

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

RUSSIAN CINEMA

Ayse Dietrich, Ph.D.

Overview Film was introduced into Russia via Europe. During the Imperial period in addition to foreign films, they began to produce Russian films began to be produced. Film became the most popular form of mass entertainment and was inexpensive and easy to produce for urban cultural life. This art form came to be used as a very effective propaganda tool by the Bolsheviks and later became an important industry influencing the social and political history of Russia.

PRE-REVOLUTIONARY CINEMA

Foreign films: Russian filmmaking emerged as an offshoot of European films, introduced by Russian film enterprises that had connections with European film companies. The Lumière brothers introduced the first films in Russia in 1896 and their cameraman Camille Cerf produced his first short film in Russia. It was a recording of the coronation of Nicholas II at the Kremlin. Initially, foreign films predominated until the first decade of the 20th century. Several foreign companies, led by Pathe and Gaumont, shot short documentaries and also helped to create a film market in Russia. 90% of the films shown before World War I were foreign made and most of the production companies in Russia were foreign. The first Russian production company was not established until 1907. During World War I, the number of foreign films was reduced as a result of anti-German campaigns and Russian filmmakers began to produce more nationalistic films.

Silent film: Evgeny Bauer was one of the first film producers of silent films. He worked in the genres of social and psychological drama, and directed *Tears, After Death* in 1915 and *A Life for a Life* in 1916. Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold created his silent film *The Picture of Dorian Grey* in 1915, using his *biomechanical principles* of acting. There were other popular silent films based on folk tales. Film director Alexander Drankov began his career in Russia while he was working as a photographer for the *The Times* in London, and received most of his financial support and equipment from England in 1907. He produced his seven-and-a-half-minute, first Russian silent narrative film *Stenka Razin*, a tale of a Cossack hero in 1908. In 1913 new movie theaters were opened in the Russian Empire, 134 in St. Petersburg and 107 in Moscow¹. Film directors and screenwriters such as Aleksandr Khanzhonkov (who also created stop motion animation) and Vasily Goncharov produced historical war films like *Defence of Sevastopol* in 1912. The main theme of these films was the struggle against foreign imperialistic powers and the strengthening of autocratic power for the Soviet Union's unity.²

Literary classics also became the themes of silent films. Film director and screenwriter Yakov Protazanov produced a biographical film about Lev Tolstoy called *Departure of a Grand Old Man* in 1912, *Nikolai Stavrogin* after Dostoevsky's *The Devil* in 1915, *Queen of Spades* after Pushkin's tale in 1916, and *Father Sergius* after Tolstoy's tale in 1918.

Film director Vladimir Gardin named his film *Home of the Gentry* after Turgenev's novel. He co-directed with Yakov Protazanov a film *Natasha Rostova* in 1915 after Tolstoy's *War and Peace* character Natasha Rostova.

Animation: The first Russian animator, dancer and choreographer, Alexander Shiryayev, using a 17.5 mm Biokam camera, and his hand-made puppets in a toy theatre, recorded the dancers' movements creating first *stop-frame* animation in Russia. Polish-Russian director, Ladislav Starevich directed his animated silent film *Lucanus Cervus* in 1910.

REVOLUTIONARY CINEMA

"The cinema is for us the most important of all the arts"
Lenin³

The Revolution in 1917 made significant changes in the film sector. At the beginning, films, having been considered an educational activity, were placed under the supervision of the People's Commissariat of Education headed by Anatoly Lunacharsky.

Films had to be created and transported to the masses. *Agitka* films which are characterized by their openly didactic content and direct verbal appeals to the audience, such as *Red Army Soldier, Who Is Your Enemy?*, *For the Red Banner* and *Toward the Bright Kingdom of the Third International* appeared to serve that purpose. They were agitational short films used to train illiterate masses and raise the morale of the Red Army during the Civil war.

Films produced during this era also contained anti-Tsarist themes. The first film produced was a religious film *Father Sergius*, which was based on Tolstoy's novel and was directed by Yakov Protazanov in 1918. In 1919, the film industry was nationalized and the world's first film school *Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography* (the VGIK) was opened in Moscow. On 27 August 1919, Lenin, by signing a relative decree, showed how important the art of cinema was for the newly formed Soviet state. It was in 1922 that state control over cinema production was imposed with the establishment of the official cinema controlling apparatus, the *USSR State Committee for Cinematography (Goskino)*. From this time until the late 1980s film-makers in the Soviet era were bound to the state and cinema production was planned, financed, censored, and subject to censorship and bureaucratic state control. Cinema was proclaimed a means of propaganda, upbringing and education, with the result that all films become some manifestation of communist ideology.

The first documentaries were shot by two important Soviet directors and theorists, Lev Kuleshov and Dziga Vertov, who developed the "camera-eye" (*kino-glaz*) concept which records what is occurring live.⁴ Lev Kuleshov also was one of the founders of the world's first film schools, the Moscow Film School, and created a montage effect called the *Kuleshov Effect*. Dziga Vertov produced avant-garde films and documentaries, such as *Man with a Movie Camera* in 1929.

Trained as an architect, Sergey M. Eisenstein moved to cinema in 1924 and his *Strike*, which began as a documentary and presented a portrait of the inequalities of capitalist Russia, was shown in theatres in 1924. Eisenstein's silent film *The Battleship Potemkin*, released in 1925, depicted the mutiny of Russian sailors on the Potemkin during the first Revolution of 1905. Film director Vsevolod Pudovkin was another film director who produced a number of feature films depicting inner conflicts and the psychology of people who fought against Tsarist rule during the Revolution of 1905 as in the film *Mother* which was based on Mikhail Gorky's novel of the same name.

Socialist Realism: In 1934 Russia went through a cultural revolution when socialist realism was officially declared the only acceptable form of artistic expression. For Stalin, art had to reflect only the reality that had accepted by the Party, and the "heroic struggle of the world proletariat ... the grandeur of the victory of Socialism, and the great wisdom and heroism of the Communist Party".⁵ With the consolidation of Stalinist power Soviet film came under almost total state control. For Stalin cinema provided him a window on cultural life and allowed him to control it. Just before World War II, in 1938 Sergey Eisenstein directed a historical drama film *Aleksandr Nevsky*, deliberately using this heroic historical event to associate it with the current political situation, creating Marxist heroes liberating the proletariat from fascist Nazis. His movie was supervised by Party officials, and it received the Stalin Prize. One year after World War II, another film, the first Soviet fantasy and color movie, *The Stone Flower* which depicted the creativity of the Ural miners against cruel landlords and social oppression and directed by Aleksandr Ptushko in 1946 won the Stalin prize.

The Thaw: The Soviet film industry received new impetus immediately following Stalin's death during Khrushchev's de-Stalinization period called "The Thaw". The cinematographer Mikhail Kalatozov's film *The Cranes Are Flying* marked a new beginning for Soviet cinema focusing on personal portraits of ordinary people who suffered from the stresses and cruelty of World War II, winning the Cannes Film Festival's prestigious Grand Prix in 1958.

The Stagnation: After the brief period of “The Thaw” censorship was reintroduced “The Stagnation” occurred under Brezhnev with the film industry becoming more heavily bureaucratized. The Goskino began to hire veteran Communist Party officials who did not have any experience in film. Sergey Paradzhanov had several projects blocked and spent several years in prison on a charge of homosexuality. Aleksandr Askoldov’s *Commissar*, released in 1967, because it included strong themes of feminism and motherhood during the Civil War, was not released until 1987 and he was barred from the studios.

The most successful film maker in overcoming barriers and in challenging the socialist realist aesthetic was Andrey Tarkovsky, who directed the films *Ivan’s Childhood*, *Andrey Rublev*, *Solaris*, *Mirror* and *Stalker*. Tarkovsky gained a reputation at home and abroad after *Ivan’s Childhood*, which conveyed the human cost of war and did not glorify the war experience, and the film *Andrey Rublev*, which was based on the themes of artistic freedom, religion, political ambiguity, and the making of art under a repressive regime, received Prize in Venice 1962 and won at Cannes in 1969. Although Soviet officials attempted to place obstacles in the way of the film festival judges, they were able to obtain the film and it was shown in Russia only after major cuts.

There were World War II dramas internationally recognized released in the 1970s and the 1980s which depicted the cruelty of war such as *They Fought for Their Country* directed by Dergey Bondarchuk in 1975, and *At Dawn It’s Quiet Here* directed by Stanislav Rostotsky. Andrey Konchalovsky was the first film director to release World War II films in Hollywood such as *Maria’s Lovers* in 1984, *Runaway Train* in 1985 and *Tango & Cash* in 1989.

Glasnost and democracy: The Fifth Congress of the Filmmakers Union in 1986, leaving behind the heritage of socialist realism, introduced less strict policies into the film industry during the period of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The Congress established a Conflict Commission to release previously banned films, and the members of the union established a film museum for the previously suppressed heritage; complete control over the production of films was lifted, and censorship was lessened. The central themes of Soviet films began to cover the problems of ordinary life for the Russian people, and two such films released in 1988. *Little Vera* depicted sexuality and alienation in Soviet society, and the thriller *The Needle* covered the struggle with mafia and drug addiction. Several Soviet films have received Oscars such as *War and Peace*, *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* and *Dersu Uzala*.

Discussion/Questions

1. How was the Russian film industry affected by the Revolution?
2. Under what conditions were films first made in Russia?
3. During the period of “The Thaw”, how much freedom did Soviet film makers have?
4. In what ways did Soviet films from the 1980s depict citizens’ ambiguous feelings about the Soviet state?

Reading

1- Lary, Nikita, “Film”, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture*, edited by Nicholas Rzhevsky, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 299-329.

2- Kovalova, Anna, “World War I and pre-Revolutionary Russian Cinema” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2017, pp. 96–117.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrsc20>

3- Swift, E. Anthony, *Popular Theater and Society in Tsarist Russia*, University of California Press, 2002, p.137.

4- *A History of Russian Cinema*, edited by Brigit Beumers, Wiley Blackwell, 2016.

5- David McKenzie and Michael W. Curan, *A History of Russia, the Soviet Union, and Beyond*, Wadsworth, 2002, pp. 505-506.

¹ Swift, E. Anthony, *Popular Theater and Society in Tsarist Russia*, University of California Press, 2002, p.137.

² Dziewanowski, M.K. *Russia in the Twentieth Century*, Prentice Hall, 2003, p. 204.

³ David McKenzie and Michael W. Curan, *A History of Russia, the Soviet Union, and Beyond*, Wadsworth, 2002, p. 505.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 505.

⁵ Dziewanowski, M.K. *Russia in the Twentieth Century*, Prentice Hall, 2003, p. 202.