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Review of the book:

*Soviet Films about the Village: Attempts at Historical Interpretation of Visual Imagery*

by:

Mazour, Ludmila Nikolaevna, and Gorbachev, Oleg Vital'evich

When we come to read the present volume, the urge arises to paraphrase Voltaire when he said that 'If God did not exist it would have been necessary to invent Him.' (Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961).

Likewise, if this book were not written here before us, it would be necessary to write it. For it is an important book, written with skill, dealing with one of the central fields of Russian cultural research in particular, and global cultural research in general, which has heretofore been unjustly neglected.

The work is wide ranging and inclusive. It deals with most aspects of the Soviet village cinema from the early 1920s to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The research is devoted to the consideration of cinematic works screened in Soviet villages whose viewers were also of that class.

The themes and the *mise en scene* approach, of this cinema – all represent the lives of Soviet peasants. Even when subjects relating to urban life or existence outside the Soviet Union do appear, they are presented to the viewer from the perspective of the Soviet peasant.

For instance, among the subjects the book discusses is the structure of a peasant family, the status of men and women in a family preoccupied chiefly with agriculture, the week days and festive days of the citizens of a Soviet village: traditional work as opposed to the peasant culture of recreation, such as, on the one hand, the village club, cultural and ideological activities but, on the other hand, also

alcoholism. The book addresses many changes of life in the Soviet village underwent, such as parting from the religious tradition, which was universally accepted before the 1917 revolution, but also a partial return to religion in the 1980s and thereafter.

A vital element of these films would be devoted to the emotional world of peasants and their interpersonal relations. Nevertheless, the depiction of the emotional life of the village resident was presented to the viewer in a simplistic fashion, part and parcel of preaching the values of Socialism, and frequently suggested propagandistic messaging rather than emotional or dramatic representation.

The work deals with the role of films about a village life as a tool for the promotion of Soviet propaganda. In other words, the book probes a cinematic depiction of the Soviet village resident as a means of work production in the Socialist society. The farmer himself, his family members, spiritual world and physical world altogether – his whole life is captured as a direct or indirect means of increasing output in the Socialist labor. Citizens of the Soviet village were required to provide basic agricultural foodstuffs to the Soviet population, and village citizens were depicted by films of the village as a kind of machine for the production of that food. In this respect provincial cinema had a different role from that of urban cinema, which presented the residents of Soviet cities as advancing knowledge and technology in the Soviet society. That said, it is noted in the book that over the years, and especially from the 1970s onward, the gap between a village and a town progressively decreased so that village life got closer and closer to urban life, and the village underwent a process of urbanization.

Considerable attention is devoted in the work to historical and sociological aspects of village cinema. The films are apprehended by the authors as first and foremost historic documents reflecting events of the period in which they were produced and events of the periods preceding it, the prevailing emotional mood of certain periods, the spiritual and physical world of the individual and the Soviet village society in general. In this way village cinema reflected the central events that overtook the Soviet Union in the seventy years of its existence. The Socialist revolution of 1917, collectivization and the formation of the kolkhozes, the Russian civil war in the early 1920s, the Second World War, the agricultural exploitation of unsettled lands at the East and North of the Soviet Union. The films were also 'rewriting' history. That is, they were presenting past events in the manner desired by the Soviet authorities in the period in which the film was produced.

The book likewise deals with sociological aspects of village cinema. The authors present statistical data and analysis regarding different village viewer groups who would attend the screenings of village cinema. For instance, the authors analyze different groups of viewers according to age, educational level, profession (truck drivers, agricultural workers, teachers in village schools), character and nature of their occupation, degree of proximity of their residence to the city. Migration from village to city was a major influence on the stability of the job market in the Soviet reality and was the leading force of social mobility. Migration to the city was also the key element influencing the changes in peasant quality of life and served as a ready channel for the transmission of information, in an era when the main means of communication was just the radio, which could be found in public places in the village, but even so was not available in all villages. That said, on the other hand, the book notes village cinema which addresses the return of villagers who had left, back to their parental homes in the village. The authors also address the subject of city dwellers, educated and with professional specializations, who come to the village, with the aim of contributing to the lives of the peasants in their field of expertise and to advance in those professions.

The book further discusses village architecture and the manner of its representation in village cinema, both internal architecture depicting village houses and buildings and landscape architecture and that of the fields. The cinema also shows the ways of life of village residents, such as wooden houses as opposed to brick houses. The films also depict water supply from wells compared to water supply from a system flowing to the homes of village residents also equipped with private baths, something which arouses some skepticism regarding the documentary accuracy of Soviet cinema in the years 1950 to 1980, yet, on the other hand, emphasizing its propagandistic element.

The book devotes pride of place to describing the village way of life. From the village way of life as depicted in cinematic films, considerable attention is devoted to means and ways of transportation. Wagons, bicycles, vehicles, buses, trucks. Development of roads and transportation was an indicator of social advance-ment (or, by contrast, an indicator of the lack of advance) in the Soviet village towards modernization.

In the context of a sociological investigation of village cinema, the authors ask such fundamental questions as: Who were the viewers of the cinema? Who were the directors, scriptwriters and

actors employed in the production of the cinema? What were the aims of this cinema? Such questions among others receive substantial and thorough discussion in the outstanding work before us.

The authors also note the educational and instructive role of cinema; in an era of limited availability of information, village cinema served as a conduit of information, similar to the role played with considerably more success today by social media. The authors address the social, communal, ideological, promotional, commercial, educational, political and propagandistic aspects of village cinema.

Attention is devoted in the work to many changes which occurred in the Soviet village life over the many decades of its existence (from 1920-1990). Likewise the authors discuss the manner of treating and depicting these changes in the context of village cinema, for in the course of these long decades it was not only the village life that changed but also the technological means at the disposal of cinematic art to present and depict those changes. Over the seventy years of the existence of that cinema both the contents and topics of the cinema, the village way of life, the inner and outer world of the protagonists – and also the means of photography and screening, as well as visual, acoustic and electronic means at the disposal of cinema were all utterly changed.

Another major topic discussed in the work is the gap between a village life and a city life as the issue is depicted in village cinema. The main gaps are those between living standards in the village, which were lower than those of living standards in the city; the village was more traditional and antiquated, and the innovations of the city would reach it late and sometimes not at all; professional standards in the village were lower – tools in the village were primitive in comparison to the city, and likewise the standard of village expertise was lower than that of experts who were educated and worked in the city. And yet over the years, and mostly from the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s on, the village life started improving and following the outstanding accomplishments expected in the city.

The research treats cinema as a historic document, a visual, textual, musical and acoustic work of art all at once. The authors represent cinema as a tool of shaping the world view of the broad community of village viewers over the decades between 1920 and 1990. In the absence of other media apart from the radio and newspapers, which were available in specific periods, village cinema served as the central means of communicating information, with an awesome power to influence many millions of village viewers. That said, the situation naturally altered with the appear-

ance of many domestic televisions, including those in the homes of village residents, in the last decades of the twentieth century.

The authors also analyze the ongoing changes in the Russian language used over these long years in Soviet cinema. It goes without saying that both the vocabulary and the manner of speaking in the Russian language underwent significant changes in the course of the seventy years of the existence of Soviet cinema. The cast of active protagonists also underwent substantial changes. For instance, the characters depicted in Soviet cinema became more complex and multilayered, more human and less stereotypical and standardized.

The work was written along the lines of scientific research in the humanities prevalent these days, such as defining the scope of the research, defining the methodology of the research and additional methodologies assisting in analyzing the extensive material. The research is conducted according to current methodologies in the field. The authors principally rely on the theoretical work of William Mitchell<sup>1</sup> and V.M. Magidov<sup>2</sup>.

Mitchell dealt with the field of visual anthropology, a field established in Europe and the US in the 1920s. This field also reached the Soviet Union in the 1970s, and the Soviet and Russian researcher Magidov continued its development in the Soviet Union. From the point of view of Mitchell and Magidov, visual anthropology is based on the study of culture, history, sociology and philosophy. According to them, cinema assisted in the creation of a new culture which is the culture of 'the viewing person' as compared to the culture of 'the listening person' which had pre-existed it. Artistic cinema – in contrast to documentary cinema – depicts events and protagonists and thereby communicates with the viewers regarding historical events which occurred in objective reality.

The research raises methodological questions such as: What order to research the films in? What is the most appropriate methodology for cinematic research? How does one combine researching cinematic narrative and its audio-acoustic aspects? What are the propagandistic, socialist and ethical aspects of Soviet cinema?

The research discusses these questions among others and provides answers to them based on the research of one of the founders of historical research in Russia, Lapo-Danilevsky<sup>3</sup>, and likewise on classical European philosophical works such as those of Got-

<sup>1</sup> William John Thomas Mitchel (1942-), is an American professor of history, media, and visual culture.

<sup>2</sup> Viktor Markovich Magidov (1938-2015), Soviet and Russian historian, researcher of the Russian cinema.

<sup>3</sup> Aleksander Sergeevich Lapo-Danilevsky (1863-1919), was a Russian historian, one of the founders of the historical research in Russia.

tfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Auguste Comte, John Stuart Mill, Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich John Rickert.

This is the work that it would have been necessary to write if it had not already been written, since it addresses the biggest sphere of culture, history and society of Russia yet to receive adequate and appropriate attention. Research of the Soviet village is the foundation of life in the Soviet Union but it has been neglected due to its imagined simplicity and marginality.

We have before us the research, comprising many different topics of village cinema. The work shows a broad and global canvas of both the Soviet village life and that of the Soviet Union as a whole. This is a monumental work, sweeping and touched with genius. It opens new horizons for the readers, awakens curiosity and reflection. This is an important piece of research which paves the way for future research.

The book is written in an interesting and compelling manner, like a riveting story in belles-lettres and engages the reader in more and more, yet alongside that, it is laid out in an academic fashion and offers a first rate scientific analysis.

While I highly applaud the book, it is important to also note the aspects that are lacking in it. The authors present Soviet village films as a historical document and a tool used by the Soviet authorities to influence the rural audience, and educate it.

However, these are objectives that contradict each other. Thus, Soviet village films did serve as a tool for educating viewers. They shaped the mentality of the villagers, as well as their moral, social, and ideological standards.

However, Soviet village films were far from constituting a trustworthy historical document, as they ignored central and global events that occurred in the Soviet Union during the extended decades of its creation.

Below I will mention several such events that influenced the mood of the entire Soviet Union. These include, for example, the Holodomor, which caused the death of millions of villagers in Ukraine and which affected the entire Soviet Union; the Stalinist repressions and prosecutions that lasted decades, and claimed the lives of millions of Soviet citizens, among them many villagers. Soviet village films ignore the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis against Soviet Jewry, including many residents of villages in Soviet Ukraine and Belorussia. These films also ignore the targeted persecution of the Jews by the Soviet authorities in the years after the war, which were called the "Jewish Doctors Affair," and the plan

to exterminate the Jewish population in the Soviet Union, many of whom were members of the Kolhozes. The Soviet village films also ignore the persecution of other nations that inhabited the Soviet Union, such as the residents of the Baltic republics, Poles, Germans, and Tatars.

Following the Soviet village films, the book before us also ignores these events that would have shocked the Soviet Union throughout the years of its existence. The authors of the book present an unreliable picture of Soviet rural existence. They depict a type of idealistic and utopian world that any reasonable person would immediately recognize as false. Indeed, the authors could not address these events for the simple reason that they are not mentioned in Soviet village films.

However, the book was published in 2021, more than thirty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. One might expect the authors to at least mention all these crucial events, which had shaken the Soviet Union for decades and claimed the lives of tens of millions of its citizens, and which have disappeared from Soviet village films as if they had never occurred.

It would have been deemed appropriate for the authors to at least explain that they are aware of the fact that the rosy and sugarcoated picture of the Soviet rural reality that they portray in the book is a result of the false image presented by Soviet village films. And so the question arises if the authors themselves were aware of the true history of the Soviet Union?