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Foreign Leaders of Soviet Film Distribution: What Were They Like?

Marina Tselysh ^{a, *}

^a Rostov State University of Economics, Russian Federation

Abstract

In his new monograph "100 Foreign Leaders of Soviet Film Distribution: A Selected Collection", professor Alexander Fedorov gives a panorama of one hundred popular foreign films in the USSR in the mirror of the opinions of film critics and viewers. Professor Marina Tselykh talks to the author of the book, designed for university teachers, students, graduate students, researchers, film critics, film historians, journalists, as well as for a wide range of readers who are interested in the problems of movies. Based on the analysis made in the book, it can be reasonably stated that the first hundred of the most popular foreign films in Soviet cinemas included only films that exceeded the threshold of thirty million spectators. Based on attendance figures, it is clear (and we expect) that movies of entertaining genres (adventure, action, melodramas, comedies, detectives, westerns, science fiction) turned out to be the most popular among Soviet viewers.

Keywords: popular foreign films, Soviet film distribution, success, Alexander Fedorov, film studies, USSR.

Marina Tselykh: You have just published a new monograph under the title "100 Foreign Leaders of Soviet Film Distribution: A Selected Collection" (Fedorov, 2022). In it you give a panorama of a hundred popular foreign films in the USSR in the mirror of the opinions of film critics, film reviewers and ordinary people. As always after reading your books I have many impressions, thoughts and questions that I want to discuss with you. Would you be so kind to tell me, how the idea of a new book comes to you? What is the concept of this book? What motivates you when you start working on it?

Alexander Fedorov: In recent years, I have turned to various aspects of the history of cinema of the Soviet period (in particular, I have published several books on the box office of Soviet films from 1930s to 1980s) and some books and article about cinema history (Fedorov, 2012; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021), and in the framework of this topic, I decided write the book about foreign movies, which were lined up in the cinemas of the USSR, and also – in the mirror of the opinions of film critics and viewers.

Marina Tselykh: What goals did you prioritize while writing this book? What are the main targets of this book? What was the most challenging thing for you during the writing of this book?

Alexander Fedorov: In this book, I wanted to answer approximately the following questions: "What foreign films were popular in the Soviet cinemas? How did the Soviet and Russian film press and the audience evaluated these films?" My new monograph is intended for high school teachers,

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: m.tselykh@mail.ru (M. Tselykh)

students, graduate students, researchers, film critics, film historians, journalists, as well as for a wide range of readers who are interested in the problems of cinema, film criticism and film history.

The peculiarity of this monograph is that for the first time in film studies an attempt is made to give a panorama of one hundred popular foreign films in the USSR in the mirror of the opinions of film critics and viewers. Quotes from audience reviews are taken from the comments published on the portals "Kino-teatr.ru" and "Kinopoisk", and the basic information about the cinema attendance of foreign films in the Soviet cinema – from the information materials of S. Kudryavtsev and others sources.

Taking this opportunity, I thank film critics Igor Arkadyev, Andrei Vyatkin, Nikolai Mayorov, Igor Fishkin for their corrections and additions in the process of preparing lists of foreign films in Soviet cinemas. I also express my gratitude for clarifying the titles of some foreign films and their translation into Russian to my benevolent readers on the Yandex portal – journalist Vladimir Ergakov and historian Concombre masqué.

The greatest difficulty in writing the book arose due to the fact that the statistics of Soviet film distribution are not available for all foreign movies, so the monograph did not include, for example, such memorable for Soviet moviegoers films. For example, French *Les Aventuriers*, *Deux hommes dans la Ville*, *Le Jouet* and many others. Unfortunately, even in such a voluminous work as *Sociology of Cinema* (Zhabsky, 2020), alas, there are no tables or digital data (in millions of viewers) attendance of foreign films-leaders of Soviet film distribution (however, there are no analogues of digital data for Soviet films)...

Thus, in the end I got a kind of selected collection, consisting of one hundred foreign leaders of Soviet film distribution.

Marina Tselykh: You were educated at Russian State University of Cinematography, the faculty of film studies. When you found yourself inside the profession, did you perceive films differently?

Alexander Fedorov: Undoubtedly, this university gave me a lot. I entered there simply as a fan of cinema, and graduated as a person who received systematized knowledge about the theory and history of Soviet and foreign cinema. For example, I recall with great pleasure the lectures and seminars of my wonderful university professors: Klara Isaeva, Lidia Zaitseva (1931-2021), Paola Volkova (1930-2013), Vladimir Bakhmutsky (1919-2004). While studying at this university, I met and had the pleasure of communicating with such outstanding personalities in Russian film studies as Victor Demin (1937-1993), Lev Anninsky (1934-2019), Kirill Razlogov (1946-2021), Neya Zorkaya (1924-2006), Ilya Weisfeld (1909-2003), Alexander Braginsky (1920-2016), Mark Zak (1929-2011), Stal Penzin (1932-2011) and others. A lot was given to me by my acquaintance during the university years with the leader of Soviet film education, Professor Yuri Usov (1936-2000), under whose guidance I later successfully defended my doctoral dissertation.

Marina Tselykh: What unites movies with millions of views? Why did viewers vote for some films with their tickets, while for others – they did not? Are they always masterpiece films?

Alexander Fedorov: Based on the analysis made in the book, it can be reasonably asserted that only films that crossed the threshold of thirty million viewers in the first year of showing in cinemas could enter the first hundred of the most popular foreign films in Soviet film distribution.

Based on the attendance figures, it is expectedly clear that the most popular among Soviet viewers were foreign films of entertainment genres (adventure films, melodramas, comedies, detective stories, westerns, action films, science fiction). The first hundred of the highest-grossing foreign films in the Soviet box office included several dozen Indian, Mexican, Pakistani and Egyptian films (mainly melodramas), which, due to their specificity, were highlighted by me in a separate list. Foreign films in the genre of Westerns (mainly produced in Yugoslavia and the German Democratic Republic, plus the American *The Magnificent Seven* and *Mackenna's Gold*), which were leading in the Soviet box office in the 1960s and 1970s, were also included in a separate list.

But the use of entertainment genres by filmmakers certainly does not guarantee the necessary super-success with the public. The participation / non-participation of movie stars, directorial skills, the relevance of the subject of the plot, etc., also play a role here.

On the other hand, the film distribution leaders often include films that are far from the level of masterpieces. The most striking example is the Mexican *Yesenia*, which gathered in the Soviet box office an audience of over ninety million viewers in the first year of the demonstration. And here I completely agree with the opinion of N.M. Zorkaya: “The model, the archetype of such perception (reading, watching) is listening to an entertaining story or, earlier, fairy tales. Listening is naive, selfless, simple-minded, the perception is holistic, undivided, not separating “what” from “how”, not controlling or correcting what is being watched, listened to, read by one's own life experience. On the contrary, a reminder of his own, the viewer's, life in such cases is undesirable. A complete switch to the world of heroes ("another" life) is appreciated. This world should not look like the real one, the surrounding, on the contrary, should differ from that in juiciness, richness of colors, should be fascinating and very beautiful, but at the same time not too exotic, which is very important for the reader, listener, viewer – some then there are bridges, albeit heavily decorated, between reality and the screen, the stage, the book. The film *Yesenia* meets all these requirements in the best way and corresponds to them completely” (Zorkaya, 1981: 111-112).

Marina Tselykh: Is true film art compatible with "box office success"? Have Western/Hollywood producers always focused on making high-grossing films? What does box office mean for a filmmaker? Is it an indicator of artistic quality, commercial success, or universal recognition?

Alexander Fedorov: In my opinion, art and box office success are quite compatible. The most vivid example here is the most famous comedies of Chaplin. As for Western producers, throughout all the years of the existence of cinema as a whole, of course, they want to make a profit, but in many cases (especially for low-budget films) they can (focusing, for example, at prestigious film festivals) finance some avant-garde, aesthetic movies that do not claim to be a massive success.

I believe that any director is happy with the massive success of his film (and this success, as noted above, is often not associated with high artistic quality), but for many directors the festival success of their films, the recognition of their importance among professionals, is of no less importance.

Marina Tselykh: Are there paradoxical/inexplicable cases of the film's popularity: nothing foreshadowed success, but against all odds, the film was loved by the audience? Is it possible to predict the success of the film in the future with viewers and at the box office?

Alexander Fedorov: Of course, there are such cases. For example, hardly any of the Western film distributors could have imagined that the melodrama *The Sandpit Generals* (USA, 1971), almost unnoticed by the American public, directed by an unknown person without the participation of Hollywood stars, would become one of the leaders of the Soviet film distribution and will gather in the USSR an audience of 43 million viewers in the first year of the demonstration.

Marina Tselykh: Is it possible to predict the success of the audience and the box office of a future film?

Alexander Fedorov: Theoretically, the massive success of a film can be planned by following, the many times described recipes (reliance on the entertainment genre, the participation of movie stars, a sharp plot, etc.) not only the professionalism of the authors is needed, but also something difficult to describe, when the filmmakers guess even the latent desires of the audience and respond to them in exactly the way the public needs at the moment.

Marina Tselykh: Today, foreign films are not prohibited, the Russian viewers watch new films not decades later, as it was often the case in the USSR, but at the time of their release. Do you think that the availability of cinema influenced the tastes of a wider audience? Has the public's taste gone bad? Or the taste "magnitude" is constant on average?

Alexander Fedorov: Yes, today Russian viewers can (albeit with some delay) watch any foreign film, even if an official distribution certificate has not been issued for it. It was during

Soviet times that viewing many Western films was the privilege of elected bosses and film critics. Now, with the help of the Internet, Russian viewers can access not only new foreign films, but also old ones that are banned from showing in the USSR.

At the same time, I do not think that the availability of foreign cinema has significantly influenced the tastes of the multi-million Russian public for the better or for the worse. The mass audience still prefers entertainment films.

Marina Tselykh: Both Soviet and Russian viewers have always had a special interest in foreign cinema (albeit for various reasons). However, times have changed, is it possible to judge films by the box office today?

Alexander Fedorov: Of course, the box office receipts of any film distribution leader in modern Russia are several times inferior to those of the most popular films of the Soviet era. However, all the same, the mass popularity of films, as before, can be judged by the results of their distribution.

Marina Tselykh: The style of presentation in your present book is very restrained and correct. You do not enter into polemics either with critics or with viewers who sometimes express diametrically opposite opinions. You are trying to give a broad objective picture of the films that were popular in the Soviet film distribution. This is undoubtedly a plus for the thoughtful reader and researcher. At the same time, your deep knowledge of the history of cinema, your erudition, concentration and the author's vision of the problem are obvious. With particular interest for myself, I highlight those moments in the monograph in which you give your own assessment of a particular film, share your impressions and feelings about the films of past years. Tell me please, do you have any favorite foreign films of the Soviet film distribution that you can watch with pleasure even now? What 10 foreign leaders of the Soviet film distribution would you recommend for mandatory viewing to a young audience and why?

Alexander Fedorov: I sometimes like to watch foreign films that I liked in the distant Soviet times. My "recommendation" for the 10 foreign films that were leading in the Soviet box office looks like this (I give this list in alphabetical order):

Bluff. Italy, 1975. Directed by Sergio Corbucci. In the USSR: 1979. 44.3 million viewers in the first year of the demonstration.

Divorzio all'italiana. Italy, 1961. Directed by Pietro Germi. In the USSR: 1964. 27.8 million viewers in the first year of the demonstration.

Le Grand blond avec une chaussure noire. France, 1972. Directed by Yves Robert. In the USSR - 1974. 27 (?) million viewers in the first year of the demonstration.

Le Vieux fusil. France-West Germany, 1975. Directed by Robert Enrico. In the USSR: 1977. 27.6 million viewers in the first year of the demonstration.

Once Upon a Time in America. Italy-USA, 1983. Directed by Sergio Leone. In the USSR: 1989. 27.6 million viewers in the first year of the demonstration.

Romeo and Juliet / Romeo e Giulietta. Italy-Great Britain, 1968. Directed by Franco Zeffirelli. In the USSR: 1972. 35.8 million viewers in the first year of the demonstration.

Some Like It Hot. USA, 1959. Directed by Billy Wilder. In the USSR: 1966. 43.9 million viewers in the first year of the demonstration. Re-release in the USSR: 1985 (+ 28.9 million viewers).

Tootsie. USA, 1982. Directed by Sidney Pollack. In the USSR: 1984. 34.8 million viewers in the first year of the show.

Un homme et une femme. France, 1966. Directed by Claude Lelouch. In the USSR: 1968. 27.9 million viewers in the first year of the demonstration.

Vabank. Poland, 1981. Director and screenwriter Juliusz Machulski. In the USSR: 1985. 34 (?) million viewers in the first year of the demonstration.

It seems to me that in addition to the genre merits, the stellar composition of these films is united by the main thing – the high professional skill of their creators.

Marina Tselykh: Do people who are far from cinema always need the knowledge of "professional kitchen" to perceive artistic production? Do all viewers need to see and discern the

professional aspects of filmmaking? Doesn't such "knowledge" interfere with the holistic perception of films? In short, does the general public need media literacy education? Will box office income fall in this case? Is it not for nothing that they say that knowledge increases problems?

Alexander Fedorov: Undoubtedly, people far from the cinema sphere do not need to know "professional cuisine" in order to perceive films. Another thing is that knowledge of the professional aspects of cinema makes a person more film-educated. I believe that media literacy education is the key to a more meaningful existence in our overflowing with information (including audiovisual). And in my opinion, there is no need to worry about the drop in box office. Compared to Soviet times, they have long ago decreased several times, and an increase in the media competent audience for the current film distribution, in my opinion, will not hurt at all...

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