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## **Review of Korneeva, M.; Gillespie, D. (2024) The history of Russian literature on film**

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*The History of Russian Literature on Film* by Marina Korneeva  
and David Gillespie (review)

Otto Boele

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translation, Szymanska asks readers to complicate their relationship to translation, participate more in its adjudication, and challenge themselves to read the 'same' text multiple times. Thus the translation multiple in effect takes after a poem, which, via its expansive economy, demands re-reading. Polyphonic translation projects continue to proliferate and Szymanska gives us the terminology we need to navigate their study as complementary, rather than competing, variants that allow for a 'more democratic structur[ing] of knowledge' (pp. 165, 167).

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Korneeva, Marina and Gillespie, David. *The History of Russian Literature on Film*. The History of World Literatures on Film. Bloomsbury Academic, London, New York and Dublin, 2024. xii + 412 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Filmography. Select bibliography. Index. £130.00: \$175.00; £39.99: \$54.95; £117.00: \$157.50 (e-book).

PUBLISHED as part of the Bloomsbury series, 'The History of World Literatures on Film', the book under review is not only about Russian films. With a final chapter devoted to foreign adaptations, it acknowledges Russian literature's international appeal and the existence of a productive dialogue between Russian writers and non-Russian filmmakers. Whether this is an exceptional situation is open to debate, but it is worth noting that this international dimension is largely missing in the other contributions to the series, which invites speculation on the 'unique' and 'universal' qualities of Russian literature.

The lion's part of Korneeva and Gillespie's book is, of course, devoted to Russian (or Soviet) film productions based on Russian literary sources, but before presenting their chronological overview of more than one hundred years of film adaptations, the authors address some of the traditional issues in adaptation theory (the flawed notion of the literary text's 'primacy', the fidelity argument) arriving finally at Brian MacFarlane's differentiation of 'transfer' and 'adaptation' (p. 3). Here the authors point to the role of the state and the demand for ideological rectitude as two important parameters affecting the adaptation process in a uniquely Russian way. Especially in Soviet times, film adaptations were supposed to follow the prevailing political demands by presenting a version that was either ideologically sanitized and morally stricter than the 'liberal' original (the film version of Vasili Aksekov's controversial youth novel, *A Starry Ticket*), or, on the contrary, considerably toned down

the primary text's ideological maximalism (*Pavel Korchagin*, the 'humanized' film adaptation of Nikolai Ostrovskii's Stalinist novel, *How the Steel Was Tempered*). Either way, the political climate has always been a considerable factor in the adaptation process, even when, starting with *perestroika*, the state was becoming less intrusive.

Focusing on cinema and largely ignoring TV adaptations and series, *The History of Russian Literature on Film* relies on the familiar chronology of Soviet historiography with each distinctive chapter describing a particular period (the 1920s, the Stalin years, the Thaw). Chapters are divided into smaller sections, the logic of which is mainly dictated by changes in the political climate ('Socialist Realism, But Not as We Know It', 'On the Shelf: No Room for Young Talent') and the everlasting popularity of the nineteenth-century classics. It is hardly surprising therefore that we encounter the usual suspects throughout the entire book and in many different contexts ('Pushkin as Prophet of the Revolution', 'Pushkin as Prophet of the Revolution (Again)'). Even so, the authors succeed in giving full credit to the enormous diversity of Russian film adaptations devoting separate sections to the 'lesser' gods (Andreev, Leskov, Saltykov-Shchedrin) and the fate of children's literature on screen. Especially insightful are those sections that signal the emergence of a particular genre in Russian cinema following the successful adaptation of a literary classic. Soviet horror would have looked different without the 1967 adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's novella, *The Vii*, which takes full advantage of the story's fantastic elements.

Inevitably with a book of this scope, the discussion tends to be quite descriptive sometimes, listing names and titles without much further comment. *The History of Russian Literature on Film* is, first and foremost, a reference work including a large index and a filmography for each individual chapter. Occasionally the authors do engage more extensively with films that they deem particularly innovative or characteristic for the Russian approach to adaptation. This is the case with Nikita Mikhalkov's film, *An Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano* (1977), which is loosely based on Chekhov's early play *Platonov*, but also includes dialogue and motifs from a plethora of other texts by Chekhov. Rather than adapting a single story or play, Mikhalkov offers a 'summation' (p. 5) of Chekhov's importance in the modern age by bringing out what he believes to be the most essential aspects of his work. Russia's literary heritage, particularly the classical authors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thus presents itself as an inexhaustible source of inspiration that far exceeds the genre of the novel.

While most of the adaptations to receive more detailed coverage are well-known films, Korneeva and Gillespie also discuss a few nearly forgotten gems, such as, for example, Abraam Room's *A Strict Youth* (1935). Based on Iurii Olesha's play of the same name, the film is no less striking for its production

history (which was marred by the arrest of the leading actor), than for its prominent display of physical beauty and even nudity. Amazingly, the film was released, but then immediately banned, its subversive tendencies being so obvious.

Stories like these make *The History of Russian Literature on Film* fun to read, but the book is, above all, an invaluable source of information for anyone studying Russian cinema.

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Knight, Claire. *Stalin's Final Films: Cinema, Socialist Realism, and Soviet Postwar Reality, 1945–1953*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY and London, 2024. xiii + 258 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Appendix. Filmography. Bibliography. Index. \$51.95; £33.99 (e-book).

ON 28 February 1950, the future literary critic Lev Anninskii, then seventeen, recorded a heartwarming recent visit to Moscow's Coliseum cinema: 'Terrific acting from Volodin, Ladynina, and especially Luk'ianov.' He had reservations about some of the other casting, but concluded: 'It's a holiday to see a film like that. It puts you in a really good mood: no shooting, no killing.'

The film that had enraptured Anninskii was the USSR's most notorious exercise in 'lacquering reality', Ivan Pyr'ev's *Cossacks of the Kuban* (1950). In later decades it had very different associations. As Alois Krylov, a professional accordionist from Sverdlovsk, informed his diary on 19 April 1965: 'If it is a masterpiece, then it is one exclusively of time-serving.' While Claire Knight's innovative new study of films released in the last years of Stalin's leadership does not draw on diaries such as these, available on the Prozhito database, they support one of her main arguments. We need to address these films in their own terms, rather than perceiving them through the prism of polemics in the post-Stalin years and since.

In fact, as Knight's chapter on *Cossacks of the Kuban* demonstrates, we need to start by watching the films carefully to begin with. The film does not actually have a scene of over-the-top feasting — unlike Friedrich Ermler's *The Peasants*, released fifteen years earlier. Its 'traditional fair' scene, on the other hand, is not to be found in other films of the era notionally set on collective farms. Now taken as typical, it was in fact atypical. Contemporary critics were equally wide of the mark: they directed their comments at the scenes of joyful labour, when in fact the film (characteristically of the pastoral genre, one might add) focuses on leisure, not effort.