MEMORY OF HOPE

Memory of Hope was inspired by the eclipse of two events. One of the last carefree days before graduate school, I was reading a novel, Omon Ra, by Victor Pelevin, an author newly emerged and quite popular in Russia. The story presented a fictional portrayal of the USSR space program.

Soviet spaceships had traditionally been delivered to the orbit by rockets with progressively detaching fuel compartments. In Pelevin's novel, rocket compartments were not detached automatically. Young boys were recruited in the program, promised to become cosmonauts and fly a spaceship. After years of training and isolation, they were finally assigned their space mission. Until the very last moment they did not realize that flying spaceship meant manually operating a rocket compartment from the inside, and perish once the compartment is detached. The society would never find out about them, and their families would be informed of their death long before the mission.

Pelevin's science fiction book was an easy and gripping read. It was, of course just fiction, but the idea of an individual being a disposable screw in the communist state machine was all too real.

The second event of that summer took place in reality: it was the sinking of the Russian submarine Kursk. Most of the one hundred and twenty people drowned shortly after the collision. Thirty or so sailors remained alive for another week, waiting for the rescue that came too late. Such tragedy did not occur due to unavailability of help. The United Kingdom, the US, and a few other countries had the technology and desire to

assist in the rescue. However the Russian military following the traditions of "honor and pride" of its Soviet predecessor, refused the offered help. They claimed that such operation would reveal technological secrets…

My reaction was similar to the thousands of Russians: it was an outrage. From the beginning of the submarine accident, it was eerily clear that the sailors were going to die. It took a week to confirm that. In the stillness of final summer days this week seemed to last forever.

The Kursk events started unfolding when I was still in the middle of reading <u>Omon Ra</u>. During the following week the reality of the BBC broadcast and the fiction on the pages in front of me became so intertwined, that it was hard to tell which story was real and which one was a product of a trendy writer, catering to paranoia and cynicism of post-soviet society. The plot seemed to have been so trivial and unoriginal, yet it repeated itself again and again.

My thoughts turned to the notion of choice associated with an act of sacrifice. Serving a higher cause, such as protecting lives of others is a remarkable thing to do. It can justify a choice to sacrifice one's life. The military propaganda worldwide has used this idea to build the image of honor and glamour. For a young person, who idealistically believes in this image, or hopes that they are invincible, or feels like life offers no other choices, it is easy to forget that the choice they make to sacrifice their own life happens at sign-up.

The actual act of sacrifice is often decided by a commander. Same applies to choice of sacrificing lives of others…Armies and wars functioned this way for ages.

So for the longest time I remained convinced that all wars are the same, all military is the same. It had to happen that in the course of just two years of my working on this animation, the events of real life presented the new reality of war.

The events of September 11th and war in Iraq have shown a different face of war, the military and the world. In his essay "The Spirit of Terrorism" Jean Baudrillard suggests that the events of September 11th mark the official beginning of the forth world war. It is lead by individuals fighting against globalization in its various manifestations: commercialism, territorial invasion, religion or media domination. He points out two new weapons of modern warfare: suicide and real-time imagery. Remarkably both of these are ideological weapons, directed at enemy's mind, more than physicality.

Throughout the history of western wars, overcoming survival instinct was seen as an act of heroism, driven by a decision made in a moment of extreme tension in a conflict. Being killed in a battle, in a military mission, or by saving somebody's life were the situations when self-sacrifice was treated as an honorable and courageous act. Western civilization looked at self –sacrifice in eastern cultures, such as sacrifice of Japanese Kamikaze pilots, for instance, as an irrational act, a result of being brain washed by the system. The value of individual life in Western civilization did not accept self-sacrifice as a rational method of military strategy.

In today's terrorist war, suicide becomes a commonly used weapon, due to its simplicity and finality. The logic of war is an exchange of mutually hurtful acts, the goal of which is to establish dominating role in determining values, territories and interests that ultimately support one's own life. In terrorist war this logic becomes corrupted. Baudrillard describes it as moving the struggle away from the notion of balance of power "into symbolic sphere, where defiance, reversion, and one-upmanship are the rule – so that the only way to respond to death is with an equivalent or even greater death". Terrorism defies its enemy "with a gift to which it cannot reply except with its death and its own downfall." Thus death becomes not the means of establishing balance, but the ultimate goal.

Real-time imagery is meant to keep the peaceful population most accurately informed of the development of events. Yet, the damage caused by realtime imagery goes beyond implanting fear and thus magnifying the effect of war. During the September 11 events and the war in Iraq it created a sense of disillusionment and confusion. On one hand the reality shown on television too often looked exactly like one in the movies; on the other hand, continuous exposure to what was known to be real, became too hard to bear. Once during the evening news coverage of war in Iraq, the anchor of one of the television networks mentioned a phone call made by a woman whose son served in Iraq. She asked of the media to decrease the time spent on war coverage. She found herself completely paralyzed by the continuous stream of information, and agitation caused by constant expectation to see her son on television.

Thinking over the impact of the recent events, made me seriously consider whether the project was even worth continuing. It seemed that all I had to say about wars and armies became irrelevant overnight. The shock of the soldier's death in the animation felt like an insult to many deaths witnessed in the recent real life events. After further contemplation, I came to two conclusions. First, treatment of western war as defending the value of life is hypocritical, because the only difference between certain death of suicide bombing and possible death in a military operation is a degree of probability.

Secondly, despite its obvious context, I understood, that my animation was never meant to be a story about war. It had to be a story about a personal experience. Subjective feelings may be unreliable, yet they are the only authentic experience for an individual. For the woman who called CBS network, the war space was not in the distant land, not on a hyper-real television screen, but in her mind tormented by worry, and anger, and fear, and doubt.

Thus <u>Memory of Hope</u> became a story of a mind that belongs to those who wait, who imagine the worst, and who have to remember not to loose hope.