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Social Construction of Gender Roles in Soviet Film

Soviet film of the 1940s and 1950s (the period of totalitarianism) provides illustrative material to demonstrate how gender roles are constructed on the basis of dominant ideological values. In relation to women these values were based upon their equal participation in the process of constructing of a new social order. At the same time the image of woman as a wife and mother was also upheld, which always placed her in a double role—that of a man's equal in the production process and that of traditional femininity in the patriarchal context.

It would be an error to think that such a double identity was an exclusive creation of Soviet ideology. As early as the nineteenth-century Russian literature, one can trace the roots of the myth of woman fulfilling simultaneously masculine and feminine roles. In a popular poem by Nikolay Nekrasov, *Russian Women* (*Russkie zhenschiny*, 1863), part of the school literature syllabus in the Soviet period, this mythical image was elaborated in accordance with the life style of Russian peasants. Nekrasov's ideal woman—laborer in the field and at home, caretaker for her children and husband, capable of carrying out all sorts of work and of heroic deeds in a time of need—is even able (and bravely) to enter a burning house and stop a horse at full speed. At the same time she is not devoid of femininity, and when she appears in public on a festival day surrounded by her children, her image is dear to “all those who love Russian people.” This image was reinterpreted after nearly a hundred years in the context of totalitarian popular culture and found its expression in such a widely accessible medium of representation as film. What in fact was represented in Soviet film of the totalitarian period was by no means the real situation of women but the myth, which can be traced to Nekrasov and Russian democratic intelligentsia of the nineteenth century.

The films I analyze in this essay all belong to popular culture and are to the present day placed in the category of “hits.” One of the reasons for addressing this artistic field is a renewal of interest in these films during the post-Soviet period, which shows that certain meanings and underlying structures of feeling have not disappeared.

Three films will be examined from the point of view of how gender is constructed through narrative schemes and the aesthetics of representation—*Tzirk*

(*The Circus*, 1940) by Grigory Alexandrov and *Svinarka i pastukh (The Pig-girl and the Shepherd*, 1941) and *Bogataya nevesta (The Rich Bride*, 1937), both by Ivan Pyryev. They are illustrative of the social role woman was supposed to undertake in society and of the aesthetic construction of female figures on the screen. I selected the three films based on the place they occupy in Soviet popular culture—all of them were top box office attractions in their time—and because of the return of the popularity of Soviet films of this period in the 1990s. The main point in this analysis is to show, following Judith Butler's elaboration of the connection between performative acts and gender constitution, "that what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (1990: 271).

A look at these films in historical perspective reveals that with the advance of the totalitarian regime the mythological aspect of the films gets strengthened and has a tendency to be transformed into a fairy-tale narrative. While the women in the films at the beginning of the 1930s were supposed to have their referents in reality, the fair beauties of the peak of totalitarianism—Lubov Orlova and Marina Ladygina—acquired aesthetic characteristics. These characteristics took them out of the real context and placed them in a mythological world populated by unreal heroes as well as machines, which embodied the myth of technological progress. In all the films open depiction of female sexuality is taboo, but at the same time the heroine remains the object of male desire expressed through a traditional narrative scheme of the "love triangle." The choice the heroine ultimately makes is based on the archetypal virtues of the male transfigured by ideology into the values of a new society. But this desire is always devoid of direct sexual implications, which were supposed to be part of an alien Western culture and is coded according to the rules of the dominant socialist value structures. While, as Laura Mulvey notes, Hollywood film "coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" (1989: 30), the coding process of Soviet totalitarian cinema was done in accordance with the mythical language of communist construction. Accordingly, the notion of pleasure, aesthetic as well as sexual, was removed from the world of the everyday, placed into the future-to-come, and substituted by the joys of productive labor. Thus, the woman in Nekrasov is liberated from forced labor but continues it, nevertheless, as a voluntary, conscious activity. She thus remains with a double workload, which is aestheticized by the media of representation and presented to the audience as a model female identity of socialist culture.

Sharing the common characteristics of popular success, the three films differ in their emphasis on the social meaning of femininity. In *The Circus* the basic aesthetic opposition is that of the image of Soviet womanhood and motherhood versus the external world of alien sexualized femininity. This opposition is illus-

trated through a visual contrast of the heroine's performance as a sexual symbol illustrative of the bourgeois world and the desexualized (but not de-aestheticized) image of a Soviet woman participating as an equal in a man's world. The heroine, played by Orlova, has all the features of a Hollywood film star with the type of beauty popular in the 1930s. When featured as belonging to the Western world, she is presented as a typical object of exploiting male gaze, transforming herself into this object reluctantly but with a feeling of inevitability vis à vis such subjugation. When she changes her allegiance, however, and finds warmth and love in the socialist world, she is depicted as an equal, a comrade and therefore as a participant in technological progress, which will transform fairy-tale to reality. Both man and woman in that reality are devoid of any sexual characteristics. They are presented as images of pure cosmic beauty, aesthetic beings for whom the still far away conquest of cosmic space has become reality; although from another world, they represent the potential of the future as present-day builders of socialism.

The main aesthetic point of *The Rich Bride* is the assertion of the myth of affinity between beauty and labor. The heroine is shown as an enthusiastic worker who can select her beloved according to the ideological standard of conscientious labor as the main social and personal value. This politics of feminine representation is closely connected to the purely mythical treatment of the machine as a magic being. The tractor, the principal instrument of creating collective farm agriculture, is animated by being referred to it as a steel horse; the male and female role distribution related to it is traditional—man is the rider and woman his assistant. If one accepts a rather common point of view that “the recurring images of women in popular media may have some influence on how people think of women in real life” (de Souza 1987: 182), one may say that these repeated perspectives appear in what has been termed “paradigm scenarios.” Drawn from everyday life, they are reinforced by stories, art, and culture. In the case of *The Rich Bride*, the narrative scheme also seems to be drawn from the everyday experience of collective farm life, but in representation it acquires a completely different character with all its elements completely transformed by a mythology of underlying ideology.

The Pig-girl and the Shepherd, made in the genre of a fairy-tale and completely removed from real life, includes representation of several Soviet myths, above all that of ethnic harmony. The heroine's representation is constructed through a contrast with the hero. Eventually, however, different types of ethnic features blend into a love union. Characteristically, the unifying factor for both characters is the ideological image of Moscow as the center of social and personal life. Being a cinematic fairy tale, the film also subverts the traditional fairy-tale structure of narrative pertaining to the separation of the lover and the

beloved. While in a traditional plot the lover should perform feats of courage (which he does in the film by saving the collective farm's sheep from wild beasts), the heroine should pine for him in feminine passivity; here, however, she also performs labor feats parallel to those of her beloved by saving her pigs from severe cold. Thus, the traditional dichotomy of the active versus passive principle is changed to a model of separation in which both the hero and heroine work for the benefit of society and through this ultimately achieve reunion. In the reunion's narrative scheme, the traditional structure is restored; the hero in his traditional masculine role has to prove his worth and win his beloved, which he does in a perfect fairy-tale manner as a brave horseman. Their union symbolizes many totalitarian ideologemes—ethnic harmony, the leading role of labor in human life, and the development of regions under the guiding role of Moscow—but at the same time it does not abolish the traditional notion that the bride has to be won over. The shepherd from the Caucasian mountains has to overcome his rival's intrigue against him and prove himself the genuine hero. The gap between the film and the context of its viewing is greatest among the cases under study here, as *The Pig-girl and the Shepherd* was completed during the first year of war (Great Patriotic War) and widely shown at the front where it produced welcome moments of escape from the tough realities of battle. The element of pleasure in the viewing process was strongest in this context because it gave soldiers the possibility of "projecting the repressed desire onto the performer" (Mulvey 1989: 31).

All these Soviet myths firmly inscribe gender roles and the aesthetics of their representation into the basic ideological context of totalitarian society. At the same time they are closely connected to much deeper traditional concepts of feminine and masculine social roles and the aesthetic patterns of their representation. One can trace in totalitarian period films a simultaneous process of undermining traditional patriarchal structures, in which women are passive and men are active, while confirming these structures by allowing for the visual pleasure of the audience, especially male, in the construction of the heroine's physical image. Falling back on Mulvey's work, one can say that Soviet film, to no less a degree than Hollywood film, involves the manipulation of the audience's visual pleasure, and the typical heroine of these films does not lose her femininity due to the male's acquired social role. Thus, a new view of woman (which, as has been seen, is not so new in Russian cultural tradition) is being established through a popular medium.

This process makes the best samples of totalitarian film appealing not only in the context of their generation but also in post-Soviet popular culture. In spite of dramatic changes in the field of visual arts, which occurred in the post-perestroika era, a nostalgic mood is prevalent both among senior and middle-aged

aged groups of viewers, and mass media reflect this mood by frequent exhibitions of Soviet films and transmission of modernized remakes of Soviet lyrical songs. This creates a visible contradiction with the statement, "it is in the realm of the visual arts—and, in particular, cinema—that the evolution of subjectivity and political consciousness is most dramatically inscribed" (Portuges 1995: 296). The explanation of this paradoxical situation lies, in my opinion, in the universal mythology underlying the visual aesthetics of state socialism, which has not lost its validity in contemporary post-Soviet culture. The ideological myths inscribed in the films have been completely unmasked and stripped of their magic qualities, and one can trace this strong demythologization in the new Russian cinema. It is enough to remember such instances of this process in *Deti chugunnich bogov* (*The Children of Iron Gods*—Tomash Tot, 1993) as a negation of the myth of the glory and beauty of labor, or numerous films on the war in Chechnya undermining the myth of the ethnic harmony of the Soviet people. The image of the West as an ideological enemy has long been replaced by complex relations with Western culture and wide-spread consumption of American and European cinematic productions. But alongside this process a new myth was created—a myth about a myth—in which old mythologies gained the status of stability and affirmation as regards their value. Women's images in those films, rooted in traditional perceptions of women in Russian culture, retain their charm despite new sexual freedom and open projection of the female body in the new Russian cinema. Moreover, they serve as a sort of counterbalance, a steady point in the destroyed value system, an escape from the fragmented world of the post-Soviet variety of postmodern culture, which is so difficult to cope with for the generations brought up in a unitary and ideologically constructed cultural atmosphere. As for younger people, it is just a part of a gigantic collage of a contemporary artistic field where the co-existence of styles and epochs has become so customary that for them classical Soviet film is a legitimate part of their multiple vision on a par with fragments of visual cultures of other periods and national contexts. Although in this case there is hardly any identification with the heroes, they become a part of a return to the past, of nostalgia for the lost "self" in the world of total otherness.

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