

The influence, inspiration and interplay of Simon Robert's *Polyarnye Nochi* and Russian cinema

by Alexandra Lennox

'The day was neither bright nor gloomy but a kind of bluey-grey tint such as found only upon the uniforms of garrison soldiers.' (Gogol)

Simon Roberts' work in its silver blue tones captures the raw, unusual beauty of Russia's Arctic periphery. *Polyarnye Nochi*, a series of photographs which follow on from Roberts' critically acclaimed book *Motherland* (Chris Boot Ltd, 2007), portrays the Russia at its most severe. The bleak and barren landscapes speak of a loss, abandonment and a melancholy that are realities of life in a land 'famous for its misfortunes, famous for the misery of its numberless humble lives.'¹

Using the perpetual dusk of Russia's far North, Roberts encapsulates the natural light that was available for only a few hours each day during *Polyarnye Nochi* (Polar Nights), the period from December until mid-January when the sun remains below the horizon. This ethereal light has been depicted by many artists from the master realists of the nineteenth century, to the latest art house film directors: Zviagentsev, Khlebnikov & Popogrebsky and Kravchuk. Its haunting blueness has inspired artists to convey the bitter cold of winter and the hardship it brings for the people that inhabit this extreme climate.

Like *Motherland* before it, *Polyarnye Nochi* is a testament to modern Russian life and can almost be viewed as a 'road movie'. It is a photo narrative, in the tradition of social documentary; and as such can assume a similar description to that of 'cinema' itself - the projection of still images through time. Thus Roberts' work blurs the line between photography and film. He captures the sound track to this photo-narrative, bringing his images to life. The viewer can almost hear shouts from the military base, sounds of engines (whether truck or plane) and the eerie clanging of metal on metal of an abandoned ship creaking in the frozen, wasteland waters of the Arctic. Roberts' cinematographic style is arguably his visual lingua franca. Yet the influence of film makes up one of the many layers of Roberts' work; other influences include: cultural geography, sociology, anthropology, exploration of identity, history and Russian landscape art of the nineteenth century. These artists exposed, in muted tones of oil and pastel, the grey sky, the vast open planes and forests of their Motherland. These later became inspiration for film directors and photographers alike in their handling of film color and composition.

'Mother Russia,' an age-old theme, in Russian visual art, pervades not only *Polyarnye Nochi* but Roberts work, as a whole. This image has been drawn upon countless times in classic and contemporary Russia cinema. It has been used by Tarkovsky in 'Nostalgia' and 'Andrei Rublev,' by Mikhaïkov in 'Barber of Siberia,' Sokurov in 'Mother and Son' and more recently by Zviagintsev in 'The Return'. 'Mother Russia,' presented by director, takes on many forms. At times, she is lush and fertile, at others raw and barren.

Roberts encapsulates Russia's brutal beauty and her desolate terrain on his medium format camera. His images bring to mind the snow covered planes of 'Andrei Rublev.' Both

¹ V. Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Harcourt, New York, 1981, p. 2.

photographer and director merge with ‘conjurer, forger and creator’² of Russia’s image, conveying the organic essence of a land, pervaded by spirit. Boundaries are blurred whether photo or film, dream or reality. In *Polyarnye Nochi*, Roberts alludes to the half light between the reality of subject and the surreal quality of image. Often he balances the dream-like property of subject matter with the use of a long exposure to render as much detail in the photograph as possible.

In *Polyarnye Nochi* Roberts comments on the destructive force of humanity. A railway station where nuclear waste is transported, abandoned warships and steel works pumping production are all subjects that come under the scrutiny of his lens. Tarkovsky in ‘The Mirror’ draws on war and industry to depict humanity’s destructive forces. Both portray the conscious destruction of Mother Nature, Mother Russia. Yet there is a second, quieter, more persistent voice, which pervades Roberts’ work, the origin of which can be traced back to the nineteenth century in Savrasov’s depictions of raw, open terrain and the poetry of Shishkin’s wild nature; this voice is filled with the beauty of Russia- ‘picturesque in her wildness.’³

Many artists have recorded the fleeting nature of human existence, in the face of Nature’s might and permanence. This has been a common thread through the work of Shukshin, Sokurov and Zviagintsev. They depict the impermanence of life in the vastness of a natural setting. Roberts’ photographs of abandoned vehicles consumed by snow suggest that we are all but passing through. A sense of the insignificance of human existence in relation to the enormity of nature is evoked at times by Roberts’ composition. Vast cities like Murmansk are framed, in context of endless terrain.

Like Konchalovsky and Tarkovsky, Roberts uses wide angled shots to convey the immensity and timelessness of the Russian land. The figures in Robert’s photographs make a similar point. Anonymous and antlike, they are dwarfed by their surroundings, silhouetted in the bleak, melancholic beauty of their environment. These hunched forms seem to embody a resilience and an acceptance. In history, the Russian people personify an endurance that enables them to survive great privation and maintain an eternal hope and optimism despite the hard reality of daily life. This strength of the human spirit is traditionally regarded by them as being grounded in nature and spirituality.

Nature is the link between the human and the godly. In ‘Mother and Son’, Sokurov camouflages his actors into the composition of each frame, in woods or garden, dusty path or plane. Roberts’ images of abandoned vehicles suggest a returning to nature, a regeneration facilitated by an organic consumption into the bowels of the earth. Tarkovsky’s ‘Andrei Rublev’ witnesses a holy bell being dug from the earth, alluding to the divine spirit of the Rodina (Motherland). For Russians, to return to nature is to return to ones roots, ones Motherland and ones soul. *Polyarnye Nochi* captures this unearthly quality of spirit and a sense of the Russian soul that is all pervasive in this harsh land.

What is this elusive contradictory sense of Russianness that artists and directors, past and present, have captured so beautifully, so concisely, that seems to escape words? It has been said that Russia, for the foreigner and the native, cannot be understood by reason alone. Soul is required to attempt to comprehend the innate dichotomy of a people and land that lie under the weight of a glorious and tragic history and a legacy of suffering.

² V. Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Harcourt, New York, 1981, p. 4.

³ V. Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Harcourt, New York, 1981, p. 3.