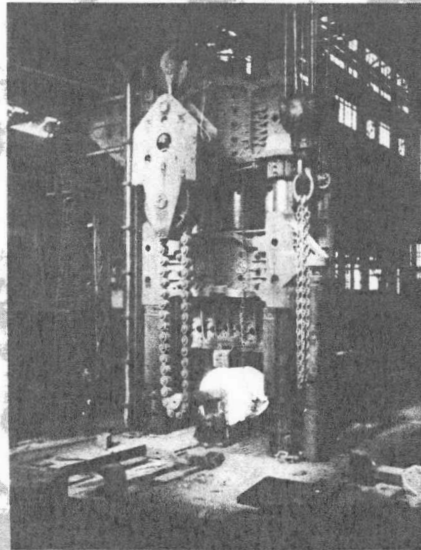


PHOTOGRAPHY/INDEPENDENT FILM/VIDEO/VISUAL BOOKS

# AFTERIMAGE

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## MECHANISMS OF POWER

### THE MILITARIZATION OF GERMAN PHOTOGRAPHY

### THE INSTRUMENTAL IMAGINATION

SEX, LIES, AND SCIENTIFIC VISUALIZATION

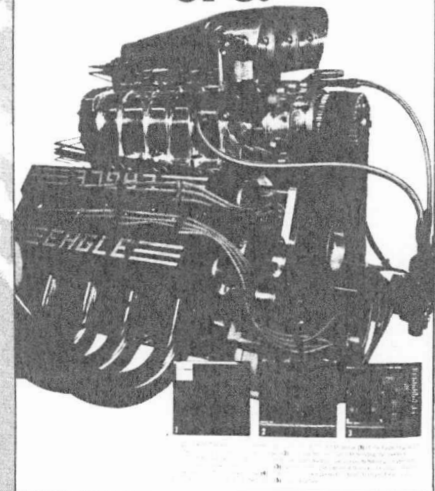
### HAVANA FILM FESTIVAL

### SOVIET CINEMA'S PHANTOM LENS

### BLACK IMAGES OF "HOME"

### CHANGING PUERTO RICO

**...TO THE POWER  
OF 3.**



1991 NEA MEDIA ARTS NATIONAL SERVICES GRANTS

MARION POST WOLCOTT, 1910-1990

JOBS, JOBS, JOBS!

LEV MANOVICH and ALLA YEFIMOV

Mikhail Yampolski is one of the leading film scholars in the Soviet Union. He is now a senior research fellow at the Moscow State Institute for Film Studies. The subjects of his books and numerous articles include the history of avant-garde film, film theory, and the history of nineteenth-century visual culture. Yampolski is a coeditor of "Philosophy at the Margins," a book series published by the Research Group for Postclassical Thought at the Moscow State Institute of Philosophy. His recent publications in English include an essay on contemporary Soviet animation and "Montage and Total Cinema," both in *Afterimage* (London) nos. 13 (1990) and 14 (1991).

In this interview we asked Yampolski about the history and the current state of alternative cinema in the Soviet Union. Given the particular organization of Soviet film practices, it is useful to define the terms he uses. "Independent cinema" refers to films that are produced using the resources of the state's studio system and film schools but are not intended for mainstream distribution. The term "parallel cinema" refers to a specific movement of experimental filmmakers who work completely outside the state film institutions. The existence of such a movement only became possible in the last five years, and in the current atmosphere of rapid social and economic change even categories of "independent" and "parallel" cinema are shifting.

Along with his academic activities Yampolski is closely involved with contemporary filmmaking and criticism and is one of the founders and organizers of Arsenal, the first international festival of independent film in the Soviet Union. The interview was conducted in Russian during Yampolski's lecture tour in the United States in November of 1990 and translated by the interviewers.

**Lev Manovich:** Can you discuss alternative filmmaking in the Soviet Union?

**Mikhail Yampolski:** I think that the emergence of alternative Soviet cinema is representative of broader changes in Soviet culture. For a long time this culture was unique because the concept of alternative or "parallel" subcultures did not exist. The difference between the cultural environments of Nikita Khrushchev's "thaw" and that of perestroika is that in the Khrushchev period artists could not think of working outside the system. In the '60s the system itself became more flexible and somewhat open; it absorbed the new generation of artists, thus prolonging its own existence. But simultaneously in this period the first seedlings of alternative culture appeared. For example, the idea of youth culture became possible. Before that the lifestyles of the young did not differ from those of adults; they partook in the same culture, watched the same films. Soviet culture was markedly monolithic. In the '60s a separate youth culture began to form, which imported forms of alternative cultural organization from the West—jazz, for example.

The emergence of alternative cultures gradually led to the freezing up of official Soviet culture and made the idea of independent filmmaking possible. Artists began to understand that real freedom lies outside the state system. The flow of new talent into the official culture stopped; in contrast to the pattern of Khrushchev's "thaw," at the beginning of perestroika the new talent did not go to work for the state institutions—the big publishing houses, film studios, and state theaters. Instead, networks for distribution of alternative culture developed—*samizdat* publishing, independent recording, and private exchange of censored music, etc.—and the creative flourishing took place on this terrain. Today independent filmmaking in the Soviet Union is developing its own system of distribution, holding its own festivals, publishing its own journal.

**Alla Yefimov:** How are these undertakings supported?

**MY:** First of all, we inherited from Joseph Stalin's times the system of "houses of culture" (cultural centers with theaters, libraries, clubs, studio spaces, and production facilities, usually attached to large factories). The original concept behind the houses of culture was that genuine proletarian culture should exist in proximity to the workplace: every factory was expected to be a center of proletarian, "people's" culture. In the '30s this utopian vision fell apart, but the houses of culture still exist. They retained their production facilities, including small film studios with 16mm equipment, and this provided an infrastructure for alternative cultural production.

Second, the state film schools have contributed to the emergence of independent filmmaking. A film school allows more freedom than a state studio. Since many schools have 35mm equipment and train their students for professional filmmaking, a number of resourceful people pursued independent projects using high-quality, professional equipment. In the absence of a more direct support system, an alternative filmmaker in the Soviet Union must be resourceful and cunning.

For instance, the State Institute of Cinema Education (VGIK)—the most prestigious school—requires each student to produce three films, two course projects and a thesis. My friend Alexander Kaidanovski took this opportunity to make three unusual narrative films based on works by Jorge Luis Borges, Albert Camus, and Leo Tolstoy. Then he made a feature-length film based on Borges's work, which was shown in international festivals. By the time of graduation Kaidanovski was already the author of four films, two of them feature length, and had won international prizes. He is

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Gleb and Igor Aleinikov, Moscow, 1990. Photo by Marie Cien.

## THE SOVIETS' OTHER ARSENAL

### AN INTERVIEW WITH MIKHAIL YAMPOLSKI

now a filmmaker with a name, even though he never worked for a state film studio and never entered the system.

The career of Alexander Sokurov, one of the most recognized young Soviet filmmakers, provides another example. His film *The Lonely Voice of Man* (1988) won prestigious awards abroad. Yet it was shot as a student project. While in film school Sokurov worked with Guridze, the recognized master of popular science films and lyrical nature documentaries. For his project Sokurov was expected to complete a two-hour nature documentary. He was given a camera, film stock, and 5000 rubles total, which is very little for a professional production. With this he produced a feature-length film based on a story by Andrei Platonov. This caused a great scandal in the school, and an order was given to destroy the negatives.

**LM:** Alternative films have been produced not only in the film schools but also at such state studios as Mosfilm and Lenfilm. How is it that the studios support the production of these films but never release them for distribution?

**MY:** Such films are made possible with the help of Debut, a quite wonderful program that provides grants to filmmakers for the production of their first professional films. It is a kind of state philanthropy, which is widely utilized by young filmmakers. However, full feature-length films rarely result from Debut's grants. They are usually under an hour, which severely limits the possibilities for distribution. Given the terms of the program, it is more profitable for well-known

actors and camera operators to collaborate on these short films than to work on the many feature-length productions. Thanks to Debut, in the Soviet Union a beginning director can work with the best actors and operators.

**LM:** It seems to me that in the Soviet Union there has been a hierarchy of ideological control over genre. The high arts—painting, narrative fiction, and cinema—were censored much more often than such marginal arts as animation, science films, and children's books, so many talented artists turned to these genres.

**MY:** This is true to a large degree. Vladimir Kobrin, an outstanding director, worked in educational science films, the most didactic Soviet genre. He made films about biophysics for college-level courses. The films were financed by the Ministry of Education but were commissioned by his physicist friends, who also served on the acceptance committee. Although produced in the science film genre, they were wonderful, poetic experimental films very close to surrealism in spirit. Naturally he was not well known except to a circle of friends—people who valued him highly.

**AY:** Can you talk about the parallel cinema movement and its journal, *Cine-Phantom*?

**MY:** *Cine-Phantom* was founded around 1986 by two brothers, Igor and Gleb Aleinikov, the two most active representatives of the parallel film movement. To a degree it was modeled after the *Cahiers du cinéma* of the '70s. The journal is a mix of translations from Western publications, including



Yevgenii Yufit, 1987. Photo by A. Bezukladnikov.



Left: still from *Game of Ho* (1987) by Boris Yukhananov. Right: Parallel filmmakers on the beach at Riga during 1988 Arsenal film festival (left to right): Igor Aleinikov, Yevgenii Chorba, Dennis Kuzman (bottom), Yevgenii Yulit, Igor Bezrukov, Gleb Aleinikov. Photo by Zygmunt Rytka.

materials about Western independent film. The editors also publish their own highly ironic manifestos and criticism, whose tone is very different from that of official Soviet criticism. The journal is both diverse and uneven. The significance of the journal is its truly cinophilic character. In contrast to most Soviet film directors and critics, the Aleinikovs are film buffs. They've spent a lot of time in film museums and have seen an enormous number of silent films; this film-historical erudition is very important to their work.

When the Jean-Marie Straub retrospective was organized by VGIK, the organizers were terribly worried about how the films would be received by the Moscow audiences, since Straub is such a difficult director. Yet the retrospective was very successful, and for the last screening the theater was overcrowded. The retrospective influenced many people including the Aleinikovs, who afterwards changed their filmmaking style dramatically. The point is that the Aleinikovs went through developmental stages more typical of Western independent filmmakers. In this respect they are radically different from most Soviet cinematographers, whose education and knowledge of film is limited to what they are presented with in the state schools.

**LM:** What groups comprise the parallel movement?

**MY:** For Moscow the center of parallel cinema is the Aleinikovs; in Leningrad it's the necro-realists, who are now working in Sokurov's studio at Lenfilm. The necro-realists are the most notorious and outspoken. The group's leader, Yevgenii Yulit, claims that his most important inspiration is Luis Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1929). The fundamental theme of Yulit's films is bodily decomposition. He takes his materials from illustrations of pathological anatomy and conceives of the body as undergoing constant transformations, having "cinemascope" qualities—the corpse decomposes, exhibits discoloration, etc.

The Aleinikovs in Moscow and the necro-realists in Leningrad are the most visible groups. They actively promote themselves and are connected with Western publications. Of course, there are many interesting filmmakers in other cities; but they are less known because of the limited opportunities for contact with the media.

**LM:** Is parallel cinema more concerned with formal experimentation or social criticism?

**MY:** One can find diverse approaches. Some work is in the genre called Sots-Art, which pushes Soviet mythology to its grotesque extreme. The Aleinikovs' best-known film, *Tractors* (1987), turns the tractor into a paradigmatic symbol of Soviet culture, a grotesque fetish. While this film approaches social criticism through the use of the absurd, the Aleinikovs' earlier work was more concerned with investigations into cinematic language and the possibilities of montage.

Almost all of the Leningrad necro-realists work around sexuality and everything concerned with the transgression of bodily norms. In this sense their films have social importance. Stylistically the films imitate the look of turn-of-the-century films. There is usually no editing; everything is shot by a single, static camera, and the narrative progresses in a slapstick comedy style. But everything revolves around corpses, excrement, and taboo sexual practices. A group in Lithuania also takes on themes of eroticism, not in a grotesque but in a lyrical key. These filmmakers contrast the naked body with its social environment, which is rejecting and alienating.

Some filmmakers are concerned with formal explorations as well. In fact, to experiment with transforming the photographic image is characteristic of many parallel filmmakers. They scratch the film or draw on it, introducing two distinct codes into their films: the code of photographic realism and the code of flat, schematic representation. The latter is superimposed upon the former and foregrounds its fiction. Recently I saw films made in Minsk (the capital of the Belorussian Republic) in which the photographic image depicted a paradigmatic scene of Soviet reality while hand-drawn symbols provided an ironic commentary. For

instance, a street scene of moving traffic was "explained" as the movement of the army, in a parody of the use of documentary photography in Soviet mass media.

**AY:** Are there any openly political films that use the documentary genre?

**MY:** Yes; some such films were made by the Aleinikovs. However, Soviet parallel cinema's impact does not rely on the rhetoric of journalism; at this moment it is not based on dealing with political issues directly. For instance, the political importance of the necro-realists' films is in the degree that they shock a typical Soviet spectator. The necro-realists' manifestos declare that they make stupid, idiotic, cruel cinema that crushes all the sacred principles of Russian and Soviet culture, their alleged spirituality and humanism.

**AY:** One could say that in the Soviet context formal experimentation itself often carries a political charge. All styles and genres are so thoroughly compromised by the official Soviet media discourse that one must find a different voice. How do you think parallel cinema relates to other forms of contemporary Soviet art practice? Since so much art is produced for export now, there seems to be little possibility for engaging with truly controversial issues of concern to Soviet audiences. Is parallel cinema becoming one of the few domains where social polemic is alive?

**MY:** Possibly so, but I think that will depend on changes in the structures of distribution. As long as the channels for dialogue are limited by the art circle itself, the idea of truly political cinema is an absurdity. Parallel cinema is the rejection of the tiresome forms of political discourse that still exist in the Soviet press and media.

There has also been a shift toward an increased political polemic within mainstream cinema, which offers prospects for reaching a wider audience. This is perhaps due to the gradual opening of the studio system to new talent. Recently a film by a very young, virtually unknown director, Maxim Pezhemski, was released by Lenfilm, called *Comrade Chkalov Crosses the North* (1989). Chkalov is a legendary Soviet pilot considered to be the first to have flown over the northern seas. Pezhemski did not have enough money to film the flight, so he made Comrade Chkalov cross the North on foot. It is a very funny film that manages to ridicule all the clichés of the official arts and propaganda. It is full of overt political references.

**AY:** It seems to me that Western independent filmmaking with any pretensions to social criticism or commentary is generally gravely serious in its rhetoric, whereas the majority of avant-garde productions in the Soviet Union, whether in plastic arts, literature, or film, rely on the absurd, on irony and dark humor. Can you explain this contrast?

**MY:** You are right. The absurd has become a widespread feature of Soviet culture. Even television, the most serious of all our institutions, presents irony and humor in absurd forms. For example, the comedy program "Montage" stages mock interviews with Soviet political leaders and creates fake documentary footage in which the characters are placed in completely absurd situations with the help of computerized image manipulation. The new late-night program "TV News Service" openly parodies the official news program "Vremya." The producers provide highly ironic, absurd commentaries on all current Soviet events. The program is enormously popular; viewers die laughing.

**AY:** There are similar programs in the U.S., such as "Saturday Night Live," but they exist more within the framework of mainstream comedy than in relation to the avant-garde.

**MY:** I think that the emphasis on the absurd is connected to the process of inner liberation, of emancipation, that is achieved through laughter. Theories of laughter, such as Georges Bataille's, often consider it to be a nonverbal emotional expression that appears in situations when available verbal language is inadequate. Our country's situation is marked by the inadequacy of the old cultural language and the absence of an effective new one. We are experiencing an aphasia of all the means of communication and repre-



sentation of our reality. The combination of these two factors—the feeling of liberation coupled with the absence of a language—makes laughter the privileged mode of emotional release. Characteristically the absurd is employed by the new generation, who can assume a distant view of the ruins of social structures: they did not have to live them.

**AY:** Is there independent video in the Soviet Union?

**MY:** Yes, there is, although by necessity it takes different forms than it does in the West. Soviet video artists do not have anything comparable to standard Western video technology. They don't have opportunities for the electronic image manipulation that forms the basis for much of Western video art. In the Soviet Union video is used as a real-time medium that allows long, uninterrupted recording, as well as less staged behavior since there is less awareness of the apparatus. Boris Yukhananov, a leading video artist, primarily organizes and records happenings, using complex camera devices.

Roma Smirnov, another video artist, produces endlessly long tapes. Each tape functions as a matrix, a sort of archive of material on a particular topic out of which he can later produce two or three alternative final versions. The visual quality of video and the possibility of layering different types of texts are important for Smirnov, so he works a lot with multimedia projection. He draws on glass and projects the images onto actors, videotaping the process. Smirnov's search is of a formal character, closely related to experimental theater; the medium itself is not central to his project.

**AY:** Apart from showing at the small number of parallel cinema festivals, what other means are there for distributing and screening films?

**MY:** There is no distribution network at all for these films within the theater system. However, it has recently become possible to rent space and projection equipment to hold privately sponsored screenings. Various avant-gardist gatherings, literary and artistic, take place quite often, and the films are shown at such events. But no theater exists in the country where one can purchase a ticket to watch alternative films. There are no distributors such as Anthology Film Archives in New York or Coop in London.

**AY:** Are there any archives or museums that would purchase prints?

**MY:** You must remember that in the Soviet Union no one buys art, including painting and sculpture. There is no internal market, so everything is sold abroad. Filmmakers especially cannot support themselves through sales and distribution, and this forces them gradually to enter the state studio system. The Aleinikovs' last film was produced at Mosfilm. Many Leningrad filmmakers work in Lenfilm's documentary studio, where they are allowed a certain degree of freedom. However, this relationship with the state studio system still presents no distribution opportunities.

**AY:** Besides *Cine-Phantom* and the official film journals, what other forums are there for film criticism?

**MY:** *Cine-Phantom* is a small and irregularly published journal that addresses a limited audience, although some of its



Untitled collage (1987) by Igor Aleinikov.

material has been reprinted in a number of official Soviet journals. Still, there is no regularly printed journal devoted to alternative film. Starting at the first Arsenal festival we published a newsletter packed with materials on alternative film; there were 10 issues altogether. A new journal, *Ekran* (Screen), was founded recently in Leningrad, and its editors are sympathetic to and connected with the parallel cinema movement. So alternative filmmakers are gradually obtaining space in various publications.

**LM:** Tell us about the Arsenal film festival.

**MY:** The first Arsenal took place in 1986 in Riga, the capital of Latvia. Riga has traditionally been an active center of cinematography. That year a group of film scholars and filmmakers decided to bring together a number of Soviet filmmakers and hold screenings of independent films for Riga's audiences. About 40 people came together and organized not just a film festival but a whole day of film celebration, with planned and spontaneous events around town. An enormous paper statue was constructed, for example, as a monument to unrealized film scripts. There were lectures and concerts throughout the night. It was a wonderful gathering, and a very informal one since all the participants knew each other and came together to watch the new cinema.

Before leaving Riga four of us met to fantasize about a future international festival. The group included myself, Augusts Sukuts, a Latvian film director who now directs the first independent video center in Latvia, Yuri Tzivian, a well-known film scholar from Riga, and Naum Kleiman, who is now the director of the Central Museum of Film in Riga. This was 1986, the beginning of perestroika, when nothing was certain. However, thanks to the dedication of Sukuts, we managed to get the project off the ground.

This was the first international independent film festival to take place in the Soviet Union, and it was organized and financed without any involvement from the state film institutions. Over 200 films were screened at the festival. Program subjects included a retrospective of American independent films, Czech surrealism, and the British avant-garde. Many European filmmakers attended the festival, such as Peter Gidal, and others, like Jean-Luc Godard, showed support by sending their films to the festival. The festival lasted for over a week. Most of the films were seen for the first time in the Soviet Union and were a sensational success.

For the second festival, which took place in October of 1990, we collected over 400 films including retrospectives of independent film from Poland and Holland. The films of Peter Greenaway and Stephen Dwoskin enjoyed particular success with the public. A large program of Soviet parallel cinema was also presented.

The major limitation of our festival is that the unavailability of hard currency prevents us from subsidizing travel from abroad. This presents a special difficulty for third-world filmmakers. We would have liked to invite a number of people from Latin America and India who cannot afford to pay for themselves. So currently the festival mostly gathers participants from across the Soviet Union and Europe.

**LM:** What is the structure of the festival?

**MY:** First of all, there is no real prize. The symbolic prize is awarded randomly by a lottery. Second, we don't exclude any genre or style of cinema. We welcome documentaries, animation, popular science films, feature-length narratives, and experimental shorts. The idea is to destroy all boundaries. Our only criteria are innovation and liveliness. The programs are purposefully mixed to suspend the pseudo-boundaries of genres and present everything as Cinema.



Left: poster from first *Cine-Phantom* film festival, Moscow, 1987. Right, top to bottom: frame enlargements from *Waiting for de Bij* (1987), *Post-Political Cinema* (1988), and *Tractors* (1987), all by Gleb and Igor Aleinikov.