
FILM REVIEW

Mother and Son. Russia/Germany, 1997. Director, Alexander Sokurov. Camera, Alexei Fedorov. Cast, Aleksey Ananishov, Gudrun Geyer.

Martin Scorsese is reported to have said after seeing *Mother and Son*, “Why can’t America make cinema like this?” Very different from American filmmaking, Sokurov’s work is not even in the mainstream of today’s Russian cinema. It belongs to the category of auteurist cinema of which we only see a few films a year, made by such masters as Theo Angelopoulos in Greece or Manuel de Oliveira in Portugal. While deeply ingrained in their respective national cultures, the work of these auteurs has long ago overcome the immediate identification with a secular identity and has come to dwell in the realm of existential restlessness. Sokurov perseveres in his spiritual quest and in his studies of human suffering and pain amidst a world that turns into a massive abyss, dominated by desolation and despair. He has the strength to talk about fundamental experiences in people’s lives—about the fear of death and the desire for life, about unconditional love, about being together and being alone.

The story of *Mother and Son* is a reverse Pieta, with the son holding the mother’s frail body. The son takes the fading mother for a stroll in the forest, then near the seaside, and then brings her back home. He leaves her alone and goes for another stroll by himself, cries in the forest, and then returns to find that his mother has left this world and now rests in eternal peace. In a cathartic scene permeated by existential loneliness, the son talks to his dead mother, promising to meet her soon beyond the borders that now lie between them.

As is true for most of Sokurov’s films, what matters here is not the story itself, but how this story is told. Like in *Lonely Human Voice*, words are spare, and the camera is left to do the “talking.” The interiors are shot in the dark sepia scale reminiscent of the color palette used in *Second Circle* and *Whispering Pages*, but in *Mother and Son* the color is of real importance. Even if the preference for earthy colors remains, as soon as the protagonists go into open air, the landscape brightens up in a range of delicate colors that change according to the light and the camera angle to suggest the changing moods of nature. Nature thus becomes a third principal presence alongside the two protagonists. In vivid colors or in dreamlike sequences we come across grass and leaves, trunks and bushes, paths and stones, earth and water, a faraway train and a faraway boat. The air is lucid or luminous, and the changing light says as much as uttered words. Within *Mother and Son*’s landscape there is a hint of every possible mood in the universe—an interplay of light and shadow, bushes in blossom and a series of eclipses, and sequences of skies stormy and serene. The camera tilt gives everything a transcendental feel and makes the lines of the footpath and the sky look as if painted by Edvard Munch, and the prolonged lines of faces and clothes as if painted by El Greco. The tableaux change constantly to resemble at various moments a whole range of paintings in a museum—from the Russian *peredvizhniki*, with their adoration and poetization of Russia’s nature, to the intense light of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin.

No matter how persistent Sokurov is in distancing himself from Tarkovski, one cannot help but make the comparison. *Mother and Son*’s shadowy interior with damp walls looks as a quote from *Stalker*, and the forest landscape where the wind ripples through the grass—a quote from *The Mirror* (but also from *Lonely Human Voice*, for that matter). But is it not precisely the furthering and the perfection of what Tarkovski started that make us admire Sokurov? *Mother and Son* is an accomplished masterpiece in which the romantic idea of the synthesis of arts comes to full realization as cinematic language enchants like painting and reverberates like music.

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