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Soviet Cinema

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Politics and Persuasion under Stalin

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For my wife, Sofia

KINO: THE RUSSIAN CINEMA SERIES

General Editor's Preface

Cinema has been the predominant art form of the first half of the twentieth century, at least in Europe and North America. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the former Soviet Union, where Lenin's remark that 'of all the arts, cinema is the most important' became a cliché and where cinema attendances were until recently still among the highest in the world. In the age of mass politics Soviet cinema developed from a fragile but effective tool to gain support among the overwhelmingly illiterate peasant masses in the civil war that followed the October 1917 Revolution, through a welter of experimentation, into a mass weapon of propaganda through the entertainment that shaped the public image of the Soviet Union – both at home and abroad for both elite and mass audiences – and latterly into an instrument to expose the weaknesses of the past and present in the twin process of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Now the national cinemas of the successor republics to the old USSR are encountering the same bewildering array of problems, from the trivial to the terminal, as are all the other ex-Soviet institutions.

Cinema's central position in Russian and Soviet cultural history and its unique combination of mass medium, art form and entertainment industry, have made it a continuing battlefield for conflicts of broader ideological and artistic significance, not only for Russia and the Soviet Union, but also for the world outside. The debates that raged in the 1920s about the relative merits of documentary as opposed to fiction film, of cinema as opposed to theatre or painting, or of the proper role of cinema in the forging of post-Revolutionary Soviet culture and the shaping of the new Soviet man, have their echoes in current discussions about the role of cinema *vis-à-vis* other art forms in effecting the cultural

and psychological revolution in human consciousness necessitated by the processes of economic and political transformation of the former Soviet Union into modern democratic and industrial societies and states governed by the rule of law. Cinema's central position has also made it a vital instrument for scrutinising the blank pages of Russian and Soviet history and enabling the present generation to come to terms with its own past.

This series of books intends to examine Russian, Soviet and ex-Soviet films in the context of Russian, Soviet and ex-Soviet cinemas, and Russian, Soviet and ex-Soviet cinemas in the context of the political history of Russia, the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet 'space' and the world at large. Within that framework the series, drawing its authors from both East and West, aims to cover a wide variety of topics and to employ a broad range of methodological approaches and presentational formats. Inevitably this will involve ploughing once again over old ground in order to re-examine received opinions, but it principally means increasing the breadth and depth of our knowledge, finding new answers to old questions and, above all, raising new questions for further enquiry and new areas for further research.

The continuing aim of this series is to situate Russian, Soviet and ex-Soviet cinema in its proper historical and aesthetic context, both as a major cultural force and as a crucible for experimentation that is of central significance to the development of world cinema culture. Books in the series strive to combine the best of scholarship, past, present and future, with a style of writing that is accessible to a broad readership, whether that readership's primary interest lies in cinema or in political history.

Richard Taylor
Swansea, Wales

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ILLUSTRATIONS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Transliteration from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet is a perennial problem for writers on Russian subjects. I have opted for a dual system: in the text I have used the Library of Congress system (without diacritics), but we have broken away from this system (a) when a Russian name has a clear English version (e.g. Maria instead of Mariia, Alexander instead of Aleksandr); (b) when a Russian name has an accepted English spelling, or when Russian names are of Germanic origin (e.g. Meyerhold instead of Meierkhol'd; Eisenstein instead of Eizenshtein); (c) when a Russian name ends in –ii or –yi, this is replaced by a single –y (e.g. Dostoevsky) for a surname and a single –i for a first name (e.g. Grigori, Sergei). In addition, in order to aid pronunciation I have chosen Fyodor instead of Fedor, Semyon instead of Semen, Yakov instead of Iakov, Yuli instead of Iuli and Yevgeni instead of Evgenii. I also use the more familiar Politburo instead of Politbiuro and Orgburo instead of Orgbiuro. In the scholarly apparatus I have adhered to the Library of Congress system (with diacritics) for the specialist.

INTRODUCTION

Existing Research, Aims, Objectives and Methodology

The basic shape of the established Western approach to Soviet cinema, which emerged in the 1930s, and still exists in a traditional, 'totalitarian' form of analysis, suggests that, under Stalinism, the Soviet film industry was brought under the firm grip of an all-embracing, centralised state and administrative system. This system crushed the creative spirit of the 1920s and obliged film-makers to become complicit in the creation of pro-regime film propaganda and the imposition of an artistically weak socialist realist approach.[1] Such accounts were challenged by 'revisionists' who emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Richard Taylor began looking at Soviet cinema in the 1920s from a political point of view, contending that the Party only began to gain control of the medium at the end of the decade.[2] Taylor soon turned to the 1930s, arguing against the traditional film history interpretation of the decline into socialist realism. He contended that, while the aim of creating a 'cinema for the millions' was subject to complex political and economic constraints, the film industry and in particular its leader, Boris Shumiatsky, managed to lay the foundations of a genuine mass form of politicised entertainment by the late 1930s.[3] Taylor and Ian Christie have also provided researchers with invaluable resources on Soviet cinema in the 1920s and 1930s, through the translation and publication of newspaper/journal articles and other documents, in the collection *The Film Factory.*[4] Taylor later co-edited a very important contribution to understanding the cinema of the Stalin era and its legacy, *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema,* featuring a range of articles from scholars of different disciplinary backgrounds, including academics from the former Soviet Union. The collection dealt with

the origins, development and legacy of Stalinism in cinema and offered contributions from both the 'totalitarian' and 'revisionist' schools of thought.[5] Denise Youngblood has also challenged received historical ideas about cinema, but from the broader perspective of revisionist Soviet history. In her *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era*, Youngblood argued that Stalinism constituted a revolution from below in cinema, but later amended this theory, arguing that there was no mass support for the changes. Instead a 'revolution from the middle' was said to have taken place within the film industry itself.[6]

The approaches of Western revisionists stood in stark contrast to the work of their Soviet counterparts. In the USSR academics, at least formally, saw the Party as the careful guiding hand for the film industry, ensuring that it moved in the correct political direction. For example, Alentina Rubailo examined the process of growing Party control during 1928–37, contending that the Bolsheviks gradually increased their influence in terms of administration, planning and the ideological side of film production. Given that the book was written in the Brezhnev era, it is unsurprising that the author presented a wholly positive account of Party influence and the politicisation of the film industry. Since the collapse of the Soviet system, study of the 1930s has ironically adopted the traditional, 'totalitarian' arguments of the West, concentrating on the supposedly overwhelming influence of Stalin, comparing Soviet films of the 1930s with those of Nazi Germany, and focusing on the negative aspects of the cinema industry. Nonetheless, Russian scholars have recently published a wealth of archival materials which promise the emergence of more nuanced accounts of the interaction between politics and cinema in the 1930s.[7]

Interest in the 1930s has grown and moved in new directions over recent years. The French scholar Natacha Laurent has dedicated an entire book, based on archival sources, to censorship during the Stalinist era (although the particular focus is on the 1940s). Laurent pays special attention to aspects of the decision-making process, providing us with a better understanding of the mechanics of censorship. Among other arguments, she points out that censorship was not only imposed from above, but also involved the film-makers themselves who formed part of a complex web.[8] Eberhard Nembach provides a useful narrative on the reorganisation of the film industry in the 1930s which favours the bridging of historical divides and provides some new factual information also based on archival research.[9] Other recent work has tackled new areas, such as

gender and masculinity and the importance of time and space in the films of this era. Yevgeni Dobrenko has devoted a book to the exploration of how Stalinist cinema *produced* history (as opposed to this work which looks at the history of the film industry itself) with film playing the role of a museum that artificially manipulated the past to legitimise the Soviet present. This new work has emerged in a context of increasing interest in the broad domain of Russian and Soviet cinema from academics working in a whole range of disciplinary areas. Such interest is exemplified by the creation of a new journal, *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*.[10]

On the one hand, the current work acknowledges the importance and validity of elements of historical interpretations that lean toward traditional or 'totalitarian' approaches. It will be argued throughout that centralised and administrative political control had a fundamental impact on Soviet cinema during the 1930s. Excessive bureaucracy played a large role in undermining the film industry and minimising the potential impact of the envisaged 'cinema for the millions'. Moreover, political violence had a significant impact on cinema especially during the late 1930s. At the same time, however, the analysis argues against certain aspects of the traditional view, especially those that regard Stalin as wielding complete control over the industry and the suggestion that any creativity was completely wiped out during this period. This book also endorses aspects of revisionist accounts. In addition to the fact that cinema was subjected to extreme centralisation and bureaucracy, the film industry was also characterised by organisational chaos and inefficiency. But while these arguments are important to this book, the aim here is to develop a fresh approach to Soviet cinema in the 1930s. If we want to understand why Soviet cinema adopted certain political, economic and organisational forms and why the aims set out for the film industry led to particular outcomes, we must begin by examining the ways of thinking that underpinned its development.

This work not only differs methodologically from previous interpretations of cinema in the 1930s, but it also deals with a broader political subject matter than has traditionally been the case. Areas that have received the particular attention of scholars, such as Peter Kenez, Taylor and Youngblood, include government and Party policy, cinema administration and administrators, censorship, the relationship between politics and socialist realism, questions of genre, the role of popular cinema and close examinations of directors, individual films or groups of films. This book also deals with some of these matters, but aims to use the

aforementioned method to gain a new perspective. So, for example, the analysis agrees, to some extent, with Kenez's view that censorship had a profound impact on film production, but the intention here is to establish why censorship increased in the 1930s and why certain decisions on films or potential films were made. It is a certain mentality that lies behind the elaborate control mechanisms and it is essential that we understand these modes of thought if we are to comprehend what happened to Soviet cinema in the 1930s.

Certain aspects of cinema have received some attention for the period covering the 1930s, but not as much as the 1920s. This is particularly relevant to the economic facets of Soviet cinema.[11] I will address this and try to develop a closer examination of the central role of the industry and its infrastructure in reaching the people. I will also address the area of film education and training which has received negligible treatment despite its fundamental importance.[12] Political violence was also of great significance in determining the future direction of the industry in the late 1930s. Again, this is an area which has been discussed, but requires further exploration.[13] Other areas have been almost completely neglected by film historians, namely thematic planning, one of the key driving (or hindering) forces behind Soviet cinema during these years. The establishment of the first cinema trade union is also important for a better understanding of how representation of varying interests changed in the 1930s and how film-makers and other workers interacted with the authorities and the cinema administration. Although this work seeks to explore new territory, it is not all encompassing. For instance, the author has decided to focus mainly on the feature film aspects of Soviet cinema as documentary film-making in this period deserves more comprehensive treatment than this book could allow.

If we are to apply the aforementioned method successfully, we must also understand the way in which the Bolsheviks attempted to justify and legitimise the basis of their power and see how their defensive ways of thinking, to a large extent, arose from the application of (an already demanding) Marxist theory to an impoverished Russia. Particular Bolshevik attitudes and ways of thinking were crucial in both shaping the Soviet system and almost every aspect of film industry development from the late 1920s onwards. The historical methodology of examining the mentalities of human beings has long-established foundations. It is usually associated with the French *Annales* school of historiography who established the approach through a series of studies which examined the attitudes

and values of various social groups over the long term, but with a particular interest in medieval themes.[14] Moreover, a concern with distinctive mentalities has also long preoccupied scholars of Russian and Soviet history. This methodology has proven especially fruitful when examining the psychological world of individual Bolsheviks, such as Stalin, and has helped us to understand why they acted in the ways that they did.[15] It has also been applied to collective mentalities manifested during the Revolutionary events of 1917, as well as in longer-term overviews of Russian history.[16]

Bolshevik Defensive Thinking

The attempt here to understand the Bolshevik way of thinking, and its impact on Soviet cinema in particular, will involve a slightly different methodological approach than those normally applied to deciphering attitudes and values in human history. The focus will be on the domain of politics as opposed to the sphere of social history often examined in the area of mentalities. The main subjects of this work are Bolshevik politicians, administrators, film-makers and cinema industry personnel in general. The aim is to show how the Bolsheviks tried to create a cinema that would serve their goals rather than to examine the reception of film among the masses or its role in their everyday lives. Thus the focus will be on the view of political history and cinema 'from above', as well as 'the middle', as Denise Youngblood describes it. The analysis does not seek to claim that there was only one mode of thought in Soviet society, rather, it tries to discover how a dominant mindset had such a huge impact on the film industry and its day-to-day functioning. The *Annales* historians have generally argued that attitudes have to be analysed over a long period of time as changes do not take place instantaneously.[17] The argument presented here does not deny this point, but suggests that the Bolshevik defensive way of thinking, while having its roots in pre-Revolutionary attitudes, had its own distinctive Bolshevik stamp.

One of the central methods employed by the *Annales* school has been the use of figures and statistics as both a means of revealing changes in mentalities, as well as proving the scientific credentials of the historiographical enterprise by suggesting that it has the same claims of accuracy and objectivity as the social sciences. For example, this might involve trying to prove the decline of the Spanish Empire in the seventeenth century by carefully quantifying imports and exports of money and goods and the balance of trading relations with the New World. The

analysis adopted here does not use numerical methods as a means to confirm its argument, but it does adopt the concepts of 'structure' and 'agency' from the world of political science as a means of trying to establish how dominant patterns of Bolshevik thinking emerged. This approach is the first step in the methodology of this work.

Whenever we attempt to understand political, social or economic developments, either historical or contemporary, we try to establish the connection between agency (individuals or groups of individuals) and the structures in which they find themselves. In the twentieth century, academics working in social sciences and humanities have adopted differing views over where the emphasis should lie in this debate. Structuralism emphasises the importance of structure, arguing that observable political, social or economic events, processes and outcomes are merely the product of unobservable political, social or economic structures, of which 'actors are merely bearers'. An alternative, but equally simplistic view, can be found in the arguments of intentionalism which suggest that structures are the outcome of human agents (often, but not always individual) acting on rational, strategic intentions that are usually unfettered by any structural constraints. Over the past two decades, there have been various attempts to overcome the artificial separation of structure and agency in order to develop more sophisticated explanations of how humans have interacted with their world. Among the most effective of these has been critical realism. Critical realism contends that human agency must always be understood as a close interaction with existing and pre-constituted structures as these structures either constrain or enable individual or collective agents by the choices and strategies which they define. Human agents can, to some extent, transform structures through intentional acts which might have either intended or unintended consequences. Moreover, by combining their incomplete knowledge of existing structures with strategic learning, achieved by observing the consequences of their actions, agents are able to develop new strategies for future action.[18] If we apply this basic conceptualisation to the historical agency of the Bolsheviks and the distinctive structures which defined the courses of action available to them, then we are able to see why their future approach to the cinema industry (and every other aspect of Soviet life) revealed less of a flexible strategic learning and more of an almost unchanging way of thinking. A particular defensiveness evolved which, to a large extent, reflected the gap between what the Bolsheviks wanted to achieve and what the structural realities allowed them to achieve.

Before we can establish a proper understanding of the relationship between Bolshevik measures and Russian structural realities, we must first look at the origins of their ideas, which can be traced back to Karl Marx. In order to understand the Bolsheviks' attempts to frame Russian reality within the terms of Marx's thinking we must briefly examine his fundamental ideas and the efforts to apply them to specifically Russian circumstances. Despite the debates on the scientific status of Marx's theoretical framework, his thought was fundamentally moral. Marx thought that human beings had the potential to be creative, free individuals, to realise themselves as fully as possible. Such emancipation had not been achieved mainly due to scarcity and the inevitable struggle for resources that were related to primitive levels of material productivity. The advent of capitalism and its mechanisation of labour showed that the masses could potentially become free of compulsive labour. Yet this could only be achieved if humanity could destroy the class system on which capitalism thrived. For Marx the central characteristics of capitalist society were class division and class exploitation, reinforced by a state that enabled the ruling class to maintain the exploitative status quo, through coercion if necessary. He believed that this intolerable situation would eventually culminate in a social revolution, leading to the end of capitalism and the emancipation of humanity.

Following the revolution the proletariat would seize and maintain political control in a transitional period whereby a socialist society would gradually replace its capitalist predecessor. The transitional period consisted of the replacement of 'bourgeois' class dictatorship with proletarian class dictatorship, justified by the fact that the working class constituted the large majority of the population. The transitional, proletarian class-controlled, socialist state would oversee the dismantling of the legal and institutional basis of capitalism, foster the development of the economic and productive powers of the state and protect the revolution from political enemies.[19] In short, it would lay the basis for the future communist society. Marx assumed that the working class would be the agency, not only for the transitional period of social change, but also for the eventual emancipation of humanity as a whole from capitalism and its class system. The ultimate goal of communism consisted of a classless society of individuals freed from exploitation, drudgery and able to realise their creative capacities in a context free from 'bourgeois' institutions. This would largely be made possible by abundance and the final elimination of scarcity. The Bolsheviks adopted Marx's basic theory