Feature

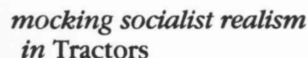
State of the Union

Karen Rosenberg on current Soviet documentaries

by Karen Rosenberg

"It would appear that in the entire history of Soviet art, no sector has made such a phenomenal leap in quality as the documentary cinema," wrote critic Alla Bossart in a 1989 issue of the Soviet journal *Smena*. Is this another example of Soviet hype? Perhaps not, when you consider that because of its transparent propaganda this genre has been one of the most discredited in the USSR.

And yet, continuity with the pre-glasnost era can be seen. Soviet documentaries are still generally agitational works, though the policies they advocate in the Gorbachev era are very different. Often, they warn citizens about the ever-present danger of Stalinism. (At the Cleveland Film Conference last October, the then-head of the Soviet Filmmakers Union, Andrei Smirnov, noted cannily that no Soviet film these days lacks a naked girl or Stalin.) ***I Was Stalin's Bodyguard*** (1989) by Semyon Aranovich uses



mocking socialist realism in Tractors

dissonant music to underline the discomfort many viewers will feel when they watch a former member of Stalin's personal entourage teach Soviet children. As the old man shames a bad student and stresses rote memorization, it is clear that Stalin is still with us. "We're for *perestroika* and Stalinism," says an older Russian woman in *Is Stalin With Us?* (1989) by Tofik Shakjverdiev.

Soviet documentaries still usually mean to inform, only now they are giving a voice to the voiceless and broaching once avoided topics. Not all deal with problem areas. *The Temple* (1987) by Vladimir Dyakov, for example, looks at religious life in the USSR today through the eyes of a monk, a parish priest, and nuns in a convent. What's new is the sympathy with which their choices are treated. But many films sniff out the underside of Soviet life. The destruction of the environment is a popular topic but there are riskier ones. *The Brick Flag* (1988) by Saulius Berzhinis bravely takes on the powerful Soviet military by exposing the hazing of recruits. Covering the 1987 trial of a young man who killed seven fellow soldiers after they beat and raped him and tried to get him to humiliate his juniors in a like manner, *The Brick Flag* is an implict plea for reform.

As glasnost goes on, you can see filmmakers building on each other's accomplishments. *And This Is How We Live* (1987) by Vladimir Oseledchik goes further than Iuris Podniek's famous documentary *Is It Easy To Be Young?* (1986) about the alienation of Soviet teenagers. Oseledchik introduces young Soviet neo-Nazis who wear swastikas meaning to shock. The quiet tone of the off-camera interviewer elicits remarkably cogent and forthright statements from a variety of people. American documentary filmmakers know that even when people feel free to talk, they need to be invited to do so in a sympathetic manner. Evidently, Soviets are learning this too.

Besides examining present ills, Soviet filmmakers are also uncovering the hidden past, for example the arrests and assassinations of the Stalin era. Even the glorification of Soviet heroism in World War II has been called into question, as in Igor Belyayev's *The Trial, Part II* (1988). Archival footage plays an important role in such works; Soviets have told me that at first they were so fascinated by old clips of once-taboo people and events that this material overshadowed the films in which it was set. But the jury at the 1988 Leningrad Non-Fiction Film Festival noticed that film after film used the same archival footage. The once-unthinkable juxtaposition of Nazi and Stalin-era footage (in *Is Stalin With Us?*) also wears thin if no analysis of their differences and similarities is offered. How long can filmmakers ride on shock effects?

One problem facing non-fiction filmmakers is that their information and analysis may be out of date by the time it reaches the public. This is especially true in Gorbachev's USSR where the periodical press is breaking down barriers at a fast clip. Last September I asked Soviet filmmaker Marina Goldovskaya why her documentary *Solovki Power* (1988), about a penal colony established in 1923, doesn't stress that the gulag was Lenin's creation. "Glasnost develops one step at a time," she answered. "My film dates from a particular period and it was a step forward for that time." Criticism of Lenin in the USSR was only beginning in September 1988 and intensified in 1989; Goldovskaya began her film in September 1987. While it contrasts propaganda footage about the camp with the moving testimony of eyewitnesses, it speaks rarely, and generally indirectly, about the limits to Lenin's tolerance of dissent.

Film is also at a disadvantage compared to printed material when it comes to distribution. Once an article or book appears in the USSR, it can be passed from hand to hand, and now even Xeroxed. And one can find out about glasnost-era film censorship by reading the Soviet press — that's another step forward at least. Screenings often take place at the mercy of Soviet ministries and local authorities, who tend to be ill-disposed to works which criticize them. Among the documentaries that have been held up are *Confession: A Chronicle of Alienation* as well as films about the effects of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the Afghan war, Chagall, alternative Soviet culture, and the violent dispersal of

joking, but one shouldn't joke about the party." More recently, *Meeting Mr. X* by Arkadi Ruderman and Juri Khashchevatski lost a section in which Evtushenko speaks about an exiled Russian writer. It is possible that the mass medium of cinema is still considered the most important art in the USSR and so subject to tighter control than the written word.

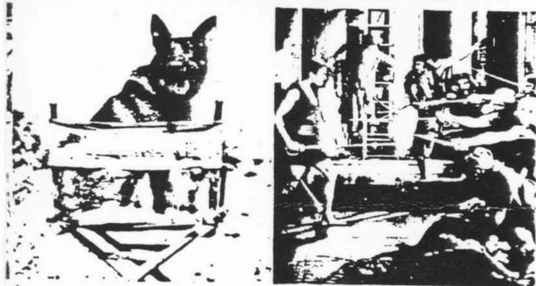
The Black Square — *part of the Glasnost Film Festival*

Yet a younger generation, coming out of the low-budget/semi-amateur "parallel" cinema movement, is challenging the prohibition on jokes about sacred cows. With somewhat adolescent humor they spoof traditional agitational and informational films in many shorts. *Tractors* (1987), by the Aleinikov brothers, is a 12 1/2-minute parody of both Soviet educational films and the boy-girl-tractor triangles of Stalin-era Soviet fiction. "One mocks socialist realism in order to free one's subconscious from it," said Gleb Aleinikov, 24, during a recent visit to Boston. If you were wondering if any Soviets notice how simple-minded yet condescending the earnest male voice-of-authority sounds, the answer is: yes. In *Tractors*, the narration and the image start to wobble, as if unable to bear the propaganda farce any longer.

Fortunately, more Soviet documentaries are dispensing with voice-over commentary and getting away from talking heads. When the Soviet magazine *Ogonyok* established *Ogonyok Video*, a subscription video periodical, they realized that their cassettes might come out two weeks after an event occurred. "There is no point in our competing with television news; we have to do something else, like create an emotional impact through the use of sound — including music — and montage," Valery Yakovlev, the producer of the series, said at the Cleveland Film Conference. Using a magazine format, each cassette offers seven to eight segments, each four to eight minutes long — more than the thirty seconds TV news provides. One segment on the violently repressed Tbilisi demonstrations of Spring 1989, uses slow motion so audiences can remember, mourn, and perhaps imagine what it would have been like to participate in the event.

Perhaps the most sophisticated Soviet maker of poetic and evocative documentaries is Aleksandr Sokurov, born in 1951. Sokurov is adamant in his rejection of informational filmmaking. "No truth can be gotten from film, only emotions. If you want truth, go to the library," he asserted at the Cleveland conference. Sokurov is currently making a series of twenty-five short documentary elegies at the Leningrad Documentary Film Studio. Like many experimental shorts of the West, they concentrate on one idea. *The Evening Sacrifice* (1984-7), examines the human face of a political parade and sees alienation, sadness and aggressiveness rather than solidarity and joy. "What does a person become in a crowd?" he asked rhetorically when I spoke with him. The deformation of people by political conventions is also a concern of his *Soviet Elegy* (1989), in which he offers a slow pictorial roll-call of about 120 leaders from the beginning of the Soviet era to the present. According to Sokurov this is the first time their faces have been shown together in the USSR. (Many portraits became unavailable after people fell into political disrepute.) These impassive, unsmiling, and remarkably similar official portraits contrast with Sokurov's long, intimate cinema verite shots of Boris Yeltsin

MENAL FOOTAGE.



footage you want, on the format you need is just a phone call away.
write for our free brochure and sample reel.

ARCHIVE FILMS
STOCK FOOTAGE LIBRARY
800/876-5115
Dept. IDA, 530 W. 25th St. NY, NY 10001 FAX 212/645-2137

SEEKING A DISTRIBUTOR?

The Cinema Guild is now acquiring distribution rights for all markets and all territories on documentary and narrative films and videotapes.

For further information, or a copy of our new Distribution Services Brochure, contact:

THE CINEMA GUILD
1697 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
Phone (212) 246-5522 Fax (212) 246-5525

PRODUCERS! RESEARCHERS! LIBRARIANS! PROGRAM MAKERS!

5 REASONS FOR USING THE WTN LIBRARY

- THREE GREAT LIBRARIES IN ONE: WTN + U.K. PATHE NEWS + BRITAIN'S ITN NEWS NETWORK
- NINE DECADES OF MOVING PICTURES FROM 1897 TO NOW
- ALL THE WORLD'S GREAT EVENTS OF HISTORY CAPTURED ON FILM OR TAPE
- BACKGROUND AND STOCK FOOTAGE FOR ALL VIDEO PRODUCTIONS
- ACHIEVEMENTS, DISASTERS, LOCATIONS, PERSONALITIES, SPORTS ... AND MORE!

Contact Vince O'Reilly, U.S. Library Manager
Worldwide Television News Corp.
1995 Broadway, New York, NY 10023
Phone (212) 362-4440 Fax (212) 496-1269 Telex 237853

falling asleep on a chair in a kitchen or sitting on a table, skeptically watching Gorbachev on television. Because there is no formal interview with Yeltsin, and because he looks so different from the stiff, withdrawn faces in the line-up of leaders, he becomes a symbol of informality and openness. A simple cinematic idea — and brilliant in its simplicity.

By eschewing commentary, Sokurov demonstrates his trust in the visual literacy of his viewers. The extreme length of his shots give them time to mull over what he's getting at. In a recent issue of *Cahiers du Cinema* devoted to Soviet film, Francois Niney relates Sokurov's long shots to Andy Warhol's. Does he know the work of Michael Snow? "I've never seen North American experimental cinema," Sokurov told me. It is likely that Sokurov assimilated Western avant- garde techniques through Tarkovsky, with whom he is often compared. *Moscow Elegy* (1987), concerns that director and, like Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia*, the documentary *Sonata for Viola, Dmitri Shostakovich* (1981/1987) by Sokurov and Aranovich inserts an image into part of the frame to suggest that the distant past and the near past intermingle. And like Tarkovsky, Sokurov is not afraid to tackle fundamental philosophical questions. Human values, not politics or history, seem to be his main concern. *Sonata for Viola* implicitly asks how people managed to live under Stalin's terror and points to the importance of sympathy and compassion.

Is Stalin With Us ?

Of course, there is a long history of poetic documentary filmmaking in the USSR, but it is not the dominant tradition. Vertov was suppressed under Stalin, though articles on him are now coming out. Esther Shub was often dismissed as a mere film editor. In 1988, the Riga avant-garde film festival had a retrospective of the short documentaries of the Armenian filmmaker Artavazd Peleshian, born in 1938, who employed the techniques of silent non- fiction film, like intertitles, cutting to music, and the montage of archival footage . But there is no question that more needs to be done to fill in the gaps in our knowledge of this poetic tendency in the USSR. ☐

"One mocks socialist realism in order to free one's subconscious from it."

Gleb Aleinkov

Karen Rosenberg often writes on politics and film in regard to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

The author would like to thank Ani Benglian, Marie Cieri, Ron Holloway and Peter Scarlet for their help in the preparation of this article. The following documentaries mentioned above are available on film from the Museum of Art in New York, N.Y. and on tape from The Video Project in Oakland, CA as part of the Glasnost Film Festival of 22 Soviet non-fiction works: The Evening Sacrifice, The Temple, The Wood Goblin, The Trial, Part II, And This Is How We Live. *To rent* Tractors, *contact The Arts Company, 43 Linnaean St., Suite 25, Cambridge, MA, tel. 617/491-1742.*

Call for Entries

National Educational Film & Video Festival

21st ANNUAL COMPETITION

Documentaries
Dramatic Features & Shorts
Animation ■ Classroom Programs
Medical/Health ■ Training/Instructional
Special Interest ■ Made-for-TV
PSA's ■ Film & Video Art
Student-made Docs & Narratives

Deadline: Dec. 1, 1990

Entry Forms:
NEFVF
655 - 13th Street
Oakland, CA 94612
415 465 6885