



The Impression of Reality and the Awareness of the Medium in Alexander Sokurov’s Family Trilogy

Malgorzata Bugaj

University of Edinburgh

E-mail: malgorzata.bugaj@ed.ac.uk

Abstract. Drawing on Brigitte Peucker’s question – “in cinematic experience, what promotes the impression of reality, and when does medium awareness come into play?” – I examine how Sokurov’s family trilogy constitutes a certain oscillation between the immediate and the constructed. The films under discussion connect with the sensual, physical-biological and socio-political reality, while, simultaneously, they emphasize the artificial and stylised. *Mother and Son* employs distancing painterly images which de-emphasise the figures of the characters while it finishes with the extreme close-up exploring the skin as a raw material used to construct image with its varied colours and textures. *Father and Son*, on the other hand, enters the dialogue with medicine; through the employment of haptic images and medical appropriations, the film focuses on the sensual along with the biological dimension of the body. Set within a clear socio-political context, *Alexandra* explores the senses which are not readily available in cinema, that is touch and smell, and thus emphasises the trace of the physical presence on screen. This paper demonstrates how Sokurov’s family trilogy situates itself on the intersection of the Bolter and Grusin’s “desire for immediacy” with the mediated and remediated.

Keywords: Alexander Sokurov’s family trilogy, intermediality, painterly images, haptic and sensual cinema.

Alexander Sokurov’s *Mother and Son* (1997), *Father and Son* (2003) and *Alexandra* (2007) are interlinked narratively and stylistically. Their stories are simple and sparse: in the first, a mother dies, in the second, a father and son explore their emotional bond knowing that the latter will soon leave, while in the last, a grandmother visits her grandson, most probably for the last time. As allegories of idealised familial relations, these films give a physical form to emotions. Additionally, they display formal homogeneity through their

meditative pace along with minimalist dialogues and narrative. Most importantly for this argument, Sokurov's family trilogy is a certain oscillation between the material and abstract, or immediate and mediated.

Sokurov's family trilogy constitutes an intensified investigation of the trace of material presence on screen. The films under discussion heighten the cinematic illusion of reality by connecting with the sensual, the physical-biological and the socio-political in a variety of ways. Firstly, haptic images – which “search the image for a trace of the originary, physical event” (Marks 2002, xi) – emphasise the multi-sensory experience of the world and accentuate bodily sensations. Secondly, references to the discourse of medicine (*Father and Son*) introduce scientific analysis of the physicality of the body. Thirdly, these films insistently examine presented worlds from different angles and proximities, frequently coming intimately close to the subject. These strategies work together to evoke Bolter and Grusin's “logic of immediacy” (1999, 5), Peucker's “material image” (2007, 8) or de Luca's “sensory realism” (2014, 1).

Simultaneously, however, *Mother and Son*, *Father and Son* and *Alexandra* revel in their nature as mediated and remediating. This is pointed to by Beumers and Condee who, considering Sokurov's oeuvre, remark: “his work is often a non-narrative visual experiment, somewhere between photography and painting, rather than film in the traditional sense of the term. Basically, we would suggest, Sokurov challenges that cinema conceived as a method either to capture or narrate reality” (2011, 1). The presence of the medium is underscored in the family trilogy by conspicuous distortions and manipulations of the image as well as references to the domain of painting and medical images. Such remediations bear similarities to Bolter and Grusin's examples of Dutch painters incorporating maps in their works or literary texts viewed online (1999, 45). Through repurposing other arts, Sokurov's family trilogy enters the dialogue with older media and makes us aware of the presence of the new medium: film.

The present analysis is an attempt to provide an answer to Brigitte Peucker's question: “in cinematic experience, what promotes the impression of reality, and when does medium awareness come into play?” (2007, 1). In other words, by examining all three films constituting the family trilogy, this paper demonstrates how *Mother and Son*, *Father and Son* and *Alexandra* situate themselves on the intersection of the “desire for immediacy” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 23) with the mediated and artificial.

Mother and Son

Mother and Son, the film opening Sokurov's family trilogy, is the poetic tale of a son (Alekssei Ananishnov) who tends to his dying mother (Gudrun Geyer). The story takes place within a single day during which they begin a journey through an ethereal landscape. [Fig. 1.] The plot of the film is simple, the number of characters is limited to the titular pair. Time, space and the bond between them hold symbolic meaning and constitute an exploration of ideal family relations; this is a representation of a myth, a certain ideal world. Most shots in *Mother and Son* are broad painterly panoramas of landscapes, the figures of characters lost in overwhelming nature. Less frequently, the camera frames them in medium shots. In contrast, the film finishes with prolonged extreme close-ups of the characters' skin, carefully drawing attention to the recognisable physical features of the human body. The bodily surface of the aged mother is juxtaposed with that of her young son as Sokurov creates skinscapes constructed of layers of human skin.

While Sokurov's oeuvre has been considered exemplary of slow cinema (Jaffe 2014, de Luca and Barradas Jorge 2016, Lim 2014, Flanagan 2010), *Mother and Son* is its most pronounced representative. The film operates within what Hänsen calls the "aesthetics of still images" (2011, 44), with stillness created using long takes and long shots, minimal movement both of the camera and within the frame, repeated silence and depictions of landscapes fixed on screen. Other traits particular to slow cinema include "the fictive characters who appear in them sidestep the frenzy and modernity" (Jaffe 2014, 6) and "the minimal narrative structure" (Flanagan 2008): *Mother and Son* follows characters living on the fringes of civilization through their walks, punctuated by frequent rests and reminiscences. The slower pace renders subjective time palpable, which makes the film an exploration of experience, another characteristic of slow cinema (de Luca and Barradas Jorge 2016, 14). Here, it is a liminal bodily experience – the death of one of the characters.

Correspondingly, according to Botz-Bornstein, Sokurov's cinema can be discussed in a way akin to traditional oil paintings: the landscapes chosen by the Russian director, the organisation of figures, the particular focus on texture and the use of colour make his films look "more painterly than typically 'cinematic'" (2007, 32). These tendencies are particularly prominent in *Mother and Son*, with scenes "condensed to a few shots like cinematic paintings" (Hänsen 2011, 50). Szaniawski, in turn, finds parallels in the works of classical painters, primary Caspar David Friedrich, whose influence is recognizable in the film (2014, 128).

Friedrich's atmosphere of stillness, limited range of colours, nostalgic tone and focus on landscape rather than the human figure are echoed throughout the film.

Mother and Son frequently deploys an array of experimental techniques, such as shooting through painted glass, or using mirrors and anamorphic lenses. In the film – “stylised and aesthetically controlled to the extreme” (Szaniawski 2014, 127) – distortions of the image are introduced from the very first shot where we see the stretched silhouettes of the protagonists. The film explores skewed perspectives (for example, in a scene when the son walks down the path), and unreal colours in landscape (e.g. in the depiction of the wind moving crops); it also emphasises a flatness of composition as well as focus on textures. Distorted on screen, nature in the film is distancing and alienating “as a result of which the audience's emotional engagement may be retarded, if not arrested” (Jaffe 2014, 60).

If, as Bolter and Grusin claim “the goal of remediation is to refashion or rehabilitate other media” (1999, 56), *Mother and Son* rehabilitates tenets ordinarily associated with painting. Long takes coupled with particularly strong stylization in the film do not emphasise reality, but, rather, attempt to recreate an engagement with the image which is similar to that experienced with a painting. This slow, deliberate gaze encourages the viewer to ponder and admire the surface of the image. In this way, the film translates the modality of the painting into the aesthetics of the moving image. This confirms Szaniawski's remark that “with *Mother and Son*, the medium procuring the commentary (film) comes several steps closer to the medium commented upon (painting)” (2014, 128). By highlighting the presence of the new medium (film) and entering into a dialogue with the older medium (painting), *Mother and Son* draws attention to the self-reflexive potential of cinema.

Painterly references in *Mother and Son* are also emphasised through the film's reliance upon long takes and long shots to place its subjects within a wider context. Here, the scenery plays the lead role; the silhouettes of the characters are often lost in the landscape. The camera frequently abandons its focus on the human figure in order to explore the space that surrounds it. For example, in a scene when the mother and son discuss their memories, the camera assumes a more distanced position in order to focus on their surroundings leaving the characters' silhouettes relegated to a third of the screen. Correspondingly, in the sequence where the son carries his sick mother on a walk, the characters are presented as if they were travelling through a painting and can be distinguished from the background only through their movement. The rich texture of the surface, the limited colour palette, and reduced depth of the image resolve the

silhouette and background into a single plane. The landscape is in tune with the human form merged with its surroundings; the bodies of the characters appear as objects overwhelmed by nature.

A similar de-emphasis can be observed in the scenes depicting the mother against a backdrop of conspicuous surfaces. In these, she is presented in medium shots or close-ups focusing on her face. After the son sits her on the bench beneath the tree, their bodies and clothes in varied hues of grey and brown appear to merge with the background. As the woman rests, her eyes half closed, the bark of the tree mirrors her dry, wrinkled face. Later, when she lies amongst the crops, her pale face echoes the colour of the field behind her. Towards the end of the film, we watch the pale, sickly face of the mother melt into her surrounding: a stonewashed wall and the white sheet the son covers her with. In most scenes, composition, light and colour function to valorise the setting, to purposefully avoid distinguishing or isolating the figure from the background.

In contrast to de-emphasising the figures of the characters, the three-minute-long final scene comes intimately close to their bodies and compels viewers to focus on the texture of their skin. The son mourns after the death of his mother: the close up of her wrinkled, still hand against a backdrop of rough fabric fills the screen. The man's face comes close to his mother's inert body, first only as a shadow. His hands, young and glistening, travel slowly over the uneven surface of the woman's pale fingers, examining the delicate folds of her skin. As he moves further, an image of his throat stretched over the hand of his mother is brought to prominence and the film focuses on the trembling muscles and tendons of the sobbing son. The heavy silence of the final fragment is punctuated by the son's cries while the steady camera corresponds to the stillness of this moment.

Shown in extreme close-ups, the surfaces of the mother's and son's bodies are de-familiarised through scale and the attention they receive. This artificial amplification accentuates recognisable properties of skin: its roughness and dryness along with pores, hair and wrinkles. Here, the film focuses on skin as a raw material constructing an image with varied colours and textures. The surfaces of the individual bodies – that of the young son and the elderly mother – comprise different parts of the image. Here, the film recalls the hilly scenery it presents in the preceding scene with the image constructed from varied typographical features; however, the geography of the landscape is replaced with that of the body. By presenting in close-ups the contrasting surfaces of the body, Sokurov creates a “surface-scape” (Quinlivan 2012, 99), or more precisely, a “skinscape” composed of different layers of skin.

This extreme close-up contrasts with the previous depictions of the characters as either lost in overwhelming landscape or merged with their surroundings. In the closing scene, the bodies become the centre of attention (with almost no other elements present) and bring to the fore their material nature through emphasising the texture and hues of the skin along with the breath of the protagonist. Strikingly, this turn to materiality occurs in the moment of mother's death: the on-screen space is transformed to reflect the emotional state of the character – it is the mother's dead body that overwhelms the son.

Hänsgen claims that “to Sokurov, the traditional medium of the fine arts serves as an inspirational reservoir of image motifs, shot compositions as well as perspective, light and colour arrangement” (2011, 50–51). *Mother and Son* is the most stylised part of the family trilogy: the presence of a new medium (film) and references to an older medium (painting) are heavily underscored throughout the film. However, the use of an extreme close-up in the final scene, concentrating on the texture and colour of skin, represents an emphasis on the materiality of the body. By coming intimately close to its characters, *Mother and Son* opens up a space in which it can engage with the trace of the physicality of the characters' bodies and produces what Peucker calls “the material image” (2007, 8).

Father and Son

Father and Son is a story of a war veteran father (Andrei Shchetinin) and his son, Alexei (Aleksei Neymyshev), a cadet in a military school. Shot between St Petersburg and Lisbon, the second part of the family trilogy is set in what Szaniawski aptly describes as an escapist, imaginary realm (2014, 207). Equally allegorical is the relationship between the parent and child: it is loving and tender, frequently translated into physical closeness (Alaniz 2010, 283). The harsh military ethos of their shared army background contrasts strikingly with the “deep, visceral desire to restore the idyllic fusion between children and parents” (Iampolski 2011, 109), or what Szaniawski calls the “Sokurovian utopia of proximity and intimacy” (2014, 193).

The opening scene of the film – the recollection of a dream – links us back to *Mother and Son* with images of similarly stretched silhouettes and the same desolate scenery in an identical colour palette. Moreover, the presence of the medium is here also clearly accentuated through a number of techniques: colour filters, soft focus, anamorphic lenses and chiaroscuro effects, as well as filming through transparent objects, such as glass or X-ray photos. Alaniz notes another

link between both parts of the family trilogy: their allusions to the paintings of the great masters. In the case of the earlier film, the reference point is mainly Caspar David Friedrich, in the case of the latter, Rembrandt (Alaniz 2010, 290). Crucially, however, *Father and Son* moves mostly between close ups and medium shots – the camera is brought much closer to its subject than in *Mother and Son*. In contrast to the first part of the family trilogy, *Father and Son* explores the bodies of its characters at varied proximities: from the investigation of their muscular figures as encountered in everyday experiences, through extreme close-ups registering the skin (and breath) in the first scene, to an exploration of the father’s bodily interior inscribed in the medical discourse. Such juxtaposition of different perspectives – as well as the intertwining of medical and haptic images – enhances an illusion of the materiality of the presented corporealities.

Father and Son pursues its preoccupation with the human corporeality by focusing on the sculpted bodies of two soldiers. The exploration of their physical figures begins with the opening scene where the main characters are presented half-naked and in each other’s embrace. Throughout the film, we watch the father weightlifting on rooftops, or the son stepping out of the shower. Alexei is observed during martial arts training, or exercising on a ladder. The father and son play football and talk about their physical fitness; their muscular physiques are accentuated by sleeveless tops and tight T-shirts. Such underscoring of muscularity which, in turn, implies strength and fitness, echoes Dyer’s analysis of male pin-ups in which he notes that muscles are generally associated with “hard bodies” (1992, 274); strikingly, in Sokurov’s film this hardness is nonetheless presented through soft focus.¹ The film’s frequent references to sport (e.g. football, wrestling and gymnastics) provide yet another illustration of Dyer’s note that “sport is the area of life that is the most common contemporary source of male imagery” (1992, 271). Additionally, the camera and lights highlight the physicality of characters who are usually submerged in saturated sun-lit yellows and oranges or subdued sepias which emphasise the skin, and frequently in close-ups underscoring texture and proximity. Repeatedly, subjects within the frame are partially obscured by a shadow thus creating a chiaroscuro effect which sculpts the bodies.² *Father and Son* can be viewed as a certain glorification of the male physique, but while the film offers spectacles of corporealities turned into

1 As Szaniawski notes, the film “is bathed in hues that connect it to at least one major landmark of queer cinema” (2014, 185–186).

2 This prompted Alaniz to point to the similarities of the opening scene to Rembrandt’s *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (2010, 290).

bodies-to-be-looked-at, it remains ambiguous as to whether these are displayed for the erotic gaze.³ [Fig. 2.]

This ambiguous eroticism is particularly strong in the opening scene. *Father and Son* begins with a few seconds of a blank screen before we begin to distinguish the anguished breath⁴ of two men, one trying to console the other. In the ensuing sequence, the soundtrack continues the close exploration of breath, while an image appears. We can see the distorted surface of the bodies presented in close-ups and in soft focus: the depiction of struggling hands and naked chests pressed to one another. The next cut is to an image of open lips – stretched on screen through an anamorphic lens – which recall a dark cave surrounded by a fold of skin; it is the space where the sound comes from. Finally, the image resolves into the clear figuration of two embracing men.

The beginning of *Father and Son* presents a certain incompleteness: first it is the lack of images, then distorted close-ups fragmenting the bodies. The sonic and, later, visual puzzle, “offering a vague sensation rather than specific information” (Elliott 2011, 171), refers us to Marks’s notion of haptic visuality and her statement that “rather than making the object fully available to view, haptic cinema puts the objects into question, calling on the viewer to engage in its imaginative construction” (2002, 16). Here, the spectator needs to create mental pictures based on sound while the concealed image is gradually revealed. After the image appears, the camera draws close, as if probing the body. Akin to the final scene of *Mother and Son*, the exteriors of two different corporealities create layers that construct the image; our eyes linger on the corporeal surfaces that fill the screen. With these skinscapes, the close-ups of the father and son’s bodies register their intimacy, as well as the muscularity of their silhouettes (which is similarly emphasised later in the film). This scene exemplifies vividly the family trilogy’s play between the immediate and the mediated. It is vibrantly sensual and immerses the audience in the bodily experience of the characters. Yet, as Szaniawski pointed out, it is “verging on abstraction through close-ups and distortions” (2014, 193). The apparent attempt at creating haptic immediacy

3 The ambivalent sensual and erotic charge of the film evoked contrasting responses from the critics: Iampolski, for example, dismisses the reading of the film as homoerotic (2011, 116), while Szaniawski points that Sokurov’s previous films feature strongly sexualised representations of beautiful male bodies (2014, 185–187).

4 The proximity of the camera to the bodies of the father and son is additionally emphasised by evoking breath. For Quinlivan, “hearing the ‘grain’ of a breathing body posits a dimension of breathing visuality informed specifically through sound and its haptic implication” (2012, 137). To foreground breath is to engage in intimacy, to recall the trace of the material object on screen and to “offer a profound sense of the palpability of the body” (Quinlivan 2012, 139).

is connected with conspicuous artificiality of this scene, which points to the presence of the medium.

Father and Son considers the surface of the body not only as the site of sensations, but also as a cover, its appearance belying the condition of that which is beneath. This use of medical images revealing the bodily interior – an x-ray and an anatomical poster [Fig. 3] – can be considered in terms of remediation, “representation of one medium in another” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 45). Here cinema enters into a dialogue with medical science, but the awareness of the original scientific discourse is retained. Medicine – with its focus on measuring and regulating (cf. Foucault’s *Birth of the Clinic*) – understands an individual as primarily a material and biological entity. Under the auspices of science, the human body is turned into a biological specimen and investigated in the same way as an object of any other scientific observation; in Leder’s words: “the human body, while perhaps unusual in its complexity, is taken as essentially no different from any other physical object” (1990, 5). By introducing medical elements, *Father and Son* comments on the bodies of the characters from the perspective of medicine.

Consider, for example, the scene when Alexei returns home from the military academy and finds an x-ray of his father’s ribcage. The medical photograph is first presented in close-up, the hand of the son slowly, almost tenderly travelling across its surface: the screen is filled with a black and white image of the corporeal interior. The film then cuts to his blurred portrait shot in soft focus. The camera briefly dwells upon the father’s silhouette as it “appears behind him [Alexei], ghostlike, more a hazy reflection of Aleksei’s inner thoughts than a concrete figure” (Alaniz 2010, 297). It then quickly returns to an examination of the son’s expression that changes from a smile to a distressed frown as he investigates the Roentgen representation. This time the face of the son is filmed through the x-ray which softens it even more: at this point the image is not clear – it is blurred and partially hidden in the shadow. “It’s your portrait,” explains Alexei to his parent, “it’s still a photograph. Just a little more revealing. You’re not hiding behind clothes...nor your muscles.” The son, who studies medicine as a part of his course, is capable of reading the photo, yet refrains from discussing it with his father.

As the hand of the son moves slowly across the surface of the radiographic photograph, almost caressing it, the film juxtaposes the exterior of the body with its interior. This close-up of the hand, with its focus on human skin and the act of touching, echoes the emotional overtones and intimacy of the opening scene. Additionally, the strong stylisation of this fragment – it is filmed through soft

lenses with subtle hues – adds a personal and artistic touch to the image created in the detached and objective context of medical analysis.

X-ray images denote certain impersonal (that is, medical) realities of the body. By penetrating the skin and unveiling the viscera, medical imaging technologies, such as Roentgen rays, offer views that are unavailable to the naked eye. Skin ceases to be the boundary of the visible, the gaze of the observer is able to reach deeper, “the border of the self is no longer the skin, the shape of the body no longer just the outline in the mirror, and the story of an individual body no longer just an autobiography” (Helman 1991, 99). In *Father and Son* the x-ray creates a more comprehensive biography of the individual by adding yet another dimension. While photos shown later in the film and the dialogues throughout characterise the father and son (the history of their relationship and the father’s war experiences), the x-ray conveys information about the father’s war injury and reveals a mystery hidden within a seemingly healthy body.

Another comment on the medical perception of the body can be found in a scene which follows a game of football between the father and son. Alexei – pictured in medium close-up - is shown standing almost still between the spread arms of a painted figure in the background. This image is of a flayed human form portraying a gymnast on rings, his skin removed in order to demonstrate the anatomical position of muscles. The son smiles, appearing lost in his thoughts, his face lit by soft hues of sunlight as he listens to his father calling his name. The camera moves slightly around the Alexei’s head, revealing more of the écorché figure and then, abandoning it, follows him as he walks around the apartment. Again, this scene is filmed through soft lenses and sepia filters, shadows and light playing within the image.

This scene points to early anatomical drawings and their distinctive aesthetic take on medicine. With a complete human face (as the locus of the self), a stylized pose, and a prop (the rings, which place the body in context), the picture of the flayed figure appeals to the imagination of the lay audience. Anatomical drawings dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century – the most significant examples of which were created by Andreas Vesalius, Charles Estienne and Juan Valverde de Amusco – intertwine the scientific (distanced and objective) with the artistic (painterly and stylised) (Benthien 2002). In such depictions, bodies demonstrating certain aspects of human anatomy frequently assume the poses of classical sculptures, and are presented against the background of a landscape, or supplied with a prop (Rifkin, Ackerman and Folkenberg 2006, 16). These images were designed to correlate the human body as it appears every day and the human anatomy within.

In *Father and Son*, the scene presenting Alexei exercising on the rings draws parallels between the anatomical image of the flayed figure and the son's body, as both are portrayed in the same position. This is also another way the film underscores the perfect physical form of the son. The x-ray, in turn, is similarly associated with the hidden depths of his father's body. Through the introduction of the medical realism, the film examines the characters from yet another angle – that of scientific, quantifying medical analysis; the focus is on the physical-biological.

Father and Son accentuates the stylised and the constructed through the use of colours, light, soft focus as well as distorting lenses. However, the manipulations of the image highlight the physicality of characters. Moreover, the film juxtaposes the body caught in haptic expression with that pictured with scientific detachment; through immersion in the bodily experience, particularly strong in the opening scene, the second instalment of the family trilogy film fulfils Bolter and Grusin's "logic of immediacy" (1999, 5). The penetration of the inside and outside, as well as the juxtaposition of the haptic and the medical, calls attention to the material and biological dimension of the human body and thus emphasises the trace of the physical presence on screen.

Alexandra

Continuing the military theme of *Father and Son*, this time in a Russian army camp in Chechnya, *Alexandra* sketches a portrait of a grandmother (Galina Vishnevskaya) who visits her grandson, Denis (Vasily Shevtsov), a captain in the Russian army. The elderly woman travels together with a group of military men and stays with them in a camp. *Alexandra* extends the trilogy's preoccupation with family ties, but is less concerned with myth and contains fewer intermedial references than the previous films. As Szaniawski notes, "it certainly boasts the most transparent, 'televisual' style of *mise-en-scène* and editing in his [Sokurov's] corpus, and is very 'realistic' in every other aspect: shot on location, with real props and costumes." (2014, 242). Indeed, the mediated is here less conspicuous, but still present: *Alexandra's* employment of a limited palette of desaturated greens, greys and yellows is strengthened by the use of filters. Also, in contrast to previous parts of the family trilogy, this film is situated in a definite socio-political context and can be read as a comment on the Chechen war (Szaniawski 2014, 241–2). Additionally, by exploring materiality and by offering vivid depictions of the landscape, objects and human bodies interpreted through multiple senses, *Alexandra* lends greater immediacy to the cinematic experience.

The final instalment of Sokurov's family trilogy begins with a sequence presenting Alexandra's body from different angles. She is portrayed in medium close-up from the back (she sits inside a bus, her hair pinned in a bun), the camera pans down to focus on her feet (as she leaves the bus), it shows her from the front (she examines her surroundings) and then moves slightly around the character. Finally, a zoom out reveals her whole figure: she stands against the background of a desolate landscape, looking slightly lost. With its insistent gaze, the camera examines Alexandra's body from different angles and proximities.

In the next scene Alexandra, accompanied by a few soldiers, walks to a train station. She is greeted by men in military uniforms entering the carriage: the camera is fixed on the woman's face while the recruits only flash by as they pass. After the young men assume their places, the camera scans their features: we watch similar bodies, in the same uniforms and with an identically organised sets of activities. The soldiers stare at Alexandra emphasising her incongruence. This part of the family trilogy is founded on contrasts: the elderly titular character is compared with the young soldiers; her wrinkled, dry skin is contrasted with their sweaty muscles. The film juxtaposes the individual and the group, youth and maturity, women and men. [Fig. 4.] This series of opposing pairs calls attention to the physical properties of the main character's body.

As Donaldson claims, "some films are prominently textured, featuring elements of clothing, environment and bodies that appeal to our tactile sense" (2014, 1). *Alexandra* is one of those densely textured films. Its narrow colour range calls attention to the textures of objects (steel, wool, wood, rubber), bodies (skin) and landscape (dry and sandy). Rough surfaces clash with smooth ones, slick and glossy with coarse and dusty. Alexandra has ample opportunity to investigate the space in close proximity. After the first night spent in the army camp, she wakes up in bright daylight and notices a man curled on the bed on the other side of the room. He is asleep which gives the woman a chance to examine his body and his belongings. The camera assumes her point of view and offers close-ups of the objects she investigates: a pair of boots and socks along with a military uniform. As Alexandra leans over her sleeping grandson; she focuses on the head and arms of the soldier. Her gaze slowly moves down to Denis's bruised feet. This scene pays particular attention to the conspicuous textures: the uneven surface of the unpolished wooden floor, mud on the leather boots, the roughness of his woollen socks and military uniform fabric.

Correspondingly, Alexandra examines objects soldiers interact with; the camera mimics her gaze through persistently repeated close-ups registering "haptically

charged surfaces” (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 124). The film explores military vehicles and weapons: the metal of tanks and cars – greasy and glistening just like the skin of soldiers – and the rubber of the tires. In a scene inside a tank, Alexandra is surrounded by steel, cables and rubber; these are slowly investigated at intimate proximity. When the soldiers clean their weapons, the camera observes the clash of textures – those of oil and stone – and examines the rough texture of a cloth presented against a background of unpolished wood. Here, the shiny, greasy surfaces of guns collide with that of leather and wood.

As Balázs notes, “the magnifying glass of the cinematograph brings us closer to the individual cells of life, it allows us to feel the texture and substance of life in its concrete detail” (2010, 38). In Doane’s words, the close-up “supports the cinema’s aspiration to be the vehicle of presence” (2003, 93). Through frequent use of tactile close-ups, texture in *Alexandra* becomes central to the viewer’s experience. Attention to textures enriches the film in order to heighten awareness of the materiality of the presented world.

As a newcomer and outsider, the titular character explores new and unfamiliar places with very acutely tuned senses, particularly touch and smell. Although the final instalment of family trilogy is set in the masculine domain of the overtly detached army camp the film features numerous moments presenting – or alluding to – touch. In one of them, the grandmother begins unbraiding her hair and Denis helps her. In two repeated, almost identical scenes, the camera closes in on his hands and follows the movements of his fingers in extreme close-up as they play with the woman’s hair. The image, composed of hair and skin against a background of textiles, fills the screen. The focus, again, is on the textures: of Alexandra’s dry hair, her dress, and that of the rough hands of Denis. After a while, when the haptic returns to the optical, we can see the woman in the embrace of her grandson. A few moments later, following an intimate conversation, Denis combs and plaits Alexandra’s hair. As the grandmother and grandson recall tactile memories from the soldier’s childhood, he repeats a ritual from when he was a little boy.

In her meditations on film’s power to call on senses other than vision and hearing, Marks considers cinema’s capacity to appeal to touch. For Marks, “the vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one’s eyes” (2000, xi). Tactile vision imitates touch, or rather, constitutes a certain attempt at evoking traces of the tactile. The gaze “moves along the surface of the object” (Marks 2000, xiii), thus, as a viewer, one is (figuratively) “touching a film with one’s eyes” (2000, xi). In Sokurov’s film, close-ups of contrasting textures – the dry skin of Alexandra and the young shiny skin of Denis – encourage the vision

to linger on the surface of the characters' bodies. Additionally, the depictions of the characters immersed in tactile experiences index physical and emotional proximity and appeal to the memory of the sensation (Marks 2000, 113). This evocation of touch and textures captures not only the closeness, but also emphasises the on-screen trace of the physical.

Moreover, *Alexandra* pays ample attention to olfactory sensations in the army camp. Military life is characterised by a variety of smells: of male bodies, weapons, tents, wooden structures, machines, military vehicles and food. The titular character is immersed in odours that are new to her and, as a visitor, she perceives them more intensely. Inside the tank that Denis shows to her, she remarks: "It smells." "It's the guns, the iron, the men. You'll get used to it," replies her grandson. In another of her excursions, the woman comes upon a sentry post and encounters two soldiers. They reluctantly allow her to sit down in their hut: "It stinks of dog in here," warns one of the soldiers. "It always smells of something here. I am getting used to it," answers Alexandra. The act of smelling features next to the experience of touch in a gentle encounter between Alexandra and her grandson. Denis smells his grandmother's hair in order to evoke memories from his childhood.

Through her references to the soldiers' heat-oppressed and sweaty bodies we are constantly reminded that they are not indurate.

"You can wash your clothes," she states when a soldier helps her leave the train, and upon meeting Denis for the first time since her arrival, she jokingly comments: "You're all sweaty! Where are your manners?" Such comments make us aware that this setting should be understood also through the sense of smell; the film suggests the haptic (olfactory) qualities of the images. Odours enhance the experience and understanding of the on-screen space. This resonates with Marks's statement that "haptic visuality inspires an acute awareness that the thing seen evades vision and must be approached through other senses – which are not literally available in cinema" (2000, 191).

With the opening scene exploring the body of the main character from different angles and proximities – and placing it firmly both within a clear socio-political context and in contrast to other bodies – *Alexandra* establishes itself as a film preoccupied with the material. Such an approach is strengthened by the film's investigation of the proximal senses of touch and smell as well as contemplating details and conspicuous textures via the close-ups of the camera. *Alexandra* encourages spectators to "almost touch" the places its central character explores contributing to a heightened illusion of the physicality of the presented world and evokes de Luca's "sensory realism" (2014, 1).

Alexander Sokurov's Family Trilogy: Self-Conscious Stylization and the "Reality Effect"

Sokurov's family trilogy juxtaposes representations of what de Luca calls "realities highlighted in their sensory, phenomenal and material plenitude" (2014, 11) with strong effects of mediation and remediation. In the case of *Mother and Son* – a cinematic experiment bearing strong references to painting – the strong stylisation is distancing, however, the final close-up draws attention to the physical properties of the represented bodies. *Father and Son*, in turn, enters the dialogue with medicine; through the employment of haptic images and medical appropriations, the film focuses on the sensual along with the biological. Set within the clear socio-political context, *Alexandra* draws attention to the multi-sensory aspects of the presented world, especially through references to touch and smell. Viewed together, these films create what could be interpreted as an orchestrated search for the trace of the material in cinema.

As Peucker states, "the film image itself is both material and referential, a fusion of art and the real" (2007, 1). *Mother and Son*, *Father and Son*, and *Alexandra* consciously employ techniques underscoring the artificial and those that strengthen the 'real.' Additionally, as a result of meditative pace of these films "narrative interaction is dissolved in favour of sensory experience and aesthetic apprehension" (de Luca 2014, 10); they invite to contemplate the images presented on screen. Both distancing and intimate, the family trilogy brings the viewer closer to the presented worlds and highlights the awareness of the medium. In all three films, however, the conspicuous stylisation amounts to the intensification of the impression of the physical world represented on screen.

References

- Alaniz, Jose. 2010. Vision and Blindness in Sokurov's *Father and Son*. In *Cinepaternity. Fathers and Sons in Soviet and Post-Soviet Film*, eds. Helena Goscilo and Yana Hashamova, 282–309. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Balázs, Béla. 2010. *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, ed. Erica Carter. Livingstone; New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Benthien, Claudia. 2002. *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Beumers, Birgit, and Nancy Condee, eds. 2011. *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Bolter, J. David and Richard Grusin. 1999. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA, London: The MIT Press.
- Botz-Bornstein, Thorsten. 2007. *Films and Dreams: Tarkovsky, Bergman, Sokurov, Kubrick, and Wong Kar-Wai*. Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- Doane, Mary Ann. 2003. The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* vol. 14. no. 3: 89–111.
- Donaldson, Lucy Fife. 2014. *Texture in Film*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dyer, Richard. 1992. Don't Look Now: The Male Pin-up. In *The Sexual Subject. A 'Screen' Reader in Sexuality*, 265–276. London and New York: Routledge.
- Elliott, Paul. 2011. *Hitchcock and the Cinema of Sensations: Embodied Film Theory and Cinematic Reception*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Elsaesser, Thomas and Malte Hagener. 2010. *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses*. New York: Routledge.
- Flanagan, Matthew. 2008. Towards an Aesthetic of Slow in Contemporary Cinema. *16:9 in English* no. 29 (November). http://www.16-9.dk/2008-11/side11_inenglish.htm. Last accessed 13. 12. 2015.
- Foucault, Michel. 2003 [1963]. *The Birth of the Clinic*. London: Routledge.
- Hänsgen, Sabine. 2011. Sokurov's Cinematic Minimalism. In *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov*, eds. Birgit Beumers and Nancy Condee, 43–56. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Helman, Cecil. 1991. *Body Myths: The Werewolf, Medusa and the Radiological Eye*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Iampolski, Mikhail. 2011. Truncated Families and Absolute Intimacy. In *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov*, eds. Birgit Beumers and Nancy Condee, 109–131. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Jaffe, Ira. 2014. *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Leder, Drew. 1990. *The Absent Body*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lim, Song Hwee. 2014. *Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- de Luca, Tiago. 2014. *Realism of the Senses in World Cinema. The Experience of Physical Reality*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- de Luca, Tiago and Nuno Barradas Jorge. 2016. Introduction: From Slow Cinema to Slow Cinemas. In *Slow Cinema*, eds. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, 1–21. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Marks, Laura U. 2000. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Marks, Laura U. 2002. *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Peucker, Brigitte. 2007. *The Material Image: Art and the Real in Film*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Quinlivan, Davina. 2012. *The Place of Breath in Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Rifkin, Benjamin A., Michael J. Ackerman and Judy Folkenberg. 2006. *Human Anatomy: Depicting the Body from the Renaissance to Today*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Szaniawski Jeremi. 2014. *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov: Figures of Paradox*. London: Wallflower Press.

Figures

Figure 1. Alexander Sokurov: *Mother and Son* (1997).



Figures 2–3. Alexander Sokurov: *Father and Son* (2003).



Figure 4. Alexander Sokurov: *Alexandra* (2007).

