Fire and Water Imagery in Nikita Mikhalkov's *Burnt by the Sun*

The Russian cinema director Nikita Mikhalkov reached back six decades for the theme of his award-winning film *Utomlennye solntsem* (1993), which is generally known in English as *Burnt by the Sun*, although the Russian title actually means something closer to "*Exhausted*" *by the Sun*. The film portrays a fictional episode from the Stalinist purges of the mid-1930s, in which a hero of the Bolshevik revolution, Sergey Petrovich Kotov (played by Mikhalkov himself) is arrested in accordance with anonymous orders conveyed by telephone to a character known as "Mitya" (played by Oleg Menshikov), who oversees Kotov's arrest. Tension in Mikhalkov's film not only is generated by the imminent arrest of Kotov, but also stems from the past, when Kotov essentially forced Mitya to enter the Soviet secret service and be separated from his lover Marusya, who in the meantime became Kotov's wife.

In the midst of controversy following the film's release in Russia, Mikhalkov was reluctant to comment extensively on the portrayal of political events. In January 1995, during an interview with *Izvestia*, he said he preferred to make his points through "artistic images", rather than "political rhetoric" (7). Yet neither Mikhalkov nor critics have said a great deal about the imagery structure of *Utomlennye solntsem*. Various reviewers have made reference to the sun, particularly in the form of a destructive sphere that appears in the film (Clark 1224, Menashe 44, James 6, Saada 64), but have noted little else, despite the fact that the image has what we might call "privileged position" by virtue of

being linked with the film's title. Upon close examination, however, one finds that the role played by what I will call more broadly the "fire", or "cosmic", cluster is actually of no greater significance than that of its opposite, the heretofore essentially overlooked category of aquatic, or water, imagery.

Mikhalkov presents the visual underpinnings for *Utomlennye solntsem* in the very first shot of the film by first showing a red star atop a Kremlin tower, then having the camera pan down to street level, revealing, in passing, a squad of soldiers marching, then showing at close range the entrance to a street underpass being cleaned by a worker with a hose, as more soldiers descend the steps. The camera then slowly pans across the screen at close-up range, showing the spray splattering against decorative motifs of grain bound by a sickle on the guardrail around the entrance. Suddenly a black car emerges beyond the guardrail, as if shot out of the spray, and is followed by the camera to the entrance of a building where it stops and discharges a passenger.

The focal point of the shot is the close-up of water spraying against the guardrail. This portion remains on screen for approximately five seconds, and provides an application of the point made by the Russian Formalist critic Yury Tynianov in his article "On the Origins of Cinema" (1927) that the cinematic close-up, once it moved beyond its initial, or primary, function as a point-of-view indicator, came frequently to denote the action of a verb (89). Here the Russian verb *chistit'*, "to clean," comes naturally to mind. Why were these specific, or "discrete", to use the term of the semiotician Yury Lotman, details selected?

What provides artistic meaning here, as opposed to what, in his book *Semiotics of Cinema*, Lotman calls "'raw' naturalness" (17)?

I think that part of the answer emerges two scenes later, in the first episode involving Kotov, when he plays the role of hero to the local peasants, to whom he is actually a cult figure of sorts. Here images of soldiers, grain, and water recur when Kotov, off duty and relaxing at the dacha—in response to the plea of the peasants—singlehandedly saves the peasants' crop by causing the cancellation of scheduled military maneuvers. Water is again prominent in this scene, with Kotov shown juxtaposed to it, and as tanks proceed from the area, the camera again pans down, once more, at close range, revealing water splashing up.

Kotov's heroic act is also his swan song, for by this time his arrest already has been ordered in Moscow as an episode of the purges. Later, aware that he is to be arrested, Kotov goes for a rowboat ride with his six-year-old daughter Nadya (played by Mikhalkov's own daughter), during which—literally surrounded by water—he bids farewell to her in carefully veiled terms. At the end of the sequence, the boat is shown drifting along with the current, and—ultimately—literally drifts out of the frame—as Kotov is to be taken out of the picture; after the boat has disappeared, the camera remains focused on the water for five seconds.

At the time of his actual arrest, Kotov is taken away by a trio of NKVD thugs and Mitya in a black sedan of the same order as the one that emerges from the spray of water in the first shot, and in which Mitya (the passenger

discharged at that time) was riding. The repeated image of the car—now shown in use as a vehicle of the purges—points back to the first shot, and provides it with new meaning: it now reveals, in retrospect, that it is not after all the everyday, primary, neutral—and concrete—meaning of the verb *chistit'*, but rather the secondary, figurative, and *political* meaning, that is, "to purge", that applies to *Utomlennye solntsem*. The first shot is hereby shown to tell a story on two different levels: first, the literal cleaning of a street underpass, and second—when we consider the car's seemingly being shot out of the spray of water, as if generated by it, the purges under Soviet power (the cosmic red star).

For Lotman (as opposed to Eisenstein), the shot is the basic carrier of meaning in cinema. It is here, writes Lotman, that "the semantic relationship—the relationship of the sign to the phenomenon . . . it designates—is most emphasized" (27). As concerns new meaning, Lotman explains: "Formation of new meanings . . . on the basis . . . of sequential appearance . . . of one object . . . result[s] in . . . a dynamic narrational text [that] . . . forms the essence of cinema" (59). In terms of signs, Lotman observes that differentiation involving "comparison of a visual image/icon with itself in a different time unit . . . forms the basis of film semantics" (43). Lotman also describes this principle in terms of what seems to me to be a distinctive view of cinematic montage: "Splicing bits of film and integrating them into a higher semantic whole is the most obvious and explicit form of montage. . . . But implicit forms of montage, in which a depiction is joined to another depiction which occurs later in time than the first, and in which their conjunction generates some [additional] meaning . . . are no less

important phenomena in the history of cinema" (59). The unifying principle in all these statements is Lotman's emphasis on the artistic text as a dynamic whole.

Water imagery, with a different twist, is at the center of an early scene depicting rising tension in Marusya and the household generally. Shortly after a flamboyant arrival at the dacha, Mitya tells Marusya he is "dying" (he says, *umirayu*) for a drink of water and goes into the bathroom to freshen up. In response to a question from a member of the household, Mitya says that he is married and has three children. His response triggers a four-minute sequence of 33 shots that consists primarily of close-ups and focuses on Marusya. In the first close-up we see Marusya's hand by the dripping faucet of a samovar, with scars visible on the wrist and lower arm. Further close-ups show, respectively, Marusya's hand placing the glass under the tap, water running over the rim of the glass, Marusya's hand taking the glass, and then Marusya drinking the water herself, as Mitya tells an anecdote about her childhood.

Marusya then goes with the empty glass to the dining area and Mitya comes out of the bathroom and goes there himself. When asked whether he wants coffee or tea, he answers that he just "wanted water". As conversation peters out, we hear Marusya's fingernails drumming on the glass, then see several close-ups of this action. When Marusya's aunt, sitting next to her at the table, finally asks, "What's that?" Marusya responds, as if to a neutral question, "A glass." Relief comes only when Marusya is out of the sight of Mitya, who seems rather amused by Marusya's behavior, perhaps enjoying the effect of the lie he has just told about being married and having a family.

The sequence forms what Lotman calls a “cinema-phrase”, a segment “bounded at each end by structural pauses” and comprising a complete unit in its own right (70-71). Here the beginning of an emotionally draining tension, which develops into a kind of tacit erotic interplay between Marusya and Mitya, is set off.

While most of what Lotman says in *Semiotics of Cinema* could apply to literature—even on some occasions when he says cinema is unique in a certain way—Lotman does make a number of strikingly original observations, such as the point that “Only the cinema—uniquely among all the arts employing visual images—can construct the person as a phrase located in time” (23-24). Indeed, at the beginning of this sequence Marusya goes into a slow-motion-like trance and, at the end, she hastily contrives an exit from the dining area. During the early part of the sequence, tension is created, as *New Yorker* critic Anthony Lane has noted, between the slow-motion effects of the shots of Marusya and the normal speed at which the others continue to function (94); later her staccato drumming betrays her racing emotions, while once again the others operate at a normal pace. At both ends, Marusya is isolated in time.

We have here what Lotman calls the violation of a system of anticipations, which he says “singles out semantic bundles” in the text (here, it seems, a bundle of nerves), and ‘deformed’ and ‘meaningful’ become synonymous (31-32). After Marusya shows a mental lapse by failing to turn off the water and then by drinking the water, the glass itself loses its neutral function as a vessel by becoming a tom-tom whose presence infectiously conveys Marusya’s by-now

nearly hysterical mood. By the end of the sequence her aunt has turned the crockery in front of her into a percussion instrument, too. As Lotman points out in his chapter on montage, content (object) and form (mode) can be temporarily reversed in artistic texts (57-58). The static nature of the glass (object) is momentarily overcome, as the glass assumes the role of mode, and functions as a "dynamic grammatical element" that conveys Marusya's mental state. Conventional dialogue is interrupted for a time by an acoustical code that Mitya alone is able to comprehend—and, at this point, only incompletely. In the case of the variable functioning of the glass, the following observation by Lotman applies: "Repetition of one and the same object on the screen creates a certain rhythm, and the sign of the object begins to separate from its visual source" (45). The glass appears in 13 of the 33 shots, and never is featured in back-to-back shots. Lotman says further that when things are repeatedly shown, "they acquire a 'facial expression' [that] can become more meaningful than the things themselves" (45). The term "'facial expression'" is particularly interesting here, since the glass seems momentarily to become a character that speaks for Marusya.

The sequence is complicated by two mysteries. The first is the appearance of the scars on Marusya's arm in the first shot. For Lotman, detail on such a close-up, which reveals only a part of an object (Marusya's arm) is an example of metaphor (44); the question here is, what do the scars stand for? They suggest, as later proves to be the case, a suicide attempt that had to do with Mitya. But the question remains: what do they have to do with water? The

other mystery is of course in Marusya's mind: why has her old lover suddenly returned, particularly if he is married and has a family?

Mitya's absence from the first half of the sequence, where various characters parade to the bathroom door and speak with him, adds to the sense of mystery. Marusya's uncle asks Mitya where he has been "all these years" (since 1928, when he left). The air of mystery, added to knowledge that he has previously demonstrated about Kotov, Marusya, and Marusya's family, give Mitya a clear sense of dominance here, and the story he tells about Marusya's childhood—about a time when he was 16 and she was six—reinforces it in her case.

The mystery of the scars is cleared up in the following scene when Marusya tells Mitya that at the time of her suicide attempt, after he left, she didn't know that she needed to hold her wrists in water so that the blood would not coagulate: and so we are led back to the linking of water and scars. Subsequently Mitya, with mock clownishness, jumps into the river fully clad. At first Marusya thinks it amusing, but then becomes concerned until Mitya surfaces.

Implications of Mitya's perishing in water (including his using the verb form *umirayu* when asking for a drink of water) are realized in the final scene, where we see him back in his apartment by Red Square at seven a.m., again fully clad in water—this time sitting in his bathtub, with his wrists slit and the water crimson with his blood. The sunlike fireball, which previously passed through Kotov's dacha, now passes through Mitya's apartment, exiting through the bathroom

window and appearing together with the star-topped towers of the Kremlin, thereby repeating, in a different configuration, the star and water imagery with which the film began.

Like Kotov and Marusya (who, we are informed in an epilogue, both perish), Mitya becomes a victim of the times, although by his own hand. Appropriately, during this scene he faintly whistles the film's title song, a popular thirties tango by Yezhi Peterburgsky about a failed love relationship. Throughout the film the song is generated by characters on screen, emphasizing that it is part and parcel of the world represented before us. For the most part it is heard in lighthearted situations, most notably that accompanying the opening credits, where it represents pure fantasy, as Kotov and Marusya tango to it out of doors in winter, while an orchestra, whose members are dressed in white summer attire, perform, and their director sings the words.

Time of day notwithstanding, inasmuch as the fireball has just been seen passing through Mitya's apartment, the song's first line seems to me to parallel the imagery of the final scene: "The spent sun [fireball] was tenderly bidding farewell to the sea [water]" (Utomlyonnoe solntse nezhno s morem proshchalos').

In an interview with the journal *Sight and Sound*, Mikhalkov commented that the fireball on the one hand symbolizes revolution, and also Stalin, a "sun" built by honest and well-intentioned men like Kotov—who, significantly, displays a sunlike tattoo on one arm.

On the other hand, Mikhalkov said during the same interview that the fireball was a "'catalyst for certain scenes'" (Glaesser 61). Since the fireball

occurs only in two scenes, including that of Mitya's suicide, the other scene is by default one in which it appears in several shots, first approaching Kotov's dacha, then passing through it, and finally moving away from it, eventually veering unpredictably into a tree and destroying it. Significantly, in the first shot here, the fireball swoops low, momentarily becoming tangential to the river, providing what Lotman refers to as the key intersection of two different sign systems—here the two lethal image clusters.

As concerns Mikhalkov's explanation of the fireball's representing Stalin, it is most interesting that Stalin's appearance on an enormous banner during the final moments of the film is preceded by a leaden-gray balloon to which the banner is affixed—perhaps a parody on Mikhalkov's own part of the sun link; also, the scene of Mitya's suicide begins with an extreme close-up of a gray sphere—a detail of the plumbing in the bathroom, but in context a clear indicator that not only his personal encounters, but also the entire order of things has got to Mitya, whose suicide is foreshadowed by two shots in the first scene of the film—a close-up of his razor, and his playing Russian roulette with his pistol; also, when the image of Stalin begins to rise, Mitya salutes it with a grimace and his teeth tightly clenching a cigarette.

The critic Louis Menashe objects to the fireball, calling its value "dubious" (44); however, I believe that by making this supernatural image interact with the natural water imagery, Mikhalkov successfully reflects an arbitrary and "unreal" world in a deceptively real and natural setting. The arbitrariness of this world is perhaps most apparent when we compare the official Soviet press's explanation

of the fireballs as “foreign diversions” with the sight of the one at the end silently disappearing as it moves toward the towers of the Kremlin. Here, I think, we have a true sense of an ending: not only does Mikhalkov coordinate these two key image clusters, but also, in bringing the dramatic plot to a startling conclusion, ironically absorbs the persistent poetic overlay of the song into the world of grim prosaic reality.

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