

## From the Introduction

Soviet cinema from its inception has been strictly connected with the national political reality. It could not have been otherwise. Born with the revolution, it started as a revolutionary art. One of its functions in those early years was to lay the aesthetic foundation of a new social order through a bold, dynamic cinematic language that challenged the conventions of the bourgeois melodrama.

Equally important was its educational function. Lenin's famous statement that "the cinema is for us the most important of all the arts" reflected the government's perception of the new medium as an effective propaganda tool. Most filmmakers, on their part, felt they had a moral commitment to enlighten the masses. As cinema spread to reach the lower urban social strata and the provincial and rural population, so did the idea that a movie had more to offer than mere entertainment.

The masters of the 1920s--Eisenstein, Dovzhenko, Kuleshov, Pudovkin, Vertov--while sharing the revolutionary ideals, devoted themselves to cinema as an art form. Consequently, their films were both positive political statements and great artistic achievements. Cinema put the Soviet Union on the international cultural map. Those films, however, were not popular with the masses at home because of their innovative style and "difficult" language. The audiences preferred comedies and dramas, dealing with issues of everyday life, made by directors who deserve to be better known abroad--Barnet, Eggert, Ermler, Kozintsev and Trauberg, Protazanov, Room. Other favorites were the imported films, especially those that came from Hollywood.

During the 1930s, because of the onset of stricter centralized control and the institutionalization of "socialist realism"--the doctrine stipulating that all aspects of Soviet culture should optimistically reflect the ideal socialist society--creativity was suppressed and cinema gradually turned into sleek political propaganda. Cinema was a popular form of entertainment in those years. Because of the grim reality of the day the people appreciated the escapism of the movies, which offered a promise of an oncoming utopia. While plots were generally weak, several films achieved a technical level of sophistication and were graced by superb performances. Such were the musical comedies of Grigory Alexandrov, featuring the acting-singing-dancing star Lyubov Orlova. Some art films were also made or planned in that decade, but many of them did not see the light of the day. Eisenstein's *Bezhin Meadow* (1935) is a case in point, as so is *A Stern Youth* (1936) by Room.

This trend was reinforced after World War II, throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. During this period, Soviet cinema was characterized by stereotyped images of patriotism, civic valor, and military heroism, most often converging into the figure of Stalin. The "cult of personality" took its toll on the cinema as well as on all other aspects of public life. However, even in those years there were some exceptions--the most notable being Eisenstein's last film *Ivan the Terrible* (Part I, 1944; Part II, 1946, released only in 1968; Part III is believed to have been destroyed). After World War II, and in the Cold War years, the Soviet produced a huge number of Anti-American films, which were amply reciprocated on our side. This trend was accompanied by a political campaign against "cosmopolitanism," which resulted in the ostracism of many excellent directors. The irony is that in Hollywood a similar witch-hunt against communists took place at about the

same time.

Soviet cinema experienced an artistic renaissance at the time of Khrushchev's cultural "thaw." In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the change in the political leadership and the emergence of a new generation of talent brought fresh energies into film production. Creativity was allowed a freer hand and new themes and styles, inspired by a general concern for the individual and his inner world, made their way to the screen. In addition, there was a revival of formalistic experimentation, most notable in the "poetic" style of several directors from the southern republics, and in the works of Andrei Tarkovsky. The trend of the 1960s reflected to a great extent the filmmakers aesthetic and moral concerns, as well as the public demand for engaging subjects and emotional appeal. After two decades of make-believe, audiences yearned for a measure of truth. How large that measure could be, no one knew for sure. Notwithstanding the relaxation in cultural policies, Party directives could not be ignored. Filmmakers had to test their limits and operate within the realm of the permissible. The revival of film art in those years brought Soviet cinema to the attention of international audiences and critics, and as it did in the 1920s, it scored high marks. Soviet cinema underwent such a radical renewal that the conservative aftermath of the "thaw." could not erase what was gained, much less turn the clock back to the forms of the Stalinist years.

In the 1970s--a period of stagnation in every area of Soviet life--there was a new trend in the motion picture industry, due primarily to socioeconomic factors. In that decade, commercial considerations gained more and more weight. The increasing availability of television required cinema to become competitive. To fill the movie theaters and fulfill the yearly financial quota established by the Ministry of Culture, film producers, distributors, and exhibitors had to cater to public taste. The genre repertoire widened considerably, and the commercial film directors became more and more skillful at presenting ideology as entertainment. Public expectations for *engagé* films of the previous decade were dulled by the prevailing consumerist atmosphere, which was expressed by light genres and simplistic morals. There were no troubling discoveries; rather, self-complacency and benign irony created a comfortable psychological setup. Selected foreign films appeared on the Soviet screen and fared well with the masses, even if they were largely third-rate films from India and the Third World. The mass audience liked to feel that they were somehow part of the international community. Within this general trend, however, there were isolated achievements. A few talented directors were able to rise above the level of grayish mediocrity and stand up for humanistic values and artistic integrity. Most of them belonged to the generation that emerged in the 1960s as an innovative force, others were equally talented newcomers. Unfortunately, a number of remarkable films made in the 1970s were either shelved or at best had limited circulation. Only in the time of perestroika, as a result of the change that reshaped the Soviet film industry, were those films released.

Following a brief period of transition, the 1980s marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of the Soviet Union. There are some parallels with Khrushchev's "thaw," but the differences outnumber the similarities. While in the 1960s the upsurge of creativity happened as the by-product of a general policy of liberalization, and was soon contained, this later artistic renaissance was planned and sustained by the Party, under the leadership of Gorbachev. Furthermore, the new regime created the

conditions for a radical restructuring of the cinema industry, which would be difficult to reverse. The filmmakers, too, played a decisive role. A creative ferment had been building for more than a decade, and the glasnost and perestroika policies provided a much-needed outlet and the opportunity to participate in the political process. However, the promise of the glasnost years remained unfulfilled. In the new "democratic" Russia of the 1990s, the economic climate did not favor the blossoming of a cinema new wave. The transition to the free market was too abrupt for many industries, including the film industry. Price liberalization, privatization, the collapse of the centralized system of production and distribution, the deterioration of the studios, inadequate law enforcement to guarantee copyright, rampant video piracy, and the general decline of disposable income among the population conjured to push film production down to an alarming low. Quality suffered as well, because of the state of social and moral disorientation that affected the intelligentsia. Many veteran filmmakers were no longer sure of their role in society and struggled to find themes and ideas relevant to the new situation.

The Filmmakers Union of Russia has been in administrative disarray for the good part of the decade and unable to support its members. This led to the election of Nikita Mikhalkov as the FU president, in 1998, which restored confidence among the membership in the revival of the union. But the issue of the economic infrastructure remained paramount. The private sector did not bet a lot of money on film production, with the exception of the two media tycoons, Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky, who stepped into that arena before their political fortune changed. The government, too, was reassessing its role. Under the Yeltsin administration, the renewed Goskino implemented friendly but ineffectual policies toward the film industry. With the inception of the Putin administration, the government reaffirmed a more authoritarian stance. Free-market competition and freedom of speech did not seem to be threatened, but they were coupled with stricter ideological control in the use of public funds. Ironically, after the breaking-away movement of the glasnost period, the film industry at the beginning of the twenty-first century seems to be moving toward greater centralization, following the general trend in the country.