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‘Tsars and Monsters’: Reflections on Soviet Cinema during Perestroika¹

Abstract: When the new general secretary of the CPSU, Mikhail Gorbachev, came to power in 1985, a political, social and economic change was introduced at all levels of the Soviet system. The new course known as perestroika, filmmakers began to explore previously forbidden themes, and distributors released films that were suppressed by pre-glasnost-era censors. Soviet cinema underwent a revolution, one that mirrors the crucial changes that took place within Soviet society between 1985 and 1991. This article represents an overall survey of the effects of this revolution on the work of Soviet filmmakers and their films – and might help to interpret the final collapse of the USSR from a different perspective.

Key words: Soviet Union, perestroika, cinema, censorship, communism, Cold War

The view of the former Soviet cultural space has changed entirely over the past two decades. The once hardened lines of discourse have given way to a more complex interpretation, allowing the development of in particular Russian culture in the twentieth century to be seen in a new light. Such a view seems all the more necessary now that the initially hoped-for process of East–West rapprochement following the fall of the Iron Curtain has largely stagnated, creating the risk of Russia

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– perceived as part of Europe since the Enlightenment – being increasingly excluded from European dialogue. Moreover, even the last two decades have been marked by striking pendulum swings in the assessment of ‘Western’ culture and relations with the West in general. This in turn has prompted closer examination of Russia’s own problems and patterns of identification – a process primarily intended to characterize Russia in distinction to the outside world.²

In such a situation of mutual animosity and rapprochement, studying the cinema can help identify shared traits and individual features, and encourage the continuation of discourse on a sound basis. One possibility – an approach also taken by this article – is to superimpose internal and external perspectives, to juxtapose viewpoints and disciplines. Given its widespread impact, cinema is better equipped to bring about intercultural mediation than any other art form. However, this can only happen if we accept that our own viewing habits are somewhat culturally conditioned and often run counter to those of other eras and cultures. Training them and sharpening the focus for films from other cultures and times past can hence be regarded as a key task of cinema historiography.³

By considering prominent examples, links will be revealed between the images of society presented in films, and past and present-day circumstances at the time they were made. Since the cinema and historical development both influence each other, particular emphasis will be placed on analysing this two-way relationship. Aesthetic modelling and its condensation in canons of representation play a role which should not be underestimated.⁴ Although in the USSR this is especially true of the Stalin era with its rigid ideas of a ‘closed’ cinematographic canon, it also applies to other periods. Only by understanding how individual films depart from the prevailing canon can we properly assess their critical and innovative potential as well as the directors’ achievements, which might otherwise remain hidden to the untrained eye.

With early pre-revolutionary Russian film largely oriented towards folk culture, its roots are to be seen more in the colourful bustle of farmers’ markets than in highly developed art forms. This orientation towards the artistic tastes of the ‘people’ (*narod*) is a common theme in the various periods of Soviet film history.⁵ Starting

² See for example the articles in the following special edition of the journal *Osteuropa*: Sapper, Manfred/Weichsel, Volker (eds.), „Auge auf! Aufbruch und Regression in Russland“, In: *Osteuropa*, 6–8, 2012.

³ For an introduction to this topic, I recommend Rother, Rainer (ed.), *Bilder schreiben Geschichte. Der Historiker im Kino*, Berlin 1991; Monaco, James, *Film verstehen. Kunst, Technik, Sprache, Geschichte und Theorie des Films und der Neuen Medien. Mit einer Einführung in Multimedia*, German edition edited by Hans-Michael Bock. Hamburg 2009.

⁴ For more on the film industry in the Stalin era, see Hülbusch, Nikolaus, *Im Spiegelkabinett des Diktators. Stalin als Filmheld im sowjetischen Spielfilm (1937–1953)*, Alfeld/Leine 2000; Nembach, Eberhard, *Stalins Filmpolitik. Der Umbau der sowjetischen Filmindustrie 1929–1938*, St Augustin 2001.

⁵ Regarding cinema in the tsarist period, see Youngblood, Denise, *The Magic Mirror: Moviemaking in Russia, 1908–1918*, Madison 1993.

in the 1920s, the film was also regarded as the most suitable medium to drive the creation of the social utopia planned out by the Communist Party. As well as being politically enforced, this goal also inspired avant-garde directors such as Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Dovzhenko, who were zealous about developing the revolutionary consciousness of their audience.⁶ In a country where illiteracy was still widespread, hopes of reaching large segments of the population almost inevitably rested on cinema with its dominant visual component. This expectation was fulfilled in that in terms of admissions the Soviet Union developed into one of the biggest film countries in the world: in fact, from the 1960s to the 1980s, audiences of 50–100 million were not uncommon for home-grown Soviet productions. During this time, going to the cinema was a very important leisure activity and a regular Sunday treat.⁷

The hallmark of the Stalin period, when the leader was placed in the limelight, and the renunciation of the 'grand style' during Khrushchev's Thaw can both be seen from the film stylistics of their respective eras. The desire to reject audience manipulation after Stalin's death resulted in directors abandoning excessive film sets and adopting a quasi-documentary style. And following a period of distinctly average productions and pandering to socialist populist taste leading to the modest 'Hollywoodization' of Soviet films in the 1970s, the cinema of perestroika focused on both a different aesthetic and other issues. Its ultimate goals were to uncover historical and social 'truth' and to rapidly deconstruct socialist principles of life and the social order. When the new general secretary of the CPSU, Mikhail Gorbachev, came to power in 1985, a sea change was introduced at all levels of the Soviet system. The new course known as 'perestroika' proclaimed reforms that were to be buoyed by openness and transparency under the heading of 'glasnost'.

The policies of perestroika and glasnost relied from the outset on the intellectual potential of the intelligentsia, who it was hoped would inject the necessary dynamism into the processes of change following years of stagnation and worn ideologies and lend moral support. Freedom of expression was granted to the Soviet artistic intelligentsia, who at first perceived Gorbachev's course of glasnost as spiritual liberation. However, contrary to the initial expectations of the Party leadership, once the new artistic and political freedoms had been approved, they acquired an unstoppable momentum. Public discourse entered areas which had long been taboo and artistic pluralism thrived. The rapid aesthetic and social development in the relatively short perestroika period was reminiscent of time-lapse, and art, literature and film appro-

⁶ Felix Lenz, Sergej Eisenstein, *Montagezeit. Rhythmus, Dramaturgie, Pathos*, Munich 2008. For a thorough introduction to the life and work of Eisenstein I recommend O'Mahony, Mika, *Sergei Eisenstein*, London 2008.

⁷ Regarding the film culture of the USSR and Eastern Europe from the 1960s to the 1980s, see Karl, Lars (ed.), *Leinwand zwischen Tauwetter und Frost. Der osteuropäische Spiel- und Dokumentarfilm im Kalten Krieg*, Berlin 2007.

priated underground culture and international trends just as quickly as society lost its seemingly established values.⁸

Long shot: State cinema of perestroika between change and collapse

As far as cinema was concerned, the first government-mandated process of ‘transformation’ (perestroika) began with the 5th Congress of Filmmakers in spring 1986. The first clear signal for the reforms cautiously announced by Gorbachev at the 27th Congress of the CPSU in February 1986 was the election of a new leadership of the Filmmakers’ Union. Lev Kulidshanov, the long-serving first secretary (1964–86), was replaced by Elem Klimov, ten years his junior, who for a while after the congress came to be regarded (including internationally) as the figurehead of the new Soviet cinema of perestroika. The newly elected committee clearly rejected the conformist policies of their predecessors, who had barely stood up to the decisions of Goskino, the powerful state film authority. In the nineteen-point final declaration drawn up on 15 May 1986, congress delegates joined the call for change proclaimed by the CPSU, and demanded both the debureaucratization of the film administration and that Goskino’s influence on artistic work be pruned back.⁹ This was combined with a demand for the decentralization of operational decision-making in order to increase studios’ independence and autonomy and ensure fair competition. The declaration underlined the need for material and moral incentives as well as for better technical facilities at film studios in order to raise films’ artistic standards and quality of content. Then there was a call for the fundamental restructuring of the editorial boards of the USSR’s two leading film magazines: *Iskusstvo kino* (since 1931) and *Sovetskij ekran* (since 1925). Bemoaning the lack of young directors, measures were proposed in the declaration in order to lower the average age of directors making their debut, at that time thirty-eight. Characterized by a positive spirit of optimism, the intention behind the final declaration was to transport Gorbachev’s ‘revolution from above’ into the film industry by means of expert criticism.

The primary target of this criticism was the monopoly status of Goskino, the centralist, strictly hierarchical State Committee for Cinematography of the USSR,

⁸ Regarding Soviet cinema in the perestroika era in this context see Brashinsky, Michael/Horton, Andrew (eds.), *Russian Critics on the Cinema of Glasnost*, Cambridge, New York 1992; Lawton, Anna, *Kinoglasnost. Soviet Cinema in our Time*, Cambridge, New York 1992; Martin, Marcel, *Le cinéma soviétique de Khrouchtchev à Gorbatchev*, Lausanne 1993; Shlapentokh, Dmitry/Shlapentokh, Vladimir, *Soviet Cinematography 1918–1991, Ideological Conflict and Social Reality*, New York 1993; Binder, Eva, „Der Film der Perestrojka“, in: Engel, Christine (ed.), *Geschichte des sowjetischen und russischen Films*, Stuttgart, Weimar 1999, pp. 256–307; Binder, Eva/Engel, Christine (eds.), *Eisensteins Erben: der sowjetische Film vom Tauwetter bis zur Perestrojka (1953–1991)*, Innsbruck 2002, pp. 253–319.

⁹ *Iskusstvo kino*, 10, 1986, pp. 121–125.

which had wide-ranging powers.¹⁰ One of the congress's first demands was for many films prohibited or censored by Goskino to be unbanned, in response to which a board of arbitration was set up.¹¹ Although directors had often successfully fought to have their censored films screened in public, the board of arbitration discovered about 250 unreleased films¹² stored in the state film archive not far from Moscow. Under the direction of film critic Andrei Plakhov, these banned or 'mutilated' films were screened again and the disgraced directors rehabilitated. The filmmakers often took advantage of the situation and paved the way for the liquidation of the repressive administrative apparatus.

The new model of cinematography that was envisaged was based on the principles of freedom of expression, decentralization, profitability and free competition. However, this system (which was revised on multiple occasions in the second half of the 1980s and of course never fully implemented) clashed – especially in the economic sphere – with the old structures and diverse links of the film industry with the overall economy of the USSR. As privatization proceeded ever more rapidly in this period, the model soon lost vital substance and almost completely collapsed in 1991.

The first structural changes in film production guaranteed the individual production units within the studios the responsibility and freedom to take their own production decisions after decades of bureaucratic hurdles and rigorous monitoring by the central authority. However, the changes also meant the loss of secure jobs for employees. The new financial arrangements consisted of a loan to be granted by Goskino every time a production plan for a film had been drawn up, and which had to be repaid a year after the film's theatrical release. The liberalization of the Soviet film industry also led to independent international co-productions and direct negotiations with foreign producers. From January 1988, production was switched to self-financing, meaning state-owned enterprises were allowed to negotiate independently with suppliers and buyers and could dispose of their profits as they saw fit, but also had to answer for any losses.¹³

Also in 1988, i.e. just two years after the momentous 5th Congress of Filmmakers, the general administration was decentralized and theatrical distribution reorganized. The hierarchical system was abolished by hiving off the committees

¹⁰ Goskino decided on production, the approval of completed films and their distribution in the USSR and abroad, and the purchase of foreign movies. This central authority based in Moscow, whose director-general was also a vice-minister, was in charge of educational institutions, film magazines, the committees of the various republics, and the six biggest film studios in the Soviet Union (*Mosfil'm*, *Lenfil'm*, the *Gor'kij* film studios, the central studio for popular-science films, the central studio for documentaries, and the animation studio *Sojuzmul'tfil'm*).

¹¹ Regarding the phenomenon of 'shelved films' see Fomin, Valerij, „*Polka*“: *Dokumenty. Svidetel'stva. Kommentarii*, Moscow 1992.

¹² Brändli, Sabine/Ruggle, Walter (eds.), *Sowjetischer Film heute*, Baden-Baden 1990, p. 75.

¹³ Lawton, Anna, *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in our Time*, Cambridge 1992, p. 76.

of the republics from Goskino and subordinating them to their respective ministries of culture. The freer production and distribution environment initially resulted in a massive increase in production. Before 1988, state film production had totalled approximately 150 feature films, 100 television films and about 1,000 non-fiction films (such as documentaries, educational and animated films) annually¹⁴ shot in the country's 39 studios. In 1990, Soviet feature film production enjoyed a boom with over 300 movies. But at the same time, cinema audiences and especially the broad public interest in domestic films declined dramatically, prompting filmmakers and critics to speak of the "death of cinema as an institution".¹⁵ Apart from the unfamiliarity with market structures among those responsible (which was reflected in inflated prices for films and a lack of marketing strategies), decreasing public interest was probably the main problem facing the Soviet film industry that year. Total admissions fell from 3.9 billion in 1986 to 2.4 billion in 1990.¹⁶ This loss of audience was a major component of the tragedy perceived by filmmakers, whose complex causes and effects were debated until the mid-1990s. For example, in the final two years of the USSR, only 10–15% of total cinema admissions were accounted for by Soviet productions, down from about 70% in the early 1980s and still as high as 40% in 1989.¹⁷ Accordingly, in the late 1980s, having been one of the biggest film countries, the Soviet Union was confronted with the paradoxical situation that the majority of the films produced there – regardless of their artistic quality – never reached their audience.

Pan shot: The role of the cinema of perestroika in dismantling the socialist utopia

Debate about the recollection of previously suppressed chapters of Soviet history was partly heralded by a cinematic parable, Tengiz Abuladze's *Repentance* (*Pokajane*), which, having been completed in 1984, was first publicly screened in 1986 in Georgia and the following year in Russia. The metaphorical leitmotif of this film could be treated as a slogan summing up perestroika cinema as a whole, for as well as unearthing and displaying banned footage, the film also shone light on forgotten, suppressed aspects of Soviet reality. The normality and order formerly prescribed were replaced by human forms of existence beyond the norm appearing in corresponding settings such as a prison, psychiatric clinic, orphanage, cemetery and

¹⁴ Brashinsky, Michael/Horton, Andrew, *The Zero Hour: Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition*, Princeton 1992, p. 21.

¹⁵ Recke, Renate, „Der Jammer um den Verlust oder das russische Filmwesen in der Krise“, in: Cheauré, Elisabeth (ed.), *Kultur und Krise. Rußland 1987–1997*, Berlin 1997, pp. 137–150; here: p. 147.

¹⁶ *Otečestvennoe kino. Strategija vyživaniija*, Moscow 1991, p. 6.

¹⁷ See *Otečestvennoe kino*, pp. 6–10.

mortuary. Previously marginalized phenomena took centre stage, be it the geographical peripheries of the USSR (e.g. the Far North and Central Asia), social outcasts (prisoners, criminals, prostitutes, drug addicts), and physicality in terms of sex, lust, violence, disease and death.¹⁸

Most of the films from the perestroika era depicted the extensive dismantling of socialism and all its mandatory ideology. The positive tone of cinema from Khrushchev's Thaw culminated thirty years later in a sudden eruption of pent-up rage. Schools and the Soviet education system were presented as places where empty phrases were reproduced, while interpersonal communication, interaction between social strata and intercultural understanding between the different ethnic groups in the multinational Soviet state all ground to a halt. Cultural pessimism permeates these films, marking a clear divide between the two euphoric phases of Soviet history: perestroika and Khrushchev's Thaw. The constructive, optimistic solutions to general human and individual conflicts put forward by the culture of the Thaw were finally rejected in the cinema of perestroika, and socialist ideology as a symbol of identification and integration was radically negated. The collective model was aesthetically replaced by an individualistic model reflected almost exclusively by loneliness and alienation in its negative manifestations. The disillusioned heroes of the 1960s ended up in irreconcilable separation from the defunct collective and drifted as it were into the void, into nothingness. The anti-utopia thus became a dominant cinematic means of expression in the perestroika period – a phenomenon which is briefly analysed below using three examples.

Zoom 1: End times after the apocalypse Dead Man's Letters (1986)

The filmmakers of the perestroika era often projected their apocalyptic feelings onto science fiction subjects – a genre that was very popular in the Soviet Union, one of the world's space powers. In his debut film *Dead Man's Letters* (*Pis'ma mertvogo čeloveka*, 1986) depicting the aftermath of a nuclear war, art historian Konstantin Lopushansky showed the destruction of not just civilization and nature but also of mankind and its concept of humanity.¹⁹ In the Central Bunker, where only the chosen

¹⁸ See Jampolskij, Michail, „Kino bez kino“, in: *Iskusstvo kino*, 6, 1988, pp. 88–95; Hänsgen, Sabine, „Wiederholung der Geschichte. Anti-Kult, Rekonstruktion, Farce, Remake im Film der Perestrojka“, in: Peters, Jochen-Ulrich/Ritz, German (eds.), *Enttabuisierung: Essays zur russischen und polnischen Gegenwartsliteratur*, Bern, Berlin and elsewhere 1996, pp. 89–104; Thienhaus, Bettina, „Chaos und Kälte. Filme aus der Sowjetunion“, in: *epd Film*, 4, 1991, pp. 22–23.

¹⁹ See Zak, M., „Roždestvo posle apokalipsi“, in: *Iskusstvo kino*, 2, 1987, pp. 32–40; Valagin, A., „Čelovečestvo, kotoroe bylo“, in: *Iskusstvo kino*, 2, 1987, pp. 40–42; Strugackij, Arkadij, „He dolžno byt“, in: *Sovetskij ekran*, 17, 1986, pp. 2–3; „Posle katastrofy“, in: *Sovetskij ekran*, 18, 1986, pp. 8–9; Gakov, Vladimir, „Pis'ma živogo čeloveka“, in: *Sovetskij ekran*, 2, 1988, pp. 18–19. Regarding the film's

ones (healthy subjects) are granted refuge, a new civilization with new social norms must be forged, albeit without the old, no longer biologically sustainable notions of compassion and consideration for the individual. Survivors' health is examined before they can be admitted to the Central Bunker, which is to be hermetically sealed for between thirty and fifty years. Everyone else is left to their fate in the ruins of the devastated city. One of those without hope is the cybernetician Larsen, who writes letters to his lost son in which he evokes the utopia of a rebirth of humanity. He tries fervently to calculate the 'resurrection hypothesis', a formula for a piece of land which may have been saved, and finds his last audience in a group of autistic children. Finally, he engineers the myth of rebirth for the children and himself: on the sixth day after the end of the old world, which happens to be Christmas Day (referring to both the creation of man and the birth of Christ), he builds a Christmas tree out of charred pieces of wood and old wire, and sends the children into the yellow-brown dust bell of the nuclear winter to search for a new world.

This Soviet anti-utopia of the nuclear apocalypse differs from comparable Western examples, such as *Malevil* (France 1981, directed by Christian de Chalonge) and *The Day After* (USA 1983, directed by Nicholas Meyer) in that it is presented as a fable. Lopushansky did not intend to tell a family story, and he also resisted the utopian salvation of human civilization somewhere in space. Using oppressive, symbolically charged images, he raises questions about mankind's moral responsibility, yet also creates a glimmer of hope for a humanity about to become extinct. In its Christian, mythological strokes, *Dead Man's Letters* is reminiscent of Tarkovsky's films in which Lopushansky was assistant director.

Zoom 2: The exotic east as a yardstick for the decline of civilization Days of Eclipse (1988)

Alexander Sokurov's film *Days of Eclipse* (*Dni zatmenija*, 1988) was a highlight of the unmasking of Soviet ways of life. Set in the barren desert landscape and sweltering heat of Turkmenistan, this depressing end-time vision seems like a never-ending dream. The dusty town of Krasnovodsk (now Turkmenbashi) on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea becomes a microcosm for Soviet society, a universal model for monotonous existence and a stalled civilization. By absolutizing the geographical frontier area, the film exposes the utopia of the multinational Soviet state as a motley collection of people united only by their foreignness and rootlessness.

reception in the West see Milne, Tom, „Pisma Myortvovo Chelovyeka (Letters from a Dead man)“, in: *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 10, 1987, pp. 311–312; „Letters from a Dead Man“, in: *Films&Filming*, 9, 1987, p. 38; „Großer Preis von Mannheim“, in: *epd Film*, 11, 1986, p. 6; „Thüna, Ulrich von: Briefe eines Toten“, in: *epd Film*, 5, 1987, p. 32.

Sokurov took the characters from the Strugatsky brothers' science fiction novel *Definitely Maybe* (whose Russian title *Za milliard let do konca sveta* can be literally translated as 'A Billion Years Before the End of the World', 1976), but without retaining its plot. As a result, the figures remain fragmentary and the context dark.²⁰

The engineer Snegovoj surprisingly commits suicide, the teacher Glukhov presents photos of the surroundings in an artificially sweet voice, and an armed intruder who suddenly appears seems like a guerrilla on the run from the state government. The figures of the ethnic groups that have lived in the area side by side for decades are equally puzzling: reserved indigenous Turkmen, exiled Russian Old Believers, stationed Soviet troops, and Volga Germans and Crimean Tatars resettled by Stalin. The two main characters, Malyanov, a young doctor from Moscow, and his friend Večerovskij, who grew up locally, remain masks: Malyanov as a symbol of the scientific rationalism of Western civilization, and Večerovskij representing the long-suffering world view of the Orient.

The two main themes addressed in the film – faith and national identity – are also conveyed by the two protagonists. In his study of children's diseases, Malyanov comes across the mysterious phenomenon that children of devout parents are much less susceptible to illness than others. So engrossed is he in his work that he pays no attention to the people around him. It is only thanks to a sick angelic boy lying waiting for him in front of his door that he finds his way back to his calling and his true destiny. Večerovskij, of Crimean heritage, grew up with resettled Volga Germans and is therefore confronted with the problem of national identity and its implications. The exotic east of the crumbling Soviet Union serves as a yardstick to raise issues of cultural identity and the threat posed by mixing and internationalization. The recurring black-and-white documentary images tinged yellow and brown show a miserable settlement with dilapidated huts and impoverished people. Dust, haze and heat typify this place, which appears to focus the tensions of the Soviet multinational empire within itself like a microcosm. Two opposite worlds collide: men dressed in traditional garb are seen sitting on a carpet and playing oriental instruments in front of a building with a sign bearing the word 'Disco'. A jumble of different languages can be heard from the street: Turkmen, Russian, Tatar, a Latin church service, an English announcement on the radio, and the German folk song 'Das Wandern ist des Müllers Lust' droning from an abandoned record player. When the sun is finally obscured above the oppressive heat of the Turkmen desert, the prospect of the end

²⁰ See Moskvina, T., „Za milliard let do konca kinematografa“, in: *Iskusstvo kino*, 12, 1988, pp. 45–53; Popov, D., „Kosmičeskij rakurs“, in: *Iskusstvo kino*, 5, 1989, pp. 75–81; Egorova, T., „Ėffekt disgarmonii“, in: *Iskusstvo kino*, 5, 1989, pp. 82–84; Michailovič, V., „Nasledniki nostal'gii“, in: *Iskusstvo kino*, 7, 1990, pp. 64–66; Šmyrnov, V., „Dni kritičeskogo zatmenija“, in: *Sovetskij ekran*, 23, 1989, p. 15; Melešin, A., „Sredneaziatskaja ėlegija“, in: *Sovetskij ekran*, 5, 1991, p. 7. Regarding the film's reception in the West see Binder, E./Engel. Ch. (eds.), *Eisensteins Erben*, pp. 288–291.

of the amicable coexistence of different, unequally developed cultures overstrained by Soviet ideology becomes inevitable.

The artistic significance of *Days of Eclipse* undoubtedly lies in Sokurov's subtle sense for signs of the times. With its almost entirely yellow, orange and brown filtered images, the film is like a lexicon of perestroika cinema: visual motifs such as the footage of women in a psychiatric clinic, the church's interior, the morgue and the decaying buildings recur in numerous cinematic masterpieces from this era. The extended tracking shots, the film's slow, meditative rhythm, the metaphorically charged imagery, and the fragments of conversation about religion and faith are like an echo of Tarkovsky's cinematic realm.²¹ Sokurov creates contemplative imagery revolving around the themes of death, eternal return, and the arrival and departure of entire generations in nature's never-ending cycle. Given its candid criticism of Stalin's resettlement policy, however, *Days of Eclipse* also examines the past and confirms yet again that cinema during perestroika above all denoted political action.

Zoom 3: The past as a grotesque comedy It – Tsars and Monsters (1989)

The cinematic examination of Russian and Soviet history frequently acquired surrealistic forms and evolved into bizarre negative utopias in which all-embracing communist views of society and the future were viciously condemned. One outstanding example is the work of Leningrad filmmaker Sergei Ovcharov, who in his film *It – Tsars and Monsters* (*Ono*, 1989) sometimes lent occult aspects to the aesthetic reflection of past, present and future. Intended as neither constructive criticism of the authoritarian system of government of the Soviet period nor a historical analysis, Ovcharov potentiated the grotesque fantasy *The History of a Town* (*Istorija odnogo goroda*, 1870) by Russian satirist Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin by projecting the novel's characters onto Russian and Soviet history.²² The past serves here as raw material for a collage – an art form of modernity displaced by the canon of socialist realism and now taken up again. The utopian objectives of Soviet culture are turned into an anti-utopia and its focus on the future culminates in the apocalypse. The result is a

²¹ For a thorough introduction to the cinematic language of Tarkovsky, see Bird, Robert: Andrei Tarkovsky, *Elements of Cinema*, London 2008.

²² See Engel, Christine, „Literaturverfilmung als konzeptuelle Transformation: 'Gorod Glupov' bei Michail Saltykov-Ščedrin und Sergej Ovčarov“, In: Müller, Ina (eds.): *Und sie bewegt sich doch. Translationswissenschaft in Ost und West. Festschrift für Heidemarie Salevsky zum 60. Geburtstag*, Frankfurt am Main 2004, pp. 127–147.

collage about the history of a fictional town and its elders which combines elements of travesty, Guignol, earthy eroticism and grotesque physicality.²³

The surrealist farce embraces the film's aesthetic direction, for the town's history simultaneously coagulates into a history of Soviet cinema and its narrative forms. Music and style change with the eras: the pre-cinema epoch in yellowed, jerky silent film images with intentionally poor picture quality, and the Soviet era in partially appropriate, partially mixed styles and genres such as the socialist realist propaganda film, melodrama, thriller, television report and science fiction. Familiar imagery and stereotypes are broken up, juxtaposed and exaggerated by the erratically changing use of parody. Stalin appears as a lecherous seducer who sleeps with his eyes open, Khrushchev as a bureaucrat promising salvation who showers the city with an over-production of mustard. The principle of the grotesque body is played out in the figure of Brezhnev, who appears as a wrathful criminal mastermind, vampire and robot who can remove his head, and who ultimately splits into two separate yet identical figures. His repertoire of commands is restricted to a single sentence – "I refuse to put up with it!" – which, it eventually transpires, comes from a musical box fitted inside his head. His correct, cautious successor Gorbachev finds himself in post-Brezhnev society in the midst of a hedonistic, bacchanalian 'intelligentsia', surrounded by rockers, punks and black masses. The last person to enter the scene is a new armed leader with an axe who runs an Orwellian system of total surveillance and threatens to turn the town into a giant gulag resembling a lunar landscape. Ovcharov's figures appear as interchangeable masks of power, while historical development leads not to the socialist utopia but to the civilizational waste of the rubbish dump and a vision of end times. Human history ends with the siege by 'it' – a radiant cosmic structure drawing closer to the already devastated Earth.

Final credits: The liberation of images and a cinema without an audience

During perestroika, the demanded changes to personnel and structural reforms in the film industry were carried out especially rapidly and transparently. Above all, the ossified governing bodies of the organizations whose conformity had for decades been bought with privileges, material benefits and high social prestige came under attack. The film sector took a leading role in the reform process when the 5th Congress of Filmmakers in February 1986 was marked by open discussions and direct reform proposals. Subsequently, the rapid social, economic and political changes

²³ See Avrutina, L., „Najti magičeskoe slovo...“, in: *Iskusstvo kino*, 2, 1990, pp. 60–65; Lagina, Natal'ja, „ONO“, in: *Sovetskij ekran*, 6, 1989, pp. 8–10; Turovskij, V., „Vozvraščenie k čuvstvu“, in: *Sovetskij ekran*, 4, 1990, pp. 6–7. Regarding the film's reception in the West see „Ono (Es)“, in: *Berlinal-Katalog* 1990, p. 30; „Es – Von Zaren und Monstern“, in: *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 19.3.1996.

were more prominent in the film industry than in other areas. On the one hand the film industry embraced free market principles such as profitability, the opening of the market and privatization. Then again, it was badly shaken by negative impacts, such as a film aesthetics which spilled over into pessimism and negative depictions, the low-budget productions of the first private producers, an inability to compete with other countries, and finally severe financial losses.

The opening of the system and the associated trend towards liberalization initially took the Soviet film industry out of the standstill of the late stagnation period and gave it an unusual boost. Censored movies from the 1960s and 1970s ('shelved films') were finally screened to a mass audience – often for the first time. The film thus became a medium for dealing with the past – and also served as a mouthpiece for the articulation of current social issues. Filmmakers turned to new topics which had long been taboo, and additionally discovered new forms of artistic expression which were also met with growing curiosity in western countries. After the long years of the Cold War, the Soviet film finally aroused the interest of film journals and cinema audiences in the West.

However, as the crisis facing society continued, the initial euphoria quickly gave way to widespread disillusionment. Profound cultural pessimism soon became the main thrust of film artistic creativity and screens were dominated by increasingly gloomy visions and reflections of Soviet reality. Numerous works of perestroika cinema are dominated by an apocalyptic atmosphere unprecedentedly manifested in not only their themes and content but also their cinematic and aesthetic level.

Furthermore, the enthusiastically welcomed liberalization of production and distribution as well as the free market restructuring of the film industry boomeranged as the interest of Soviet audiences in domestic films rapidly declined and foreign productions flooded the newly opened up market. The country with the fourth largest potential audience in the world and a film production industry which had been profitable until 1986²⁴ irretrievably lost not only a lucrative business sector in the late 1980s but also a formative social and cultural institution. Thus it was that cinema unintentionally and indirectly fell victim to Gorbachev's policy of reform. The cinema, on which Lenin had pinned his hopes as the "most important of all the arts" for mass enlightenment, lost its audience almost as soon as it had mustered its forces to dismantle the once proclaimed great utopia.

²⁴ *Otečestvennoe kino*, p. 9.

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Резиме

Др Ларс Карл

„Цареви и монструми“ – размишљања о совјетском филму у периоду перестројке

У периоду перестројке, захтеване промене кадрова и структурних реформи у филмској индустрији, вршене су веома брзо и транспарентно. Изнад свега, остареле владајуће структуре и организације, чија сагласност је деценијама купована привилегијама, материјалним добрима и престижом у високом друштву, су била под нападом. Филмски сектор је преузео водећу улогу у процесу реформе пошто је Пети конгрес редитеља у фебруару 1986. године био обележен отвореним дискусијама и директним предлозима за реформу. Сходно томе, брзе социјалне, економске и политичке промене су биле више заступљене у филмској индустрији него у другим областима. С једне стране филмска индустрија је прихватила принципе слободног тржишта као што су профитабилност, отварање тржишта и приватизација. Отварање система и са тим повезан тренд ка либерализацији у почетку је совјетску филмску индустрију извукао из периода дуге стагнације и дао му необичан подстрек. Али на крају, био је тешко уздрман негативним утицајима – филмском естетиком која се одликовала песимизмом и негативним приказима, нискобуџетном продукцијом првих приватних продуцента, немогућности да се такмичи за другим државама, и са неколико тешких финансијских губитака.