MOSCOW PRIME TIME

HOW THE SOVIET UNION BUILT THE MEDIA EMPIRE THAT LOST THE CULTURAL COLD WAR

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Figure 1.1. The Amphibian in love. Anastasiia Vertinskaia and Vladimir Korenev in the USSR's first blockbuster, *Amphibian Man*, 1962. RIA Novosti. Used with permission.

Man (*Chelovek-amfibiia*, 1962), a fantastical romance featuring beautiful young stars and state-of-the-art underwater photography, sold 65.5 million. But Soviet cinema-art had both Ivan *and* the Amphibian, international esteem *and* a gigantic domestic audience. It was the kind of thing that went to people's heads, and not only Soviet filmmakers'. Goskino officials traveled internationally in the post-Stalinist era, too, and they could share a sense of pride in Soviet cinema: the prestige of high art and the clout and dynamism of a mass audience (all the sweeter to savor as audiences were seen shriveling on the vine across Western Europe). It was easy to gloss the details: that Soviet viewers adored the Amphibian even if Sartre and the cinematic community loved Ivan—audience dynamism rarely correlated with artistic prestige—and that they also showed great affection for the heroes of foreign commercial cinema, say, the American Western *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). These were "shortcomings" in Soviet parlance, sometimes probed in meetings and in the media but easily evaded in favor of a generalized notion of Soviet cinema-art: outsized, upstanding, unique.

FOREIGN FILMS ON SOVIET SCREENS: SWINGING WITH TARZAN, INVITING BRIGITTE BARDOT

While the thaw has often been celebrated as the moment when the USSR emerged from Stalinist cultural autarky, the history of cinema presents a more complicated picture. Foreign-made films were a powerful presence in the Russian-Soviet cultural marketplace for nearly all of the twentieth century. The 1930s were an anomaly: the only decade when domestic productions had a conclusive lock on audience affections and the only decade when foreign imports were almost entirely suppressed. In the pre-1917 period, French, American, and German productions ruled the screen, with a nearly 80 percent share of the market in the Russian Empire's cities, and for most of the twenties foreign domination was equally pronounced.[44] Once again in the post–World War II era, foreign cinema had a leading position, beginning almost immediately at the war's end. If we consider the volume of foreign-made movies proportionate to the overall market, the high point was late Stalinism. In 1951, only one in four films in distribution in the Soviet Union was Soviet-made.[45] In 1952, the top of the box-office ratings in the USSR—all four slots—were occupied by four *Tarzan* pictures from Hollywood. Although actual attendance figures are not available, we know that each sold more than 31.6 million tickets (as that was the figure for the fifth-place film, a Soviet civil war drama "starring" Stalin).[46] And 1952 was in no way exceptional for foreign cinema's triumph. The most widely seen picture in the USSR for the 1940s was neither a thirties classic nor a postwar masterpiece but a German musical production, *The Girl of My Dreams* (*Die Frau meiner Traüme*, 1944).[47]

Tarzan, Marika Rokk (the girl of their dreams), and other foreign exotica came to the USSR by way of Nazi Germany; they were war booty and so exceptional by definition. This at least is how the authorities presented them to Soviet audiences. Yet the story of these films' careers in the USSR reveals fundamental, long-term trends in the Soviet approach to masscult—trends in popular and bureaucratic tastes, mechanisms for control, and the centrality to the system of "commercial considerations," to use the Soviet bureaucratic trope. In most respects, it turns out, the trophies were not exceptional at all.

It took the Soviets less than a week after the Nazi surrender to have someone from the Ministry of Cinematography on the ground in Germany and hunting for movies. The official, I. Manevich, picked up new boots from Mosfil'm's wardrobe

44. Denise Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (New York, 1992), 20; Neia Zorkaia, "O 'massovom segodnia'—Neskol'ko elementarnykh istin," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, no. 45 (2000): 27–37.

45. Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepel: Kniga pervaia*, 3.

46. The film was *Nezabyvaemyi 1919* (*The Unforgettable Year 1919*). Box-office figures at http://www.nashekino.ru/.

47. D. B. Dondurei, ed., *Otechestvennyi kinematograf: Strategiia vyzhivaniia: Nauchnyi doklad* (Moscow, 1991), 71.

department and went directly to the "German Hollywood" at Babelsberg, where he found a specially designed, bunkerlike movie archive surrounded by Red Army men. The soldiers were as eager as Manevich, "shouting, demanding the pictures, and proposing to break down the doors to the bunker with grenades," he later wrote. Manevich seized over 17,000 films and selected around 3,700 features and about 2,500 shorts for immediate shipment to Moscow.[48] Among them were a large number of genre productions—adventures, comedies, musicals, and love stories. Most dated to the prewar period and were American and Western European (especially German) in origin.[49]

At the very highest levels, Soviet authorities treated their cinematic war booty with loving care. Stalin scheduled regular late-night screenings for members of the Politburo and watched a good number, if not all, of the films himself, with simultaneous translation provided by the minister of cinematography.[50] The films were also vetted by the CC, which gave precise instructions about what to release, where, and in what form.[51] All trophy pictures were to be accompanied by "a specially prepared text that correctly orients the viewer as to the content of the film" and "carefully edited explanatory subtitles," the CC advised.[52] *Stagecoach* (renamed *The Journey Will Be Dangerous*), recalled one Muscovite, began with an on-screen announcement: "This film displays the morals of bourgeois society, and the hypocrisy and bigotry that are its distinctive characteristics. It will not be difficult for the Soviet viewer to discern that the film does not accurately show America's colonialist policies vis-à-vis the Indian tribes."[53] All the films also had their opening credit sequences cut and replaced by a title page that identified them as the spoils of war.[54] In some cases the films were edited so clumsily as to be nonsensical in parts or to alter their original meanings altogether. In the Soviet version of *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (renamed *The Dollar Rules*), Deeds, a millionaire accused of insanity because he had decided to give his money away, was *not* vindicated in court in the end. Soviet audiences saw only the judge threatening to expel the millionaire's vociferous supporters, followed by shots of an empty courtroom and the millionaire's beloved in tears.[55]

Mr. Deeds joined Tarzan, Ali-Baba and the Forty Thieves, and the King of California in winning Soviet viewers' hearts all the same. In Tula, all four of the city's movie theaters were showing the foreign films in the fall of 1947, while in Barnaul, the Oktiabr' theater offered forty-five days of trophy cinema that season and only two days of the Stalin cult film *The Oath* (*Kliatva*, 1946). One Riga house was showing *Girl of My Dreams* practically around the clock, from the first screening before noon to the last at one in the morning.[56] In Baku, movie theaters held screenings even later, at two and four in the morning, and some ardent viewers went from one to the next.[57] A whole series of political and workplace organizations in Moscow petitioned for special screenings of *Girl of My Dreams*, from the Academy of Sciences to large factories such as Krasnyi Oktiabr'. Even the CC apparat chimed in with its request.[58] Many contemporaries, particularly people who were then youngsters, recall going to see trophy pictures over and over again. Moscow's courtyards sprouted rope swings for adventuresome young Tarzan imitators, and boys sported the *tarzanets* haircut after their hero.[59] Grown-up Russian men "practically drooled" at the mention of the American Deanna Durbin,[60] while women swooned over Robert Taylor, star of the British love story *Waterloo Bridge* (1940).

The stunning success of the trophy films elicited some murmurs of concern and even protest at the time. After the release of *Girl of My Dreams* in 1947, officials from a variety of regional party organizations contacted the CC questioning

48. The official numbers cited by Manevich were 17,300 total: 6,400 feature films, 3,500 shorts, 4,800 advertising spots, and 2,600 newsreels. I. Manevich, "Chuzhie trofei," *SE*, no. 18 (1991): 5.

49. The German trophies were combined with pictures seized during previous military operations (from western Ukraine and Belorussia in 1939 and the Baltics and Bessarabia in 1940) to form a special fund housed in Belye Stolby. About 40 percent of the films were American in origin, and roughly 50 percent were Western European. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 88, ll. 3–4. The Soviets had also acquired (by purchase or as gifts) a number of American and British films prior to and during World War II, including *Sun Valley Serenade* (1941), *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), and *Bambi* (1942). Though often lumped together with the trophies, these films were on Soviet screens much earlier, and they were legal. Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park, PA, 2003), 129; M. Semenov, "'Trofeinoe kino'? Net, vorovannoe," *Novoe russkoe slovo*, 19 February 2002, and 12 March 2002.

50. Archival documents make occasional mention of a film's release "according to Comrade Stalin's instructions." RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 576, l. 60.

51. A 1948 report on a batch of seventy films rejected nineteen "as politically alien or base from an artistic point of view"; twenty-six were approved for "limited" use in trade unions and clubs; and twenty-four were authorized for general distribution. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 92, l. 11.

52. Ibid.

53. Semenov, "'Trofeinoe kino'?"

54. This was also an attempt to avoid copyright disputes: the Soviet authorities were well aware of the potential for lawsuits and concerned that film sales abroad would be jeopardized and Soviet film distributors held liable. See RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 92, l. 5.

55. V. Demin, "Nostalgiia—greshnoe protivoiadie," *SE*, no. 18 (1991): 3.

56. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 576, l. 57.

57. Elena Kurbanova, "Eiramdzhan, ulozhivshii Kuravleva v ginekologicheskoe otdelenie," *Moskovskaia pravda*, 11 May 1999.

58. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 576, l. 4.

59. Aleksei Kozlov, *Kozel na sakse* (Moscow, 1998).

60. Oriana Atkinson, *Over at Uncle Joe's: Moscow and Me* (New York, 1947), 136. Deanna Durbin's popularity appears to have been extraordinary and enduring. See Irving R. Levine's comments in *Main Street, USSR: Selections from the Original Edition* (New York, 1960), 141; Serge Fliegers, "Liz Taylor Mistaken for Deanna Durbin," *Chicago Daily Defender*, 28 January 1958.

the wisdom of showing the films, as did the head of the Komsomol.[61] In 1948, L. Il'ichev (of the CC Department of Agitation and Propaganda) reported that the department had received "a large quantity of letters from workers" about the trophy films with "harsh criticism and, in many cases, demands for their removal from the screen."[62] One man in 1952 wrote of his frustration that Soviet theaters were, as he put it, "engaged in real bourgeois propaganda."

> The harmful effects of showing these films can be seen in every courtyard—including ours, where dozens of children play "Tarzan and Cheetah," in particular—and also in relations between adults. It seems to me that the state of affairs is reminiscent of the situation in the well-known fairy tale by Andersen, when everyone had to admit that "the emperor had no clothes."[63]

But with the emperor out naked on parade, Soviet media carefully avoided drawing attention to the spectacle. Few indignant missives like this one appeared in the central press; movie critics kept their distance, too.[64] Trophy films were at once official—the mainstay of everyday cinema culture in the late Stalinist USSR—and unofficial, everywhere on view, yet rarely reflected in orthodox visions of Soviet life.

The story of the trophy films captivates people now in its very strangeness. Tarzan and Stalin in one sentence—on one screen, in fact, as any *Tarzan* showing would have been preceded by newsreels featuring Stalin—is difficult to fathom. Factor in the world beyond the theater, and your head spins. This was a time when the Soviet regime forbade marriage to foreigners, when scores of artists and scientists suffered public persecution, and often worse, for their alleged lack of "Soviet patriotism." If drooling over Deanna Durbin did not qualify as groveling before the West, what did?

Historian Peter Kenez has suggested that Soviet leaders were willing to tolerate the trophies because they considered them light and frivolous and also because officials were banking on them to distract people from pressing economic and social problems.[65] Yet other light cultural forms from the capitalist world—jazz in particular—were under heavy ideological assault in the same period.

61. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 576, l. 2; ibid., l. 58.
62. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 92, l. 63.
63. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 133, d. 383, l. 208.
64. When *Komsomol'skaia pravda* ran an editorial critiquing the trophy film phenomenon in 1947, the Ministry of Cinematography sent a formal objection the CC. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 125, d. 576, l. 59. Seven years later, another Komsomol critique appeared in *IK* and won the journal an official rebuke and the Komsomol a warning from the CC. The offending article criticized Soviet filmmakers for failing youth and effectively throwing them into the arms of Tarzan. It was apparently quoted by an Associated Press reporter. See E. S. Afanas'eva and V. Iu. Afiani, eds., *Apparat TsK KPSS i kul'tura 1953–1975: Dokumenty* (Moscow, 2001), 285.
65. Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 192.

What was the difference between jazz bands and Tarzan? Imagine, for a start, the sound of millions of kopeck coins jingling in cash drawers across the USSR. As Manevich, the official in charge of seizing the Nazi film fund, explained in 1991, trophy films were a cash cow, helping the film distribution bureaucracy overfulfill its plan, and its officials win tidy bonuses, for many years. In the sixties a new Soviet picture that sold 40 million tickets (at 25 kopecks per ticket, for a gross take of 10 million rubles) was considered a smash success.[66] In 1948, when the potential audience was far smaller, the Soviets anticipated an income of 35–40 million rubles for a *limited* release of the American *Viva Villa!* (1934).[67] And the film came free of charge. There were dozens of *Viva Villas!*

The story of the trophies, then, while captivating, is not so strange after all. With the new wave of imports after Stalin's death, many things changed, but the Soviet audience's taste for foreign, commercial cinema held fast. The children of Tarzan's fans in the USSR crowded theaters for *The Magnificent Seven* and *Bobby* (a 1975 Bollywood teen romance); yesterday's droolers for Durbin and Taylor now lusted after Sophia Loren and Rishi Kapoor. Moreover, the fondness of the USSR's cultural bureaucracy for masscult endured over the decades.

In the early postwar period, the framework for authorizing this taste was war booty—a just reward to the victors, like wristwatches seized from POWs. In later years, the official basis for imports was mutual cultural understanding. The USSR also used cultural exchange agreements as a mechanism for promoting Soviet cinema abroad. Soveksportfil'm, the organization in charge of import-export deals, chose a packet of films from, say, India, and India, in exchange, accepted a selection of Soviet pictures.[68] The Soviets also bought films outright. In the Brezhnev era, they were spending US$50,000–150,000 for a picture made in a capitalist country. Films from the developing world came far cheaper and were often bartered for goods, a fact that made them even more attractive. With socialist countries, the typical method was exchange.[69] (The division of cinematic production into "capitalist," "socialist," and "developing world" is an artifact of Soveksportfil'm's own classification system.) The Soviets never paid percentages or royalties—a sale was a sale—and they were also known to circulate film prints until they shredded.[70] The most popular film of all time in the USSR, Soviet or foreign, was a Mexican-made melodrama with a gypsy theme, *Yesenia* (1971),

66. Zorkaia, "O 'massovom segodnia,'" 28.
67. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 92, l. 5. See also the three CC decrees on projected profits in Oleg V. Naumov and Andrei Artizov, eds., *Vlast' i khudozhestvennia intelligentsia: Dokumenty 1917–1953* (Moscow, 1999).
68. See Sudha Rajagopalan, *Leave Disco Dancer Alone! Indian Cinema and Soviet Movie-Going after Stalin* (New Dehli, 2008), 76–83.
69. Arkus, *Noveishaia istoriia*, 5:98–103
70. Films from capitalist countries were typically licensed for a limited period—a legal arrangement not always respected on the Soviet side.

which the Soviets bought for only U$20,000 in 1974. *Yesenia* sold 91 million tickets.[71] Even with the costs of copying, distribution, theater management, and so on, the clatter of kopeck coins was thunderous. Soveksportfil'm had a reputation as the most profitable foreign trade sector in the economy, and it was not thanks to exports. For every ruble in its budget, Soveksportfil'm estimated income from foreign film purchases at 5 rubles; in the case of some masscult pictures, it could reach 250.[72]

Comprehensive statistics on the foreign-film market in the USSR are not available at this time, but all indications suggest that films from capitalist countries attracted more viewers as a rule than either Soviet productions or films from the socialist bloc. A CC investigation in 1960 found that in the first nine months of that year, each film from the capitalist world drew an average audience of more than 500,000 in Moscow, while Soviet productions averaged 357,000 and socialist bloc pictures, 133,000.[73] Using other indicators, historian Sudha Rajagopalan concluded that Indian-made films were even more successful than capitalist productions on the Soviet market. The USSR imported 206 films from India in the period 1954 to 1991, nearly all of them (175) Hindi-language melodramas made in Bombay (so-called Bollywood cinema). Rajagopalan counted the number of films surpassing the 20-million mark for ticket sales in their first year of release and found that fifty productions were from India, more than from any other country. (The United States was second with forty-one, France third with thirty-eight.)[74] Until 1962's blockbuster, *Amphibian Man*, the record holder for any film was one of the first Indian productions to come to the USSR: Raj Kapoor's *The Vagabond*, released in 1954. At nearly 64 million tickets, *The Vagabond* still ranks in the top twenty films at the box office for the entire Soviet era.[75]

In 1960, Central Committee investigators concluded that the country's cinematic network had "received an excessively large diffusion of films from capitalist countries" and that "as a result, the attentions of a wide sphere of Soviet people are riveted on themes and ideas far from our tasks in ideological work and not infrequently contradicting those tasks."[76] This was one of several attacks on cinema repertoire, by the Central Committee and others, between 1958 and 1961, and some modifications did follow. Never again (in the Soviet era) would the U.S. Information Agency be able to boast that nearly half of Moscow's theaters were showing Hollywood films, as it did in the summer of 1960.[77] After a high of ten U.S. releases in 1960 and seven in 1961, the years 1962–70 saw numbers ranging from two to six annually. (The 1960 level was then surpassed only once, in 1977, with eleven U.S. releases.)[78] As a rule, according to one official in 1966, two to three times fewer copies of capitalist pictures than Soviet releases were also being printed.[79]

Yet it is important to recognize that the new approach—restricting the number of new titles and copies, especially for U.S. films—did not always limit audience size. Twenty-four million viewers managed to watch the mere 360 copies of the French *Les Misérables* (1958).[80] *Some Like It Hot* (1959) with Marilyn Monroe reached even more spectacular heights: 211,000 viewers per copy.[81] Visitors to the Soviet Union continued to remark on the prevalence and popularity of masscult. One young Yugoslav scholar was surprised to count more than eighty Moscow theaters showing capitalist films in the summer of 1964. Well over a third of them were playing the same picture, the Italian comedy *Divorce Italian Style* (1961).[82] In the 1970s, the policy of restricting the number of new titles continued, and with it came a general shift away from films made in the capitalist West and toward Middle Eastern, Latin American, and especially Indian products.[83] One expert estimated that only 65 percent of ticket sales in the seventies were for Soviet-made productions, with the rest attributable to foreign films.[84] The head of the Filmmakers' Union gave an even lower figure for 1975 at the union's congress: 50 percent. He may have been pleased to report that the number had risen to 70 percent by 1981, but that still left nearly one-third of ticket sales outside the Soviet camp.[85]

71. Dondurei, *Otechestvennyi kinematograf*, 73. See also Neia Zorkaia, "Sovetskii kinoteatr, ili chto tam bylo na samom dele v proshlye gody," *IK*, no. 11 (1995): 121.

72. Arkus, *Noveishaia istoriia*, 5:98–103.

73. Afanas'eva and Afiani, *Ideologicheskie komissii*, 258.

74. Sudha Rajagopalan, "A Taste for Indian Films: Negotiating Cultural Boundaries in Post-Stalinist Soviet Society" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2005), app. A.

75. Sergei Kudriavtsev, *Svoe kino* (Moscow, 1998), 391. Rajagopalan, "Taste for Indian Films," 149.

76. Afanas'eva and Afiani, *Ideologicheskie komissii*, 258.

77. "USIA Report Notes Huge Increase in U.S. Films Shown in Soviet Union," *Washington Post*, 19 September 1960.

78. Golovskoy, *Behind the Soviet Screen*, 133.

79. The Moscow party organization complained in 1961 that the city's largest theaters and stadiums were still showing capitalist films (though trade union clubs and TV were not). TsAOPIM, f. 4, op. 139, d. 52, l. 6.

80. RGALI, f. 2936, op. 4, d. 1307, l. 106.

81. Average viewership per copy was twenty-five to thirty thousand. Dondurei, *Otechestvennyi kinematograf*, 71; Kudriavtsev, *Svoe kino*, 392. The Soviets bought *Some Like It Hot* for 54,000 convertible rubles. Evgenii Zhirnov, "Arkhiv: Kremlevskie piraty," *Kommersant-vlast'*, 14 October 2002.

82. Mihajlo Mihajlov, *Moscow Summer* (New York, 1965), 51. See also William Taubman, *The View from Lenin Hills: Soviet Youth in Ferment* (New York, 1967), 136.

83. Peter Kenez estimated there were only twenty Western films on Moscow screens in 1969–70. Kenez, "Notes on a Moscow Movie Season" (August 1975), OSA, box 300-80-1–316.

84. Golovskoy, *Behind the Soviet Screen*, 137.

85. *Chetvertyi s"ezd kinematografistov SSSR*.

Here we can draw a straight line back to the trophy film era: the Soviet cultural bureaucracy was consistently canny when it came to imports. For all the complaints about greedy officials pushing lowbrow movies and talk of their corrupting influence, these films never left the screen. They were essential to the smooth functioning of the Soviet cinematic system. Boris Pavlenok, Goskino's deputy chairman in the seventies, described the rationale in 2003:

> In order to make ends meet, we "invited Brigitte Bardot," as we used to say. This is a normal approach for producers. It is not important where I get the money—the main thing is to pay off my debts and obtain credits for the following year. Sometimes, the head of Gosbank would call Yermash and say: "Listen, buy some *Yesenia* or another, my accounts are empty." So we bought Indian melodramas, tossed them in the theaters in many copies, and filled up the budget.[86]

Soviet officials naturally did not speak in public about the Bardot technique, nor did they share the details of another important continuity with the past: acquisition practices. Soveksportfil'm representatives made a preliminary selection of films abroad and sent copies to Moscow to a special commission for review. The commission comprised people from Goskino, the CC apparat, the Ministry of the Interior and sometimes other ministries, the KGB, the Filmmakers' Union, and also representatives of "the public," such as writers and teachers, and it generated reports with recommendations. Until 1965, every acquisition of a capitalist production required an official go-ahead from the CC sekretariat.[87] But even after 1965, "the final word in any case rested with the CC," said one former participant, and in practice, the tastes of the top-level authorities carried enormous weight. *Divorce Italian Style,* for example, reportedly made the cut because Adzhubei was a fan.[88]

Soveksportfil'm for this reason played it very safe in its proposals. The selection it sent for review was always narrow, and this was especially true as much of cinema outside the USSR grew more sexually explicit, violent, and morally ambiguous. It was not enough for a film to contain stringent social criticism, to be anti-American, anticapitalist, or even Marxist. If it might be considered "formalist" (read: a nonlinear plot or abstract or experimental cinematography), "naturalist" (naked bodies), or "brutal" (graphic violence), Soveksportfil'm had good grounds to assume it would be rejected. This is one reason why Bollywood productions—typically free of these defects—were perennial favorites for acquisition. Politics could come into play in other ways as well. Soveksportfil'm's former deputy head recalled that the buying commission's favorable recommendation of Milos Forman's *Amadeus* (1984) was blocked by the Czechoslovak communist leadership, who made it known how offended they would be should their Soviet comrades purchase a film made by a "traitor" to their homeland.[89]

If, as was sometimes the case, the Soviets decided to acquire a picture with objectionable scenes, they altered it, and this too was a link with the past. Audiences in the USSR saw a *Divorce Italian Style* almost entirely stripped of its storyline about a local communist, deemed too controversial. Censors were known to cut as much as thirty minutes of a standard two-hour feature. They also edited—changing the sequencing of scenes, for example—and purposefully mistranslated dialogue in dubbing. These practices reached historic heights in the seventies and eighties, but by then they were a Soviet tradition stretching back to the twenties.[90] Titles were changed wholesale; color films were printed in black-and-white; Soviet artists copied and recorded songs from foreign film soundtracks as their own. In the hands of the Soviet cultural system, embattled by definition, masscult films were always a kind of war booty. The attitude was at once cavalier with respect to the rights of creators and mindful, even fearful, of the potential power of the creation.[91] These movies were there to generate revenues and demonstrate the Soviet state's commitment to providing art and leisure (even if of dubious quality). They were also objects of intense attraction from the very top of the system down. The Soviet love affair with masscult cinema was no fling; it was an enduring, fruitful passion at the very heart of the cultural system.

DEFINING CINEMATIC SUCCESS

Cinema's superprofitability in the USSR is a historical chestnut that deserves to be cracked open and examined. In Soviet times, officials often bragged about their multibillion-strong audience, and although they mostly refrained from grubby talk of rubles and kopecks, the message was clear enough. Internal reports from Goskino and the Filmmakers' Union did include financial data, and in the mid-sixties they put gross ticket sales at roughly 1 billion rubles annually, of which the state was said to have collected 440 million in "pure profit."[92] Boris Pavlenok claimed in his post-Soviet memoirs that cinema had a 900 percent profit margin during his tenure. He also cited the figure of 1 billion rubles for an annual box office and estimated 440 million rubles or so as the annual take.[93]

All these figures should be taken as notional rather than actual because they were notional in their original historical context. The 1 billion-ruble gross sales

86. Evgenii Zhirnov, "Arkhiv: Rentabel'nost' sovetskogo kinematografa sostavliala 900% v god," *Kommersant-vlast',* 10 March 2003.
87. RGALI, f. 2918, op. 5, ll. 40–42.
88. Zhirnov, "Arkhiv: Kremlevskye piraty."
89. Arkus, *Noveishaia istoriia,* 5:102.
90. Ibid., vol. 4 (Moscow, 2002), 109–111.
91. Foreign literature fared no better. See Maurice Friedberg, *A Decade of Euphoria: Western Literature in Post-Stalin Russia, 1954–1964* (Bloomington, IN, 1977), esp. 16–57.
92. Fomin, *Kinomatograf ottepeli,* 6.
93. Zhirnov, "Arkhiv: Rentabl'nost' sovetskogo kinematografa." See also Boris Pavlenok, *Kino: Legendy i byl': Vospominaniia, razmyshleniia* (Moscow, 2004), 91.

number, for example, was not an actual box-office figure but rather an estimate derived from the number of tickets sold. The USSR, unlike most countries at the time, evaluated cinema in tickets, not cash (and tickets were also often sloppily equated with viewers, which had the effect of inflating audience size, since individuals frequently saw a film more than once). Taking an average price (itself an estimate) of 25 kopecks per ticket and an audience of 4 billion (also estimated), one arrives at a box-office take of 1 billion rubles. Similarly, the 440 million derived from the organization of the film financing system: by plan, 55 percent of all receipts from movie ticket sales went to local budgets. That would leave roughly 440 million of the 1 billion in "pure profit."[94]

Overall, we can say that cinema *was* a moneymaking venture for the Soviet state through the seventies.[95] The boon to city and regional coffers, in particular, was substantial: movie money helped pay the salaries of teachers, doctors, and many others on municipal payrolls across the USSR. My point here is not to mock the Soviets for either their pride or their bookkeeping but rather to draw our attention to how they framed cinematic success. Two important themes emerge. The first is the centrality of profit to cinema's very identity in the Soviet context. Though the term "profit" itself was shunned, the conventional wisdom—false but durable—was that film ranked second only to vodka in generating revenues for the state. The most important of the arts was always marked by its Midas touch, and filmmakers did not hesitate to point this out. Cinema, the Filmmakers' Union and Goskino reminded the CC in 1966, "is the only art in our country that brings in stable, constant, and ever-increasing revenues."[96]

The second important theme to note is the opacity of Soviet film finances as a matter of policy and not mere incompetence. Along with audience research, economics was the least well-tended and most secretive field in the entire cinematic sphere. It is not only that the Soviets did not collect accurate, comprehensive data.[97] They also rarely publicized and discussed what they did know. Box-office figures were almost never published, and even filmmakers rarely knew how their work had fared in theaters—nor were they particularly interested. The perpetual, systemic cloudiness about the facts on the ground and demands for "performance," however vaguely defined, opened filmmakers up to periodic assaults for squandering resources and undermining a winning sector of the socialist economy. Yet this kind of systemic cloud cover also worked to

94. Kosinova, *Istoriia kinoprodiuserstva v Rossii*, 20.

95. Birgit Beumers contended that returns on ticket sales exceeded expenses until 1983. Beumers, "Cinemarket, or The Russian Film Industry in 'Mission Impossible,'" *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, no. 5 (July 1999): 871; Arkus, *Noveishaia istoriia otechestvennogo kino*, 5:125.

96. Fomin, *Kinomatograf ottepeli*, 85.

97. Aleksandr Fedorov, "Gorkaia pravda luchshe vsiakoi lzhi?" *SK-Novosti*, no. 43, http://www.film.ru/sk-news.

their advantage.[98] It was, in this way, one of the most fruitful contradictions of the Soviet film industry. Movie theaters were packed, film was profitable overall, and digging into the details could well be considered beneath the dignity of the socialist artist or even a socialist cultural bureaucrat.[99] The image of Soviet cinema's profitability was essential to the smooth functioning of a system that had many bumpy patches.

Art or no, cinema was also an industrial process, and it suffered production problems typical of Soviet industry. The plan was the organizing principle. In the case of film, production plans were set by the film administration and the appropriate Central Committee departments, and they were organized by theme: a thematic plan (*tematicheskii plan*) specified the number of films a studio would produce in a given year—seven films in the historical-revolutionary thematic slot, three social dramas, and so on.[100] There were also plans for shorter periods—quarterly plans, for example. Studios routinely failed to meet them all. Sally Belfrage, an American who worked briefly on a Mosfil'm production in the late fifties, noticed very little happening on the set until the very end of the month, when there was a flurry of activity.[101] This was storming to meet the plan, much as Belfrage would have found in a refrigerator plant. And since half or more of all film productions in the early sixties were not completed until the final quarter of the fiscal year, storming must have been very common.[102] Other productions—again, an estimated 50 percent—simply ran over schedule.[103]

Why was this so? A 1963 evaluation of the industry gave a typical litany of problems, from overshooting and unnecessary travel to rewriting screenplays and recasting actors midway through productions.[104] If Soviet filmmakers were

98. Sloppiness in data collection could also make it easier to cook the books. Vladimir Motyl' claimed that the figures for *The White Sun of the Desert* (*Beloe sol'ntse pustyni*, 1970) were lowered so that those for another film would appear higher. "Vladimir Motyl': V kino nuzhno gospolitika," *Kommersant-Daily*, 6 November 1998.

99. My argument is not that the Soviet film industry was the only one to cook the books (Hollywood was, and is, famous for it) but that recipes differ by system. See Edward Jay Epstein, *The Big Picture: Money and Power in Hollywood* (New York, 2006).

100. Thematic plans varied yearly and were subject to interest-group lobbying. Plans for 1965, for example, set an increase in the military-patriotic category to commemorate victory in World War II. The late 1950s saw a spate of movies featuring honest police officers—part of a mediawide campaign to burnish the reputation of the police force. Denis Gorelov, "Chelovek-amfibiia," *Izvestiia*, 24 March 2000. The KGB in the seventies rallied for films on Soviet counterintelligence as a retort to a wave of anti-Soviet films in the West. Fomin, *Kino i vlast'*, 143.

101. Sally Belfrage, *A Room in Moscow* (London, 1958), 147. The film was *Pamiat' serdtsa* (1958).

102. Afanas'eva and Afiani, *Ideologicheskie komissii*, 475.

103. RGALI, f. 2936, op. 4, d. 1307, l. 25.

104. RGALI, f. 2944, op. 1, d. 20, l. 185.

here to defend themselves, they would protest—with good reason—that the problems were not their fault. Given the execrable quality of Soviet film stock—an estimated 10 to 15 percent of the costs of production were related to problems with defective film—the amount of wasted footage was massive and reshooting inevitable.[105] "Rewritten" was often another word for censored. What choice did a director have if, say, military top brass decided the character of the soldier in his film was not sufficiently heroic? He reworked the script. He found an actor with a stronger chin, broader shoulders, and better connections, and he reshot the soldier's scenes. Many filmmakers did whatever they could to beat the system, and sometimes this meant shooting material they knew would likely raise objections, but they were willing to sacrifice to satisfy the bureaucrats.

All these changes drove up the costs of filmmaking substantially: in 1970, the average Soviet production cost over 400,000 rubles, up 30 percent from a decade before, and the trend continued.[106] However, expensive films were not necessarily popular ones, and filmmakers were producing fewer and fewer hits as the years went by. In 1960, thirty-nine Soviet-made pictures sold 20 million tickets or more in the first year of their release, whereas by 1964, only twenty-three could boast this level of success.[107] *Amphibian Man*'s 65.5 million tickets in 1962 stunned the cinematic community not only because it was the first Soviet film to surpass the 50 million *and* the 60 million mark but because its success was completely out of proportion to that of the rest of the industry. The average Soviet picture in the mid-sixties sold just *under* 15 million tickets.[108] The downward trend continued through the 1970s, and by 1984, one-half of new productions did not meet the 5 million-ticket mark for their first year on the screen.[109] None of the non-Russian Soviet republics had a film industry that covered its own costs in box-office returns; they were all (except Ukraine, which covered its own losses) dependent on direct subsidies from Moscow.[110]

The core mechanism of the Soviet cinematic system was the official rating assigned to every film for its "ideological-artistic quality" by a special Goskino commission of bureaucrats and cineastes. There were four levels. Studios received financing according to fiscal plans (and before films went into production); most people who worked in cinema earned regular salaries. But it was a film's rating

105. Evgenii Zhirnov, "Kak zakalialsia brend. Tselluloidnoe iskusstvo," *Kommersant-dengi*, 20 September 2004.

106. L. Furikov, "Analiz odnogo . . . analiza fil'ma," *IK*, no. 8 (1970): 108.

107. RGALI, f. 2936, op. 4, d. 1307, l. 97.

108. Ibid., l. 23.

109. Valerii Golovskoi, *Mezhdu ottepel'iu i glasnosti: Kinematograf 70-x* (Moscow, 2004), 68; Sergei Kudriavtsev, "Rekordy i mify sovetskogo kinoprokata," *Vremia novostei*, 2 August 2007.

110. Interview with Baskakov in Troianovskii, *Kinematograf ottepeli: Kniga vtoraia* (Moscow, 2002), 334.

that set the gears in motion for additional forms of compensation. A top-rated picture brought its studio a bonus of 15 percent of its budgeted cost, whereas a second-tier rating brought 10 percent and a third tier 5 percent.[111] Directors, too, received bonus payments based on ratings and regardless of whether they had met their fiscal plans.[112] In fact, from the perspective of a studio and its professionals, the longer and more expensive the production, the better. Since bonuses for production crews were calculated as a percentage of their total wages for the shoot, they had a built-in incentive to draw things out.[113] A picture that lost money overall still stood to make money for its studio and the people who made it. The forgotten *The General and the Daisies* (*General i margaritki*, 1963) failed to earn back even 70 percent of its costs (for production, copying, and distribution) in ticket sales yet still earned Mosfil'm a healthy 50,000-ruble bonus.[114] The key was the rating.

Ratings determined how many copies of a film were printed (its *tirazh*), and this made them especially important to screenwriters and composers.[115] Unlike other film professionals, these two groups had a right to royalties, calculated as a percentage of the gross take in theaters (*potirazhnye*). The range in film *tirazh* was very wide—anywhere from a dozen to a few thousand copies—and a high rating was no guarantee of high royalties.[116] Republic- and district-level authorities had a say in setting cinematic repertory in their areas, and in theory, a film with a top rating might not be selected widely. In practice, higher ratings

111. Cohen, *Cultural-Political Traditions*, 444. On the origins of the ratings system, see Kosinova, *Istoriia kinoprodiuserstva v Rossii*, 158.

112. Faraday's informant reported directors' bonuses of 8,000 rubles for first-category films, 6,000 for second, 2,500 for third, none for fourth, and 12,000 for *goszakaz*. These rates likely refer to the seventies and early 1980s. George Faraday, *Revolt of the Filmmakers: The Struggle for Artistic Autonomy and the Fall of the Soviet Film Industry* (University Park, PA, 2004), 59.

113. A 1972 *Pravda* article quoted in Cohen, *Cultural-Political Traditions*, 445. The system also encouraged longer-running films. The trend was for two-part films, running three-plus hours but shown in one seating. Viewers were said not to like them because of the length and because they had to buy two tickets. Steven Hill, "The Soviet Film Today," *Film Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (Summer 1967): 40; Chukhrai, *Moe kino*, 164–165.

114. Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepeli*. 78. *General i margaritki*, directed by M. Chiaureli, known for Stalin cult films. An official in 1966 cited different figures for the film (cost, 715,000r; sales, 190,000r; bonus, 36,000r) to make the same point. RGALI, f. 2936, op. 4, d. 1307, l. 46.

115. No doubt this is one reason why so many directors were credited as screenwriters as well. Some industry critics complained that the practice of directors writing or rewriting screenplays contributed to the gray-film problem. See Aleksei Kapler's letter to the CC in Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepeli*, 87–89. Fomin also published a 1969 KGB report on Kapler's complaints that directors were forcing writers to split screenplay royalties. Fomin, *Kino i vlast'*, 92–94.

116. "Kak vziat' ot fil'ma bol'she?," *IK*, no. 7 (1966): 13.

almost always translated into larger print runs and widespread distribution. Actors also stood to gain materially from high ratings, although rarely at the level of screenwriters, composers, and directors.[117] Though most were ordinary salaried studio employees, actors who had been awarded state honors—"people's artists" (*narodnye artisty*), for example—brought home fatter pay envelopes and other perquisites as well. To participate in highly rated films with wide distribution was to increase the odds of collecting honors.[118]

Limiting distribution practically guaranteed limited audiences; the regime employed this strategy for controversial works throughout the postwar period. Tarkovskii's *The Mirror* (*Zerkalo*, 1975) was printed in only thirty copies for the entire USSR, to give one example.[119] Conversely, to grant a picture a high *tirazh* was to give it the biggest possible advantage on the Soviet market. This was the case with the so-called state orders (*goszakazy*), the most prestigious and potentially lucrative of all productions. Most filled the historical-revolutionary (1917 and the civil war) or military-patriotic (World War II) slots in studios' thematic plans, and all were lavishly funded, promoted, and distributed. *The Living and the Dead* (*Zhivye i mertvye*, 1964), a screen adaptation of the novel by Konstantin Simonov, was one example. With a whopping three thousand copies in Soviet theaters, it inevitably topped the box-office charts. The actor-director Sergei Bondarchuk made several films by goszakaz, including *War and Peace* (*Voina i mir*, 1966–67), a four-part extravaganza that gave new meaning to the cliché "a cast of thousands." Bondarchuk used his connections to muster an entire cavalry division for the film. The estimated cost: nearly 20 million rubles.[120] By way of comparison, the Filmmakers' Union reported spending a little over 2 million rubles over a five-year period in the seventies on housing projects for its members.[121]

A goszakaz film embodied the essence of Soviet cinematic production. In effect, the goszakaz filmmaker locked in top ratings, bonuses, honors, festival prizes, and foreign travel—the best the system had to offer if you played by its rules. He (and most were men) *guaranteed* Soviet cinematic success by successfully managing his relationships with people in power. Not every film could be a goszakaz, and not every film professional aspired to work on one.

117. Actors consistently complained about low pay levels. See, for example, comments at the 1981 Filmmakers' Union congress. *Chetvertyi s"ezd kinematografistov SSSR*, 111.

118. Other film professionals were also eligible for honors. Marina Raikina, "Patologicheskie narodnye," *Moskovskii komsomolets*, 14 May 1999. On the introduction of honors in 1937, see Maya Turvoskaya, "The 1930s and 1940s: Cinema in Context," in Taylor and Spring, *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, 37.

119. Arkus, *Noveishaia istoriia*, 5:125.

120. "Kak vziat' ot fil'ma bol'she?" 9. The film was also reviewed in more than one hundred newspapers. Woll, *Real Images*, 153.

121. *Chetvertyi s"ezd kinematografistov SSSR*, 42.

Filmmakers often chafed against the demands of thematic planning and railed against the ratings system. But an overwhelming majority of productions received first- or second-category ratings; level-four productions were practically unheard of.[122]

If most Soviet films drew the highest ratings and funding levels while also failing at the box office, how did cinema rate as a profit-making sector of the Soviet cultural economy? Cinema-art did have a business model of a sort, and if we were to draw it, the best shape would be an inverted pyramid: a great block of middling and failing films balanced on a far smaller base of box-office hits. This model worked in large measure because the base of the structure was so solid and because moviegoing held a privileged place in Soviet social life well into the 1970s. It was the amphibian men plus strategic infusions of Bardot and Bollywood that filled Soviet movie houses and dominated the moviegoing experience of Soviet audiences. It was these films, in large measure, that bankrolled the industry.

In their public statements, Soviet officials were adept at stressing cinema's vitality in the USSR while eliding the issue of its basis—fudging their business model, in other words. But Soviet cineastes were also routinely excoriated for wasting the people's money and failing to meet the challenge of masscult infiltration. The attacks came in public speeches and published decrees as well as behind closed doors. Goskino's chairman told a group of filmmakers in 1963 that of the forty-two films he had recently screened, only five or six had a future. The rest, he said, "are doomed to lie in storage.... They will not be successful with viewers. They have nothing to offer from the perspective of cinematographic innovation. They have nothing to offer, period."[123] To be clear, these were not films the chairman planned to send to the shelf (though there were a few of those too, he said); they were "gray" films destined to fail on the market. At a 1966 conference on film distribution, the head of the film distribution agency took filmmakers to task for producing "large quantities of gray, boring, utterly uninteresting films that have no success whatsoever with viewers."[124] "Gray," of course, was not a neutral term but a cudgel in the hands of officials and filmmakers alike. One person's gray film was another's artistic experiment. A gray film was a lost opportunity to fulfill Soviet cinema's given mission—aesthetic, political, and ethical education of the masses. And if the masses then chose to spend time in the enemy camp with a film like *The Magnificent Seven*, this was a loss compounded and made potentially treacherous.

The "upper political leadership was always dissatisfied with cinema," said a former Goskino deputy, V. Baskakov, in a post-Soviet interview; in his view, the

122. RGALI, f. 2936, op. 4, d. 1307, l. 44.

123. RGALI f. 2944, op. 1, d. 19, l. 81.

124. RGALI, f. 2936, op. 4, d 1307, l. 13.

situation worsened as the sixties wore on, especially after 1968.[125] The ideological controversies around cinema were serious, and they have been skillfully documented by Fomin, Josephine Woll, and other film scholars. Yet for all that, we should recognize that nothing fundamentally altered the way filmmaking was organized in the Soviet Union after Stalin. Cinema was mass art, but small films (gray or artistic—much depended on your perspective) proliferated; *Amphibian Man* remained a rare exception; and generations of audiences packed the aisles for movies identified as ideological lightweights, if not pollutants.

As in other spheres of Soviet life, the question was not so much one of skill as one of self-interest, incentive, and inertia. Cinema's business model generated revenues for the state; the pyramid structure stood, and it was impressive in size and scope. Soviet filmmakers had very little incentive to alter its structure and produce audience-pleasing films. No doubt director Mark Donskoi spoke for many when he told distribution officials, "I think that if I have made a film, then it is your business to take care of putting it forward [*zanimat'sia ego prodvizheniem*]. I have never gone out to the movie theaters, and I do not feel comfortable selling my own films."[126] In terms of cultural capital, there was indisputably more prestige to be won by producing an artistically innovative, sophisticated work than by attracting mass audiences. Mass popularity could be damaging to one's reputation and sense of self; cinema's amphibian man, Vladimir Korenev, said he found his success embarrassing, and he refused romantic leading roles and eschewed entertainment-oriented films from then on.[127] The highest goal for any Soviet film professional was to join the canon, preferably the international one, which is where Soviet cinema-art saw itself as the natural leader. And though not everyone could be a Sergei Eisenstein, of course, there were few penalties for nursing those delusions, not even financial ones. The landscape was in fact strewn with incentives.

Cultural capital was a critical commodity for Soviet filmmakers on its own terms, as George Faraday has argued.[128] Film professionals publicly scorned "petit bourgeois materialism" (*meshchanstvo*), reflecting both Soviet ideology and the traditional orientation of the Russian intelligentsia. Antimaterialism was also a theme in many Soviet films, and we have no reason to question filmmakers' sincerity. Marlen Khutsiev, director of a controversial youth-theme film, *Ilich's Gate* (*Zastava Il'icha*), released as *I Am Twenty* (*Mne 20 Let*, 1965), recalled that after the film's first screening at the studio, Mikhail Romm came up to him and said, "Marlen, you have justified your existence."[129] Soviet cinema-art could not have been more serious to self-defined Soviet artists.

Nevertheless, the structure of the system was such that it was always impossible to isolate cultural capital from the political and material kind. Romm's opinion of *Ilich's Gate*—and, more broadly, mobilizing the cinematic community (so-called *obshchestvennoe mnenie*, or public opinion) in favor of your film—was essential. People at Goskino and the Central Committee were not certain to accept the currency, but sometimes they did. Cineastes knew too that cultural capital could be spent to improve their lifestyles: such was the way of the Soviet world. Tickets from the Filmmakers' Union to a rare movie screening went to your connection in the electronics shop who had promised you first pick from the next shipment of transistors, to your seamstress, to your doctor. If you were sent to Venice with your film and saved your per diem wisely, you just might be able to buy shoes for yourself and a raincoat for your daughter. Nearly every Soviet cineaste's memoir includes at least one story of this kind, and though most are gently self-mocking in tone, they also acknowledge the importance of these consumer boons in a system of chronic shortages. On a larger scale, to be acknowledged as a great Soviet artist (especially, but not only, by foreigners) could mean moving from a communal to an individual apartment or jumping the queue for a telephone or a car.[130] Cultural capital not only had real currency in the film community and among the intelligentsia, but it also counted "on the street" (with your hairdresser and mechanic) and most significantly, "upstairs" among the political-bureaucratic elites.[131]

In 1988, with the system unraveling at lightning speed, one Soviet director attempted to orient a reporter from the *New Yorker* magazine: "In most countries," he said, "you make either films that are high art or films for the general public—for people to enjoy. But in the political situation that existed here for so long the vast majority of films were of neither type. They were made to please the people in Goskino, and nobody watched them."[132] Fomin and other film scholars stress the same dynamic—filmmaker-bureaucrat or, better still, filmmaker *under* bureaucrat—and emphasize how damaging this was to the creative process because it induced people to play it safe. There were so many gray films in Soviet

125. Fomin, *Kino i vlast'*, 135.

126. RGALI, f. 2936, op. 4, d. 1307, l. 98.

127. Elena Smirnova, "Zolotaia pora Ikhtiandra," *Rossiisskaia gazeta*, 21 June 2000; Tat'iana Khoroshilova, "Vladimir Korenev: Moi geroi byl naiven i chist," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 22 November 2003.

128. Faraday, *Revolt of the Filmmakers*.

129. Larisa Maliukova, "Cherno-beloe vremia Romma: Vladimir Dmitriev i Marlen Khutsiev govoriat o mastere," *Novaia gazeta*, 5 February 2001.

130. On networking and the lifestyles of the Soviet intelligentsia, see Maia Turovskaya, "Sovetskii srednyi klass," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, no. 1 (2002).

131. Here I part ways with George Faraday, who sees a "gulf between the creative intelligentsia and the nomenklatura" in terms of values. *Revolt of the Filmmakers*, 36. Not only did their ranks overlap (many members of the intelligentsia held nomenklatura rank), but their cultural values were broadly consonant.

132. James Lardner, "A Moment We Had to Grasp," *New Yorker*, 26 September 1988, 82.

cinema, the argument goes, because the bureaucrats, the party, the regime bled the color out of nearly every one.

The bleeding was real enough, no doubt. But determining just who ordered the operations and how they transpired is more difficult. Soviet cinema was a complex social formation. Although historians tend to trace bright lines separating film professionals from the "other side," if we look at the way the system was lived, we see that all lines of necessity overlapped. A filmmaker had to please people in power, but some of the most powerful people in Soviet cinema were fellow filmmakers—cinema's power brokers. Screenwriters and directors altered their work to meet the demands of their studios long before they went before Goskino. This was mutual censorship; there was also self-censorship. No doubt many people involved would have preferred not to do it—including some on the bureaucratic side. It is a point several former cineastes have made when prompted to recount their experiences with censorship. Khutsiev, for example, took exception to one interviewer's blanket statements condemning the authorities (*rukovodstvo*) in 2005. "Today people curse the editors, but they varied," he said, mentioning one studio editor who stood up for him. The interviewer persisted: "But there were 'supervisors' [*smotriteli*] at Goskino who saw sedition in the most innocent things." Khutsiev answered, "This is complicated too, because after all they were not free. They suggested that I get going on new projects."[133]

People had no choice but to work together across artist-bureaucrat lines, and given the importance of networking in Soviet life generally, they often socialized across lines as well. Many Soviet officials prided themselves on having friends in the arts and cultivated those ties. Actor Vsevolod Sanaev joked with a friend, "What do you think, why do the bosses include me in every film delegation traveling abroad?... Because they are bored! How do they relax there in the evenings? They sit in their hotel rooms and drink. And I tell jokes and cock-and-bull stories.... Thanks to this talent of mine, I have seen the whole world."[134] When director Georgii Daneliia went to Rome for the first time in 1963, he shared a hotel room with Baskakov, then new to Goskino. This would not have been his choice, he later wrote, but the two men got along better than he had imagined, and he sympathized with the deputy chair's difficulties on his maiden voyage abroad—his failure to anticipate needing more than two shirts, for example. Baskakov was the boss without a doubt (Daneliia handed over *his* shirts), but it was Daneliia who had experience in foreign situations, and it was Daneliia and his filmmaker colleagues who got Baskakov the invitation he coveted to a swanky dinner with Italian cinema's leading lights.[135] A film official had more power than filmmakers, but in some situations, he also had no power without them.

133. Larisa Maliukova, "Kul'turnyi sloi. Marlen Khutsiev: Vremia samo prostupaet na ekrane," *Novaia gazeta*, 3 October 2005, 24–25.

134. *Sergei Bondarchuk v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov* (Moscow, 2003), 476.

135. Daneliia, *Bezbiletnyi passazhir*, 182–189.

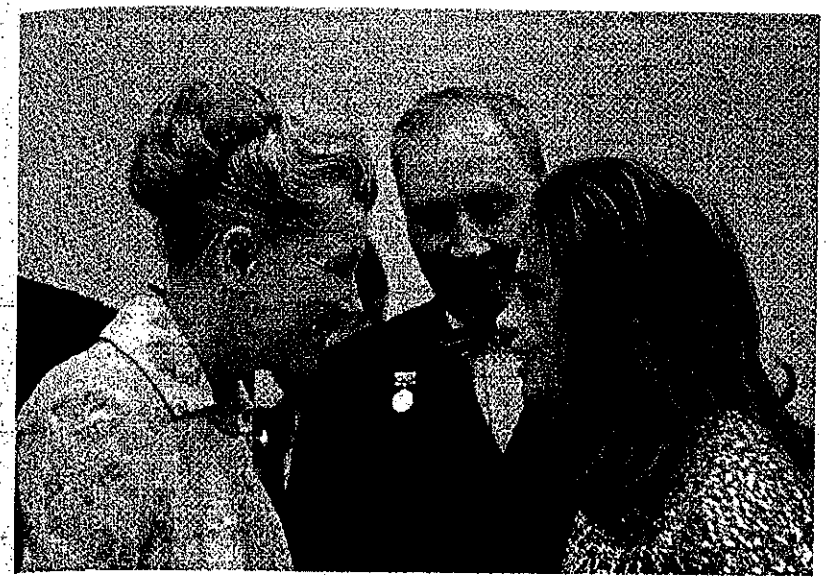

Figure 1.2. Connections: Minister of Culture Ekaterina Furtseva hobnobs with French star Leslie Caron and leading Soviet director Sergei Iutkevich, 1967. Boris Kaufman, RIA Novosti. Used with permission.

It was no minor point that filmmakers in the USSR were said to produce something defined as art—something that would uplift the masses at home and spread the good news about superior socialist culture abroad. Even in the context of an authoritarian system, Soviet filmmakers' status as artists always gave them a good deal more room for maneuver than the portrait painted for the *New Yorker* reader implies. Even films sent straight to the shelf still meant a paycheck for their producers. Some directors—Tarkovskii is the best example—saw their work all but banned at home yet screened and sometimes sold abroad. And even directors who were troublemakers from the regime's point of view, but did not enjoy international cachet, were usually able to secure financing for future projects. A fruitful, if painful contradiction. For all the real ideological pressures exerted on Soviet filmmakers, they were never compelled by the regime to make popular or even acceptable films. And this is because cultural capital was a meaningful commodity not only to them but to Soviet political elites as well.

REDEFINING CINEMATIC SUCCESS UNDER BREZHNEV?

The best demonstration of Soviet cinema's deep structure and values is the story of the Experimental Creative Studio, or ETK (Eksperimental'naia tvorcheskaia kinostudiia), a targeted test in applying the profit motive to film production

that lasted from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies. Although the formation of Goskino in 1963 was meant to put the cinematic house in order, the new men in the Kremlin were still dissatisfied and instituted another bureaucratic reorganization two years later. Goskino saw its status and staffing levels raised and also suffered a wave of firings.[136] More sweeping measures, however, still lingered in the air: one idea was to create a Ministry of Cinema, as had existed under Stalin; the Politburo also considered liquidating all the creative unions and replacing them with a single organization, the better to manage the intelligentsia.[137]

The new Filmmakers' Union worked actively in this period to forestall what it saw as drastic action, and together with Goskino, it put together a series of proposals for reforming Soviet cinema that were remarkable in their candor and often radical in their approach. Singling out the ratings system as, in the words of one 1966 proposal, "the source of the complete apathy of creative workers and studio directors regarding their films' performance in theaters," they advocated introducing limited material incentives pegged to box-office results.[138] It was an idea in step with the times: in 1965, the Kremlin had tipped its hat cautiously to the profit motive with the Kosygin reforms (named for the then chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, Aleksei Kosygin). The reformist spark turned out to be fleeting, however, and the regime opted instead to ratchet up control by expanding and purging the film bureaucracy yet again and increasing party oversight. This process, which had parallels in other mass media, picked up momentum after 1968 and culminated in the 1972 reorganization of Goskino under Yermash. The Experimental Creative Studio was a lone survivor of the sixties reformist moment and lasted until 1976, when it was declared to have run its course.[139] Roughly ten years later, in the full flush of perestroika, cineastes would cite the ETK story as an example of how an incompetent and intolerant bureaucracy had stifled cinematic progress.

ETK's founder, Grigorii Chukhrai, was no run-of-the-mill Soviet cineaste, and the same could be said of Vladmir Pozner, his chief collaborator, a dynamic manager with a rare commodity in the Soviet film world: Hollywood experience. (Pozner was an émigré who had spent much of his adult life in the United States, where he had managed overseas film distribution for MGM.)[140] Chukhrai came to cinema a decorated veteran of World War II, and this, plus his international reputation (his films had won multiple awards, including Cannes) gave him unusual clout with the authorities. Moreover, though Chukhrai was a proud party man and socialist, he was also a self-styled maverick. With his intellectual and moral swagger, Chukhrai epitomized the *shestidesiatniki* (people of the sixties) spirit; he was a true believer. And it is in this context that we must examine his cinematic experiment in market socialism.

Chukhrai told *Soviet Screen* in 1966 that the problem with the Soviet cinematic system was that it "incessantly pushes people to lie."[141] The insight had come to him, he said, when he was working as a screenwriter, and a director asked him to add a few bogus shots in order to pad the budget. Chukhrai refused, but rather than blame the director, he concluded that the root of the problem was the system's fixation with meeting budgets regardless of performance or artistic merit.[142] The ETK was designed to reward people according to how well a film performed with audiences. Screenwriters, for example, earned twice as much at ETK as at other studios, *provided that* their films drew an audience of at least 30 million. The studio was also prepared to penalize failure: the same screenwriters who stood to gain from a hit got no bonus at all if their films failed to sell 17 million tickets, the average amount necessary to cover the cost of production and distribution.[143] It was a sink-or-swim operation: if they made unpopular films, it would fail, and its staff would be out of work.[144]

The ETK was thus the first and only Soviet studio since the 1920s to focus on crowd-pleasing productions. "The ETK shunned making films for an elite circle," said one of its most successful directors, V. Motyl'. "It was interested in genre films for mass distribution."[145] Many of these directors achieved terrific successes with their ETK productions, and on the whole the studio proved profitable. For the period 1966–71, ETK films on average drew 29.2 million viewers, compared with the overall Soviet average of 17.3 million.[146] Chukhrai boasted of their accomplishments in 1986: "Productivity increased sharply, and useless expenses dropped. In terms of profitability, our films surpassed our highest expectations."[147]

136. For Baskakov's view of the mid-sixties changes (which cost him his job), see Fomin, *Kino i vlast'*, 137.
137. Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepeli*, 60.
138. Ibid., 77; Kosinova, *Istoriia kinoprodiuserstva v Rossii*, 228–229.
139. Motyl', "Za derzhavu po-prezhnemu obidno." One historian reports that the CC approved plans for an ETK-like studio as early as June 1962. Kosinova, *Istoriia kinoprodiusertva v Rossii*, 229. Chukhrai described his initial meeting with Kosygin in *Moe kino*, 173–176.
140. Pozner was also the father of the future television star of the glasnost era, Vladimir Vladimirovich Pozner, who described his family's life in the United States in *Parting with Illusions* (New York, 1990).
141. "Eksperiment vedet v budushchee," *SE*, no. 3 (1966): 1.
142. That this was not only an economic but a moral question for Chukhrai comes through even more clearly in his post-Soviet memoirs. "Workers were getting paid for money they did not earn. This suited them and at the same time corrupted them." Chukhrai, *Moe kino*, 168.
143. Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepeli*, 239.
144. "Eksperiment vedet v budushchee," 1.
145. Motyl', "Za derzhavu."
146. Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepeli*, 241.
147. G. Chukhrai, "Chto 'kormit' kinostudiiu?" *Pravda*, 14 February 1986, 3.

Although the ETK was brought summarily to an end in February 1976, Goskino's decree sounding the death knell also seemed to endorse the studio's business model.[148] Linking the "size of the material rewards for film crews" with their observance of shooting schedules and budgets had achieved "significant results," it said, and it recommended that the leading figures in ETK be rewarded for having "fulfilled an important governmental task."[149] The studio had passed all its periodic governmental audits with high marks, and in 1973, Goskino had gone so far as to establish a special commission to develop plans for expanding the experiment to the entire Soviet film industry. One year later, the head of Mosfil'm declared that his entire studio would shift to ETK's model of self-financing. The February 1976 decree itself claimed that Goskino and Mosfil'm had studied the results of the experiment and were "developing new, specific principles of planning and organizing production, providing economic incentives and increasing workers' material self-interest in creating films of high ideoartistic quality." None of this came to pass.[150]

It is hard to know why there were these confusing signals, but it should come as no great surprise that the ETK model was allowed to die on the vine. Following its principles would have turned the entire film industry on its head—precisely the kind of fundamental change that all bureaucracies, and not only the Soviet, resist. Yet why snuff out the studio itself, which was, after all, highly profitable? Valerii Fomin, who has enjoyed unusually broad access to the Goskino archive, reported that there is no paper trail to follow about the decision to close the studio; the 1976 decree is not accompanied by the usual supporting documents. Fomin speculated that Yermash, the Goskino chairman, was personally behind the disbanding of ETK because its success made him, and the entire industry, look bad.[151] Chukhrai told an interviewer in 2001 that the decision had "come from above" [Yermash]. "It was axed with the rest of the Kosygin reforms."[152] In 1986, he offered a few vague comments about people who saw the ETK as "a reproach and a threat to their well-being"[153] and elaborated more fully in his post-Soviet memoirs: Goskino economists and film professionals had opposed

148. The ETK's death was drawn out via two 1976 decrees. The first (February) ended the experiment formally and reconstituted the experimenters as a regular Mosfil'm working group; the second (May) dissolved this new unit. Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepeli,* 245–248.

149. Ibid., 245–247.

150. We have some signs of possible ETK influence, however. According to one recent history, films that passed the 19 million mark in the seventies could be reevaluated for higher ratings. Arkus, *Noveishaia istoriia,* 5:125. Golovskoy, a former Goskino employee who emigrated to the United States in the eighties, concurred. Golovskoy, *Behind the Soviet Screen,* 74.

151. Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepeli,* 249.

152. "Partinyi bilet za premiiu Fellini," *Novye Izvestiia,* 13 November 2001.

153. Chukhrai, "Chto 'kormit.'"

the model. On one occasion, he said, he was called in to the CC offices to explain how it was that Leonid Gaidai had earned 18,000 rubles for a single film. Apparently they had been hearing complaints from other people in the film world.[154]

Garden-variety jealousy? Yes, but given the rules of the game, opposing the ETK was also nothing if not logical. It seems telling that the ranks of ETK directors were filled with two extremes: the very young (E. Klimov, L. Shepit'ko, A. Smirnov) and the very well established (Chukhrai himself, G. Daneliia, L. Gaidai, P. Todorovskii).[155] Few people were interested in taking up the challenge. If the entire industry were to shift to an ETK model for production, then most professionals in the film world would be cut from the studios' payrolls and forced to compete for contracts. If bonuses were tied to box-office receipts, then some people stood to live without bonuses. The Filmmakers' Union was always interested in increasing its powers (and directors' powers too); the sixties proposals, in the full flush of a reformist moment, can be seen in that light. But the union was less supportive of competition (in 1960 it opposed and defeated a plan to award productions on the basis of contests), and a sink-or-swim approach had little to recommend it.[156] By the 1970s, the costs of filmmaking had risen substantially, and the overwhelming majority of Soviet productions were receiving high ratings. Bonuses were solid and dependable, and cineastes had even more reason to shun the risks of competition.

The other obvious possible source of opposition to the ETK is ideological. Konchalovskii, who worked as a screenwriter for ETK, claimed the studio was "a nest of revisionism, a hotbed of samizdat [and] seditious ideas."[157] The real ETK had ended as early as 1968, he wrote, when "tanks drove through Prague, showing the whole world how experiments end up." That year the studio, which had been independent, was attached to Mosfil'm. Certainly the atmosphere and ethos of the ETK were unique. Chukhrai and Pozner welcomed young professionals with dubious political credentials, and the studio was known to champion controversial projects as well. The 1976 decree has an undeniable whiff of ideological dissatisfaction: it faulted the studio for failing to create "large-scale pictures on contemporary and historical-revolutionary themes"—the two favored thematic categories for Soviet cinema-art.[158]

It is possible, as Konchalovskii suggests, that the ETK was shut down as a breeding ground of subversion, but the truth seems more prosaic. The studio inspired jealousy and had few defenders, and in a system that had for generations

154. Chukhrai, *Moe kino,* 183–184. The film was the comedy *Ivan Vasil'evich meniaet professiiu* (*Ivan Vasil'evich Changes Careers*)—third place at the box office in 1973 with 60.7 million tickets.

155. Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepeli,* 237.

156. See V. Fomin, "God 1960," published at http://www.film.ru/sk-news.

157. A. Konchalovskii, *Vozvyshaiushchii obman* (Moscow, 1999), 53.

158. Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepeli,* 246.

relied on relationships and barter, this meant a great deal. But most important of all, the ETK was, in context, superfluous. It is true that it was profitable, but so was Soviet cinema in big-picture terms—inefficient, yes, wasteful, no doubt, but what of it? With a box office of 4 billion tickets, the bureaucrats at Goskino and the CC could still crow to their bosses *and* their foreign counterparts about Soviet cinema's might.

Chukhrai always spoke of the ETK as a model for modernizing Soviet cinema. (In his memoirs, he stressed that its planning experts had designed evaluation techniques analogous to those used in the American space program!)[159] Yet in many ways, by the late sixties and certainly the seventies, Chukhrai, with his socialist idealism, was already an old-fashioned figure on the scene. The Soviet cinematic sphere modernized without him, if by modernization we mean its increased complexity, differentiation, and resemblance to cinemas in the capitalist West. The notion of resemblance may seem counterintuitive, given the expansion of Goskino-party control mechanisms in this period and the increasingly complex choreography of social, political, and bureaucratic factors that came with it. Control was plainly never in question; there was no samizdat movie circuit in the USSR. What we do see, nonetheless, is a steady segmentation of the Soviet cinematic sphere into high/low, elite/mass, art-house/mainstream zones, with different films, different audiences, and even different venues. This was one facet of the broad process of sociological modernization in the postwar USSR that brought people more free time, disposable income, and cultural resources, as well as more clearly delineated phases in the life-cycle, and that therefore facilitated a variety of choice.[160]

Audience segmentation was an ideological live wire few people were willing to touch in public, certainly not in the fifties and sixties. Art, by definition, transcended individual taste and experience, and cinema was the "most important of the arts." A film about a construction worker might well appeal to construction workers more than to sailors or students, but its artistry (its "truth" as Soviet writers often put it) lent it universal import. Chukhrai's own work, to his mind, was *mass* art, and that was his goal for the ETK films as well. He was a traditionalist in this sense. But in the seventies the realities of the cultural marketplace very clearly pointed to self-segmentation of the Soviet audience and divisions within the filmmaking community too. And to some extent, these divisions were pursued and promoted by regime policies.

Goskino's new chairman, Yermash, was a vigorous proponent of Soviet-made genre productions, or films with an entertainment orientation, and an open admirer of capitalist models; one director even recalled his screening Hollywood

159. Chukrai, *Moe kino*, 179.

160. The connection between lifestyle changes, social differentiation, and the development of Soviet cinema is developed in D. Dondurei, "Gumanizm zhanra," *Kinovedcheskie zapisi*, no. 11 (1991): 82–86.

pictures at meetings as an example for cineastes.[161] However, the new emphasis on genre was never designed to supplant goszakaz films with ideological heft, nor was it advanced as Soviet cinema-art's organizing principle and dominant face to the world. Some former cineastes even praise Yermash today for having appreciated the value of aesthetically challenging projects and for supporting their development within the parameters of ideological correctness (unlike, it is said, his predecessor, Romanov). "He did not care about whether an individual picture covered its costs, but he did worry about the profitability of the sector as a whole," explained one historian.[162] In genre, he saw a mechanism for maintaining the movie industry's bottom line.

The Yermash policy had undeniable successes. Melodrama was a main beneficiary, and its most famous example, *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (*Moskva slezam ne verit*, 1979) a sweeping Soviet-style rags-to-riches romance, not only conquered the Soviet market, selling 84 million tickets for each of its two parts, but won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Picture to boot. Cineastes also tried their hand at large-scale action films and thrillers during his tenure, including *Pirates of the Twentieth Century* (*Piraty XX veka*, 1979), another two-part extravaganza that pitted Soviet sailors against opium smugglers in a gripping, if inevitably uneven battle. (The good guys won.) At 88 million tickets, *Pirates* was the number one Soviet film of the Soviet era and came close to besting the USSR's absolute record holder, the Mexican *Yesenia*. Yermash presided over an era of blockbusters. The overall audience for cinema in the USSR was in fact shrinking—people were going less and less often—but there was also a greater number of hit pictures than ever before in the seventies.

Meanwhile, in small, often out-of-the-way cinemas, clubs, and special screenings, cognoscenti audiences were watching what in the West would be called "art house" films—and this, too, must be considered an essential feature of the Yermash era. Some of these pictures were foreign-made, and others were productions that Goskino had decided to bury on the market by limiting their distribution, but many were films no one, including Yermash, had ever expected to reach a mass audience: films made to speak to an elite that did not call itself an elite. They were "people with developed taste," "aesthetically educated people." This sector, made possible by the remarkable boom in the movie industry after Stalin's death, expanded in the Yermash era; as it did, it took on a more distinctive cultural identity. By promoting a more robust entertainment sector in the industry, the regime also authorized a more forthright cultural elitism. Segmentation was still a tricky concept ideologically; the unified mass audience remained the ideal. Nonetheless, some critics and filmmakers now referred to elite productions and audiences proudly. As one cineaste said in the

161. Arkus, *Noveishaia istoriia otechestvennogo kino*, vol. 6.

162. Ibid.

perestroika period, "[T]he very existence of the Soviet arts depends on the fact that we can idle away year after year and then ingeniously hit the nail on the head."[163] It was this idling and ingenuity that the rejection of an ETK model protected, and with it a whole way of thinking about films, filmmakers, and audiences.

The postwar Soviet film industry always operated with a business model that used entertainment-oriented cinema, foreign and Soviet-made, to fill the coffers. The shift in the seventies under Yermash was not fundamental: it was one of degree and, to certain extent, of frankness about the model itself. In the eyes of many historians and some former Soviet cineastes, "cynicism" would be the more operative term. There is a tendency in the literature to present the policies of the Yermash era as antiprogressive, even reactionary. Some say masscult imports and Soviet-made genre films "deformed" audience sensibilities ("the public taste in entertainment turned 'bourgeois,'" wrote one historian). Others describe the growing segmentation of mass-elite cinemas in terms of loss ("the "destruction of audience cohesion"). Yermash is accused of trying to "enforce an entertainment orientation on the film industry."[164] It is an argument that echoes voices from the era, when Goskino's support for blockbusters was resented in many quarters as an assault on the notion of cinema as an art and on the position of the artist in Soviet society. At the Filmmakers' Union congress in 1981, several people, including the screenwriter for *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears,* referred to the "snobbery" of the cineaste establishment faced with so-called box-office (*kassovye*) films; others defended their right and their duty as Soviet artists to ignore the box office. Yermash told the assembled filmmakers that the "economic factor" was "one of the most important [factors]" in their work. "Figures reflect the importance and the role of cinema in the life of the people."[165]

And yet, even at its most frankly commercial moment under Yermash, the Soviet film industry did not go so far as to adopt the ETK model; though economic viability may now have been touted as one of the most important factors, bureaucrats and political elites, cineastes and viewers all had more pressing factors in mind. For this reason, Faraday characterized the Soviet industry as "nonrationalized" in financial terms.[166] But Soviet cinema had its own terms. Mosfil'm had three times as many cameramen on staff as there were jobs in the seventies.[167] They knew the terms when they picked up their pay packets every week, as did cineastes who defended their duty to pursue Soviet cinema-art, regardless of costs or revenues. And as for redefining cinematic success under Brezhnev, they saw no need.[168]

163. Lawton, *Red Screen,* 388.

164. "Public taste turned 'bourgeois,'" Anna Lawton, *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (Cambridge, 1992), 9; "destruction of audience cohesion," Graffy, "Cinema," 183; "enforce an entertainment orientation," Faraday, *Revolt of the Filmmakers,* 90. See also Golovskoy, *Kinematograf 70-x,* 75–76.

165. *Chetvertyi s"ezd kinematografistov SSSR,* 179.

166. Faraday, *Revolt of the Filmmakers,* 66–70.

167. *Chetvertyi s"ezd kinematografistov SSSR,* 98.

SOVIET FILMS ON FOREIGN SCREENS: CINEMA-ART AND THE CULTURAL COLD WAR

If the contradictions of Soviet cinema-art bore fruit domestically—for cineastes and the industry, for bureaucrats, and even for audiences in this golden age of moviegoing—what about the international context? Dependent though they were on masscult, Soviet officials always promoted their cinematic system as a world apart and a model for emulation. The Soviet minister of culture launched Moscow's 1958 International Film Festival by declaring, "[T]he days of Hollywood's domination of the world market are coming to an end."[169] Soviet cinema-art would lead the way. Nine years later the Soviets inaugurated an international festival in Tashkent for film from the postcolonial world that further promoted the image of Soviet cinema-art as both anti-Hollywood and the antidote *to* Hollywood.[170]

Success on the international screen was central to Soviet cinema's identity, and from some angles it did cut an impressive figure. In the Khrushchev era, Soveksportfil'm expanded its operations substantially to field offices worldwide (in over 50 countries as of the sixties); where it had no official representation (such as in the United States), its agents brokered deals via intermediaries.[171] In 1967, to take one year, the USSR boasted film sales in 108 countries, for a total gross revenue of over 4.4 million rubles (roughly 2 million from sales to the socialist bloc, 2.4 to capitalist countries.)[172] Certain films sold very widely. By 1963, Grigorii Chukhrai's *Ballad of a Soldier* (*Ballada o soldate,* 1959) had sold in 93 countries and *The Cranes Are Flying* (*Letiat zhuravli,* 1958) in 88.[173]

Raw figures, however, are often misleading. One major film could weight the scales: the rights to *War and Peace,* for example, sold for US$1.3 million, a sizable chunk of the total revenue from capitalist-country sales in 1967.[174] More important, a sale did not necessarily translate into widespread distribution. *The*

168. On similar phenomena in literature, see Dirk Krechmar, *Politika i kul'tura pri Brezhneve, Andropove i Chernenko, 1970–1985 gg* (Moscow, 1997).

169. "US Film Rule Scored," *New York Times,* 3 August 1959.

170. Rajagopalan, *Leave Disco Dancer Alone!* 84–85; S. Chertok, *Tashkentskii festival'* (Tashkent, 1975).

171. Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepeli,* 379–386. The situation for trade with the People's Republic of China was exceptional. See Tina Mai Chen, "Internationalism and Cultural Experience: Soviet Films and Popular Chinese Understandings of the Future in the 1950s," *Cultural Critique* 58 (Fall 2004): 82–114.

172. RGALI, f. 2918, op. 5, d. 511, ll. 10–11.

173. Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepeli,* 381.

174. RGALI, f. 2918, op. 5, d. 511, l. 14.

Cranes Are Flying was one of the films the United States bought via a 1958 U.S.-Soviet exchange, and though it got good play on the university and art-house circuit, it never entered the cinematic mainstream. The number of Soviets who watched *The Magnificent Seven* dwarfed that of Americans who saw *Cranes*, and the same might be said in comparing Soviet audiences for *Les Misérables* (1958) and French audiences for Chukhrai's *Ballad*.[175] The Soviets chalked this up to ideological warfare—audiences in the West were being denied Soviet movies for political reasons—and they protested; in 1963, a senior Soviet official announced that the USSR would stop buying U.S. films unless the American side could guarantee wide distribution for Soviet films.[176] No boycott ever happened, and in the seventies Soveksportfil'm was still struggling to broker deals with U.S. firms that would ensure not just sales but exposure for Soviet films.[177] The Americans, for their part, argued that Soviet pictures did not perform well, and they were not alone. The Indians were also reluctant to take on Soviet films, especially after 1960, when distribution moved from a cultural exchange format, via friendship societies and clubs, to a commercial one.[178] Even fellow socialists were far from enthusiastic; in the early sixties film distribution agencies in the people's democracies were refusing over half the Soviet pictures on offer.[179] A Soviet delegation to Poland in the summer of 1962 was dismayed to find Krakow's theaters showing only five Soviet films, but twenty-five capitalist ones.[180] The only sector that appeared to be expanding for the Soviets in the 1960s and '70s was the postcolonial one—Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East—but here too, despite Soviet attentions, the United States held an overwhelming advantage.[181]

The USSR lost the cultural Cold War in cinema in blockbuster fashion: the gap between Soviet cinema's reach and Hollywood's was colossal. It is true that in comparison with Western European countries and Japan, the USSR was very successful in protecting and developing its *domestic* industry. The Soviets, of course, did not see themselves as playing in the same league with anyone else when it came to cinema for reasons of ideological superiority. But they also understood their innate material advantages: the Soviets were right not to compare themselves to, say, France, which, given its size, had little hope of supporting a large-scale, capital-intensive production and distribution operation along the lines of the Americans. (India, although it had both raw size and an extensive industry, lacked the capital.) The USSR was the only major industrialized country in the world with a domestic market big enough to drive an industry to rival Hollywood in its global reach. Arguably, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, a multiethnic, multilingual state, was in as good a position as the United States, and possibly a better one, to develop a cinema culture that could speak to a diverse global audience as well.[182]

The Soviets were always vociferous critics of Hollywood's bullying of the international movie marketplace, and for good reason. Yet as many critics also pointed out over the years, the USSR's export troubles had deep domestic roots. Soviet cinema was an industry that identified itself as an art but operated like a craft; it had a handmade quality that hindered its international competitiveness. As Hollywood and other cinemas went to color and wide-screen films, the Soviets lagged behind. More than that, they suffered baseline problems with equipment of all kinds. The production values in Soviet films often fell far short of international standards, and this was something cineastes talked about openly. Reform proposals from the Filmmakers' Union in the sixties flatly stated that Soviet films were not competitive on the world market because of their inferior production values. Film-stock quality was the most glaring issue. It was a problem universally acknowledged, repeatedly studied, and never solved.[183] The film industry also lacked adequate facilities for subtitling and dubbing films and so wound up spending hard currency for the services of foreign companies or, more often, doing without.

On the organizational side too, as we know, Soviet cinema suffered fundamental problems. An industry that missed its domestic production deadlines missed the international ones, too.[184] Indian film distributors complained about the lack of professionalism at Soveksportfil'm as agents dallied in selecting films

175. *Les Misérables* with Jean Gabin sold 46 million tickets in 1961. RGALI, f. 2329, op. 13, d. 138. On U.S.-Soviet film exchanges, see Yale Richmond, *US-Soviet Cultural Exchanges, 1958–1986* (Westview, CO, 1987), 65.

176. "Moscow to Halt US Film Imports," *New York Times*, 2 March 1963; I. Bol'shakov, "Sovetskie fil'my na ekranakh mira," *IK*, no. 9 (1959); Y. Vorontsov and I. Rachuk, *The Phenomenon of Soviet Cinema* (Moscow, 1980), 369–388.

177. See, for example, transcripts of negotiations between Soveksportfil'm and representatives of different U.S. film companies in 1973. RGALI, f. 2908, op. 7, d. 162, ll. 8–10, 13–15.

178. See Rajagopalan, *Leave Disco Dancer Alone!* chap. 2.

179. Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepeli*, 383.

180. Poland's cineastes had even more reason to be concerned: there were only two Polish movies on Krakow's screens! TsDAHOU, f. 1, op. 71, d. 261, ll. 6–21.

181. For Goskino concerns about Chinese cinema as a rising competitor in the developing world, see RGALI, f. 2981, op. 5, d. 283, ll. 81–89.

182. For an argument about Hollywood's competitive advantage internationally (including the question of the ethnic composition of the United States) and its relationship to the establishment of American "cultural hegemony" in Europe, see Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2005). For a different interpretation of the American challenge to European national cinemas, see Pierre Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Societies, 1939–1990* (New York, 1991).

183. Soviet cinema suffered from the transfer of its industrial base to the Ministry of Defense Industries in the Khrushchev era. Yermash waged a successful campaign to change this in the 1970s and also had plans (never fulfilled) to buy a Kodak factory outright. Arkus, *Noveishaia istoriia*, 4:123–126.

184. RGANI, f. 5, op. 55, d. 51, ll. 638–666, 39–49.

and returned them damaged.[185] The Soviets also faced persistent rumors—well founded, as it turns out—that they illegally copied films sent to Moscow for consideration.[186] Many foreign cineastes who knew of the Soviets' high-handed attitude to intellectual property rights were reluctant to do business with them. Polish film officials complained to a visiting delegation in 1962 that the materials they got from Soveksportfil'm were of such poor quality that they could not use them to advertise Soviet pictures.[187] Similar problems hampered efforts to propagandize Soviet cinema through noncommercial (diplomatic and educational) channels. Though the only film projector bus in all of West Africa in the early sixties was indeed imported from the USSR, it sat rusting in a Soviet embassy compound in Senegal for years: the embassy claimed it had no money to operate it, and the State Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries refused to let it be presented as a gift to the Senegalese government.[188]

The other crucial question in Soviet cinema's fate on the world market was, of course, whether audiences wanted what it had to offer. The Soviet answer was always framed in terms of artistic and ideological caliber, as was true in evaluations of the domestic scene. The standard line was that Soviet films failed when they lacked depth and failed to take on important issues in contemporary life. I. Bol'shakov, the USSR deputy minister of foreign trade, fleshed out the portrait of failure for *The Art of Cinema (Iskusstvo kino)* in 1959: "[T]here are a lot of unnecessary details of everyday life [in these films]," he wrote, "and romantic troubles which do not touch the viewer, lots of little songs, dubious witticisms, and lightweight, openly entertaining scenes."[189] It is a formula that sounds rather promising from the point of view of genre, or entertainment-oriented, cinema. And of the films Bol'shakov listed that fit this bill—films therefore unfit for international distribution, in his view—a good number were crowd-pleasers on the USSR domestic market: for example, the spy drama *Case No. 306 (Delo no. 306)*, second place at the box office in 1956 with 33 million tickets, and *Girl with a Guitar (Devushka s gitaroi)*, a musical comedy that sold 32 million three years later.

185. Rajagopalan, "Taste for Indian Films," 146–147.

186. Socialist bloc countries were also rumored to have copied capitalist films illegally and sold them to the Soviets. Philip Caputo, "The Soviets Veto the Hollywood Filmmakers' Box-Office Blockbusters," *Chicago Tribune*, 21 August 1977. Films sent for festivals were also illegally copied. This is how *Easy Rider* (1969), a noncompetition festival film in Moscow in 1971, entered the dacha circuit. "Director of Soviet Film Festival Rules Out the Publicity Seekers," *New York Times*, 21 July 1971; Stephen Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 97.

187. TsDAHOU, f. 1, op. 71, d. 261, ll. 6–21.

188. Sergey Mazov, "Soviet Policy in West Africa: An Episode of the Cold War, 1956–1964," in *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters*, ed. M. Matusevich (Trenton, 2007), 303–304.

189. Bol'shakov, "Sovetskie fil'my na ekranakh mira," 123–124.

Soviet taste consistently fell within the international mainstream. Soviet hits, in theory, could be international ones too.

The USSR did market some domestic hits successfully—*Amphibian Man*, for instance. But bringing girls with guitars and amphibian men to the international viewer was never the ideal, as Bol'shakov made clear. And, more to the point perhaps, the Soviet film industry had few of these films to market anyway. Soviet cinema as a world cinema could not contravene the realities of domestic production—the great gray block of movies that few people cared to watch and the small clutch of films like *Ivan's Childhood* that, however important from an artistic point of view, also failed to attract mass audiences. Soviet cinema-art did not fare well on the open international market because it did not meet international standards for cinema entertainment. Surely it was galling that, as export officials reported to the CC in 1963, "we were unable to sell a single film at the Cannes Film Festival." It was unacceptable that even socialist countries turned up their noses at Soviet productions.[190] But the standards of the international market were not Soviet standards; they were, critics sneered, masscult in nature, cut from Hollywood's cloth. Soviet cinema-art doggedly sought refuge in its own values and sense of superiority.

As a strategy this had definite pluses: it provided a ready explanation for failure, and it played well for a time to pro-communist, and anti-anti-communist, elites. In the West, the fascination with the post-Stalinist USSR faded, and in the seventies in particular, intelligentsias set their sights on other sources of revolutionary chic (including, significantly, the cinema of the Soviet avant-garde of the twenties).[191] Tarkovskii and a few others remained influential, but in the eyes of fellow auteurs in the West, they looked more and more like exceptions to a rule of Soviet banality—a rule only confirmed by the Yermash-era run of homegrown genre hits. The influence of the Soviet cinematic model among educated elites in the postcolonial world developed somewhat later, and the USSR worked hard to promote it through material interventions such as the Moscow and Tashkent international film festivals. VGIK and other Soviet institutions also trained aspiring cineastes and contributed to the development of new, national cinemas. Despite the many problems of the Soviets' export business, audiences for Soviet films gathered in many postcolonial urban centers. The critic Kirill Razgolov maintained that "in a significant part of the world, primarily the 'developing' world, the doctrine was: the worst Soviet film is better than the most perfect Western one."[192]

190. Fomin, *Kinematograf ottepeli*, 383.

191. This was especially true of France in the aftermath of May 1968. For a brief discussion, see Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896–1939* (London, 1994), 11–13.

192. Kirill Razlogov, "Vyvozu ne podlezhit," *IK*, no. 7 (2006): 64–70.

This may have been true, but we must recognize that in the postcolonial sphere, as in the West, the audience that preferred Soviet cinema to its capitalist rival was by and large an educated, elite audience. This is not to say that Soviet pictures never performed well internationally but rather that they consistently and dramatically performed worse than the Soviet model's sense of itself as world leader, and that this was important. At home, Soviet cinema made room for an elite/mass split in practice: it could accommodate a definition of cinematic success that relied on exploiting theoretically noxious or inferior productions (foreign and Soviet) to satisfy audiences while giving cineastes salaries and the all-important idling time for art. Internationally, however, in open market conditions, Soviet cinema had no way to implement this strategy, no way to fudge its business model and define its own way to success. Not only was the Soviet Union a net importer of cinematic imagery from its ideological archnemesis, masscult, but Soviet cinema, which defined itself as the world's leading cinema, was patently peripheral on the world screen. This was one contradiction that simply could never bear fruit.

THE NEW SOVIET MOVIE CULTURE

Soviet cinema-art was a particular kind of ideological construct, and at its heart was a particular model of a Soviet audience. It was, by definition, a gigantic audience, ceaselessly expanding, and unanimous in its appreciation for the work of Soviet cineastes. Each of these characteristics was essential. The size of the audience—not millions of tickets but *billions*—was living proof of Soviet cinema's success. And because film in the USSR was defined as art, a huge audience further demonstrated the cultural level of its people and their fundamental unity.[1]

Soviet cinema's model audience was forged in the 1930s, when *Pravda* had declared, "The Whole Country Is Watching *Chapaev*" and in fact entire factories, military brigades, schools, and offices marched off to watch the 1934 civil-war drama en masse, as they did for other films instantly dubbed "classics" by the authorities. All Soviet viewers returned to these classics again and again, it was said, not only for recreation but also for inspiration and education, for *heroes*.[2]

The Soviet film world, bureaucrats and cineastes alike, invoked Soviet cinema's canon throughout the entire postwar period. *Chapaev,* especially, was summoned up as a symbol of unity—the unity of politics and art, of filmmakers and viewers, of the audience itself—and as a model for emulation. Yet in villages, towns, and cities across the postwar USSR, Soviet cinematic culture presented a rather different picture. Most obviously, if the whole country was watching anything in the years after World War II, it was likely to be the trophy film *Tarzan* or the first Soviet blockbuster, *Amphibian Man,* Bollywood's *Love in Simla* or the Soviet adventure story *Pirates of the Twentieth Century*—that

1. Cf. Stephen Lovell on Soviet book culture, *The Russian Reading Revolution: Print Culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras* (London, 2000).

2. On Chapaev and the canon, see Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds. *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896–1939* (London, 1994), 334, 358–363; Richard Taylor, "Ideology as Mass Entertainment: Boris Shumyatsky and Soviet Cinema in the 1930s," in *Inside the Film Factory,* ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (London, 1994), 211–213; Maya Turovskaya, "The Tastes of Soviet Moviegoers," in *Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika,* ed. Thomas Lahusen and Gene Kuperman (Durham, NC, 1993), 95–107.