

THE DEATH OF RUSSIAN CINEMA, OR SOCHI: RUSSIA'S LAST RESORT

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1.

“Malokartine” is a made-up word, the Russian equivalent of “cine-anemia,” a devastating blood disorder in the body of the Russian cinema industry. The figures speak for themselves: in 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, the Russian Republic produced 213 full-length feature films. Since then, the industry has suffered an annual decrease of 25-30%. In 1992, Russia produced 172 films; in 1993, 152 films; by 1994, 68 films; in 1995, 46 films; in 1996, only 20 films, putting Russia behind Sweden and Poland in the “second tier” of European film production. At this rate, the “blood count” by the end of 1997 should be around thirteen feature films.

This dramatic decline is, in part, the inevitable end to the cultural boom of 1986-1990, when *perestroika*'s filmmakers produced up to 300 feature films a year: moralizing exposés, erotic melodramas, and incomprehensible *auteur* films. Once the boom ended, however, the industry could not recover to the stable norm of 150-180 films of the 1970s and early 1980s. Instead, Mosfilm, Moscow's leading film studio, which regularly had had 45-50 film projects in production at any given time, now has at best five to seven films in process. At Lenfilm, St. Petersburg's lead studio, the situation is bleaker: only a handful of films are in production and its studio space, like many movie theaters around town, doubles as a car wash.

Of course, cynics might see a tender irony in this transformation: in the early post-revolutionary years, Soviet commissars had converted Russia's Orthodox churches into makeshift movie theaters, screening (in Lenin's words) “the most important of all the

arts.” Now the “new Russians” are transforming Soviet cinema space into their own “places of worship”: furniture stores, auto showcases, and merchandise warehouses.

With the few functioning movie theaters operating only at 2-8% capacity, information on movie-theater attendance is no cheerier. If in 1986 the average Soviet citizen, not including newborns, went to the movies about 13-14 times a year, by 1995 the rate had dropped to less than once a year, and only once every four years for Muscovites. Given that eight of ten films screened in Russian cinemas are US titles, while only one in ten is a Russian film of *any* decade, it would seem that the average Russian citizen had all but forgotten the grandchildren of Eisenstein, Vertov, Pudovkin, and Dovzhenko. And although television and VCRs are widely blamed for keeping Russian filmgoers home, the available fare there is also largely US imports. About 70% of evening primetime, for example, consists of US films and serials, such as *Santa Barbara*. Of the remaining 30%, only a small percentage of primetime is contemporary Russian film, which loses out even to older Soviet cinema of the despised Stagnation period (1964-1985). As for video, an estimated 222.3 million cassettes, or 73% of the Russian domestic market, consists of pirated copies, an annual six-million-dollar business that puts Russia at the top of the list in illegal video production.

Does the problem lie in Russia’s outmoded industry or the new Russian films themselves? Both, say industry experts such as Daniil Dondurei, film sociologist and editor-in-chief of *Cinema Art*, Russia’s leading cinema journal. Indeed, a cursory look at Russia’s 1996-97 inventory (with only 20 Russian films, this is one week’s work) reveals that the industry produces essentially two films: the nostalgic melodrama and the action thriller, distinguishable from each other largely by their props.

The nostalgic melodrama, such as Aleksandr Proshkin's *Black Veil* or Samson Samsonov's *Dear Friend of Far, Forgotten Years*, features surplus from Nikita Mikhalkov's *Burnt By the Sun* and *Slave of Love*: brass beds and broken statues; bicycles with bent wheels and simpering, homicidal cuckolds; warped gramophones and pitchers with washbasins; pince-nez and steamer trunks; lace curtains, infantile emotional excesses and botched suicides; long-suffering heroines named Masha and ratty wicker furniture; Chekhovian dialogues without transitional passages and out-of-tune guitars; shawls and fountains shut off for the winter; women in white dresses and open diaries left out in sudden downpours; *natures mortes* on the walls and *natures meurantes* on abandoned banquet tables; wildflowers, dripping leaves, crystal decanters, and gloves with the fingers cut off.

The action thriller features flammable corpses and walkie-talkies, but also white jeeps, billiard tables, leather sofas, rifles with telescopic lenses and champagne glasses. In films such as Mikhail Tumanishvili's 1996 *Crusader*, Vladimir Sukhorebry's 1997 *The Raving*, and Victor Sergeev's 1997 *Schizophrenia*, the real men (in Russian, "hard-boiled men") check their guns while their flat-chested women (a sign of upward mobility) sleep in satin nighties. The men, sporting either long ponytails or shaved heads, only let the women drive stickshift once the men get shot. The men choose good wines and climb drainpipes; they ride motorcycles and then take bubble baths. Exhibiting both fine and gross motor skills, they consult filofaxes before parachuting into ravines. They would never use a rotary phone, manual typewriter, record player, or black-and-white television. And they always, always watch American television.

In these action films, the language barrier presents no difficulty, since language itself values sound over meaning, and competes with other “sound-symbols”: car alarms, airplane noise, police sirens. The device of internal monologue seems to have disappeared entirely; apparently in Russia no one talks to himself anymore. The Russian language, no longer contained within recognized boundaries, routinely spills over into Uzbek, French, Ukrainian. Long passages without subtitles provide no meaning beyond the exchange of props: the mobile phone is set down next to the samovar; the hundred-dollar bill is hidden inside a volume of Marx; the bottle of vodka is opened, but not finished; the *borzoi* is the only witness. These details aspire to be the director’s “international currency,” images that can cross national borders where dialogue is detained.

But these films do not cross national borders; they do not even cross the threshold of Russian movie theaters. In a country where an *unsuccessful* film used to draw ticket sales of 15 million, by 1994 no Russian film sold more than 500,000 tickets. Are we witnessing the death of Russian cinema? One answer is provided by Mark Rudinshtein, a businessman described by some industry-watchers as cinema’s most ambitious “resuscitator of the dead.”

2.

To own a solid stone house was considered an admission of cowardice.

--Sochi guidebook on ancient customs.

Rudinshtein will never live in a solid stone house. He shares a small Moscow apartment with his wife and their poodle; he owns no car or dacha, and keeps no foreign

bank accounts. Despite this modest mode of living, he has been repeatedly threatened by the Russian mafia, eager to capture a piece of his earnings. In a country with over 500 contract murders last year, Rudinshtein would do well to heed Russia's leading tabloid, *Speed-Info*, which recently circulated rumors of his impending assassination.

But Rudinshtein is used to living on the edge. Growing up in a tough area of the southern port city of Odessa, he was a teenage member of an inner-city gang and spent time in an adolescent prison colony for a knife fight. As he himself recounts in a raspy voice reminiscent of Brando's Godfather--the legacy of the 200-proof moonshine that burnt out his vocal chords--he left Odessa at age sixteen to live on his own, working in a shipbuilding factory in Nikolaev, a small town near Kiev.

A businessman "by accident and by misfortune," as he has described it, Rudinshtein became involved in show business began long before *perestroika*. During a stint in the army, a friend convinced him to join the amateur military song-and-dance ensemble to escape the boredom of drills. His experiences brought him into contact with future figures of the Soviet stage, such as Aleksandr Lazarev, future lead conductor of the Bolshoi Theater. From there, Rudinshtein was transferred to the Soviet Army Ensemble, where as a professional performer he was freed from active duty. Within the Ensemble structure, he drifted into concert management, producing and directing concerts for officers' wives. It was there that he found his own first wife.

Leaving the army, he enrolled in the directing department of Moscow's Shchukin Institute, where he studied theater production, even playing the role of Lenin. His education at Shchukin was interrupted for reasons all too familiar to those acquainted with the politics of Stagnation, that murky period from Khrushchev's 1964 ouster to

Gorbachev's 1985 election when consorting with the wrong people could have dire consequences.

By the 1970s, when the so-called “third wave” of Soviet emigration was decimating the stages, concert halls, and film studios of every major Soviet city, Rudinshtein's own relatives—including his parents and brothers—had left for Israel and the United States. Rudinshtein, living in Podolsk near Moscow, married and father to a sixteen-year-old daughter, decided to stay.

Given the world of Soviet internal politics, with its funky mix of money, amateur espionage, and criminality, it is hardly surprising that Rudinshtein's bad luck followed him beyond the walls of the Shchukin Institute. Hired at Roskontsert, the state’s theatrical booking agency, he was accused of embezzling major funds. The legal process dragged on for five years, resulting in a six-year prison sentence. Rudinshtein served only eleven months, when a review of the materials resulted in his release. It was not, however, a moment of celebration. By then, Rudinshtein had developed serious heart problems, suffering a heart attack shortly after his release. His wife, unwilling or unable to stand the pressures of the legal process, had left.

When *perestroika* finally provided rudimentary conditions for cultural initiatives, Rudinshtein founded Moscow Outskirts, a company that divided its resources among film production, distribution, and show business. Its early film investment successes, which included a Russian version of *Superman* and Petr Todorovsky’s 1989 smash hit *Intergirl* about a hard-currency prostitute, brought the company an income of 37 million rubles, a considerable sum at that time.

But by the late 1980s, Rudinshtein was battling a countervailing tendency in the film industry: one shadowy Tagi-Zade, a mysterious Azeri millionaire who had allegedly cornered two lucrative markets: movie-theater distribution networks and the carnation business. This improbable combination had made Tagi-Zade fantastically wealthy-- wealthy enough that he was rumored to have reserved an entire hotel at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival, where he appeared in a white cowboy outfit riding a white horse.

Not surprisingly, Tagi-Zade's cinematic tastes ran to the kind of trashy US films that no one lists in film catalogs. Key ingredients invariably included isolated islands sporting active volcanoes, dense jungles, and man-eating amazons with enlarged sexual traits inadequately concealed by animal pelts. With all this foreign competition, as one might anticipate, domestic film production plummeted and distribution companies such as Moscow Outskirts found themselves shut out of the competition, allegedly “fixed” by the complicity of old-style Soviet bureaucrats, enriching themselves in the service of Tagi-Zade. Profits from these American cultural monuments, film experts claimed, were banked in the West, and the film industry in Russia ground to a virtual standstill.

Meanwhile Rudinshtein sought a different outlet for his film interests. His first effort at a film festival was his 1989 “Unbought Cinema,” a festival in Podolsk of interesting films overlooked by Russian film distributors. The success of this event aroused in Rudenshtein the mad dream, devoid of any logic: a “Cannes on the Caucasian Riviera,” a “Hollywood of the Caucasus,” a new post-Soviet film empire. All he needed was a venue. He found Sochi.

All [the foreign travelers] noticed the extraordinary beauty of the local women. Their wasp waists were an object of common worship. Girls wore a tight leather corset, sewn up in childhood. It could be cut off only by the husband on the wedding day.

--Sochi guidebook on ancient customs

Some local Sochi women still favor the tight leather corset, though the custom has changed. It is no longer sewn up in childhood, nor is it precisely the husband who cuts it off. Foreigners and Russian tourists alike continue to appreciate the women of this port city, and their appreciation helps to tide the corseted beauties over in the lean off-season months. But they are not Sochi's only appeal.

Sochi derives its name from an Ubykhi tribe called Sshatche, distantly related to the modern-day Abkhazians. "The Ubukhi language," a local English-language guidebook informs us, "was incomprehensible even to the Ubukhi's neighbors; it was compared with birds' twitter by the Europeans, and with a pile of stones by the Ubukhi themselves." If one turns for clarification of this point to the Russian-language guidebook—birds' twitter? A pile of stones?--, one finds with alarm that nothing is lost in translation. Apparently, it is just another European-Ubukhi cultural snafus. In any event, the Adrianople Treaty of 1829, which ceded the territory to Russia, recognized an already-existing extension of Russian imperial power in the area.

Sochi is located on the Black Sea, the sea of the Argonauts and Ulysses's wanderings. Above it rise the peaks of the Northern Caucasus, where Zeus's eagle picked away for centuries at Prometheus's liver. Breaking his promise to the Gods, Prometheus had brought to humans the one forbidden thing that marks the difference

between humans and Gods, the thing that would ease human suffering, warm their caves, and stop their hunger pangs: fire. And so Prometheus was chained to the rocks on Frisht Peak, the local citizens say, splayed out like a slab of uncooked meat for the eagle's delight as it soared above the Black Sea.

Experts disagree on why the Black Sea is called black, since its color on any given day ranges from silver to dark blue, never approaching black. According to some legends, its name comes from the sulphurated hydrogen that blackens all metal objects dropped to the ocean floor. Then there's the linguistic explanation: known as the Hospitable Sea (*Pontus Euxinus*) to the ancient Greeks, the Black Sea was known as the Inhospitable (hence, "black") Sea (*Karadeniz*) to the Turks. The Greeks, as one might guess from this apparent divergence of opinion, had more successful trade relations with the local population than did the Turks.

Long before the Bolsheviks, wealthy Russians came to the Northern Caucasus to "take the waters" around Sochi and neighboring Matsesta. These "fiery waters"—so named because they turned the skin a flaming red—were filled with high concentrations of chemicals and chemical compounds. In addition to hydrogen sulfide, they contained carbonic acid, iodine, bromide, fluorine, nitrogen, methane, chloride, sodium, potassium, magnesium, rhodon, manganese, bromide, phosphorus, and radium. For centuries, local tribes had sought to cure their bodily ills by digging pits in the earth, leaving them to fill with water, then returning to bathe in the rich chemical soup. Early Russian visitors to the region told of finding candle stubs set at the edge of the caves and bright scraps of cloth tied to nearby tree branches, tokens of gratitude for the curative powers of the caves' waters.

The curative claims focus most intensely on Matsesta, the principal springs in the region and the later site of Sochi's major health center. In addition to curing familiar ills—rheumatic heart disease, high blood pressure, eczema, psoriasis, and various kinds of joint problems—Matsesta's springs cured ills that a late-twentieth-century Westerner can barely decipher: radiculitis, neurasthenia, hysterical and psychastenic neurosis, neurodermititis, and, of course, *endarteritis obliterans*.

A local legend recounts that the Matsesta springs were named for a beautiful maiden, heroine of Caucasian "Beauty and the Beast," but with a grim, Eastern European twist. Grieving for her aged parents who were in failing health, Matsesta appealed to the Earth Spirit, a monster who served as keeper of the fiery waters. The monster agreed to help, but demanded in return Matsesta's undying love. Matsesta did her best; she married the monster and resigned herself to sharing his cave.

It must be said that cave life probably had its own chilly pleasures, for the 400-odd caves around Sochi are limestone, and therefore filled with wondrous, internal configurations. One cave contains a series of limestone bells that give off beautiful notes when struck. Deep inside a neighboring cave is a chamber in the shape of a concert hall, complete with limestone stage, curtain, and chandelier. The nearby Hall of the Georgian Speleologists is the size of an entire football stadium. One cave reaches a depth of eight kilometers, an entire Mount Everest turned upside-down. Some caves have been given beautiful names, like Soaring Bird or System of Friends.

But Matsesta, unlike Belle, could not love her monster-husband. Finally, unable to stand her fate any longer, she murdered him. In revenge, the fiery waters turned on Matsesta, killing her and spewing out her corpse in a bilious gush of bubbling, acid

cavewater. From then on, the place where her corpse was spit forth was called Matsesta in her memory.

As Sochi's major spa, Matsesta was already treating some 19,000 patients a year by 1913. By 1930 their numbers had reached 410,000. Promethianism—the impulse to provide for human comfort that which had been available only to the Gods—had become the Great Idea of the Bolsheviks, whose agenda also included reanimating the dead, engineering the human soul, and, in the words of Stalin-era composer Isaac Dunaevsky, "changing fairytale to reality."

4.

Death by lightening was thought to be sacred, and so young people often ran outside during a thunderstorm in hopes of finding good fortune.

-Sochi guidebook on ancient Black Sea customs.

Changing fairytale to reality--and reality to fairytale—was, as Rudinshtein saw it, the very stuff of cinema. He founded the Sochi Film Festival in 1990; by 1997 he was listed in *Premiere* among the ten most influential figures in Russian cinema today for creating a venue where Russia's leading film producers, directors, actors, and critics can meet informally on the beach and in the bars to strike deals, negotiate contracts, and keep alive a dying industry. Of the dozen post-Soviet festivals that have cropped up ("like mushrooms," as Russians love to say about anything mysterious and fertile), the Sochi Film Festival is one of the few that has managed—if just barely—to keep afloat, highly visible, and highly attractive to government support.

Unlike the older Moscow Film Festival, held only once in two years, Sochi's annual festival emerged in the mid-1990s as a smaller, more flexible event and soon became Moscow's major competition. Today, as the Moscow Film Festival barely survives to celebrate its twentieth festival, Sochi--the southern Black Sea spa that once was Stalin's favorite watering hole--remains literally and figuratively Russia's "last resort."

Rudinshtein's madness had always had its own internal logic. Unlike the older, northern studios—Mosfilm, Lenfilm, Gorkii Film Studio--where short daylight hours, unfavorable weather, and poor climate hamper the number of profitable shooting days, Sochi's balmy subtropics boasts two hundred sunny days a year and nearby exotic shooting locations. It provides an ideal site for the full range of Rudinshtein's ambitions: technologically advanced film studios, a sophisticated distribution network, film festival, even a summer capital for Russia's political and cultural élite. In this last respect, at least, Rudinshtein's instincts have proven absolutely correct: Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov are familiar Sochi guests, who arrive at the Opening Ceremony to read President Boris Yeltsin's congratulatory greetings. The appointment of Vitalii Ignatenko, General Director of ITAR-TASS, to head Sochi's 1997 Organizing Committee, signaled high-level consensus that the festival deserved official favor and--of key importance in the ongoing economic catastrophe that is Russia--tax breaks, along with other forms of governmental support to ensure the festival's survival.

Rudinshtein's characteristic "signature" is a curious anomaly: on the one hand, his ambitions know no bounds. With evident irritation, he unfavorably compares Cannes's Square of the Stars and famous staircase with Sochi's blue-and-white Star Path, leading

up to the Winter Theater, the festival's main screening venue. Of course, Sochi is not even remotely in a position to compete Cannes for many reasons. First, not even Cannes can compare with Cannes. Second, unlike the top-ranked "A" festivals—Venice, Berlin, Montreal, Moscow, and of course Cannes—Sochi is a "B" festival. According to the norms of FIAPF -the international organization certifies film festivals-"B" festivals require competitive screenings with a clearly defined focus. Sochi's focus, enforced only for the International Competition, is "young cinema," a director's first, second, or third full-length film. It awards the Big Pearl (\$20,000) for Best Film and Special Prize (\$10,000), usually for Best Director.

At the same time, Rudinshtein is notoriously skittish about any mainstream standard by which his festival might be measured and found wanting. He is strategically inattentive to the rule-of-thumb whereby successful festivals are measured by their proximity to the US box office. Instead, Sochi is a distinctly "counter-American" festival; US films are routinely screened at Sochi, but the emphasis is on independents, debut, and experimental films that depart from box-office norms.

In addition to the International Competition, Sochi runs a parallel Open Russian Festival; and it is here that a curious paradox prevails. Of the two competitions, the Open Russian is the "low prestige" event, with a selection committee reduced to a single member, film critic and editor Irina Rubanova. Yet the Russian Open is the hotly contested event, for its outcome had become the national barometer of employment opportunities for the year ahead. "Most of the Russian films shot today," one critic wryly remarks, "are shot for Rudinshtein."

Sochi's Russian prizewinners, which in recent years include Sergei Bodrov, Sr.'s 1996 Chechnya war film *Prisoner of the Mountains* and Aleksandr Rogozhkin's 1995 comedy *Peculiarities of National Hunting*, have enjoyed considerable success elsewhere in international festivals and in distribution. This year saw the Russian Open Prize awarded to Aleksei Balabanov's film *Brother*, whose young demobbed, Russian soldier wanders to St. Petersburg in search of his "older, wiser" brother, only to discover that his role model has become a hired killer.

The film's lead, Sergei Bodrov, Jr., is the son of director Sergei Bodrov, and had earlier starred as the Russian soldier Vanya in his father's *Prisoner of the Mountains*. Balabanov's negotiations with Bodrov, Jr. over his future role in *Brother* took place on the beach at Sochi. The cinematic "maturation" of young Bodrov's characters from Russian POW in *Prisoner of the Mountains* to postwar urban thug in *Brother* suggests to many viewers a disturbing "narrative continuity": many of the inner-city criminals, popular opinion believes, learned their skills in Russia's war with Chechnya. The intermingling of Moscow's resident Chechens with the mafia is seen as an internalization of the Chechen conflict into Russia's capital city. This explanation for street violence is more appealing to progressive Russians than the alternative—blaming the West—since Westernization is widely seen as an inescapable process. Furthermore, with the murder rate precipitously climbing, the old Soviet image of the "violent West" becomes increasingly untenable.

The proximity of the Chechnya, Abkhasian, and other regional conflicts to the Sochi Festival was evident not just in the presence of UN jeeps in the area. Festival guests who took a (not-entirely-legal) one-day trip across the border to Abkhasia were

suddenly confronted with the conflict in terms they could understand: Abkhasian Cinematographers' Union, where no one nowadays is shooting anything--either films or guns--stood abandoned, surrounded by empty bullet shells. One war film that drew attention at Sochi, Georgii Khaindrava's new completed *Cemetery of Reveries*, resulted in the death of one crew member in its effort to document the consequences of the Abkhasian conflict.

Khaindrava shared Sochi's Russian Special Prize with Kira Muratova, whose *Three Stories* comes from an entirely different "family" of filmmaking: in a highly stylized depiction of gruesome, almost casual murders, Muratova's eccentric, apparently sociopathic film challenges Russia's long tradition of moralistic art. Khaindrava and Muratova represent two extremes in Russian film today: cinema-as-life and cinema-as-*objet*, each in its own way an antidote to a half-century of Socialist Realism, the official Soviet art form that could tolerate neither deviation. Sochi, despite its small size, manages to accommodate the cinematic range from Khaindrava to Muratova.

Rudinshtein is the matchmaker who brings this talent together. In recent years, his foreign guests have included Michael York, Franco Nero, Gerard Depardieu, Liliana Kovani, Agnieszka Holland, and Annie Girardeau. The Russian guest list is a *Who's Who* of Russian culture: film directors Aleksandr Sokurov, Stanislav Govorukhin, Kira Muratova, Vadim Abdrashitov, and Andrei Konchalovsky; film stars Georgii Batalov, Inna Churikova, and Sergei Makovetsky; writers Viktor Erofeev (author of the erotic novel *Russian Beauty*) and Vladimir Voinovich (*The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*).

Rudinshtein's job as General Producer is to juggle an impossible set of economic circumstances from year to year, each time giving new meaning to the phrase "feast in time of plague." To juggle successfully, he needs to convince the newly wealthy Russians, many of whom had earlier been influential Communist Party officials, that they are gambling on a tradition of grandeur that is simultaneously Russian and Soviet.

5.

Recently a couple of reporters for a Moscow newspaper...bought every ticket for a local Moscow lottery...and didn't buy a single winning number.

-New York Times 8 July 1997.

Lenin's April 1919 decree, "On Curative Localities of National Importance," signed while the Civil War was still raging, recognized Sochi's role in restoring the physical well-being of the new Soviet citizen. The Caucasian Riviera, Sochi's first health hotel, had opened ten years earlier in 1909; the Bolshevik dream was to replace such exclusive playgrounds with a kind of workers' preserve, where Soviet laborers' could enjoy the curative baths previously available only to the rich.

Between 1933 and the start of the Great Patriotic War (1941-45), as it was then called, the rough outlines of Utopia's "southern tier" were carved out. Granite embankments edged the rivers; grandiose bridges linked up the city. The greatest of the Stalin's architects—Ivan Zholtovsky, Aleksei Shchusev, and Viktor Vesnin—as well as Palekh folk artisans, famous for their lacquered boxes, were sent to supervise the city's transformation into a showcase for the socialist paradise. Thirty of the fifty major Sochi sanatoria were built--huge, white palaces, bearing revolutionary names. Some sanatoria

names were straightforward enough: the Lenin, the Pravda, the Metallurg, the Dawn, the Spark, the Aurora. Others were somewhat ominous: the Frunze, named after the People's Commissar who "conveniently" died on the operating table in 1925; the Sergo Orjonikidze, named after Stalin's closest comrade, whose "heart paralysis" in 1937 was widely rumored to have been a forced suicide. These stately sanatoria, like enormous ocean liners, were erected along the coastline, crowned by Green Grove, Stalin's camouflaged summer estate, built between 1934 and 1937 in the mountains above Sochi.

And so, in the late 1930s, as political commissars were being shot in the back of the head, Sochi's health palaces led the modern world in treating disorders of frayed nerves and weak hearts by providing steaming, hydrogen sulphide baths. The Climatological and Physical-Therapy Research Institute provided the most advanced science in the three major medicinal baths: inhalation, gynecological, and four-chamber (read "arms-and-legs") baths. Soviet scientists even solved a problem that had long plagued serious balneologists. Digging deep wells into the rock, they were able to produce waters with a stable chemical composition and temperature, unaffected by rainfall and other changes on the surface of the earth.

By 1964, 3,500,000 people a year were coming to the Matsesta Baths. By the late Soviet period--the 1970s and early 1980s--an entire micro-culture had grown up around the notion of a Sochi vacation. "If I'd known the cards," gamblers would say, "I'd be living in Sochi." Sochi came to represent every citizen's dream that, to every Iron Law of Soviet society, a miraculous exception might be made. In the unending Russian winter, Sochi was balmy and fertile. In a land without fresh fruit, Sochi grew its own. In a virtually landlocked country of flat horizons, Sochi lay surrounded by snowcapped

mountains and was bordered by the Black Sea. In a culture abounding in topographical metaphors for boredom—the frozen tundra, the steppe, Siberia—Sochi was a swanky resort town: frivolous, convivial, and trendy.

During the late socialist years, more trashy songs were written about Sochi than about any city on earth: "My Sochi," "Sochi Waltz," "Holiday Sochi," "Nighttime Sochi," "City of the Sun," "My Love is the Black Sea," "Hi There, Sochi!" Usually sung by jaunty, middle-aged resort employees--Frank Sinatras of socialist descent--the songs employed the unvarying, childlike simplicity so favored by totalitarian cultures and American hotel chains. The sea and the sky were blue; the sun and the dawn were golden; the fields and the palm trees were green; the waves, seagulls, and sanatoria were white. Fixed epithets ensured that the song was good. Nothing was ever liver-colored or puce.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the Soviet composers of these songs faced a daunting task: their lyrics had to be suggestive but not intimate; evocative but not sexual. Their rhythms encouraged a kind of aerobics waltz, sure to arrest menstruation if the vacation extended beyond two weeks. Occasionally, only the full string symphony of a ballroom extravaganza was adequate to orchestrate the emotions throbbing in a musician's breast as he imagined returning to work at the Moscow Union of Composers after a Sochi vacation:

The sea, like the sky, is endless;

Everywhere I go, I am still with you, Sochi!

And my sorrow, yes, my sorrow, it is eternal...

As they say in Russian at this point, “you should drink less.”

These songs—perky, insistent, and hygienic—reverberated for years in Sochi’s restaurants, bars, and cafes. Had the CIA been worthy of its middle initial, it could have broken any Soviet agent merely by exposing them to a 150-watt bulb, no sleep, and a ninety-minute tape of “Hi There, Sochi!” Not surprisingly, these songs adapted well to the conditions of early capital and continued to play over the audio systems and sell on compact disk along the beaches and promenades of Sochi’s shoreline.

6.

Criminals spend 13 minutes in a bank. They take two minutes to tie the bank manager to a chair, three minutes to stash the cash in a sack. How many minutes do they have left to surrender to the police and leave the bank with their hands up?

--Grigorii Oster, *Arithmetic Exercise Book*

By the mid-1990s, however, the new caste of wealthy Russians longed for something different, not only in their songs, but in other areas of their new culture as well. That elusive “something” was an alloy of two precious metals: ostentatious worldliness and nostalgic Russian provincialism. Getting the mix right was the hardest part. In many of Russia’s 1996 films, for example, directors gambled on glamorous screen adaptations of Russian classics. Nikolai Gogol’s *Inspector General* became Sergei Gazarov’s *Inspector General*; Anton Chekhov’s stories became Vladimir Motyl’s *The Horses Are Taking Me Away*; Maksim Gorky’s *Summer Guests* became Sergei Ursupiak’s *Summer People*. This trend was due neither to laziness nor a lack of imagination. It was a calculated risk that, in the popular imagination, the pre-

revolutionary past was indeed that coveted alloy, both worldly and deeply national. Moreover, the grand, imperial style portrayed in these nostalgic films conferred on the newly wealthy a mantle of legitimacy that it sorely needed. Yet the films' long, convoluted plots and lagging pace were, as the commissars used to say, "out of step" with the world of cellular phones. These screen adaptations failed in all but one spectacular instance: Lev Tolstoy's "Prisoner of the Caucasus" became Sergei Bodrov's *Prisoner of the Mountains*.

In a culture allergic to socialism's Happy End, today's viewers are equally skeptical of capitalist Happy Ends, a contrived "result" of hard work, a clear conscience, and a good heart. Instead, directors often portray a character's good luck as simply miraculous, as in Murad Ibragimbekov's wry *Man for a Young Woman* or Vilen Novak's melodramatic *A Princess Who Lives on Beans*. In a culture where full-tort auto insurance is a dashboard icon and a gun, and where film production studios are named Chance and Talisman, happiness is an even more mystical notion than it is in the West.

Ultimately, cinema's showy props and stories of inexplicable luck have to do an anxiety about social mobility, about who will have access to the dream of well-being, and what ethical compromises are required to obtain it. The paradox is that film characters are extremely rich or poor precisely at a time when the Russian middle-class is emerging as a recognizable entity with its own lifestyle and consumer choices.

Perhaps this is why *contemporary*—rather than historical--melodrama has been the most successful genre of recent Russian film. Drawing on a tradition that includes Petr Todorovsky's 1989 *Intergirl*, Vasilii Pichul's 1988 *Little Vera*, contemporary melodrama provides a glimpse into the anguished conflicts of the propertied class, set

against a surplus of consumer goods and interior decoration. However unrealistically, upwardly mobile Russians can picture themselves reflected back on the screen in a welcome change from the “black culture” that Russians call “chernukha.”

Moreover, the politically destabilizing effects of “black culture” have been a source of worry to those both inside and outside the cinema industry, especially during the last elections, when it seemed as if the hardline Communist opposition might indeed emerge as a serious contender for power. As Anatoly Maksimov, producer for film programming at ORT, Russia’s largest television network, recalls of last year’s electoral process:

All national cinema seemed to be agitating for the [Communist] opposition! Soviet films—because of they offered the edenic pleasures of nostalgia, islands of bliss; contemporary films—because everything in them was a monstrous, black haze from which you want to flee. Even if the hero was positive, he was required to be bruised by life. If authority was depicted, then they were ringleaders of gangs. If it was the militia, then utter corruption.

The cautious return to upbeat cinema aimed at a mass audience is of course fraught with complex neo-Stalinist associations, yet it may be Russia’s only road out of the current impasse. It is surely no coincidence that one image repeatedly looms large in contemporary Russian film: Moscow’s newly built Cathedral of Christ the Savior,

majestic and corrupt, Mayor Luzhkov's proof that even the Russian soul can be successfully commodified. Capturing the extremes and the contradictions of contemporary Russian life, the Cathedral is a gaudy glorification of the spiritual, a profane monument to the sacred, a post-Soviet version of its pre-Soviet past. In Eldar Ryazanov's *Hello, Dear Fools!*, Ivan Popov's *The Kitten*, and a handful of other 1997 Russian films, the Cathedral appears as a landmark of hope and redemption, an architectural description of a national identity without shame.

Yet the prospect for Russian cinema in the near future is not entirely without "secular" hope. Several films by major Russian directors, delayed for technical and financial reasons in 1996-97, are now near completion: Vadim Abdrashitov's *Time of the Dancer*, Aleksei German's long-awaited *Khrustalev, Bring the Car!*, Pavel Chukhrai's *Thief*, and Lidia Bobrova's *In That Country*. Industry experts hope, therefore, to see a rise in film production by the end of 1997, though they warn that the number of films is only one piece of the larger puzzle.

Video piracy, though still running at around 40-50% in Moscow, is considerably down from an estimated 99% in 1995-96, when Hollywood blockbusters were available on cassette even before their Hollywood premieres. The 1991 Russian boycott by the seven US major studios, the result of an unauthorized television broadcast of *Die Hard 2*, has ended, though Russian MPA legal advisor Sergei Semenov has acknowledged that, far from hampering Russian piracy, the boycott only further contributed to the upsurge in copyright violation. The formation during this year's Twentieth Moscow Film Festival of a Russian Anti-Piracy Organization lends industry clout to a new January 1997 law punishing copyright violation with a potential five-year prison term. Pending legislation

may repeal the 70% tax on video rental profits, thus providing conditions for legal video rental shops beyond the ten existing ones in all of Russia, according to *Screen*.

At least as significant for the film industry as a whole, however, is a new model of low-budget film production developed by Gorky Film Studios, Russia's oldest studio. With low honoraria, few takes, and a tight shooting schedule, Gorky Studio, run by two gifted young filmmakers, Sergei Livnev (*Hammer and Sickle*, 1994) and Sergei Selianov (*The Time of Sorrow Has Not Yet Come*, 1995), has managed to reduce the average production cost of a Russian film from \$700,000 to around \$200,000. Their recent production triumphs include Natalya Pyankova's 1997 *Strange Time* and Aleksandr Rogozhkin's 1996 comedy *Operation "Happy New Year!"*, as well as rights to Balabanov's *Brother*. In addition to a projected production goal of nearly a film a month, Gorky Studio also is developing a thriving business producing film posters, ads, video clips, and brochures for other film projects not associated with Gorky Studios. It is a desperate effort to keep alive the industry at a time when, in the words of director Valery Todorovsky, cinema is "an art we can't afford," a far cry from Lenin's "most important of all the arts."

In his opening address as General Director of the Twentieth Moscow International Film Festival in July, actor Aleksandr Abdulov answered festival critics who had called for its cancellation. "The people," Abdulov intoned, "need the festival so they can remember what cinema is." In fact, the people do indeed remember what cinema is, but prefer to remember it at home on TV, where the experience is comfortable and free.

To remember cinema in a movie theater, paradoxically, requires that the experience be comfortable and expensive. The recently built Kodak Kinomir and such

renovated theaters as the Pushkin, the Shockworker, and the Artistic now charge six to eight dollars a ticket and are the only cinemas drawing crowds. Resembling a club more than an old-style Soviet movie house, Kodak Kinomir offers a bar that serves snacks and desserts, a boutique selling (legal!) video cassettes and movie memorabilia, and an adjacent branch of T.G.I. Friday's. Although only one Russian film--Balabanov's *Brother*—has been screened at Kinomir since it opened in September 1996, it is nevertheless a venue where young, middle-class Russians can demonstrate that they are fashionable, cultured, and able to afford the price of admission.

For contemporary Russian films to compete successfully at Kodak Kinomir and elsewhere, says sociologist-editor Daniil Dondurei, they must be geared toward the audience, not the director's whim or the government's annual film budget. Dondurei does not underestimate the importance of government support of cinema. With roughly half the cost of his own journal *Cinema Art* covered by the government, Dondurei knows better than to advocate *khozraschet* (self-sufficiency), a chimera of early *perestroika*. But unless films attract audiences, he insists, no amount of government money will be enough:

The film industry must rely on itself, must see the government not as a dairy cow that gives free milk, but as a respected partner, a master who watches his accounts. Of course, the 35 million dollars a year... currently allocated from the government budget is a ridiculous, even shameful amount. It is the cost of a single US film or several Russian tanks, of which dozens tore into Chechnya... [But]if the current Russian economy

is not sensitive to viewers' demands, and does not provide the stimulus for creativity, then we can only rely on the revival of the much maligned system of government demands.

Looking back today on the triumphant purge of the Union of cinematographers in May 1986 at the Fifth Union Congress, a milestone in the cultural liberalizations of *perestroika*, Armen Medvedev, current Chairman of Goskino, the state cinema committee, calls the historic event “not a rebellion, but a ruptured aorta due to having been silenced so long, to the long impossibility of speech, the abrupt change from being stifled to the flood of oxygen.” The flood of oxygen has ended, and the cinema industry is now facing up to the fact that it must learn simply to breathe if it is to survive.

7.

“To avoid an electric shock, you should jump into the trolley bus, putting both of your legs on the floor simultaneously. To descend, you should jump out in the same manner.

-Aleksandr Ulianov, president of Moscow's transportation agency

Ultimately, critics insist, nothing is wrong with the Russian cinema industry that isn't also wrong with the entire country. A half-dozen random factoids on Russia might give a clearer picture:

1. Russia's death rate exceeds its birth rate by 70%.
2. Of the sixteen-year-old boys alive today, barely half will live to age sixty. Their odds of reaching sixty were better a century ago than they are today.

3. The color of Moscow's drinking water on any given day alternates between gray and brown; its taste alternates between bleach and fecal.
4. The Russian government spends only 2.2% of its gross domestic product on health care; even then, most of the allocated monies do not materialize.
5. Police protection is a luxury few can afford to buy, especially in the provinces where wages in many professions, including the police, have not been paid for over a year.
6. The Republic of Russia has fewer lawyers than Los Angeles County.

Unlike the ills enumerated above, however, the ruined cinema industry, or any other part of Russia's cultural life, requires a stimulation of the national imagination as well as the national economy.

Perhaps a lesson can be learned from the only other prolonged period of "cine-anemia," when from 1948 to 1952 the Soviet Union produced as few as nine films a year. The death of Stalin in 1953 and the exciting new license afforded artists during the Khrushchev Thaw encouraged a devastating critique of Stalin that became even more vocal during Gorbachev's "second Thaw" of the perestroika period. Today in Stalin's Green Grove dacha above Sochi, tourists pay the equivalent of a few dollars to get their pictures snapped next to Stalin's wax figure. For the time being, this may be the only film that draws a profit in the former USSR.

Russian filmmakers have a superstition, the origins of which no one recalls. At the very beginning of a film project, the director smashes a china dinner plate and gives one shard to each crew member. As so often happens in the inverse world of Russian

superstition, the film will successfully be assembled provided the crew each keeps a shard of the broken plate. The Russian film industry will not as easily be assembled after the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991. All the pieces are present—the empty theaters, the unemployed directors, even (now, finally) the middle-class audiences with money to spend. What is lacking is something more ephemeral: Russian fascination with its own national culture, a desire to see their own Russia up on the screen. Until that desire returns, no amount of money or film stock will suffice.

Nancy Condee

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Whatever Rudinshtein's shortcomings, he cannot be outdone in the matter of theatrics. Each festival is "launched" in Moscow by a floating reception on a boat that sails along the Moscow River bearing selected stars, journalists, and political figures. The festival juries are flown by helicopter to an isolated spot high above Sochi, not far from Prometheus's agonies, so that their deliberations can proceed undisturbed. Both the opening and the closing ceremonies, with their elaborate parade of the stars, awards ceremonies, and concerts, are extensively broadcast on Russian television. And then, of course, there are the fireworks.

Sochi's fireworks revive a Russian imperial tradition, dating back to long before even Peter the Great: the engagement of Western expertise in the service of extensive Russian wealth. Frederick Milton Olsen III, "America's Fireworks Ambassador to Russia," had been living in Moscow since the early 1990s and would have arrived much earlier, had not the Cold War so ruthlessly hampered the natural development of Russian-American fireworks cooperation.

The tradition of "recreational explosives," as the pyros call them, had practically died out in the Soviet Union. Although major Soviet holidays were still marked by fireworks, the displays had become automated, mechanical events with a narrow range of colors—mostly red and white--and set configurations. By the standards of Western experts, the art had become as stagnant as every other aspect of Soviet society. Having inherited the Italian tradition from Western "fireworkers" during the time of Peter the Great, Russian experts after the revolution became incorporated into military facilities. The Italian tradition had been all but wiped out in World War Two, as the grand masters of Russian fireworks were pressed into the war effort, forced to build too many missiles

too quickly out of shoddy and unstable materials. The US-Soviet arms race prolonged this servitude, as the Soviet military strained to outstrip the United States in the production of “non-recreational explosives.” By the Stagnation period, fireworks had turned to a kind of bastardized Oriental tradition that emphasized few special effects or noises. Moreover, it was exclusively a military operation, governed by official, secret book of approved designs and materials, which did not include even such basic materials as charcoal-used as a prime or “first fire”-and chlorine donors that enhance color. Sparklers were used instead of flares for lighting fuses; military land mines were converted to aerial shell casings.

Meanwhile, in the US, the event that prompted a change in Fred Olsen's lifestyle was a 1988 article in the trade magazine of the Pyrotechnics Guild International (PGI), revealing troubling demographics: despite the guild's claim, the PGI included less than ten foreign members. Fred Olsen, a former torch juggler, rose to the challenge, selecting the Soviet Union as new terrain upon which he would embark to make the Pyrotechnics Guild as international as its name.

Besides juggling torches, Fred had worked with guided missiles in the navy, so his transformation from naval-technician to pyro-technician was itself a kind of personal witnessing of the post-Soviet peacetime conversion program. Fred had followed the same trajectory as most other pyros: snake pills and sparklers as child; more serious amateur explosives as a young adult; then black-market display-size explosives bought from an illegal vender in an unmarked trailer; and, with age, the gnawing urge to go legal. He had been taught to make fireworks in the Italian tradition by Jim Freeman, four-time Grand Master and President of PGI. Now, as a member of the newly formed

US-Soviet Conversion to Peace Program, he set off for Moscow, in his words, “to turn death bombs into beauty bombs.”

Arriving in Russia late 1992 to view the New Year’s displays, Fred discovered that, once again, international politics had preempted Moscow’s fireworks: Nixon was in town. Peace was too fragile to risk shooting off explosives. By 1993 Russia had an entirely different problem: it was shooting off explosives at its own parliament, shelling the Russian “White House,” as conservatives battled Yeltsin for control of Russia’s future. Despite these odds, Russian pyrotechnicians were able to organize the first Russian Fireworks Competition, aptly named Prometheus ’93, in Moscow’s Gorky Park. Olsen was invited to establish the competition categories and serve as judge.

By 1995, Olsen had seen his dream realized. Fireworks were becoming rapidly demilitarized (as was the military itself); his skills were in demand for workshops and seminars to re-teach Russia the Italian tradition; and then there was the US Chamber of Commerce in Moscow, eager to celebrate the fourth of July and anticipating the 210th anniversary in 1996. But Olsen had already focussed on other problems. There was a great need for a pyrotechnical dictionary: “*kometa*” did not mean “comet”; “*saliut*” did not mean “salute”...

A particular gripping insight into Russia can be gleaned from the following “modern” math problem in a school textbook:

While the math example is certainly up-to-date, relevant, and whatever else a school book should be, its narrative is a tad anxiety-provoking as it walks the children through the mechanics of unsuccessful bank robbing.

Moscow International Film Festival

The 19th Moscow International Film Festival was held in mid-July. The festival was under the gun to produce a more polished, better organized event than the eighteenth, held in 1993 and described by Sergei Soloviev, filmmaker and then Secretary of the Union, as "paralyzed with shame," a Russian mode familiar to many who study that culture.

One of the most hotly debated topics was the focus of the festival. Given that its date coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of World War Two (1941-45). Critic Vladimir Dmitriev and others suggested that the festival be dedicated to commemorating that event, and consist largely of retrospective films. Organizers thankfully realized that this would be the sure kiss of death for a genre that thrives on novelty, superficiality, and exotica. A counter-proposal by Minister for Cinema Armen Medvedev was to reorient the festival so as to have a greater emphasis on the new Russian cinema.

The 1993 18th International Moscow Film Festival, first held in 1959 in the heady days of the Thaw, when it seemed as though things would continue, if by fits and starts, to loosen up. It was two years after [?] the Youth Festival and the horizons of socialism, promising an easy coexistence of high and low culture, youth and classical tastes, could more comfortably coexist, or at least coexist in an analogous fashion than in the West.

The most exciting festival was 1987, which had a great many major stars inc. **[newspaper article in We/my]**. Business contacts have been so fragile that the Moscow Festival is also endangered by that fragility. Series of films with Marilyn Monroe. One theme of the festival was a familiar one that could describe every year since 1991, or really from before the collapse of the Soviet Union, since the end of perestroika had been announced as early as **[1989]**: "Post-Soviet Cinema: The Test of Crisis." Another series, "Unknown Soviet Cinema, 1941-45," and "The Generation of the 1990s," which included author films such as **[first name, last name]**'s *Children of Iron Gods* and Sergei Ovcharov's prizewinning (Sochi). One of the few ways that Russian films will find a venue with an European audience. *Barabaniada*, of which these two represented Russia in the main competition at Sochi.

films were shown, including a panorama that Rudinshtein calls a "cinema of hope...a bit of fairytale and benevolent dreams." [Sochi] In honor of cinema's centenary, the festival opened with a dedication of a mock monument to the Lumiere Brothers on the square in front of the Winter Theatre, Sochi's main theater. Among his plans are the imprinting of handprints of the festival's winners on a special plaque in front of the Winter Theater.

Films

Thirty-four films were shown [check]. Rudinshtein and Yankovsky held the right to a "presidential quota," the choice of two films to be entered in the [?] competition. Their choices were Alla Surikova's *Moscow Holidays* and Evgenii Matveev's *Love à la russe*, choices that signal a return to a gentler, more sentimental cinema than the "black" cinema of the past few years.

Russia currently has somewhere close to fifteen film festivals in the course of a year, of which few deserve major attention: Moscow—the only A festival—, St. Petersburg, the Constellation [Sozvezdie] Festival for actors, and Cine-Shock, held each year in Anapa.

Funding for Sochi was initially provided by Rudinshtein himself. Recent international sponsors have included Bacardi-Martin, Kodak, Samsung, Sony, Antonini Jewelry, and Nescafe. Russian money has come from a variety of sources among the newly wealthy: Vnukovo Airlines, Narodny and Vneshtorg Banks, Ekaterinburg's influential Esther Financial Group, and the new Russian oil barons.

The State Publishing Committee reports that the 350 million copies to be issued this year represents 22% of the *perestroika* boom in 1990 production. Book production is on a par with 1940, ironic because the other time of “malokartine” in cinema was in the same decade, 1950-54, when only two to four full-length feature films were produced a year. A bestseller is 30,000 as opposed to several million during the late Soviet period.

Vyacheslav Krishtofovich's 1997 melodrama *Friend of the Deceased*, Pavel Lungin's 1996 parodic thriller *Life Line*, Valerii Chikov's 1997 “sentimental parody” *Don't Play the Fool...*

Sergei Solovev leaves his post at the head of the Union of Cinematographers in November 1997.

Wax figure of Stalin: photo taken for a small fee. Broken plate at beginning of film project. Marx: we have to go apart before coming together. Marx the filmmaker.