



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Country: Russia

Topic: *Clowns and Combines: The Musical Films of Grigorii Aleksandrov and Ivan Pyr'ev (1934-1950)*

In spite of the hostility of many Party functionaries and even filmmakers during the 1930s to the depiction of the socialist project in a comic vein, the musical films of Grigorii Aleksandrov and Ivan Pyr'ev were among the most popular cinematic works of the Stalin years, beloved by both the Best Friend of Cinema Workers and the general population. Romantic comedy with a "kheppi-end" in city or steppe and the sing-along melodies of Dunaevskii, Khrennikov and other composers helped sustain ordinary people during the difficult years of socialist construction and World War II. Although the idealized world of the musical film was a good fit with both Socialist Realism's "depiction of reality in its revolutionary development" and the official optimism of the years of socialist construction, other features of the genre that engaged the spectator on an emotional level—a strong love plot, privileging of memorable songs and dance, slapstick humor—assured the continuing popularity of these films.

The musical films of Aleksandrov and Pyr'ev constitute a body of genre works delimited by a single historical period and marked by a uniform deep structure overlaid by variable localized narratives. Recent publication has emphasized the Stalinist historical-cultural context and selected thematic characteristics, but there is no full-length study of the corpus, nor have the musicals been examined as a discrete cinematic genre. My research will lead to the first book on the musical films of Aleksandrov and Pyr'ev, and will focus on several areas, including the

making and reception of the films, their intersection with theoretical models of established western genres, assimilation of native and foreign genre/extra-generic influences, cultural context, narrative and stylistic systems, and cinematography. The book will examine from an historical-cultural, theoretical and stylistic perspective a defining phenomenon of Stalinist popular culture, which remains a vital part of the continuing discourse on national identity in contemporary Russia.

The IREX grant (Sept. 1 – Dec. 31, 2001) funded research on the first part of the book project--the history of the making and reception of the eleven musical films. Because the Ministry of Education was late with visas and plane travel was delayed after the events of Sept. 11th, I was able to reach Moscow only on Sept. 20th, thereby losing almost 20% of grant time. The greatest challenge therefore was simply fulfilling the original research agenda, but that has always been the *modus vivendi* for our field. Since the part of the project funded by IREX was historical, my research focussed on archival work, taped interviews with surviving actors and camera crew members, viewing other 1930s-40s Soviet comedy films to establish context, and research in libraries on published accounts of the films and their reception. Research sites included: The Russian State Archive of Literature and the Arts (RGALI), the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), the Mosfil'm museum, the private archives of Marina Ladynina (star of the Pyr'ev musicals), the family archives of Isaak Dunaevskii and Vasillii Lebedev-Kumach (the composer and lyricist respectively for many Aleksandrov and Pyr'ev films), Gosfil'mofond (the national film archive which holds the largest collection of 1930s-40s Russian films), the Russian State Library newspaper repository at Khimki, and the library of the State Historical Museum. The archival records on the making and reception of the films turned out to be more extensive and interesting than I had anticipated; various items turned up in unexpected locations in other archival collections. Thanks to leads from several film historians and filmmakers, I was also able to locate and interview surviving actors and camera crew members from the Aleksandrov and Pyr'ev films, thereby gaining the benefit of various (and varying) eyewitness perspectives that I will have to weigh and contextualize. Work in the national film archive was not easy because the early collections are not well organized, but holdings of foreign films distributed in Russia during the early thirties did yield leads on possible sources for borrowed motifs in the Aleksandrov musicals.

My preliminary conclusion, based on archival records and interviews, is that the Aleksandrov and Pyr'ev musical films cannot be studied solely in the context of Soviet Socialist Realism, but must be viewed within cinematic genre traditions rooted in western film, Russian folklore and Russian cinema of the 1920s. In their work with scriptwriters (often actual co-authorship) and their work as directors, Aleksandrov and Pyr'ev consciously created films that followed the logic and laws of these genre traditions, which were often in tension with hegemonic Socialist Realism. Secondly, the eleven musical films are largely synthetic creations rather than the personal directorial achievements of

Aleksandrov and Pyr'ev. Archival records and interviews with camera crew members confirmed a degree of co-operative and/or hidden authorship and "group creativity" beyond the conventional pattern of both American and Russian musical films. Thirdly, as is now widely recognized, Stalinism was never a monolithic phenomenon, but rather a system that experienced ebb, flow and the vagaries of chance. The fluid state of government cadres at the middle and upper levels during the late thirties and ensuing opportunities created by fortuity or chance were also among the forces shaping the musical films of Aleksandrov and Pyr'ev.

Suggestions for future research agendas in the field: more studies on the concept of national identity in Russia, on arts management, on ecological and urban planning issues.