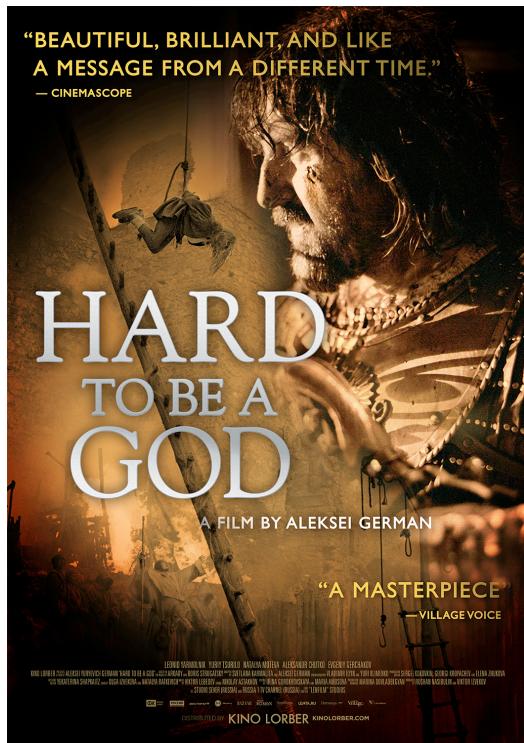


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HARD TO BE A GOD



A film by Aleksei German

2013 / Russia / 170 minutes / 35mm / DCP, B&W

A Kino Lorber Release
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CAST

Leonid Yarmolnik – Don Rumata
Aleksandr Chutko – Don Reba
Yuriy Tsurilo – Don Pampa
Evgeniy Gerchakov – Budakh
Natalya Moteva – Ari

CREW

Director: Aleksei German
Screenwriters: Svetlana Karmalita, Aleksei German,
Based on the novel by Boris and Arkady Strugatsky
Cinematography: Vladimir Ilyin, Yuri Klimenko
Production Design: Sergei Kokovkin, Georgi Kropachev, E. Zhukova
Costumes: Yekaterina Shapkaitz
Makeup: Olga Izvekova, N. Ratkevich
Music: V. Lebedev
Sound: N. Astakhov
Editors: Irina Gorokhovskaya, Maria Amosova
Story Editor: Yevgeny Prizker
Production Manager: Marina Dovladbegyan
Produced by: Viktor Izvekov, Rushan Nasibulin
Production Companies: Studio Server (Russia), Russia 1 TV Channel (Russia)



SYNOPSIS

A group of research scientists has been sent to the planet Arkanar, living under an oppressed regime in a period equivalent to earth's Middle Ages. The local population is suffering a ban issued on anyone who knows how to read and write. The scientists must refrain from influencing political and historical events on Arkanar. They must work incognito, and they must remain neutral. Don Rumata, recognized by the locals as a sort of futuristic god, tries to save the local intelligentsia from their punishment. He cannot avoid taking the stance: "What would you do in God's place?"

Adapted from the 1960s cult sci-fi novel "Hard to Be a God" by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Hard To Be a God is a project that Russian director Aleksei German had been considering since the mid-1960s. German tried to make it as his debut film as early as 1964. Instead, he made *Trial on the Road* in respect to Lenfilm, the historic production company for which the director worked throughout his career. The project was later approved by Goskino, the State agency responsible for organizing filmmaking in the Soviet Union, but in 1968, after the uprising in Prague, the authorization was revoked for ideological reasons. Twenty years later the director returned to the project, but decided instead to make a film that would take him a long time to complete, *Khrustalyov, My Car!* Ten years later, after stating "I am not interested in anything but the possibility of building a world, an entire civilization from scratch", German committed his efforts to *Hard to be a God*. The film was shot between the autumn of 2000 and August 2006: it even involved the construction of castles near Prague and on the sets at Lenfilm; the shooting took so long that some of the actors died of old age; the post-production phase took over five years. German died on February 21st, 2013; the film was completed by his wife and closest collaborator, Svetlana Karmalita, and by their son Aleksei A. German.

INTERVIEW WITH SVETLANA KARMALITA

1. The Strugatsky brothers wrote the book in 1964. Why did Aleksei German immediately want to adapt it to the screen?

The novel by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky immediately broke out with striking success. Readers saw something that caught their interest. The ready-made feature movie plot, rich in conflict, offered them a diverse cast of characters typical of the Middle Ages and at the same time resembling real neighbors, friends, colleagues and distant acquaintances. Of course the issue of the eternal fight between good and evil was not put aside by the authors, so everything in the novel seemed very similar to the life of common people although full of romance and valor.

The intelligentsia of the '60s, which by that time had tasted and enjoyed the charm of "allusions", found in the novel the embodiment of their conception and understanding of social life in Soviet Union. The book was immediately sold out and began traveling from hand to hand.

Aleksei German belonged to that part of intelligentsia that still held onto illusions regarding the possibility of liberal and democratic ways of development. Nevertheless, he feared the return of the terror that our country had experienced, especially in the 30s. All his life he worried that that time could return, revealing all its ugliness yet again.

In this sense German the reader and German the artist associated himself with the essence and thoughts implicated in the novel.

The movie script that had already been approved at "Lenfilm" was terminated on the second day after the entrance of Soviet tanks into Prague. The ideas that the intelligentsia found in the novel were also obvious to government censors who immediately associated the Czech events with the landing of the "grey order" mentioned in the script. On the 23rd of August of 1968, Aleksei was informed of the repossession of his movie script. Generally speaking, August of 1968 terminated all the illusions of the so-called "Sixtiers".

2. The narrative has a secondary importance in the film. The camera is like a subjective point of view floating among characters. Like in paintings, there are simultaneous actions happening at the same time on different grounds. The camera is always on the move...

Starting from his second movie, Aleksei became more interested in depicting the world that surrounds a protagonist. He had always believed that the reasons and sources of deeds and emotions of a character could only be understood through depicting the environment and reality around him. Appreciation or rejection of real life and its intrinsic manifestations by a character, all those factors that mold his personality are no less important in the fiction story than the figure of a protagonist. Aleksei believed that the camera should be an artist's tool in revealing different aspects of one phenomenon. Indeed, if we distinguish the different plot lines in the movie every character would be presented as a finished character sketch. Although lost in the movie sequence, each character still has his own nature and his own place and value defined by the artist.

The main plotline often recedes into the background permitting the audience to feel as if they were part of the panhuman history.

Several plotlines introduced by the author, nonetheless, had to bring together the movie sequence and the cinema viewer – a person of another time, another civilization and another understanding of the world. The call for these plot lines was satisfied by their quantity – just no more and no less.

3. Don Rumata is a nobleman who tries to save culture, art and intellectuals but fails and ends up as a lonely man. Did Aleksei German want to make an apocalyptic film?

There is another point of view on the ending of the film. I have taken part in many discussions concerning the movie and many viewers have interpreted the ending as positive or optimistic. Some viewers pointed out the fact that Rumata demanded to take off the boots of slaves. Besides, the last sound is the trumpet produced by a slave that echoes Rumata's musical improvisation. Harmony in the world is not achieved that is to say not yet achieved. Rumata's friend is wearing hand-made wings behind his shoulders with which brainiacs learnt to fly. Obviously, he is not surrounded by like-minded persons, and this is not possible because of a number of reasons. But on the other hand nobody has yet disproved the influence of a Personality on the world, and in this sense Don Rumata is definitely a Personality.

I am often being told about the so-called “light at the end of the tunnel.” But “light at the end of the tunnel” is something unreal and abstract. Is not the process of living “in the tunnel” more interesting itself? Is it not more interesting to live in the time we are plunged in, in the real time of our life?

The main ideas implicated in the novel transformed in the director’s and scriptwriter’s mind when it came to the moment when Rumata was to return to Earth. Here in Arkanar he has lived most of his life. Here are his friends, his enemies, his home, the woman whom he does not love yet. As an historian he made a grave mistake by not checking what was happening with the “black order” and thus was unaware that it was gaining ground for attack.

When it came to finishing the story of Don Rumata it was decided that it was absolutely impossible for him to return to Earth and leave behind everything that had become so familiar and dear to him, and without paying for his mistake. His leave would mean betrayal of his friends and beloved people. The end of the story reconsidered in this way had a strong impact on the “back run” of the whole story and determined changes during shootings. Those changes concerned a more detailed narration of Rumata’s relations with surrounding persons.

4. Hard to be a God presents a new world with its own civilization. Aleksei German Jr. talks about his father’s search for authenticity and attention to details...

None of the scenery was created without Aleksei’s signature on drawings and sketches. Nothing was done behind the director’s back. Everything that is in the film is part of the director’s conception of the depicted time and world. If today I found myself in Rumata’s dwelling, God forbid, I could live there as I live in my own house in which everything is so familiar to me. I know where I should sleep, eat, take a bath, and where all the necessary things are located. The creative process was very complicated, and the completed movie does require effort from viewers.

On the other hand the question is “What was the director to do with all this complexity?” Should he have made the shooting and the movie simpler? This would have been merely impossible as a real artist can in no way deliberately limit himself in artistic devices.

5. The faces of the crowd and the secondary characters are particularly striking and memorable. What characteristics were searched for during casting?

All the extras were selected by Aleksei. He himself never used the word “extras” and forbade the crew to use it, too. Instead, he called them foreground actors, second-ground actors, third-ground actors, etc.

We searched in different offices, hospitals, outside in the streets, in theatres – everywhere. There were often open calls among them. Aleksei said that if someone without theatrical background could express the change of human emotion before the camera it meant they were an actor by nature; they had merely never realized that before. Aleksei enthusiastically cooperated with such actors.

6. Where were the settings built? What was the budget of the film?

The main part of exterior shootings took place in Czech Republic as we could find a lot of castles there – medieval constructions where we could create the necessary settings. The shooting partly took place in St. Petersburg, Russia, where sceneries and settings were built from the ground up. The sceneries were projected and built at Lenfilm studio. Chambers, enormous corridors, passes, halls, two-story apartments – all of these were constructed not by small parts but using big complexes. The scope and quality of work done are well seen on screen.

I do not understand anything in regards to the budget, and neither did Aleksei. It was only known that the movie was financed by private business. Taking into account the complexity and scope of such work, Aleksei demanded to spend “other people’s money” very sparingly. Financial issues were managed by two producers. One of them – Viktor Izvekov – is also a brilliant leader as well as our old friend and a person with excellent artistic taste.

Aleksei’s first cooperative film with him was “My friend Ivan Lapshin”. The other producer, Rushan Nasibulin, we came across in the very beginning of our work on the film and chummed up very quickly. The basis of our friendship was the commitment to creative work, which is to say, art. I think this very commitment united the people creating the movie and

those who provided money to make the work possible.

Actually the main difficulty in the beginning of production was the director's insistence on high standards which he required from everybody. But this kind of attitude did not inspire resistance in people. Mainly Aleksei always worked with the same people creating all his films. At the bottom of it all we all were like family.

Later, during shooting, Aleksei's health became poor. He continued shooting, editing and synchronizing his movie between stays in hospitals. When he stayed in a hospital we just waited for him. Or otherwise the shooting team was preparing for next stage of work.

7. How close to being finished was the film when Aleksei German passed away?

The movie was almost finished. Aleksei had finished editing, and completed synchronization; the music to be used had been agreed upon with the composer, Viktor Lebedev. Aleksei liked the music composed by Viktor very much. So the movie was ready for the last stage – mixing, which means the convergence of all film elements in the completed movie. The mixing was never completed by Aleksei. So this was our job. I was more like a consultant as I knew all the director's ideas and manners. And Aleksei German Jr. did this job as brilliantly and professionally. We preserved all as it was; we neither added anything nor cut anything out. We completed Aleksei's work right, in the way he had conceived it, and I can vouch for it.

8. What would you like to say to the spectator that will discover the film?

I would like to say to spectators: *Hard to be God* is a very simple film. It is the best work by Alesha in my mind, but I have always valued each of his new films as a better one compared to previous ones. I would like to give the following advice: just watch the protagonist and try to share his life.



ALEKSEI YURYEVICH GERMAN (DIRECTOR)

Aleksei Yuryevich German was born in Leningrad in 1938. His father, Yuri P. German, the famous, award-winning “humanistic” Soviet writer, a friend of director Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold, convinced him to enroll in the Faculty of Theatre Directing in Leningrad. After graduating, German collaborated with Georgy Tovstonogov, a key figure in Soviet theatre in the 1950s and 60s. In 1964, the director began to work with Lenfilm, the oldest “studio” in the Soviet Union, which became the cradle of auteur filmmaking. In 1967, he made his first film with Grigori L. Aronov, *Sedmoy sputnik* (The Seventh Companion).

In 1971, German finished *Proverka na dorogach* or *Operacija “S novym godom”* (Trial on the Road), inspired by a novel written by his father. The film, set during World War II, was immediately forbidden with the excuse that it distorted historical facts: it was not released until 1985. In 1977, the director made *Dvadtsat dney bez voyny* (Twenty Days Without War), inspired by the novel by Konstantin Simonov, the famous party loyal writer who defended the film before the leaders of the Central Committee and ensured its distribution. In 1984, German again worked on one of his father’s novels and made his most famous film, *Moy drug Ivan Lapshin* (My Friend Ivan Lapshin), set in the early 1930s. German’s portrayal of Soviet history irritated the Party and the film was immediately withdrawn from movie theatres. To survive, German wrote screenplays together with his wife Svetlana Karmalita, under her name alone.

German’s parabola of life and creation was fraught with events that were as tough as they were dramatic, and which reduced his opportunities to personally develop his own projects. During the longest period of his inactivity as a director, in 1988 German and his companion in life and work Svetlana Karmalita did however create and direct the Studio for debut works and experimental films at Lenfilm, a structure to develop debut works by new directors which produced eight feature-length films, as well as shorts and animated films.

With the advent of the 1990s and the new political situation, German worked on *Khrustalyov, My Car!*, released in 1998, after being presented in competition at the Cannes Film Festival. In that film, German came to the conclusion that after the horrors of the Stalin era, art was no longer possible in its previous form. In 2000, the director, finally recognized as one of the great masters of Russian filmmaking, and honoured with many awards, began to work on the epic project of *Hard To Be a God*, inspired by the famous eponymous novel by the Strugatsky brothers, which took thirteen years of hard work. In this work, German portrayed an entire civilization onscreen, reviewing the history of humanity with ruthless precision and enormous compassion.

Aleksei German died on February 21st, 2013. The film HARD TO BE A GOD was completed by Svetlana Karmalita and by their son Aleksei A. German.

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FILMOGRAPHY

- 1967 - *Sedmoy sputnik* (The Seventh Companion) * co-direction with Grigori L. Aronov
- 1971 - *Proverka na dorogakh* (Trial on the Road)
- 1976 - *Dvadtsat dney bez voyny* (Twenty Days Without War)
- 1984 - *Moy drug Ivan Lapshin* (My Friend Ivan Lapshin)
- 1998 - *Khrustalyov, mashinu!* (Khrustalyov, My Car!)
- 2013 - *Trudno byt' bogom* (Hard To Be a God)

Hard To Be A God is set in the future on a planet bogged down in the darkness of the Middle Ages. Now, just what memory, even a collective one, can German possibly be thinking of here? In fact this film, destined to be his final, concludes the director's long-standing inquiry, linking the grotesqueness of contemporary reality (which in the 20th century echoed with the return of some of the Dark Ages' worst nightmares – the destruction of culture, the legal enshrinement of xenophobia, civil war) with an authentically photographed fictional universe, re-created in this case according to the paintings of the Northern Renaissance instead of newsreels and photos...

Enraged by the futility of the events going on around him and the deaths of his friends and beloved, (the leading character) Rumata, whose powers seem godlike to the planet's inhabitants, abandons the role of neutral observer and takes up arms, brandishing a sword of vengeance. The carnage he unleashes on Arkanar is comparable to the Holocaust and Hiroshima: a reign of pure terror that cannot be adequately expressed in either words or images. But what will change after this Sodom and Gomorrah? Only one thing: God will cease to be God and, having acknowledged the vile human nature within himself and accepted it as punishment, will be exiled from his comfortable paradise. In the Strugatsky Brothers' book, after the carnage Rumata flies back to Earth; in German's film, he decides to remain in exile on the abominable Arkanar forever.

– Russian critic Anton Dolin from his article “The Strange Case of Russian Maverick Aleksei German”, published in *Film Comment* (2012).