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## Making Scents of the Past: Stalinism's Sights and Smells in the Films of Aleksei German, Sr.

Tim Harte

*Bryn Mawr College*, [tharte@brynmawr.edu](mailto:tharte@brynmawr.edu)

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“Making Scents of the Past: Stalinism’s Sights and Smells in the Films of Aleksei German, Sr.”

Tim Harte

She used a cheap, sweet perfume called ‘Tagore.’ Ganin now tried to recapture that scent again, mixed with the fresh smells of the autumnal park, but, as we know, memory can restore to life everything except smells, although nothing revives the past so completely as a smell that was once associated with it.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Mary*<sup>1</sup>

Smell, as Vladimir Nabokov emphasized in his first novel *Mary* (*Mashenka*, 1926), remains a sense firmly embedded in the present yet also capable of reviving, in an instant, the past. Our memories, unable to invoke a specific scent without some prompting, are seemingly at the beck and call of smell, easily overwhelmed by a fragrant whiff of a familiar odor that can transport us back to a very particular time and place. It is this lopsided and somewhat paradoxical relationship between smell and memory that has proven particularly germane to the work of the recently departed Soviet-Russian filmmaker Aleksei German, Sr. (1938-2013), who in many respects tried to overcome the inaccessibility of the redolent past by resurrecting bygone smells cinematically. While German could not, of course, recapture on screen the scents of former times, he visually evoked odor as he sought out powerful, visceral means for resurrecting Soviet history in his films.

A filmmaker inordinately preoccupied with Russia’s dark Stalinist period, German strove to conjure up a distinct historical atmosphere before his viewers’ eyes, appealing to the senses—not only sight and hearing, as one would naturally expect in cinema, but also smell—to probe the

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Mary*, trans. Michael Glenny (New York: Vintage Press, 1989), 60.

essence of Stalinism and collective memories of these dark Stalinist years. For German, smell signified a convenient, albeit somewhat illusive avenue to the past. In *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (*Moi drug Ivan Lapshin*, 1984) and *Khrustalev, My Car!* (*Khrustalev, mashinu!*, 1998), two of the mere six films German made over the course of his long directorial career, this visionary filmmaker increasingly evoked and amplified smell as he dug deeper and deeper into the complex—and very fragrant—authoritarian underpinnings of Soviet society. As I will argue in what follows, smell constitutes a fundamental component of German’s films, serving as a conspicuous focus of his cinematic work while also providing a helpful prism through which to experience and comprehend his frequently confounding, yet undeniably vivid filmic evocations of the Soviet past. Although the multifarious smells evoked by German may at times repulse viewers, it is a repugnant odor that ultimately unites the past with the present, as German uses the sense of smell to transport audiences back to his country’s Stalinist past and the heavy, redolent air of authoritarianism.

Film, of course, hardly seems an ideal vehicle for conjuring up scents. Yet in comparison to other artistic media, save literature perhaps or, one might imagine, installation art with a provocative, aromatic twist, cinema offers a very effective means for showing people sniffing, reacting to certain smells, and even emitting odors. Moviegoers may not be able to directly appreciate a fragrance (other than that of popcorn), but they can indirectly gain access to a whole array of olfactory sensations triggered by a given image or scene. According to Laura Marks, who has written extensively on touch, scent, and the other senses in the arts, smell is the sense “most likely to operate mimetically” and can be conveyed on screen in three distinct ways.<sup>2</sup> First, the filmmaker might show in a straightforward mimetic fashion a character smelling or sniffing.

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<sup>2</sup> Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 115.

Second, a director can rely on a synaesthetic appeal to other senses that subsequently evoke an olfactory effect, such as a sound closely connected to this smell (the snorting of a pig, for example) or an image of something distinctly fragrant (such as a loaf of bread straight out of the oven). And third, filmmakers can place particular emphasis on the haptic appreciation of close up images that in their proximity to the viewer and through their detailed visual texture evoke or at least hint at certain smells. By haptic, Marks implies anything related to touch, and it is indeed an olfactory tangibility that cinema is capable in certain instances of invoking, particularly when a given film shot undermines conventional ways of viewing or hearing. As Marks explains, “By resisting control of vision, for example being blurry, haptic images encourage the ‘viewer’ to get close to the image and explore it through all of the senses, including touch, smell and taste.”<sup>3</sup> In instances when sight and sound do not allow viewers to grasp the meaning of a film scene due to blurriness or, to cite several of German’s signature methods, due to muffled voices and dizzying imagery produced by a rapid traveling shot, audiences can be compelled to rely upon other senses to process what transpires on screen and thus perceive a given sequence not simply diagetically or conceptually but also sensorially. Therefore a conspicuous shift away from traditional forms of cinematic representation potentially triggers within viewers a collective, visceral form of memory, whereby smell can bolster the intricate rendering of the past that, as Soviet and Russian audiences have been well aware of, materializes in virtually every Aleksei German film.

In German’s complex cinematic work, smell—or, as the case may be, visual, haptic references to smell—are indeed at the heart of the viewing experience for audiences, whom German challenges through his films’ disorienting images and scenes. By recreating the past and evoking collective memories of the Soviet Union’s troubled history, German accordingly relies

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 118.

on all three of Marks's well-defined methods for cinematically triggering film viewers' senses and olfactory recollections. From a brief, tender sequence of a woman carefully cutting a loaf of Russian black bread in *The Seventh Companion* (*Sedmoi sputnik*, 1968), German's first film, to shots of boiling pots on the stove of a crowded communal apartment in *Twenty Years without War* (*Dvadtsat' dnei bez voiny*, 1977) to close-ups of a naked behind in a decrepit outhouse shown during the opening credits of *Hard to be God* (*Trudno byt' bogom*, 2013), the director's final film, imagery associated with smells—some familiar to all audiences but many familiar only to Soviet viewers—have always occupied a prominent place in German's work.<sup>4</sup> The most Russian of filmmakers, German created images and very specific sensorial impressions of the Soviet past that have often proven visually challenging to Western audiences. All shot in black and white (save several sequences with faded colors from *My Friend Ivan Lapshin*) along the principle that our memories are colorless, German's films vividly evoke bygone scents.<sup>5</sup> This emphasis on smell is especially pronounced in *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* and *Khrustalev, My Car!*.

Throughout both films characters not only find themselves in very odorous situations but also actively sniff and snort, as if to ground themselves in the disorienting, threatening environment of Stalinism. In the latter of these two films, moreover, the focus repeatedly falls on noses, be they sniffing, sniffing, or, thanks to the secret police (the NKVD), bashed and bloodied. Indeed, German's Stalin-era personae smell, taste, and feel their way through cold, murky landscapes

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<sup>4</sup> German co-directed *The Seventh Companion* with the well-established, albeit conventional Soviet filmmaker Grigori Aronov. The events of the film take place during the Civil War soon after the 1917 Revolution. *Twenty Years without War*, a more mature work by German, recounts the making of a propagandistic film during World War II and a fleeting love affair, both of which transpire in the eastern Soviet city of Tashkent (now part of Uzbekistan). And as German's final film, *Hard to be God* is the only work by the filmmaker that does not harken back to a former time but rather, ostensibly in sci-fi fashion, recounts events on a distant planet that eerily resembles the Middle Ages on Earth. German's second film, *Trial on the Road* (*Proverka na dorogakh*, 1971/1986), meanwhile, transpires during World War II, but it places far less emphasis on a sensorial recreation of the past in comparison to German's other films.

<sup>5</sup> In a 1999 interview, German remarks, "Close your eyes. Imagine [your deceased relatives] in color. You won't have any luck with this. Recollections don't have color. One can try and film them in color. Sometimes it seems pretty, but after 300 meters [of film] you realize that you are ruining the film. It's strange, but color kills reality." See Maria Bozhovich, "Aleksi German: 'Izgoniaushchii d'iavola,'" *Iskusstvo kino* June 1999 (No. 6).

and cramped spaces that so often appear to be emitting a bewildering mix of both pleasant and noxious odors, well in accordance with Marks's notion of cinema synaesthetically appealing to the other senses to evoke olfactory sensations. And as if reinforcing Marks's contention that haptic images can indirectly conjure up smell, German frequently hones in on everyday objects and body parts in ways that indirectly allude to familiar odors, many of them unpleasant ones from the repressive Stalinist era, while he also stimulates viewers' senses by means of his characters' inaudible speech, disquieting actions, and angry outbursts. Insinuation of smell likewise arises out of German's penchant for claustrophobic spaces through which his camera gymnastically maneuvers, presenting the past in a visually unorthodox, unsettling fashion. By relying on these untraditional means of haptic representation to transport his viewers back to the Stalinist past, German repeatedly privileges smell in both *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* and *Khrustalev, My Car!*.

*My Friend Ivan Lapshin*, German's most celebrated and broadly appreciated film, has been resoundingly praised for its innovative form of nostalgia. As Anthony Anemone writes, "Rooted in the historical revisionism of the Khrushchev period, the film may be unique in all of post-Stalinist Russian culture for its historical accuracy, subtlety and the depth of its critique of Stalinist utopianism."<sup>6</sup> In *Lapshin*, German recreates in painstaking detail the unique atmosphere of a provincial town in 1930s Soviet Russia, replicating the language and mannerisms of the time, along with the textures and smells of the early Stalin years. German, writes Anton Dolin, "is the sole practitioner of a genre of his own invention: 'film recollection.'"<sup>7</sup> A hybrid form of cinema that is hyper-realistic (and inspired by old photographs

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Anemone, "Moi drug Ivan Lapshin/My Friend Ivan Lapshin," in Birgit Beumers, ed., *The Cinema of Russia and the Former Soviet Union* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 203.

<sup>7</sup> Anton Dolin, "The Strange Case of Aleksei German," trans. Oleg Dubson, *Film Comment* 48/2 (March/April 2012), 31. Dolin's article on German initially appeared in the Russian newspaper *Moskovskie novosti*.

of the era) yet at the same time dreamlike in nature, German's cinematic recollections go well beyond conventional cinema's typical, commercially popular "period piece" in that he establishes a vivid, highly personal portrait of the past that simultaneously underscores a collective vision of Soviet history. *Lapshin*, the plot of which is loosely based on fiction by the filmmaker's father (the well-known Soviet writer Yuri German), begins with an adult reminiscing in the present-day (the 1980s) about his childhood in the mid-1930s, when Soviet society stood on the threshold of the Stalinist purges and era of Great Terror that resulted in the disappearance and death of so many Communist officials and others in the Soviet hierarchy.

Right from the outset of *My Friend Ivan Lapshin*, odors of a bygone era waft through the film and its vision of the past, fondly recalled by German's narrator as he reminisces about his pre-Purge childhood. In the film's brief present-day prelude, this narrator remarks that in moments of idleness the distinct fragrance of Lapshin's cigarettes suddenly come to him as he returns to the past.<sup>8</sup> German, however, will quickly dispense with, or at least de-emphasize, the first-person narrative, as he works to establish a collective, rather than individual vision of the Soviet Union's redolent, yet very anxious past. The plot of German's film subsequently involves a series of events from the mid-1930s in Unchansk, a fictional Soviet town, where the eponymous police chief pursues a vicious band of criminals headed by a shadowy figure named Solov'ev. Lapshin, clumsy and quite awkward when it comes to women, falls for an actress performing at the town's theater in a semi-successful staging of a socialist realist play (Lapshin has better luck capturing criminals than he does capturing the heart of this actress). Although

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<sup>8</sup> German's narrator states: "Only infrequently, when I write or read, or when, like today, there's no work, suddenly for no reason at all I recall the sound of my childhood steps in the long corridor of our apartment, the smell of those "Bliuming" cigarettes, which Lapshin smoked" ("Лишь изредка, когда пишу или читаю, или когда, как сегодня, не работается, вдруг ни с того ни с сего припоминается мне звук моих детских шагов в длинном коридоре нашей квартиры, тот запах папирос "Блюминг", которые курил Лапшин"). This perhaps contradicts Nabokov's point on smell from *Mary*, but it surely points to the prominence of smell in German's film.

Stalinism lurks only in the background of the film, with mere whiffs of the upcoming Purges in the air, the small-town atmosphere and tense interrelationships of the characters suggest that Stalinist authoritarianism has slowly been working its way into people's lives. A semi-sweet nostalgia for the sounds and scents of the early Soviet era permeates the film, but these sounds and scents ultimately prove somewhat ominous, even oppressive, as if the essence of the Stalinist era can be found in its minor, everyday details and plethora of smells.

Mention of cat odors, a fragrant prostitute, and the stench from a man who has had his fill of vodka after a night of revelry provide a background of relatively harmless, albeit unpleasant odors in the film, as does the cheerful atmosphere—so carefully recreated by German—of a fortieth birthday party for Lapshin that occurs early on in the film. In this early scene, a host of characters, mostly police officers, sit at a cluttered table in a crowded, smoke-filled room, as German, using one relatively lengthy, slow panning shot, moves through the party, capturing bits and pieces of various conversations (one of which, incidentally, involves cat smells) before slowly zooming in on Lapshin. Nostalgia floats through the air, as the polyphonic mix of voices, songs, whistling, and joyful clinking of glasses produces a tangible, albeit somewhat confusing tapestry of life in 1930s Soviet Russia. As in so many other scenes from the film, smell comes not only from direct mention of various stench and such, but also from the evocative black and white images and diverse, discordant sounds of day-to-day life under Stalin.

The everyday odors of provincial Stalinist Russia and its somewhat repressive atmosphere, however, give way to more malodorous smells, particularly when Lapshin discovers an underground vault containing two dead bodies. These two corpses, the grisly result of Solov'ev's criminal activity, provide a fitting, albeit gruesome embodiment of German's ambiguous nostalgia and retrospective attitude toward the Stalinist era. Police carry the bodies

out of the vault and into the open air, as if conveying metaphorically—embodying, one might say—the filmmaker’s urge to expose the rot and stench of Stalinism. Since the scene transpires in the heart of winter, the odors of these rotting corpses are masked by the frost, but German’s camera hones in on the bodies as the police place them in the back of a truck, thus providing viewers with a stark, sensorial reminder of the era’s brutality. A crowd of bystanders lingers, their frosty breathe and the exhaust from the truck beautifully captured in the scene amidst harsh cries coming from a distraught women, thus creating considerable dissonance in the sequence. And quite tellingly, it is immediately following this scene with the corpses that Lapshin, racing on a motorcycle through Unchansk’s barren, wintery landscape, blurts out a Stalinist-inspired slogan: “No matter, we’ll clean this place out, we’ll plant a garden, and we’ll even manage to stroll in this garden” (“Nichego, vychistim eto mesto, posadim sad, i sami eshche uspeem pogulat’ v etom sadu”). This slogan only accentuates the emerging discrepancy between utopian propaganda and reality in the country’s emerging dystopia. After the rotting corpses and harsh shouting, Lapshin’s words notionally reek of irony, for it is death, not a flower, that blossoms in this spoiled garden of Stalinism.

The foul air of crime and authoritarianism gradually pervades German’s film, as evidenced by the scene in which Lapshin leads his men to the ramshackle lodgings of Solov’ev’s gang. Having surrounded the building, Lapshin and his fellow officers approach and surround the criminals’ hideout, whereby the police themselves emerge as a gang ready to do what is necessary to get their man. The camera, lingering at the threshold of these dilapidated lodgings, reveals the comings and goings of the police and various suspicious characters before accompanying Lapshin as he enters the building (German uses a lengthy handheld traveling shot to increase the scene’s dizzying sense of confusion). Pitch-black shots prevail for several

seconds before the camera proceeds quickly down a faintly lit corridor. In line with Marks's notion that an audience's sense of smell can be triggered through disorienting, haptic imagery, the traveling camera shots create a bewildering scene of chaos in which the odors of the criminal environment again prove disturbingly tangible. In the semi-darkness, Lapshin and his fellow officers aggressively bang down the doors of various rooms, yet Solov'ev manages to escape (and then stab Lapshin's good friend Khanin) before eventually being gunned down by Lapshin himself. This thwarting of Solov'ev, however, will be only a pyrrhic victory, for a similar fate surely awaits Lapshin; it is implied that he will perish in the upcoming purges, as the violent practices of the police come back to haunt Lapshin and others amidst an intensification of the era's repressive atmosphere.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas in *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* German makes sporadic, subtle use of smell through haptic images of dark, musty crime scenes, crowded rooms, and cramped communal apartments, in 1998's *Khrustalev, My Car!* the smells have become all the more pungent, unavoidable, and unsettling. Developing on the sensorial complexities of *Lapshin*, German goes much further with these olfactory sensations in his later *Khrustalev*, whereby he links history and smell in a comprehensive, conspicuous, and unmistakably redolent fashion. Indeed, intense smells waft through the entire film, as scene after scene places a heavy emphasis on the penetrating odors of corruption in the late Stalinist era. At the same time, all the smelling and overwhelming attention paid to scent in *Khrustalev* establishes a direct link between the film's grotesque cast of characters and contemporary viewers, who must implicitly breathe in the same air and react to the same smells as German's semi-historical figures. The smells being sniffed in both a diagetical and extra-diagetical fashion ultimately emanate from the rotting body of the state, a

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<sup>9</sup> Discussing his decision to have the relatively unknown actor Andrei Boltnev play the role of the central, eponymous protagonist in *Lapshin*, German remarked, "He had to have the face of a man from the Red List, a man who would soon be killed." Quoted in Dolin, "The Strange Case," 30.

stench that for German has wafted well into the present day. In interviews, in fact, German has admitted that *Khrustalev* has great relevance to the present-day situation in Russia.<sup>10</sup> And by leading his viewers, via his murky plot, straight to the stench of the dying Stalin, he will provide both his fictional characters and his audience with a strong, often overwhelming whiff of Soviet tyranny.

The odors in *Khrustalev* may be explicit, but the narrative threads of this beguiling film, which took German over a decade to make, prove anything but straightforward. Replete with muffled whispers, sharp yells, and threatening innuendo, *Khrustalev* remains baffling to many viewers (especially those who did not grow up in the Soviet Union).<sup>11</sup> The semi-autobiographical, semi-historical action, loosely based on German's own memories of childhood in Moscow as the son of a prominent Soviet writer, defies easy comprehension. In various respects, a good understanding of the film requires multiple viewings, as well as a very solid grasp of Soviet history. Discussion of *Khrustalev*, therefore, must begin with a brief synopsis of the film's narrative (the screenplay for which German co-wrote with his wife Svetlana Karmalita), particularly given the obscure, confusing nature of so many of the film's scenes. The events of *Khrustalev*, told as a series of dreamlike reminiscences belonging to the protagonist's son (a stand-in for the young German), take place in late February and early March of 1953,

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, J. Hoberman's discussion of German's film, which draws upon an interview Hoberman conducted with German. Hoberman writes, "I asked German if *Khrustalyov* was about present-day Russia. 'Of course,' he replied, adding that 'maybe things are simpler now—they just shoot you.'" See J. Hoberman, "Exorcism: Aleksei German Among the Long Shadows," *Film Comment* January/February 1999 (No. 1).

<sup>11</sup> In fact, it is not unusual to see *Khrustalev*, *My Car!* and have only a minimal sense of what is transpiring in the film. Reaction to *Khrustalev*, given the confusing nature of the film, was initially quite negative, although appreciation for it has grown steadily, now that people have gotten a second look. The film, in fact, received loud, derogatory boos during its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival in 1998, and many in the audience walked out midway through its screening; Harlan Kennedy, discussing the 1998 Cannes Film Festival that year in the journal *Film Comment*, writes, "Even the rubbish this year at Cannes was lively... Alexei Guerman's *Khoustaliiov*, *My Car!* [sic], a political satire from Russia, was like escaped early Dick Lester. (Some of the audience escaped early, too)." See Harlan Kennedy, "Idiot's Delight," *Film Comment* 34/4 (July/August 1998): 7. Dick Lester is an American filmmaker. But French film critics subsequently apologized for their harsh, initial reaction to *Khrustalev*. For more on the negative reaction to *Khrustalev* at Cannes and the subsequent about-face of French film critics, see Irina Rubanova, "Davai uletim!" *Iskusstvo kino*. March 2000 (No. 3): 55-62.

when an ill Stalin lay on his deathbed and the Stalinist, anti-Semitic “Doctor’s Plot” targeted various physicians, among them the film’s fictional protagonist General Yuri Klensky, a prominent Moscow brain surgeon (although not a Jew) and Red Army general. Amidst a swirl of subplots, whispers, and snow, Klensky finds himself under suspicion, as the NKVD monitors his whereabouts and eventually arrests him (after his son has implicitly informed on him following a visit from a Swedish journalist).

In the second half of *Khrustalev*, the authorities transport Klensky through a labyrinth of checkpoints, vehicles and snowy roads before pushing him into the back of a Soviet Champagne (“Sovetskoe shampanskoe”) truck, where a gang of prisoners brutally rapes and sodomizes him. Soon after this grotesque, violent rape scene, however, Klensky is ostensibly freed and delivered to a heavily guarded complex near Kuntsevo, the town outside of Moscow where an ailing Stalin, having suffered a stroke, lies dying in bed at his dacha. Instructed by Lavrentii Beria, Stalin’s main henchman, to minister to the ailing leader in a cramped, cluttered room, Klensky attempts to aid his soiled and comatose patient, who breaths his last breaths—officially, at least, on March 5, 1953, but most likely several days earlier—before the anxious, agitated Klensky and the fat, morose Beria. The title of the film, appropriately obscure, comes from these climactic scenes at the Kuntsevo dacha, where Beria shouts to Stalin’s real-life, eponymous bodyguard, “Khrustalev, my car!”; German does not even show Khrustalev, who remains off screen during this momentous point in the film. Klensky subsequently returns as a free man to his family in Moscow, but he then vanishes, and it is in the final scenes of the movie that Klensky is shown, some time later, on a creaky train traveling through the stark Soviet landscape, now rather desperate and deprived, but still a charismatic figure who drinks with fellow revelers on an open-air train car. While performing a drunken stunt with a shot glass balanced on his head,

Klensky asks a traveling companion to wipe his nose, with which he seemingly hopes to breathe in the fresh, post-apocalyptic air of the post-Stalinist era.

From the first shot to the last, *Khrustalev* is a very idiosyncratic cinematic work, as it merges autobiography and Soviet history. Profoundly modern in its use of space and its evocation of the past, the film exudes a visual power that largely emanates from the claustrophobic atmosphere created early on in the opening scenes of Moscow's dark, snowy streets. As in his earlier work, particularly *Lapshin*, sweeping long takes and constricted settings full of ominous figures and shadows enable German to generate a distinct spatial component that visually challenges audiences. Confining the gaze of viewers through his frequent dispensing with standard lighting and through shots of crowded apartments, Moscow's ornate baths, and a truck's dark cargo bay, among other tight places, German establishes a highly elaborate, often oppressive mise-en-scène in *Khrustalev*. Startling, unconventional pirouettes by German's camera prove especially disconcerting, as the filmmaker provides his audience with highly visceral impressions of life under Stalin. Throughout the film, black and white imagery, the headlong flow of the camera through narrow spaces, and erratic behavior from virtually every character enable German to convey so much of the horror and repressiveness of late Stalinism. Fellini-esque in nature, given the way the camera navigates the hellish, decadent world of late Stalinist Moscow à la *La Dolce Vita* (or, as Phillip Lopate has nicely put it, "like a hellish version of *Amarcord*"), *Khrustalev* presents a disorienting, carnivalesque portrait of life under Stalin.<sup>12</sup> And as witnesses to all the claustrophobic scenes and grotesque imagery, German's viewers find themselves trapped in the Stalinist era, their senses engulfed in the era's violence, threatening sounds, and repellant odors.

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<sup>12</sup> Phillip Lopate, "New York," *Film Comment* 34/6 (Nov./Dec. 1998): 52.

In comparison to *Lapshin*, the emphasis on smell throughout *Khrustalev* has increased noticeably. In the first half of the film, for instance, aromas and smelling abound, particularly in a series of overcrowded Moscow apartments and buildings, which offer a disorienting maze of smell-filled dining rooms, baths, toilets, and offices through which German's acrobatic camera guides the viewer. Consider, for instance, one crucial scene in the hospital where Klensky works as the chief of medicine. Parading through the hospital with his underlings in tow, the General somewhat inexplicably breaks down the door into another ward in an adjacent part of the hospital, where within the "enema room" he discovers his double, a man who looks remarkably similar to him (prominent figures under suspicion often had doubles who would appear on their behalf at show trials to insure the delivery of proper testimony). Against a portentous backdrop of seemingly noxious steam that rises throughout the hospital and amidst various references to the smell of death, odors implicitly permeate this highly chaotic scene that is made all the more disorienting and unnerving to the senses by the rapid, flowing movement of German's traveling camera. Over the course of this bewildering hospital sequence background figures jump unexpectedly out of the shadows. "Death, is that you?" ("Smert', eto Vy?") Klensky asks a worker ("Death" is evidently this individual's moniker) before he encounters another attendant holding (and then dropping) two cats by the scruff of their necks, whereby the head surgeon barges into the room where his double stands. Klensky sits down with his double and offers him a cigar, but the imposter passes on the cigar to someone else, remarking that it smells awful ("It smells like shit" ["Der'mo pakhnet"]). Other smelling ensues here as well, for instance when Klensky's subordinates attempt to get a whiff of his "tea" to discern whether it contains some cognac. But the most significant odor sensed here by Klensky and his subordinates is a

threatening, metaphorical one: they now know with great certainty that he is under suspicion and in serious danger of being arrested.

Upon discovering his double, Klensky instinctually senses—as do German’s viewers—that he is a marked man. The most immediate method of self-preservation in the unsettling, suspicious atmosphere of Stalinist Russia indeed appears to be an olfactory one, as a variety of the film’s characters attempt to smell and snort their way to safety. In analysis of *Khrustalev*, French film scholar Georges Nivat has remarked, “Everyone sniffs at things; if noses are more active than intellects it is because an animalistic resistance to annihilation exists, as life triumphs, irrespective of anything and above all.”<sup>13</sup> All the overt sniffing in *Khrustalev*, Nivat suggests, conveys the reflexive, animalistic response of Soviet citizens to the repressive order established under Stalin, as German accentuates the dehumanizing, degrading effects of Stalinism on the Soviet people. The underlying suspicion and brutality of the Soviet state have transformed its populace into wild animals who must smell and scrape for their survival.

General Klensky senses danger all around him, as rumors, threats, and the realization that he is under suspicion propel him forward through the labyrinth of constricted spaces comprising German’s conception of Stalinist Moscow. In one crucial scene toward the end of Part One of this approximately two-and-a-half hour film, Klensky attends a party in the ornate, yet crowded Moscow apartment of an aging, well-to-do woman, the academic Shishmareva, who is, as it turns out, a specialist in extending the lives of human beings.<sup>14</sup> Klensky and Shishmareva, along with her Great Dane, quietly retreat to a cluttered little room where the doctor offers Shishmareva’s dog some cognac in a bowl and then lets the big animal lick his face for a treat. As if to emulate

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<sup>13</sup> George Nivat, “Popugai v kommunal’noi pustote,” trans. from French by V. Bozhovich. *Iskusstvo kino*. February, 2000 (No. 2): 56.

<sup>14</sup> For more on the scientific and artistic preoccupation with immortality in early Soviet culture that presaged the Stalinist-era experiments in longevity alludes to by German, see Nikolai Kremmentsov, *Revolutionary Experiments: The Quest for Immortality in Bolshevik Science and Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

this dog, the intoxicated Klensky sniffs at Shishmareva's fist. Odors, both actual and metaphorical, permeate this sequence, given the tight space (accentuated by a model of a miniature theater into which Klensky places a shoe) and the fact that Klensky, in discussion with Shishmareva about extending the life of a human and about his recently discovered double, mumbles that "death reeks" ("smert' voniaet"). And together with these smells and morbid thoughts comes a veiled conversation between Klensky and Shishmareva regarding Stalin's fragile health, impending death, and the immediate threat lurking in the air for doctors like Klensky ("When Nero dies," Klensky whispers, "there are executions, executions. Who needs these insignificant little doctors here?"). Speaking to Klensky somewhat inexplicably through a large plate of glass, Shishmareva scolds her interlocutor for cynically speaking of Stalin's death, and as a coughing Klensky looks to exit this small, redolent space, Shishmareva repeatedly tells the doctor that he is sick.

Following Klensky's cryptic scene with Shishmareva, the phantasmagorical, carnivalesque tone of the film dissipates somewhat, as decadent scenes of feasting (seemingly in the time of the plague) give way to more nightmarish musings but also something less personal for German, as the film takes on a more implicitly collective theme. Night turns to day, but in place of the ominous, threatening shadows of Part One, it is now unadulterated brutality and death that materializes. Odors accordingly grow in intensity throughout Part Two of *Khrustalev*, for instance when Klensky finds himself in the hands of the NKVD. Having been viciously sodomized in the back of the Soviet Champagne truck (I will refrain from delving into the smells evoked throughout this dark, disturbing rape scene, given that the sensorial emphasis is far more physical than olfactory), Klensky is dragged away from the other prisoners and revived by several officers so that he can medically attend to Stalin. An officer pours cologne into one of

Klensky's boots to help make them fit, for these boots actually belong to Klensky's double encountered earlier in the hospital. The cologne surely hides the reek arising from Klensky's violated body and ruptured anus, while it also masks much more widespread smells. And it is this cologne that catches the attention of a guard on the long road leading toward Stalin's dacha. Accompanying Klensky from one automobile to another at a guardhouse along the beautiful, snow-packed approach to Stalin's abode, the guard asks Klensky why he stinks of perfume ("Pochemu tak pakhnet dukhami"). Klensky can only shrug and mutter, "It happens" ("Byvaet"), as he sits in the car and gazes pitifully at this guard, whose hand twitches as he momentarily dozes off before Klensky. Only the fragrance of the cologne, which will be mentioned several more times in the film, can overpower, albeit temporarily, the vile smells of the brutal Stalinist system, so disturbingly embodied by the earlier rape sequence in the truck and the scene to come by the side of Stalin's deathbed.

At Stalin's dacha, a Dante-esque ninth circle of hell, Klensky at last discovers the fundamental source of all the vile smells pervading the Soviet landscape. In this climactic scene with the comatose Stalin, in fact, German focuses inordinately on each of the five human senses, as sight, sound, touch, smell and even taste all play a role in the protracted scene of Stalin's last moments, thus enabling German to create a sensorial smorgasbord of death. Hence the sight of the Soviet leader is a remarkable one for Klensky, who at first does not even know that he is in fact in the presence of Stalin (he asks Beria if the patient is his father, whereupon Beria replies, "Father? ... You said that very well"). It is only when a gust of cold air blows open a wardrobe door in the room to reveal the leader's uniforms that Klensky realizes that it is indeed Stalin lying before him (and that he has also been dealing with Beria). Several times Klensky rubs his eyes, as if doubting the veracity of what he sees. Sounds likewise predominate, as Stalin's

moaning, gurgling belly, and passing of noxious gas resonate loudly throughout the room, as do Beria's frantic screams and yelling. German similarly amplifies touch in this climatic scene, as Beria pours disinfectant over the hands of Klensky, who proceeds to thrust a finger into Stalin's mouth, rub the dying man's bloated belly, and then press down on the belly in attempt to save his patient's life (Beria beseeches Klensky to extend Stalin's life, but the frantic doctor refuses and says it is impossible). Once Klensky realizes that it is indeed Stalin who lies before him, he quickly gives himself an injection before placing multiple kisses on the Premier's decaying body. And taste, meanwhile, also seems to figure in the action, as bubbles come oozing out of Stalin's mouth and then, once Stalin has died, when Klensky eats a quick, interrupted meal with the distraught Beria.

Above all, however, it is a sense of smell that most significantly underlies the tumultuous, early March 1953 events in *Khrustalev*. As he does in so many instances throughout this film and his other work, German offers a *mise-en-scène* of a small, cramped space within the Kuntsevo dacha, undoubtedly to make the pervasive odors seem all the more intense and suggestive. A vile, unpleasant stench conspicuously wafts through the enclosed space of the room, and Beria on several occasions over the course of this approximately five-minute scene complains about the awful odor. Desperately recoiling from the stench, he has an attendant nurse pour disinfectant on his hands, which he then splashes over his face. Klensky too is well aware of the smell. Asked to administer to the dying man, he immediately begins to sniff the Soviet leader up and down. Upon thrusting his finger into Stalin's mouth, Klensky uses his nose to inspect this finger carefully, while he also pulls back the sheets on Stalin's bed, only to find the Premier lying in his own excrement. The attendant nurse tries to explain to Beria that she had recently changed the now-soiled Stalin ("He was clean! He was clean!" ["On byl chistii! On

byl chistii!”), whereby she receives a whack on the head (and probably worse) from Beria for her troubles. To alleviate the stench, Beria opens the window, as a burst of fresh air wafts through the room (and forces open Stalin’s wardrobe); this is one of the film’s rare moments of tranquility, as German’s camera focuses for several seconds on the window curtains while they billow in the wind. A sublime moment amidst all the horror, death, and depravity of the time, these images of the billowing curtains hint at the fresh air needed throughout the entire country (and in the film itself, one might contend).

Over the course of this climactic scene of death, German’s camera remains relatively immobile, sporadically blocked by various figures and seemingly a startled bystander to this momentous event in Soviet history. In the end, there is no need for German to insinuate smell through disorienting camera work and indirect haptic images, for smell occupies a foremost, position in the scene. As it becomes clear at the Kuntsevo dacha, we have at last come to the primary source of the smell that the film continually privileges, for the stench from Stalin’s excrement, rotten farts, decaying body, and, in a metaphorical sense, his moral turpitude implicitly fill the room and beyond. Beria, like Klensky, cannot escape the stench, and in certain respects, neither can German’s viewers, who have been thrust—via the film’s overt olfactory references to Soviet history and via haptic insinuation of scent—into the Stalinist past. For many viewers, this stench may be unbearable (and thus the profound difficulty audiences have had with this film), but German, like Klensky, has traveled to the heart of Stalinism in such a vivid, cinematically compelling fashion.

The collective memories of Stalinism that German uncovers and probes so vividly in *Khrustalev, My Car!*, as well as *My Friend Ivan Lapshin*, hinge greatly upon viewers’ visceral reactions to the noxious odors of repression. In certain respects, the emphasis on smell in these

two films, particularly *Khrustalev*, offers audiences an active way to reassess the Soviet past. “Smell,” film scholar Paul Elliott maintains, “is inextricably linked to memory and, through this, to our sense of space, place, and identity; but it is also constantly in flux, existing in a continual becoming that avoids being tied to specific meaning and thus to semiological processes.”<sup>15</sup> A smell-induced flux and shifting sense of the Soviet Union’s historical “space, place, and identity” indeed lie at the heart of *Lapshin* and *Khrustalev*. In both films, semiological processes fluctuate in accordance with Elliott’s supposition that olfactory memories resist any fixed, rigid meaning. Thus smell provides German—and those viewers willing to engage in a sensorial fashion with his films—the opportunity to defy, conceptually and viscerally, the authoritarian essence of Stalinism. The smells may be overwhelming at times, as are the sights and sounds of these two films, but through active memory and through a willingness to grapple with a filmic vision of the past that is in constant flux, viewers can ultimately escape the stench, much like General Klensky does in the concluding scene of *Khrustalev*.

What is SOVIET here? i.e. can you explore what, if anything, is peculiar to German’s rendering of the Stalinist era with such stench?

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Elliott, *Hitchcock and the Cinema of Sensations: Embodied Film Theory and Cinematic Reception* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2011), 125.