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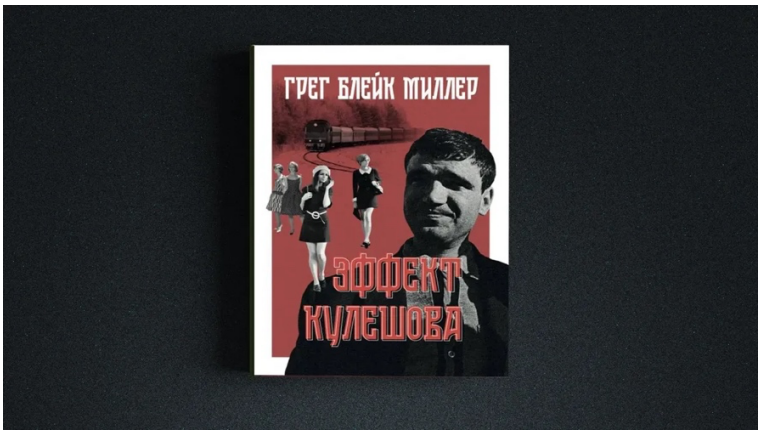

Appointment With Shpalikov

*Film director **Andrei Khrzhanovsky** on the newly released novel from Freedom Letters, Greg Blake Miller's "The Kuleshov Effect"*

Dear Reader! You are about to read something unlike anything anyone has read before. Because nobody has written anything like it. This is roughly how Rousseau begins his *Confessions*. Frankly, every artist should address the reader, audience, or listener in this way. After all, if a work doesn't contain a new discovery, it has no rightful claim on our attention. But I don't see many opening addresses like this anymore, probably because of the modest and self-critical approach of today's authors.

But in one case such opening remarks would be completely justified. I'm talking about the work of a non-Russian, the American writer Greg Blake Miller, whose novel *The Kuleshov Effect* has just been released by Freedom Letters in Ekaterina Kevkhishvili's beautiful Russian translation. Having barely picked up the book, I was immediately intrigued by the opening epigraph from Lev Kuleshov himself. I graduated from Lev Vladimirovich Kuleshov's workshop at the All-Union Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in 1962. That year, in the neighboring building at Gorky Film Studios, Marlen Khutsiev was finishing the film *The Ilich Gate,* which he had written together with my classmate and friend Gennady Shpalikov. My intrigue only grew as I read *The Kuleshov Effect*, whose heroes include precisely Khutsiev and Shpalikov. But the heart of the matter isn't just their presence in Miller's novel, but the incredible, almost mystical interpenetration of the poetics of their film—well, of everything that ever emerged from the pen of Gennady Shpalikov, including his never-completed novel—and a work that appears 60 years later on another continent.

As I grasped the "ethereal colossus"—a phrase Akhmatova used to refer to Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*—of Miller's book, the precise details of Shpalikov's novel came back to me, starting with its birth right before my eyes in the early spring of 1967, and ending on a summer day in 1968, when Gennady turned up unannounced at the studio where I was working and handed me a net-like "just-in-case" shopping bag of the sort we carried back then (do you know what those were, dear reader?), in which, like a fisherman's catch, shone a pile of pages covered by typewritten words. "This is my novel, *Ball Lightning,*" he said. "Read it. Everything's in there." With those words, Gena disappeared as suddenly as he'd arrived. Amid the pile of pages I found a note: "The pages are all mixed up here, because this is the only copy of the manuscript. But you can read it out of order, although the order is also important. Read bravely. G."

And there it is, before my eyes—Miller's novel, seemingly sent from somewhere in the noosphere where the spirit of my friend Gennady resides. As if someone had answered the exhortation of another poet, given voice by Pushkin: "Keep this manuscript, o friends, for yourselves. … Gather sometime, you superstitious crowd, to read my faithful scroll."

Where does this almost-mystical sensation come from? Well, yes: the fantasies of both authors—Shpalikov and Miller—populated their novels with historical figures whom the writers did not know personally. (In Miller's case, Kuleshov, Khutsiev and Shpalikov, as well as Mikhail Romm, Andrei Tarkovsky and others. In Shpalikov, we meet not only Mikhail Bulgakov, Boris Pasternak, and Marina Tsvetaeva, but also Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who has decided to get even with Salieri—two of them, in fact—and so that the revenge would be convincing, punches one in the face and throws potassium cyanide in his open mouth and arranges for the public hanging of the other with a big crowd on hand.)

All of these characters are worked into the "now" of their respective authors. And the authors do it with an enchanting, intoxicating sense of freedom. Concerning Shpalikov, I can only confirm what I said about him many years ago: "Shpalikov was not only the freest person I knew—he was the only absolutely free person." I think this explains his refusal to take part in the officially prescribed "corrections" to *The Ilich Gate*—a refusal for which he was criticized by many of his contemporaries, including Khutsiev himself.

The author of *The Kuleshov Effect* demonstrates this same freedom. This freedom is in everything—in the handling of the story, in the free artistic play with time and space. Nabokov rated the level of a reader (actually having in mind, of course, the level of the writer) by the quantity of details he could hold in his mind, and in this regard Miller is absolutely unrivaled in his descriptions of both American and Soviet reality. He masterfully conveys the most difficult innermost essence, the atmosphere of an age, right down to the smells. The detail in his descriptions at times approaches the level of hallucination, summoning the sense that before us is a recording of what has been seen and projected on a screen—that is, either a masterfully written screenplay or the final description of a completed film, the shot list, so to speak. And if the future reader wants someday to know what Leningrad-Petersburg looked like during and after the crash of the socialist economy, I couldn't give better advice than to read Miller's chapters about an American student's visit to the Russian Nineties.

Miller doesn't hide the links between his literary method and filmmaking. The book is even arranged in cinematic terms: "Reel One," "Reel Two" … The hero "spools and unspools the days like film"; the heroine wonders, "What if time really does work like film? Cut here, splice there"; they constantly have to "re-splice time and space." And if you open the door to Petersburg's Museum of Oddities (*Kunstkammer*) and find yourself in another country and

century, you'll understand at once that before you is not a book, but the expanse of the screen. It's pointless to retell the whole novel—you'll soon enough become convinced of all this.

In short, there's a girl, Kira (not Muratova, the famous real-life director, though she resembles her); she lives in the 1920s and '30s and works with the famous young directors and writers Grigory Kozintsev, Mikhail Romm and Alexei Kapler, then she's arrested, then she dies. But Kira has the ability to return, and immediately after her death she's reborn in Leningrad. There she lives through the brutal Nazi Blockade, goes to VGIK in the late 1950s, meets once again with Romm—now an old master—and marries an American student, Tom Benjamin. Tom and Kira become friends with Shpalikov, Khutsiev, Natalia Ryazantseva and others—each of them so alive and recognizable that the reader senses he's in the grip of a hallucination.

In time, Kira is arrested again and her husband is thrown into a Soviet psychiatric hospital. Years later, as she leaves Novodevichy Cemetery on the day of the unveiling of the monument at the grave of her old mentor Romm, she is run over by a car.

But Kira is reborn one more time with a single assignment: to find her son, who was staying with her best friend on the day she died.

All of this looks like a screen adaptation of Anna Akhmatova's late verses: "Don't you see, Lord, that I'm tired of resurrection, and of death, and of life?" Why does Miller use this device? Is it because similar historical ages give rise to the same archetypes? This explanation is banal; the point is that it's senseless to gloss this magical book. What is *The Ilich Gate* about? It's about air. *The Kuleshov Effect* is the ideal novel, the "ethereal colossus."

In the multilevel construction of *The Kuleshov Effect*, the reader from time to time finds himself on the landing where he—along with the novel's heroes—is sincerely worried about the fate of a a tiny gray furball, a kitten named Aelita, daughter of Pushkin(a) the Cat. This lyrical line illuminates the pages of the novel with an especially warm light. That's not to say that the book is not sometimes cruel, ironic, and terrifyingly precise. Here you'll find our—Russia's—"hopeless optimism" and "the faces of our new Soviet hypocrites, inflated to the point of bursting with declamatory patriotism" … and our country, which "loved its fairy tales almost as much as it loved its lies". And here you'll also find Yuri Gagarin, who "show(ed) us—Russians, humans—what we're capable of when we pause the bloodshed."

These kinds of images, like the entire content and structure of *The Kuleshov Effect*, paint a portrait of the author, whose deep and empathetic understanding of Russian history and culture can only make the Russian-speaking reader proud. Why does he love us so? This is a mystery, without which, as we know, good art cannot exist.

Andrei Khrzhanovsky is one of Russia's greatest animators. He has directed, written, or produced more than 25 films, including the 1968 classic "The Glass Harmonica," which was written by Gennady Shpalikov. The film, a surreal allegory of the battle between the forces of creativity and those of repression, was banned in the Soviet Union for more than 20 years. Khrzhanovsky now lives in Israel after denouncing Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine.