

My Friend Ivan Lapshin

ALEKSEI GERMAN

1985

The narrator tells us, 'Sometimes when I'm reading or writing, I hear the footsteps of a small child...my own.' The first shot of the film is in colour, of the small white statue of a woman, resting on a bookshelf filled with records. There is a black and white photograph on the wall, the handheld camera lingers on it briefly, mimicking the nature of human vision. There is a disconnect here between narration and scope, what German has chosen to show the viewer is the material and tangible facts of life; this is in contrast to the uneasy and almost unintentional-seeming act of memory undertaken by the narrator. We pass a small boy seeing through the narrator's eyes, 'That's my grandson,' he tells us, 'A good boy.' It sounds almost as though it is an afterthought. Then all of a sudden, as viewers, we are transported back to an, as of yet, unnamed narrator's black and white past.

Aleksei German, as a director, in his impressive oeuvre, is often compelled by the past. His films have tackled the dark subjects of war and the oppressive years of Stalinism post war. Undoubtedly, *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (1985) is his most personal film: an exploration on memory, consciousness and the deep draw of the unresolved past. Set in the cramped but loving environment of a 1930s communal apartment, German draws from the short stories of his own father, Yuri German, to re-invoke that time. German's successful recreation of the aesthetics of the time has prompted applause from many critics. Allegedly, the wonderful array of characters proliferating their cramped world are based on people Yuri German knew in real life. So, no doubt, *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (1985) is filled with elements that have come to inform the director's own life and upbringing.

For a film that runs at just over 90mins, the polyphonic strands of narrative played with by German are masterful. The titular Ivan Lapshin, unsurprisingly, acts as their common denominator. Through him we experience his struggle with unrequited love, his attempts to catch the notorious Solovev and his gang and his relationship with the other residents of the communal apartment. There is a peculiar romance in the way that Lapshin is portrayed, through the vestiges of time the narrator retains a rose tinted and romantic perspective on the police detective; in spite of Lapshin's

brutal decision to murder Solovev after Solovev's surrender. This is not the only way German, who would go on to briefly use a child as an unreliable narrator in the infamous *Khrustalyov! My Car* (1998), seeks to actively distort the events of the film.

From a technical perspective, there is notably less use of montage to propel plot and sequence than most modern films. Montage, amongst many other things, situates two different shots as happening simultaneously or in quick succession of each other. German, instead uses long travelling shots, which evoke a sense of disorientation. Scenes are cut together at a fast pace, with little to establish them. As if we are explicitly privy to someone's memory, there is no way for the viewer to work out the timeline of these events. On top of this, there is a multitude of sounds that happen off screen, German himself said that this was intentional, he wanted to increase the 'documentary' qualities of the film. Famed for his Kubrick-esque perfectionism and fixation with detail; German in an interview stated that he even went as far as to personally choose extras from photographs gathered by the crew, and on set everyone would be dressed in period clothing, down to their underwear. This even went for extras whose faces were invisible. Again, these technical devices exist at a strange tension with the nature of memory. Why has German gone to such technical lengths, both in terms of set design, camerawork and sound, in order to deliberately subvert this realism at every turn? It is an exceptionally fertile line of enquiry, and forms the basis of the film's power.

Another vital part of German's film is its cultural specificity, he himself joked that it is 'Weird to imagine people sitting in an American cinema watching my movie.' Whilst art can translate universally, one can see his point. The Soviet project is embedded into the dialogue of German's film: virtually every character portrayed happily believes in the project of socialism. This imbues the film with a sense of optimism which is at cross purposes with the impending Stalinist purges and world war which German himself has been so critical of. As with every moment in *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (1985), we are pulled into a strange game of trickery, German shows us his hand, and then tells us something else entirely.