

## Analysis of Interview with Galina Chistiakova

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### The Interview

In July 2009 two students from the College of William and Mary, Jan-Pieter Verheul and Zhenya Derevyannykh conducted an interview with Galina Chistiakova in St. Petersburg, Russia. The two students were studying Russian language and culture in St. Petersburg at the time, and conducted the interview as part of a project then-entitled “Moscow Theater Project, and which has since been renamed “Russian Movie Theater Project”. The project is designed to record the movie-going experiences of ordinary Russians in the Soviet and Post-Soviet periods. In this case, the interviewee is Galina Chistiakova, a retired woman who grew up in a small town near Rostov-on-Don in Southern Russia and later moved to St. Petersburg. The interviewers in this case both have knowledge of the Russian language and Russian and Soviet film, and it is important to note that Zhenya Derevyannykh is a native Russian speaker and grew up in the Russian Federation.

Chistiakova focuses a significant amount of her attention on the physical and technical developments in theaters and movie projection over the years. Her descriptions of specific theaters and her experiences of going to the movies paint a general picture of the recovery of Russian cinema after the Second World War and its overall development to roughly the present day. First, she describes the immediate postwar atmosphere of movie-going in Rostov-on-Don and the nearby town where she grew up. She focuses on the physical shortages of the time and the response of people in her city to the wartime destruction and the pace of reconstruction. She states plainly that movie theaters were not a priority with the limited resources available, and goes on to explain how they watched films and dealt with the shortages. She describes films being shown outdoors on sheets stretched over houses using portable projection equipment. She only mentions one film during this period, a war film called [\*Chapaev\*](#)<sup>1</sup> which she says particularly struck her. *Chapaev* is a historical revolutionary film about the Russian Civil War. She remembers all of the children particularly enjoying *Chapaev* and describes the “victorious mood” of the times. A possible explanation for why people enjoyed this film in particular is they equated the scenes depicting the Russian Civil War with the Second World War, which had just ended.

She also recounts the first theater built in her neighborhood, the “Chkalovets” specifically mentioning the comfortable and individual seats. She emphasizes the progression and development of non-film aspects of the movie-going experience, going to great lengths to place them in the context of Soviet life at the time. When asked what types of films she saw, she talks not about films that she necessarily enjoyed, but films that were available or were generally popular. She brings up what she refers to as trophy films, which were films captured from the Germans during the war to mask a lack of film prints in the Soviet Union. She recalls that these films were shown often and usually in their original languages without any form of translation.

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<sup>1</sup> *Chapaev* (Lenfilm 1934)- A Soviet film about a Bolshevik hero of the Russian Civil War.

Later, when asked when during the day she went to movies, she places her response in the context of school shortages in the Soviet Union during her youth. She says that the times during which children of her generation could go to the movies were determined by the time of their shift for school. There were three time blocks during which children of different ages would go to school. The youngest schoolchildren would go first for several hours, and then the next youngest group, and so on.

Chistiakova is not particularly forthcoming with details about specific films. However, she has an excellent memory for actors and actresses. She explains toward the end of her interview how important the acting in a film is to her, relative to the plot, but she does not begin to describe actors in detail until one specific moment. During the interview, Zhenya comments about a specific actress she mentions: [Vera Kholodnaia](#)<sup>1</sup>, the Russian silent film star. After Zhenya expresses interest in the actors and actresses of Chistiakova's youth; she mentions several others including [Marlene Dietrich](#)<sup>2</sup>, [Greta Garbo](#)<sup>3</sup>, and [Charlie Chaplin](#)<sup>4</sup>. From this point on, as well, she specifically mentions actors, probably because she feels this information is important to her audience. Before Zhenya's comment about Vera Kholodnaia and her surprise that Chistiakova knows about her, Chistiakova only mentions Charlie Chaplin briefly before moving on. However, after that point she mentions every actor she can think of connected with Russian films, such as [Yanina Zheyemo](#)<sup>5</sup>, [Erast Garin](#)<sup>6</sup>, [Faina Ranevskaya](#)<sup>7</sup>, [Nikolai Rybnikov](#)<sup>8</sup>, and [Igor Iliinski](#)<sup>9</sup>. The first three are mentioned in connection with the film [Zolushka](#)<sup>10</sup> or *Cinderella* and the latter is mentioned for his role in the film [St. Jorgen's Day](#)<sup>11</sup>. Chistiakova explains the importance of acting in her movie-going experiences toward the end of the interview. She says that she primarily went to see films for specific actors regardless of the plot of the film, much like a person would go to the theater to see a specific actor or actress. In this context she mentions [Alexei](#)<sup>12</sup> and [Anatoly](#)<sup>13</sup> [Kuznetsov](#) and [Alexei Batalov](#)<sup>14</sup>.

Again, in her recollections of films she places them in the context of Soviet life at the time. When asked what types of films she saw, she talks not about films that she necessarily enjoyed, but films that were available or were generally popular. She brings up what she refers to as trophy films, which were captured from the Germans during the war. She specifically mentions a Hollywood film about Strauss, [The Great Waltz](#)<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Vera Kholodnaia (1893-1919)- A Russian silent film star.

<sup>2</sup> Marlene Dietrich (1901-1992)- A famous German actress and singer.

<sup>3</sup> Greta Garbo (1905-1990)- a famous Swedish actress during Hollywood's Golden Age.

<sup>4</sup> Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977)- An English silent film actor and director.

<sup>5</sup> Yanina Zheyemo (1909-1987)- A Soviet Actress active between 1925-1975.

<sup>6</sup> Erast Garin (1902-1980)- A Soviet comic actor and director.

<sup>7</sup> Faina Ranevskaya (1896-1984)- A famous Soviet actress.

<sup>8</sup> Nikolai Rybnikov (1930-1990)- A famous Soviet actor.

<sup>9</sup> Igor Iliinski (1901-1987)- A Soviet actor and favorite of director Vsevolod Myerhold.

<sup>10</sup> *Cinderella* (*Zolushka*, Lenfilm 1947)- A Soviet musical based on the classic fairy tale.

<sup>11</sup> *St. Jorgen's Day* (*Prazdnik Svytogo Jorgena*, Mosfilm 1930)- A Soviet part-talkie comedy film.

<sup>12</sup> Alexei Kuznetsov (1959- )- a Russian actor who commonly features in American productions.

<sup>13</sup> Anatoly Kuznetsov (1930- )- A Russian actor who starred in *The White Sun of the Desert*

<sup>14</sup> Alexei Batalov (b. 1928)- A Soviet actor famous for his role in *Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears*.

<sup>15</sup> *The Great Waltz* (*Bolshoy Valtz*, Loew's Productions 1938)- An American film about Johan Strauss.

Interestingly, she thinks that this was an Austrian film, not an American film. She does not place as much emphasis on individual films as she does individual actors. This could be because they went to see any films that were available, while they were available. It could also be because, by her own admission, she did not go to the movies very often and probably only went when she recognized specific actors. Speaking collectively for the Soviet people, she says that people liked classic films the best, although she does not give any titles for these films. The only film based on a classic literary work she mentions is [War and Peace](#)<sup>1</sup>, but the version she refers to is the American version, not [Bondarchuk's production](#)<sup>2</sup>. Most of the titles she mentions are post-Soviet films, some of which she seems to have seen and some of which she seems to be aware of only from advertisements. The only other Soviet film she mentions is [White Sun of the Desert](#)<sup>3</sup>, but otherwise she talks about the films [Gladiator](#)<sup>4</sup>, and [Ice Age](#)<sup>5</sup>. Another contemporary film she mentions is [Mu-mu](#)<sup>6</sup> [Iurii Grymov's](#)<sup>7</sup> post-Soviet remake of an earlier adaptation of an [Ivan Turgenev](#)<sup>8</sup> story. She only went to see this film, she says, because she did not think she could fully appreciate the wide panoramic shots of the Russian countryside on her television.

Chistiakova's account of Soviet movie-going during her youth in Rostov-on-Don is extremely nostalgic. While she does mention shortages, she does not recall being aware of any censorship or political maneuvering in cinema, explaining it away with the statement "we were far away from all those political games" (27:40). This "out in the country" explanation is not particularly feasible, especially since she mentions the active role government officials played in the selection of films and because Rostov-on-Don is still a fairly large and important city in southern Russia. She goes to great pains to stress the positive aspects of movie-going during the Soviet Union. She stresses how no one ever broke the rules and snuck in without paying or brought underage children to the theater. She also describes the entertainment provided for movie-goers waiting for the screening and expresses her desire to see this practice restored now. This entertainment typically consisted of a small band accompanied by one or more singers or dancers.

There is a sharp break in her tone when describing changes in movie-going from the Soviet period to the post-Soviet period. Her description of negative changes in movie-going begins in 1985 at the start of Perestroika, when construction halted on a brand new movie theater in her neighborhood. This is after she had moved to Leningrad, but regrettably the interviewers never asked when she moved there from Rostov or whether she had lived anywhere else. She describes the disappearance of neighborhood movie theaters, the emergence of specialized theaters for specific movie genres such as the theater "Knowledge is Power" for popular science films. She also mentions the rise of multiplex theaters in shopping centers and the drastic change in prices from the Soviet to

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<sup>1</sup> *War and Peace* (Paramount Pictures 1956)- American/Italian film directed by King Vidor

<sup>2</sup> *War and Peace* (Voina i Mir, Mosfilm 1968)- Soviet film directed by Sergei Bondarchuk.

<sup>3</sup> *The White Sun of the Desert* (Beloje Solntse pustyni, Mosfilm 1968)

<sup>4</sup> *Gladiator* (Dreamworks 2000) American film about a Roman Gladiator directed by Ridley Scott.

<sup>5</sup> *Ice Age* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox 2002)-An American computer-animated film.

<sup>6</sup> *Mu-mu* (VGTRK 1998)- A remake of a 1959 film based on a story by Ivan Turgenev

<sup>7</sup> Iurii Grymov (1965- )- A Russian film director and director of *Mu-mu* (1998).

<sup>8</sup> Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883)- A famous Russian writer.

the post-Soviet period. This last development she describes as an outrage compared to earlier movie ticket prices. The price she gives is 200 rubles for a ticket, which at the time the interview was conducted would have been less than \$7. However, this is in contrast to her quoted Soviet-era price of 30 kopeks.

The transition from the Soviet period to the post-Soviet period also brings about a change in Chistiakova's narrative voice. When describing the decline of the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet period she increasingly uses "I" to describe events, whereas during her descriptions of movie-going during the Soviet period she uses "we" to describe nearly everything. This switch in narrative voice denotes a change in her relationship with post-Soviet society. She does not identify herself as being a part of the new post-Soviet Russia. In fact, she ties in the decline of her own interest in movie-going in the Soviet Union with the decline of the Soviet Union. Her interest in cinema wanes during the 1970s and almost disappears during the 1980s with the beginning of Perestroika.

These changes in narrative voice bring up certain contradictions in Chistiakova's account. She gives the impression that during her childhood in Rostov-on-Don, people went to the movies all the time even to see the same films multiple times. She depicts this as something common to everyone, but in a small aside she mentions she did not go to the movies very often because her stepmother would not pay for her to go. So, she says, she stayed home and read. However, she mentions that she never read any of the Russian classics, but instead saw their film adaptations, and after describing how she never went to movies she talks about how "we" used to go all the time, admitting there was nothing else to do in the '50s and '60s. In her closing statement she says "film occupies a great place in the ordinary life of a Soviet person... everyone always went to the movie theater, both young and old" (39:00). This contradicts her earlier statements that she rarely went to the movies for most of her life and almost never in the 1970s and 1980s.

The only way to reconcile these contradictions is to consider her audience. She is speaking to a young expatriate Russian girl and a young American student. Knowing this, she may be trying to paint a broad, more favorable picture of life in the Soviet Union compared to contemporary Russian life using movie-going as the point of contrast. This is not to say that what she says is not true for the general population or that movie-going did not occupy the special place in Soviet society she says it does, but it does indicate that her memories may be colored by a collective consciousness. She may be placing her own experiences in the context of what she learned about about movie-going in the Soviet Union from the media, even when her experiences do not match up with what she believes to have been true. This helps to explain why she is reluctant to discuss personal experiences, and does so only when directly prompted, and seems to believe her opinions are worthless. They do not always match up with her assumptions and beliefs about general movie-going during the Soviet period and so she seems to think that they are anomalies, not indicative of the movie-going habits of the Soviet population at large. The fact that she only seems to elaborate on events which are of communal or collective importance, typically using plural pronouns, also supports this idea.

Galina Chistiakova's interview provides valuable insight into the technical development of movie theaters and film presentation in the Soviet Union. She documents the post-war recovery of Russian movie theaters and the various technological

advancements over the years from screen ratio, to color, to individual seating. She focuses heavily on the movie-going experience itself and on which actors and actresses were particularly well-liked by viewers. She does not comment at length about particular films, but does mention how films were chosen for screening and how the authorities obtained many films in the immediate postwar period. She also describes how movie-going changed with Perestroika and then more distinctly how it changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the contradictions in her interview suggest that her memories of movie-going in the Soviet Union are colored by official and popular memories of the subject. Simply put, she often describes what she heard and thinks most people did, rather than what she personally experienced. This could be for a number of reasons, but it must be taken into account when reading her interview. However, her accounts of the appearance of certain films and screening developments are valuable, especially since she is describing movie-going in a smaller, provincial city rather than Moscow or St. Petersburg.