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Anastasia Kostetskaya

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Stalingrad re-imagined as mythical chronotope: Fedor Bondarchuk’s *Stalingrad* in IMAX 3D

Anastasia Kostetskaya

Department of Languages and Literatures of Europe and the Americas, University of Hawaii at Mānoa, 1890 East-West Road, 457 Moore Hall, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA

**ABSTRACT**

In this article, I maintain that IMAX 3D *Stalingrad* (2013) by Fedor Bondarchuk takes the mythologization of Stalingrad to an entirely new level in order to create an innovative national myth for contemporary Russia. The film not only incorporates the traditional Soviet Stalingrad myth of ‘a sacred battle’, but also shapes the city as a mythical space through fictional postmemory, which is posed as authentic. *Stalingrad* imbeds its setting into the ‘IMAX paradigm’ meant to transport its viewers into the fictional but credible reality of the embattled city, which has more in common with, for example, the space station Pandora or Hogwarts. The film defies linearity of historical time in favour of the mythical recurrence of Stalingrad entrapped in the vicious cycle of war. It presents Stalingrad as a mythical chronotope tied to the idea of circular time, enveloping the individual. The cinematic city, where time folds in on itself, thus belongs more to the romantic-folkloric tradition than to history. I pay close attention to how camerawork and IMAX special effects re-enact Stalingrad for the younger audiences used to representations of war in computer games. My article demonstrates how digital effects intensify nationalist sentiment through their visceral-emotional impact.

**Introduction**

Fedor Bondarchuk’s *Stalingrad* (2013) appeared on a wave of new Russian films about the Great Patriotic War, which shape it as the central ‘cause of present patriotic sentiment and national renewal’ (Norris 2012, 112). Films such as *The Star* (*Zvezda*, 2002) by Nikolai Lebedev, *Penal Battalion* (*Shtrafbat*, 2004) by Nikolai Dostal’, *On the Nameless Height* (*Na bezymiannoi vysote*, 2004) by Viacheslav Nikiforov, *Brest Fortress* (*Brestskaia krepost’*, 2010) by Aleksandr Kott, and *Burnt by the Sun 2: Exodus* (*Utomlennye solntsem 2: Predstoianie*, 2010) and *Burnt by the Sun 2: Citadel* (*Utomlennye solntsem 3: Tsitadel’*, 2011) by Nikita Mikhalkov, to name but a few titles, not only incite patriotic sentiment in contemporary audiences, but they also shape the memory of Russian history and war for the new generation of Russian viewers. These films demonstrate the continuing ‘obsession with war’ (Carleton 2011, 617) and present the discourses of triumphalism in terms of ‘two interdependent scenarios – one of cyclical…'
devastating tragedy and the other redemptive unassailable victory’ (ibid.). Bondarchuk’s film elevates the war to the abstract strife between Good and Evil and foregrounds its mythical cyclicality as both the disaster of fratricide and eternal triumph of life over death.

*Stalingrad*, filmed in IMAX 3D, presents the embattled city as a mythical chronotope, with the digital media and special effects meant to intensify the nationalist sentiment through their visceral impact. By embedding the historical Stalingrad setting into the ‘IMAX paradigm’ of ‘a fictional but credible reality’ (O’Hehir 2014), Stalingrad’s director champions a mythic World War II as a new genre. The film thus adds a new dimension to the historiography of war as ‘the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse’ (White 1988, 1193). As Anton Kaes points out ‘cinema has a particular affinity for the neomythic tendencies of the present because its nonverbal language of images appeals to the subconscious’ (1989, 59). Stalingrad reinforces the mythmaking potential of cinema through the use of IMAX technology. It teleports the viewer to the heart of the urban battle zone in the same way it has transported viewers to a fictional Hogwarts, the space station Pandora or the bottom of the ocean – experiences well familiar to the new generation of IMAX audiences (Shamsutdinov 2013). The 3D video game-inspired reconstruction of Stalingrad as a mythical chronotope puts the viewer at a distance in terms of space, time and emotional involvement by aestheticizing violence for the sake of an impressive image. Although most of Stalingrad’s viewers will never see it in the intended format but rather on a computer screen, this analysis looks specifically at how IMAX technology and aesthetics facilitate a new way of mythologizing Stalingrad by relying on the already existing myths and on audience experiences with film and new media.

Online comments provided by those who watched the film in IMAX 3D when it premiered in October 2013 testify that the IMAX format ‘facilitates immersion’ (Iurii 2013) into the ‘oppressive atmosphere of the apocalypse’ and gloom (Ortega-y-Gasset 2013), through the use of special effects and the pervasive morbidity of slow motion cinematography. At the same time, most of the viewers agree that the 3D format does not compensate for the

![Figure 1. Still from Bondarchuk’s Stalingrad.](image-url)
absence of emotional involvement across the screen as is characteristic of Soviet war films, such as *The Cranes are Flying* (*Letiat zhuravli*, 1957) or *The Officers* (*Ofitsery*, 1971) (Vedun 2013). The viewers perceive the style in which *Stalingrad* is filmed as close to ‘fantasy as it is very similar to *Lord of the Rings* trilogy’ (2001–2003) (ars-projdakov 2013). One user describes the impression as a ‘rum go’, since ‘there is no credible story line, no heroes, and, in fact, no film itself, but the atmosphere is there’ in the film (romazhigun 2013). Comments focus on the combat scenes of the film as specifically successful in creating a visceral impact, for example the episode where Soviet soldiers engulfed in flames charge up a hill. One user describes his reaction in terms of olfactory sensations: ‘the smell of the burnt flesh almost spreads through the theatre’ (shequel 2013). One opinion encapsulates the essence of IMAX 3D immersion as a touristic museum encounter: ‘Stalingrad looks like a painterly interactive tour of a war memorial, where the guide presents an interesting story through individual portraits and attracts the viewer’s attention to certain details, which can entertain you for a while’ (oscar75 2013). In sum, the viewers perceive *Stalingrad* as an immersive simulacrum of its real-life prototype with IMAX 3D technology shaping it as fantasy or mythical chronotope.

*Stalingrad*’s engagement with the past is heavily conditioned by the spatio-temporal experience of urban warfare inspired by 3D video game reconstructions, such as *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor: European Assault*, which include Stalingrad episodes. The film is obviously customized for younger audiences, more familiar with the war mediated through such games as *WarGames* (1983), *Avalon* (2001), *WarGames: The Dead Code* (2008) and the *Resident Evil* series (2002–2017) in Hollywood films. Like many contemporary war films based on such games, *Stalingrad* does not aspire to historical authenticity, which can no longer possibly be verified (Tsyrkun 2013). Bondarchuk admits that his film, longlisted for the Oscars, is ‘less about the real battle of Stalingrad than about a group of heroes who rescue a princess locked in a tower’ (O’Hehir 2014), which caters to the tastes of western cinemagoers. As such, the film reduces the gigantic battle to the love story between the only survivor of a Stalingrad building, Katia, and her five Soviet defenders, all of whom she considers to be fathers of her son born after the battle is over.

The unprecedented scale of devastation and human loss ideally suits Stalingrad to excite mythmaking imagination, ‘which is more likely to be kindled by the abnormal, some striking catastrophe, some terrible violation of the social code’ (Farnell 1919, 47; quoted in Velikovsky 1950, 302). The film demonstrates that this sense of catastrophe remains the force that fuels what Serguei Oushakine calls ‘the patriotism of despair’ – a ‘post-Soviet tendency to achieve a sense of belonging by framing the nation’s history as one of experienced, imagined or anticipated traumatic events’ (Oushakine 2009, 5). In *Stalingrad*, Bondarchuk centres on ‘the unifying function of the war’ for the nation and essentially produces ‘a unifying myth for Putin’s Russia’ (O’Hehir 2014). Treating Stalingrad as ‘a sacred territory for Russia, which gives birth to legends’ (O’Hehir 2014), he re-invents the Soviet myth of Stalingrad as the site of military glory and triumph into Stalingrad as ‘a tragedy of antiquity’ or ‘the Saga of Stalingrad’ (Roth 2013). This treatment disconnects the embattled city from its living memory and pushes the historic event back into ‘the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins and myths’ (Nora 1984, xviii). The film, thus, turns into a sort of Christmas story or a fairy tale with a happy ending at all costs, in which the seed of life survives through deadly ordeal only by miracle. Re-played in the context of the recent Fukushima disaster, which serves as a narrative frame for the story of the battle, Bondarchuk’s *Stalingrad* conceptualizes life as a farewell gift from the
dead. Evoking the trauma of the past, the film shapes Russia’s present as a moment of relief after the disaster is averted, and before a new imminent disaster occurs.

**The people of Stalingrad**

The central characters of *Stalingrad* – five Soviet soldiers, Nikiforov, Astakhov, Poliakov, Chvanov and Gromov, and the 18-year-old girl Katia they defend, along with the German officer Peter Kahn and his Russian concubine Masha – re-enact a myth of the great disaster, akin to the myth of the Great Flood. In order to pass on the seed of life after the war is over, only one virtuous woman – Katia – is given a licence to survive the catastrophe. Each of the heroes is defined by and related to the others through his or her ultimate loss – the death of family members as well as abrupt or forceful dispossession of one’s human characteristics or human rights. Katia is the only survivor not only among her family, but also among all her friends and neighbours. Rape by German soldiers, an incident she alludes to in a conversation with her Red Army defenders, she epitomizes the conceptions of lost innocence and desecrated childhood. Scout Nikiforov loses his humanity amid the horrors of the first war months in 1941 and becomes a cold-blooded killer; artillerist Astakhov is the only survivor from his whole regiment; Sergeant Poliakov’s young wife and little daughter have been killed in a bombing; sniper Chvanov’s brother has been hanged, his sister raped and his mother crippled by the Germans. Captain Gromov has never had any attachment to either people or places; an orphan, he experiences a sense of belonging only in a war zone. The German officer Kahn lost his wife to tuberculosis back in Germany and now discharges his anger and lust onto the local girl Masha, who also seems to carry her burden in life absolutely alone, hated by her Russian neighbours as a traitor and despised by German military men. The inclusion of the perpetrator, Kahn, in the paradigm of irrecoverable loss conveys the idea of the universality of wartime suffering.

Devising the mythical Stalingrad through the folkloric oral narrative device of *skaz*, Bondarchuk ‘valorizes memory over history’ (LaCapra 1998, 17), or ‘grounds history in “authentic” memory merged with the imaginary’ (16). The director makes *skaz* central to the etiological myth, or the myth of how he came into being, as told by Katia’s now elderly son, Sergei Astakhov. An EMERCOM worker, he participates in the rescue operation at the site of the Fukushima disaster in 2011. There, he saves the lives of five German teenagers trapped underneath ruined buildings and tells the story of his mother’s survival in Stalingrad to one of them. He develops this narrative as a parable of human perseverance in the face of death. Astakhov inevitably relies on his mother’s memory of the events antedating his birth, or more precisely, his memory of the story he heard from his mother. This fictional narrative masked as an authentic family chronicle draws on contemporary understanding of memory as ‘a crucial source for history’ (LaCapra 1998, 19). This memory twice retold, however, sustains the atmosphere of the mythical recurrence and destroys ‘a more authentic, existentially rich, living memory’ (17) of Stalingrad. By dismissing ample extant memoirs of life in the embattled city, Bondarchuk’s *Stalingrad* veils and displaces trauma by its romantically folkloric form (19).

The narrator Astakhov, existing in the film mostly in the form of the voice-over commentary, embodies the mythical chronotope, given that ‘the image of man’ is ‘intrinsically chronotopic’ (Bakhtin and Holquist 1981, 85). He is enigmatic, as his face is never revealed. He sees through time and beyond the constraints of his own life, for instance when he...
speaks about the circumstances leading to his birth or gives out details from personal lives of the people he never met. Astakhov features as a folkloric figure of significant longevity and vitality; his life is cyclical and heroic. At the age of 68, he is still an active participant in the Ministry of Emergency Situations rescue operation at Fukushima – a fact that has raised doubts among film critics (D’iakova 2013) and the blogosphere. He grants life to five German teenagers by extracting them from the ‘netherworld’ of rubble. His narrative intimates that he does it by way of a symbolic exchange for his own survival, which he owes to five Soviet soldiers at Stalingrad. Astakhov looks up to these heroes of the past – the time dimension preferred by the folkloric-mythical tradition (Bakhtin and Holquist 1981, 148). His narrative flips the folk-tale formula ‘once there was a father who had three sons’ into ‘once there was a son who had three fathers’ (bylo u ottsa tri syna/bylo u syna tri ottsa) – even five, in the case of Stalingrad – most likely to give mythical augmentation to the hero’s image. It is not until the end of the film that we learn which of the five soldiers Astakhov considers to be his biological father.

Mythmaking around the issue of fatherhood in the film directly refers to the civilian plight at Stalingrad. Its memory is overshadowed, even to the present day, by the grandiose myth of Soviet military triumph, which is popularly believed to be sponsored directly by Joseph Stalin, the Father of the Peoples, whose name the city bears. This myth presented the absence of civilian evacuation as part of the heroic defence of the city, inspired by Stalin’s reported aphorism that ‘soldiers do not defend empty cities’ (Reitman and Fel'dman 2010, 40). The civilians thus trapped in Stalingrad, according to this myth, were protected by the Red Army from the horrors of the German occupation, rather than exposed to it. Hence, in his narrative Astakhov drafts his aetiology through an acceptable ideological lens, as he adopts and perpetuates the myth of his ideologically ‘clean’ origins: he is the son of a fallen hero-artillerist cum ‘son of the regiment’. Both aetiologies also fit well with the myth of the hero-father in the context of the post-war fatherless childhood, when a story of a father’s heroic death on the battlefield served as the best legitimate explanation for his absence. Developing his

![Figure 2. Still from Bondarchuk’s Stalingrad.](image-url)
analysis of Astakhov’s story as an *apocrypha*, film critic Iurii Gladil’shchikov suggests that the hero’s conception can be considered immaculate. In fact, the film does not provide any visual evidence as to whether Astakhov’s mother, Katia, whom he calls ‘a Russian eighteen year old Mother of God’, had ever had any kind of sexual involvement, beyond hugging and quite innocent kissing, with any of her five Red Army protectors (Gladil’shchikov 2014). Katia, however, gives a hint that her son’s conception may have resulted from rape by German soldiers. When sniper Chvanov challenges the girl with sexual innuendoes about her life in the occupied city, in her vehement invective response she only obliquely acknowledges the horror of sexual abuse during German occupation of Stalingrad: ‘Go ahead and ask, how we lived under the Germans and what they did to us!’ Her voice is subdued by tears while Captain Gromov gives the order to his unit to suppress the highly uncomfortable shared memory: ‘Everyone, forget what you have just heard!’ Thus, precarious fatherhood becomes an important component in creating the unifying national myth: the war is portrayed as a great leveller of guilt and imposed suffering, which equates the perpetrator and the victim.

In the trenches of IMAX: place

The mythical appearance of the city is mapped through situating it outside of its traditional spatio-temporal context, widely explored in previous Stalingrad films. The IMAX *Stalingrad* deviates from the conventions of the Russian/Soviet war film genre and, consequently, from attendant expectations of the viewer brought up in that tradition. Such Soviet war epics as *The Battle of Stalingrad* (*Stalingradskaia bitva*, 1949) by Vladimir Petrov and *Stalingrad* (1989) by Iurii Ozerov embed the battle into larger contexts of the Great Patriotic War and World War II, as they show the preceding events and locales on the way to the German advance on the city, and establish cause and effect relationships between the events. It was also typical of traditional war films to show the city on a map with arrows charting the directions of the offensives and retreats, such as in *The Great Turning Point* (*Velikii perelom*, 1945) by Fridrikh Ermler. This element is also present in the German film *Stalingrad: Dogs, Do You Want to Live Forever?* (*Hunde, wollt ihr ewig leben?* 1959) by Frank Wisbar; through montage, its short introduction juxtaposes parading Nazi troops in Berlin and corpses of German soldiers frozen in a snowy field at Stalingrad, thus presenting historical cause and effect of the German defeat. *Stalingrad* (1993) by Joseph Vilsmaier opens with the journey of German soldiers across Europe to the Eastern Front; the men are shown changing throughout the film, with their expectations of the Blitzkrieg and acquisition of land gradually substituted by bitterness and realization of the horror of what they are involved in.

Cinematic Stalingrad’s uncanny detachment in Bondarchuk’s film echoes the historical rupture that resulted from renaming the city Volgograd in 1961, during Nikita Khrushchev’s administration. The change of name automatically downgraded the significance of the battle and the city of Stalingrad, as pertaining to the name of Stalin, Khrushchev’s personal opponent. The disappearance of the toponym from the geographical map made Stalingrad synonymous solely with the battle, which took place in the past, thus completely disconnecting it from the present moment. The city’s existence, now attached only to battle memorials dispersed throughout its territory and beyond, became cyclical and recurrent, simultaneous only with annually celebrated victory anniversaries. As a result, the Stalingrad chronotope acquired the recurrent status of a myth, which revolves around the most traumatic event in the city’s history.
Despite IMAX’s unlimited potential to span time and geographic locations, *Stalingrad* constantly limits the viewer’s gaze: the city is shrunk to the size of a small fortress with only a few inhabitants, whose characters are not shown in depth within the three days of the battle that the film embraces. In comparison to its predecessors, Bondarchuk’s cinematic *Stalingrad* appears as a distant planet immersed in the chronotope of an ever-going war. The association of Stalingrad with Japan through the time-space of devastation invites an understanding of war as a natural disaster, similar to an earthquake. Analogies the film draws between Stalingrad and Fukushima, a city on an island, reinforce the perception of the city as yet another ‘inhabited island’ created by Bondarchuk, in reference to his film *The Inhabited Island* (*Obitaemyiy ostrov*, 2008). Its main hero arrives on the dystopian planet Saraksh ruled by an authoritarian government, and soon realizes he cannot go back to Earth, as his spaceship has been destroyed. This narrative correlates with the one unfolding in the opening scene of *Stalingrad*. There, soldiers also crash land in post-apocalyptic Stalingrad, as if on a distant planet. They become involved in the battle of Good and Evil, not to be associated with the Red Army and Nazi Germany, and die for the sake of the ultimate survival of life on Earth. Their entrance into mythical Stalingrad is represented as walking on water when they prepare to cross the Volga by boats into the city. As the camera lifts its eye from the dark waters of the river to show the burning city on its opposite bank, a regiment of soldiers enters the screen and silently marches through the river as if upon land. The film thus makes a reference to a religious motif, Jesus walking on water described in three of the Gospels (Mark 6:45–53, Matthew 14:22–34, John 6:15–21), which shapes the defence of Stalingrad as an extraordinary and almost impossible task comparable only with the deeds of Christ or mythological heroes.

Bondarchuk’s film evokes such extreme forms of tourism as travelling to the sites of disaster and war zones, when it transports the viewer from devastated Japan to ruined yet invincible Stalingrad via IMAX technology associated with learning about new locations and distant epochs. Just like in war-inspired video games, the viewers crash land in Stalingrad...
together with its heroes, participate in combat and otherwise viscerally engage in the film’s action via its 3D interface. Various geographical backgrounds, however, are only mentioned or invoked throughout the film. As the German officer Kahn reproduces the myth of the Third Reich’s unlimited territorial expansion, he turns the idea of war as tourism into war as sex tourism with the German army operating ‘the biggest travel agency in German history’ (Confino 2000, 108). In his imagination he spans the distance from his homeland to India via Russia. He associates Germany with his deceased wife, Russia with his lover Masha who reminds him of his wife and replicates for him home away from home. Kahn describes India as a sexual paradise where soldiers can gain unlimited access to women, each of whom has six hands. In a desperate attempt to incite fighting spirit in his weary soldiers, Kahn virtually collapses the geographical distance and presents India as a mythical promised land located right on the opposite bank of the Volga – a paradise they can reach by simply crossing the river. Although such manipulation of geography sounded outrageous to Bondarchuk’s critics (Mikhailova 2013), Kahn expresses the German soldier’s popular myth of the Volga’s supernatural powers. ‘More than just a river’, a ‘life line’ and ‘a divide between Europe and Asia’, the river, which Germans reached but could never cross, became for them a mythical divide between life and death and ‘a point of no return’ (Dehnhardt et al. 2006).

Stalingrad’s 3D computer-generated iconography (CGI) represents war as an altar on which people are burnt as sacrificial offerings to gods, and, as with many war films, Stalingrad aestheticizes violence and physical suffering intrinsic in war. The ordeal by fire metaphorically blends the victim and the perpetrator and equates them in their suffering and, hence, martyrdom. This iconography is especially prominent in the scenes that foreground death by burning: the dazzling elemental dynamics of fire create a stark contrast with the film’s overpowering grey tones and sluggish tempo. The immersive quality of IMAX turns the viewer of Stalingrad from an onlooker into a participant in the combat and violent scenes, with ‘visceral excitement bypassing reasoning about the credibility of the moving image’ (Zone 2012, 176). The film’s 3D mobile painterly composition forces the experiencer to do an embodied scan of this virtual reality, rather than focus immediately on the horror of the moment.

Through the trope of fire on the altar of war, the film simultaneously invokes two meanings of Holocaust: a historical meaning as a Jewish sacrificial offering that is burned completely on an altar, and the Holocaust, or the mass murder of Jews under the Nazi regime. Captain Kahn’s superior, the evil Lieutenant Colonel Henze, briefly reminds him about the ancient German tradition to offer a sacrifice to the gods in order to succeed in battle, after he gives orders to burn a Jewish woman and her child alive in front of other civilians. As the camera focuses on the sacrificial pair engulfed by flames, the Soviet snipers observing the scene boil with anger as they crouch inside their hiding place. They shoot the German flame thrower but only after he accomplishes his mission. Stalingrad’s video game format invites the audience to share the point of view of the sniper; although we are supposed to experience relief and a sense of achievement from destroying one more enemy, the sight of fire unites the flame thrower, now aflame, and the Jewish pair in their martyrdom and underscores the epic universality of suffering.

The film expresses the same idea in one of the most visually stunning combat scenes, in which Germans blow up the oil tanks on the steep bank of the Volga in order to prevent the Russian troops from capturing them. The indomitable advance of the Soviet soldiers storming the hill, however, surpasses the force of the horrendous explosion. As they turn into live
oil torches but continue their eerily slow motion march, they appear as fiends from Hell in front of the German troops they attack. Pairs of soldiers are shown locked in hand-to-hand combat, together forming balls of fire as they roll on the ground. Finally, the camera gives a panoramic view of the battlefield, which now appears to be a sea of fire. The otherworldly character of this attack, augmented by IMAX 3D, is reminiscent of war correspondent Vasilii Grossman’s famous passage about the heroism of Soviet soldiers, chiselled on a wall of the Mamaev Hill memorial complex in present-day Volgograd: ‘The iron wind was thrashing into their faces but they kept moving forth, and superstitious horror overcame the enemy again and again: was it people attacking? Are they mortal at all?’ (Grossman 1942, 10). Although the voice-over commentary in the film praises the unwitting courage of Stalingrad defenders, in this scene the viewer is forced to associate, almost simultaneously, with both the Soviet and the German sides in the combat via the camera changing its point of view: at one moment we are charging up the hill together with the Soviet troops, the next we are horrified by their frontal attack, which, shot in close-up, is threatening to spill over from the screen onto us.

In the trenches of IMAX: time

Time appears to be frozen and circular in Stalingrad. This effect is achieved through the film’s semblance of museum dioramas; it does not only immerse the viewer in a touristic museum encounter associated with IMAX, but also underscores the extra-temporal and eternal quality of Stalingrad’s existence. In its recreation of the Stalingrad cityscape, the film relies on the sets of the Panorama Museum of the Battle of Stalingrad to present its key moments. The ring-shape representation of the city in the panorama museum, which director Bondarchuk employed to build mise-en-scènes for his Stalingrad in the Leningrad region, metaphorically maps circularity of time through circularity of space. The static panorama display pursues a purpose similar to that of the mobile IMAX picture – to surround and immerse the viewer in the experience. The film presents Stalingrad’s urban layout, in reality an extensive stretch of land along the Volga, as an enclosed circus, with its famous landmarks – the drama theatre, the fountain with dancing children, the Pavlov House, central to the cinematic narrative – pulled from different locations throughout the city centre to surround the filmic square across which Russians and Germans exchange fire. Computer-generated images of slowly moving soldiers and machines in the film create an impression of the museum sets coming alive from eternal slumber, but still retaining the look of reality sunk in lethargy. The slow dreamy rhythm of Stalingrad, which ranges from slow motion to bullet time, strives to visually expand a single moment into eternity. The song ‘The Legend’ (‘Legenda’, 1988) by Viktor Tsoi, which accompanies the final credits, verbalizes this message: ‘And suddenly a moment turned into eternity’ [vnezapno v vechnost’ vdrug prevratilsia mig].

IMAX’s borderline position between museum and theatre contributes to the representation of Stalingrad time as frozen in its circularity and the recurrence through a traditional representation of history and war as theatre, where the show is repeated over and over again. Stalingrad embeds a theatre performance in its plot when artillerist Sergei Astakhov offers Katia the spectacle of air combat in the theatre-like settings of a ruined flat at the top of a building as her birthday present. A partially destroyed wall and roof form an opening through which the fusilladed nocturnal sky can be seen as if framed by theatre curtains. The camera then adopts the point of view of the heroes as they are immersed in the show. The perception of war as theatre provides Katia and Sergei, and hence the audience, with a mythical safe spot
at the very heart of the battle zone, but detached from it. The film creates yet another island within the mythical island of Stalingrad, or a ‘cloud,’ as Sergei calls it, on which a temporary escape from the traumatic reality can be found. When Katia expresses incredulity over the absence of Germans in the building while ‘they are everywhere’ otherwise, Sergei observes the mysterious absence of both Germans and Russians. ‘That is good,’ he says, ‘we will wait till it is over: the fear, the night, the horror, the war, as if we are on a cloud.’

The film presents Stalingrad as a mythical chronotope tied to the idea of circular time, enveloping the individual. It is this circularity of mythical time that blocks the development of characters throughout the film’s story and limits their existence to only one function. The urban panorama of devastation is introduced via an orbital shot of Captain Gromov standing on a rooftop of one of the buildings surrounding the rubble-filled square central to the filmic narrative. A burning German plane makes a semi-circle over the square before it crashes on the ground, ensnared in fire. It accomplishes the circularity of the static ruins and delineates the vicious cycle of Captain Gromov’s life – as mentioned earlier, this warrior is doomed to be entrapped in the war chronotope.

Circularity of time in IMAX Stalingrad is designated through the 3D photography and projection, which turn a flat theatre screen into an opening, adding depth to it. The filmic space does not only recede into the distance beyond the opening, but also ‘comes forward through the opening to embrace the viewer’ (Ramsdell 1953, quoted in Zone 2012, 1). Circularity is also created by the surround sound effect accompanied by Angelo Badalamenti’s orchestral score, which ‘immerses the viewer into the chaos of the warfare’ (Kendrick 2014). Although 3D adds visual depth and perspective to Stalingrad’s chronotope, the 3D vortex does not translate into an emotional experience of identification with the heroes and their suffering across the screen. Viscerally sucked into the space-time of Stalingrad, the viewers cannot experience the same degree of immersion into the human-emotional aspect of the story.
The cyclical nature of human life, as well as an individual’s entrapment in the chronotope of mythical disaster and suffering, is visually laid out through the scope of a sniper’s rifle. This presentation and lack of narrative depth also reflect the viewer’s limited knowledge about the human side of the characters. As in a video game, it strips people of their individual characteristics and turns them into moving targets. The viewer is forced to associate with the sniper’s point of view, for example in the episode where sniper Chvanov justifies killing Masha because, as he explains, she is ‘a German whore’. Although Chvanov is shown to be seething with hatred, we perceive his gesture as a part of game play, where gamers compete for points and killing is reduced to scoring, and where death and destruction are regarded as the mere clinical removal of another moving figure in the game.

The city of Stalin is the city of God

IMAX aerial photography as ‘a way to survey the objects, and especially landscapes’ (Acland 1998, 436) mediates the uncanny presence over and throughout the devastated urban terrain in Stalingrad. In a war film, the aerial photography is primarily associated with the point of view of a bomber pilot undertaking a reconnaissance flight or bombing the city. In Stalingrad, it is complicated by the aerial shots of the bomber aircrafts ‘watched’ from above. The film does not only provide the viewer with a kind of map-making experience via downward-looking shots from god’s eye view perspective, it also consistently presents people in unmediated communication with god as they are shown from above or looking upwards.

Clearly giving preference to the vertical, which connects people to God and thus to an otherworldly eternity, the film presents this eternity as ‘simultaneous with a given moment in the present’ (Bakhtin and Holquist 1981, 148) and cancels historical time with its horizontal linearity and natural flow. A pervasive presence of God is revealed through references in the heroes’ speech directed to and mentioning God, as well as through panoptic aerial views of the battle. Both the Russians and the Germans speak about god as a protective superpower. Artilleryman Sergei Astakhov, for example, is referred to as ‘kissed on the crown of his head by God’ in a comment about his military prowess. The vertical axis connects God above observing the world of people below. In the case of young and innocent Katia and Sergei, this viewpoint demonstrates that they are protected, for example in the episode where they wade through the rubble-filled square to Sergei’s observation post on Katia’s birthday. This angle also refers to human mortality as it predates and foreshadows the hero’s death. Lethally wounded Poliakov looks up with a happily unfocused stare in his wide open eyes, as he embraces the paradise he thinks he is on his way to. Kahn, Astakhov and Gromov look up in silence when the final storming of the Pavlov House begins, as they realize they will not survive.

The vertical perspective from above in the point-of-view shots serves as a harbinger of German doom: Peter Kahn is repeatedly shown in god’s eye view shots, angry and rebellious. In one such scene, he appeals to god with curses for the war, for Russia and for the unconquerable Pavlov House. Shown from above, he is foreshortened and pathetic; his world is limited to a small circle of dim light, with Masha entwining herself around his feet, the rest of the space sunken in darkness, which forebodes his inglorious death. When Kahn gives a motivational speech directed at his soldiers before they storm the Pavlov building, Kahn reminds them about the slogan Gott mit uns (‘God is with us’) engraved on the buckles of their belts; he calls Adolf Hitler their god, hence the camera angle yielding the ‘reverse’
verticality as it shoots the soldiers from the worm’s eye view perspective against the wall with a bas-relief of Stalin on it. The film thus maps Hitler, as well as Stalin, as a false deity.

The trope of landing, falling or otherwise downward movement is foregrounded in Stalingrad within the centrality of IMAX flight, as it accomplishes the panoramic view of death and devastation on an epic scale. The film starts with a plane arriving in Japan ravished by the earthquake and tsunami. In Stalingrad, a bomber aircraft spectacularly crashes on a city square. The sound of this crash wakes Katia up from her sleep, metaphorically returning her down to earth, as sleep is also traditionally associated with flight. The montage posits war simultaneously as a bad dream and nightmarish reality. Snuggling in the foetal position in the erstwhile cosiness of her parental home, which is filled with artefacts typical of the pre-war Soviet lifestyle, she is seeking a symbolic refuge in the past. The horrific otherworldly character of the contemporary reality outweighs the past and cancels out a future for all the characters in the film, except for Katia, as they are killed and fall down and as the exploded buildings crumble. Only the final episode of Stalingrad allows upward movement: it designates breaking free from the vicious cycle of war. Before the camera takes off and leaves Stalingrad on an unseen aircraft, showing the devastated urban terrain from the god’s eye view perspective, we see Katia inside the broken window frame – a symbolic divide between death and life that she is entitled to continue. Although, in reality, the battle of Stalingrad continued from August 1942 to February 1943 – the film only speaks about the three days in November 1942 – the airlift symbolically relieves the viewer by breaking away from the war disaster chronotope. It reconfirms the audience in their confidence that the whole experience has just been an IMAX sponsored time travel experience, which guarantees maximum visceral involvement and ultimate safety to its customers simultaneously.

**Conclusions**

The film concludes with a tribute that Sergei Astakhov pays to the heroism of his ‘fathers’ and the fathers of his compatriots, because of whom he ‘does not know what war is like at all’. Despite Stalingrad’s anti-war stance, which shapes the battle of Stalingrad as a war to end all wars, its mythical-heroic form provides evidence to the opposite.
By incorporating his *Stalingrad* into the multifaceted mythic paradigm, director Bondarchuk attempts to create a national myth for contemporary Russia via bridging the largely unexplored disjuncture between official heroization of Stalingrad and its trauma. He achieves this ‘reconciliation’ by shaping Stalingrad as the dreamed-up extra-temporal time-space continuum, where Good wages eternal war on Evil. As such, the film creates ‘the founding myth of Russia’s current peace-keeping missions all around the world, be it on the peninsula of Crimea or somewhere else’ (Schwartz 2014). Stalingrad’s use of IMAX technology and a fictional folkloric postmemory narrative authenticate this modified Stalingrad myth for younger audiences familiar with war mainly through film and computer games. Memory (in its phenomenological sense) thus presented can give ‘direct access to experience, often vicarious, that may be sacralized or seen as auratic’, Maier maintains (1993, 144). The film, however, does not produce a cathartic experience of coping with the trauma. To the contrary, it reveals a ‘morbid preoccupation’ with the past, which, according to LaCapra, ‘inhibits action on the present oriented to a more desirable future’ (1998, 14). Through its visceral-emotional impact, the ‘mythical memory’ of *Stalingrad* thus provides access to a more subtle yet enduring traumatic experience – one of entrapment in history.

Notes

1. A type of a literary fiction narrative, imitating the style and specific intonation of folkloric oral tales and demotic idiom.
2. EMERCOM is derived from Emergency Control Ministry, also known as the Ministry of the Russian Federation for Affairs for Civil Defence, Emergencies and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters, also known as the Ministry of Emergency Situations (Ministerstvo po chrezvychainym situatsiiam, MChS Rossii).
3. The title of the sub-chapter refers to Cyrill Shamsutdinov’s film review (2013), which in its turn alludes to the literal English translation of the novel by Viktor Nekrasov, *Front-Line Stalingrad*, written in 1946 as *In the Trenches of Stalingrad (V okopakh)*.
4. The film is a screen version of the science-fiction novel by Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii, written in 1969.
5. ‘India was right behind Stalingrad for the Germans … What nonsense! What India is this German Kahn speaking about??? […] The Fall down of Stalingrad could have catastrophic consequences for the USSR. But for Bondarchuk’s heroes, Stalingrad is a gateway to India.’
6. While the length of the city during the battle was about 50 kilometres, the Stalingrad front ranged from 400 to 850 kilometres.

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Notes on contributor

Anastasia Kostetskaya Born in Volgograd, Russia, obtained her undergraduate and graduate degrees in Language Theory from Volgograd State Pedagogical University. After receiving her PhD in Russian Literature and Culture from the Ohio State University in 2013, she is now working as an Assistant Professor of Russian at the University of Hawaii, Manoa. One of her projects is on the Russian and German cinematic Stalingrad discourse and broader issues of WWII memory.
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