

Interview with Svetlana Nikolaevna Efimova

Conducted by Sabina Abdullayeva and Jennifer Stolz in St. Petersburg, Russia (21 July, 2010). Transcribed and Analyzed by Sabina Abdullayeva, Mary Burke, and Jennifer Stolz (Fall 2010).

Interview Analysis

The interview was conducted with Svetlana Nikolayevna Efimova, a teacher of Russian language at the St. Petersburg State University by Jennifer Stolz and Sabina Abdullayeva on July 21, 2010. Svetlana was born in Ukraine and her family moved to St. Petersburg, Russia when she was in her twenties. She also mentions that her parents have moved around between “a few very good cities” (02:22). During the interview, Svetlana focused on three major topics: types of films that she likes to watch, movie theaters that she use to visit in her childhood and teen years, and the promotion of films in the late Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia.

A Franco-Italian film adaptation of Alexander Dumas’ *Three Musketeers*¹ was the first film that Svetlana watched. She could not recollect initially where she first went to the movies but later she remembered that it was in the Crimea where she was on vacation with her parents. Although the movie itself was not scary, she recollects being scared by the atmosphere of the movie theater itself. The dark screening room and the noise of the soundtrack made her feel very uncomfortable.

At first when asked about her favorite film genres, Svetlana stated that in her teen years she liked many genres, but she later admitted to prefer comedies, melodramas and “of course, films about love” (35:35). Her genre preference seems to be based on the traditional age and gender expectations for what a young girl would or should have liked. It is also important to note that even though film genres were mentioned in her answers, she preferred to talk about her favorite films rather than generic clusters of films. Only after repeated questions from the interviewers she began to include as an aside each film’s genre when describing it. It did not, however, seem to be an important means of grouping or film identification in her recollections. She did not include genre designation without prompting, choosing instead to identify her favorite films as “beautiful” or “lyrical”, or having a “subtle sense of humor” (27:06).

Svetlana’s own taxonomy of films is based primarily on the country of origin of the films. Even though she claimed at some point that “it’s not important if the film is American, or Japanese, or French, in my opinion, people everywhere are the same” (34:57); she is pretty certain that her favorite films from her early film-going experiences were foreign and for the most part French and German. Her most precious childhood memories included French films starring Alain Delon²

A part of the interview was actually dedicated to the place of international, above all French films, distributed in the Soviet Union in the 1970s. Svetlana noted that, in her

¹ *Three Musketeers* directed by Bernard Borderie, France/Italy 1962.

² Alain Delon is a French actor who starred in such award-winning classics as *Rocco and His Brothers* (dir. Luchino Visconti 1960) and *Le Samourai* (dir. Jeff Costello 1967). Many of his films were available in Soviet distribution. In 1980 he starred in a Soviet-led international co-production *Teheran 43* (dir. Alexander Alov and Vladimir Naumov, France, Switzerland, Spain, USSR 1981).

opinion, Russian and French cultures are very similar. That's why in her view Russians like French films in particular (5:41).

While talking about her movie going experiences, Svetlana also shared with us her childhood memories of television viewing. She noted that she did not watch television a lot because her father thought television was a waste of time. Since she was not allowed to spend a lot of time in front of the TV, she went to the movies more often. During her school years, Svetlana visited the movie theatre close to home and watched mostly Western European comedies and what she refers to as "serious film" (6:50). Judging from her examples these were melodramas. One in particular that Svetlana remembered was Franco-German co-production *Rain Washes Away All Traces*³ a melodrama about an unhappy romance with the young male hero dying tragically at the film's end.

In her further discussion of films which she enjoyed as she grew older, Svetlana noted that she knows now for sure that she dislikes detective and science fiction films. For example she does not like James Cameron's *Avatar*⁴. In addition, Svetlana said that she does not like to watch post-Soviet historical films about Stalin era, above all those made by Nikita Mikhalkov⁵. In Svetlana's opinion these films deal with obvious topics, such as hardship during Stalin era, and do not say anything new. The distaste she expressed for what she calls Mikhalkov's "exploitation" is not limited to his films only – she attributed this over-representation of the Stalinist period to many "recent Russian films" (8:29). For Svetlana, revisiting the Stalin era again through modern Russian films is a waste of time, and if she had to watch a Russian film then she would rather watch a film from the Soviet period (9:41-43).

Despite her love for French films, Svetlana seems to favor Soviet films as snapshots of good life in the past instead of contemporary pictures about Stalin era that often examine the traumatic experiences of the era. As the interview came to a close, Svetlana talked about Soviet films and actors that were popular in her younger days and are still popular today. Among her favorite Soviet films she mentioned Georgii Danelia's *Mimino*⁶, Nikolai Gubenko's *Orphans*⁷ and *Life on Vacation*⁸, and Eldar Riazanov's *Irony of Fate or Enjoy Your Bath!*⁹, a film that is traditionally shown on television every New Year's Eve in Russia since its release in 1975. Svetlana also remembered famous actors, Vakhtang Kikabidze, Frunzik Mkrtchian, Nikolai Gubenko, Zhanna Bolotova, who have remained popular with the public for the last thirty years, as their films became cult classics. It is interesting that having started out with the subject of foreign films; Svetlana found it necessary to end her interview with predominantly Soviet films and

³ *Und der Regen Verwischt jede Spur dir*. Alfred Vohrer, France, West Germany 1972. The film was nominated for the Golden Prize at the Moscow International Film Festival in 1973.

⁴ *Avatar* dir. James Cameron, USA 2009.

⁵ Nikita Mikhalkov (1945-) is a Russian director, writer and actor. Among his films are the Oscar-winning *Burnt by the Sun* (1994) and *12* (Golden Lion at Venice Film Festival 2007).

⁶ *Mimino*. USSR 1980.

⁷ USSR 1977. The title of Gubenko's film, *Podranki*, literally means Wounded Birds. In the US the film was released under the title *The Orphans*.

⁸ USSR 1980.

⁹ *The Irony of Fate, or "Enjoy Your Bath!"* dir. Eldar Ryzanov, USSR 1975.

actors. Perhaps, it can be said that Svetlana favors Soviet films from the 1970s as much as the foreign films of the same era.

When asked to describe movie theatres she visited, initially Svetlana could not recollect anything. She only remembered that screening rooms of her childhood seemed to be enormous compared to other rooms she visited. Later in the interview Svetlana described in detail the movie theatre she frequently visited during her school years. As Svetlana recounts, it was a screening room that belonged to the wine factory, which lent it the name “Wine-barrel.” The room was built during the Stalin era for state-sponsored social functions but later in the 1970s became a revenue-generating space. At the “Wine-barrel” there were three showings throughout the day, the earliest being at around 4 pm. Unlike movie theaters in the United States, for example, there were no matinee showings or show times specifically for children. The hall only had one viewing room, with seats that were “wooden and very primitive” (12:18). The story of this social events hall gradually morphing into a commercial public venue for the consumption of mostly Franco-German genre films reveals important features of late socialist culture, above all the gradual emergence of mass consumption and consumer culture oriented public spaces.

Svetlana also talked about concessions at the movie theaters at the time. Notably there were no concessions at the “Wine barrel.” According to Svetlana, in Soviet movie theaters concession stands appeared only about 15 years ago. She notes that during Soviet times concessions existed in the major metropolitan areas, where “you could buy ... both juice and ice cream, and now [after the end of the USSR] you can buy popcorn, sit inside and eat” (12:58).

While consumption of food and films were the major pleasures of movie going, Svetlana noted that in her Soviet childhood pleasure and enlightenment went often hand in hand. She recollects listening to a short introduction by a film critic before the screening of many foreign films. Like in other parts of her interview, the examples that she provided were from French films, many starring Alain Delon and Jean Gabin. Such mini introductions, she claims, were normally common only in movie theaters located in larger cities, which could attract a significant crowd to the event.

In the mid section of the interview Svetlana went on to talk about how she learned of new releases and how films were advertised. The ways Svetlana learned about movies theaters’ repertoire is indicative of the time period when she grew up. It was a late socialist culture, which combined elements of the centralized economy inherited from Stalinism with some elements of consumer culture. On the hand, Svetlana remembers several venues to promote information about the new films. She recalled reading about some new movies in magazines, such as Soviet Screen (20:40)¹⁰. She also recalled reading about the new movies in other magazines, which focused more on the European films she tended to enjoy. She did not mention specific titles of the magazines. Judging from the fact that The Soviet Screen was the only popular viewership magazine, Svetlana might have been confusing her contemporary experiences of numerous magazines about media and show business with what she used to read in the 1970s, namely just The Soviet

¹⁰ Soviet Screen (Sovetsky Ekran) is a Soviet film magazine. It appeared during Khrushchev Thaw as the only popular film magazine for moviegoers and died together with the Soviet film industry in the early 1990s.

Screen. Finally, Svetlana mentioned poster advertisements which announced what films would be playing in each theater that week. The posters were not eye-catching. They did not include any visuals, just text, and listed all necessary information about a movie, such as the venue, the day, and show times for each film.

On the other hand Svetlana remarks that “in Soviet times films didn’t have to be advertised...” (21:52). The demand for the new films was so far ahead of supply that people used word of mouth instead of magazines and posters to learn about the new films and made sure they get the tickets quickly for the new, especially, Western features. Svetlana’s contradictory statements about how viewers learned about the new films most likely serve as a testimony to the internal contradictions of the late socialist culture where viewers already acted as savvy consumers in a quasi-market economy and the cumbersome centralized film distribution system could by no means satisfy the viewers’ demand both for information and exciting films..

To give an example of how the promotion of new films evolved from Soviet to post- Soviet times, Svetlana discussed the promotional campaign of Nikita Mikhalkov’s new feature *Burnt by the Sun 2* (2010)¹¹. The film became the official selection from the Russian Federation at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival. In case of a prize the filmmaker hoped for the international distribution of his feature. On the home front Russian television started a massive advertising campaign of the new film. Only after this global promotional effort the film appeared in the movie theaters. Russian film industry became both global and multimedia (at least heavily dependent on television support). According to Svetlana, the Soviet film industry did not advertise its films on television while the Russian film industry promotes its films on television a lot.

Overall, it seems that Svetlana stopped going to the movies in the mid 1980s. When in the late 1990s the new Russian film distributors built the new multiplexes and brought Hollywood fantasy and sci-fi blockbusters, like *Avatar*, on their screens, Svetlana refused to pay 210-240 rubles per ticket (approximately \$8 US dollars) to watch the unfamiliar stories and stunning special effects. Instead she prefers to remember warmly her childhood memories of going to the “Wine-barrel” movie theater and watching the heroic feats of Jean Gabin and Alain Delon.

¹¹ *Burnt by the Sun 2* dir. Nikita Mikhalkov, Russia/Germany/France 2010