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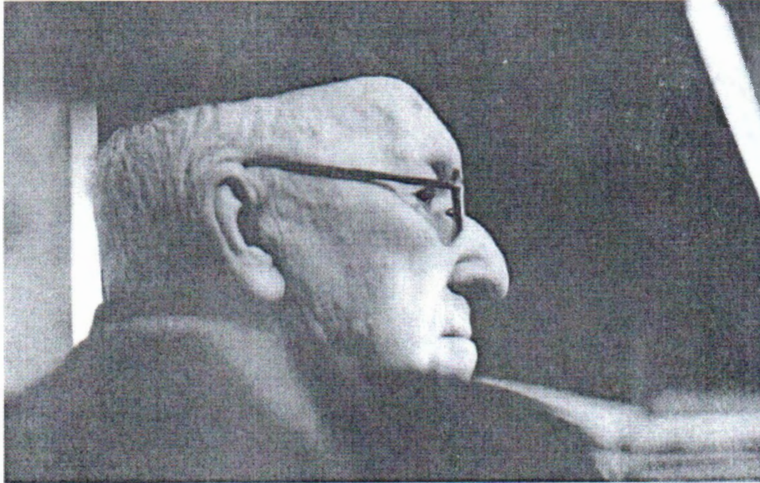
Cowboys in the Kingdom of Shadows: The Soviet Flaherty Seminar

By Deirdre Boyle



From *Losev*

The mutable, enigmatic nature of documentary films was never more apparent than at the Robert Flaherty Soviet American Seminar, held in Riga, Latvia in September 1990. A delegation of over 40 American film and video makers, critics, scholars, and programmers met with their Soviet counterparts for eight days of screenings and discussion in Jurmala, a resort town on the Baltic Sea. The Soviets, many of whom had attended screenings of the American Showcase documentaries which toured nine Soviet cities earlier in the year, had come to expect film journalism from Americans, what in their republics was the province of television not documentary film studios. Within a few days, the American films and tapes screened dramatically altered their preconceptions. The Americans, in turn, were shocked to discover how "unpolitical" the Soviet films were to American eyes. Anyone expecting the kind of Marxist analysis common to many American political documentaries was in for a big surprise.

The seminar began with a retrospective of Latvian films. Most notable were the short films of Herz Frank: *Ten Minutes Older* (1978), *The Song of Songs* (1989) and *The Prayer* (1990). Exquisitely simple in composition and intimacy, Frank's films focus on the faces of individuals in the grip of a profound experience -a child watching "a fable of good and evil," a couple giving birth, a Jewish couple praying. Inspired by a spirituality that is once again publicly asserted in Soviet art and daily life, Frank offers a view of life which challenges the status quo. When I asked him about the political nature of his films—Riga offers the only family birthing clinic in the Soviet Union, and Jews continue to be persecuted despite official tolerance of religious expression—Frank was perplexed, asserting there was nothing political in his films. It was the first of a number of such misunderstandings which arose during the week. Later, in conversation

with Frank, I came to realize that "political" has a different meaning for a Soviet: political work conforms to official ideology; to assert one's own views is a revolutionary act.

From *The Blues Accordin' to Lightnin' Hopkins*

Screenings alternated between American and Soviet programs. Journalistic made-for-television documentaries elicited a polite interest from the Soviets that barely disguised their disappointment. What finally elated them was Les Blank's film, *The Blues Accordin' to Lightnin' Hopkins* (1967). But when Marlon Riggs asked Blank about his decision to omit any mention of the civil rights movement in a Sixties' film about a black musician, the chasm between American and Soviet perspectives became palpable. Moscow film critic Vasiliy Kisunko found the question strange: Didn't Les have the right to choose how he would present his "hero ". (What Americans refer to as "subject" the Soviets Call "hero", a legacy of the Socialist Realist past, perhaps.) What dazzled the Soviets was the intimacy and lyricism of Blank's filmmaking style as well as its focus on an individual; Blank's celebration of human joy, sorrow and song was a film free of the need to serve any ideological purpose—for Soviet filmmakers, a rare freedom. But it was this very freedom from any social or political context that raised American hackles.

The Soviets were also enthusiastic about Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1986), in which he wittily intertwines a journey following General William Tecumseh Sherman's march to the sea, laying waste the South during the Civil War, with his own feckless romantic pursuit of Southern belles.

Half the American delegation was composed of women, and their work—whether as film scholars or documentary makers—often took the Soviets by surprise. When Pam Yates screened her pro-Sandinista film, Nicaragua: *Report from the Front* (1983), some asked what such "a charming girl" was doing making such a dangerous film. The fact that a woman, and a young and

pretty one at that, had made the film overshadowed the issues it raised. Feisty and outspoken Chris Choy took the Soviets by storm with *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988), her unrelenting investigation of racial violence against Asian-Americans in white middle America. Familiar with prejudice directed against blacks, the film's subject was a revelation to many Soviet viewers. Su Friedrich, whose films fall only marginally within a conventional American definition of documentary, showed two works, *The Ties That Bind* (1986) and *Sink or Swim* (1990). which were also highly appreciated by the Soviets.

As the week progressed, a number of things became apparent about Soviet filmmaking. For Soviets the documentary is an art embracing all nonfiction filmmaking. What in the West is divided into documentary film and experimental or avant garde film is indistinguishable in the USSR. Film critic Vasiliy Kisunko took me to task for using the term experimental for works like *The Ties That Bind* or *Tongues Untied*: "An experiment is something which may or may not work, a trial, but these are carefully crafted, mature works of art!"

Soviet filmmakers of necessity have had to express themselves obliquely ; they have become masters of irony, indirectness, metaphor, and parable. Deciphering their symbolism and analyzing their aesthetics is how their critics discuss their underlying messages. But the Soviets' emphasis on aesthetics disconcerted many Americans accustomed to speaking directly through their films and suspicious of any "party" debate that seems to privilege form over content. When American videomaker Marlon Riggs showed *Tongues Untied* (1990), his brilliant autobiographical essay on being black and gay, he voiced concern that Soviet critics seemed more willing to discuss the elaborate aesthetic construction of his work than its confrontational subject, particularly given the USSR's past persecution of homosexuals as criminals. Sergei Muratov, professor of journalism at Moscow State University, assured Riggs that homosexuality is a subject that poses no problems for Soviet intellectuals. But Moscow film critic Andrei Shemyakin added that the question of sexual identity remains a secondary issue for a people who are still struggling with the fundamental concept of having any identity at all. Shemyakin's incisive comment cut to the very heart of the problem—the inescapable and enormous cultural, political, and philosophical differences historically sepa rating Soviet and American audiences.

This gap was made visible by Andrei Zagdansky's exceptional film, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1989) which juxtaposes spoken passages from Freud with at first witty and then increasingly chilling footage culled from Soviet archives. In it Zagdansky recapitulates the Soviet past ironically filtered through Freud's observations on sex, aggression, totalitarianism and war. Zagdansky, a young Kiev filmmaker, noted that it is only in the last four years that Freud has been published in the Soviet Union. He might have added it is only in the last four years that a film like his could have been made.

Soviet films are shot in 35mm, and 16mm, and often in black-and-white. The familiar technical and stylistic clues that situate any Western film viewer to the time and place of a documentary film do not exist as such in USSR productions. Instead, one finds a different establishing code operating. One sees in films made during the years of stagnation, transition, and glasnost different styles reflective of greater or lesser openness and artistic freedom. One also detects subtle regional differences: the Leningrad school, for example, which emerged in the mid-70s, is noted for a dry, unadorned style which leaves difficult questions unanswered. Victor Kossakovsky, a young filmmaker much influenced by Andrei Tarkovsky, showed his elegiac first film, *Losev* (1989), a portrait of a philosopher in life and in death, which exemplifies this

Leningrad style. However, to the novice viewer these often subtle distinctions took time to sort out, especially given the overwhelming elegiac nature of so much Soviet filmmaking, past and present. Some Soviet pundits half-jokingly referred to their younger, independent filmmakers as necrophiliacs.

But translator Mischa Zagat wasn't laughing when he commented that the younger filmmakers are not providing new visions for a beleaguered Soviet people. He seemed to be asking, how are we to transform society if our filmmakers continue to mourn the dead and lament the past? People need to be cheered and inspired if they are to move out of a moribund time. Where will the visions for a new, better future come if not from young filmmakers?

Much is expected of Soviet filmmakers and "new model" cinema in this period of perestroika and glasnost. Gorbachev knew he would need the support of the intelligentsia and the consensus of the people for his reforms to be adopted and implemented. As allies he chose artists—in particular filmmakers—who can influence wide audiences with their work. While Lenin may be out of favor today, his understanding of the power of film has not been lost on Mikhail Sergeevich.

With new freedom of expression comes new burdens: the film studios are being restructured and will have to support themselves, no longer solely dependent upon state subsidies. This is particularly serious for documentary producers, who have never had to compete for audiences or rubles. One may wonder whether the demands of a free market will prove more detrimental to "new model" documentaries than any posed by an ideological censor.

The Soviets' enthusiasm for contact with foreigners is understandably fueled by the prospect of co-production funding and new outlets for their work. Ivars Seleckis, director of the Riga Film Studio, showed *Latvia, August, 1989* a film on independence which he co produced with French television. Juris Podnieks, the now famous Latvian director of *Is It Easy to Be Young* (1986), which announced a new era of socially-critical yet intimate documentaries, did not attend the seminar; he is working on coproductions in Europe.

The ambiguity of the Soviet filmmaker's position is slowly changing now that more directness is tolerated and even demanded. But the history of purges and redoubled repression that traditionally follows periods of cultural "thaw" tempers any headlong rush toward openness. The only Soviet woman filmmaker attending the seminar, Marina Ivanova, showed two recent films which reflected both new-style frankness and old-style indirection. *In A Drop of Kalmyk Blood* (1989) Ivanova exposes the forced exile of the Kalmykia from the temperate region around the Caspian sea to Siberia during the Stalin years, detailing the tragic dissolution of their ethnic and cultural identity in a story told largely by women. By contrast *The Soviet Street* (1989), seems like a parable: in it, three young boys, one of whom is retarded, play in a bucolic landscape that surrounds an abandoned house. They find a phonograph and play old records which stick. Two boys go off, abandoning the idiot to his musical nostalgia. When asked privately to comment on this enigmatic film, Ivanova said she had made it as though the past were looking back on the present. Criticism of the Stalin years is openly accepted today, but musings on the current scene still inspire circumspection.

The few Soviet women present—only one filmmaker and a handful of critics and programmers—prompted repeated questions about women in Soviet films. Although seminar

organizers insisted there were many women filmmakers in the USSR, their absence here belied such avowals. Although women frequently work as screenwriters—and all editors in the Soviet Union are women—they are rarely directors of their own documentary films.

Although video is now found in the film studios, it still plays a relatively minor role. Few Soviet works on video were screened, but Vadim Grunin's *Hostages* (1990) demonstrated that Soviet video at its best possesses the urgency and immediacy of eyewitness news reporting combined with the cinematic power of a Costa-Gavras thriller. Gmin's fast-paced documentary tracks a desperate attempt by Soviet dissidents to escape, following them from their seizure of a school bus onto the plane that will eventually carry them to Israel and then back home to stand trial and serve long prison terms. Gmin tells this story with compassion for both the hostage-takers and their prosecutors, revealing the complex factors that drive some to domestic terrorism as well as the reasons for their punishment. More than any other program screened, Grunin's gripping, morally wrenching work resembled American media. Compared to the slow, meditative, and at times ponderous pace of Soviet documentaries, Hostages' pulsing energy marks Grunin for foreign attention and co production support.

But not all Soviet filmmakers want to emulate the style of Western documentaries. Filmmakers like Herz Frank, Victor Kossakovsky, Alexander Sokurov and Artavazd Peleshyan come out of a poetic filmmaking tradition that nurtures them and their audiences. Alexander Sokurov's *The Simple Elegy* (1990), is one in a series of 25 film elegies he has planned. It is a spare portrait of Vytautas Landsbergis, president of independent Lithuania and musician by profession. The film consists of two seemingly hand-held shots: the first gently circles Landsbergis as he plays a composition for piano; the second locates Landsbergis at his desk, surrounded by telephones and laboring over documents of state, then slowly tracks backward and out of the huge office as an almost invisible arm shuts the door. Elegant and metaphoric, Sokurov's visual language eloquently expresses the wholeness of the man in his music and the alienating distance that political responsibility places between him, his art, and the world.

Armenian Artavazd Peleshyan loops his scenes in a manner curiously reminiscent of American structuralist filmmaking of the Sixties. His films *Us* (1969) and *Seasons* are profound lamentations that evoke natural disasters and cycles of human tragedy which transcend geographic boundaries and limits of time even as they remain rooted to specific events (an earthquake) and characters (shepherds tending their flock). In the hands of a Peleshyan or Sokurov, the melancholic nature of the narration less poetic Soviet documentary becomes stunning world cinema.

The kingdom of shadows, Maxim Gorky's expression for documentary cinema, remains a predominantly visual world whose ambiguity affords some freedom to Soviet artists who can never take their freedom for granted. For those Soviets who yearn for the freedom of mind and exploration of form currently enjoyed by American artists, scholars and critics, their hopes are tied to the future of glasnost and to the courage of individuals who exercise this new freedom, not knowing how long it may last or what its consequences may be. As American independents faced with uncertain government support of the arts and threats of reprisals over expression of controversial ideas, we learned what happens when fear and repression are allowed to govern art.

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https://www.documentary.org/feature/cowboys-kingdom-shadows-soviet-flaherty-seminar