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The Discourse of Desire in Early Soviet Culture

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the research is to identify and analyze the different discourses for construction of desire of the Soviet subject and their differences in the context of the early period of the development of Soviet culture and the Stalinist period on the example of literature and cinema. In addition, the study aims to show the differences in the functioning of the culture in the NEP period and in the Stalinist period. The study reveals that the early period of development of Soviet culture is characterized by the fact that there was a common goal: to create a collective consciousness and desire, but no means were formed to achieve this goal. As a result, the early Soviet culture cannot be defined and understood as an holistic phenomenon, but represented a singular multiplicity of various artistic trends that did not perform the function of forming a single collective desire and consciousness, but acted as an intermediary of these. The study analyzes the main cultural transformations that occurred during the Stalinist period, and reveals the trend of fetishization of Soviet culture. It is shown that the cultural and artistic objects of the Soviet culture of the Stalinist period, although they retained their indirect function, also began to act as fetishes, replacing the lack of practical implementation of socialism. The study reveals the reason why literature, in contrast to cinema, was less effective in the means of constituting the ideological discourse of desire.

Key words: mediation, desire, fetish, soviet culture, cinema, novel

АННОТАЦИЯ

Основная цель исследования заключается в том, чтобы определить и проанализировать дискурсы конституирования желания советского субъекта и их различия в контексте раннего периода развития советской культуры и сталинского периода на примере литературы и кинематографа. Помимо этого исследование имеет цель показать различия в функционировании культуры периода НЭПа и в Сталинский период. Исследование раскрывает, что ранний период развития советской культуры характеризуется тем, что существовала общая цель: создать коллективное сознание и желание, но не были сформированы средства для достижения этой цели. В результате ранняя советская культура не может быть определена и осмыслена как целостный феномен, а представляла из себя сингулярную множественность различных художественных тенденций, которые не выполняли функцию формирования единого коллективного желания и сознания, а выступали в качестве опосредования оных. В исследовании проведен анализ основных трансформаций культуры, произошедших в сталинский период, и раскрыта тенденция фетишизации советской культуры. Показано, что культурные и художественные объекты советской культуры сталинского периода, хотя и сохранили свою опосредованную функцию, но также начали действовать как фетиши, замещающие отсутствие практической реализации социализма. В исследовании раскрыта причина того, почему литература, в отличие от кинематографа, была менее эффективна в средствах конституирования идеологического дискурса желания.

Ключевые слова: посредничество, желание, фетиш, советская культура, кино, роман

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INTROUDCTION

The Soviet culture of the twenties and the thirties i.e. the period of the avant-gardes and of Stalinism, has been explored and studied in numerous occasions and continues to be a topic of recurrence in the academic sphere. There is a tendency to approach to it from its ideological and propagandistic specificity. The by-product of this approach is that of the negation of the ideological qualities, which though unconscious are also inherent, of every culture. Culture, in general and the arts, in particular, have always been devices through which the values of a specific society express themselves, and also the tools to promote new ones. Among these values stand the ideal subject and the ideal image of the society he lives in; what should people strive to be and build. The promotion of these ideals in culture is the mediation and how should be this mediation in terms of representation and identification is the *discourse of desire*. The relevance of this research stands in its innovative way to approach Soviet Culture: instead of addressing the issue through its specificity, it ascribes all the specific elements of Soviet Culture into a general existing theoretical cultural and philosophical frame.

In this field can be found great contributions by academics like Boris Groys who in his book *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond* makes a unique and clever analysis of the Stalinist period as a continuation and realization of the avant-gardist project, in addition, in the field of literary theory it is worth noticing Katerina Clark's book *The Soviet novel: History as Ritual* where the Australian academic describes the main characteristics and methods of representation of the Socialist Realist novel. The theoretical frame of this research is based on the ideas of René Girard in his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Giorgio Agamben in *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, Thomas Pavel *La Pensée du Roman*, and Walter Benjamin in his article *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Furthermore the book *Soviet Russian Literature: Writers and Problems, 1917-67* by Mark Slonim has been of great use to understand the literary context. The book, though written long time

ago still has one of the best insights in Soviet literature. To understand the cinematic context I have used *The Russian Cinema Reader vol.I 1908 to the Stalin Era* edited by Rimgaila Salys. It is a volume which contains articles by renowned academics like Denise Youngblood or David Bordwell. In addition, multiple articles written during the twenties and the thirties as well as other articles written by contemporary academics have been used to complement the information.

The main purpose of this thesis is to determine and analyse the different discourses of desires that were elaborated during the first two decades of the Soviet Union in the novel and cinema, and also establish the differences between the NEP and the Stalinist period. The research aims to explain that in the first decade, there was the common goal: to build a collective consciousness but the result was singular multiplicity of various artistic trends that did not perform the function of forming a single collective desire and consciousness, but acted as an intermediary of these. The second part of the thesis dwells on the major change that supposed the Stalinist period, and how cultural and artistic objects, though they retained its mediational function, they started to operate as fetishes as well. The second aim of this thesis is to show how the novel that, unlike cinema, found itself constricted by tradition, was not able to offer a polished discourse of desire that would work on a formal and ideological level. To do that the research will analyse different novels and films from those periods, namely, *The Foundation Pit* by Andrey Platonov, *How the Steel was Tempered* by Nikolay Ostrovsky, *The Man with the Movie Camera* by Dziga Vertov and *Battleship Potemkin* as well as *Aleksandr Nevsky* by Sergey Eisenstein.

Finally, though the intention of this research is to bring some light on how desire was approached and mediated in the early Soviet culture, here are only described the general tendencies through a small sample of books and films. An extensive look would require also the study of poetry, theater, plastic arts as well as other forms of representation. Nonetheless, it is my opinion that this thesis opens a path for it in future endeavors.

1. THE TWENTIES: A TIME OF MULTIPLICITIES

The cultural and artistic production of the first years of the Soviet Union was marked by the Civil War, everything was subjected to agitation, and it was not until the end of the war where cultural authorities saw the need for an original Soviet culture, with its own myths and characteristics. Everything was subject to a new reformulation from desire to human as a subject. Artistic creation had to represent this change, and not only that, it had to mediate people's desire, to show them which would be the ideal path, the ideal man.

Traditionally that has always been the role of literature, more specifically, of the novel. The novel has never been a mere imitation of reality but it has also sought to influence it. As we will see, what René Girard (1965) calls the *metaphysical desire* to become the ideal, has always been a key element from the novel. The problem is that in the beginning of the twentieth century the novel, as well as other traditional forms of art, had undergone a crisis. It was a crisis of language, a crisis of worldview: reality had fragmented and the only thing left were subjectivities. As Berdyaev observes in his book *The Fate of Man in the Modern World* (1935), the modern novel could no longer represent man as a whole, his whole image had disappeared and the only thing left was fragments, the modern novelist can only picture evil realities. Under this condition, the novel turns into a complicated mechanism where stylistic innovations rank as the first priority. This means as well, that novelists were no longer interested in mediate people's desires, in being representative. In the beginning this crisis did not had the same impact in Russia but by the twenties it already appeared as a symptom. As we will see, the novel suffers from a paradoxical condition as there are multiple formulations on what the novel should be and do but none are them are completely satisfying on an ideological and formal level.

From the other side, in the beginning of the century cinema affirmed itself as a new art. An art infused with optimism and without the weight of tradition. The fragmentation of reality did not seem to affect cinematic depiction; on the contrary,

reality had never been presented so truthfully. With this optimistic attitude cinema became the form art which inherited the novel's duty to represent man as a whole, to show non-fragmented worlds to the spectators, and stories with characters that would be infused with life, characters with which the audiences could identify but also characters which would show them how they should be. Furthermore, the cinema of that time, being silenced, created a universal language of images that it could reach any kind of audiences regardless of this social status or nationality.

This was the state of the arts when the Soviet Union appeared but there is another factor that influenced artistic creation during the first decade of the Soviet Union: the implementation of the New Economic Policy also known as NEP. After the Civil War the Soviet Union functioned under what was called *War Communism*, by the end of it, there was an urgent need to revitalise the economy of the country. As a consequence, in 1922 was implemented the NEP a mixed system which gave the state control of the foreign state and large factories but gave room for private individuals to create their own businesses. The new economy influenced directly literary and cinematic production. Thanks to it, multiple private publishing houses with different editorial lines appeared. In cinema there was the state company called *Goskino* (Gosudartsvvennoe Kino) which was founded in 1924 and one year later would be replaced by *Sovkino* (Soviet Kino). Additionally there was the semi-private studio called *Mezhrabomfilm* (Mezhdu rabotchaia pomosh') funded by the German based International Workers Aid Movement and *Proletkino* which was founded by the Proletkult.

The fact that there was not a centralised culture translated into a variety of discourses in the artistic landscape which makes it is impossible to talk about the twenties as a unified discourse whether it is in literature, cinema or plastic arts. Instead, different groups and movements had their own ideas on what the novel and cinema should be. Certainly, there was censorship during that time and not all positions were welcomed, one has to remember the execution of the Acmeist Nikolai Gumiliev or the political persecution which Osip Mandelstam suffered. Nonetheless, the writers and directors of this period experienced a certain level of

artistic freedom which later in the Stalinist period will not exist as all artistic production would be centralised.

In this chapter we will see an overview of the literary landscape of the twenties, which discourses the different groups of writers promoted, which techniques for the processes of identification and mediation they thought should be applied when writing a novel, but also the aim of the section is to prove the idea of how the novel in a time of need for a universal discourse did not manage to present a well-rounded product. Let it be for a lack of interest, mastery, or intention. As an example of this crisis a section will be devoted to Platonov's novel *The Foundation Pit* in relation to Girard's ideas on the *metaphysical desire*. The section will explain how, for Platonov, mediation of people's desires was impossible as there was a lack of referents in the Soviet reality. Furthermore the chapter will explore the situation of Soviet Cinema and prove that, unlike in the novel, Directors strived and succeeded in create a new form that would mediate people's desires and present a new collective subject. Of course, the optimism of cinema does not mean that there was a unified discourse that is why, one section will be devoted to the methods Dziga Vertov used and another one to Sergey Eisenstein. Departing from a similar idea of wanting to bring people consciousness each director would choose different paths

1.1 IN SEARCH OF A SOVIET LITERATURE

One of the mistakes researchers often make is to approach the avant-gardist discourse as, not the predominant one, but somehow the official one. Of course, there is some truth to that as they put themselves in service to the communist from the beginning of the revolution, they wanted to influence and change the world through art, and, in fact the commissar of education Anatoli Lunacharsky favoured them during a period of time. But, the truth is that their influence gradually faded

out and in 1923 the LEF ceased to exist¹. Furthermore, it has already been said that this dissertation is not about literature as a whole but about the novel. For some reason, among the cubo-futurists, there are not distinguished novelists. They favoured and excelled in other literary forms like in poetry (Vladimir Mayakovsky) and theatre (Vsevolod Meyerhold) but there is an empty space when it comes to the novel. Maybe it is because they saw in poetry and theatre most convenient and better suited ways for influencing people, but perhaps there is another reason behind.

As much as they would have liked to reject it, the fact is that the avant-gardists in general and the cubo-futurists in particular, were the product of a time before the revolution. They are closer in terms of time and tradition to the authors of the Silver Age. This period is famous for seeing the renaissance of poetry but not so much of the novel. There are few examples of novels from that period and the most relevant were written by symbolist authors (*Petersburg* by Andrei Bely or *The Little Demon* by Fyodor Sologub), Yevgeni Zamyatin in its own right, or more conservative writers like Maksim Gorki who wrote books with a style closer to the realism of the 19th century. But apart from these authors, artists generally would prefer to write poetry or theatre.

Maybe this is indicative of the crisis that the novel as a literary form went through in the beginning of the 20th century, and that is why there is not, at least among the cubo-futurists, an answer on what the novel should be and do. And also, this crisis could explain the multiple discussions that came during the twenties about the possibilities and limitations of the novel. That does not mean, in any case, that there were no novelist in the twenties, quite the contrary, as Mark Slonim points out (1977), in the mid-twenties there was a resurgence of the novel as an art

¹ LEF (Left Front of the Arts) was an artistic association and Journal created by Osip Brik and Vladimir Mayakovsky. In it participated multiple formalist and constructivist artists like Boris Arvatov, Aleksey Gastev, Dziga Vertov or Einstein. It is interesting that in it contributed writers who later would be considered as Fellow-travelers (Boris Pasternak, Viktor Shclovsky or Isaak Babel).

form and prose was produced in larger number than poetry, but as we will see, the ideas of what should be the role of the novel varied and change depending on the literary movement.

One of the predominant positions in the beginning of the twenties was that of the Proletarian Writers. They represented the fiercest opposition against the futurists and the fellow-traveller (of which we will talk later). This group of writers believed, as Mark Slonim (1977) remarks, that being determines consciousness, which means that culture is determined by the social-economic order and the predominant class. That means that literature should be an expression of that change that Russia underwent and represent the new reality. Nothing which has already been produced in art can be utilised because it is the product from a bourgeois society. This is the main problem Proletarian Writers have against the avant-gardist, they are a product of the previous regime and no matter how hard they try their art will always be infected with “pseudo-bourgeois intellectuality”. And, evidently, this means that this art should not emulate the style of the writers of the nineteenth century (Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and so on)². This new literature should be written for and by the predominant class of the Soviet Union: the proletarians.

For that purpose, in 1918 was founded the Proletkult, an organization consisting of different cultural associations all around the country where proletarians would learn how to write and would be encouraged to engage in artistic creation. There was this idea of the Proletkult as a factory of writers. At the beginning it was, at least in numbers, quite successful as hundreds of associations

² Both Lenin and Trotsky looked at the Proletarian Writers with certain reluctance, for starters, Lenin did not agreed with the decision to break with all the previous tradition, as that would also mean, for example, not follow the tradition of Chernyshevsky and the revolutionary literature from the forties and sixties. Trotsky looked at this movement with skepticism, and was against the multiple attacks of the Proletarian Writers to the Fellow-travelers, it was his opinion that if they wanted to have hegemony in the literary sphere they should first write something noteworthy.

were created. Inside the Proletkult could be found two main factions: Kuznitsa (The Smithy) and Oktyabr (October). In both factions there was a predominance of poets, but there were also a few novelists. The problem with the Proletarian Writers is that when it came to the quality they were not able to produce novels with artistic value. The “what” of this literature, the intentions behind it were quite clear: literature should represent the collective spirit; it should abandon the representation of men as an individual, and find in the novel a collective subject and its will. The content was clear but not the “how”. It never materialised in a concrete revolutionary form, on the contrary, most of the novels written were a copy of Gorki`s realism. Perhaps the most famous novel from that period was *Cement* by Gladkov (who belonged to Kuznitsa) and regardless of its quality there is no novelty in this novel³.

So as we see, paradoxically, the Proletarian Writers rejected tradition but at the same time wanted to restore one of the main functions of the novel: an art form which should create role models, to conduit what should man aspire to be. But by rejecting the previous tradition and retaining its functions, no novel of quality and novelty appeared. So, if avant-gardists had no project over novel, the Proletarian Writers favoured content over form, or rather, they were not able to find a successful form that would complement the content.

The last group of writers which should be taken into consideration are the so-called *Fellow-travellers*, this is a name popularised by Trotsky in his book *Literature and Revolution* to refer to those writers who did not necessarily engage in the revolution or the construction of socialism but at the same time were not against the regime. In other words, the name does not refer to an artistic movement but to a large number of independent writers and artistic schools. Nonetheless, despite their differences, they did have certain traits in common. This category included writers such as Yevgeny Zamyatin, Boris Pasternak, Andrey Platonov,

³ *Cement* is considered one of the first novels of Socialist Realism. Later in the second part of the thesis the characteristics of this literary movement will be extensively discussed.

Isaak Babel, Mikhail Bulgakov, Yuri Olesha, or the groups *The Serapion Brothers* (Mikhail Zoshenko, Veniamin Kaverin, Vsevolod Ivanov or Viktor Shklovsky, among others) or the group *OBERIU* (Daniil Kharms, Aleksandr Vvedensky, and Konstantin Vaginov)⁴.

All this amalgam of writers represents different styles, different ways to approach literature. But all of them show a reluctance to subjugate prose to its previous function; they are not interested in presenting positive proletarian characters people should emulate. As Borys Groys (1992) points out, their usual answer to this demand was that in the 1920s Soviet Russia did not have yet the socialist economic base to which a new proletarian art could correspond. Of course the problem goes deeper than that. For starters, yes, it implies the impossibility of an art based on an economic system which has not yet made roots in the Soviet society, but, it also means that this authors saw themselves as part of the literary European tradition, a tradition which was not interested anymore in mediate people's desires but to show the mechanisms of the mind, not the mind of ideals, but regular people.

The refusal to link their artistic fate to the political situation of the country and the prioritisation of style does not imply that their novels and short stories were oblivious to the world; on the contrary, the most predominant genre of this period of time was satire. Satire is very much in touch with reality but cannot offer a solution to its problems, only point out the problems; it puts the finger on the wound but does not offer a cure. For example, in his stories Zoshchenko would depict the contradictions of everyday life in the Soviet Union, there are no positive figures, instead, he depicts simple people who do not know how to navigate in a

⁴ To include OBERIU among the fellow-travelers might be considered problematic as they were heavily influenced by Russian Futurism and actually are considered their successors. But Futurism, inside the LEF, is a product of the first 5 years of the twenties and as much as the members of OBERIU were influenced by futurism it is safe to say that as a group they stand on their own. This is why the previous affirmation that futurism had an empty space when it comes to the novel is still valid.

world full of tricksters and rogues, and he is also famous for depicting the phenomenon of *meshantsvo*⁵. Another example could be the novels of Ilf and Petrov *Twelve Chairs* and *The Little Golden Calb* whose main protagonist is Ostap Bender a *picaro* who goes around the Soviet Union in search of money and taking advantage of all the gullible citizens he encounters, unmasking, at the same time, their hypocrisy.

Even outside the realm of satire this authors were unable to present a harmonious world of wealthy personalities, the short stories by Isaak Babel are traumatizing images of the civil war, one of the most important and ground-breaking novels written by Zamyatin is an anti-utopia which rejects the idea of a collective subject. Even a writer who was a great supporter of the regime like Yuri Olesha had trouble creating a convincing positive portrait of the new Soviet man in his noble *Envy*. One could argue that this novel is a satirical comment on the man of the pre-revolutionary period but the picture he makes of the young soviet generations is also not endearing and desirable, it lacks humanism.

So as one can see, the problem of this time is that there is an absolute absence of referents, there is no desirable object. Man does not know, at least in the domain of the novel, what to strive for, whether it be because there is a lack of interest in the novel as an art form, like is the case of the avant-gardes, or because there is a lack of mastery like with the Proletarian Writers, or finally because there is no interest in representing positive figures like the case with a lot of the Fellow-travellers. Instead, this group of writers represent the process of seeking the new type of desire, the representation of the real reflection on the becoming of the new reality.

The next section will be devoted to Platonov's *Foundation Pit* as one example of the multiple approximations to literature in the twenties. One might argue that the novel was written in 1930; therefore, it should be considered a novel from the thirties. But the spirit of a decade does not always die with the end of the same decade. *The Foundation Pit* stands as a bridge between the twenties and the

⁵ Meshantsvo: philistinism.

thirties. Though it foresees some of the characteristics of the thirties it has the experimentation and the lack of adherence to an ideology that the fellow-traveller novel had, in addition, it does not seek to mediate people's desire, and on the contrary, as we will see, it unmask the nature of mediation.

1.2. PLATONOV'S THE FOUNDATION PIT: MIMETIC DESIRE AND THE ABSENCE OF UTOPIA

Platonov is, perhaps, one of the most characteristic and curious writers of the first and second decade of the Soviet Union. He is among these types of authors, like Chekhov, who considered literature as his second profession, at least in his first years. Nonetheless, he started writing poetry from a young age, and proved his mastery among the literary circles of Voronezh whilst working as an electric engineer. He quickly adhered to the Bolsheviks, and fervently believed, though in its own way, in the project of building socialism. Platonov became part of the Proletkult and he would write multiple articles for their newspapers (*Kuznitsa*, *Oktyabr*, *Krasnaya Derevnia*), regarding science, art or philosophy. In fact he would do the typical Proletarian Writer activity of going to a factory and write an article or short-story about it. Nonetheless, it would be quite reductive to talk about Platonov as a Proletarian Writer.

He should be considered a Fellow-traveller because regardless of his first years of activity in the Proletkult and being a member of the party in 1920, he was rapidly expelled one year later because he was considered an unstable element. Furthermore, his writing was extremely different to the language his companions from the Proletkult used. Whereas the other writers would write stories which were indistinctive between each other in plot and style, Platonov sought his own particular way of using language, a difficult and personal style which was not of the taste of the authorities. Furthermore, as it already has been said, he welcomed with enthusiasm the Bolsheviks but he had his own ideas in mind. The young Platonov was heavily influenced by the Russian philosopher Nikolai Fedorov.

As Thomas Seifrid explains in his *A Companion to Andrei Platonov's The Foundation Pit* (2009), Fedorov saw in human existence a tragedy because it is ruled by the universal law of physical death. This fact conditions man's existence. And instead of overcoming this, man continuously falls into a cycle of sexual procreation which the only thing it does is affirming and contributing to the never-ending sequence of death. Man should reject sexual relations and seek a unity amongst brothers, but not only a unity with the present humanity but also with his ancestors. Humans have to understand that they all come from a common ancestor which links them. Humans should overcome death, impose its will to material nature and form the kingdom of heaven in this world, not in another after life world as the orthodox religion preached. To do that man should use technology and learn mechanical skills that would allow him to terraform the same earth, i.e. making it more habitable than it is in the present day, to annul its hostility towards human existence. Furthermore this technology should find a way to resurrect those who have already died. Then and only then, man will live in the perfect utopia. Platonov saw in the Bolshevik revolution not just a tool to overcome social inequality but also physicality. This philosophy was central for Platonov in his youth years, but gradually he would become disenchanted, with both the possibility of the Soviet Union for being the project which would make possible the Federovian utopia and also with the Federovian utopia itself. He doubted the possibility of its realisation.

The disenchantment coincides with Platonov's first attempts as a novelist in the second-half of the twenties. In 1928 he started writing *Chevengur*, which finished in 1929. The book tells the story of a group of people, during the drought of 1921, which make an unsuccessful attempt to build the communist utopia (based on the ideas of Fedorov); the village they live in ends up being destroyed by some Cossacks. In the same year Platonov finished the novel, he started *The Foundation Pit* which would end in 1930. The novel starts with Voshchev, a proletarian who gets fired from a factory for thinking too much and not being productive. He starts wandering and ends in some barracks where a group of workers is digging to make

a foundation pit for a building (metaphor for the socialist utopia). The character decides to stay with them because they seem to know the truths of life. The novel also portrays the process of collectivisation that the USSR started in 1928.

In Karl Ove Knausgård's novel *My Struggle* the character sometimes exposes his ideas on literature, in one of these digressions he goes on to say that literature is always linked to utopia, whenever it loses its utopian character, literature loses its meaning, this digression describes perfectly the feeling behind Platonov's novel. Seifrid is right when he states that *The Foundation Pit* makes a parody of those novels written by writers from the Proletkult. The plot of these novels revolves around a hero which sets the task to build socialism through a determined act, the construction of a factory, for example. In the end, these novels would praise the collective effort towards the building of socialism. Furthermore, Platonov's novel parodies some of the characteristics of the Utopian novel and subverts them. The main character of the Utopian novel does not live in the utopia but suddenly finds himself in it; this journey is not physical but sometimes is the product of a dream, or is the soul that travels. The Utopia is an ahistorical space with no conception of time, and finally the main character cannot stay in the Utopia but always comes back to this reality. Instead Platonov ironizes the projects that the heroes of the Proletarian novels set to do, no matter how hard the workers of the pit work, they never seem to be able to finish their task, on the contrary, it never ends as their ambition grows and grows. Regarding the utopian novels, Voschev does unwarily enter in this "utopian" space, but he enters as a physical being like Dante who suddenly finds himself in a "gloomy wood" and enters hell. The space in which Voschev enters is not a Utopia that has already achieved the end of history, Voschev's world seems eternal in time, but condemned into a never ending process of construction, and paradoxically, to entropy. Those who leave in this world are doomed to perish in the illusion that their task will end someday. Finally, unlike the protagonist of the Utopian Novel, Voschev cannot leave the place where he is now.

The other thing that parodies in his novel is the Bolsheviks for its Marxist materialism, through which they tried to fulfil, as Tulchinsky points out (2020), the typical Russian ambition of metaphysical unity and the realisation of paradise on earth. As Seifrid points out (2009), Platonov accentuates the physicality in his descriptions, even the simplest action is noted as somewhat special; the characters are slaves of matter, and there is nothing outside the physical realm of existence, there is no soul nor transcendence. The problem is that materialism seeks to find meaning in matter, the salvation comes through the domination of nature, but nature has a principle of entropy, all the environment that surrounds the workers of the pit is dead, or will soon die. Any physical attempt to create a perfect world is deemed to fail, because, first the colossal task ends up killing human existence, secondly, the project seems to never end because the needs of the people keep growing as humans advance: the workers keep expanding the extension of the pit, what once was a housing facility, suddenly turns into a Babel Tower where all future humanity should leave eternally protected from the hostilities of nature. Furthermore, the project cannot seem to solve the problem of death, which makes life meaningless because it takes from people the opportunity to live under their own will, instead they are conditioned by death. Finally, materialism lacks transcendence, it negates metaphysical development, as a result, personality is crushed and humans become empty vessels. Regarding Fedorov's theories, there are two main aspects Platonov parodies from him. First is the principle of immortality and resurrection which, at least through Marxism are impossible: Because the resurrection is impossible, in the novel Voshchev collects lost objects that belonged to dead people, they serve as memorial. And then is Jashev who does not accept this impossibility and acts violently towards Prushevsky who negates its viability. The second aspect that parodies is his claim for man to cease in sexual relations. During the novel, we see people like Chiklin or Prushevsky who cannot fail but miss intimate contact with a woman, they find themselves thinking about the last time a woman kissed them, then there is comical situations as Seifrid (2009) notes, where is insinuated that characters like Zashev or Kozlov

masturbate. Man is incapable of rejecting his own physicality, like with death, he is defined by it.

How is this related to *discourses of desire*? The Foundation Pit is a parodic novel, and parody does not limit to imitate and subvert the form of the novel, or the plot, but it makes apparent the mechanism of triangulation of desire. The terminology was created by René Girard and explored in his book *Deceit, desire, and the novel: Self and other in literary structure*, it refers to the metaphysic desire to become and embrace the ideal. For the French philosopher this desire is always mediated by a third, the *other*, and this *other* influences the character's choices: how he acts and what he aspires to be. Historically, the novel is not only the device to influence the reader desires, but it makes apparent the mechanism. He puts in conflict the romantic idea of originality of desire, the impulse that comes from inside, in opposition, there is the truth behind the novel which denies an original desire. But, it is incorrect to assume that the problematic is inherent to romanticism only. Up until the 19th century the novel was divided in two types: the idealist and the parodic. The idealist novel would present positive characters, incorruptible in their nature that represent the ideal form of man and how it interacts with the world. The parodic novel would imitate those novels by presenting doomed figures in a hostile environment, furthermore, only the parodic novel would reveal the mechanism of mediation. The best example and, interestingly the one that Girard devotes more time is Don Quixote. The main character imitates the idealist chivalric novels, and turns crazy, and in the second part it is he who influences and mediates other people, they enter in his fantasies. Time would pass and the frontier between parodic and idealist novels would blur. The realist novel would present the world in its hostility, with its shades, but one could always find positive characters in those novels as well as an apparent triangulation of desire. Nonetheless, Platonov's novel is not realistic but adheres more comfortably to the old conception of the parodic novel. How does it materialise the triangulation of desire in The Foundation Pit?

The workers of the Foundation desire too in an imitative way, they all seek meaning and count that their comrades know it, so they all act according to what the others would expect from them. Voschev arrives to pit and see the other men working, he thinks that they might have the truth too existence, for what to live and how, as a consequence, he joins them and starts working too. The problem is that none of them is convinced about the nature of their desires and the mediation is empty. This is a particular kind of mediation; it does not involve a triangle but a group of people. Renne Girard (1965) explains this phenomenon through Don Quixote: in the novel there is a woman who explains to Don Quixote a vision she had when she was faking her own death: she saw a dozen demons playing some kind of tennis like game, the players were opposed but alike and they imitated their moves, instead of a ball they passed each other books, it seemed, as the woman describes it, that there were no winner or losers but all curses and complained. For Girard this is the idea of the imitative desire, they all play the game, their positions are interchangeable, once one can be the subject and the other the mediator and the other way around, but in the end they all lose, because they cannot be the *other* and put the blame in their mediator for their misfortunes. To some extent the workers in the pit are the demons in Don Quixote's story. In Platonov's story there is a lack of true referents, there is no positive figure product of the Socialist Utopia. Instead they are left with each other, they are aware that the nature of their desire is fictitious, that the babylonian tower they try to build will not be ever finished, but they act as if they did not know it. They perform this *simulacrum* of desire because they do not have anything left in their lives. There is a scene which exemplifies it: After the collectivisation, at night the workers and the people in the village start to hear noises, it turns out that Misha the humanised bear is working on the forge, he is hammering because he suddenly felt alone. Though at first, everyone complains and tries to stop the bear from working, rapidly they start helping him. Misha's pain has reminded them of their own pain and they start working with him so they can forget it.

Seifrid (2009) says that the different characters that appear in the novel are different levels of dehumanisation. And though it's true, they also represent the different levels of awareness of this phenomenon, because not all of them are equally aware that they are performing a *simulacrum*. Prushevky and Voshchev are the ones who are more aware about the fiction they are living in. Prushevsky sets out to design the perfect building where people would live forever, happily, but at the same time he is aware of the impossibility of the task, so at the same time he plans for his own death. It is interesting to see how the activist likes to have Prushevsky around as it serves others as an example to emulate, which reaffirms the idea that this mediation is based on a lie as Prushevsky himself is not convinced of his desire to build the utopia. Voshev is also conscious about the act he is performing, he sees the project of the pit as useless because at the same time the task kills human existence and there would be now one to live in it. Still he takes part in the *simulacrum* because it keeps him distracted from his own void.

Kozlov, Safronov and the Activist are less conscious of the fact that they are acting through imitation. They are convinced that desire is original, that it is theirs but they rely as well on the people they are surrounded with to keep the illusion. There is a moment when the workers are all lying down; it seems as if all of them suddenly realised the futility of their actions. Safronov starts to realise it, and begins to question the nature of his actions, but rapidly jumps to his comrades and reproaches them for not working, but he himself does not start working. He proceeds then to turn on the radio to listen to the state directives, he tries to mediate his own desires and his companions through the *Bolshevik speak* from the radio but fails in his attempt. Kozlov, as well thinks that his desire is original, when he quits his work to get his pension the narrator says “*Kozlov could think thoughts himself; therefore he silently withdrew to a higher generally useful life, the little trunk with his belongings in his hand.*” Of course, one cannot help but notice the sarcasm behind those words. But it is precisely because he is oblivious to the lack of real originality and the hopeless nature of his desire that he endures. Once he is retired he starts memorising formulations, resolutions from the party or

poems, it seems as if he were the ideal socialist man and every time he is with the workers in the pit, Paschkin shows Kozlov to all the workers so they would imitate him. Finally we have the Activist: He is engaged with the cause, but, perhaps more often than Safronov and Kozlov, he questions his life and the decisions he makes, normally this happens when there is no directives of the general line. He needs directives to make sense of his actions. When after the collectivisation he receives a directive that questions all his actions during the process, and accusing him of being too much on the left he crumbles⁶. He followed the general lines of the party, and interiorised them as his own will, and suddenly he is being punished, which for him is incomprehensible.

There is an element which gives hope to the characters and makes them think that their performative act might be real: Nastya. On that moment when it seemed as if everyone had unveiled the truth behind the situation Safronov says: “*Comrades, we must have here, in the form of childhood, a leader of the future proletarian world*” (Platonov, 1975, pp.50) some pages later Chiklin goes to and old factory and finds Nastya, and Safronov says:

“A factual inhabitant of socialism lies before us in a state of unconsciousness. From the radio and other cultural material we hear the party line, but nothing we can touch. But here rests the substance of creation and the goal of the party—a little human being, destined to become the universal element! For that reason, we must finish the foundation pit as suddenly as possible, so that the building will rise sooner, and a stone wall will shield the childhood personnel from wind and catching colds!” (Platonov, 1975, pp. 63)

Safronov, suddenly becomes aware that the things they hear in the radio and the mediation they exercise on each other, no matter how hard they try, does not materialise into something fruitful. They need something pure, a factual element of the utopia which could justify their desire to sacrifice themselves for the cause.

⁶ This is a reference to Stalin’s *Dizzy with Success* (1930). In it he accuses those in charge of the process of collectivisation of taking the plan to an extreme.

Nastya stands as the last hope for their desire not to be a mere *simulacrum*. Ironically, Nastya seems as a conscious element, a truthful product of the revolutionary society, but, even her desire is an imitation. Before dying, her mother tells her to act as a proletarian in order to survive. As a consequence even Nastya acts according to what is expected from her. Nonetheless, Nastya's death serves as a confirmation: the desire to build a socialist utopia cannot guarantee the salvation of humanity.

When the truth is unmasked, suddenly the nature of their true desire unveils as well: “*To perceive the metaphysical structure of desire is to foresee its catastrophic conclusion.*” (Girard, 1965, pp.288). Sometimes in the novel the characters express their desire to die but it's quickly overlapped with their desire to first build the socialist utopia, masking it as his true desire. Throughout the book they experience their will to die through sleep, Platonov makes an indistinctive parallel with the action of sleep and death, for example, when Chiklin sees the corpses of Safronov and Kozlov he asks as if they are sleeping. When Nastya dies and the whole structure of their desire is exposed, the characters embrace death as the ultimate response. Chiklin starts digging in the pit which now is not the foundation of a building but a grave. The will to die expresses their autonomy against the hostility of the world, and furthermore, unlike Fedorov's beliefs, death stands as the only unifying principle for humanity. Collective subject is found in death

In conclusion we can see in Platonov's *The Foundation Pit* a perfect example of the “crisis of the novel” which could not mediate and create positive characters to emulate; on the contrary the novel describes the problems of the Soviet Union and its society. The novel unmasked the nature of the imitative desire: the construction of socialism is a project with a lack of referents which make people act blindly, furthermore instead of providing a utopia the result of its construction negates human existence, the only principle that reaffirms it is that of death.

1.3 IN SEARCH OF A SOVIET CINEMA

We have seen how novelists found it difficult to create a novel that would be both formally and ideologically notorious. That does not mean that the novels of that time were, plainly speaking, bad, the problems is that the modern novel did not adhere, as we saw, to the traditional previous canons. With cinema we encounter a different situation. The twenties are famous for its constructivist approach to cinema, but the truth is that most of the cinema produced at that time was mainly made for entertainment. In addition, for a long period, most of the films which were shown were American or European⁷. Among this amalgam of films the formalist directors would strive to create a cinema which would be representative and would adopt the novel's mission to present role models for the Soviet population as well as be innovative. Evidently cinema had problems of its own, but they were of a different nature, mostly economic.

During the war, most of the movies were what they would call *Agitprop*. These were short movies with a simple plot to simply entertain the masses. But after the end of the war, there was a huge interest to make cinema a profitable industry. According to Lunacharsky, Lenin, said that cinema was the most important of the arts, and Trotsky, as Richard Taylor points out (1992), the Soviet leader in his article *Vodka, the Church and the Cinema* stated that cinema should be a weapon utilised to open the eyes of the proletarians an help build socialism. Furthermore it has already said how this idea of art as an industry was also followed in literature by Proletarian Writers: they wanted to create a factory line of authors who would produce literature on demand. The difference is that in the core of film production is already imbued with this logic of an industrial art; a film is not the product of just one person but of a group of people: the light technicians,

⁷ This will be one of the biggest complaints of Mayakovsky in his speech in the debate on 'The Paths and Policy of Sovkino'. He aggressively complained to the authorities that Soviet Cinema is sick because there is a lack of innovative movies, meanwhile, the theaters would show only melodramas and foreign films.

the camera men, the actors, the director, the editor and so on. This is why in a culture based so much in industrial and collective progress cinema became the embodiment of these values. The problem was that at that time the Soviet Union counted with little equipment and little funding to buy new one. These facts alone influenced on the decision making to select which type of movies were mainly going to be produced⁸.

Most of the films produced at that time would be purely an entertainment, simply for the fact that authorities needed to be sure that profit could be made of them so the industry could sustain itself. And for the most part these films would be directed by what Denise Youngblood (1991) called “The Old Guard”. The name does not refer to a collective of directors who shared a common approach to cinema, but to certain film directors who started their career before the revolution and adapted to the new conditions. Among these directors we have Iakov Protazanov who directed one of the most popular films of the twenties: *Aelita* (1924) based on Aleksandr Tolstoy’s novel. Other directors of the old guard were Piotr Chardyinin, and Vladimir Gardin. These directors fairly adapted to the new regime, their films contained elements of ideology but it was not their primary concern. It does not mean that they were not effective and polished, but they did not seek to influence the population’s opinion and desires or to find a new form, they simply wanted to entertain the audiences. This was not a characteristic only of the old guard; there were new young directors who would follow this line as well: Fridrikh Ermler and Abram Room. The predominant genres were traditional comedies and dramas but there is also the case of Boris Barnet who tried to export the genre of the western in his film *Miss Mend* (1926). The minister of Enlightenment Lunacharsky who was the main figure in charge of cinema production was aware of the lack of ideology of these films, some even satirise the

⁸ On the economic difficulties the Soviet Union encountered to build the cinema industry see *Government Policies and Practical Necessities in the Soviet Cinema of the 1920s* by Kristin Thompson included in the book *The Red Screen : Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema* edited by Anna Lawton.

NEP, but as Richard Taylor (1983) points out, the minister would hide behind the idea that the people needed not only ideological films but a “healthy varied diet”

Aside from these directors who practically dominated the box-office, we can find a group of young directors who were convinced that cinema needed a new form that would be in accordance with new times. There had to be a new way of telling stories (even if it was by not telling stories), a new way to represent man and infuse the population with a proletarian spirit. As it happened with the novel, directors found multiple ways to create this new form. In this group we find directors like Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein. In later sections plenty of time will be devoted to Eisenstein and Vertov, that's why now only a quick overview will be given of these groups of directors.

In this new group there were great theoreticians, some learned to film through the making of *Agitprop* during the Civil War, or in other cases, as Denis Youngblood (2013) points out, they were heavily influenced by these short films and the way the montage was utilised. Lev Kuleshov was one of those who filmed agitation films during the war and also one of the greatest cinema theorists from this period. He was of the opinion that only through a well-taught form could the ideological message reach the audiences. He was quite interested in American filmmaking, in fact, as Vance Kepley (2013) explains: Kuleshov would go to cinema theatres not just to study American films, but also the audience's reactions to them. He noticed that the spectators had big emotional responses to them. This emotional response was due to the dynamic tempo and accelerated action but also because of their compositional simplicity. He did not want to have details meddling with, for example, the acting of an actor. This way, audiences could be engaged and focused on the emotions that were being portrayed. In other words, in order to convey an ideological message that would penetrate in the audiences, the film had to work through emotional responses that would engage the spectator; audiences had to experience a sort of catharsis. This is something which Eisenstein, as we will see later, developed and took to a step further. The most

successful film made by Kuleshov was *The Extraordinary Adventure of Mr. West in the Land of the Soviets* (1924). The movie tells the story of an American named John West who travels to the USSR to promote the YMCA; once he arrives he loses his suitcase and ends up with a group of thieves. The film challenges American stereotypes about Russia, though it also satirises life during the NEP. The film is the realisation of all of Kuleshovs's ideas, from its sense of dynamic-tempo to the simple composition of images. (Not only in interiors were normally we see a character before a black background but even in exteriors were there are barley elements in the street that could distract the audiences from the main action)

The other director from this group is Vsevolod Pudovkin. By the beginning of the twenties he was a chemical engineer who was not particularly interested in cinema; it was not until he met Kuleshov that he became fascinated with the possibilities of cinematic art. His conception of cinema draws in significance from his partnership with Kuleshov. Pudovkin is interested in dynamic tempo through montage. For him the ideology defined the form, and that would be reflected in his idea of "associative montage" which implied that the relation between shots exposed the meaning⁹. In his view, the moment of filming does not set in stone the essence of the film, rather the shots are the material that later through montage the director uses to his own will and preference to establish the meaning of a scene. The associative montage became a characteristic of all this group of directors. The other trait of Pudovkin's cinema at that time is the use of character-type. Pudovkin, though he worked with them, disliked the idea of using stage actors as they had a tendency to overreact; he wanted to film a real man just as he would film a real tree

⁹ This associative montage is based in the now known technique called *Kuleshov effect*, named after Lev Kuleshov who in the end of the twenties together with Pudovkin conducted some experiments to demonstrate how the spectator perceives differently or has a different attitude towards an image depending to which other image is then related. This idea was shown in a film experiment where the face of a man was shown three times, and each time a different image would follow his (first some soup and a glass of wine, then a little child in a coffin, and finally a woman laying on a couch)

or real water. On some occasions he would film regular people with no acting experience and then through montage work his way to make it real, like in *The Heir of Genghis Khan*, but it required too much time. So he would work with actors who could adjust to the idea he had in mind for the characters and devote hours working with them.

The following sections will elaborate on Dziga Vertov's, and Sergey Eisenstein's cinema. These two directors, as we will see, share a lot of qualities in common with the previous filmmakers and between them: they share the same goal of creating a collective subject, of giving art back its social function but the means through which they achieve this are completely different. Before starting talking about Dziga Vertov and Eisenstein it is my intention to briefly talk about Walter Benjamin's conception of cinema as an art because later it will be helpful to understand both Soviet directors. The German philosopher in his famous article *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical* (1935) cleverly dissected the nature of cinema as an art and explained which should be its usage. He detected these positive traits and uses of cinema in Soviet cinematography.

Walter Benjamin praises cinema for ending with what he calls the negative theology of *l'art pour l'art* which denied the social function of art. In Russia this discourse never really penetrated among the Russian avant-gardist movements, on the contrary art should have a social function, it should change the world, but it is true that this conception was, to some degree, theological as it meant that the independent reality of art should influence human reality. In the novel as we saw we did not find that discourse and to some extent the fellow-traveller novel has a social function as it satirised the reality, though it did not intend to fix it. For Benjamin cinema appeared as the new art which could fulfil "*the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly*" (Benjamin, 1965. p.5).

Cinema should not depict illusions, it should not present characters with whom the masses cannot feel represented, cinema should respect and ensure *modern man's legitimate claim to being reproduced* (Benjamin, 1965, p.13). But

what does that mean? We saw how the idealist novel presents characters that would represent the ideal, and how the parodic novel would manifest and reveal this process of mediation. Take for example *Don Quixote* he turns mad, and decides to become a knight, thus he acts and desires as the knights of the chivalric novels would do. But the problem is that those desires are never fulfilled and Don Quixote always ends badly at any attempt of his to act as a Knight. Let's take another example, Prince Myshkyn from *The Idiot* by Dostoyevsky, when asked, the writer always said that he was a combination of Christ and Don Quixote. Prince Myshkyn tries to be good, or better, he is genuinely good, but he ends up in a sanatorium in Switzerland. The problems with Don Quixote and Prince Myshkin is that the ideal they try to emulate, and which directs their steps, is too far away, is unattainable and no matter how much they try to act as him the result will be invariably negative. Cinema should not try to reproduce that path as American cinema does, it should respect modern man's claim to being reproduced, so he might be able to be its own mediator of desires, which shall not find frustrations but correspondence. The mass should have control over its own desire.

The other positive trait of cinema for Benjamin is that it allows for collective experience. This is something that no other art can grant: reading a book is, in the end, man as an individual facing the work of art, the same for paintings. It could be argued that theatre allows for collective experience but when faced with a theatre play, the spectator chooses what to see on what to focus its attention, whereas in cinema through the camera and the montage the director decides what the spectator should see. This is relevant because collective experience creates an indissoluble bond between spectators, they turn into a collective subject which sees and desires as one. The mass becomes self-aware of itself. In Vertov's and Eisenstein's films these two ideas are central and define their cinema.

1.4 DZIGA VERTOV: THE PHANTASM AND THE EYE

Dziga Vertov, from the beginning of his cinematographic career, was in disagreement with the more conventional and theatrical approaches to cinema. He aspired to create a new form of cinema which would represent facts, life in its pure form. In 1922 he formed a collective of cinematographers together with Elizaveta Svislov (who was the editor of *The Man with the Movie Camera*) and Mikhail Kaufman called Kinoks. The name of this new kind of cinema they developed was *cinema-eye* (kino-glaz), characteristics of which will be elaborated later in the section. Vertov is, with Eisenstein, the perfect example of how cinema unlike the novel was able to become, first, modern and forward-looking, an art which sought new forms of expression, but, secondly, an art form which did not renounce its duty to be representational and help to build the socialist utopia and succeed¹⁰.

In 1922 the Kinoks released 23 newsreels called *Kino-Pravda* which elaborated on themes of actuality like the construction of an airport or the organization of farmers into communes. Vertov considers the *Kino-Pravda* to be his first steps towards experimentation. Later, in 1923 he would film *A Sixth Part of the World* which showed remote industrial areas of the Soviet Union, but the film where all of his ideas about the cinema-eye crystallised was *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929). The movie shows Dziga Vertov with a movie camera documenting images of three Ukrainian urban cities Odessa, Kharkiv, and Kiev. The reason it is considered his best film is due to its unique (at that time) use of the montage. The next paragraphs will explain how the cinema-eye became the cinematic response to the need of common people to be its own role model. Furthermore, the section will elaborate on the topic of the *phantasm in* connection with dramatised cinema, and how Vertov's tried to dispose of it through the cinema-eye. Finally, the section will see how Dziga Vertov strived to create a collective subject through cinema-eye: these 3 topics will be explained through the

¹⁰ At least succeed in an artistic and formal perspective as in reality his films were never really popular among viewers, and the common man had trouble understanding them.

film *A Man with a Movie camera*, some of Dziga Vertov's theoretical texts, and the book *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* by Giorgio Agamben.

1.4.1 THE RIGHT TO BE FILMED IN DZIGA VERTOV

To start with the analysis of Dziga Vertov's film, it would be useful to talk first about a movie directed by Buster Keaton. The American actor played a young projectionist in a film called *Sherlock Jr.* (1924). The plot of the film is not relevant, but it is worth describing how it ends. In the final scene we see the protagonist in the projection room, at the same time, a romantic scene is being shown on the screen. Suddenly the projectionist's wife appears, she approaches him, and because he does not know what to do, he looks at the screen and observes how the main protagonist of the film embraces his love interest with his arms, Buster Keaton's character does the same, subsequently, the man on the screen gets his face closer to the woman and gives her a ring, and, evidently, Buster Keaton does the same. Finally, the character in the film kisses the woman and Keaton does the same. What is being shown at the end of *Sherlock Jr* is how the screen is the element that teaches Buster Keaton the sensual language of love, it shows the main character what and how he should desire and express himself i.e. the screen is acting as his mediator of desire. It is unknown if Dziga Vertov was acquainted with this film or not, but 5 years later he will present something similar in his famous film *The Man with the Movie Camera*.

The first scene of the film acts as a prelude: a movie theatre is shown, it can be seen how everything it's getting ready: the chairs, the projectionist, the orchestra, and then we see the people taking their seats. Finally, when everyone is seated the projectionist starts the movie, and the audiences, (inside the film and outside) watch the actual movie.



Fig.1. Ferreras (2021). *Spectators at the movie theatre* [Screenshot]. (Rvision-YouTube).

This is a film partly about the medium, about how the Kino-eye should be and which should be its main task. This scene bears inside the same logic as the man learning to love in *Sherlock Jr.* The starting scene explains how cinema and the screen are the mediums through which the people see themselves, through which they fulfil their right to be their own role models. The basic function of the cinema-eye is to

“To unite all the workers scattered over the earth through a single consciousness, a single bond, a single collective will in the battle of communism. This objective of ours we call Kino-eye. The decoding of life as it is. Using facts to influence worker’s consciousness”. (Vertov, 1925/1984, p.49)

Later on, we will see what Dziga Vertov understood for unity, for the moment, we shall focus on what consists of the process of enamourment. Instead of falling in love with an idealised version of themselves, or in the case of Buster Keaton’s film, of an idealised idea of romantic relations, the Kino-eye shows the proletarians how they really are and what they should strive to be¹¹. In other words, Dziga Vertov tries to get rid of the *Phantasm*.

¹¹ *The Man with the Movie Camera*, as a documentary presents lots of the contradictions of the Soviet reality, how there were still residues of capitalist society, for example, through the juxtapositions of shots of some beggars in the street and elegant bourgeois ladies. The social

1.4.2 THE PHANTASM AND THE ORGANIC COLLECTIVE

What is the *phantasm*? Giorgio Agamben in his book *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* elaborates on the phantasmagorical nature of love and desire in western culture, this conception goes back to medieval times: the image of the loved one is an illusion, a product of phantasy. The *phantasm* is the product of sensation, which is translated into the imagination, the dream, the memory, and even language. This means that the real object of desire does not exist, or rather is never truthfully perceived. As a consequence, the desired object is not ever really represented, instead, the result is always a *phantasm*. One of the logical results is that this *phantasm* represents an idealisation of the desired object, which means that such an image is never attainable because it is not real, is a distorted reflection; any attempt from an artist to represent reality and to mediate people's desires will be based on a lie that, that at best, can only produce frustration.

Furthermore, in his book, Agamben (1993) describes how in the medieval medical literature, which later influenced artistic creation, the eye were to be considered the part of the body which created the phantasm, because of his aquatic nature that makes it to act as a mirror: “*To know is to bend over a mirror where the world is reflected, to descry images reflected from sphere to sphere*” (Agamben, 1993, p.81). It is not strange to see how in medieval artistic literature as Agamben (1993) points out, the eyes first generate love, in other words, they are the ones who generate the *phantasm* which later transforms into memory, imagination, and language (which makes them empty signifiers).

Evidently, it would be far-fetched to assume that Dziga Vertov was knowledgeable in matters of medieval medicine and literature. Be that as it may,

criticism of the film will not be discussed here, but, on this topic, is highly recommended the article *Cinematic Abstractions as a Means of Conveying Ideological Messages in The man with the Movie Camera* by Vlada Petric included in the book *The Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema* by Anna Lawton.

cinema became, unofficially, the substitute of the novel. That meant that this art was part of the long tradition of the *phantasm*. When cinema became the predominant form of art (on a discursive level), it inherited some of the problems of the novel. Vertov was well aware of the phantasmagorical nature of art. One of his remarks about dramatic cinema was that “[it] clouded the eye¹² and the brain with a sweet fog.”(1924/1984, p.47). He is aware and criticises the phantasmagorical character of these films, not only those of Iakov Protazanov but also those of Eisenstein, which he considered to be a middle ground between dramatised films and the documentary films of the Kino-eye. For him, these films were not capable of creating a mass consciousness in the proletarian class because the only thing they could offer was uneducated illusions. Things like plot or even actors were getting in the way of depicting real life. Instead, the cinema-eye “opens the eye, clears the vision” it has “the ability of making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt” (Vertov, 1924/1918, p.47, 41)

How did Dziga Vertov intend to vanish the *phantasm* and represent life and reality as they really were? First is the problem of the eye, in opposition to the human eye that cannot see the world as it is, Dziga Vertov, as the name of his movement signals, offers the eye of the camera: “We cannot improve the making of our eyes, but we can endlessly perfect the camera eye” (Vertov,1923/1984 p.15). In all the manifestos Vertov signs with the rests of he Kinoks, he remarks the possibilities of the camera to become a more perfect eye than the human one, for his ability to capture movement, to record that which the human eye cannot apprehend and because of its mechanical composition. The problem with dramatic films consisted in that they made the camera reproduce that which the regular eye would see, but the path is to liberate the camera of such constrictions. In *The Man with the Movie Camera*, this process is demonstrated. The film shows how man liberates the camera, and depicts impossible images: long shots of the city, big

¹² Bold font added by the author.

close-ups of a sewing machine, or the famous low angle shot under the rails of a train.

If one were to imagine the film as a novel, the images that the camera record would be the words. The problem with other arts is that they rely on a system of languages whose words do not signify. The images they try to convey are not real, they might be a product of memory, imagination, or dream. Instead, the camera eye creates a set of images/words which do signify, and then the only thing left to do is using those words, organise them, in other to create a closed system of meanings, and references, in literature that could be a novel or a poem, and in cinema is the film. The act of writing in cinema is embodied by the montage.

The act of the montage is also shown in Dziga Vertov's film and it's a crucial part of it too. The theatrical films use montage to link the plot of the story whereas in the cinema-eye the montage serves to establish relations of meaning, for example, after the scene in the movie theatre we see the image of a woman waking up, which later is linked with the shot of the city waking up establishing a relation of similarity between them. This is the associative montage which Pudovkin also used. Another example could be the super impression of two shots making it seem as if the man with the movie camera was on top of a roof, which implies the possibilities of the cinema of the facts. But most importantly, through the montage you can create the idea of the perfect individual:

“From one person I take the hands, the strongest and most dexterous; from another I take the legs, the swiftest and most shapely; from a third, the most beautiful and expressive head- and through montage I create a new man” (Vertov, D, 1923/1984, p.17)

. This statement may sound like the creation of a *phantasm*, but the key is that the film does not present a complete and full realisation of the ideal man, but presents some of the *already* existing qualities of it through the montage.

Together with Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov believed in the need to represent man as consciousness, a collective subject, which desires and acts as the sum of all the proletarians and not as an individual, cinema had to be understood as a Marxist

exploration of the economic structure, which justifies the idea to understand the subject as a collective. This is the same concept the Proletarian Writers aim to represent through literature. Unlike them, both Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov succeeded in their task. In *The Man with the Movie Camera*, the need of the individual to become a collective subject is represented by the constant juxtaposition of shots of individuals and wide shots of the city with people engaging in economic activities. Furthermore, the new man or the new collective subject needs to embrace technology, to fuse with it. One of the most evident referents in the film is the man with the movie camera himself, through the union of him and the camera, he embodies this new era where man allies with technology and together they act as one.

The union between machine and man, and the understanding of the collective subject do not translate into a mechanical conception of humanity where the sum of every subject creates a perfect machine that works as a Swiss clock. Instead it could be argued that Dziga Vertov proposes an *organic collective*. This idea was first introduced by the researcher Annete Michelson (1984) and then expanded by Malcom Turvey (2007). For them, Vertov does not represent Soviet society like an inhumane collective which works and interacts blindly as if it was a machine. On the contrary, what is shown is how each part of the collective acts towards the purpose of the whole. The key of the movie is to show this wholeness, and awake a desire to contribute to that wholeness:

“The textile ought to see the worker in a factory making a machine essential to the textile worker. The worker at the machine tool plant ought to see the miner who gives his factory essential fuel, coal. The coal miner ought to see the peasant who produces the bread essential to him. Workers ought to see one another so that a close indissoluble bond can be established among them” (Vertov, 1925/1984, p.56)

In *The Man with a Movie Camera* this indissoluble bond is exemplified in a moment where we see man cleaning a railroad which then is followed by the image of a train passing by on that same spot, also just by showing the life of

three main different locations, the three cities of Odessa, Kharkov, and Kiev makes audiences aware of this whole. Through the screen, not only the connections between the cities are made, but also through the audiences who watch the film (both inside and outside the film).

In conclusion, the cinema by Dziga Vertov constitutes of three prerogative, first the need for common people to see themselves on the screen, the need to vanish the *phantasm* in order to depict life as it, is to make a cinema about facts, and finally, the possibilities of cinema to build the collective organic subject by establishing bonds between the proletarians.

1.5 EISENSTEIN AND THE CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS

Eisenstein did not begin his artistic career in cinema, in fact, the majority of the first half of the twenties he spent working in the Proletkult in the department of theatre and he worked as well under the guidance of Meyerhold. In his theoretical texts one can see the influence theatre had on his views on cinema. It was in 1923 when he began theorizing about cinema and when he wrote his famous article *Montage of Attractions*. In it, one can find most of the ideas that later on he will bring to his films. Although it could be considered that his first film is *Strike* (1925) his first immersion into cinema production was a short film called *Glumov's Diary* (1923), which was part of the theatrical production of an Ostrovksy's Comedy. Later on, during the rest of the twenties he would film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (1928) and *The General Line* (1929).

It is not my intention to dissect Eisenstein cinema and talk about all his theoretic postulates. First, because such a task would be colossal, and secondly, because it is not relevant. Instead the section will focus on two main aspects which are directly related with the on-going theme of this part of the research: cinema as the new mediator of desire. It is well-known that Eisenstein

represented in his films not individuals but the mass, he presented a collective subject with whom the spectators had to feel represented. Here we will see how he envisions and puts on the screen the collective subject. The second aspect dwells on the emotional aspect of the film, which for Eisenstein should produce, or rather help to this process of identification as well as lead the audiences to a desired response.

1.5.1 THE RIGHT TO BE FILMED IN EISENSTEIN

As It was the case with Dziga Vertov, Eisenstein felt that cinema should be an understanding a Marxist exploration of economic structure. Dziga Vertov would represent daily life, communism in construction and the mass participating in this construction. Instead, in most of the films of Eisenstein during this period, this understanding is shown as a conflict between masses. To do that, as it is well known, he chose to put his focus on collective subjects and not individuals, but still his films are theatrical. Here, one might argue that if everything is staged, and there is a use of actors, how can a common man be his own mediator?

This same problem arises in Walter Benjamin's article. He would argue that in theatre, actors would module their acting in accordance to the particular audience that day. The spectators would not just see a character but also the actor behind, its aura. The same problem should not happen in cinema, actors do not act in front of an audience, but before the camera, his acting cannot be modified, as he is both aware that he will be seen by millions but unaware of what will be their reaction. In addition, the ending product of his acting does not depend in the acting itself but on the camera and the montage. All these should guarantee that the actor's aura, his personality does not transpire the screen. Even in Russia the cinema industry would overcome that by creating a star-system: a set of actors who would perform in most of the films. Spectators would go to the cinema expecting to see their most beloved stars, this way, if the character of a film is a sailor; he is

not simply the character in the film but also the famous actor behind it whose aura reaches the audiences.

Dziga Vertov avoided this *phantasm* as we saw through the use of the camera itself and also by not portraying known people but trying to catch reality and man unaware. Instead, Eisenstein who believed in the possibilities of theatrical cinema followed a different system. For starters, he would try to use not known actors or even people who had never acted in their life, that way he could ensure that the actors personality would not dominate over the characters secondly he would chose people, like Kuleshov did, by character-typing: if he needed a group of sailors, he would use choose his actors based on the prototypical image of a sailor, he appealed to the collective imagery of what a worker, a sailor or a middle class woman should look like. Furthermore, though sometimes characters would appear as individuals, normally the action would be taken by masses. In the most decisive and spectacular parts of the film the spectator can see the clash between collective subjects: masses. The famous scene of the stairs in *Battleship Potemkin* is a perfect example: not only are those who are oppressed represented by a mass but also the oppressors.



Fig. 2. Farreras (2021). *The Tsarist Troops at the Steps* [screenshot] (Mosfilm-Youtube).

Whereas the oppressed masses are presented in pure panic, and practically defenceless, simply put, shown in their humanity, the representatives of the tsarist

regime are portrayed as an inhumane killing machine. The same happens in the scene of the mutiny in the beginning of the film. The process of dehumanisation or the difference in treatment comes from establishing individual shots of the masses, focusing on their struggle. For example, there is the shot of the woman getting shot at the top of the steps, or the one with the old woman begging the soldiers to stop the massacre. The tsarist troops do not get the same treatment; there are no individual shots of any soldier. The device avoids any kind of process of humanisation by the audiences. Having said that, even if a character would appear individually and had to a certain extent some protagonism, he would not appear as a developed psychology with personal motifs that make him do the things he does in the film, rather the character would be given special focus as the embodiment of an idea, as David Bordwell (2013) explains “*their [the character’s] actions are more often determined by their historical or organizational roles*” (p.118). Take for example Vakulinchuk in *Battleship Potemkin*, aside from the fact that he is a sailor, the spectator does not know nothing of his motifs or who he is, his complain about the meat is not only a personal complain but the reflection of a collective discontent. Personality is the instrument through which history works. Vakulinchuk’s death leads to the mourning and rage of the masses and the union of the people of Odessa. But, again, the character might have been a different one and the result would have been the same, the death of Vaklinchuk is a symbol of the struggle of the masses under the Tsarist regime, not a personal tragedy.

How do all these devices fulfil the right of every man to be filmed? By presenting character-types without psychological traits, extracting the aura from them and representing the subject as a mass, focusing at the same time in their condition of the oppressed, the spectator undergoes a process of identification. There is an empty space in that representation. The individuals inside the masses stand as types not as personalities, as have been said, which means that the spectator can pour inside those empty types, with whom they share a common

¹³ Added by the author.

experience, their own personality. The end objective as we see is the same as in Dziga Vertov: to make aware the spectators of the wholeness they belong to. The end objective is not to build a collective subject because it already exists, what cinema does is make apparent this subject, it brings the spectators self-consciousness, in addition they have to comprehend that the agency to move history forward is theirs, not of a certain individual like, for example Napoleon, but of the mass.

There is another element that has not been explored yet and that helps bring consciousness to the mass: emotion. If little attention has been paid to it so far, it is because emotion fulfils other functions in Eisenstein's cinema which deserve to be addressed separately. It is important to represent the collective subject, so spectators can see themselves, but is equally relevant to find a collective response, to lead the spectators to a desirable reaction.

1.5.2 THE EMOTION AND THE ATTRACTION

Eisenstein's article *Montage of Attractions* explains the nature of theatre, how every element of a play, of its representation, seeks a determined response in the audiences. He calls this phenomena *Attraction*:

“The attraction (in our diagnosis of the theatre) is every aggressive moment in it, i.e., every element of it that brings to light in the spectator those senses or that psychology that influence his experience-every element that can be verified and mathematically calculated to produce certain emotional shocks in a proper order within the totality-the only means by ' which it is possible to make the final ideological conclusion perceptible. The way to knowledge-"Through the living play of the passions" -applies specifically to the theatre (perceptually).” (Eisenstein, 1923/1957, pp.230-231)

Later in his cinematographic career he would transfer this idea in his films, every element of a film, as we shall see, should be designed to influence the spectators experience, every film should be an attraction. In cinema the attraction should be embodied by conflict as the primary emotion. He saw in

conflict the perfect tool for the audiences to create meaning. Between the clash of two elements, let it be masses or the juxtaposition of shots, the audiences should find the meaning, the theme in the film. This meaning is not found aleatory. The director should strive to create a perfect system which should guide the audiences.

The plot of the film and the story should be based on the idea of conflict as well. This is why, to bring consciousness, Eisenstein chooses historical events which show the struggle of lower classes, as David Borwell (2013) points out, the three main films of these period represent a defeat (*Strike*) a gain (*Battleship the Potemkin*) and a Victory (*October*). But, regardless of the outcome, the important element of these historic events is that in each of them there was a clash between classes, which brought consciousness. Once the theme of the film is picked, it is of importance to construct a plot and structure infused with emotion and conflict. David Bowel (2013) dissects the structure of *Battleship Potemkin* and he observes that each of the parts consisted of a moment where the masses would find themselves in a conflicting situation, and they would react. For example, the crew complains about the meat and the ending result is a mutiny on the ship, the death of Vakulinchuk provokes a reaction of the people in the harbour. The sum of all the parts results into an expanding revolutionary wave, with each part adding more tension and emotion, which in the end leads, in *Battleship Potemkin*, to the union of all sailors who refuse to shoot the ship.

The other element in the film which should produce emotion and conflict should be the montage. Eisenstein gave great importance to montage, and he found in it the main feature of cinema. He would use the technique of associative montage. Unlike Kulehov or Pudovkin, he did not believe that the value of an image varied in relation to the one that would follow. For him single shots contain meaning in themselves and they should be in accordance with the theme of the film. What creates a new meaning is not the mere juxtaposition of shot but the collision, or conflict between two shots (both of them equally meaningful) which results in a new meaning. Eisenstein (1929/1977) compares

it to Japanese ideograms which separate might have a meaning but the combination of two results into a new word. The shot of a priest with a cross has meaning in itself, the image of an officer with his dagger does as well, and the juxtaposition of both images brings the meaning of oppression. Another technique he would use would be the same dissection of the scene, it has been said how the mass would be individualised sometimes in shots. This humanises the crowds but also provoked an emotional response in empathy with them. The dissection of a grand movement into multiple shots would create meanings and also tension. He would combine this technique with the repetition or extension (in duration) of certain shots. In the last scene where the sailors are trying to leave the harbour and they are surrounded by other ships, the tension is built through the depiction of little details like the engines working, the shot of a sailor waving a flag, the cannons getting ready, and shots of the other ships. The scene repeats these elements and others and extends the actions which provoke a feeling of tension in the audiences. Additionally, by extending the tension the end result, when the other ships withdraw and let the battleship Potemkin pass, is a feeling of joy, a cathartic moment among the audiences, where they become aware of themselves.

In conclusion through the presentation of subject as a mass, and the use of character-typing, the audiences should undergo a process of identification that together with the emotion of conflict which is present in all the elements of the film should lead spectators towards a moment of realization and gain conscience of themselves as collective subject.

DISCUSSION OF THE FIRST CHAPTER

The first part of the research has proven that the culture of the twenties cannot be understood as a unified discursive block through the example of cinema and literature. Instead, there was an amalgam of discourses with a common goal: to create a collective subject. Cinema and the novel had to become devices of mediation through which the Soviet society had to learn what and how it should desire. The research has proven that in the field of the novel, regardless of the multiplicity, there was not a single movement who could find a satisfactory form for the novel that would adhere to the ideological goal: the avant-gardes payed little interest to the novel as suitable format for their means. The Proletarian Writers did not have the mastery to implement those stylistic changes which they were seeking in order to represent the new socialist reality and the new proletarian collective subject, instead their novels came closer to the realist novel of the 19th century. Finally, the so called Fellow-travellers, heirs to the European tradition of the beginning of the 20th century, did not subjugate their prose to the political situation of the country, this novels, though were in touch with reality and were eager to comment on it, could not provide non-fragmented worlds, they could not mediate people's desires. As an example of this trend among the Fellow-travellers, the research has focused on the novel *The Foundation Pit* by Andrey Platonov. The analysis has shown that the novel functions as a parodic novel that unravels the nature of the *metaphysic desire* and its mimetic function. The novel explores the impossibility of a real mediation as the desire the workers of the pit perform cannot be fulfilled and also that there is a lack of real referents that could mediate other's desires. As a consequence all the workers act in a *simulacrum* of desire. Finally, for Platonov the idea of a collective subject can only be found in death as is the only unifying principle of man's existence.

The chapter has focused, as well, in the cinema produced during the twenties. The problems that arouse in cinematic production were of an economical nature. This resulted in the production, for the most part, of films made for

entertainment with little ideological message, and no intentions for mediation. The difference with the novel resides in that, at least in cinema could be find a small group of directors who would strive to create a new type of cinema that would inherit the novel's previous role as a mediator of desire and at the same time find a new form. Evidently, there was discursive multiplicity as well, but also a certain amount of satisfactory discourses. The research has focused on the main two directors of this period: Dziga Vertov and Sergey Eisenstein. Both directors shared the goal of represent a collective subject but also what Walter Benjamin would called "The right of common man to be reproduced" i.e. to be its own referent. The chapter has explained how Dziga Vertov aimed to avoid any phantasmagorical representation as that would have meant an idealisation of the subject. Instead, Dziga Vertov used the Kino-eye to portrait facts, life unaware and tried to make aware spectators of the wholeness they belonged to. Eisenstein believed in the reformulation of theatrical cinema, and presented a form imbued with emotion and presented character-types and masses, in order for the spectator to undergo a cathartic process of identification, and become aware of the collective conscious he belongs to. In conclusion, regardless of the multiplicity of discourses in cinema, unlike in literature, satisfactory discourses were implemented in it.

2. THE STALINIST CULTURE: THE PHANTASM AND THE FETICHE

In 1934, the First Congress of Soviet Writers concluded that the new style for Soviet literature, which later was extended to all arts, would be Socialist Realism. That meant rapture with the estate of the arts born in the twenties. However, this resolution was merely a crystallisation of a process that started in 1927 with the dismantling of the NEP. This section will elaborate on the causes that brought to this point in Soviet Culture and the consequences it had on in terms of representation in cinema and literature.

During the last half of the twenties, there were signs of exhaustion of the Soviet Literature. The party's resolution of 1925 which stated that the party and the state would not favour any concrete organisation or movement, vanished all hopes for avant-gardes and especially the LEF to influence in the construction of the new socialist world, the last attempt to do that was Mayakovsky attempt to create a new LEF which in reality would consist on him and his followers.

The dismantling of the NEP was a death blow to the Fellow-travellers as it meant, though unofficially and against the party's preferences, the hegemony of the RAPP (Russian Association of Soviet Writers) in the literary scene. In 1928 the Soviet Union had established the first Five-Year plan, started the harsh process of collectivisation, and with them, the idea of socialism in one country took place instead of world revolution. The main ideologists inside the RAPP like the Proletkult sought to create a somewhat factory line of proletarian writers who would constantly develop in literature on the issues of actuality, and the need to enhance the spirit of the masses: the depiction of the Five-Year Plan and of the class war within its framework was the only problem of the Soviet Literature. As it happened with the Proletkult, too little attention was paid to technique, the main goal was the ideological sphere of literature, and as a consequence little quality could be found in those writings. The hegemony of RAPP in the literary scene was more due to their belligerent attitude towards the Fellow-travellers, and the

formalist than a result of their effectiveness in representing the proletarian reality during the Five-Year plan.

Finally, in 1932 the party took a stance and banned all literary organizations which resulted in the end of the RAPP's attempts to influence Soviet literature. All writers had to be, from now on, inscribed in a unique union called The Soviet Union of Writers. As Mark Slonim points out (1977), although in the beginning the creation of the union took the pressure away from the despotic influence of RAPP, from outsider writers, It also meant, in the long term, a homogenisation of literature as no writer outside the union could be published and there was only a union of censors which translated into one unique criterion for publishing.

The same trend can be observed in cinema. Previously, it has already been explained that cinema was the perfect embodiment of this transversal relationship between economy or industry, as well as mass consumption. The NEP was closer to a capitalist model of production as it allowed private studios to film their own films. The new economic, although cultural as well, paradigm introduced by the Five-Year Plan sought to *recentralise* all film production: the film industry had to embody this change of the country into a state economy. This translated, in the year 1930, into the banishment of all cinematic associations and the creation of a centralised organisation that would be in charge of all the film industry in the country: thus, Soyuzkino was born. Similarly to the case of literature that meant a unique criterion for censorship which aligned with problems of infrastructure lead to a pronounced decrease of films produced per year.

The other key factor which set to rethink the art of cinema was the newly discovered technique of attaching sound to the movies. Confronted with the new possibilities of this discovery, the chief executive in charge of the Soviet film industry Boris Shumyatsky (who took charge after Lunacharsky's forced resignation in 1929) adopted a clear rejection towards formalist cinema. The implementation of sound was taken as an opportunity to actually represent the life of the simple man, or rather of those who constituted the fabric of the Soviet Union: peasants and workers. This is an important factor because it meant the

return, or better the reaffirmation (as traditional representation in films was never abandoned) of man as an individual inside the collective. This time will see the downfall of Dziga Vertov and his experimental cinema: after his experimentations with sounds in *Symphony of Donbas* and his film *Three Songs about Lenin*, it can be observed a slow but progressive disappearance from the cinematic scene, and a lack of interest from the party towards his ideas (of which, taking it from his diaries, he was quite aware). Shumyatsky saw in the talking pictures a path for a cinema for the millions. As Lilya Kaganovsky (2013) in her article *The Stalinist Cinema 1928-1953*:

“In his notes from Kremlin screenings a year later, Shumiatskii reported that Stalin was particularly interested in “light” films, noting specifically that: “*The audience needs joy, cheerfulness and laughter. They want to see themselves on the screen.*” (p.217)

The statement “*they want to see themselves on the screen*” follows the same idea described by Walter Benjamin and applied by Dziga Vertov and Eisenstein of the right of man to be reproduced, to be its own role model, to be its own mediator of desires. Nonetheless, the implications it had in this time, as well as its repercussions, had a different meaning as we will see later on.

All of this led to the year 1934 when the First Congress of Soviet Writers was organized. In it participated key figures of the cultural and literary scene such as Aleksandr Zhdanov, Maksim Gorky, Karl Radek, Nikolay Bukharin and Aleksey Stetsky. The congress served the purpose to discuss the current state of the Socialist Novel, its task, its deficits, and the future line it should follow which finally was set as Socialist Realism.

In Zhdanov’s speech can be found the main goals of this new literature. First, there is a prevalence of content over form i.e. what is important in the novel is its socialist content because it is what makes the work of art revolutionary and useful. “*The novelty of the Soviet socialist order derived from the novelty of its contents rather than from any “bourgeois” novelty of form which merely concealed and old bourgeois*” (Groys, 1992, p.44). Radek’s intervention under the

title *James Joyce or Socialist Realism* (1977/2004) discusses this. He asks if there is inherently something wrong with the bourgeois novel, with authors like Joyce or Proust, if instead of representing reality it is better to thoroughly dissect and depict the mind of an individual character, to write 500 pages simply to describe the thought processes he has during a day. The problem is that these forms, these techniques are devoted to describing people who are not even worth depicting, they are no revolutionaries, they do not have good traits; the decadence of these forms is that they are imbued with pessimism. Although not in these terms, this phenomenon has already been discussed in the previous section: after realism the novel did not seek to present the type of characters common people should aspire to be, there were no more Levins and Sonias. As part of a long tradition, the writers of the twenties were not interested in creating these kinds of characters. This new trend in Socialist Realism was a clear attack on those writers. The task of the socialist writers was that of “engineers of the soul” i.e. they had to mediate people’s desires, show them the path to be the ideal man, the socialist novel cannot reject representing ideal characters, on the contrary, that has to be its main task. The socialist response to “bourgeois pessimism” is optimism, a utopian state of mind.

Secondly, this idea of representing optimism can be found in how to represent reality. In his conference Zhdanov (1977/2004) explains that the artist must not depict life “*in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as “objective reality”, but to depict reality in its revolutionary development*”. The statement implies that the artist should not create life as it is, with lights and high points as well as its miseries and problems. The novel should depict all that is good in the socialist country, to depict life imbued by a revolutionary spirit of history which leads to the socialist Utopia (Zhdanov never denies the utopian and biased character of this literature). To represent those glimpses that come from the future but which constitute already a reality in the present.

In addition, as the goal is to represent life in its revolutionary development, an important aspect of art is its socialist message, Zhdanov argues that the socialist

author has at his disposition, and can use all those techniques and forms from the past which were progressive¹⁴. The Soviet Union as the only Socialist state in the world saw itself as the rightful heir of this progressive past.

“To the Bolsheviks ideologists [...] The art of the past was not living history but a storehouse of inner things from among which anything that seemed appealing or useful could be removed at will. It was often said in Stalin’s time that the Soviet Union was the sole preserver of the cultural heritage that the bourgeoisie itself had rejected and betrayed.” (Groys, 1992, p.42)

Evidently, this view of Soviet Russia as the rightful heir of the revolutionary past, and the idea that this past should be used when needed contradicts the avant-garde but also the Proletarian Writer’s and RAPP’s ideas of breaking completely with the past, and make a new art that could represent, the new man. Boris Groys (1992) argues that Stalinist Art was a continuation of the art of the avant-garde, at least in spirit, as both arts tried to influence reality and change it. Be that as it may, the truth is that on a formal level, Stalinist art was in clear opposition to the avant-gardes as well as with the novels and short stories written by the Fellow-travellers.

All these requirements of the Soviet novel, the optimistic and revolutionary representation of reality, the need to create this idea of the Soviet Union as a land of heroes, and the use of the past as a tool for creation, were subsequently exported to all arts which in the end resulted in a process of fetishization of culture.

What could be considered a fetish? In 1927 Freud wrote his article *Fetishism*, in it he explains how he had encountered a vast number of patients who had an strange sexual fixation towards a concrete object, in the article he gave the example of an English man who had an obsession of glancing noses. Evidently,

¹⁴ In cinema, this idea will translate into a process of Americanisation of the Soviet Cinema, or rather in a Sovietisation of the American way of filming.

Freud argued that fetishism starts on an early age, when the child notices the absences of phallus in the mother. The child then fears its own castration and rapidly fixes his eye into an object that could compensate for the lack of phallus in the mother.

But, the truth is that Fetishism is not just a matter of sexual and individual psychology but it involves collective psychology as well; for example, as Agamben (1992) explains, Karl Marx saw in capitalism a phenomenon of *fetishism of commodities*: “Marx is explicitly concerned with this transformation of the products of labour into “appearances of things” in a “phantasmagoria...that is subject, and also not subject, to the senses. (pp.36). in principle the idea of fetishism of commodities resides in the idea the product of labour suffers a doubling, the object does not represent anymore a use-value but also the exchange-value. As a consequence the commodity turns into something abstract, the enjoyment of which is only possible through accumulation and the exchange. A perfect example would be collection figures: a person buys a figurine, its use-value would be determined by how successful is the figurine in entertaining, as normally they are designed for kids, but then, if this person were to be a collector he would not be able to play with the figurine but the toy would have to be forever sealed in its original box so it would retain its exchange-value or even increase it, in Walter Benjamin’s terminology that would be its aura. By prioritizing one of the values of the figurine, the subject loses the other one.

For Agamben the Freudian and Marxist conceptions of the fetish have in common its unattainability and their call to the otherness. The fetish stands in psychoanalysis as a compensational element that always refers to the lack of phallus in the mother, It is a performed simulacrum, a call to a non-existent reality; the fetishist wants to attain the real object but the fetish can only provide a phantasmagoria, in Marxist theory the fetish has this condition of otherness by relating to an unspecified and abstract value. The fetish in both theories cannot be attainable as the fetish in Freud represents the part of a whole and in Marxism, the fetish cannot be attain as a whole because both values of the commodity cannot be

experienced simultaneously. By uniting both concepts Agamben, as the academic Emily Apter (1991) points out, conceives the fetish as “*degraded simulacrum or false representation of things sacred, beautiful or enchanting*” (p.4)

There are two more aspects of the fetish that are worth exploring as well. As it has been said the fetish function in its core is compensation but, the interesting fact is that the fetish not only compensates for the lack of an object but it also underlines and makes apparent this absence to the fetishist, it exposes, as Baudilliard (1981) would call it, his “magical thinking”. For Freud this fact does not have any consequence as even though the subject acknowledges the absence, the function of the fetish never seems to be consumed, and if it was, the subject would just find another fetish. In the Marxist conception the fetishist can only gain satisfaction by the accumulation of fetishes. The nature of the fetishist is that of a collector.

How does the fetish relate to Stalinist culture? After the optimism of the first decade of the Soviet Union where there was a genuinely belief (at least for some) that socialism could be built and materialised, it seems as if the Stalinist era resigned itself to build a performative socialism, one that would be felt and experienced through culture, a simulacrum of communism but not a reality.

The culture shaped by Stalin during the 30s by this point was a culture that unequivocally relayed on fetishes¹⁵. It is far from a coincidence that when life in the country had become harsher, and extreme (due to the beginning of the Stalinist purges, the violent process that was the collectivisation, the lack of housing facilities, and so on) that the cultural and artistic response was a mystification, idealisation of the road towards socialism. Zhdanov’s claim to represent "reality as

¹⁵ The fetishization of culture is not a phenomenon exclusive from the Stalinist era; it could be argued that is a by-product of modernity. Capitalist societies heavily rely on fetishes too. For example, those rich philanthropists who come out of nothing and embody the American dream, as well as the successful middle-class so typical of the American movies could be considered as fetishes from capitalist culture. Baudrillard (1981) saw in bourgeois culture a phantom of Aristocratic values.

it should be” to represent “those fragment that come from the future” are a call to the otherworldly, a call to a long-distanced paradise. As a consequence, the Soviet society turns into a fetishist who accumulates fetishes.¹⁶

This phenomenon is in no way exclusive from the domain of literature and cinema; on the contrary, fetishism was a phenomenon that permeated the whole Soviet Culture during the thirties. What is Lenin Mausoleum if not the ultimate fetish? His figure resting in front of the Kremlin both represent the ideal man of socialism and the institution that serves to build it. The tomb, where the remains of a Saint look-alike reside, becomes a place of peregrination, a place not only to admire the figure of Lenin but to feel the grandiosity of the socialist man, and the task that he set off to do, is a place to feel inspired; as it is said in the film *Three Songs About Lenin* (1934): и если у тебя большое горе, подойди к этой кибитке и взгляни на Ленина и печаль твоя разойдется как бода.¹⁷ The mausoleum and Lenin’s mummy became fetishes whose task was to overcome, to compensate reality with all its banalities, injustices, or frustrations. Fetishes helped to sense the long-awaited socialism at least in the domain of the symbolic.

Another example is the Stakhanovite movement born in 1936: the Soviet Union needed heroes, people who against all odds would succeed in the honourable task of building socialism. A once common man, known only in his village, becomes known all over the union because he exceeded the expectations in his line of work: miners, builders, factory workers, it did not matter; a proletarian was someone proud to look up to. The movement was not only a motivational or inspirational method to increase production (though will be exploring this side too later). The fact that the focus on the individual had returned did not mean the idea of the collective had disappeared rather found itself rooted in nationalistic

¹⁶ Here one can see again the performative desire and the clairvoyance of Platonov when it came to assert what would be the future of the Soviet Union.

¹⁷ And if you are overcome with grief, come to this tent, take a look at Lenin and all of your sorrows will dilute like water. (Translation by the Author)

principles. Every country has its national heroes, people who courageously aid in the task to build the nation: kings, generals, writers. It is obvious that the Soviet Union could not rely on past figures from the Tsarists times, though they would rework their way and approach towards them (which we will talk about in more depth once we talk about the cinema produced in this time), nonetheless, new national heroes had to be created, people who symbolically could embody the spirit of the country: common man. An ordinary person who works in a factory line could never be or feel identified with General Kutusov, even less with Peter the Great, but they could see themselves in, for example, a miner who increased productivity and managed to extract 14 times more coal than the daily recollection standard.

To a certain degree, it does not matter if one as an individual felt frustrated if his desires were never fulfilled because the subject would still feel accomplished. As a citizen from the Soviet Union, a regular person walked among earthly heroes, who pushed socialism forward, and because the individual was part of the country that made these heroes possible, their successes were also his.

The population would read the news related to these heroes and recognise themselves in them, fall in love, like Narcissus looking at his reflection. The problem is that a reflection, as Agamben (1992) points out, is nothing but a distorted image, it does not reflect the real object, therefore the subject falls in love, unwarily, with an idealised depiction of himself. In the first section we saw how Dziga Vertov wanted to get rid of the *phantasm*, this new age sought to, or better needed to be built on phantasms.

As said previously, the fetish's main function is to compensate for the absence of an object, in this case, Socialism, but at the same time, a fetish cannot fulfil its tasks completely. By compensating for an object the fetish painfully underlines to the subject the lack of that object. Its effects cannot be sustained over time, there has to be movement. Boris Groys (1992) says in his book that the art of the Stalinist period conquered the realm of eternity; it created a timeless, suprahistorical, space towards utopia. I would argue that this idea is partially true,

the art produced at that time sought to represent this timeless, realised space but, artists, or rather, Stalin was well aware that just by conquering the realm of the symbolic the Soviet Union could not endure the long term, all culture had to inspire, mediate people's desires to the betterment of themselves and the union. Heroes do not only conquer the symbolic but also to motivate, serve as mediators of people's desires.

Stakhanov's story, for example, could grant that: suddenly one day He becomes a celebrity all around the country people love him, Nikita Izotov, a fellow worker of his, sees what happens, desires the glory, the respect, not out of envy but out of duty, he wants to be like his comrade Stakhanov, six months later instead of the 106 tons of coals that Stakhanov managed to collect that time, Nikita collects 607 tons, setting a new record. Sometime later a whole movement is born which increases the production of coal throughout the Soviet Union to 80 percent.

Mediation stands as the second function of culture in the Stalinist Soviet Union. It retains the main function it had during the twenties, and it followed the same principles. It can be argued that these two functions of the cultural object contradict themselves, and they do, because how can we represent reality as it ought to be, but also show its revolutionary process, how to combine statism and movement? The fetish in the Soviet Union is a fetish that does not resign itself to be one. It is as if the fetishist firmly believed that his object of desire, his fetish would at some point materialise the mother's phallus.

The leaders of the early Soviet Union during the twenties, and also intelligentsia were convinced that the world revolution could start at any minute, just like the first Christians who thought that the day of the final judgment was just around the corner, but the truth was that nor the final judgment nor the world revolution happened. During the 30 that became apparent and Stalin's formula of socialism in just one country took place. This fetishization of culture changed the paradigms of literary and cinematic representation. The novel and the film had to both compensate reality and mediate people's desires to change it.

2.1 THE SOVIET NOVEL: A CASE OF NEW CHIVALRY

One of the best exponents of this change and one of the authors who best embodied the conceptions introduced by Socialist Realism was Nikolay Ostrovski (1904-1936). His first and only novel was published before the famous Soviet Writers Congress took place in 1934, and therefore the new-line which authors had to follow had not been even implemented yet¹⁸. Nonetheless, his novel *How the Steel was Tempered* published between 1932 and 1934 has become the best exponent of Socialist Realism, which proves that literature had already changed after all literary organizations had been banished and unified into a single one and that this new age of heroes was already influencing cultural life all around the Union.

The semi-autobiographical novel tells the story of Pavel Korchaguin: In his young days working at a train station cafe, he learns about the injustices that take place in the tsarist empire, then the revolution starts, and manages to enrol in the red army, the novel describes different scenes after the war is over where Korchagin, heroically helps as part of the Komsomol to build socialism (from building a railroad to help a young girl escape the tyranny of her father), sadly, because he has put his body under too much pressure during his years serving the country he falls incapacitated and loses his mobility and sight, the novel ends with

¹⁸ Interestingly enough, most of the books which theoretically constitute the pinnacle of Socialist Realism were written before the implementation of this style in the first congress of soviet Writers: *Cement* by Fyodor Gladkov, the aforementioned *How the Steel was Tempered*, or the first part of Sholokhov's Opera Magna *The Quiet Don* as well as the first part of *Virgin Soil upturned*. In addition, it could be argued that it would be better suited to use one of Sholokhov's novels as a case study, considering that his works are better constructed than Ostrovsky's novel. The reason behind this decision lays in the fact that the style of those novels is closer to psychological realism than to Socialist Realism. The adherence of his works to the latter was a politically motivated convention but has no ground on a stylistic level.

the hero learning how to write properly and getting his first novel published, which puts him at ease because he can serve the Soviet Union in another way.

The tendency in literary criticism has been to consider this novel to follow the structures and topics of a bildungsroman: we follow the main character during his years of formation until he achieves maturity and acquires knowledge of himself. If one were to listen for the first time a summary of *How the steel was tempered*, he would unequivocally say is a bildungsroman; the reader gets to see Korchaguin grow, learn how to cool his temper whilst helping to build socialism, however, is that what happens really? Does even Pavel have a developed psychology? The fact is that he has not. Throughout the novel, both Pavel and the narrator try to convince the reader that he is going through a journey of self-discovery, that in the end, Korchaguin is not the same he was when he was a child. Nonetheless, the reader never gets to see that, rather the contrary: from beginning to end Pavel Korchaguin is still that same impulsive, hot-headed person. The only thing that changes in him is his physiognomy due to his illness; his interior stays always the same. At one point in the novel, Pavel says he is not that child who got greatly influenced by novels about romantic revolutionaries. He says that he has been able to temper himself, but then a couple of pages later we see him beating some colleagues of him because they were saying disrespectful things about a woman they knew. There are examples like this all around the novel. Furthermore, none of his actions have dire consequences on him or the world he lives in.

One might argue that the fact that he becomes an invalid is already a consequence of his actions, however, that rather depicts the image of a martyr more than that of a real man who has to deal with the consequences of his actions. The fact is that every time the character does something impulsive, it is approached as something heroic: when he beats his colleges he does not face any reprimand, he might consider that his actions were impulsive and reckless but he gets praised and, in the end, thanks to him those characters get expelled from the party. When as a child he helps to release Zhukray, a revolutionary detained by the local police, he not only manages to save him but moreover, once detained, Korchaguin

manages to escape prison in a comedic way, or finally when he heroically helps to build a railroad in the middle of a storm and as a consequence, he falls ill, not only he survives but the railroad is finished. Ultimately, it seems that it does not matter if he acts impulsively or not, as long as he is on the right side of history.

It is true that all of these errors in structure and character building might have happened due to the lack of literary skills Ostrovsky had, this novel is in no sense a well-constructed product. Nonetheless, if we were to change the focus, if this novel was not approached as a stereotypical bildungsroman, one might be able to understand how the soviet world with its heroes and villains was understood at that time, and why this novel was such a success among readers. The fact is that, where the novel fails to be a bildungsroman, it somewhat succeeds in being a new socialist version of a chivalric novel.

The next paragraphs will talk about Thomas Pavel's main characteristics of the chivalry novel in terms of description of reality and the main hero's most characteristics traits to demonstrate how the novel *How the Steel was Tempered* could be considered a modern chivalry novel, moreover, I will try to connect this on how reality, representation, and mediation were understood in the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, there is no translation either in Russian or English from Pavel's book *Pensée du Romain*, which means that although the quotes will be extracted from the Spanish translation, the ones in English on the footnotes will be mine.¹⁹

2.1.1 THE NATURE OF HEROES

In his book *Pensée du Romain* Thomas Pavel (2005) defines the heroes of the chivalric novels as presented in the following quote:

¹⁹ Before starting with the analysis, I would like to clarify that this section is born solely out of the dialogue between Ostrovsky's novel and Pavel's main characteristics of the chivalric novel. Having said that, it is worth mentioning that ideas of a similar nature can be found in *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* by Katerina Clark. Though, to clarify, the book has not been used as a reference for the following analysis.

Los héroes de las novelas de caballerías, animados por una energía y por una fuerza psíquica inagotables, parecen moldeados con la misma arcilla que los antiguos matadores de monstruos celebrados por la mitología politeísta. [...], se lanzan al mundo, participan, en todos los enfrentamientos y están dispuestos a arriesgar sus vidas a la menor provocación. Estos seres poderosos, impulsivos, que no quieren guardar distancias con lo que sucede a su alrededor, son sin duda producto de una sociedad más próxima a sus fuentes heroicas que a la civilización griega tardía que vio nacer a Quereas y Calirroo y las Etiópicas. (p.62)²⁰

It is fair to say that Pavel Korchaguin does have all of the aforementioned requirements to be considered the hero of a chivalric novel. To begin with, he is, indeed, infused with an inexhaustible psychic strength and one might add even physical strength. Despite his illness at the end of the book, the protagonist shows an almost inhuman resistance, he puts his body under great pressure and manages to survive things that no normal human could survive. Once he is recovered after the incident on the train, his doctor is surprised by his recovery, and partly it is because he is determined to serve that he endures. Furthermore, it is his determination to serve and be useful to the cause of socialism that encourages him to learn to write and be an author.

Secondly, Pavel as the hero in chivalry novels is characterised by his impulsive nature. That same impulsive nature which the narrator says Pavel has gotten rid of at the end of the book is present throughout the entire novel, and it

²⁰ The heroes from the chivalry novels, encouraged by inexhaustible energy and psychic strength, seemed to be cut from the same cloth the ancient beasts slayers celebrated in the politest mythology were. They jump into the world, participate in all the confrontations, and are ready to put their lives at risk at the slightest provocation. These powerful, impulsive beings, who do not want to keep distances with the things happening around them, are a product of a society that is close to its heroic sources than to the late Greek civilisation who so the birth of Choereae and Callirrhoe and the Aethiopicas (Translation by the author)

defines him. That impulsive nature is what makes him be in the middle of all confrontations. All the heroic deeds he makes are a product of his inability to stay behind.

In addition, Thomas Pavel makes an interesting commentary in the previous quote. He states that the characters depicted in chivalry novels are products from a close society (in time and space) to its heroic sources. This is something that has already been discussed previously regarding Soviet Culture in the thirties in general, but the character in the novel is a perfect concrete example. Pavel Korchaguin is not a general, he is not a key political figure, he is simply a man who tries to do his duty. The referent is somewhat close, his type was the kind of person people would encounter in normal life, (though probably in a less idealised manner), even so, the source of the story is partly Ostrovsky's own life experiences.

The errant hero is not simply a character who goes around the world doing good deeds; he is the embodiment and also executor of a human moral norm:

“El ideal de la caballería establece la existencia de una ley que es competencia de los hombres, en la medida en que sólo la devoción de los caballeros la garantiza, pero que, a la vez, también viene de fuera, pues los caballeros la proyectan sobre los hombres, por así decirlo desde lo alto, con la autoridad de verdaderas divinidades tutelares²¹ (Pavel, 2005, 64)

It would be problematic to say that Pavel Korchaguin by himself is a higher authority who takes action aside from the party's directives, he does not. He is subordinated to the party, to the Bolsheviks, nonetheless, he is the representative of its commandments, of the human normal law stabilised by the party, and it is his devotion to those ideals that give him the authority to take action. Because only the devotion to those ideals by people like Korchaguin, Seriozha, or Rita Ustanovich,

²¹ The chivalric ideal establishes the existence of a law which is under the jurisdiction of men, because only the devotion of the knights can guarantee it, though at the same times comes from the outside because the knights project it as if to say from the heights, with the authority of guardianship divinities. (Translation by the author)

can guarantee its success. It's their devotion and Korchaguin's especially, the thing that inspires the rest to follow that path and secure the future of socialism. Moreover, it is because of this devotion that the acts of the hero never seek any reciprocity, Pavel never acts with second intentions, and he is reluctant to ask for anything, besides being allowed to be useful to the cause.

Where does this sense of justice, this devotion come from? According to Thomas Pavel (2005) the nature of heroes is fixed already from the moment they are born: "*Los caballeros de la novela, que representan un período heroico más tardío, pertenecen a la casta de los héroes hereditarios cuya valentía aumenta en proporción de la dignidad de su nacimiento*".²² (p.63) Needless to say, the heroic nature of the soviet hero does not come from a hereditary birth right. However, it is a birth right. The new novel has an essentialist discourse: the new man is a hero from the moment he is born because he comes from a proletarian or poor upbringing. As a consequence, the hero is destined from the beginning to fight, to be the ideal norm, and impose it in the world. Korchagin himself is a depiction of this phenomenon, even before being introduced into socialism, he has a proletarian consciousness. He sees the evil in the world and tries to fix it. Already at the beginning when he starts working in the cafeteria, Pavel is conscious of two things: the importance of being a hard labourer worker, and the exploitation he is being subjected to. He does not accept being mistreated and abused; he confronts his fellow workers when he realises they are prostituting the girls in the cafeteria. This sense of justice does not come from the outside, is not something he learns, but something he is as a proletarian.

Finally, another trait can be observed in the personality of the chivalry hero: his incapability to manage himself in the regular life outside the heroic deeds. The chivalric novel juxtaposes both realities. The ideal moral norm they (knights) represent is evident, it does not have nuances, therefore when presented a conflict

²² The knights from the novel, which represent a later period hero, belong to a breed of hereditary heroes whose courage increases in proportion to the dignity of his birth. (Translation by the author)

they do no doubt, they jump to the first line and act, but the world they live aside the moments of action is a labyrinth, as Thomas Pavel sentences (2005):

“Su conciencia discierne con una rapidez fulgurante las máximas que esta debe obedecer pero cuando se trata de orientarse por los senderos del mundo estos guerreros necesitan ser guiados por los escuderos, las damiselas o los guardabosques”.²³ (p.68)

Korchaguin does have this personality trait. He is incapable of understanding the nuances, and the shades that come from building socialism; the politics, the envies, ambitions, and differences inside the party do not make sense to him. He needs mentors like Rita Ustanovich to help him navigate in this world, to teach him. Even then, he still has trouble learning, for example, theoretical literature. Nevertheless, this in no way indicates that he is mindless ignorant. The problem is that the human morals norms he embodies are not apparent in everyday life. One thing is to have the courage to act in situations where the problem is clear, and another is to manage, in the best way possible, what Russians describe as the everyday *byt*²⁴. If one would make a parallel with the Russian folklore tradition, Pavel Korchaguin is somewhat like Ivan the Fool who spends his time sleeping over a stove and suddenly does a heroic deed. The researcher Svetlana Boym says about Ivan (1992): “Ivan the Fool is a great hero but he does not know

²³ His conscience discerns with a blazing speed the principles it has to obey but when it comes to orienting itself through the trails of the world, these warriors need to be guided by squires, damsels, and rangers.

²⁴ “The Russian word *byt* means something extremely basic, but cannot be translated by a single word, or even a single phrase, in other European languages. Everyday life, daily life, quotidian existence, material culture, private life, domestic life: all of these various shades of meaning are present in the term. Sometimes, but by no means always, *byt* is defined by being opposed to *bytie*, spiritual existence: in this context, the translation of *byt* would come close to ‘earthly existence’ as well as to ‘material life’. Additionally, *byt* is sometimes used as a value-laden term – a circumlocution like ‘the dreariness of quotidian life’ would capture the flavour.” (Kelly, 2004)

how to live between his heroics deeds” (p.40) affirmation that can be applied to Pavel Korchaguin.

2.1.2 THE HERO AND THE WORLD

The world where the Errant knights live is a violent one, it's a place always in danger, that constantly loses its equilibrium and it is the knight who individually has to restore it, in the absence of any other transcendental figure. It could be argued that the Soviet Union in the novel is also a place that is in constant danger. The norm of this world should be a swift transition towards socialism; nevertheless, it's also plagued by people who put that dream in danger. The first part of *How the steel was tempered* presents a world in the middle of a war with enemies like Petluria, exploiters, and bandits, the second part of the book deals with saboteurs, Trotskyites, corrupted politicians, and tyrannical father figures.

Furthermore, the chivalric world faces two main problems. First, there is not in the world a central figure that constantly controls the balance, which means that humans have to adhere to human law voluntarily and it does not always happen, that is why the figure of the Knight is so important. As said previously, Pavel Korchaguin does not act outside the sphere of the party, but, he does bring balance occasionally there where the party has no reach: the fight with his colleagues over the commentaries they do of a woman, Zhukray's liberation, cleaning the workshop, saving Taya from his father...

The other problem which raises Thomas Pavel (2005) in his book is the effectiveness of the hero's actions:

“Si bien es cierto que el carácter local y limitado de las infracciones las hace susceptibles de ser rápidamente reparadas, tal reparación, al efectuarse de forma dispersa e individualmente, nunca conducirá al combate decisivo ni al restablecimiento permanente del orden. La norma que los caballeros se

esfuerzan por salvaguardar arriesgando sus vidas esta pues, perpetuamente amenazada y la concretización de esta amenaza se llama aventura.” (p.65)²⁵

In the novel, this problem is visible not only through Korchaguin’s experiences but also through the experiences of his companions. Once they manage to fix a problem, or once they have created a well-organised proletarian structure in a certain location, they are rapidly sent to another mission, and the task to build the world seems endless. It is true that calling some of Pavel’s actions an adventure might be far-stretched. Nonetheless, these tasks, no matter how simple they might seem, are approached by the narrator as heroic; besides, they do correct the world, and put it on the right track.

However, a distinction can be made between the world presented in the chivalric novel and the socialist novel. Whereas the medieval world found itself perfectly balanced in statism, the socialist world, or the soviet world found it in movement. The ideal world depicted in the soviet novel was not a full-realised world, but a world in transit. The socialist novel placed the arrival of socialism in the future as if it were the promise of paradise. Nonetheless, signs of this future are already present in Soviet life.

2.1.3 THE CONFLICT BETWEEN DUTY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Thomas Pavel (2005) remarks in the book the ongoing tension in chivalry’s novels between two aspects of the hero: for one part is his duty towards the world and his personal salvation. Does the severity of the ideal permit an own personal destiny? In Korchagin this conflict is reflected through two themes: Love and disease.

²⁵ Although the local and limited nature of the infractions indeed makes them susceptible to being rapidly solved, the reparation performed individually and locally will never bring to the final combat nor the permanent establishment of order. The norm that the knights strive to safeguard risking their lives is perpetually threatened and the concretisation of this menace is called adventure.(Translation by the author)

The three love relationships Korchaguin has in the novel underline this conflict. His first love interest is Tonia Toumanova, the daughter of a forest inspector, they meet as teenagers and from the beginning, the differences between them are quite clear, she comes from a wealthy background and he is a proletarian, they are from different worlds even though they might not see it at first. Pavel tries to blend in with Tonia's environment but does not succeed, their relationship ends abruptly when after being released from prison Pavel enrolls in the red-army. Later they will find each other and both are more self-aware of their social differences, and they finally break up. Pavel later acknowledges in an encounter they have that their love could have never succeeded, she does not represent any of the ideals he holds. The scene is not represented as a traumatic moment, Pavel at that point has no interest in Tonia, he even despises her, and so the conflict between him as an individual and duty is rapidly solved.

More complex might be his relationship with Rita Ustanovich, his comrade from the Komsomol. What is interesting about their relationship is that it is established among equals, both of them are equally engaged with their duties, both of them hold up to their ideals, both of them are Heroes. That is why their friendship never evolves into anything amorous; they are committed to their responsibilities. Later on, they admit the love they had for each other, and Pavel even asks her out, but she is already married and has a daughter. Nonetheless, it could be argued that this love would never work, being together would not have restored any imbalance in the world, it would not have been heroic, it would have been just a normal relationship between two normal people who love each other, and heroes cannot be normal.

This is when the third relationship comes to play. Already heavily ill, Pavel meets the Kiutsam family; he lives with them and rapidly notices how the father and the older brother rule the household with an iron hand. The mother and her daughters are constantly being terrorised by the male figures. One day Pavel offers Taya, the little daughter, to marry him to escape from her father's reach. It is evident their engagement is not born out of love, but duty. Pavel wants to strip

away the family from the father's influence and save Taya, as in medieval tales the knight would rescue his love interest from the hands of a mad warlock. It is later when the love between them evolves, as she gradually becomes part of Korchaguin's world and becomes a conscious proletarian. This is why he can have a relationship with her, she represents the harmony between collective responsibility and individuality; in the love towards Taya, both love and duty are aligned.

The other way this dilemma is expressed is through Pavel's disease. As the novel progresses the protagonist faces different injuries that put his life at risk. The first time is when he gets shot in the hip during the war, he immediately resumes his duty but in a trifle, with some bandits, he gets hit and falls from the horse. This time he barely survives: he fractures his skull and loses the visibility in one eye (to what he says that he better had lost the left eye because he is not able to shoot). Even then, once dispatched from the hospital goes directly to work.

The third time his health and duty enter into confrontation happens in the railway episode. As he quickly sets to build the railway, under extreme temperatures, in the midst of a storm he does not yield, he knows he has contracted the typhus but goes on. He, as well as his comrades, is a hero and his job is to restore balance where needed.

Finally, as his illness progresses due to all the pressure he has inflicted on his body, Pavel tries to find different jobs suitable for his condition, he does not want to delegate his duty. Nonetheless, once blind and paralysed it becomes clear that he can no longer serve the task of building socialism on the first lines. His response though is not of resignation though, he decides to become an author, he finds a new way to serve his country. Even when he reaches a point in his life where he could rest, he chooses duty.

In conclusion, the dilemma presented in chivalry novels, the personal interest and well-being against solidarity and duty towards the world has a clear response in Ostrovsky's novel: the socialist hero must always choose duty over love, service over self-preservation. If a vast quantity of time has been devoted to

explain why *How the Steel was Tempered* as the new socialist novel is a new reformulation of chivalry movements it is because it follows the same logic as the Stakhanovite movement. The Socialist realist novel is another fetish; it represents this ideal world moving towards socialism, a place where heroes fight every day putting aside their self-preservation. It presents history in its real development, the world is represented as a never-ending war against the old world. The same thing that was considered as a nightmare in Platonov's *The Foundation Pit*, here, acquires a positive connotation. Nonetheless, the novel also inspires, educates by presenting the reader the image of ideal heroes who learn how to become the new socialist man.

2.2 MUSICAL AND THE JOY OF LIFE

In cinema existed as well films which would depict this world in constant peril but filled with heroes who fight to build the socialist society, films which “showed the need for “Bolshevik vigilance” against inner saboteurs; for a long time one of the most famous popular films from Soviet Cinema was Chapaev (1934) based on the novel written by Dmitri Furmanov, the movie tells the story of a red army division commanded by the civil war hero Vasily Chapaev against and their fight against the white army troops. Nonetheless, apart from this type of films, after the resolution to extend and apply Socialist Realism to cinema, a new genre became highly popular among the audiences: the musical.

The musical constituted the artistic answer to Shumyatsky's demands of a cinema for the millions where people could see themselves represented. The plot and story were frequently straightforward and simple, which means that unlike the formalist cinema from the twenties these films had a story and a message that everyone could understand. In addition, the characters were always simple people like tractor drivers or amateur performers. This ensured the process of identification as viewers could see certain traits in their own life reflected on those

characters. Secondly, if films like Chapaev serve the purpose to infuse the viewers with “socialist Heroism”, the musical's main function was to represent those glimpses of the socialist utopia that come from the future. Later in the analysis of the film *Circus* (1936), we will see how space presents itself as an achieved utopia. That means that because there is no longer struggle conflicts in these films are never a matter of life and death, there is nothing at risk, the only thing left is that *joy-de vivre* which Shumyatsky eagerly demanded: “*We need genres that are infused with optimism, with mobilizing emotions, with cheerfulness, joie-de-vivre and laughter.*” (Kaganovsky, 2013, p.215). The musicals show the values of the socialist utopia, but the reality represented is not real. This indicates the trend of fetishization of soviet culture as this *joie-de-vivre* can only manifest through the viewing of these films, and can only momentarily compensate for the absence of those values in the real world. In addition, it also means the return of the *phantasm*, as the camera is no longer as in Dziga Vertov’s movies, the embodiment of the perfect mechanic eye through which the viewer falls in love with the real image of themselves, now is the perfect machine to create illusions, and turn the population into narcissus.

Most of the more characteristic traits in the Soviet musical were established by Eisenstein’s protégée Grigory Aleksandrov who devoted most of the thirties to the filming of musical comedies like the aforementioned *The Circus*, *Jolly Fellows* (1934), *Tanya* (1940), or one of Stalin’s favourite movies of all time *Volga-Volga* (1938).²⁶ His success comes from his way of cleverly importing the main characteristics of the American musical and filtering them through the soviet culture. Rimgaila Salys has a book called *The Musical Comedy Films of Grigorii Aleksandrov: Laughing Matters* (2013) where thoroughly analyses each musical film and, most importantly, describes all these adaptations and techniques he borrowed from the Hollywood musical. The introduction, for example, explains

²⁶ Interestingly enough, Aleksandrov who later became one of the most influential figures of the sounded cinema originally signed a statement in 1928 with Eisenstein and Pudovkin where he rejected the possibilities of this new cinema in favour of montage as the main tool of cinema.

how as a consequence of his visit to the Disney Studios, and inspired by its animation films he borrowed comedic techniques as the musical stage of chaotic groups or the use of well-known classical music in comedy chase scenes. But, the probably most important characteristics he borrowed were the introduction of the love triangle in the argument and the implementation of ideology in a light manner.

Salys (2009) follows the idea of Rick Altman that the

“Deep structure of the American musical consists of a dual-focus narrative strategy of alternation, confrontation, and parallelism between the male and female leads. [...] Male and female are further identified with opposing cultural values, which the musical seeks to reconcile. The formation of male and female into a couple invariably parallels the success of a venture or task in the narrative. A secondary couple or a love triangle, consisting of the primary couple and a male or female rival, typically fulfils a comic function.” (p.5)

This means the return of the triangulation of desire in its more prototypical form, which as it has been discussed, for Girard was so representative from the novel, and unlike Platonov's example, in this case, mediation is possible as the referent does exist and manifest (at least in the domain of the story). Furthermore, the discourse is somewhat different from the socialist novel because the hero there was already the representative of the moral law, whereas in the musical the main protagonist improves through the mediation happening in this love triangle. Examples of this sovietisation of the love triangle can be found not only in Aleksandrov's musicals but also in, for example, Pryrev's *Tractor Drivers*.

To conclude the other element is the introduction of ideological elements in the movie, i.e. through entertainment and comedy the musical became the best platform to infuse ideology to the masses, to mediate their desires: “*While the American musical integrated free enterprise capitalism and nationalism into its narrative, the Soviet incorporated Stalinist ideology and nationalism.*” (Salys, 2009, p.8-9) Aleksandrov's movies present this achieved utopia in the present,

motives of duty, or the importance of the collective, but all is presented in a light, and joyful manner so the viewer could both enjoy and learn.

Aleksandrov's adaptation of the play *Pod Kupolom Tsirka* (*Under the Circus's Dome*), originally written by Ild, Petrov, and Valentin Katayev, was the first musical to embody all the myths of Stalinist Culture²⁷. The movie cleverly translates all the musical clichés from American movies, into a Soviet version of them²⁸. It tells the story of Marion Dixon, a woman who escapes America after being persecuted by a mob. She ends up working for a wicked German named Kneischit acting in a circus. She is the star of a number named "Flight to the moon". Together they arrive in the Soviet Union and perform in the Moscow Circus. There, Marion meets Ivan Petrovich Martynov and falls in love with him, meanwhile the director of the circus decides to make a Soviet version of the "flight to the moon" named "flight to the stratosphere". Problems arise when Kneischit intervenes. First, he tricks Martynov into thinking Mary loves another man and then jealousy blackmails Mary, to reveal that she has a mulatto son. Finally, Mary does the circus number and reveals his love to Martynov, Kneischit reveals Marion's secret but the people in the circus do not humiliate her, they start soothing the mulatto baby and singing to him a lullaby. The last shot is of all the protagonists marching in the May Parade through the streets of Moscow.

The next paragraphs will explore the film concerning three different topics: space, mediation, and the ideal. Space, in the film, is the metaphor of two contradicting poles: real/unreal, Public Life/Private Life. My goal is to explain how these roles interact with each other, how they embody these dichotomies, and how

²⁷ Also, Ild and Petrov did not want to appear in the credits as scriptwriters, probably because the satirical nature of the original play was lost in the adaptation of this movie.

²⁸ As Remilga Salys explains in her article *Circus the Spectacle of Ideology* (2013), part of the success is due to Aleksandrov's collaboration with Vladimir Nil'sen who had been to America and studied American production and technology, as well as, Isaak Dunaevskii who compose the soundtrack and established the musical cannons for soviet musicals e.g. the incorporation of a song that acts as a leitmotiv called in Russian "massovaia pesnia (mass song).

they influence, together with the process of mediation, the formation of the Soviet Ideal.

2.2.1 FLIGHT TO THE MOON

As said previously, the film starts with the protagonist jumping to a train as a consequence of being persecuted by a violent mob. Once she gets on the train an image of earth at the back of the train is presented. The camera zooms in and the globes move from the U.S.A to U.S.S.R. It is worth noticing that the globe does not disappear into a Soviet landscape, such as Moscow. Instead, it disappears onto the same stage of the circus, where Marion's number is about to start. This single movement expresses a jump between reality, and this non-place that is the circus. In the real world, America is presented as a wasteland, a violent territory where women are miserably judged and lynched. Later this image is confronted with the idealised western world.

The circus acts as a nonplace where the best representations of the world take place. Evidently, the films present such an idealised version of capitalist values in a satiric way. The image of Marion escaping America does not correspond with this "new" image of Marion. Whereas in the beginning, the spectator could see a frightened and helpless Marion, under the dome, she acts in a sensual, flirtatious, and carefree manner. The spectacle "flight to the moon" is mostly performed by her alone, and all under the vigilant eye of Kneischit who practically only shoots the cannon that will take Marion to the Moon. Aside from the capitalist depiction of women, these elements show the individualist character of western society, as well as the unequal relations between men and women. Even the idealised image of the capitalist world is flawed.

Additionally, in this scene, Ivan Petrovich Martynov is shown for the first time. The male protagonist will serve as Marion's love interest but primarily as her mediator. He exemplifies the ideal Soviet man. Through her love for him, Marion will learn to love the Soviet Union and how to become the ideal Soviet woman,

loving him will mean becoming him. Already in her book Rimgalia Salys (2013) indicates the main characteristics of the male protagonist:

“In *Circus*, Ivan Martynov is figured as precisely this Aryan physical type—tall, muscular, square-jawed, and blonde. His first appearance in the film confirms his recent military service and unerring marksmanship. When not performing, he wears uniform garb, a Stalin-style jacket with cavalry trousers, and high boots. Whether in public or private space, whether marching in a parade, sitting in a circus loge, or at the piano, Martynov’s bearing is military, a return to the pre-revolutionary officer’s body language: straight back, expanded chest, and erect torso that does not bend, even when seated.” (p.261)

It is worth noting that Martynov shares some characteristics with Pavel Korchaguin. They both share an incredible strength, the fact that Martynov wears his military clothes everywhere signs, as well as it did with Korchaguin, that he does not make a distinction between his private and public life, both of them are the same: there is never a time when the Soviet hero is out of duty. Finally, they both share reluctance towards self-preservation and have endurance through the pain: “his stoic denial of pain and trauma after his fall is yet another demonstration of virility. The native template for Martynov’s masculinity is, of course, the folkloric Russian knight or bogatyr” (Salys, 2013, p.293). All these characteristics demonstrate that Korchaguin’s example was not an exception or a single example in the vast spectrum of Stalinist culture. Instead, it is safe to say that those were the stereotypical traits of the Soviet hero of that time.

2.2.2 SONG TO THE MOTHERLAND

The scene where Martynov and Marion play the piano is crucial. It intertwines all the themes of mediation, space, and the ideal subject in a couple of shots. At the beginning of the scene, there is a wide shot of the red square, then the camera swiftly zooms out and turns to its right and frames Martynov at the piano, Marion on top of the instrument, and another window covered with curtains. This

single shot alone encapsulates the idea behind the scene. The camera establishes a relation between the outside and the room. This is the scene where Marion falls in love with the Soviet Union but she still is not a part of it. The window behind them covered with a translucent curtain creates a barrier between the protagonist and the Soviet reality. It reminds the spectator that the hero is not yet part of the country.



Fig.3. Ferreras (2021) *Marion and Petrovich Singing Song to the Motherland* [Screenshot] (Rvision-You Tube).

As told before, all the events which happen in other rooms outside the circus cover the private sphere. It is in this room where the story entangles: In these places, Kneischeit blackmails Marion, and then she writes a love letter to Martynov which, under the actions of the German antagonist, never gets to him, and provokes the misunderstanding between lovers. Private spaces are dominated by Kneitscheit; he manages himself perfectly in those spaces because they are infused with the capitalist notion of individuality²⁹. Instead, the piano room with

²⁹ As a matter of fact, two other characters who have a predominant presence in those places are Raecka and Skameykin. That is not to say they are negative characters. Nonetheless, they do not represent the ideal image of the Soviet man and woman. Raechka is jealous, capricious, and not athletic, and Skameykin is a puny coward. Given those characteristics, it is normal that they find themselves being part of the entanglements happening in the film.

the window opened to the red square is a middle space between the private and public spheres. Marion cannot be a Soviet woman yet because her life is still dominated by her private affairs. Once his son starts crying, she starts playing the piano louder and louder, she fears rejection. It is only when her mystery is revealed; when she has no more secrets that she becomes in her entirety a soviet woman.

The other topic of this scene is the mediation; this is not only the scene where Marion falls in love with Petrovich but also the scene where Petrovich, as a representation of the ideal man, passes on to her his love for the Soviet Union, he acts as the mediator of her desire. At first, in the scene, he starts singing the *Song of the motherland*, a song about the greatness of the country, about its vastness, and the joyful sense of living, in other words, about the motherland as the perfect utopia. Later, Marion joins him in the singing, he says a phrase, and she repeats it. Unaware he is teaching her the amorous language of the soviets, a joyful language of camaraderie, devotion, but also a language of duty towards the motherland³⁰. By the end of the song she does not need Petrovich to tell her the words, their voices are synchronised, united not by the love they feel for each other, or not exclusively, but by the love they profess to the country.

2.2.3 FLIGHT TO THE STRATOSPHERE

It is in the representation of flight to the stratosphere where all these conflicts get resolved. First, this scene serves as a counterpart scene to the “flight to the moon” number at the beginning of the movie. If the ideal topics of individualism and sensuality were present in the capitalist version of the number, here one can observe the opposite. The first logical difference is that Marion

³⁰ It is worth noticing how in the real play, written by Ilf and Petrov, the scene shows Petrovich teaching the Russian language to Marion. The decision to change it made sense, in so much as the movie is a musical, but also as it made the metaphor of what is actually happening more clearly to the common spectator.

herself is no longer a femme fatale-like woman, there is nothing sensual in her acting, as Rimgalia Salys (2013) points out, in this act Marion transforms into the ideal soviet woman: a *Fiskul'turnitsa* (athlete woman). Furthermore, the ideal collectivist society is also present. Whereas in the first number, the deed was performed by Marion alone, the soviet number is performed by a large group of people who synchronised with each other to make the show even more spectacular than the first one. As if to say, the individual can take one to the moon, but only collective labour can take a man to the stratosphere.

The other aspect which gets resolved in this scene is the conflict between private and public life. While Marion is performing the number, Kneischit is trying to catch her son. He manages to do it and shows him to everyone in the public. Initially, Mary faints, but then Martynov wakes her up and takes her to the centre of the stage, which as Salys (2013) points out, is a metaphor for her death and rebirth. By the time Marion sees that neither she nor her son is being rejected her transformation into the ideal soviet woman is finished. Furthermore, not only the secret of his son is revealed but her relation with Martynov is finally consummated. The scene in the piano room shows them falling in love but not being able to be together, finally, when their relationship leaves the private sphere and enters the public sphere it becomes real. Just as in *How the steel was tempered*, the movie tries to explain that only when public and private life are aligned, one can become a Soviet Hero

If *The Circus* were an American movie in all probability it would end with a family scene. Maybe it would show Martynov, Marion and her child having dinner, maybe singing all together a song. Instead, we see the main protagonists marching on the streets, singing again the *Song of the Motherland*.



Fig.4. Farreras (2021) *Ending Scene at the Parade*
[Screenshot]. (Rvision-You Tube).

The film acts as a chiasmus, in the beginning of the film the viewer gets presented with the catastrophic and violent reality of the capitalist world, which is contra-posed later with the utopian representation of capitalist ideals in the circus. They do not correspond. However, almost by the end of the movie the viewer gets to see the Socialist Utopia outside this non-place that was the circus's doom. Subsequently, the screen jumps to the real world and, unlike with the capitalist example, both realities (the dome and the real world) correspond: anti-racism is present in the real world, man and woman march equally and the collective exists, the Soviet Utopia is not a fantasy.

In conclusion, the film *Circus* through the devices of space, and the mediation through the ideal, presents the conversion of a foreigner into the ideal Soviet woman. One might argue that the discourse followed in *How the Steel Was Tempered* and *Circus* contradict each other: It has been said in the previous section that behind the figure of the Soviet Hero laid an essentialist discourse, which means that the hero's characteristics could not change or evolve; he is good, conscious, courageous and impulsive from the beginning. All this should contradict the idea behind the conversion process Marion goes through. Notwithstanding, it could be argued that the fact that she is a foreigner, already allows the film to develop a *Bildungsroman* plot. Most importantly I would argue

that the primary argument which proves that such a contradiction does not exist, is that even though Marion was not a Soviet Woman at the beginning of the film, she did have the characteristic traits required: throughout the film, we can see how it is in Marion Dixon's nature to be kind, resilient and impulsive, the film depicts how she learns to redirect those qualities and made them suitable for the soviet reality.

Furthermore, the film still has the function of a fetish as it depicts the world in an idealised and joyous manner. It compensated on a symbolic level the reality of that time: although it is evident a reason of causality cannot be established with this particular example, it is interesting how these films that were supposed to transmit the joy of living were demanded at the same time when the Stalinist purges began.

2.3 RESHAPING THE PAST THROUGH CINEMA

If one were to look at the list of films produced during the thirties, one would observe an increasing interest in the production of historical films and biographies. This interest manifested in the year 1937. Before that year, the predominant genres were dramas and comedies. The trend started with three films: *The Youth of Pushkin*, *Peter the Great*, and *Lenin in October*. By the next year, in 1938, this genre got consolidated with films like *Aleksandr Nevsky*, *The Great Citizen*, *Friends*, *Minin and Pozharsky*³¹ or the second part of Peter the Great's biography. Why did this sudden interest in the past appear?

The Stalinist culture sought to rework the past, to redefine it. As Groys points out (2009) the party wanted to give a new function to classics in the construction of the new world, there was no need for new innovative styles as the

³¹The next section will be focused on Eisenstein and his film *Aleksandr Nevsky* as the paradigms of the historical movie. Having said that, it is worth noting that during this time Vsevolod Pudovkin filmed a vast number of historical movies: the aforementioned *Minin and Pozharsky* or *Suvorov*, *Admiral Nakhimov*, and a film about the scientist *Zhukovsky*. All of these films helped in the rehabilitation of historic figures, as well as shaped the historical film as a genre in the Soviet Union.

already the socialist content was innovative by itself. Evidently, simply this notion has a vast number of interpretations and uses: it did not only mean that there was no need for new styles of representation, whether it be in cinema or in literature; it also expressed a will to pick elements from the past and reused them for whatever purpose the party felt fitted. New views of the past were also present in literature e.g. Aleksey Tolstoy`s novel about Peter I, but it is through cinema where brighter examples can be found.

Historical films permitted to infuse the country with a national spirit, to represent all history of Russia as a revolutionary process towards the present situation, to talk about the present in a metaphorical manner, and re-establish aristocratic artists who brought national traits into art or manifested in some way a rebellious attitude towards the former regime e.g. the film *The Composer Glinka* (1954) which was not filmed during that period but followed the same directives. The film tells the story of how Glinka became heavily influenced by Russian folk songs and introduced those topics in his opera *Susanin* or *A Life for The tsar*. It praises the fact that for the first time common Russian people were represented in an opera. Interestingly, the same opera which is praised in the film was banned in the Soviet Union. Another film that follows this trend is *The Young Pushkin* (1937): it was produced to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Pushkin`s death and as the title indicates the film is about the life of a teenage Pushkin. As the researcher Jonathan Brooks (2016) points out, the mechanism used to set a distinction between him and the imperial society in which he lived was an accentuation of his racial traits.

Evidently, the best example of a historical film is *Aleksandr Nevsky* (1938) directed by Eisenstein. It is not the first film to start this new trend of portraying historical figures, however, it is considered to be the film that set the norms for future historical films. Be that as it may, it was, indeed, the first movie made by Eisenstein that could be classified under the prerogatives of *Socialist Realism*. Had he not capitulated, most probably, he would have shared the same destiny as Dziga

Vertov and gradually be left apart from the film industry as they both were too tied with the avant-garde and formalism.

The film focuses on the main campaign led by Aleksandr Nevsky against the Teutonic Order, which tried to conquer Russia and convert it to Catholicism. As many academics have pointed out, the film was a device to enhance patriotism amongst the people, as a consequence of the foreseeable upcoming war against Germany. It also confirmed the nationalistic traits of this new era: It gave Russia a historical and messianic perspective of its own historic path which not only justified the idea of creating socialism in just one country but also gave Russia the right to be that country.

Lastly and most importantly, since the Soviet Union had increasingly evolved into a more and more personalist system that revolved around the figure of Stalin, the film tries to establish a historical parallel (though arhistorically³²) between the figure of Aleksandr Nevsky and Joseph Stalin. It sets out to explain what the function of both of them as leaders is. For the researcher Evgeny A. Dobrenko (2008) this means that the principle of a proletarian class-based society is contradicted. It could be argued, however, that such is not the case. The following paragraphs will explain which are the main functions of the national leader through the representation of Aleksandr Nevsky, and how these traits do not contradict in the film the principle of a proletarian society

First of all, the film does not depict the story of a hero. It does not tell the story of an individual who goes on adventures, has a love interest, or suffers deceit. In fact, his presence in the film barely amounts to 20 minutes (of the total sum of 108). If he were an idealised hero he would be presented taking action in the battle

³² Evgeni A. Dobrenko (2008) in his article *History with Biography* explains that this type of film did not seek to depict events in an accurate historical manner. Alternatively, they seek to turn historic events into myths. For instance, when Eisenstein was first approached to film a historical movie, he was given the choice to either film a story about Aleksandr Nevsky or one about Ivan Susanin. He chose Aleksandr Nevsky because there was little historical material for that time.

on the ice, and he barely appears. Instead, during the scene, the focus is on the mass, in people like Bulsay or Gavriilo. Furthermore, if Nevsky was the representation of the ideal man, Bulsay and Gavriilo would aspire to be like him. Instead, these characters become the best versions of themselves as a consequence of the competition they have between each other at the beginning which turns in the end into an understanding of comradeship, duty, and honour. Nonetheless, it is true that as Pavel Korchaguin, Aleksandr Nevsky does not have elaborated psychological traits; however, the reasons for it are different. Unlike Pavel, the prince does not represent the ideal of man, nor does he represent the contrary: Aleksandr Nevsky, as a leader, represents the symbol of the state.

Dobrenko (2008) already elaborates on this theme in his article; he goes on to explain how

“Alexander Nevsky occupies a key place in the history of the Soviet historical biographical film. On the level of iconography, the hero of this film could be related to the ‘tsarist’ series. As with every film in this series, the movie is about a ‘people’s tsar’ (in this case, a prince). The Slavophil idea of the ‘people’s monarchy’ is based on the unity of the leader and the people, on national unity and solidarity, and as such contradicts the class approach” (p.78)

The problem resides in that Dobrenko seems to indicate that the people’s monarch is chosen as a leader to be a ruler, but in this case, he is chosen to be a symbol. The State as an executioner, as an organiser of people's lives, is embodied by the people itself. The discourse Dobrenko talks about, can be better seen in the first part of *Ivan the Terrible*: both times he is confronted by the people, once at the beginning of the film after Ivan’s coronation and at the end, It shows how the people chose him to be not just a symbol of Russia but also a ruler, and executioner of the power of the state.

In Aleksandr Nevsky the unity between the leader and the *narod* is not understood in terms of tsar and serfs; their unity comes from being the same entity in different levels of reality. The people in Pskov are the ones, who take the

initiative to fight the Teutonic order, but they need Aleksandr Nevsky to unite all of Russia, he serves as a catalyst through which the will of the people expresses (not executes).

Dobrenko (2008) follows the idea of Olga Yumasheva that whereas films like *October*, *Battleship Potemkin*, or *Strike* elaborate on the theme of “collective consciousness, Aleksandr Nevsky is a shift towards the topic of sole patriotism. However, it is the author's opinion that the film explores both themes: common men, peasants, and fishermen are still understood as a class who exercises executive power as part of the state. The union between symbolic and factual reality is possible due to the ahistorical characterisation of Aleksandr Nevsky as a fisherman. In the beginning, externally his appearance is that of a simple man, not a prince. It is his depersonalised use of language, his rhetoric, which sounds as if all of Russia were talking through him, that makes him a walking monument. Nevertheless, his conversion into a fully realised symbol for Russia comes when the people pick him to be their leader. That does not mean that the film does not show traits of nationalism, it clearly does, be that as it may, those traits serve to demonstrate that the roots of communism could already be found in Russia in the 13th century, to strengthen the idea that Russia had been historically ready for what came in the 20th century, and additionally to awake audiences a need to protect their country in the upcoming war.

To conclude, following the ongoing idea which states that cultural objects served the purpose of a fetish in Soviet culture, it could be argued that the film *Alexander Nevsky* embodies this idea as well, first, by portraying a homogenous ideal of the Russian mass as a conscious collective, and second, in the idea of the leader. This monument-like leader dominates the symbolic, it is a closed system of representation and a catalyser through which the desires of the people express and manifest.

DISCUSSION OF THE SECOND CHAPTER

In this part of the research the aim was to explain the changes that took place during the first decade of the Stalinist period. In this period it is no longer adequate to talk about a discursive multiplicity: culture production was centralized and the only style permitted, Socialist Realism, was extended to all kinds of artistic representation. Artist had to be now “engineers of the soul” i.e. mediation became obligatory; furthermore Socialist Realism had to represent the glimpses of the future Utopia that live in the present time. The research has proven how these changes added a new function to cultural objects; they had to act as fetishes, to compensate for the lack of practical socialism, culture acts in this new era as a *simulacrum* of socialism.

In the novel this resulted in a reformulation of the chivalric novel. The chapter has proven this through the example of *how the Steel was Tempered*: The depiction of the world in constant peril, the hero as the representation of the moral norm and also the only element that can guarantee its implementation, and the conflicts that arise in these type of novels are characteristic of the medieval age novel and applied in Socialist Realism. The novel acts as a mediator as it introduces positive, incorruptible characters people should aspire to be, but also as a fetish because it presents an idealist image of the road towards socialism.

The research has proven that this fetishization process was also present in cinematic production. Musical as a genre became highly popular during this decade and presented a happy world where people would collaborate and with minor conflicts that do not put in peril the integrity of the whole system. The film *Circus* is an example of that: The socialist utopia is not depicted in a far future but in the present, the comedic character of the film adheres to Shumyatsky’s demand for representing the *joy-de-vivre*. The film retains its mediational function as well as it presents the ideal image of man through Petrovich and the ideal image of woman through Marion in the end of the film. Furthermore, the next section of the chapter sought to show how past was reproached in cinema: it was a tool to

reframe past historical figures, and make comments on the present, to create an undivided link of the present situation and the past. The section has analysed the film *Aleksandr Nevsky*: it presents the prince a simple man which is chosen by the masses to be the embodiment of their national traits, a fetish that reigns in the domain of the symbolic and through which the spirit of the *narod* expresses.

CONCLUSION

The research has explored the different discourses of the construction of desire and techniques of mediation which were developed during the NEP period and the first decade of the Stalinist period. The main focus has been put on literary and cinematic production and it has been the author's intention to show how cinema was as, an art, more successful than literature in its task. The first chapter has proven that the early soviet culture could not be understood as a unified block but rather as a multiplicity of discourses and proved how novelist struggled in creating a novel that would be both formally and ideologically satisfactory. Futurism did not pay attention to the novel as a tool for their means, the Proletkult favoured content over form and the result were uneven novels with no literary quality, and third, the fellow-travellers did not want their art to be subjugated to ideological constrictions, they belonged to a tradition of the novel who gave up representing man as a whole, positive characters people should emulate, they rejected mediation. Later the research has proven that constructivist cinema of the twenties, contrary to the novelist position, found different ways to develop a path that would be formally and ideologically balanced. The problem is, again a multiplicity of discourses instead of a unified one

The second part of the research described the most fundamental changes that shaped Stalinist culture. Namely, the unification and centralization of all artistic associations and the implementation of Socialist Realism as the only artistic style permitted for representation. The consequence of these facts is a fetishization of culture. Cultural objects retained their meditative nature but turned as well into fetishes which had to compensate the lack of a real implementation of socialism. Furthermore, cultural objects are subjects of a paradoxical existence as both functions annul each other.

Though the results of the research are satisfactory, here can be only found the general tendencies through the examples of literature and cinema. Nonetheless,

it is the author's opinion that the research opens the path for future works which could include the study of poetry, theatre or even music.

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