

Aesthetic choices: Aleksandr Sokurov's *The Sun*

Stefan Steinberg
20 November 2009

The Sun, directed by Russian director Aleksandr Sokurov, is opening in New York City this week. The following comment appeared on the WSWS as part of coverage of the Berlin film festival in March 2005.

Aleksandr Sokurov's latest film *The Sun* was warmly received by many journalists and film critics following its European premiere at the 2005 Berlinale. In his career, the Russian director has made more than 40 documentary and feature films dealing with a broad range of subjects. Sokurov (born in 1951), who developed a close friendship with the late filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, frequently ran into problems in the 1980s with a disapproving Soviet bureaucracy.

His latest project, *The Sun*, presents a snapshot picture of the Japanese emperor Hirohito and is one of a series of films Sokurov has devoted to major political figures. Preceding *The Sun* were his films *Moloch* (1999), dealing with Adolf Hitler and his political entourage, and *Taurus* (2001), which features an ailing Lenin in the last days of his life.

The Sun centres on the figure of the Japanese emperor in the closing days of the Second World War. Film notes make clear that Sokurov was intrigued by the memoirs of US General Douglas MacArthur who, as head of the conquering US army, met Hirohito in order to negotiate Japan's surrender. MacArthur writes in his memoirs: "The Emperor took the responsibility for all the actions of the Japanese government and armed forces, clearly understanding that it threatened him with unavoidable trial and death.... He was an emperor by birth, but at that moment I realised that I met the first Japanese gentleman judged by the strength of his courage." The confrontation between MacArthur and Hirohito, as representatives of two different societies, constitutes the central core of the film.

The Sun's opening scene shows the emperor being dressed by his manservant for one of a series of appointments. Officially, Hirohito was designated a god—the 124th descendant of the "Goddess of Sun Amaterasu." But in *The Sun* we see him as a reluctant god and keen natural scientist who likes to indulge his passion for biology. In line with his scientific beliefs, he has questioned his own role as a god—after all, does not his body resemble that of ordinary men? His entourage will hear nothing of this. For them his godlike status is indisputable.

Despite his scientific leanings, Hirohito is incapable of coming to grips with the small change of everyday life. After a meeting with MacArthur, he turns to leave and stops abruptly at the door. He bends to examine the mechanism of the door handle, which after a few moments he masters. He can leave the room. For the first time in his life, liberated from the small army of attendants and servants, he has opened a door by himself.

All of this is mildly amusing, but as the film progresses we note that Sokurov's treatment of Hirohito favours the incidental; it deliberately lingers on the anecdotal. Westerners who met the emperor have commented on his similarity to Charlie Chaplin—small, frail, and ungainly. We are duly treated to a scene in *The Sun* where US press photographers first fail to grasp that the slight figure tripping towards them is the emperor himself. Then his similarity to Chaplin is raised and joked about

by the assembled photographers.

As in all of Sokurov's recent films, the director pays close attention to the "look" of his film and creates a unique atmosphere for his characters. He not only directed *The Sun*, he was also his own cameraman. Grey and dark green tones pervade the film; the only splash of light comes from the luminescent white gloves of the emperor's servant. The slow measured pace of the action combined with subdued lighting gives his film a semidocumentary feel.

Any sort of concrete political or historical context is lacking. The war that brought devastation to huge swathes of Southeast Asia and culminated in the dropping of two US nuclear bombs, which inflicted the heaviest casualties of the war on the Japanese population—all of this is far away. Sokurov is more interested in the mannerisms of his main figures.

Sokurov repeatedly takes up historical-political subjects in his films. In addition to treatments of Hitler in *Moloch* and Lenin in *Taurus*, he has also filmed his own conversations with Russian president Boris Yeltsin, *An Example of Intonation* (1991). In *The Knot* (1998), which was aired on national television to commemorate the author's 80th birthday, Sokurov conducted a two-part interview with a man he evidently views with some sympathy, Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Sokurov's *Moloch* concentrates on the Führer's mistress, Eva Braun, while depicting Hitler as a grotesque, obsessed with his food fads and hypochondria, who denies any knowledge of what was taking place at Auschwitz (Moloch is a mythical monster who eats children). In *Taurus*, Lenin is depicted as an ailing tyrant obsessed with his fall from power and bullying those around him, in particular his wife.

Characteristically, in *Intonation*, Sokurov plays down the significance of the content of his discussions with Yeltsin. The volume of the film is so muted that the words spoken are practically unintelligible. Instead, in the words of the film title, Sokurov's priority is "intonation."

In Berlin, Sokurov explained at a press conference how he approached such films. When asked to comment on the common features of *Moloch*, *Taurus* and *The Sun*, Sokurov (who studied history as a student) responded: "I am not interested in the history or politics which took place, I am not really interested in historical events or the period, I am much more interested in the human being...how he changes when he acquires this terrible weapon—politics. How anyone who acquires this weapon can become inhuman."

Addressing a similar question regarding his Hitler film, Sokurov emphasised in a Cannes interview his view of the theatricality of power: "These people, the people of power, turned their lives into theatre. Guided by a myth, they conceived and modified their lives, staged real mise-en-scene and subordinated their behaviour to rituals and ceremonies. This pattern is by no means unique, and Hitler was not exceptional. It's a common occurrence that grandiose shows driven by vanity end up in the dustbin of history."

The rise of fascism in Germany and Japan, the horrendous casualties of the Second World War, the struggle over the future of the Soviet Union in

the wake of Lenin's illness—all, according to Sokurov, can be reduced to mere “grandiose shows driven by vanity”!

Sokurov says that he is “not interested in...history or politics,” but “in the human being.” This will appeal to a section of the contemporary audience, no doubt, but what does it mean? Human beings are not simply the sum total of their biological functions and elementary psychological responses. Their most essential character emerges in social beings. The “human being” Sokurov refers to, a creature outside of history and social life, is an empty vessel, a cipher. When dealing with leading political figures of the twentieth century, such an approach is positively fatal.

Perhaps Sokurov is not interested in politics and history, but politics, so to speak, is interested in him. By placing two leaders of reaction in the twentieth century—Hitler and Hirohito—and the outstanding Marxist and socialist revolutionary—Lenin—on the same plane (“on the human level,” as Sokurov would argue), the filmmaker is making a distinct and reactionary political statement. He is equating Bolshevism and fascism, on the one hand, and indicting Lenin for the crimes of Stalinism, on the other.

Sokurov's efforts to promote such notions have been duly recognised, and in February 2003 he was awarded the Philip Morris Freedom Prize, an honour from an American-based cinema foundation that selects its winners in central and eastern Europe on the basis of expressly political priorities: the upholding of free-market liberalism.

In the final analysis, *The Sun* leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Sokurov insists that his priority is the human being, but what have we learnt even about the individual Hirohito by the end of the film? That he was a shy man, enjoyed good wine and had strained relations with his wife. In fact, Sokurov's depiction is entirely dishonest. Although initially cautious about joining the fascist Axis alliance, Hirohito supported the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and enthusiastically played his role in the following years as the official face of Japanese patriotism and war. The Japanese military was responsible for massive atrocities in China and elsewhere.

In the face of domestic political opposition in January 1945, and as defeat loomed for his forces, Hirohito refused to sue for peace. He argued for one final offensive against the allied forces. In the course of 1945, an additional 1.5 million Japanese were killed. In all, 3 million Japanese soldiers and civilians died in a war waged in the emperor's name. Sokurov charts an episode in Hirohito's descent from god to man and willfully excludes his role as politician and militarist.

Sokurov insists on his right to ignore politics, but, in fact, his sanitised presentation of Hirohito is tailor-made to assist nationalist and right-wing political forces in Japan who are currently seeking to bathe the country's imperial past in the most favourable of “tones” in order to relaunch Japan as an imperial and military power.

Sokurov's aesthetic choices

Sokurov's contempt for politics and disregard for history have made him especially attractive to figures such as American director Martin Scorsese and the late essayist Susan Sontag, who described Sokurov as “the most ambitious and original filmmaker of his generation working anywhere in the world today,” making films “comparable to the masterpieces of [Greek director Theo] Angelopoulos and Tarkovsky.” There is no doubt that one source of his appeal is his particular approach to aesthetic questions in his films.

Sokurov has not only directed films dealing with political figures. In addition to *Russian Ark*—an innovative tour through the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg—he has also made a number of documentary elegies dealing with painters, poets and musicians. Sokurov has explained that his aesthetic preferences have won him both friends and enemies: “I

think it's my preference for certain aesthetic choices which irritates people, such as my love for German Romantic painting and Romantic art in general.... In the elegies, my romantic idea that film is another life shines through. Film not as a means of communication, but film as another life.”

What Sokurov means by “film as another life” is unclear, although unappealing in its implications, but it is worth dwelling on Sokurov's dismissal of film as a means of communication. While he emphasises his kinship with German Romanticism (a broad ideological movement that was influential throughout many of the hundreds of petty statelets which, at the start of the nineteenth century, constituted what we now call Germany), Sokurov's interpretation of aesthetics bears little resemblance to the artistic priorities laid down by the greatest figures of the German *Sturm und Drang* and early Romantic movement.

Exhilarated by the possibilities opened up by the French Revolution, figures such as the dramatist and essayist Friedrich Schiller and the poet Friedrich Hölderlin embraced the potential of new popular democracy and positively emphasised the role of art and aesthetics precisely as a means of *communication*—a force for bonding human beings together. In his essay *The Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller, the outstanding theorist of German aesthetics, writes, “Only the aesthetic mode of communication unites society, because it relates to that which is common to all.”

In opposition to Sokurov's platitudes about politics and corruption, as well as the exclusion of social development in his work, the early Romantics were painfully and *concretely* aware of the debilitating nature of bourgeois society. In the same essay, Schiller writes: “Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the Whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment; everlastingly in his ear the monotonous sound of the wheel that he turns, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of putting the stamp of humanity upon his own nature, he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his occupation or his specialised knowledge.”

There is more than an echo of Schiller's appeal for man as a harmonious whole in Leon Trotsky's own comment more than a century later: “Art is an expression of man's need for a harmonious and complete life, that is to say, his need for those major benefits of which a society of classes has deprived him.”

As hopes in the progressive consequences of the French Revolution faded amongst Germany's isolated intellectuals, other priorities and arguments developed amongst a later generation of Romantic artists and thinkers. However, even the most rudimentary exploration of the German Romantic tradition indicates that Sokurov's own aesthetic choices, which exclude any serious consideration of the relation of society and history to art, can only be comprehended as symptoms of his failure to comprehend the social and artistic consequences of fascism and Stalinism in the twentieth century.

In common with all German thinkers and artists of the period and reflecting the material backwardness of Germany, Schiller poses his thesis for the overcoming of man's alienation and achieving freedom in idealist terms. Nevertheless, his definition of the role of art two centuries ago in “Over the use of the choir in Tragedy” constitutes a clarion call emphasising social responsibility against all those “playful postmodernists,” artists and intellectuals who are either too tired, too demoralised or too lazy to seriously address the experiences of the twentieth century.

“True art, however, is not merely a transitory game. It is seriously concerned not merely to provide man with a momentary dream of freedom, but rather to *make* him free, really, here and now; and it does this by awakening and developing in him the power to interpose an objective distance between himself and the sensible world, which otherwise merely oppresses us as a gross matter or blind force, the power to transform the sensible world into a free work of the spirit, and so dominate the material

by the ideal.”

The theories spawned by German artists, essayists and philosophers in the last half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century about the nature of art and its role in furthering human freedom have played a crucial role in stimulating debate over aesthetic values in the modern world. For the German Romantics, the issue of the relation between form and content in art was not a “formal” question. At the heart of their own debate was precisely the question of how to free men from oppression and “blind force.”

Sokurov makes his aesthetic choices on a completely different and opposed basis. For Sokurov, the issue has been decided—oppression and subordination to authority are man’s natural condition. As he remarked in his Berlin press conference, “oppression by power is unavoidable, it is our fate.” Man is doomed to tragedy. Rather than “awaken and develop” man’s own powers Sokurov elevates the formal aspects of film-making—tone, nuance, camera angle—in order to daub the walls of mankind’s prison cell in interesting shades (and sanitise his jailors).

His work, artistically and intellectually bankrupt, sheds a revealing light on the depths of the degeneration of a significant layer of the Russian intelligentsia.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact