

From the Introduction

The background

Early morning. December. The taxicab was rushing toward Sheremetyevo airport. I was leaving Moscow after a five-year stay and was not scheduled to come back for a while. The old Volga—still the staple model among Moscow cabs—was being passed by shiny Mercedes, Volvos, and BMWs, braving the inclement weather at a sustained pace. Large billboards appeared at equal intervals through the twirling snowflakes: Hyundai, Marlboro, Sony. . . . I was leaving behind a city greatly transformed, a world that did not exist when I landed there in early 1991.

I had been to the Soviet Union before—many times over a span of more than ten years. As a scholar sponsored by academic institutions, I had always had a precise project, a declared purpose, a mentor/facilitator, and designated housing in university hotels. Those U.S.-Soviet exchange channels made possible my previous publications, and I gave them full credit in the prefaces to my books.

But this time it was different. I went on my own. At the twilight of the Gorbachev years, as the Soviet Union was loosening up restrictions on private enterprises and individual ventures, I took up residence in Moscow. I had press credentials, which allowed me to move with considerable freedom over the territory of Russia and opened up many doors. Soon, I started working at the Press and Culture section of the American Embassy, as the Deputy Director of Public Information and Media Outreach and the editor of a magazine publicizing U.S. technical assistance to the new Russia. At the same time, I kept pursuing scholarly activities, recording the transformation of the film industry in the market economy and analyzing structural changes and new productions. My ongoing research appeared as a weekly column on Russian cinema in Moscow's largest English-language newspaper, *The Moscow Times*, and has now been incorporated in this book.

The collapse of the Soviet Union had the effect of making Russia even more of a riddle to the foreign observer than it had ever been. The Western powers and the political pundits who expected Russia to become a democracy overnight were disappointed. The general assumption was that once the Soviet institutions were removed, the democratic infrastructure would emerge naturally, sustained at the grassroots and sanctioned at the top—with financial help from abroad. Those expectations were based on the understanding of capitalist democracy as it applies to our Western civilization—the civilization that has its cultural roots in the Renaissance, the foundation of its political thought in the Age of Enlightenment, and the motor of its economic power in the “American dream.” But for the Russians, capitalist democracy is not a “natural” condition. In its one thousand years of history, Russia has never been a democratic state. Rather, the population has been subjected to an uninterrupted series of authoritarian governments, from the yoke of Mongol khans to the rule of autocratic tsars to the dictatorship of Bolshevik commissars. Russia's borders were long sealed to the influence of the great cultural movements that in successive waves propelled Europe into the modern age.

But what about Russian ballet? The neo-classical architecture of St. Petersburg? Pushkin's exquisite iambic tetrameters? Malevich's conceptual art? True, these features are linked to European culture. They are the later result of the forced Europeanization the Russians underwent at the hands of Peter the Great in the eighteenth century. This was a most bizarre despotic act, the like of which has few parallels in the history of any other country. To achieve the emperor's goal—to catch up with Europe—the Russians were ordered to change their way of life and conceal their uncouth demeanor under a slick veneer of European civilization. This decree covered mainly fashion and etiquette. The idea of “*liberté-égalité-fraternité*,” which shook the Western world toward the end of the century, never figured in the imperial plan. It was actually banned by Peter's successors, and its sympathizers were sent to penal colonies in Siberia. Eventually, the European cultural implant grew and flourished, but never wholly supplanted Muscovy's native roots.¹

This created a dilemma for generations of Russians, who saw themselves as having a dual nature, partly Asian and partly European. Central to Russian intellectual life was the quest for identity. This theme was played out in many ways in literature, the arts, and cinema, creating

mythological oppositions such as East vs. West, Moscow vs. St. Petersburg, natural village vs. artificial city, soul vs. reason, and more. But under totalitarian rule, the quest for identity was merely an existential one. The state provided the citizens with an official identity, well encased within the parameters of established culture. When the totalitarian state collapsed, so did the cultural institutions. Identity became of paramount importance, because now it was going to affect not only a spiritual need but the political and economic setup of the country.²

The first reaction was to move sharply to the West. This direction was encouraged by the massive influx of financial aid from the United States and the European Union. During his first term, Yeltsin relied on Western economic advisors and gave Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar *carte blanche* in the implementation of the policy of shock-therapy reform, whose main pillars were price liberalization and privatization. This policy turned out to be a disaster. Deprived of the social safety net, a huge number of citizens plunged under the poverty level. Those were not just the traditional poor—rural area residents—but also the urban intelligentsia and the working class. Doctors, teachers, engineers, scientists, members of the creative unions, as well as the workers from giant Soviet enterprises, saw their salaries shrink to almost nothing as a result of the devaluation of the ruble and a galloping inflation that reached the triple-digit level in no time. I remember going shopping with a plastic bag full of ruble banknotes in denominations from 1 to 25. The twenty-five-ruble bill used to be the highest denomination normally used in daily transactions, when a loaf of bread cost a few kopeks. By 1992, the price of that loaf of bread had risen to 150 rubles. It took the government several months to print the new bills, in the hundred and thousand denominations. Until then, we carried two shopping bags, one for groceries and one for money.

But many citizens did not have the same resources. In the course of a few weeks, their life savings were wiped out. In addition, the government ran out of cash and deferred payment of salaries and pensions for months in a row. Citizens were left in limbo, without an income. This triggered the most amazing global performance in the art of survival. To make ends meet, factory workers resorted to barter exchanges—for example, textiles for fertilizer, glassware for sausages, and tractors for timber. Occasionally, imports were used to pay the workers instead of cash, as in the case of a factory that compensated its collective with a shipment of Tampax, causing the workers to line up along the main road to peddle the unseemly merchandise. White-collar workers and intellectuals reinvented themselves in all sorts of trades—from travel agent to graphic designer to breeder of Siamese cats. And the pensioners became street vendors, selling their heirlooms together with hand-knit socks and mittens. Moscow turned into a grand bazaar, with some points of intense concentration. The site of the largest open-air market was, ironically, the stadium proudly named after Lenin.

A few, however, struck gold. The oligarchs, a handful of men who emerged out of the Soviet structure, succeeded in appropriating the country's enormous natural capital, and to control finances, information, and politics. In the Yeltsin years, they became the real power behind the government.³ On a much lower level, the embryo of a middle class began to emerge in Moscow (to a lesser extent in other cities), made of up and coming young executives hired by foreign corporations or operating in the various branches of the oligarchs' empire. Some small business entrepreneurs were also able to succeed, provided that they accepted racket protection. But to call this group a middle class is actually inappropriate, because their existence was extremely precarious. They had no solid economic foundation, or a bourgeois culture of work ethic and saving practices to rely on. Their good incomes allowed them to enjoy Moscow's new shopping malls and fancy nightclubs. But the income flow was volatile, and subject to be cut off at any time.⁴

The widening gap between the haves and the have-nots created resentment among the population, which eventually was vented out as an anti-Western, anti-capitalist attitude. The identity compass took a 180° turn and pointed to the East. The two extremist parties in the Duma that stirred nationalist feelings—the Communist Party under Gennady Zyuganov on the left and the Liberal Democratic Party under Vladimir Zhirinovskiy on the right—built substantial followings. The majority of the people began to blame "capitalism" and "democracy" for the bad

economic turn in their lives.⁵ Intellectuals and political commentators acknowledged that Russia should find its own unique way, rather than following the Western model. By the end of the century, with the election of Vladimir Putin as president, these sentiments materialized in a new policy that is generally characterized as “managed democracy.” Even if the economic upturn was not immediately apparent, the new government satisfied the traditional Russian craving for the strong leader.

In the cultural field, after an initial wave of intoxication with Western products, there was a return to the domestic. Western labels were not rejected altogether, but Russian culture made a comeback. A renewed pride in being Russian resurfaced, which was lost after the country suffered the humiliation of falling from superpower status. This situation was reflected in the film world. While the screens at the beginning of the decade were flooded with Western imports, Russian productions emphasizing national traits gradually reappeared in the theaters. American films were still popular, but domestic films that criticized the U.S. and glorified a Russian hero, like *Brother 2*, were great box office successes. Such films, though, for all their Russianness, attempted to recreate the style of the American action movie. This is a good indication of what was the prevalent mood in the cultural arena, a pull toward the national roots to assert Russia’s spiritual heritage together with a fascination for Western forms and products perceived to be technically superior. Most films present this dichotomy, expressed in different ways.

But it is futile to look for a trend or a movement in Russian cinema of the 1990s. The best way to deal with the productions of those years is to integrate film with life and provide a picture of Russia (with Moscow in the foreground) as the big stage on which the drama unfolded. For this book, I relied on my experience as well as on reports by other journalists and authors. I used archival materials and recent sources. I analyzed current politics and drew inspiration from the surrounding reality. I eye-witnessed the urban battles for the White House in 1991 and 1993, and attended the elite parties for the launching of the Russian *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy*. I struggled to rent an apartment and buy a car, getting a taste of the shadow economy on the fringes of legality. I participated in film festivals and symposia. I talked to directors and producers, politicians, diplomats and journalists, as well as the emerging entrepreneurs rightly or wrongly surrounded with a mafioso aura. And I got to know the carpetbaggers from the West—the big corporate executive and the small con man—who by the thousands settled in that frontier town known to the expatriates as Moscowville.

Against this background, I discussed some eighty films made between 1990 and 2000. I sorted out the selected titles into four broad categories, each corresponding to a chapter. Chapter I covers the situation in the film industry and the many problems that threatened its survival in the market economy. It also deals with the changes in production and distribution and the reshuffling in the administration of the Filmmakers Union and Goskino (State Cinema Committee). Chapter II deals with history; the way history is recreated in film, and the way it is made in the street during extraordinary occurrences (the two uprisings of 1991 and 1993). Chapter III focuses on films that reflect urban violence and everyday life in the new Russia, with ordinary people struggling to survive in the highly criminalized environment of the big city. Chapter IV explores films that connote fantasy worlds. These may be idealized spaces such as the steppe, or demystified spaces such as the village; the myth of the West; nightmarish mental landscapes; Soviet dystopias; and war theaters. This chapter opens with the film festival circuit as a special fantasy world of its own. Chapter V discusses films that handle humor in a peculiar Russian way. This is the technique of “laughter through tears,” the ability to discover the comic side of life even in tragedy.

The films selected in these five chapters may vary in technical quality and depth of thought; they may be mainstream pictures, or art films. But taken together, they provide an eloquent portrait of Russia, entering the new millennium still in search of its true identity.

The text

Several articles have been written on the cinema of this period, in Russian periodicals as well as in English-language publications. As for books in English, to my knowledge there are only two: one collection of essays, which covers a good part of the decade (up to 1998), and a general survey of Russian cinema focusing on genre, which includes some of the latest films.⁶

The present book takes a different approach from the typical scholarly publication. It incorporates into an organic whole the realities of film production, the films themselves, and the socio-political-cultural context, weaving these three threads into a narrative discourse. The result is an unfolding story, in which film and facts occupy the same space. Often, readers will have to step back and readjust the spectacles on their nose, in order to be able to switch the focus from film to fact and vice versa. To help along the way, I have provided plenty of notes—"Too many notes!" the general reader would complain. But my colleague-scholars may actually appreciate it.

This story is based on scholarship, even though the style may be unorthodox. The text combines different genres—chronicle, analysis, memoirs, scenarios, film criticism—all tied together in a rambling structure that allows for flashbacks, flash-forwards, fantasy flights, and jump-cut chronology. Facts are at times reported in the style of a film script. Some colleagues who have read the manuscript referred to it as postmodern scholarship. I think that what contributed to this characterization, more than the mixing of the genres, is the persona of the "scholar *in fabula*."⁷ The scholar in this book is endowed with a very obtrusive voice in her role as narrator. Like the "man with the movie camera," she roams through the *fabula*, opening fresh fields of vision, and building unexpected montage sequences. She invites the readers to follow her and engage in a challenging interactive game.

Notes to Introduction

- ¹ Orlando Figes discusses the dichotomy of Russian culture in his compelling book, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002).
- ² See James H. Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself* (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Kathleen E. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory During the Yeltsin Years* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), see in particular the chapter, "Searching for a New Russian Idea": 158-72. Also, James Rupert, "In Search of the Russian Meaning of Life," *WP* (August 4, 1996): A29. The article reports that Yeltsin encouraged his aides to "develop a new national idea to unite all Russians," and the newspaper *Rossiskaya Gazeta* offered its readers 10 million rubles (\$2,000) for the best "unifying national idea."
- ³ See David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs, 2002) and Vadim Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002). A study by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), published in 2002, found that Russia's major oligarchic structures were blocking the development of small and medium-size businesses. The report singled out the leading oil and metal companies as still wielding enormous political and economic power at all levels of the state. Reported in *RFE/RL Newslines*, Vol. 6, No. 223, Part I (November 27, 2002). According to an assessment by *The Economist*, more than 70 percent of Russia's \$330 billion GDP is controlled by just 20 conglomerates; eight oligarchic clans control Russia's 64 leading companies, including the Yeltsin-era family which still controls more than 20 percent of the GDP. Reported in *RFE/RL Newslines*, Vol. 7, No. 31, Part I (February 18, 2003). Another recent book offers a general overview of post-Soviet Russia, Andrew C. Kuchins, ed., *Russia After the Fall* (Washington, DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002).
- ⁴ By 2002, seven percent of the Russian population could be considered "middle class," according to economist Elena Avraamova, who participated in a nationwide study financed by the Carnegie Foundation. Reported in *RFE/RL Newslines*, Vol. 6, No. 215, Part I (November 15, 2002). An overview of the emerging bourgeoisie is to be found in Harley Balzer, "Routinization of the New Russians?" *The Russian*

Review, No. 62 (January 2003): 15-36.

- ⁵ In a survey of 1,500 residents of 94 urban and rural areas across Russia in early April 2000, the polling group ROMIR found that only 38.7 percent of respondents agreed to some extent with the view that democracy is the best form of rule despite certain problems it poses. Almost 24 percent of respondents disagreed with the view to some extent, while 24.3 percent were undecided. At the same time, 39.9 percent thought military rule would likely be bad for the country, and 27.5 percent rejected it outright with 27.5 percent undecided. *RFE/RL Newswire* (April 20, 2000). A more recent study shows that the support for democracy has further eroded, with only 22 percent preferring democracy and 53 percent opposing it. See Richard Pipes, "Flight from Freedom: What Russians Think and Want," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (May/June 2004), www.foreignaffairs.org.
- ⁶ Birgit Beumers, ed., *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 1999). This is a collection of essays by British, American, and Russian authors, which resulted from a conference on the theme of the "Russian idea." David Gillespie, *Russian Cinema* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Ltd., 2003). This is a very good survey of Russian cinema from its early days to the end of the 1990s. However, because it is so rich in content and short on pages (only 200), the films of the 1990s are only touched upon. For articles in English, see in particular, Louis Menashe, "Moscow Believes in Tears: The Problems (and Promise?) of Russian Cinema in the Transition Period," *Cineaste*, Vol. XXVI, No. 3 (Summer 2001): 10-17. Also, visit the websites: ce-review.org/video/video_main.html, kinoeye.org, ntvprofit.ru, kinoart.ru, which offer archival and recent film reviews. They also have a video store.
- ⁷ I borrowed the expression from Umberto Eco, "Lector in Fabula: Pragmatic Strategy in Metanarrative Text," in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Text* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979). I am referring only to the title phrase, and not to the content of the article, which focuses on the reader rather than the writer.