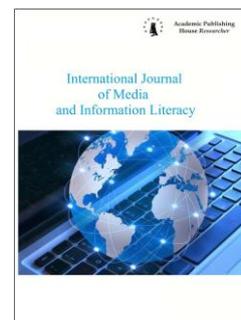


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## Forbidden Soviet Cinema (1951-1991): A View from the 21st century

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### Abstract

In 2021 the Publishing House SM "Information for All" published a book by Professor Alexander Fedorov "Record holders of the banned Soviet cinema (1951-1991) in the mirror of film criticism and viewers' opinions" (Fedorov, 2021). In this interview with Professor Marina Tselykh, Alexander Fedorov discussed the reasons for which films were banned, shelved or interrupted at various stages of their production in the USSR, how audiences reacted to the release of such "shelf" films during "perestroika," and other aspects of the topic.

After reading this book it becomes clear how difficult was the fate of Soviet film directors, screenwriters and actors. The lives of some of the most talented filmmakers were ruined... For example, Alexander Askoldov was banned from working in the film industry for twenty years after his film "Commissar" was shot. And Soviet many films have been banned from cinemas and television or stopped while they were still in the making. And this despite the fact that many of them had real artistic value, were masterfully filmed.

**Keywords:** Soviet cinema, banned films, film studies, film criticism, book, Alexander Fedorov.

*Marina Tselykh:* After reading your book "Record holders of the banned Soviet cinema (1951-1991) in the mirror of film criticism and viewers' opinions" (Fedorov, 2021), I realized how difficult the fate of Soviet directors, screenwriters and actors was. The destinies of the most talented filmmakers were broken. You write, for example, that Alexander Askoldov was deprived of the right to work in cinematography for twenty years after the "Commissar" was banned. How many films were banned from showing in cinemas and on television, or stopped while still filming!! And this despite the fact that many of them had real artistic value, were masterfully filmed and superbly represented by the cast.

Could you, please, briefly describe and systematize the main reasons why films were banned, "sent to the shelf" or interrupted at different stages of their creation.

*Alexander Fedorov:* The reasons for the ban and the "shelf" fate of a number of Soviet films were, in a generalised form, as follows:

- Ideological reasons (divergence of the concept of the authors of this or that film from the official course of interpretation of historical, political, socio-cultural events). Examples: A. Askoldov's *Commissar*, A. German's *Checking on the Road*, V. Žalakiavičius' *Moment of Truth*, etc;
- Artistic reasons (the author's search for a new form, style that does not coincide with the norms of "socialist realism" approved by the authorities). Examples: S. Paradzhanov's *Kiev*

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*Frescoes*, Y. Ilyenko's *Spring for the Thirsty*, G. Poloka's *Intervention*, R. Khamdamov's *Unexpected Joys*, and others;

- A changed political situation changed as a result of which films that had been "properly" conceived and initially approved by the directorate stopped being relevant and necessary for the state by the middle or at the end of the shooting process (*Farewell, America!* by A. Dovzhenko, *Conscience of the World* by A. Room, *Always on the Watch!* By E. Dzigan, *Starling and Lyra* by G. Alexandrov and others);

- Too gloomy and problematic, in the opinion of the authorities, portrayal of Soviet reality. Examples: *Thema* by G. Panfilov, *Victor Krokhin's Second Attempt* by I. Sheshukov, *Vacation in September* by V. Melnikov, etc;

- The emigration of a film director or screenwriter to the West. Examples: *The Price* (directed by M. Kalik), *While the Dream Is Mad* (screenwriter V. Aksenov), etc;

Films of a low level of art that, in the opinion of film authorities, had no "box-office prospects" were rarely placed on the "shelf". They were simply given so-called "republican" distribution and/or small print runs...

Many outstanding works (G. Shpalikov's *Long and Happy Life*, M. Khutsiev's *July Rain*, S. Paradzhanov's *Color of Pomegranate* and others) which for one reason or another were deemed undesirable to a mass audience also received a small print.

In the course of writing this book, it turned out that sometimes the well-established information about the total prohibition of one or another Soviet film turned out to be false.

So in many sources (Wikipedia, the portals "Kino-teater.ru", "Kinopoisk", etc.) it is still asserted that the drama of Kira Muratova *Long Farewell* (1971) did not appear on the all-Union screen, since it was banned and lay on the "shelf" until 1987 perestroika. Similar information is contained even in such authoritative publications as "Our Cinema" (Kudryavtsev, 1998: 55), "Home Cinematheque. National cinema 1918-1996" (Zemlyanukhin, Segida, 1996: 127), "Cinema of Russia. Director's Encyclopedia" (Cinema..., 2010: 330).

However, it is not. Here is what Natalya Ryazantseva, the author of the script for *Long Farewell*, writes about this: "The picture came out in a small number of copies. Thanks to Gerasimov. And then she was suddenly removed from the screen in all cinemas by order. It did not last long ... There were more than five hundred copies" (Ryazantseva, 2008).

However, *Long Farewell*, apparently, was at the box office in 1971 not a day or two, but a much longer period, since as a result of a survey of readers of the magazine *Soviet Screen* this picture by Kira Muratova was recognized as the worst film of the year: 27.3 % of the viewers who saw him recognized him as bad, 7.3% – weak, 30.9% – mediocre, 21.8% – good and only 7.2% – excellent (Competition..., 1972: 19).

Thus, *Long Farewell* was in the Soviet film distribution in 1971, and printed in not such a small circulation – over 500 copies (by the way, in the reference book "Home Cinematheque. National Cinema 1918-1996" it is noted that the circulation of this picture was 535 copies, but at the same time, as I have already indicated above, it is erroneously asserted that, despite this, the film was not released in the 1970s) (Zemlyanukhin, Segida, 1996: 127).

But the circulation of 500-535 copies is quite comparable with the circulation figures of such famous films as *Tenderness* by E. Ishmukhamedov (508 copies and 9.3 million viewers in the first year of screening in cinemas), *Girl and Echo* by A. Žebriūnas (501 copy and 5.8 million viewers), *I Come from Childhood* by V. Turov (504 copies and 7.6 million viewers), *I Am 20 Years Old* by M. Khutsiev (535 copies and 8.8 million viewers per episode), *Blue Notebook* by L. Kulidzhanov (483 copies and 8.5 million viewers), *A Plot for a Short Story* by S. Yutkevich (420 copies and 8.1 million viewers), *Steppe* by S. Bondarchuk (552 copies and 3.2 million viewers), *The Woodpecker Doesn't Have a Headache* by D. Asanova (544 copies and 6.6 million viewers), *Flights in Dreams and in Reality* by R. Balayan (502 copies and 6.4 million viewers), *The Fox Hunt* by V. Abdrashitov (499 copies and 5.9 million viewers), *Valentina* by G. Panfilov (496 copies and 5.4 million viewers), *The Voice* by I. Averbakh (533 copies and 2.3 million viewers).

And this is much more circulation of such outstanding films as *July Rain* by M. Khutsiev (164 copies and 3 million viewers), *Long Happy Life* by G. Shpalikov (89 copies and 1.5 million viewers), *Adventures of a Dentist* by E. Klimov (78 copies and 0.5 million viewers), *Andrei Rublev* by A. Tarkovsky (277 copies and 2.9 million viewers), *There lived a Songbird* by O. Ioseliani (320 copies and 2.6 million viewers), *Pirosmani* by G. Shengelai (209 copies and 1.5 million viewers), *Plea* by T. Abuladze's (179 copies and 1.2 million viewers), *Color of the Pomegranate* by

S. Parajanov (143 copies and 1.1 million viewers), *Autumn* by A. Smirnov (261 copies, 9.8 million viewers), *Mirror* by A. Tarkovsky (84 copies and 2.2 million viewers), *Stalker* by A. Tarkovsky (193 copies and 4.3 million viewers), *Funny People!* by M. Schweitzer (215 copies and 1.6 million viewers), *Farewell* by E. Klimov (270 copies and 1.3 million viewers), *Parade of the Planets* by V. Abdrashitov (263 copies and 2.2 million viewers), *My friend Ivan Lapshin* by A. German (118 copies and 1.3 million viewers) (the source is book of film critic Sergei Kudryavtsev "Our Cinema" and in his Internet blog ([Kudryavtsev, 1998](#))).

And since 1.7 million viewers watched them during the re-release of *Long Farewell* 1987, it can be assumed that in 1971 the audience for this film by Kira Muratova was not less, but much more. Here I proceed from the fact that O. Ioseliani's film *There Lived a Songbird* (1972), which is equally far from entertainment and also black-and-white, managed to get 2.6 million viewers even with a significantly smaller circulation - 320 copies, and *July Rain* (1967) by M. Khutsiev was seen by 3 million viewers with a circulation of 164 copies...

At the same time, it is clear that ordinary cinemas tried to get rid of such non-entertainment films as *Long Farewell* as early as possible, they went there for a maximum of a week, and then smoothly moved to club halls - for a couple of days, for one or two sessions...

Therefore, we can safely say that even if *Long Farewell* in the all-Union box office ran for only two weeks, they managed to gather their 2-3 million viewers, some of whom later noted this psychological drama as the worst film in the questionnaire of *Soviet Screen* of the year...

A similar example is the usually considered totally forbidden film by M. Osepian *Ivan's Boat* (1972). Having received the so-called fourth category and a circulation of 197 copies, this drama was released in Soviet distribution in 1974 and gathered 1 million viewers in its first year of demonstration.

It is curious that when during the "perestroika" (in 1987) *Ivan's Boat* was released to the all-Union rental again, accompanied by warm reviews in the press, the audience for the first year of the demonstration gathered viewers even in smaller numbers: only 0.9 million (source - Internet blog of film critic S. Kudryavtsev ([Kudryavtsev, 1998](#))).

A similar example to the film by Andrei Konchalovsky *The story of Asya Klyachina, who loved, but did not marry*, because this picture, titled *Asya's Happiness* in the late 1960s (again, contrary to numerous allegations of a complete ban), she still visited the Soviet box office.

Here is what the film critic N. Zorkaya (1934-2006) wrote about it: "*The story of Asya Klyachina*, disfigured by amendments and cuts, was released under the ironic title *Asya's Happiness* and in a ridiculous number of copies" ([Zorkaya, 2006](#)). This fact was also noted by the film critic Marina Kuznetsova: "Several printed copies were released on the third screen in the so-called club distribution, renaming it, as if in a mockery, *Asya's Happiness*" ([Kuznetsova, 2006](#)).

And here again the question arises, if the screenwriter Natalya Ryazantseva considered the circulation of K. Muratova's film *Long Farewell*, which amounted to 535 copies, to be small, then it is quite possible that the "ridiculous" circulation of *Asya's Happiness* was commensurate with, indeed, small circulations at that time such famous films as *July Rain* (164 copies and 3 million viewers), *Long Happy Life* (89 copies and 1.5 million viewers), *Adventures of a Dentist* (78 copies and 0.5 million viewers) and *Plea* (179 copies and 1.2 million viewers). And, consequently, the film *Asya's Happiness* attracted at least one million viewers in the Soviet film distribution in the end of 1960s.

*Marina Tselykh*: Well, many films have been returned from oblivion. Can it be argued that today these "shelf" films are able to become loved and demanded by the viewer? After all, the historical, political and cultural context has changed a lot. The media language has changed, the audience attending cinemas has also changed.

*Alexander Fedorov*: In my book I cite data and calculations by experts in Soviet film distribution, which show that profits in the 1960s-1980s were only realistic for those films that had built up a cinematic audience of at least 14-15 million viewers in their first year. Only Klimov's *The Agony* (18.1 million viewers) managed to overcome this barrier among films released during perestroika.

For example, when, with the triumphant support of the cinematographic authorities and the perestroika press, *The Story of Asya Klyachina, Who Loved But Did Not Marry* appeared on the

screens in 1988 in a repeated (and, presumably, considerable) circulation, then following the results of the first year of showing in cinemas it attracted 1.9 million viewers from cinemas...

In my opinion, this speaks volumes about the fact that there was no significant audience potential for this black-and-white drama based on rural material, outstanding in its artistic merit, but devoid of even minimal entertaining baits - neither in the late 1960s, nor in the late 1980s.

When I tentatively tested the above text on the Internet, but immediately received responses from some fellow film critics, in which, in the spirit of Soviet vocabulary, they accused me of "juggling the numbers" and that all this is far from the "true political and cultural context of that time", "they do not explain anything", "millions of viewers of 1965 and 1988 are completely different millions", and that I, they say, hinted that "since these films were released for hire and turned out to be so unattractive that it was hardly worth reviving them during the perestroika campaign"...

As we can see, a well-known manipulative technique was used, when phrases that did not belong to him were attributed to the "opponent" and then criticized.

Of course, both in the 1980s and now I believe that the prohibited films during the "perestroika" were quite rightly freed from the captivity of the "shelf" and shown to the audience, but this in no way negates the real facts, which clearly indicate that: 1) *Asya's Happiness*, *Long Farewell* were at the box office in the late 1960s and in 1971, respectively, and at least 1-2 million viewers watched them; 2) in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Soviet viewers watched films like *Long Farewell* and *Ivan's Boat*, in very moderate quantities for those times, as they mostly preferred entertainment / spectacular film production.

The preferences of Soviet viewers in the second half of the 1980s were similar. The audiences of the "perestroika" era enthusiastically watched P. Todorovsky's *Inter-Girl* (44 million viewers) rather than A. Alov and V. Naumov's *A Bad Anecdote* (1.1 million viewers) and K. Muratova's *Long Goodbyes* (1.7 million viewers).

My previous monograph "One Thousand and One Highest-Grossing Soviet Film: Opinions of Film Critics and Audiences" (Fedorov, 2021) is devoted to the preferences of the Soviet mass audience. So I am well aware of the political and sociocultural context of the Soviet era, as well as the fact that as a result of the prohibitions "the most promising trends of Soviet cinema were thrown to the periphery, that the destinies of the most talented filmmakers were broken".

Yes, millions of viewers at different times are different in "weight". But aren't they ten times different? Well, let's say, *Long Farewell* would have been given in the 1970s a circulation not of 535 copies, but 2,000, and would have been released in wide distribution. Would they really have received an audience of more than 3-4 million? No, of course not, since for all its artistic merit, this is a non-entertaining "movie not for everyone"...

Of course, the ideal option was simply to release such films in regular distribution, then there would have been no need to create any commissions in the 1980s for their rehabilitation...

Let me also remind that hundreds of articles and dozens of books have been devoted to the phenomenon of audience success (including Soviet cinema), including such leading Russian film scientists of the past decades and the present as N. Zorkaya (Zorkaya, 1981), M. Turovskaya (Turovskaya, 1979), M. Yampolsky (Yampolsky, 1987), M. Zhabsky (Zhabsky, 1998; 2009; 2020), and many others. And all these studies prove that complex, philosophically filled art-house films never received even a tenth of the audience, relatively speaking, *Diamond Hand* or *Pirates of the XX century*...

Even today, in the 21st century, banned Soviet films of the old days interest mostly a very narrow spectrum of "advanced" viewers, mostly of the older generation.

*Marina Tselykh*: One cannot but take into account the fact that "bans" stir up public interest in a banned film. Is the excitement around such an "open" film always equal to its artistic merit and significance? How did perestroika mood affect the interpretation of the returned films? Has the opinion of critics changed now?

*Alexander Fedorov*: As I have already noted above, the hype generated by the perestroika press about the films that were taken off the shelves (and they were of varying levels of professional quality) did little to help their real success in cinemas.

Among the films taken off the shelf (there were over three dozen of them), only *Agony* achieved "profitable" indicators (18.1 million viewers in the first year of demonstration). It can also

be assumed that in the case of the timely release of such potentially spectacular films as *Farewell, America!* (1951), *Rainbow Formula* (1966), *Intervention* (1968), *Literature Lesson* (1968), *Always on the Watch!* (1973), *Starling and Lyra* (1974), *While the Dream Is Mad* (1978), they would also make a profit in the box office. And truly championship fees could await the destroyed film *Moment of Truth (In August 44<sup>th</sup>)* by V. Žalakevičius, based on the sensational novel by V. Bogomolov, if it had been released in Soviet cinemas in 1975 or 1976...

Based on the fact that the most popular Soviet films based on military material (*The Dawns Here Are Quiet...*, *Shield and Sword*, *Strong in Spirit*) gathered from 55 million to 66-68 million viewers in the first year of demonstration, it can be assumed that that *Moment of Truth* could even surpass these indicators and reach the level of 70 million viewers...

Of course, the perestroika mood had a more positive effect on the treatment of previously banned films which had been put back into distribution. For example, in the second half of the 1980s Soviet film critics were eager to give good recommendations even to, in my opinion, quite modest in its artistic merits, *Hare Reserve*...

The opinions of contemporary film critics on "shelf" cinema have, of course, become more balanced, these films are usually seen in a broad political and socio-cultural context.

*Marina Tselykh:* Could a new reading of the film arise because the temporal context has changed? After all, today we know about the heroes and events of the Soviet years, more than the contemporaries of the film knew about them.

*Alexander Fedorov:* You are right, today the perception of Soviet "shelf" cinema has become different, and this is clearly evident in the books and articles of Russian film historians of the 21st century (O. Kovalov, E. Margolit, A. Shpagin, V. Fomin, etc.). In my book I cite the opinions of many Russian film historians (Fomin, 1992, Fomin et al, 2012; Margolit, 2012, etc.), for whom banned Soviet films became the subject of a multifactorial study.

*Marina Tselykh:* In your book, you write that our yesterday's spiritual heritage would have been noticeably richer if talented and truthful works had not been "lying" on the shelves. And we cannot but agree with you. But how to determine the real value of a work that came to us from the past? After all, it is impossible to say unequivocally that time kills a film for good and all. And there are many examples of this. Which of them do you consider the most revealing? Of course, if the film is released on time, then the author's allusions are seen more clearly and easier to read. But, perhaps, it is not for nothing that they say that "the big is seen at a distance".

*Alexander Fedorov:* Film evaluations are always subjective. Both in the past and today, the same film may appear to some critics as a masterpiece and to others as a failure. There are films that become obsolete just a few years after they were made, and then there are examples of many years of cinematic appeal. Sometimes it happens so: in the year of creation a film seems to many film experts a trifle, not worthy of attention (a striking example here is the film adaptation of the novel *Amphibian Man* made in the early 1960s), but even after several decades, the picture remains in demand among the audience. And then, for film historians, the film becomes the material for an in-depth sociological analysis.

*Marina Tselykh:* What are the most promising trends in Soviet cinema were thrown to the periphery as a result of excommunication? What films testify to this?

*Alexander Fedorov:* I believe that the Soviet authorities' fight against "formalism" and "modernism" did a great disservice to the development of poetry in cinema. Just imagine for a moment how many outstanding works Sergei Paradzhanov could have directed after *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* had it not been for the ban on his *Kiev Frescoes* and the sad fate of *Color of Pomegranate*... To say nothing of the fact I am not saying about the fact that in 1970s this outstanding master, in general, was sent to prison... Certainly, the level of historical truth in cinema about the Great Patriotic War would have been different, if in early 1970s *Checking on the Roads* by Alexey German would not have been shelved...

*Marina Tselykh*: Which washed-out or lost film do you regret the most?

*Alexander Fedorov*: Of course, about 99 % shot and then destroyed *Moment of Truth* (*In August'44<sup>th</sup>*, 1975) by V. Žalakiavičius. I think it was probably the best work of this talented director, author of such a famous picture as *Nobody Wants to Die...* My book included an exclusive interview which was given to me by the performer of one of the main roles in *Moment of Truth* – a great actor Alexander Ivanov. He spoke in detail about the shooting and the reasons for banning the film.

*Marina Tselykh*: Are there any "shelf films" today, or is it rather high-grossing and elite cinema?

*Alexander Fedorov*: There is no "shelf cinema" in the Soviet sense in twenty-first-century Russia. But there are quite a few films whose shooting over the last thirty years has been interrupted for financial reasons. Or films that were made but never made it to cinemas, because cinema owners did not see any commercial potential in this kind of production...

In addition, the way the film industry in Russia is organised is that once they receive money from the Russian Ministry of Culture to shoot a film, producers, directors, actors, and other film crew members earn (often a sizable sum) during the filming process, but they have no particular interest in the distribution of the film itself. The overwhelming majority of Russian films today fail to break even at the box office. But after the next failed film at the box office, Russian producers again and again receive money from the state for their next projects, and therefore, again they earn good money...

There are many reasons for the failure of contemporary Russian cinema in the box office (there is fierce competition with Hollywood productions, television and the Internet; there is often a low level of professionalism in the films; and the transformation of a once wide age-range cinema audience into a teenage audience, plus now there is the pandemic, and so on). But the fact remains that dozens of Russian films, originally made as entertainment films, fail miserably in cinemas today. Although there have certainly been some box-office successes for Russian cinema in recent years (*Upward Motion*, *Holopop*, etc.).

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