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AAASS-Roundtable

Size Matters: The Ideological Functions of the Length of Soviet Feature Films and Television Mini-Series in the 1950s and 1960s

By Alexander Prokhorov (College of William and Mary)

In the late 1950s and 1960s Soviet visual culture underwent major changes. The film industry started revising the format of its major product—the feature film. On the one hand, filmmakers started making features consisting of several parts; on the other hand, studios started releasing portmanteau films, features consisting of several shorts. During the same era, television emerged as a new medium that potentially could compete with cinema for viewers. Television soon articulated its own format—the mini-series, or what Soviet critics called at the time “the television film,” a narrative that developed over the course of several episodes. The rise of the mini-series redefined the meaning of the extra-long motion picture in Soviet culture from being a domain of Stalinist monumental style to being primarily the domain of the small screen aesthetics with its emphasis on the cyclical flow of audio-visual material. In other words, I argue that changes in Soviet ideology and economic changes in the film and television industries in the 1960s reshaped the format of the Soviet feature film and established the mini-series as a distinct genre. The dialogue between the film and television industries was one of the decisive factors in the changes of the Soviet feature film format and the rise of the mini-series.

The Soviet film industry of the 1930s and 1940s functioned as a tool of propaganda and entertainment, embracing the major cultural values of the Stalinist era, such as monumentalism, hierarchy, cults of heroes who overcame the limits of human reason while building communism. As Richard Taylor has demonstrated in his article, “Red Stars, Positive Heroes and Personality Cults,” [1] hagiographic biopics about the heroes of Soviet and Russian imperial history dominated the industry’s output, especially after World War II. The length of a film often depended on the significance of the depicted historical personage and his place in the official pantheon of heroes and martyrs. For example, Lenfilm released Vladimir Petrov’s screen biography of Peter the Great in two parts (96 minutes each) in 1937-38, and in the 1940s the Soviet film industry planned to release Sergei Eisenstein’s tripartite epic about Ivan the Terrible (part 1 was 95 minutes, part 2 was 88 minutes, and part 3 was never produced).



The cinematic hagiographies of Lenin and Stalin deserve special mention. First, they consisted of several films because the leader's life was too expansive to fit into one film. Second, films about Lenin were dedicated to the life of Stalin, where Lenin played the role of a feisty and speech-impaired buffoon, foregrounding the monumental figure of the true leader. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Mosfilm produced Mikhail Chiaureli's trilogy about Stalin, *The Vow* (*Kliatva*, 1946), *The Fall of Berlin* (*Padenie Berlina*, 1949), and *The Unforgettable 1919* (*Nezabyvaemyi 1919-yi*, 1951). These three films represented the hallmarks of the leader's monumental life: the passing of the baton of leadership from Lenin to Stalin in *The Vow*, the story of Soviet origins in *The Unforgettable 1919*, and the story of winning the final war, *The*

Fall of Berlin. In addition, *The Fall of Berlin* represented a film of monumental length: its two parts lasted approximately three hours. Inspired in part by the monumental epics of Leni Riefenstahl, *Fall of Berlin's* staged costume drama also laid claim to historical and documentary accuracy in depicting the leader's rise to eternal world power.

During the Thaw, feature films consisting of several parts/episodes retained their strong affiliation with an ideologically significant narrative. Such films, however, maintained a more mediated relationship with the major ideological icons and narratives. Instead of an epic episode from the life of a leader, Thaw-era multi-partite films for theatrical release favored melodramatic plots, where the Civil War (as the story of Soviet origins) merely provided an epic background for the feature melodrama.

All such super-features of the late 1950s maintained their high culture status not only through affiliation with ideological iconography, but also through the high culture status of their literary sources. By the late 1950s-early 1960s the range of themes permissible for a screen adaptation in a multi-partite epic for theatrical release increased and included a screen adaptation of a Russian classical novel, a spy story, and a story of an artist. During the 1960s, Sergei Bondarchuk made his epic adaptation of *War and Peace* (1965-67; 403 minutes) in four parts, with himself in the lead role of Pierre Bezukhov, while Aleksandr Zarkhi released a big budget adaptation of *Anna Karenina* (1967; 145 minutes) in two parts with Tat'iana Samoilova playing the protagonist. These productions of 19th century classics, as well as melodramas set during the Russian Civil War and depicting the Whites not only as villains but also as tragic figures, became possible because Thaw-era cultural producers continued the rehabilitation of Russian imperial history initiated by Stalin during World War II to boost the morale of the Red Army. [2] It is notable that almost all big budget film adaptations of the era deal with Russian imperial history or the Russian Civil War as the time of the empire's reinvention.

Similarly, in the spy film—Veniamin Dorman's *Resident's Mistake* (*Oshibka rezidenta*, 1968; 2 parts, 142 minutes), Savva Kulish's *Dead Season* (*Mertyvi sezon*, 1968; 2 parts, 138 minutes), Vladimir Basov's *Shield and Sword* (*Shchit i mech*, 1968; 4 parts, 344 min.)—melodramatic plot dominates the action plot. Soviet spy blockbusters play the sentimental rather than action note. The goal of the protagonist is not to defeat the bad guys and get the girl, the Bond formula, but rather to fulfill the state family's assignment and to reunite with the symbolic figures of the state father and the biological mother representing the Motherland. In Dorman's film, one of the key scenes is the Soviet super agent's return home to a rural house in the middle of a Russian forest, where he briefly meets his biological mother and then sees his KGB boss, his mustached state father. The Soviet spy film of the 1960s did not follow the Bond formula in another significant way: instead of having every episode be a self-contained narrative, Soviet spy films consisted of several episodes and ended with a strong closure—the Soviet agent returning back to his community. Sequels were not possible. The narrative was always serious, never ironically self-reflective, and always conclusive.

The third type of extra-long film that emerged in the 1960s was the art film. Influenced by the European art cinema and in tune with Thaw-era interest in the role of a creative individual in society, the Soviet art film made subjectivity and strong authorial presence the narrative's major motivational forces. Like European art cinema, Soviet art cinema was not for the most part overtly engaged politically, limiting its subversive power to formal innovation. Most importantly, Soviet art cinema favored the protagonist-creator—an alter ego of the filmmaker himself. If in European art cinema the tension between the protagonist's subjective motivation and authorial motivation was resolved via the device of ambiguity (Bordwell 779), [3] in the Soviet art film the protagonist and the author gravitated toward each other and by doing so avoided narrative ambiguity. Soviet art film narratives were monumental and ideologically tendentious, evoking the narrative mode of Stalinist cinema. Not surprisingly, Soviet art films of the 1960s gravitated toward the length of Stalinist epics: the director's cut of *Andrei Rublev* (Andrei Tarkovskii, 1966) was 205 minutes long, while the director's cut *Lenin's Guard* (*Zastava Il'icha*; dir. Marlen Khutsiev, 1961) was 189 minutes long.

In addition to the ideological reasons for producing lengthy monumental films, there were economic reasons as well for these productions. First, the Soviet film industry could not sell the average Soviet feature on the international market because of its inferior quality and because it had to compete with big budget Western productions. With the advent of television in the US and Western Europe, Hollywood (and to a lesser degree Western European film companies) began to specialize in super-productions that employed all the advances of technology, above all, wide-screen and color. Soviet cinema tried to emulate Western film epics. The best example is probably Sergei Bondarchuk's *War and Peace*, which followed in the footsteps of a recent American adaptation of the same novel (King Vidor, 1956), and then his Soviet-Italian co-production *Waterloo* (1970; 122 minutes). Such productions were the result both of Soviet cinema's attempts to gain a niche in the international film market, as well as cold war rivalry. [4]

The Soviet film industry's attempts to achieve international recognition during the 1960s originated from its unprecedented success on the domestic market. In the mid 1960s the film industry made 1 billion rubles in revenues and 440 million rubles in profits per year, [5] thus being the most profitable branch of Soviet cultural production. While attendance in movie theaters decreased in the West because of suburbanization and the rise of television, in the Soviet Union film viewing at a movie theater remained the main choice for popular leisure. [6]

Releasing films consisting of several episodes for theatrical screening was not so much an attempt to lure the viewer to a movie theater, as it was the industry's response to the high demand for new films and a way of lowering the costs of production. Filming several episodes with the same crew and sets decreased the expenses per episode. The demand for new films was especially high because in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the Soviet Union began the mass construction of movie theaters in major cities and to some extent satisfied the demand for movie theaters in rural areas. [7] In 1954, the year after Stalin's death, Moscow had only 49 movie theaters, sixty percent of which were built before the revolution. In the same year Paris had 351 theaters, London—327, Rome—231, NY—624. These statistics translate into 5 seats per 1,000 people in Moscow, 9 per 1,000 in Leningrad, 100 per 1,000 in London, and 80 per 1,000 in New York (Zezina, 400). One also has to keep in mind that a huge percentage of the population in the United States owned TV-sets by this time, while in the Soviet Union people had to pay a special government fee for owning a TV-set until 1961.

As the Soviet film industry developed new types of large budget features in tune with changing cultural values and demands for domestic and international markets, the reevaluation of Soviet ideology and the debunking of the monumental aesthetics of Stalinism triggered filmmakers' interest in small cinematic forms. During the 1960s, many young filmmakers favored the short, and the portmanteau film as an alternative to the monumental narratives of the Stalinist era. Comprising several shorts by several directors and implying a plurality of points of view, the

portmanteau film was viewed as a healthy antidote to Stalinist ideological dogmatism. The short lengths of the parts of the portmanteau film incarnated the anti-monumentalist spirit of Thaw cinema. [8]

Leonid Gaidai emerged as the most commercially successful and prolific proponent of the comic portmanteau film. He took full advantage of the instability of ideological narratives and created inherently fragmented films instead of relying on cause-and-effect narration. He made quasi-silent slapstick comedies based on primitive chase narratives, mischief gags, and sight gags.[9] The mischief gag plays a special role in Gaidai's films because he is less interested in narrative continuity than in narrative disruption and discontinuity. [10]

While the portmanteau film appeared as a sign of the new sensibilities of the Thaw-era, it also emerged as a product of the new economic conditions in the Soviet film industry. The increase in film production during the 1950s and 1960s required new filmmakers and scriptwriters *en masse*, as well as inexpensive ways to train them. The portmanteau film allowed several filmmakers and scriptwriters to make their own films within a bigger project. [11] For example, the portmanteau film *Journey (Puteshestvie, 1966)* consisted of three shorts, all directorial debuts based on Vasilii Aksenov's stories: Inessa Selezneva adapted "Daddy, What do They Say?" (*Papa, Slozhi!*), Ina Tumanian—"The Lunches of '43" (*Zavtraki sorok tret'ego*), and Dzhemma Firsova—"Half Way to the Moon" (*Na polputi k lune*).

While Soviet cinema of the 1960s made mega-profits on the domestic market and adjusted the length and content of films to the new values and the commercial needs of the increasing size and number of screening facilities, Soviet television emerged as a new medium that did not promise any profits and demanded huge investments. The Soviet leadership realized, however, the ideological potential of television as the tool of propaganda and organized both the production of TV-sets and broadcasting. Television was defined as the new medium of mass information and propaganda. Television's primary function, as Ellen Mickiewicz reminds us, was education: "The primary mission of the media system in the Soviet Union is the socialization of the person receiving the message. In a broad sense the media are educators, just as are schools, the courts of law, the family ... In fact, the educational mission is *primary* for all of these institutions" (26, emphasis in original). [12]

The premier Soviet film journal *Art of Cinema (Iskusstvo kino)* also started publishing discussions of the specifics of television as an art form and the means of electronic transmission of programmes. By the early 1960s critics were also discussing on the pages of *Art of Cinema* the notion of the television film as a distinct type of a film. The two major issues in these discussions were the cultural status of television and the industrial and aesthetic features of the television film—above all, its length as apparently reflecting its ideological and cultural significance.

In 1962 Arkadii Rokhlin and Vitalii Shastin published a small monograph, *Television as Art (Televidenie kak iskusstvo. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1962)*. The authors argued that television in the Soviet Union differed from Western television because it promoted the values of Marxism and relied on the achievements of Russian and Soviet literature and cinema. The television film was considered a prime example of artistic expression on the small screen. While television obviously received the status of an art form within the Soviet hierarchy of arts, television films received much less financial support than films made for theatrical release because it was not clear how television films would be able to return investments. Critics explained the lower costs of Soviet television films by the specifics of the new medium: more close ups, few or no spectacular scenes, studio-bound shooting, and simplified sets. The real problem, however, was the economic impossibility of recouping state investments in television films while broadcasting them on non-commercial television networks.

In the early discussions of the television film, its length was one of the key features that distinguished it from films for theatrical release. Critics argued that the television film should be

short because of the peculiarities of its reception: at home, by relaxed viewers who cannot follow a long and complicated plot. The length of Soviet television films in the late 1950s and early 1960s was between thirty minutes and one hour. The end of the political Thaw in 1964 coincided with Soviet television releasing the first mini-series, *Drawing Fire* (*Vyzyvaem ogon' na sebja*; dir. Sergei Kolosov; 4 episodes, 308 minutes). The film was commissioned by Gosteleradio, the State Committee for Television and Radio, and produced by the Mosfilm Studios. The idea of a serialized television film came to the Soviet Union from East Germany, the most Westernized Soviet ally. In 1962 the East-German mini-series *Gewissen in Aufruhr* (*Sovest' probuzhdaetsia* in Russian release; dir. Hans-Joachim Kasprzik and Günther Reisch, 1961) was broadcast on Soviet television and completely redefined Soviets' notion of a multi-episode production. Instead of signaling—through its length—the major ideological significance of the film and of its screening, the East-German multi-episode television production represented programming-driven leisure. As Russian TV critic Sergei Muratov recalls, *Gewissen in Aufruhr* created a shock: “We simply did not know that a film can last five evenings in a row.” [13] In other words, an entire week's schedule could be organized not only around work, but also around television programming—the screening of a mini-series.



Made during the Thaw, with its cult of sincerity and authenticity, *Drawing Fire* was based on real events that took place during World War II. To maintain the high culture status of the multi-episode project, the film was also based on a literary source, a documentary novel by Soviet writer Ovidii Gorchakov and Polish writer Janusz Przymanowski. [14] The novel, on the one hand, dealt with ideologically fool-proof topics, the war against the Nazis and the friendship between Polish and Soviet resistance fighters; and, on the other hand, presented a spy story with great popular appeal.

Drawing Fire also provided a bridge between the Soviet radio-theater tradition and television. One of the major genres of Soviet radio broadcasting was the serialized reading of classic and contemporary literature, especially of works dealing with patriotic topics such as the Russian revolution and World War II. Before shooting the series, Kolosov made a radio mini-series of *Drawing Fire* and only then made the television mini-series using materials developed for the radio broadcast. In effect, *Drawing Fire* served as the text linking old and new conceptions of the media, old and the new cultural values. The film established a key genre formula for the Soviet television film: a spy thriller with action controlled and directed by the ideological message. [15]

Most importantly, *Drawing Fire* redefined the function of the length of a television film and its place in the program flow. The makers of Stalinist epics used a film's length to emphasize the ideological significance of the picture's topic. In the 1960s, the directors of mini-series produced films several times longer than the most ambitious feature films of the Stalin era, but for a completely different reason. The new television medium demanded a series of segments that could be run over the course of a week. Ideological concerns were not the primary factor in determining the length of the mini-series. While film had been traditionally theorized as being spatialized time and dynamized space, [16] television had been theorized, above all, in terms of time. As Charlotte Brunson notes: “Television is, for the most part, made as programmes or runs of programmes: series, serials, mini-series... It is precisely this possible ‘drifting’ through an evening's viewing that has come to seem ... one of the unique features of television watching”. [17] *Drawing Fire* became the first Soviet-made series that contributed to conceptualizing Soviet television as the flow organized around programs and serialized films.

During the 1950s and 1960s the length of the Soviet film changed its meaning from representing primarily the film's ideological significance (under Stalin) to representing a variety of ideological and aesthetic meanings depending on the film's production, screening, or broadcasting circumstances. While in cinema the ideological and aesthetic tensions of Thaw culture influenced

the feature's length and narrative structure, and resulted in the rise of both the multi-partite feature and the portmanteau film, in television broadcasting, the mini-series emerged as the prime type of film made for television. Filmmakers created a film format meeting the demands of the new medium.

In general, during the Thaw, changes in the length of Soviet films for theatrical release and for television broadcast represent the gradual transformation of Soviet culture towards greater commercialization and a media-based leisure culture. By the 1960s Soviet cultural production muffled the role of the "Repressive State Apparatus" and enhanced the role of the "Ideological State apparatuses"—above all the "Cultural Ideological State Apparatus"—thereby providing media-controlled leisure. [18]

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Notes

1] Richard Taylor and Derek Spring (eds). *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1993. 69-89.

2] In 1957-59 Grigorii Roshal' made an adaptation of Aleksei Tolstoi's novel *Stations of the Cross* (*Khozhdenie po mukam*) about the Russian intelligentsia's role to revolution. The film consisted of three parts: *Stations of the Cross I: Sisters* (*Khozhdenie po mukam I: Sestry*, 104 minutes), *Stations of the Cross II: The Year "18"* (*Khozhdenie po mukam II: Vosemnadsatyi god*, 97 minutes), and *Stations of the Cross III: Gloomy Morning* (*Khozhdenie po mukam III: Khmuroe utro*, 105 minutes). In 1957-58 Sergei Gerasimov released a 340-minute adaptation of Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don* (*Tikhii Don*).

3] David Bordwell. "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice." *Film Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. NY: Oxford UP, 2004. 774-82.

4] *War and Peace* competed with big Western productions on all fronts. To match the latest technological developments in filmmaking and screening, Soviet distributors offered Bondarchuk's film in 35mm and 70mm print formats. The film also had an astronomical budget. The [Internet Movie Database](#) notes: "Adjusted for inflation, this film cost over \$560 million to make, and is thus the most expensive film ever made."

5] Mariia Zezina. "Kinoprokat i massovyi zritel' v gody ottepli." *Istoriia strany. Istoriia kino*. Moscow: Znack 2004. 395.

6] By the mid-1960s attendance in movie theaters in the US and Europe decreased, while in the Soviet Union it continued to grow. In the mid-1960s Soviets attended movie theaters 18-20 times a year, Italians—14, Americans—12, West Germans—6, and Dutch—4 times a year (Zezina 406).

7] In 1958 the Soviet of Ministers of the USSR adopted a special decree to build large movie theaters for more than 1,000 spectators in the 19 largest cities of the USSR (Zezina 400).

8] The portmanteau film became the most graphic manifestation of the trend toward loosening the cause-and-effect structure in films of the 1950s and 1960s. The episodic, fragmented narrative became more common than a coherent large story to hold the cinematic feature together. Among the most common types of Thaw-era films with episodic narratives are city films where the setting—rather than the narrative—brings together several loosely connected episodes—for example, Marlen Khutsiev's *Lenin's Guard* (*Zastava Il'icha*, 1962), Georgii Danelliia's *I Walk Around Moscow* (*Ja shagaiu po Moskve*, 1963), Vilen Azarov's *Green Light* (*Zelenyi ogonek*, 1964)—and the portmanteau film comedy—El'dar Riazanov's, Naum Trakhtenberg's, Eduard Zmoiro's, Vladimir Semakov's, and Leonid Gaidai's *Absolutely Serious* (*Sovershenno ser'ezno*, 1961), Leonid Gaidai's *Business People* (*Delovye liudi*, 1963) and *Operation Y and Shurik's Other Adventures* (*Operatsiia Y i drugie priklucheniia Shurika*, 1965). However, even the film about the Soviet leader, the sacrosanct Soviet genre, experienced fragmentation into a portmanteau film during the Thaw in Sergei Iutkevich's *Stories about Lenin* (*Rasskazy o Lenine*, 1956).

9] For a discussion of the mischief gag see Tom Gunning. "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy." *Classical Hollywood Comedy*. NY: Routledge, 1995. 87-105. For a discussion of the sight gag see Noël Carroll. "Notes on the Sight Gag." *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*. Ed. Andrew Horton. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1991. 25-42.

10] Gaidai's career, how he came to the short as his favorite film length and to the slapstick as his genre, reveals a lot about the operation of the Soviet film industry and the role of ideological censorship in it. His first independent project was a feature comedy, a satire of provincial bureaucracy with a strong didactic narrative. However, by the time all the censors' demands were satisfied the film had turned into half of the original length—a forty minute-long picture. Gaidai was almost fired from the studio for the lack of satirical fervor and had to make a film about the Russian Civil War to redeem himself ideologically. After that he avoided big forms, fragmented his feature length films into episodic narratives, and when possible avoided dialogue, regressing into quasi-silent slapstick cinema.

11] Parallel to the rise of the portmanteau film as an alternative to the feature film, the single film author fragmented into the collective film author during the 1960s. Many young Soviet filmmakers formed teams and made their first features as a collective author, emulating the famous avant-garde tradition of collective authorship, on the one hand, and getting their apprenticeship while splitting authorship of the feature production, on the other. The first features of Alexander Mitta and Aleksei Saltykov, *My Friend Kolka* (*Drug moi, Kol'ka!*, 1961) and Georgii Daneliia and Igor' Talankin, *Serezha* (1960) provided them with training and launched the careers of these major Soviet filmmakers.

12] Ellen Mickiewicz. *Split Signals. Television and Politics in the Soviet Union*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

13] Anna Kachkaeva. "Mnogoseriinos' na televidenii: stanet li serial Idiot sobytiem nyneshnego televizionnogo sezona?" [Radio Svoboda](#) May 19, 2003.

14] Przymanowski also authored the novel and screenplay for the Polish mini-series *Four Tank-Drivers and a Dog* (*Czterej pancerni i pies*, 1966-69), which became one of the most popular mini-series in the Soviet Union.

15] For a detailed analysis of the role of TV mini-series in late Soviet culture see Elena Prokhorova. [Fragmented Mythologies: Soviet TV Mini-Series of the 1970s](#). Ph. D. Dissertation. U of Pittsburgh 2003.

16] Erwin Panofsky. "Style and Medium in the Modern Pictures." *Film Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. NY: Oxford UP, 2004. 289-302 (291).

17] Charlotte Brunson. "What is the television of television studies?" *The Television Studies Book*. Eds. C. Geraghty and D. Lusted. London: Arnold, 1998. 95-113 (105-6).

18] I follow Louis Althusser's definitions of the Repressive State Apparatus and Ideological State apparatuses. "Remember that in Marxist theory, the State Apparatus (SA) contains: the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc., which constitute what I shall in future call the Repressive State Apparatus. Repressive suggests that the State Apparatus in question 'functions by violence' ... I shall call Ideological State apparatuses (ISAs) a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions [functioning by ideology—AP] ... the educational ISA (the system of different public and private 'Schools'); the family ISA; ... the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.); the cultural ISA (Literature, the Arts, sports, etc.)" (110-111). Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." *Mapping Ideology*. Ed. Slavoj Zizek. London: Verso, 1994.

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