The Reel Russia: Cinema and the Outsiders

The Havighurst Center at Miami University, April 1 - April 3, 2004

Panel 2: "Back in the U.S.S.R.", Friday 2 April, 2.00

Julian Graffy – "Coming to Watch, Coming to Fight, Staying to Learn: The Representation of Visits to the Soviet Union by Foreigners in Soviet Films, 1924-1935"

DRAFT

Russia and abroad:

The kind of 'otherness' being examined in this panel is very straightforward – the films we are looking at have a foreign protagonist. It is a commonplace of the study of Russian history, politics or culture to say that because of a widespread perception of Russian backwardness, Russians have always had a nervous desire to compare themselves and their culture with other countries, particularly those of the rest of Europe [is Russia part of Europe or not?] and the United States. The latter has provided a particular point of reference since both countries share an ambiguous attitude to Europe and both have the same vastness, large population and huge economic potential based on natural resources. Thus Russia was imagined as a 'New America' by the Symbolist poet Aleksandr Blok in his poem of that title of December 1913.[1]

Foreigners in pre-Revolutionary Russian film:

Russian film has also always been eager to draw comparisons between Russian / Soviet life and the life and attitudes of those who live beyond its borders, and in this context we are able to draw upon a very large range of cinematic material

[1] Blok, A. 'Novaia Amerika', Sobranie sochinenii v 8 tomakh, Moscow-Leningrad, 1960-1965, vol. 3, pp. 268-70.

consisting both of films set in Russia which have foreign characters in them and of films set abroad, including adaptations of Western novels and plays. As an addendum to this, the history of the carefully controlled importation of foreign films during the Soviet era also yields useful evidence. It both tells us how those responsible for running the Soviet film industry and specifically for the choice of films to import used this mechanism to construct an ideologically driven picture of Western life in the minds of Soviet viewers, and also how, perversely, those Soviet viewers managed to 'read between the lines' and use this material to give themselves some sense of what life outside the Soviet Union was actually like.

Film came to Russia in 1896, only months after the Lumière Brothers' films were shown in Paris, but it was a decade before there was native Russian production of acted films. Since all these first films were foreign and most of the subjects and the characters in them were foreign, film itself was considered to be a 'foreign' phenomenon. In this context it is not surprising that the first Russian producers wanted their studios to make films about Russian subjects and Russian history. What is conventionally called the first Russian film, Vladimir Romashkov's *Sten´ka Razin*, released on 16 November 1908, took as its subject the life of the Don Cossak who led a peasant revolt in 1670, capturing several towns along the Volga before he was defeated and taken to Moscow to be broken on the wheel.

Sten´ka has remained a central hero of the Russian popular imagination, so that it is entirely in keeping that he should be the subject of the first Russian film. What is interesting, however, is that the film does not show him and his men revolting. Instead it shows their 'forest revels', their epic drinking bouts, which evoke another key aspect of the Russian self-image. Sten´ka is also shown revelling with a captive Persian princess. Though they themselves are hardly model upstarts, the

rebels blame the princess for diverting their leader from the true path, and plot against her. Thus the first foreigner to be depicted in a Russian film is constructed as the quintessential 'perfidious jade' of European Orientalism. Race, gender, religion, dress, behaviour, all mark her out as Other, and her fate is sealed: in the film's final sequence she is thrown into the Volga. The mother of Russian rivers envelops the threat to Russian manhood.

Overall, however, the pre-revolutionary industry's eyes remained firmly directed on Russian characters and Russian themes with a small number of foreign characters, but it is perhaps instructive that in Evgenii Bauer's *Silent Witnesses* [Nemye svideteli], of 1914, the characters with foreign names, the Baron and Ellen, are represented as cynical and treacherous hedonists and adulterers.

Throughout the silent era, both before and after the Revolution, Western films continued to be widely shown and extremely popular in Russia. This provided a stream of images of western characters and western life and fostered cults of Western stars. The Russian industry had been thrown into chaos by World War and Revolution, and it did not re-emerge on any scale until 1924. Immediately it started giving its audiences pictures of foreigners, perhaps in conscious or unconscious contrast to the images provided by the repertoire of popular French, German and American films. Specifically it provided a subset of films whose plots told the story of a visit by a foreigner to the USSR and examined his or her reaction to this experience. Indeed, the Soviet industry's representation of foreigners becomes centred on their reactions to the Soviet system.

Coming to consciousness:

The phenomenon identified by Katerina Clark as 'coming to consciousness', widespread in the fiction and the films of the period, followed a model set by such

pre-Socialist Realist works as Maksim Gor´kii's novel *Mother* and involved an encounter between a character who is well intentioned but not ideologically 'conscious' and a mentor figure who can direct the character's energy in a politically conscious direction.[2] In the case of *Mother* the peasant heroine learns from the words and the behaviour of her politically conscious son, Pavel, and his friends.

The model was widely used in film, for example in such works about the collectivisation of the Russian village as Dovzhenko's *Earth* [Zemlia], Eizenshtein's *The Old and the New* [Staroe i novoe] and Medvedkin's *Happiness* [Schast´e] or the Civil War drama *Chapaev*, directed by the Vasil´ev "brothers" in 1934, in which the commissar, Furmanov, leads the commander, Chapaev, to a political understanding of the nature of the struggle he is involved in, and therefore to consciousness. This film was regarded by Boris Shumiatskii, the head of the Soviet film industry, as a model that Soviet cinema should follow.

Foreigners in Russian film: Mr West:

In April 1924 Lev Kuleshov's ***The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*** [Neobychainye prikliucheniia Mistera Vesta v strane bol´shevikov] opened in the Soviet Union. The hero, Mr West, whose very name announces the director's polemical intent, is the President of the New York YMCA, and is motivated to visit Moscow, as an intertitle tells us, by 'Yankee curiosity'. This is a very well known film of the period, and I do not intend to linger on it, but it is worth noting that both the character and his treatment in the film's plot set the model that later films would follow throughout the Soviet period. His experience, and that of the foreigners who follow in his footsteps, of coming to accept the rightness of the

[2] See especially Katerina Clark, The Soviet Novel. History as Ritual, Chicago, 1981, pp. 15-16, 21-22.

Soviet system, is a particular subset of the coming to consciousness identified by Katerina Clark. In the films of this type the first stage is to identify the protagonist as a foreigner, and in Mr West this is done in a spectacularly obvious way, with Mr West carrying a flag and wearing stars and stripes socks, but it is also crucial that the figure about to experience change is identified as a positive character, a character with potential – Mr West is shown to be kind and well intentioned.

Next his reactions to Soviet reality are tested. Gradually he comes to consciousness and understanding, and learns a political and personal lesson, making a choice that marks his acceptance of the Soviet Bolshevik way of life. At the end of the film he sends his wife the following radio message: "Dear Madge: I send you greetings from Soviet Russia. Burn those New York magazines and hang a portrait of Lenin in the study. Long live the Bolsheviks! Yours, John."

So the cinematic model of coming to understanding, acceptance, consciousness has been established. In fact, arguments still rage about Kuleshov's representation of Mr West, of the Bolsheviks and of the underworld gang he gets involved with, for Mr West is shown as gullible and naïve, innocent and malleable. This in fact is what makes him suitable 'human material' and causes both the gang and the Bolsheviks to try to manipulate him. But Kuleshov's (almost certainly ambiguous) intentions are in a sense irrelevant here. *Mr West* has set a model for other film makers to follow. In Iurii Zheliabuzhskii *The Cigarette Girl from Mossel´prom* [Papirosnitsa ot Mossel´proma], which opened in December 1924, a rotund American businessman, Oliver McBright, perhaps modelled on the caricatures of capitalists familiar to us from the cartoons of the revolutionary period and echoed in Sergei Eizenshtein's film *Strike* [Stachka], which would open the following year, is first seen teetering unsteadily down from his private plane on a mission to sell Russian women

his ready to wear collection. He then packs his many heavy cases into a carriage, à la Mr West, and, of course, when it tries to drive off the wheel comes off. His scheme, alas, does not meet with success.

Following the model: visitors from east and west

The model of the visiting outsider, from East or West, who comes to the Soviet Union, sees that it is good, and in most cases takes or sends the lesson back home, is widespread in the first years of the Soviet film industry. A political example of the genre, involving an encounter of a character from the East, is provided by Vsevolod Pudovkin's film *Storm over Asia* [*The Descendant of Chingiz Khan*] [Potomok Chingis Khana], released in November 1929. Set in the east of the Soviet Union during the Civil war, it tells the story of a Mongol trapper, Amogalan, who encounters a group of Red partisans. When the leader of the partisans dies from wounds he has received, he passes on a message to his group that they must be faithful to the legacy given to them by Moscow and by Lenin. This scene of ideological baton passing adds another dimension to the ritual of becoming Soviet, with stress laid on language and on a particular ideologically powerful word. When Amogalan is arrested and interrogated by officers of the British Intervention Forces, he proves that he has learnt his lesson by making a reference to Moscow and to Lenin. This knowledge is powerful enough to save his life and to stop him succumbing to the blandishments of the British, and at the end of the film he leads a rebellion against their power.

Protazanov's Tommi:

Among the many consequences of the coming of sound to Soviet cinema in the early 1930s was the possibility of developing the ideological message that films could convey. It is no coincidence that the first Soviet sound feature was Nikolai

Ekk's film *Ticket to Life* [Putevka v zhizn´], released on 1 June 1931, which is set in a children's labour commune and tells the story of their reclamation as worthy Soviet citizens. Exactly five months later, on 1 November 1931, Iakov Protazanov's ***Tommi***, was released. It is based on episodes from Vsevolod Ivanov's Civil War drama 'Bronepoezd 14-69' (Armoured Train 14-69), published in the journal *Krasnaia nov´* in 1922, episodes which, in the original story, recount the capture of an American soldier by a band of Red Army partisans and his ideological re-education.[3] The film alters the story to make the soldier a member of the British Intervention Force (the 'Tommy' of the title - the use of this name to suggest a typical British soldier is explained at the beginning of the film in an intertitle) and of his coming to proletarian consciousness.

Tommi opens with scenes of a forest under thick snow. This snowy landscape will recur throughout the film, not only as its setting, but as a metaphor both for Russia and for the arduousness of the task the partisan heroes have to achieve. The men are engaged in dragging a captured cannon through the snow in order to get it to headquarters so that it can be used by the Red Army. In the film's first episode one of the men is crushed under the cart on which the cannon is being carried, a motif of heroic sacrifice that is common in films that follow this model. Another man, Vas'ka, who will later play a crucial part in persuading the British soldier of the wrongness of the Intervention, is told to take his place. The men occupy an abandoned church and from its watchtower they see that their path is blocked by a British base, another example of the symbolic use of landscape. The British, identifiable by their smart

[3] Vsevolod Ivanov's 'Bronepoezd 14-69' first appeared in Krasnaia nov´, 1922, 1. For a recent assessment of the episode of the capture of the American, see Daniel E. Collins, 'The Tower of Babel undone in a Soviet Pentecost: a linguistic myth of the first Five-Year Plan', Slavic and East European Journal, 42, 1998, pp. 423-43 [p. 430]

uniforms, which are unlike the rough clothes of the partisans, and also by the fact that they seem very keen on drill, block the path across ‘gorbatyi most’ [hunchback bridge]. When one of the Red soldiers knocks against the bell in the bell tower, he is heard by the English sentry, who thus know that the Reds are about.

Following the model set by Mr West, the next sequence identifies the British soldiers and, in this case, also shows their own subconscious sense that their presence here is inappropriate, expressed through a yearning for home.

TOMMI – EXTRACT 1: Identifying him as the foreigner. The Union Jack and singing the British Army song.

A Chinese trader, Sin Bin-U, sells sunflower seeds to the Whites and notices that there are many English about. A White officer asks for cocaine, and when the Chinese tells him that there is none, he kicks his basket over, thus [there is a similar episode with a White officer and his batman in Chapaev] preparing the way for the Chinese to defect to the Reds.

The partisan commander reads his men an order from Revolutionary Headquarters to deliver the captured cannon and ammunition to the Fourth Regiment at all costs, since the regiment is going to go on the attack the following day. When one man wonders how they can manage to do so with ‘merikantsy’ all around, another retorts that it is ‘absurd’ for partisans to be afraid of the English and that they have to resist the capitalists, interventionists and bourgeois. As in Gor´kii’s novel *Mother*, the source of this structural model, the rhetoric deployed is that of class and internationalism, not of nation. They determine to respect the order by going through the virgin land of the woods and across a bridge over the river.

Meanwhile, British officers, who look remarkably similar to the ones in *Storm over Asia*, speak in a mixture of English and poor Russian about the British army

being in charge, while the Orthodox priest who has already been shown giving them information looks on. This is followed by a scene of Tommi, wounded and ill, back in the barracks, playing the accordion and looking pensive. After this he is seen on sentry duty and in a flashback he reminisces about life back home working in a steel works. The harsh treatment of the workers by the bosses in this scene, the arduous labour and the injury to one of the men are reminiscent of Eizenshtein's *Strike*. These scenes serve, as in the other films and novels of the period, to show that he possesses the positive qualities that will make it possible for him to find the true path and pass the series of tests that will bring him to understanding.

While he is plunged in thought Tommi is captured by the partisans and the Chinese, blindfolded and taken off to the main partisan group. Here he is called a devil and a bourgeois lackey. The Chinese reports on the many Englishmen and the White officer who lie in their path. A woman calls Tommi 'satan' and there is another flashback to the arson and killings inflicted upon villagers by the Whites, followed by calls for Tommi to be killed. But Vas´ka, now the partisan leader, meets Tommi's gaze and realises that there is 'human material' that can be saved here. It is notable that the two men are physically similar, and Vas´ka will perform the role of mentor. 'Pogodi ubivat´', he calls, 'Wait before you kill him'. Vas´ka's alternative plan is for Tommi to be propagandised', 'upropagandirovat´'. The men are certain that he will not understand and amused at the prospect of hearing Vas´ka speak 'American', but Vas´ka is determined that Tommi will learn 'Bolshevik truth' and eager to persuade him that it is wrong for the British working class to fight against Russian workers and peasants. The introduction of the sound film had, of course, destroyed the internationalism of cinema, but Protazanov uses the soldier's inability to understand Russian in the service of the film's narrative in a moving and sometimes comic way.

TOMMI – EXTRACT 2. Tommi fails to understand.

Vas´ka has tried to explain that the Russians Tommi has encountered are all peasants and workers, and that it is therefore wrong to kill them. But despite his best efforts Tommi has failed to follow this, perplexedly announcing 'I don't understand!', and provoking a response from the partisans of 'He doesn't understand Russian. The poor fellow!'. Vas´ka thinks that perhaps a picture would do the trick and the Chinese goes off in search of one. The men are determined to waste no more time and to finish Tommi off, but Vas´ka insists: 'No, he will understand. If only I could… find the word… a real word… Lad… you explain to your people there that it is not a good idea to destroy our land…' But once again Tommi fails to understand. The pressure to kill him mounts and the men begin to disperse, but again Vas´ka is insistent and this time he realises that he has found the word that will bring understanding.

TOMMI – EXTRACT 3. Tommi understands.

So the magic word Lenin unlocks Tommi's brain, and his coming to consciousness is followed by an intertitle quoting Lenin's words that 'We conquered the entente because we removed from them the workers and peasants dressed in soldiers' uniforms', words which exactly echo the plot of the film. The men are delighted, and at this point Sin Bin-U returns with a biblical painting of the story from Genesis of Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac as an angel looks on. With help from the Chinese, Vas´ka interprets the picture. The man with the knife (Abraham) is the bourgeois. The man who is tied up (Isaac) is the proletariat. The angel, who helps the bourgeois, is 'An American woman, an English woman, a Japanese woman… all that scum of Imperialism.'

The Chinese repeats the lesson and Tommi latches on to a word he has understood, Imperialism. So Vas´ka tells him to go home and tell his friends to send

all the bourgeois and the scum of Imperialism to the devil. At this point Tommi goes beyond mere understanding to affirmation, announcing, somewhat ungrammatically in a mix of languages – he has miraculously learnt a bit of Russian - that 'I am proletariat. Imperializma… doloi!', for which assertion he is kissed and embraced. The use of the word proletariat is itself indicative of Tommi having learnt an ideological lesson. The Chinese repeats the lesson of Internationalism, insisting that there should no longer be individual national republics but one class republic.

TOMMI – EXTRACT 4. The lesson of the painting.

The film's final sequences contrast the corruption – and bad Russian - of the British Entente officers with Tommi's participation in the successful delivery of the cannon across the bridge. He watches the heroic efforts of the partisans and tears the braid from his English army cap badge. In a symbolic composition, Russian, Chinese and Englishman combine in heroic endeavour, while the men sing of Chapaev and his legendary exploits. In a device used in several of his films by Pudovkin, snow melt heralds the coming of spring. The film ends with another quotation, this time from Kliment Voroshilov, who in 1931 was Commissar for War and the Navy, about the readiness of the Red Army to defend the Soviet frontiers, thus showing the continued relevance of the film's concerns for the present.

1930s versions:

So the well intentioned Tommi learns an ideological and moral lesson, and in so doing learns a little Russian and the lexis of international Marxism. The plot structure applied here was used repeatedly in films throughout the Soviet period. In Boris Shpis and Rokhl Milman's film *The Return of Nathan Becker* [Vozvrashchenie Neitana Bekera] [Nosn Beker Fort Aheym], released a year later, at the end of 1932, the returnee is a Jew whose family had emigrated to the USA before the Revolution

and who comes back to the Soviet Union to help build Magnitogorsk. The story of Vsevolod Pudovkin's *The Deserter* [Dezertir], released in September 1933, begins in the Hamburg docks. The hero Karl Renn is too fearful and inconstant to continue to support a strike by dockers and gets himself included on a workers' delegation to the USSR. But he, too, learns his lesson through observing the life of Soviet workers, realises that he has been evading responsibility and, in a new twist to the master plot, returns to Germany and the conflict, in which, in the film's final sequence, he pays the ultimate sacrifice.

Perhaps the most important example of the genre is presented in Grigorii Aleksandrov's 1936 film *The Circus* [Tsirk], which is the subject of the paper presented on this panel by Professor Josephine Woll. Here, too, the plot is constructed around the path to understanding of the sympathetic foreigner. Here, too there is comic play upon the inability of a foreigner to understand Russian (and, for Western audiences, comic play on hearing Russian actors speak 'English'), and much stress is laid upon the Russian verb 'ponimat´', to understand.

Later developments:

The trope continued to be used in films throughout the Soviet period, being applied to such groups as the fellow-travelling journalists discussed in the work of David Caute[4], and later to Russian émigrés coming back in search of their roots. By 1979, when the country had begun to open up to the outside world, Georgii Daneliia made fun of the foreign visitor in *Autumn Marathon* [Osennii marafon] the tale of Andrei Buzykin, a Russian intellectual already worn down by the demands of wife, mistress, work, and quite incapable of coping with the energy exuded by his jogging Danish colleague, Bill Hansen. By 1990, the idea of westerners coming to the Soviet

[4] David Caute, The Fellow Travellers: A Postscript to he Enlightenment, London 1973; David Caute, The Dancer Defects, Oxford, 2003.

Union in search of political enlightenment was almost ludicrous, yet Nikita Mikhalkov could still find mileage in the trope in his film of that year *Hitchhiking* [Avtostop], in which a world-weary Italian drives through Europe to snowy Russia, where he gives a lift to a heavily pregnant woman. Realising that it is too late to get the woman to hospital, he joins her husband in helping her to give birth in the snow. Stunned by the couple's stoicism and interpreting it as a manifestation of the Russian soul, he decides to effect a reconciliation with his own family and telephones his estranged son.

Reversals:

In the late and post-Soviet cinema, the trope is reversed.

One mechanism of reversal is to take the Russian hero abroad. In *Urga. Territory of Love* [Urga. Territoriia liubvi], a film made in 1991 by the same director, Nikita Mikhalkov, the Russian lorry driver hero, unable to find work in the Soviet Union, is forced to become a guest worker in Mongolia. Here he witnesses a new alliance between East and West, effectively expressed in a symbolic scene in an Ulan Bator discotheque, an alliance which excludes the Russians and their currency of tawdry Lenin badges.

A second way of reversing the trope is to bring an outsider to Russia but make what he finds there less than edifying. This is the model used in Aleksandr Rogozhkin's hugely popular comedy *Peculiarities of the Russian Hunt* [Osobennosti natsional´noi okhoty] of 1995, in which a young Finn joins a Russian hunting trip only to find that almost the only activity engaged in on the trip is heavy Russian drinking.

Régis Wargnier's *East-West* [Vostok-Zapad] made in 1999, is set in 1946. Though the film has a French director and its two female stars are French, it is

otherwise made by Russians. It tells the story of a French woman who follows her Russian husband back to USSR at the end of the Second World War, only to find that she has made a journey to hell. The film concludes with the self-sacrifice of the hero in getting his wife and child out of this torment. But in yet another reversal of the model, made by a Russian director who in his recent films has pandered to wounded Russian patriotism, Aleksei Balabanov, in his *Brother 2* [Brat 2] of 2000, sends his hero, Danila, to the USA. The New York he finds is totally Russian, while Chicago is inhabited almost entirely by venal Black pimps and gangsters. In the film's final sequence Danila saves Dasha, a bald, exploited Russian prostitute, and take her home to Russia to the sound of the famous Nautilus Pompilius song 'Goodbye America'. In Balabanov's 2002 film, *War* [Voina], the weedy English hero John has to learn in lesson in male toughness from his Russian friends [both of these films were discussed by Professor Tony Anemone in his analysis of Balabanov's vigilante heroes presented at this morning's panel of the Symposium].

Postscript:

That the basic model, of Russian directors structuring a film around the visit of a foreigner to Russia and his reactions to the experience, is still capable of yielding fruitful insights, into Russia, into Western perceptions of Russia, and into Russian reactions to those perceptions, is, of course, apparent from the discussion around Aleksandr Sokurov's 2002 film *Russian Ark* [Russkii kovcheg]. The debate about Russia's otherness, or about perceptions of Russia by those whom Russians perceive as 'other', is far from over.