

# Alexandre Alexeieff: Poems of Light and Shadow

**Giannalberto Bendazzi, 2003**

## ***Portrait of the artist as a young man***

Alexandre Alexeieff (Aleksandr Pavlovich Alekseev) was born on 18<sup>th</sup> April 1901 in Kazan, in Czarist Russia. He was the third and last child of Maria Polidorova, a headmistress, and Pavel Alekseev, an officer in the imperial navy. Aleksandr's brothers' names were Nikolay and Vladimir. One year later, Pavel Alekseev accepted the post of naval attaché at the Russian embassy in Constantinople (then capital of the Ottoman Empire and now known as Istanbul), and his family moved with him to the shores of the Bosphorus. Constantinople was a happy time for the boy, as he enjoyed the best affective and material conditions that anyone could wish for. Yet it came to a tragic end in 1906, when his father died in strange circumstances, in all likelihood murdered, in Baden Baden (Germany), while on a diplomatic mission. The family had to return to Russia and cope with a difficult existence in Saint Petersburg.

Though this initial chapter of the artist's life might seem a mere simple melodramatic anecdote, it is of decisive importance in understanding his future inspiration. That interrupted bliss gave rise to a perennial *forma mentis*, sowing in him the need to cling to the moment, to conserve the taste of every joy experienced, and cemented a nostalgic character.

In those days, Saint Petersburg was brimming with writers, painters, musicians, scientists and thinkers; its theatre scene was buzzing, its elegant life shone... However, Alexandre barely got a whiff of what his new city had to offer. His time was given over to reading and to study, to training and to drawing in the Cadet Academy where his position as an officer's son entitled him to a place. Once again, an event in the early years of his life was to leave an indelible mark on the artist's career: his drawing master at the Cadet school influenced him categorically by letting pupils explore their potential for fantasy, far beyond the constraints of traditional academic copies from nature. From

now on, Alexandre Alexeieff would never use models except on one occasion, when he turned to his wife Claire for help, using her face to illustrate Malraux's *La condition humaine*.

In 1914, Russia, allied with France and Great Britain, went to war with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This was World War One, in which the Russian soldiers, facing a German army that was well equipped, well trained and well officered, fell apart disastrously. The 1917 Revolution put an end to Czarism and set off a civil war that was to last for three years.

In the most chaotic situation imaginable, those sixteen-year-old cadets were caught between the orders from their superiors and their own desire to conduct themselves like self-sufficient adults, between the dizzying hopes of a radical reconstruction of society and of humanity and the daily horror, the killings, the robberies, the violence...

One group of them was sent deep into Russia to await orders. Alexandre was holed up in the town of Ufa, near to his mother's brother, Anatoly Polidorov, a socialist lawyer who successfully defended peasants and workers against the arrogance of the rich and powerful. His uncle asked him about his plans for the future, and Alexandre replied that he wanted to be an engineer. "I thought you wanted to be an artist", quipped his uncle. Alexandre, fired with revolutionary ideas, said that the country needed engineers in order to build a society that was new, prosperous and advanced. "You disappoint me", concluded Anatoly. Alexandre reconsidered his future and took art classes for the rest of the time he was stationed in Ufa. Later he learnt that his uncle had been killed by the Bolsheviks, who were somewhat less than accommodating when it came to rival ideas on the left. From that point on, Alexandre steered well clear of ideologies and all that lurked behind them.

Three freezing months later, the cadets –those who were able to- reached Vladivostok, the furthestmost tip of Eastern Siberia. They left on board a warship but it was several months before they were told that the civil war was over. After a year of aimless drifting, Alexeieff chose France (whose language he had already mastered) as

his new home, and used of a letter of introduction that he had been given in Ufa, to establish himself there. He landed at Cassis, near Marseilles, and settled in Paris in 1921.

## ***Les années de bohème***

The letter of introduction, written by the drawing teacher who had refined Alexandre's hand in Ufa, was addressed to the set designer Serge Soudeikine (Sergey Sudeikin). In spite of Sudeikin's generous help and advice, the young artist's first year in the intellectual capital of the world was pretty hard to mouth, managing as he did to get only occasional work as a set designer. Things got better over time and his new friends introduced him into Parisian circles. It was then and there that he met an actress with Georges Pitoëff's company, Alexandra Grinevsky, who he married in 1923 and with whom he had a daughter, Svetlana.

Closest among his new friends were the young surrealist poets, with whom Alexeieff shared a certain understanding with regard to artistic creation: a maximum of spontaneity and a minimum of intellectual control over one's inspiration, so as to unblock the illogical and often unexplainable mind of the artist. It was one of these leading lights of surrealism, Philippe Soupault (1897-1990), who pointed the Russian immigrant in the direction of what would become one of his main activities: printmaking.

Soupault, who had put together a book on Guillaume Apollinaire, asked Alexeieff to illustrate it with a woodcut, to which he, a complete novice at xylography, agreed on the spot. With neither manuals nor masters available to him, and with only a few days to produce the image, Alexeieff invented the technique for himself, and on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1926 had in his hands the first of a long series of books enriched with his visual fantasies: *Guillaume Apollinaire*, published by Les Cahiers du Sur, Marseilles.

But it wasn't until a year and a half later, in June 1927, that the printmaking specialists would be exposed to the mature style and technical expertise of an artist who at the tender age of twenty-six could already be considered a master. Nikolai Gogol's *Diary of a madman*, published by Les Éditions de la Pléiade, included 21 illustrations in aquatint, a type of etching that makes it possible to get all the shades of grey between

absolute black and white. This technique was well suited to Alexeieff's way of thinking, opposed to the declamatory, exhibitionist and frequently superficial attitude of the contemporary poets, painters and musicians who populated the avant-garde. "They play the trumpet, while I play the violin", he used to say, unassumingly but lucidly.

### ***Illustrate or create***

Among the aquatints that Alexeieff produced in his life some were splendid, others good, none mediocre. Some of the very best were *The fall of the house of Usher* (1929), *Colloquium of Monos and Una* (1929), *The brothers Karamazov* (1929), *The song of Prince Igor* (1950), *Hoffmann's tales* (1960) and *The works of Malraux* (1970).

Apart from a handful of commissioned etchings, he produced no "original" work, preferring to confine himself to pre-existing literary texts. In the field of *static* visual art he was an illustrator more than a painter (to some extent, it could be said that he was an illustrator even in the field of dynamic visual art, i.e.: in animation; but we'll talk about film later). However, a question needs to be asked here: What is an illustrator? How does an illustrator work?

The attitudes of a man of images faced with the written word are innumerable. There are those who isolate a phrase and literally translate it into a drawing, those who take a suggestion and develop it according to their own inclination, those who identify with the story and those who simply rebel.

To Alexeieff, the concept of illustration was that of free, independent reinterpretation of the literary text. To some extent, he always re-wrote in images what he was asked to illustrate, so that what the readers ended up with was, in the same book, a literary version and a visual version of the story. Obviously, his masterpieces came thick and fast with the texts that he felt the strongest bonds with: Hoffmann, Poe, Dostoyevsky, and the extraordinary reinterpretation in images of Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (1959), which enthralled even the novelist, who was able to see it shortly before dying.

In his work as an illustrator he used those inspirational criteria that we have already mentioned: "surrealist" spontaneity, memory (Pasternak was astonished to find

in these illustrations done by an emigrant who had left Russia as an adolescent everything that he'd seen as an adult during the civil war – “I can even smell the goods wagons”, he declared), and another element dear to the surrealists because it was considered free of the conscious mind: dreams.

Alexeieff's illustrations are almost invariably a voyage into the unconscious, nourished by a reading of the book that he translates into images. At times, as for example in the case of *Hoffmann's tales*, the aquatints are so rich (dense even) in symbols, analogies and allusions that they become real visual poems to read, re-read and mull over until they shed even their deepest meanings. This is where the draughtsman fuses into an author in his own right, abandoning the secondary role of decorator of someone else's work. As we shall soon see, as a cinematographic author Alexeieff was to latch onto the work of others, from Mussorgsky to Gogol, only for his own independent inspiration to shine over and above theirs.

If we examine an engraving plate with a strong magnifying glass we can easily appreciate the basic process of the creation of the image: where the plate is smooth, the ink doesn't get caught. This is why these areas stay blank during the printing phase. Where the plate is etched, it leaves a varying amount of tiny indentations, microscopic pinholes where the black ink is deposited. To the human eye the black of the ink combines with the white of the paper, producing a grey that is lighter or darker according to the density of the holes, in other words, according to how much ink is retained. We need to remember this in order to understand how and why Alexeieff came to invent the Pinscreen.

## ***Cherchez la femme***

Alexandre and Alexandra's marriage wasn't happy. Born out of a shared need for company more than for love, the young Alexeieff's age and artistic ambitions were at odds with the sedentary concept of family and fatherhood.

In 1930, Claire Parker was twenty-four. Born in Boston, Massachusetts, she was rich, good-looking and emancipated but dissatisfied, so she left for Paris to join that group of Americans (Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Man Ray,

etc) irritated with the provincialism of their country, and keen to experience the intellectual stimulation of the international capital of culture. One day she found herself leafing through one of the books illustrated by Alexeieff and fell in love with that powerful, original art, realising that she had found her vocation. Shortly afterwards she wrote to him asking for printmaking lessons.

Their first meeting was so like the slushiest of romantic novels that one blushes to describe it in detail. Suffice to say that that instant saw the birth of a human passion and an artistic collaboration that was to prove itself invulnerable to the severe trials that private and external events were about to subject them to – beginning with the Second World War.

All the following *auteur* films (with the curious exception of *En passant*) would be credited to both of them. However, academics and critics have always referred to them as “Alexeieff’s films”. This attitude was partly a result of the innate sexism in our society, partly of the need to simplify matters for record-keepers, who always prefer to identify one person as the object of their discourse;<sup>1</sup> but the decisive element for this option was a hefty dose of historical truth. For a start, Claire Parker always openly declared her role to be, artistically speaking, no more than that of catalyst –and cheerleader- to Alexandre Alexeieff’s inspiration. As often happens, it is the gaps than the evidence that prove to us what is real: Claire left us not one unpublished sketch, no technical note, and those who knew her never saw a pencil or brush in her hand, or even a notebook. Her inspiration was added onto his, she completed him, she corrected him. Without her, he would have been a lesser filmmaker; without him, she wouldn’t have been in motion pictures.

Alexandra, meanwhile, had come across a young artist of Hungarian origin, Etienne Raik, and had made friends with him. We have no details about this relationship in its early stages, but in his old age Alexeieff grumbled that, while he had been in a clinic getting over an intoxication caused by the acids used in his printmaking work, his wife devoted more time to Etienne than to him. Whatever the case, the two

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<sup>1</sup> Normally, for example, one speaks of *8 ½* as “a masterpiece by Fellini”, overlooking the fact that for the film he was able to use uniquely talented collaborators like the scriptwriter Ennio Flaiano, the set designer Piero Gherardi, the director of photography Gianni Di Venanzo, and the musician Nino Rota.

couples, now *crossed*, had a relationship of considerable harmony for many years, living opposite each other and working together on film commercials.

## ***The Pinscreen***

At the age of thirty, Alexandre Alexeieff felt deeply unfulfilled. Art had been his vocation, and after several ups and downs it had made him famous, well-paid, and well integrated in the world of friends and intellectuals who shared his interests and his passions. Yet this goal, instead of seeming to him much-coveted achievement, gave him the feeling that he'd reached the end of the road. Every new job from an editor, which would normally have been welcome, deep down meant repeating a technique, or a style, or a creative approach that were already well trodden. Limiting himself to a formula scared him. So he started to think about cinema.

Between the end of the First World War and the early 1930s, Paris bestowed upon the new invention of film the rank of art. It chose the first great masters: the German “expressionists”, the Russian Sergei Eisenstein and, above all, Charlie Chaplin (to whom the critic, theoretician and filmmaker Louis Delluc in 1921 devoted his first thematic book: *Charlot*). It hosted the most original avant-garde shorts invented by the painters Fernand Léger (*Le ballet mécanique*), Marcel Duchamp (*Anémic cinéma*), Man Ray (*Le retour à la raison*), Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel (*Un chien andalou*), not to mention Francis Picabia, René Clair, Germaine Dulac... “Cinema –said Alexeieff in the course of a long TV interview in 1971-, was certainly considered worthy of interest by my painter and writer friends. So I said to myself: I will make cinema. Alone. I don't want a large team, I'm not looking for El Dorado. Under no circumstances must my films ever be a product. They must be works of art”.

One day, the fledgling filmmaker asked his wife and daughter to go and buy him three thousand pins. This purchase naturally turned into a small comic sketch when the stunned shop assistant asked for confirmation of the number of pins ordered. Alexeieff took possession of the pins at home, and the family patiently arranged them in geometric order on a painter's canvas coated with wax. Alexandre spread out the pins here and there until he'd formed with them the shape of Svetlana's favourite toy, a doll

called Baby Nicholas, and he finally allowed himself a smile of satisfaction. The test run had been positive, the pinscreen could work.

## ***The Pinscreen (two)***

From my experience of more than thirty years of writing about Alexeieff, I can testify that the pinscreen and how it works is easy to understand when one sees it with one's own eyes, but less easy to grasp when one reads a description. I'll try to make myself clear.

The idea of the artist-inventor was to use a pinboard (though he preferred to call it a *screen*) upon which one arranges thousands of retractable pins, spread densely and set to an inclination of sixty degrees. Putting a low-angle source of light at either end of the board, each pin casts two shadows on the white surface, and the resulting mass of shadow makes the board completely dark. From this point on, all one has to do is to pull back certain groups of pins to reduce their shadows and make the corresponding area lighter. By pulling them out completely, any shadow vanishes, leaving just the illuminated part of the surface exposed. The artist was thus able to obtain a full range of greys in the creation of any shape. And this is where the animation comes in. Modifying the image manually and photographing it with a film camera at each new phase, the image comes to life.

It wasn't such a far-fetched idea as it might seem at first sight. Just think back to the principle of printing aquatints that we mentioned earlier on. Every small shadow cast over the surface of the boards equates with one of the tiny holes that absorb the black ink. Each white, lit up area corresponds to the bare (uninked) surface of the etched plate. In essence Alexeieff managed to transfer the instrument that he already used for his static images into dynamic terms. He could now, definitively, make cinema out of animated prints.

## ***The Pinscreen (three)***

“This will be the film that I wanted to make but never could”, Alosha (this was Alexeieff’s nickname) told Claire one day. “And why not?” she asked him. “Because I haven’t got enough money, and for this job you need a lot of money.” Claire’s American pragmatism could not countenance an unfulfilled aspiration. “I have a letter of credit. I can finance the making of a pinscreen and the production of the film”.

Together they assembled their first pinscreen and patented it (in Claire’s name as the banker), thinking not just about the film that Alosha had in mind, but also letting the instrument pay for itself by selling copies of it to animators all over Europe and the rest of the world. This latter scheme, to their great surprise, never happened. That device wasn’t exactly what many creators were looking for. In fact, for a long time, it was only so for Alosha and Claire. It wasn’t until 1972 that the National Film Board of Canada acquired a pinscreen. The French-Canadian Jacques Drouin was to be the only other filmmaker who would use it on a regular basis to make his (excellent) films<sup>2</sup>.

## ***Une nuit sur le Mont Chauve***

Russia was *far away* from Paris in 1931. In Moscow, political power was in the firm hands of Stalin, who was pitiless when it came to exiles. Many of them, gathered in various groups and ghettos (political, artistic, philosophical, religious, esoteric), spoke only Russian, excluded themselves from the France that was all around them, and chattering to each other about a return that they all knew was pure fiction. Alexandre Alexeieff frequented these groups for a while, at the start of his stay, and it was on one of those nights that he was dazzled by the piano playing of an old lady. Her listened to her at first because she reminded him of his mother, also a pianist. But that evening the woman didn’t play Chopin, as Maria Polidorova (*Mrs Alexeieff*) used to do, but *A Night on Bald Mountain*, a single movement symphonic poem composed by Modest

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<sup>2</sup> The author of these lines is aware of the existence of two other pieces made with this technique: the short film *Ciné-Crime*, by the Canadian composer Maurice Blackburn (1965), and some advertising sequences made in the 1990s by the Californian team John Lindauer-Lisa Yu.

Mussorgsky in 1876 and arranged after his death by Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov. The memory of that composition stuck in Alexeieff's mind, and he fantasised on it long and hard. When he decided that these gatherings of exiles were sterile, and began to reconstruct his own internal Russia of the memory, choosing to live like a Frenchman among Frenchmen, *A Night on Bald Mountain* became the centrepiece around which all his nostalgia clustered.

For many days, in the darkness of his room, Alosha listened and listened to the recording made by the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Albert Coates, constantly fantasising around the piece. It was one of his ways to be a surrealist: the images surged involuntarily and dream-like from his subconscious, and he connected them later by analogy and without any rational thread to make them flow together.

While he explained to Claire everything he wanted to put into the film project about Mussorgsky's symphony, she calculated the timing. It would work out as a piece of roughly 45 minutes, which would need some trimming, as the music lasted a little over eight minutes. They set to it diligently, without any preparatory sketches that might spoil the spontaneity of the idea (the pinscreen itself, with the unpredictable but agreeably smooth touch of the steel pins, was also capable of suggesting improvisations to the artist-modeller), and at last they were able to get down to the real work. In contrast to the tradition of animated cinema, the camera was positioned horizontally – like in shots of real images-, with the pinscreen looming vertically in front of it. In a year and a half of continuous work, of reconstruction and corrections, Alexandre Alexeieff y Claire Parker made *A Night on Bald Mountain* and presented it to the public.

### ***Few see it, many talk about it***

The short was screened for a couple of weeks in Paris and for a week in London. Today nobody would be bothered about an event that was so palpably irrelevant. But in the 1930s there was more respect for intelligence, and *A Night on Bald Mountain* was such as novelty of a film that it caught the attention of intellectuals and journalists. To a ripe old age, Alexeieff kept a thick pile of articles and reviews published when it was first shown. In *Le Temps*, the musicologist and theoretician Emile Vuillermoz wrote: "Among

the latest offerings from the technique of cinema special note should be made of this animated print essay by Alexandre Alexeieff. A masterly adaptation for the screen of Mussorgsky's *A Night on Bald Mountain*. We find in the film a series of absolutely new effects, whose importance should be stressed. (...) These animated prints reject all elements of realism. They are not photographs. Everything here is composition and transposition. But this is not even the traced drawing normally associated with animation. What we have before us is a printing technique, a dictionary of subtle nuances, of a range of greys and of blacks, whose marks of light and shade wax and wane to infinity. Instead of playing with lines and angles, the artist uses the language of surfaces, of volumes and of figures with shifting reliefs. In terms of the relationship with the music, it can be said that rarely does a conductor accept the discipline of the score with so much fidelity. Some parts demonstrate just how much can be achieved in this field when one tries to avoid the separation of two artistic disciplines born to work together. When the spectral beings arranged in a circle hold hands then raise and drop their arms, or the moment when the music surges like a rocket and then falls like rain, what is achieved is a reinforcement of musical emotion of extremely rare quality. (...) This film marks a day to remember”.

Stefan Priacel wrote in *Regards*: “Two admirable artists have just put together a short film of eight minutes’ duration whose importance is such that I consider this to be a date to write in the history of cinema. The subject of these images matters little. Let’s simply say that they are inspired by fantastic folklore of the Ukraine, to which are added the fantasies of Alexeieff and Claire Parker. There are hags and demons on horseback, there are witches’ sabbaths that combine musicians and birds, horses and fireworks, landscapes that are calm one moment and stormy the next, in one oneiric vision. But the importance of the film lies not in the subject but in a change in procedure whose scope is such that it could be said to be to cinema what a beautiful painting is to a photograph”.

In Britain, in the Autumn 1934 issue of *Cine Quarterly*, the great film-maker and producer John Grierson was beside himself with admiration: “The film, beyond its technical interest, is a triumph of fantasy. It’s difficult to describe due to its startling nature. Try to image a Walpurgis Night in which animal tracks on the ground indicate the presence of spirits, where monsters and evil creatures appear, disappear y tumble

about by pure magic, where scarecrows dance the fandango with their shadows on bare hillsides, where black and white horses race across the highest heavens, and skeletons that walk... Every art house cinema should show this film. It is the most astonishing, brilliant short that you will come across”.

The distributors thought otherwise. They judged the film to be very hard for the general public to cope with, and the best they could come up with was to say that they would be willing to negotiate a contract provided they had a guaranteed production of at least six films a year, which was physically impossible. Critical success was thus followed by commercial failure. *A Night on Bald Mountain* started to make a bit of money thirty years later, when the US distributor and film specialist Cecile Starr put it on the American alternative circuit, on university campuses and in associations passionate about art house cinema.

### ***A life in advertising***

In the Europe of the 1920s and 30s (unlike in the USA) it was quite common to show commercials at cinemas. But the European mentality of those days considered that boasting about the qualities of a product displayed slightly poor taste, so the advertisers adopted the softer approach of *making friends* with the audience. In practice, the publicity film, which could be four or five minutes long, presented itself as a short entertainment –witty, fun, original- and suggested purchasing the product only at the end, after having ... forgiven the intrusion.

That meant that whoever had a creative mind could be given quite a lot of freedom so long as he was able to captivate the audience. Alexandre Alexeieff, Claire Parker, Alexandra Grinevsky, Etienne Raïk and some other friends put their heads together and set off on this new path. Until the German invasion of France (1940) they all made a living from cinema commercials. On their return from their exile in the United States (1947), Alosha and Claire resumed that work and kept doing it for another ten years.

He didn't like advertising. It forced him to busy himself with things that had nothing to do with his inner world; it was just about selling objects. It put him in contact with clients whose myopia and arrogance he despised. Making films that catered to

mass tastes and not for sincere self-expression contrasted with his sense of artistic worth. For market reasons, moreover, what dominated was the use of colour, which he had always scorned, considering it a mere embellishment with respect to the ideal work. And *that*, in his opinion should be based on black and white, in other words, on the fundamental principles of yes and no, of love and hate, of good and evil, of life and death.

Despite everything, due to one of the many contradictions of the human soul, all his life he tirelessly defended the decision to devote himself to this work, even declaring that the painters of the Renaissance had no qualms about doing publicity for the Church, or court painters for their sovereigns, or the writers of *The thousand and one nights* for Arab merchants. Every retrospective organised in collaboration with him also screened his commercial films, of which he invariably showed himself proud.

Seen today, these films have not aged well. They have lost any serious interest (with the partial exception of *La belle au bois dormant*, 1935) and make patently clear the author's lack of intellectual interest. He rigorously avoids using the pinscreen, reserving it for more important occasions, and concentrates on small technical innovations to amuse himself and invent some motivation. At the risk of seeming too harsh, in my opinion Alexeieff's commercials tend towards kitsch and are best forgotten.

## ***America and back***

In 1940 Hitler's troops invaded France. The day before they marched into Paris Alosha, Claire, Alexandra and Svetlana left the country and moved to the USA, where Claire managed to get each one of them an American passport in record time. Alosha and Claire settled in the New York suburb of Mount Vernon, and began a humble but happy life. Photos from those years show them smiling and head over heels in love.

Work, however, was hard to get because New York was not yet the world's capital of art and galleries, nor did it possess the cultural and worldly finesse that it had developed by the end of the century. An animator could only draw cartoons and an artist had to paint like Grant Wood or Edward Hopper if he wanted to sell his work.

It was Norman McLaren, who had seen *A Night on Bald Mountain* in London and was then working for the National Film Board of Canada, who sought out the couple and proposed a small project to them: illustrating a Quebec folk song, *En passant*, to include it in a series that the NFBC had just got going.

For this film, two and a half minutes long, a screen with 1,125,000 pins, the largest in the whole of career of Alosha and Claire, was specially built. *En passant* (Passing by, 1943) turned out to be minor anomaly in the artistic production of the two filmmakers. It was the only film not to be based on a Russian story, the only one credited exclusively to Alexandre, the only one that portrayed an external situation (like an impressionist canvas, with touches of Monet) instead of the inner movements of the mind. It has some stunning moments, like the church that suddenly becomes transparent, revealing its interior, but at the end of the day it is a lesser work; and Alexeieff himself always considered it as such.

### ***Illusory solids***

The most abstract experimentation began in 1951, after their return to Paris. “Illusory” is a solid which, with a long exposure time, is traced onto the cinema film by a moving source of light. The example that comes most easily to mind is represented by night-time photos of moving vehicles, published for many years in specialist magazines. The exposure is long, so as to get all the nocturnal light possible, but the red tail-lights and the white headlights don’t register as points, rather as long luminous traces, which are “illusory” because they don’t exist in reality.

Alexeieff decided to connect a tracing source (a chrome-plated metal sphere, which glowed when strongly illuminated) to a compound pendulum, whose oscillations were mathematically calculable and could therefore be predetermined. In this way the different shapes that were traced in the air, one after the other, by the shining sphere could be predicted and controlled. Thus it was possible to animate the illusory solids, those solids that were inexistent in reality. “What this is about –said the artist-, is the second phase of movement.”

Though it was fascinating from a philosophical point of view, the nuts and bolts technique of illusory solids never merited more than a few seconds of film, normally used for suggestive special effects in publicity work. In 1952 *Fumées*, for the Belgian cigarette company Van Der Elst, won an award at the Venice Festival for its contribution to visual innovation.

The year 1956 was also important for our cinematic history. The prestigious Cannes Festival agreed to the request from various French filmmakers and critics, amongst them Alexeieff, Paul Grimault and André Martin, to devote a section to animation. The *independent* (read: *non-Disney*) filmmakers had the chance to meet and find out that they had interests and goals in common. In 1960 the first festival in the world specialising in animated cinema was inaugurated in Annecy (Haute Savoie, France). Two years later saw the birth of Asifa (Association Internationale du Film d'Animation), the United Nations of the sector. Behind these initiatives invariably lay the discreet but determined will of Alexandre Alexeieff.

## ***The two giants***

En 1962 Orson Welles was involved with one of his many difficult projects: *The Trial*, based on the Franz Kafka novel. He realised that something was lacking, and he found it in Paris. This is an account of the event in his own words:

“(Peter Bogdanovich) – How did you manage to get the story illustrations for the prologue?”

(Orson Welles) – They’re images made with pins, thousands of pins. I found these two old Russian (*sic*), completely crazy, cultivated, elegant, fascinating. It was Alexandre Alexeieff and Claire Parker, husband and wife. They sat down and stuck pins in a big board. The shadow of the pins made the chiaroscuro. They were two of the kindest and happiest people in the world. In my opinion, those images are extraordinarily beautiful.

- Yes, they’re really beautiful. How did you find them?

- I don't remember. I must have seen something on television or somewhere. They were working on a film, I think they'd been working on it for the last sixty years. I went to see them and I persuaded them to interrupt their work for five months (not long, by their standards) and stick pins for me. They did it, and they did it superbly.

- Yes. It's one of the moments of the film that I like most.

- We should have made the whole film with pins! With no actors. A film without actors, what you and Alfred Hitchcock like!"<sup>3</sup>

As told by Claire Parker, the encounter had funnier touches.

"After a couple of calls from the producer, Orson Welles came to our studio. He started to look around everywhere, at all our equipment, getting more and more surprised. At first he spoke to me in English, then he realised that Alosha also spoke the language well. From that moment he forgot my presence and addressed himself solely to him. It was entertaining to see these two creative giants trying to seduce each other, to win each other over. Eventually they reached an agreement about how many images were needed, how much time was needed, about how much money was needed. Then, before leaving, Welles said to Alosha: "Could I come here when you're working? I'll just be sitting in a corner, I won't talk, I won't distract you. I'd like to see how the prints on the pinscreen are created". Alosha looked at him, and his voice became even more baritone: "One cannot refuse Orson Welles anything –he replied as if he were pronouncing a sentence-, but I know my work would suffer!" So he parted with a resigned smile, and we never saw him again. We found out, many months later, that he was very pleased with the work".

Orson Welles wasn't wrong in identifying the actors as the problem in his film. Indeed, *The trial* has a fundamental defect: Anthony Perkins, too American, too Hollywood, too short on nuances to cope with a role in which mystery has to turn into destiny and evil turn into life. His is a face in which one could probably read the

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from the book *This Is Orson Welles*, by Peter Bogdanovich and Orson Welles, under the direction of Jonathan Rosenbaum, Harper Collins, New York 1992.

neurosis of Freud but never, by a long way, the consummate darkness of Kafka. Many critics wrote that the prologue (based on another Kafka text, the short tale *The Judgement*) was better than the film itself. Alexeieff made it with fixed images, only slightly *enlivened*, darkened at some point in the developing process, while Welles' splendid voice narrates the story off screen.

Strange as it may seem, this one-off commissioned job turns out to us, as spectators, to be decidedly *alexieffian*. The oneiric images of a mysterious large door, the enigmatic luck of a man trying to get through it, the atmosphere of fear that envelops the narration has much in common with *A Night on Bald Mountain*.

## ***The Nose***

The film which, to give credit to Orson Welles, Alosha and Claire had been shooting "for sixty years", was a short adaptation of a short novel by Nikolai Gogol. It was ready in 1963 and it was called *Le nez (The Nose)*.

The original story was published in 1836. The plot seems like a dream (a nightmare of castration, we students of popular Freudianism would say these days,) in which a Saint Petersburg barber, one 25<sup>th</sup> of March, finds a nose in his breakfast bread. The nose starts to lead its own life, talking and socialising. The owner, his face denuded, tries to regain the protuberance he has possessed since birth, until on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April, when everything returns to normality.

Although it was classed within the canon of fantasy literature that had existed since the birth of mankind, *The nose* had such a pronounced touch of surrealism that it even to some extent upset Gogol himself. Devoting the final pages to a debate on the implausibility of the affair, he did so intelligently, ironically, self-satirically, but letting slip a sneaking uncertainty, ending with these words: "However you look at things, in all this there is something truly absurd. Nevertheless, whatever you say, in this world similar events happen; seldom, but they do happen".

The setting is as always Russian culture, and this time the starting point is a piece in prose instead of a musical composition, in some sense as if Alexeieff had decided to transfer his experience as a book illustrator to the screen. (It should not be forgotten

that only very recently had he produced a huge number of images for *Doctor Zhivago*, choosing to work with the pinscreen instead of etching plates). In this film we find all the now-familiar themes: the surreal, nostalgia, Russia, the old days of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the absurdity of things, the irrational breaking into everyday life, even comedy. And it's all mixed together in a wonderful black and white dream, using a secret process that allows the author to make the images pulse just like the light pulses in his beloved city of the White Nights and of his adolescence.

## ***Return to Mussorgsky***

In 1972, for the first time, Alosha and Claire sent a film to compete at a festival (*The nose* had been shown at Annecy but as a special screening). The result was bitter. The jury at the first Zagreb Festival decreed no recognition to the film by the two living legends of animation *d'auteur* and opted to award their Grand Prize to the Soviet *The Battle of Kershents*, directed nominally by the old Stalinist Iván Ivanov Vano and in practice by the unrestrained Yuri Norstein.

The work by the Parisian couple was titled *Tableaux d'une exposition (Pictures at an Exhibition)* and was made up of three parts illustrating the three segments of the homonymous musical composition by Modest Mussorgsky dating from 1874.

Certainly, the jury made an error, given the film's indisputable artistic excellence. Yet in their defence it should be noted that there is no such thing as a jury that does not make mistakes. Besides, given the extraordinary flowering of novelties coming from all the countries that attended in the early 70s, this very personal, hermetic, black and white film, made many, perhaps all of them think that maybe Alexeieff was repeating himself sterilely.

As usually happens, time has shown itself to be the best judge and the wisest critic. Removed from the euphoria and the emotion of its time, it reveals today all its exceptional poetic power, above all in the central piece entitled (oddly enough, in Italian) *Il vecchio castello (The Old Castle)*.

This is masterpiece of non-narrative animation, interweaved with well-honed visual hints and with unimaginable dynamic inventions, such as the surprising play of

bi-dimensionality and tri-dimensionality created by the simultaneous use of two pinscreens, one rotating in front of one that's static. In a letter dated 19th December 1971, announcing the completion of the film, Alexandre Alexeieff told this writer: "I think that this film is as good as *A Night on Bald Mountain*, although it's very different. You need to see it at least twenty times before you can say that you know it well. That is something that good poetry requires too".

## ***The Moon Is Down***

With seventy years behind him, Alexeieff started to feel old. Claire was still smiling, displaying her natural cheerfulness and optimism, but French Slav was showing signs of melancholy. In 1977 he mentioned that he was planning some last experiments, and that he wanted to have a go at doing an animated version of *adagio* defined by the pace of its movements. He also said he was fascinated by the caressing movement of the leaves of a lime tree...

The experiments turned into a last film, *Trois thèmes* (*Three Themes*, also known as *Three Moods*), based on three other pieces from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. In the first piece we see an ox melting away in a Russian landscape, while in the second a string of images from *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The third offers a contrast between an obtuse giant stamping out coins and a brave little flying thing (and in whom we recognise Mussorgsky) buzzing around to try to get some attention.

Despite the fact that it has plenty of quality moments, this is clearly a film made by an old man, by someone who has run out of steam. Basically this is an attempt to summarise his artistic life and, more or less consciously, leave behind a spiritual testimonial. It is the work of a pessimist. The last *picture* in this *exhibition* shows us the heavy, rich Goldenberg producing money with his fists, while around him pants the tiny, anxious, creative Schmuyle. The former symbolises the power of the wealthy man, the latter the weakness of the artist. And the scales hang on the musical notes, ringing when the coins fall into his dish, but it changes its balance definitively when golden coins rain into the other.

“Alexeieff loved putting the moon in his films”, confessed Claire Parker to the public in the soundtrack of *À coups d'épingles*<sup>4</sup> (to the sound of pins), a short 1959 documentary. In *Three themes*, for the first time, we see no moon. Without giving too much importance to this element, which could have been accidental (yet knowing Alexeieff's complex psychology, it doesn't seem likely), undoubtedly the missing moon is indicative of a farewell.

Claire Parker began to show the first symptoms of bone cancer in the spring of 1981, and after a great deal of suffering she died in Paris on October 3<sup>rd</sup> that year. Alexandre Alexeieff, beaten, survived her less than a year. He left us on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, 1982.

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<sup>4</sup> Play on words: *un coup d'épingle* in French is “a small provocation”.