phrase, spoken by a number of characters.

¹⁸ For some of Yufit's shorts on VHS, see *Werewolf Orderlies* and *Wild Boars of Suicide* (original titles *Sanitary-oborotni* and *Vepri suitsida*; USSR 1984-88). Ekaterinburg Art Home Video Kino bez granits 2003; and *The Woodcutter* and *Spring* (original titles *Lesorub* and *Vesna*; USSR 1987). Ekaterinburg Art Kino bez granits 2004.

despite the official pronouncements that Lenin's body in the Mausoleum was 'more alive than any living being', *zhivee vsekh zhivykh*). Yet Sokurov's sensibilities are significantly informed by the concept of liminality, the borderline between life and death included (see Graffy 74, 87-88; Shemiakin 51).¹⁹ In one of *Days of Eclipse*'s most memorable sequences, vaguely reminiscent of Yufit, Gubar's corpse temporarily comes back to life, to deliver the following warning to Malianov (which summarises a theme that is key not only for the Strugatskiis' book but also for their script): 'Everyone is given a boundary which should not be crossed. When it is, guards of unimaginable power put up resistance'.²⁰ Undeterred, Malianov – not Vecherovskii who admits defeat and decides to leave the town for good – withstands the pressure to the end (in an unexpected twist for those who have read the book before watching the film). In the penultimate shot Malianov even sends a smile to the sky above him, as if in defiance.

[Days of Eclipse. Krupnyi plan. 2004 – the “Dead Body” still]

A significant number of shots in *Days of Eclipse* has been made from a bird's eye, or perhaps an 'outer space, perspective' (Popov 75), as if a cosmic force has been watching the characters from above. The film seems to suggest, at least partly, that this force is little else but the Homeostatic Universe, or Mother Nature, trying to protect itself from scientific progress, whose ultimate goal and effect are altering everything beyond recognition. This would be in keeping with one possible interpretation of *A Billion Years Before the End of the World*, which ascribes the pressure on the novel's characters to 'the hypothetical force of universal homeostasis [...] not letting human minds reach too far' (Howell 117). Such a reading does not exclude an alternative possibility of attributing the pressure to 'the concrete force of the Soviet secret service' (ibid.). In fact, a renowned Strugatskii expert argues that 'the novel can be read both ways' (ibid.).²¹ And so can be the film by Sokurov. Taking advantage of Gorbachev's *glasnost*, when it was made, it is much more overtly politicised than the book, published during the period of stagnation. Thus, the film has a sound quote from a speech by Brezhnev accompanying the photographic images of Hitler. Furthermore, in a dream, Malianov sees himself as a small person walking under the monumental hammer, sickle and five-point star in the street – but also as a giant wading amidst Turkmen huts which only reach up as far as his ankles. Is this to say that political pressures should be taken as part of life's landscape? And that gifted individuals are head and shoulders above the ordinary people yet can only act as cogs in the Soviet totalitarian wheels? Critics have repeatedly collated the end of the world as portrayed in *Days of Eclipse* with the end of the Soviet empire (see Popov 79; Ostria 60; Trofimenkov 130; Sirivlia 39), and the last visual sequence of the film (picturing the unwelcoming Turkmen terrain) has been described as a 'Red Desert – scorched and lifeless, the end product of ideological battles' (Shemiakin 51).

¹⁹ Thus, Sokurov's first and in many aspects defining feature film, *A Lonely Human Voice* (original title *Odinokii golos cheloveka*; USSR 1978-87), an adaptation of Andrei Platonov's short story 'Reka Potudan'' (The Potudan' River, 1937), also deals with the characters vacillating between life and death (see Rogatchevski 2013: 465-67, 478-79, 485-86). According to Platonov's *Kotlovan* (The Foundation Pit, 1930), quoted in Sokurov's working notes for *A Lonely Human Voice* (Sokurov 1994: 33), 'the dead are human beings, too' (Platonov 72).

²⁰ The motif of a dead body coming alive is present in the Strugatskii script, too. The boy who is apparently drowned in the sea by an unnamed superior force as a retribution for not acting efficiently enough to stop Malianov, comes back from the dead on the seashore, after a long while, all by himself, not resuscitated by anyone (he turns out to be part of the force and not its victim, after all).

²¹ Cf.: 'It is of course tempting to treat the theory of Homeostatic Universe as an allegory of soulless totalitarianism, hostile towards creativity' (Turovskaia 105).

[Days of Eclipse. Krupnyi plan. 2004 – the “Hero in the Landscape” still]

It is indeed undeniable that the film trivialises its message a little when it ‘systematically discards or lightens a good deal of [the book’s] science-fictional baggage and trappings’ (Jameson 88) in preference of picturing late Soviet reality. Sokurov himself admitted in an interview that to him, sometimes, such a reality appeared ‘much more fantastic than anything the Strugatskiis have ever written. It simply seems to me that life of the so-called Soviet people is so unusual and fantastic – this everyday life with its interethnic relations, unique political and absurd cultural tangles – that it is much more fanciful than sf’ (Popov 79, qting Sokurov). For his part, Arabov confirms that working on the script of *Days of Eclipse* could have been termed ‘a struggle with sf. [...] [In the film,] not a cosmic law but this social and cultural life imposes taboos [on you], because you are different from others’ (Arabov 2003).

Yet it is also clear that Sokurov did preserve the ‘three principal ideas [of *A Billion Years*] which form the basis of drama in *Days of Eclipse*. First, it’s the end of the world. Second, the pressure. Third, it’s the choices made under pressure’ (Popov 77). And ‘humans under pressure’ is ‘a central theme in [...] almost anything the Strugatskiis have written. [...] Their characters face not just any kind of choice but the one that comes from being completely and utterly overpowered’ (Garros 65). If Sokurov remained faithful to *A Billion Years*’ issues and subject matter (even though not always to its imagery and genre), why in his adaptation did he take out ‘the coherent rational backbone which held the book together, [so that] the events became incomprehensible, as if the key words were removed from the phrase “the director A. Sokurov has recently made a [...] film called *Days of Eclipse*, scripted by Yu. Arabov”, to leave “A. recently eclipse Yu.” [?]’ (Moskvina 46-7).

The answer may lie in Sokurov’s frequent pronouncements asserting the primacy of literature over film, such as ‘cinema is derivative’; ‘literature is necessary but cinema isn’t necessary’ (both quoted in Condee 180); and ‘I’m a very literary person, not so much a cinematographic person. I don’t really like cinema very much’ (Rose, qting Sokurov). A similar attitude can specifically be observed in Sokurov’s printed tribute to Arkadii Strugatskii upon the latter’s death in 1991. This brief but touching appreciation seeks to emphasise not the brothers’ contribution to cinema, which may have been expected from a film director, but the (seemingly undervalued) superior artistic merits of their fiction: ‘Will the Strugatskiis still be remembered as those Strugatskiis who worked with Tarkovsky? Will there still be a false impression that the authors Strugatskiis do not exist?’ (Sokurov 1991). According to Strugatskii scholars, the pivotal feature of the Strugatskiis’ art is that the brothers’ ‘literary world is neither realistic nor fantastic. To become conceptually united and complete, it actively demands the reader’s intervention’ (Gomel’ et al 297). The ‘quasi-sf’ (Condee 164) *Days of Eclipse* requires nothing less from its viewers – and may have been made mysteriously elliptical with an aim of urging them to pick up *A Billion Years* (again). Thus, obfuscating the message of a literary source paradoxically becomes a means of staying loyal to it.²²

It seems appropriate to conclude by an attempt at a generalisation. As far as filming the books is concerned, the authors as a rule are adapted by two kinds of film directors, the auteurs and the artisans. This division is not judgemental. Both auteurs and artisans can make more or less successful films, artistically as well as commercially. The artisan is often guided by

²² The same arguably applies to Sokurov’s adaptations of J B Shaw (*Skorbnoe beschuvstvie / Anesthesia Dolorosa* 1983-87), Gustave Flaubert (*Spasi i sokhrani / Save and Protect* 1989) and J W von Goethe (*Faust* 2011).

predominantly commercial considerations and is well suited to adapting bestsellers. Yet the commercial component cannot be excluded from the auteur's output either, owing to the costs involved and the necessity to recoup them. The true difference lies elsewhere. The auteur mostly adapts the author to suit his/her own artistic world (the author's and the auteur's creative realms overlap and resonate with each other, and a cross-fertilisation occurs). The artisan, on the other hand, does not have or create much of an artistic universe of his/her own, and is, as far as an adaptation is concerned, on a mission to provide a memorable visual manifestation of the author's world. *Days of Eclipse* is best understood within Sokurov's own artistic universe.²³ The same can be said of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (the 1979 adaptation of the Strugatskiis' *Piknik na obochine / Roadside Picnic*), as well as Aleksei German's 2013 film version of *Trudno byt' bogom / Hard to Be a God*.²⁴ For their part, Arkadii Sirenko's *Iskushenie B / Temptation B*, a 1990 adaptation of the Strugatskiis' *Khromaia sud'ba / Lame Fate* (see Rogatchevski 2007), and Peter Fleischmann's 1989 film version of *Hard to Be a God*,²⁵ can serve as examples of the artisan approach.

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²³ Cf.: '*Days of Eclipse* steps into areas that will remain of central importance to Sokurov – the lives of soldiers in contested territories in the documentary *Spiritual Voices* and the feature film *Alexandra*; disquisitions about the Soviet legacy in *Taurus* and *Russian Ark*. [...] The film's liminality also identifies *Days of Eclipse* as typical of Sokurov's entire production, reflecting in microcosm both the formal nature of his films, on the border between fiction and documentary, and also Sokurov's chosen position on the edge of the Russian film industry' (Graffy 87-88).

²⁴ See Muireann Maguire's contribution to the present issue.

²⁵ See Matthias Schwarz's contribution to the present issue.

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