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Cinema from the End of Time: *Malmkrog* by Cristi Puiu and Vladimir Solovyov

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Abstract. Arguably Cristi Puiu's most intricate film so far, *Malmkrog* (2020) comprises nearly three and a half hours of intense discussions about some of the most pertinent questions of our times since the Industrial Revolution – about the ethics of war and progress, the inevitable end of history, and the elusive nature of Good and Evil – posited by the Russian religious philosopher Vladimir S. Solovyov in his seminal book *War, Progress, and the End of History* (subtitled *Three Conversations Including a Short Story of the Anti-Christ*) and published in 1899. The article looks at the screen rendition of Solovyov's three dominant discourses – statist-militarist, bourgeois-liberal, and religious-philosophical – through the grid of *katechon* (or "that which restrains") in its Biblical, and above all, in its political philosophic meaning (following Carl Schmitt, Georgio Agamben and Sergei Prozorov). Furthermore, by introducing the concept of intermedial *katechon*, the article argues that while Puiu's audio-visual rendition remains congenially faithful to the original, it transcends its allusions to the tragic 20th century, and illuminates our murky times of ubiquitous (bio-)political, social, intellectual, and above all ethical angst.

Keywords: *katechon*, Anti-Christ, anomie, Tolstoy and Tolstoyanism, bare life.

> "Nikolai: In any event, it is clear that the negative increases with the positive. The sum tends toward zero." (*Malmkrog*)

Arguably Cristi Puiu's most intricate film so far, *Malmkrog* (2020) comprises nearly three-and-a-half hours of intense discussions about some of the most pertinent questions of our times since the Industrial Revolution – about the ethics of war and progress, the inevitable end of history, and about the elusive nature of Good and Evil – posited by the Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyov at the closing of the 19th century. It is difficult to think of a handful of filmmakers who would be interested in Solovyov's prophetic prose, and of even fewer who would be successful in pulling off its screen adaptation. Which makes Puiu's screen rendition

of *War, Progress, and the End of History* (subtitled *Three Conversations Including a Short Story of the Anti-Christ* and published in 1899, one year before the author's death), nothing short of congenial since it not only remains faithful to the original, but transcends its allusions to the tragic 20th century, and illuminates our murky times of paramount angst – medical, social, political, but, above all, ethical.

My interest in this film was sparked by the way it develops two major themes – the conjunction of ethics and aesthetics, and the phenomenology of evil – which in my view have been ingeniously tackled by the New Romanian Cinema, and on which I have devoted a few publications since the early years of the millennium (2013, 2016, 2019b). These themes have also inspired me to describe the unique cinematic phenomenon of New Romanian Cinema as existentialist realist, where "austere aesthetics […] reinforced by its archetypal narrative structures, brings together contents, minimalist form, and ethics into a compact philosophical entity, comparable to the philosophical propositions of Ludwig Wittgenstein, which he also described as 'pictures of reality'" (Stojanova 2019a, 12). Most importantly, however, the existentialist realism of New Romanian Cinema is "not only a philosophy and an aesthetic approach," but also "a way of life for its directors" who, in the words of Søren Kierkegaard, find in their work "'a truth that is true for [them]. . . the idea for which [they] can live or die'" (Stojanova 2019a, 12).

The powerful ethical-aesthetic congruity of Cristi Puiu's works has predetermined his formative influence on the movement and its Existentialist Realist aesthetic to a great extent. Of particular importance is the theme of death at the heart of his oeuvre, and the way Puiu sees it played out in a society that, albeit officially atheist, is deeply gnostic, and thus intimately interested in the interplay of Good and Evil as independent Manichean forces of equal standing rather than in Christian terms as the confrontation between Good, identified with God, and Evil, which is merely the absence of the Good. As Mircea Eliade, the renowned Romanian cultural anthropologist states, "the Balkan peninsula is both a crossroad and a zone of conservatism in which the arrival of a wave of higher culture does not necessarily dissolve and obliterate the earlier form of culture simply by its success" (1972, 160). It is therefore understandable why besides Puiu – and Sinişa Dragin before him – an increasing number of New Romanian Cinema directors[1] offer fascinating interpretations of Evil on screen, interlaced with oblique references to the Antichrist.[2]

1 E.g. Gabriel Achim in *The Last Day* (*Ultima zi*, 2016), Bogdan Mirică in *Dogs* (*Câini*, 2016), Marian Crişan in *Horizon* (*Orizont*, 2015), Constantin Popescu in *Pororoca* (2017). For more on the topic, see Stojanova 2019b.

2 Curiously enough, the promotional text for Achim's *The Last Day*, quoted on the film's IMDB

The Christian *Katechon* of the Gospel

Yet for Solovyov – and for Puiu – Anti-Christ is of a different magnitude; unlike Christ, he is not an incarnate abstraction, and mythological entities like Lucifer, or Beelzebub do little to capture his omnipresent, yet elusive presence which, if personified, would be hardly discernible from the rest of us. For as Nikolai – the screen version of Solovyov's original stand-in, Mr. Z, and principal moderator of the *Three Conversations* – warns us at the very end of the film, "in ecclesiastical literature, we find only his passport, with his distinguishing marks,"[3] but nothing about his individuality. He then leaves his companions, promising to soon return with the manuscript by a certain monk, called Pansophius (or the "all-wise"), which would reveal the true nature of the Anti-Christ. And although he never comes back – Puiu leaves it up to us to seek out and read the perilously genuine *Short Story of the Anti-Christ*, the epilogue of *War, Progress, and the End of History* – Nikolai's closing announcement throws in high relief all references to the Anti-Christ (seven, to be precise) throughout the film. Furthermore, these references link the book – and the film – to St. Paul's *Second Letter to the Thessalonians* (or *2 Thessalonians 2*),[4] and its warnings against the plan of the Anti-Christ to "make people wrong," i.e., to bring them to a state of *anomie*.[5] Albeit the Letter – being mostly preoccupied with the *exposure* of the Anti-Crist – never identifies him by name (Ἀντίχριστος)[6], but calls him "man of lawlessness," "man of Evil,"

website, reads: "The devil used to tempt people, nowadays he doesn't even bother. He just shows them the way and wishes them 'safe journey!'"

3 Direct citations from Solovyov's book are identified throughout the text, all rest are from the transcribed English subtitles of the film.

4 "3 Do not let anyone fool you in any way. Before the day of the Lord comes, many people will stop believing God (*Apostasy*). The Man of Evil [*the man of lawlessness, the son of perdition*] will be seen […]. 4 He will put himself against God. He will put himself above everything to do with God, and above everything that people worship. He will sit in God's holy place and tell people that he is God […]. 6 And you know what is holding that evil man back. He will not be seen until it is his time to be seen. 7 The plan to make people wrong (*anomie*) has already begun to work. But someone is holding back that plan (*ho katechon*). He will stop the law-breaker for a time. 8 Then that evil man will be seen. The Lord Jesus will kill him with the breath from his mouth. The coming of the Lord Jesus will be so bright and wonderful that it will put the evil man to an end (*Parousia*)." 2 Thessalonians 2, from *Worldwide English (New Testament) (WE)*, *https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Worldwide-English-New-Testament-WE/*. Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

5 In a sociological sense, *anomie* is described by Émile Durkheim as "instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values or from a lack of purpose or ideals." See: *https://www.britannica.com/topic/anomie.* Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

6 The idea of the Anti-Christ (singular and plural) is derived from the First and Second Epistles of John, where it is employed to designate "those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (2 John 1:7) and whoever "denies the Father and the Son" (1 John 2:22), making

and "son of perdition" – it speaks for the first time about the fateful role of the *katechon* as the sole restrainer (in Greek: *τὸ κατέχον*) of his actions. According to the Letter, the *katechon* is "what is holding that evil man" – and his rebellion or Apostasy (apostasía / *ἀποστασία*) – "back," preventing his plan from coming to pass. Yet in doing so, the *Katechon* also prevents the Anti-Christ from being exposed, that is, from being seen for what he is, and killed by Lord Jesus, and therefore simultaneously impeding the "bright and wonderful" Second Coming of Christ (or the *Parousia* / *παρουσία*).

St. Paul's Letter gives preferences to euphemisms, foregrounding the devastating socio-political effects of *anomie* – normlessness or lawlessness. Due to what political thinker Sergei Prozorov (2012, 489) calls "extreme political intensity," the Letter has been defined as "one of the foundational texts of the Western political tradition," despite reservations, calling for treating it only "as an obscure" passage in an ancient church epistle, which could hardly play any role in our secular contemporary politics.

The Secular *Katechon* of Schmitt and Agamben

The paradoxical duality of the *katechon* as both restrainer (of evil) and preventer (of good), accounts for the longevity of this eschatological metaphor in modern and postmodern social and political thought, which secularized – or rather neutralized – the term by the early twentieth century. One of the most prominent places among the *katechon* secularizers belongs to Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), a follower of Thomas Hobbes[7] and German political economist, who equates Pauline's *katechon* with the (Christian) Capitalist State as the sole restrainer of the forces of social *anomie*, and protector of the bourgeoisie (or the citizenry) against descending into the Hobbesian "state of nature" and "war of everyone against everyone else." Thus in its "neutral and general sense the katechon refers to any constituted authority" which – while "delaying the social catastrophe" – also "simultaneously withholds a radical redemption from it" (Prozorov 2012, 487).

them unbelievers in the Christian revelation and therefore also candidates for Antichrist status. According to the Revelation of St. John, an apocalyptic catastrophe would bring the era of Christ to a dramatic end, signalling the triumph of Antichrist as reincarnation of Satan.

7 Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was an English philosopher, considered the central figure in the secularization of the *katechon* for "his theory of sovereignty seeks precisely to ward off the anomic catastrophe of war of every man against every man […] whose potentiality is inscribed in the state of nature" (Prozorov 2012, 487).

The neutralization (or secularization) of the *katechon* was further developed by the Italian social-religious philosopher Giorgio Agamben, notable representative of the so-called "messianic turn" of the postmodern thought, epitomized by such diverse figures like Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Derrida, Alain Badiou, and Zygmunt Bauman. Building on Schmitt, but mostly on Thomas Hobbes – Agamben goes on to claim that the "covenant" of the modern democratic state with its subjects or citizenry, "is void," since "the subject is simultaneously abandoned *by* the sovereign, i.e. left without his protection, and abandoned *to* the sovereign's unlimited exercise of violence" (italics in the original, qtd. in Prozorov 2012, 487). If in Schmitt's understanding "the secularized katechon is legitimized as the only force that wards off the natural *anomie* and the end of the social order as we know it," Agamben "suggests that the katechon is the Anti-Christ that perpetuates its reign by concealing the fact of its long having arrived and pretending to be the 'lesser evil,' to ward off its own advent" (Prozorov 2012, 487). In Agamben's understanding then, "the idea of the katechon is an insidious device, by which 'substantially illegitimate,' anomic power perpetuates its reign, diverting the quest for redemption to the preoccupation with protection against the 'greater evil'" (Prozorov 2012, 487). In other words, because of its preoccupation with bio-politics, meant to restrain "the natural state" – that is, human nature – the modern democratic state reduces its subject to *homo sacer*[8] in a state of "bare life,"[9] and is therefore no *katechon*, but the Anti-Christ, the evil incarnate itself, paving the shortest cut from democracy to totalitarianism.[10]

8 According to Agamben, *Homo Sacer* is, a "paradoxical figure […] one who may not be sacrificed, yet may be murdered with impunity." See: *A Dictionary of Critical Theory https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095943431*. Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

9 A term Agamben created, according to *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, by merging the "two different words… ancient Greeks had for what in contemporary European languages is simply referred to as 'life': *bios* (the form or manner in which life is lived) and *zoē* (the biological fact of life)." His argument is "that the loss of this distinction obscures the fact that in a political context, the word 'life' refers more or less exclusively to the biological dimension or *zoē* and implies no guarantees about the quality of the life lived." *https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095446660*. Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

10 An intriguing take on the political-religious dimensions of the *katechon* is offered by British political scientist David G. Lewis in his recently published and very relevant book in light of the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (2020). Among others, the author (2020, 211) links contemporary Russian politics to Solovyov's critique of Slavophilism as a form of Russian messianism, and subjects to heavy criticism the ultraconservative ideas of New Eurasianism, propounded by Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin, and particularly the way he relates them to Carl Schmitt's understanding of the *katechon* (2020, 193–215).

Puiu's Intermedial *Katechon*: Summary

Bearing in mind the rich epistemic potential of the concept, which implies the complexity of any struggle for restriction of chaos, this paper introduces the notion of an intermedial *katechon*, entailing sophisticated narrative and audio-visual artistic approaches, designed to preserve the authenticity of Solovyov's ideas with their prophetic urgency from being diluted into the mire of postmodern philosophical relativity, where "everything could be otherwise" as Ludwig Wittgenstein has cautioned us in Proposition 5.634 of his *Tractatus*.[11]

In adapting Solovyov's book, Puiu has brought it closer to our current realities by making it palatable without affecting its original meaning and wording, which in itself is a tremendous feat. It is this unique artistic brilliance – equally successful in critiquing, even ironizing Solovyov's ideas while endorsing them; in historicizing while also contemporizing them; and ultimately in entertaining while educating us – which I have defined as Puiu's intermedial *katechon*. Intermedial, because he uses audio-visual techniques, borrowed from paintings, theatre, cinema, widely different musical genres and multi-layered sound montage, not to mention structural borrowings from philosophical dialogues. And *katechon*, because the resultant fluid artistic and discursive *heteroglossia* allows competing media and meanings to reinforce each other in vying for the viewers' attention, yet to simultaneously keep the viewers focused on the ideas discussed by ingeniously warding off attempts at their resolution or vulgarization.

Puiu's intermedial *katechon* is thus instrumental in the screen rendition of Solovyov's three dominant discourses – statist-militarist, bourgeois-liberal, and religious-philosophical – focused respectively on the contradictory role of the (Russian imperial) State; on (pan) European civilization; and on (Christian Orthodox) religious beliefs in the eternal struggle of Good vs Evil. What is more, by designing the *mise-en-scène* of the debates as a succession of *tableaux vivants*, seeped in warm dark colours and shot by Tudor Vladimir Panduru in panopticon-like manner, Puiu tampers the crudeness of cinematic realism, transposing the action to an alien, yet canny realm. The captivating visuals thus lay bare the social sterility and political limitations, which have affected such crucial philosophical discourses then, at the end of the 19th century. And at the same time compellingly demand from us to confront these discourses in their

11 According to the proposition, if there is no "part of our experience that is a priori," then "everything we see could also be otherwise" and "everything we describe at all could also be otherwise" (Wittgenstein [1922] 2015, 87–88).

new apparition, recognize the pressing need to relate to them, and debate their relevance to our day and time.

In this line of thought, the intermedial *katechon* permits Puiu to offer an aesthetic equivalent of Solovyov's ideas and – via the rich *heteroglossia* – bring into high relief the paradox of the freedom of choice – one of the fundamental tenets of his philosophy. By presenting Solovyov's text as prudently as possible, he situates its personages within a scrupulously defined and ingeniously visualized historical moment and yet suggests that – as any freedom of choice obliges – we approach Solovyov's ideas without prejudice and bearing in mind their inherent disposition to what Carl Gustav Jung calls *enantiodromia*,[12] that is, their tendency to turn into their opposite at the blink of an eye within different historical, ideological, and political contexts.

The Intermedial *Katechon*: Narrative and Architectonic Dimensions

Puiu's intermedial *katechon* is instrumental in limiting the representation of immanent social problems, which would have drained Solovyov's ideas from their archetypal energies, reducing them to political slogans. It is with this caution in mind – that "everything could be otherwise" in "the absence of an a priori experience" – that Puiu approaches Solovyov's text.

To begin with, while generally respecting the original chronology, Puiu's script observes – in the best traditions of the New Romanian Cinema – the Aristotelian unities of time and space. And instead of following the characters over several days in the bright summary climes of the French Riviera, Puiu has the five interlocutors confined, from dawn to dusk – or as Aristotle has it, for a "single revolution of the sun" – within the sprawling reception quarters of a wealthy Transylvanian manor around Christmas time in the 1890s (Aristotle [350 BCE] 1994). Furthermore, Puiu has altered the gender balance of Solovyov's *dramatis personae* from four men and one woman to three women and two men; and has both internationalized and individualized the original "cast." Thus although nominally Russian, his characters converse in French, speak with the servants in either German or Hungarian (in tune with the linguistic realities of Transylvania at that time), and very rarely use Russian. Finally, Puiu has changed

12 Borrowed from Heraclitus, *enantiodromia* is a term defined as "an essential characteristic of all homeostatic systems," pertaining to "the inherent compensatory tendency of all entities, pushed to the extreme, to go over to their opposites" (Stevens 1990, 140).

their names from generic – the General, the Politician, the Lady, the Prince and Mr. Z – to the respectively cosmopolitan-sounding Ingrida, Edouard, Madeleine, and the Russian Olga and Nikolai. By selecting excellent theatre actors, Puiu has made sure that his personages are full-blooded characters and not just anthropomorphized mouth-pieces. Two of the actors – Ugo Broussot (Edouard) and Diana Sakalauskaité (Ingrida) attended a theatre workshop in Toulouse, led by Puiu in 2011, and participated in his little known film *Three Exercises in Interpretation* (*Trois exercices d'interprétation*, 2013). A dry run in preparation of *Malmkrog*, *Three Exercises* is an edited record of table-top readings of Solovyov's *Three Conversations*. The other actors – Marina Palii (Olga), Frédéric Schulz-Richard (Nikolai), and Agathe Bosch (Madeleine), as well as the two in the supporting roles, István Téglás as the Chief Butler and Levente Nemes as the Colonel – are all well known in their respective countries (Romania, France, and Hungary) as theatre rather than film actors; an extremely important condition with regard to the convincing delivery of the philosophical text.

Further impelled by the need to structure Solovyov's text, Puiu has divided the film into six parts of unequal length, five of which are named after the main characters (I Ingrida, III Edouard, IV Nikolai, V Olga, VI Madeleine), and one – after the Chief Butler (II István). This intervention provides a narrative, aesthetic, as well as ethical structure of the film against the proliferation of meanings – forbiddingly complex or seemingly outdated – inspired by Solovyov's text and bound to overwhelm the contemporary viewer. On the one hand, the intertitle plates create a sense of formal order in the film narrative, and also allow for a respite in-between the parts of this unusually long film. On the other hand, the intertitles focus the viewer's attention on the eponymous characters, on the dress, meals, and behavioural code they – as well as everyone else present – abide by, construing these as a kind of restrainer, a flimsy *katechon* of sorts against the increasing signs of on and off-screen *anomie*.

The Statist-Militarist *Katechon*: Ingrida

Understandably, Puiu takes yet another step to contemporize and universalize Solovyov's principal philosophical concerns. Thus the *First Conversation on War* is inaugurated by Ingrida, who Puiu introduces in lieu of Solovyov's General. The General is dispensed of at the very beginning of the film, and we only see a glimpse of him bidding his good-byes on his way out of the manor. This substitution is no small directorial feat as Ingrida, as the General's wife, does a much better job

with her stern, impressive demeanour in the ensuing heated discussion on war, its divine nature, and its role in the battle between Good and Evil. Indeed, such a militaristic stance commands a much closer attention when coming from an intelligent woman who, although past her prime, is still stunning, elegant and well-spoken – rather than from a high-ranking solder! Thus by naming Part I of the film, Ingrida, the director justifies her throwing in the General's original anti-Tolstoyan (and in light of current events in Russia, prophetic) remark "Does a Christ-loving glorious Tsarist army exist at this moment, yes or no?" – used by Solovyov as a starting point of the discussion in the *First Conversation on War* – and focuses our attention on the manner she fiercely carries through her militarist argument.

At the heart of the *First Conversation* is an excerpt Ingrida reads from a letter her husband wrote to her during one of the Russian-Turkish wars from the second half of the 19th century. The letter graphically describes the "barbaric" atrocities a mercenary, Bashi-Basouk army inflicted on an Armenian village in Asia minor, followed by a no less barbaric, "eye for an eye" response on behalf of her husband's regiment. Her most passionate opponent is Olga – another apt rendition of an original character, that of the Prince – who is an epitome of the pacifist Tolstoyan position,[13] and therefore against any violence, especially when perpetrated in the name of God. Despite her counterarguments, put forth with poignant earnestness – Olga even faints at one point, unable to sustain the mounting intellectual and emotional pressure – the offhand participation of Nikolai and Edouard help run into the ground this verily contemporaneous discussion about justification of holy wars. Yet although the film – like Solovyov's original for that matter – fails to offer a viable response to the basic ethical question as to why atrocities in the name of the higher Good – whether Christian fate, Freedom, Democracy, etc., – are somehow better and nobler than atrocities, perpetrated by "barbarous evils" like the Ottomans, it offers solid justification for the existence of Schmitt's secular *katechon*. For the war waged by the General and his army, while nominally in the name of God as the higher Good, is actually waged to strengthen and enlarge the Russian Empire; the Armenian village episode is only a detour in the right direction. And since according to Schmitt the only force that could prevent a total collapse into the "state of nature," and could "provide a bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events, and a tremendous historical monolith like that of the Christian empire of the German kings" is "the belief that

13 The Tolstoyan social movement was based on the philosophical and religious views of Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), whose views were formed by rigorous study of the ministry of Jesus, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. Famous followers of Tolstoyanism are Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Ludwig Wittgenstein, etc.

a restrainer holds back the end of the world" (Schmitt 2003, 60). In other words, the subject of Ingrida's belief – as well as that of Schmitt – "is not a figure of the divine but rather a secular force" – a state, an empire – that "restrains the ultimate advent of the divine," allowing for the energy of the people to be harnessed in the name of the higher Good as defined by the Sovereign (Prozorov 2012, 486).

The Intermedial *Katehcon* of Gesturality and Sound Ineffability: István

Before moving to the *Second Conversation on Progress,* or Part III of the film: Edouard, it is important to note Puiu's meticulous attention to the amalgamation between the concrete materiality of the physical world, shown on screen, and the existential metaphysics of the dialogue, which Ágnes Pethő has succinctly formulated in her analysis of *Sieranevada* as "gesturality" of objects […] prevailing over the image, yet "all point[ing] to people having placed them there" (2020, 420). In *Malmkrog* the "gesturality" of beautiful objects – well-designed furniture, leather-clad books covering the walls, paintings, sculptures, ornate candle holders, beautiful crystals and china, expensive clothes, stylishly served meals, etc., definitely contributes to the intellectual intensity of the *Conversations*, serving, as does the soundtrack, as an unspoken argument in support or in opposition to its main theses – in this case the role of Civilization and Progress, which Edouard is about to passionately defend as the sole *katechon* against lawlessness.

The highly suggestive gesturality of objects in *Malmkrog* is instrumental in both scrupulously identifying the historicity of time and space circa 1899, and in transcending it by creating a contemporary mental comfort necessary for transposing the viewer amidst Solovyov's world of ideas. This transcendence is further enhanced – to quote Pethő's discussion of *Sieranevada* again – by the feeling of being "immersed not so much in a story, but in a world," where "the sensuous universe of voices" and "rich choreography of gesticulating bodies […] renounces classical dramaturgy" for the sake of "fluctuations in tensions, endlessly repeated acts of comings and goings from one room to another," with all of this happening in a "quasi-real time format," which amounts to an experience resembling "site-specific theatre" (2020, 420). Yet while the intellectual, emotional, and physical commotion of *Sieranevada* affects each character, thus betraying the egalitarianism of Romanian post-communist society, in *Malmkrog* the character movements are definitely correlated with their place in the social

hierarchy. Indeed, the carefully choreographed laidback passages of the five interlocutors from one spacious space into another, morph elegantly into reposes around breakfast or dining tables, on sofas, or around the grand piano. Their self-assured and purposeful slowness is contrasted by the increasing motility of the personnel, lurking on the back and middle ground under the keen eye of István, the Chief Butler. Therefore, the naming of Part II: István, after a character non-existent in the original – and interlacing it, so to speak, with the *Conversation on Progress* – is decisive in augmenting Solovyov's polyphony of characters and ideas. And although we hear István say but a few words – he is mostly gesturing or giving brisk orders to the servants, and even slapping one of them over the unsavoury taste of the samovar tea water – his ubiquity brings to bear the role he and his employees play in securing the precarious *katechon* of statist order and bourgeois splendour. And while István and his people surely do not own the beautiful objects, they are intrinsically related to them as they are the ones who keep them in "place," thus creating this crucial sense of security and permanency.

As the film evolves, we also become sensitized to the ineffably sensual dimension to each episode, originating from the masterful parallel editing of folly sounds and musical pieces. The film opens with the muffled chiming of church bells somewhere from beyond a frosty wood, and a child is being lovingly summoned into a white-column mansion at the foot of a snow-covered mountain. The bells of a passing-by herd of sheep blend in with Stevan Mokranjac's divine Christian-Orthodox psalm *We Sing to Thee* – thus creating an inimitably nostalgic atmosphere of a harmony long lost, yet passionately yearned for. In fact, the background soundtrack would gradually – along with the *mise-en-scène* – establish itself as a distinct voice in the film's *heteroglossia*.

The statist-military *Conversation*, dominated by Ingrid's deep and assertive voice, is punctuated by noises, beckoning the invisible but busy life of the manor. Initially benign and sporadic – like doors banging at the far end of the house; sotto-voce exchanges among the servants; a group of street singers at the door wishing to congratulate the residents with Christmas – blend reassuringly within the general atmosphere of material comfort. Yet some of the noises begin to take a markedly disturbing life of their own – loud clatter of kitchenware; commotion, signalling a medical emergency and the hurried arrival of a doctor; an agitated child rushing into the guest premises and briskly whisked away by a nanny – thus creating a foreboding dissonance with the intellectual coziness in the guest quarters. The growing sense of menace on the sound track reaches its peak, as shall be seen, during the *Second Conversation on Progress*, that is, in Part III: Edouard.

The *Katechon* of Civilization: Edouard

A screen version of Solovyov's Politician, Edouard is a diplomat, a libertine, an admirer of everything Western – and a self-nominated gambler. A self-confident man of delicate stature, considerate and sympathetic, Edouard however seems to be taken not very seriously by his companions. The thesis he propounds is that neither State nor Empire, let alone God or the Military, but the bourgeois Civilization, a stronghold of Progress and Culture, is only capable of securing lasting peace and prosperity. And the life it would bring, is bound to invariably make people better and brighter, and open to lofty ideas, to art and philosophy, as well as to religion, if they so wish, but not necessarily. Therefore, all European countries, along with Russia, should come together in this march towards Civilization under the banners of Progress – preferably peacefully but most likely pugnaciously – against "barbarous" civilizations like the Ottoman and the Chinese, perceived as the biggest threats. To achieve this, however, a pan-European union should be established, something like the United States of Europe, with Russia as part of it.

Edouard's stand on war is curious – while he believes that any inter-European war is "insane and internecine" – he defends what he calls an "anti-war," which is not of the in-the-name of-God kind of war Ingrida has previously defended, but rather a Just War, which is waged in the name of European Civilization. For, as Edouard competently declares, "first there were only Greek Europeans… then all the rest appeared … then … American Europeans, now it is the turn of the Turkish Europeans, Persian, Indian, Japanese, and even Chinese Europeans." For, in his view, "European is a notion with a well-defined content, which is constantly growing."[14]

Edouard obviously belongs to those hapless hedonists and opportunists whose idealistic worldview would soon crumble in the conflagration of two world wars, while their illusions of a better, just world order, guaranteed by an inclusive democratic state, would turn into a cruel mockery – first by Bolshevism, then by Fascism and Communism, and finally by Bio-politics – until totally buried under the trash of ubiquitous consumerism. Unlike the divisive first and last conversations, featured in Parts I, IV and V, this one – quite appropriately for its subject matter – is rather tame and the discussants have no problem agreeing to disagree. In the absence of Olga and in the mostly disinterested presence of Nikolai

14 If this sounds too colonialist and even racist, then changing European Civilization to Global Civilization would definitely contemporize Edouard's discourse (without however making it less colonialist or racist), and reveals, once again, Solovyov's prophetic stance.

and Ingrida – whose tongue in cheek remarks focus on Edouard's frequent visits to Monte Carlo rather than on his world views – it is Madeleine who remains his only, albeit offhand interlocutor, surmising sardonically that if the subject of the previous conversation was God and War, now it is Culture and Peace, with culture understood mostly as synonymous to politeness, good manners, and good food.

It is thus significant that the off-screen chaos, growing over the first hour or so of the film, comes to a head during Edouard's passionate defense of the civilizational benefits of a pan-European culture and democracy. The tail end of this *Second Conversation* becomes drowned in a loud piano banging of a ragtime, accompanied by jovial drunken laughter and off-tune singing voices, forcing Edouard to repeat passages of his tirade in order to be heard. Immediately preceded by Nikolai's inability to summon István as the guardian of domestic order, and Madeleine's remark that the situation is increasingly remindful of a "comic opera" house, the culmination occurs on the top of the second hour of screening time. The cook, followed by other servants, rushes into the quest dining rooms, screaming "Zoechka, Zoya!"[15] Shots are heard, glass is broken (or explodes), Edouard and Nikolai drop to the floor, the room is filled with smoke, yet it never becomes clear as to whether the turmoil was caused by some kind of a man-made (social) cataclysm or a natural disaster. The screen goes black, and opens again on a serene panoramic shot of the guests, all of them intact, leisurely strolling in the wintery park just outside the mansion, with chaos and normlessness once again restrained – if not by State or Civilization, then at least by Puiu's Intermedial *katechon*, which has relegated them once again to the safety of the off-screen space.

The *Katechon* of Bio-politics: The Colonel

This major disruption could easily have been explained away as a class-motivated upheaval, making *Malmkrog* comparable to Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (*La règle du jeu,* 1939) or its contemporized version *Gosford Park* (Robert Altman, 2001), if Puiu had not kept Solovyov's original *dramatis personae* strictly separated from his add-ons, thus creating a very clever simile of the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire, which exploded in the murderous social conflagration of the Bolshevik Revolution as soon as elites and ordinary people – kept apart for so long – came together under the Provisional Government in March–October 1917.

15 It might be reading too much into it, but the name is directly derived from the Greek *zoē*, which Agamben translates as "bare life."

In any case, the metaphoric representation of social tensions in *Malmkog* is way more effective than its literal realistic rendition in Renoir's and Altman's films as the growing turmoil in the background of the *Conversations* here adds yet another mental dimension to the three main discourses. And the eruption of *anomie*, which derails the *Second Conversation*, also exposes the dangerous *enantiodrom*ic propensity of Western Progress, and the porousness of Civilization as a *katechon*. Stability is however quickly restored and normlessness is once again restrained by the still strong statist *katechon*.

Yet there is one kind of disruption that neither State nor Civilization or Religion could contain, and which Puiu chooses to look at: the disruption of Illness, Age, and Death, epitomized in the film by the old and ailing Colonel, the significance of whose existence on and off screen could be best seen in light of Agamben's bio-political *katechon*. To reiterate, Agamben insists that by diverting the quest for (spiritual) redemption to preoccupation with bio-politics, meant to restrain "the natural state" – that is, human nature at its worst, including illness and death – the modern democratic state reduces its subjects to "bare life."

The Colonel, although non-existent in Solovyov, is created by Puiu in tune with the Russian philosopher's prophetic stance, and – among other things – in support of the argument that Death is the greatest and irredeemable Evil, espoused by Nikolai in the *Third Conversation*. In contrast to the omnipresent and motile István, the Colonel is bed-ridden in his rooms at the far end of the lofty premises on the ground floor, where the five main characters converse over a succession of formal meals, punctuated by tea, coffee, and wine drinking. A continuously destabilizing presence on dramatic level, the Colonel is first seen at the beginning of the film, in the early morning, when Ingrida's husband, the General, makes a deliberate point to bid him good-bye before hitting the road on his urgent mission. Thereafter, Puiu reminds us of the Colonel by including – along with the other disruptive "bursts of real life" – audial and visual vignettes, indicative of his health emergencies, but remains deliberately vague about who the Colonel actually is, and why Nikolai and Olga are so concerned about his well-being.

In the context of the *Second Conversation*, whose focus is on the limitless potential of Progress, the Colonel provides a powerful counterpoint, foregrounding the biological limitations of such a Civilizational utopia. In other words, despite of his high rank and visible wealth, the Colonel is already reduced to "bare life" as infirmity and old age have all but destroyed the quality of his life, seen by Edouard as the high-end product of European Civilization.

And yet, at the turn of the twentieth century, the *katechon* of Carl Schmitt's (Christian) Capitalist State of modernity was still effective in protecting the affluent social strata against the "state of nature." Even so, the disturbing manifestations of normlessness observed so far point to other, much more tangible threats to the Civilizational utopia, put into ideological and historical perspective by a telling, semi-audible exchange between the Colonel and István, planted by Puiu just prior to the last *Conversation on the End of History*. The cluttered soundtrack, featuring house noises of caregivers moving in and out of the Colonel's rooms, is dominated by an unpleasant child-like voice struggling with a tune, accompanied by an equally irking piano playing. The exchange in question is partially seen from the vantage point of Nikolai who – dressed in formal evening attire – idles in front of the Colonel's rooms while waiting to accompany Madeleine to the dinner table. The Colonel, having just been given a bath and tucked into freshly changed sheets, is heard asking István what is the actual meaning of the first lines of *L'Internationale* – "Arise, life's accursed / Arise, those condemned to hunger!"[16] This exchange between a powerful man, reduced to "bare life," and his butler on whom he is entirely dependent, could be seen as the "message in the intermedial bottle" Pethő wrote about (2020, 399), meant to suggest a possible interpretation of the normlessness, so diligently restrained via various *katechon*s, including the intermedial one. The rumbling chaos could therefore be understood as an expression of the growing tensions between an ageing old elite and an emerging young social stratum, determined to overcome its class limitations by making itself first indispensable, and then gradually take over. There is nothing civilizational or progressive in the *L'Internationale* exchange between István and the Colonel since – judging from István's attitude to his employees – they equally detest people "who want to work less but earn more" as the Colonel suggests. The only difference being that the Colonel belongs to the more sophisticated yester elites, and István – to the upstarts who are about to helm the bloodiest social revolutions of the twentieth century – the Bolshevik and the Fascist, and thus clear the way for the insidious bio-political state, which – being Anti-Christ incarnate, would pretend to be the *katechon*, preventing his own advent. Caught in-between are the intellectuals and the intelligentsia – that is, Solovyov's interlocutors, whose ideas, to reverse Mephistopheles's famous dictum, are "Part of that Power, not understood / Which always wills the Good, and always works the Bad" (Goethe [1808] 2005).

16 *The International*, hymn of the world proletariat movement, verses by Eugène Pottier, 1871.

The Religious-Philosophical *Katechon*: Nikolai and Olga

Yet it is still late 19th century on screen, Nikolai closes the door to the Colonel's room, and takes Madeleine to the dining room, where the last, *Third Conversation* is to take place. As already mentioned, Nikolai, as Puiu's version of Solovyov's Mr. Z, is a good-looking, well-mannered, and intellectually smug interlocutor who likes to play the devil's advocate – an image enhanced by his well-trimmed goatee and fashionable moustache. A controversial – and often confrontational – role, which he vindicates, citing the Gospel: "He came to bring us the Truth, and the Truth, like the Good, is a sword, it divides." Nikolai is obviously also quite wealthy – the host of the *Conversations* and most likely the owner of the sprawling Malmkrog estate – and therefore far removed from Mr. Z as stand-in of the Russian philosopher, whose generosity reportedly led him to donate to the needy anything he owned, including the clothes on his back.

Olga, on the other hand, is the youngest and most idealistic amongst the five main characters, and is also Nikolai's favourite target. The gender change from Solovyov's faceless Prince to Puiu's beautiful Olga – gentle and fragile looking, yet a tenacious debater – has allowed the director to play up the philosophical and filial tensions between her and Nikolai thus forming a kind of intellectual yin and yang entity, as the director mentions in his video interview for the Berlin Film Festival in 2020.[17] Olga is cast as the voice of Tolstoyan ethics as the doctrine of life in service of the Absolute Good, which makes her vulnerable before Nikolai's unsettling reading of the Gospels. Inspired by the Mephistophelean spirit of negation who stimulates human activity through productive contradiction – and informs the works of foremost 19th-century thinkers like Goethe, Nietzsche, and Dostoyevsky – Nikolai boldly challenges the Christian dogma of God as the highest good – that is *summum bonum,* or the "totality of all goodness" – whereas Evil is – as formulated by Saint Augustine – a *privatio boni*, that is the "absence of Good" (qtd. in Eliade 1962, 79).

The religious-philosophical discourse in *Malmkrog* is concentrated around the discussion of two parables, placed strategically at the opening and at the closing of the film. By moving the first parable from its original place in the *Second Conversation on Progress* to the prologue, Puiu sets up the highly-charged intellectual atmosphere of his film. Once inside the mansion and regardless of the early breakfast hour, we are immersed in a story Nikolai is telling Madeleine. It is about two ancient hermits and the very different outcomes of their incidental

17 See Puiu's interview: "I believe that historical memory is a subjective and an emotional matter," *https://cineuropa.org/en/video/385835/*. Last accessed 23. 08. 2022.

lapse into debauchery during a three-day sojourn to Alexandria. And, as Nikolai tells Madeleine, while both of them "committed every other crime, only one met his doom – the one who became despondent" (Solovyov [1899] 1990, 76). The other one, who never admitted openly to the sins they committed, and, after a long and righteous life, died like a saint, and was canonized as one. The parable posits despondence as "the only mortal sin," because – as Nikolai puts it – "it gives birth to despair, and despair is not even a sin, it is the death of spirit itself" (Solovyov [1899] 1990, 71).

In analytical-psychological terms, the Anti-Christ represents God's dark side – or, what Jung calls the Shadow. As such, the Antichrist balances out Christ as the emanation of God's bright side, thus forming a *coniunctio oppositorum* or unity of opposites, which meets the Jungian definition of psychological wholeness. Needless to say, such an interpretation – although sound psychologically, metaphysically, and also ethically – has never been welcomed by Christian theologians, who as mentioned above, insist that God is the "totality of all goodness" and Evil – only its "absence."

In this light, the parable speaks of two very different ways of dealing with one's shadow: the first hermit succeeds in coming to terms with his despondency by integrating his dark side, and is thus able to get on with his life as a holy man. The other one, however, could not move beyond recognizing the chaos within himself, letting it ravage his soul.[18]

The second parable is in the centre of the *Third Conversation*, taking place around the dinner table. It tells the story of the hired hands who benefited from working in a vineyard, yet refused to give the owner his fair share, destroying his envoys and even killing his son. Its discussion further relativizes the problem of Good and Evil, taking it from the internal realm of psychological chaos discussed in the first parable, to the external, social one of lawlessness. The argument is provoked by Olga's Tolstoian interpretation of the parable as in her view, the vineyard stands for the Garden of God, who generously let His "servants" work there, but instead of "tending the land for their Master," they "imagined the vineyard to be their property," and "set on enjoying life," destroying those "who reminded them of Him and their duties." The sad result, Olga concludes, is that "almost everyone lives today like them," oblivious to the fact that neither the Garden nor their own lives belong to them, but to their Master.

18 Interestingly enough, the issue of despondency comes up a few times in the Conversation on Progress, apparently reflecting Solovyov's own concerns with his dark side, and the need to keep it at bay.

Nikolai vehemently counters Olga's interpretation, censuring her doctrinal attempt to strip the servants – the husbandmen (or "hired hand's") in the Gospel – of agency, and suggests that the original text of the parable does not profess sheepish submission but rather freedom of choice as the ultimate ethical responsibility. And points out that the problem with the "husbandmen" is not their "unholy" desire to live like "pleasure-taking mushrooms" as Olga has scornfully put it, but in their ethical ignorance. In other words, by ignoring their Lord's envoys, and ultimately killing His son, the husbandmen have made a deliberate choice to not "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's" – that is, to ignore the Law, both secular and divine – and have thus sealed their unsavoury fate. All the more that Nikolai has little respect for the Lawmaker, claiming that as long as "this Master who asks others to do good, but himself does not, who lays down obligations, but does not show love, who does not show you his face, but lives abroad, incognito, I will remain convinced he is none other than 'the god of this age,'" that is, the Antichrist.[19]

Yet Nikolai is equally critical of those who sheepishly follow the Law, especially doctrines of the Absolute Good thus implying that Tolstoy and Tolstoyanism could be instrumental in the dangerous *enantiodromic* reversal of Christian spirituality and ethics to their opposite. Indeed, as Solovyov argues when analyzing the ambivalent nature of contemporary evil, freedom of choice – while providing the only possibility to eradicate evil – could as easily breed it out of control. As Czeslaw Milosz remarks in his 1990 preface to the English edition of *Three Conversations*, Solovyov never appreciated "the metaphysical void of hollowed-up Christianity that leaves in its wake only a social, ethical message." By painting his Antichrist as the Great – and Tolstoy-like – Do-Gooder, combining demonic traits with traits of love and kindness, Solovyov "tries to warn humanity of the consequences of such a purely horizontal religion, reduced to ethics, without a vertical dimension" (Solovyov [1899] 1990, 12).

19 Nikolai's interpretation of the two Biblical parables, and his argument in general, is heavily influenced by the Gnostic understanding of good and evil as two separate divine forces, caught in perennial struggle. Solovyov's religious thought was heavily influenced by Gnosticism, resulting in what is known in literary criticism as "Solovyov's philosophical Sophiology" (see Glukhova, 2016), expressed in his poetic works, devoted to Pistis Sophia (known also as world-soul, emanation of wisdom, the eternal feminine, etc.).

In Lieu of Conclusion: Madeleine

Although the odd person out, denied a strong conceptual voice of her own, Madeleine does an excellent job in keeping the debates going with her intent interest and witty remarks. Always clad stylishly in black, she is amicably engaged in all aspects of the otherwise irreconcilable viewpoints of the two opposing pairs of interlocutors, yet her big dark eyes consistently betray aloof disengagement. Designed originally as the Lady – the only female among Solovyov's five characters – Madeleine has retained that traditionally calming aura, believed back in the 19th century to ensure decorum in heated, all male debates. Although towards the end of the evening she has her moment in the limelight with the superb performance of Schubert's *Musical Moment Number Three* on the grand piano, it only underscores the lingering heavy mood after Nikolai's conclusive pronouncements at the end of the *Third Conversation.*

The issue at hand, Nikolai said, lies not with the Christian piety or the hedonist arrogance of the "husbandmen" – and even less so with their respect for or rejection of the Law – divine or secular. But in the fact that no matter how they live, they are doomed to die. This, he said, "means that Death is the ultimate Evil and therefore *obviously* more powerful than good." Therefore, Nikolai reasoned, "if the *obvious* is the only thing real ... then the logical conclusion is that the world is the work of evil power," and therefore a Kingdom of Death rather than Kingdom of God (Solovyov [1899] 1990, 149).

Nikolai's tirades on Death and Evil chime well with Puiu's own preoccupation with death as a narrative expedient for his philosophical engagement with evil – it is enough to mention *Aurora* (2010), *Sieranevada* (2016), and particularly *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu* (*Moartea domnului Lăzărescu*, 2005). In this light, Madeleine's comforting presence makes her comparable to Mioara, the compassionate paramedic-cum-psychopomp,[20] who faithfully accompanies Mr. Lăzărescu unto his death-bed at the antechamber of the surgical theatre, lending a friendly ear to his last clumsy efforts to connect with a world that is slipping away. Imagining Madeleine as a psychopomp, ready to gently show her friends to the banks of Lethe,[21] looks increasingly plausible, given the emotional and intellectual exhaustion that has set in at this late hour, and in light of the final conversation in the music room, which takes place within the short interval after

20 I. e. in Greek mythology, the psychopomp is the guide of souls to the underground world of the dead.

21 Lethe is the Greek spirit of forgetfulness and oblivion; also the name of the River of Forgetfulness, one of the five rivers of the underworld in Greek mythology.

Nikolai's departure to bring the Anti-Christ revealing manuscript, and before the screen goes black, and the final credits roll under the sounds of Stevan Mokranjac's *We Sing to Thee*. Initiated by Edouard, the exchange dwells initially on rational attempts to explain the gradual loss of perfect clarity of vision as an objective phenomenon, and therefore sign of the mutual exhaustion, suffered by the aging interlocutors but also by the Earth, which is also getting older. However, with her remark about a disquieting "sense of foreboding," descending upon them, Madeleine makes way for Ingrida's metaphysical take on the loss of perfect clarity of vision, suggesting that it is "the devil's tail scattering fog across the created world," and a true sign of the Antichrist. To which Madeleine, with her eerily mysterious smile, retorts, "yes, Ingrida, no doubt about it."

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