



Sympathy For The Devil

Mia Taylor

The ill-fated attempts of Polanski, Fellini, Manzarak, and a host of others to bring Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* to the big screen. Published in Tin House Issues no. 06 (volume 2, no. 2, Winter 2001) about Hollywood.

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Scripts written, locations scouted, money squandered: Is the ghost of Stalin working overtime to prevent the 1930s Russian novel from being brought to the big screen?

"'And what will come of it?' you ask. I don't know. In all probability you will put it away in the writing desk or the cupboard where the corpses of my plays lie, and from time to time you will remember. However, we cannot know our future."

- Mikhail Bulgakov, in a letter to his wife

What do Federico Fellini, Roman Polanski, and Ray Manzarek have in common? They have all tried and failed to bring *The Master and Margarita*, one of the greatest Russian novels of the twentieth century, to the screen.

First published in 1967, twenty-seven years after the death of its author, Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita* filled a void in Eastern Europe and Russia, where it was instantly and passionately embraced. In Russia there is a joke that seven out of ten people today will tell you it's their favorite book. Travel agencies offer walking tours of *The Master and Margarita's* Moscow, and the walls of the building Bulgakov lived in are scrawled with loving graffiti tributes to the novelist and his immortal characters. Phrases from the book have entered the common vernacular.

To readers in the West, even those unfamiliar with the political subtext, it is a magical, fantastic tale, a bold retelling of Faust and the Bible. With its vivid, feverish, and hallucinatory descriptions - from a huge talking black cat stalking the Moscow streets on its hind legs and bloodcurdling beheadings to the climactic grand demonic ball attended by history's greatest villains - what filmmaker could resist the temptation to make it his own?

It's a stifling spring evening in a Moscow park when the devil, in the guise of a mysterious foreigner named Professor Woland, materializes before two writers debating the existence of Jesus Christ. Woland asserts that Jesus did indeed exist and evokes an eerily vivid picture of Christ's first meeting with Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem. He then prophesies the death of one writer by decapitation, which occurs moments later. Soon Woland and his retinue, including the impudent talking cat, and a seven-foot-tall "choirmaster" wearing a cracked pince-nez, are living in the dead writer's apartment and wreaking havoc throughout Moscow, preying on the greed, pettiness, unbelief, and cowardice of the Muscovites, driving some victims to seek incarceration in the local mental institution. One longtime resident of the institution is the Master, a writer crushed by persecution in reaction to his life's work, a book on Pontius Pilate, a book that bears an uncanny resemblance to the devil's narrative. He tells another inmate the story of his love for his Margarita, whose devotion to him and his art could not save him. Margarita has searched for him in vain since his disappearance. When the devil asks Margarita to act as hostess for his annual ball, her love is so boundless that she is willing to forfeit her soul for the mere chance of saving the Master. Margarita is queen of the ball, the perfect hostess, spending one long night,

naked, greeting a seemingly endless procession of ghoulish guests disgorged from hell. In gratitude, Woland reunites her with the Master. The Master himself must first complete his novel, and suffer the fate of Pilate himself, before being granted eternal peace with his Margarita.

Rights have been bought, scripts written, rights lapsed, money squandered, locations scouted. Obscure adaptations have even been made, ones that seem impossible to track down. But something seems inevitably to bedevil these efforts. Thirty-three years after the book's publication, the definitive film has yet to be made.

Among the idealistic youth who read the book in the late sixties and early seventies were some who grew up to be filmmakers, and some of those were cultural icons of their own generations, like Fellini, Polanski, and Manzarek (Though Manzarek earned his renown as the keyboard player for The Doors, not as a filmmaker). What is it that captivates them? What drives them to cling so tenaciously to an apparently cursed project? What hubris pushes them to attempt the adaptation of such a complex and elusive work? What has prevented their efforts from reaching fruition? Has the time passed for this film? Is it too late? And what would Bulgakov, the master satirist and also a brilliant adapter, make of the movie people and what they want to do to his book?

Mikhail Bulgakov was no stranger to heartbreak and crushing disappointment. He lived through one of his country's darkest eras, and his courage and tragic history became part of the novel's myth. Like Pasternak, Mandelstam, Babel, and Akhmatova, he wrote in the shadow of Stalinism and indeed developed a perverse kind of relationship with the general secretary himself. Compared to many of his contemporaries, he was lucky. He was not imprisoned, exiled or executed, but he was silenced.

Paradoxically, through sheer will, tenacity, and faith, he was able to overcome poverty, illness, oppression, and constant fear, and maintain the playfulness, buoyancy, and dazzling imagination of his writing. Bulgakov, his voice stifled, his works "corpses," a prisoner in his own country, toiled in secret for eleven years on his masterpiece, knowing he would never see it published.

Starkly modern and fresh even now, in 1967 *The Master and Margarita* was a radical work, both politically and artistically. A dangerous book, it said the unsayable. It expressed thrilling, forbidden ideas and emotions, satirizing Soviet ideology, glorifying individual love and portraying a living Jesus when collective love and atheism were creeds, rejecting socialist realism and unapologetically embracing the supernatural, the irrational, the divine.

In the West where it was published simultaneously by the YMCA Press in Paris, it became a cult classic. The Vintage imprint consistently sells ten thousand copies a year.

To make a film is never simple. The development process can seem like a labyrinth without exit, financing has to be fought for tooth and nail, egos clash, and scripts are carted to the recycler by the truckload daily, but even by these standards, the unmade film of *The Master and Margarita* has a particularly snarled history. Some filmmakers have come tantalizingly close to their goal,

even reaching the first day of principal photography, only to have the prize cruelly ripped from their grasp.

As Woland says to the Master, "Your novel has some surprises in store for you."

Andras Hamori: "I went to a Russian high school in Budapest in the late sixties. We had a very rebellious Russian teacher who instead of Gorky and Kataev taught us Russian from *The Master and Margarita*. It was a subversive cultural icon of the late sixties. It broke taboos. When I left Hungary for good in '81, I smuggled out *The Master and Margarita* as a cultural asset. I guess the first reason I thought of making it into a movie was I believed this was a hidden masterpiece of the twentieth century, unknown in the West."

Michael Lang: "Someone gave me the book about fifteen or sixteen years ago. I always thought it would be an amazing film."

Menno Meyjes: "It was a much talked about novel in the late seventies. One reason was the Stones song "Sympathy for the Devil." That's sort of how it entered the cultural stream. Abel Ferrara (director of *Bad Lieutenant*, *King of New York*, and *The Funeral*) and I were in the very early stages of our careers. We had both read this book, were fascinated by it, and decided to give it a shot."

Roman Polanski: "In Poland it's a cult book. We were much more sensitive to all that Soviet absurdity and surrealism. I was looking for material in the late eighties, and I thought of *The Master and Margarita*. The desire to make a movie comes from what you would like to see, and at that time, that was what I wanted to see on the screen. I have a very good relationship with Warner Brothers. When I mentioned the book, the development department got very excited. They knew and loved it. They said yes, definitely, let's do that."

Ray Manzarek: "I first read the book ten or fifteen years ago. I didn't necessarily think, I've got to make this into a movie. I thought, how incredibly cinematic this book is. Then I got together with the screenwriter Rick Valentine, who said he was working on a script, and I said, "Impossible! I love it, man, but it's impossible!" Then I read his script—a work of genius! I said, 'Okay, man, let's see if we can sell this baby, let's get it up on the screen.'"

Peter Medak: "I read it in the late sixties and thought it was amazing, but I never thought it could actually make a film. It's very difficult to translate into filmic terms, and there were so many special effects needed. I completely forgot about it until Ray Manzarek got hold of me."

Bulgakov's first career was as a physician, but after serving in the civil war as a doctor to the White army, he erased his past and reinvented himself as a writer. His first success was as a playwright, but not without cost. From the very beginning, he was plagued by censorship, and denounced from the pulpit of political correctness.

In May 1926, Bulgakov's apartment was searched by the OGPU (precursor to the NKVD and KGB), and his diaries and the manuscript of the novel *Heart of a Dog* were confiscated. After repeated protests, they were returned to him. He burned the diaries, and never again kept another. Ironically, it was the OGPU that

preserved the diaries for posterity, as they had made copies.

By 1929, all of Bulgakov's works had been banned. He compared his situation to "being buried alive."

Bulgakov began work on *The Master and Margarita* in the spring of 1929, and although he later burned the first manuscript, he continued work on the novel intermittently up until the end of his life.

Hamori: "I guess this project has been circling me for the last twenty years. I went to Moscow because I really liked the Russian director, Elem Klimov, the director of *Come and See*, who in the late eighties had backing from Columbia Pictures and David Putnam for his *Master and Margarita* project.

I thought it should be a Russian director. Plus, economically, it sounded like a great deal, because it was still the cheap ruble Soviet Union. Even if the special effects cost a lot, the location shoot was inexpensive. So I went to Moscow and got drunk with Klimov. He wanted about seven to eight million, but he didn't have a script. He said we have to make a deal without a script, without a cast, without anything. So we never made a deal. Maybe I should have done it, because at that time you could have gotten someone like a Daniel Day Lewis to work with Klimov, because it was romantic to work with a Soviet director, especially on a novel like this. But I really didn't like Klimov. I felt his reasons were more mercantile than artistic.

Then I heard that Roman Polanski wanted to make it. Roman is one of my idols. His script came the closest, but it wasn't entirely there.

One day I was sitting in my office on Sunset Boulevard, and Ray Manzarek came in. He had heard from Peter Medak that I'm crazy about *The Master and Margarita*. He said he owned a script of it, and would I like to read it. I said great, and he put the script on my desk and left. A half an hour later my secretary came and said, this man is outside waiting for you, and I said, which man, and she said, well, the man who was here earlier. I went out, and Manzarek was sitting on the terrace. He said, have you read it yet? And I said, no. He said, well, then, I'll just wait. I eventually read the first twenty pages and it sounded so amateur that I never followed up. And then he hated me.

Since then, I've read that it's going into production with this director, or that producer, but none of it ever happened. Later I heard that this guy in New York, Michael Lang, owned the rights. His partner, Ira Deutschman actually brought it to me, when I was running Alliance Pictures. They said they have Polanski attached, so I called Roman, and he said, I used to want to do it, but I don't know anymore. So the whole thing disappeared, but never completely."

Josef Stalin himself, at key junctures, intervened in Bulgakov's affairs and decided his fate. A word from Stalin got his plays banned. A phone call revived his career. But it also left him waiting the rest of his life for the other shoe to drop.

In 1929, Bulgakov, in despair, took the enormous risk of addressing a frank letter to Stalin himself.

"At the end of this tenth year my strength is broken. Since I no longer have the strength to survive, since I am persecuted and know that it is impossible that I shall ever be published or staged within the USSR again ... EXPEL ME FROM THE USSR TOGETHER WITH MY WIFE."

July 29, 1929 - letter to Stalin, Kalinin, Svidersky, and Gorky

He received no reply to this letter, and in May 1930, tried again.

"It is not only my past works that have perished, but also my present and my future works. And I personally, with my own hands, threw into the stove a draft of a novel about the devil ... All my things are past rescuing."

"Not being allowed to write is tantamount to being buried alive." If they would not allow him to leave the country, he requested some kind of job to keep himself alive.

"This letter did receive a reply, in the form of a phone call from the General Secretary himself, one that would haunt Bulgakov for the rest of his life."

The novel's film rights have been in constant question. In most cases, a limited option, a percentage of the final purchase price, is paid to the owner of the copyright. The purchaser must make the film before his option expires. If the film is made, the remainder of the purchase price is paid to the owner of the copyright. If the film is not made, the film rights then revert to the owner, who is then free to option them to another party.

Ellendea Proffer: Owner/founder Ardis books, Bulgakov biographer and translator: "We get inquiries about film rights as often as once a month, and it's not that easy to find us since we moved from Ann Arbor."

Lang: "It was assumed to be in public domain, but I was never comfortable with that, and I was doing a project at the Kremlin, where I met Bulgakov's grandson. I made a deal with him for the rights. You need a translation to prepare the screenplay from, so we bought the rights to the Ardis translation, which is the best I've read."

When Russia joined the Berne convention on international copyright in 1993, it officially restored the rights to Bulgakov's heirs. He left all his copyrights to his "Margarita," his third wife, Yelena Sergeevna Bulgakova. They had no children together, but Yelena had two sons with her first husband, Evgeny Shilovskiy, and it is to these descendants that the copyrights reverted.

The grandchildren's Paris attorney, André Schmidt, maintains that since only a censored version was published in the Soviet Union in 1967, and the full text only in Paris the same year, the book has been covered by the Berne convention since its original publication, France being a member. It is the Shilovskys' contention that the copyright has always belonged to them.

Further complicating matters, according to Ellendea Proffer, is that under the Uruguay Round convention of '93, if a translation was completed before that time it doesn't fall under Uruguay and therefore is not subject to the family. There are documents proving the Ardis translation was completed by '93.

Proffer: "There are three major translations, Mirra Ginsburg's (Grove Press, 1967) which is incomplete, as it works from the censored version, Michael Glenny's (Harper & Row, 1967) which is not reliable, and our Ardis edition, published in 1995, (Diana Burgin and Katherine O'Connor, with annotations and afterword by Ellendea Proffer)."

A filmmaker has to attach himself to one of these translations. They've all been attached at various times.

Manzarek: "We have a private translation. I have a Russian friend who translated the whole damn novel. We based the script on his translation."

Bulgakov was awoken from a nap. When he was told the General Secretary wished to speak with him, he assumed at first that someone was playing a prank. But it was indeed Stalin on the other end. Stalin first asked Bulgakov if he really wished to go abroad. Bulgakov's entire future rested in his answer. He said, "I have thought a great deal recently about the question of whether a Russian writer can live outside his homeland. And it seems to me he can't."

Stalin then promised him a position at the Moscow Arts Theatre.

Finally, Stalin said that he would like to meet with Bulgakov at some point and have a conversation. Bulgakov was excited at the prospect, and waited years for the invitation, which never came.

May 30, 1931, Bulgakov once again wrote to Stalin.

"I want to tell you, Iosif Vissarionovich, that my dream as a writer would be to be summoned to see you in person ... because your conversation with me over the telephone in April 1930 left a deep mark in my memory."

There was no reply. Later that year, he wrote to his friend, the writer Vikenty Vereseyav.

"I suffer from one tormenting unhappiness. And that is that my conversation with the General Secretary never took place. What that means for me: horror, and the darkness of the grave. I have a frantic desire to see other countries, if only briefly. I get out of bed with this thought every morning and I go to sleep with it."

"For a year I have been racking my brains, trying to work out what happened. After all, I wasn't hallucinating, was I, when I heard his words? After all, he did utter the phrase 'Perhaps you really do need to go abroad ...'?"

"Hope flared up in this writer's heart: only one step remained—that I should see

him and discover my fate."

"But then a thick veil descended."

July 1, 1939 - letter to writer Vikenty Veresayev.

Proffer: "This needs to be a film. All the elements are there ... it is cinematic at its core, really visual. But there is the question of what genre this is. It is a love story, it's a mystery, it's supernatural, it has horror, and it's told in a defamiliarizing way. It has Jesus before the mythmaking. Sometimes the adaptations go too grotesque. An unerring blend is necessary. The supernatural must push against something. If the devil comes to a supernatural Moscow, that's not funny. There is the horror and comedy of Soviet Russia, not just any period, but Russia during the Terror. It's about the 'suffering questions'. If there's a God, why is there evil?"

Friends in Moscow told me that Fellini wanted to make the film. The Master and Margarita came out in Italy in 68-69. He wanted to do it when he was in his surrealistic mode. But first he had to do another film. It was always on his backburner. He would have had marvelous stage design, but back then you wouldn't have had the right special effects."

Polanski: "Special effects back then were not digital. They were done in a way that was quite expensive. The final result today would be much more effective, because you can digitally morph the cat into a man and vice versa. This would be just beautiful."

Polanski, in his adaptation with John Brownjohn, while mercilessly paring away the plot of Satan in Moscow, is faithful to Bulgakov's serious and electrifying retelling of the story of Pontius Pilate and the man Bulgakov calls Yeshua Ha-Notsri.

Polanski: "Passing from those three different plots, one to the other, in such a smooth way is very cinematic. It works beautifully in the literature, but I daresay would work even better on the screen.

The greatest moment in the movie is right at the beginning when Woland (the devil) starts telling the story of Jesus Christ in such a manner that it becomes extremely human and moving. The story of Pontius Pilate is non-pareil."

In Polanski and Brownjohn's script, the Master and Margarita are no longer adulterous lovers, but neighbors, with Margarita as a young music teacher.

"I did that to simplify, to get the emotions that bind those two people, so their separation would affect the viewer. You have to compensate for what is non-existent as a scene or scenes in the book. You have to develop the relationship where it doesn't exist.

A film script requires a rigid, economical construction. Already the way it is written, would be a film on the long side. And I feel sometimes scenes that seem

evident don't change much in the overall piece. I don't think that Satan's ball, which is so prominent in the book, matters really for what Bulgakov is trying to tell. Sometimes the most popular pieces can be removed without hurting much. How much would Hamlet suffer without 'To be or not to be'? In fact it would not change a thing."

Michael Lang: "Polanski and I met in Paris and spent an afternoon together. Polanski is a very engaging guy, with strong ideas about the films he makes. I thought leaving out the ball was a mistake. It's such a great scene. He said Hamlet would have been Hamlet without 'To be or not to be,' and I said, but what do people remember?"

Polanski: "I thought of doing part of it in Poland and the rest in France, with some shots in Moscow. I went location scouting in Moscow, but there is nothing left from that period, with the exception of the Kremlin, and even the Kremlin changed a little bit. I felt it could have been done much better in a place like Krakow with some construction."

Meyjes: "Abel and I did a very traditional version. It begins: New York has never looked so much like Moscow. You have these somber buildings, there's drift snow in the street. A woman in a fur coat walks through the night, enters a small church, and puts a charred manuscript on the altar, prays, and leaves. The pages of the manuscript rustle on the altar, and the movie begins.

I always think of Margarita as an haute bourgeois. There has to be something very straight about her in the beginning. I think we had her as the wife of the Belgian cultural attaché.

Where the book works the best, is where it is jaunty and not too out-of-worldly. Like when Likhodeyev, the theatre director, wakes up with this horrendous hangover to find the devil and his retinue in his apartment, the cat drinking vodka and spearing mushrooms with a fork, and having this very playful conversation, before they kick him to Yalta.

Then you can have things like the Escher-like apartment that grows and grows, and it really works. And Woland is particularly compelling, a wonderfully realized character. He is a specifically Russian devil, not the Satan we're familiar with in the western world. He is a kind of louche angel with his own agenda, but who obviously answers to a higher court.

The Master is kind of a whiner, always wringing his hands. He's passive and Margarita takes care of everything. But in the end, the Master prevails. I think it appeals to all artists, the idea that at least in heaven they understand your work, and not only that, they intervene on your behalf, and slay all your critics."

Lang: "We're approaching it around the relationship between the Master and Margarita. Neither of them appear till way late in the book. We've brought that to the beginning, and made it the vehicle that takes you through the story. Moving it to present day New York is not the way to go. Too many people have fond feelings about the story, and it would be a big mistake to change it that much."

Hamori: "I would start the film with the Master and Margarita's story. It's

probably the most beautiful love story of the twentieth Century. That is what makes it contemporary. People think, oh, nobody cares about 1930s Moscow. It's so remote. But you could have a love story that's 2000 years old and people want to see it.

That's the frame, not Pontius Pilate. You can then incorporate 1930s Moscow and the supernatural, and Pontius Pilate, and Jesus and so on."

Although faithful to the setting and period of the novel, Manzarek and Valentine's script takes perhaps the greatest liberties with the story. It also emphasizes the love story, and goes a step further in transforming the Master into a character named Mikhail, a version of Bulgakov himself. They have reverted the defamiliarized story of Yeshua Ha-Notsri and Pontius Pilate to the New Testament version of Jesus of Nazareth.

Manzarek: "It was as though Bulgakov was over Valentine's shoulder, saying, you can cut all of that. Go ahead, you can cut that too—no that's the essential, the Master, Margarita, the love affair. We need Jesus and Pontius Pilate, okay, but we don't need the betrayal of Jesus for a movie. Judas is not a character who enters into our equation. It's basically the biblical story of Jesus and Pontius Pilate, and the Master and Margarita, the things that go on with the Master and his novel, and Margarita with professor Woland, the magic show, and of course the devil's ball. All those highlights.

Bulgakov is the writer. He is the master. When Rick did it, I thought, what a great idea man, yes! The author himself of the book, of *The Master and Margarita*, is the Master, is the writer. Perfect.

We have two possible endings. One is, the book is then published in 1967. They've had the devil's ball in Moscow, and they're off to somewhere else. Now, where is professor Woland going to go with his little troupe? And he says, 'I know! Los Angeles, the Summer of Love' and the Cat goes 'Whoah! Rock and Roll! Los Angeles!' Cut to: a bookstore in Venice Beach, bunch of hippies milling around. One hippie pulls *The Master and Margarita* off the bookshelf and says 'Hey, this looks groovy'. It ends with "Sympathy for the Devil," cause you hear 'Please allow me to introduce myself' and here they come, down the Venice Boardwalk, up to no good once again.

The second ending is actually the one I prefer. I like the hippie ending, but I think even better is the straight love story of the Master and Margarita, Margarita sacrificing everything for the Master, their love carrying them ultimately into the light.

Although Bulgakov himself would have liked the summer of love. He'd say, "Perfect, man! You had what in 1967, you called it the Summer of Love?" He would love the irony.

They say, what would the author think? The author would say, fine, entertain! I've written an extremely entertaining novel. You're going to put it on the screen, make it entertaining. Bulgakov himself would be more than happy."

Manzarek: "I talked to Mick Jagger about the possibility of him playing Professor Woland. Jerry Hall said to me, 'Don't make the movie until he's finished with the tour. It's his favorite book! The part is his! He is Professor Woland.'

We were talking to Julie Delpy, who wanted to play the role of Margarita. She's at William Morris, so we thought, gosh, let's see who else they have and package it over there. Bruce Willis would be very off the wall as Professor Woland. Peter Medak was going to direct. Peter wanted to do it. He would have been great."

Medak: "We were thinking about Uma Thurman. She loved the book. I remember sending the script to her. I never heard back."

Lang: "We've been talking to directors the last year or so. It's important to have someone who is familiar with the novel, who understands it. We talked to Polanski, and Milos Forman who also loves the story, but didn't have the time to work on the screenplay. He would have been perfect. We're in discussion right now with a director who I think would work out really well. I can't discuss him yet, because we're in the works."

Hamori: "I would cast Kate Moss as Natasha, the maid."

Bulgakov was a hypochondriac, preoccupied with his health but also the premonition that he would die young, as his father had. As a doctor he was acutely sensitive to physical symptoms.

He began to fall prey to phobias, agoraphobia, and a fear of being alone. By the end of his life, he who deemed himself a prisoner, and risked his life for the chance to see other countries, was afraid to leave his apartment.

"I began to suffer from ... the filthiest thing I have ever experienced in my life, a fear of solitude, or to be more precise a fear of being left on my own. It's so repellent that I would prefer to have a leg cut off!"

1934 July 11 - to V. Veresayev

Proffer: "Imagine the kind of fear he had to block in order to create."

"A demon has taken hold of me. I suffocate in these little rooms, I have begun to scribble down all over again page after page of that novel I destroyed three years ago. Why? I don't know."

In the summer of 1935, Bulgakov finished the first complete draft of *The Master and Margarita*. He gave occasional readings of it to a very select group of trusted friends. It is only within these circles that the existence of the novel was known until its publication in 1967. He never allowed the pages to leave his apartment.

1937 saw one of the darkest years of Stalin's Terror, with the murder of Sergei Kirov and subsequent widespread arrests, trials and executions.

By 1937, feeling he was nearing the end of his life, Bulgakov started to concentrate on *The Master and Margarita*, revising the 1936 draft from the beginning.

"Having become convinced over the last few years of the fact that not a single line of mine will ever be printed or staged, I am trying to develop an attitude of indifference towards this fact..."

"All the same, however much you might try to throttle yourself, it's difficult to stop seizing your pen. I am tormented by an obscure desire to settle my final accounts in literature.

"At the moment I am engaged in a job that is entirely senseless from the point of view of everyday life—I am doing a final revision of my novel."

March 11, 1939 - letter to V. Veresayev

Proffer: "The grinding process of developing a movie is not unlike what Bulgakov went through mounting a play for the Moscow Arts Theatre, the drawn out process of rewrites, the revisions, the story meetings, disappointments..."

Meyjes: "We set it in New York. Right there, you run into a huge amount of problems ... so many things were untranslatable. It's very specific to a time and place: the Soviet Union and the petrified world after the NEP (New Economic Policy). What is the equivalent of the institutionalized atheism, which is the wall that the rubber ball bounces off of in the book? Here, you have a society that has declared itself atheist and the devil comes to town. That's joke number one.

But then, you can't honestly start comparing, say, the Writers' Guild, (although some of us do, at times,) to the one described in the book. The only thing we felt that still played was this hunger for real estate. There's also the specter of Stalin, hovering. You can have your differences with America, but it certainly doesn't compare to the Soviet Union in the thirties."

Lang: "We met with Ray Manzarek a couple of years ago. His script didn't quite seem right. Polanski's was better, although I had problems with that as well."

Medak: "About seven years ago, Manzarek said he's got the whole thing set up and ready to go. All I have to do is say yes. And then I read the script and it was not good. It proved a very difficult piece to pull off, which doesn't mean that it shouldn't be made.

Also I knew Roman was thinking of doing it. I know him as a friend, and I love his work, so if he was really going to do it, I wouldn't have seriously gotten involved, because it's an unwritten etiquette for directors who like each other."

Polanski: "It was quite expensive and complex, and I suspect Terry Semel, the head of Warner Brothers, did not read the book himself. He knew only what was reported to him. And when it came time for him to give the so-called green light, he must have read the script for the first time, because we had long talks, and he didn't believe the picture had commercial potential to justify the expense. Finally, it was dragging for long time, and I said, okay, let's forget it. I tried to set it up with some other companies, which I think was a mistake, because once the word goes around that the studio dropped the project, even if you asked them to, the word is out, and I could not put it together.

My problem is I suspect it's no longer relevant. Today, I am flabbergasted when I talk to young people in Poland about things that ended only a decade ago, and they know nothing about it!

Grant you, in Poland, we didn't have seventy years of Soviet rule, but we had thirty or thirty-five, and previous generations were so much affected, I would say destroyed by it, that those youngsters should at least know that it was not always the way it is now. Now it is just a normal country, you go from Poland to Germany to Belgium, it seems the same. So if they don't know how it was in their own country, let alone Russia ... and to youngsters in America it's pure abstraction. You would have to spend more time on motivating, making people understand why things are this way.

In the eighties, newspapers were carrying articles about Russia—about changes, about Stalinism, about Marxism, about lack of freedom. There was still a cold war going on. Now it's history. It's another plot set in some virtually biblical time. In a way, the novel's biblical plot line is more immediate than the Moscow one, since it's something they are given by transmission from generation to generation. But Moscow? Stalin? They hardly know who Stalin was."

Manzarek: "Making it depends on bringing the right players together. It's very tough. It's a big budget film and it's not exactly the kind of thing studios want to see."

Lang: "I think it could reach a very broad audience. One of the problems it's had over the years is that studios have always looked at it as an art house film and it's too big to do as a low budget art movie. That's why it hasn't been made yet, other than the fact that nobody ever bothered to get the rights. It is a substantial budget. We have a lot of interest, much of it from overseas. We haven't gone to tie those ends up until the director is selected."

Meyjes: "I'm hell-bent on trying again, I've got it figured out this time."

Hamori: "I still would want to make it if I find the right director and the right script. Sometimes this takes ten years to put together. The only film director today who I would be very intrigued to see what he thinks, is Emir Kusturica."

Polanski: "I'm still very much attracted to this book, because it presents to me, as a director, the possibility of doing very exciting things in those two parts we talked of. One is the biblical stuff, and the other is special effects. These are very tempting. The old Moscow reality is very difficult to show, very difficult to understand."

Manzarek: "There's an Everest and it's called The Master and Margarita. It's a race and we'll see who the winner is. It'll be interesting, because on a psychic level, which is the script that deserves to be made? And which is the script that'll be the most faithful to the essence of Bulgakov? Of course, I think that is Ray Manzarek and Rick Valentine's script. I think I intrinsically understand what that man was getting at: the fun, the darkness, the joy, the cleverness, the whole thing."

Proffer: "All that's needed is the will. In my dealings with people who do movies,

I've met some who've had success, but even they seem defeated. When it works, it's sort of a miracle, so they guard themselves against disappointments. To make this you need a lot of hope, confidence, verve. I think he's up there saying, it's about time, and I hope it's a good movie, but he was also the supreme realist, so I'm sure he won't be surprised if it isn't."

Bulgakov's final play, *Batum*, was about Stalin, written in honor of his sixtieth birthday. Bulgakov's contemporaries were perplexed at his accepting this commission. Some saw him as finally capitulating to the regime he had defied throughout his career, but for a writer who insisted on telling the truth, the assignment was a dangerous one.

In August 1939, on their way to Batum to do research, the Bulgakovs were abruptly called home. Stalin had spoken. He would not permit the play to be staged. Bulgakov feared this was the end, but the knock on the door never came. However, this latest disaster was a crushing blow to his health from which he never recovered.

In September of 1939 Bulgakov began to go blind. He diagnosed the symptoms in himself of the nephritis that had killed his father.

In February of 1940, his condition dramatically worsened. Blind and with agonizing pain throughout his body, he continued to dictate changes to Yelena, adding the epilogue to the novel after the manuscript was bound. He believed that one should continue to work up until the last moment of consciousness.

Until two weeks before his death, he continued to dictate to Yelena, who sat on a pillow on the floor by his bed, copying out his revisions in a notebook. She wrote in her diary that she told him four days before he died,

"I promise you faithfully that I shall make a fair copy of the novel and deliver it to them. You shall be published!" He listened fairly lucidly and attentively and then said, "so that they know... so that they know."

On March 10, 1940 he died, as his father had, from nephrosclerosis, at the age of forty-eight, holding Yelena's hand.

The following day there was a telephone call from Stalin's office. "Is it true Comrade Bulgakov is dead?" they asked.

After keeping the manuscript hidden for twenty-seven years, Yelena was able to have it published in 1967, three years before her own death.

Proffer: "Bulgakov had some kind of hope, he had a belief in his future. It must have been so hard to write for generations you won't see."

As Woland says to the Master, "Your novel has some surprises in store for you."