

Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History by Evgeny Dobrenko

Trans. by Sarah Young. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008. (ISBN: 9780748634453) 263 pp.

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During the second Moscow show trial of the 'Right-Trotskyist Centre' [...], the screenplay for *The Great Citizen* lay on Stalin's desk

(Dobrenko 2008, p.229)

The image of Joseph Stalin conveyed by this confident monograph is that of a diabolic screenwriter-director. As a mighty, egotistical *auteur*, he attempted to shape a nation to suit his paranoid delusions, and constantly redrafted historical narrative to further resemble a *noir* plot. In the process he 'erased' real, living people as ruthlessly as a soap opera hack axes an inconvenient character. That Stalin's rule was bloody, despotic, and at odds with what socialism was supposed to stand for, has been the standard consensus since his crimes were denounced during the 'Khrushchev thaw' of the late 1950s. This book explores the ideological foundations of Stalinism, through an intelligent consideration of 'socialist realist' films of the Stalin era. It is, thus, a political history book as much as a film history book, suggesting that it might be too soon to dispose of the notion of ideology.

The work is divided along broadly generic lines: there is a chapter on period dramas, one on biopics, two on literary adaptations, and a final one on political thrillers. Each chapter provides attentive discussions of three or four films, weaving a convincing argument through powerful examples. When Dobrenko examines Mark Donskoi's screen adaptation of Gorky's autobiography, for instance, it is hard not to see that a whole new

plot, based on the political needs at the time of production, was wrung out of the 'classic' book. Although each chapter develops a self-contained thesis specific to the genre under analysis, when taken together they substantiate Dobrenko's wider argument: that Stalinist art was "a grandiose political-aesthetic project" (p.1) constructing contradictory versions of history as an attempt to legitimise an illegitimate government.

Using a wealth of period material, Dobrenko shows how political intervention – frequently from Stalin himself, a self-styled film adviser – determined the presentation of the past in historical films. But if politics transformed art, it is because art had a crucial role in these politics. This book is a lesson on text-context dialectics, and as such it is a valuable contribution both to Soviet studies and to film studies. Its understated multidisciplinaryity allows it to grapple with otherwise taboo terms such as 'ideology' and 'style'. Dobrenko writes a clean prose, dense in a good way; it is never condescending to the reader, which means that it can be quite demanding, in particular since it assumes familiarity with Soviet history. Film studies people, like the reviewer, with no background on Soviet studies, can hardly get a glimpse of the contested assessment of Stalinism that is at the core of the argument, since the author provides no reference to the ongoing historiographical debate.

For all the sophisticated engagement with the issue of historical narratives, the historian's own narrative position is insufficiently acknowledged. Thus, the book risks falling into a game of 'double revisionism': Stalinism obscured history, but today historians can see through the fog and rediscover 'real' history. Dobrenko's passionate indignation at Stalinism fuels his very readable style, but also makes it too keen and assertive by scholarly standards (which on the other hand are, admittedly, too bland). The historian's ideological

perspective, which seems to take for granted an individualist, phenomenological aesthetics of personal experience as opposed to the ‘alienated’ constructions of collective history, is also a problematic undercurrent as long as it is not properly exposed. This personalism in turn fosters a super-human conception of Stalin, as an evil almighty agent, countering a more historically motivated analysis of Stalinism as a collective phenomenon.

One of the threads that run through the book is that Soviet historical films from the late 1930s and 1940s were, at heart, adaptations of the *Short Course (History of the All-Union Communist Party [Bolsheviks])*, the ‘historical’ treatise published by Stalin in 1938. The *Short Course* itself is described by Dobrenko as an attempt to justify the Great Terror by rewriting the history of the Bolshevik Party and the 1917 Revolution, so to portray all opposition as enemies, traitors, and conspirators. Dobrenko then traces this back to Stalin’s psychology. The fact that one man could have so much power to, single-handedly, project his fantasies onto a political structure, a war, a vast country, and a cultural trend, not only defies belief but contradicts another contentious idea presented in the book, namely that the Bolshevik Revolution was a “traditionalistic reaction to modernisation”, holding a “conservative ‘collectivist’ utopia” against “liberal Enlightenment” (p.196). It can of course be argued that Stalin was no Bolshevik, but then again he was no champion of Enlightenment either. Perhaps Stalin embodied an unresolved tension between the individual and the collective in Socialist thought, but the relationship between Joseph Stalin and Stalinism goes unquestioned in Dobrenko’s book.

Stalin seems to be the only individual agent, bent on further alienating (i.e. de-personalizing) the masses. Far from cultural studies’ optimistic hypothesis of viewer resistance, Soviet audiences come

across as alienated masses indeed. Given that ‘socialist realism’ as a style perpetuated most of the representational conventions of popular-bourgeois styles, an engagement with the reception of the films would have been an appropriate counterpoint to the looming figure of the General Secretary. Dobrenko shows how paranoid politics were well suited to conspiracy narratives, and how these proved popular with audiences who enjoyed detective stories. The grand kitsch of authoritarian regimes has precise links to popular taste, and these continuities in style should also be accounted for, as an artistic inertia that might shape ideology.

These quibbles notwithstanding, the comparative approach deployed throughout the book is fruitful and persuasive. Some engagement with the burgeoning field of adaptation studies might have given greater subtlety to the comparisons between films and their literary sources; but, as it is, the need for ‘more theory’ is not apparent. Indeed, the book is less convincing in its attempts to see history in terms of a philosophy of time; such excursions are not germane to the argument, which successfully presents history as a political battleground.

As an additional asset, Anglophone academics will find this book a useful gateway to Russian language sources on film and Stalinist art. Dobrenko quotes abundant documents published at the time of production, as well as scholarly publications in Russian spanning the past seven decades. Considering this rich documentation, it is a great disappointment that the book includes neither a bibliography, nor, even more worryingly, a filmography. Films are mentioned with no reference to director, studio, or date, which is a regrettable editing error. However, these data are easy to find elsewhere and should not distract the reader from the general strength of the book’s thesis.

Displaying admirable concentration and control, this is a tight, focused argument that extracts novel insights on Stalinism out of a group of films which have been considered aesthetically irrelevant. The notion that period pictures say more about the time when they were made, than about the time they depict, is nothing new; but in this book the idea is put to action in order to cast a fresh glance at 'socialist realism'. The enquiry might start by accepting that these films are artistically worthless, although interesting from a politico-historical perspective. But what is new here is that Dobrenko actually devotes great attention to the films themselves, opening them up to discover in them the seeds of a hugely influential artistic style: neo-realism and the Bazinian rejection of montage in favour of the deep *mise-en-scene*. Thus, the international history of sound film style and conventions is unexpectedly connected with a horrific, murderous episode in world history. So much for Bazinian humanism! Or, rather, so much for the easy identification of style and politics! Dobrenko has set an example of interpretive practice with this detailed, painstaking exploration of the interface between ideology and cinema.

This work was supported by the Programme Alβan, the European Union Programme of High Level Scholarships for Latin America (scholarship No. E07M400239CO).

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