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The Arctic in the Soviet cinema lens: “Two Oceans” by Vladimir Shneiderov*

© Ivan A. GOLOVNEV, Cand. Sci. (Hist.), Researcher

E-mail: golovnev.ivan@gmail.com

Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, RAS, St. Petersburg, Russia

Abstract. The study aims at introducing unstudied materials, i.e., film documents of the Soviet period, related to the development of the Russian North, into the scientific circulation. So-called expedition films occupied a special place in the history of Soviet visual anthropology — films of educational content about the peoples and territories of the USSR. They reached its heyday at the turn of the 1920s — 1930s. One of the pioneers of Soviet visual anthropology is considered to be the filmmaker V.A. Shneiderov, the author of a series of films about the USSR territories (“The Great Flight”, “The Pamirs (the bottom of death)”, “At the height of 4500”, etc.). In addition to solving creative issues, the production of such films was part of a state experiment on the construction of local images and the country. The Soviet authorities used the resources of the cinematographer as a media source and agitation. In this article, the author considers the example of the expedition film “Two Oceans”, the classic of documentary films where V.A. Shneiderov pictured the history of the Northern Sea Route and the Soviet colonization of the Arctic. The context of the filmmaking, i.e., parallel processes in Soviet cultural politics and cinema, is discussed as well. The author conclusions contain thoughts about the research value of the Soviet expeditionary film as a complex historical source.

Keywords: the Arctic, Soviet films, Vladimir Shneiderov.

The development of the North-East route connecting Europe and Asia, since ancient times has been attractive for researchers and geopolitics, seafarers and traders from different countries. Water routes were the first bonds linking the world in the Middle Ages, and therefore competition for sea and river routes was a struggle for power. At the end of the XV century, Spain and Portugal controlled the “southern” sea routes in the East, around Africa. It actualized the search for “northern” passage among the elites of other maritime powers, and above all — England. In 1533, the trading company “Misteri” with the assistance of the London Guild of Merchants travelers launched the first expedition to the North under the command of H. Willoughby. But this debut campaign was not successful: two ships of the expedition reached the coast of East Murman, where they were forced to stop for wintering. All crew members, incl. Captain Willoughby, died of scurvy and frostbite. The third ship led by Captain R. Chancellor managed to reach the mouth of the Northern Dvina. He sent representatives to Moscow and even pass the offer on trade relations from the English King Edward VI to the Russian Tsar Ivan IV the Terrible. So, the result of this campaign was a patent for trade with Russia. But “Misteri”, which equipped the expedition of H. Willoughby, was renamed to the “Moscow Company” and continued the search for the North-East sea passage to expand the trade ties of England with Asian countries. In 1556, the company equipped another expedition to the North under the command of S. Borro. This expedition went

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further than the previous one: for the first time, it reached the shores of the Novaya Zemlya, tried to enter the Kara Sea, but was forced to return. On the way back, the expedition had wintered in Kholmogory on their way back. In 1580, “Moscow company” sent its ships to the North “to reach the countries and possessions of the powerful Chinese emperor” [1, Vise, p. 27]. This new expedition developed the successes of the previous ones and managed to pass into the Kara Sea, but was unable to overcome the heavy ice and had to return without cutting the “windows” from Europe.

So, the relay in searching the North-Eastern sea route passed to Holland. In 1584, the expedition of Captain O. Brunel, who set a goal to reach China, reached the Novaya Zemlya and was forced to return. Ten years later, in 1594, a new Dutch expedition was more successful: a detachment of four ships under the command of Captain W. Barents reached the Kara Sea. The expedition members decided that they had managed to find the desired sea route to the East Indies and reported upon their return to Holland. It served a strong argument for the immediate dispatch of the next expedition. It successfully passed to the Kara Sea, but could not move beyond the Yugorsky Strait because of heavy ice. And the third expedition of W. Barents failed: the expedition reached the Novaya Zemlya and landed on the shore for a forced wintering. So, the plans for a further trip to the North died as well as Captain Barents, whose name is now used to call the rebellious northern sea. A series of the above-mentioned unsuccessful English and Dutch expeditions forced to leave the idea of the North-Eastern passage discovery, dormant in the ambitions of the European elites up to the 19th century [1, Vise V.Yu., p. 39].

In 1878, the Swedish expedition under the command of the scientist A.E. Nordensköld was supported by the Russian merchant A. Sibiryakov. The expedition along the northern coast of Eurasia aimed to pass from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. They left Sweden on the steamer “Vega” and A. E. Nordensköld successfully passed the Kara Sea, reached the mouth of Lena, for the first time, and went further — to the Pacific Ocean. But they could not reach the Bering Strait and had to stay for winter in the ice. Next summer, the expedition managed to reach the Pacific Ocean. So, two years of expedition and A. E. Nordensköld and his crew solved the problems of previous centuries: open sea routes to the estuaries of Siberian rivers — Lena, Ob, and Yenisei — and for the first time, the North-East sea passage from Europe to Asia itself was passed. At the same time, A. E. Nordensköld was skeptical about the exploitation of the seaways he had discovered: “Can the voyage of “Vega” be repeated every year? This question still has no answer without an unconditional “yes” or an unconditional “no”. The sea route from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean along the northern coasts of Siberia can be traveled in a few weeks on a suitable steamboat with a crew of experienced sailors. But in general, this way, as we know the regime of ice off the coast of Siberia, is unlikely to have an effective significance for trade” [2, Nordensköld A.E., p. 159]. The second conquest of the Northern Sea Route, but the first one in the direction from Asia to Europe, was made by the expedition of the Russian sailor B. Vilkitsky, consisting of two icebreaking vessels — “Vaigach” and “Taimyr”. This expedition departed in 1914 from the Bering Strait and opened new geographical objects: Severnaya Zemlya and the island of Maly Taimyr. But, as well as A. Nor-

densköld, B. Vilkysky was destined to winter in the ice, and only the next year his expedition arrived in Arkhangelsk. The third passage of the North-Eastern route was R. Amundsen's expedition that took two years. After leaving Vardø on the ship "Maud" in 1918, R. Amundsen twice stopped for forced wintering on the way to the Bering Strait and reached the Pacific Ocean only on July 21, 1920.

Formally, the Great Northern Route was opened. But the experience of its passage, despite the actual success, contributed only to confirmation of skepticism about the creation of stable navigation here. Against this historical background in the early 1930s, a new expedition to conquer the Northern Sea Route was prepared in the USSR. For the Soviet Union, the development of this highway was of fundamental importance, because from an economic point of view, the Arctic Ocean is a transport link with Siberia and the Far East, and from a political perspective — the key to the new, Soviet, colonization of the Arctic. And in the framework of the so-called Second Polar Year (1932), the USSR had thrown a historical challenge to other northern states i.e., for the first time to pass the Arctic sea route without wintering. This responsible mission was entrusted to the All-Union Arctic Institute. Head of the expedition, Professor O.Yu. Schmidt said: "the task set by the party before the expedition was formulated simply and clearly: to overcome the North-East Passage in one navigation; to reach the mouth of Lena from the West and to follow further to the East; to reach the Pacific Ocean; to explore the path for future regular navigation" [3, Shneiderov V.A., p. 3]. At the same time, it was not enough to pass the Great Northern Way. It was necessary to properly "show" it on the screen because in the 1930s cinema became the most effective media both inside and outside the country.

Vladimir Adolfovich Shneiderov (1900–1973), a pioneer of expeditionary cinema in the USSR, became the head of the film group. He started his professional activity with ethnographic film sketches "Around Samarkand" (1924), "Around Uzbekistan" (1924), etc. In 1925, based on film materials about the Soviet aviation expedition Moscow — Ulaan-Baatar — Beijing — Shanghai — Tokyo, he created the film "The Great Fly". But the most famous in the history of Soviet cinema were his expeditionary films made in the late 1920s — early 1930s: "The Foot of Death" (1928) about the Pamir, "El-Yemen" (1929) filmed in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, and "Two Oceans" (1933) — about the trip along the Northern Sea Route on the icebreaker "Alexander Sibiryakov". The films of V.A. Shneiderov gained popularity in the film distribution of the USSR and foreign countries, received recognition among researchers, and eventually took their place in the category of world film classics. At the same time, with rare exceptions [4, Golovnev A.V.; 5, Sarkisova O.], these and numerous other expeditionary films of the Soviet period remain virtually unexplored in modern science, which actualizes the need for their research analysis. The film "Two Oceans" (1933) is a subject for this article. It is an indicative film-text, combining posters and slogans-titles reflecting the specifics of the state cinematography.

Directly the film expeditions of the "Mezhrabpomfilm" to the Arctic were preceded by preparatory work, incl. the study of published scientific papers on the geography of the area. Accord-

ing to V.A. Shneiderov, “going to remote and little-known countries, the author relies on the careful study of materials, conversations with scientists, maps and iconographic materials and he always has enough opportunities to define in advance the character of his future film, to develop his author's script” [3, p. 11]. Not the last role at this stage was played by the scientific consultant of the film — O.Yu. Schmidt. According to the memoirs of O.Yu. Schmidt, he relied on the long experience of the film director in expeditionary conditions, choosing V.A. Shneiderov for the position of the director of the film group: “He managed to visit Pamir, Tien Shan, Arabia, and China, but in the Arctic V.A. Shneiderov was for the first time. “It gives special sharpness to his perception, and the rich experience of the traveler allows comparing with other difficulties” [3, Shneiderov V.A., p. 3]. O.Yu. Schmidt, who had experience in Arctic expeditions, supplied the group of V.A. Shneiderov not only with scientific data on various areas of research but also took a lively part in the discussion of the scenario sketch of the future film.



Figure 1. Movie group (right to left): directed by V. Shneiderov, operator M. Troyanovsky, assistant director Ya. Cooper.

V.A. Shneiderov, unlike his famous contemporary Dziga Vertov, was a principal supporter of pre-shooting script development in documentary films, preliminary creation of the future film on paper. “Only after mastering the material, understanding it, having imagined the contours of the future film, it is necessary to develop a first sketch of the next literary author's script based on the selected topic. Briefly describing the plot of the future scenario, revealing the main content of the film, author's libretto is the original document, the creative plan” — insisted the film director [3, Shneiderov V.A., p. 12]. The script of the film “Two Oceans” was not based on the principle of a simple display on the screen of the expedition path and acquaintance with physical and geographical materials about polar regions, but it was showing a film campaign through the prism of the heroic feat of sailors and scientists performing a historical mission. Such a construction of the film determined the introduction of several scenario episodes, which under another decision could be omitted altogether: household scenes on the ship, hunting polar bears, everyday work of sailors, command staff and scientists, the situation of marine scientific stations, rush job on the hull of the

ship when passing through the ice. At the same time, the script was introduced and subsequently deployed in separate episodes, all cases of the approach of the ship to the ground — to the island of Dixon, the Bay of Tiksi, the Medvezhiy Islands, the shores of Novaya Zemlya and Severnaya Zemlya. In the preparation, carefully designed and coordinated with scientific consultants, the scenario was divided in two parts: planned and eventful. The first included a plan of mandatory filming and the second implied freedom of recording materials depending on the specific conditions on the scene.

The subsequent expedition work of the film group also shows its methodological nuances. On this occasion, the director recalled: “As we prepare for the shooting, we carefully inspect and study the ship. There is no such place on the deck, on the bridge and holds, wherever we go in search of the best shooting spots, designed for all possible shooting options. The lowest point is the paws of the anchor hanging from the nose of the ship to the water. The highest point is the “crow nest”, that is, an iron barrel attached high on the front mast of the icebreaker. It opens special possibilities of landscape shooting from a high point” [6, Shneiderov V.A., p. 73]. Also, interesting for research is the analysis of the combination of documentary and staged film techniques used in the creation of the film: from reportage shooting to reconstructions of complex shooting events. On the question of whether staging is allowed in the documentary film, participants of the V.A. Shneiderov's group answered positively. “In this case, we do not falsify events, but only reproduce them exactly the same, that is, we observe the basic commandment of documentaries, which states that in a documentary from the beginning to the end there must be authentic people, authentic places of action, real, characteristic events selected in accordance with the objectives of the film, sometimes restored or organized only for the purpose of ensuring possibilities of their filming”, — the film-director justified the general position [6, Shneiderov V.A., p. 69]. Thus, the reconstruction of one of the most heroic scenes of the film — the repair of the blades of the icebreaker screw was shot in expeditionary conditions. Besides, the feature of Shneiderov's filming can be called the mounting filming — fixing the sequence of frames inside the scenes, as well as scenes inside the film according to advance designed director's plan. And at the final stage, it remained only to carry out the technical editing of the film, i.e., to glue fragments of the film in a certain sequence, providing the film narrative with information titles.

A full analysis of the film “Two Oceans” would be incomplete without considering the cultural and ideological context where the cinematography of the studied period developed. In 1932, the expedition on the icebreaker “Sibiryakov” went to the Arctic Ocean with an ambitious historical task: to pass the Northern sea route from Arkhangelsk to the Far East in one navigation. The entire world community followed the expedition and was interested in its outcome. In this regard, the film group of V.A. Shneiderov had a serious responsibility, i.e., to create a film image of the expedition. Such a project was obviously a state one in form and content. After all, by that time, the general principles of centralized leadership had embraced cinematography: all its plans were

determined by the Organizing Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPSU(b), coordinated with departments and sent for execution in the film organizations. And the political leadership of the country determined not only what is necessary to build, but also how it should be removed [7, p. 189]. The cinematography was established in the program of the party, adopted at the VIII Congress of the CPSU (b) as one of the main educational resources and over time, turned into an important tool of the cultural revolution [8, Lebedev N.A., p. 67]. "The most important of the arts" (expression by V.I. Lenin) i.e., — the cinema was considered a key media and agitation tool for Bolshevik leaders. Therefore, they pointed out the need to start the production of new films, permeated with the communist ideas and reflecting the Soviet reality, with special attention paid to the film chronicle and documentary films: as an effective visual channel designed to "practically show how socialism should be built" [7, p. 185]. The state setting with an emphasis on agitation affected the prime of the special direction of "agitfilms". In particular, the instructions of the First All-Union Conference on Cinematography contained the norm: "Considering cultural film (popular scientific, ethnographic, educational) one of the powerful means of dissemination and popularization of common and technical knowledge, it is necessary to put its production exemplary; It is necessary to ensure the accessibility of cultural films to the wide audience in its content" [9, p. 449].

The USSR built its cinema to serve the new country, on the one hand, as a "factory of dreams" (feature film), on the other hand, as an industry of "truth" (documentary). And the design of the revolutionary "film truth" (the term by Dziga Vertov) became the main agenda of the entire film industry. Yes, as you know, creative approaches to the creation of official documentaries have been different. Thus, in the mid-1920s there were strong positions of Dziga Vertov and his fellow filmmakers who relied on experiments with the form of the film language: this methodology involved sending agents operators to different parts of the Union for filming cinematic "raw materials", and then mounting from the original materials of its own "cinema-truth" [10, McKay J., p. 41]. But already at the turn of the 1920s — 1930s, under the influence of the departmental will, the revolution of form in cinematography was completely subordinated to the revolutionary content. The establishment in the USSR of the political course on industrialization changed thematic plans of the state order in cinematography. New movie heroes appeared on the screen — builder of unmaintained roads and workers of socialist construction sites — the characters of the next Soviet myth, which was so needed by the party leadership. In these conditions, V.A. Shneiderov built his creative methodology not from the experiment, but from careful preparation of materials, from scientific consultations, from personal experience in expeditionary works. It is no coincidence that he, by that time, the title person in documentalism, had the role of the creator of the film chronicle of Soviet colonization of the Arctic. According to the head of the Arctic campaign of 1932 O.Yu. Schmidt, "it would be wrong to say that in the face of comrade Shneiderov we had only the "movie eye" of the expedition. Comrade Shneiderov is a Bolshevik, one of the most active members of the expedition, and through his entire film the consciousness of the great importance of the cam-

paign, responsibility to the party and the government for the performance of the task passes” [3, Shneiderov V.A., p. 3].

In this film project, V.A. Shneiderov fully confirmed his reputation as a skillful filmmaker and popularizer, laying the foundations for the subsequent implementation of the project of the geographical cinema atlas of the USSR, in its turn reformatted into a known TV program “Club of film travelers”. Memoirs of V.A. Shneiderov clearly testify to the ideological position of the main director of the direction of Soviet view (geographical) films: “If, abroad, in bourgeois countries, the view paintings serve the purposes of imperialist propaganda, distorting the reality, presenting it as the capitalists wish to submit it, then in our country these films are telling the truth about the present day of our Motherland, show the beauty and richness of its unseen edges, show the life of Soviet people and the transformation of nature, carried out by them according to the great Stalinist plans” [6, Shneiderov V.A., p. 160]. Released in 1933, qualitatively filmed and genuinely imbued with the pathos of the historical feat of Soviet sailors and researchers, the film “Two Oceans” gained unprecedented popularity in cinema distribution, giving the opportunity to ordinary viewers to make a grand arctic film journey, to share the experience of the difficulties of passing and the joys of conquest of the Northern sea route [8, Lebedev N.A., p. 15].

Thus, the film “Two Oceans” fulfilled its multifaceted task. On the one hand, it became a contribution to the history of science. It was one of the first film documents about the development of the Arctic and the life of its population. On the other hand, it captured the processes of Sovietization of the region: opening and name of new lands, construction of social institutions and economic bases, development of new transport routes and resettlement projects — universal components of construction state community in the USSR at the turn of the 1920s — 1930s [11, Tishkov V.A.]. And his applied methodology of combining techniques of feature and documentary cinema in the course of film creation is relevant for use in the modern expeditionary film making [12, Golovnev, Golovneva; 13, Williams, Golovnev]. At the same time, the distinctive feature of cinema as a means of research is the possibility of capturing and retransmitting not only information about the phenomenon or event but also its multilayer context. As you can see, the documentary “Two Oceans” by V.A. Shneiderov is a complex historical source that reflected not only the dramatic twists of the Arctic expedition on board of “Sibiryakov” along the Northern Sea Route but also the peculiarities of the ideology of its time: because the image of the Soviet ship alone breaking the eternal ice is the obvious hypostasis of the “Revolution” — the quintessence of the official heroic in the USSR.

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