



The Author and the Magician
Fusing Historical 'Mysticism' with Contemporary Cinema
in Bortko's *Master & Margarita*
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"Что бы делало твоё добро, если бы не существовало зла.
И как бы выглядела земля, если бы с нее исчезли тени?"

I. Introduction

That Mikhail Bulgakov's seminal novel *Master & Margarita* enjoys a vaunted status in Russian society is to significantly understate its influence. For all intensive purposes, the novel is a *sine qua non* of Russian literature and culture as a whole, standing shoulder to shoulder with the great masterworks of Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and all those who followed. The main difference is its relatively lesser stature on the stage of world literature vis-à-vis those works. The reasons for this are likely dual: politically, it remains, arguably, the greatest *Soviet* novel; and culturally, it is exquisitely 'Russian', and thus difficult to grasp on any level deeper than superficial for a foreign reader. The novel is, then, a relatively well-kept secret outside of Russia. However, inside Russia, it retains its force as a cultural phenomenon, as evidenced by the recent references in the Russian media to its 'mystic fame' and the great anticipation of Vladimir Bortko's adaptation of the story as a television mini-series. Simply put, to not understand the phenomenon is to not understand Russian culture. While the rest of the world was observing yuletide tradition and preparing for New Year's celebrations, Russians were tuning into their televisions *en masse*.

Aside from the overwhelming anticipation surrounding such a cultural event, the technical aspects of reproducing the Bulgakov masterpiece greatly compounded its production. For the screenplay, Bortko opted to remain absolutely faithful to Bulgakov's text, using only Bulgakov's exact words in writing it. That he drafted the screenplay nearly ten years ago is a testament to the difficulties involved with the project. Bortko was also faced with the task of bringing to life such events as Margarita flying to the ball on a broomstick, "magic with an explanation" led by the magician Woland and, by far the most bizarre and beloved of Bulgakov's literary devices, the giant talking cat Behemoth. Such imagery required the unprecedented use of every special effects group in the Russian Federation. Also compounding the problems of production was the nature of the text itself – it is an intensely rich literary work. As such, any imbalance between the three 'levels' of the story would seal its failure. The historical narrative, Soviet 'present', and supernatural events would have to be given equal treatment. Finally, casting was also difficult, as those actors chosen for characters so adored would have to adhere to the specific imagery Bulgakov described. To begin any serious analysis, some background is essential. Thus, I'll begin with a look at Bulgakov: his life, the text, and how personally he invested himself into the novel.

II. Bulgakov as 'Master'

Mikhail Afanasievich Bulgakov was born in Kiev in May 1891 to Russian parents. As was the case with many Russian artists under the rule of Stalin, his work was repressed and he suffered greatly. His exasperation at the suppression of his plays culminated in a personal letter he wrote in 1930 that was answered by Stalin himself, albeit to refuse his request for emigration. He began work on the *Master & Margarita* sometime in late 1927 or early 1928, only to burn the manuscript, which would eventually inspire the most famous line of the novel. Having been refused exile, he devoted the last decade of his life to the completion of his masterpiece, completion of which was undertaken by his wife following his death from genetically inherited kidney failure in 1940.

Bulgakov's own life is omnipresent throughout the novel. For all intensive purposes, he is the Master, and his third wife Yelena Shilovskaya inspired the character of Margarita to

no small extent. In fact, the last chapters of the novel were dictated to his wife while on his deathbed. The first appearance of the novel was in 1966 in the *Moskva* magazine, and caused a sensation at the time, as did the appearance of the second part of the novel the following year. It reinvigorated Soviet society, as Bulgakov's story delved into a world that was not only completely unfamiliar to its audience, but also unthinkable at the time. The impact was tremendous – readings were held, people gathered to discuss their favorite characters and events, and the Russian lexicon was forever changed. The sensation its appearance caused owes itself, without a doubt, to those events in Bulgakov's life that inspired his masterwork: he loathed the bureaucratic officialdom of his time, particularly in the area that affected him most, the literary circle embodied by its bureaucratic structure – *Massolit*; he burned the manuscript in a fit of paranoia; he had a devoted wife who saw him through those fits of paranoia; and one might certainly conclude that he, too, found peace only in death.

III. The Three 'Layers' of *Master & Margarita*

The defining aspect of Bulgakov's masterpiece is most certainly the eloquence and grace with which he intertwined the three narratives in the story, and the acumen and levity with which he injected heavy themes onto them. From the outset, the reader is made aware that this will be no ordinary work of literature. Woland's philosophical refutation of Kant's 'Five Proofs' for the existence of God in answer to the lack of faith of Berlioz sets the tone. Woland asserts that Kant made himself into a farce by providing a 'Sixth Proof', and he told him as much personally, over breakfast. From the very first scene, then, one witnesses the interaction of all three narratives – the historical, contemporary, and supernatural. Entire novels could be written about each, so I will focus only on those particular elements of each narrative as they relate to its adaptation to screen, by enumerating the events crucial to each.

Chapter Two is devoted to Pontius Pilate's interrogation of Jesus on charges of inciting the people to destroy the Temple of Jerusalem, and his speech on government power. It is a widely accepted view that Bulgakov used Pilate as a vehicle for the almighty (and unseen in the story) Caesar, much in the way that the petty bureaucrats of 1930's Moscow were used as an extension of the 'ever-watching' Stalin. Bulgakov is careful to stress that Pilate acquits him on the charges of inciting the people to destroy the Temple, but then sentences him for his speech on government power. The message is clear: words are the most dangerous of offences, and will not go unpunished. The effect of the message is a stroke of genius: criticism through an anachronistic lens – Bulgakov lambastes the suppression of literature under Stalin by taking his criticism out of its historical context. The implication of the speech itself – that there will come a day when there is only the rule of truth, and government power will be no longer – is also clear: the Soviet regime had become the Leviathan of bureaucracy it originally sought to abolish. For all these reasons, the seemingly 'strange theme' of Pontius Pilate is central to the story and permeates it at every level. The young poet Ivan dreams about it, Woland dictates his eyewitness account of it, Master writes it, and Margarita reads it aloud.

The contemporary narrative in the story is characterized by the farcical blunders of the Soviet authorities in their attempt to reconcile the bizarre events taking place during the novel. Bulgakov does not give names to any of the detectives or investigators of these events, and their incompetence in conjuring up an official explanation certainly intimates the violability of state terror under Stalin. Instead of focusing on the ineptitude of the authorities, he chooses to wrap all three narratives around the impressionable character of Ivan the Homeless, who serves as a sort of *Bildungsroman* character throughout. Ivan undergoes drastic changes in the course of events in the novel – from attentive listener to the figurehead of literary bureaucracy, Berlioz, to indignant citizen at

his foretold death, to placid mental patient, to willing disciple and successor to the heroine. Ivan's transformation can be 'read' in any number of ways, though the most likely interpretation is that he serves as an example – the vehicle through which Bulgakov demonstrates the courage required to live in such an oppressive system. Such courage is also found in the Faustian bargain Margarita makes, telling in that she accepts the bargain so easily and finds such release in her life as a witch.

The third narrative in the story is the one that captivated (and continues to captivate) everyone, that being the supernatural narrative. Most of the important and lasting passages in the novel come from Woland, and not without purpose – Bulgakov portrays Woland in a manner that is far from unflattering. Woland has come to Moscow to observe the new Soviet citizen, and is obviously unimpressed. From the outset, he makes it clear that mankind is unfit to manage its own fate, that mankind is: *"Виноват, [...] для того, чтобы управлять, нужно, как-никак, иметь точный план на некоторый, хоть сколько-нибудь приличный срок."* ("Guilty...in order to manage, one somehow needs to have an exact plan for some, nay any, decent period of time.") (23).¹ Of course, Woland is not simply refuting Berlioz's argument, but making light of the overzealous 'management' of the Soviet regime. In nearly the same breath, he asserts that Jesus did in fact exist, and that he was there as proof. Woland spends the rest of the novel clearly demonstrating mankind's inability to manage its own fate. He does so with the aid of the mischievous duo of Koroviev and the most beloved of Bulgakov's characters, Behemoth – a giant talking cat that drinks vodka, eats at the same table as humans, shoots guns, and wears a bow tie. Also in Woland's retinue are Azazello, who is blind in one eye, and Hella – the lovely half-naked witch. Woland and his retinue wreak havoc on Stalin's Moscow and capture the imagination with their bizarre antics. More importantly, though, they are portrayed in a much more benevolent and favorable light than the authorities, even the anthropomorphized Behemoth. In any case, the supernatural narrative is the most imaginative and effective of Bulgakov's devices.

IV. Bortko: from novel to screen

The challenge facing Vladimir Bortko in adapting such a treasured cultural artifact to the screen was enormous. One of Russia's most respected directors, he garnered critical praise for his previous adaptations of Dostoevsky's *Idiot* and Bulgakov's own *Heart of a Dog*. With a budget of just over \$5 million US, the Rossiya TV channel made the screening of the work its banner event for 2005. Adverts were strewn all about Moscow and the rest of Russia, and the event even warranted international mention, with articles appearing in the *New York Times* and *Guardian UK* on 19 December 2005. On top of the media blitz was what *MosNews.ru* called the 'arcane malevolence' surrounding previous attempts to adapt the novel to screen in its native tongue, all of which failed or did not even make it to shooting. Nonetheless, Bortko remained undaunted, taking ten years between when he finished the screenplay and when he finished shooting, including an aborted attempt at shooting in 2000.

The project required pooling together all available resources and making key decisions. The first of those decisions was the most prudent – Bortko decided to take all dialogue and scenic direction from the novel directly. The next issue to address was casting, particularly finding actors/actresses to match the physical descriptions put forth in the novel. Bortko retained a number of actors from his previous screening attempt, and the

¹ All citations from Bulgakov, M.A. ***Izbrannoye***. Literatura Publishers, Moscow: 1998, 23. All translations are mine.

cast is as follows: Aleksandr Galibin (Master), Oleg Basilashvili (Woland), Vladislav Galkin (Ivan Bezdomny), Kirill Lavrov (Pilate), Aleksandr Abdulov (Koroviev), Aleksandr Filippenko (Azazello), Sergei Bezrukov (Ieshua/Jesus), and Aleksandr Bashirov & Semyon Furman (Begemot/Behemoth). The role of Margarita was the last casting, with Anna Kovalchuk getting the part due to her resemblance to Bulgakov's wife Yelena, according to interviews with both Bortko and her.

With the cast settled, the next obstacle for Bortko was one that would have hardly been overcome even five years ago – the special effects required to create some of the novel's fantastic scenes. For this, Bortko enlisted the help of Begemot Studios of St. Petersburg (the name of the studio is purely coincidence), who in turn employed every major special effects studio in Russia, an unprecedented feat. They would be responsible for such difficult imagery as bringing Behemoth to life, Margarita flying over Moscow on a broomstick, and Satan's Ball. The final version includes 163 minutes of computer-generated effects and/or processing. Finally, the most difficult of all challenges in any such adaptation is retaining the feel of the original, which in this case required the replication of Bulgakov's masterfully seamless intertwining of the three 'layers' in the novel. To accomplish this most important element to the film, Bortko chose to use different film stocks for different narratives, to staggering effect. The historical narrative is in full colour, the contemporary narrative is in a drab black and white layered over with a sepia tone (achieved by aged film stock), and the supernatural scenes are all processed digitally and in heavily saturated hues of colour. The only deviation from this arrangement involves the scenes portraying the conversation between Master and Ivan, which are shot in a pale blue so as to evoke the light of the moon at which Master is gazing throughout. As for the story itself, aside from his nearly total adherence to the original text, Bortko also remained more or less faithful to the original sequence of events. The first episode corresponds to Chapters 1-3; the second to 47; the third to 8-11 with a brief scene from 15; the fourth to 12-14, ending in the middle of 13; the fifth is the most disjointed, with scenes from 13, 16, 17, 19, and 25; the sixth to 18-21 with a brief scene from 27; the seventh from 21-23; the eighth from 24-26; the ninth from 26-29; and the tenth to Chapter 30-epilogue. The epilogue includes documentary footage of 1930's-1940's Moscow that focuses on Stalin's Great Terror.

V. Review

The impact of Bortko's undertaking was immediate: from the screening of the first episode on 19 December through its conclusion on 30 December, the streets of Russia were largely dark. More than half of Russia's population, or about 80 million adults, tuned in to watch the series, as reported on CBC 29th December. A comparison of this number of viewers to the number one show in the U.S., *CSI*, yields the following: its average weekly audience is approximately 30 million, and its highest rated episode drew in 40 million. Russia has a population a little over 100 million less than the U.S. From this, one can surmise the extent to which Bortko's adaptation had an impact, and that its impact was indeed tremendous. A new generation of Russians has witnessed a cultural event and has been exposed to its Soviet past, an often-overlooked and critical element in Russia's growth in the post-Soviet period. Most reviews of the series have been positive, with the occasional complaint that the effects were not adequate. As Woland would say, 'that's a matter of taste'. From all indications, Bulgakov's masterpiece is as alive and well in today's Russia as it ever has been. I conclude with a personal note that should serve well to illuminate the impact of Bortko's work. *Master & Margarita* has been my favorite novel since I was introduced to it, and I harboured many of the same skepticisms of others. Upon viewing the series, I was completely awed at its precision, at least satisfied and at times also awed by its effects, but most of all...the cast was absolutely majestic. Galibin's performance was nuanced and troubled, Basilashvili was omnipotent, yet compassionate, and finally, Kovalchuk was brilliant as Margarita, displaying her beauty,

elegance, and devotion to near perfection. Bortko has cast a big shadow for anyone who should wish to follow him, one that complements the shadow of his subject admirably.