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### To the Virgin Lands

#### The Epic and the Idyll in the Cinematic Representation of Khrushchev's Great Adventure

This essay is meant to call attention to the role of performance art as a code and subtext in mass films or popular movies.<sup>1</sup> Teachers and researchers in history and other scholars of Russian-Soviet culture and society increasingly make use of such films. Cinema reviews feature in journals such as *American Historical Review*, *Russian Review*, and *Slavic Review*. Literary scholars tend to look at intertextuality, among other things; film studies people often focus on the formal attributes of film. Film-as-history in the classroom caught on in our profession a long time ago and professors routinely use it to enrich their courses with visual material. But traditional ways of screening mostly offer the masterpieces of cinematic art or the obvious “films of persuasion.” Sergei Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin* (Brononosets Potemkin, 1926) serves both purposes on a grand scale. I have found that these great works have limits in getting inside the mentalities of the people who saw them at the time of release—and later. The classics often failed to

appeal to mass audiences in the way that popular movies did—musicals and movies of romance, comedy, and action-adventure. My purpose here is to illustrate through a single example how popular movies can be made to speak to the student of history in the languages of their stories, acting styles, *mise-en-scène*, music, and particularly performance art in the cultural context of the era in which they were made and viewed.

The film under discussion, *Ivan Brovkin in the Virgin Lands*,<sup>2</sup> a rustic musical of 1958, appeared at a major turning point in Soviet cultural history where history failed to turn. It draws on two lines of narrative, scenic backdrop and social mood: the epic and the idyll. The epic of construction, a major theme in all genres of popular culture from 1928 to the 1950s—romanticized physical labor, manual toil, and the realia of machinery against a backdrop of wilderness. During the Russian Civil War (1918-1921), building something fast—such as a railroad—took on epic proportions, a fact celebrated with gorgeous cinematography in Alexander Alov and Vladimir Naumov's *Pavel Korchagin* (1955), the best screen version of Ostrovsky's notorious socialist realist novel *How the Steel was Tempered* (1932-1934). In the first full sound film, *Start in Life*—also known as *Road to Life* (*Putevka v zhizn*, 1931)—director Nikolai Ekk utilized the railroad as salvation in a story about orphan boys in the 1920s. Sergei Gerasimov's *Komsomolsk* (1938) offered a camera study of deforestation and town-building in the Soviet Far East. In these pictures, the act of cutting down and building up was endowed with a special pathos and poetics that proved irresistible over the decades and whose cinematographic style was incorporated into wartime epics.

The Soviet idyll emerged in the 1930s alongside the epic. In the 1920s, village life had often been ridiculed in the popular arts. Folk dances, songs, and costumes were depicted as the archaic trappings of roach and god-infested worlds of darkness. The great exception to this of course is the work of Oleksandr Dovzhenko. But after Soviet collectivization in the early 1930s, the new *kolkhoz* (collective farm) was romanticized as a confluence of the new and the best of the old—bicycles and hospitality, tractors and head scarves, brigades and peasant fertility. This thematic blossomed in folk dance ensembles, paintings, operettas, novels, and films in the 1930s and 1940s, and reached its apogee in Ivan Pyrev's famous *Kuban Cossacks* (*Kubanskiye kazaki*, 1949), a cinematic *kolkhoz* operetta and a classic of the glossy, "conflictless" films of the late Stalin era. In contrast to the epic, which is driven by the motif of dynamic change, this film represented the ultimate static utopia where nothing changes except the decimal point in production figures. When tension between new and old was treated, the new was always vindicated—as in the most famous example, *Cavalier of the Golden Star*, a novel, an operetta, and Yuly Raizman's 1950 film starring Sergei Bondarchuk.

*Ivan Brovkin* was shot in the midst of Nikita Khrushchev's Virgin Lands campaign—a drive to cultivate large tracts of land in the steppes between the Urals, the Caspian, and Siberia and in Northern Kazakhstan. Although released only a few years after *Cavalier*, it gave the conflict a new resolution by treating the old village and the new *sovkhoz* almost equally. The former is symbolized by rural folkways, stubborn elders, and a bride who refuses to join her man on the cultivation sites beyond Orenburg. But this standard characterization—almost identical to that in *Cavalier*—is deployed with great tact and delicacy. Its traditional trappings are contrasted and intercut with the epic plot of the new Virgin Lands campaign. Out on the steppe, modernity springs forth from a semi-desert under the hands and brains of the hero, his wise and kindly mentor, and a crew of young, idealistic, ethnically varied Komsomols (Young Communists) who tear open the earth and careen upon it in their iron victory chariots in a civic version of savage joy. The domestic scenes of gathering, homebuilding, and planning are done in the painterly fashion of Stalinist socialist realism.

### **Storyboard**

*Ivan Brovkin in the Virgin Lands* revolves around a demobilized peacetime soldier's decision in the 1950 to leave his *kolkhoz* in order to go as a volunteer tractor driver to the Virgin Lands and help turn the barren grass land of the region into an enormous grain basket. The film opens to the ring of an army bugle and a military march. An artillery unit, after strenuous gymnastic exercises, is being mustered out, thus establishing a familiar theme: the link between military ardor and socialist construction campaigns. Whereas the tank drivers in the 1940 film *Tractor Drivers* had gone off to a Moscow factory, a Georgian vineyard, and a Ukrainian collective farm upon terminating their service, Brovkin chooses to continue that service in what Leonid Brezhnev, comparing World War II to the Virgin Lands, called a "great battle won by the Party and the people."<sup>3</sup> When Brovkin goes home to say farewell to his *kolkhoz*, he encounters the dual conflict in the story: his fiancée Lyubasha (played by D. Smirnova) dissolves in tears at his decision and declines to accompany him as his bride; her father, the *kolkhoz* chairman, is angered at the imminent loss of his best worker. Once ensconced at one of the Virgin Lands units, the Komsomol Sovkhoz (Young Communist State Farm), Brovkin fits in easily, but his work ethic is eroded by the absence of his sweetheart. The Sovkhoz director finally persuades him of the value of the new Soviet project and sends him back to fetch his beloved. They both return as the film ends.

Embedded in the story are the contrasting but complementary images of new and old, town (out on the steppe) and village (kolkhoz), epic and idyll. The old is destined to lose in the struggle, in line with Khrushchev's continual efforts to hasten the advent of communism by consolidating kolkhozes into large amalgams and fostering more sovkhoses. But the victory is softened with nostalgia and romance for the loser. Brovkin's home farm, the kolkhoz he deserts, has an "old time" look, with many of the visual and auditory qualities of the pre-Soviet Russian village which is captured in beautifully framed black-and-white shots resembling the prints and picture postcards of rustic life that were mass-produced before the revolution.<sup>4</sup> No church bells ring out. But the houses are fronted by white picket fences; the kolkhoz chairman wears the belted peasant shirt and bloused boots; and women, as they serve the men at table, are garbed in traditional-looking dresses, though in fact they are Soviet made cotton prints. Lyubasha wears braids and her lovelorn lamentation is set in a birch grove. On the village street at eventide, young women of the kolkhoz sing stylized folk songs as the men stroll by with accordions as in the old peasant promenade. Brovkin tries to console and win over his girlfriend by serenading her with song and accordion, while Lyubasha, the chaste village maiden, reluctantly stays inside by the window and weeps. It is a Mickey Rooney-Judy Garland moment set in a folkloric rural Russia.

The epic face of the film begins to unfold on that great emblem of modernity, the train, which rolls in a straight line out toward the Orenburg steppe. The ur-Russianness of the story is slightly diluted when a non-Russian Soviet Asian Virgin Lander, Abaev (played by T. Zhailibekov), becomes Brovkin's new sidekick, a slightly clownish figure who acts in the manner of the old Soviet (and Hollywood) "quaint ethnic types." He is in fact a holdover from the first Brovkin film (*The Soldier Ivan Brovkin*, 1955); and his name, as Michael Rouland suggests, "signals a link to the popular turn-of-the-century Kazak poet and 'friend of the Russians,' Abai Kunanbaev."<sup>5</sup> Socialist Realism kicks in hard when Brovkin meets the director of the sovkhos—also an ex-artilleryman—who becomes his mentor in work and in love. In short, he helps his love-sick and malingering brigadier to snap out of his melancholy yearning for the faraway Lyubasha by summoning up, with the aid of flash forward footage, energetic pictures of hard work and rewarding production figures. One is again reminded of Brezhnev, who recalled how he helped and hovered over underlings of less developed consciousness. Once back in gear, Brovkin again evokes the theme of production-as-tactics by acting out the famous potato scene from the film *Chapaev* (1934), known to every Soviet moviegoer. The potatoes are now stand-ins for tractors instead of Civil War partisan formations.<sup>6</sup>

To unleash an epic, one must have formidable obstacles to overcome. The camera provides convincing visual evidence, via capacious long shots of the immensity of the steppe, the challenge of the untilled soil, and perilous climatic changes. Brezhnev recalled with fondness “the tractor columns battling their way across the roadless blizzard-swept expanses.”<sup>7</sup> He speaks of “the primeval nature of the steppe” and other hardships.<sup>8</sup> Both in the flash forward dream scenes and in real-time sequences, the film fills the vast landscape with “grunting, snorting trucks” and the relentlessly rolling tractors that slice the resistant soil, cultivate it, and harvest its mountains of grain.<sup>9</sup> Paralleling the carving up of the land, the director captures the rapid collective construction of housing and public buildings for the sovkhos population: individual cottages, even for singles, and service edifices—including the official wedding office. The forbidding distance from the Russian heartland is conquered by technology: an airplane arrives with new volunteers and Brovkin’s visiting mother.

### **Performance as Subtext**

What makes production epic films like this so memorable, of course, is not the banal love plot and labor scenario, but the music and the performance. Imagine the plots of *State Fair* and *Oklahoma* without the music and lyrics of Rodgers and Hammerstein. But categorizing this film according to familiar Western genres does not work very well. Unlike musicals in rustic settings such the above-mentioned American musicals, *Brovkin* does not stop the action for set pieces; rather it integrates song and dance into the story at every stage, reinforcing comedic, emotional, and celebratory effects. Only the off-screen orchestral scoring of the field production and other scenes departs from the otherwise realistic narrative. It thus retains a strong rhetorical character, which allows the “messages” to be folded in without excessive intrusion. Furthermore, both familiar tunes and the newly composed but clichés score connect easily for viewers who have heard it or something like it on the radio and on recordings for years and thus allows them to identify with the people who sing it or work to its strains. And *Brovkin* rises above the simplistic cinematic epics of the Stalin years in the way it fleshes out and complicates the tension between two visions. A good dramatic opera alternates musical and performance styles between opposing worlds—for example the scenes of amorous encounter and those of a menacing dungeon. In this film the chiaroscuro arises from the clever juxtaposition of idyll and epic and its brilliant illustration in performance art.

The film skillfully sets up the coming contrast of nature and modernity by drenching the kolkhoz scenes with the sad-and-sweet melodies redolent of old-time village life.

Composed Russian “folk” songs of course date back to the late eighteenth century; in the Soviet era they undergirded a virtual cultural industry, along with the invented folk ensemble. The traditional songs and those provided by the popular songwriter, Anatoly Lepin, reek of folk or fake-folk stylization. One in particular owes much in structure and rhythm to Vasily Soloviev-Sedoi and Mikhail Matusovsky’s canonical paean to innocent love, “Evenings Outside Moscow” (known in the West as “Midnight in Moscow,” 1955), written shortly before the *Brovkin* film was released.

The wedding at the Virgin Lands sovkhos makes some concessions to tradition: garlanded vehicles, flowing scarves, folk dance, and *chastushka*. But the men in attendance are wearing newly made European-style suits and ties. In the kolkhoz scenes, the singing and dancing, independent of all fieldwork, are performed only on the village streets. Out on the steppe, by contrast, the music is synchronized with labor and production and the score tracks the path of the agrarian vehicles as the tractor drivers and harvesters sing their hearts out. The singing becomes an instrument of agrarian bounty and these scenes seem to be reversing a popular saying, as cited by Brezhnev: “Only let there be grain and the songs will come of themselves.”<sup>10</sup> An indoor dance is interrupted by a radio “performance” announcing super-worker competition winners, and the director’s monologue on his farm’s production achievements is applauded as in a play. If the kolkhoz songs recall a deeper past, the Virgin Lands singers draw on Komsomol and quasi-patriotic marches with the upbeat rhythms and four-square optimism of the great Stalin-era composer, Isaac Dunaevsky. The sovkhos director and Brovkin’s mentor converts him back into a Soviet-style taste for work not only with words and images of production victories, but by singing to him in—of course—a lovely bass voice, in the manner of the father in *La Traviata*. Joyful declamation has displaced the bittersweet longing of the “folk” idiom. In the final scene, the sadness of departing from the village has been overcome. The espoused couple stands on the train’s back platform and look happily into the looming distance as they speed along the track across the steppe. For them, *toska* for a fading world has given way to nostalgia for the future. “The virgin lander,” wrote Brezhnev years later, “is a historic figure and represents a heroic age.”<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

The marriage of epic and idyll is celebrated at many levels: the wedding scene that choreographs the disorderly and energetic folk dancing along a ruler-straight street laid out on the steppe; the accordions and birch twigs on the nuptial automobile; the return



of the hero to claim his bride and their journey back to the steppe on a train. Brovkin (played by Leonid Kharitonov) is a younger, more vigorous, more credible version of Bondarchuk's cavalier of the gold star, and his triumph more humane. *Ivan Brovkin* proclaims a kind of moral and cultural equality and coexistence between kolkhoz life, with all the cultural baggage it retained after collectivization, and the new sovkhos life with its clean bathrooms and electric lights. At the same time, it tilts the equation in favor of a new way of life, the product of youthful "storming" and wise planning of Kremlin elders. It voices a fond farewell to the old farm and announces the headlong rush to agrarian utopia. The film illuminates that moment in Soviet history between the relentless Stalinist exaltation of new over old that prevailed from 1928 until the mid-fifties and the exaltation of traditional village values which was now beginning in the works of village prose writers, film makers, and intellectuals of many kinds.<sup>12</sup> As for real entertainment on the ground in the Virgin Lands, Brezhnev mentions, almost in passing, that Lyubov Orlova and several other popular screen stars came there to put on shows in the manner of the troop entertainment brigades of World War II. But he was apparently more interested in the airplane hopping from site to site than in their performances.

The reader will note that the film ignores certain obvious historical aspects of its subject matter. In the spring and summer of 1954, some 300,000 Komsomols and other volunteers entrained eastward. The plan was to cultivate some 13 million hectares of soil. Within a few years, the campaign became an "agricultural and ecological disaster."<sup>13</sup> Film and press treatments largely glossed over the genuine hardships and shortcomings of the first phases of the Virgin Lands campaign that were generally known even at the time and have since been well-documented. Even the sugary memoirs of one of its chief organizers, Leonid Brezhnev, reveal more of the reality on the ground than does this film. The lack of amenities, the ferocious blizzards that enveloped the steppe and snuffed out the lives of the unsuspecting, the surliness of the locals, the inability of Soviet ploughshares to carve open the root-entangled sward of the ancient grassland—all this is missing in the film. Distortion comes also in the monochromatic treatment of the festive culture of the Virgin Lands. "Alongside the officially sponsored spirit, there arose an undercurrent of pure individualism celebrated in such songs as 'We Drink to the Malcontents, the Different Ones,' expressing what was probably the deepest layer of values among the young who were mostly apolitical—certainly not dissident but bored with the magniloquent words and gestures of the parent state"<sup>14</sup>—precisely the ones that dominate the film. Lev Kopelev recalled that, like other youth working far from home, "virgin-landers...put distance between themselves

and the ruling, 'industrially' standardizing civilization, the gloomy clichés of propaganda, and all kinds of cultural work done according to plan." No trace of this phenomenon appears in *Brovkin*, which played only to the positive. This can hardly surprise. Frontier life and construction invite romanticism in cinematic treatment: it makes for fun, audience appeal, and good ideology. The American boomtown, railroad, and oilfield epics of the 1930s are hardly different in this regard.

But very much present is the movie's obvious design as a mobilizing agent to recruit needed youth. The studio that produced it, the Gorky Central Studio of Children's and Youth Films in Moscow, specialized in combining targeting young people with a blend of moralist and socialist values. Women and especially physicians (combined in one character in the movie as in real Soviet life) were also objects of recruitment for the Virgin Lands campaign. In this *Brovkin* resembles the great construction epics of the 1930s, both documentary and fiction films. However, in the end, and in reality, women were the ones who sustained the home and the public services more than becoming heroines of the mechanical revolution in the fields. In Soviet iconology, the woman had long come to be identified with the countryside and thus with a relatively nurturing role in society (in spite of her prominence in the urban work force); the man with the city, the factory, the machine—and thus power.<sup>15</sup>

How well the propaganda of this film and in other media actually worked in creating genuine enthusiasm for the project is hard to know.<sup>16</sup> The numbers—even though gained by a combination of pressure for conformity and the still buzzing atmosphere of last years of the thaw—are impressive enough. Yet it seems that the most important element in this movie turns out to be—in the light of what came after—the ultimate failure of the epic. I refer not to the concrete failures of the Virgin Lands in agricultural output, but of the much deeper failure in subsequent decades of the entire epic project in Soviet life. Brezhnev's Baikal Amur Magistral program of the 1970s resembled the previous construction dramas superficially, but the old spirit of enthusiasm and the romance of construction, eventually soured and yielded a great breakup or divorce between rural and urban values and social life, as depicted so brilliantly and poignantly by the village prose authors. And so it is that the aesthetically inferior but popular film can sometimes unwittingly catch moments in a historical watershed.

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[www.units.muohio.edu/havighurstcenter/publications/documents/Stites06.pdf](http://www.units.muohio.edu/havighurstcenter/publications/documents/Stites06.pdf) as “[Draft 2] Virgin Lands. The Movie,” new title supplied by Richard Stites himself to Anna Lawton; re-formatting and footnote completion by Stefanie Tubbs and the editor.

## Notes

- 1 Richard Taylor, *The Politics of Soviet Cinema 1917-1929* (Cambridge, 1979); Denise Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society, 1917-1953* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000); Anna Lawton, *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). For parallel discussion of the other popular arts, see Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- 2 *Ivan Brovkin na tseline* (Gorky Studio, 1958), directed by Ivan Lukiinskii. Filmed on location at the Komsomol Sovkhoz in Orenburg Oblast.
- 3 L. I. Brezhnev, *Trilogy: Little Land, Rebirth, the Virgin Lands* (1978; Moscow: International Publishers, 1980) 231-398 (p. 244). Brezhnev, a Party official overseeing the program at that time, repeats the World War II and the Virgin Lands campaign throughout his memoir (pp. 249, 253, 297-98, 310, 329).
- 4 *Pozdravitel'naya otkrytka v Rossii (konets XIX veka–nachalo XX veka)*, ed. Yuri Kombolin (St. Petersburg: Trade House Konstantin, 1994).
- 5 Personal communication from Michael Rouland, a close student of Central Asian history and culture.
- 6 Brezhnev, *Trilogy*, 236, 247, *passim*. See Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), for the mentor figure in Soviet fiction.
- 7 Brezhnev, *Trilogy*, 321.
- 8 *Ibid*, 250, 266-67, 353, 380.
- 9 *Ibid*, 324.
- 10 *Ibid*, 233.
- 11 *Ibid*, 301.
- 12 *Ibid*, 374-75. For the wartime brigades, see Stites, “Frontline Entertainment” in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*, ed. R. Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 126-40 (or below here, 329-348). Al. Romanov, *Lyubov Orlova v iskusstve i v zhizni* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987) makes no mention of this episode.
- 13 William Taubman, *Khrushchev: the Man and his Era* (New York: Norton, 2003), 263.
- 14 Stites, *Russian Popular Culture*, 144-45 and 222 n. 28. Kopelev quoted in Gerald Stanton Smith, *Songs to Seven Strings: Russian Guitar Poetry and Soviet “Mass Song”* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 42.

- 15 See Gail Lapidus, *Women and Soviet Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) and Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- 16 Woll, *Real Images*, the best book on 1950s cinema in English, discusses *The Soldier Ivan Brovkin* (pp. 14-16), but not its sequel. She quotes (p. 149) a puzzling 1962 attack on quite another film, but endorsing *Ivan Brovkin*: "Everyone knows that when *Ivan Brovkin* came out, 25,000 tractor and combine drivers set out for the Virgin Lands territories. That's what the Party wants." Woll indexes the quote under *The Soldier Ivan Brovkin*, though the reference seems to be for the sequel.