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Elegia dorogi (Elegy of a voyage), Sokurov, Aleksandr, 2001
Molokh, Sokurov, Aleksandr, 1999
Vostochnaya elegiya (Eastern elegy), Sokurov, Aleksandr, 1996
Dolce, Sokurov, Aleksandr, 2000
Povinnost (Confession), Sokurov, Aleksandr, 1998

Requiem: The Visionary Films of Alexander Sokurov

Alexander Sokurov's reputation as a purveyor of intense, "spiritual" films was sealed by Nick Cave's article "I Wept and Wept, from Start to Finish," about the singer's reaction to *Mother and Son*. But as this full-scale retrospective—the first in North America—reveals, the Russian master has produced a body of work that is dauntingly prolific in range. Suppressed by the Soviet censors, admired more in France and Japan than at home, and largely unavailable in North America, Sokurov's films and videos range across histrionic early works banned by the Soviet authorities (*The Lonely Voice of Man*, *Mournful Indifference*); hushed, inward portraits of lone souls coping with familial death (*The Second Circle*, *Mother and Son*); spectral films based on Russian literature (Dostoevsky in *Whispering Pages*, Chekhov in *Stone*); monumental meditations on the military, set in forbidding landscapes (*Confession*); and a quartet of recent features about the twentieth century's most powerful leaders (Hitler in *Moloch*, Lenin in *Taurus*). Woven throughout his career are the "elegies": poetic, death-haunted portraits of figures, both real and fictional, who are in some way isolated from the world. Anointed by Andrei Tarkovsky as his spiritual and aesthetic heir, Sokurov has led an embattled and solitary career over the past twenty-five years, creating work that is visionary, romantic, and by turns serene and feverish, despairing and exultant.

This retrospective was organized by James Quandt at the Cinematheque Ontario in collaboration with Jytte Jensen of the Film and Video Department, Museum of Modern Art, New York, with generous assistance from Alexei Jankowski, Studio Bereg, St. Petersburg.

♦ March 8 (Friday) 7 pm

♦ March 12 (Tuesday) 9 pm

Mother and Son (*Mat i syn*)

Directed by Alexander Sokurov
Germany/Russia 1997, 35mm, color, 73 min.

With Alexei Ananishnov, Gudrun Geyer
Russian with English subtitles

MOTHER AND SON IS A SLOW, SOFT, and sad poem about the last day of a woman weakened by disease, and about the loving son who cares for her in her remote cabin home. Formal elements converge to reinforce the elegiac tone: the whispering wind, crashing waves, sea-gull cries, and other natural sounds recall the glissandi of violins; the images, distorted by filming through painted glass panes, mirrors, and special lenses, are reminiscent of German Romantic painting; the pace of the film verges on stillness, as though fixing on the moment between life and death, consciousness and oblivion. In the triumphantly pre-Freudian universe of the film, the parent is a literal burden who is carried through the world by her son in a sort of reverse pieta.

♦ March 8 (Friday) 8:30 pm

Days of the Eclipse (*Dni zatmeniya*)

Directed by Alexander Sokurov

USSR 1988, 35mm, color, 133 min.

With Alexei Ananishnov, Irina Sokolova
Russian with English subtitles

BASED ON A NOVEL BY famous Russian science-fiction writers the Strugatski brothers, *Days of the Eclipse* is the account of a young doctor who travels to a barren, unnamed provincial town in Central Asia. Mysterious forces interfere with his research, however: unbearable heat, strange people, mysterious omens, a conversation with a dead friend, alien intervention. The film is structured on contradiction: sound tracks that don't match images (as in the concatenation of a praying

Moslem woman and a Looney Tunes-style song); color and texture that change drastically and randomly; images that are yellowed as though from heat or time or decay. In this poetic narrative, time is suspended and bent and causal relationships disintegrate at will.

♦ March 9 (Saturday) 7 pm

Whispering Pages (*Tikhiye stranitsy*)

Directed by Alexander Sokurov

Germany/Russia 1993, 35mm,

b/w and color, 77 min.

With Alexander Cherednik, Sergei Barkovsky
Russian with English subtitles

THE PAGES THAT WHISPER through this brooding, beautiful tone poem are from nineteenth-century Russian literature, primarily Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. An anonymous man wanders through decomposing, fog-enshrouded catacombs and encounters a series of "the degraded and the humiliated," including a holy prostitute and a Kafkaesque bureaucrat. Shot partly in Sokurov's dreamlike black and white with a dense sound track of eerie, echoing voices and bursts of mournful Mahler, *Whispering Pages* serves as what critic Gavin Smith has called "an epitaph for a civilization in the throes of slow death."



Alexander Sokurov *Whispering Pages* 1993

♦ March 9 (Saturday) 8:45 pm

Sonata For Hitler (*Sonata diya Gitlera*)

Directed by Alexander Sokurov

USSR 1979–89, 35mm, b/w, 11 min.

BANNED FOR TEN YEARS, this provocatively titled short film constructs a lyrical montage of archival footage from the end of the war in Germany and Russia: Nazi generals and their victims, landscapes of catastrophe, Soviet victory won at a calamitous cost. The images are numbered with the dates of Hitler's and Stalin's deaths to forge an analogy between the two dictators, both of whom inflicted destruction on the bodies and souls of the Russian nation.



Alexander Sokurov *Moloch* 1999

♦ March 15 (Friday) 7 pm

The Lonely Voice of Man

(*Odinokij golos cheloveka*)

Directed by Alexander Sokurov

USSR 1978/87, 35 mm, color, 90 min.

With Tatyana Gorjacheva, Andrei Gradov
Russian with English subtitles

FILMED IN 1978 BUT BANNED UNTIL 1987, *The Lonely Voice of Man* was Sokurov's first full-length feature, based on two works by suppressed Soviet experimental author Andrej Platonov. The story, set in the 1920s, concerns Mikita—a solitary young man who has been deeply affected by the civil war—and the torturous course of his relationship his middle-class wife as the two struggle to adapt to an unrecognizable new society and the disintegration of their moral world. Sudden intrusions of archival footage that portrays scenes of daily life in those early post-revolutionary years combine with discordant montage, nonrealist use of color, varying film speeds, and a shockingly atonal, expressionist sound track—all characteristic of Sokurov's unique personal style.

♦ March 15 (Friday) 9 pm

The Second Circle (*Krug vtoroj*)

Directed by Alexander Sokurov

USSR 1990, 35 mm, color, 92 min

With Pyotr Aleksandrov,

Nadezhda Rodnova

Russian with English subtitles

THIS UNCOMPROMISING WORK begins with the haunting, enigmatic image of a man who walks along an empty, snowy road, struggling against the wind; suddenly, bending as if kneeling in prayer, he vanishes as snow fills the screen. The man, it turns out, is heading to a Siberian village to bury his father, and the harsh, bone-chilling landscape he trudges across sets the tone for this mournful human story—a harsh, unsentimental view of family relationships and death. Though the narrative is spare, Sokurov suggests much through his rich compositions and shifts from monochrome to scenes of clear, delicate color.

Moloch (*Molokh*)

Directed by Alexander Sokurov

Russia/Germany 1999, 35mm, color, 102 min.

With Elena Rufanova, Leonid Mosgovoi
German with English subtitles

MOLOCH IS AN ABSORBING reconstruction of the last days of Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun that attempts to comprehend manifestations of evil and power. Set in the Führer's spectacular mountain retreat just before the German defeat at Stalingrad, the film focuses less on clichés of evil than on the vacuous boredom of absolute power. A naked Braun prances on the clammy battlements, Goebbels and Hitler dance to music together, and Nazi officials raid Hitler's liquor cabinet like frat boys while somewhere, a country burns. Hallucinatory visuals and a sense of suspended time heighten the claustrophobic aura that surrounds the characters like a fugue.

♦ March 16 (Saturday) 7 pm

Stone (*Kamen*)

Directed by Alexander Sokurov

Russia/Germany 1992, 35mm, b/w, 84 min.

With Leonid Mozgovoy, Pyotr Aleksandrov

Russian with English subtitles

SUSAN SONTAG CHOSE *STONE* as one of the ten best films of the nineties. Employing the flow and fugitive feeling of a half-remembered reverie—full of mysteries, portents, inexplicable happenings, and chimerical objects—the film, set in the Chekhov Museum, centers on the relationship between a young museum guard and an older visitor who seems at different times to be a lover, a doctor, or a surrogate father. Shot in evanescent black and white with a sound track of silences, breathing, natural sounds, and fragments of classical music, this rarely screened work is a haunting and enigmatic evocation of the dream state.

♦ March 16 (Saturday) 9 pm

Oriental Elegy (*Vostochnaya elegiya*)

Directed by Alexander Sokurov

Russia 1996, video, color, 45 min.

Japanese and Russian with English subtitles

ORIENTAL ELEGY PRESENTS Sokurov's meditative journey to a small Japanese island village, where landscapes, objects, and people appear blurred through the mist as in a dream. His sensitive encounters with lonely old people envisioning the end of their lives are complemented by the director's own interior journey, in which aural affinities revive memories of Russia.

Dolce

Directed by Alexander Sokurov

Russia 1999, video, color, 61 min.

Russian with English subtitles

USING THE DOCUMENTARY FORMAT, *Dolce* explores the contours of memory and nuances of the psyche. Miho Shima, widow of the celebrated Japanese writer Toshio Shima (who died in 1986), lives with her handicapped daughter on a solitary island in the middle of the ocean, avoiding strangers. She discovers herself through introspection, self-analysis, and spiritual revelation as her husband's life and work are evoked.

♦ **March 22 (Friday) 7 pm**
Simple Elegy (*Prostaya elegiya*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 USSR 1990, 35mm, color, 20 min.
 CONSISTING OF FIVE LONG TAKES, this portrait of Lithuania during the Soviet economic blockade was shot in the streets of Vilnius and in the halls of Parliament—whose tense silence is broken by the haunting sounds of President Vitautis Landbergis performing Ciurlionis's nocturnes on the piano.

A Humble Life (*Smirennaya zhizn'*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 Russia 1997, video, color, 76 min.
 Russian with English subtitles
 THIS VIDEO PORTRAIT—a contemplative report from a solitary old house lost in the mountains of Japan—creates a poetic image out of small details and the refined simplicity of Japanese life. An old woman lives alone, silently sewing kimonos, cooking and eating, kindling the fire, combing her hair, giving alms. As a final prayer she recites a sorrowful haiku about loneliness and loss. Pictures of nature and portraits of the old woman become intertwined with Japanese folk music and the melodies of Tchaikovsky as Sokurov reflects affectionately on Japanese culture and his own nostalgia for Russia.

♦ **March 22 (Friday) 9 pm**
A Soldier's Dream (*Soldatski son*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 Russia 1995, 35mm, b/w, 12 min.
 THIS LYRICAL STUDY FOR THE five-part, seven-hour *Spiritual Voices*, in which it is included as a scene, explores footage of soldiers on patrol duty on the border between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan—a parable of young men positioned between peace and war.

Evening Sacrifice (*Zhertva vechernyaya*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 USSR 1987, 35mm, color, 20 min.
 THE TITLE OF THIS PORTRAIT of perfunctory participants at an official May Day parade and fireworks display in Leningrad refers to an Orthodox prayer of repentance: "Let my prayer be like incense before Thee, like my hands uplifted, an evening sacrifice." Questioning the longstanding role of the crowd in Soviet cinema, Sokurov portrays the undulating sea of people not as part of some joyous unanimity but as a gathering of tired participants acting without leadership or purpose.

Elegy of a Voyage (*Elegia dorogi*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 France/Russia/Netherlands 2001, video, color, 47 min.
 Russian with English subtitles
 THIS LATEST WORK FROM SOKUROV evokes the timelessness of a dream state as it presents the voyage of an unnamed man (Sokurov's own silhouette) across snow-covered landscapes, through a journey that culminates in a deserted museum at night. In the nocturnal silence, surrounded by Dutch masterworks, the man discovers that he may have been present when the portrait of St. Mary's Square was painted by Peter Saenredam in the seventeenth century.

♦ **March 23 (Saturday) 7 pm**
Taurus (*Telets*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 Russia 2001, 35mm, color, 90 min.
 With Leonid Mozgovoi, Maria Kuznetsova
 Russian with English subtitles
 A STRANGELY TENDER ACCOUNT of the final days of Lenin in 1923, *Taurus* is the second work in Sokurov's tetralogy of portraits of "men of power in the twentieth century." Chekhovian in tone and setting, the film takes place in a country mansion whose inhabitants bemoan their expropriated belongings and imminent demise. The film (the first Sokurov shot himself) is tinged with a blue-green pall that hovers like a twilight of loss and regret: the power of the "comrade leader's" personality cult has dissipated, and all that is left in its wake is a quiet unease and gathering obscurity.

♦ **March 23 (Saturday) 9 pm**
Moscow Elegy (*Moskovskaya elegia*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 USSR 1986–87, 35mm, b/w, 88 min.
 Russian with English subtitles
 THIS DOCUMENTARY IS A subjective, elegiac portrait of Andrei Tarkovsky, focusing on the director's work as it was received in Russia and on his forced exile in the West. Originally intended to mark the Tarkovsky's fiftieth birthday, the film was delayed because of disagreements over the style and content of the project from the Soviet Professional Union of Cinematographers.

♦ **March 25 (Monday) 7 pm**
 ♦ **March 29 (Friday) 7 pm**
Save and Protect (*Spasi i sokhrani*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 USSR 1989, 35mm, color, 167 min.
 With Cecile Zervoudaki, Robert Vaab
 Russian and French with English subtitles
 INSPIRED BY FLAUBERT'S *Madame Bovary*, Sokurov's *Save and Protect* recalls the most crucial events of Emma's decline and fall: affairs with the aristocratic Rodolphe and the student Leon, the humiliation that follows her husband's botching of the operation on the stable boy's clubfoot. The universality of the theme of eternal struggle between the soul and the flesh is conveyed through the absence of specific reference to time or place: although the film seems to begin in 1840, its surreal mode effortlessly accommodates an automobile and the strains of "When the Saints Go Marching In" on an off-screen radio. Focusing on passion from a woman's perspective and downplaying plot, Sokurov explores his subject in exquisite detail, capturing not only the heat of passion but also the quiet moments before and after and the innocent sensuousness of the body.



Alexander Sokurov *Save and Protect* 1989

♦ **March 26 (Tuesday) 7 pm**
Dmitri Shostakovich: Sonata for Viola (*Altovaja Sonata*)
 Directed by Semen Aranovich and Alexander Sokurov
 USSR 1981–86, 35mm, b/w, 78 min.
 Russian with English subtitles
 BEGUN IN 1981 BY FILMMAKER Semen Aranovich, this portrait of Shostakovich gained Sokurov's distinctive mark after the director was invited to participate in editing archival footage for the film. The result of the collaboration is a musical biography and meditation on artistic silence that is fleshed out within a broad historical context. It portrays the composer's struggle with Stalin's regime, employing newsreel footage of the siege of Leningrad and military parades as well as images of Shostakovich and his family. The film was banned immediately on completion and not released until the perestroika in 1986.

♦ **March 26 (Tuesday) 9 pm**
Soviet Elegy (*Sovetskaya elegiya*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 USSR 1989, 35mm, color, 40 min.
 Russian with English subtitles
 THIS IS A DEVASTATING, almost cruel portrait of Boris Yeltsin, in which the leader is removed from the public arena of speeches and propaganda and placed in the quintessential Sokurovian space: one of silence, stillness, inaction. The result is an ambiguous vision of immobility verging on paralysis and death.

An Example of Intonation (*Primer intonacii*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 Russia 1991, 35mm, color, 48 min.
 Russian with English subtitles
 JUST WEEKS BEFORE HE BECAME Russia's first democratically elected president, Sokurov engaged a deeply fatigued, mumbling Boris Yeltsin in a provocative discussion of his personal beliefs. Set in and around Yeltsin's family home in an informal atmosphere of tea and blinis, the film asks the urgent question: "Who is this man?" Sokurov inflects his portrait with a sound track that obscures Yeltsin's voice often to the point of incomprehensibility.

♦ **March 27 (Wednesday) 7 pm**
Maria (Peasant Elegy) (*Mariya [Krestjanskaya elegiya]*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 USSR 1978–88, 35mm, b/w and color, 41 min.
 Russian with English subtitles
 THIS REQUIEM IN MEMORY OF MARIA—a Russian peasant woman who has grown flax in the traditional manner all her life—is told in two chapters. The first, in color, creates a pastoral atmosphere around Maria's life as she works in the fields, bathes in a stream, takes a vacation in the Crimea. The second, in black and white, takes place nine years later: Maria has died and the traditions by which she lived have been lost.

♦ **March 27 (Wednesday) 8:30 pm**
Elegy (*Elegia*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 USSR 1985–86, 35mm, color, 30 min.
 Russian with English subtitles
 THIS TRIBUTE TO LEGENDARY Russian singer Fyodor Chaliapin centers on the removal of the basso's body from the Batignolles cemetery in Paris to Novo-Devitchye cemetery in Moscow. Chaliapin was censored for emigrating from Russia to the west; this film was censored as well.

And Nothing More (*I Nichego bolshe*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 USSR 1982–87, 35mm, b/w, 70 min.
 Russian with English subtitles
 THIS MEDITATION ON THE COALITION of the USSR, Great Britain, and the U.S. during WWII employs archival footage from the different countries as Sokurov incorporates images of the allied leaders into a mosaic of real but anonymous people. Creating unexpected moments through editing and music that aid viewers to draw new associations from the archive of imagery, the film suggests the important role that average citizens played in the outcome of the war.

♦ **March 30 (Saturday) 7 pm**
Confession (*Povinnost*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 Russia 1998, video, color, 260 min.
 Russian with English subtitles
 THIS POETIC DIARY—or "confession"—of a ship captain (made before the Kursk disaster but haunted by it now) is one of Sokurov's most majestic and troubling achievements. Structured in five equal episodes, the film parallels the outer journey of the ship with the inner voyage of the captain, and the destiny of Russia with his individual fate. The first two episodes meticulously describe the everyday duties and routines aboard a ship stationed in Murmansk that patrols the Arctic Sea; the final three become increasingly abstract, subjective, and allusively political. Formally rigorous and full of astonishing imagery, the film transforms documentary detail into metaphysical lyricism as Sokurov ponders the effect of extended isolation on the human soul and psyche.

Hubert Robert, A Fortunate Life (*Robert. Schastlivaya zhizn'*)
 Directed by Alexander Sokurov
 Russia 1996, video, color, 26 min.
 THIS PERSONAL ESSAY on the work of French painter Hubert Robert (1733–1808) begins with scenes from a Japanese play filmed in slow motion. Robert's pictorial world unfolds as we enter landscapes, grandiose architectures, and ruins—until a "meeting" between Sokurov and Robert incorporates the painter's work within the filmmaker's own. With a sound track of music by Albinoni, Glinka, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky combined with the sounds of storms, rain, and birds, the film evokes the mysterious links between biography and autobiography.