

## The Soviet Modernization Project and Representations of National and Ethnic Belonging in Soviet Cinema (1953-1985)

The workshop aims to analyze the treatment of the relation between the Soviet project of modernization (and modernity) and national and ethnic belonging in films from the Soviet Union, focusing on productions from the Soviet republics other than Russia (RSFSR) since the Thaw era.

As Terry Martin (*The Affirmative Action Empire*, Cornell Univ. Press 2001) has reconstructed most prominently, the Bolsheviks, after the Russian Revolution, envisioned an ‘indigenization’ (*korenizatsiia*) of communism within the heterogeneous national and ethnic cultures in the dominion of the Russian Empire. This endeavor, obviously, resulted in many excesses of violence and power relations that are today increasingly analyzed—in contrast to what the Soviets would have wished for as their legacy—in terms of *colonialism*.

The Thaw era, initiated by Stalin’s death and his succession by Nikita Krushchev, gave momentum to a new push for political and, especially, cultural autonomy from Moscow in the Soviet Republics, a process not necessarily halted during the so-called Stagnation period (ca. 1970-1985). In the field of cinema, this gave rise to renaissances and re-inventions of National film traditions, as Jonathan Hirst (*Ukrainian Cinema*, London/NY 2015) has shown most intriguingly for Ukrainian cinema. Earlier, often monumental Soviet productions like Dziga Vertov’s *A Sixth Part of the World* (USSR, 1926) and Viktor Turin’s *Turksib* (USSR, 1929) had pushed for modernization and had portrayed indigenous cultures merely as moribund, cruel, and patriarchal, while nature was perceived in extractivist terms as a bunch of resources. In contrast, the costs of modernization processes—human suffering, material loss, and spiritual alienation—could now be addressed, within negotiable degrees, leaving out, of course, excessive terror. A paradigmatic example is Tolomush Okeev’s *The Sky of Our Childhood* (*Bakajdyn šajyty*, Kyrgyzfilm, USSR, 1966), which depicts nomadic pastoralism on the brink of destruction and replaces enthusiasm for progress with a blend of melancholy and sobriety, while criticizing stubborn resistance to inevitable progress.

The workshop wants to ask about the place of culture, and especially cinema, in this picture. James STEFFEN (*The Cinema of Sergei Parajanov*, Univ. Wisconsin Press, 2013) has shown, for instance, how Sergei Parajanov’s version of the 1960s *cinéma d’auteur* became the site of the invention of (Ukrainian and Georgian) tradition. How did film construct cultural sites of national and ethnic belonging that were, at the same time, subversive and compliant in relation to the Soviet Modernization project and its newly invigorated project of indigenization? Are culture and film designated as preservational or political and forward-looking? Which emotional registers are activated in the viewers?

Another theme the workshop wants to address is gender relations, and whether films since the Thaw Era reconnect with the Bolshevik program of gender equality by criticizing male domination over women (like *The Sky of Our Childhood*), or idealize patriarchal gender relations, like Khodzha Kuli Narliyev's *Daughter-in-Law (Gelin/Nevestka)*, Turkmenfilm, USSR, 1972), relying on increasing trends of conservatism and romanticism in mainstream Soviet cultural ideology.

## **Abstracts and Short CVs (in order of appearance)**

Birgit Beumers: *Soviet/Kazakh Schooling in the Films of Abdulla Karsakbaev*

The paper examines the image of Kazakh school education portrayed in the films of Abdulla Karsakbaev from the 1960s and 1970s, notably *My Name is Kozha (Menia zovut Kozha)*, 1963) and *Alpamys goes to School (Alpamys idet v shkolu)*, 1976). The institution of the school is shown as a Soviet structure, while teachers are largely ethnic Kazakhs. At the same time, the classroom is a place where discipline is instilled, while children learn from nature, friends, and elders/parents. The paper argues that in these films, based on the stories of Kazakh writers, the filmmaker manages to balance Kazakh and Russian/Soviet values in a way that allows Kazakh traditions to appear stronger without necessarily denouncing or criticizing Soviet influence.

**Birgit Beumers** is a professor emer. in film studies at Aberystwyth University (Wales). Currently, she is conducting the DFG-funded research project “Zentralasien als Film-Land: Kultur als Macht” in which she combines research tools from culture, film, and media studies to analyze the production of national history and identity. She is a leading expert on Russian and Soviet film history and has published, in addition to many anthologies and compendia, her monograph *A History of Russian Cinema* (Berg, 2009). Among other notable works is her book on the mimesis of violence in Russian theatre (*Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama*, with Mark Lipovetsky, Intellect 2009) and a monograph on Russian nationalism in film (*Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*, Tauris, 2006).

Anna Ladinig: *Ambiguous Images of Soviet-Kyrgyz Mountainscapes in The Sky of Our Childhood (Bakajdyn šajjty, Nebo nashego detstva, 1966)*

Mountains play dominant and strategic roles in Kyrgyz cinema. They serve as an important mediator in the constructed antagonism between ‘national’ and ‘socialist’ evoked by media representations and, further, in the conventional associations between

‘nature’ and ‘national’, on the one hand, and ‘progress’ and ‘Soviet’, on the other. The talk will explore how mountainscapes constitute and interweave ‘Sovietness’ and ‘Kyrgyznes,’ using the 1966 film *The Sky of Our Childhood* (*Nebo nashego detstva*, 1966), directed by Tolomush Okeyev, as a reference. The mountainscape serves not merely as a backdrop to the narrative but as a source of ambiguity, reflecting its transformative power.

**Anna Ladinig** studied Slavic Studies and heads the International Film Festival Innsbruck (iffi). In this role, she has done much to popularize Central Asian film among a Western European audience. She is working on a PhD about space-time constructions in Central Asian Cinema.

### **Matthias Schwartz: “Watch out! Snakes!” *Anti-Colonialism, Emancipation, and Masculinity in Late Soviet Uzbek Adventure Films***

In the modern era, colonial adventure stories became the most popular literary and film genre in the West’s imperial centers. Adventure fiction set beyond one’s own civilization—where sensuality and exoticism, individual heroism, and natural wildness still promised an unalienated life—offered a way to ease unease about capitalist progress and the industrial rationalization of society. In the Soviet Union, especially since the Stalin era, a radical struggle was waged against this colonial exoticism of adventure, and attempts were made instead to establish a distinct heroic-adventure genre that offered the oppressed peoples of the world an internationalist, emancipatory perspective with the Soviet Union at its center. During the Thaw, the Uzbek Soviet Republic served as a window onto decolonization movements in the Global South. In my talk, I examine some of the most successful adventure films produced by the Uzbekfilm studio (for example, *V 26-go ne streljat’*, 1966; *Sed’maja pulja*, 1972; *Beregis’! Zmei!*, 1979; *Prikliučenija Ali-Babyi 40 razbojnikov*, 1980; *Ochota na drakona*, 1986). I discuss the late-Soviet ambivalences and fragility of this adventure narrative in relation to the construction of anti/colonial masculinity and emancipation, modernity and backwardness, and imagined (multi)national belonging.

**Matthias Schwartz** is co-director of the Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung in Berlin (ZfL), where he heads the program *Weltliteratur (World Literature)* and leads the research project *Adjustment and Radicalization. Dynamics in Popular Culture(s) in Pre-War Eastern Europe*. His numerous research interests include memory culture (remembering the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet Union) with an emphasis on popular culture. Recent publications include *Appropriating History: The Soviet Past in Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian Popular Culture* (co-ed. with Nina Weller, transcript 2024) and

*Klassiker des russischen und sowjetischen Films* (co-ed. with Barbara Wurm, Schüren, 2020).

Matthias Meindl: *Supernatural, Mythical, and Religious Elements in Sergej Parajanov's National(ist) Cinema*

According to the evolutionist model that Marxism inherited from bourgeois liberalism, the nation-state is the most developed political organization of a people, the ethnos. As a necessary intermediary step toward realizing communism in the Soviet Union, the ethnic entities on its territory were to be subsumed under this model. According to Stalin's positivist definition of the nation, it is not founded on belief but on objective communalities (above all, language). Peculiarly, the filmmaker Sergej Parajanov, born in Tbilisi to Armenian parents, created national or nationalist cinema, often based on religious legends and fairy tales and featuring religious and supernatural elements, all the while *inventing tradition*. With *Tini zabutykh predkiv* (*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, Dovzhenko Film Studios, 1965), which features a sorcerer as the antagonist to its unhappy protagonist, Ukrainian national cinema was revived. The film is associated with Aleksandr Dovzhenko, who, in his film *Zvenyhora* (*Zvenigora*, VUFKU, 1928), had already made the case for preserving national myth in a technologically modernized society. Hence, the question becomes: how should art—and, in the context of Parajanov, the film d'auteur (Jonathan Hirst's idea of "author nationalism")—*contain* national myth? *Ambavi Surams tsikhisa* (*The Legend of Suram Fortress*, Georgia-Film, 1985), based on a literary folk legend, can be read as a mysticist positioning that announces Perestroika by highlighting religious aspects and introducing voluntary religious-nationalist martyrdom despite the censors' warnings. However, one might ask whether the film also lays bare the dialectics of secularization and resacralization at the heart of national martyrdom (Sigrid Weigel) and the imaginary core of nationalism.

**Matthias Meindl** is a postdoctoral researcher at ISOS and specializes in the intersections of aesthetics and politics across various Eastern European contexts. Currently, he is completing a comprehensive study about *Screening Sex and Sexual Revolutions in Yugoslav Cinema since the 1960s*.

Eugénie Zvonkine: *Self-Narrating and Autobiographical Territory as a Vector for a National Cinema in The Sky of Our Childhood* (Bakajdyn šajty, Nebo nashego detstva, 1966)

Tolomush Okeev's first feature film was commissioned and directed at a time when the Central Asian republics of the USSR were developing a national discourse within the

framework of the Soviet empire. *The Sky of Our Childhood* is partially autobiographical and features an original script entirely written by the director. Both elements were quite rare, if not unheard of, at Kirghizfilm at the time. With the help of archival documents (both from the official archives and private archives) and testimonies, as well as a close reading of selected sequences from the film, I will show how this approach offers a perfect opportunity to initiate a radical shift in Kyrgyz cinematography by critically engaging with the Soviet standard duality of the old and the new, and how the film creates a cinematic space that can be understood as a national space.

**Eugénie Zvonkine** is a professor at the Laboratoire ESTCA, Université Paris 8, and an expert on Soviet, post-Soviet film, as well as Perestroika cinema. She has published one of the few monographies (based on her PhD thesis) about one of the most important Ukrainian filmmakers, and maybe the most important Soviet/post-Soviet female director, Kira Muratova (*Kira Mouratova: un cinéma de la dissonance*, Editions L'Age d'homme 2012). She has contributed scientific commentary to the recent Blu-ray edition of Muratova's oeuvre (Potemkine Films, 2025). Recently, she has published *Sexuality, Nudity, and the Body in Soviet Cinema* (co-edited with Birgit Beumers and Catherine Géry, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2026).

Eugénie Zvonkine: *Self-Narrating and Autobiographical Territory as a Vector for a National Cinema in The Sky of Our Childhood (Bakajdyn šajty, Nebo nashego detstva, 1966)*