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# 'The Soviet Film Collection: Two Films by Alexander Sokurov'

Thurs/21 and Thurs/28, New PFA Theater

The remarkable Alexander Sokurov had a "hit" of sorts with 1997's *Mother and Son*, his first feature to get an actual U.S. release. Still perceived as too abstract and difficult even for art-house audiences, the Russian filmmaker's works since have reverted to their prior limited exposure on the festival circuit. The Pacific Film Archive's current series of highlights from its extensive Soviet collection provides a rare glimpse at two titles from his prolific, if little-seen, first decade. Premiering around the time when perestroika went large, 1988's *Days of the Eclipse* is an apt metaphor for systemic collapse. Protagonist Dmitri (Alexei Ananishnov, a Slavic Jan-Michael Vincent type who'd later play the latter role in *Mother and Son*) is a young doctor sent from Moscow to live in the atrophied society and chalky landscapes of Turkmenistan. Absorbed in his personal research project, he figures, "This [place] is as good as anywhere." But everyone else keeps prodding him with statements like "You're crazy coming to this hole." When a corpse in the local morgue seconds that emotion, "waking up" long enough to warn, "Go away ... this is no place for the living," Dmitri's tether begins to snap — or is it just that the purgatorial, hope-depleted life here has finally overcome his resistance? Narrative comprehensibility surges and recedes at will, like a distant radio signal; as with many Sokurov films, *Eclipse* seems no less monumental for revealing its grand design only in jagged fragments. Shot in wide-screen bleached color and sepia-tinted black and white, the movie inhabits an irrational, near-subliminal zone as redolent of certain literary touchstones (Paul Bowles, Graham Greene, Franz Kafka) as cinematic ones (Antonioni,

Lars von Trier's *Element of Crime*). But unlike most such antecedents, Sokurov is capable of overwhelming tenderness — seen especially in a long sequence with a runaway child and the homoerotic fidelity between Dmitri and his friend Sascha — as well as a pervasive spiritual despair. Glacially paced *Eclipse* requires patience, but its supernatural dislocation just might stay with you forever. By contrast, the 1983 (though not released until four years later) *Mournful Indifference* shows Sokurov at loggerheads with precisely the wrong "collaborator": George Bernard Shaw, whose epic 1913 antiwar parlor comedy *Heartbreak House* is diced, warped, and intercut with period newsreel footage to hapless results. See Rep Clock for show times. (Dennis Harvey)



STILL FROM DAY OF THE ECLIPSE