UNDER THE BIG TOP: AMERICA GOES TO THE CIRCUS

Josephine Woll

Two outsiders penetrate the utopian Soviet world depicted in Grigory Alexandrov's 1936 film, *The Circus*. One, Marion Dixon, is American, though she has been literally driven out of the American heartland by stone-throwing racists. The other, Franz von Kneischutz, becomes her manager, after she lurches breathlessly onto the train that will carry her away from the lynch mob and tumbles into his arms, clutching her blanketed bundle. Even before we know his name, we know he is German: though he is reading an English-language newspaper, his first words to Marion are "Was wollen Sie?" After a spin of the globe, we find them in Moscow, ready to perform the "Flight to the Moon" in the Moscow circus, and the rest of the film details their experiences in the USSR.

Both Marion and von Kneischutz, then, begin as outsiders to the Soviet Union. But by the end of *The Circus*, their stances vis-à-vis Soviet society diverge radically. Marion sheds her outsider status to become a part of the Soviet collective, proudly marching in the May Day parade. Von Kneischutz has been neutralized, extruded from and rendered entirely irrelevant to the society whose values he never understood, even as he spurned them contemptuously.

"Other," *чужой*, implies its opposite, свой, the entity or group or society whose values constitute the norm against which the "other" is defined. So before exploring the specific nature of "otherness" personified in Marion Dixon and Franz von Kneischutz, we need to understand the *свой* that Alexandrov depicts in *The Circus*. The film intends the circus, both its behind-the-scenes world of manager, performers, crew and even animals

and its on-stage world in performance with an audience, to represent the values and composition of Soviet society, a synechdoche much like the grin of the Cheshire cat. Alexandrov exploits the entertainment potential of his genre exceptionally well, presenting ideological messages in a mixture of comedy, musical and melodrama that amused, engaged and pleased viewers then and still does. Those messages, packaged in *The Circus* so appealingly, are familiar indeed, part of the bundle of quasi-political, quasi-mythic patterns that consistently characterize official Soviet culture of the 1930s, both "high" and popular culture.[1]

Свой

So who and what constitute the *свой* in *The Circus*? First of all, the *малая семья*. The world of those who work under the big top is a symbolic family, its round ring visually appropriate for an apparent absence of hierarchy. Theoretically the circus director is boss – as he suggests when he embraces the hero Martynov or, much later, Marion, "in the name of the Главное управление…" or when he vehemently refuses to allow a "talking dog" act in the ring. But his sputtering irascibility highlights rather than disguises his good nature, and his relationship to other characters is far more egalitarian than his job might imply. He consults Martynov as a peer if not indeed as a supplicant, when he beseeches Martynov to devise a Soviet equivalent to Marion's "Flight to the Moon." The performers, his nominal subordinates, due for a rehearsal at 10 AM, keep him waiting two hours; his daughter Raika pretends to bow to his paternal power but – no less adroitly than any daughter in French neoclassical comedy – does whatever she wants with him. Toward the end of the film, to kill time until the bruited "Flight to the Stratosphere" can begin, the director performs a unicycle number along with his crew

members, all of them superannuated circus performers who perfected their creaky act decades earlier. Despite their age, they work together cheerfully – if with increasing exhaustion - for the good of the circus.[2] Even the "talking dog" act triumphs, sneaking onto the ring while the director tears out his hair backstage – so much for his authority! And during the lullaby scene director stands level with manager/announcer, the two men happily united in their approval of what they see. Though he has but one biological daughter, the circus director regards with paternal affection nearly everyone else, especially Ivan Petrovich Martynov and, eventually, Marion Dixon.

The close-knit geniality of the circus performers' малая семья includes animals too: the seals who propel the globe on their snouts, the monkey itself taken aback at the shot it fires, the goose that obligingly gives up a feather so the director can sign a document, the elephant who tenderly nudges Marion in the hay, even the cowardly – if fearsome - lions with whom Skameikin is trapped. Skameikin himself, though his roving eye follows any and every pretty girl, is the most innocent sort of lecher, and he willingly puts his skills as a builder at the service of the circus. Like Skameikin, Martynov, Raika and the others happily dedicate themselves to the greater glory of the circus/state, demonstrated by their commitment to create the "Flight to the Stratosphere," superior in every way to the "Flight to the Moon."

Martynov himself exemplifies all the qualities of a socialist realist positive hero, slightly humanized by love: what Turovskaia calls "целомудрый монах в полувоенной форме."[3] Despite his occupation, which hardly calls for a uniform, he wears one, and he enters the film with a display of skilled marksmanship, both links to the military forces that defend the USSR. He displays the determination of the Stakhanovite and the derring-

do of those other heroes of the 1930s, the polar explorers, the crews of ice-breakers, the pilot Chkalov. The film consistently associates him with technological innovation, what Katerina Clark has called the "romance of machines," so valorized during the First Five Year Plan; yet – in line with the shifting emphases of the mid-1930s – he remains in control and ultimately triumphs over gravity itself in the "Flight to the Stratosphere," circling the big top in his flight suit and aviator's helmet. Outstripping the capitalist "Flight to the Moon" in its audacity, its technical skill, its sheer ostentation, the Soviet "Flight to the Stratosphere" promises triumph in other international rivalries.

Martynov demonstrates no less facility as Marion's instructor, a role perhaps even more important ideologically than his circus подвиг. Standing next to her at the piano in her opulent suite at the newly-built Metropol hotel - a source of pride for Soviet viewers - Martynov teaches Marion the words to the "Song of the Motherland." The camera frames them in full frontal shot, Martynov just enough taller than Marion to reinforce his superiority, his square face and high forehead a physical manifestation of his integrity, clarity and dedication. Patiently he enunciates the crucial words of the song, a tuneful paean of praise to the values of *свой* and to the collateral values enshrined in the Stalinist Constitution of 1936,[4] and Marion instantly learns them, her voice "increasingly loud and confident, […] blending with the strong, pure voice of her beloved."[5] Her eager mastery is, however, still superficial: she does not trust the song's sentiments enough to reveal her secret to Martynov, instead drowning out her baby's crying with a crashing elaboration of the song on the piano.

The song itself emphasizes Soviet egalitarianism (Нет для нас ни черных, ни цветных), its freedom (Я другой такой страны не знаю,/ Где так волньо дышит

человек), its superiority to other systems (И никто на свете не умеет/ Лучше нас смеяться и любить) , its ability to protect itself from inimical outsiders (Но сурово брови мы насупим/ Если враг захочет нас сломать./ Как невесту, родину мы любим,/ Бережем, как ласковую мать!) It celebrates the extension of those values already exemplified by the *малая семья* of the circus family to all of Soviet society.

Alexandrov reserves his portrait of the *большая семья*, Soviet society itself, for the climactic lullaby scene. Before von Kneischutz slinks out in defeat, he attempts to climb the steps alongside the seats to retrieve the little boy. Both official and unofficial Soviets prevent him. Official protectors, two uniformed men, stand up to block him, joined by a solid wall of civilians ranged against him – the movie's equivalent of the border guards so exalted in the mid-1930s. (At the February 1936 Plenum of the Writers' Union, as Katerina Clark mentions, a border guard was marched into the auditorium, to the applause of the audience and praise of the plenary speakers, and marched out again.[6]) As he backs away in incomprehension, two armed men, also in uniform, make sure he exits the stage. Unofficial protectors, ordinary Soviet citizens enjoying the delights of Soviet achievement, circus-style, demonstrate equal solidarity as they pass the child from one set of cradling arms to another. The filmmaker carefully constructs the baby-brigade to showcase individuals of different ethnicities, as demonstrated by both their distinctive physical features and their various languages. Men – father-figures comparable to the director – dominate the scene visually, as the camera pans from Slavic faces to a beak-nosed type from the Caucasus, a Central Asian, a tender Jew, a black sailor – the latter framed together with a white wife or girlfriend, a triangle with the child at its apex. The audience, itself a microcosm of Soviet дружба народов, exemplifies vaunted Soviet

values of cohesiveness, inclusiveness and tolerance as it generously welcomes the baby and his mother.

Чужой

Although initially an outsider, and certainly a foreigner, Marion conforms to the paradigm of socialist realist heroes or more often heroines, who begin in ignorance and/or innocence and progress to knowledge and understanding, under the tutelage of a seasoned and experienced mentor. In Marion's case she arrives in Moscow scarred by her American experience and pinioned by what she believes to be the inevitable cost of her "mistake," social ostracism if not actual physical threat. She learns otherwise: from Raika, from Martynov, from the audience at the circus.

In fact Marion joins a roster of cinematic "outsiders" of the 1920s, foreigners who – as in the title of Julian Graffy's presentation – "come to watch, stay to learn." Whether initially suspicious of the Soviet Union, like Mr. West, or simply curious about it, like Aelita, these outsiders eventually become enamored of the Soviet state's patent advantages. In the films of the 1920s, outsiders were not, by definition, enemies, and many in fact became friends. Enemy-status was reserved for compatriots: White Army officers, remnants of the pre-Revolutionary bourgeoisie, recalcitrant kulaks.

By the 1930s, the scene had changed. While the spectrum and quantity of domestic enemies had grown exponentially, the international political situation did offer potential menace, with the rise of fascism to the west and Japanese militarism to the east. *The Circus* borrows from both realities to create a clear dichotomy between the sympathetic stranger, Marion Dixon, and the deceitful, unscrupulous enemy, von Kneischutz. In Marion's case, sexual attraction triggers her enlightenment. Marion's skill

and talent impress Martynov, who tosses Skameikin's bouquet to her as she circles the tent, and Martynov's pictures, spilling out of the suitcase misdelivered to Marion's dressing room, intrigue and impress Marion. But romance immediately takes a back seat to ideology; this love is chaste and de-eroticized.

Once underway, Marion's shift from outsider to insider progresses rapidly; love and learning go hand in hand. After the first "Flight to the Stratosphere" attempt fails, and Martynov crashes to the circus floor, Marion caresses him. She has assimilated native custom so quickly that she calls him by his patronymic, Petrovich, a sign of both acculturation and intimacy. Although shame about her past, and fear of exposure, compel her to follow von Kneischutz out of the circus arena, she rejects his impassioned pleas in her hotel suite. [CLIP] He offers California and sunshine; she retorts that she wants to stay in Moscow. He jerks off their hangers clothing worth "thousands of dollars," all of which he bought "for you, Mary, for you." "The Mary you bought them for is no more," she proudly replies. Earlier, Marion pulled off her black wig to reveal her blonde hair, a stark visualization of the opportunity Moscow gives her to reveal her true self. By the time she rejects von Kneischutz in the hotel, she has shed much of that alien skin. Indeed, when Kneischutz roughly points to the baby's kinky hair and black skin, Marion retorts that "they" will forgive her – "they" meaning the citizens of her new home.

Her hope that Martynov will, indeed, forgive her past emboldens her to take the risk of openly declaring her love, in a letter that propels the plot for the rest of the film. But when von Kneischutz proclaims her secret to the circus audience, residues of fear and shame send her running to the wings, to weep into a bale of straw. She emerges, under Martynov's sheltering arm, only when the audience has demonstrated its absolute, unified

acceptance of the baby. Even then, she asks the circus manager what it all means, giving him the chance to declaim that "in *our* land" all children are loved, all children are precious, black, white, pink, purple or polka-dotted.

The director's explanation nearly completes Marion's enlightenment, though full transformation requires the transition from consciousness to action, here presented via the dissolve from the circus into Red Square, from the dark robe that Marion shrugs off to raiment of bridal white, from cowering under Martynov's shielding arm to standing straight, head up, shoulders back, stomach in. Only then, when Raika asks Marion, "Теперь ты понимаешь?," can Marion finally answer wholeheartedly, "Теперь я понимаю!" She joins thousands of members of the joyously marching большая семья, an image that in turn dissolves into a lengthy and extravagant celebration of Soviet military and ideological power, superimposed images of banners adorned with Marx, Lenin and Kirov; row after row of synchronized …, tanks and …, all enhanced by the repetition of the "Song of the Motherland," which by now the theater audience has mastered as well as the characters and can hardly help but join in singing.

The other outsider, von Kneischutz, both diametrically opposes Martynov's virtues and totally lacks Marion's potential for conversion from outsider to insider status. He blends the physical features of the moustache-twirling villain of silent melodramas with the ruthlessness of a fairy-tale ogre and the ideological beliefs of several categories of enemies of the Soviet state. Typically, in films of the 1930s, action set in Siberia or the Far East involve Japanese spies who manage without difficulty to find local saboteurs with whom to conspire, while films set in central Russia link Soviet saboteurs with Germans. Von Kneischutz's interspersing of German phrases reminds us of his

nationality, while his views on racial purity and the sin of miscegenation partake more or less equally of Nazi ideology and American racism, Klan variety. Germany's menacing militarism finds symbolic expression in the row of torpedo-shaped objects behind which von Kneischutz crouches in the hotel room. His absorption of American materialism also contributes to his belief that everything has a price tag, as we have seen with his crude equation of buying clothes for Marion and buying Marion.

Like nearly all the domestic enemies who received public attention in the 1930s, von Kneischutz is adept at disguising himself and his real feelings and intentions. His physical strength is illusory, as the inflation of his otherwise puny chest with a pneumatic pump attests, and his psychological domination of Marion, at first so effective, proves equally illusory. His deceptions may be trivial – he smilingly accepting Skameikin's flowers before contemptuously tossing them into the gutter. But the trivial deceits are simply part and parcel of a malignant mendacity directed against the circus itself, and by extension the Soviet Union. He pretends to commiserate at the failure of the "Flight to the Stratosphere," but he caused it: determined to prevent the success of the Soviet circus act in rehearsal, he plied Raika with cake so she would gain weight and cause the imbalance in the cannon shot. Von Kneischutz's heavy-handed flirtation can seduce only a girl as innocent, if willful, as Raika.

The notion of foreigners entrapping loyal but naive and misguided Soviet citizens was all too common currency in the 1930s and 1940s, and made its way onto the screen in several films. But perhaps the best example of the psychological evolution from disbelief to acceptance occurs in Lydia Chukovskaya's novella *Sofia Petrovna*, written within two years of the Terror. Her main character, the excruciatingly naïve eponymous

heroine, learns of the shocking arrest of the director of the publishing house where she works and can't believe the news. Her friend, Natasha, more politically savvy, helps her see the light:

> Natasha took a carefully folded newspaper out of her old briefcase. […]
>
> "Understand, my dear, he could have been seduced," said Natasha in a whisper, "a woman…"
>
> Sofia Petrovna began to read.
>
> The article recounted the case of a certain Soviet citizen, A., a loyal party member, who was sent by the Soviet government on a mission to Germany to study the use of a new chemical. In Germany, he fulfilled his duties conscientiously, but soon became involved with a certain S., an elegant young woman who professed to be sympathetic to the Soviet Union. [After S steals important documents] A. had sufficient courage to break off with S. immediately but not sufficient courage to tell his comrades about the disappearance of the documents. He went back to the USSR, hoping by his honest work as a Soviet engineer to atone for the crime against his homeland. For a whole year he worked peacefully and was already beginning to forget about his crime. But hidden agents of the Gestapo, infiltrating into our country, began to blackmail him. Terrorized, A. handed over to them secret plans from the factory at which he worked. […]
>
> "Do you understand?" Natasha asked in a whisper. "…Our director is, of course, a fine person, a loyal party member. But citizen A., they write here, was also a loyal part member at first. […] They say our director has been abroad…" (40-41)

Typically, the party responsible for foiling the enemy's plans and stripping his mask away is an ordinary Soviet citizen who follows his suspicions to find the truth. At that point the NKVD, coming as if from nowhere, takes over, and the saboteur/enemy simply disappears. *The Circus* wholly conforms to this pattern. When von Kneischutz makes one last attempt to present his worldview – that miscegenation is a crime against civilization - the united collective of the circus audience laughs with good-natured derision. To his bewildered question, "Why are you laughing, ladies and gentlemen?" the director states the obvious, "What should we do, cry?" Von Kneischutz sinks into his collar and exits, his departure ensured by the two armed and uniformed men who follow behind.

Where he goes, what happens to him become quite irrelevant. The focus returns to Marion, now emboldened to return to the ring, and to the final montage. What Mamatova writes about this pattern generally pertains perfectly to *The Circus*: "By the end the saboteur [вредитель] is completely forgotten, all memory of him supplanted by the spectacle of the violent exultation of simple people at their major victory in the workplace. The massive repressions of the 30s were difficult to square with any understanding of legality, so the film viewer was not encouraged to consider what awaited the saboteur – trial or extra-judicial punishment. The sentence, naturally, remained secret as well."[7]

What endows Alexandrov's portrayal of the *свой/чужой* dichotomy in *The Circus* with particular piquancy is the way in which the film's mélange of comedy and melodrama manipulates quasi-official, quasi-mythic patterns and renders them palatable, indeed appealing, not only to Soviet audiences of the 1930s (and 1940s and early 1950s)

but, seventy years later, to American audiences. I want to conclude by quoting at length what Richard Stites wrote about the divergence between what he called "political" and "expressive" worlds in the Soviet Union of the 1930s:

> If one views the popular culture of the 1930s only as an immense mask of an engine of fraud, then no further analysis is needed. Those who interpret the function of mass culture in purely ideological terms are inclined to read it as simply an imposed system of mystification. Common sense and evidence belie such a reading. […] In many realms of culture […] there is no necessary contradiction between fraud, deceit, and manipulation on the one hand and authentic popular enjoyment on the other. The violation of reality, the call for suspension of disbelief, the assault on plausibility are central to popular genres, even "realistic" ones. When people read or watch something that is palpably untrue […], they do not "believe" it; they do or do not enjoy it. But they do not "disbelieve" it either: they look for a core of truth inside the art they consume, whether or not it is objectively true. And a core of truth indubitably existed for millions of people in the popular culture of the Stalinist 1930s.[8]

Audiences in the 1930s derived pleasure from *The Circus* in large part because of the values they identified as their own, values obviously superior to those espoused by the representative of an alien, hostile world. Those values – tolerance, egalitarianism, acceptance, unity - should defeat those of von Kneischutz and his ilk, and of course they easily do. [A bit more will follow]

Endnotes

[1] Of particular relevance: Rufus Mathewson, *The Positive Hero in Rusian Literature*; Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*; … ; and essays by Maia Turovskaia, Lilia Mamatova, and Liliana Mal'kova in *Kino: Politika I liudi (30-e gody)* (Moscow: Materik, 1995).
[2] See Clark, 115-17
[3] Liliia Mamatova, "Model' kinomifov 30-ykh godov," 62.
[4] According to the venerable conservative film critic Rostislav Iurenev, Martynov inspires in Marion "a keen awareness of that great, strong, and kind country where people live joyfully and freely." Cited by Moira Ratchford, "*Circus* of 1936: Ideology and entertainment under the big top." In ? p. 88
[5] Ibid 90.
[6] Clark 114.
[7] Mamatova 66.
[8] Stites 95-96.