

BETWEEN JOB AND HOMO SOVIETICUS: SERGEY BONDARCHUK'S *FATE OF A MAN* AS A MASTERPIECE OF PROPAGANDA CINEMA¹

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1.

Considering the work of Sergey Bondarchuk (1920-1994) in the context of Old Testament motifs – which will to a large extent be the subject of this article – may seem an extravagant idea. This acclaimed Russian director, an Oscar winner (for two parts of the screen adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, 1965-67), was a favoured filmmaker of the Brezhnev era, and was regarded as the bard of 'socialist humanism'. Thanks to *Red Bells* (1982), based on John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World*, he became known as the 'epic creator of the revolution'. Bondarchuk's most important films include *Fate of a Man* (1959), which received the Lenin Prize. The comment below is symptomatic from the point of view of a contemporary assessment of the importance of Bondarchuk's legacy for the development of Soviet cinematography:

This film, however, is very important for understanding Soviet cinema. Immersed in the past, it ran into the future. It combined – relatively harmoniously – the traditions of the former totalitarian cinema of the 1950s, with [...] a new wave and an attempt to refer academically to the Russian classics.

¹ See Polish first edition of this article: *Między Hiobem a homo sovieticus. O Losie człowieka Siergieja Bondarczuka w aspekcie transsemiotycznym*, „Teksty Drugie” 2010, №5, p. 200-211.

This model of cinema would reappear for years in the USSR and then Russia. Whatever you think about him, Bondarchuk was its undisputed champion².

2.

In the opinion of Jerzy Płażewski, *Fate of a Man* differs from other works of Soviet cinema in that it is a film about suffering (Płażewski 1995: 219). The protagonist of the film, Andrei Sokolov (played by Sergey Bondarchuk), suffers great misfortunes as a young man (his parents and sister died during the famine in 1922), then as a Red Army soldier, a prisoner of war and a prisoner in a concentration camp; finally as the father of the family: Andrei's beloved wife, Irina (Zinaida Kiriyyenko), dies with her daughters in the bombing of Voronezh, and – if that weren't enough – his only son Anatoly, a war hero and highly talented mathematician, is killed on the threshold of victory. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that this man, like Job, experienced everything but his own death.

It is difficult to fully agree with the opinion that Soviet cinema had a reluctance to the character of a suffering person: the despair and pain of the individual are, in fact, the subject of excellent films such as Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes are Flying* (1957), Grigory Chukhray's *The Forty-First* (1956) and especially Andrei Tarkowski's *Ivan's Childhood* (1962). Certainly, none of the characters created in them deserve to be called the 'traumatic hero', as Andrei Sokolov. The director showed him not only as a man experiencing extreme existential situations, but also as someone who makes the effort to speak about his tragedy, unknowingly becoming the 'bard of suffering' (cf. Gosk 1998: 113-125).

Sergey Bondarchuk, in line with the literary prototype of the film, used retrospection in his adaptation, which further exacerbated the existential sharpening of the narration by introducing tension between 'I' the survivor and 'I' the narrator³. Sokolov tells his story to a driver he meets accidentally waiting to cross the Don. The men meet in early spring, in a scene of awake-

² Fragment of a sketch by Tomasz Jopkiewicz, which was attached to the DVD publication of *Fate of a Man* in the Classics of Soviet Cinema series from Epelpol Entertainment 2008.

³ This phenomenon has long been known to theoreticians of prose; see: Stanzel 1980: 267 et seq.

ning nature, which could be treated as an ironic counterpoint to the hero's personal drama, if not for the images of the river flooding the surrounding orchards carrying destructive connotations⁴. Significantly, the montage of the initial sequence stands in contrast to the images of the sky.

The protagonist of *Fate of a Man* is therefore the same on the screen as in Mikhail Sholokhov's story: someone who bends under the overwhelming burden of suffering and someone who seeks expression in words for it⁵. Starting his tragic story, he repeats in his mind the eternal question: 'Life, why have you hurt me so? For what is this punishment?' (Sholokhov 1985: 11; underline – B.P.J.) These words, preceded by an image of clouds, come in the prologue of the film, just before the titles, marking them as the film's motto.

3.

In Bondarchuk's one-hundred-minute film, Sokolov gazes several times up at the sky for a long time (perhaps the most typical gesture of this character), but never once speaks of God's name – Yahweh is replaced in his statements by 'life' and 'fate'. It seems that the character's casting of his own misfortunes in terms of guilt and punishment is primarily rhetorical: it is more a way of expressing a traumatic experience than a search for a cause of his suffering.

However, it must be noted that in the story of *Fate of a Man*, clear signs of irony can be found. This comes through with particular force in the final parts of the film, when the main character, with his heavy burden of experience, begins to dream of quiet old age at the side of his son that he has found. Sokolov characterises this period with words of reassurance: 'Soon, happiness smiled at me – like the sun after a storm'. The son, with whom Sokolov could have had a hope of healing his pain in the future, dies on the last day of the war. (To emphasise the paternal drama, contrasts were used in the film: shots of the pained face of a mourner were contrasted with the euphoric shouts of cheering Red Army soldiers.) Thus, we find here echoes

⁴ Water is associated with death and destruction also in other parts of the film: when Sokolov arrives in his home town of Voronezh and sees the ruin of his home and finds out about the death of his closest family, he stumbles through puddles with difficulty. (This scene is not in the original story, in which Andrei learns about the tragedy in a letter from a neighbour.)

⁵ In Sholokhov's work, the main narrator is not Sokolov, but his interlocutor.

of perceptions typical for the nation of Pushkin about the determinant of human existence, which with a little malice turns a defenceless person into a 'game of fate'.

According to studies of Anna Wierzbicka, Russian culture 'bounces' within several essentially untranslatable words: one of them is *sud'ba* [fate] – the most important noun among those by which Russians 'develop their attitude towards life' and through which they communicate with others (its status is evidenced, for example, by the fact that it is extremely common in Russian phrases, sayings, songs and titles; Wierzbicka 2007: 358). The concept of *sud'ba* is made up primarily of an ancestral inheritance, the fatalistic conviction of man's subordination to an overwhelming force (in the oldest manifestations of these beliefs, it is depicted anthropomorphically), which decides about the unpredictable and often dramatic character of human existence. The idea is linked to the belief that, despite the cruelty of fate, one should accept its judgments without opposition, in an attitude of resignation.

Regardless of the cultural context mentioned above, it would be a gross oversight to underestimate the fact that Sergey Bondarchuk's film, though in a rather perverse way, takes up the Old Testament issue of suffering, including the problem of divine favour, so important in the Book of Job, in the downfall of the most faithful of the faithful. The sequence in the orthodox church is essential for the audio-visual conceptualisation of this issue.

4.

The only character in Bondarchuk's film who calls out to God is a young man accompanying Sokolov along with dozens of other prisoners on the way to the camp. His creation was satirically redrawn by the director. When the other prisoners are planning to assault the Nazi soldiers escorting the convoy, the man is plagued with fear and whispers to himself: 'God, protect me and have mercy on me, protect me from the enemy'. In the orthodox temple where the prisoners are forced to spend a night, the lonely man still lifts his erratic gaze and performs mechanical gestures that betray as much religious zeal as cowardice and backwardness. (Looking at that caricatured figure, the slogan spread by Soviet propaganda comes to mind: 'Religion – the opium of the people').

The scene of the death of this nameless character, which takes place against the sound of a violent storm, is tragicomic. The pious man dies because he doesn't allow himself to go to the toilet in a place he regards as sacred:

MAN [Collapsing in pain.]:

– Where to go, where?... They said they won't let us out. What should I do, brothers? I am a believer after all, I am a Christian!

OTHER PRISONERS:

– Do it through the dome, we'll lift you up. [Laughter]

– If you ask nicely, the angels will take you on their wings. [Laughter]

MAN:

– I cannot insult this place. I cannot offend it. I am a believer, I am a Christian ... [The man runs, pounds the locked doors of the temple with his fists, shots are fired...]

A deeper understanding of the scene requires us to see the cinematic fusion of elements of different sign systems and open up the imagination to a subtle, trans-semiotic and trans-medial play of meaning⁶. In addition to the dialogue, the mimicry, and the gestures of the actors in this part of the film, acoustic effects and the specific way of handling light play an important role. Their meaning in a given context seems to have a negative character based on enigmatically emerging intertextual relations, including allusions to artistic patterns existing in European culture that present the sacral sphere (in particular literary and artistic conventions).

⁶ Talk here of trans-semioticity and trans-mediality refers to the situation where 'semiotic or media systems that contribute to the message lose their independence in the creation of meanings. And thus trans-semiotic relationships are, for example, relationships in which images and sound enter film messages; trans-medial refers to quotations and paraphrases, such as literary narrative structures or paintings in film. This process is omnidirectional and reversible, which means that in the film, for example, the partial meaning contained in a moving image is reinterpreted by those present in the sound layer and verbal semantics layer, and vice versa – they reinterpret themselves' (Szczyńska 2004: 36). See also: Łotman 1983: 97-101.



Picture No. 1. S. Bondarchuk's *Fate of a Man* (1959)

The shameful drama of the man who begs God to intervene is set in a storm⁷. The lightning bolts, connecting heaven to earth, have for centuries played the role of 'tools of transcendence' and symbolic manifestations of the wrath of God in literature (see for example the ancient depictions of Zeus with the thunderbolt or the folk conception of justice referred to in Juliusz Słowacki's *Balladyna*). In Bondarchuk's work, it is different. Although it is difficult to leave to one side the convention of a film's genre, it is worth mentioning that, under the pressure of new contextual conditions, these motives function as 'signals of absence' of supernatural intervention.

In the church sequence, particularly noteworthy is that the image occurs immediately after the tragic finale of the scene described, because it invokes the apocalyptic vision of religious painters, or artistic portrayals of the descent of the Holy Spirit or other manifestations of divine grace (seen for example in the work of El Greco or Gustav Doré)⁸. We see on the screen the

⁷ Storms and thunder are traditionally considered to be 'objects of grandeur' (Płuciennik 2002: 14).

⁸ I have in mind a certain type of artistic composition, not so much a particular artwork. Cf. *Obrazy z Biblii z klasycznymi ilustracjami Gustave Doré*, comp. G. Davidson, trans. J. Polak, Poznan 2010.



Picture No. 2. Biblical illustration by Gustav Doré

shapeless mass of sleeping prisoners, bathed in splashes of light shining through the vault of the temple; from its frescoed walls, monumental saints look down, over the 'battlefield' of bodies there is a cross, the symbol of salvation (see pictures No. 1 and 2). This image can be considered another manifestation of irony in the film by the Soviet director: this time its plane of reference is the faith of Christians in the providence of almighty God. In view of later events, the shards of afterglow, which evokes associations with embodiments of the idea of sacred emanation, turn out to be, in essence, as banal as ordinary lightning. Themes and compositions accompanying the depictions of the sacred in various cultural texts appear in Sergey Bondarchuk's, but they are subjected to polemical re-evaluation⁹. Their function also changes radically: they simply become signs of transcendental emptiness.

⁹ Examples of the different functioning of such hidden references to religion can be found in Ingmar Bergman's film *Whispers and Screams* (*Viskningarna och rop*, 1971). According to experts on the Scandinavian director's work, this film 'fully [...] reflects the meaning of his main metaphor of human destiny as the Passion of Christ' (Szczepanski 2007: 330).

5.

It can be said that in Bondarchuk's scene, he 'disposes with' this aspect of the figure of Job that does not fit the Soviet ideal of humanity. On the other hand, according to the director's own words, the film is a polemic against *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958) by Andrzej Wajda: the Home Army soldier lost and struck by moral indecision is compared here with a 'type of a new socialist man' who, despite the toughest of experiences, does not lose faith in a better future. Although the ending does not seem optimistic (Sokolov reveals his fear of sudden death in a dream), the film is redolent with a faith in human persistence and the sense of solidarity in battling the greatest adversities. With Bondarchuk, the alternative to the 'silent heavens' is the uncompromising and active resistance of a man who does not hesitate to take even the most extreme action, if the good of the cause so requires. This conclusion results, for example, from the logic of the selection and the aftermath of the orthodox church scenes.

After the death of the 'pathetic Christian', the most controversial sequence in the film takes place, although the way that further events are presented largely camouflages their moral burden. Sokolov barely listens to a conversation among two prisoners in which one of them threatens to reveal the next day the identity of the other to the Germans and condemn him to being shot. The frightened commanding officer is a small and delicate man, and the expression of regret to his ruthless companion is the only form of protest that he can muster. (At this point in the film, Bondarchuk, exceptionally, allows himself some ideological bragging, but not that sullies the mouth of the main character. The officer says with bitterness: 'I always suspected that you, Kryzhniev, were a bad man. Especially when you didn't want to join the party, explaining it with your illiteracy'.)

Andrey Sokolov's actions, unlike the actions of Maciek Chełmicki in *Ashes and Diamonds*, are resolute and ruthless – with his bare hands and voluntarily he suffocates a potential traitor in his sleep. Although the scene of the killing is shown on the screen, it is done in a rather specific way. The camera operator (Vladimir Monachov) used visual metonymy as euphemism: the viewer's attention is focused not on what Sokolov is doing (he leaves the frame), but on the officer, whose role is to hold the legs of the man being suffocated. It lasts a few seconds and then it is over. In Sholokhov's story, immediately after the murder Sokolov feels intense revulsion and

almost has convulsions, but in the film, he only rubs his hands gently against his clothes, and in the next scene (the cynical execution of randomly chosen prisoners), viewers are allowed to breathe deeply that what happened should have happened. The conclusion proffers itself: Andrei Sokolov is without doubt a hero¹⁰. The rest of the film, and especially the fact that he adopts an orphan who is wandering alone in the Russian countryside, testifies to him being sensitive to the suffering of others and compassionate.

6.

In terms of construction, Andrei Sokolov is a hybrid character, although we see him as a distinct personality. It can be said that he consists of several images, several archetypes that complement each other. (This kind of construction has a long tradition in Russian culture, for example Prince Myshkin from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, who unites in himself a child, a holy fool, Don Quixote, Christ and Pushkin's 'poor knight'.) The main character of *Fate of a Man* draws a lot of from the character of Job, but above all, he is also the embodiment of the idealised image of the Russian (Filipowicz 1998: 181-194). As befits a son of Russia, he combines strength of character and hardness with an unusual sensitivity: he loves his native land, fields of grain, birdsong, and the blue of the Russian sky, and he has warm feelings in his heart for one woman. He is a strong and courageous man, full of dignity and seriousness, he likes to swear and drink, but often makes gestures that show a hidden delicacy. (It is worth noting the scene in which Andrei, stealing from the uniform of an unconscious drunken German, lifts a brick from the ground, not to strike him, but to place it under the head of the enemy soldier as a makeshift 'pillow').

Andrei Sokolov is above all a soldier, the embodiment of the mighty spirit of the nation – nothing shows this better than the respect that prisoner 331 evokes in the enemy. This is the meaning that the famous sequence with the psychopathic camp commandant Müller (Yuri Awierin) has, in which the prisoner, aware of the horror of the situation, prefers to drink for his own destruction instead of in a toast to the victory of the German army.

¹⁰ Examples of the justification and even glorification of violence for ideological purposes were seen in the early years of Soviet cinema, for example the *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronienosiec Patiomkin*, 1925).

(Incidentally, the film's creators skilfully emphasised the supra-individual dimension of Sokolov through Müller: the Nazi first called him disrespectfully 'Ruski Ivan' twice, and then speaks to him with unmistakable respect, referring to him as 'a true Russian soldier')¹¹. This scene also captures the very concrete, and very painful – also for Job – physical dimension of human suffering. Exhausted from starvation, the prisoner is summoned to where German officers are sitting at a table heavily laden (as for wartime) celebrating the alleged successes of Hitler's army. Under these conditions, a refusal to accept the refreshments – here appears Sokolov's famous line 'After a second glass [of vodka] I'm not used to biting' – is not only a manifestation of daring courage but also a heroic manifestation of the dignity of a man who can overcome the humiliating 'coercion' of his own body (cf. the scene in the church).

In the screen adaptation of *Fate of a Man*, not unlike in the Old Testament¹², an imagined relationship is established between satisfying hunger and consolation (at times only temporary relief) – in both cases, the symbolic weight of the motives used in this context are diametrically opposite. At the end of his torment, Job finds himself eating bread in his own home with friends, while Sokolov, who has survived a verbal battle with Müller, is rewarded with a loaf of bread (he shares it with his fellow prisoners so that 'everyone is equal'). This theme returns in the final sequences of the film. Sokolov takes the just adopted Vanja (played by Paviel Boriskin) for a meal together. The unlucky widow observes a hungry boy with tenderness and pain: the 'recovered son' tries to satisfy his lengthy hunger by swallowing soup and munching greedily on a lump of bread...

Going beyond the bounds of the actual historical context allows us to discern in the scene with the degenerate commander Müller further discrete analogies with the Book of Job (this time about the motif of the Devil joining

¹¹ This scene contains an almost comic touch. Müller's skirmishes with the tough prisoner are 'looked over' by Hitler himself; his gaze is directed at Sokolov, and his face seems to express extreme irritation (the protagonists are 'separated' by a portrait of the leader handing slightly behind them). Care was taken to maintain the right proportions – it is certainly no accident that the face of the portrait and the heads of the characters are, roughly speaking, the same size.

¹² Eating motifs are reviewed by Aitken 2010: 47-68.

Job). Sokolov's steadfastness – as a man and a son of the Russian nation – is also tested by the demonic Gestapo officer, and as a consequence he gains a heroic dimension. However, in both cases ideals that are quite different are at stake.

7.

Bolshevik leaders after Lenin attributed great ideological significance to cinematography (Stalin called cinema 'a powerful means of mass agitation'), which had to have a strong influence on the Soviet Union's cultural policy. Against the background of the obtrusive audio-visual propaganda output of the country, *Fate of a Man* was received as the herald of change¹³. From today's perspective, this assessment may seem overly radical. Bondarchuk's film, being one of the flagship cinematographic achievements of the 'Khrushchev thaw', uses stereotypes, simplified axiological and situational patterns (such as images of infantile German soldiers) and painfully exalted moments. However, it must be admitted that its creator was well aware of the dividing line between art and ideological journalism. This does not change the fact that he was able to smuggle in the most virulent content in an innocent manner. A good example of Bondarchuk's method is a procedure that can be termed 'sound-association insinuation'.

For example, during his stay in the concentration camp, Sokolov sees crowds of people heading to the crematorium; their terrifying procession moves along the road of no return to the sound of a tango. This irritating rhythm appears as a counterpoint also after a brutal fight in a quarry, when Sokolov reluctantly leans over a crag over which the Nazi guard has beaten one of the exhausted prisoners. In a much later scene, an old man (a former neighbour) tries to comfort Sokolov after the loss of his family. To improve his mood, he plays a gramophone record, but this drives the distraught widower into an explosion of uncontrolled anger. Now some time, the rhythm of the hated tango returns, with the only difference that now it is

¹³ This was how the film was interpreted in the West. To this day in discussions about *Fate of a Man*, the issue of the 'rehabilitation' by Bondarchuk of Soviet prisoners of war who were treated by Stalin as traitors of the nation is strongly emphasised.

accompanied by words. The 'criminal melody' is sung in a Germanic language: not in German but in English...

In this way the Soviet director, exploiting the possibilities offered by the poly-semiotic nature of cinema, besmirches the allies of the Red Army: the power of association places them alongside the war criminals.

8.

The atheistic policy of the Soviet authorities after the October Revolution was twofold: on the one hand, explicit anti-religious persuasion and deprecation was used, or simply everything associated with the sacred sphere was ridiculed, and on the other, attempts were made to use the authority of religion for the approved ideology, adapting traditional imagery and related expressions to new needs (cf.: Leinwand 1998: 160-196). A manifestation of the first tendency, for example, is the lithograph of the famous Russian propaganda artist Viktor Deni titled *Peasant Mother of God*, based on icons depicting the Virgin Mary and the Child. On this poster, probably used by the authorities during parodies of religious processions, the place of images of saints is taken by caricatures of political opponents.

The second tendency is illustrated by the transposition of iconographic images of the bloody battle between Saint George and the dragon (the subject of the fight against good and evil always occupied a prominent place in the Byzantine church and Russian tradition, Leinwand 1998: 171 et seq). For example, on the poster of St. George the Victor, Deni presented Lev Trotsky as a hero who injures the hydra of the counter-revolution with a spear.

According to those who research these issues, religious language was often used in party literature in the Soviet Russia, and post-revolutionary iconography was full of religious motifs and references – 'it was understood that the place of forbidden faith and removed symbols and rites should be occupied by new objects of cult and new saints' (Leinwand 1998: 168). For example: Karl Marx holding Capital in his hand was presented in the midst of clouds, which was supposed to evoke associations of God the Father, and the worker, as a 'martyr of labour', was shown in the image of Christ crucified. Moreover, after 1917, many Soviet political poster artists more or less consciously referred to Russian sacral art (modelled on compositions of icons). The Judeo-Christian tradition was also often combined with patterns typical of the labour movement. Thus, the early Soviet propaganda developed

ways of adapting Christian tradition for agitation goals. Sergey Bondarchuk's *Fate of a Man*, contrary to popular opinion, continues this tradition, although it does it in a skilful and balanced manner: emphatically but without agitating ostentation (for this, it fully deserves the title of 'a masterpiece of propaganda cinema'). Perhaps the phenomenon of the film lies precisely in the fact that – although it expresses the content it expresses – it is still art.

Undoubtedly, the world of religious imagery and ideals is an implicit but very important plane of reference for the work of the Soviet director¹⁴. In *Fate of a Man*, there are no, and perhaps there couldn't be, any direct references to the Book of Job. Except for the whole series of 'fundamental questions' asked by the main character or implied by the situations in the film, Sokolov's strength of character and his 'charism of suffering' are unmistakable references to Job. These features, however, are greatly recontextualised in the film. Nevertheless, the great philosophical drama of the Old Testament appears as one of the most important archetypal texts for Sergey Bondarchuk's film (which would be hard to say about Sholokhov's story). It must be remembered, however, that the path connecting the biblical Job with the idealised incarnation of Homo Sovieticus, Andrei Sokolov, is separated by a network of ideological entanglements and cultural mediating forms. Therefore, indicators of this relationship (including signals of existence in the polemic relation) must be sought in the sphere of volatile and vague meanings, emerging between gesture, word, sound and image.

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¹⁴ Against the background of the cognitive strategies previously described, even the title of Sokolov's son's article seems to be significant: the debut of that talented mathematician is the treatise *Current Infinity* (its title does not appear in the original story), and the fact that the main character, like Saint Joseph, is a carpenter.

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Between Job and Homo Sovieticus: Sergey Bondarchuk's *Fate of a Man* as a Masterpiece of Propaganda Cinema

The subject of this article is a famous Soviet war-film, *Fate of a Man* (1959), directed by Sergey Bondarchuk and based on the short-story written by the Nobel Price winner, Mikhail Sholokhov. The proposed analysis aims at uncovering an essential but hidden context of Bondarchuk's vision of 20th century traumatic human experiences: the Old Testament Book of Job. Focused on

the subtle meanings being created between gestures, words, sounds and pictures, the author tries to show the presence as well as the function of biblical images in this 'most Soviet of the Soviet movies'. It would be useless to seek such dimensions in the literary version of the same story. Owing to his audiovisual sensibility, Bondarchuk turns out to be a real master of 'soft' adapting of the religious tradition to the needs of the new ideology.

Keywords: Sergey Bondarchuk, *Fate of a Man*, Soviet cinema, propaganda film, Book of Job, Mikhail Sholokhov, trans-semioticity, trans-mediality, religious references, intertextuality