

# The Thief

PAVEL CHUKHRAI

1997

One of a handful of Russian films from the mid-'90s to make a real impact in the Anglophone world – it was nominated for Oscars and Golden Globes – Pavel Chukhrai's *The Thief* explores with both sensitivity and grit questions of lineage and inheritance, fatherhood and fidelity. Set in 1952, in a Soviet Union devastated by the war and on the verge of losing its patriarch in Stalin, *The Thief* maps out the complex dynamics of resentment, guilt, and attraction that arise when professional criminal Tolyan insinuates himself into the family of war widow Katya and her 6-year-old son, Sanya.

For fans of classic Soviet cinema, these thematic concerns are no doubt deepened by the extra-filmic associations that are inevitably drawn with Pavel's own father, Grigory. Chukhrai Sr was one of the directors most closely associated with the Thaw in Soviet film; his 1959 drama *Ballad of a Soldier* is one of the most beloved of all time and was instrumental in establishing new models of Soviet heroism onscreen in the post-Stalin era. Following a young soldier over the course of a few days' leave from the front, *Ballad* celebrates the purity and sincerity of Soviet youth rather than extolling the militaristic virtues of the Stalin era. It transfigures the sacrifices of the war – we learn in the opening scene that our protagonist will not survive – into something altogether wholesome.

It is hard not to watch Chukhrai Jr's work and to see the parallels, the echoes, and the ironic inversions that he draws out in relation to his father's work. Pavel suggests that the optimism of *Ballad of a Soldier* is misplaced, choosing to dwell in the Hobbesian muck of post-war society, an unforgiving arena that demands survival instincts above all else. Both films feature long train journeys, but where Grigory's hero serendipitously

meets his sweetheart while riding the rails, it is in third class where Katya and Sanya are first intruded upon by the duplicitous Tolyan.

Perhaps most tellingly, both films feature fatherless families. Absent, surrogate, or otherwise flawed fathers recurred throughout Russian film of the '80s and '90s, and Chukhrai's film is one of a number that focus in particular on Stalinist father-son relationships: *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (1984) and *Khrustalyov, My Car!* (1998) by Alexei German, *Repentance* (1984) by Tengiz Abuladze, *Burnt by the Sun* (1994) by Nikita Mikhalkov. The disappearance of the paternalistic Soviet state, whether celebrated or mourned, left a psychic gap that filmmakers addressed again and again, often through a relitigation of the Stalinist cult of personality. Tolyan's tattoo of Stalin becomes a doubly symbolic icon, representative of a paternal pressure that is experienced by Sanya as both intrusion and also comfort. Tolyan may be a crook, but he is present; Sanya's real father is a ghost, an ideal, a dead hero who is unable to lead his son into the promised land of peacetime.

Burdened with two equally unsustainable models of fatherhood, the only possible outcome for young Sanya is disillusionment. In recreating the years of his own youth – like Sanya, he was born in 1946 – Chukhrai works through the paradoxes of post-Soviet masculinity while avoiding the trap of sentimentality. Whether his film can be considered a rebuke to his own father's most famous work or not, *The Thief* demonstrates that the lessons learned by the post-war Soviet generations were put to good use when it came time for them to forge their own cinematic legacy.