

Koktebel

(Boris Khlebnikov, Aleksei Popogrebsky, 2003)

Another post-Soviet Russian road movie. Another small-cast, low budget, post-Soviet Russian road movie about father-son bonding. Another small-cast, low budget, post-soviet Russian road movie about father-son bonding, done mostly on location, with directors who favour long-held static shots with characters walking out of and back into frame.

The opening shot says much. It's a bare landscape, with little colour, and not just because it's early in the day – you suspect that more light won't mean more colour. A car goes past on what you realise is a raised bypass or flyover in the middle distance. You don't know who's in the car, where it's coming from, or where it's going to. Is it important? The light increases, and you see either one or two figures (probably two) walking through a tunnel under the bypass. You have no idea who they are, either. All the time, rain drizzles down depressingly. By a time-lapse effect, some light comes into the sky, but little colour – then there's a cut.

As with *The Return*, we mustn't know too much about the social pressures on the characters. It's quite un-Marxist, and just at a time when a bit of Marxist analysis is what's needed in Russia. Why did the father lose his job, which seems to have been in an aircraft factory? Did the factory close? Or was it because of his alcoholism? Sack all Russians with that problem and you'll have a very small workforce indeed. Was the actor who plays the father cast because he's a dead ringer for Adrian Noble? Why does the aunt (to whose home on the Black Sea they appear to be travelling) say that she's "at her home in Siberia?" She can't be in the gulag – that's been dismantled, much as Mr Putin would like to bring it back (give him time). How much money does she leave in the envelope at the end? How does she know they're coming? What draws the father away from the agreeable lady doctor whom he's fucking, and back on track to see his sister on the Black Sea? These are questions to be asked, not answered. Prosaic ("quotidian") details would lessen the metaphorical resonance.

The dead, mystic hand of Andrei Tarkovsky hovers, I feel, over it all, and, try and drive it away as you might – as the boy drives away a greedy seagull which attacks first his loaf of bread and then him (eventually he half-strangles it, no mean feat with seagulls), the dead, mystic hand of Andrei Tarkovsky won't be driven.



I'm told that only Russians can understand films like this. A journey through a bleak landscape to a doubtful destination, with relatives whom you hate and love in equal measure, has a metaphorical resonance for Russians which for other peoples it lacks. It's as if, for the Russians, *Waiting for Godot* had either never been or had a message for them alone.

Koktebel, as the son discovers, doesn't exist in any atlas. The father – who's an educated man, unlike the father in *The Return* – says that's because Koktebel was its Tartar name, and all the Tartars were deported after World War II. It's now named after a glider factory which the Soviets built there. They test gliders, he asserts, from a handy nearby ridge.

The son's excited by this idea, and when he arrives – he arrives alone, Dad having stayed with the doctor – climbs the hill which tops the ridge, with a view to testing the air-current. His father's told him all about air-currents, in an impromptu lecture on albatrosses, given as they trudge through a field. But the glider-testing ridge is deserted, and dominated by a plinth with bits of twisted iron sticking out of the top: whose statue's been taken down from it? It's not hard to guess – not that of Gorbachev, we may be sure. They don't build gliders there any more – so neither the Tartar name nor the Soviet name mean anything.

The son rips a page out of the atlas (which he's stolen from the lady doctor) and tries (without folding it into a glider-shape or anything) to launch it into the wind. This is all done in one of the long-held static shots I mentioned. The young actor must have had luck, or they must have taken it over and over again (destroying lots of atlases), because at the third or fourth go it takes off. He doesn't, however, seem either elated or deflated at his achievement. He then tries to visit his aunt – fails – sleeps rough – and is at last joined by his father at the end of a pier, where he's just half-murdered the seagull. He says nothing as his father sits down next to him.

The final shot is a vertical one, from dozens of feet above the pier, of father and son, isolated at the pier's end, surrounded by many square metres of Black Sea, which seem calm right now but which, given the huge amount of screen-space it takes up relative to father and son, could, you sense, appear threatening.

There's an idea in here somewhere about being driven by the wind from place to place without effort, as an albatross is by the ocean winds; but I kept finding my "quotidian" doubts and theories coming between the movie and its message. The father-son thing, because less intense and strange than that in *The Return*, doesn't carry enough emotional weight.