

The adolescent and the child in the cinema of the Thaw

Alexander Prokhorov *College of William and Mary,
Williamsburg*

Abstract

This article compares and contrasts the representation of the child and adolescent hero in films of the Thaw (1956–64). It argues that, while Thaw films seemed to represent a new value system that placed the individual in the centre, numerous films in the 1950s and 1960s continue to follow the patterns of Socialist Realist plots and position characters in hierarchical relationships that replicate the family structure represented in Stalinist texts. In the aftermath of World War II and the Purges, the family unit is broken. While adolescents seek mentors outside the traditional family, and may fall into traps and be misguided, it is the children who fix the broken family bonds. The article argues that, with the shift of narratives to focus on children, traditional values, such as family and nation, are revised, signalling a move away from the centre to the periphery, from the vertical to the horizontal axis. The child-hero moves to the margins and eventually disappears from the screen completely, literally perishing or being transformed into a comic figure in the Stagnation period.

Keywords

Russian cinema
Soviet culture
nation
melodrama
children
Thaw

For the period of the Thaw (c. 1956–64) anti-monumentalism is probably the most important visual manifestation of de-Stalinization, as is evident, for example, in the architectural shift from wedding-cake high-rises to the five-storey housing blocks labelled *khrushcheby* (after Nikita Khrushchev, initiator of a boom in housing construction). Thus, when Soviet cinema started articulating the new cultural values of the Thaw (fully discussed in Woll 2000), such as individuality, domesticity, and emotional self-expression beyond the limits of the official ideology, film-makers literally reduced the hero in size and made him much younger and more spontaneous. Thaw cinema also abandoned the epic mode of Stalinist cinema in favour of the melodrama, which became a dominant cinematic genre. Two heroes dominated the films of this period: the adolescent and the child.

1. The school film had an ideological counterpart in Soviet literature: the school tale. For a detailed discussion of this, see Evgenii Dobrenko (2005).

Adolescents in genre films

The adolescent became the favourite hero of the 1950s. Younger than Stalinist heroes, he rebelled against the former figures of authority and symbolized the changing values and new distribution of power after Stalin's death. Gradually, however, the adolescent would grow into a positive hero. Thaw films tended to leave open the ending for the viewers to complete the familiar master plot. Three genre models serviced the new positive hero: the family melodrama, the crime film, and the school film.¹

The family melodrama was the key genre of the Thaw. It reinvented the nuclear family as the community of the rejuvenated Soviet culture that opposed the monumental ‘great family’ of Stalinist culture (Clark 1981: 114–35). However, family melodrama usually favoured communities larger than just the nuclear family, but smaller than the great Soviet family. In *The House I Live in* (*Dom, v kotorom ia zhivu*, Lev Kulidzhanov and Iakov Segel, 1957) – an exemplary film of the era – the community consists of the inhabitants of an ordinary Moscow apartment building, an egalitarian microcosm representing the Soviet community at large and lacking the vertical hierarchy characteristic of the ‘great family’ of Stalinist culture. The ‘House’ as the new community has an ideologue, Dmitrii (played by Mikhail Ulianov), a prospector, who spends most of his time in expeditions on the margins of the Soviet Empire, sacrificing his well-being for the good of those who live in the centre, in the House. When the Nazis invade, Dmitrii volunteers to fight them, and perishes for the good of those who live comfortably in the House. He has no children of his own, but his neighbour’s son, Serezha, follows Dmitrii’s footsteps and becomes a prospector, inspired by his neighbour’s example. The film implies that Serezha is Dmitrii’s spiritual heir and will accomplish Dmitrii’s mission cut short by his premature death. The film-makers leave the narrative structure of the film open-ended; this is, however, a red herring, because Serezha, the new positive hero, is allowed only one route: toward communism, the same as his spiritual mentor, only that his will be uninterrupted by the war.

The House I Live In also establishes a new type of ideological mentoring in Soviet film. The perfect verticality of the Stalinist family is avoided through



Figure 1: *The House I Live in*.
Photo courtesy of Iskusstvo kino archive.

the physical reality of the Thaw film: instead of the adolescent (Serezha) being the real son of his spiritual and ideological father (Dmitrii), the heir is usually his neighbour or nephew. However, the vertically structured ideology is not suspended completely: instead, it acquires a metaphysical dimension. Serezha maintains a spiritual rather than physical link with his former neighbour: at the film's end Serezha, now a prospector too, returns home from one of the expeditions and is captured against the background of the clear sky – the possible dwelling of his martyred mentor, thus establishing a vertical axis beyond the egalitarian physical reality, as is common for other films and literary texts of the era. For example, in Vasilii Aksenov's cult novel *A Ticket to the Stars* (*Zvezdnyi bilet*, 1961), the two heroes are brothers (a horizontal relationship); when the older brother dies in a space programme experiment a vertical relationship is introduced and at the end of the novel the younger brother looks at the sky where his brother disappeared: inspired by his brother's Promethean example, the younger brother sees his own ticket to the future made of the sky with stars as the ticket's punch holes. One of the most important films of the era, entitled *Clear Sky* (*Chistoe nebo*, Grigorii Chukhrai, 1961), also combines the horizontally structured screen world with the metaphysical vertical axis at the end of the film, when the protagonist, a pilot, flies beyond the clouds, re-establishing the possibility of reviving revolutionary utopia.

In the mid-1950s, the crime film emerges as distinct genre employing a variation of the melodramatic story with an adolescent or young adult protagonist. In this new genre, crime ceases being an ideological transgression and is redefined as a traumatic event in an individual's life and a social disease. The individual's erroneous choices and irrational desires, such as greed, alcoholism, and laziness, become the primary reasons for crimes being committed and replace the motivation of crimes through class war or foreign espionage. The criminals that feature in Thaw narratives are adolescents who lost their fathers during the war and ended up with false mentors during the late Stalin era. Many such films are titled after individual cases: *The Rumiantsev Case* (*Delo Rumiantseva*, Iosif Kheifits, 1955), or *Case 306* (*Delo No. 306*, Anatolii Rybakov, 1956). The plots of these films see the false mentors replaced by new father figures, usually police investigators, who trigger the process of the protagonist's re-education. Again, as in the family melodrama, the viewer often does not see the entire process of reforming the young protagonist. However, the fact that the Soviet police keep the process under control ensures that excessive adolescent energy will find the proper ideological channel.

The Thaw-era crime film is quintessentially a melodrama narrating the fall and redemption of an orphaned adolescent in search of a new father. The crime film's narrative structure and set of characters remain more or less similar to the Stalinist cinematic canon, while the tone of presenting this ideologically correct story changes radically from the epic to the melodramatic. The story stops being distant and timeless, and becomes immediate and emotionally excessive. Notably, the immediacy is reiterated by the present-day setting of these films.

In addition to evoking emotional excess by depicting a lost and powerless adolescent-criminal, crime films of the Thaw make the temporality of 'too late!', typical of melodrama, central to their narrative structure

(Williams 2004: 737). This new temporality challenges above all the Stalinist temporality of the communist future in the present, which Katerina Clark calls the 'modal schizophrenia' of Socialist Realist culture (Clark 1981: 37). In Thaw films, the crime is not a conspiracy in progress that can be prevented by acts of social hygiene, such as purges and extermination of the rich and foreigners. Rather, the crime appears as a fait accompli that cannot be prevented or reversed, but which has traumatic consequences that have to be dealt with.

The crime film also blurs the line between hero, villain, and victim because the young protagonist often carries out all three functions at the same time. The protagonist's transgression from one function to another is essential for triggering the film's action. The crime film also re-establishes the importance of movement within the frame by returning to the screen the chase scene and physical violence. This new aesthetic of movement as both a manifestation of the new cultural politics and a purely commercial attraction replaces the Stalinist aesthetics of monumental stasis.

While the family melodrama and the crime film continue to employ the Stalinist re-education plot as a key narrative model, the school film carnivalizes this model by transforming high-school students into mentors, who re-educate their failing teachers. This mentoring of the teachers by their students has undertones of martyrdom, because the students suffer and turn into victims of a corrupt community before being able to give a lesson to their callous teachers and the insensitive community.

This carnivalesque inversion of the re-education story manifested the general spirit of revived utopianism in the 1960s. The school became the space where Utopia received its last revision before a long and happy life. At this penultimate stop on the way to communism, former taboo topics could be addressed: religious experience in *Clouds Over Borsk* (*Tuchi nad Borskom*, Vasilii Ordynskii, 1960); premarital sex in *And What If It's Love?* (*A esli eto liubov'?*, Iulii Raizman, 1962); juvenile delinquency in *My Friend Kolka* (*Drug moi, Kol'ka!*, Aleksandr Mitta and Aleksei Saltykov, 1961); and the refusal to participate in Soviet public life in *We'll Live Till Monday* (*Dozhivem do ponedel'nika*, Stanislav Rostotskii, 1968). The adolescent transgressed the former limits of the permissible, and by doing so, established new borderlines in tune with the new, redefined Soviet values of the Thaw.

While the school film supposedly reconciles the conflict between the transgressing adolescent and the outgoing communal values incarnated in the school, it often avoids, or fails, to depict the resolution of this conflict. For example, in *Clouds over Borsk*, the protagonist tries to share her first romantic experiences with her teacher and receives a rigid and clichéd response instead of friendly advice. As a result she joins a religious sect in search of spiritual advice and community. The film is narrated by the school teacher who has pushed her student in the direction of the religious sect: her voice-over functions as the confession of her errors and becomes the story of her own re-education in the course of helping her student rejoin the Soviet school community. The film, however, skips the story of the student's reintegration, as though the film-maker did not know how to represent this story without falling prey to Soviet clichés. At the film's end, the viewer only hears the teacher, assuring us that her student

abandoned the sect and warning against Christian sectarians hunting for weak Soviet souls. Thus, the only conversion that the film portrays is the student's conversion to Christianity. The vicious sect literally crucifies the gullible student, whose martyrdom on the cross makes the teacher rethink her ways of dealing with students and rescue the lost girl at the last moment.² The student becomes the martyr-mentor while the teacher turns into a potentially redeemable student.

In many school films of the 1960s the protagonists are female. On the one hand, the melodramatic narrative traditionally favours the female, preferably virginal, protagonist to be victimized in the course of the story. On the other hand, the prominence of female heroes and villains signals the crisis of the key narrative model of Soviet culture: the master plot that was once the domain of primarily male positive heroes and villains in high Stalinist culture was delegated in the 1960s to 'second-gender' characters.³

Children and national identity

While adolescents in films of the Thaw aspired to become the positive heroes of the future communist society, children carried a new set of values and of potential community models. In contrast to adolescent heroes, who were often born under Stalin and shared with their fathers the sufferings of the Great Patriotic War, the children of films of the Thaw era were naturally separated from the war and Stalin's rule. They had mostly entered the world after the war, often even after Stalin's death. In the case of *Serezha*, the first feature film by Georgii Daneliia and Igor' Talankin, the date of birth of the six-year-old protagonist is revealing: he was born in 1954, a year after Stalin's death.⁴

Children provide the centre of the new community, which – for Thaw film-makers – is above all biological rather than ideological. At the centre of this community is the nucleus of the family, which is usually associated with rebirth and the reconstruction of life after the war, or after the fall of Stalin's regime. The propensity of Thaw films to imitate the visual style of neo-realist cinema with its emphasis on poverty also contributes to the conflation of the narrative about the end of the war with that about the end of totalitarian rule.⁵

The newly formed nuclear families of Thaw films usually lack fathers. The explanations that critics usually provide for this phenomenon include the death of the Great Father, Stalin, and the decimation of the male population after the war. I would like to bring up one more observation mentioned first by Benedict Anderson:⁶ the family regenerated on the sacred memory of the fallen father (venerated in the figure of the Unknown Soldier) constitutes the key icon of national community, providing a secular alternative to religious or totalitarian quasi-religious continuity (Anderson 1983: 9–12). The nuclear family of Thaw culture in this respect proceeds not only as a physical entity, but also as an imagined one, maintaining the trans-rational link with the perished fathers.

This organic context of the Thaw child also made him (less often her) the essential member of the national community in films of the era. While political nationalism became an increasing headache for the Soviet

2. Josephine Woll notes that the film was commissioned by the KGB but initially shelved because, according to the KGB viewers, the film was too sympathetic to the 'heroine's religious experience' (Woll 2000: 118).
3. During the Thaw, the similar gender shift one can observe in the Soviet war veteran film: a film about a soldier returning home and struggling to get integrated into peaceful life. In Larisa Shepit'ko's *Wings* (*Kryl'ia*, 1966), the female protagonist, a former military pilot, tries to find her place in the post-war Soviet life.
4. The film-makers changed the time of action in Vera Panova's story in order to emphasize the ideological divide between Stalinism and the Thaw.
5. Woll notes: 'film professionals, film club members and urban residents generally had easy access to Rossellini's *Rome – Open City*, De Sica's *Umberto D.* and *Bicycle Thief*, and to De Santis' films; the regime permitted liberal distribution because these movies dealt with social issues and depicted "simple" working class characters' (Woll 2000: 35).
6. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow was erected on 3 December 1966.

7. The film was Bondarchuk's directorial debut and became a landmark Soviet war film because the protagonist, Andrei Sokolov, fights the Germans to save his family and Russia, not to defend communism and the Soviet Union.
8. The depiction of uncle Kostia in a white uniform in the fields evokes the portrait of Stalin by Ivan Shurpin, *Morning of Our Motherland* (1946).



Figure 2: Serezhka. Serezhka and his stepfather (Sergei Bondarchuk).
Photo courtesy of Iskusstvo kino archive.

authorities during the late Soviet period, the artistic expression of Soviet national identities was permissible as long as representations of such identities did not completely overshadow the visual signs of Soviet identity or touch on controversial political issues.

The children of the Thaw era, as opposed to adolescents, incorporate national markers in their natural identities, which precede the social and ideological world. Sometimes ethnicity comes through metonymically, through association with the father figure. For example, in *Serezhka*, the title hero becomes unmistakably Russian when his new stepfather (played by Sergei Bondarchuk, the iconic Russian soldier since his lead role in *The Fate of a Man* (*Sud'ba cheloveka*, Bondarchuk, 1959)) appears in the film.⁷ In *Serezhka* the Russian father (representing the new era of post-Stalin Russia) is juxtaposed with his friend's uncle, Kostia – representing the old Stalinist values and pictured as a uniformed captain, covered with tattoos, and framed in a manner reminiscent of Stalin's official portraits.⁸ Initially attracted to the exotic and monumental male figure, Serezhka changes his opinion about his potential role model when he witnesses how this tattooed giant beats his nephew. Eventually this temporary change of the role model brings Serezhka closer to his benign Russian father.

While Serezhka discovers national identity as part of the world of his nuclear family, the young protagonist of Mikhail Kalik's *Man Follows the Sun* (*Chelovek idet za solntsem*, 1961), Sandu, embraces in his world historical and ethnic communities, with which he comes in touch when meeting people of his home town. As Vitalii Troianovskii has noted, Sandu's journey proceeds subjectively rather than spatially, by entering the consciousnesses of the people he encounters and who allow him into their worlds: 'a girl-gardener into her recently abandoned Moldavian village, a barber and



Figure 3: Serezha. Serezha and 'Uncle Kostia'.
Photo courtesy of Iskusstvo kino archive.

9. The film was banned in 1967 and released only in 1988 during Gorbachev's perestroika (Lawton 1992: 115–18). Over the last twenty years, scholars have discussed in depth the film's narrative structure, its gender politics, and its production history. See Andrew 2007: 27–44, Monastyreva-Ansdell 2006: 230–49, Roberts 2005: 89–99, Margolit 2003: 423–28, Stishova 1993: 175–85, Stishova 1990: 62–75.

shoe-shiner – into a Jewish quarter (or in Odessa)' (Troianovskii 2002: 13, my translation). As the child protagonist, Sandu posed two ideological problems for Soviet cultural administrators: first, he put a sign of equation between the value of his individual subjectivity and the Soviet world outside his consciousness; second, his subjectivity started fragmenting this unified Soviet world into multiple worlds, whose primary markings are national and individual.

Finally, in *Peace to Him Who Enters* (*Mir vkhodiashchemu*, Aleksandr Alov and Vladimir Naumov, 1961), not the child, but the foetus possesses a national identity that provides the major meaning for the entire narrative. Alov and Naumov narrate the story of Russian soldiers and a pregnant German woman travelling to the delivery ward across a destroyed Germany during the last days of the war. The characters are traumatized by the war, above all, war's Manichean logic, which divides the world into 'us' and 'them', and acquired allegorical significance at the time of the film's release, linking totalitarian ideology with the divisive ideology of the war. The world of peace belongs to the child born at the film's end, significantly a German child. The end of the war signals the end of imperial ideologies: the heir of these ideologies is the newborn whose communities are beyond the reason-driven utopias and belong to the irrational worlds of his family and national community.

The notion of national community epitomized in the nuclear family and juxtaposed with the inorganic Utopia of the Revolution found its clearest manifestation in Aleksandr Askol'dov's *The Commissar* (*Komissar*, 1967).⁹ A Russian Red Army commissar, Klavdia Vavilova (Nonna Mordiuikova), appears in the film as the unflinching scourge of the Revolution. On the spot, she sentences to death a deserter who took advantage of the situation and visited his family while his regiment was

10. Bakhtin defines carnivalesque misalliance as 'all things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a noncarnivalistic hierarchical worldview are drawn into carnivalesque contacts and combinations. Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid' (Bakhtin 1984: 123).

passing by his home village. In the film, domesticity and longing for the organic community are incompatible with the demands of the Revolution. While Klavdia punishes the transgressor, she discovers the same flaw, namely the need for domestic space, literally inside herself: she is pregnant and has to deal with the demands of personal life that distract her from her Revolutionary duties. The commissar decides to stay behind with a Jewish family, the Magazanniks, to give birth. They are the only intact family in the entire film: all other families have been destroyed by the war and the Revolution. The Magazanniks give her shelter, deliver her unwanted child, and then, when the protagonist abandons her child, accept this child into their family and community. When Vavilova's son is born, Maria Magazannik, the family matriarch, says: 'We have a boy,' thus including the newborn in her family.

According to the film's logic, the child cannot stay with the commissar, because the child needs a family to survive. The commissar has to choose between becoming a Russian peasant woman and a mother to her son, or being a commissar and continue fighting for the Revolution. The Magazanniks actually manage to transform, albeit temporarily, the disciplined, uniformed, and masculine body of Vavilova into the body of a Russian peasant woman. A long sequence in the film is dedicated to the Magazanniks' tailoring of her new outfit of a peasant woman. Vavilova, however, chooses the Revolution and returns to her warrior identity after the delivery. According to the film, the warrior world of the Revolution is fertile only with death. The Communist Internationale, the concluding tune of the film, inaugurates the death of the Revolutionary Utopia and is opposed to the preceding Jewish melody of survival, despite the Civil War pogroms and the Holocaust (shown in a flash-forward).

In *The Commissar*, childhood hinges on two organic communities, familial and national, and is seen as the only creative period in human life. This creativity has three important aspects. First, children serve as history's unbiased chroniclers: they observe and then re-enact in their naïve and cruel games the war and ethnic pogroms. Second, children trigger the prophetic potential of art: their war game serves as a flash-forward to the Holocaust, which the film-maker allows the Magazanniks to envision. Finally, children make art a transcendental spiritual experience beyond the horrors surrounding them: they can endure these horrors by escaping into the syncretic world of a game that combines art, history, and religion.

The father, Efim Magazannik (played by Rolan Bykov), occupies a special place in the film. On the one hand, he is the patriarch, the moral leader of the family and of an ethnic, national community; on the other hand, he is an anti-monumental leader, an antipode of the Stalin-era father figure. The character of Efim is constructed in accordance with what Mikhail Bakhtin would call the principle of misalliance: he is the father-child.¹⁰ Askol'dov starts constructing this anti-monumental father by juxtaposing him with the gigantic figure of the commissar. Then he establishes Efim's place in the family structure: the family is ruled by his wife Maria while Efim shares with his children an interest in play and fantasy. He is, in fact, the oldest child, whose major talent is his imagination, the ability to create and find



Figure 4: The Commissar – the pregnant Vavilova.
Photo courtesy of Iskusstvo kino archive.

comfort in creation. It is not a coincidence that he works as an artisan: he fixes the broken world with the power of his creativity.

In a key scene Efim leads his 'nation of children' into a dance to comfort them when bombs are being dropped on their house. The dance articulates both the ethnic/national and religious identity of the family, and becomes prophetic. The camera cuts from the dancing Jewish family to the flash-forward: the viewer sees Efim and his family/nation walking towards the gates of a concentration camp. The scene emphasizes that the child in Thaw films inseparably links the national and the creative/artistic. To assert national sovereignty becomes an indispensable condition for asserting artistic sovereignty. Only after Efim says: 'Maybe someday Jews will live where they want and Jews will not have to hide in cellars', he finds the inspiration for survival.

While in many Thaw films belonging to a national community signals being outside the logic of the Soviet order of things, few film-makers tried to explore the possibilities of national identity beyond the negative meta-identity: national as non-Soviet. Andrei Tarkovskii attempted to deal with the problem of Russian national identity in his first feature film, *Ivan's Childhood* (*Ivanovo detstvo*, 1962). While the child-protagonist incarnates the search for a lost organic identity (nuclear family and national community) Tarkovskii complicates this collision by introducing the dilemma of the Russian idea. Nancy Condee defines the Russian idea as 'a belief system that reveres endurance, powerlessness and sacrifices in this historical world as necessary, even holy, elements in life's anticipation of the future (and therefore transhistorical) Utopia' (Condee 1999: 26). The split between powerlessness in this world and dreaming of the organic world where his

11. See Sartre ([1963] 1991: 14); Anninskii (1991: 112); Troianovskii (2002: 25).

family and national community are intact defines both Ivan's universe and the formal structure of the film.

The split between Ivan's dreams, where his sibling and his mother are alive, and the historical world of wartime destruction, determines the narrative structure. The film opens with Ivan's primal scream 'Mama!' anticipating her death in the world of the film and the incessant desire to resurrect her in his dream. While the world of the film is split between utopian dreams of harmony and a hellish reality, Ivan's consciousness mirrors this shattered reality in its insanity.¹¹ Ivan tries to bring together this split reality: the illogical world of the war and his dreams of the organic harmony of his family.

Visually, Tarkovskii also favours the dualism of black and white to emphasize Ivan's paradoxical world, where the dream image and the image of historical reality tear apart Ivan's consciousness. Moreover, even the world of Ivan's dream, where biology and spirit supposedly are in tune with each other, is visually split. In Ivan's final dream, Tarkovskii does not just use the reversed negative sequence, thus inverting the paradise world of the dream, but he depicts his hero in the positive while the world surrounding him turns to negative. The unity of the world is destroyed not only in the historical reality of the film, but also in Ivan's dream world. The world is not just hellishly inverted, as it would be the case in F.W. Murnau's negative photography sequence in *Nosferatu*, but internally split within the film frame.

Ivan's Childhood in this respect is the most topical Thaw film, dealing with the aspects of Russian identity unresolved to the present day. *Ivan's Childhood* does not place Ivan's national identity in opposition to the Stalinist imperial identity associated with senseless and irrational war. Instead, Ivan's consciousness combines, in a paradoxical misalliance,



Figure 5: *Ivan's Childhood*.
Photo courtesy of Iskusstvo kino archive.

powerlessness in the face of destruction in the earthly world and the despair of lacking the future Utopia. Utopia is dead because Ivan's dreams are corrupt at the film's end: in the centre of his paradise stands the dead tree of life. As in modern-day Russia, the empire generates only death, while Russian national identity is repressed by both the imperial and messianic 'Russian idea'.

Tarkovskii's second feature, with the telling working title *The Passion According to Andrew* (1966),¹² is a much more conventional rendition of the 'Russian idea'. The artist, Andrei Rublev emerges out of the sufferings of his Mother Nation on the outskirts of the Tatar Empire. A monk, he is innocent like a child. After being forced to kill a Tatar during the war, he takes a vow of silence, thus eschewing the discourse of violence embraced by his contemporaries. His ability to remain a child allows him to become an artist and incarnate in his icons 'the transhistorical Utopia'. At the film's end, the colour image (replacing the black-and-white image) signals the coming of Utopia. What seems to be an irreconcilable split in *Ivan's Childhood* finds resolution through the Orthodox icon painting in *Andrei Rublev*. Most importantly, the divine child Andrei has a double, who serves as an allegorical figure representing Russia as the heavenly fiancée of the artist. This double appears in the film as a nameless girl/fool-in-Christ (played by Tarkovskii's wife Irma Raush) born out of the Orthodox faith and the brutality emanating from the world of secular power.

The shift from adolescents to children thus fits well into the anti-monumental tendency of Thaw culture and diversifies the range of functions that protagonists play in Soviet cinema. This trend stands in contrast to Stalinist cinema, which favoured the positive hero who defends and expands the Soviet Empire.¹³ The hero's function remains the same for the Civil War hero Chapaev (1934), fighting for the Soviet regime, and for Ivan the Terrible (1945–46), the tsar who expanded the borders of mediaeval Muscovy and whom Stalin advocated as a model for own his autocratic rule. Conquering nature, destroying adverse social classes, or defeating ideologically flawed evil empires were part of the total project of Russo-Soviet imperial aggrandizement. On the surface, the adolescent hero of Thaw films emerges as the bearer of new cultural values. However, the adolescent appears largely in films that entail only a slightly modified version of the Socialist Realist master plot.¹⁴ Most importantly, these films continue to recreate the hierarchical relationship between the ideological mentor and his disciple, the positive hero. On the one hand, such relationships provide continuity with the cinematic tradition of the Stalin era; on the other hand, the hierarchy enacted in adolescent-centred Thaw films represents the relationship of inequality between the empire's ideological centre and its less ideologically conscious periphery.

In contrast, the child hero stands at the centre of a completely different community, one that lacks the ideology of Marxist quasi-religion and favours instead the organic community of the family, both nuclear and national. This new community is closer to what Benedict Anderson terms the 'imagined community of the nation' (Anderson 1983: 7). Similar to a nation, the child's community is limited and never all-embracing, as opposed to the communist community that imagined itself, after the success of the world

12. Tarkovskii completed the film in 1966. It was released under the title *Andrei Rublev* in France in 1969 and in the USSR in 1971.
13. I use Terry Martin's definition of the Soviet Union as the 'affirmative action Empire': the empire that preserved 'the imperial structure of a state-bearing imperial nation and colonial nations but reversed its valence by promoting the national "forms" of the former colonial nations and downplaying the expression of Russian national identity' (Martin 1991: 82).
14. Katerina Clark defines the master plot in her discussion of the Soviet novel as the positive hero's transformation from the state of spontaneity into the state of consciousness under the guidance of the ideological mentor/father figure (Clark 1981: 255–60).

revolution, as equal to the whole of mankind. The child's community in Thaw films also gravitates toward a horizontal rather than vertical structure, not unlike the nation, which according to Anderson 'is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' (Anderson 1983: 7).

The child in stagnation-period cinema

The end of the Thaw in Soviet cinema manifests itself through several important changes in the function of adolescent and child heroes. The adolescent hero loses the ability to undergo re-education and to be mentored. Two types of film that represent this ossification emerge during the 1960s: the slapstick comedy and the film about the adolescent prophet. In the former, represented best by the films of Leonid Gaidai, the positive adolescent hero is parodied and becomes a modern version of Ivan-the-Fool, such as the student Shurik, who – like his folk ancestor – is incapable of any transformation until he is assisted by miraculous coincidence and modern versions of magic helpers. Moreover, Shurik succeeds only by luck and chance and not because of his ingenuity or out of the iron necessity of history.

The film about the adolescent prophet is a less entertaining model than the slapstick comedy and it is represented, above all, by the films of Aleksandr Mitta and Gleb Panfilov: *Someone is Ringing, Open the Door* (*Zvoniat, otkroite dver'*, Mitta, 1965), *Shine, Shine, My Star* (*Gori, gori, moia zvezda*, Mitta, 1969), *No Ford Through the Fire* (*V ogn'e broda net*, Panfilov, 1967), and *The Debut* (*Nachalo*, Panfilov, 1970). Arguably, the key narrative motif of these films is the widening gap between reality and the world



Figure 6: Shine, Shine, My Star.
Photo courtesy of Iskusstvo kino archive.

of Revolutionary Utopia. The death of the adolescent protagonist is a frequent conclusion of such films. Aleksandr Mitta's *Shine, Shine, My Star* models the hero-prophet on the martyrdom archetype. The protagonist carries the name of Iskremas – the acronym of the slogan, 'Iskusstvo revoliutsionnyn massam' ('Art to the Revolutionary Masses'). He appears from nowhere as a ready-made artist and prophet of the Revolution, saves the community, and disappears (he is killed by one of the local outlaws). It is not a coincidence that the climactic scene of Mitta's film is set in a church rebuilt as a Revolutionary theatre.¹⁵ If Gaidai's *Shurik* gravitates towards folkloric narrative models, then Iskremas evokes hagiographic narratives of martyrdom.

During the late Thaw, the linguistic diversity in films became a matter of serious controversy and signalled an important limit of the permissible in Soviet culture of the era. Soviet films could have ethnic themes and characters, but these ethnic characters continued speaking Russian, the language of the Soviet Empire. To be more precise, republics of the Soviet Union usually made a certain number of films in the local language, which were then dubbed into the Empire's official language for the Soviet release. The films, in which other languages appeared as part of the filmic world and competed with Russian as signifiers of a non-Soviet ideology and identity, often got film-makers in trouble with the Soviet cultural authorities. For example, in *The Commissar*, Askol'dov includes in the Magazannik family the grandmother who speaks Yiddish. While the grandmother is marginal to the film's action, these peripheries are often important for Thaw films because the centre is corrupted by totalitarian culture. In the case of the grandmother, her marginality together with her ability to speak Yiddish is of primary importance: she maintains the authenticity of the Magazanniks' cultural, religious, and family identity. In Sergo Paradjanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (*Teni zabytykh predkov*, 1964), the titles of the film's chapters appear in Ukrainian, and characters speak in Ukrainian dialects, as opposed to standard Russian. Needless to say, both Askol'dov and Paradjanov had problems with the cultural authorities: accusations of formalism and falsification of Soviet history were levelled against these film-makers (Woll 2000: 185–86, 202). The conflicts around films that emphasized the periphery over the centre through the use of minority languages and featuring ethnic groups as protagonists, marked the end of the Thaw.

It is noteworthy that Gorbachev's perestroika began precisely with an attempt to accomplish the unfinished agenda of the Thaw, namely to assert a horizontal over the vertical axis: the release of *Repentance* (*Pokaianie*, Abuladze, 1984, released 1987),¹⁶ a film with Georgian dialogue, signalled Gorbachev's new policy of openness in the sphere of culture, which eventually would lead to the demise of the Soviet Empire and its culture.

The issue of national identity appeared in Thaw films as a side product of the search for new routes toward the communist Utopia and the redefinition of the meaning of a unified socialist identity. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, the conflict between national and imperial identities has remained central for many films. What during the Thaw were the imaginary worlds of national identities associated with child heroes, has turned – since the demise of the Soviet Empire – into the 'imagined communities' of newly independent states.

15. In Gleb Panfilov's *Debut*, the female protagonist lives two lives during the film: that of a common Soviet woman (Pasha Stroganova) and that of Joan of Arc sacrificing herself for a lofty goal. The protagonist feels capable of living the life of a hero-martyr in the epic past, but has to live a life of an average citizen in the prosaic Soviet present.
16. Tengiz Abuladze made *Repentance* in 1984 for Georgian television, but Soviet authorities did not release it until January 1987. The film appeared in a record number of prints (1200), and was one of the last films to draw record numbers of spectators before the collapse of the Soviet film distribution system (Anashkin, Bykov and Kovalov 2002: 308).

Works cited

- Anashkin, Sergei, Bykov, Dmitrii and Kovalov, Oleg (2002), “‘Pokaianie” vykhodit na ekran’”, in L. Arkus (ed.), *Noveishaia istoriia otechestvennogo kino*, vol. 4, St Petersburg: Seans, p. 308.
- Anderson, Benedict (1983), *Imagined Community*, London: Verso.
- Andrew, Joe (2007), ‘Birth equals rebirth? Space, narrative and gender in *The Commissar*’, *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, 1: 1, pp. 27–44.
- Anninskii, Lev (1991), *Shestidesiatniki i my*, Moscow: Kinotsentr.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1984), *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bordwell, David (2004), ‘The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice’, in L. Braudy and M. Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 774–82.
- Clark, Katerina (1981), *The Soviet Novel*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Condee, Nancy (1999), ‘No Glory, No Majesty, or Honour: The Russian Idea and Inverse Value’, in B. Beumers (ed.), *Russia on Reels. The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*, London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 25–34.
- Dobrenko, Evgenii (2005), ‘The Entire Real World of Children: The School Tale and “Our Happy Childhood”’, *Slavic and East European Journal*, 49: 2, pp. 225–48.
- Lawton, Anna (1992), *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in our Time*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Margolit, Evgenii (2003), ‘Komissar’, in L. Budiak (ed.), *Rossiiskii illuzion*, Moscow: Materik.
- Martin, Terry (2001), ‘The Affirmative Action Empire’, in R.G. Suny and T. Martin (eds.), *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 67–90.
- Monastyreva-Ansdell, Elena (2006), ‘Redressing the Commissar: Thaw Cinema Revises Soviet Structuring Myths’, *Russian Review: An American Quarterly Devoted to Russia Past and Present*, 65: 2, pp. 230–49.
- Roberts, Graham (2005), ‘The sound of silence: from Grossman’s Berdichev to Askol’dov’s *Commissar*’, in S. Hutchings and A. Vernitski (eds.), *Russian and Soviet Film Adaptations of Literature, 1900–2001: Screening the word*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 89–99.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul ([1963] 1991), ‘Po povodu *Ivanova detstva*’, [Letter to Mario Alicata, first published in *L’Unità*, 9 October 1963] in A.M. Sandler (ed.), *Mir i fil’m my Andreiia Tarkovskogo*, Moscow: Iskusstvo, pp. 11–21.
- Stishova, Elena (1990), ‘Passions over Commissar’, *Wide Angle: A Film Quarterly of Theory, Criticism, and Practice*, 12: 4, pp. 62–75.
- (1993), ‘The Mythologization of Soviet Woman: *The Commissar* and Other Cases’, in L. Attwood (eds.), *Red Women on the Silver Screen: Soviet Women and Cinema from the Beginning to the End of the Communist Era*, London: Pandora, pp. 175–85.
- Troianovskii, Vitalii (2002), ‘Novye liudi 60ykh godov’, in V. Troianovskii (ed.), *Kinematograf otpelei: kniga vtoraiia*, Moscow: Materik, pp. 6–59.
- Williams, Linda (2004), ‘Body Genres: Gender, Genre, and Excess’, in L. Braudy and M. Cohen (ed.), *Film Theory and Criticism*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 727–42.
- Woll, Josephine (2000), *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw*, London: I.B. Tauris.

Suggested citation

Prokhorov, A. (2007), 'The adolescent and the child in the cinema of the Thaw', *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 1: 2, pp. 115–129, doi: 10.1386/srsc.1.2.115/1

Contributor details

Alexander Prokhorov works on issues relating to the cinema as a mode of political and aesthetic expression. His teaching and research link these issues to the relationship between genre films and art films, and the construction of imperial and national identity, with particular attention to Soviet and Russian cinema. He is the editor of *Springtime for Soviet Cinema: Re/viewing the 1960s* (Pittsburgh Film Symposium, 2001). His essays and reviews have appeared in *Slavic Review*, *Slavic and East European Journal*, *Russian Review*, *Wiener Slawistische Almanach*, and *Kinokultura* as well as the anthologies *The Russian Memoir* (ed. Beth Holmgren, 2003), *Against the Grain: Parody, Satire, and Intertextuality in Russian Literature* (ed. Janet Tucker, 2002) and *Imitations of Life: Two Centuries of Melodrama in Russia* (eds. Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger, 2002). Contact: Professor Alexander Prokhorov, College of William and Mary, Dept of Modern Languages and Literature, Washington Hall, PO 8795, Williamsburg VA 23187.
E-mail: axprok@wm.edu