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CINEMA OF THE THAW 1953-1967

Alexander Prokhorov

Ironically, the era named the Cold War by the West, Russians titled the Thaw. The Russian name of the period comes from the title of Il'ia Ehrenburg's 1954 novel, the publication of which signaled a change in Soviet cultural politics after Stalin's death. In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev denounced the cult of Stalin in his Secret Speech at the Twentieth Party Congress. Because literature served Soviet culture as its most authoritative form of artistic production—and the most informed of new directions the Party was adopting—changes in literature translated into new cultural policies in other art forms. Cinema was by no means the first to experience the cultural Thaw, both because film production required a greater investment of time and resources and because, despite Vladimir Lenin's famous dictum that cinema was "the most important of all arts," film art stood below literature in the hierarchy of Soviet arts.

While Stalin's death usually marks the beginning of the Thaw era in Soviet culture, historians identify several key events that marked the end of the Thaw in the mid-late 1960s. In 1964 Nikita Khrushchev's colleagues in the Party leadership orchestrated a palace coup, voted him out of office and declared a change in the USSR's political course. In a symbolic gesture, Leonid Brezhnev restored the Stalin-era title of General Secretary of the Communist Party, the title he held for the next eighteen years. In 1966, the KGB arrested Andrei Siniavskii and Yuli Daniel for publishing their prose abroad and expressing in it views that differed from officially approved ones. The trial of writers for their aesthetic and political beliefs brought back traumatic memories of Stalin-era show trials. In 1968 the Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia and deposed the reformist government of Alexander Dubček, who had sought to build "socialism with a human face"—a socialist society that respected human rights, embraced freedom of the press and





Fig. 75. Il'ia Muromets

political pluralism. While these events created an oppressive atmosphere in Soviet society, I would like to argue that, in Soviet cinema specifically, the political clampdown started with the creation by the KGB's newly appointed chief Yuri Andropov of the Fifth Main Administration for Ideological Subversion (1967). The First Department of this Administration was responsible for policing the Soviet artistic intelligentsia, filmmakers among others. By the mid 1970s, this new KGB unit and the Ministry of Cinema (Goskino) had established very close state control over the minds and deeds of Soviet filmmakers.

The last years of Stalin's rule came to be known as the time of cine-anemia (*malokartin'e*), the sharp decrease in film production due to strict ideological control over the industry and relatively low financing of film production and exhibition. After Stalin's death in 1953, the industry received more resources and was decentralized. While in 1951 only 9 feature films were released, by 1967 the industry produced more than 130-150 films per year.¹ Studios adopted new technologies and began producing widescreen films with stereo soundtracks. In 1955 the first movie theater with a wide screen and stereo equipment opened in downtown Moscow. On 16 November 1956 *Il'ia Muromets*, the first widescreen feature film, premiered at the Khudozhestvennyi movie theater (Fig. 75).

¹ Sergei Zemlianukhin and Miroslava Segida, *Domashniaia sinemateka. Otechestvennoe kino 1918-1996* (Moscow: Dubl' D, 1996), 6.

Three directors, Ivan Pyr'ev, Mikhail Romm and Sergei Gerasimov, introduced key changes into the production of films, the ideological climate in the filmmakers' community and training of the new generation of filmmakers. In 1954, Pyr'ev became the head of the Mosfilm Studio. Following Hollywood studio models, he divided Mosfilm into production units. Led by artistic directors, these units received a degree of artistic autonomy and no longer were required to report every office supply purchase to the Central Committee and industry authorities. Pyr'ev's decentralization of Mosfilm provided the blueprint for other Soviet studios.

Pyr'ev hired and mentored young filmmakers who became industry leaders during the Thaw and beyond. Having realized that the industry needed "fresh blood" and that VGIK (the State Film Art Institute) did not provide a sufficient number of cinema professionals, he established his own filmmakers' school at the studio in 1956. The school became an independent institution of higher learning, VKSR (The School for Scriptwriters and Directors) in 1960. It provided a second degree in filmmaking for professionals who already had a university degree and who wanted to work in the film industry. Among Pyr'ev's students and protégés were the famous film directors Grigorii Chukhrai, Alexander Alov and Vladimir Naumov, Eldar Riazanov, Leonid Gaidai, Georgii Danelia, Igor Talankin and many others.

Mikhail Romm led a workshop at VGIK that trained a new generation of filmmakers, including Andrei Tarkovsky, Andrei Konchalovsky, Vasilii Shukshin, Nikita Mikhalkov and many others. These filmmakers reintegrated Soviet cinema into the global art cinema community in the 1960s and 70s, after its virtual isolation during Stalin's rule. Romm's colleagues at VGIK, Sergei Gerasimov and Tamara Makarova, trained many actors (Nonna Mordiyukova, Galina Pol'skikh, Nikolai Rybnikov) and directors (Sergei Bondarchuk, Lev Kulidzhanov, Tat'iana Lioznova, Kira Muratova) who filled the new positions in the growing film industry. While heading one of the creative units at the Gorky Film Studio (the second biggest studio in Moscow), Gerasimov was the studio's de facto director and helped his students to begin their careers. At his studio he allowed Alexander Askol'dov to make *Commissar* (1967).



And after the Central Committee banned the film and ordered the destruction of all the film stock related to the “anti-Soviet” picture, Gerasimov personally saved the negative of Askol’dov’s masterpiece.² The worldwide screening of *Commissar* during Gorbachev’s Perestroika signaled the demise of state censorship in Soviet cinema.

In 1957, Pyr’ev and Romm established the Organizing Committee in charge of establishing the Filmmakers’ Union. While the creation of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934 led to greater state control of the authors under Stalin, the same move during the Thaw established the guild that provided film industry workers with increased autonomy from the state and party institutions in charge of film production and censorship. With its transitory title and fluid structure, The Organizing Committee existed from 1957 until 1965 and was in tune with the ambiguities and contradictions of Thaw culture. When in 1965 the filmmakers finally established their Union, the organization became more bureaucratic, anticipating the ossifying stability of the Stagnation era.³

In the 1950s and 60s the film press became an important presence in Soviet popular culture. Until 1953, the only Soviet film journal in print was *Art of Cinema (Iskusstvo kino)*. Under Nikita Khrushchev

² Interview with Irina Shilova (Pittsburgh 1999). There seem to be various candidates for the role of saving *Commissar* from the flames. I chose this story as one less commonly told. Evgenii Margolit indirectly confirms Shilova’s account. He notes that Gerasimov mentored Askol’dov and *Commissar* was produced in the studio unit led by Gerasimov. The director supported both the film and its author as well as he could (“he took an active and sympathetic interest in the fate of the film and its author,” 44). In 1975 Gerasimov and Rostislav Pliatt wrote to the Central Committee of the Communist Party requesting the release of the film and the rehabilitation of its director. Neither the fate of the film nor that of Askol’dov changed after this desperate attempt to restore justice. For further information, see Evgenii Margolit, “Askol’dov, Aleksandr Iakovlevich,” in *Kino Rossii. Rezhisserskaia entsiklopediia*, Vol. 1, Ed. Lev Roshal’ (Moscow: NII Kinoiskusstva, 2010), 42-44.

³ Notably, before the Union of Filmmakers was established in 1965, The Central Committee of the Communist Party removed from the Union’s Organizing Committee the independent and outspoken Pyr’ev. Pyr’ev was a problematic figure for the Party and artistic establishment because he constantly challenged the status quo.

the nature of the Soviet film press changed dramatically. While still funded by the state, *Art of Cinema* became a journal for the intelligentsia and filmmaking community to discuss matters of cultural politics. In 1957 a veteran of the 1920s constructivist movement, Solomon Telingator, redesigned the cover and layout of the journal. The first 1957 issue opened with a new section titled "Round Table" in which critics and filmmakers discussed their professional concerns. At this first round table, Sergei Iutkevich encouraged his colleagues to begin thinking about cinema as art, implying that previously cinema had served primarily as a vehicle for state propaganda. In 1959 *Art of Cinema* published Viktor Nekrasov's article "Words Great and Simple" that compared two trends in Soviet cinema: the epic (read Stalinist) and the anti-monumentalist. Nekrasov called for the cinema to represent human experience, rather than that of great leaders. The article became a manifesto for anti-Stalinist filmmakers, just as six years earlier Vladimir Pomerantsev's article "On Sincerity in Literature" had become an anti-Stalinist manifesto for Soviet writers.

In the same spirit of return to the lively cultural life of the 1920s, the fan magazine, *Soviet Screen* (*Sovetskii ekran*), was revived to address and elicit responses from average moviegoers. The magazine not only informed viewers of new films, but also published viewers' letters, and even allowed them to vote on the most popular films of the year. This dialogic model was a major departure from the one-way-street cultural policies of the Stalin era. *Soviet Screen* had the layout of a western-style magazine, with large color publicity photos of Soviet and international stars. In 1957 Sovexportfilm began publishing a cinema magazine, *Soviet Film* (*Sovetskii fil'm*), in English, French, German and Spanish to target international moviegoers. Not surprisingly, Vladimir Pozner Sr.,⁴ a former Hollywood executive, used his expertise in setting up these new film magazines.

⁴ Vladimir Pozner Sr. was born in Russia. After the Revolution his family moved to Europe. In France he worked for the European division of MGM. After the Nazis occupied France, he moved to the US, where he worked in the Hollywood studio system and headed the Russian Section of the film department of the US Department of War (1943). Pozner was a communist





Fig. 76.
The Dorm Room

Soviet Screen's color publicity photographs had a tremendous impact on the everyday life of Soviet people. They began decorating their apartments and dorm rooms with photos of film stars. To create a 1950s atmosphere in *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (*Moskva slezam ne verit*, 1979), director Vladimir Men'shov chose photographs from *Soviet Screen* for the walls of dorm rooms as the most memorable feature of the period's interiors (Fig. 76).

In the 1950s Soviet cinema renewed contacts with other national film industries and international film markets. In the last years of Stalin's rule the USSR began importing Indian films. Indian melodramas, such as the 1951 *Awaara*⁵ (starring Raj Kapoor), captured the imagination of Soviet moviegoers by their exotic settings and overtly melodramatic plots catering to popular tastes, instead of the tastes of the Soviet film censor. Cultural authorities were happy to collect high revenues for these relatively inexpensive imports. In the 1950s the Soviet Union also imported genre films from France and Italy. During the Thaw, Soviet filmmakers began

sympathizer and at the beginning of the Cold War had to move first to East Germany and later to the USSR. During the Thaw, Pozner Sr. played a major role in the destalinization of the Soviet film industry. See below.

⁵ In Russian the film was titled *Brodiaga* (*Tramp*).

making co-productions, first with the countries of the Eastern Bloc and later with India, France and Italy.

In the second half of the decade, festivals of Italian and French cinema allowed viewers in Moscow and Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) to discover Italian neorealist cinema and, later, cinema of the French New Wave.⁶ The first “Week of French Cinema” was held in October 1955 and the “Week of Italian Cinema” was held in October 1956. The key event in the process of reintegration of Soviet cinema into international film culture was the revival of the Moscow International Film Festival in 1959.⁷ The festival occurred biannually until the fall of the Soviet Union and alternated with the other Eastern Bloc film festival in Karlovy Vary. The on-and-off scheduling of the Moscow Film Festival was in tune with the Thaw’s seasonal rhythms: temporary warm winds of cultural openness followed cultural freezes, only to be followed again by new, albeit brief, periods of liberalization of the cultural climate.

⁶ Italian Neorealism (ca. 1942-52) rejected fascist middle-class melodramas (the so-called “white telephone” films), instead striving to confront audiences with the gritty reality of poverty and unemployment in post-war Italy. Neorealism eschewed literary adaptations, emphasizing slices of everyday life. Non-professional actors were preferred, along with natural dialogue and even regional dialects. A documentary style dominated, including location shooting (rather than studio work), natural light and hand-held camera. Rossellini’s *Roma, città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*, 1945) and De Sica’s *Ladri di biciclette* (*The Bicycle Thieves*, 1948) are classic examples of the movement.

French New Wave directors acknowledged their debt to Neorealism. The New Wave movement of the late 1950s-early 60s emphasized the primacy of the auteur, the *mise-en-scène* and contemporary discourse, while rejecting classical narrative, seamless editing and the use of star actors. The New Wave sought a sense of spontaneity, preferring location shooting, fast editing, including jump cuts and unmatched shots, and the avoidance of establishing shots. Examples are Truffaut’s *Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*) and Resnais’ *Hiroshima mon amour* (both 1959).

⁷ The Moscow Film Festival opened in the newly built Shockworker (Udarnik) movie theater in 1935. Sergei Eisenstein was the president of the Main Competition Jury. The major prize winners were the Vasil’ev Brothers for their feature *Chapaev* (1934), René Clair for *The Last Billionaire* (1934) and Walt Disney for his animation films.



Originally the festival had one first prize. Soviet cultural administrators tried to award it to the Soviet film and this was usually the case. During the third (1963) festival, this led to a major scandal. In the wake of Soviet advances in arts and technology, especially Sputnik and the launching of the first manned flight into space in 1961, the festival attracted many major stars. Federico Fellini brought his new film *8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)*, and the jury led by Grigorii Chukhrai decided to award the first prize to Fellini's film. However, Party authorities pressured the jury into awarding the prize to the socialist realist feature about innovative methods of gas pipeline construction *How Do You Do, Baluev! (Znakom'tes', Baluev! dir. Viktor Komissarzhevskii, 1963)*. In protest, international jury members threatened to leave the festival. Eventually, with Nikita Khrushchev's blessing and despite the fact that he fell asleep during the screening of Fellini's picture, *8 1/2* received the first prize. After the controversy over the award, which Soviet authorities perceived as a fiasco, the decision was made to award three first prizes: one for a Soviet film, one for a western film and one for a third-world feature. Arguably, this non-competitive model removed suspense from the competition and signaled the coming of the period of stability and status quo, which Gorbachev-era commentators would call the Stagnation era.

Stylistically and ideologically, two historical events were at the center of most politically significant films of the era: The October Revolution and the Great Patriotic War. During the last years of Stalin's rule, both events became absorbed into the monumental biography of the Great Leader and Father. After 1953, the story of the October Revolution morphed from the story of how Lenin prepared the arrival of the true leader, Stalin, into the tragedy of a self-reflexive protagonist torn between personal desires and responsibility to the communal cause. Often such a story takes a tragic turn when a woman has to sacrifice a child, her beloved, and even life itself for the community. Semen Freilikh's article about Grigorii Chukhrai's film *The Forty First (Sorok pervyi, 1956)* carried the telling title "The Right for Tragedy" and announced the new approach to the story of Soviet origins.

In the best films about the Revolution, the tale of a tragic protagonist falling for the cause and larger community was carefully intertwined with the narrative of the nuclear family that experiences the revolutionary upheaval. The narrator with whom the viewer was supposed to identify can be a son of the tragic father figure and the contemporary of the viewers. The most successful film about the Revolution and Civil War made according to this blueprint in the 1950s, *The Communist* (*Kommunist*, Iulii Raizman, 1958), follows this family melodrama structure and effectively implicates the individual viewer in the myth of the Revolution as the story of a family overcoming the challenges of modernity.

A similar narrative structure appears in the Thaw adaptations of Shakespeare's tragedies released at the time: *Othello* (*Otello*, Sergei Iutkevich, 1956) and *Hamlet* (*Gamlet*, Grigorii Kozintsev, 1964). These films deal metaphorically with Soviet society's rethinking of its revolutionary past and the intellectual's role in it. When they watched the Danish prince declaiming his soliloquies, Thaw intellectuals (or the "people of the sixties," as they called themselves) felt themselves sons and daughters of the tragic hero who preserves his or her individual integrity and confronts those who claim that everyone should conform with the rules of Elsinore.

By the 1960s, the ideals of the Revolution as the Soviet intelligentsia understood them included the right of the individual to express one's own opinion and reservations about sacrificing the individual either for the cause of the state or the social class. Notably, even films about Lenin made in the 1960s portray the leader of the Revolution as an incarnation of this intelligentsia's ideals (*Lenin in Poland*, *Lenin v Pol'she*, Sergei Iutkevich, 1966). After Innokentii Smoktunovskii played Hamlet in Kozintsev's film, the actor was asked to play Lenin as a self-reflexive, tolerant intellectual in two pictures about the October Revolution, *On the Same Planet* (*Na odnoi planete*, Il'ia Olshvanger, 1965) and *The First Visitor* (*Pervyi posetitel'*, Leonid Kvinikhidze, 1966).

Just as the Revolution and, especially, the Civil War became reinterpreted as tragic experiences, the way White Army officers and soldiers were represented was changing too. They ceased being one-dimensional villains and became complex and often tragic

characters. Lieutenant Govorukha-Otrok from Chukhrai's *Forty First* was the first complex White Army character in Soviet cinema; by the 1960s, the White officer, a decent human being who serves the wrong cause, had become a stock character of Soviet cinema. Given the Russian predilection for melodramas with unhappy endings, films about doomed White officers became popular with moviegoers and altered popular memory of the October Revolution. Notably, by the late 1960s major Soviet stars coveted the roles of the White anti-heroes, not the positive Red heroes. For example, in the 1968 feature *Two Comrades Were Serving* (*Sluzhili dva tovarishcha*, Evgenii Karelov), the rising star of Soviet cinema and theater, Vladimir Vysotskii, received the role of lieutenant Brusentsov. After several tragic turns of the plot involving stunning horses and beautiful women, the White Army officer chooses to put a bullet through his forehead instead of emigrating from his beloved Russia.

In the late 1950s the myth of the Great Patriotic War started taking shape and would soon overshadow the story of the October Revolution as a myth of origins. Denise Youngblood notes that late Stalinist films about the Great Patriotic War celebrated it "as national triumph, but the war as national tragedy remained virgin territory for directors."⁸ During the Thaw, war films visualized an event that defined the Soviet people as a community and implicated individuals in the story of national tragedy and triumph.

In the films about World War II filmmakers began experimenting with film form and taboo topics. In their narration and style, Thaw filmmakers chose three main directions: (1) reviving the traditions of the 1920s avant-garde, (2) incorporating neorealist aesthetics into their film style and (3) depicting the war through the lens of art cinema narration. Mikhail Kalatozov and his cameraman, Sergei Urusevskii, revived the constructivist tradition of the 1920s in their *Cranes Are Flying* (*Letiat zhuravli*, 1957) and won the *Palme d'Or* at the Cannes Film Festival, the only one thus far in the history of Russian cinema. Marlen Khutsiev in *Two Fedors* (*Dva Fedora*, 1956),

⁸ Denise Youngblood, 117, in *Further Reading*.

Chukhrai in *Ballad of a Soldier* (*Ballada o soldate*, 1959) and Bondarchuk in *Fate of a Man* (*Sud'ba cheloveka*, 1959) also embraced the neo-realist tradition. Their films played a major role in the destalinization of Soviet cinema but had only relatively modest success at international film festivals because Neorealism was over as an artistic movement in Europe by the time Soviet filmmakers engaged with this tradition. At home, however, these pictures constituted an essential part of Russo-Soviet collective memory of the war.

Soviet art cinema filmmakers of the 1960s used war as a pretext to practice modernist cinematic narration, i.e. episodic structure, focus on the individual character (often via her or his dreams and fantasies), self-reflexive uses of cinematic form, symbolic rather than realist linkage of images. Such films as *Ivan's Childhood* (*Ivanovo detstvo*, Tarkovsky, 1962), *Peace to Him who Enters* (*Mir vkhodiashchemu*, Alov and Naumov, 1961), *Clear Skies* (*Chistoe nebo*, Chukhrai, 1961) and *Wings* (*Kryl'ia*, Larisa Shepit'ko, 1966) subvert many commonplaces, not only of Stalinist but also of neorealist cinema. For example, neorealist films depict the child as the epitome of innocence, not implicated in the crimes of the past (fascism in Italy and Stalinism in the Eastern Bloc countries). In contrast, the child hero in *Ivan's Childhood* has a unique vision of the world because of his trauma. This child, however, promises no redemption. Tarkovsky's masterpiece can be read as a film polemicizing with the neorealist tradition and examining the issues of visual narration and commemoration from a position similar to that of Alain Resnais in *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959). Soviet art cinema films about the war invent a new hero—one who is estranged from traditional social institutions, such as the family, work community, military unit, or society at large. Not surprisingly, many Soviet art cinema films about the war were censored and had only limited domestic distribution. These films, however, gained critical acclaim at international film festivals and restored the prestige of Soviet cinema on the international festival circuit.

While historical-revolutionary and war films of the Thaw revised the key political myths of Soviet culture, the film comedy legitimated private life. Comedies broadened the limits of the permissible and visualized previously taboo sides of Soviet life:

the domestic sphere, individual desire, the anarchic body and socially disruptive behavior (alcoholism, street violence, private entrepreneurship and even sexual aggression). Often a film that belonged to a serious Soviet genre, such as the historical-revolutionary film, would include comic episodes or secondary comic characters who introduced taboo themes. For example, in *Probation Period* (*Ispytatel'nyi srok*, Vladimir Gerasimov, 1960), a film about Soviet secret police agents fighting for the Revolution, the positive hero is paired with a comic foil. The lead character (played by Oleg Tabakov) follows the socialist realist maturation plot. In the course of the film, the protagonist overcomes his excessive humanity towards the enemy and turns into a ruthless Cheka agent emulating his senior colleagues. His partner (played by Viacheslav Nevinnyi) is a comic foil who erroneously models himself on western dime novel private eyes, instead of emulating Soviet secret police role models. Nevinnyi's character animates the boredom of the socialist realist tale. While viewers approved the positive hero's selfless service to the cause of the Revolution, they could also vicariously enjoy the comic foil's exaggerated macho style and his insatiable desire for fashionable clothing, good food and big guns.

Under the wing of Pyr'ev, Riazanov made *Carnival Night* (*Karnaval'naia noch'*), a 1956 remake of Grigorii Aleksandrov's *Volga-Volga* (1938), that established the genre of the New Year film, a subgenre of Russo-Soviet comedy. Alyssa DeBlasio argues that the main features of this genre include "release and screening dates that coincide with the New Year; time imagery representing the transition from one stage of life to the next; the presence of fairy-tale motifs; ... and the emphasis on private rather than public space."⁹ The New Year film legitimated private life, established the New Year as a nuclear family-oriented annual holiday and defined the time of this holiday as the moment for carnivalizing the traditional hierarchy of Soviet values, the state's supremacy over individual and domestic concerns.

⁹ Alyssa DeBlasio, 43, in Further Reading.

Leonid Gaidai revived slapstick comedy, the film genre representing and rechanneling via laughter the trauma of modern life's overstimulation. In his films Gaidai disrupts the narrative continuity inherited from Stalinism and subjects his characters to a barrage of shocks and jolts. His viewers appreciated the long forgotten thrills and spectacle of crashes, explosions, fights and chases. Highly stylized, carrying the genre memory of chapbooks and circus entertainment, these films depicted a life in which all the taboos and, most importantly, the hypocritical pretenses of Soviet life were suspended. The villains indulge in excessive (by Soviet standards) consumerism: international travel, dinners in restaurants, driving private cars. And Russian entertainment cannot be complete without excessive libations! Gaidai's films explore not only consumption but also the illegal production of hard liquor (*Moonshiners, Samogonshchiki*, 1962). In this popular utopia even doctors recommend that their patients treat their high blood pressure with cognac instead of boring pills (*The Diamond Arm, Brilliantovaia ruka*, 1969).

But next to this world of forbidden pleasures, Gaidai depicts comic situations that border on horror, a horror often based on the inversion of gender hierarchy. In *The Diamond Arm*, the male protagonist experiences nightmares after the scenes in which women assert their power. In one such comic/horrific scene a female gangster assaults the protagonist physically and sexually. When the protagonist faints, he sees an exploding bra clasp and a female monster, who combines the features of the female gangster and the female superintendent of his apartment building.

Gaidai considered himself a genre filmmaker, but film historians remember him now as a film auteur. Like the famous French director Jacques Tati, he created a cinematic world in which the filmmaker-magician ultimately rules. Gaidai even invented an alter ego, the naïve, bumbling and good-hearted student Shurik. Shurik has education but lacks power in a world ruled by street thugs and corrupt bosses. However, through cunning, incredible luck and visual gags constructed by his ultimate magic helper, the director, Shurik overcomes the comic villains.



Gaidai is also important for the period because his films became the record ticket sellers of the 1960s, three of the 10 top grossing films in the history of Russian cinema: *The Diamond Arm* in third place with 76.7 million tickets sold; *Kidnapping Caucasian Style* (*Kavkazskaia plennitsa*, 1967) in fourth with 76.5 million tickets, and *Operation Y* (*Operatsiia Y*, 1965) in seventh with 69.6 million tickets. His comedies made film administrators think not only about ideological propriety but also about the fact that films can bring in a lot of cash. Not surprisingly, Gaidai collaborated closely with the Experimental Creative Unit (*Eksperimental'noe tvorcheskoe ob''edinenie*) ETO, a film studio designed to overhaul the economics of the Soviet cinema and the dismantling of which brought the cinematic Thaw to final closure.

In the early 1960s, Grigorii Chukhrai and the former American studio executive Vladimir Pozner Sr. decided to change the economic basis of the Soviet film industry by making filmmakers' and studios' incomes dependent on ticket sales. The ETO studio was created in 1965, at the time when Aleksei Kosygin proposed similar reforms in the Soviet economy. The experiment proved that the new model was highly effective. Production costs went down and many ETO films became top ticket sellers. The ETO threatened the economic foundation of the essentially feudal Soviet system in which filmmakers, like serfs, were attached to their studios and received from the state regular but low pay, no matter how successful the results of their labors with audiences. Moreover, ETO projects brought new narrative models into the Soviet genre system. Vladimir Motyl' and Nikita Mikhalkov embraced the genre of the western. Edmond Keosaian worked in the genre of crime thriller. Finally, Gaidai made several highly successful comedies at ETO. Stylistically, many of these films established irony and parody as new double-voiced narrative models, alternatives to the monologism of the socialist realist genre system. In 1976 the State Committee on Cinematography (Goskino) recognized the economic success of the experiment but decided to close the studio. One of the reasons was the studio's preference for entertainment genres at the expense of historical-revolutionary and topical films about the political issues of the present. The Goskino leadership rejected the

option to reform the film industry from within and, after the fifteen years of Stagnation, in 1991 the industry collapsed, together with the rest of the Soviet economy.

While the end of the Thaw era was a gradual and contradictory process of artistic and economic evolution, the controversy around Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1967-1971) provides a valuable insight into the changing sensibilities and values of the communities involved in the production and dissemination of Soviet cinema. The film itself bears Thaw-era values, while the history of its release is about the ideological ambiguities of the coming Stagnation era. In short, *Rublev* serves as a bridge text linking two periods of Soviet film history.

Tarkovsky began thinking about the picture in 1961, co-authored the script with Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky and published it in *Art of Cinema* under the title "The Passion according to Andrei." The film itself represents an artful exercise in modernist narration. In the course of 215 minutes, the filmmaker celebrates both his unique vision and the individual as the ultimate measure in ethical and aesthetic debates. Tarkovsky examines the artist and his relationship to power. Like many Thaw era texts, such as Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, the film revives the reading of Christian narratives and symbolism as an alternative to official Soviet mythology.

The film's release and exhibition history represents the crisis of the Thaw-era approach to the administration of cultural production, specifically cinema. The end of the Khrushchev era, with its rhetoric of reviving Leninist revolution after the Stalin cult, blurred ideological priorities for cultural administrators and censors. Nationalist concerns began to compete with Soviet, supra-national ones. Party officials mixed their criticism of Tarkovsky for his lack of a Marxist class approach to the Russian Middle Ages with accusations that he hated the Russian people and had made an anti-Russian film.¹⁰ Through *samizdat* and *tamizdat*, dissident critics

¹⁰ P. N. Demichev (presumably, according to Valerii Fomin), "Otzyv o fil'me *Andrei Rublev*, podgotovlennyy v TsK KPSS, 1967," in Valerii Fomin,

broadened the interpretive community of the film. While *Rublev* was attacked by Party censors from the left, it was also attacked by religious thinkers from the right. Alexander Solzhenitsyn criticized Tarkovsky's film for its exploitation of violence, lack of historical and emotional authenticity (*neserdechnost'*) and lack of genuine Christian spirit.

Cultural administrators also had to take into account Tarkovsky's international status and festival organizers' interest in his new film. Soviet cultural officials could not simply dismiss their international partners because Soviet cinema had become integrated into the European art cinema process and specifically, the festival circuit. As a result, *Andrei Rublev* was not officially banned, but was not released for a broader audience either. In the USSR *Rublev* premiered at the Filmmakers' Club (*Dom Kino*) in 1967, but was de facto shelved for the next five years. Soviet film administrators did not ban the film from being shown at international film festivals but they delayed its release to the Cannes Film Festival until 1969. Thanks to the efforts of the same Soviet film officials, the film was not part of the official competition at Cannes and was screened at 4 a.m. The audience, however, received *Rublev* enthusiastically and it won the FIPRESCI Award. Only after the film's international triumph, and under pressure from such influential figures as Grigori Kozintsev and Dmitry Shostakovich, did an abridged version of *Rublev* see limited domestic release in 1971. Only 277 copies of *Rublev* were shown in a nation of 250 million people and, as Tarkovsky recalls, not a single poster advertising the film was seen on Moscow streets. The Stagnation era model of ideological control was not about ubiquitous fear, mass terror or the promise of communist utopia; rather it was about limiting access to information and the continual harassment of those few, like Tarkovsky, who did not give up and continued exercising artistic agency.

146-47, in Further Reading; S. Surnichenko, "Otzyv Vladimirskogo Obkoma KPSS o fil'me A. Tarkovskogo *Andrei Rublev*. 17 iulia 1969 g.," in Fomin, 147-48.

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