

In July 2012 Andrew Andell and Rachel Faith interviewed Irina Valeryevna Leventhal in St. Petersburg, Russia. The interview was transcribed and translated by Andrew Andell, Emilie Clark, Hannah Kitchen, Alex McGrath, Jessica Parks and Alexander Prokhorov during Fall and Spring 2013 for the Russian Movie Theater Project.

At the time of the interview, Irina Valeryevna Leventhal was a third-year graduate student and an adjunct professor at the Department of Russian as a Second Language at Saint Petersburg State University.

Irina Leventhal was born in a small, industrial town in the Pskov oblast, on the border with Belarus. She lived in this town until she was sixteen, when she moved to Saint Petersburg. As a child, she went with her mother and brother to the movietheater “Motherland,” which she describes as “such a typical Soviet movie theater” and notes that nothing has changed, as the same portraits of Soviet actors still hang on its walls (pt. 1, 5:34). Leventhal recalls that, when she was little, going to the movies was “a big event” and that she was enthralled with the fact that the movie theater had a separate entrance and exit (pt. 1, 7:47). In her childhood she watched Soviet animated and fantasy films such as [The Stone Flower](#) (dir. Alexander Ptushko 1946), which was a compilation of animated fairy tales. However she remembers the name of one of the stories, Mistress of the Copper Hills, instead of the name of the entire film.

Leventhal went to the movies during school, when the teacher would take the entire class out to the movie theater. She makes a note that, during the 1990s, people did not go to the movies and so she did not start going to the movie theater on her own until she was around fourteen years old (pt. 1, 8:49). At least once a week, she and around fifteen of her friends would go to an evening showing at the movie theater.

When describing how the movies have changed during her lifetime, Leventhal emphasizes the collapse of the Russian movie industry during the tumult of the 1990s and the emergence of a completely new type of movie-going experience. She repeats how no one went to the movies in the 1990s, and that when she and her friends went to the movies they were the only ones: “We were alone in the auditorium. We were always alone” (pt. 1, 12:10). Then, in the early 2000s, she explains how the theaters that appeared were “of a completely different type; international, modern, comfortable, beautiful...” (pt. 1, 12:10). The rise of popular, commercial films (in particular American blockbuster films) stands out as a major break with the pre-1990s movie-going experience. As she says: “To be honest, everything changed” (pt. 1, 12:10).

She explains that, for example, in the 1990s Disney films appeared in Russia. She lists [Aladdin](#), [The Little Mermaid](#), and [The Beauty and the Beast](#) as examples, but also notes that in her teen years she watched Soviet comedies (pt. 1, 14:53).

Leventhal states that, when she moved to St. Petersburg, she started watching different genres of films, such as psychological dramas and comedies. She expresses a distaste for mass, commercial films (pt. 1, 16:21). This distaste reappears throughout the interview, mainly through her focus on how popular, commercial films have been very prevalent in Russia since they appeared in the 2000s.

Her eclectic taste in directors highlights her distaste for mass, commercial films, as none of the directors that she lists produce what could be considered as a typical blockbuster. These directors come from a variety of places and were active in different time periods: From Russia, her favorite directors include [Andrei Tarkovskii](#), [Alexander Sokurov](#), [Kirill Serebrennikov](#) and [Aleksei Popogrebski](#). She makes a point of noting that, while she likes the directors, that does not mean that she likes all of their films. In the same manner she explains how she enjoys European cinema, in particular that from the 1950s and 1960s. She lists the Italian directors [Federico Fellini](#), [Luchino Visconti](#) and [Michelangelo Antonioni](#) among her favorites, as well as the French [Jean-Luc Godard](#) and Swedish [Ingmar Bergman](#) (pt. 1, 17:27). Among her favorites, she also lists the modern American directors [David Lynch](#), [Jim Jarmusch](#) and [Darren Aronofsky](#) along with the Danish director [Lars von Trier](#) (pt. 1, 19:28).

In addition, Leventhal lists the Russian actress [Tatyana Drubich](#), the Italian actress [Monica Bellucci](#), the French actress [Juliette Binoche](#) and the American actor [John Malkovich](#) among her favorite actors (pt. 2, 17:37; pt. 1, 20:37; pt. 1, 20:14).

Leventhal has a good memory, as evidenced by her ability to recollect names of actors, directors and the films with which they are associated. Her taste in films is very eclectic, and encompasses a global scope: "I love to watch European cinema...and American cinema as well...I certainly watch few films from Asia...I watch Russian cinema, yes? Maybe less than European, but I watch it" (pt. 2, 14:27).

What is interesting to note is that Leventhal often compares not only Soviet theaters with modern ones, but she further compares the mass, popular movie theaters with the ones that she goes to. One example is when she is asked to describe the smells that she recalls when she thinks about movie theaters (pt. 2, 1:27). She describes a chemical

smell, possibly relating to the furniture, and the smell of pirogis frying in oil as being associated with her memories of Soviet theaters. She then continues: "Movie theaters that I go to, for example, there isn't popcorn...There's no smell of popcorn. In movie theaters that everyone goes to, common ones...there is the smell of popcorn" (pt. 2, 1:48). Her interview is often a comparison between the past and two competing images of the present: the mass, commercial movie theaters and the more independent movie-going experience.

Towards the end of the interview Leventhal offers a theory for why mass, commercial films are so popular: "People love simple cinema...they love to go to movies that don't bring negative or unpleasant sensations or such deep feelings..." (pt. 2, 10:47).