

## **Bury and let die...**

### **Film censorship in post-Stalin Russia**

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**Film censorship in post-Stalin Russia was neither rational, nor a product of ideology. As, historian Martine Godet convincingly shows, it was rather the result of a fluid and unpredictable process, where status and stratagems played a key role.**

**Reviewed:** Martine Godet, *La pellicule et les ciseaux. La censure dans le cinéma soviétique du Dégel à la perestroïka*, CNRS éditions, 2011.

“What? *Kuban Cossaks* is banned! And *Eugene Onegin*, and *Loyal Friends!*” Even the members of the Goskino (the Ministry in charge of cinema) Collegium were flabbergasted when the Conflict Commission, in 1986, began to review the body of films that had been kept “on the shelf” for decades.<sup>1</sup> As the work of the Conflict Commission progressed, many in the inner circle kept asking themselves, why? What could have been the reasons for condemning such a large number of films – about 200, a mixed bag of works of different genres, different topics, and different artistic levels, which could not have been judged by a set of fixed rules. Martine Godet’s *La pellicule et les ciseaux* does a very good job at answering the “why.”

### **The Soviet art of “editing” films...**

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<sup>1</sup> Rolan Bykov is quoted on this episode in “Plus Sixty,” *Moscow News*, No. 29 (1988).

Godet focuses on censorship in the period which includes the “thaw” and the “stagnation” years, roughly from 1955 to 1985, with occasional flashforwards into perestroika time. These historical periods are heavily marked by the personality of their respective leaders – Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Gorbachev. Therefore, the question of censorship, as well as all other matters concerning the cinema industry, reflected current government policies and, by extension, the cultural atmosphere they engendered. Martine Godet writes that her book’s aim is to analyze the mechanism of censorship in the post-Stalinist period as an object of social history, and to elucidate the relationship between the intelligentsia and power. This is what makes her work particularly valuable, and different from others on the subject: censorship after Stalin became a matter of culture, rather than of institutionalized rules enforced by specific organs.

To be sure, Goskino exercised its patronage and control functions with meticulous efficiency. There was a chain of command that went from the studios up to the minister’s office and beyond, reaching the *sancta sanctorum* of the Central Committee and the Politburo. On the side, there were other watchdogs, such as the KGB (always under cover) and the Ministry of Defense for topics touching on war.

But “censorship” was not a term in use. The supervision of film production was entrusted to the “editorial department.” Therefore, the various stages, from submission of the script to the release of the film, were rather fluid. Judgment was subjective, and finally rested with whomever had the greater decision-making power. Decisions were not set in stone and could change by the “power of the telephone,” those peremptory calls that came down from the high spheres and settled the matter instantaneously. And, more often than not, the editors and their higher-ups aimed at satisfying the popular demand, which reflected the rather prude and conservative taste of millions of viewers.

### **Navigating through the obstacles of censorship**

Godet paints a broad canvas of the prevalent discourse on cinema in the post-Stalinist period, relying on in-depth research as well as on interviews with the protagonists of those events. Her sources include published and unpublished archival material, monographs, articles, catalogues, reviews, oral testimony, and the films themselves. The picture that emerges is of a

society more open than it is generally thought, inasmuch as there were areas the individual could navigate if she/he was shrewd enough to dodge the obstacles. In those troubled waters, censorship was applied as a network of ambiguous relationships.

To sustain this thesis, Godet organizes her analysis into three groups: the institutions, the cinema officials, and the filmmakers, and points out the numerous stratagems applied from all sides in order to attain a goal, serve one's own interests, or simply protect oneself.

It was a common practice of the Central Committee members and the Goskino bosses not to leave any track record. They used only oral communication in order to keep the process fluid and unpredictable – and safe for themselves. Another trick was to avoid branding a film with an official ban. Official banning was a rare occurrence because it reflected badly on the whole system. They preferred to release the film with a low classification grade, so that only a few prints would be produced and never distributed. Consequently, the film in question would not be officially banned, but simply buried. A third stratagem was the so-called “dacha screening,” where high officials had a film delivered to their dachas for the weekend, prior to its release. There, they would invite a numerous audience of wives, children, grandmothers, domestics, and family friends to have the film judged by “the people.” These screenings were a nightmare for the progressive filmmakers, because a great deal of films displaying social criticism or formalistic features ended up on the shelf as a result.

### **Ostracized or tolerated**

*La pellicule et les ciseaux* provides the point of view of the filmmakers thanks to a good survey of prominent figures, such as Guerman, Klimov, Muratova, Konchalovsky, Panfilov and others.<sup>2</sup> Later, in the appendix, some of them come vividly to life through interviews that bring to the fore their true voices.

Interviews reveal some of the stratagems they used to circumvent the system. First and foremost, there was self-censorship. Screenwriters and directors knew very well to which extent

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<sup>2</sup> Alexei Guerman, Elem Klimov, Kira Muratova, Andrei Konchalovsky and Gleb Panfilov had begun their careers in the 1960s, and have struggled for two decades against the censorship machinery. The few films they were able to make were promptly shelved. In the perestroika period they represented the new face of Soviet cinema.

they could push the envelope. The doctrine of Socialist Realism, established in 1935, was still in force, and one had to be mindful of the consequences for crossing the line. It was, therefore, common practice to submit a script apparently conforming to the rules and, after passing the first test, to change the thrust of the story during the filming process. Visual communication can convey a message completely different from the written text, and the filmmakers used the power of the camera to create the so-called Aesopian language, connotative and suggestive of hidden meanings.

At times it worked, and at times it did not. The outcome depended very much on the personal relationship between a particular filmmaker and the authorities. Not all were treated equally. Guerman says that he could afford to be a rebel because his family was part of the intelligentsia. His father had a status as a writer, notwithstanding his opposition to power. Therefore, within this context, the authorities would not expect Guerman to tread the orthodox line, and the punishment would be lenient. This was also the case with the brothers Andrei Konchalovsky and Nikita Mikhalkov.

Conversely, Muratova received a harsher treatment partly because she was a foreigner (originally from Romania) with no connections and no protection. This situation was further compounded by her intractable personality, which did not make her any friends and caused her to become a pariah until the beginning of perestroika.

Hostility toward Klimov and his films had a different origin. His family belonged in the higher echelons of the Party bureaucracy, and the authorities resented his “defection” to the side of the critics of the regime. The case of Askoldov is similar. A Party member, he worked at Goskino as an editor/censor for a few years. Because of this early connection, when he switched to filmmaking and realized his controversial masterpiece *Commissar* (1966), he was branded as a traitor and harassed for twenty years. The sad irony is that even in the first years of perestroika, when ostracized filmmakers were rehabilitated, he remained a *maudit*. This had to do with the ugly atmosphere of petty revenge and settling of personal accounts that set in at the Filmmakers Union under the Klimov administration. For reasons still unknown, Klimov himself tried to block the release of *Commissar*. Later, Klimov was criticized for applying the same kind of rigid

leadership that the new liberal forces were supposed to replace. He himself acknowledged it: “There was a wall and we breached it... it collapsed. And what did we see beyond that wall? A mirror. And in that mirror we saw ourselves.”

Of course, these were not the only reasons. Godet presents for each film the probable causes for its rejection, which run from ideological deviations (Klimov’s *Rasputin/Agony*) to tabu topics such as the infamous “Vlasov army” (Guerman’s *Trial on the Road*), the *embourgeoisement* of the nomenklatura (Muratova’s *Brief Encounters* and *Long Farewells*), the Jewish question (Askoldov’s *Commissar*), the dismal state of village life (Konchalovsky’s *Asya’s Happiness*), and so on.

In some cases, the censors had such an aversion against a given film that they would order it destroyed (although, as a rule, all films had to be deposited in the Gosfilmofond archives). Testimony exists of how courageous studio technicians would produce a positive print in secret the night before the negative was scheduled for destruction, and how filmmakers and crew members would then stash the illegal print under the couch at home. It is thanks to these actions that some of the best films of the Soviet era were able to see the light of the day again when the regime fell.

To balance the picture, one interview presents the voice of the censor, Igor Sadchikov, who worked at Goskino as editor for seventeen years. His account provides an insider’s view of how the mechanism worked. It includes portraits of the major figures, ministers and vice ministers, relationships, processes, episodes relative to specific film cases, interactions with filmmakers. He describes himself as a mediator between the artist and the system, advising screenwriters and directors on the best way to satisfy Goskino’s requirements, often involving numerous cuts and revisions. He does not come across as an insensitive censor, but as a decent individual performing his job with knowledge and fairness. His major point of concern is to be able to establish this fact, and to rectify the prevalent opinion among cinema scholars that Goskino was an apparatus exclusively bent on crushing the best Soviet talent.

As a case in point, Sadchikov mentions, repeatedly, the report of the team working under the direction of Valeri Fomin, published as a series of articles in the journal *Iskusstvo kino* in 1988 and 1989, by the title “Notes from the House of the Dead.” The report is based on the hundreds of documents found in the cinema archives as soon as they were opened to the public. The work of the Fomin team is remarkable for the wealth of information it unveiled, but, as Godet points out, it is also biased. In its revolutionary zeal, the report “interprets these manifestations of censorship in a radically anti-Soviet way, and presents on one side a censorship... emanating from a monolithic power and, on the other, the filmmakers as total victims.”

Godet succeeds in redressing the balance by adding nuances and layers to that simplistic Manichean model, and, by so doing, reveals the true nature of post-Stalinist censorship as a complex organism of interrelated networks and systems.

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