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BEYOND THE DEATH DRIVE: *SHADOWS OF FORGOTTEN ANCESTORS* BY  
MYKHAILO KOTSIUBYNSKY AND SERGEY PARAJANOV

*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors, the novel and the film demonstrate, albeit with different accents, the ambivalence of the past, which creates continuity of subject's memory, but also takes away his or her life, holds it back and haunts it with bloody specters. This grip of death, theorized by Sigmund Freud as a death drive inherent to life, is emphasized in the film: from his early childhood Ivan, the main character, finds himself in the tenacious embrace of death from which he cannot break away during all his life until at the end when he finds in it the higher joy of merging with loved one – in nothingness. But in the novel, and more so in the film, death drive is sublimated and released in the beyond of aesthetic.*

Key words: death drive, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, Sergey Parajanov, Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky, Sigmund Freud.

Sigmund Freud started talking about the death drive (Todestrieb) after the First World War, the bloody horrors of which were reflected in the social unconscious.

Emergence of the means of mass destruction revealed the dark side of the dialectic of enlightenment, laying bare the void of beyond the pleasure principle and its correlative, the principle of reality. From the first dualism to the second Freud ascends from morality to mythology extending the scale of the scene to the epic magnitude. The grand cosmic forces – Life and Death – come to replace petit bourgeois passions surrounding sexual taboos.

In his groundbreaking work *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1920) Freud relates the death drive to the general aspiration of the matter to return to its previous inorganic state, encapsulating his hypothesis in a poetic form disguised as a logical conclusion:

“If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons — becomes *inorganic* once again — then we shall be compelled to say that '*the aim of all life is death*' and, looking backwards, that '*inanimate things existed before living ones*'” [4, p. 34]. The death drive is rarely encountered in everyday life in its pure form; – it is usually mediated through the rationalizations and transformed under the pressure of censorship; this is why it remains a questionable concept even in psychoanalysis despite all too present aggressivity in human society and the fact of inevitability of the death itself. It is on the other scene of the aesthetic where we can discern its contours more palpably. Here, on the other hand, it seems to evade, due to the alchemy of sublimation, the raw compulsion of the repetition, of return to the previous thus opening the space beyond the death drive. The novel by Ukrainian writer Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1911) and its cinematic rendering of the same title (1965) by Sergey Parajanov provide a good opportunity to dwell upon this terrain.

*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestor* sweep from the mountains, immersed in a morbid beauty: both Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky and Sergey Parajanov are two travelers mortally in love with the Carpathians, with Hutsulshchyna and its culture, in which the life and death, the present and past are indissolubly intertwined. There is something majestic in the title, something which captures the imagination and leads it astray.

Kotsiubynsky has gone over many variants for his Carpathians novel: “In Green Mountains, Shadows of Past, The Voice of Past, Echo on Past, Breaths of the Ages, Eternal Voices, Heritage of Ages, Gift of Forgotten Ancestors, Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors, Voice of Forgotten Ancestors, In the Wake of Ancestors, Power of Forgotten Ancestors, Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors” [10, p. 354]. *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* are repeated twice in this list, the second time at the very end, as a final variant. Shadows won over voice, echo, breath, heritage, gift, wake, and power. This variant is the darkest of all which occurred to Kotsiubynsky, the most ambivalent out of them; it encompasses the tension between the present and the past, which is so characteristic to Freudian understanding of the death drive.

The relation to the past in *Shadows*, the novel and the film, is not univalent. Parajanov's film is usually interpreted in the context of memory politics of post-Stalinism: the return of the inhibited, the rehabilitation of the repressed, the renewal of the ties between epochs and generations. The loss of memory, oblivion is identified in this paradigm with the mental mutilation, traumatic rupture of consciousness. Ivan is praised for not being able to forget his dead love and carry on with his life. Such a context enables Leonid Alekseychuk to say about Parajanov: "His heroic ancestors were neither shadows nor forgotten." [1, p. 25] But is that really the point of the title? Isn't it pointing, on the contrary, to the desire to break with the past and to the inability to totally accomplish this? The past continues to pursue the present in an eternal return of the same, an eternal *Wiederholungszwang*. This is a different paradigm in which forgetting indicates a victory of the living over the dead. It appears almost in a Nietzschean manner as liberation from the lethal embraces of the past, as an ability to forget and endure with life: "But his father's death made less of an impression on Ivan than the friendship with the little girl..." [9, p. 13] - the excerpt from Kotsubynsky, which Parajanov transposes in the film. There seems to be a contradiction between these two paradigms, but if we take a closer look it becomes clear that there is a dialectical connection between the two polarities of memory and forgetting, and that the key to the relation between the two are the work of mourning, and its sister, the laziness of melancholy.

But do we have enough strength for such work? On the other side of the Iron Curtain in 1965 an American anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer publishes a survey of the rituals of mourning in contemporary Western society and comes to the conclusion about their almost total demise particularly in regard to public space. According to the anthropologist this decline began after the First World War when, with the invention of the means of mass destruction of unprecedented scale, dead bodies had become simply unaccountable, not to mention a due ritual which requires considerable work [6]. This tendency just accelerated with the further progress and the arrival of the

Second World War. How did these bloody events reflect in cultural memory and social unconscious from which poets derive their ideas? There is a black wall of Bloodlands between Kotsiubynsky's novel and Parajanov's film. We are setting out in search of its shadows.

Death drive sublimated into drive of staging of death. Or, to be more precise, we have to use plural of death, because there is a multiplication of death in the film where it marks the beginning, the middle and the end of the story. This differs from the novel, which is structured around main character's three ascents into the mountains. The grip of death is established as leitmotiv from the very outset of the film, with the death of an elder brother of the main character in the prologue. The placement of this episode before the title of the film endows it with the metatextual function. There are three more deaths in the film, that of main character's father at the beginning, his beloved at the middle and his own at the end. Each death is pictured differently and each forms an energetic center of the film.

The first encounter with the grip of death reveals the pure horror of the raw death drive. What is going on in the metatextual scene of death in prologue, that of the elder brother Oleksa, is so overwhelming for little Ivanko that the only action he is capable of is a flight. The incommensurability, absurdity of the situation is captured in the dialogue, which, if taken separately from the images, consists of unrelated set of phrases:

- Olekso, Olekso, do you hear me, brother, come to have a meal!
- Run away, Ivane, run away!
- Olekso, let me go, brother, let me go, let me go, let me go!

And while we are catching our breath from the cinematic attraction - filming of Oleksa's death is made from the top of the pine tree, which falls over him - we become witnesses to the tragedy of exchanges of these invitations, orders, requests, as an exchange of the fates, which unites forever the younger with the elder brother, while the latter is setting himself instead of the former under the guillotine of the pine

tree.

Parajanov shoots the death of Ivan's father at the beginning of the film in the same manner as he later would shoot the clash of Ivan with the sorcerer, during which - at least this is what most of the viewers believe - Ivan is mortally wounded. This produces an interesting mnemonic shift in which the two scenes get often confused. The death of Ivan's father is rendered as his antemortem vision: his mental screen is flooded with the blood, the streams of which transform into the famous mesmeric red horses in a slowed-down movement. They are shot from a low angle as if from the point of view of a mortally wounded rider, who is cut up with death's scythe and looks from the ground to the sky with a fading gaze. In the recollection of many viewers this shot is displaced toward the end of the film, to the scene of Ivan's clash with the sorcerer. This mnemonic shift is also present in the published texts about the film [5, p.32; 3, p. 213; 8, p. 234]. It is open for the discussion whether this shift in memory was intended by filmmakers or is it a mere side effect of the transformation of the point of view from the novel to the film. In the novel the scene of Ivan's father is seen through the eyes of little Ivan whose field of vision is blocked and reality is transformed into a distant chaotic mash. The death remains on the blurred background. By the way of contrast, in the film the point of view is not stable and is constantly shifting between the characters: the camera enacts a virtuoso dance, passionate but also sophisticated in its expressive power. This fluidity of vision comes to stillness only in the moment of death. This moment is captured from the diametrically opposite point of view comparing to the first death in the prologue of the film, as a subjective vision of the dying father. In the film opposite to the novel death is foregrounded to the point of impossible during the fight of the feuding families.

From Kotsiubynsky to Parajanov a woman loses her own voice and independent existence, but this pertains only to life. There is an opposite direction regarding the death – here, by the way of contrast, the feminine becomes more pronounced from

the novel to the film. Marichka's death in the novel is described very briefly without an emotional appeal, as a raw statement of the toll death takes on a human being. While Ivan's death depicted in Kotsiubynsky's novel from the first person, with keen lyricism, Marichka's death is given from the third person's perspective, almost in telegraphic style: "When she had been fording the Cheremosh, the water had taken her away. A flood had sprung up unexpectedly, and savage waves knocked Marichka off her feet, swept her over a waterfall, and then carried her off between the rocks below. People watched the waves toss her about and heard her screams and entreaties but could not save her." [9, p.27]. This description cannot help but remind albeit remotely the death of the other famous drowned maiden, that of Ophelia. In the dispositive of Kotsiubynsky's scene the gaze is entrusted to impersonal "people," who appear to be a kind of collective eye, which cannot contravene to the execution of fate, but can only be a witness to it. There is something horribly cruel and relentless in this distancing from public death, death as a pure spectacle.

Ivan's own death in Kotsiubynsky is, on the contrary, not only private but also slow, stretched in time, prolonged, and filled with reflections and introspections, as a lived, comprehended, and cherished experience of vanishing. Kotsiubynsky time and again describes the process of Ivan's dying, his gradual alienation from the life, his giving in to the death drive, his becoming inanimate: "Ivan was languishing. He himself was amazed at the change. What happened to him? His strength was deserting him. His eyes were sunken and watery. Life was losing its relish... His skin darkened and stuck to his bones. His eyes sank even deeper. Fever, irritation, and restlessness gnawed him. He even lost his appetite for food... Weakness and indifference flooded his body again. Whatever for? It must have been fated this way." [9, p. 34 - 35].

But when exactly does this living death begin? We can move it further and further back, in the depth of the past: inanimate was before animate. The dead never cease trying to take possession of the living, to seize their force, to turn it into the fossilized state of inorganic. Ivan never managed to free himself totally from the embrace of

death, in which he finally falls irrevocably. But even the very final moment of death lasts in the novel as if in slowed-down motion: “I’m here! Ivan shouted and then suddenly sensed that the abyss was pulling him down. Seizing him by neck, it bent him backward. He flailed his arms about, tried to grasp rocks with his legs, and felt that he was flying headlong, his body filled with the strange cold emptiness. The heavy black mountain spread its wings in an instant and took a flight like a bird. A sharp, deathly curiosity burned his brain: what would his head strike? He heard a bone snap and felt an unbearably sharp pain wrack his body; then everything melted down in the red fire that consumed his life.” [9, p.40]

Exactly at this point Parajanov reverses the roles - Marichka’s death in his rendering rather reminds Ivan’s death from the novel. Even “the rock, torn away by abyss” (this particular detail, rhetorical personification so emblematic to Kotsiubynsky’s animistic writing in *Shadows* is missing in Marco Carynnyk’s translation) is repeated in the film - and enlarged in a close up. The duration of Marichka's death in the film is slowed down comparing to the novel. Before falling into the river from the high rock ledge Marichka freezes in the state of weightlessness in order to exchange her last gaze with the treacherous star which led her astray. Marichka’s silhouette pasted into the steep wall of the rocky precipice lends the image with archaic abstraction - she starts resembling an ancient Egyptian figure. The Renaissance perspective imbedded in a cinematic apparatus is neutralized in this frame, which becomes characteristic to the whole Prajanov’s mature oeuvre, and two-dimensional space is created, marking the return to the archaic not as a regress, but as an aesthetic elaboration.

We do not know from the novel what preceded Marichka’s death, while in the film, on the contrary, her death is lengthened out into a frenzied nocturnal episode, in which Marichka feverishly forces her way through the mountain thicket before finding herself on the narrow path and making the fatal step which leads her in abyss. Ex facte, Ivan is absent from the scene of her death and doesn’t have any relation to it. He is far away in the mountain pasture ground when “the water takes her away,” even

if he feels the breath of the disaster from a distance, the call of death drive. It is possible, however, to talk, at least in regard of the film, of his indirect presence not only due to the effect of parallel editing, which cuts the action between separated lovers, but also thanks to the mediation of the star at which two lovers agreed to look before the parting and which with its cold blue shine leads Marichka to death. This ambivalent aspect in the relations of lovers is absent from Kotsiubynsky's novel.

The death drive in its pure state is rendered through Ivan's work of mourning which in its inexhaustibility borders with the laziness of melancholia. This work is depicted by Parajanov in the black and white episode "Loneliness" which arises from a literary ellipsis: "For six years there was no news of Ivan. He appeared unexpectedly on the seventh." [9, p. 27] "The work of mourning" and "the mourning of work" as Jacques Derrida liked to play with words. In the "Loneliness" episode solitary Ivan is shown not only in alienation, while undergoing mourning, but also in work, or rather in the breaks from a work, heavy and exhausting physical labor, which symbolizes a magnitude of work as such, its mournfulness, and, first of all, a mournfulness of mourning which Derrida exemplified as work *par excellence* [2, p.167].

But let us add that manual labor, which is much more present in *Shadows* compared to ordinary Soviet production dramas, this physical work is not always represented as alienated. The work in *Shadows* can also be creative, captivating, and paired with the joy of accomplishment. The scene in which the shepherd forms a head of cheese symbolizes in Kotsiubynsky the magic of creative action, when something emerges out of nothing [9, p. 22]; Parajanov adds here visual materiality transforming the screen into an ethnographic still life, the series of (almost) static picturesque compositions rendered in close up. A work can be vertiginously beautiful as in the episode where the camera shoots from the position of the scythe with which Ivan mows down the grass. But the very same scythe, an instrument of the cultivation of land, of growing life, is also an attribute of death. Parajanov doesn't miss the chance to emphasize this ambivalence and to show that Ivan continues to wander between the



two worlds, that of the live and that of the dead. He maintains communion with the dead to live with them.

Commentators have already pointed out that the beginning and the end of Parajanov's *Shadows* are linked with the clatter of an invisible axe [7, p.185], which, being the acoustic equivalent of the grip of death, reoccurs during the course of the film to announce the next return of the death. One may go further and discern, aside the sonic link between the beginning and the end of the film, a visual one, since the prologue repeats the epilogue in symmetrical reverse. In both a dead body uncannily behaves as if alive being observed by little boy(s). The commentators differed in opinions regarding the mood, hopeful or doomed, of the last shot of the film, which Parajanov in his storyboard called "Eight Ivanchyks": the little boys, his own son Suren among them, look through the window, presumably at Ivan's dead body. Those, who read hope into this image, interpret it as a promise of a new life, while the others do not see anything promising in this: a new life will be a repetition of the same fate. It is interesting to note that there is another reiteration involved here: Marichka's ghost also appears in the same manner from the beyond of the window frame fragmented by it in a series of fixed compositions. The children at the end of the film, however, are neither fragmented, nor static. There is a lively process of experiencing the moment in which they submerge behind the apparent motionlessness.

Aren't those "eight Inanchtyks" the answer for the question, which in the second half of the film Ivan addresses to his wife Palahna: "Where are my children?" In fact he talks to himself rather than to her. The image of the boys looking at him after his death is the answer which remains unanswered. Pure life without a history, present without memory, unmediated presence of da-Sein are unattainable. The existence here and now in all its animalistic simplicity recedes to the background before the recollections of the losses, before the traumatic memory of the past, before "the history which is impossible to read without bromide."

On Christmas Eve Ivan invokes the spirits and talks to the animals. Dead Marichka appears in the window to remind about herself, to attract him. Ivan dies not from the wound of the rival, and even not from his magic. Ivan dies from “*internal* reasons” - the inner sorrow for lost love. The ghost of the other-worldly Marichka is closer to him than the body of live Palahna: “His consciousness was splitting. He sensed Marichka beside him and yet knew Marichka was gone, that someone else was leading him into the unknown, to the desolate mountain crests, in order to destroy him. Yet he felt good. He followed her laughter and girlish twittering, light, happy, and unafraid the way he once had been.” [9, p.37]. This is where Freud's sweeping generalization “the aim of life is death” acquires its concrete aesthetic reality and by the very process of figuration transcends its compulsive brutality.

Grappling embraces of death from which Ivan couldn't tear himself away during his life opened up and he took them as long awaited reunification with his beloved, which was accomplished in nonexistence - Romeo, who stayed in this world for too long, married Orpheus.

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