

***Trudno byt Bogom* / 'Hard to be a God' (2013)**

Drama/Science Fiction film, black and white, 177 min.

Directed by ALEKSEI GERMAN. Written by ALEKSEI GERMAN, SVETLANA KARMALITA.

Cast: Leonid Yarmol'nik, Evgenii Gerchakov, Aleksandr Chutko.

Russia and Czech Republic: Sever Studio/Lenfilm.

Language: Russian.

In the closing moments of *Hard to be a God* (2013), in the aftermath of a brutal massacre, Don Rumata mournfully plays his clarinet. A passing man and a young child trudge down a snow-covered path. 'Do you like this music?' the girl asks, 'It hurts my stomach.' The girl's response to the music could well serve as an initial reaction to this film, as it is a deeply beautiful work about the ugliest atrocities mankind is capable of. Initial reactions of confusion, queasiness of the stomach, and mutterings that the film is "impenetrable" merely demonstrate the public reluctance to deal with such an uncompromising work of art.

The film depicts a planet that is still languishing in a medieval phase of development, unlike Earth where space travel and futuristic technologies fully flourish. Disorder reigns as local warlords vie for power. Intellectuals and artists are rounded up and brutalised, beaten and dunked head-first into latrines. A scientist from Earth, disguised as local nobleman Don Rumata, observes all this, reporting to his superiors on the events and protecting the hounded wise men with a view to secure a future renaissance. Rumata is searching for one such key thinker, a doctor called Budakh. However his attempts to locate the man and to intervene in local politics result in a backlash from a local warlord, who instigates an eruption of pillage and mass murder (the original title of the film, 'The Chronicle of the Arkanar Massacre', unambiguously established this potential spoiler as a theme). The core dilemma this film grapples with is God's possible intervention in human affairs. For every positive intervention there is a potentially disastrous consequence. In discussion with Rumata later in the film, Budakh suggests that the best gift God can give his creations is self-determination, to leave them alone to make their own fate. Ultimately, Rumata must bear the consequences for this intervention and for his paternalistic meddling resulting in a landslide of unexpected chaos.

Of course, any reworking of a Strugatskii brothers novel is bound to raise comparisons with other major adaptations: Andrei Tarkovskii's *Stalker* (1979) and Aleksandr Sokurov's *Dni Zatmenii* ('Days of the Eclipse', 1988) in particular. Indeed, parts of *Hard to be a God* develop as a slow motion replay of the sack of the city of Vladimir from Tarkovskii's *Andrei Rublev* (1966). However, these comparisons should only be used to situate *Hard to be a God* within its context. In Russia and the former Soviet Union, there is a long tradition of taking science fiction seriously, including its cinematographic incarnations. Therescience fiction has long been a forum for debating metaphysical, sociological and ethical questions, rather than an occasion for action-packed spectacles.

It is also worth speculating that *Hard to be a God* takes the films of Tarkovskii and Sokurov even further in its commitment to a new cinematic way of seeing. Unlike the earlier, more prosaic adaptation by Peter Fleischmann (which seems to

unfold in a duller procession of grey fright wigs), delineating the events of the novel clearly was not a priority of German's film. Instead, the plot becomes submerged in a thick, viscous mass of incident and rich, tactile detail. Bleak, snow-covered landscapes, courtyards with hanged bodies swaying lightly in the breeze as people mill about indifferently along narrow corridors filled with cackling denizens. Ropes, chains and grotesque human flesh frequently fill the centre of the frame, obscuring our view of the action. At other times, characters peer directly into the camera and speak seemingly to the audience, in a move that at first seems like a breaking of the fourth wall. In fact, this move is better conceptualised as the fullest realisation of Pier Paolo Pasolini's notion of 'free indirect vision', where the objective (the point of view of the camera) and the subjective (the worldview of the characters) entwine.

German builds his film out of complex, weaving shots that whirl around a pro-filmic reality that is already teeming with movement. This restless, fluid camerawork was created by Vladimir Il'in and Yurii Klimenko. The latter also helped to bring a poetic sensibility to the emblematic films *Legenda o Suramskoi kreposti* ('The Legend of the Suram Fortress', 1984) and *Chelovek ukhodit za ptitsami* ('Man Follows Birds', 1975), but has truly outdone himself here. With all this constant movement and baroque detail, there's a sense of the *horror vacui* of outsider artists. That's not to say that the film is undisciplined, or the shots uncomposed. The careful sense of stacking of details and the remarkable ease of free exchange between the foreground and the background astound and confound in equal measure. The image itself has a luminous quality and a sharpness that captures every nuance of the smoke that seems to waft into view of almost every shot. The addition of colour would be excessive; the monochrome isolates the details of every horror that unfolds, making it a vivid but never a lurid experience.

Aleksei German died on 21 February 2013, leaving his son and wife to supervise the final leg of the film's post-production. *Hard to be a God* takes the form of an epitaph then, but it is also the crowning achievement of German's all too brief an *oeuvre* as a director: six feature films counting his debut, *Sed'moi Sputnik* ('The Seventh Companion', 1967), co-directed with Grigorii Aronov. Despite aforementioned critical grumblings, the overall response to German's film seems more receptive than to his previous film, *Khrustalyov, mashinu!* ('Khrustalyov, My Car!', 1998). Perhaps this is because the director's passing has encouraged people to evaluate the loss of a major talent.

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