

Yuri Mamin's
"Fountain" (1989)



BY KAREN ROSENBERG

GLOOMY SOVIET OFFERINGS

Cynics say that every Soviet film these days contains sex or Stalin. But actually the formula used by Soviet directors is more complex. "Mainstream Soviet films often concern the current social and economic ills, including drugs, racketeering, violence, the alienation of youth and the helplessness of parents," says Vida Johnson, a professor of Russian at Tufts who attended the 1989 Moscow Film Festival.

There are many reasons for gloom in Soviet cinema. There's a reaction against the false optimism of pre-Gorbachev cinema. There's a long-repressed desire to imitate Hollywood's depiction of crime and sex. And there's the idea that film should reflect the state of the nation. "If film is a barometer of the social climate, then the mood is despairing," says Johnson.

Some Soviet directors have sensationalized these themes, but Boston-area museums have steered clear of schlock in their upcoming programming. This spring, the Museum of Fine Arts and the Institute of Contemporary Art are bringing strong works from the USSR that avoid cheap, shock effects.

"Freedom Is Paradise" (1989) by Sergei Bodrov (MFA, May 11, 5:30 p.m.) is the story

of a boy who runs away from reform school to see his father in prison. Another director might have made this a tear-jerker, but Bodrov shows admirable restraint. His lead actor, Vladimir Kosyrev, expresses little emotion, as if life had already hardened him. Dispassionately, the camera records the dilapidated buildings and self-centered adults the boy sees on his journey. Although there are acts of kindness by a nun, a prostitute and a prison warden, the focus of this film is the brutality of Soviet life.

Dissident Soviet writers have often used the metaphor of prison to describe Soviet society. It has now entered mainstream cinematic vocabulary, as demonstrated by "Freedom Is Paradise."

"Fountain," an 1989 film by Yuri Mamin (MFA, May 11, 7:45 p.m.) uses a collapsing building to symbolize the USSR. It's not an original idea; Soviet Georgian director Eldar Shengelaya employed it more subtly in "The Blue Mountains" a few years back. But Mamin has a good eye for the grotesque that makes his film visually interesting. The over-long comedy turns nicely into tragedy and then enters the realm of the supernatural, somewhat less successfully. But a few scenes manage to capture the desperation of Soviet

citizens these days. For example, when a middle-aged woman cries that she sold flowers on the black market only so her family could move out of their one-room apartment, the humiliation that economic dislocation causes becomes painfully real.

In comparison with these 1989 features, the 1986 film "Lonely Woman Seeks Life Companion" by Vyacheslav Krishtoforovich (ICA, April 30-May 2, 7 & 9 p.m.) is less hard-hitting. Although the director said he used a hidden camera to shoot the long lines in front of liquor stores, alcoholism has long been discussed in the Soviet press.

The middle-aged heroine of the film lives alone in a well-maintained apartment building; her problems are not material but psychological. She places a lonely-hearts ad and meets an alcoholic. When her boss tells her to dump the guy, it's clear that the director believes that the USSR has authoritarian aspects: private life is not private, and harshness rather than compassion is counselled.

The conflict between humanism and authoritarianism in Soviet society is conveyed by the heroine's ambivalence about her suitor. Irina Kupchenko's acting rescues a rather banal scenario.

While professional Soviet directors have concerned themselves with social and moral questions, a younger generation in the USSR is rebelling against all meaning. Obviously, they've had it with lofty abstractions.

Generally men in their 20s, they often make short, experimental videos and films outside of the studio system, using their own equipment or the facilities of amateur film clubs. Two different programs of this "parallel" cinema, which has rarely been seen in the United States, will play in the ICA, April 27-28, 8 p.m., followed by an informal discussion with 24-year-old Moscow filmmaker Gleb Aleinikov and his 28-year-old brother Igor on April 29, 2 p.m.

Of the works that will be shown, those by Aleinikov Brothers, are among the strongest. "Tractors," to be shown April 27, is an amusing 1987 spoof of a central symbol of the Soviet era. Like some other independent films, such as Vladimir Zakharov's 1989 film "War and Peace" (April 27), "Tractors" plays with archival footage, suggesting that history is no longer sacrosanct in the Soviet era.

During a recent interview in Boston, the Aleinikov brothers said that German filmmakers from Pabst and Murnau to Fassbinder and Schroeter have influenced their work. After years of involuntary ignorance of film history, Muscovites can now see important works in film history at the recently-opened Konocenter. "I go there two or three times a week, at the very least," Igor Aleinikov said.

Perhaps because Soviets were long cut off from Western cinematic traditions, the ICA's videos and films often look like a youngster's first steps. There's a homemade, improvisatory quality to the animation and other techniques which obviously results from inexperience as well as from the desire to challenge the polished aesthetics of mainstream Soviet cinema. There's a lot of clowning in the works, which is sometimes deliberately absurd and sometimes merely adolescent. But Soviet-watchers should take a look at what the newly-established experimental festivals are presenting.

Because they need money and facilities to make more films, some of these young men are being drawn into the Soviet studio system, where experimental units for emerging directors have been set up in the Gorbachev era. It will be interesting to see how they are changed by working with skilled camera operators and lighting technicians, editors and make-up artists. And it also will be fascinating to see how their irreverent humor affects the gloomy cinema of the USSR.

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