

Interview on the release of the book "One Thousand and One Highest Grossing Soviet Movie: Opinions of Film Critics and Viewers" *

* An extended version of the interview of Oleg Sulkin, a film critic and correspondent of the Russian service of the Voice of America in New York, with Professor Alexander Fedorov.

Sulkin O. Leonid Gaidai named the absolute champion of the Soviet film distribution. *Voice of America*. 23.10.2020. <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/interview-with-alexander-vedorov-on-soviet-cinema/5633107.html>

Oleg Sulkin: Why did you decide to make this book? Do you have any predecessors in this topic?

Alexander Fedorov: Such a wide panorama of the opinions of Soviet and Russian film critics, film critics and viewers about a thousand of the highest-grossing Soviet films is given in this book for the first time. This panorama, in my opinion, helps to think about such, for example, important questions: Why exactly such Soviet films became the leaders of the box office? Which Soviet directors can be considered the highest grossing and why? How did the press and viewers assess and rate the highest-grossing Soviet films?

Unfortunately, film distribution data are not available for all Soviet feature full-length films (and there were over seven thousand of them). There are, for example, serious gaps in the 1920s – 1930s.

I wrote this book for a long time – I collected and analyzed data from film statistics, articles and reviews of Soviet and Russian film critics, audience reviews on Internet portals, I tested individual parts of my text on the Yandex platform (often receiving good corrections and comments there), on portals “Kino-teater.ru”, “Kinopressa.ru” and Facebook. In particular, I would like to thank film critics Sergei Kudryavtsev and Igor Arkadiev for the constructive comments.

Of course, in film criticism, there were earlier attempts to analyze the most popular Soviet films, but these were, as a rule, the reflections of one film critic or film expert about the phenomenon of mass success in cinema (M. Turovskaya, N. Zorkaya, I. Levshina, V. Demin and etc.) or box-office Soviet films (S. Kudryavtsev, D. Gorelov, E. Nefedov, etc.). At the same time, as a rule, it was about a rather limited number of films that make up, conditionally, speaking, the first hundred in terms of film attendance. As far as I know, no attempts were made to make a large-scale comparison of film-critical and audience opinions about a thousand of the most popular Soviet films before the publication of my book.

Oleg Sulkin: How do you explain the phenomenal success of Leonid Gaidai's comedies?

Alexander Fedorov: The success of the best comedies by Leonid Gaidai, in my opinion, is due to a number of reasons. Here are those that lie on the surface: the popularity of the genre of comedy itself, the participation of famous actors (let's not forget that A. Demyanenko was a popular actor even before his first appearance in the legendary role of Shurik, Yuri Nikulin also had considerable popularity, Georgy Vitsin, Anatoly Papanov, Andrei Mironov, Sergei Filippov, Mikhail Pugovkin, Nonna Mordyukova, Leonid Kuravlev and many others), witty scripts saturated with dialogues and phrases that have gone "to the people", excellent directorial professionalism.

But, I think, there were other reasons that distinguished the comedies of Leonid Gaidai from hundreds of other Soviet comedies. First of all, it is a reliance on stable folklore archetypes of characters, successfully adapted to the Soviet realities of the 1960s – 1970s. The famous Gaidae's "trio" (Coward, Goonies, Experienced) grotesquely personified human types widespread among the people, in which millions of viewers could easily recognize, if not themselves, then their relatives and friends. L. Gaidai also had a successful remake of the traditions of silent sitcoms and masks of the 1920s.

There was also a bold satire. Well, for example, how do you like this plot twist: an influential communist boss sends a dissident to a psychiatric hospital so that he could not expose his criminal acts. Which Soviet filmmaker could afford such a plot twist? And in Leonid Gaidai's "Prisoner of the Caucasus" this is almost the central episode of the film. And the fact

that "The Diamond Hand" has become a kind of satirical encyclopedia of Soviet life was not written, probably, only by the lazy one.

The success of Leonid Gaidai is connected, of course, with the fact that he was able to find the key to the tastes of the most diverse layers of the audience. Someone was amused by tricks, chases, songs, funny remarks, etc. Someone enjoyed acting. Someone was attracted by the sex appeal of the young heroines of "Operation 'Y'" and the "Prisoner of the Caucasus". Someone happily "read" satirical injections. And someone enjoyed the parody layer of Gaidai's films, available to the so-called "watched" public. In other words, in the best comedies of Gaidai, schoolchildren with students, workers with peasants, and servicemen with officials, and the intelligentsia happily found their "cinema"...

Oleg Sulkin: You state that Boris Durov's fighter "Pirates of the XX century", which managed to gather 87.6 million viewers in the first year of the demonstration, has always remained the most popular Soviet film. How do you explain the success of this film, which many critics have branded as a second-rate genre product?

Alexander Fedorov: Here, probably, the answer will be simpler than about the reasons for the popularity of L. Gaidai's comedies. "Pirates of the XX Century" was released in Soviet theaters in July 1980, that is, back in the era of a total deficit for the action movie genre with a stake on oriental martial arts. Foreign films of this kind in the all-Union film distribution practically did not fall, and when sometimes this happened (Japanese "Judo Genius": rental in the USSR since 1967), they enjoyed overwhelming popularity. In addition, in 1980, the general audience did not yet have VCRs where they could contemplate Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris. The exoticism of the scene, the poignant plot, the popularity of Nikolai Eremenko were, of course, an important but secondary component for "Pirates of the XX century". If "Pirates of the XX century" were released in the Soviet release, say, in 1990–1991 (in the perestroika era of video salons and Western production flooding the screens), they probably would not have gathered even 20 million viewers...

Oleg Sulkin: The first, second and third places in terms of the number of millions of viewers in the first year of showing a particular film (or its first episode) in cinemas were shared by directors Leonid Gaidai, Eldar Ryazanov and Ivan Pyriev. What is your short comment on these top three?

Alexander Fedorov: I have already answered in detail above about the reasons for the success of Leonid Gaidai's comedies. The pictures of Eldar Ryazanov, with all their breadth of mass coverage, were mostly addressed to the intelligentsia of the audience and were often not sitcoms, but characters, therefore their popularity was less than Gaidai's. The highest-grossing film by Leonid Gaidai "The Diamond Arm" gathered 76.7 million viewers in the first year of screening, and the highest-grossing film by Eldar Ryazanov ("Office Romance")– 58.4 million. The difference, you see, is significant (and this despite the fact that the circulation of these comedies was high).

As for Ivan Pyryev, his films of both comedy and melodramatic–dramatic genres were consistently popular with a wide audience both in the 1930s – 1940s and in the 1950s – 1960s. He skillfully knew how to make "folk cinema". In the thaw and post-thaw times, he was scolded for "varnishing reality" in "Pig and Shepherd" and "Kuban Cossacks", but, in my opinion, these movies initially did not pretend to be the slightest semblance of realism, but were a kind of fairy tales with a bright folklore basis. And, I think, the audience of the 1940s – 1950s perceived them precisely as fairy tales about a rich and happy life, into which one could immerse themselves in front of the screen, even if temporarily distracted from the difficult reality.

Oleg Sulkin: What, in your opinion, attracted the viewer to such different, but beloved by the public, films like "Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears", "Amphibian Man" and "Gentlemen of Fortune"?

Alexander Fedorov: These are films of a different genre spectrum, so the reasons for their success have different dominants.

Consistently sustained in the genre of melodrama "Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears" was based on the fairy tale about Cinderella, but at the same time it successfully retained everyday verisimilitude, immersing the audience either in the atmosphere of retrostalgia associated with the thaw end of the 1950s, or in the recognizable realities of the turn of the 1980s (at the same time, without any pedaling of ideology). The main characters of "Moscow..." were typically close to the interests, feelings and aspirations of tens of millions of viewers. Far from the last reason for success was the gender line of this melodrama, connected with the fact that the three main characters are women with different destinies, intellectual level, trajectory of life success. I believe that the Oscar for the best foreign film "Moscow..." was awarded for the totality of all these components of success.

I have published a long article about the phenomenon of the "Amphibian Man" (<https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/art/kino/667/>), where I analyze in detail this highest-grossing Soviet science fiction film.

V. Propp, N. Zorkaya, M. Turovskaya, O. Nechai, M. Yampolsky and other researchers have convincingly proved that for the total success of works of mass culture, their creators must reckon on the folklore type of perception, and "the archetypes of fairy tales and legends, and the corresponding archetypes of folklore perception, when they meet, give the effect of the integral success of mass favorites" (Zorkaya, 1981 : 116).

Indeed, audience success is very closely related to the mythological layer of the work. "Strong" genres – thriller, fantasy, western – always rely on "strong" myths" (Yampolsky, 1987: 41). The interrelation of extraordinary, but "genuine" events – one of the fundamental archetypes (based on deep psychological structures affecting consciousness and subconsciousness) of fairy tales and legends – is very important for the mass popularity of films.

Researches of scientists (Eco, 1960; Zorkaya, 1981, 1994, etc.) show that the approaches of V. Propp to fairy tales are quite applicable to the analysis of many media texts, including almost all works of mass media culture (literary, cinematographic, television, etc.). Indeed, cultural mythology can be easily found in many popular films – in one way or another, echoes of myths and tales about Odysseus, Cyclops, Sirens, Aladdin, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Baba Yaga, Snake Gorynych, Bluebeard, etc. Of course, the audience (for example, school) may not notice this, but still unconsciously reach for fabulousness, fantastic action, mythological heroes... And in the massive success of the "Amphibian Man" this manifested itself extremely vividly...

The comedy "Gentlemen of Fortune" (where the talented directorial hand of Georgy Danelia, who remained "behind the scenes", but this is a separate story, as they say,) was very close in genre to the best works of Leonid Gaidai.

On the whole, many of the champion films owe their success among the mass audience to a complex of factors. These include: reliance on folklore and mythological sources, constancy of metaphors, orientation towards the consistent embodiment of the most persistent plot schemes, synthesis of the natural and the supernatural, appeal not to the rational, but to the emotional through identification (imaginary reincarnation into actively acting characters, merging with the atmosphere, aura of the work), The "magic power" of heroes, standardization (replication, unification, adaptation) of ideas, situations, characters, etc., mosaicism, seriality, compensation (the illusion of the realization of cherished, but not fulfilled desires), a happy ending, the use of such a rhythmic organization films, TV shows, etc., where the feeling of the audience, together with the content of the frames, is influenced by the order of their change; intuitive guessing of the subconscious interests of the public, etc.

Oleg Sulkin: You epigraph Pushkin's statement "They will say that criticism should be solely concerned with works that have visible merit, I don't think so. Another composition is insignificant in itself, but remarkable in its success and influence... ". Can you give one or two examples in film practice, confirming this idea of the classic?

Alexander Fedorov: There were quite a few such films in the USSR. It is clear, for example, that the artistic merits of the same "Pirates of the XX century" were incommensurable with their grandiose audience success. Other examples can be cited: "The Woman Who Sings" (54.9 million viewers), "No Returns" (43.6 million viewers), "Young" (39.1 million viewers), etc.

For all that, this is a good material for studying the psychology of audience preferences, genre features of film success, "compensatory effects", etc.

Oleg Sulkin: Why, in your opinion, did “dramas and tragedies” become the leader in the table of genre ranks, and not “comedies” and “melodramas” that took second and third places, respectively?

Alexander Fedorov: At first glance, it seems surprising that a thousand of the most popular Soviet films are dominated not by comedy, melodrama or detective story, but by the dramatic genre (301 films out of a thousand). However, if we do not forget that films on the theme of the Civil War and Great Patriotic War were very popular among the mass audience throughout the years of the existence of the USSR, and in the 1930s–1960s, dramas on a revolutionary theme were also popular, then the situation becomes clearer.

So among the three hundred highest-grossing Soviet films of the dramatic genre, films on the theme of the Great Patriotic War – 71 (23.6%), the civil war – 21 (7%), revolution – 21 (7%), other wars – 19 (6,3%), armies on peace days – 12 (4.0%). In total, 47.9% of the most popular Soviet films of the dramatic genre are associated with the themes of wars, the army and the revolution that are in demand among a wide audience. Dramas, which take place in peacetime, are only 157 among the thousand highest-grossing Soviet films, which is less than the number of comedies (205) and melodramas (183).

Oleg Sulkin: It is known that in Soviet times, the distribution practice was widely used, when in reporting to a "necessary" film, for example, on a historical–revolutionary theme, viewers were added, taking them away from foreign entertainment films. Did you take this factor into account when calculating attendance?

Alexander Fedorov: Of course, I know about this practice, but, alas, it was impossible to use this factor in calculating the attendance, since no one has ever made public, for obvious reasons, what proportion of the distribution indicators Soviet film distributors "on the ground" added to the "necessary" in the ideological and political sense of films. Another thing is that "the necessary film production" in the USSR was often given an increased circulation. Circulation data for many Soviet films are available, but the tasks of my book did not include immersion in the subject of the peculiarities of the circulation practice of Soviet film production. Perhaps this will interest other researchers of the history of cinema.

Oleg Sulkin: Is there something that unites the highest-grossing Soviet directors?

Alexander Fedorov: I believe that the highest-grossing Soviet directors are primarily united by their reliance on the genre's staginess (plus professionalism). It is not for nothing that the top ten Soviet film champions include mainly comedic, brightly melodramatic and action-packed films (“Pirates of the 20th century”, 87.6 million viewers; “Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears”, 84.4 million, “The Diamond Hand”, 76.7 million, “Prisoner of the Caucasus”, 76.5 million, “Wedding in Malinovka”, 74.6 million, “Crew”, 71.1 million, "Operation “Y” and other adventures of Shurik”, 69.6 million, "Shield and Sword" (first episode), 68.3, "New Adventures of the Elusive", 66.2 million viewers) and only one film in the genre of war drama ("The Dawns Here Are Quiet...", 66.0 million viewers). For comparison: only one film by Andrei Tarkovsky and only two films by Andrei Konchalovsky got into the thousand of the highest-grossing Soviet films (and, of course, outside the first hundred leaders)...

Oleg Sulkin: Is there a fundamental difference in the position of film critics and the public?

Alexander Fedorov: To put it simply, a wide audience often completely surrenders to the screen spectacle, without trying to subject it to any deep analysis, while film critics do exactly this professionally, already while watching, they often try to analyze each component of the "film text" ... As for the typology of spectators perception and assessments of film works,

then in my book a separate chapter is devoted to this, where I highlight the corresponding levels and characteristics.

Oleg Sulkin: Why do you call films media texts?

Alexander Fedorov: I understand the term "text" in a broad sense, and "film text" is a part of the media production, therefore, it can be called "media text" as well.

Oleg Sulkin: In the Soviet Union, and you write about this in your book, semi-official film critics treated the commercial success of Western blockbusters negatively as "the aggression of mass culture" and "ideological sabotage of the West" ... What was the influence of Western models on Soviet cinema?

Alexander Fedorov: The influence of Western cinematography was felt both in the Soviet mass film production, there and in the so-called "auteur cinema". If we talk about mass cinema, then, for example, the same "Pirates of the XX century" were clearly filmed according to the Western patterns of a spectacular action movie. In many of the Soviet "Eastern" stories set during the Civil War, it is easy to feel the influence of Western Westerns.

Oleg Sulkin: What period of Soviet cinema do you consider the most fruitful and why?

Alexander Fedorov: It depends in what sense. In artistic terms, this is most likely the thaw and post-thaw period of the 1960s with such, for example, masterpieces as "Andrei Rublev" and "July Rain"... During this period, many creators of Soviet films sincerely believed in the possibility of "socialism with a human face" (remember, "I am 20 years old" M. Khutsiev), paid great attention to the search for moral ideals, pictorial solutions. During this period, censorship (especially before the beginning of the Czechoslovak events of 1968) was still not as harsh as in the 1970s.

In terms of box office, the greatest take-off of Soviet cinema fell on the period from 1967 to 1980 (it was at this time that the most popular films appeared on Soviet screens), then for various reasons (there was both the enthusiasm of the masses with the political events of perestroika, and the sharply increased competition from TV, which became more spectacular in the second half of the 1980s, and the arrival of video, and the greater openness of Soviet distribution for foreign production, which also brought with it perestroika, and the deterioration of the economic situation, etc.) a gradual decline in cinema attendance began, which sharply increased in recent "Perestroika" years.

Oleg Sulkin: Today there is a gender revolution all over the world. Women are increasingly pushing men in the directing profession more and more confidently. In this context, how would you comment that the list of the thousand highest-grossing films of Soviet cinema included only 43 films (4.3%) directed by women, while the first 50 highest-grossing films of the USSR included films directed only by male directors?

Alexander Fedorov: Yes it is. The director's profession in the USSR was traditionally considered "hard" (including physically), so it was very difficult for women to break through an independent production. Of course, there were no official prohibitions, but the system itself was designed in such a way that already in the process of selecting applicants seeking to enter the directing department (for example, VGIK), men were more often preferred... then they strove to become directors in those days.

Oleg Sulkin: Today Russian film critics are free in their analysis of Soviet cinema and can afford any assessment. You have studied the reviews of both the Soviet and post-Soviet times. Did you see a fundamental difference in the ratings? Can you state that the truth has finally triumphed?

Alexander Fedorov: Of course, in Soviet times, film criticism was clearly divided into semi-official, rigidly pursuing the "general line of the Communist Party" in their articles and film criticism "with a human face", trying to support talented works, often using the "Aesopian language". There were film critics who sincerely smashed, for example, "Amphibian Man" for "prettiness" and "bourgeois". There were film critics (N. Zorkaya, M. Turovskaya, and others) who tried to seriously approach the study of the phenomenon of "mass culture".

Russian film critics (especially young ones) can afford any swagger of tone and freedom of style, any assessments, including the most rude ones, without looking back at the opinions "from above". Well, it didn't fit for a newspaper, so you can publish anything on the Internet... Can it be stated today that the truth in film criticism has finally triumphed? I don't think so. The spectrum of opinions about the same films both in the USSR and in today's Russia is quite wide. And often even talented film critics do not agree on the assessments of both Soviet and Russian films.

Oleg Sulkin: What came as a surprise to you while working on the book and collecting statistical data?

Alexander Fedorov: The collection of statistical information was conducted by me for years and was largely based on the data given in the reference books by S. Kudryavtsev (1998), S. Zemlyanukhin and M. Segida (1996), but I was supplemented by rental data from the magazines "Cinema Art" and "Soviet Screen", dissertations, official documents, scientific monographs, etc. The greatest surprise of the collected film statistics for me was such a significant share of dramatic films in the thousand of the most popular Soviet films, since until now it was considered that entertainment genres dominated in the USSR. In general, this is true (especially at the top of the leaderboard film list), but what three hundred of the "thousand champion" films turned out to be a dramatic genre, which came as a surprise to me.

Fedorov, A. One Thousand and One Highest Grossing Soviet Movie: Opinions of Film Critics and Viewers. Moscow: Information for all, 2021. 1134 p.

Федоров А.В. Тысяча и один самый кассовый советский фильм: мнения кинокритиков и зрителей. М.: ОД "Информация для всех", 2021. 1134 с. (pdf в свободном доступе): <https://ifap.ru/library/book615.pdf>