

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Cold comfort</b>
Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1997 Mar 11
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Mat i syn (Mother and son), Sokurov, Aleksandr, 1997

# Cold Comfort

Tracking the Usual Suspects at Berlin '97

BY J. HOBERMAN



Aleksej Ananischnov in Aleksandr Sokurov's *Mother and Son*

pet of newsreel film from May 1968, I dropped in on the world premiere of Aleksandr Sokurov's Russian-German coproduction *Mother and Son*.

One of the least compromising filmmakers in the world, an obsessive individual whose fastidiously crafted movies typically concentrate on the most fugitive sensations, Sokurov outdoes all previous efforts with this astonishing 80-minute chamber piece. The director's trademark twilight zone is here the shadowland between consciousness and oblivion. A woman is dying, attended by her grown son in an isolated country cabin. Their speech is muffled, the light is fading, the perspective is unfixed, and yet these ethereal sounds and images have a startling precision—even as the movie appears to float somewhere in space casting its faint shadow on the screen.

Pondering a postcard from her unknowable past, the son treats his enfeebled mother with a lover's tender solicitude. At times, he seems the dotting parent and she the child—refusing to sleep or eat, fretfully asking to be taken outside for a walk and then experiencing some sort of attack. (It's a measure of *Mother and Son's* greatness that one can imagine this reverse pieta as the perverse postscript to Albert Brooks's *Mother*: "You will still have to go through all I have suffered," she tells him. "It's so unfair.") Alone, the son returns to the fields. A black cloud covers a vast landscape. He turns to watch the gradual progress of a distant train traversing the valley—inexorable time, crawling across the screen.

Unlike Sokurov's other works, *Mother and Son* has neither allegory nor even subtext—unless, as suggested by the New York avant-gardist Ken Jacobs (in Berlin to present his own perceptually rarefied 3-D projections), the dying mother is also the cinema. It's a sobering thought that Berlin did little to dispel. On the other hand, the two

Berlin's supreme metaphor was provided by Fred Kelemen's *Frost*, in which, for some four and a half hours, a battered wife treks through the frozen countryside searching for her lost East German childhood. The 1997 festival was indeed a restless quest, from theater to theater, for something to love. Finally, after splitting an interminable French meditation on a snip-

audiences with whom I saw this masterpiece seemed genuinely rapt. A movie of incredible stillness, *Mother and Son* evokes overwhelming solitude amid creation—the filmmaker's not the least. Watching it is like watching the last sunset. ♦



## Jury Duty

At the Berlin Film Festival all you have to do is say "I'm a jury," and the waters part. You have instant access to every screening. Theoretically that is. In practice, however, your time is consumed by the films in the particular category you're judging. Thus, of the four films I most wanted to catch—Sogo Ishii's *Labyrinth of Dreams*, Chris Marker's *Level Five*, Elfi Mikesch's *My Little Cap*, and Aleksandr Sokurov's *Mother and Son*—I saw only the last, which was extraordinary that every film paled by comparison.

I was a member of the three-person jury for the Wolfgang Staudte prize, given for the best first or second feature shown in the Forum section of the festival. Among past winners of this 20,000 (about \$13,000) award: Ni Comez's *Laws of Gravity* and Serge Bodrow's *Freedom in Paradise*.

After narrowing the field of 20 films down to about six, I gave the prize to José Ara's *Landscape of Memories*, set in the poorest region of Brazil, which mixes documentary and fiction, politics and mysticism in a way that recalls Cinema Novo. I also gave a special mention (praise, no cash) to Esteban Sapir's *Picudo Fino*, a ten-formally ingenious Argentine no-budget film starring a pair of young heartbreakers.

Had the prize been for talent rather than for a popular film, I would have given it to Fred Kelemen's four-and-a-half-hour *Frost*, which combined ravishing images with stupefying clichés. I was from the editing room, so I'd like to recut it, but it's unlikely that he'll find financing for what still would be a noncommercial movie. If the picture were slim this year in Berlin, it's largely because of the funding crunch that's led American indies to look to Europe as well. —AMY

### ALSO IN THIS SECTION:

*THE WATERMELON WOMAN*  
*THE DAYTRIPPE*  
*PRIVATE PART*

March 11, 1997 VILLAGE VOICE