

RESEARCH REPORT

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Country of Research: Russia

Title of Research Proposal:

“Filming Riazan: The History of Cinefication in a Russian Province”

Topic of Research

By the mid-1920s the Soviet central government had defined a project of “cinefication,” under the auspices of a State Committee for Cinematography and its regional branch offices, which was aimed at disseminating feature and educational films, as well as newsreels to the entire country. The goal was to reach every town and village, every collective or state farm, the most remote corners of the Soviet Union, using trains, trucks, airplanes, horseback, ships, and other modes of transport. The Soviet project of “cinefication” represents the most grandiose project of film distribution, exhibition, and reception that the world has known to date. “Filming Riazan” is an attempt to write the history of this project, from its beginnings in the 1920s to its collapse in the late 1980s by focusing on Riazan administrative region, two hundred miles south of Moscow. Using provincial and central archival data, trade journals and specialized histories and handbooks, archival footage, as well as footage shot in June 2004, “Filming Riazan” has already materialized into a 50-minute documentary film, entitled *The Province of Lost Film*, to be premiered in October 2005 at the Riazan film festival “Okraina.” A monograph will be submitted for publication in 2006.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

Because the aim of this research is a book and a film, the impact will be double in terms of the targeted audience. For the cultural historian and specialist of Soviet cinema, the book will contribute to the notoriously difficult issue of reception through a case study involving the very heartland of Russia. Those who played a part in the cinefication of the Soviet Union are fewer in number each year and they are telling their story through the book and the film. Both are thus an entirely new contribution to the history of Soviet cinema and of the Soviet propaganda machine trapped within the theory of “plans”, and the reality of country roads and a viewing public who have their own ideas about the role of cinema in their lives. There are few documentary films on the Post-Soviet countryside and few documentary films available to English-speaking audiences on everyday life in contemporary Russia. Most film resources have gone into documentaries that explore the dark days of the Soviet past.

Prescreenings of *The Province of Lost Film* in Canada and Russia have already received very positive audience reactions. The film provides both Russian and English-speaking audiences with insight into everyday life in Post-Soviet Russia and captures how post-Soviet inhabitants see the world around them.

Approach and research methodology; list of research sites

The research was based on two types of sources: 1. oral/visual and 2. written.

1. During one week in June 2004, I toured Riazan oblast with Andrei Melnik (deputy director of the Riazan State Archive), Aleksander Nikitin (director of the Riazan film club and local historian), Tracy McDonald (historian of the Riazan countryside, McMaster University, Canada), and Aleksander Gershtein (journalist and cameraman for RTVI in Toronto). We interviewed (former) movie theater directors, projectionists, other employees of the cinefication apparatus, and people in small towns and villages. The result is about 14 hours of footage. Other material obtained from cinefication employees include posters, letters, publicity for films screened, photos, etc. A small part of these materials have been used for the film, the rest is used for the book.
2. During the remaining two months of my stay in 2004, I worked in the Riazan State Archive. Particularly useful was the “fond” of the Riazan Oblast Administration of Cinefication. In May and June 2005 I returned to Riazan for two weeks to work on the local press from various periods to get a sense of what films were advertized in Riazan and other localities. I spent the rest of my time in Moscow archives (GARF, RGASPI), and the Lenin and State Public Historical Libraries to document the central administrative structures and policies concerning cinefication. I will make a final short trip to Russia in October 2005 for additional materials and the screening of our film.

Research findings and preliminary conclusions

Both written and oral sources indicate that “cinefication” is yet another example of the powerful dreams that characterized the Soviet experience, its successes, and failures. Especially striking are the measures, started in the mid-1920s and continued throughout Soviet history, to bring cinema to the rural population, and the difficulties in implementing them. A series of contradictions surface with unrelenting regularity: the quasi-Utopian dimension of the plan, creating a real demand among the population; the drastic condition of the infrastructure (roads, equipment, etc.) which constrasts so sharply with the often heroic desire to make “things work”; the needs of profit vs. ideological correctness (the contradiction, for example, of showing foreign “trophy” films to make movie-going more attractive, i.e., to sell more tickets, during the campaign against cosmopolitanism); and, last but not least, an omni-present bureaucracy from top to bottom that gets “things done” and strangles the operation

at the same time. Judging from what people in our film remember of this experience, however, the Soviet effort of cinefication was part of an unprecedented effort to create a culture as a public good, to be shared and valued instead of being sold and consumed as a mere commodity.

Future research agendas

I plan to continue my research on cinefication by taking the example of the former Soviet republic of Kirghizia. A key element of this research is the persona of Izya Gershtein, a famous documentary film maker who spent most of his life in Kirghizia. In an interview, recently made in his present home in Tel Aviv, he tells the story of his film making and his role in cinefication out of Frunze/Bishkek. In one of his films, *It Demands Character* (1987), Gershtein tells the story of a “Soviet/Kyrgyz” German, Theodor Yakovlevich Lackmann , chairman of the model collective farm “Victory” in Kalinin district, not far from the capital Frunze (Bishkek). I have since then followed the traces of Lackmann and his family, who emigrated to Germany in the early 1990s. I intend to continue following Izya Gershtein's footsteps by interviewing and filming some of the inhabitants of the Kyrgyz countryside that were part of Gershtein's films, to document the evolution of daily life from Soviet rule to independence. One of the highlights will be to document the campaign, recently launched by Izya Gershtein's students in Bishkek, to show documentary films in the Kirghiz villages, as an alternative to foreign B movies and cheap serials, seen on Kyrgyz TV. The outcome of this research will be another documentary film, a series of articles, and, possibly, a book.

Policy recommendations

Regional film distribution centers in Riazan and all over Russia contain uncountable reels of Soviet feature films, educational shorts, and newsreels. Some of these centers are very well maintained (the Bashkiria distribution center in Ufa, for example, is a model of maintenance and innovation, see: <http://bashkino.ru/about/about.htm>), but most are neglected, falling apart because of the lack of funding. I recommend that these film distribution centers be included in government- and private-sponsored programs that help Russian archives to be preserved. I would be happy to assist any such initiative with advice and provide contacts.