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## **Evgenii Margolit: Zhivye i mērtvoe. Zametki k istorii sovetskogo kino 1920-1960kh.**

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In his book *Zhivye i mērtvoe* Evgenii Margolit revisits the history of Soviet cinema. An expert Russian cinema critic and historian, Margolit offers an original approach to the history of Soviet film, which distinguishes his massive volume among numerous books on this topic. Instead of using the history of the Soviet state—often divided into periods associated with a particular ruler as a lens to analyse Soviet film—Margolit sees Soviet cinema as a holistic phenomenon which ceased to exist 20 years before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike other historians, the author of the book does not depict the relationship between Soviet cinema and the state as a banal confrontation in which cinema had to follow the directives of Party leaders. Instead, he sees the power of both Soviet cinema and the Soviet state as rooted in the 1917 Revolution and emphasizes the unity of their aspirations – “a cardinal transformation of the world on sensible and rightful grounds” (2012: 8). This approach allows the author to explore the equal nature of Soviet film, its dialogism, and its controversy in relation to the state’s powers.

The book is a compilation of previously written articles divided into seven chapters. These chapters illuminate the time periods that are traditionally grouped together in Soviet film, starting with its early history up to and through the 1960s. However, Margolit aims not only to connect the films with contemporary events, but also to present the organic evolution, continuity, and inevitable end of Soviet cinema under the overarching themes of the revolutionary struggle: old and new, good and evil, and freedom and oppression. The resolution of these binary oppositions ultimately precipitates the victory of the new and good, and promises freedom in the radiant future. Each chapter opens with a general introduction that defines the way filmmakers of each epoch approach the overarching revolutionary themes, points out state-initiated restrictions on the cinematographic depiction of these themes, and describes the interaction between filmmakers and Party bureaucrats.

In the first chapter, Margolit focuses on the 1920s and explains the importance of the emerg-

ing cinema industry for the new Soviet state and the support that the state found in early filmmakers. He emphasizes their youthful ambition and thirst for freedom of social self-realization and self-expression. Margolit argues that film directors did in fact receive a cultural mandate from the new government. However, the nature of the order “to flip the universe upside down” (2012: 30) delighted young and bold filmmakers as it matched their ambitious aspirations. The theme of the revolutionary struggle focuses on the individual and his relation to the masses and their coalition against evil. The thematic development begins as a game of a masked and adventurous, devious yet noble protagonist who saves the day, e.g. *Neobychnaiye prikliucheniia mistera Vesta v strane bol’shevikov / The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (Lev Kuleshov, 1924, Soviet Union). Later, it switches to a rebellious child defying his father. The child serves as a metaphor for the “little man” and the father represents the patriarchal, stagnated tsarist regime, e.g. *Bronenosets Potëmkin / Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eizenshtein, 1925, Soviet Union) and *Mat’ / Mother* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1926, Soviet Union). Finally, the theme of the revolutionary struggle finds its resolution in the cosmic unity of the universe, Man, and machine in *Zemlia / Earth* (Oleksandr Dovzhenko, 1930, Soviet Union). Margolit points out that the imagery employed by the filmmakers is rooted in the Russian literary tradition of the nineteenth century, folklore, pagan worldviews, and Christian martyrdom. This explains how cinema became a new testimony, occupying the void left by religion and the autocratic voice of the Tsar while showing common people both the path and the destination.

The second chapter examines the new Soviet genre of propaganda film, agitprop, and the beginning of sound in Soviet films from 1929 to 1936. The speaking protagonist acquires strategic significance; he becomes the voice of the state. In this respect propaganda films resemble the radio, which differentiates Soviet sound cinema from its Western counterpart. In this chapter Margolit also analyses

films banned from the screen by Soviet censorship for the incompatibility of the protagonist's thoughts with state ideology. Soviet censors understood any seeming deviance from the mainstream ideology as its "crude distortion" or "false depiction" (2012: 139). However, Margolit emphasizes that the state did not severely punish those filmmakers who misinterpreted the official message; rather, it eventually allowed them to continue their efforts to prove the concordance of cinema and state ideology.

The theme of clash often appears as the inner conflict of a main character. He or she must reject old values that bring death and destruction and accept and implement values of the new order that aid the masses in their fight towards the radiant future, e.g. *Putëvka v zhizn' / Road to Life* (Nikolai Ekk, 1931, Soviet Union). However, in the third chapter, which covers the period from 1936 to 1941, the inner struggle becomes an external one, as the time for self-reflection is over. "The 'last battle' is happening at the present moment" (2012: 245). Potential danger constantly looms over the festive world of the collective. The protagonist must fight against a real enemy who may appear in the guise of a friend, relative, or lover, and often sacrifices his- or herself for the benefit of the collective. The theme of the revolutionary struggle, as the open confrontation between the protagonist and antagonist prepares the viewer for the sacred war that would spread communism around the world. This ideology acquires a prophetic character at the outbreak of Second World War (2012: 285).

The fourth chapter, devoted to films of 1941-1946, emphasizes the cinematographic revival of true revolutionary hopes in the midst of the predicted war. Contemporary filmmakers depicted the theme of the revolutionary clash as a final sacrifice of the Soviet people in the war against the Nazis. The victory in this struggle becomes the ultimate catalyst for freedom, equality, and the radiant future. However, the state has to lower its expectations regarding the previously promoted image of the radiant future, as an abstract ideological pathos would not stimulate motivation to defend the coun-

try. Therefore, images of family values, friendship, and the joy of labor for the benefit of one's loved ones began to flicker across the screen, rather than preoccupations with the ephemeral masses. Having abandoned his ideological fanaticism of the 1930s, the protagonist becomes a hero with a human face, who is able to make a silly joke or let a tear drop, e.g. *Dva boitsa / Two Soldiers* (Leonid Lukov, 1943, Soviet Union).

Margolit devotes the last three chapters to the gradual end of the theme of revolutionary struggle that intended to bring the radiant future. Soviet filmmakers began to realize that the state had betrayed the original revolutionary ideals. The film protagonist of this period became introverted, disillusioned, and incapable of finding his or her place in reality. The promised radiant future now appeared distant, vague, and hopeless. Margolit sees this as the final and dramatic milestone in Soviet cinema, after which Soviet cinema ceases to exist. The author removes the label of the ideological victim of the Party ambitions from Soviet cinema and emphasizes its active role in the construction of the myth of the Soviet Union as the most powerful state and home to the happiest people. Such an approach to the history of Soviet film turns the book into a film in its own right, where chapters, films, directors, themes, and Party bureaucrats are the actors performing their scripted roles.

Margolit's use of archival data, notes from memoirs, transcripts of Party meetings, cultural and historical references, public speeches, personal correspondence, writings of other film critics, and literature bolsters his arguments, demonstrates his expertise in the field, and contributes to the occasional humorous or sarcastic tone of narration. This contributes to the book's readability and keeps the reader's attention.

Margolit writes for a variety of readers. His straightforward language, logical arguments, and original approach make his work engaging for both scholars and casual Soviet film lovers. More than 700 films are woven into this larger ideological context, demonstrating the encyclopedic breadth of the

book and contributing to its value as a research tool. The book invites readers to reconsider familiar films, their themes, aesthetics, and place in the Soviet film canon. Readers will discover previously unfamiliar films and gain a better understanding on the nature of Soviet censorship that kept many films off of the silver screen. *Zhivye i Mērtvoe* succeeds in presenting a unique argument for the development and eventual decline of Soviet film, one that is unrelated to the downfall of the state.

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## Filmography

Dovzhenko, Oleksandr 1930. *Zemlia / Earth*. VUFKU.

Ekk, Nikolai 1931. *Putēvka v zhizn' / Road to Life*. Mezhrabpomfil'm.

Eizenshtein, Sergei 1925. *Bronenosets Potēmkin / Battleship Potemkin*. Goskino; Mosfil'm.

Kuleshov, Lev 1924. *Neobychnainye prikliucheniia mistera Vesta v strane bol'shevikov / The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*. Goskino.

Lukov, Leonid 1943. *Dva boitsa / Two Soldiers*. Tashkent Studios.

Pudovkin, Vsevolod 1926. *Mat' / Mother*. Mezhrabpomfil'm.

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