

## New Soviet Man. Gender and Masculinity in Stalinist Soviet Cinema

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In the USSR during the period c1928-33, there was a Cultural Revolution that resulted in the abolition of the autonomous artistic and literary groupings that had proliferated after the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917. The Communist Party's assumption of control over Soviet culture was marked by the establishment of Socialist Realism as the sole approved mode of cultural production. The function of Socialist Realism was to show life, not as it was but as it ought to be, in order to blaze the trail into the bright future of socialism. One of the main duties imposed on Soviet writers, artists and film-makers was to offer role models of the future New Soviet Person. The concept was gender-neutral, encompassing both men and women, but the linguistic and social structure of Soviet culture of the 1930s (and beyond) was intrinsically patriarchal, in the sense of prioritising masculinity, the traditional family and the cult of Stalin as the 'great father of the Soviet people'.

The basic premise of John Haynes' book is that the Cultural Revolution heralded a re-masculinisation of Soviet culture that can be seen as exemplified in the ways that gender roles were presented in popular Stalinist cinema. The technical and stylistic aspects of film design are less important to Haynes' arguments than the narratives and characterisation. Nevertheless, the illustrations - all provided by the British Film Institute - offer vivid examples of the ways in which set design, lighting and costume were used to create visions of socialist Utopia and of the New Soviet Man.

The book begins by identifying the model, male, 'positive hero' type as represented by the leading role in Mikhail Kalazatov's film biography of the aviator, *Valerii*

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*Chkalov* (1941). The Chkalov character behaves with certainty - free from psychological doubts and dilemmas - placing personal ties secondary to the demands of the state and the 'great father', Stalin.

For Haynes, this image of the New Soviet Man as a 'model son of Stalin', viewed through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, presents the Stalinist ideal of masculinity as locked into a pre-Oedipal, infantile state – an idea that has been promoted in the writings of Hans Gunther<sup>1</sup>. Haynes goes on to illustrate the development of this image within the urban musical comedies, *The Happy Guys* (1934), *Circus* (1936), *Volga-Volga* (1938) and *The Radiant Path* (1941) directed by Grigorii Aleksandrov, and Ivan Pyr'ev's collective farm comedies *The Rich Bride* (1938), *Tractor Drivers* (1939), *The Swinemaiden and the Shepherd* (1941) and *Cossacks of the Kuban* (1949). He then looks at the extreme images of the 'positive' soldier-hero presented in *Chapaev* (Vasil'ev brothers, 1934) and *The Rainbow* (Mark Donskoi, 1944).

What seems to emerge from Haynes' argument is that while the ideal masculinity can be seen to be in a state of arrested development in which sensuality or sexuality must be permanently sublimated by the 'call to work', a tension is created by the way that the dominance of the masculine is asserted – particularly in the presentation of the New Soviet Woman as ultimately subordinate and submissive to guidance, limitation

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Hans Gunther, 'Wise Father Stalin and his Family in Soviet Cinema', in T. Lahusen & E. Dobrenko, eds, *Socialist Realism without Shores*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1997, pp. 178-90.

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and permission from male authority. The point of the study seems to be to suggest that this tension prefigures a 'crisis of masculinity' in the psyche of the cinematic New Man, brought into the open by wartime experiences, and eventually surfacing as psychological expressions of self-doubt in the characterisations of masculinity offered by Eisenstein in *Ivan the Terrible* (1944-5) and Sergei Bondarchuk in *Fate of a Man* (1958).

Although Haynes declares Soviet film to be a 'social document', his primary concern is not with grounding the films discussed within a consistent (and shifting) historical context. Having identified the Cultural Revolution as the source and trigger for the masculinisation of culture that his argument wishes to chart, reference to historical context becomes increasingly marginal. By chapters 4 and 5, for instance, the discussions of post-1940 films such as *Cossacks of the Kuban*, *The Rainbow* and *Fate of a Man*, give no sense of the political and social changes or the pressures on cultural production wrought successively by the circumstances of World War II, the *Zhdanovshchina* of the late 1940s, the death of Stalin in 1953 and the cultural 'thaw' of the late 1950s under Nikita Khrushchev.

John Haynes lectures in Film Studies in the Department of History at the University of Essex, and the perspective taken by the book derives largely from the Freudian-Lacanian theoretical base established by the magazine *Screen* as central to film studies and to discourse on cinematic representations of gender. Despite the publisher's claims for a broad audience, the book is likely to appeal most to

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undergraduate students of film who are acquainted with the theoretical language, and interested in extending their knowledge of 1930s Soviet film.

All of the films covered have been subjected to contemporary critical analysis and Haynes' arguments provide a relevant survey of recent writings on Stalinist film, spiced with his own interpretations. The bibliography comprises predominantly English language texts, mainly secondary sources published in the late twentieth century, and is plumped out somewhat by citations of individual texts in anthologies as well as the anthologies themselves. Very few Russian sources are cited in the bibliography or references, and in the text there is little reference to primary sources from the Stalinist era, except for those that have already been translated into English. While this might make the book less interesting to scholars of Russian and Soviet studies, it will not affect the English-speaking audience for whom the book seems to be largely intended.

Overall, the style of the book is mainly engaging and despite the elements of ahistoricity and a certain cloudiness of structure in the introduction and conclusion, the book makes an interesting contribution to the available literature on gender in Soviet cinema.

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