DIVAS – THE BLAZING WEAPONS OF SOCIALIST PROPAGANDA

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Abstract:

The Russians communist theoreticians have assigned an important role for the cinema -one of the propaganda vectors. Easy to understand, spectacular and glamorous had all the right attributes to convey the message of a new world. In this set up, the role of the female characters, divas had their well-defined place. This paper will present the powerful story of feminine heroism during the war, a heroism inspired by the admiration for a fictitious character. In this endeavor I will travel in time and present the building pillars of the story and its impact with the public at the time.

Keywords:
Manipulation, communism, cinema, divas, war heroine.

Sweet, dainty or powerful and mysterious, the Eastern Divas, stars of the socialist cinema were powerful means of propaganda. Female heroes but also female objects played a role in the direct or concealed manipulation meant to design a wishful reality, a dream both beautiful and necessary. They were part of the sugar swallowed along with the bitterness of sacrificing the present for the higher purpose of a bright future.

But how did it all begin?

In order to identify a pattern, the fabric that served as basis for the multiple facets of the female characters of the Eastern cinema, we will start with an excerpt of the Communist Manifesto.

Leveraging the Disenchantment Theory that derides Middle Ages' chivalry as well as the religious concepts, it states on page 17, paragraph 4:

> "*The bourgeoisie has torn the veil of sentimentality that pertained to the family relations and reduced them, to a mere money relation. "*

Later, on page 36, paragraph 6
"*The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production."*

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Once these allegations were charged, a commitment was also made: communism will provide equality, a partnership between man and woman.

These basic concepts are to be found in Eastern cinematography where the woman would rather be seen as a fellow, partner and comrade than as an object of desire.

The rising of the new man signifies to some extent the rising of the new woman. Since she constitutes a crucial element of the Bolshevik propaganda, this new woman must therefore be defined and positioned within society. She must be removed from her dim cottage and brought to the city, socialized and once integrated in the new social order she can evolve, she can become a manager, a union leader, she can set an example of firmness and altruism. The women are cast as active characters which struggle, pursue, succeed, sing and understand the nature of things.

Every possible facet and especially that of the battlefront heroine is developed in the soviet movies of the early communist era. Overall, there is a noticeable prevalence of strong and determined female characters.

Was it all planned? Are we able to grasp the history of an epoch through its movies?Acknowledging the power of visual image, Lenin has stated that "*of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important!*"

On the 12th of July 1923, in the *Pravda* newspaper Leon Trotsky published a study entitled "*Vodka, the Church and the Cinema*". The triumph of the working class – eight hours of work, eight hours of sleep and eight hours of leisure – has radically changed the life of the working man and has established the foundation for cultural development. An adult can be defined through the way he spends his free time, the same way a child can be analyzed and his character revealed by playing.

Trotsky too defines cinema as a perfect weapon that inflicts itself with an unprecedented speed, being at the same time as popular amongst the proletarians in big cities as were the breweries and the churches. Further, he describes this new passion as a lasting one, well rooted in the man's innate necessity for entertainment:

> "[…] t*he desire to see something new and improbable, to laugh, to cry not for oneself – but because of other people's misfortune. The cinema gratifies these demands in a very straight, visual, scenic and vital manner, without requiring anything in return, not even to be literate.* "

This weapon can be used by any kind of propaganda, be it against alcohol or against the Church. Trotsky saw the Church as a less important enemy than the vodka, for which he recommended prohibition. He explains the relation between the working class and the Church by means of tradition and need for drama and distraction and he recommends an indirect confrontation, a gradual detachment:

> "*In church only one drama is performed, and always one and the same, year in, year out; while in the cinema next door you will be shown the Easters of heathen, Jew,*

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and Christian, in their historic sequence, with their similarity of ritual. The cinema amuses, educates, strikes the imagination by images, and liberates you from the need of crossing the church door. The cinema is a great competitor not only of the tavern but also of the church. Here is an instrument which we must secure at all costs!"

Ten years after the publication of this essay, in 1934, the movie "Ceapaev" was released. I would propose it as an example, as it was famous enough for the eastern audiences, and not yet historically out-of-date. Moreover, there is a true story related to this film that perfectly illustrates the manipulative power of the cinema.

Its subject depicts a Russian Civil War event, obviously set through the eyes of the winners. It is directed by the brothers Georgi and Sergei Vasilyev. Dogmatic, oversimplified – the white officers are voracious and shady and the partisans heroic and honest – the entire film tries to formally observe the historical truth, also by shooting in the actual locations where the events took place.

* *Vodka, The Church and the Cinema*". Pravda 12 July, 1923



Ceapaev film poster

The two brothers and directors were initially documentarians specialized in reconstruction of actual events. And the movie is touched by the same attention to detail, with the addition of a simulacrum of a plot, a decent directorial treatment and a female presence.

But who is she, the heroine?The character, a young country girl, close to the partisans gathered around commander Ceapaev, during a battle where her friends are visibly outnumbered decides to grab a gun from an injured fellow and to start fighting along, with courage and determination. Performing: Vera Myasnikova, an actress born on the 5th of October 1900, which at the time of the shooting was married to the director Sergei Vasilyev.

Georges Sadoul also mentioned the sequence illustrated above, where the heroine is taught to use the machinegun by Petka (Ceapaev's deputy), underlining the sexual tension built between the two protagonists. A natural gesture and the glimpse of desire in a sterile environment, has clearly a heightened power.

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The man – Leonid Knit, actor specialized in soldiers' roles, The woman – Vera Myasnikova.

In the pursuit of finding stories about this actress, we have discovered the influence that her character, Anka, had over the audiences, thus additionally motivating our choice of exemplification.

And so we found Nina Onilova, born in 1921 from Ukrainian parents and raised in an orphanage in Odessa from the age of 8. At 13, while still in the orphanage, Nina benefits from a visit to the cinema. Witnessing this new invention for the first time, she is mesmerized by the movie Ceapaev.

Her destiny is now outlined. Nina wishes to become a machinegun operator. At 18 she begins working in a textile factory, but enrolls as well for paramilitary trainings, as did Myasnikova, her favorite character. When USSR is invaded in 1941, she voluntarily joins the army and takes part in the battles defending Sevastopol, and gets to fight in the native village of Myasnikova. She gets to destroy two German tanks, but is seriously injured.

Before going into the battle, as an incentive and in order to disperse her fear, she writes a letter to the actress. Nina tells Myasnikova that she will defend her village, that being an orphan she doesn't have a family of her own, so the whole Russia can be her relative. She therefore chooses to relate to and to defend those in Myasnikova's village. Wounded, she is sent to the hospital, with the unfinished letter by her chest.

Next we will exhibit a facsimile of the letter, the way it was published in the volume "*Fallen heroes are speaking*" with testimonies collected by Alexandr Borschchahivsky.

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Original letter facsimile

ПИСЬМО КОМАНДИРА ПУЛЕМЕТНОГО РАСЧЕТА ГЕРОЯ СОВЕТСКОГО СОЮЗА Н. А. ОНИЛОВОЙ



Февраль 1942 г. 1

Настоящей Анке-пулеметчице из Чапаевской дивизии, которую я видела в кинокартине «Чапаев» 2. Я незнакома вам, товарищ, и вы меня извините за это письмо. Но с самого начала войны я хотела написать вам и познакомиться. Я знаю, что вы не та Анка, не настоящая чапаевская пулеметчица. Но вы играли, как настоящая, и я вам всегда завидовала. Я мечтала стать пулеметчицей и так же храбро сражаться.

Когда случиласьквойна, я была уже готова, сдала на «отлично» пулеметное дело. Я попала — какое это было счастье для меня! — в Чапаевскую дивизию, ту самую, настоящую. Я со своим пулеметом защищала Одессу, а теперь защищаю Севастополь. С виду я, конечно, очень слабая, маленькая, худая. Но я вам скажу правду: у меня ни разу не дрогнула рука. Первое время я еще боялась. А потом все прошло... 3 Когда защищаешь дорогую, родную землю и свою семью (у меня нет родной семьи, и поэтому весь народ — моя семья), тогда делаешься очень храброй и не понимаешь, что такое трусость. Я Вам хочу подробно написать о своей жизни и о том, как вместе с чапаевцами борюсь против фашистских. .

In simple words, Nina confessed that she knows now the differences between a character and an actor "*I know now that you are not really Anka, but your acting was so real that it inspired me to fight for Sevastopol, specifically in the Ceapaev partisan division*". Nina Onilova, the young Ukrainian dies in the hospital and doesn't get to meet her idol, although she meets eternal glory.

Vera Myasnikova was followed by a horde of actresses, some of them more beautiful or more talented, but due to her influence over Nina, the orphan hero, she gets to hold a leading place inside the communist stardom.

Throughout the years, once the socialist realism starts fading away, the profile of these heroines gets more and more refined, acquiring blaze and gaining additional nuances. A lot of talented divas were born and evolved, influencing and casting their fascination over entire generations, but the reward was never again paid in human life.

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