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0521444756 - Russian Critics on the Cinema of Glasnost

Edited by Michael Brashinsky and Andrew Horton

Excerpt

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Introduction

*Michael Brashinsky and
Andrew Horton*

In 1978, long before this anthology (or, for that matter, *glasnost* itself) was conceived, a book titled *America on the Screen* appeared briefly on the Moscow bookstands. Published during the cultural vacuum of Brezhnev's stagnation, that book – a collection of American film reviews from the 1970s, reprinted (who knows if legally) from every major U.S. publication – was unprecedented and extraordinary. The movies critiqued in the book, *The Godfather*, *Cabaret*, *M.A.S.H.*, *The Exorcist*, *Scarecrow*, and *Catch-22*, among others, had never been seen (some were never even heard of) by Soviet audiences. Remarkably, it was not the films nor the film makers but the critics – Andrew Sarris, Richard Schickel, Rex Reed, and others – who became heralds of the American screen and, more remarkably, of the American culture and America itself to people who were not allowed to know. If Pauline Kael was feared on the Hudson, she was indeed trusted on the Moscow River.

Since then, the world has turned 180 degrees. Pauline Kael has retired. The USSR is no more. The country, its communist regime, its unelected leaders, and its old names have all ceased to exist. Yet one of the few things that remains unchanged is the unenlightenment of the two cultures about each other. This collection, limited to the cinema of glasnost and the last years of the Soviet Union, is intended to fill one gap. Once again, the film critics lead the way.

We have documented in *The Zero Hour: Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition* (Princeton University Press, 1992) how important cinema was to the Gorbachev period of restructuring, from 1985 to 1991, the year the Soviet Union finally dissolved. This present text is in a sense a companion to *The Zero Hour* for it covers the same time span but goes beyond the camera to focus on the role and reaction of Russian film critics to the shattering changes of the glasnost era. In the twenty-three assembled reviews and essays, some commissioned for this project and almost all appearing in English for the first time, we have attempted to bring the English-speaking audience an accurate picture of the scope and depth of Russian film criticism, written as history was being made on a day-by-day basis around the writers.

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These essays then, inevitably, are dispatches from the front, from the heat of the excitement, confusion, questioning, frustration, and reflection that is the essence of living through these times of sharp political, social, cultural, and personal change in Russia. None of the essays is weighted down by footnotes and references to Metz, Derrida, Foucault, and Baudrillard, or even Russia's own Eisenstein and Bakhtin; they reflect something more than intellectual speculations on film. They capture the spirit and the flavor of the times. And despite their differences of approach, each suggests the active engagement of a critic coming to grips with cinema in an age of shifting standards and values.

**“To scorch with words the hearts of men”:
The Russian critical tradition**

The engagement of the Russian film critics was clearly generated by Gorbachev's policy of glasnost. But on a deeper level, it is a product of the Russian critical perspective in general. To sketch roughly: It occupies a middle distance between what in the United States is seen as pop journalistic film reviewing and highbrow theoretical academic analysis. Soviet criticism covers a much more spacious area, one that spreads far beyond film, art, and even culture onto life itself.

The roots of such a perspective must be traced back at least to the first half of the nineteenth century, when literature, and criticism as an equal part of it, became a vital force in the social life of Russia. We should especially consider Alexander Pushkin (who, as Lev Karakhan's essay reminds us, defined the writer's mission as “to scorch with words the hearts of men”) and Vissarion Belinsky, the renowned literary critic of the 1830s and 1840s who influenced more than any other writer or rebel of that time both Russian culture and the democratic movement. Since then, a critic has been considered a judge, a teacher, a prophet, or even something of an anarchist, but nothing less. “Intervene in life, for you can change it” became the motto of Russian artists and critics. The critic came to be seen as a medium who should pose and answer basic questions of life and death for ordinary mortals.

In part, this tradition helps us understand why almost none of the essays in this book speaks in analytical detail about the cinematic qualities of the films. Rather, the unspoken center of attention is that of the forces – cultural, political, social – that have given rise to the film itself. Thus, Yuri Bogomolov and Alexander Timofeevsky are both concerned with the issues of democracy (and why it is not happening in Russia) while reflecting on, respectively, the popular genres and the cultural generations. From different positions, both critics arrive at the conclusion that an antiindividualist, collectivist mentality is the root of authoritarian rule.

The times of glasnost have only deepened this trend of general “exis-

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tentialist” analysis by assigning artistry to a back seat and bringing the search for truth to the limelight.

“The most important art”: The Soviet critical tradition

Along with the Russian cultural tradition, we must also look back at Soviet history, which since the late 1920s has been taming this tradition and succeeded, in fact, quite well. During Stalin’s and then Brezhnev’s epochs, criticism lost its literal meaning, as personal opinions were dangerously unwise. Criticism was converted into glorifying the “requisite” works and bashing “alien,” “harmful” ones, which usually meant death or repression to their creators. Besides the loss of dignity and sincerity, this policy brought about almost total amnesia concerning the basic aesthetic principles that are indispensable to any elementary criticism.

The result of such a Stalinist mentality was not long in coming: The dominant mode of Soviet criticism became “social problem writing,” as opposed to structuralism, formalism, auteurism, or any other “sinister ‘-ism.’” It is not that theoretical and close analysis of film did not exist in the Soviet Union; it is just that it was the exception, cultivated in academic circles, and not the rule. Yuri Lotman’s semiotic studies of cinema were clear examples of such an exception. But writing from Estonia rather than Moscow, Lotman geographically, as well as intellectually, made it clear that such an approach, one that American film theorists in particular would be more in sympathy with, is outside the Russian cultural mainstream.

Who makes this stream “main,” who fills this abyss between life and art, using the latter to discuss the former and splicing old liberal and new totalitarian concepts together?

Who’s who in Soviet film criticism

There is but one film school in all of Russia that awards film criticism degrees: the National State Film Institute (VGIK) in Moscow. But very few of the contemporary critics (including those represented here) are VGIK graduates.

Traditionally, Soviet critics have been writers who have turned to film, not students who chose the profession. At least for the last three decades, the two main sources that have provided the film industry with its dedicated card-carrying critics have been journalism and literary/theater criticism. The former’s attributes are precision and sharpness of style and perception. The latter equips critics with a broader cultural context. The weakness of both is the same – they come from outside film, not from a background steeped in love and understanding of film.

“Today, there are three generations of film critics in the USSR,” wrote

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the young Soviet critic Victor Matizen in his informative 1990 essay, "What, How, and Where Cinema Is Written About in the USSR." "The elder were brought up under Stalin, the middle-aged under Khrushchev and the younger under Brezhnev. The first consider cinema a business of the state and believe in the absolute values; the second consider cinema the public business, but also believe in the absolute; the third maintain that art is a strictly private business and rely on relativism."*

Since glasnost, the Stalinist generation has lost most of its members and influence. Conversely, the Khrushchevian generation (known also as "sixtiesniks," as it very much belongs to the 1960s) has been gaining under new social and political circumstances.

Khrushchev's rule was a time of great reevaluations and hopes, as well as of a renaissance in spirit and art. Poets cried out their verse on the squares and critics recalled the testaments of their nineteenth-century predecessors. But the movement soon failed. By reversing natural law, the thaw was relieved by frost. Some "sixtiesniks" became *apparatchiks*, some dissidents, others just struggled to retain their dignity.

The 1970s sneaked in surreptitiously. This black hole in time did not bear a new generation compatible with the previous one, but rather begat the youth: skeptical, cynical, and introverted.

Therefore, when *perestroika* started off from above, from the Party, the only real force able and willing to support it from below was the middle-aged generation, the "sixtiesniks." Perestroika gave them the last chance to apply their dreams to reality. Unfortunately, Khrushchevian ideals of "socialist democracy" had become hopelessly obsolete. Besides, a new generation of "glasnost kids" had emerged, having learned from their 1970s stagnant childhood to take nothing for granted. This generation was destined to tell their gurus that they have failed again, as Alexander Timofeevsky's sharp obituary to the "dads" does. This generation was also destined to shape public opinion in the chaos of postperestroika Russia.

If the "sixtiesniks" visionary attitude toward art is delineated in Lev Karakhan's essay "Jobless Prophets," their moralistic stand in criticism is largely a target of Timofeevsky's "The Last Romantics." The "sixtiesniks" assess film mostly from general existentialist frontiers. The new generation, if not aesthetic gourmets, are journalists who long to be postmodern connoisseurs. The "sixtiesniks" still tend to comment on films spiritually, placing them in a wide sociomoral context, to which the reviews of *The Commissar* (1967) by Maya Turovskaya, *Is It Easy to Be Young* (1987) by Lev Anninsky, and *The Days of Eclipse* (1988) by Victor Bozhovich are the brightest examples. Their younger opponents insist on examining aesthetics rather than ideology, as the essays by Tatyana Moskvina, Sergei

*Victor Matizen. "What, How and Where the Cinema Is Written About in the USSR," *Soviet Film*, Moscow, 7 (1990): 16–17, 26.

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Dobrotvorsky, Igor Aleinikov, Marina Drozdova, and Alexander Kiselev present. They, as Victor Matizen testifies, “need not to influence others, but to be individually free.”

Until glasnost, the “sixtiesniks” had all the grounds to utilize their non-formalist methods, inasmuch as Soviet cinema was largely shapeless and overrideologized (Mikhail Yampolsky’s opening essay, “Cinema Without Cinema,” elaborates on the subject). Since the late 1980s, however, the old tools proved useless to treat such playful features as *Assa* (1987) or *The Needle* (1988), which deal with cultural clichés more than with morals and problems. Hence one of the principles of assembling this collection was to preserve the actual balance between different perspectives but also to push them into “dialogue” and, often, into conflict with one another.

Magazine circles and journal squares

This conflict between generations as well as between individual critics will be seen as more dramatic if we point out that before and during glasnost there were very few venues where the critics could promulgate their ideas.

In 1990, no more than a dozen film journals and magazines were published in all of the USSR, most of them owned by the state and very few run by public organizations such as the Film Makers’ Union. A handful of general and literary publications gave some of their pages to film reviews.

Even when Soviet cinema became virtually decentralized, film criticism remained almost exclusively a Moscow-based phenomenon. This is not to say that film magazines and film reviewing did not exist in Kiev, Alma-Ata, Tbilisi, Riga, or Vilnius – major national film capitals. They existed indeed, but had no influence beyond their local level of consumption. Leningrad, the second largest city in Russia and once the cultural capital of the empire, had until 1991 no regular film publication at all.

The Moscow picture was less than encouraging. At the top of the small pyramid was (and remains) *Iskusstvo kino* (*The Art of Film*), published monthly since 1931 (and since 1989 by the Film Makers’ Union). As the thickest, most serious noncommercial journal, *Iskusstvo kino* with its 60,000 copies each issue was read, in the early stages of *glasnost*, by far more people than those reading *Cineaste*, *Film Quarterly*, *Cinema Journal*, *Wide Angle*, and *Camera Obscura* combined in the United States. During the late 1980s, the popularity of *Iskusstvo kino* even increased as the magazine, responding to the readers’ thirst for glasnost revelations, published sensational pieces from fields other than film.

Its regular departments would include:

The Present and the Screen. Discussions and essays on the current state of the Soviet film industry.

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World of the Soul (which first appeared in January 1990). Publications of previously unavailable or banned works by Russian and Western philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists, such as Berdyayev, Merezhkovsky, and Freud.

Cinema of the 1980s (or later, *the 1990s*). Reviews, interviews, and portraits of film personalities.

Theory and History. Studies of history and theory of Soviet cinema; reviews of the revival houses' favorites; memoirs and documents previously censored.

Selected Prose. Writings by Soviet dissidents or previously untranslated foreign authors, including Roger Vadim's and Gérard Depardieu's memoirs and Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby*.

Abroad. Festival reports, discussions, interviews, and foreign film reviews.

Plots and Facts. Documentary prose about the unknown pages in the history of Russian and Soviet culture.

A Screenplay yet to be produced.

The second leading film periodical, *Sovetskii ekran* (*Soviet Screen*; since 1992, understandably, known as simply *Ekran* "Screen") was always closer to what would be considered in the United States a slick magazine. During 1985–91, it published in one million copies, eighteen times a year, and had a definite pop, star-oriented, large-page, color-illustration layout. If not for its questionable printing quality, *Sovetskii ekran* could be called the Russian equivalent of *Premiere*. Many of its departments were dead ringers of *Premiere's* *Shot By Shot*, *In the Works*, *Short Takes*, and others. One important difference, however, was that the Russian top film lists were voted on not by the critics but by the readers.

The rest of the film publications, aside from a few "cultural" newspapers such as *Literaturnaya gazeta* (*Literary Gazette*) and *Sovetskaya kultura* (*Soviet Culture*) and a handful of thin and unpopular advertising editions such as *Sputnik kinozritelya* (*Filmgoer's Companion*), existed primarily for internal circulation either in academia or in the distribution network.

Critics, almost none of whom could ever afford to be a freelancer, and film buffs routinely complained that the arena for film criticism was as limited during glasnost as it was before. But what did general audiences think?

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Critical mass and the masses

In the preperestroika past, dusty magazines full of lies would pile up at the newsstands, unread and without even a future in recycling. With glasnost the picture has changed radically. To buy a magazine during the late 1980s, one often had to stand in line, as for food, clothing, and other necessities. The most liberal *Moskovskiye novosti* (*Moscow News*) and *Ogonyok* (*Little Flame*), a popular, *Newsweek*-like magazine, for example, sold millions of copies, which were never enough – a fact that suggests that the people saw these democratic forums as their voice.

Film journals and film criticism never did occupy such a high niche. But neither publications nor critics could avoid participating in the “glasnost race” – the race for social, political, historical, and not necessarily artistic, truth. The price they had to pay was the critical analysis itself. The reward, however, seemed much higher: From virtually no relationship with their passionate but unenlightened audience, the Soviet film critics suddenly found themselves back at Pushkin’s “ground zero”: More than ever engaged, now with the new freedom to accomplish the old mission, to scorch with truth the hearts of readers.

The first part of this collection represents the most popular genre of Soviet film criticism – “problem essays.” It signifies the latitude of critical reflection and the sharpness of questions the Soviet critics had to raise and solve for the audiences.

In the second half of this book, the films chosen as perestroika’s “top ten” movie hits represent the trends in reviewing as well as in the productions that came to be national social events, not merely artistic and commercial successes. As glasnost broke down barriers and allowed discussion of forbidden subjects, the films have become truly sensational, raising the stakes of their critiques. The films selected for this collection also reflect the range of topics that shook up Russian social quietude. Such topics included the guilty past (*The Cold Summer of '53*), state corruption (*A Forgotten Tune for the Flute*), the domestic mafia (*Assa*), drug abuse (*The Needle*), decay of the family (*Little Vera*), anti-Semitism (*Taxi Blues*), and the Afghan vet problem (*Is It Easy To Be Young?*).

After glasnost

This collection ends with the official withering away of the Soviet Union. But we have capped the Gorbachev era with Marina Drozdova’s polemic farewell to glasnost. Her evaluation of the confusion in the postperestroika, post-Soviet Russia reflects both the frustrations and the hopes for the future.

Since the end of the USSR, the enthusiasm for films that tell the truth and the flood of independent films that reached a level of about 400 fea-

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tures in 1991 appears to be over.* In 1992, fewer than a hundred feature films were made and few of those made it to the Russian screens, which have become crowded with cheap American, Indian, and European films.

With Russian cinema in complete disarray, what role will critics now play?

New film magazines suggest an answer. One of them, *Kino-glaz/Cine Eye*, picking up where the state supported multilanguage *Soviet Film* left off, makes an effort to reach out beyond linguistic and territorial borders with film news, reviews, interviews, and gossip published in Russian and English. The subtitle of the magazine – “art and business” – is misleading: There is not much art in it and plenty of business, mainly for export. With 30,000 copies per issue, *Cine Eye* has a decidedly commercial, “everything-for-sale” look and feel to it, not unlike a blend of *Variety* and *Premiere*. Although Soviet film magazines always carried photos of female film stars, the actresses represented in *Cine Eye* are blatantly more sexually alluring than in the past – and phone numbers, weight, and height are generously provided by the editors!

Another new periodical, the St. Petersburg–based *Seans (Picture Show)* takes an entirely different direction. Openly elitist and bohemian, it writes about David Lynch, postmodern mutants, deconstruction, and recent openings in the same cool and ironic tone that denotes fatigue of the disengaged and disillusioned postpolitical consciousness.

How does this new critical picture relate to the state of cinema?

The film voted Best Film of 1992 by 90 Russian critics was Nikolai Dostal’s *Cloud Paradise (Oblako-rai [1992])*. What won critics over was the absolute simplicity of the tale of a youth in his late teens who decides to do what nobody else in his tiny village has ever done: to leave the village. Gogol, Beckett, Buñuel, and Chaplin all cross paths in this finely wrought ensemble piece with no special effects, no gimmicks, no rock score, and no orgies.

Perhaps the 1990s without socialism and beyond the shambles of instant capitalism will allow some critics the chance to write with such lucid simplicity. They too may find not Aristophanes’ *Cloudcuckooland* but a critical *Cloud Paradise* in which they have the courage to leave their villages and strike out for new territory.

*See Michael Brashinsky. “Nyet And Da,” *The Independent*, New York (October 1992): 14–17. Also: Andrew Horton. “Russia,” *Film Guide International 1993*, ed. Peter Cowie, London: Hamlyn, 1992, pp. 324–9.

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[More information](#)**Cinema without cinema***Mikhail Yampolsky*

As I reread these notes, I fully recognize that not only *a typical Soviet film* but also *Soviet film* overall are categories far from a scientific definition. The films by various directors from different Soviet republics hardly can be measured by the same “yardstick.” We all nevertheless intuitively sense that in our film industry, some artistic standard has evolved that appears in some current films as well as in the film-thinking. This standard is shaped by several common cultural traditions and the peculiarities of the film industry and film education in the Soviet Union.

Particular to our cinema is the firm reluctance to divide film production into the two categories used widely abroad. Films in the West tend to either commercial or artistic quality, whereas between these opposites, there is a wide variety of cross-overs and also an obvious tendency toward commercialization of the artistic (even among such masters as Fellini).

Soviet cinema has an abundance of top-notch films, but truly entertaining films for general audiences are utterly weak, as these films are usually produced by second-rate film makers. This situation is easily explained by the fact that Russian and Soviet traditions, more than anything else, scorn popular culture.

The bulk of Soviet production is unappealing to both film buffs and ordinary film goers. From the regular viewer’s standpoint, Soviet film is a message to nobody. This paradox is reflected in the genre structure that, although it is quite astonishing, we have grown used to. Commercial cinema cannot exist without active participation of *regular* film genres. Our film industry is truly *genreless* and here it differs from other film industries around the world. However, we are accustomed to speaking of an “industrial film genre.” But a *genre* is an established formal mythic system that meets the viewer’s deep psychological needs through the stereotypes of perception. That is why commercial film abroad banks on the genre structure. Outside of commercial film, genre language and clichés serve as models for parody and subjects to various formal “inversions.”

In Soviet cinema, the “industrial film” is a sort of *genre* unto itself. Although it has its own specific mythology, it disregards the viewer’s interests and preferences, or, in other words, the viewer’s psychology. It is