Alexander Fedorov

Film Criticism and Russian Screen *

Film-Criticism and Cinema-Press in Russia

The history of Russian cinema-critics will be written some day, including the main stages, currents and directions, «the revolution's romanticism» of the twenties, «the ideological conservatism» of thirties and forties, «the thaw» of the fifties and sixties, «the stagnation» of seventies, the problems the capital and provincial cinema-critics, etc.

My intentions here are more modest - to chronicle the situation in the nineties, when the former leaders of the profession (Rostislav Urenev, Georgy Kapralov, Alexander Karaganov) were removed for various reasons, or became TV-journalists (Boris Berman, Sergey Sholokhov and Petr Shepotinik). Others (Victor Demin, Georgy Bogemsky, Vladimir Baskakov, Valery Turovskoy), left us for a better world...

«Reading Hall» (editor-in-chief of Alexander Troshin) - vastly simplifies the access to the statistics of the articles published by Russian cinema-critics. From the Russian «old guard» of cinema-critics, only a few preserved their positions: Lev Anninsky, Jury Bogomolov, Myron Chernenko, Kirill Razlogov and Alexander Braginsky, each of them publishing an average of ten articles a year. The leading Russian cinema-columnists (Jury Gladiltsikov, Leonid Pavluchik, Victor Matisen and others) publish 30-40 articles per annum. The «critics-stars» of the «Perestroika» Alexei Erohin, Alexander Timofeevsky, Viacheslav Shmyrov and Sergey Lavrentiev have less articles to their credit, despite the fact that given their nontrivial method of criticism, each of them could, probably, be at the head of his own cinema magazine.

The new names on the firmament of Russian cinema-critics include Statislav F. Rostotsky, Elena Telingator, Dmitry Savosin, Georgy Samsonov. Their articles are more frequent than ever in the Russian press. However, only Dmitry Savosin tends to continue the glorious tradition of «francophone» Alexander Braginsky. A big group of young critics works now in the new magazine «Premiere» - the analog of French-American «Premiere» for young readers.

But the only true leaders of cinema criticism in the nineties are Andrei Plakhov and Sergey Kudriavtsev. They publish annually about 100 articles, reviews, portraits of actors and directors. Sergey Kudriavtsev also published 3 volumes of video-cinemacatalogue-encyclopedias and the special books «All is Cinema» & «Our Cinema»...

Since the mid-eighties, Andrei Plakhov has become the most active participant in international cinema-festivals. He did not miss, probably, any important cinema events during that period. His reports are analytical, ironical and professional. Sergey Kudriavtsev, as a rule, sees the films in Moscow, but his efficiency is astounding. He writes thousands of voluminous reviews and portraits, including detailed lists of all prizewinners, be it the Oscars, Cesars, Palmes d'Or, Golden Lions, etc. Many other Russian journalists, less known, lacking the necessary preparation, with modest baggage of knowledge, abilities and talent, systematically write about cinema and travel to festivals. But Kudriavtsev does not enjoy this privilege...

The articles of Sergey Kudriavtsev and Andrei Plakhov stand out due to their high degree of professionalism (the lucky absence «scientific» style) and the love for Cinema Art.

Certainly, in the age of computers and satellite, television tends to be more prestigious then cinema. The audience for TV-critics is now enormous. And many critics find it much easier to speak or to interview than to write the articles. Which makes «non-television» people such as Sergey Kudriavtsev and Andrei Plakhov, look like old-fashioned traditionalists. But since when are all critics supposed to be avanguardists!

Else 15 years ago the situation in Russian cinema-press thread seems stable: for mass-audience was released magazine «Soviet Ecran» with million by circulations and advertising review «Satellite of Cinema-Viewer». For elite audience - fat magazine «Cinema Art», for

cinema-distributors - monthly magazines «Soviet Film», «Projectionist» and «New Films», for amateurs of the dramaturgy - magazine «Screenplays». Materials about movies regularly emerged on the leaves ordinary press is and all...Compared with dozens French or American periodical cinema-press this is was, certainly, drop in sea. That is why Gorbachov's liberalization immediately led to appearance the new cinema-magazines. With the emergence of Petersburg's «Séance», with European style and the intellectual reflection of Russian cinema-critics of the young generation, Moscow lost its old monopoly in cinema-press. But in the early '90s Moscow's critic Vladimir Borev made the publishing home «Video-Ace Magazine's bouquet: «Video-Ace», «Video-Ace Premier», «Video-Ace Express», «Video-Ace Sunrise», «Video-Ace Favorite», «Video-Ace Satellite», «Video-Ace Crown», «Video-Ace Dandy», etc.

Truth, the first outputs of this magazines had very modest polygraphy, but soon financial backing of several Moscow's banks and working agreement with one of top French publishers carried out «Video-Ace» on entirely European level color photo-design and scope about 200 leaves of big format. In that or another key magazines of «Video-Ace» from the very beginning were oriented generally on Hollywood cinema, the portraits of top directors, interview, hit-parades, reportages from the largest festivals, information about video-techniques, video-pirates and legal video-firms.

Almost simultaneously with «Video-Ace» other cinema-press appeared in Moscow: «Video-Digest» (Editor Vsevolod Vilchek), weekly newspaper «Ecran and Scene», epatage newspaper «Cinema Home», magazine «Cinema-Eye» (about cinema-business) based by the group of the authors of the «youths of outputs» in «Soviet Ecran», professional and academic «Cinema-critics' Memos» (Editor Alexander Troshin from Scientific Institute of Cinema, Moscow) and modest little magazine «Opinions» about new Russian films. The boom of the periodical press of end '80s - early '90s also concern cinema-press. For account of the several sensational publications increased the circulation of «Cinema Art». Magazine «Ecran» losing at new redactor Victor Demin (1936-1993) its prior adjective «Soviet», as before retained auditorium of readers. How mushrooms after rain, unfortunately, with the same duration of existence, steel to emerge another issues of cinema-press («Cinema-Video Review», «Film and Video Reporter» and so on.): let with pore by bad quality seals, but with great titles.

But everything was changed after the beginning of Eltsin's reforms. Existing state budget «Opinions» closed. Due to the same financial causes not get till ninth number, was gone in history «Video-Digest». Was concealed with banking money, the magazine's bouquet of «Video-Ace» (200 pages) fading directly on eyes. With larger temporary intervals steel to come out «Ecran» (despite the heroic attempts of new editor Boris Pinsky) and «Cinema-Eye». Obviously not from good life were poured out under one binder «New Films» and «Projectionist». Last NN of «Video-Ace» & «Ecran» was published in summer of 1998. It is very difficult to publish something without of money...

Only «Cinema Art» (though even greatly losing in circulation: from 50,000 to 5,000) was successful publishes (with the grant's help). Thread seem, situation existing in Russian cinema press, logically reflected common painting in domestic cinema (blunt abbreviation film-production, economic difficulties, etc.).

And, contrary to all forecasts, in end of '90s Alexander Semenov founded the new «Video-magazine» (for distributors of videos) and old editor of «Video-Ace Express» Georgy Samsonov founded magazine «Film». New Russian cinema-paper for professionals were borne at the end of 1998: «SK-News» (The News of Union of Russian Filmmakers»). Also gave to start to right away several new magazines about movies and video. In may 1997 appeared of Russian edition «Premiere», a la French-American samples: qualitative paper, excellent colors, the absence of pirates' photos... To the editorial office honor must badge, what she was not was limited by the translations of the clauses of its foreign partners: the better half of 100-pages scope occupied material about Russian cinema, video, sound and computer. Another new magazine (60 pages) is «Cinema-Park» at the same colors and Hollywood orientation. Incidentally, unlike Western «Premiere», «Cinema-Park» has more Russian. However on

today's Russian market they do not only compose serious competition, but also residing as to essence on one genre-thematically floor of bulks each other for right of to be the most popular Russian cinema-press. What it: rejuvenation of Russian cinema-press, or artificial reanimation of detrimental business? Shall-see...

Alexander Fedorov

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The Mystery of Russian Cinema

Russian cinema today is, like Russia itself chaotic, unpredictable and full of contrasts. No one can tell if the country will become an equal among equals on the world's professional stages by the beginning of the 21st century, casting off its poor role as a supplicant to Western artistic leaders.

Anyone who knows even a little history is aware that Russia was virtually outside European civilization for 75 years of XX century. The Communist regime firmly controlled all spheres of life for a sixth of the planet's citizens. In spite of totalitarian pressure, however, Russian culture managed to survive. The best books of Mikhail Bulgakov and Anna Ahmatova, the symphonies of Dmitry Shostakovich and Alexander Prokofiev, the films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Vassily Shukshin were created in the years of the most rigid censorship.

Despite bans, prisons and gulags, the artists leaned to speak to their readers and spectators in some sort of «language of initiates». Music, without clearly defined plot, made it much easier to do this. Writers, directors and actors were forced to talk about many things in hints and symbols, taking advantage of legends, fairy tales and parables.

Russian authorities of the 60-s through the 80-s officially supported the publication and distribution of classical literature - the works of Lev Tolstoy, Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, Ivan Turgenev, Anton Chekhov, etc. The best film directors knew this, and were aware of weakened censorial control applied, at times, to screen adaptations. Consequently, the period saw *The Nest of Noble Family*(1968) based on Turgenev novel and *Uncle Vanya*(1971) based on Chekhov's play, directed by Andrei Konchalovsky.

There were also *Station's Employee* (1972, using Pushkin's prose) directed by Sergey Soloviev, *Dead Souls* (1984, from the Gogol novel) directed by Mikhail Schweitzer, and others. Nikita Mikhalkov, making films based on Chekhov (*Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano*, 1976) and Ivan Goncharov (*Several Days in the Life of Oblomov*, 1980), succeeded in telling more about the situation in Russia - and the national character - than the majority of his colleagues whose pictures dealt with the country's modern life. Oblomov embodies the paradoxes of mysterious Russian soul: intelligence, talent and an innate sense of beauty go poignantly hand in hand with passivity, laziness, sleepy inaction and abstract dreaming...

The Russian cinematic fairy tale also has old traditions, founded by Alexander Row (*The Frosty Fire, Water and Cooper Trumpets, Morozko,* etc.) and Alexander Ptushko (*The Stone Flower, Sadko*). Until recently, however, fantasy films had to submit to two unwritten rules: all except a few were made for a children's audience, and the action had to take place in ancient times, in a faraway kingdom. The first rule dictated an understandable style for the fairy tale, with vivid, clear pictures and vocabulary, and villains looking not very fearful but on the contrary, usually, funny and harmless. The second rule was very seldom infringed, because magicians, witches, demons and other fairy characters - according to «highly placed» thought - could be perceived as an embodiment of the authors' mysticism intruding on a modern background. In these cases, when magic and witchery were admitted into our days (as in *The Snowy Fairy Tale* by E.Shengelaya and A.Saharov), unintended associations and parallels appeared.

In the word, the production of films similar to *The Omen* by Richard Donner and *The*

Shining by Stanley Kubrick for the Russian screen couldn't be even imagined until 80-s. Now the situation has turned 180 degrees. Russian screen are full of foreign and indigenous horror films and fearsome tales that chill the blood. Vampires, demons, witches and others evil spirits have become frequent guests on video and cinema circuits from Moscow to the very frontiers...

Remarkable Russian actors - Oleg Dal (1941-1981), Vladimir Vissotsky (1938-1980), Anatoly Solonitsin (1934-1982), Vladislaw Dvorzecki (1937-1978), Nikolai Grinko (1920-1989), Alexander Kaidanovsky (1946-1995) - very often played heroes who stood beyond the usual circle of life on the screen of the 60-s and 70-s. The Fairy Ivans, fools and intelligent outsiders of Dal. The hot-tempered, contentious, furious romantics of Vissotsky. The inspired, always doubtful or cynical, devastated heroes of Solonitsin (Andrei Tarkovsky's favorite actor)... These were in opposition to the artificial characters distilled in the retort of Socialist Realism.

Censorship was ruthless to the filmmakers. Important scenes, phrases and frames were cut out of many movies. Yet Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1966), despite all the alterations, extolled Russian culture and closely connected with the Orthodox faith, while Elem Klimov's *The Parting* (1981) remained an angry accusation of the political system of the time, aspiring to destroy this same culture and religion.

After the widespread destruction of temples and churches in the 20-s and 30-s, Russian culture became a peculiar national religion; as the only source of spirituality, it allowed people who could not stand slavery to maintain a dream of Beauty during the hardest years.

Indisputably, politics had a highly negative influence on the development of Russian culture and education, but the classical legacy of art helped people to survive. Every new truthful book or film of the masters was perceived throughout the country as a desirable breath of cool wind. I remember how the books of Alexander Solzhenitsyn were handed around, how the films of Marlen Hutsiev or Gregory Chuhrai, in the '60s, were discussed till voices became hoarse. And what events for Russian viewers in the '70s were screenings of masterpieces by Federico Fellini (Amarcord, Orchestra Rehearsal)! Another paradox of Russian life is that all people hoped for and aspired to the «light future», yet their ranks included dissenters who were Slavophiles, craving a return to the Russia of 1913, and dissenters of Western orientation who wanted a rapprochement with America, while the majority of the so-called «common people» faithfully waited for a near-Socialist paradise of well-being and, in the name of this, were ready to tolerate «temporary» hardships. Today a lot of Russian politicians try to find some «middle way» between capitalism and socialism where, to trust the premises of fashionable leaders, harmony will reign. In the political, economical currents some Russian filmmakers thoroughly lost their bearings, becoming victims of the whirlpools, submerged stones and shallows. Having got rid of censorship and having been given «carte blanche» in freedom of thought, they began to throw onto the screen what they apparently believed were commercial and brave statements, but which in fact were monotonous, non-competitive films. The freedom didn't evoke the expected abundance of masterpieces, because bitter truth alone isn't enough for the creation of a work of art. Talent is also needed, and it is everywhere in deficit.

More and more Russian cineastes, finding it harder and harder to work in the Motherland in a condition of permanent economic crisis, are gathering under Western's roofs. Almost all Russian masters (Nikita Mikhalkov, Pavel Lungin, Ivan Dykhovichny, Valery Todorovsky, Gleb Panfilov, Andrei Konchalovsky, Alexei German and others), even if they make films in China or in Moscow, nevertheless do it with the help of U.S. or French money, on Western film stock, with the Western sound system. Western producers willingly stake these talented directors who capture prizes at prestigious festivals. For nearly a year the preeminent actor of Russian cinema - Oleg Yankovsky (*Nostalgia* by Andrei Tarkovsky)- appeared on stage in a Paris theater. It is rather logical: Russian filmmakers hope that West will become a gate to the world screen for them; at home indigenous movies are being forced out by American production everywhere. Only the most entertaining Russian films manage to survive the competition in such conditions, but they, as usual, copy U.S. pictures and don't hold any special interest as art. Undoubtedly, such work in the West (by Andrei Konchalovsky and Nikita Mikhalkov, for example) requires a

certain attention to the producers' wishes and an orientation toward middle-of-the-road European and American viewer's tastes. Well, don't judge and you will not be judged...

The words of Russian great writer Gogol about the «Bird-troika» - Russia - therefore turned out to be really prophetic: «Russia, where are you rushing to? Give the answer. No answer».

Alexander Fedorov

Phenomenon of Russian Cinema-Hits

Modern screen art over its success to the use of folklore, myth, synthesis of the natural and supernatural, and a consistent orientation toward the most popular plot schemes. Their metaphorical appeal is not to the rational but to the emotional. through identification with the magic power of heroes and standardization of ideas, situations, characters and so on In compensation for dreams not realized in life, there are illusions - happy endings. In movies, TV shows, and music videos' rhythmic organization, viewers' feelings are influenced as much by the order of changing shots as by the content of productions.

American critic Richard Corliss notes that for the creators of many Hollywood movies plot is a thing of past, and these movies are more thrilling than satisfying. Their main impact on most of the youthful public lies in the expect special effects making spectators gasp in surprise or freeze with fright. this «dynamic cinema», according to Corliss, put higher demands on viewers, because we have to follow every frame of a shot waiting for the trick. These features of mass culture reveal themselves in some favorite movies of the Russian audience. They are clear embodiments of the above-mentioned «phenomenon of mass success» tendencies.

The action in these films moves form one short episode to another (in order not to be boring to viewers) with sensational informativeness: event take place at various exotic locations in a cruel world of pirates drug dealers, Mafia men, racketeers and prostitutes. Psychological pressure is active - throughout the stories the idea that sly enemies (inner and external) are scheming is repeated over and over. Now something mean is planned, now somebody is robbed; now positive heroes are attacked...

The main hero of these movies is an almost magical, fairy-tale character. Cute, strong and smart, he comes out of al supernatural situations safe and sound (an excellent motif for identification and compensation). Many episodes touch human instincts and emotions (such as fear). There's even continuity, as each story supposes an endless number of sequels. In spite of an absence of technical shine and the presence of numerous mistakes of taste or sense, the common components of these motives are rather professionally presented: fights, chases, shootings, pretty women, alarming music, strong feelings, a minimum of dialogue, a maximum of movement, and other attributes of action films. Other favorites of Russian public are made with similar attitudes and qualities...

Much more firmly than in cinema, these features of mass culture show themselves on Russian TV. Ideally, television should be various, unobtrusive, rich in visual information, and pluralistic without dull teaching and officiousness. Only lately has Russian TV started developing aesthetics for its entertainment packages, rejecting the different demands of the public. There are some intellectual and game shows - even some mass-culture programming - made on professional level. But the border between artistic and inartistic is often erased in a tendency toward documentary, one-day value, «open» formats that reproduce something in its process of becoming an event. This peculiarity of mass communication is an obstacle in determining the aesthetic distance. For examples, platitudinous music videos are show all the time on Russian TV; if a viewer didn't have taste preferences; this could penetrate deep enough into his mind to unconsciously determine them...

Alexander Fedorov

The Gloom of Russian Fantastic Movie-Land

One might think, after the gloomy films of Constantine Lopushansky (*Russian Symphony*, *Letters from a Dead Man*) and other supporters of the genre usually called futuristic fantasy with element of horror, that the fashion would have faded. Russian cinema and video viewers prefer the technically perfect American scare movies to our boring and indistinct mix. In contrast with the old Romantic stories about men-fish and astronauts, however, the heroes of many Russian films of '90s continue their agonizing, hard traveling across «The Zone», and if they leave the surface of the Earth, they do so only to hide in another planet's gloomy caves or dungeons. Often the action of these pictures takes place under some dictatorship. On the land and in the air the «services of liquidation» move, armed with lethal weapons. For photography dirty and deserted streets are chosen, with decayed houses, the walls of which are covered with mold as turbid water slowly drops from the ceiling. Hysterical characters with matted hair and eternal bags under eyes rush about the ruined labyrinths and sandy ridges. They may keep silent for a long time, staring into cracked mirrors or, contrariwise, burst out in endless superintellectual monologues. Here dark old oaken doors creak vilely and swampy puddles stick underfoot (a variant: the unsteady sand is creaking). The beautiful and mysterious women from time to time throw off their covers, and their naked bodies shine in the semi-darkness...

Central scenes of such films are episodes of contact with the strange and forbidden Zone where, in imitation of Andrei Tarkovsky's works (Solaris, Stalker), a lot of extraordinary things happen to the heroes. There is uncertainty at every step: malicious mutants, werewolves, dog-cannibals, maniacs, and so on.

The motives «inspiring» authors of this «Russian fantastic movie-land» are understandable. They want to create something epochal on the theme of humankind's responsibility for its actions on the planet; to condemn the principle of «the end justifies the means»; to think about the problems of ecology and nature, psychology and intellect. As a rule, however, philosophical concepts are hardly visible through the steam of cinema clichés, rented for the occasion.

The authors of such films often claim famous literary origins. But their modest «based on» postscript only affords an opportunity to make a middling movie out of any original story or novel once it is provided with meaningful pauses. These, deprived of a psychological basis, serve only to lengthen the picture.

It's hard for even talented actors to play in these films, because their heroes are submitted to the firm laws of the marionette. It's easier for less-gifted actors but that, obviously, doesn't add artistic pluses. Perhaps only cinematographers and designers feel themselves free there, hoping to surprise spectators with defined compositions, whimsical plays of light and color. Unfortunately, poor budget are quite clearly evident. The technical backwardness of Russian cinema is obvious in the productions' primitive shooting; their horrors don't frighten. Fantasy today can't be made with ancient means: the gap in effects, tricks and technology is too great between Russian «fantastic movie-land» and any of the works of Robert Zemeckis, James Cameron or John Carpenter.

One way out for Russian fiction is as old as cinema world - studying the films of Spielberg and Lucas - but the disorder of our economics does not evoke optimism...

Alexander Fedorov

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From Boarding School to Nuthouse
(Domestic and Other Violence on the Mirror of Russian Screen)

Recently I found a new hobby: collecting stereotypes of Russian cinema plots. For examples, the theme: "Domestic & Non-Domestic Violence on the Mirror of Russian Screen".

1. Public schools, boarding schools, children's shelters, educational-training establishments.

Action of films in this category always alternates between bathroom and punishment room, between ruined shed and small, dark cell. Under the narrator's "My address is neither a house nor a street..." there is violence, drug addiction and cruelty - when a teacher, knowing the customs of his group, prefers not to notice fresh blood on the dresser mirror in a child's bedroom, or when the strong mock with pleasure the weak. Somebody stark naked is sitting on the toilet, somebody in the same state of dishabille is running down and up stairs...

Russian moviegoers once watched sentimental, touching stories about careful, kind tutors trying to create an illusion of homey coziness for poor orphans. That was ages ago. Now, whatever the film, it's a severe and ruthless accusation, saying we can do nothing - over the last 80 years the whole country turned into an unfriendly state institution whose inhabitants, from early childhood, are doomed to endless humiliation, indignity, discomfort and stress, poverty and constraint. In the boarding school, as in a drop of water, all the evils and vices of life are reflected, where a 15-year-old boy knifes to death a strong, drunken man. This is not only revenge for the raped girl of the same age, it is furious and irrational retaliation for a crippled childhood, for a friend who became the victim of drugs, for the false slogans of adults, for their indifference, for...

The teachers in Category N 1 are only administrative appendages of the formal mechanism of management. Hypocritically, they can suddenly cry with the power of a fire-engine siren then, in a moment, smile as if nothing had happened. By the way, this is a fact noted by authors of the pictures' source books: workers in Russian boarding schools, with the help of a system of instruction in "standard educational training", acquired the strange – for normal people - ability to drive themselves almost to hysterics (outwardly) with absolute coldness and indifference in their hearts. On screen, portraits of these tutors are well matched by characterizations of the destitute boys' and girls' parents. They don't mind letting fall a tear - over glasses of vodka - to lament a son or daughter given away to the boarding school. Audiences pity the children, abandoned by this scum to live at this scum to live at the expense of the weak Russian state, as they pity some mad father, drunk, wandering at night under the windows of a boarding school in order to see his child.

2. Sanitariums, hospitals and other medical establishments

"All the world's a nuthouse, and all its people are mad". Rephrasing Shakespeare is probably the best way to express the main idea of film in this category.

For example, all characters - wives and children, neighbors and passersby - cooped up in their communal flat wish the main hero to kill a bureaucrat who for years hasn't maintained normal housing It is for this mission the hero is brought from a mental hospital: a psycho is a psycho, he can't answer for his acts. Once freed, however, the hero finds himself still in a world of madmen: there is the former cavalryman with naked sword, the bald athlete who is glutton and drunkard, some mountaineers, some people from an underground organization singing a song about "the black raven", etc.

Having got into the office of the hateful chief at last, our hero is again part of a crazy-show, this one scripted by the sly bureaucrat. There are machine-gun firings and explosions of grenades, poisoned coffee and the staff's pretended pity for the freezing children. The film ends with the escape of the real psychos who capture the main municipal building while troops and tanks are called against them, and demagogic speeches are made. In a word, everyone wears

fashionable political dressing; with their exposes and social accusations, cinema mediocrities - who were quietly making nonsense films before this time - now are trying to dash forward as leaders of the "fighters" and "truthful people". Their operative principle is: I'll roar, if nobody will hurt me.

The setting for these films from my second category are, as a rule, unpleasant interiors... dirty walls painted with cheerless colors, semi-submerged basements, filthy hospital cots and soon. Numerous conversations are staged, but their dialogue is empty and unintelligible for viewers with more or less stable nervous systems. Indisputably, the nuthouse as a model for the totalitarian state, were every display of normal mentality and human individuality is suppressed, is good material for the creation of gloomy parables, pathological visions, shocking naturalistic images and surrealistic symbols. If only these films had less of the epigone's features.

3. Prison colonies and other reformatories

A typical scheme: some sort of remake of action pictures of the '60s-'70s about war. Added will be homosexual passion and, certainly, scenes of cruelty and violence with dozens of accusatory speeches. But today's on-screen "bad guys"(fascists) and "good guys"(heroically struggling prisoners preparing a protest action or an escape) are caricatures. In short, after watching several of these films, you could easily gain the impression that all of them make up one gloomy and monotonous serial about the Russian State House. It can be located anywhere, the main point is the same. But the stream still flows, as Russian screenwriters and directors continue to gladden our hearts with cinema theses about what is wrong. All this makes me sick. Yet in spite of it... we live! I wish, though, that my collection of Russian State Institutional Films didn't keep replenishing itself.

Alexander Fedorov

America, America…

Consider these titles – *I Want to go to America, We Are Going to America, The American Boy, Our American Borya, The American Grandpa, The American Daughter, The Groom from Miami…*

These are the titles of a few of the many Russian films of the 1990s that have the 'American Dream' as their theme. Basically, these are entertainment films that are not made for festival awards or critical acclaim, but deal with the dream of many Russians to visit the U.S. one day.

In Russia now, as in the West, directors and producers must find money to produce a movie. Having announced their intention to make a movie that takes place in New York, Miami, or Hawaii, Russian filmmakers of this 'American Series' assume that they will more easily find a backer. For one thing, a backer is more likely to think that an American theme will bring theatrical success. Also, filmmakers themselves want to visit the world across the ocean. Besides, shooting on location in the U.S. encourages the participation of popular Russian actors, who like to have a good time for free.

The basic interests of these Moscow film crews, then, are from art and close to partying and shopping. Russian actors waste little time in America. Aside from making the movie, they get a tan, go shopping, and put on some shows for Russian immigrants living in Brighton Beach or in other parts of New York and U.S. It's kind of funny that the plots of some of these 'American Series' Russian films are about the adventures of Moscow actors, artists, singers, et al., who come to the U.S. to make money by any means.

Other plots are popular as well: an ordinary Russian guy gets an inheritance; or a Russian guy gets an inheritance; or a Russian returns from America and learns that a gang has killed his best friend, and now he must seek revenge. But probably the most popular stories are about prospective grooms (less frequently, brides, grandfathers, and grandmothers) who come from the U.S. to Russia searching for a loving and faithful spouse. This is certainly understandable – it's

much cheaper to make such movies because the action takes place principally in Moscow. Comedies about American grooms (as a rule, of Russian origin) come in two basic varieties. In one version (e.g. *Our American Borya*), a shy young man comes to Moscow from the U.S. to visit his relatives. His hosts begin searching for a bride at once. Almost immediately, young women are besieging 'the man of their dream' and he tries to get rid of them. In another version (e.g. *The Groom from Miami*), a self-confident young man comes to Moscow to visit relatives. He begins a search for a young woman himself, and ends up finding the woman of his dreams.

Name actors are what filmmakers bank their money on. And sometimes this works. In The Groom from Miami , L.Udovichenko, with her uniquely naughty, diva-like manner, plays a sly woman who attract men with her classy appearance, then robs them of everything. There is a lot of charm and irony in her performance. On the whole, however, such comedies resemble amateur drama-club productions in which the quickly-written then acted script seems like a collection of pointless, often vulgar episodes. Sometimes not only professional actors performs in these films, but also their wives, children, and other relatives. It's as if the filmmakers have decided that, since the relatives have traveled to America, why shouldn't they appear in the movie, too?

Having had a lot of fun on location, filmmakers of this 'America Series' often like to show off their patriotism. Their characters reject the American dream in the film's finale, and choose to stay in unlucky and troubled Russia. But by the mid-1990s, when this kind of plot became a cheap cliché, Russian directors started to change the minus sign to plus more frequently. The makers of *The Groom from Miami*, for example, frankly suggest to Russian audience that they leave for U.S. Forever. Not a bad suggestion, perhaps. But if they were to follow it, who would be left in Russia?

Alexander Fedorov

Videopirates from Russia

Undoubtedly, Russia today takes one of first place in the world's number of videopirates. The Kremlin has signed the Bern international authors' rights convention. But Russian authorities doesn't control the pirates' audiovisual productions. Countless booths sell thousands CD, CD-ROM and videocassettes with Western films - mainly the newest which have just appeared in America, France or Italy. Of course, nearly 80% of this audiovisual production are American CD and action films with Stallone, Van Damme, Schwarzenegger and others Hollywood stars. The adroit shopmen, as a rule, have neither licences to the copyrights nor the right to sell or rent foreign CD or films, but the trade is very successful.

The purchase price of one videocassette or CD is nearly $2-4 dollars in the black market. The same cassette can be rented in hundreds of Russian cities and towns for half a dollar a day.

One Russian videopirate revealed to me the secret of his "firm's" operational efficiency. Once a month - or more often - Moscow agents leave for America to buy as many new DVD, laserdiscs as possible in the biggest video shops of New York, L.A. and others cities. (Videocassettes are less desirable because of their larger size, which makes it difficult to transport them abroad). Having gotten the batch, the agents return to Moscow where in several underground studios the American laserdiscs are copied onto videocassettes on a mass scale. In the course of this, the U.S. NTSC system is transformed into Russia's adopted system - PAL-MESECAM/VHS. The cassettes are translated into Russian by a staff of experts in English, a lot of whom have been occupied with this profitable business for 10-20 years.

Sometimes it happened that Russian videopirates can't buy a laserdisc of the latest screen hit quickly. Then the executive agent arms himself with a camcorder, goes to an American movie theater where, for example, Spielberg's new production is showing, and photographs the film straight form the screen. The quality of such a recording is, of course, much worse than that of a laserdisc, but the salable result can be brought to the Russian video market with maximum speed.

Audiovisual-pirates across the country know well in Moscow "offices" the converted cassettes or CD can be bought. Two or three times a month they come to Moscow, pick up the next lot of transfers and then copy them for consumers in their cities and villages. Piracy is not only the selling or renting of stolen videos, CDs or CD-ROMs, however. There is wide broadcast of Western cinema novelties by little private TV channels. (Even small Russian towns have two or three local private TV channels.) Each shows from two to six pirated videos a day. Besides, the cable owners get monthly income from subscribers, and the private-TV owners meet expenses by inserting commercials during the piratical video's broadcasts.

The broad development of audiovisual-piracy in Russia has, to my mind, one characteristic peculiarity. Being in an extremely difficult financial situation, many Russian viewers find in an everyday exposure to pirated films the only opportunity to feel themselves in another world even for a few hours, to escape from the surrounding misfortunes, hardships, etc.

Watching the screen adventures of Harrison Ford or Bruce Willis characters who, in peaceful well-being, enjoy ownership of cozy two-storied American cottages while they busy themselves with clarification of love affairs, Russians can admire the power of foreign technology in fantastic special-effects super-shows and, if only in dreams, find a place as heroes of an inaccessible life.

Some 20 years ago Russian authorities struggled severely not only with the audiovisual-pirates, but even with common spectators - anyone who had bought abroad an erotic cassettes or one containing Rambo's latest adventures. People could be imprisoned for illegally watching the *Godfather* or *Caligula.* Today audiovisual censorship in Russia is practically unknown. Up to 1987, the audiovisual stream in Russia was almost 100% controlled by strict regime. At the end of '80s the system, in place for 70 years had begun to disintegrate; in the early '90s it finally collapsed. Russian audiovisual pirates now reign boundlessly and completely, cutting into profits of the ordinary cinemas whose attendance is catastrophically down. Spectators filled only 2-7% of the seats in the average movie theater (exceptions: several modern Dolby Digital theaters in Moscow), even there was an American novelty on the screen. Russian viewers prefer the screen of their home TVs. Once Russia was called the Empire of Evil. I can only hope it will newer be the Empire of Audiovisual-Pirates...

Alexander Fedorov

Something About Russian Screen

The Outsiders: Two films by Sergei Bodrov

S.Bodrov, well reputed as a commercial screenwriter in the ‘70s, in the ‘80s became the real revelation among new directors. His films – *I Hate You* (1984), *The Sweet Sap of the Grass* (1985), *Unprofessionals* (1985), *SIR: Freedom Is Paradise* (1989) – received prizes in many Russian and foreign festivals. They told viewers about the problems of a generation of teenagers with unusual – for those times – frankness and artistic power. Bodrov showed that he could work with unprofessional actors; the reality of his films was enhanced by improvisation on the set, and by the subtly elaborated psychology of the leading characters.

Unfortunately, Bodrov’s *Cardsharper* (1990), a dashing story about professional card players, somewhat surprised his admirers with standard situations and diminished directorial effort. His *I wanted to See the Angels*, however, refutes the pessimists who hurried to relegate him to a level of minor importance.

I wanted to See the Angels can be linked to a fashionable stream of “unmasking” films with naturalistic themes. There are rockers on roaring bikes, Mafia gunmen, dirty basements, scenes of morgues and police, and the cold, comfortless nighttime Moscow’s streets. Moscow itself is shown from its black side. You do not see here the bright lights of New Arbat and fashionable supermarkets, but rather the plain outskirts whose houses sullenly twinkle with the

weak-sighted windows of communal flats… nearly the film's only scenery. There are also familiar main characters: the novice hired killer and street girl. In short, a number of dull clichés are present.

But it seems one can make a good film with such ordinary – for Russian cinema – characters and settings. Of course, it depends on the director's talent. Bodrov managed to imbue this story of the bitter love of a Saratov boy (who comes to the capital to kill a Mafia debtor) and a rocker's girl (who dreams of writing a letter to Madonna) with the sincerity of real feelings.

The general sensation after the film is hopelessness. Young outsiders can't "find themselves" in a life that holds no prospects. Being romantics in their souls, they aren't satisfied to sit as clerks in commercial shops for many hours or sell bubble gum in the Metro stations. One woman is attracted to the image of an "easy rider" flying on a bike along the freeway; another dreams about warm American beaches and communications from the famous pop-star. But these dreams stay unrealizable, as castles in the air; each of the characters has a better chance of going to the heavens by way a lover of women's caresses – a hospital attendant – will out with the neatness of a professional, fill out the last medical report on the "client".

This had no chance of becoming a Russian screen bestseller. As well as its heroes, the film itself was condemned to be an outsider. There are too many dramas and sad stories in Russian modern life to hope that a film telling about such joyless things in earnest and without sentimentality could achieve mass success.

In the same year of the release of the forlorn *I wanted to See the Angels*, Sergei Bodrov produced *White King, Red Queen*. The main character was played by French actor André Dussolier who became known for roles in the films of his more famous compatriot Alain Resnais .

White King... begins as a biting comedy of temperaments. A small Russian trade-union delegation comes to a Swiss town for a conference and stays in a little hotel. This gives the director cause to show the charms of poor Russians who once in a blue moon can fall greedily upon the West. There are dinners with tinned fish in the room, the sale of vodka "for a song", wild joy upon the receipt of 20 or 30 dollars, an occasion for free refreshment, and so on. The heroine is a mature woman with sings of former beauty who dully begins a flirtation with an ex-TV commentator while their colleagues drink spirits from morning till evening. The situation of Russians who find themselves shameful beggars in prosperous Switzerland may be a little exaggerated; taking into account the almost comedic plot, however, it doesn't seem a falsity.
Further on, the comedy turns smoothly into melodrama: an elegantly dressed man (Dussolier) appears in the hotel; 20 years ago he was a famous Russian chess player who moved to the West, and he has learned that his old love, by the whim of fate, is in Europe for several days… but, alas, one can't step in the same river twice, the previous love can't be renewed, and the Red Queen doesn't find enough strength to stay with the White King.

This sad story with a gay beginning, although not claiming the psychological depths of Bergman or Antonioni, is made with European mastery. Bodrov skillfully observes the laws of the melodramatic genre with its heightening of emotions and expectant pauses, while accenting the differences in mentality, habits and image of his characters so as to make the film understandable and accessible to a European audience. Because of this some things at once obvious to Russian viewers are explained more distinctly and straightforwardly than we might expect, but this perspective takes into account the film's distribution in the West.

Alexander Fedorov

Alexander Fedorov

Retro-styles

The System's Typical Product

1934 was one of the most fateful years for our suffering Russia. The shooting of Communist leader Kirov was the cause of a new wave of mass murders. Ex-cameraman and now director D.Dolinin, in his eighth movie *The Myth of Leonid*, tries to catch the sense of that time, to investigate the phenomenon of "the small man" Leonid Nikolaev – one of the screws in the Party's machine constructed by the Bolsheviks. Like I.Dyshovichny in *Moscow Parade*, Dolinin doesn't want to make everything happening on screen into documentary. Remaining within the framework of realistic narration, the director tries to investigate the character of a hero, interpreting him as the typical product of a totalitarian system. The ambitious, pitiful, odd, self-loving Nikolaev doesn't evoke compassion, though there is nothing to hate him for… there were plenty of such people in those days. He was just the one to whom that lot was cast, and with his help Stalin's intelligence corps played its bloody game, using his extreme, odious suspiciousness.

Had The Myth of Leonid come out about 15-20 year ago, its appearance would probably have raised viewers' interest and tempest in the Russian press. But, unfortunately, the movie is late. Readers and moviegoers in Russia have already been exposed to a storm of information about different aspects of the Soviet totalitarian regime. Their fed-up feelings can be overcome only by a masterpiece. The Myth of Leonid doesn't claim this title.

Lost in the Kremlin…

The Inner Circle directed by A.Konchalovsky developed a certain reputation in Russian cinema press: one after another, critics said that its aim was to cater to Western viewers' preferences by means of American marketing techniques.

There are reasons for such a conclusion: The main roles in the film are played by the American Tom Hulce and the British bob Hoskins; the story of Ivan Sanshin, Stalin's private projectionist, is developed on the screen in a style close to the traditions of melodrama. Konchalovsky, an expert in psychological drama (*Uncle Vanya, Duet for One*), turns up the volume in *The Inner Circle* while deliberately declining to apply a European depth – a penetration of thought – to his characters; that, of course, makes them understandable to an audience not versed in the twists of Russian history through the Thirties and Forties.

Many Russian directors, probably inspired by A.German's *My Friend Ivan Lapshin*, would try to focus on the tragedy of the bitter understanding of truth by a man who, a cog in Stalin's totalitarian machine, became the obedient executor of another's orders. But this Russian directors of an American film accentuates the love story of Ivan and his wife who passed through the dirty, lusting hands of the killer Beria. In another move, Konchalovsky demotes her memories in favor of the usual plot constructions of standard transpacific cinema.

And, frankly speaking, I don't see anything bad about this.

The internationalism (not of class, but common human values) of the cinematic language in *The Inner Circle* is a necessary bridge between different mentalities and cultures.

Moreover, Konchalovsky managed to gather a wonderful acting team. Tom Hulce (the legendary Amadeus in M.Forman's film) plays Ivan in such a way that there is nothing for us but to wonder how this star of Western screens captured Slav naiveté', enthusiasm and childlike defenselessness.

B.Hoskins, in the role of Beria, scores no less of an exact hit with the buttery look of this funny fat man from whose eyes sometimes blows a cold, ominous wind. Maybe the role is played slightly grotesquely, yet it is brightly convincing. Against this background, A.Zbruev loses in the role of Stalin; he hasn't got much kick or an actor's original vision.

A whole constellation of Russian actors play minor characters in *The Inner Circle*, and in spite of their short appearances on screen stay in memory even more than in their previous roles. Brilliantly does I.Kuptchenko lead her episode as a teacher in orphanage for children of the

"people's enemies", revealing contradictory feelings of fatigue, fear, compassion, pain and devastation.

A sense of the real nature of a Russian woman who doesn't understand how it is possible for a man to love Comrade Stalin more than a wife and a poor child exists in the performance of the performance of the American actress L.Davidovich also.

In *The Inner Circle* Konchalovsky aspires to show that despite all hardships the people felt themselves happy in the faraway Thirties, though their happiness was possible only while they trusted leaders infinitely and dispensed with questions and doubts. As soon as they began to ask questions, the whole of their prosperity was ruined, drawing them into the currents of morally and physically crippled Fates.

Returning to Form

Frankly speaking, Piotr Todorovsky's, previous film with the enticing title of *Inter-Girl*, very much disappointed me. A subtle psychologist, director of the wonderful *The Martial Love Affair* and imperfect but ingenious *Along Main Street with the Brass Band*, Todorovsky suddenly was carried away by V.Kunin's shallow story that showed – in an accessible, mass-language style – how prostitutes could love. Of course, thanks to the director's professionalism, the straightforward script began to look rather profound and sometimes even psychologically convincing, but on the whole it was not suited to Todorovsky's personality.

Thank to God, in his *Encore, More Encore* Todorovsky has returned to his own style. He himself wrote the script about the life of Russian military town in 1946, he wrote the touching music, and he chose the same title as that of canvas by the famous Russian artist Fedotov.

I spent my childhood in one such town for Army personnel. And during the screening I remembered the past with a sad nostalgia. The closed community: a reserved world where everybody knows each other, where even a needle in a haystack could never hidden from the curious eyes of the officers' wives, but where nevertheless all kinds of extraordinary events take place. Now the handsome major brings a whole bunch of frivolous beauties from the city in his smart car; now several drunks fight; now the senior lieutenant, pistol in hand, chases his unfaithful wife…

Gathering these stories together, and inviting Mel Brooks to direct, a very funny comedy could be made. But Todorovsky, as is well known, isn't Brooks. So in his film the funny episodes (for example: a husband comes home after work to find his wife sleeping with his chief) are mixed with a dramatic plot. The ominous signs of those times are in evidence – when the authorities could send a boy, who was counting days till the end of his military service, to prison simply for carelessness in writing several superfluous words to a civilian friend; when the colonel, a wartime hero, had to submit to a miserable KGB captain; and so on.

One Russian critic declared in TV program that *Encore…* evokes brutal laughter among audiences, that there is no love in the film, and primitive instincts triumph. From my point of view, only a man who didn't watch attentively could have such an opinion. True, there is no refined, intellectual love here; the love scenes are loaded with humorous detail. You believe, however, in the sincerity of the characters' feelings. You believe that while the colonel, who was in the whole war, loves his wife whom he met at the front, he can't forget his pre-war wife too. You believe that the colonel's young wife had fascinated the charming lieutenant and then he lost courage. You believe in the love of the unfaithful wife, who receives her husband's supervisors in her bed for the sake of his service career.

This film appeals because it does something the Russian cinema of late years has pretty much forgotten is possible: Todorovsky tells about life through love… even if it sometimes looks funny and is not what you'd call spiritual.

Those years

Summer 1957. Moscow. International festival of youth & students. The rhythms of banned jazz. Smiling young faces…

V.Moskalenko rather carefully recreates the romantic atmosphere of those years, when Russia was creeping slowly out of Stalinism's ice age. The love story of a Moscow student and

his new girlfriend – French with Russian origin – seems natural against this background. The authors of the film *The Way to Paradise*, however, don't seem to want to please us with retro-melodrama: the lovers are between two fires. On one hand, the KGB wants the Russian boy, nephew of an academician-chemist, to be its informer. On the other, the girl has been sent by the French side to learn the chemical secrets of her boyfriend's uncle.

Obviously, it's an unexpected change after a lyrical beginning. I would have liked the film just to tell the love story… sentimental, a little bit sad, with its '50s teenage hits. But I'm sure this spy's version of the plot will find its admirers, especially since in this conflict the authors are obviously on the side of love, not the interests of this or that intelligence or secret service.

The Way to Paradise is made with a sense of style, the actors' play is rather convincing. Like S.Ursulyak's *Russian Ragtime*, Moskalenko's film doesn't claim psychological depth and analysis. It's a moody sketch, invoked by nostalgia for the end of the '50s.

Melodramaland' 66

The late Russian poet and screenwriter G.Shpalikov had a wise line: "Never come back to the old places". I won't say that's a strict rule, but director B.Frumin's melodrama *Viva, Castro!* Convinces from its first episodes that nostalgia for his youthful experiences in the '60s didn't help him create some special piece of art. The attraction of "the time of good hopes", brightly reflected in M.Hutsiev's 1962 *I'm 20* and G.Danelia *I Am Walking in the Streets of Moscow* (both movies, by the way, made from G.Shpalikov scripts) in lost in *Viva, Castro!* The young actors are dull and stiff, the love story is unemotional and weary against the background of a 1966 visit by Cuban leader Castro to Moscow. The spirit of those days is evoked only by the soundtrack's songs from archival tapes.

Some years ago B.Frumin could make much better melodramas. But having captured the attention of audiences with *The Diary of the Principal* (1976) and *Family Melodrama* (1977), he became a victim of s\censorship. His 1978 film *Mistakes of Youth* was banned; he emigrated to the USA where he couldn't manage to find success. After making *Black and White* in 1991 he has attempted, with this film, to return to his Russian roots, not listening to Shpalikov's advice. Unfortunately.

Detective Tricks'83

Y.Moroz's film *The Black Square* is based on the detective novel by F.Neznansky, *The Fair in Sokolniki,* whose action takes place in 1983. For Russia that year was extraordinary, as ex-KGB leader Andropov tried to fight the Mafia in the highest State spheres. The novel's main character, a young investigator, gradually understands that the trail of an apparently ordinary murder leads to the Kremlin, where plans of world control involve seizing the planet's main oil resources.

This could have been filmed as a serious traditional detective story. Moroz chose what I find a more successful approach – half parody, with an accent on the detective's humor, and half tricks. The cast, understanding the director's aim very well, enjoyed acting, making fun of commonplace details in past Russian life (like so-called "grocery requests" with were the privilege of the authorities only, because of the lack of food in stores).

Not placing any special stylistic emphasis on 1983, Moroz nevertheless recreates the atmosphere of that time pretty convincingly… a time when Russia fought not only with the Mafia, but with its own ordinary people, too, if they happened to be outdoors during working hours.

Watching these characters form a '90s point of view, the film's authors certainly understand how naïve and unrealistic dreams about victory over corruption were. That's where the bitter feeling radiating through the comedic action comes from. Famous Russian abstractionist Kazemir Malevich's canvas *The Black Square* becomes a symbol of unbeaten Evil, whom the Good is doomed to forever fight.

Alexander Fedorov

Alexander Fedorov

Crime on the Russian Screen

Agatha Christie's Arithmetic

Dmitry Svetosarov, who likes showy cinema, is not a very consistent director. Now he flashes with European professionalism `a la Claude Lelouch in *The Speed* (1983), now he sags into dull naturalism with *The Dogs* (1990). In *The Arithmetic of Murder* Svetosarov decided to stay with the traditional detective format. The crime in the film is investigated with all rules of the genre: detailed questioning of witnesses and suspects, the appearance of some convincing alibis and so on.

A Petersburg public flat, at firs sight very common, turns from episode to episode into a mysterious tangle of criminal threads in Agatha Christie's favorite method: any character could have committed the crime. The film doesn't limit itself, however, to the arithmetic of a detective thriller. S.Bekhtirev plays the main role of armchair-bound invalid. Never destroying suspense and other attributes of the genre, he creates a contradictory image of the man, aspiring to the… But I shall not reveal mystery. There are many surprises, and the film, although far from a Hitchcockian masterpiece, is psychologically convincing, never dull. And cinematographer S.Astahov demonstrates great skill working in feebly lighted rooms.

Feeling Cheated

The Day Before, form the viewpoint of this writer who is very tired of unprofessional movies about the Mafia, starts riskily. A group of actors, sitting in armchairs, speaks in wooden, false voices about some machinations. In a minute, however, you understand that it's a sharp parody of Russian F-class action movies.

After this prefatory trick the film's debuting directors, former actors O.Boretsky and A.Negreba, take an abrupt turn into stylization. The story becomes one of nice, handsome young men and women trying to preserve the ambience of 1970 "kitchen talks" in the '90s: sociable jokes, romantic attractions, intelligent discussions. In a word, praise to friendship. In this main part of the movie the attentive viewer will find a lot of cinema quotations from films of the '70s by O.Ioseliani, K.Muratova, etc. It's a playful stylization in many ways. Not for a minute does it become the fruit of cold calculation, or lose its free, elegant spirit of improvisation.

Then the alarming signals of other words intrude on the movie's intellectual lyricism: a sex maniac attacks one of the heroines; the other charming woman, aiming to prevent a rape, plucks out the eye of a street beggar. After such encroachments the final events of the film, with all their unexpectedness, have a certain logic. Feeling cheated, as were we all in that time, the intellectuals do not become nice heroes. Donning masks and taking up guns, they engage in murder and robbery "to get to the West". In this way the film reflects the old story of some of Tbilisi's youthful elite who tried to fly an airplane away from the hated USSR.

After this mutual directorial debut, Boretsky and Negreba decided to go their own ways, though their duet, to my mind, turned out to be organic and united.

Thirst for a Thriller

Former actor A.Haritonov proves, in his directorial debut, that he wants and is able to make thrillers. *In Thirst for Passion* Haritonov didn't hide quotations from other films (for example, Kubrick's *The Shining*), he built them precisely into the action. The story, about a phantom-twin chasing a young aristocratic lady, is taken from Valery Brusov's prose and is told according to the rules of classic thrillers in the spirit of Hitchcock: ominous pauses, presentiments of terrible events, and a coldly erotic elegance… all giving the film a necessary style.

Surely, Haritonov is not Kubrick. He isn't even Brian De Palma. He does have a command of his profession, though, and his actors are good. A.Vertinska is very effective in both role, real and illusory, while I.Kostolevsky, as the police commissar, can compete with the inspector in any American crime-detection TV series.

A Toy-Brick Game

Director and actor I.Okhlobystin likes to astonish the Russian public. I can't remember the last time some cinema personality as famous as he declared an attachment to drugs. But Okhlobystin has made it several times (now he is very religious man). In his detective story *The Arbiter* he also spites tradition, splintering stereotypes and playing with them at the same time, as a child does with toy bricks. His characters – a freshman detective with his gray-haired colleague – chase a serial killer. The standard plot becomes the basis for cinematic hints by the director/leading man. Single shots and full episodes periodically quote or resemble the films of Alan Paker (cameraman M.Mukasey doesn't miss a chance to play with light rays penetrating the blades of a gigantic ventilator), Hitchcock, Friedkin, Lynch and Scorsese.

These ironical quotations and hints help the director turn the film into some kind of retrospective, proving that the style of French post-modernists Luc Besson (*Subway*) and Leos Carax (*Mauvais Sang, Boy Meets Girl*) are close to the interests of modern young Russian cineastes. Not accidentally, maybe, many members of *The Arbiter'*s team resemble (in their creative style) famous parents in some way: actor Kirill Kosakov, composer Artem Artemiev, etc.

The Arbiter counts on aficionados. It's hard to surprise somebody in the West with this kind of movie. American, French and British cinema, to my mind, has polished such style till it shines. In Russian, I.Okhlobystin's work is doomed to the TV heading "Not for Everybody".

Devilish Speculation

N.Stambula's film *Operation Lucifer* is made with clear intention: to add to gossip about the mysterious murder of Russian pop star Igor Talkov. Stambula offers his own version of the death of the singer, composer and poet: that neither jealous competitors, the Mafia nor racketeers are guilty, but Develish power, the same evil creatures who – in Stambula's plot – want to kill an actor playing the role of Talkov in some movie by a gloomy director. There is a subplot about a woman who buried her husband in a suit, one of whose pockets held a lucky lottery ticket for a prestigious car (this story was printed in all Russian newspapers some time ago). The action is interrupted by erotic scenes in a pool and out of it. In a word, it's pure speculation.

However, who knows? – if Stambula had the talent of Alan Parker, director of the 1987 mystical thriller *Angel Heart*, this might have been something artistic. But as it stands there is nothing going on.

Alain Delon doesn't Drink Eau de Cologne

And this drink isn't favored by his screen heroes either, among which are hired killers (*Le Samourai* by J.-P.Mellvile, *Traitment de choc* by R.Davis, etc.). Actor and director V.Shilovsky decided to try on one of the established Delon's roles. In *Deadline* Shilovsky plays a liquidation professional making Mafia people uncomfortable. His next victim becomes respectable, and sets out to destroy the superbosses. Shilovsky's hero kills a "client", then wants to be out of the game, but…

All in all, the standard plot of *Deadline* doesn't shine with specially dramatic passages. It's not actually bad, though, until Shilovsky tries to give the actions of his character a psychological basis. As a child, he saw during the war how some died of hunger and others enjoyed a glut of apples and peahens. That's when he began to hate the masters of life. Therefore, he is not an everyday hired gun, but a man with firm ideological principles – the killer-avenger. This is another Russian attempt to complicate things, to make a murderer not a murderer but some sort of victim of the social environment.

Pity, but there is none of Delon's charm in Shilovsky's hero. And he drinks, alas, eau de Cologne instead of bourbon and Napoleon brandy…

Primitive Scripting

The plot of B.Grigoriev's *The Confession of the Mistress* is simple: the Mafia kidnaps a businessman, one of the so-called New Russians, and demands money from his mistress and companion. A police detective tries to free the hostage with the woman's help.

Most of the movie takes place in the heroine's gorgeous apartment, where she and detective are sitting beside the phone on which criminals call her from time to time. Under these conditions only excellent directorial effort and well-developed acting could have saved the movie. But neither M.Zudina nor M.Zhigalov manages to bring life to the primitive script scheme. Their characters are monotonous and unattractive, their dialogue is boring. The action develops very slowly, and by the middle of the movie only determined perseverance keeps one from walking out for a breath of fresh air.

Belief in a Right to Kill

Kidnapping themes are as common in Russian cinema as American. The suspense movie *The Nonhuman* tells of the kidnapping of a 13-year-old boy whose mother had a high office in City Hall. Contrary to some other versions of such events, director Y.Ivanchuk puts the main accent not on details of investigation, chases and fights, but on the family's moral situation. The kidnapping is presented as a harsh revenge for the mother's sins (bribery, corruption, lying). Here the talented actress L.Gurchenko had material for creation of an interestingly complicated character. She played it, however, for half its potential, without the psychological truth she brought to *The Five Nights* (1979) by N.Mikhalkov and *Sibiriada* (1980) by A.Konchalovsky. S.Bragarnik, who performed a similar rile in V.Aristov's drama *Devil* , managed to create a more convincing and interesting character.

The criminal in *Devil* was scarier, too. Actually, he was kind of a Raskolnikov from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, fixated on the belief that he was superhuman, having a right to kill for some higher aims. In *Devil* the criminal didn't get punished and the evil was his celebration of a devilish victory. In *The Nonhuman* the criminal is killed by an assassin's bullet. Happy ending? Or evil just passing on its bloody baton?

Elena and a Russian Clyde

Russian Roulette, a film by V.Chikov, is made for spectators who love the American cinema of the '60s-'70s. A couple of gangsters-outlaws rob racketeers, thieves and at last just suspicious-looking rich men until the dramatic ending. Chikov doesn't conceal the origin of his movie in Arthur Penn's 1967 *Bonnie and Clyde*. But his action takes place in Russia of the '90s, and instead of Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty there are Elena Yakovleva and Denis Karasev. They are not bad actors but they play in too "soviet" a way. The vivid music of A.Kozlov, with its rich saxophone tunes, from to time evokes a moody, stylish variation on the theme of gangsters' Eros, grown dim in a romantic fog.

It would be ridiculous to demand that a common criminal movie rise to the level of Dostoevsky, so let's enjoy at least *Russian Roulette*'s good music.

Abuse, Song, Fighting, Sex and Guns

It seems like only yesterday that Russian authorities didn't want one of outstanding director K.Muratova's films exhibited because its main female character uttered a couple of "bad language" words in one scene. In N.Dzhgurda's film *Superman Against His Will, or The Erotic Mutant* the characters are swearing in nearly every scene, and it's O.K. – the movie is circulating without restriction.

Were there indisputable artistic values in Dzhigurda's *auteur* effort – he is the screenwriter, co-director (with S.Gaiduk), singer, poet and actor playing the role of an engineer-inventor in a constant fight with the Mafia – to be compared even a little with Muratova's films, no one would be paying attention to its vocabulary. You can hear more of it in real life. Unfortunately, besides the trumped-up "bad language" *Superman…* can attract attention only through numerous soft-porn scenes wherein N.Dzhigurda apparently acted without a "body double", while shyer A.Hmelnitska used the services of a young photomodel from Moscow men's magazine *Andrei*. The film's sexual-acrobatic episodes are, however, rather monotonous, and no more creative are its action scenes' skirmishes.

Dzhgurda with his hoarse voice reminiscent of Vysotsky, flashes on Russian TV screen in assorted music videos, concerts and commercials. *Superman…,* obviously, was planned by him as a 1 1/2 –hour self-promotion, counting on million-ruble box-office profits. And here it is – an old, greasy, obscene story with an unbridled pop-music soundtrack.

Alexander Fedorov

Alexander Fedorov

Comedies `a la Russe

Identifying with Images

Until only recently it was hard to even imagine a comedy about the life and activities of Lenin appearing on Russian screens. His persona remained sacred through all the years of '20s – '80s. But two talented directors - V.Studennikov & M.Grigiriev – have ventured to destroy a stereotype and defy the censors' ban with *A Comedy of Strict Regime*. Those between age 50 and 100 certainly remember the unforgettable spring days of 1970, when the whole great country of Soviets prepared to celebrate the 100th anniversary of this legendary workers' leader. Press, TV and radio sent and endless stream of information blockbusters at the public. From Moscow to the very east a great wave of holiday celebration was rising.

The central characters of this movie swam in it, unfortunately for them. They, the officers of a rigidly organized prison colony, decide to surprise the authorities with an amateur-theater production, *The Light of October*, casting convicts in the roles of the first world state's workers and peasants. In might seem that nothing could be stupider than this! But the more the ex-thieves and murderers identify themselves with their images, the clearer a resemblance becomes. Sitting in the theater, you understand that in spite of obvious differences (in education, for example) the actors and the prototypes are people with similar moral values. For them the life of an individual is worth nothing ("no man, no problem"), the aim justifies all means.

The seriousness of its material notwithstanding, the film is a real comedy, with excellent satirical skits on the colony's life (a huge poster says, "Lenin is more alive than everybody living even now – V.I.Lenin") and a perfect understanding of funny elements. It is not accidental that the role of this leader is given to the plainest, most insignificant convict, who day after day begins to identify with it, arming himself with quotations from the books and films of M.Romm – *Lenin in October* (1937) & *Lenin in 1918* (1939) – and becoming himself a real leader, able to make the mob follow him wherever… even to escape from the colony, distracted by the celebration.

There is no Lenin-movie cliché that is not ironically remade in *A Comedy of Strict Regime*. In a fountain of quick-witted gags and dialogue the action develops dynamically; without extended or repeated tricks. This is humor behind which lies a bloody and terrible history of "dictatorship of the proletariat" and civil war, mass terror and violence. But there is a saying in the holy book of Marxism: "Mankind parts with the past laughing".

The same, with a difference

Remake is not a very word in Russian cinema yet. It applies to America, where they like to shoot the same script several times. Often, it's done without a wish to parody the original; yet attempts to use cinema classics as background for ironic rewondering happen too.

Such appears to be the goal of Igor & Gleb, the Aleinikov brothers-film, ex-editors of handwritten paper, *Cine-Phantom,* and authors of the 1980's Underground Cinema. They took the script of a famous I.Pyriev comedy, *Tractor-drivers* (1939), and made a parody in the spirit of amateur action films about Russian Mafia. At first it's funny. Why not? The female tractor-driver Mariana lives in a luxurious villa, drivers an American car, shoots every kind of weapon expertly. Rivals from a competing farm resemble a gang of terrorists and assassins. The ex-solder Klim has to make an uneasy choice between these two armed, warring groups.

Unfortunately, the authors' imagination and fantasy are sufficient for a 30-minute movie only. In 15 to 20 minutes the film's action stops going anywhere, the tricks and gags are being repeated, and it doesn't look funny at all. In a word, 85 minutes of *The Tractor-drivers 2* are too much. And what was forgivable in enthusiastic amateurs, on the big screen looks like unprofessionalism.

A Russian Shveik

Recently a lot of movies have shown, with realistic thoroughness, the horrors of Russian army life: violence, cruelty, crimes, murders. Y.Volkogon's *Saluting!* , for what may be one of the first Russian film, tells about the same problems in the comedic tradition of novelist Gashek's unforgettable hero, The Good Soldier Shveik.

The comedy evolves with some bitterness, but it is funny at the same time. A.Androsov brightly plays Ivan, the recruit who manages to make fools of stupid authorities and even Ministry commissioners with his untamed optimism and idiotically thorough completion of orders. Half Shveik, half hero of folk tales, Ivan comes safe and sound through dead-end situation to win the love of his commander's daughter.

Viewers who know Russian army life will probably get genuine pleasure from how the movie turns into gags so many barracks customs, from the cleaning of latrines to the thousand repetitions of the same drills. Reality, however, can be glimpsed in each absurd episode. Wouldn't it be great if everything shown in *Saluting!* Were just a fantasy!

Country Clumsiness

The star of V.Chikov's comedy *About Businessman Foma*, M.Evdokimov, used to be famous in Russia as a music-hall comic, reading humorous and satirical monologues in the character of a rural athlete who from time to time comes out of a bathhouse with "a red face and vodka inside the shirt". Director Chikov decided to adapt this character for the big screen by making Evdokimov into Foma, a tractor-driver who, having sunk his tractor while drunk, decides to open a pay-restroom in his native village. The film obviously expects laughter to be evoked by this odd situation itself. Really, though, what is a public toilet for in this tiny village where everybody has his own house? The gag is simply not enough for a full-length comedy. Aware of that, the script adds racketeering and a mad Communist who decides to protest this form of private property by burning himself in the new toilet.

Sometimes it gets laughs, but on the whole it's too monotonous and clumsy. Evdokimov's original monologues, told from the scene, were much funnier.

With Maternity in Mind

A young, single, pretty woman wants to have a baby without marrying its father. It's not so easy, however, to find a suitable man. In *A Baby for November* director A. Pavlovsky develops this idea in the comedy genre (though the events can be easily imagined in a dramatic version). A line of male characters, all unsound for our heroine's purpose, passes episodically before our eyes. Finally, a married friend lets her borrow her stupid husband (one of the most popular actors of today's Russian cinema, S. Makovetsky, is very good as this infantile fellow)
There are plenty of spicy situations which, I suppose, would be likable if directed by French masters for erotic comedies. But Pavlovsky is neither Michel Deville nor Roger Vadim. Erotic here lack charm, and there is no improvisational delicacy in the performances of the majority of actors. A sex comedy doesn't have to be so serious.

An Author Acts

Nearly every famous actor in Russia today has decided to try directing. So have screenwriters and even film critics. More often, though, music-hall comics and pop singers become movie actors – and the screenwriters are taking a turn. They used to write scripts. Now they perform in film. In leading roles. You want an example? Here you are: a film by S.Nikonenko (also an actor, by the way), *I want Your Husband*, in which the man of the title is played by writer-humorist M.Zadornov, who decided to transfer his own monologues to the screen.

One day a wife opens an apartment door and there stands some lady declaring that she wants to buy her precious spouse. This start is rather intriguing. But as soon as the husband appears the movie turns into a kind of radio show or TV performance of Zadornov reading his stories. This famous writer lacks the acting skills to keep viewers' attention for an hour and a half. And the director hasn't helped him at all; action, taking place primarily in one room, is filmed uncreatively, on the level of a common new report.

The great Chaplin, as we know, was a screenwriter, director, actor and composer all at the same time. But he was Chaplin…

Not Quite a "The Sting"

In its script and style, V.Mishatkin's crime comedy *We Will Meet in Tahiti* resembles George Roy Hill's famous *The Sting* and its Polish variation *Va-Banque* by U.Mahulski. This director's level is undeniably lower, and the movie came out not brilliant, but there are many funny episodes and the gags are no worse than any of Mel Brooks'. Young actors play – with visible pleasure – the roles of the smart rogues; L.Kuravlev is excellent as their elder colleague, a lover in the guise of a thief-pensioner…

Service Compris?

It is common to give tips to waiters in a restaurant. That's a rule all over the world. The protagonist of R.Zurzumia's comedy *The Waiter with the Gold Tray* decides to break the rule and step out of the game. This is dangerous: his colleagues, not wanting "the good guy" around, call him a traitor. The restaurant's customers, surprised by this waiter's unusual behavior, almost kill him.

The situation of the "white crow" is not a new one for art. Yet it's one thing when authors of a film depict, for example, someone standing up against a totalitarian regime, it's another when they just tell about a man who doesn't want to take extra money from clients.

Zurzumia pays no attention to this difference, making the waiter (played by the popular Russian actor A.Abdulov) almost a hero, one worthy of the Honored Legion awards. This could be forgiven if the movie had shone with artistic fantasy, gags, quick-witted dialogue. Unfortunately, the script of *The Waiter with the Gold Tray* is another one failing to justify a full-length film

Seeing Paris

French motifs have become very popular in Russia. "To see Paris and die" – the title of a A.Proshkin film – become the theme of a lot of Russian films and Y.Mamin's comedic fantasy *The Window into Paris*, characters can be instantaneously transported between Petersburg communal houses and the center of modern Paris. Mamin plays up the essential difference between Slav and Western mentalities rather successfully. One unlucky Frenchwoman, who finds herself almost naked in a dirty Petersburg yard, is absolutely unable to get used to situations that surround all Russians from childhood, while Russian citizens – having discovered a magical route to France – in several days begin to trade in the French stock market and steal whatever isn't fastened down. Against such a background, the figure of a failed musician, an aged romantic who just wants to get pleasure from the sudden gift of fate, seems funny and odd.

Maybe the best joke of the film, in which Mamin sounds the highest note of pitiless sarcasm, is the sequence about a restaurant musician who moved to France about ten years ago. Lazily offering cognac to a former friend, he abuses Frenchmen and their customs, sentimentally recalls Russia and almost cries while saying that he would give everything for an opportunity to return to Petersburg just for one minute. As a gag, his friend fulfils this wish (via the magical "open window"). But instead of the expected ecstasy, the emigrant – seeing an armored car in front of the Petersburg railway station – falls into despair.

The fact is that modern Russia is good only in sentimental dreams and in conversations before the cozy foreign fireplaces of restaurants with a view of the Sein, the Thames or the Hudson.

I can't say that Mamin's film is as funny as the early comedies of Leonid Gaidai. There are brilliant comedy scenes and pointedly devised details (in the principals office of a private college for young businessmen, hanging portraits of political leaders have been replaced by gigantic dollar symbols), but they are side by side with useless dialogue and events.

The finale of the film – driven by the slogan "We don't need French shores" – isn't, frankly speaking, new. There are, however, more successes in *The Window into Paris* than stereotypes.

Almost a Fairy Tale

Kira Muratova's film *The Asthenic Syndrome* (1989) was strict uncompromising, even ruthless in its aesthetics and vocabulary. Her *The Sensitive Militiaman*'s style is completely opposite: imitative conventions harmonize with a fairy-tale plot.

Anatoly, a nice young soldier, finds a baby in a cabbage patch one night and wants to adopt him. This idea might have been taken from the half-forgotten Russian cinema of the late '50s and early '60s, when there were very popular lyric films about sweet lovers and handsome babies. And, in fact, at first sight *The Sensitive Militiaman* seems to be a naïve, bright movie about love and compassion awakening in its hero.

But K.Muratova remains faithful to herself. Her film is a subtly stylized, unusual toying with mythology, ironic quotations and eccentric characters… all making it impossible not to notice a connection with her previous works – *The Long Seeing Out* (1971), *Learning the World* (1978), *The Change of Faith* (1988) and others.

The slightness and transparency of this picture may be a surprise for those who expected a new *Asthenic Syndrome*. Muratova's talent, however, was always unpredictable, original, mobile. For some, her cinema is affected; for others, this writer included, it is attractive and masterly.

Alexander Fedorov

Alexander Fedorov

Fantasies and Parables…

A Fearsome Story

The authors of Gongofer speak frankly and ironically about the old and new clichés of fearful cinema tales. I wouldn't, however, call this film, directed by B.Kilibaev, a clear parody. It is a fantasy on the theme, with hints of the stories of Nikolai Gogol, its style in the spirit of the genre's aesthetics.

Kolka, a young Cossack, comes to the capital with his uncle to buy a bull for breeding. Initially the film recalls Pig-Woman and Shepherd (1941) with its pompous fountains and frank, intellect-unburdened faces of the heroes that look as if they were created especially for the cinema, glorifying the best collective farmers in the world. But soon after, the unpretentious comedy about provincials in Moscow for the first time breaks off as the ill-fated Kolka meets the blond beauty Hanna – who turns out to be a witch and exchanges eyes with the guy during their love ecstasy.

Kilibaev deliberately makes this perfidious substitution shocking and natural. The camera keeps our attention on the spreading eye slime in the palm of treacherous Hanna, surrounded with a hellish glow. And then a chain of funny and rather frightening episodes begins, in which Kolka and his uncle try to get his stolen eyes back.

Gongofer can be reproached for its eclectic lack of style. But despite that Kilibaev managed to make it a dynamic show, whimsically combining myths of the epoch of Socialist Realism with special effects like Joe Dante's.

What Boredom!

E.Nikolaeva's film *Sextale* is derived form Vladimir Nabokov's airy, refined story *The Tale,* as is clear to any admirer of the works of famous Russian-American writer. But I'll avoid comparing screen and prose because during all the action of *Sextale* the original plot's development is absent. The filmmakers, probably, isn't want to write more dialogue than Nabokov did and decided to fill in the pauses (the story is short and film is long) with displays of whimsical decorations, costumes, smoke and fog. The set decorators and artists really worked hard on this. It needed something else, however… such as actors with skill. On one hand L.Gurchenko is supple and musical in the role of The Devil, tempting a pretty young man with displays of erotic desire. (It is the tempter's whim that the fellow can choose – until midnight –

any number of the most beautiful women, providing this number is odd.) On the other hand, there are inexpressive performances, in unemotional erotic scenes, by all the other actors. Add to this an unjustified reserve of action, slack cutting, and badly recorded sound. In short, it is very boring – despite the participation of the bright Gurchenko with her playful expression, biting irony, and natural sense of style.

Rather than seeing the movie, it's better to read Nabokov.

Too Obvious an Allegory

A rain of festival awards and unanimously enthusiastic opinions greeted the film *Drumaniada* by S.Ovcharov practically from the first days of its release. "A unique contribution to the development of Russian cinema", "faithful to the theme of love for life" – those were some phrases praising the picture. My voice, I'm afraid, will be omitted from the chorus. *Drumaniada* seems to me the weak work of a talented director.

Previous fantasies by Ovcharov – *Clumsy* (1979), *Flight of Fancy* (1983), *Left-hander* (1986) and his version of Saltykov-Schedrin's *The Story of the One Town* under the title *The It* (1989) – were created in an atmosphere of strict censorship that began to weaken and die only at the end of the '80s. Using the traditions of Russian folklore and comedy tricks from the great silent films, Ovcharov created a world built on eccentric allegory. I can't say that director openly presented puzzles and symbols to his viewers, but the satirical sharpness of his films (*The It* especially) probably was read by every attentive admirer of the tenth muse.

In contrast, unnecessarily straightforward, newspaper-style satire can be felt in *Drumaniada* in spite of its allegorical plot. The premise itself is interesting: to make a one and a half-hour parable – about the misadventures of a funeral orchestra's drummer who inherits an enchanted drum labeled "Stradivarius" with which he travel around Russia – without the characters speaking a single word.

But… again there's a captious "but"… the story of this poor wretch is good enough for a short film only. Forty minutes into the picture one feels the exhaustion of the method, as one monotonous episode follows another. Even a scene in which the wonderful drum turns into a TV set for several minutes is just boring. And the climactic sequence of the visit of foreign homeless people to Russia, taking place in a town's rubbish heap, is rather crudely made, and the actors' performances are inexpressive.

An image of this country as a rubbish heap populated by homeless beggars has become the Russian media's most widespread cliché. The film's other symbols are equally straightforward and shallow. The signing of treaties for collaboration between Russian and foreign beggars won't impress anybody as a satirically courageous fantasy. And there are a great number of such scenes. The behavior of the main character – the sad clown, a pale reflection of Baster Keaton – and the development of early episodes become too predictable. The only good thing about *Drumaniada* is the music on the soundtrack: Beethoven, Mozart, Mahler – this is forever!

Ivanov after Godard

For his directorial debut in feature cinema, E.Ivanov chose an ambitious project requiring a subtle stylistic gift: anew version of Jean-Luc Godard's brilliant 1959 *`A Bout de souffle(Breathless)* . Ivanov's film is called *Nicotine*, and its action takes place not in Paris at the end of '50s, but in Petersburg of '90s. On the whole, the plot's lines – and even several details of the characters' dress – are retained. But something like the fantasies of Leos Carax and Jean-Jacques Beinex breaks the style of the "new wave" at times. In general, this film is close to the classical understanding of the word "remake" without parody, admixtures or eccentric pranks.

It's a pity that Ivanov insistently demands we pay attention to his source, the legendary Godard's debut with Belmondo and Seberg in the leading roles. He does this by making the characters attend a lecture by cinema critic and director O.Kovalov, who introduces the film *`A Bout de souffle* to Petersburg's movie fans; and he also restages one of Godard's press conferences with the help of a double.

This persistence is worthy of a better application for two reasons. First, viewers who know the creative work of Godard very well, or who at least saw *`A Bout de souffle*? Guess the family tree several minutes into Nicotine without any oral prompts. Secondly, viewers who don't know who Godard is will be helped neither by lecture episodes nor by stills of his old masterpiece to perceive *Nicotine* as a remake: the visual associations, cutting and plot parallels remain "unreadable".

Yet Ivanov's biggest mistake, it seems to me, is in the unfortunate choice of actors who very much let him down. It's hard to suppose, certainly, that a young director might his the target and find Russian performers whose scale of personality and charm would live up to Belmondo's and Seberg's But having cast actors deprived of not only inward charm also attractive appearance, Ivanov had to use them as visual effects, simply opportunities to underline – in strange, long passages of light and shade – the black and white style of the film.

The emotional influence *`A Bout de souffle*? In which the reckless Michel, having accidentally killed a cop, tried to fight his fate till the tragic realization of the exhaustion of his life, is left below the surface by the director of Nicotine.

That is why, to my mind, this is not a warm declaration of love to the French "new wave" but the fruit of cold, professional calculation.

To Believe the Prophecy for a Moment…

The film of E.Riazanov get sadder form year to year. *The Prophecy* is perhaps his most sorrowful. It even has a gloomy outset: a famous writer (O.Basilashvili) learns from a Gypsy fortune-teller that only a day is left for him to live and he is to meet with an unexpected man.

In that mystical tone a young man (A.Sokolov) with the same name and same temple scar appears in the writer's flat. Who is this mysterious double – phantom or guardian angel? The answer remains open throughout the film.

So the time of summing-up comes for the tired writer, shaken by life. He is well-to-do in Russian terms: he has an apartment in the center of Moscow, a car and video camera, and his books are published in Paris. But, characteristically for a man living in a country of endless admonitions, distress his look reveals the effect of freedom's absence. And it's not because of the peculiarities of his biography (his father perished during the repressions, his mother is Jewish – which he couldn't mention for a long time – and his wife died in a car accident). The brand of unfreedom is stamped on practically everybody in Russia, except those under 20.

In that regard, the choice of actress for the leading female role was perfect: French star Irene Jacob Though her character is just a modest cashier in a bank, she can be at once distinguished from the surrounding Russian fuss by her uncommon expression. She becomes a fairy princess and, probably, the writer's last love… for this princess is colored by the shade of nostalgia for unrealized dreams.

In contrast with Riazanov's previous works (*Dear Elena Sergeevna*, etc.), there is little topical populism – although the conclusion is connected with one of the most widespread script devices in Russia today (escaping from Mafia pursuit, the hero tries to leave for Israel). Sensitive to his audiences' mood, Riazanov couldn't but feel that a mass interest in cinematic political investigations and revelations has almost disappeared, while the need for melodramatic love stories is great.

Actually, *The Prophecy*, can't be called melodrama. There are comedy episodes (a visiting fanatic suggests that the writer burn himself in Red Square as protest against something – it's not important against something – it's not important against what, the main thing is to perform the action), and there are elements of a parable. I don't find such a genre alloy organic and convincing. This seems to be the director's attempt to get a second wind.

And I'm Again Walking about Moscow

Thirty years ago, whistling happily, the hero of young Nikita Mikhalkov walked through Moscow streets wet with rain. It was a time of hope, joy was felt there. The Metro stations shone, shady lanes in the park attracted. The heroes of another G.Danelia's firm film *Nastya* are also young, also fall in love, make dates in the Metro and jump on the day's last bus or streetcar,

but the intonation has become sad, and even the funniest moments are tinted with this sadness like maple leaves in autumn.

Telling the fairy tale of a Moscow girl who one fine day turns into the beauty from an advertising poster, Danelia deliberately puts aside the gloomy old song with which modern Russian "exposé" films are so rich. And in this film there are no fights in doorways, no scenes of undressing and no "bold" language of modern Russian cinema.

Danelia has cast charming A.Abdulov as the representative of new "democratic power". Yet the film doesn't fall into the expected wrathful pathos. Abdulov's hero is petty in his nouveau riche manners, fussy, boastful, infinitely proud of his position as prefect and his participation in big-time politics, but he hasn't lost his wonderful outbursts of soul.

The main success of the film is a duet of actresses playing the role of the 18-year-old stationery clerk. Before the magic change Nastya was a nice girl, unhampered by men's attention, who tried to break out of the solitude, poverty and grayness of surrounding life with its mother-yardkeeper, small flat and a brightly made up shopgirl colleague who, month after month, suggested dubious entertainments with "cool guys".

Nastya after the miracle is a beauty. With surprise she discovers how much appearances influence the life of a man… not, often, in the best way. Happening upon an art show in the subway where "men of culture" get very drunk and petty thieves pretend to be businessmen or weighty sponsors., Nastya feels herself a stranger in this festivity of pseudo-life.

Alexander Fedorov

Territory of Love

The Wind from the East…

Nikita Mikhalkov's *Urga* reached Russia in the glow of a triumph at the Venice film festival. This picture about a possible harmony with nature, about the attempt of a common Russian driver to understand the world of Mongolian nomads, was received in Moscow with restraint, in spite of additional praise from Rome and Paris. There were a lot of things the film was reproached for: An attempt to run away abroad from the difficulties of Russia's troubled time, for a tourist's point of view on Asia and its people, for lacking the intuition of Bertolucci, and so on.

Urga it rather vulnerable to such reproaches, though they don't seem to me well grounded. On the other hand, charges against the director's and script's prosaicness (as in a talky restaurant episode about the essence of the Russian nation) are fair. But all this is put aside when you see the wonderful landscapes of the imposing steppes, shot by V.Kaluta's camera, and when you hear the thousands of sounds.

The simplicity and ease of the Mongolian and Chinese actors frees a comical story (how a Mongolian herdsman's wife sent him into town for contraceptives, lest they be punished for violating a law controlling the birth rate) from any bad tone. The professional European actor usually has serious problems when working among Asiatic performers, but V.Gostukhin's hero is well realized and convincing.

So, after a long interval, Nikita Mikhalkov decided to return to the free-breathing cinematograph.

And God Created Kiss

Director A.Karpikov, the pupil of Sergei Soloviev, is talented, flashy, and skillfully stylized. His *The Fish in Love* (1989) was an elegant fantasy on themes of the French New Wave, transformed in the atmosphere of Kazakh's nighttime capital. *Air Kiss* continues a search in the same direction. The film can seem an affected melodrama about how a beautiful nurse prefers a lame gardener and a bandaged moto-racer to her respectable fiancé, the chief doctor of her hospital. Yet it is bright and ironical, with a hint of the aesthetics of Roger Vadim and the unforgettable image of Brigitte Bardot. In short, it's postmodernism with a parodic layer that is not very intensified and does not disturb the emotional atmosphere at all. And to their credit, the young actors play sincerely, animatedly.

A doubtful spectator, after seeing Karpikov's film, may ask: What about something Kazakhian? All the characters are played by European actors – where is national vividness? But who says Russians must make movies just about Russians, and Kazakhs about Kazakhs?

A Day Without Arguments

In *You're My Only One* director D.Astrakhan succeeds in expressing the sensations of average Russian who for one wonderful day experience a "holiday of life" in which there is no place for nostalgic sentiments and hot arguments on spirituality, in which businessmen accompanied by suave friends drive about in Fords and Mercedes, lazily count wads of dollar notes, buy foreign delicacies and telephone New York right from their cars.

The life of 40-year-old Eugeny (A.Zbruev) resembles thousands of others. He has a modest occupation as engineer in some institution, a flat in a standard tall block, a wife (M.Neyolova) dreaming of escape from the closed circle of humiliating poverty, and a 16-year-old daughter for whom her ill-provisioned parents are a vivid demonstration of how one mustn't live – the embodiment of her dread of destiny.

The film's opening episodes create a familiar sketch of "common family of intellectual workers": reproaches of Eugeny by wife and daughter, unmistakable hints that he is a typical failure, that all others managed to do better long ago, that he ought to join a number of fellow employees in a Russian-American joint venture, etc. And then, dreams… about trips over the ocean, Hawaiian beaches, Dior perfume and Cardin dresses…

Zbruev and Neyolova play this without pressing, without relishing the muddle of their characters' lives. Even scenarist O.Danilov's move into fantasy doesn't make their performances less truthful. It turns out that the firm organizing the joint venture is headed by one of Eugeny's former schoolmates whose younger sister Anna comes to Russia from USA. Anna has loved her "only one", her "unique Uncle Eugeny" since childhood. Now she is ready to become his fairy godmother – or princess: buy him a smart suit, make him the representative of the American firm in Russia, drive him in a Mercedes along the Petersburg streets.

But pride prevents Eugeny from becoming dependent on his old friend, although pride is not the main problem in his affair with Anna: "I don't love you, you see! Don't love!" he cries to his benefactress in a riveting sequence. A lot of things are mixed in Zbruev's expression. It would be good if he spoke so because he was deeply in love with his wife, but not at all… love has smoothly changed into habit. And if it's possible to live without rapturous love with one woman, then why is it impossible with another? There is quite another thing, too – fatigue: hopeless awareness of the fact that his life is over, that he has no strength to restart everything from zero.

The bitterness of this feeling doesn't disappear after either Eugeny's return to his wife or a Felliniesque postscript with a birthday celebration in the snowy garden of his house. Having escaped the turn of fate, the heroes of *You're My Only One* will, several days after the touching departure of Anna for America, again poison each other's lives with mutual criticism… and dream about a separate room for their daughter.

The film reminded me of the best works of E.Riazanov (*Beware of the Car, Irony of Fate*) and G.Danelia (*The Autumn Marathon*). D.Astrakhan can tell a story emotionally, vividly and with psychological truth, in spite of its fantastic turns.

Identification of Cliché

Antonioni, Taviani, Wenders… *The Identification of Wishes*, director T.Hamidov's movie, is obviously made for people who know cinema. Quotations from famous directors' classic films (slow plot development, psychological pauses, etc.) are spread among pseudo art-house movies.

The story – about three teenagers who, learning that a friend's mother works as a prostitute at night, decide to "visit her" – in presented, for the most part, naturalistically. The people, though not convincing, are sufficiently developed to show Hamidov's thoughts about the necessity of moral borderlines… which the characters don't have, and which lack marks them

inhuman. Yet there's not much kick to the film, no discovery. Instead of postmodern stylization, it as dull collection of clichés. Hamidov doesn't seem to have prospects.

Though He is Clever and Handsome

Petersburg's atmosphere seems to create in movie critics and cinema scientists the wish to show directors how real films must be made – not only in theoretical articles but on the set. Following O.Kovalov (*The Gardens of the Scorpion, Island of the Dead*), another Russian film critic in St-Peterburg – Y.Pavlov – has decided to try his hand at directing.

Pavlov's philosophical *The Creation of Adam* can be regarded as you please, but to my mind it has one great advantage. The film is beautifully made. In its world are yellow sandhills, the play of Baltic waves, the deserted streets of Petersburg's outskirts, the fashionable costumes of the main characters… shots that seem to belong in a picture gallery.

Unfortunately, for me, this is the *only* attractive aspect of the film, because the story – of a handsome, 30-year-old homosexual who finds clarity in life and love after meeting an effeminate guardian angel – left me indifferent. The fashionable Gay theme evoked only weak surprise because the characters didn't invite a sharing of emotions with them, while the slow development of action reminded me of Wim Wenders' late films and brought boredom. I can watch the "slow" films of Michelangelo Antonioni for hours, charmed again and again by the silent pauses of *L'Avventura, La Notte* or *L'Eclisse*, so my dislike of *The Creation of Adam* is not due to its pace and cautionary plot, but to a serious discrepancy between its author's perception of film and the aesthetic preferences of this spectator.

It happens sometimes in life: you meet a man who is dressed with taste and seems to be clever, but it's boring to speak with him. Antipathy arises in a moment… sometimes at first sight. The same holds true for films; you watch some with pleasure, you can't wait for others to end.

It was bad luck for me to see *The Creation of Adam*. This is not my cinema, this is the cinema of Y.Pavlov, corresponding to his ideas of how stylish directors' films should look.

Red Riding Hood & Bluebeard

Despite its trendy modern-Mafia story, A.Chechulin film A Wife for the Maitre d'Hotel is in fact a free fantasy on the theme of two famous fairytales by Charles Perrot.

A young, really naïve beauty (A.Nemolyaeva), though foolishness and the effects of alcohol, finds herself in the room of a professional maitre d'hotel – a University graduate who knows eight languages. He spends the night with her and, untrue to stereotype, proposes to her. That's the point where the story of Red Riding Hood being eaten by the wolf turns into the story of Bluebeard. Showering his wife with presents, luxurious outfits and awesome travel tours, the intellectual maitre demands only one thing: that she not interfere with his criminal deeds. But, of course, the temptation is too powerful, and she has secret affairs with her husband's best friends – a gangster and cop – whom he cold-bloodedly kills when he learns the truth.

You say in the original tales Bluebeard killed non his wives's lovers, but the overly curious ladies themselves? But that's Chechulin's fantasy, modernizing Perrot. His finale follows suit: disappointed in her husband, our heroine returns to her mother's house and… becomes a prostitute.

So it's better to go into the streets than to live with a loveless husband! If only this idea had been presented to us as humorous parody. But Chechulin just retells Perrot's story using the language of Emile Zola.

The Time Has Passed

V.Bogachev's *Dark Alleys* is based on the novels of Ivan Bunin, classic of Russian literature. The best thing about the film is the duet of actors O.Bogacheva and D.Lubshin – she with the slightly mocking eyes, he with the shyness of a tutor-student, both in their days of transient happiness, all shown with appropriate respect for the Nobel Laureate's work and a will to re-create the atmosphere of Russia at the beginning of the 20th century.

Episodes framing the dramatic story, however, turn out badly. Roughly naturalistic, reformed with extreme theatricality, they resemble the tricks of a roving street circus. You don't believe these characters could be related to the Russian elite of Nikolai II's epoch.

It's hard for today's filmmakers to get rid of the post-Soviet outlook and create anything slightly resembling the images of Bunin's heroes. *Dark Alleys* is another unrealized attempt to relinquish the Russian "cinema of gloom" for the beautiful world of passionate love evoked by classic literature.

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How to Shoot the "True" Film About Russia (Ironical instruction for Western cineastes)

As a member of the Union of Russian Cineastes, I've worked up a set of brief instructions for Western producers, writers and directors who want to make «true film about Russian life»:

1. Say you're basing your movie on a Russian story.
2. Give the leading male positive role to an actor with a «manly» appearance.
3. To show his endless attraction to Russian nature, church and children. Have him mouth deep psychological thoughts about «the essence of being».
4. Make the principal Bad Guy look nasty with uncommon eyebrows and a curly black wig. His residence must have foreign posters on its flat-painted walls and Cosmopolitan magazine on the table. He should show an eager desire to run off over the border, visit underground clubs, make fun of Russian boldness and - the main thing - have an affair with another's Slavic wife.
5. It's necessary for the heroine not only to show a bright Russian manner but wardrobe to match... such as big «sarafan»(a female costume in old Russia). She can have her weaknesses, certainly, as does everyone. Even commit adultery. None of it is her fault, however; she is simply a victim of the Mafia.
6. Between the Bad and Good Guys of a True Film about Russia you can't omit the «intermediate link»: one hesitating character - an alcoholic doctor, for example - who is torn between Good and Evil.
7. For the creation of action tension it's okay to use: explosion of secret laboratory; a car accident; stripteases in rock club, and location footage in Paris.
8. Photographically, a Fine Arts representation must be made through poetic contrast: milky fog drifting over green fields and a pensive cow will definitely underline the alienation evoked in the Russian soul by your images of the cold shine of Western skyscrapers, luxurious shops and bottles of White horse (more suggestive of deceitful, negative characters than Stolichnaya vodka).
9. If, seeing the end result, critics and some spectators are indignant over the primitive drama, dialogue and performances, and the director's pretentious amateurism, they should be rebutted by special advertisements in the mass newspapers and TV-channels.
10. If that doesn't work, than the last advice is simple as everything that's brilliant: declare publicly (preferably on TV) that your film can be understood and appreciated only by True Lovers of True Russian Culture.

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*** The first publications of some of these texts were:**

in the American magazines **Cineaste** (1997, Vol. XXII, n 4, p. 62),
Audience (1994, n 179, p.20-22; 1995, n 180, p.13-17; 1995, n 181, p. 24-28; 1995, n

182, p. 4-7; 1995, n 183, p.15-17; 1995, n 184, p.40-42; 1995, n 185, p.14-16; 1996, n 186, p. 14-16; 1996, n 187, p.2-4; 1996, n 188, p. 21-23; 1996, n 189, p. 14-15; 1997, n 197, p. 19; 1998, n 198, p. 29; 1998, n 199, p. 19-21; 1998, n 201, p. 20);
in the Norwegian magazine **Media i Skolen** (1992, n 5, p.55-57; 1993, n 1, p. 55-58; 1993, n 2, p. 58-61; 1993, n 3, p. 51-55; 1993, n 4, p. 46-50; 1994, n 1, p. 36-39; 1994, n 2, p. 21-24; 49-51; 1994, n 4, p. 41-45; 1994, n 5, p. 48-50; 1994, n 6, p.50-52; 1995, n 1, p. 55-58; 1995, n 2, p. 40-42; 1995, n 4, p. 54-60; 1996, n 1, p. 25-32; 1996, n 6, p. 26-30; 1997, n 1, p. 39-41; 1995, n 2, p. 26; 1997, n 3, p. 12-13; 1997, n 4, p. 34-35; 1997, n 5-6, p. 39; 1998, n 1, p. 30-31; 1998, n 2, p. 22,33; 1998, n 3, p. 40-42; 1998, n 4, p. 39; 1998, n 5, p. 58-59; 1999, n 1, p.36-37; 1999, n 2, p. 45-47; 2000, n 2, p. 6-7, 45-47; 2000, n 4, p. 38-41; 2001, n 1, p. 36-37).