Buttons, Buttons, Who's Got the Workers? A Note on the (Missing) Working Class in Late- and Post-Soviet Russian Cinema

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Abstract

"Farewell to the Working Class?" was the title of a scholarly controversy in a recent issue of *ILWCH*. The title could also serve to introduce an aspect of modern Russian cinema, in both its Soviet and post-Soviet forms—the disappearance of the working class and working-class heroes from their once prominent place on Soviet screens. This is an impression gleaned from a sampling of recent films, probably the best, most important ones by any measure, and not from an exhaustive survey based on a statistical and content analysis of the whole Russian film corpus turned out over the last two decades. (Soviet film production was substantial during the first part of that period, peaking at over three hundred titles in 1991, but has since plummeted to double digits in the post-Soviet years.) Would such a survey confirm or disprove the impression? This "Note," a preliminary probe, stresses the disappearing act and offers some possible explanations. When workers reappear, they are far from heroic. In some sense, Russian cinema has been a parallel universe to the course of Soviet life and society, from beginning to end, and after.

A strange thing happened when I took up the subject of workers in recent Russian cinema. I couldn't find them. Or, if I found them, their representation was not especially positive. What happened to the workers in the films of the workers' state, or the once workers' state? What happened to those heroic figures—faces shining, the future in their eyes, spotlighted in mass array or individualized—that we all know from the classics of old Soviet cinema, from the great silent films of Sergei Eisenstein (*Strike*) and Vsevolod Pudovkin, (*The End of St. Petersburg* and *Mother*) to the Grigori Alexandrov musicals of the 1930s (*Volga, Volga* and *The Shining Path*, sometimes known as *Tanya*), with much in between and later? There were times when the worker-hero theme was overshadowed by or coexisted with other state-mandated genres. Patriotic-historical subjects gained prominence in the late 1930s with the gathering of European war clouds (*Alexander Nevsky*, *Peter I*, *Minin and Pozharsky*) and later (most notably, *Ivan the Terrible*, but also *Suvorov* and *Kutuzov*). The Great Patriotic War (as World War Two is known) also generated at the time memorable battlefield films like *Zoya* and *The Rainbow*. The figure of Josef Stalin himself monopolized all heroism, leaving little room for others in the sparse film output after the war (*The Fall of Berlin*, *The Unforgettable Year 1919*, *The Battle of Stalingrad*).

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 59, Spring 2001, pp. 52–59

Ordinary folk, not necessarily workers, were the heroes of films from the de-Stalinizing period of "The Thaw," which also saw the revival of the war genre in rather different, more human form in such films as *The Cranes Are Flying* and *Ballad of a Soldier*. Ideologically correct directors like Alexander Zarkhi could still evoke the "beauty of the workers' world" in his *Heights* (1957), but such films are not the ones we remember.[1]

None of the great directors and their great films of the 1960s through the mid-1980s, the truly Golden Age of Soviet cinema—Andrei Tarkovsky, Andrei Konchalovsky, Nikita Mikhalkov, Alexei Guerman, Gleb Panfilov, Sergei Paradzhanov, Georgi Shengelaya—were particularly concerned with worker themes and characters as such, and certainly not disposed to treat the problem of workers as a class in the manner of contemporary British, Italian, and French cinema, or even of Hollywood, for that matter. (Compare *Matewan*, *Hoffa*, *Norma Rae*, and the independent documentaries *Harlan County USA* and *Roger and Me*, to name only a few of many US productions on worker themes.) Of course, these "class conscious" films of the class struggle are set in the capitalist West, but I can think of no Soviet film that broaches worker themes on the level of, say, Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* from Poland, or Pal Gabor's *Angi Vera* from Hungary, films that raise the problems and contradictions of workers in purportedly socialist societies with dramatic eloquence.

Andrei Tarkovsky's student film, *The Steamroller and the Violin* (1960), has a worker-driver as a main character, but the director's purposes here are lyrical and humane, foreshadowing his later work with decidedly nonworker themes. Andrei Konchalovsky's epic *Siberiade* (1979) concludes with an oil-field adventure centering on some roustabouts (one of them played brilliantly by his brother Nikita Mikhalkov), but the film is devoted primarily to the ideas of respect for nature's beauty and the preservation of old Russian culture. Significantly, a tractor, once the proud symbol of Soviet agricultural and industrial modernization, here knocks down a beautifully crafted ancient villiage gate. In Elem Klimov's sivilarly themed *Farewell* (1982), based on the angry novella by Valentin Rasputin about the drowning of an old Siberian island-village in the name of progress—a hydroelectric station—a bulldozer unsuccessfully rams a wonderfully grand and ageless tree marked for razing. Gleb Panfilov did offer another version of Maxim Gorky's *Mother* (as had Mark Donskoy earlier), but, interestingly, he chose another Gorky novel for a fine but little known film, *Vassa* (1983), a melodrama set among the prerevolutionary Russian bourgeoisie (*kupechestvo*). His most recent effort is a saga of the last Romanovs, just as Elem Klimov's shelved *Agoniya* (1975, released in 1985, known abroad as *Rasputin*) pictured Nicholas and Alexandra in a sympathetic, tragic light—a common evaluation among Russians today, offsetting old official Soviet views ("Nicholas the Bloody"). Alexei Guerman's masterpiece, *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (1983, released 1985) has a provincial policeman as its likable, pathetic hero, while his last film, the nightmarish, phantasmagorical *Khrustalyov, My Car!*, throws a blinding light on the last days of Stalin, as experienced by a highly placed surgeon. Nikita Mikhalkov's recent work includes the Oscar-winning *Burnt by the Sun*, an evo-

cation of the Great Terror of the 1930s in a Chekhovian-cum-Soviet setting as it affected a Russian Civil War hero of plebeian origins and his gentry family by marriage. A comical, luckless truck driver shows up repeatedly in the film, literally riding around in circles only to be liquidated by an NKVD bullet. The same director's lavish *Barber of Siberia*—the most expensive Russian film ever, and as yet unreleased in the United States—is a paean to Imperial Russia in the time of Alexander III (played with—unintended?—comic flair by Mikhalkov himself).

Village themes, folkloric epics, screen renditions of Russian classics, and diverse portraits of contemporary or historical figures (or of the spiritual and the self: Tarkovsky), or the undefinable, deeply personal visions of Alexander Sokurov and Kira Muratova characterize the work of the great directors as well as the work of many lesser ones. But there are no major worker themes, nor a solid, identifiable working-class genre. One thinks of Sherlock Holmes and his sagacious observation that what was significant about the dog is that it did not bark; in late Soviet film, what is striking about Soviet workers is their absence—as workers, members of a real class with real, acute problems under Soviet socialism.

Sometimes, when we see a worker on the screen, the picture is not altogether flattering, particularly when we enter the *glasnost* period of late Soviet times. Earlier, to take a couple of examples from notable films, what do we learn about the Soviet worker—once the hero, now the fall guy? In Vladimir Menshov's very popular *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1980, another Oscar-winner), one of the three provincial women who come to Moscow to better their lives settles for a modest happiness by marrying a fellow construction worker, a reliable, good-natured, and friendly sort. The couple bears several children and tend to the vegetable and fruit patch of the husband's parents' small *dacha*: This is a quiet Soviet life over a period of twenty years, roughly the late 1950s to the late 1970s; there is nothing either negative or heroic here.

The real heroine of *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* is upwardly mobile and transcends her working-class life. Katya works in a metals plant; a funny scene there parodies the canned Soviet TV profile of a model worker, but she speaks out on camera about low wages for fitters. Despite an unsatisfactory affair that left her an unmarried mother, she studies hard at a chemistry institute and moves up an enterprise ladder to a directorship, which brings with it those Soviet luxuries (wow!), a car and a nice apartment, very different from the workers' dorm she lived in when she first came to Moscow. What's more, the man of her dreams is a special kind of worker, no ordinary worker for her; the unorthodox Gosha, a laboratory mechanic beloved by the scientists he works for, affects a gruff working-class style, but can cite Diocletian. He may don an apron to fix dinner—greeted with jaw-dropping amazement in the Soviet household—but he also insists on traditional, male-dominant values to govern his relationship with Katya. He is mortified to learn that she is an executive and earns more than he does, becoming so upset that it prompts a drinking binge. Executive or not, the seemingly liberated Katya accepts Gosha's rules of the game in order to keep him.

Alcohol figures in—and ruins—the marriage of the third girlfriend in the film. The high-spirited Ludmila, who has her eyes set on anyone of high social

standing, be he an officer or a professor, succeeds in a glamorous enough catch—he is working-class in origin, but he is a famous hockey star. Sadly, he descends into alcoholism, presented here as a consequence of his fame, but also one of the unfortunate enduring features of Soviet (and post-Soviet) working-class mores. All in all, *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* offers a generally appealing view of Soviet urban life in the Leonid Brezhnev years, complete with a happy ending for the central couple, Katya and Gosha. However, the darker side is also revealed, and in the course of the narrative one is left with the impression, so different from earlier Soviet idealizations, that the working-class life is something to escape from.

The milieux of Georgy Danelia's lesser known but superior film, *Autumn Marathon* (1980), are different from Menshov's. The story takes place in Leningrad, and its main character is the harried and hapless Buzykin, a translator and university lecturer who is carrying on, with very painful contortions, an extramarital affair with a younger woman who works as a typist (the office worker as home wrecker?). Two vignettes bring us face-to-face with workers outside of the intelligentsia orbit: one, a brief episode on a thoroughfare Buzykin is crossing, the other, in his apartment. In the first, Buzykin is almost run down by a van, whose boorish driver blames him for the mishap and even accuses him of denting his vehicle. In the other, a working-class neighbor, played with pungent comic brilliance by the late Evgeny Leonov, barges in on Buzykin and a colleague at work at home, and insists on fueling the encounter with toasts of vodka. He then persuades them to go mushroom picking, an expedition that ends with Buzykin's trusting colleague, a foreign scholar hungry for the Russian experience, winding up in an overnight lock-up for intoxication. The office-worker girlfriend aside, does *Autumn Marathon* present emblematic miniatures—through the eyes of the intelligentsia to be sure—of the Soviet worker as either surly lout or amusing goof-off?

Of course, the intelligentsia are the filmmakers, and whether we perceive them as artists who are conscious or unconscious conveyers of societal moods, or as a caste with their own independent point of view and prejudices, their resulting work certainly doesn't idealize the worker—fair enough—but neither does it take up his cause. As a state enterprise, Soviet cinema would hardly be permitted to produce film polemics about worker exploitation in the Soviet Union, or polemics about the real meaning of the so-called social contract, best expressed in the folk formula, "We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us." But instead of a little sympathy, within permissible boundaries, filmmakers extended to workers an indifference at best, or an attitude toward them as the "dark people" of a modernized Russia, replacing the peasantry of the old society in that role.[2]

The coarse realities of Soviet life, belying the ever-growing triumphalist official rhetoric, constituted one of the main preoccupations of *glasnost* cinema in the Mikhail Gorbachev years and after the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.[3] These "*chernukha*" films (daily life painted in black), as the genre was dubbed, was a mark of emancipation from state-regulated norms that always insisted on

positive portraits of "Soviet reality." (Certain foreign films were often banned because they showed ordinary workers in capitalist societies abroad living in what were, by Soviet standards, enviable material conditions.) Vasily Pichul's *Little Vera*, the most popular film of the epoch—and not because of its explicit sex scene, a first for Soviet cinema—is perhaps the best example of this neorealist genre. But rather than sympathize with the working class and call attention to the victimization of the class in the class-ridden, exploitative, elitist, and authoritarian ensemble of political and economic institutions that structured Soviet society, this film, like many others, positions workers as part of the general Soviet problem, a degraded social order without culture, without soul, whose most prominent outward features are alcohol and violence.

At the center of *Little Vera* is a dysfunctional working-class family in the grimy southern port city of Mariupol (once called Zhdanov) and its disconsolate eponymous heroine. Alienated from her family, drifting into promiscuous sex, accustomed to watching the working-class guys brawling at gatherings of the young, without clear career directions, Vera is a stand-in for the Soviet provincial teens living out harsh, barren, dead-end lives. Significantly, the young man she casually marries is from a professional intelligentsia family (or so he implies, perhaps as a put-on), and bears nothing but contempt for Vera's working-class household. He and her hard-drinking father (a truck-driver) fail to hit it off from the start, and their relationship ends with violence: In humiliated rage, Vera's father drives a kitchen knife into his son-in-law, nearly killing him. Vera's response to all the misfortune is attempted suicide. This is not a very pretty picture, but it is a true one, not just metaphoric, according to the many people I asked about it when I traveled in the Soviet Union in 1988–1989. (A young Communist Party official in Yaroslavl exclaimed to me: "110 percent true!")

If Pichul is brutally frank in his portrait, and not particularly sympathetic to his working-class characters—they are simply part of the bleak Soviet scenery—an extraordinary post-Soviet film by Sergei Livnev, *Hammer and Sickle*, offers more insight into the nature of rulers and ruled in Soviet life. The setting is historical (Moscow in the late 1930s) and the director's general aim is to lampoon Soviet political culture, and much else, the working class included. The subject is Stalinism, manifested through some unusual goings-on revolving around a sex-change operation ordered by the tyrant—Evdokia becomes Evdokim. Stalin and his Beria-like sidekick reverse their support of the experiment, and leave Evdokim to fend for himself in a Moscow where the metro is being built, soon to be one of the proud, gleaming products of Soviet industrialization during the Five-Year Plans. Reconciling *herself* to his new *himself*, Evdokim works hard as a Stakhanovite groundhog, attends evening classes, and is celebrated as a worker-hero among whose prizes are a peasant-hero wife (a tractor driver, naturally) and—the ultimate Soviet reward—a handsome roadster, a convertible no less. He and his wife even become the real-life models for Mukhina's famous monumental steel couple, the collective-farm peasant and the worker, their arms holding aloft the sickle and the hammer. (The world-famous statue is also the logo of Mosfilm Studio: a sly dig by the director?)

This worker-saga is recounted by Livnev in a brilliant, mimetically accurate parody of the Soviet documentary in all its kitschy, hortatory, and mendacious glory. But the totalitarian state, and Stalin himself, have claims on Evdokim, and permit him no real private life, and certainly not one deviating from the Party-State agenda scripted for him. Stalin denies Evdokim's assertion to be himself, a man of free will, and refuses his request to leave his official post and leave his loveless marriage. In a violent confrontation with the tyrant, Evdokim is shot and paralyzed, suffering even further frustration as a now speechless, bedridden propaganda icon of a new type shown off to foreign communist and fellow-travelling dignitaries. Livnev's knowing, dark satire is a magnificent, idiosyncratic portrait of the real power relationships between workers and the state in the Soviet workers' state. And in Livnev's bureaucratically "deformed workers' state," to use Trotskyist analytic lingo, where workers are privileged, especially in the sphere of material consumption, so long as they abide by the rules of the system, there is actually a worker rebellion (the Trotskyist will-o-the-wisp) in Evdokim's symbolic assertion of manhood, futile, of course.[4]

Ultimately, the system was overthrown not by the exploited workers, but by a section of the ruling elite who embarked on a reform program that led—can one say, *inevitably*?—to the implosion of the system. I know of no Russian films, documentaries or features, that take up these issues within this framework. The *glasnost* and post-*glasnost* fiction films, i.e., late and post-Soviet cinema, portray workers according to *chernukha* norms, or in the fantasy genre. Filmmakers had abided by official ideology in different ways, according to the epoch, in their treatment of workers on screen. The pre-Stalinist classic silent films were made when the embers of revolutionary fervor were still warm, not long after Great October; we see the worker as revolutionary. Later, Stalinist film necessarily idealized the worker, builder of socialism, in Soviet society. In the considerably more relaxed ideological atmosphere of post-Stalinism through the Brezhnevian era (the period later self-servingly characterized as "*zastoi*," or stagnation), the studios and their leading filmmakers no longer went in for idealization, but still could not tell it as it is, and more or less ignored workers or worker themes.

When the censorious chains were finally broken, the resulting film portraits of the worker's personality and working-class life in contemporary Russia or in the Soviet past were colored in very dark (because very real) hues. Some of the better known films in this vein came from the directors Pavel Lungin, Yuri Mamin, and Valery Ogorodnikov. Ogorodnikov's powerful *Barak* (the basic one-story wooden structure housing workers in communal conditions) is set in postwar Central Asia, where exiles mingle with ordinary workers.[5] There are some light moments in the episodic film, but crime and violence seem to be the depressing norm. Ogorodnikov's 1999 film recalls another, earlier work set in a *barak*, this time in the Soviet Far East in a labor-camp zone that included Japanese prisoners of war—Vitaly Kanevsky's gut-wrenching *Freeze, Die, Come to Life* (1989). Yuri Mamin's burlesque, *Sideburns* (1990), pokes fun at political reactionaries who seek to revive a style of life modeled on Alexander Pushkin's time; naturally, they recruit working-class skinheads to their cause.

Working-class skinheads—violence-prone, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic—populate Pavel Lungin's *Luna Park* (1992), his follow-up film to his successful *Taxi Blues* (1990). The latter was something of a hit in the West as well, not simply, I think, because of its sex and violence, but from Lungin's layered portrait of a Soviet working-class character, the taxi driver figuring in the title, a strong presence whose alternately brutal and sensitive disposition both attracts and repels his accidental buddy, a Jewish jazz musician—the feelings are mutual. Lungin describes his last film, *The Wedding* (of a coal miner), a Golden Palm entry at Cannes, 2000, as somehow "joyous," and disavows any "coded social or political message," but, once again, the dreary environment of a small town not far from Moscow is marked by crime, alcoholism, police corruption, and out of wedlock births. We are in the post-Soviet time of free markets and new class structures and disparities here, but the tableau might just as well represent provincial working-class life before 1991. Such is the portrait offered by Tomasz Tot in his *Children of the Iron Gods* (1993), set in Soviet times at a big metallurgical plant in the Urals (Magnitogorsk?). Tot mixes the inevitable brawls and boozing with some high adventures on the steppe, but, sadly, all roads lead up blind alleys.

Afterword

Yes, Soviet socialism led workers up a blind alley, not onto the promised Shining Path. At first, and for a long time, Soviet filmmakers did their best to bend their art to revolutionary goals, to build socialism, advance industrialization, hail collectivization, and bless the existing sociopolitical order, its leaders not least. Workers had starring roles in such cinema. When ideological vigilance weakened, or ideology failed altogether, workers fell off the stage. Directors lost interest in them, or even showed them up with a veiled contempt. The best of them turned to the high-minded themes that normally inhabited the mental world of the Russian intelligentsia, where mere issues of working-class life had little place. The old elitism dividing *us*, the intelligentsia, from *them*, the dark people below, reasserted itself in a new way. But there was always another side to that elitism, a kind of *intelligence oblige*—many intellectuals, filmmakers among them, needed to be engaged and speak for the voiceless. The *glasnost* and post-*glasnost* cinema of exposure did just that. On screens playing to millions, such cinema showed what working-class life was really like, then and now. It also made for better films.[6]

Did Russian audiences, workers among them, appreciate that? A middle-aged woman selling tickets at a theater in Stavropol, where *Little Vera* was playing in 1988, told me she thought the film was "disgusting." The following year a Leningrad taxi cab driver opined, "Who needs such films? We have enough of that garbage in real life!" Perhaps, as with film audiences everywhere, the masses want the Hollywood dream factory, not the Magnitogorsk steel-works. A mirror to working-class life is not necessarily what the working class wants to see. Russian viewer surveys and opinion polls seem to suggest the truth of this seeming paradox. When the formerly state-subsidized Russian film industry nearly collapsed after 1991 and the new free market conditions for film distribution

beckoned films from abroad, Russians, when they went to the movies at all, showed a preference for Western, and especially American, films. This was a natural, understandable reaction to decades of state-mandated restrictions on foreign imports. At the risk of sounding like some culture commissar myself, I would hope Russian filmmakers turn to serious consideration of working-class life, not for the cheap thrills of *chernukha*, but for analysis and enlightenment. Is that asking for too much of a medium that has always valued entertainment over sociology? But where else can we pose that ideal if not in Russia, where the social purposes of art have always been enshrined?

NOTES

1. Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and The Thaw* (London, 2000), 67–70.

2. Dmitry Shlapentokh expresses this point another way: "While the Soviet regime maintained the notion that it represented the masses, in its providing film producers with a sense of economic freedom from market forces, it was actually providing them with an independence from the masses. This helped instill in Soviet intellectuals, including film producers, a sense of elitism, which in many ways was responsible for the creation of movies (e.g., Tarkovskii's) that became real masterpieces." Dmitry Shlapentokh, "Soviet Union/Russia," in *The International Movie Industry*, ed. Gorham Kindem (Carbondale, IL, 2000), 183–84.

3. The best examination of *glasnost* cinema is Anna Lawton, *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (Cambridge, 1992).

4. Unfortunately, Livnev's *Hammer and Sickle* has never been released in the United States.

5. Boris Yeltsin spent his boyhood in these *baraks*. His biographer offers this description: "The most common variety of communal lodgings in urban Russia at the time, *baraks* were a veritable institution that shaped two generations of Russians. As much a fixture of 'socialist industrialization' as the gulag, these structures became an indelible part of Soviet popular culture. Like hundreds of thousands of other *baraks* throughout Russia, Yeltsin's consisted of a long corridor, into which opened twenty rooms—one per family. Behind the *barak* were a wooden privy and the well from which the tenants drew water." In one of the *baraks* four Yeltsins and a she-goat "slept together on the floor, pressed close to one another." Leon Aron, *Yeltsin: A Revolutionary Life* (New York, 2000), 6.

6. Soviet and post-Soviet documentaries are another subject, and deserve separate attention, but the generalizations offered above about feature film patterns serve as well for the documentaries. *Glasnost* documentaries, for example, opened up a whole range of previously taboo themes—the poverty of village life; prostitution; drug addiction; pollution of land, air, and water; frankness about the Afghanistan war; and the "blank spots" of Soviet history—but no special attention settled on the industrial process, workers, or the working class. See, for example, the fine documentary films and "video diaries" of Marina Goldovskaya, or the array of twenty-two documentaries in "The Glasnost Film Festival." (All are available from The Video Project, Ben Lomond, California.) Younger notable Russian documentarists—Viktor Kosakovsky, Vitaly Mansky, Sergei Dvortsevoy, among them—have set their talented sights on villagers, Central Asian nomads, and diverse biographical subjects, but not on workers. At the St. Petersburg "Message to Man" Film Festival in 1996, I was happy to see an amusing debut documentary by Sergei Loznitsa and Marat Magambetov, *Today We Are Going to Build A House*, which gently mocks the Russian work ethic. Workers at a construction site are shown taking lots of smoke breaks, flirting, doing nothing in particular, but in the final shot—*voilà*!—there is a completed building. Contemporary worker themes are often found in the work of some Western documentarists. See, for example, *Perestroika from Below* by Daniel J. Walkowitz and Barbara Abrash, about the striking coal miners of Donetsk in 1989; and *Magnitogorsk—Forging the New Man* by Pieter Jan Smit (1996), which looks at Magnitogorsk today, and traces the fate of some of the worker-heroes once hailed in *Song of the Heroes* (1932) by the celebrated Dutch director Joris Ivens. (Both are available from First Run/Icarus Films, New York.)