

Khrustalyov, My Car!

Alexei German

1998

Alexei German's long career only saw him direct five solo features: *Trial on the Road* (1971), *Twenty Days without War* (1976), *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (1984), *Khrustalyov, My Car!* (1998), and *Hard to be a God* (2015). Hindered at first by official disapproval, and then simply by the fastidiousness of his own gruelling approach, each of his films is a minor miracle of sorts, a victory for creative intent. That being said, immersing oneself in the disorientating, cacophonous world of his first post-Soviet masterpiece does not exactly feel like a blessing – until one is safely out the other side.

German had already made his name with a series of reconstructions of Stalinist Russia in his first three films before the fall of the Soviet Union freed him to direct, finally, on his own terms. *Khrustalyov* is thus German's definitive reckoning with the world of his father, Socialist Realist author Yuri German; his exorcism of the still-lingering ghost of Stalin; as well as his middle finger salute to the sum total of the twentieth century's various social insanities. It is a film that could only have been made in post-Soviet Russia, but which depends for its effect on a lived-in sense of the preceding decades and the psychological toll they had inflicted. A significant number of high-profile films from the 1980s and 1990s are engaged in the same project of relitigating the lost idealism of the Stalinist childhood: *My Friend Ivan Lapshin*, *Repentance* (Tengiz Abuladze, 1984), *Burnt by the Sun* (Nikita Mikhalkov, 1994), *The Thief* (Pavel Chukhrai, 1997). But none have German's hallucinatory clarity.

Trial on the Road and *Twenty Days* are set during the Second World War, *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* in the mid-thirties on the eve of the Great Terror. *Khrustalyov*, though, takes place in the days leading up to Stalin's death in 1953. German liked narratives set at historical turning points, and here he conjures up a society on the verge of total emotional collapse. The paranoia and openly ruthless ambition of the time is reflected in the film's oblique references to the so-called Doctors' Plot – an anti-Semitic purge of Soviet high

society premised on the absurd conspiracy that Jewish doctors were planning to assassinate Stalin. In one of German's many dark comic ironies, our protagonist, Klensky, is in fact released from prison in order to save the afflicted Great Leader. He fails.

German's sense of history is a complicated one; he directs with an uncanny sensitivity towards the ways in which memory and narrative intersect and mutate one another. He was famous for his incredibly strict approach to production design, insisting on period accuracy costumes and settings to the point of mania. But he would then shoot his meticulously arranged historical tableaux askew, in long, meandering takes that drift in and out the supposed "action". German cast against type, switched primary and secondary characters around mid-narrative, and unsettled the distinction between foreground and background, main action and subplot – what Anton Dolin calls his "baffling egalitarianism". Baffling is indeed the word, and viewers may struggle at first to discern what we would usually call the "plot" in his films, *Khrustalyov* in particular. But that is very much the point of his historical rabbit holes. As the director himself said, "I always liked making the background. [State censors] even wrote about me... that I present the background as if it were the real cinema. But that background is indeed the most important; it is life itself."

The film ends with Klensky disappearing into the distance, carried away from the viewer by a train to nowhere-in-particular, totally and utterly denuded of his belief in even the pretense of Soviet idealism. All of German's films are about the forestalling of the future, and *Khrustalyov* is his most devastating. Even the death of Stalin cannot redeem matters. "That lost Soviet future is recaptured by German as an homage en arrière to the verdancy, ignorance, and naivete of the fathers," writes the scholar Nancy Condee, "[a naivete which is] no longer available to German's contemporary audience, for whom a grasp of the past is the only compensation."