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# Flesh and Blood

**M**other and Son is a movie as elemental as its title, as well as the most rarefied vision its famously uncompromising director, Alexander Sokurov, has yet produced. An artist whose fastidiously crafted movies concentrate on the most elusive, fugitive sensations, Sokurov here outdoes all previous efforts with this astonishing chamber piece—the equivalent of a visual whisper—about the last hours a child spends with his dying parent.

The 47-year-old Russian's trademark twilight zone is here the shadowland between consciousness and oblivion. An enfeebled woman (Gudrun Geyer) is attended by her grown son (Alexei Ananishnov) in an isolated country cabin. Their speech is muffled,

## *Mother and Son*

Directed by Alexander Sokurov  
Written by Yuri Arabov  
An International Film Circuit release  
At Film Forum  
Through February 17

## *Nil by Mouth*

Written and directed by Cary Oldman  
A Sony Pictures Classics release  
Opens February 6

## BY J. HOBERMAN

individually worked-out composition. Indeed, *Mother and Son's* spectacular "creative geography" is doubly invented—the image modified by a system of mirrors and glass filters, some of them hand-painted, positioned both behind and before the lens.

Ethereal as it is, *Mother and Son* makes a stark contrast to Sokurov's

in its limning the child's ambivalence, desiring—even as he fears—the release of his mother's death. The dying parent is a literal burden who, for much of the movie, is carried through the world by her son in a sort of reverse pieta.

A movie of incredible stillness, *Mother and Son* evokes overwhelming solitude amid fulsome creation—the filmmaker's not the least. (Sokurov's subtlety and high seriousness was poorly served by the ludicrous trailer that Film Forum had the good sense to cease showing.) Sokurov is driven to strive for the sublime, working without the net of irony that served Lars von Trier in his similarly high-flown *Breaking the Waves*. In the film's most stunning passages, the son leaves his mother alone and returns to the fields, wandering through the deep forest and



Reversal of misfortune: Geyer and Ananishnov in *Mother and Son*

even as the noises around them are exaggerated. The light is fading, the perspective seems unfixed, the colors are barely present, and yet these flattened-out, smeared images have a startling precision. How does something so insubstantial project so much authority? The crackle of the logs in the fireplace might be the sound of burning film emulsion, even as the movie appears to float somewhere in space, casting its faint shadow on the screen.

*Mother and Son* (which was screened once at the last New York Film Festival) looks like no other film ever made. Sokurov has fused locations ranging from the Russian woods to the sandy cliffs of Germany's Baltic coast, synthesizing his own version of early-19th-century Romantic landscape canvases. (Caspar David Friedrich is the painter most frequently invoked, although Sokurov's images can also suggest William Turner's quieter compositions in mist and light.) Each shot is an

most original movie, the 1990 *Second Circle*—a far more materialist view of death, where the protagonist spends most of his time in the miserable Siberian hovel where his father has just died, arranging for his parent's corpse. Shot nearly in real time, this sui generis borderline black comedy had as much to do with dreariness and discomfort as it did with grief. *Mother and Son* is different. "The relationship between a father and a son is more complicated," Sokurov told one interviewer. "Between a mother and son there is virtually only one relationship, that of love, irrespective of how it manifests itself."

Be that as it may, the son here treats his enfeebled mother with a lover's tender solicitude. At times, the son seems the doting parent and his mother the child—refusing to sleep or eat, disdain her medicine, drinking like a baby from a bottle, fretfully asking to be taken outside for a walk. The movie is triumphantly pre-Freudian, although not

windswept hills. A storm is gathering; black clouds cover the sky. He turns to watch the gradual progress of a distant railroad train traversing the valley—inexorable time, made tangible to crawl across the screen. (Seeing this, we understand that a life has passed.)

Interviewing Sokurov in a recent issue of *Film Comment*, Paul Schrader linked the director to the austere spiritual Dreyer-Bresson-Ozu tradition he analyzed a quarter century ago in his book *The Transcendental Style in Film*. Sokurov's, however, is a bleak pantheism. Neither mother nor son makes mention of God. And, although the child speaks to her corpse as a Tibetan Buddhist might, the mother's last words are what hang in the air: "You will still have to go through all I have suffered. It's so unfair."