Chapter 12:

# Come and See, Once Again

## A Russian Television Series on the Seventh Symphony in Defeated Leningrad

*Matthias Schwartz*

## 1. Introduction

*Come and See* (*Idi i smotri*) by Ėlem Klimov was a sensation in 1985 when the film was finally released after years of being blocked by Soviet censors. It won the main prize at the Moscow International Film Festival and became one of the most successful films of the year in 1986 in the early days of glasnost and perestroika.[1] No one had ever portrayed the horrors of the German war of extermination from 1941 to 1945 so radically, the situation of the Soviet partisans so hopelessly and bitterly, the German scorched earth policy so relentlessly and clearly. Without ideological filter, without scrupulous symbolism, it showed how deadly and merciless the German occupation of the Belarusian territories of the Soviet Union was: 'Come and see', the terse request referring to the four horsemen of John's Apocalypse, was a sensation even in West Germany, where the myth of the 'clean Wehrmacht' was still officially upheld, a country where Chancellor Helmut Kohl had laid wreaths at SS soldiers' graves together with US President Ronald Reagan as late as May 1985 (Stiglegger 2020: 169–178; cf. Bulgakowa/Hochmuth 1992: 127–132). But the film remains in the memory above all through the main actor, 14-year-old Aleksei Kravchenko in the role of the boy Flëra, through whose eyes, or more precisely: in whose face we as viewers perceive all the horrors depicted, mirrored, seen. Children's faces have always been the most credible witnesses to the horrors of the adult world for cinema directors – but rarely has the expression of a youthful face been so cruelly destroyed as in Klimov's work.

Four decades later, Aleksei Kravchenko, now 52, is once again starring in a film about World War II, in Aleksandr Kott's eight-part television series *The Seventh Symphony*

1 I thank Nina Weller and in particular Franziska Thun-Hohenstein for their extremely helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay. All translations from Russian quotes are mine if not noted otherwise.

(*Sed'maia simfoniia*, 2021), which, on the occasion of its 80th anniversary, tells the story of the performance of Dmitri Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 7 in C major* in Leningrad while besieged by the Germans in August 1942. The broadcast of the television series had been associated with high expectations not only because of its subject matter. After all, Aleksandr Kott, who on 24 February 2022 immediately positioned himself against the war (Popogrebskii et al. 2022),[2] is a successful cinema and television director who had previously made demanding literary adaptations such as Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (*Geroi nashego vremeni*, 2006,), eight-part television series, exciting biopics such as *Trotsky* (*Trotskii*, 2007), eight-part television series, but also patriotic World War II films such as *The Brest Fortress* (*Brestskaia krepost'*, also known as *Fortress of War*, 2010). The cast also included many star actors (Mel'nikova 2021; Morozova 2021; [Anon.] 2021). Accordingly, when the series was first broadcast in the second week of November 2021 on Russian state television's second channel Rossiia, it achieved the highest viewing figures (Al'perina 2021). The critical response was largely positive, both at home and in Russian-speaking communities abroad ([Anon.] 2022c), with the only criticism being the sometimes considerable deviations from historically verified facts, but also the underlying "anti-Soviet" attitude (Kudriashov 2021; Karev 2021; Litov 2021; Timuka 2021). Other critics praised the fact that this was not the typical "militarism" of other series about World War II (Maliukova 2021; Dubshan 2021). And so, in January 2022, on the eve of the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine, the series was awarded the most important jury prize, *Zolotoi orël*, as the best television series of the year ([Anon.] 2022a).

## 2. Aleksei Kravchenko Now and Then: The Poetics of Popular Culture

Aleksandr Kott knows exactly who he has in front of the camera with Aleksei Kravchenko, from the very first scene. *Come and See* ends with Flëra, who, enraged, shoots repeatedly from his rifle at a picture of 'Hitler the Liberator' (*Hitler Asvabadzitsel'*) lying in the mud, while black and white documentary film images run backwards before the audience's eyes to atonal musical sounds, tracing the entire history of the horrors of the National Socialists from the end, beginning with pictures of the extermination camps and the destruction of the war, through repeatedly shown images of Hitler caressing children. It is only when the reverse documentary history pauses on a photograph with Hitler as a baby on his mother's arm that Flëra stops shooting, and his child's face freezes in close-up with his eyes wide open. In the moment of freezing, the choral voices of the *Lacrimosa* from Mozart's *Requiem in D-minor* are heard, under whose dramatic singing Flëra rejoins the partisans in the Belarusian forests. The inconceivable horror brought upon humanity by the politician from Austria cannot be undone by the music of the great composer from the same country, but it can give expression, at least for the moment, to the child's speechless anguish of the soul.

The first scene of the first episode in *The Seventh Symphony* begins on 20 September 1941 at a jetty in Leningrad on the river Neva, where Kravchenko, playing the role of the

2 Aleksandr Kott signed the appeal "No to war!" initiated by the president of the Cinema Association of Russia, Aleksei Popogrebskii, directly on 24 February 2022. Cf. Popogrebskii et al. 2022.

NKVD lieutenant Anatolii Serëgin, is taking his wife and two children to be evacuated by steamboat. Mozart sounds again, now from the public radio speakers, but this time it is the *Piano Concerto No. 23 in A major*, to the sounds of which Kravchenko runs around dancing a little with his son on his shoulders. But the cheerful major sounds instead of the minor of the *Requiem* are deceptive. As he waves on the shore, looking after the departing ship, there is a bombing raid by the German Luftwaffe and he has to watch his wife and children being sunk in the Neva: again, with the same eyes wide open in horror, an expression that we know so well from *Come and See.* As if the horror never stops, but rather catches up with him, again and again. Even four decades later. Even almost eight decades after the end of World War II.

And yet there are huge differences between the 1985 cinema film and the 2021 television series, not only because almost twice as much time has passed since the end of the war on the eve of a new war and because Aleksandr Kotts' television series was made in a completely different socio-political environment. In the mid-1980s, in the face of the debacle of the Soviet mission in Afghanistan, which was discussed more and more openly in the Soviet press and in which a generation of conscripts had gained traumatic experiences of war, the anti-war film *Come and See* undoubtedly struck a chord with the times, in which heroic war narratives could hardly be conveyed. During Vladimir Putin's fourth term as President of Russia, on the other hand, the state-funded production of films, television series, novels, exhibitions and educational initiatives presenting the Great Patriotic War in all its heroic and patriotic facets reached new heights. The defamation of the Red Army and the defence of the fatherland was made a punishable offence and the mass cultural preoccupation with the war became a central propagandistic *lieu de mémoire* staged and celebrated in all media and on all possible occasions as an obligation of subsequent generations for the future.

But the decisive difference between the advanced cinema film of 1985 and the successful television series of 2021 lies in the different genre, since the popular format of mass-culture television productions follows a completely different logic than the auteur cinema of the time, which worked under the conditions of state censorship and regulation. While here the director has to assert his work of art above all against the ideological and aesthetic control authorities, popular culture in today's Russia, although dependent on state support as well, is mostly tied to audience success and therefore reacts much more strongly to current moods in the population or among certain target groups. Popular culture signals and reinforces what is considered fashionable and relevant, and in its products makes offers to give a social unease, widespread longings and fears, social questions and political concerns an affective and imaginary space to be articulated and adapted to certain realities (cf. Hermann 2008; Borenstein 2011; Boele et al. 2020). All kinds of music cultures with their scene locations, dress codes and habits of behaviour, but also mass commodity products such as popular literature or TV series function in this way.

In capitalism, such popular mass cultures are generally analysed as consumer offers that help people come to terms with the relations of exploitation, insecurities and fears of decline in neoliberal market economies. Since popular culture gains its attractiveness through the participation and involvement of consumers, it can certainly become the catalyst and motor of protest movements and revolutions, but it can also contribute

to defusing and neutralising radical resistance in the field of culture, just as conversely, it may also strengthen populist and reactionary movements (cf. Storey 1996; Hall 2009: 508–518). In authoritarian or dictatorial societies like the Russian Federation, this relationship between adaptation and protest is much more ambivalent. On the one hand, popular formats are an instrument of state actors to attune the population to existing social conditions and ideological narratives, but since popular culture – unlike mere propaganda – always remains dependent on the interest and participation of consumers, it constantly produces contradictory and conflicting signals and semantics (György 1999: 53–72; Bassin/Poso 2017; Stephen 2022). A concert or blockbuster movie that no one attends is just as worthless as audience flops or news programmes solely watched by foreign correspondents.

This mode of operation of popular television series will be analysed in the following using the example of Aleksandr Kott's *The Seventh Symphony* against the general background of the enormous production of film and television series about World War II in the contemporary Russian Federation. The aim is not so much to work out a general characteristics of this mass cultural genre, but rather to show the specific pragmatic and poetic function of this series between narratives prescribed by the state, affectively and imaginatively appealing offers of identification and the compensation of collective fears and target group interests.

## 3. World War II in Contemporary Russian Television Series

In the Russian Federation of the first two decades of the 21st century, the Stalinist era and World War II were probably the most controversial period of history to which the increasingly professional commercial and state film and television industry devoted itself (cf. Beumers 2006; Norris 2012; Brouwer 2016). The sides of the war that had been taboo or little discussed in Soviet times could now be dealt with in an audiovisually sophisticated form using digital techniques and exciting scripts. Punishment battalions with criminals and political prisoners from the Gulag who were burnt out at the front (the series *Penal Battalion*, *Shtrafbat*, 2004, directed by Nikolai Dostal'), (former) NKVD officers and spies spreading fear and terror (like in the series, *Execution Impossible to Pardon*, *Kaznit' nel'zia pomilovat'*, 2017, directed by Kim Druzhinin), incompetent and scheming party politicians, collaboration with the occupiers or anti-Semitism even in their own ranks became the subject of melodramatic war adventures just as much as rousing action thrillers (cf. Norris 2021: 48–75).[3] Often, novels that were banned, well-known or popular in Soviet times served as scripts, such as Vasilii Grossman's *Life and Fate* (*Zhizn' i sud'ba*, series 2011–2012, directed by Sergei Urusliak) or Anatolii Rybakov's *Children of the Arbat* (*Deti Arbata*, series 2004, directed by Andrei Ėshpai), but just as often there were series whose scenarios were developed specifically for the production. At the same time,

3 The expression "Kaznit' nel'zia pomilovat'" is a catchphrase in Russian, which carries opposite meanings depending on the emphasis or comma placement: "Execution impossible, to pardon" or also "Execution, impossible to pardon". Its written or oral origin is unclear; it is attributed to various tsars such as Peter the Great.

in addition to curiosity about that which was forbidden and hidden behind the official scenes, these series often confirmed, but sometimes also questioned and subverted certain clichés and prejudices of their viewers. For example, Sergei Ursuliak's series *Liquidation* (*Likvidatsia*, 2007) showed the criminal milieu in Odessa in the immediate post-war period, reproducing many familiar topoi about Jewish shrewdness, Ukrainian collaborators and the sunny life in the port city, but also openly problematising anti-Semitic prejudices (cf. Noordenbos 2021: 150–169). Series thus also function on an affective and intellectual level as imaginary offers to the viewer to become immersed in a fictional reality full of adventure, exoticism and unexpected challenges.

In cultural-political terms, these series productions primarily followed the function of familiarising the viewers with the harsh everyday reality of war, whereby the focus of the plot was often not on the battles and combat life at the front, but on what was happening behind the front. Either the action took place in the enemy's territory, where one had to cope as a saboteur or agent, or behind one's own lines, where one was confronted with treason, sabotage and espionage. This function of normalising and portraying the everyday realities of war can be observed in exemplary fashion in the Russian-Ukrainian co-production *Under Military Law* (*Po zakonam voennogo vremeni*, 2016–2023), six seasons so far. The series, directed by Maksim Mekheda, Evgenii Serov and Sergei Vinogradov, deals with all the fears of machinations and intrigues within the security services, addresses corruption and arbitrary violence in the army as well as the illusion of a supposed infallibility of the party and its commissioners. In many episodes, however, simple naivety, egoism, jealousy and plain opportunism within their own ranks often provide drama and suspense. Civilian life can only be adapted to the titular 'military law' with great difficulty. At the same time, the four main heroes, the conscientious investigator of the military prosecutor's office Ivan Rokotov (played by Evgenii Volovenko) and his chauffeur Grigorii Fedorenko (Aleksandr Pankratov-Chërnyi), always up for a joke, both from Kyiv, as well as the attractive investigator of the Supreme Military Prosecutor's Office of the Red Army, Svetlana Elagina (played by Ekaterina Klimova), and her superior Nikolai Mirskii (Maksim Drozd), both from Moscow, survive all the dangers and difficulties they are confronted with on their countless missions from Kyiv in the summer of 1941 to Königsberg in the autumn of 1945. The fact that this series primarily serves to convince viewers at home of the 'just cause' of the war is shown by the fact that the German enemy and his war crimes appear at most in passing and as background events, while the criminal cases mostly revolve around uncovering grievances and misconduct in one's own ranks. The aim is not to play down the scepticism towards the secret services and the military by concealing and 'varnishing reality', as was still common in Soviet times. Rather, the credibility of the fictional reality is suggested by the fact that personal failures and criminal violence are depicted, but then always in the end the state authorities find a resolution as a necessary and essential instrument of power. The series (the last two seasons of which were only produced by the Russian side) also deals extensively with the mistrust and disagreements between Kyiv and Moscow, which are, however, always resolved by the protagonists in a productive Russian-Ukrainian cooperation, symbolically embodied in the love affair between Elagina and Rokotov. The series, which was launched after the Euromaidan in 2013/2014, the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation and the proclamation of the separatist 'People's Republics' in Luhansk and Donetsk,

is in this respect also a popular cultural response to how the military-political conflict with Ukraine should be overcome from the Russian point of view.[4]

Yet, at the same, this series, like many others, follows the global model of Hollywood cinema in its aesthetics and even in its "military-patriotic" textbook, as a critic noted:

> It is as if there is a textbook, no more elaborate than the primer on which most local war serials are diligently filmed. The plotting is admirably clear. If our guys are in the picture, they are mostly good, although villains and traitors and not always fair NKVDs are allowed. If the Germans are in the frame, they are mostly bad, but clever and formidable opponents are tolerated, and in a sense, sometimes even almost positive characters. And if love occurs, it is usually with a distinct flavour of doom. (Legostaev 2020)

This pattern "with a distinct flavour of doom" is also followed by the series *The Seventh Symphony,* but it undertakes significant shifts, attempting to unite war and art, entertainment and high culture in its subject, which almost inevitably means a lot of kitsch.

## 4. History and Fiction: The Leningrad Symphony Myth and NKVD Terror

The story of the performance of Dmitri Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 7* is one of the best-known episodes from the 900-day German siege of Leningrad during World War II and has been the subject of many artistic representations. After the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, the German Wehrmacht had advanced rapidly across the Baltic, while from the north Finland recaptured the territories lost in the Winter War of 1939/1940. After the Wehrmacht had captured Shlisselburg on Lake Ladoga, Leningrad was surrounded from 9 September 1941 to 27 January 1944. After the German leadership decided not to conquer the city with Lenin's symbolic name but to systematically starve its population, more than a million inhabitants died during the blockade, which lasted almost 900 days, mainly from hunger, but also from air raids and artillery fire, as well as from cold and deprivation, since the people could only be supplied through makeshift routes via Lake Ladoga and by air.[5] Shostakovich was in besieged Leningrad in September 1941 when he was already writing a new symphony, but he did not complete it until he had been evacuated to Kuibyshev (Samara) at the end of the year. After its premiere by the evacuated orchestra of the Moscow Bolshoi Theatre in Kuibyshev in March 1942, premieres took place in Moscow, London and New York, among other places, before *Symphony No. 7* could also be performed in Leningrad on August 9, 1942 by the radio

4 It is certainly no coincidence that some of the Ukrainian actors who appeared in the series also played prominent roles for Volodymyr Zelensky's production company "Kvartal 95" and its television series *Servant of the People* (*Sluga naroda*, 2015–2019), three seasons, such as Stanislav Boklan or Viktor Saraikin.

5 There is an ongoing debate about whether and if so to what extent the Soviet side also willingly contributed to the famine, but the film does not take any explicit position on this. For more recent research on the siege of Leningrad, cf. Kirschenbaum 2006; Ganzenmüller 2007; Reid 2011; Bidlack/Lomagin 2012.

orchestra that had remained in the city and the conductor Karl Eliasberg in the hall of the Philharmonic. The performance was broadcast live nationwide on the radio so that the besieged city and the entire Soviet Union could follow it (cf. Reid 2011: 356–369; Redepenning 2011: 169–193).

Thus, the symphony entered the canon of anti-fascist art worldwide already during World War II, dramatically giving musical expression to the inconceivable suffering and resistance of the Leningrad population. Nothing was better suited as a symbol of the triumph of art and civilisation over the barbarism of German National Socialism than classical music. The performance is also portrayed as such a collective human effort in the face of the horror of the siege in the black-and-white film *Leningrad Symphony* (*Leningradskaia simfoniia*, 1957, Mosfilm) by the dramatist and director Zakhar Agranenko, which was released in Soviet cinemas on the 15th anniversary of the performance. However, this film was soon forgotten, still heavily influenced by the narrative schemes of the late Stalin era, where Eliasberg is given a Russian name and oddball elderly gentlemen, motherly women and strong young men overcome the most difficult dangers. The heroic pathos inherent in this performance under the conditions of the blockade resonates even in William T. Vollmann's great epic novel *Europe Central* (2005) about the fate of the continent in the short 20th century, whose narrator devotes central passages to Shostakovich and the radio broadcast of the Symphony on 9 August 1942:

> How should I tell this tale? […] The Great Hall Philharmonic, that dull yellow, not particularly ornate building, with it white-on-yellow rococo decorations sparse and faded, this was now the brain of our national telephone; and Shostakovich had braided the sub-waves of his immense signal so as to most beautifully and loudly carry the commands of the automatic central office in a rhythm as reassuringly steady as Red Army men with up-pointed files filing past our trapezoidal shelter for the Bronze Horseman. […] Many wept. Leningrad was transformed into gold. (Vollmann 2005: 218–219)

Aleksandr Kott avoids such pathos. Instead, he follows the narrative patterns of popular television series that demand dramatic conflicts, emotional shock, unexpected twists and multiple opportunities for identification that captivate the viewer by combining the strange and the familiar, the unfamiliar and the mundane, the exciting and the comforting into an exciting story. For this, Kott changes the historical reality considerably in some points. It is the heartbreaking story of about a dozen largely fictional orchestra members and helpers, whom we get to know better while they practise the performance of the symphony under the terrible and deprived conditions of the Leningrad blockade. At the centre of the plot, he puts the enmity between the NKVD lieutenant Anatolii Serëgin, played by Kravchenko, and the conductor of the radio orchestra Karl Eliasberg, played by Aleksei Gus'kov. Whereas there is no historical precedent for Serëgin, the conductor, who then was actually 35 years old, now becomes an older man, whose wife is even arrested. While Serëgin is a typical 'achiever' (*vydvizhenets*) of the 1930s, coming from humble proletarian beginnings, believing in iron self-discipline, masculine toughness and uncompromising rigour, Eliasberg in the film is from the Baltic German and Jewish bourgeois upper classes, living entirely for art and music. He is the conductor of the Leningrad Radio Orchestra and refuses to be evacuated in order to stay with his or-

chestra, which had to remain in the besieged city alongside the choir and the comedy theatre on the orders of Andrei Zhdanov, secretary of the Communist Party and at the time a member of the Leningrad Front war council, in order to raise the spirit of resistance among the population. A little later, Eliasberg receives direct orders from Zhdanov himself to perform *Symphony No. 7*. At the same time, Serëgin, who has absolutely no interest in classical music, is ordered to ensure the proper performance of Shostakovich's work and at the same time to spy on the orchestra for agents and traitors. But in practice this order means, above all, that he must find capable musicians in Leningrad and at the front and forcibly recruit them for the orchestra.

But this mission turns out to be difficult for Serëgin, not only because often the people he is looking for have already died of hunger, cold or at the front and are severely physically injured. As an NKVD officer, his person inspires fear and terror above all. The memory of the Great Terror of 1936 to 1938, when the chekists took innocent people from their homes at night, when anyone could be denounced as an enemy of the people and a traitor, when people were arbitrarily shot or banished to the Gulag, is still too dense, and the cultural intelligentsia in particular suffered from the purges. And this fear seems to be more than justified, as becomes clear in the very first episode of the series, when Eliasberg's wife is personally arrested by Serëgin before the conductor's eyes. A few scenes later, people in the air-raid shelter talk about how it is better to die under bombs than to be taken away at night by the NKVD (episode 1, min. 42:25-43:00). Accordingly, when the lieutenant first appears, people panic and anticipate their immediate arrest and shooting. When Serëgin is looking for an urgently needed violinist, his mother at first refuses to give him any information for fear that he might be captured, and when he finally finds the son in the front line, he flees in panic: the violinist would rather die at the front than in the torture cellars of the NKVD. An oboist whom he fetches from her bombed-out flat insults the chekists as inquisitors from the Middle Ages. And when, just before the premiere, the orchestra's agitated viola player Leonid Kleiman (played by Timofei Tribuntsev), exasperated to hysterical with despair, wants to volunteer for the front, he curses the whole orchestra as cowards, blurting out the following while standing right next to the NKVD lieutenant Serëgin:

> "I didn't think I would say this, but he was telling the truth from the beginning, you're all cowards, eighty people gathered to play a little concert, and you all happily hid behind him.... Do you know what will happen after the concert? Maybe not right away, maybe not even this year, but people like Lieutenant will devour you, one by one, the masses will crush you and kill you like new enemies, because they are many and you are eighty..." (Episode 7, min. 33:05-34:00)

The fear of the cultural intelligentsia of the terror of the NKVD, which culminates in this tirade, is historically accurate and to a certain extent prophetic here, since it could be understood as a reference to the repressions of the post-war period.[6] Within the logic of the

6 On the repression during the blockade, cf. Ganzenmüller 2011. On the postwar period, cf. Bljum 2011.

plot, however, it represents a complete misjudgement of the situation, since the television series has previously made it more than clear, in particular through the character of Serëgin, that the fear is not only unfounded but also unjust. The lieutenant is anything but a merciless inquisitor and ruthless murderer.

Rather, the chekist in the series is himself a deeply traumatised person, as the viewers know from the opening scene with the death of his wife, son and daughter, a person who is initially completely incapable of expressing his feelings other than through anger and aggression. Accordingly, after the scene at the jetty we see him for the first time on a professional assignment, where he almost beats a prisoner to death in an NKVD cell and can only be stopped at the last moment. But it is not murderousness that speaks from his eyes, but pure desperation and helplessness. Just as the boy Flëra in the film *Come and See* desperately shoots at the portrait of the *Führer*, the adult Serëgin strikes here without sense and reason. He does not torture due to political or other motivations, but out of despair, which is psychologically immediately understandable for the audience. And with each subsequent scene and series episode, the empathetic, compassionate camera eye makes the NKVD lieutenant more sympathetic and familiar, for behind the tough façade lies a soft character who has difficulty putting his feelings into words and initially tries doggedly to suppress his own pain and grief. He helps people out of difficult situations, supports the weak, saves lives or signals understanding and compassion through his silence alone. The more often he manages to shed his body armour of an iron chekist in the course of the series, the more human he becomes. This 'humanisation' of Serëgin takes place primarily through three characters: a little red-haired boy, a woman who loves him and the conductor Eliasberg as his actual opponent.

## 5. The Boy, the Beloved and the Conductor: The Humanisation of a Chekist

Popular television series explain the world through the experiential horizons of their main protagonists, often bringing the enigmatic and mysterious ways of big politics into conflict with private issues and personal interests, which adds drama and suspense. This is also the case with NKVD Lieutenant Anatolii Serëgin, who is supposed to be monitoring the orchestra for traitors and informers, but at the same time has to reconcile his deeply traumatised, yet still intact world view of an uncompromising chekist with the partly eccentric and completely alien world of the orchestra musicians. This contrast between the world of state violence and suspicion and that of culture becomes most obvious in the encounters with Karl Eliasberg.

In this confrontation, the sympathies of the script and camera are clearly on the side of the arts. For while the repressive policy of the NKVD is discussed as an anti-human and false understanding of order that only causes fear, chaos and suffering, the order of music is no less strict and rigorous, but it provides harmony, stability and security. And this other, better order is embodied from the very beginning by the conductor of the radio orchestra, who states in one of his very first appearances: "There is no excuse for hackwork, especially now… the more chaos around, the more order should be here" (episode 1, min. 18:55-19:10).

Eliasberg's role is to uncover the narrowness and falseness of Serëgin's world view. Already at their second encounter (after the arrest of Eliasberg's wife), when the NKVD lieutenant is still grumbling about why he has to look for musicians for this needless orchestra, the following dialogue develops between him and the conductor:

– "If you had gone to the front, there would have been no problem."
– "I went to the enlistment office and they turned me down. They said I'm needed here."
– "You mean waving the baton? With your name, comrade Eliasberg, there's nothing to do at the front. They'll shoot you."
– "Were you at the front?"
– "No, I've been catching your countrymen here."
– "By the way, I'm half German. My father is German. My mother is Jewish."
– "And even worse."
– "You don't like the latter?"
– "Well, let's put it this way: I don't trust them."
– "Karl Marx was a German Jew. You don't trust Marx?"
– "Marx? I had no idea."
– "I was named after him."
– "But you don't look much like him."
– "Thank God for that."
– "Why so?"
– "Because. Marx has to be the one and only." (Episode 2, min. 18:34-20:07)

Serëgin embodies the typical careerist from a simple background, characterised by his semi-education and anti-Semitic prejudices, while Eliasberg even emphasises that he comes from an educated communist family by referring to his first name, Karl. Accordingly, the two despise each other, as becomes clear in their next conversation:

– "I'm not such a moron."
– "Who told you that you're a moron?"
– "Well, this is why I said it? You have it written on your face that you despise me, just like the working class."
– "I love the working class. It's just that putting people in jail, torturing women, whipping children, that's not a job."
– "I don't torture women, at least I don't put them in a cell with murderers according to the eighty-first article. Well, I could. But I don't torture." (3, 15:20-19:09)

Eliasberg expresses this abysmal dislike for the NKVD lieutenant repeatedly, with anger over his arrested wife certainly playing a role.

Only gradually does Eliasberg realise that Serëgin also has human sides when, for example, he does not impose a punishment on a young man who has reported to the front with false papers. Conversely, thanks to the conductor, the chekist begins to understand why music is so important to the state and what an important role culture apparently

plays for people, so that he even steals a popular booklet on the *Myths of Ancient Greece* (*Mify Drevnei Gretsii*, 1941) from a destroyed library, which he also reads.[7]

But the decisive impulse for his 'humanisation' in the series comes from someone else, namely the flutist Vera Preobrazhenskaia (played by Elizaveta Boiarskaia), whose name already symbolically indicates this, since her first name in Russian means "faith" and her last name means something like "The Transforming One": she has to convey both qualities to him in the course of the series.[8] Her first appearance in the series is when she gives birth to a boy in a hallway under German bombardment, but in the very next scene with her we see a broken woman with ruined hands at the front, from whom Serëgin learns in an 'interrogation' that she lost her son shortly after birth and that the illegitimate father was killed in the war: he orders her to come back to the orchestra anyway. However, already in the third episode we learn in a flashback that Preobrazhenskaia's relationship with the child's fallen father was not a happy one: Vera was actually in love with the Jewish viola player Leonid Kleiman, but despite all her familiarity with him, he preferred the blonde estrada singer Lidia at the time, which is why she consoled herself with the soldier.[9] When Vera Preobrazhenskaia is ordered back to the orchestra, the guilt-ridden Kleiman's affection for her flares up again, but she now seeks support and closeness with Anatoly Serëgin, who keeps his distance from her for a long time.[10]

Serëgin only begins to visibly show emotion when, while searching for orchestra musicians in a bombed-out flat, he comes across the striking red-haired boy Kolia Vasiliev (played by Makar Mozzhevilov) hiding in a wardrobe, staying with his slain grandfather.[11]

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7 In the series, the booklet is attributed to the historian Nikolai Kun (1877–1940), whose popular science book on the ancient stories, previously revised and expanded several times, first appeared in 1940 under the title *Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece* (*Mify i legendy Drevnei Gretsii*). In fact, the cover of the booklet *Myths of Ancient Greece* (1940) by Vsevolod and Lev Uspenskii, published in the same year, is shown in the film.

8 Her surname has an ambivalent connotation in Russian, since the main hero of Mikhail Bulgakov's well-known satirical story *The Heart of a Dog* (*Sobach'e serdtse*, 1925), the surgeon Professor Filipp Filippovich Preobrazhenskii, bears the same eloquent surname, who implants the dog's heart in a human being, thus transforming him into a fanatical animalistic Bolshevik. Aleksandr Kott to a certain extent symbolically reverses this "transformation" from a human being into a bestial creature, albeit not through surgery but through music.

9 Leonid Kleiman also married Lidia, but she leaves him during the siege, preferring the adventurous life of a front-line orchestra. When Lidia's lover is killed before her eyes in a bombing raid, she returns to Leonid in despair, emaciated by hunger and losing her mind, she buys fake chocolate on the black market in exchange for her last piece of jewellery, which she then fatally poisons herself with.

10 Thus, the pre-war constellation between Vera and Leonid is repeated under the opposite sign: Kleiman is now alone and despises the NKVD man just as he hates military men, but Preobrazhenskaia courts Serëgin this time not for comfort but out of actual affection.

11 Red-haired boys have been considered headstrong and rebellious at least since O. Henry's legendary short story *The Ramson of Red Chief* (1907), so also in the Soviet O. Henry movie adaptation *Strictly Business* (*Delovye liudi*, 1962) by Leonid Gaidai. Tom Sawyer, modelled on his red-haired creator Mark Twain, is often portrayed as a redhead in films too, as in the 1981 Soviet television series *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn* (*Prikliucheniia Toma Soiera i Gekl'berri Finn*, dir. Stanislav Govorukhin). The headstrong Kolia shares some of the characteristics of these role models.

Ten-year-old Kolia refuses to stay at the children's home, so he takes him to the orchestra and Vera agrees to take him into her flat while Anatolii Serëgin gets treats for him on the black market and builds him a makeshift bed. For the first time, the chekist shows a hint of *joie de vivre*: he smiles with the boy and makes jokes. But Kolia demands more from "Uncle Tolia" (the short form of Serëgin's first name Anatolii), he should not only put him to bed and be near him, but take him seriously, give him his attention. One evening Kolia asks him if he will go to the front, repeating word for word the last words of Serëgin's dead son. This childlike, naïve importunity bursts Serëgin's emotional shell: with eyes wide open, a face expression we know so well since *Come and See*, the horrible memory overwhelms him, and we see fragmented flashbacks of the last moments until his son's death, whereby Serëgin almost collapses, drenched in sweat. A little later he is sitting on the edge of Vera's bed alone with her, who tells him face to face:

> "You are terribly afraid. Then no, you are a brave man, you are not afraid of the enemy, of the battlefield of death, but you are terribly afraid to live. […] you can't live in the past all the time… yes, I don't know what will happen tomorrow, what will happen the day after tomorrow… I only understand about now, there's you, there's me, we're alive, what else?" (Episode 7, min. 22:55-24.00)

With these words his resistance is broken and they spend the same night together in her bed.

The series thus performs a double therapeutic function: on the one hand, Vera Preobrazhenskaia succeeds in curing the NKVD man of his private traumas and turning him into a living human being. On the other hand, the series also cures the traumas of *Come and See* on an emblematic level: Now Kravchenko plays the symbolic father to the ten-year-old boy Kolia, a father who the 14-year-old Flëra he played then never had. The war in *The Seventh Symphony* is also cruel and senseless, but love in solidarity and human empathy can at least temporarily bring fleeting happiness and relief. However, this overcoming of traumata doesn't last for long. For the very next day, before Serëgin can even leave for the front, he is surprised by a bombing raid while saving the life of Karl Eliasberg, but he is so badly wounded that he ultimately dies as a result of his injuries. After this next dramatic event, the conductor at last recognises the humane side of Serëgin, and so Eliasberg, standing next to the chekist's corpse, has to confess: "I was wrong to think Anatoly Ivanovich Serëgin was a stranger. I was wrong. I failed to tell him that while he was alive. This is how wars begin when we think other people are strangers" (Episode 8, min. 22:52-23:10).

Thus, in the end, the series exposes a double misjudgement: the secret services have wrongly persecuted the cultural intelligentsia in the Great Terror and murdered many of its representatives, but the artists have also been mistaken in their disdain for the ordinary 'new men,' whom they perceived as 'strange' transformed beasts, and therefore in a sense share at least a certain responsibility for their own persecution. So, the series suggests that war does not begin with an external threat or the German attack on the Soviet Union, but at the moment when people perceive the other in their own country as a 'stranger', an enemy of the people and a traitor.

## 6. Imperfect People: The Leningrad Blockade as an Existential Challenge

In the end, the 'transformed' chekist remains a tragic hero who only realises what life is all about just before he dies. For life, as the series shows in many small scenes, means the acceptance of strangeness and otherness, of even deviant feelings and acting according to one's own needs, which also sometimes includes transgressing rules and regulations. This is shown most clearly with the Jewish viola player Kleiman, who in his eccentricity and desperation repeatedly transgresses all boundaries of decency and tolerability without ever being malicious or unsympathetic.[12] But this also applies to the behaviour of the nurse Anna, who deserts from the front for fear of being raped by her battalion commander, while her beloved trumpeter illegally gets her food and forged food stamps. Rather almost grotesquely carnivalesque, this irregularity of transgressive behaviour is demonstrated by the double life of the orchestra's oboist and party organiser (*partorg*), Ekaterina Prudnikova (played by Elena Velezheva), who, even before the war, has charged the fun-loving timpanist and womaniser Valerii Korneichuk (played by Jurii Anpilogov) with a council tribunal for publicly imitating a sex act at a festive event. The accused, however, ridicules the charge by making sexual remarks to the party woman, which the audience approves with general laughter, while she is at a loss for words due to indignation. After his heroic death at the front, however, it turns out that this very prudish and strict party organiser was the last secret lover of the heartbreaker.

Even behaviour that is clearly harmful to society goes unpunished in the film. The fat oboist Semënov, for example, prefers to be fed by his no less obese mother, who works in a canteen, through stolen food rather than take on the stress of orchestra rehearsals. But when his mother dies and he is caught stealing cabbages, he is forgiven because he now conscientiously attends rehearsals. And even the denunciator of Eliasberg's wife, the young violinist Tusia from Belarus, is forgiven in the end, since she acted out of unhappy love and jealousy.

Thus, in its depiction of interpersonal relationships, the series is also a plea for generosity and solidarity, according to which different population groups, regardless of class and nationality, must come to terms with their private wars and social conflicts. Yet, one would misunderstand the series if one were to see it as unreserved advocacy of tolerance and diversity, since it is clearly demonstrated that the transgressions, going to the point of grotesque frenzy, are motivated above all by private or war traumas. In other words, the German siege of Leningrad is only the backdrop, which has a cathartic effect on the protagonists as an existential challenge. The micro-world of the orchestra is staged as humanism actually lived, which represents a clear counter-world to the official propaganda image of the 1930s with its conservative values and heroic narratives. Reports from the front and the war only appear indirectly in conversations and news fragments, official socialist slogans as well as Christian Russian Orthodox or Soviet patriotic tones are completely absent. However, the series is not concerned with conveying a 'more truthful' or

12 Especially in the character of Kleiman – but also in that of Eliasberg – the series addresses many anti-Semitic stereotypes common in Russia by indirectly invoking them, but then unmasking them clearly as inaccurate projections and prejudices through the behaviour of the respective protagonists.

even 'realistic' picture of everyday blockade life or with deconstructing common myths around heroic suffering and the 'Leningrad Symphony'. Rather, it incorporates everything into its immersive and narrative logics, even fine arts, especially classical music and the titular *Symphony No. 7*, but also literature through the poetry of Ol'ga Berggolts.

## 7. The Third Zone: Classical Music and the Poetry of Ol'ga Berggolts

Aleksandr Kott not only takes the performance of Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 7* during the Leningrad Blockade as grateful material for a partly tragic, partly melodramatic plot, but also skilfully incorporates the motif of music into the symbolic-affective level of the story, as he shows from the first scene, when the radio broadcast of Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 23* segues directly into the death of Serëgin's children and wife in the hail of bombs. But music is not only used as a soundtrack to intensify emotions, tension and drama, as is otherwise common in popular films, it is also a direct object of reflection. Karl Eliasberg for instance, in the first scene that shows him as a conductor at an orchestra rehearsal, a broken man after the arrest of his wife by Serëgin, in his despair quotes from the so-called 'Testament' of the 31-year-old Ludwig van Beethoven, who wrote that it was art alone that prevented him from committing suicide. Whereupon the rehearsal of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* begins.

This opening with Beethoven's famous letter to his brothers from 1802 is already symbolic, as he writes it because of his incurably progressing deafness, and by the time he completed *Symphony No. 9* in 1823 he already could not hear anything. Thus, the motif of performing or not-performing, hearing or not hearing music is put forward as a varied motif in the series from the beginning. So, many musicians initially refuse to continue working in the orchestra because of personal grief, since music seems to be pointless in times of war, but then they realise that making music is more important than killing.[13] Conversely, Serëgin's inability to grasp the beauty and expressiveness of music is a consistent theme in his relationship with Preobrazhenskaia. She repeatedly tries to cure him of his 'deafness', but initially without success. It is only when she plays Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*, the 'Fate Symphony', on the gramophone at her bedside in the evening that he slowly begins to sense what music means, even if he cannot yet put it into words. And it is not only Serëgin's 'fate' that is softened by Beethoven's music: the 'officers of the Third Reich' blockading Leningrad, who have been listening via radio on the other side of the front, are so thrilled by a live broadcast of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* by the radio orchestra that they give Eliasberg a German *Volksempfänger* by parachute as a thank-you.

And for Eliasberg himself, Beethoven's fate is also decisive, since he not only owes his stamina to Beethoven's 'Testament', but he himself almost completely goes deaf due to the fatal bomb attack that costs Serëgin his life. Thus, the performance of Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 7* in Leningrad is also a symbolic quotation of Beethoven's premiere of his

13 The orchestra's blind percussionist, for example, immediately reports to the front when he hears that blind people are also wanted there. Thanks to his absolute hearing, he identifies all enemy aircrafts, but returns to the orchestra in the end because he considers music more important than the war effort.

*Symphony No. 9* in 1824, which the already completely deaf composer himself conducted. It is the same with Eliasberg; he hears very little, but still knows his cues as a conductor at every moment. At a dress rehearsal, he even exaggerates this contrast between making music and making war, addressing the orchestra:

> "I don't know anything about the war, yet I don't want to know either. When I hear what Beethoven sounds like, when it sounds exactly as he intended, I cannot believe that a human is capable of such harmony. But war, that's disharmony. And Beethoven is German, and I'm not ashamed of him. But war, that's a shame. A shame!" (Episode 7, min. 34:20-35:25)

It is these words that, in a sense, sum up the quintessence of the television series, making it a pathetic anti-war work. War between nations, but also between people fighting each other as strangers and enemies, is a moral disgrace, "a shame", whereas music can transform this disharmony into a higher harmonic order that does without false morals and mendacious words. And it is precisely this transformation of disharmony into harmony that Kott also stages in the more than ten-minute-long central final scene of the series: the performance of Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 7* in the Leningrad Philharmonic. In the first movements, we experience this acoustically and visually as an extreme disharmony: we hear the music excerpts with the damaged ears of Eliasberg, who can only distinguish some distorted sounds from the noise in a very selective and fragmented manner, or with the ears of the radio listeners, as they hear the fuzzy and shrill excerpts played through loudspeakers across the Soviet Union. The camera work, which is otherwise usually quite conventional in the series, also visually underlines this disharmony by daring to use bird's-eye views and extremely subjective shots before Shostakovich's musical sounds are gradually 'harmonised' audio-visually and the images take on a more phantasmatic, dreamlike dimension, when the orchestra members also see the figures of fallen relatives and acquaintances sitting in the rows of Philharmonic visitors, before the last sounds of the *Allegro con troppo* are shown through close-ups of the exhausted, tense-looking faces of the musicians and the conductor as a final collective physical and psychological act of strength on the podium.

But Kott does not leave it at this crowning conclusion, which tends towards heroic kitsch in its audio-visual harmonisation of the orchestra collective to Shostakovich's dramatic, droning final chords, but allows the performance to be followed by a short, no less pathos-filled speech by Eliasberg in the small circle of musicians.[14] This, however, is then abruptly broken by the conductor with his last, slightly mumbled words ironically distancing: "Somehow, that was a lot of pathos, let's go home, robbers!" (Episode 8, min. 41:23-41:28) Though in saying this, he indirectly underlines that musicians are not soldiers and conductors are not political orators, but with their arts they rather undermine the state order and the war pathos, resembling more "robbers" (*razboiniki*), gentleman

14 "And we may be forgotten, forgotten by name. But the performance of Shostakovich's music from the besieged, tormented city will not be forgotten… They won't forget… our children, our grandchildren, their grandchildren's grandchildren will remember and know: music is stronger than death!" (Episode 8, min. 40:36-41:12)

thieves, criminals of lost honour. Such an anti-pathetic stance is further emphasised by the fact that Shostakovich's symphony is not the last piece of music in the series, but after a few more exchanges in which Eliasberg once again refuses to be evacuated, the 'robber chief' goes to the stone steps of the Neva shore, to which the hauntingly moving piano sounds from the *Adagio* from Johann Sebastian Bach's *Concerto in D minor (BMV 974)* resound to the noise of the waves. Sad minor sounds at the end as in *Come and See*, but this time not by Mozart, but by Bach. Not to return to partisan war, but to draw stamina for further 'robber' actions. Classical music is thus not only the art that overcomes man's disharmony and wars, but also purifies human hearts and leads them back to the harmonious state of nature, for which the stone Neva shore with its long Petersburg mythology has long served as a cultural-historical trope since the founding of the city.[15]

A similar, but different function to music is fulfilled by the poetry of the Leningrad poet Ol'ga Berggolts (1910–1975) in the series, who remained in the city throughout the blockade period and makes a total of five appearances in the film (played by Viktoriia Tolstoganova), reading sometimes lengthy excerpts from her poems written between 1940 and 1942. Her recitals are connected to the plot only by the fact that her verses are broadcast live on the radio, just like the concerts by Eliasberg's radio orchestra. Only in the first scene is there a brief cool encounter with Serëgin in the broadcast studio and at the end she also sits in the audience at the performance of *Symphony No. 7*. But her appearance has strong symbolic significance for viewers educated in literary history, since Berggolts as the most prominent poet of the Leningrad blockade embodies the tragic fate of the cultural intelligentsia under Stalinism like no other: she had written poetry from childhood, was a convinced communist, worked as a journalist, war correspondent and newspaper editor since the end of the 1920s, wrote reportages and poems for adults as well as children's books, before she was caught up in the mills of the Great Terror in Leningrad at the beginning of 1937, when she was drawn into the fabricated accusations against former RAPP leader and critic Leopold Averbakh (1903–1937), initially only as a witness. After her first husband was shot as a 'Trotskyist' in February 1938, the charges against her were initially dropped, but in the same year she was again imprisoned as an 'enemy of the people' for 171 days, before she was released and rehabilitated in July 1939. In February 1940, despite everything, she joined the Bolshevik Party, and during the nearly 900-day blockade, she made almost daily live radio broadcasts to encourage Leningraders to hold on and to testify to the world outside of the inhabitants' heroic struggle for survival. Her

15 However, the series does not follow the so-called 'Petersburg text', according to which the founding of Petersburg represents a civilisational taming of the wild element of water, which, in the form of the river, repeatedly challenges man's fate through fog and floods. In Kott's work, in contrast, the deadly threat comes from the sky in the form of German bombs, as the very first scene makes clear when Serëgin's family drowns after a bombing raid. In *The Seventh Symphony*, the river has rather a religious connotation of the purification of souls. Again and again, the protagonists go alone or in pairs to the banks of the Neva, let their feet be washed by water on the stone steps, seek comfort and relaxation by the river, which is also visually underlined by shots of the calming, unshakable rippling water that are filmed in ever-changing ways. Instead of mortal danger, in Kott's work the river is a consoling confidant and silent witness to human fate.

second husband, the literary critic and journalist Nikolai Molchanov, died of starvation during the siege of Leningrad in 1942.[16]

Added to this was another tragic private fate: she had lost two daughters at a young age because of serious illness already in the 1930s, and during the interrogations and arrests 1937 to 1939 she was pregnant twice, but lost both children due to torture by the NKVD, the first while still pregnant, the second as a stillborn child. After that she could no longer bear children. By no means could Berggolts speak publicly about all this at the time, but her destiny is well known to today's educated Russian citizen, at least since the publication of her secret diaries in the late Glasnost period. And Aleksandr Kott deliberately alludes to this, when Serëgin, in response to Eliasberg's accusation, feels compelled to categorically emphasise twice that he does not torture women – the viewer may relate this dialogue directly to the nowadays well-known poet's own experience with chekists. Accordingly, when Serëgin loses his own two children on the quay, when Preobrozhenskaia's child dies shortly after birth under bombing, and they both symbolically adopt Kolia, and Kravchenko intertextually recalls his role as Flëra from *Come and See*, then all this points unequivocally to the subtext of Berggolts' biography. In a sense the fictious protagonists thus act out her experience of suffering, whereby the German bombs from the sky also become detectable as an allegory for the torture cellars of the NKVD.

At the same time, Berggolts is depicted in the series as an alternative role model to Eliasberg for the cultural intelligentsia during times of terror and war: while the conductor does not want to know about the chaos and 'disharmony' of the world, the poet knows all the abysses of suffering and dying, but she is not allowed to tell this truth publicly. Outraged, she yells at the radio recording supervisor in her very first appearance in the series: "There, in Moscow, no one knows anything about us, do you understand, no one! […] We are all going to die here, they just don't know about us. So I'm going to go and say all this live on air!" (Episode 2, min. 25:55-26:06) The latter desperately tries to stop her from doing so, which is overheard by Serëgin who happens to come in, whereupon she indignantly shouts at him:

> "Standing here and spying! For how long? […] I was in Moscow. Nobody knows anything there. Everyone keeps talking about the Leningrad heroism, but no one knows about the real situation. And it is forbidden to speak! How do you think that is?" (Episode 2, min. 26:25-27:05)

To which the chekist only tersely replies, "Some truths you don't need to know." (ibid.) But that is precisely the role of Berggolts and her poetry in *The Seventh Symphony*: she knows the whole truth, she knows what immeasurable suffering and death mean, but she is forbidden to speak about it publicly. And the viewer won't see her anymore in a private conversation. Instead, she recites poems live on the radio. Radio is thus also a medium of censorship, a censored venue of public speech that is only allowed to broadcast artistic truths, saying in verses, but also in music, what is not allowed to be said in plain language. Lidiia Ginzburg (1902–1990) has already indicated the "very hysterical note" with

16 For biographical details, cf. Gromova 2017. I thank Franziska Thun-Hohenstein for all her valuable advice on Berggolts.

which Berggolts tried to encode the private and the collective in her poetry after the personal "catastrophe", and Polina Barskova has recently pointed out how polysemous, fluid, ambiguous her "lyrical invocations" actually were, expressing the inner turmoil of her poetic voice and speaking to different addressees inside and outside the city, to the suffering and the powerful, alive and dead (cf. Ginzburg 2011: 111–113; Barskova 2017: 104–108; ibid. 2020: 65–67).[17]

And it is precisely this ambivalence of truth and prohibition due to censorship, this tension between saying and concealing, hope and despair, concrete biographical allusions and general human 'hysterical notes' that the radio readings also convey in Kott's television series. In a way, her poems are woven into the series plot like musical counterpoints, often but not always at the end of an episode. And they invite not just the older viewers – as they were used to do in Soviet times under the conditions of censorship – to interpret her words and accordingly the series' plot allegorically. For example, in the second episode, after we learn of the death of Preobrozhenskaia's baby and Serëgin has found Kolia, she reads the third stanza from her poem *Europe. The War in 1940. For Il'ia Erenburg* (*Evropa. Voina 1940 goda. Il'e Erenburgu*, 1940), in which the lyrical I dreams of a recreation of the world as a kingdom of children who will live there like birds in accordance with an undestroyed nature (episode 2, min. 28:08-29:30):

> Perhaps, these times are close:
> No howl of sirens, screech of bombs,
> But silence the children will hear,
> In their bomb-shelter sealed up tight.
> […]
> All slaughtered… Only the children
> Saved, under the scorched earth.
> They do not remember those times,
> They do not know who they are and where.
> Like birds, they wait now for sunrise
> And warm themselves, splashing in the water.
> […]
> Thus, will the childhood on the world arrive,
> And the wise dominion of children.
> (Berggolts 1988: 195)
> (Translation by Daniel Weissbort)[18]

17 The only one in the series, who still sometimes says in plain language and with a 'hysterical note' the truth about the real situation in besieged Leningrad, is Leonid Kleiman, who in a certain way performs as the poet's revenant, endowed with a fool's licence in his desperation close to madness.

18 Berggolts 1996. Quoted from: https://arlindo-correia.com/040704.html [30 September 2023]. Berggolts 1988: 195: "Быть может, близко сроки эти:/ не рев сирен, не посвист бомб,/ а тишину услышат дети/ в бомбоубежище глухом. […] …Все перебиты. Только дети/ спаслись под выжженной землей./ Они совсем не помнят года,/ не знают – кто они и где./ Они, как птицы, ждут восхода/ и, греясь, плещутся в воде. […] Вот так настанет детство мира/ и царство мудрое детей."

Obviously, the unspoken truth of these verses is that this 'dominion of children' is also the realm of her own dead children, "slaughtered" by the NKVD, which here poetry, like music, raises to a certain stage of lyrical harmony. Meanwhile, we see Serëgin – alongside recordings of the poetry recital – walking through barricades and tank traps in Leningrad, lost in thought; whether he has heard the verses, and what he may think, remains open.

Even more suggestive is the associative linking of Stalinist terror with German besiegement in the scene when the dead Serëgin, lying on an open truck next to the sitting Preobrazhenskaia and Kolia, is driven away to the gravesite to the first three stanzas of her poem *29 January 1942* (*29 ianvaria 1942*, 1942), which Berggolts dedicated to her husband Nikolai Molchanov, who died of malnutrition that day (episode 8, min. 25:20-26:05):

> Despair and sorrow aren't enough
> to get this cursed sentence over with!
> […]
> Why?
> I can't even rock your child
> to sleep or swaddle him.
> (Berggolts 1989a: 33)
> (Translation by Venya Gushchin)[19]

Serëgin here symbolically takes the place not only of her dead husband, but also of Berggolts' and Molchanov's common child, whom they lost during the 'cursed sentence' (*prokliatyi srok*) in NKVD prisons: the cruel constellation of her private catastrophe is revised in the series' fiction: here the chekist made human has to die instead of the child Kolia.

But the series cites not only a certain 'Soviet aesthetic' of coded truths, but also one of artistic defamiliarisation. When Serëgin seeks out the denunciator Tusia at her work in a tank factory in order to forcibly recruit her for the orchestra, she only stares at him wordlessly when they meet, whereupon Berggolts reads lines of poetry from the *February Diary* (*Fevral'skii dnevnik*, 1942) about how only hatred and the need for revenge can still unite and warm us. In Berggolts' poem, these verses are clearly directed against the Germans, but here they can also be related to the relationship between the two protagonists (episode 4, min. 48:56-49:40).[20]

Just as Berggolts' verses are thus taken out of context, the poems in this way alienate the plot in the television series, in a sense replacing the protagonists' possible thoughts

19 Berggolts 1989a: 33: „Отчаяния мало. Скорби мало./ О, поскорей отбыть проклятый срок! […] Зачем, зачем?/ Мне даже не баюкать,/ не пеленать ребенка твоего." Berggolts 2022: 64–65.

20 "No, we do not cry. There is not enough tears for the heart. Hate keeps us from crying. Hate is our guarantee of life: it unites, warms and guides. That I will not forgive, that I will not spare, that I will avenge, that I will avenge as best I can, cries out to me the mass grave on the Okhtensky, on the right bank." Berggolts 1989b: 35: "Нет, мы не плачем. Слез для сердца мало./ Нам ненависть заплакать не дает./ Нам ненависть залогом жизни стала:/ объединяет, греет и ведет.// О том, чтоб не прощала, не щадила,/ чтоб мстила, мстила, как могу,/ ко мне взывает братская могила/ на охтенском, на правом берегу."

and feelings, giving them an intertextual meaning of self-reflection through Berggolts' biographical experience, but also a more general allegorical dimension. So, the lines of poetry interrupt or disrupt the otherwise stringently narrated plot, imaginatively opening up a "third zone", as the famous Blockade poem *The Third Zone* (*Tret'ia zona*, 1942) by Berggolts is called, which is quoted in full length: A zone where words are disoriented and feelings confused:

> How do you cry, rejoice, beckon,
> who told you what is wrong with me?
> I am joyful today to the point of pain,
> I myself do not know why. (Episode 6, min. 50:25-50:42)[21]

But in 'defamiliarising' depicted events and experiences in this way, the lines of poetry at the same time also elevate the plot of the series in besieged Leningrad during the one year from September 1941 to August 1942 to a more general, human level, thus 'familiarising' it for contemporary viewers, who may recognise as educated people in Berggolts' poetry the general fate of the cultural intelligentsia under Stalinism and war, but a less historically savvy audience may also project their own topical feelings and thoughts onto the hardships and pains, conflicts and catastrophes suffered by the protagonists.

## 8. Conclusion

Whereas Elem Klimov's film *Come and See* attempted to capture the horrors of war with cinematic devices on a formal and aesthetic level, Aleksandr Kott's *The Seventh Symphony* works with the conventional patterns of representation and narration of contemporary television series, which are, however, constantly enriched with allusions and signs of distinction from high culture. Moritz Baßler characterises this form of storytelling as the "international style" of "popular realism," which presents itself as sophisticated high culture, as demanding on a formal aesthetic level and offering complexly constructed plots. But as a popular form of realism, it is in fact decidedly directed against any artistic modernism and renounces any "poetic function" in the sense of Roman Jakobson, any effective "defamilarisation" in the sense of the formalists that could lead to a "new seeing" of reality. Instead "popular realism" constantly confirms the existing symbolic order and an "educated bourgeois basic trust" ("bildungsbürgerliches Urvertrauen") (Baßler 22: 86). Precisely this narrative dynamic can also be observed in *The Seventh Symphony*, which does indeed integrate defamiliarising elements and avant-garde devices on an audio-visual level, among other things with Berggolts' poems and Shostakovich's music, but these defamiliarisations only temporarily disrupt the fictional diegesis, temporarily delay it, but in no way lastingly impede its narrative logic and a straightforward reception of the series' episodes.

21 Berggolts 1989c: 58: "Как ты плачешь, радуешься, манишь,/ кто тебе поведал, что со мной?/ Мне сегодня радостно до боли,/ я сама не знаю – отчего."

With the melodramatic reenactment of Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 7* in the popular television series format, the film *The Seventh Symphony* thus provides a double integration offer in the context of Russian culture on the eve of Russia's 'special military operation' against Ukraine: vis-à-vis the state authorities, it stages the 'humanisation' of the chekist in the figure of Anatolii Serëgin by presenting the terror of the 1930s as a historical aberration that had already been fundamentally revised during World War II; and towards the Soviet socialised and post-Soviet educated and art-loving classes, this cinematic reinterpretation of the past signals that it shares the discomfort with a glorification and sacralisation of Great Patriotic War that increasingly is performed in the state media since the 2010s, presenting with Eliasberg and Berggolts alternative role models of how to behave in times of repression and censorship.

When Karl Eliasberg exclaims in an indignant voice: "I don't know anything about the war, yet I don't want to know either. […] But war, that's a shame. A shame!" then this exclamation can be understood in various ways. It can be understood as a clear anti-war statement. But it can be taken also as the exact opposite of what Elem Klimov's *Come and See* did: one does not want to come and see the horrors and cruelties of war, but prefers to stay behind the front in his 'harmonious' world of art and music. Instead of a rejection of war out of experience and observation, this is rather a refusal of war out of demonstrative disinterest and ignorance. Even more, the quotation marks this 'ignorant' attitude as morally superior by describing war as something inferior, indecent, as 'a shame' (*stydno*). In this way, however, the television series also makes an offer to the anti-war sentiment of the cultural intelligentsia within Russia: you are welcome to consider the war a dirty affair and devote yourself to culturally superior matters; the 'shameful' dirty work will be done for you by others. But then the cultural intelligentsia (like the fictional Eliasberg) also doesn't have to interfere with official state decisions on warfare and peace. And if you absolutely do not want to remain silent about the truth, then you have to censor yourself, as (the fictional as well as the real) Berggolts has done in her poems and radio addresses (and this series does too!), choosing an artistically coded form. At the same time, the series pleads for 'humanised' interactions within society in all its diversity, including ordinary military men and chekists like Anatolii Serëgin, who must not be treated as 'morons' or 'strangers' but as equal human beings with feelings and compassion.

It is precisely such characteristics, contradictory at first sight, that make popular culture products attractive: they deal with political sensitive issues and social aversions (against the NKVD, the terror of the chekists, the war), dangerous resentments (anti-Semitism, nationalism, class prejudices), uncontrolled aggressions and fears, and bring them together in an exciting plot. As a work of 'popular realism' the series at the same time addresses the specific target group of the cultural intelligentsia or people who see themselves as such, to whom it presents slightly encoded sophisticated high art, starting with the intertextual allusion to the film *Come and See*, classical music and Berggolts' poetry, and offers – in the shape of its protagonists – various options for integrating into the respective society despite all obstacles and reservations. And it is this specific offer of socialisation that makes the television series *The Seventh Symphony* still relevant and top-

ical after 24 February 2022, even if the space for divergent cultural agency is increasingly limited within the contemporary Russian Federation.[22]

If one considers *The Seventh Symphony* in the broader context of Russian popular culture before 24 February 2022 it is – as some critics have claimed – not so much or, at least, not alone an exception to the rule, but in a way also fits into the general development towards a gradual militarisation of public discourse. However, it does not call the cultural intelligentsia to the front; on the contrary, it uses the fictionalised story from besieged Leningrad to formulate an option to participate in the social and cultural life of one's own society with moral integrity and even critical consciousness, staying in the civilian, though permanently threatened and endangered hinterland.[23] In doing so, it represents the performance of Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 7* as well as Berggolts' poetry readings on radio as a civilisational act of high culture in contrast to the inhuman cruelties and horrors of an ongoing war, which the film *Come and See* once depicted so vividly. The series prefers rather not to speak of these horrors, not to come and see, once again.

## Filmography

*A Hero of Our Time* (*Geroi nashego vremeni*), dir. Aleksandr Kott, Russia 2006.
*Children of the Arbat* (*Deti Arbata*), dir. Andrei Ėshpai), Russia 2004.
*Come and See* (*Idi i smotri*), dir. Ėlem Klimov, USSR 1985.
*Execution Impossible to Pardon* (*Kaznit' nel'zia pomilovat'*), dir. Kim Druzhinin, Russia 2017.
*Leningrad Symphony* (*Leningradskaia simfoniia*), dir. Zakhar Agranenko, USSR 1957.
*Life and Fate* (*Zhizn' i sud'ba*), dir. Sergei Urusliak, Russia 2011–2012.
*Liquidation* (*Likvidatsia*), dir. Sergei Ursuliak, Russia 2007.
*Penal Battalion* (*Shtrafbat*), dir. Nikolai Dostal', 2004.
*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn* (*Prikliucheniia Toma Soiera i Gekl'berri Finn*), dir. Stanislav Govorukhin, USSR 1982.
*Servant of the People* (*Sluga naroda*), dir. Oleksii Kyriushchenko, Ukraine 2015–2019.
*Strictly Business* (*Delovye liudi*), dir. Leonid Gaidai, USSR 1962.
*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn* (*Prikliucheniia Toma Soiera i Gekl'berri Finn*), dir. Stanislav Govorukhin, USSR 1981.
*The Brest Fortress* [also known as *Fortress of War*] (*Brestskaia krepost'*) dir. Aleksandr Kott, Russia/Belarus 2010.
*The Seventh Symphony* (*Sed'maia simfoniia*), dir. Aleksandr Kott, Russia 2021.
*Trotsky* (*Trotskii*), dir. Aleksandr Kott, Russia 2007.

22 It is certainly no coincidence that in May 2022, when the military disaster and the brutality of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (like in Bucha) were already obvious, the series was awarded the prize for best patriotic series of the year at the St Petersburg film festival "Viva Russian cinema!" ("Vivat kino Rossii!"), cf. [Anon.] 2022b.

23 Just as official Russian rhetoric has appropriated and recoded many other Soviet topoi and narratives in imperial and national garb, here Socialist humanism, the civilising mission of Soviet internationalism and the cultural front against anti-fascism reappear in the guise of and in the name of classical music.

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