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From Chapter V: Transition

THE ESTHETICS OF THE UGLY

Russian cinema can be proud of a rich tradition, and has had—still has—enormous talent at all levels of the craft. What's holding it back today? Where are the creative breakthroughs that would return the Russian public to their (improved) theaters to enjoy popular Russian films not made yesteryear—films, moreover, that might command global respect? Finances and the structure of the industry are obviously a problem, a terrific problem, but they are not the whole story. Judging by the films that overcome financial hurdles and do get made—often with foreign co-production assistance—Russian cinema is still in a transitional mode where gloom is, perhaps inevitably, the esthetic order of the day. And shoddy production values don't help.

The film curator and historian Naum Kleiman a few years ago called for imitating what he called “the healthiest reaction by a national film industry to a crisis situation.” He meant Hollywood during the Depression years, and he identified three genres for emulation—the socially critical films of Frank Capra, John Ford, and Mervyn LeRoy; comedies and musicals “which reminded people that life could also be funny and enjoyable, that they could pull through”; and historical films that described the past, instead of “consistently settling scores with it.” Mikhalkov, who stands with those pleading for patriotic (*otechestvenny*) cinema, had his own spin on the Hollywood model: “America walked out of its crisis thanks to its cinema,” which created a national myth people could identify with and strive toward. Soviet cinema did something like that, he said: “You may or may not like the ideology, but we created the image of a Soviet man and stuck to it.” Others have called for more *dobroe kino*, (“feel-good” film), more *svetlukha* instead of *chernukha* (a play on the Russian terms light and dark), while Dondurei deplored the collapse of film “as an instrument of social influence. The country is undertaking modernization and reform, yet not a single film has ‘voted’ in favor of reform...” A political party, the liberal Union of Right Forces, even put up \$120,000 in prize money for film and television scripts that would avoid *chernukha* and portray the country in a positive light.¹⁴

These are sound enough admonitions, but of what value are such shoulds and woulds and simple prescriptions? The Russians have had enough of external, top-down tutelage. No *ukazes*, from critics or other sources, guarantees good movies. Besides, I don't think there are any Russian Frank Capras or Howard Hawkses or Busby Berkeleys ready to hand (not even a Grigori Alexandrov). The Russian film ethos is an unavoidable, maybe necessary, reflection of the mood and condition of the country at large, and its disorientation. This also meshes with and reinforces what is perhaps an ingrained national disposition to the morose in art. Russian lightheartedness in film is, presently, at least, almost an oxymoron. There are attempts to replicate American commercial cinema, but even the best efforts only fall flat. Just compare

Alexei Balabanov's recent *The Brother* (1997), or Alexander Zeldovich's *Moscow* (2000), Tarantino wanna-be's both, to the real things. In the hands of lesser directors than Balabanov or Zeldovich, the results are even more embarrassing. Grigory Konstantinopolsky's *\$8½* (1999) is a garish example. *The Check*, directed by Boris Giller and Alexander Borodyansky (2000) is another failure in the same mode. More successful, but still clumsy and earthbound, is Vasily Pichul's latest effort, *Sky Studded with Diamonds* (1999). I'm afraid we have been witnessing the emergence of an unfortunate new genre, the Russian crime or the crime-cum-comedy film, with contorted plot-lines, where the special effects are tinny, the humor crude, very broad at best, and the constant resort to magic realist devices a sign of creative insolvency. Also unfortunate is the all-too-frequent attempt on the Russian side to explain away poor reception in the West as a cultural problem, as cognitive dissonance. "There are a lot of things that the Western viewer won't understand," said the "necro-realist" filmmaker Yevgeny Yufit in a recent interview. "He has different social stereotypes, for one thing. And he doesn't react well to the elements of black humor—that's something Russians find easier to swallow."¹⁵ That's very debatable. Admittedly, there is much a Western viewer might not understand about a Russian film (or any foreign film), but good films, including black humorous ones, share universal values that overcome local references.

The recent work of three of Russian film's greatest figures are more successful than those lame imitative efforts I have mentioned, but they also illustrate what might alienate film-going publics in Russia and abroad. Kira Muratova's *Three Stories* (1997) is a grim, very grim triad, three chilling chronicles of murderous crimes that go unpunished. Her recent *Second Class Citizens* (2000) is in the dark-comedy mode. Alexander Sokurov's *Mother and Son* (1997) is an aching melancholy elegy on nature and dying, rather distant and surreal.¹⁶ These are powerful films; we know that whatever the epoch or its conditions Muratova and Sokurov will go their own very personal way, but here the personal tonality coincides with the somber hues of the land. Maybe catharsis first, then laughter.

Alexei Gherman's long awaited *Khrustalyov, My Car!* (1998), almost ten years in the making, is certainly no laughing matter, and offers plenty of material for historical mourning and catharsis. In a chaotic, often incoherent cascade of cluttered scenes shot in high-contrast black-and-white, and delivered with high-octane editing, Gherman assaults the audience with his bleak vision of a horribly bleak Soviet period, the last days of Stalin. Included in Gherman's portrait of the death rattle is an agonizing rape sequence (of the male hero), and the very squalid end of the tyrant himself. Provincial life just after Stalin's death is conveyed from the laughter (some) and tears (mostly) of Valery Ogorodnikov's odd gallery of characters in his powerful *Barak* (1999; "Dedicated to Our Parents"). Contemporary provincial life is not much happier despite the director's more tender-hearted and lyrical ministrations in Lydia Bobrova's

In That Land (1997). The talented Balabanov showed his taste for the grotesque—one might say the Russian taste for the grotesque—in his very gothic *Of Freaks and Men* (1998), a kind of Slavic *Boogie Nights* minus the humor. Balabanov's sepia-toned and genteel St. Petersburg early in the century is the milieu for lust, voyeurism, pornography, and murder: highly stylized pre-Soviet *chernukha*, in idiosyncratic minimalist form suggestive of silent film. The illogic of nightmares, the experience of frustration and powerlessness—what we think of as Kafkaesque—is a natural subject for filmmakers in the arduous ambience of today's Russia, and Balabanov went into such territory with his evocative rendition of *The Castle* (1994).

No, such cinema is not likely to attract mass audiences, though they may garner cultish followings. But even recent films that have won domestic popularity and international recognition, Academy Award nominations no less, and one winner among them—Mikhalkov's *Burnt by the Sun* (1994, the Oscar recipient), Sergei Bodrov's *Prisoner of the Mountains* (1996), and Pavel Chukhrai's *The Thief* (1997)—even such films are not exactly cheerful romps. *Burnt* is a treatment of High Stalinism; *Prisoner* captures the passions and violence of the Chechen war; and *The Thief* is a well crafted retro melodrama that highlights the destructive and self-destructive exploits of a very smooth con-man of the 1950s (played by Vladimir Mashkov)—a film which concludes, incidentally, with the war in Chechnya. It's perhaps emblematic that the kids in all three films—Nadia in *Burnt*, Nina in *Prisoner*, and Sanka in *The Thief* all have more-or-less bad ends, unlike the finally happy Kolya of the Czech film of the same name that beat out *Prisoner* for the 1996 Oscar in the foreign language category.¹⁷ All three directors also displayed that other recent and regular affectation of Russian cinema, daubs of magic realism, something that turns up too in Vladimir Khotinenko's sprawling indictment of the brutalities of (once again) contemporary village life, *The Muslim* (1995).

It's hard to find a solid comedy offering from the Russians, though we know they have had the gift. Presently, when directors try their hand at comedy, there is always a dark underside, or the laughter is awash in tears. The sardonic and satirical seems the comfortable habitat of contemporary Russian directors, not the simply comical. Their intent is not to make us laugh, but to make us wince, whether they're kicking around old Soviet mores or jabbing at current realities. Alexander Rogozhkin's *Particulars of the National Hunt* (1995) comes to mind, a film that incidentally demonstrates the director's versatility, a welcome satirical contrast to two of his other recent works, *The Chekist* (1991) and *Living with an Idiot* (1993), both violent and ugly enough to make you turn your head away or close your eyes in some parts. The critic Oleg Kovalov's "optical poem," *The Gardens of Scorpio* (1991) is an ingenious compilation that weaves found footage into an old Soviet potboiler, yielding a cerebrally satisfying, if not a side-splitting put-on. Livnev's *Hammer and Sickle* (1994) is a brilliant parody of Stalinist culture and politics, very acerbic and clever, but also terribly gloomy. The present (post-Soviet, hence also anti-

Soviet) Russian fascination with absurdist esthetics can be self-defeating; comedy will surrender to intellect. Buñuel could bring it off, so might a new cinema-Gogol—Eldar Ryazanov came closest in the past—but there are none around. Farce and fantasy are also alluring for cinema, but hard to realize successfully. Labored situations and unfunny slapstick spoil Yuri Mamin's *Window to Paris* (1994)—too bad, for his earlier tweak at Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, among other targets, in his *Neptune's Holiday* (1986), showed real comedic flair—and they spoil Sergei Ovcharov's *Drumroll* (1993), for all of its Buster Keaton antics and enchantments. Otar Ioseliani's *Brigands, Chapter VII* (1996), is overly long, frequently tiresome, but interestingly contoured, an angry and mocking epic of human folly and violence from medieval times through Soviet *vlast*, and on to the sordid Uzi-and mafiosi-ridden present. There is material for laughter here, but the laughter wears a straight face and comes through clenched teeth, which is the way I imagine Ioseliani looks when he ponders the human condition. (Forgive me for using a Georgian, and one in Parisian emigration at that, not a Russian, to make my point.)¹⁸ Too often, solid efforts at comedy or melodrama are subverted by over-long descents into farce, as if directors took to heart Oscar Wilde's maxim that nothing succeeds like *excess*. Several recent examples come to mind, all well-made but over-doing it—*The Wedding* (2000) directed by Pavel Lungin, whose gritty-sad *Taxi Blues* (1990) enjoyed a theatrical run in the West; Vladimir Menshov's *Envy of the Gods* (2000; his popular *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* won an Oscar for best foreign film in 1980); and Vladimir Fokin's *House of the Rich* (2000). *The Wedding* is a dizzying portrait of good and bad folks in a mining town; ultimately, a simple Russian humanism triumphs over violence, corruption, and alcoholism—the stuff of most films about contemporary Russian life, for obvious reasons. *Envy* is set in the Moscow of 1983, when a Soviet fighter plane brought down a Korean passenger airliner, and brings out well some of the imagery of the period, from Ronald Reagan's "Evil Empire" speech to the repressive official attitudes that force people to watch *Last Tango in Paris* with conspiratorial secrecy. A brilliant performance by Vera Alentova (of *Moscow Does not Believe in Tears*) and a comical cameo by Gerard Depardieu are overwhelmed by banal scripting and contrived plot turns (a visiting Frenchman—played, unfortunately, by a Russian—unlocks the heroine's sexuality). *House of the Rich*, a longitudinal melodrama—different generations occupy a house from Tsarist through Soviet times, down to the present—has some engrossing historical sections, but also fritters away its substance, at great length, in farce. (Fellini has always been a powerful influence on the Russian film world.)

The Russians are presently doing best, it seems to me, in recovering their past. Not only are they good at getting details of costume and historical dramas down right, but there is the added *frisson* of taking old themes and giving them an anti-Soviet complexion, of telling the history as it could not be written or filmed in Soviet times. Such is the case with Alexander Proshkin's

colorful epic *The Captain's Daughter* (2000; based on Pushkin), about the violent (and violently crushed) Pugachev peasant rising of the 18th century, a painful reminder, the director has said, of the regular cruelties in the Russian experience. Add to this category Vitaly Melnikov's *Tsarevich Alexei* (1997), focusing on the tortured relationship between Peter the Great and his son, Alexei, conveyed with sympathy not for the tyrannical state-builder, but for his sensitive son. (For a comparison with a Soviet treatment of the same subject, see Vladimir Petrov's bloated, two part *Peter the First*, 1937-38.) I have not yet seen the most recent work of Gleb Panfilov, one of the most capable of Soviet-era directors, on the last Tsar and his family (*The Romanovs*, 2000), but he likely re-tells the story of Nicholas II from an anti-Bolshevik perspective, which may recall a standard Western treatment of the subject, Franklin J. Schaffner's *Nicholas and Alexandra* (1971), although I suspect Panfilov's is less hackneyed and more accurate. Also departing from Soviet conventions is Alexei Uchitel's *His Wife's Diary* (2000), a handsome and honestly told, Merchant-Ivory sort of rendition of pages in the life of Ivan Bunin, the first Russian writer to win the Nobel Prize. Bunin detested the new Soviet regime and ended his days in emigration. *His Wife's Diary* dwells on the *ménage à trois*, and other erotic complications, that developed in the author's circle while living in southern France. (Old Soviet-style attitudes die hard. Members of the state financing commission were reluctant to grant Uchitel funds on the grounds that a great writer's love life is not an appropriate film subject. From another universe came a different kind of obstacle: the French withheld co-financing because Uchitel didn't agree to their demand to star Omar Sharif as Bunin. The film was the official Russian entry for the foreign-language Oscar, but was not nominated.)

Sometimes I think that extra-esthetic considerations explain some of the unappealing mannerisms of recent films. They are overpopulated, for example—is it because directors want to write in parts for unemployed actors? They are also claustrophobic—is it because outdoor shooting on location or constructing elaborate sets is so much more expensive than grouping your cast around a kitchen table? Some extended research might clear this up, but the sense of overpopulation or confining spaces comes across in Vadim Abdrashitov and Alexander Mindadze's rambling *Time of the Dancer* (1997), Natalya Piankova's *Happy New Year, Moscow!* (1993), Sergei Ursulyak's *Russian Ragtime* (1993), and Boris Frumin's *Viva Castro!* (1993). The last is nevertheless a very vibrant (and sad) study counterpointing adolescents and adults in a provincial town of the 1960s.

There is something else about so many of the films I have mentioned, both the better and the worse—an absence of strong narrative. The films unfold not around a narrative axis or clear story line, or within a well-defined plot, but as a collage of scenes, as a series of situations with indeterminate resolutions at the end. At times, especially in those crime-comedy works described above, you get the feeling that scenes and situations are improvised from day to day

during production. Does this denote a certain indifference to scripting and structure in the strapped film industry of today, or does it flow from some mildly post-modernist impulse, augmented by a strong reaction-formation against the conventions of Soviet socialist realist esthetics? Or is it that, as the critic Mikhail Brashinsky has explained, storytelling in the usual sense is not in the Russian tradition; a story might be used for some ideological or moral purpose, but is not valued as such.¹⁹ This is not necessarily a bad thing. Visuals and characters in film can very well carry their own story and bring it to life without, as it were, narrative help, whether revealing past horrors (*Khrustalyov*), or exposing villagers drinking themselves to death (*In That Land*). Besides, the (many) characters that (over) populate these situations are often vivid, colorful, striking, sometimes even memorable, thanks in great part to the still superb acting talents of Russian screen performers, especially in ensemble work.

But overpopulation, even with talented actors and their vivid characters; claustrophobia; leaky plots and structures; and visual ugliness are not the stuff of an appealing, popular cinema, at home or abroad. "There is such a thing," said Yuri Mamin, "as the esthetics of the ugly. Life is not all about beauty. Vulgarity, chaos, and paradox are all part of our social life, and they prompt the visual solution." Similarly, to his critics who fault *Khrustalyov* for being "complex and frightening," Gherman answers, "no more than life itself."²⁰ Do Russian directors fetishize the ugly for their own expressive purposes, and as therapeutic mirrors held up to the ugly past and the ugly present?; or as I speculated above, are there less weighty reasons: They settle for ratty *mise-en-scène* to cut down on production costs?

Whichever, maybe both, Russian cinema is no dream factory today, or Republic of Entertainment. Not surprising: Remember, Russian filmmakers are in the Transition Period, not on *The Shining Path*.

Originally, a paper presented at the Conference, "Reimagining Russia: Cultural Transformations in Post-Soviet Russia," College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, April 4, 1998. Revised and published, Cineaste, Vol. XXVI, No. 3, Summer 2001. Special thanks to Maria Solovieva for research assistance in St. Petersburg. Jytte Jensen, Assistant Curator, The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film, Boris Frumin, and Anne Borin, Director, New York Expo of Short Films, shared their views on the current Russian film scene with me: Thank you.