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The masculine and feminine elements in Aleksandr Sokurov's film *Alexandra*

Aleksandr Sokurov is an uncompromising filmmaker, whose efforts often end up devising new forms of filmic expression. To quote Russian film critic Vladimir Levashov, "you simply cannot out-auteur Sokurov, his cinematic efforts are plainly nonpareil" (Levashov, 2001). In 1995, the European Film Academy featured the filmmaker on its list of 100 greatest directors working worldwide. Before filming *Alexandra*, his fourteenth feature, he penned a short film novella under the same title, which was later

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published in an anthology of Sokurov's writings collected under the title *V tsentre okeana* (In the Middle of the Ocean, Sokurov, 2014). *Alexandra*, which premiered at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, can be viewed through the lens of Sokurov's "generational triptych", in which blood ties are the common thread linking the instalments, including *Mother and Son* (1997) and *Father and Son* (2003).

Alexandra was shot on location in Chechnya, in the very borderlands between Russia and Chechnya that were stage to the armed conflict that raged there throughout 1999–2009, putting the film crew in genuine danger (Tuchinskaia, 2007b, p. 74). Sokurov began his filmmaking career working on documentaries. *Alexandra* carries traces of a wartime newsreel, while its artistic aspect is stripped of any undue narrative pathos. The film features no spectacular explosion shots,¹ and only distant echoes of gunfire testify to the combat engagements raging nearby, a framing that allows us to focus on the dramas of everyday life, in and of itself a torment to people trapped in the war zone.

The objective of this essay is to identify those means of cinematic expression which constitute anthropological categories apparent in *Alexandra*, such as time, space and man (film character), and to investigate the manner in which the masculine and feminine elements function in the film's diegesis.

The plot of the film seems simple enough. The main character, Alexandra Nikolaevna, arrives at a military encampment where her grandson Denis, the commanding officer of a reconnaissance detachment operating near the Chechen border, is stationed with his unit. Russian troops struggle with adverse weather conditions – the dust carried off the arid earth by the wind and the intense, scorching heat – as well as the crushing idleness of camp life and their own thoughts. These conflicts unfold incessantly and across a number of levels. Also important is the rather advanced age of the titular character, to whom the physical conditions of the camp are as much a burden as the moral disquiet brought upon by the sense of sharing some of the blame for the evil around.

Alexandra's arrival disrupts the everyday tedium of the camp and affects the troops stationed there. To the best of their abilities, the young servicemen try to treat her with the proper respect, while Alexandra spends her time paying a closer look at camp life, with its boredom, monotony and dreariness. Denis' grandmother is also the only character in the film exempt from military discipline and the chain of command – she strolls

¹ Some sort of distant fire can be seen only in one shot, when Alexandra stops by the gate barrier to rest.

through the camp alone, even after lights out. Alexandra also manages to venture outside the wire, visiting the local market where she meets Malika, a young Chechen woman living in a partially bombed-out residential block, who invites the elderly woman to rest and recover her strength at her apartment before heading back to the camp. Thus, Alexandra becomes a mediator, an arbiter negotiating between two opposing worlds, the Chechens and the Russians; her impact, however, penetrates far beyond just the physical realm.

The current state of research

The particular method of inquiry applied herein, namely anthropological-morphological analysis, is based on a detailed examination of the film image and its attendant interpretations. It aims to craft a consistent depiction of the manifestation of male and female elements in the analysed film. The combined contributions of the film's particular means of expression, including the acting, costume and set design, sound and music design, and camera direction, ultimately prove the genetic unity of the director's idea, itself drawing on the incessant confrontation between the two elements within the film's setting.

From the film's very release, Russian film critics had trouble defining the genre *Alexandra* belonged to. It has been called a "physiological sketch" (Gracheva, 2011, p. 329), "a news-reel turned myth" (Tuchinskaia, 2007a), or "a parable mixed with documentary reporting" (Kuvshinova, 2007). In Poland, few authors tackled the film (Sadowska, 2007, p. 70), and most of the pieces, usually one-page-long or shorter, focused primarily on the Russian-Chechen conflict. Thus, it was believed to be mostly a portrayal of the moral and spiritual shape of a country in which violence was the only legacy. Alexandra was at once hailed the "grey-haired conscience of the country" and saddled with some of the responsibility for its demise and corruption (Sadowska, 2007, p. 70). In his book, *Filmowy neomodernizm* (Neomodernism in Film), Rafał Syska discussed *Alexandra* in a brief subchapter (Syska, 2014, pp. 320–323), in which he explored Sokurov's historiosophy, the question of individual freedom, and the problem of pursuing pacifism under the Russian system of government.

Notably, scholars only saw the symmetry of those relationships that were rooted in spatial order. Busy contrasting the characteristics of the Russian and Chechen nations, they paid no heed to the duality of the relationship between the film's main characters – Alexandra and Denis. Although some film scholars writing about *Alexandra* have indeed sensed the presence of a deeper interpretive plan (Rozhdestvenskaia, 2007), they ultimately

made no effort to probe the film image for proof of its existence. Their essays are rife with catchy metaphors brushing against the essence of the film, but ultimately coming off like platitudes due to their lack of grounding within the film itself: "Rather than of those who suffer, those who stray and those who doubt, the film speaks of eternity" (Maliukova, 2011, p. 327); "Sokurov discusses something else, the corrosion of interpersonal relationships or, to be more precise, the erosion of the human soul" (Lemchin, 2012, p. 303).

Seeking the answer to the question of what lay at the heart of *Alexandra*, Russian critics compared it with Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Such an interpretation saw the protagonist wander the "otherworldly landscape", guided by soldiers resembling "Virgil in camouflage" (Gracheva, 2011, p. 329). Speaking of the performance of lead actress Galina Vishnevskaja, Aleksandra Tuchinskaia called her an "ethereal entity traversing the frame", but ultimately failed to explain the meaning behind it (Tuchinskaia, 2007a). Sergeï Uvarov, on the other hand, focused primarily on the film's musical arrangements, interpreting them through the lens of war and family relationships (Uvarov, 2011, pp. 51–55), almost summarily ignoring other seemingly fundamental aspects, such as the protagonist's inner experience and time, the latter a category inextricably linked in the film with certain musical *leitmotifs*.

The film has also been examined by a number of Western critics. In "The Impression of Reality and the Awareness of the Medium in Alexander Sokurov's Family Trilogy" (Bugaj, 2016, p. 18), Małgorzata Bugaj examines the film's somatic realities, while Jeremi Szaniawski, in "Alexandra: The Return to Neverwas and the Ambiguity of Romance", explored the film's references to the *topos* of the mother and its attendant symbolism, tracing it, however, within the specific construction of space, while omitting remaining anthropological categories, such as time and man (film character). Describing Alexandra's particular situation, the scholar wrote of a soul thrown into an alien, rough, hostile yet "oddly hospitable realm" (Szaniawski, 2014, p. 240), but failed to identify particular means of cinematic expression that would substantiate such a "sensual" reading of the film. American scholar Nancy Condee, meanwhile, examined the symmetrical distribution of male and female roles portrayed in *Alexandra*. In Condee's view, the very narrative structure of the film is vertical by design, the axis separating two seemingly equivalent, parallel columns – the military camp and the Chechen town, the latter home to Malika and her younger neighbour, who themselves can be read as counterparts to Alexandra and Denis (Condee, 2011, p. 196).

A comparison of critiques of *Alexandra* penned in Poland and abroad reveals that most film critics focused on superficial issues, and limited themselves to recapping the plot, interpreted primarily through the lens of the current political moment, history and other

films exploring similar territory. What the critiques lack, however, is in-depth analysis and interpretation of the means of cinematic expression utilized in *Alexandra*, which would allow the critics to penetrate into the film's "deep structure" (Chomsky, 1957).

Masculine and feminine natures in the world depicted in the film

Notably, one of the very first shots in the film – showing the protagonist from the back – defines the relationship between Alexandra and the world around her. In the scene, the camera first focuses on the thick, undulating bark of a tree, then the coarse undergrowth, finally showing Alexandra's face in the third shot. The arrangement identifies the film's dominant themes: soil, nature, man. In Slavic folklore, tree trunks are inhabited by spirits – like the human body is inhabited by the soul. Although the tree is considered female by virtue of its ability to produce new shoots and new trunk, some have come to label it "the earth phallus" (Neumann, 2015, p. 49).

The first minutes of the film, therefore, encapsulate an androgynous unity of male and female elements in nature, itself indispensable to the maintenance of equilibrium – a responsibility that the film places upon its protagonist, Denis' grandmother. The world she arrives in is devoid of life, barren, scorched by the merciless sun. Her arrival is ultimately an attempt to breathe a little life back into that particular space, return it to stability.

Then, the woman puts her hands on her hips. Visually, the non-verbal gesture expands the space around a person and signals readiness for action (Drewnowska-Rymarz, 1992, p. 284). Men hold their arms in this manner when they want to send a warning to people entering what they see as their territory. The protagonist is surrounded by young troops, we can see a military helicopter. The world we see in the film is dominated by the presence of men, who are soon to rally behind their "spiritual leader" – Alexandra.

The space of the labyrinth

When the protagonist arrives in the camp and begins exploring its premises, we can see at first glance that the camp grounds are completely closed off from their surroundings. Encircled with a razor wire fence, the only way in or out of the facility is through a checkpoint guarded round the clock by armed soldiers. The front gate is fitted with a large red star, a symbol

denoting, within the labyrinthine structure, “a *closed site* (original emphasis) (...) that is rather difficult to leave; but which still doubles as a refuge, a safe haven” (Santarcangeli, 1982, p. 283). Thus, Denis is confined to the camp, bound to a prison he “cannot leave, at least not until his potential ‘rebirth’ down the line” (Santarcangeli, 1982, p. 183).

The scene in which the protagonist steps off the train also warrants further attention. The framing emphasizes the moment she crosses the threshold. Alexandra stands in the carriage door. Filmed from a low angle, her character clearly towers over the soldier helping her off. A close-up on his hand, pointing out the stripe warning the passengers to mind the gap, accentuates the moments she enters a different space.² In another scene, one of the officers tells Alexandra: “Ladies like you rarely call on the army anymore”,³ further emphasizing the gravity afforded by the soldiers to her visit.

Notably, Alexandra is transported at once into the very centre of the space created by the rows of tents and winding footpaths, as evinced by the post placed in the very centre of the frame. It appears twice within a single scene: when a gentle left-to-right dolly shot shows her stepping into the tent, and then when the camera dollies left after she is already inside. The shot ends with the camera stopping on the post, dead centre in the frame, a key reference point and gateway to the central area of the encampment. The symbol of the centre is then repeated inside the tent – a similar post can be seen clearly in the small hours of the morning, after Alexandra’s first night in the camp, in the left-hand part of the chamber, right next to her cot.

Alexandra’s grandson, sitting in the centre of the closed camp, may be serving a purpose similar to that performed by the Minotaur imprisoned in the labyrinth: “‘Someone’ inhabits that core, that gargantuan womb; there unfolds the skirmish between the element of Life and the element of Death, and as the former triumphs over the latter, so is the difficulty of leaving the maze vanquished” (Santarcangeli, 1982, p. 202). According to scholars, the monsters dwelling in the labyrinths were abhorrent and repulsive not just on the outside, but the inside, too (Kowalski & Krzak, 2003, pp. 27, 174). When Denis tells his grandmother of life in the camp, he makes a point to emphasize the physical ugliness of his fellow troops. Furthermore, he adds that he finds himself unworthy of marriage and that he is afraid of his nightmares which could, against his will, reveal to the world the evil lurking inside of him.

² The close-up on the stripe was also included in Sokurov’s short film novella: “Standing below the carriage deck, he loudly cleared away the floor of the freight train (...) with his large hand” (Sokurov, 2014, p. 29).

³ “Takie kak vy uzhe ne priezhaiut v armiiu.” All passages from the film are taken directly from the character lines.

He sees Alexandra's arrival as his opportunity to be "free" again, to cleanse himself and make himself ready to love again.

Alexandra's repeated injunctions to Denis to wash his uniform and her efforts to get him to wash himself are ultimately driven by a desire to return him to a state of inner purity. It seems that the elderly woman is the only person around to still see the good and the beauty that lies dormant deep inside Denis.

The characters' internal transformation taking place over the course of the film will also touch Alexandra herself. Every person who enters the labyrinth, leaves it as someone else – someone blessed with the ability to ascend to a higher plane of existence. Journeying into oneself is usually most illuminating: "You return transformed, capable of seeing into another and fathom the relationship between mankind and the cosmos. (...) Such a person – an individuality but not an individualist – will be particularly valuable to the collective, because their mental experience will allow them to grasp the duty of 'the individual' toward 'the collective'" (Kowalski & Krzak, 2003, pp. 27, 157). The arrival of the woman-saviour is a small token of hope for the ascension from one life to another, from "carnal animality (Minotaur) toward spiritual humanity (Theseus)" (Santarcangeli, 1982, p. 210).

The camp grounds, with their maze-like footpaths and a multitude of seemingly identical tents, bear the hallmarks of a labyrinthine structure, signifying, in this particular instance, a path of initiation which, traversed repeatedly,⁴ is supposed to eventually lead the sufficiently prepared character to the inner sanctum (Santarcangeli, 1982, p. 174), where they will come upon a fundamental aspect of human nature. The scene depicting Alexandra's meeting with her grandson, unfolding within the very centre of film space, serves to communicate the essence of Alexandra's journey to the camp.

Alexandra's quest to locate Denis is effortful, but undertaken voluntarily. The change taking place within man is symbolically encapsulated by the vision of the labyrinth, which holds Denis-Minotaur and which Alexandra-Theseus probes in search of the creature, to defeat and thus release it from its bondage. Alexandra is equipped with weaving attributes, including long hair and a plait, as well as yarn from the Chechen woman Malika, a veritable personification of the archetypal Ariadne, whom she will encounter along the way.

⁴ The necessity of crossing thresholds – and facing challenge after challenge – by a character seeking rebirth was also explored by Joseph Campbell (see Campbell, 2008, p. 74). Campbell's findings were later used by Christopher Vogler (Vogler, 2007, p. 153)

The costume as metaphor

During her first day, Alexandra focuses primarily on understanding all of the rules that regulate life in the camp. Observing the daily routines of the troops, she asks not to be hurried as she attaches considerable importance to her efforts. Sitting in the tank, she even presses her cheek against the stock of a gun and pulls the trigger, intent on going through the same experiences soldiers go through in combat; her gaze becomes sinister, terrifying. In that moment, the male element in her rises to the surface, dominant. The subsequent scenes, on the other hand, serve to emphasize the female element in the protagonist's nature, an effort helped considerably by the outfit Alexandra is wearing.

One of the reasons behind Sokurov's decision to offer the role of Alexandra to Galina Vishnevskaja was the opera singer's incredibly deep, piercing, wise gaze. He went so far as to say that without her on board, he would have never shot the film (*"Voïna bez voïny"*, 2006). In his view, Vishnevskaja embodied the archetype of womanhood firmly rooted in Russian culture, as well as the power and dignity which informed the international status of the Russian state and Russian peoples.⁵ The artist – with her monumental effortlessness and regal bearing – became "the core of both the physical and spiritual world that Sokurov strove to craft" (Tuchinskaja, 2007b, p. 74).

From the very beginning of the film, our attention is drawn to one particular element of Alexandra's outfit – the ruby earrings,⁶ vividly red against her brown dress and the "scorched" environment. They are even more apparent when the protagonist, already on the train, is filmed in a medium close-up as she greets soldiers stepping into the car. Rubies are often used in jewellery worn by high-ranking church officials, to symbolically strengthen their resolve and courage (Telitsyn, Bagdasarian, & Orlov, 2003, p. 413).

It can be argued, therefore, that Sokurov chose that minute detail in the protagonist's overall outfit to accentuate her particular status in the realm she arrived in and the power she would command along the way. The ruby red of the earrings is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, an indication of the strength, the will to live and the fighting spirit of the protagonist (Gross, 2000, p. 9), who, as the film draws to a close, manifests her inner needs through

⁵ As cited in: interview with Aleksandr Sokurov (*"Master Class: Aleksandr Sokurov"*, 2016).

⁶ The detail is also described as a constitutive element of the protagonist's outfit in Sokurov's short film novella: "Not minding the scorching heat, she wore a light grey jacket over a long, below-the-knee-length silk dress the colour of coffee. On her wrist – a small golden watch with a square face, which grew quite popular in the 1960s. (...) Small earrings with rubies. Light grey sock and plain, beige sandals with a small heel" (Sokurov, 2014, p. 22).

her garb: "My life is at an end. And I want to live. My body grew old, but my soul is ready to go through another life".⁷

It is worth noting that following the first conversation with her grandson and before heading to bed, Alexandra takes off her jewellery: her ruby-studded rings and earrings, an act which might be compared to the act of taking off one's belt in an attempt to make oneself resemble a creature of the underworld, a practice rooted in Slavic folk beliefs and seen as requisite to establish contact with the immaterial reality. Furthermore, the ring and the bracelet both served as stabilizers, cementing the bond between flesh and soul. The scene could be said to draw on the mythical belief that said protective belts could be taken off in places concealing a secret treasure (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, pp. 136–138). Alexandra wears dresses in muted colours, the hues matching her surroundings and resembling the drab patterns used for military uniforms. Her attire, therefore, serves the two primary functions of a film character's costume: it accentuates the incredible power of the protagonist, while simultaneously concealing the true objective of her visit from the soldiers around her (Płażewski, 1982, p. 387).

The protagonist is a central figure and a clear illustration of the process of integrating elements traditionally seen as male and female. The latter are manifested through subtle elements of her attire, like the ruby jewellery, suggesting inner majesty, and the floral print on her dress,⁸ with the pattern depicting plants weaved together into a maze, bringing up numerous connotations to Paradise (Santarcangeli, 1982, p. 264).

Alexandra's masculine attributes are apparent in the way she holds the weapon inside the tank, as well as in another prop – the cap given to her by her grandson right before she left the camp. Notably, the protagonist wears her floral print dress on only two occasions: when she finds herself in the closed military zone and when she visits the Chechen town. On both her arrival and her departure, she wore the same uniformly brown dress. The night gown she emerges in after her first night in the camp is also printed with a floral pattern. The plant motifs worn by the protagonist emphasize her connection with the earth and allow the director to craft a parallel between her character and motherhood, between the homeland and the motherland.⁹

⁷ "la znaiu, zhizn' moia konchaetsia – zhit' khochu. Telo moë sostarilos', dusha gotova prozhit' eshchë tseluiu zhizn'."

⁸ Although following her first conversation with her grandson Alexandra takes off her earrings and ring, both of which serve her as protective talismans (Telitsyn et al., 2003, pp. 231–232), the print on her dress plays a role similar to the stitching of wedding garb in Slavic folk beliefs, which held that evil forces were unable to penetrate fabrics joined with ornamental stitching, so the bride's shirt used cross-stitching (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, pp. 137–138).

⁹ In Russian, the word *rodina* 'motherland' is feminine and is often imagined as female. Many monuments in Russia portray the motherland allegorically as a woman, e.g. The Motherland Calls in Volgograd. During the Great Patriotic War, Soviet propaganda also prominently used Irakli Toidze's poster featuring the same slogan (*Rodina-mat' zovët*).

The weaving process

The series of weaving efforts were an isomorphic reflection of the changes brought on by the seasons. Referring to the former in further interpretation of the film, we can identify in *Alexandra* specific stages that seemingly correspond with the processing of raw material – foreshadowing the reunion of grandmother and grandson, during which the plait is made. The opening of the film, when the setting, we ought to reemphasize, is so clearly defined – as scorched and dust-ridden – corresponds with the period of winter hibernation. That particular stage includes scenes set at night – Alexandra's first conversation with her grandson and her solitary stroll through the camp. The next stage of the weaving process, on the other hand, is usually associated with longer days, fields and meadows – spring-time was traditionally when weavers began prepping their raw materials for further work. In the film, this particular stage is reflected in Alexandra's trip to the local market.

In this part of the essay, I will attempt to analyse the process of preparing the characters "to be weaved into fabric" (Korycka, 2017). It is not without significance that the protagonist first meets Malika during that first outing beyond the wire. Already on the way to the Chechen woman's abode, the wind picks up and, as the leaves rustle in the backdrop, birdsong replaces the cawing of crows. It seems as if the whole world rejoices at the sight of the protagonist approaching the place where she is supposed to rest and gain new knowledge. We can also hear non-diegetic music growing louder with every minute, and as it slowly drowns out the diegetic sounds, the music emphatically suggests that this stage will involve the protagonist changing on at least two levels: the physical – as Alexandra will regain her strength, and the spiritual – affecting her inner life. The scene also outlines the binary of the eternally vibrant natural world and the human realm, ossified and decrepit.

It is worth noting that Alexandra meets Malika when the latter is knitting. Soon afterwards, the Chechen local invites the protagonist over to her apartment. Notably, in most tellings of the fairy tale, Baba Yaga gave those who came across her house gifts carrying attributes commonly associated with weaving: a weaving comb, a spinner, a spindle, a length of golden thread and a skein (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, p. 69): "By crossing the threshold of the cabin, the fairy-tale characters passed into the underworld, where they soon came upon its first avatar – the old crone who was both witch and weaver" (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, p. 67). In the film, meanwhile, Malika serves tea to her guest, offering the weary woman an opportunity to rest and recover. Later on, the gifts become

immaterial as Alexandra received a little weary wisdom from the elderly Caucasian. Against the non-diegetic instrumental score, we hear Alexandra say: "By God, is it even possible to begin everything again in our old age?";¹⁰ thus implying that a renaissance, a rebirth is her ultimate goal, as is "sowing good seeds" across the realm she chose to visit.

Alexandra's excursion outside the wire concludes as she is escorted back to the camp by a young Chechen down a winding road passing through fields of golden wheat, all the way up to the barrier marking off the camp premises, which the boy cannot cross. In the background – as in the scene where Malika and Alexandra head home together – we can distinctly hear a chorus of birdsong. In folk weaving traditions, birds were often believed to be checking on the women's preparation of the yarn for further work and initiating the subsequent stages of the weaving process by providing the requisite weaving tools (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, p. 35). The growth of crops, the awakening of nature – all signify nature's inexorable rebirth. Notably, be noted that the lesson given to the protagonist by Malika – on the importance of keeping a family together and preserving the deep bonds between its members – is eventually brought up during the last stage of the fabric making process, that is the long conversation with Denis. The knowledge Alexandra gleaned from the "aliens" thus serves as yarn, destined to be used in the later portions of the "weaving" process.

The process doubles as a confrontation between the male and female elements. The powerful force binding Alexandra and Denis together is apparent in the words the grandmother utters to her grandson: "I love you. I want someone to be by my side".¹¹ The protagonist then tells her grandson that families are like woven fabrics that should never be unravelled. Only then can it be strong enough to withstand the challenges it will come to face.

Weaving the new man

In the final stage of the weaving process – represented in the film by the second conversation between Denis and his grandmother – we witness the process of "making fabric" commence. It should be noted here that following their initial conversation, Denis leaves his grandmother alone for the night, arguing that he did not want her good night's rest disturbed by the profanity he was sure to utter in his sleep. During their second encounter in the same tent,

¹⁰ "Gospodi, razve možno v nashem vozraste vsë nachinat' s nachala?"

¹¹ "Ja liubliu tebia. Khochu byt' s kem-to riadom."

however, Alexandra pleads with him to stay with her for the night. The woman essentially “detains” her grandson in the tent, in order to soak in his presence.

The grandmother tries her best to set up proper conditions for a face-to-face confrontation between herself and her grandson, but they require a unity of both time and place. In the words of Józef Tischner, beauty demands sacrifice: “Freedom of movement is the first sacrifice to beauty. The constant proximity beauty requires of its discoverer soon becomes an inescapable burden” (Tischner, 2013, p. 354). Only inhabiting a common space-time can permit communion with beauty and genuine understanding of the essence of femininity and masculinity by both Alexandra and Denis.

The scene with plaiting hair is absolutely fundamental to understanding the essence of *Alexandra* and the amalgamation of masculine and feminine elements that takes place over its course. The frame showing the grandson plaiting his grandmother’s hair was composed deliberately so that the plait itself would split the frame down the middle. In the background, we see Alexandra’s floral print dress, her grey hair falling to rest against it. The flowers making up the pattern seem to come together into something akin to a meadow, instantly conjuring up images of youth (Santarcangeli, 1982, p. 240). Thus, Alexandra and her grandson are enveloped by the same space, silence and pure beauty, which helps push him back to memories of childhood. As he drifts back in time, Alexandra says: “I remember you plaiting my hair when you were a little boy”.¹² Gesture repetition is typically used by non-verbal children to learn about the world around them.

The scene also upends those traditional roles, an inversion similar to what we have already seen when Alexandra stepped out of the tank and Dennis took her in his arms and carried her away.¹³ Here, the adult man serving as his child self performs the ritual of plaiting hair – Alexandra only provides him the necessary raw material.

In Slavic lore, young women were tasked with looking after and caring for raw weaving materials, and used a bevy of supposedly magical rituals to do so, including a practice of letting their hair down and combing it out to make the yarn soft and long (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, pp. 46–48). And strikingly similar behaviour on Alexandra’s part can

¹² “Pomniu, kogda ty mal’chikom mne kosu zapletal.”

¹³ The tank scene ends with a shot of Denis carrying his grandmother in his arms, against a solemn score, a possible allusion to a similar scene in *Mother and Son*, in which the eponymous son carried his sick mother in his arms. Other references to *Mother and Son* in *Alexandra* include the colour palette and framing used for the scene in which we see Alexandra return from her visit to the market, accompanied by the young Chechen. Either openly or in a more roundabout way, Sokurov seeks to connect all of his films, to create a complete, robust semantic field (see Lemchin, 2012, p. 305).

be observed in the scene depicting her second encounter with her grandson. Plaiting hair was also an important part of folk wedding rituals (Kruglov, 2001, p. 252). After the nuptials, the matchmaker would unravel the bride's plait and split her hair down the middle; then, she would take half herself and begin plaiting a new one, leaving the other half to a girl she would select from the guests (Kruglov, 2001, p. 252). The ritual marked the bride's passage from maidenhood and into matrimony.

After Alexandra brings up remembering Denis plaiting her hair back when he was a boy, she lifts her gaze up and closes her eyes, while in the background a handful of parallel musical motifs begin to play. With the plait finished, the scene ends with a gentle edit – first fading out to white and then fading into the next scene, set at dawn, in which Denis tries to awaken his deeply sleeping grandmother. Sleep during weaving was perceived as a state of transient death, whereas the rhythm, repetitive movement, mirrored by the rhythmic speech pattern, was supposed to help the child transition between wakefulness and sleep (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, p. 37).

It should be also be noted that plaits were often seen in folk customs as a symbol of vitality and fertility (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, p. 158). Long hair, meanwhile, is an analogon of yarn, expressing the notion of continuity and persistence. "Long hair, as a symbol of immortality, and long threads both stood for (...) the ability to preserve the husband's bloodline" (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, p. 160). Lulled by the weaver rituals and the sound of the shuttle, the grandmother falls asleep, sliding into a dream so peaceful and deep that Denis finds it difficult to wake her up.

The "fabric", the canvas and the plait – all of which require the work of at least two people to exist and all of which have their separate, individual functions – become a symbol of one body, a shared bloodstream¹⁴ signifying generational continuity, but also responsibility for progeny and the duty to preserve the memory of those who came before,¹⁵ especially since Slavic folklore often portrayed the creation of life as weaving a new person (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, p. 71).

The reunion between Alexandra and Denis and their joint "weaving rituals" end up producing a new person – an ideal being in whom the two constitutive elements of human nature balanced each other out. The films particular space-time carries traces of both male and female elements,

¹⁴ It should be noted that in the scene that ends with plaiting Alexandra's hair, the characters keep discussing blood ties between compatriots and family members, and blood itself, seen here as both a symbol of death – when trickling down military uniforms, an image brought up by Denis – but also of rebirth.

¹⁵ The notion of commemorating those who passed away but whose presence still lingers is also explored in the photo album scene in Sokurov's debut effort, *The Lonely Voice of Man* (Korycka, 2015, pp. 83–117).

and their echoes reverberate throughout its aural layer. The protagonist's journey leads her through the *orbis exterior*, the realm of the unclean, evil and alien, toward the *orbis interior*, the realm of the beautiful, tamed and familiar, nestled deep inside every human being (Stomma, 1981).

Music from the past

Within the context of examining the role played by male and female elements in the "weaving process" depicted in *Alexandra*, it might be a good idea to take a closer look at the film's score, which is more or less built around two chief *leitmotifs*: a mournful requiem theme and the jolly song "U riabiny rodnoï" (Under the Familiar Rowan Tree), performed to the tune of a Viennese waltz by the young Galina Vishnevskaja and an accordionist in the 1940s.¹⁶ The former is mostly reserved for funerals and votive services, mass prayer intercessions intended to alleviate the suffering of souls trapped in purgatory. The latter, on the other hand, is based around the figure of a circle, expressed herein through the repetition of a specific motif. Both aspects of the score appear already in the opening, seemingly superimposed over each other, and later play over the end credits, similarly interwoven.

Thus, already in the beginning, the film lays out two separate tracks along which the narrative will unfold. One explores external space – describing a world steeped in war, and commemorating the dead who gave their lives in defence of their homeland. The other, meanwhile, pertains to the inner life of the protagonist, and revolves around the voice of Alexandra herself. It should be noted that the concept of introducing a counterpoint pitting two separate *leitmotifs* against each other, in line with all the precepts of harmony and rhythm, was proposed by the director rather than the composer (Uvarov, 2011, p. 53) – the approach clearly highlighting the importance Sokurov attached to the organic "interior-exterior" binary.

In the analysed and interpreted scene, the union of the main characters was also fleshed out in the film's aural layer. We hear Alexandra's voice – sourced from the song's original recording performed by the young Vishnevskaja – speaking the verses from Mikhail Lermontov's "Net ne tebia tak pylko ia liubliu" ("It Is Not You Whom I Love So Ardently").¹⁷ The poem was written in 1841, shortly after the author first met Ekaterina Bykhovets, a woman who reminded Lermontov of his

¹⁶ *U riabiny rodnoï* (1946) – music: Georgii Nosov, lyrics: Aleksandr Churkin.

¹⁷ Rather than include a translation of the Lermontov poem, the subtitles in the Polish version carry only a description of its contents, which precludes the audience from deciphering the full meaning of the scene, which Sokurov distributed along a handful of different levels.

true love, Varvara Lopukhina, whom he was unfortunately unable to have a romantic relationship with (Lomov, 2010, p. 93). If we were to transpose the situation of the lyrical subject onto the experience of the protagonist, we would soon realize that she is actually saying goodbye to the past, to past pain, as meeting her grandson conjures up memories of her youth, while, at the same time, forcing her to cleave herself from those burdens that bind her to the past.

In the background, we can also hear the song “U riabiny rodnoĭ”, built around the symbol of the rowan tree, traditionally associated with adolescent femininity in Russian folklore (Romanova, Filippova, & Pan'kin, 2007, p. 190). The lyrical subject identifies with a young girl, jealous of a boy who prefers another girl over her. The fact that it accompanies Alexandra from beginning to end accentuates her energy and vitality, but also serves to define her objective – seizing the young man for herself, dissuading him from continuing down the path leading him astray, and, finally, convincing him to choose her over everyone else:¹⁸ “I want you to forget the way to hers and come only to me”,¹⁹ say the lyrics of the folk song.

In *Alexandra*, the peculiar hypertrophy of longing for the past, repeatedly brought up by the folk lyrics and the Lermontov verses, is juxtaposed with images of a space that is dead and alienated, a place that can never be home. Thus, the homeland the film characters speak of must necessarily migrate inwards, emerging in that inner space where male and female elements coexist in harmony. In this multi-level “symphony of sounds”, we can also hear a faint male sound – but are ultimately left unable to decipher the meaning behind the words it utters. The female nature is apparently dominant, but it is the male who triggers the commencement of further stages of the process.

Alexandra as mirror of the invisible

Importantly, there is a mirror in the room where the second meeting between grandmother and grandson takes place,²⁰ in front of which the protagonist stands to let her hair down. It is not, however, a mirror of her soul as the film will subject more than just her psyche to “spiritual vivisection”. Not once does the camera show the woman looking at herself

¹⁸ It should also be noted that the rowan tree is often associated with the motherland, as evidenced by the 1934 Marina Tsvetaeva poem “Longing for the Motherland” (translated into English by David McDuff). For Russian émigrés, the homeland is basically non-existent, and that is why their poetry introduced the exile paradigm that Sokurov draws so deeply on (Kovalev, 2002, pp. 4–8).

¹⁹ “Ja khochu, chtoby ty/ Pozabyl k neĭ puti i dorogi/ I ko mne prikhodil/ Pod okoshko vecherneĭ poroĭ.”

²⁰ A mirror can also be found in Malika's room. Both Alexandra's and the Chechen woman's dwellings are spaces where the protagonist is capable of transcending the threshold of the visible world, the mirror being a symbol of that ability.

in the mirror – on the contrary, she is filmed from the side, in a wide shot, and later in a medium close-up, so that her grandson, standing behind her, sees only her inverted reflection, which feels as if she is speaking to him from another plane.

The protagonist stands in front of the mirror, seemingly only to mention how dirty it is and thus unable to perform its basic function. The bewildered soldiers cannot use it to look into their soul. Alexandra arrives at the camp to tear that veil down and become a mirror herself, in which the troops will be able to find a wellspring of motherly love, of the female element, and thus will be able to realize their own beauty. Each one of the men longs for female nature, and that longing manifests itself in their subtle smiles, the effort they put into making Alexandra's meals, and one of the officers' gentle touching of her hand.

"All men are beautiful";²¹ Alexandra declares during her conversation with Denis. Tischner argued that human sensuality strives toward synthesis – toward finding that beauty lies in the other. Although encountering beauty does not change much at first glance, "the truth is everything changes, man and his world alike. Life thus becomes purer, grows innocent and sacred" (Tischner, 2013, p. 350). In the wake of his reunion with his grandmother, a source of the female element, Denis himself changes, going so far as to allowing himself the thought that Alexandra will one day find him a wife. "Endowed" with female love, the man becomes capable of loving.

The presence of the mirror in the scene encourages us to look for instances of symmetry in the relationship between Denis and Alexandra portrayed in the film. The female and male elements clash with each other, seeking a state of inner homeostasis. Snuggling against her grandson, Alexandra says:

Alexandra: "You smell so good. How wonderful men smell sometimes."

Denis: "All women are the same..."

Alexandra: "It's because all men are beautiful."²²

Here, beauty symbolizes that which remains coveted. The scene is surreptitiously observed by another soldier, who closes the door to the room only after their conversation ends and he himself realizes that what he witnessed was a conciliatory "confession" between Alexandra and Denis.²³

²¹ "Vse muzhchiny prekrasny."

²² Alexandra: "Kak ty khorosho pakhnesh. Kak inogda khorosho pakhnut muzhchiny." Denis: "Vse zhenshchiny odinakovy." Alexandra: "Potomu shto vse muzhchiny prekrasny."

²³ The scene in which Denis carries his grandmother in his arms might be considered a prelude to their second conversation. It is then that she utters the word "beauty" and wraps her arms tight around Denis' neck, which we can see in a wide shot as the characters, placed centre frame, walk away from the camera with their backs to the lens.

Sokurov used the plaiting scene and Denis' later efforts to wake Alexandra up to portray the circular nature of time itself, and its eternal pursuit of renewal.²⁴ Cosmogony requires creation, struggle and raw material, "the primeval thread, the matter of creation; in the act of procreation, the thread is a metaphor for the human body, while in handicraft, it stands as a genuine counterpart of the mythical prototype" (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, pp. 54–55). In the analysed and interpreted scene, Sokurov manages to trace the path from birth all the way up to death.

A world without women

The military camp depicted in *Alexandra* is a world without women. They are rarely the subject of conversation, and when they are, they are described with trite platitudes and stereotypes: "The only thing women can think of is money and TV, where we, men, think about the homeland",²⁵ one young soldier says.

When asked by Alexandra about the homeland they mean, however, the young men are unable to offer an answer. Russian theologian Paul Evdokimov saw in that evidence of the spiritual fall of civilization: "The more secular a civilization, the more it is burdened with typically masculine attributes – and the further it strays from the feminine, the more stricken it gets with despair" (Evdokimov, 1991, p. 167).

Evdokimov argued that when stripped of any trace of the feminine, any reality is destined to fail and collapse. A world that no longer responds to female charms "grows ever more godless, heedless of its origins, cut off from the wellspring of truth and liberty. Through her generosity, devotion, committed belief, inspiration, spiritual receptivity, sensitivity and compassion, the woman enables the survival of the world and Christianity, particularly in the most difficult of times. To men, life is struggle, killing, conquest. To women, on the other hand, life is selflessness, it is bearing, supporting and protecting life. Men sacrifice themselves in combat to win, whereas a woman seeks to provide relief, even at the cost of her own life" (Evdokimov, 1991, p. 170).

The film also explores the lack of balance between the masculine and the feminine and the attendant crisis of modern masculinity. On the actors' childlike faces, we see

²⁴ Said nature is also encapsulated in the Russian word for time, *vremia*, etymologically linked to terms like "circle" and "revolution", the latter pertaining to the turning of the spinning wheel used in weaving (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, p. 38).

²⁵ "Vse zhenshchiny vsë vremia smotriat iashchik, dumaiut tol'ko o den'gakh, pravil'no? – A o chëm nado dumat'? – O rodine."

embarrassment and humility. They hide themselves behind their camouflaged uniforms, holding weapons supposed to augment their masculinity. In a conversation with his grandmother, Denis reveals that most soldiers hide their eyes under the peaks of their caps to avoid confrontation with their fellow human beings. Both in the camp and the Chechen town, the men keep out of the way, crowding the sidelines, the cracks of space,²⁶ the tents, sleeping under cars, glancing at each other only from a distance.

Alexandra's arrival in the camp forces them to lift their gaze from under their caps. She catches their gazes and looks deep inside them. Shots featuring these skirmishes are usually long, offering the audience a closer look at the silent conversations. Denis' gift of his beret, which he wore while first showing the camp to his grandmother, is particularly important in this context. As she leaves, he himself puts on a patrol cap. Offering the traditionally masculine piece of headgear to a woman completes the process of transformation and restores balance to the feminine and masculine. The Minotaur, the living embodiment of total, unconscious evil and death, and his sister, Ariadne – embodying good and rebirth, are both symbols of the masculine-feminine binary that underpins human nature (Kowalski & Krzak, 2003, p. 28). Alexandra's promise to find her grandson a wife serves to seal this symbolic "exchange of spiritual gifts".

Alexandra carries within herself both typically masculine and typically feminine elements.²⁷ On the one hand, she assures her grandson that he is as strong as she is, and her strength is indeed evident in her appearance and imperious gestures. On the other hand, however, she has many typically feminine attributes, including her floral print outfit, her care for the soldiers, and the gentleness she exhibits in the plaiting scene. Alexandra's piercing and withering stare – which, in a paradoxical illustration of the character's dual nature, also exudes tenderness – is capable of penetrating into the innermost depths of the soldiers' souls and alludes to one of the mechanisms of maintaining discipline (Foucault, 1995, pp. 170–172).²⁸ The ambiguity of Alexandra's gaze, and the motherly care it seems to emanate, makes the soldiers "cling to her like lost puppies, fawning over her and following her with their eyes" (Sadowska, 2007, p. 70).

²⁶ "On a symbolic level, evil penetrates through the 'cracks' of existence. It is a parasitic growth, a foreign object that is a parody of Sophia, a 'nightmare of creation,' its demonic mask (Evdokimov, 1991, p. 78).

²⁷ "The presence, however, in all structures of essential contrasexual components, this hermaphroditic quality, makes possible an inner 'independent' experience of the opposite sex" (Neumann, 2015, p. 24). Because of the gentleness and care he manifests in the plaiting scene, Denis also seems such a hermaphroditic psychological structure.

²⁸ "In the perfect camp, all power would be exercised solely through exact observation; each gaze would form a part of the overall functioning of power. (...) The geometry of the paths, the number and distribution of the tents, the orientation of their entrances, the disposition of files and ranks were exactly defined; the network of gazes that supervised one another was laid down. (...) The camp is the diagram of a power that acts by means of general visibility" (Foucault, 1995, p. 171).

It may therefore be that only such a configuration of attributes, a condensation of feminine and masculine characteristics within a single figure, allows the creation of the Great Mother archetype, whose manifestation in the character of Alexandra is global rather than singular in nature: "The ascent of Promethean, masculine civilizations is as violent as their inevitable fall. Such was the fate of the Romans. Eastern civilizations (...) generally speaking, reserved much more space for values considered feminine, which translated into their relative longevity" (Evdokimov, 1991, pp. 170–171).

Leading Alexandra to her apartment, Malika remarks on the men sitting aimlessly nearby, snapping at them to find themselves a job. Evdokimov argues that a woman replacing man does not bring any added value to society. On the contrary – the woman thus tends to lose a sense of her own femininity and the intuition of her calling (Evdokimov, 1991, p. 179). In one of the film's closing scenes, Alexandra hugs the Chechen women who came to the train station to see her off. The four women, Malika among them, embrace one another in a heartfelt hug, becoming a symbol of the immense power of femininity. All of them are wearing floral print dresses, reiterating their relationship to the Mother Earth archetype, facilitating constant spiritual and vital growth. The Great Mother is a goddess of life, death and rebirth (Santarcangeli, 1982, p. 183). For Sokurov, the shot with the hugging women is a sort of *mise-en-scène*, embodying the "filmmaker's dream and fairy tale" (Tuchinskaia, 2007b, p. 75).

The fact that Malika rejects Alexandra's offer to move in with her in Stavropol for a while only accentuates the weight that the peoples of the Caucasus attach to blood ties and the values they were taught in their family homes – although now physically destroyed, the homes continue onwards, carried within by their former occupants. Malika knows that hers and Alexandra's paths have now diverged, never to intersect again. Now, each of them has to take care of "their men" in their own respective homelands.

Conclusions

Alexandra is the central figure of the film and the stage on which the process of integrating the masculine and feminine plays out. The latter manifests itself in subtle elements of Alexandra's wardrobe, including her ruby earrings, indicating her inner majesty, as well as the floral pattern on her dress, in which Alexandra resembles a symbol of life, Mother Earth, or the archetypal Grand Mother to which the soldiers around her are subconsciously drawn;

her masculine nature, on the other hand, manifests itself in her strength, the power of her gestures, or the way she handles the weapon inside the tank.

Specific scenes in the film actually reflect individual stages of the process of weaving fabric, a process which – like weaving canvas or plaiting hair, both of which require the work of two people – becomes the symbol of one body, a shared bloodstream, pumping the same blood, itself a symbol of generational continuity, as folklore often equated the creation of life with the weaving of a new man.

The film's space and time both carry traces of the masculine and feminine elements, their echoes also reverberate throughout its aural layer. The protagonist's journey takes her across a labyrinth running through spaces both within and without. It should be noted that the semantic field of the word "labyrinth" also encompasses the world of plants, the intricacies of tree roots and canopies, the dark tunnels of thick woodland. The protagonist finally arrives in the very heart of the aforementioned innermost space, in order to show to Denis that "the centre of the world is the centre of man" (Santarcangeli, 1982, p. 303). Alexandra's mission, therefore, undertaken out of respect for the blood ties running like a thread through generations, out of longing for beauty and for love of our fellow man, out of a desire for inner complementarity and the will to give a piece of oneself, a piece of her female nature, to the realm she arrived in, may thus be considered accomplished.

Translated by Jan Szelągiewicz

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Pierwiastki męskie i kobiece w filmie *Aleksandra* w reżyserii Aleksandra Sokurowa

Artykuł jest poświęcony przedstawieniu rudymentów archetypu Wielkiej Matki w filmie *Aleksandra* w reżyserii Aleksandra Sokurowa za pomocą metody analizy antropologiczno-morfologicznej dzieła filmowego. Efektem spotkania bohaterów i ich „czynności tkackich” jest nowa osoba – istota idealna, w której równowaga pierwiastków męskich i kobiecych osiągnęła stan pełnej harmonii.

Słowa kluczowe:

Sokurow; Aleksandra; Wielka Matka; labirynt; wojna; pierwiastki kobiece i męskie

The masculine and feminine elements in Aleksandr Sokurov's film *Alexandra*

The aim of this article is to present the fundamentals of the Great Mother archetype in Aleksandr Sokurov's film *Alexandra* using the anthropological-morphological method of analysis. The effect of meeting between the protagonists, Alexandra and Denis, and their interweaving, is a new person – a perfect being where the masculine and feminine is brought to a perfect harmony.

Keywords:

Sokurov; Alexandra; Great Mother; maze; war; masculine and feminine elements

Note:

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