

**CONSTRUCTING THE PAST IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN
CINEMA:
IMAGES OF ARCHITECTURE, OR
WHERE THE RUSSIANS LIVE IN RUSSIAN FILMS**

Oksana Bulgakowa

The spatial constructions are society's dreams. If the hieroglyphics of this space can be decoded, the base of the social reality offers itself.

Siegfried Kracauer, *Ueber Arbeitsnachweise*, 1930

Perestroika accelerated the process of evaluating the Russian and Soviet history, and the society was confronted with the imperative to recall what it had forgotten. The culture - and film as a part of it - have to produce a therapeutic cure from amnesia. This cure does not merely rehabilitates lost memory but also creates memories of what had never taken place, in both cases embodying these recollections in images, pictures, sounds. Film could always create a convincing colour-and-sound simulacrum, which embodies the image of the reality or the past or the memory which the society wished to have. This memory is largely associated with specific architectural forms. These connections between time, memory and architecture were often the subject of reflection. The Greeks imagined memory as a temple under construction. The analysis of the historical self-understanding of the society turned often towards its architectural forms. Collage of quotations that a post modern architecture employs derives from the post-modern conception of the reversibility of time. The constructing of the past in contemporary post-Soviet film can also be analyzed through architectural forms selected or preferred by film makers as an embodiment of memory. This process had its corollary in reality when, for the first time in this century, reconstruction of Moscow planned for the year 2000 was linked to the slogan "recreation of the historical centre": reconstruction of the destroyed monuments of Russian history; reverting to the original names of the streets and neighbourhoods, and restoring the original functions of the old buildings (the

cathedrals that had previously functioned as workers' clubs are being transformed back into cathedral, aristocratic clubs that had been converted to office space are now again aristocratic clubs) etc.

However, even this simple job of changing the signs, names and functions leads to uncertainty. The old ('true?') is forgotten, the people are confused and often mix up the old (allegedly true name) with the new, allegedly inauthentic name. This is how the first shift occurs between the wished historical memory and its concrete absence. Will the building in the Dimitrovka (Pushkinskaia) be decoded as the club for the Moscow aristocracy or as the House of Trade Unions? Is it a place of the old or of the new history? I presume that in the memory of the living generation (with their own historical memory) the building is decoded as a place of a new state, the place of the state's ferocity where the show trials were staged, or the place of a state mourning where the bodies of Lenin, Stalin, Brezhnev etc. lying in state were put on display.

Soviet film was always a school of the right, 'correct' seeing, it was able to monopolize the old buildings for the new history and to transform, to instrumentalize its symbolic forms as new signs. Eisenstein demonstrated this powerfully with the storming of the Winter-palace in "October" (1927) staged in the film as a occupation of the symbolical form of the old power. Its signs (decorations, god, monuments, power emblems) were demythologized as objects, the objects of a new power (armoured vehicles, flag, telephones, maps) were transformed into fetish.

Soviet film played with this conflict between form and function by transforming a church into the workers club (by Dziga Vertov in "Enthusiasm", 1931), one nest of gentlefolk into the seat of a revolution-committee (in Nikita Mikhalkov's "Svoi sredi

chuzhikh", 1972), the tsar's paplace in Livadia into the sanitarium for workers and farmers (in Eisenstein's "The Old and the New", 1929). Mikhail Kaufman dedicated his whole film "Moscow" (1927) to explaining the new functions of the old buildings. The new perception was shaped through repetition. Sots-Art showed ten years ago how one can destroy the meaning of the symbolic forms produced by the Soviet culture by placing their signs into a new context whose message could be decoded by the insiders, the contemporaries. Today, the work of Sots-Art is becoming obscure, the signs are hard-wired to their historical context, and their iconography must be studied by the young generation the way they study medieaval art forms. The situation in the new Russian cinema is not comparable with this praxis in other visual arts. Film is oriented to the world of here and now while having to integrate the Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet forms into the emerging 'new historical' context. Even in the deconstructive cinema (I mean the films where the level of narration, the transmitted story, is meant to deconstruct 'false history'), even in such films, the construction of the past goes on unabated, if at the level of different subcodes.

Architecture, assumptions about urban life, food and drink customs bring these important subcodes and create a visual stuff of the film. They allow us to examine how the social coding enters into the film, sometimes how the film influences their formation. Today it is especially exciting, since the film tries to do the work of integration against the background of general decomposition. Post-Soviet cinema is the scene where specific architectural forms undergo a radical transformation, destroying created symbolic systems and the elaborated meaning of specific monuments utilized in Soviet film. The attempt here is to erase the inherited 'falsified' memory and to replace it with an

ostensibly true, though historically false, one. Often in this process, the resulting memory to becomes a phantasm underlying a new mythology.

When we try to answer a simple question where the post-Soviet urban human being¹ lives - I mean not in the reality, we can still answer it, but in the space that the post-Soviet film attributes to him - we discover a strange state of affairs.

Friedrich Gorenstein puts this simple question already in his novel, "Place" (Mesto, 1972): where, in what kind of building is the Soviet person actually at home? What type of architectural metaphor is applicable to this social and cultural type? Has he only a bed, a 'koiko-mesto', in the hostel where an individualist fights aggressively against the imposed community of smells, sounds etc.; or is it an old bourgeois apartment with a mahogany table on which the hero can comfortably write his reports for the KGB; or one cell under the staircase as place for political conspiracies and philosophical debates; or a kitchen, in which the hero produces words for the eternity? All these architectural forms are tried on like clothes by the Soviet human being and his actions, and the author suggests sarcastically that the Soviet person has no place that would not be ridiculous, since form and function always fall apart.

Also in the modern Soviet film the hero finds no place. He is in principle homeless or house-free like Ivan Bezdomny from Bulgakov's novel.

The Soviet person - just as the person we know from film – lived before the revolution in a humble cabin or cellar (VIDEO, "The General line" or "The End of St. Petersburg"), then in the palaces (housing of the foreign dignitaries), then he built palaces for himself (as an imitation of the special housing for foreign dignitaries). In the 30's the

¹ I exclude with intent the images of the Russian rural housing as a special topic.

Soviet film transfigured the hostel or the communal apartment (re-transformed bourgeois housing) as the place of human solidarity; in the 60's films lent a poetic aura to Khrushchev's new housing projects or the reconstructed urban space of Moscow (VIDEO, "Mne dvadtsat' let"), Shostakovich even wrote an operetta "Moscow-Cheremushki" that was immediately adapted for the screen. After perestroika, however, all these forms were discarded, the heroes of the perestroika-films slept in the destroyed industrial constructions that, as chance would have it, still provided shelter, in basements, even booths (VIDEO, "Ia khotela uvidet' angelov"). The light spacious apartments of Stalin's era or the nice comfortable apartments of the Khrushchev era (as represented on the screen) were now depicted as dirty, dark, dangerous places, as fantastic, often deadly labyrinths. The 'perestroika' - film created a very impressive picture of it and it is in this form that Russian dwellings migrated in to most western films (VIDEO "La chasse aux papillons", "The Saint").

The situation in the post-perestroika film is even more dramatic. The post-Soviet film-hero has no house to live - that is the statement that the film throws at us - so he finds a refuge for a night or a week in the monument, in the museum, in the zoo or in a strange apartment that belongs to nobody (in any case, not the hero), a permanent temporary state, where the protagonist is a fugitive, an alien. This state of being an 'alien at home' or even 'homeless at home' is the leitmotiv of the most urban films of the recent time.

The buildings featured in film are presented as architectural forms that are humiliating, violating the feelings of the post-Soviet human being. He can sleep here but

in fact, all he can do is flee from this ugly dark place (as a rule into the clean and cold-white snow landscape) or die – either slowly or suddenly (VIDEO “Bratan”).

Since all in the soviet era built housing is presented in the film as uninhabitable, dangerous, inhuman, the film is looking for the architectural forms of the past: church, summer residence of aristocracy or a monument. But they are ‘occupied’ by the system of displaced references (the church is now a workers club, the summer residence of aristocracy is now designated for the Soviet officials, etc.)

New film must create a new frame of references. This imperative focuses the old Russian tendency to mystify real spaces on new objects. The church, the dacha, the monument of the Stalin era become the architectural topos of the post-perestroika film, and it is to these objects that the constructed historical memory is linked. However, the images of these building in film are rather ambivalent.

The destroyed cathedral in “The Repentance” (1984/87) introduces that wave in film, as does the construction of the Moscow’s Christ Saviour Church in reality.

When we compare how Soviet film decomposed the church in the orgy scene in Eisenstein’s “Bezhin Meadow” or in Vertov’s “Enthusiasm” with the way post-Soviet film makers deal with the images of the church-restoration and re-consecration, we can only conclude that the imaginative power became diminished over time.

The re-transformation of the church is presented by Dziga Vertov as a carnival symbolic cross-dressing: the red star or the red flag replaces the cross; the church is named club and in the end of the church-episode we see a sculptor shaping a bust of Lenin to take place the statue of Christ in the earlier shots. The locomotive drives the new

Bible - the 12.volumes of Lenin's selected works. However, all of this is happening on one level.

The destruction of the church becomes in the film of Vertov a complicated semiotic operation embedded in his film technique: the church is dismantled, but this dismantling was reinforced by the filming device. Using the technique of multiple exposure, Vertov produces a well-known film trick: several crosses get wiped out one after another. The church is 'split' or put down by the lying camera in the diagonal composition. The red star rises on its roof instead of the cross through the reverse motion of the film (actually the red star falls down). [VIDEO] The documentary (=objective) filmed act of the re-transformation of the church betrays the ambivalence: the icons are carried out by the Komsomol-members in a way similar to the Easter procession, the gathering masses pray as they usually do. This whole sequence is named the "Last Resurrection". And the last picture in this chain is a dark shadow of a church sticking out like a tower into the heaven, like an unconquered fortress. It hard to interpret this image unambiguously. Is the church the loser or the winner? VIDEO

Today the directors seemed to have no imagination for such a 'staging' of architectural forms. The cross as signs is devaluated - like the star. So they shot the church like Vertov did it with the industrial construction (the water power station in "Three songs about Lenin" or "The lullaby") with the extreme slow speed that accelerated the movement of the clouds (VIDEO), the sign of a poetic transformation (but however applied to another object). Or they use the interior of a church as exotic scenery with displaced function. Valerii Ogorodnikov settled in the protestant church of St.

Petersburg, which was transformed during the Soviet Era into the swimming pool, an asylum for the insane (“Bred ljubonogo ocharovaniia”, 1992).

In “Repentance,” the torture-chamber is accommodated in a cathedral, in “Hammer and sickle” the church appears as a prison hospital for uncanny medical experiments. Post-Soviet film follows the tradition of the Gothic novel and represents the Soviet power celebrating in the church a black mass. But the new directors seemed to be unable to invent their own techniques to re-enthroned this architectural form. Only one’s ironic attitude toward one’s own impotence or the invisible image helped post-Soviet film. The destroyed cathedral in “Repentance” is restored only as an icing on the cake. Nikita Mikhalkov shows in the documentary film “Anna from 6 to 18” a community of believers who slides on their knees to a place in the forest where a church used be. This invisible church that they adore is the true place of the memory, the director means in his commentary (in off).

The church celebrates its resurrection like the invisible city of Kitezh, that is the single image that the new Russian film is able to symbolize. But an invisible image is a problem for the visual arts.

The Stalinist constructions and monuments have much more luck in the post-Soviet film. First they were represented - like the church – with the grotesque reversal of their function: The monument of hammer and sickle served in “Swan lake. The Zone” (by Yuri Il'enko based on the script of Sergei Paradzhanov, 1989) as a shelter for an escaped prisoner, truly a mother’s womb for the lost sun. VIDEO

Since housing was depicted as inhabitable, instead the films show, how Soviet people have learned to live in monuments. Or in museums. In “Hammer and sickle” (Serp

i molot, by Sergei Livnev, 1993) the monument and the museum became a paradigm for deciphering the Stalin Era. The hero lives in his own museum in which he is the main exhibit, a living corpse. VIDEO

The film made to its plot the idea of usurpation of human body through the state: a woman is turned by a sex-conversion into the man, and this man accomplishes the miracle-career as a Stakhanov-worker by the construction of the metro or as a high official. Sergei Livnev demonstrated also the travesty of the signs of the Stalin-culture on the visual level, both (the plot and the reversal of signs) are rather traditional in the frame of Sots-Art or the Soviet post modern 'ideology', but the very original message of the film lies in its "optical unconscious" observation how the Soviet people learn to love and to live both in the monuments of the Stalin Era and as monuments. The relationship between the hero and the monument are deciding for his fate and his posture. He became his final shape as a model for the (real) statue of "The worker and the farmer-girl". When the hero tries however to escape from his monument-role and to kill the sculptor, the creator of his destiny comrades Stalin, he is wounded, paralyzed and so he found his final role: as a an exhibit chained to the bed in his own museum. The hero committed suicide (on the level of the plot) but the visual message of the film is another: the hero as a woman is a shapeless body, as a transfigured man she became the iridescent attractiveness. If he (or she) tries to escape from his interiors (the museum) to the beloved nurse (beyond the system and its beauty canon), he became homeless (goes through the already in the other films established image of the uninhabitable, dangerous labyrinths of the ugly foreign apartments or the state of the homeless).

The film attempted to produce a travesty of the Stalin era's culture of monuments, but it exposed another process as well: The erosion of the Soviet symbolic forms is, in the last analysis, being delayed by the rhetoric of the film, since the forms of the Stalinist Empire clearly fascinate the imagination of the film-makers. It is not the film's protagonists that become addicted to necrophilia (materialized in a sex act between the paralyzed trans-sexual Stakhanovite and his wife, who is the curator of her husband's museum), but film maker and the viewers themselves.

At the first glance, Stalinist building are travestied by the grotesque reversal of their function (the monument is presented as a mother's womb; the museum, as a true home). On the second look, though, they reveal themselves as installations or transfigured pictures of an assertive, monstrosity and masochistically attractive power – one that was capable of creating such violent iridescent monuments. So the invisible Stalin, whose image had disappeared from all the public places, has -- thanks to the film "Hammer and Sickle" – replaced Pushkin's Bronze Horseman in the Russian imagination.

I must refer again to the film of the 30's in order to demonstrate the differences in the codification of the old architectural forms. The old and the new constructions (of the Russian State and of the Soviet State) were contrasted in "The new Moscow", a film from 1938 of Aleksandr Medvedkin. The new forms were introduced as models, the old shown in the process of demolition. In order to create a desired reaction (the old must be connected with the laugh) Medvedkin used a simple trick from the slapstick comedy – the reverse movement of the film: the destroyed monuments (the Church of the Christ Saviour and some others cathedrals) were re created on the screen through the film trick. So the

laughing of spectators was transferred (and motivated) from one action (the film trick) to another (the resurrection of the church).

The spectators could also laugh during the second sequence of the film (and they do it today always), the laughing is caused by incoherence of proportions: the monumental forms that the models depicted and their actual realization as a toy, as a building for dwarfs. Naturally the spectators of the 30's could also laugh at that moment, but their real laughter was suppressed by the monumental music of the sequences. The spectators of the 30's could perceive these toys as projection of the future, they appealed to their imagination. The Russian spectators of today know that only some of the models have been realized in stone. They laugh during the demonstration of the unrealized project (Palace of the Soviets), but the monuments that had been erected have become objects of nostalgic admiration in the film ("Prorva" by Ivan Dykhovichnyi, "Serp i molot" etc.) - as sole remaining monuments that we still possess. VIDEO

It is remarkable, that only in the film of a Russian 'foreigner' Pavel Lungin this nostalgia is missing. He can play with the same architectural form (Stalinist skyscraper) however it may be referred to the other addressee of his film. Lungin actually shot one of his more recent films for foreign consumption. "Luna Park" (1991), as the film is called, corresponds to the expectation clichés of the Western audience (the film was financed by the French producer Marin Karmitz) present what is our 'own' as something that is 'foreign,' so that it can be recognized abroad as something 'Russian'. Of course Lungin had to rename some place (the real Gorki-Park into an imaginary Luna-Park, because the title had already been taken), reshape (or adapt) the commonplaces from the media (for

example, Russian anti-Semitism) into grand mythological patterns (Oedipus and die Walküre) and finally spice up the whole lot with the Russian Exotic.

The audiences abroad know little about Russia, however they know definitely one thing: all Russians are crazy. If they guzzle vodka, they do it from the bathtub. They use refrigerators to store grenades from the time of the civil war, and in the oven they bake machine guns. They possess and display the famous terrific Slavic emotions, they relieve their stress by riding the roller coaster, that in Russia, incidentally, is known as the American, not Russian, hills (all that we can see in Lungin's "Luna Park").

Lungin takes a blood tragedy as a plot for an eccentric comedy. A Russian 'Schwarzenegger' hates Jews only to find out all of a sudden he is actually a half-Jew himself (his father was one). So the boy goes on the father-search. The Jew appears in the film as a comic figure: he is of course weak and thin, and of course a professor, and of course a musician, with a, yes, tremendous sexual drive (the latter, by the way, appears more like an adaptation of a German cliché of a Jew, not a Russian one). The Jew is cosmopolitan, multi-cultural, with astonishing assimilation-ability: Lungin demonstrates how easily Naum Khejfits fraternizes in four consecutive episodes with French journalists, Russian drinkers, Soviet pioneers and Uzbek farmers.

The son must choose not only between the Jewish father and the Russian mother but between the Jewish Communist father-land and the nationalist blood-and-soil Mother-land that his father and mother represent. That mythological drama turns itself into an ideological parable, that finds a matching scenery in an architectural construction. At the beginning of the picture we see the power-outbreak of the new youth at the background of the hotel "Ukraina", the Stalinist skyscraper, the support of their dammed

aggression. However the father of the hero, who stands for the state, lives in the famous skyscraper at the Rebellion Square in Moscow with its famous memorial to the 1905 Revolution.. The father has a lot of states decorations, is photographed with (real) cosmonauts, he had composed all the Soviet hits, that the whole country sang for decades with passion (the hits are real).

The state, embodied in the father-house through visual and acoustic memory, is the old new one, a reservoir of all perestroika-clichés (perestroika is seen by a son naturally as a ‘Jewish’ sale of the Russian values to the west): here the son met a former dissident with the camp experience coming from Paris, western journalists, Georgian Mafiosi, Russian currency whores with the Arabic client with which they play Palestinian camps in a tent hit in the apartment in this skyscraper etc.

The hate of the nationalistic mother is incidentally also tied to one construction: the Jews from the examination-commission did not let her sing on the stage of the Bolshoi Theater, therefore she sings in private Jewish restaurants.

The both forces – the Jewish and the nationalist Russian, the old communist and the new post communist - occupy the same architectural form, the Stalinist skyscraper. Lungin motivated this symbolical reversibility to the genre of eccentric comedy. But this transmitted subcode became independent from the story. The skyscraper is the universal set for all post Russian events: the comedy, the drama, a backdrop for the Versace fashion show or the meeting of old Stalinists, of new Communists or Nationalists. This is the only one architectural form that the contemporary Russian film can impressively ‘stage’.

The third type of building preferred and selected by the post-Soviet film is an aristocracy-nest, a summer-residence, *usad'ba*, between Turgenev, Nabokov and Chekhov. "The Foreign Shores" (*Chuzhie berega*) - so the Russian title of Nabokov's memoirs - is understood as its English title: *Speak, Memory!* The building must now be re introduced in the post-Soviet society not as a violent expropriated and transformed construction but as 'our heritage', seen and inhabited by quasi rightful successors.

That operation was produced by Nikita Mikhalkov. Only he could do that because he created in the 70's with the adaptations of Chekhov's "Platonov" ("Unfinished piece for a mechanical piano") and Goncharov's "Oblomov" ("Some days in the life of Il'ia Oblomov") a nostalgic image of Russia and Russian intellectuals that the Soviet intellectuals have assumed as an agreeable mirror. He gave them the summer residence of the old aristocracy instead of the Moscow miserable kitchen as a single possible home, as a architectural form corresponding to their real mood. The director shown his deep sorrow for the disappointed melancholic gentle losers (who became a true heroes) and settled them in a distinguished interior. This house was lost by the present-day spiritual inhabitants as a space, but they could mourn themselves as a still existing cultural myth (without a house) in the Russian landscape.

How can one write the Soviet experience into this myth? In the late 90's Mikhalkov tried to adapt this architectural form for the Soviet history. He could do it transforming the aristocratic residence of Oblomov or the General's widow from "Platonov" into the more modest summer house of Chekhov's heroes, my be Arkadina or Voinitskii. In "Utomlennye solntsem" (*Burnt by the Sun*, 1995) Mikhalkov settled in this interior the intellectuals from the beginning of the century (musicians, professors of the

law from the Moscow University, singers, their widows, children, nurses and servants) and the new Soviet aristocracy, the General of the Red Army, a former farmer, a close friend of Stalin. The Mikhalkov's spectators in Russia will recognize this housing as new embodiment of the old 'nest of the gentlefolk' through repetition of certain lighting effects that Mikhalkov had used before: in this film the heroes also drink vodka hidden in the old buffet in the darkness, the cigarette-stubs flares up in the total dark, as in "Platonov", the warm light in the shady house is confronted with the cold sunlight outdoors, all this evokes unconsciously the visual memory of the home for Chekhov's and Goncharov's heroes. VIDEO

The house depicted in "Burnt by the Sun" is like an island, on which the old distinguished Russians are rescued from the grotesque Soviet reality of the 30's. The house absorbs even a red general. The interiors, the furniture, photographs, chests, ground floor, crickets, buffets or wardrobes capture the parvenu (not only the woman from this house). Only the history of these objects are visualized in the film (the characters' supposed interior is not present). The Red General (or is it Mikhalkov himself?) feels himself comfortable among the objects of his 'class enemies'. So the summer residence of Chekhov's heroes is turned into the summer-residence of the Soviet official with privileges. Mikhalkov's idea takes shape when the former quasi rightful inhabitant of the house appears, the once wished for son-in-law of the professor who had owned the house before the revolution – a musician, a white officer, and now a KGB agent. This old intellectual (even an aristocrat – recall his French-speaking butler) is assigned the apartment of the Soviet official, while the new Soviet official takes the

summer-residence of the old intellectual. The exchange is complete. But what did Mikhalkov show us finally?

Is the form understood only as an empty vessel whose function can change and produce grotesque metamorphoses like Gorenstein demonstrated them in the *Odyssey* of his poor hero through the common 'spaces' of the Soviet history? Mikhalkov shows us something else, if carelessly. The architectural form had shaped their inhabitants and had taken possession of them. The Red General is inscribed in the 'Russian' interiors, and this has changed his mode of feeling. This is a part of the reconciling work between the old and new Russia that Mikhalkov aspires to provide through his films presenting all parts of divided Russians as heirs of the same unique history. The architectural forms are something that brings the splitters together. The only requirement (or condition) is to accept this form as a refuge from the history. But the history in the film is only a story, it doesn't go from yesterday to today but from today to yesterday, because today has restructured the yesterday again.

The architectural landscape created by a post-Soviet film is rather peculiar. The chosen architectural forms, that should construct the past (structured by the present), are few. The Church remains invisible. The Stalinist skyscraper towers as a dominant monument that we don't want but really possess. The aristocratic summer residence is depicted an island for the fugitives, that we really not possess but want. The one type of building settled in the world of film excludes the another one or exactly they are not put in relationship to each other. We have not the deep perspective but a flat landscape with some architectural forms (the embodiments of the memory or the past) like at chain of disconnected signs: the cathedral, Stalinist monument, and the summer residence.

The chain can be accomplished by further signs: Mickey, portraits of the tsar family, Korean advertisement, or an announcement about the concert of Rolling Stones. The young generation can consume these signs in the everyday life without difficulties because they dominate their urban space. (A SLIDE from the gallery of Gregory Freidin). The Post-Soviet film refuses to organize these signs into a readable message, it prefers to render its urban modern heroes as, in principle, homeless people, strangers at home and the parvenu in their own history.

Автор выражает глубокую признательность Григорию Фрейдину за импульс написать эту работу и за редакцию ее английского текста.