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Published in the USA
International Journal of Media and Information Literacy
Issued since 2005
E-ISSN 2500-106X
2022. 7(2): XXX-XXX

DOI: 10.13187/ijmil.2022.2.XXX
<https://ijmil.cherkasgu.press>



One Thousand and One Highest-grossing Soviet Film: Opinions of Film Critics and Viewers. Leaders in the Box Office through the Eyes of a Movie Expert

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Abstract

What does the list of the thousand most popular Soviet films look like? Why did these Soviet films become box office leaders? Which Soviet directors can be considered the most box office hits, and why? How did the press and the audience evaluate the highest-grossing Soviet films? Professor Alexander Fedorov's monograph *One thousand and one highest-grossing Soviet film: opinions of film critics and viewers*, now in its third revised edition, offers a broad panorama of a thousand of the most popular Soviet films, viewed through the eyes of film critics and audiences.

The material of this book might be of interest for higher-school teachers, students, graduate students, researchers, film critics, cinema scholars, journalists, as well as for the wide range of readers who are interested in the history of cinema art, problems of cinema, film criticism and film sociology. In connection with the publication of the monograph A. Fedorov gave an interview to Professor Marina Tselykh.

Keywords: Soviet screen, Fedorov, book, film studies, film distribution, Soviet cinema, readers, audience.

Your new book, which continues your series of books on cinematography (Fedorov, 2021; 2022), is called "One thousand and one highest-grossing soviet film: opinions of film critics and viewers". Its name says a lot. This is currently your largest book in terms of volume (it has a total of 1250 pages). It contains and presents not only the statistics of film distribution, but also a brief history of Soviet cinema, its periodization, a typology of levels of perception and analysis of films by a mass audience.

It is known that people tend to have an evaluative perception. When it comes to films, the opinions of people who have seen them often differ diametrically. Moreover, viewers do not always agree with the opinions of film critics and do not perceive them as reference or testifying to the real quality of the work.

Your book is just interesting because it contains diverse reviews and reviews of people with very different levels of cinema / media competence: from ordinary film lovers to professional film critics and film experts.

Your analysis of numerous reviews of Soviet films clearly shows that even a high level of film competence does not exclude different interpretations of film works and sometimes even opposite assessments of their artistic significance.

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What did such a detailed analysis of the list of thousands and one of the highest-grossing Soviet films in the mirror of the opinions of film critics, film critics and viewers give you personally? What scientific conclusions did you draw as a result of your meticulous research work?

More than once I have encountered the ironic comment that there was so little entertainment in the Soviet Union that any Soviet film that was released was doomed to mass success as long as it had a large circulation.

In fact, this is far from being the case. For example, such notable films with large print runs as *A Member of Government*, *The Light Way*, *Ivan the Terrible*, *Time, go ahead!*, *The Red Tent*, *The Slave of Love*, *Five Evenings*, *A Winter Evening in Gagra*, *A Military Field Love Story*, *Leo Tolstoy*, *Marry the Captain* and many others. Of all the films Andrei Konchalovsky made during the Soviet period, only two (*Noble Nest* and *Romance of Lovers*) made it into the top thousand box office hits. Only two films by Nikita Mikhalkov (*One's own among strangers, a stranger among their own* and *Kinfolk*) managed to overcome the 15 million viewer barrier in their first year of release. Of all of Sergei Solovyov's films, only *Assa* surpassed this threshold...

Let us also not forget that Soviet films competed at the box office not only with foreign films (which, incidentally, had many hits; suffice it to recall, for example, such popular movies as *Spartacus*, *Fantômas*, and *Yesenia*), but also, since the 1960s, with television.

According to data compiled by S. Zemlyanukhin and M. Segida, all in all more than seven thousand full-length feature films were made in the USSR (up to and including 1991, not including television films) for release in cinemas.

Thus, only one in seven of the highest-grossing feature films for distribution could be included in the top thousand Soviet films. And the barrier of 40 million viewers could take only a hundred Soviet films. So not all films in a row (despite their, for example, large circulation) were watched with equal enthusiasm by the mass audience...

The genre distribution among the thousand and one Soviet films that had managed to attract anywhere from 15 to 87.6 million viewers during their first year in cinemas is as follows: 1) dramas and tragedies – 306; 2) comedies – 202; 3) melodramas – 183; 4) detectives and thrillers – 145; 5) action films (including westerns) – 108; 6) fairytales – 32; 7) science-fiction – 21; 8) concert-films – 4.

So if you count only comedies, detectives, action, fairy tales, science-fiction and concerts as entertainment genres, then they make up 51.2 % of the box office figures for a thousand Soviet films. But if you include melodramas, the percentage is certainly higher – 69.3 %.

At first glance, it seems surprising that the thousand most popular Soviet films is dominated not by comedies, melodramas and detective stories, but by the drama genre. But if we bear in mind that for all the years of the existence of the USSR the films on the Civil War and the Great Patriotic War were quite popular with mass audiences, and in the 1930s – 1960s there were also dramas on a revolutionary theme, then the situation becomes more understandable.

On the other hand, the percentage of entertaining Soviet films is highest in the top ten ratings (90 %); but they also dominate in the top thirty (over 70 %) and overall among the highest-grossing three hundred Soviet films (over 60 %).

That said, the number of popular non-films among the top 300 highest-grossing Soviet films, which had been quite large in the 1960s (33 films), was gradually declining until it reached a minimum in the 1980s (8 films).

I should also note that the top 20 highest-grossing Soviet films consisted exclusively of films made in the Russian Federative Republic. As for box-office hits made in other Soviet republics, they made it to the top 300 of the Soviet box-office leaders much less often, usually with no more than two films, and secondly, they all belong to entertainment genres (comedy, fairy tale, detective and action).

My research showed that the maximum number of Soviet box office leaders were shown in cinemas between the 1950s and 1970s: 72.8 %, which essentially corresponds to the peak of movie attendance, which had been rising consistently from the second half of the 1950s to the early 1970s (at the turn of the 1970s, the annual number of film attendances per resident of the USSR reached 19). However, film attendance in the Soviet Union began to decline as early as the second half of the 1970s.

Various factors had an impact on the level of film attendance:

- subjective: the growth in the number of cinemas (which significantly increased film attendance in the 1950s and 1970s), the genre structure of the film repertoire (in the 1950s and 1970s many more melodramas, comedies, detectives, and action films popular with audiences began to be screened)

- objective: population growth; changes in the population's share of free time; the intensity of the development of other media (television, the Internet, and others); competition from foreign films that found their way into Soviet distribution, and, from the second half of the 1980s, onto video screens (video parlors, individual video consumption).

It should also be noted that entertainment genres practically always dominated among the most popular Soviet TV films.

Thus, despite all the efforts to implement communist ideology and active state support of an "ideologically restrained" cinema, the viewing public in general was following the same global patterns: the entertainment genre films (though in many cases of high professional quality) were consistently at the top of the list of audience preferences.

Your book tells in a very interesting way about the factors that make the mass audience sympathize with films and other media texts. Among them you name the reliance on folklore and mythological sources, the constancy of metaphors, the orientation towards the consistent embodiment of the most persistent plot schemes, the synthesis of the natural and the supernatural, the appeal not to the rational, but to the emotional through identification (imaginary reincarnation into active characters, merging with the atmosphere, aura works), the "magic power" of the heroes, standardization (replication, unification, adaptation) of ideas, situations, characters, etc., mosaicism, seriality, compensation (the illusion of the fulfillment of cherished, but unfulfilled desires), a happy ending, the use of such a rhythmic the organization of films, TV shows, etc., where the feeling of the audience, together with the content of the shots, is affected by the order of their change; intuitive guessing of the subconscious interests of the audience, etc.

Is it enough for a director to know all this to make a box office movie? It turns out that this is a universal model, and the result is obviously amenable to preliminary calculation for the total success of a work of mass culture????!! So why doesn't this model always work? How often did Soviet directors use "recipes for success" when creating their films?

Films belonging to mass (popular) culture are successful with the audience not because they are supposedly oriented only to people with low aesthetic taste, subject to psychological pressure, easily believing lies, etc., but because their authors respond to real, worthy of respect and study audience needs, including – informational, compensatory, hedonistic, recreational, moral, etc.

V. Propp, N. Zorkaya, M. Turovskaya, O. Nechay, M. Yampolsky and other researchers have convincingly proved that the total success of mass culture works requires the calculation of their creators on the folklore type of aesthetic perception, and "archetypes of tales and legends, and their corresponding archetypes of folk perception, having met, give effect to the integral success of mass favorites" (Zorkaya, 1981).

Indeed, success with audiences is very closely tied to the mythological layer of the work. "Strong genres – thriller, sci-fi, western – always rely on 'strong' myths" (Yampolsky, 1987). The relationship of extraordinary but "authentic" events, one of the underlying archetypes (drawing on deep psychological structures that affect the conscious and subconscious) of the tale, the legend, is very important to the popularity of many media texts.

However, the greatest influence on the audience is in television mass culture (which is now also available on the Internet), which is oriented toward the creation of large, multi-month (or even multi-year!) cycles of programs and series. Here "the system-forming properties of multiseriess come into play: 1) the duration of the narration, 2) its discontinuity, 3) the special plot organization of the parts-sequences, which demands a certain identity of their structure and the repetition of separate blocks, 4) the presence of crosscutting characters, permanent heroes (or a group of such heroes)" (Zorkaya, 1981). Plus such specific properties of the organization of audiovisual spectacle as periodicity, rubricism, programmaticness, proportionality, translationality (providing increased communicativeness).

In addition, the creators of media texts of mass culture take into account the "emotional tone" of perception. The monotony of story situations often leads the audience to disengage from contact with the "text". That is why in the works of professionals there is a change of episodes,

causing "shocking" and "calming" reactions, but with a happy ending that gives a positive "discharge". In other words, there are quite a few popular media texts that can be easily and painlessly broken down into blocks (often interchangeable). The main thing is that these blocks should be connected by a well-thought-out mechanism of "emotional gradients" – the alternation of positive and negative emotions evoked in the public.

Many bestsellers and blockbusters are built according to a similar "formula of success", including folklore, mythological basis, compensation for those or other missing feelings in the life of the audience, a happy ending, the use of spectacle (that is, the most popular genres and themes). Their action is usually based on a fairly rapid change of short (so as not to get bored) episodes. Let us add here and sensationalism: a mosaic of events unfolds in various exotic places in the center of the plot – the world of evil, opposed to the protagonist – almost magical, fairy-tale character. He is handsome, strong, and charming. He emerges from all supernatural situations unscathed and unscathed (a great excuse for identification and compensation!). In addition, many episodes actively involve human emotions and instincts (a sense of fear, for example). There is a serialism, which implies many sequels.

Is it enough for a director to know all of this, to have a kind of recipe for a universal model of total cinematic success, the result of which is obviously calculable in advance, in order to make a box-office movie?

Of course not. Reliance on folklore, entertainment, spectacle, seriality, and the professionalism of authors is not yet sufficient for the large-scale success of a mass culture media text, because popularity also depends on hypnotic, sensual influence. Instead of primitive adaptation to the tastes of the "masses at large," the "secret subconscious interest of the crowd" is guessed at the level of "irrational feat and intuitive insight" (Bogomolov, 1989).

The same stories, getting to the average craftsman or, for example, to S. Spielberg, transformed, gather different audiences. Professionals of popular media culture have mastered perfectly the art of "puff-pastry": the creation of works of multi-level construction, designed for the perception of people of different ages, intellects and tastes. There emerge a kind of polustylizations-half parodies mixed up with "half serious", with countless allusions to textbook films of yesteryear, direct quotations, with references to folklore and mythology, etc.

For example, for some viewers the "text" of Spielberg's *Indiana Jones* series will be equivalent to seeing the classic *Baghdad Thief*. And for others, more sophisticated in media culture, it will be a fascinating and ironic journey into the realm of folkloric and fairy-tale archetypes, cinematic associations, and subtle, unobtrusive parody.

Frantic may well be perceived as an ordinary thriller about the disappearance of the wife of an American scientist who came to a Parisian congress, or it may – as a kind of reinterpretation and mischievously stylized heritage of the rich tradition of the detective genre, "black" thrillers and gangster sagas – from Hitchcock to our days, and even – as a veiled autobiography of director Roman Polanski...

The therapeutic effect and the phenomenon of compensation are also important for the mass success of the media text. It goes without saying that it is perfectly natural for a person to compensate for the feelings and experiences he lacks in real life.

Are these trends and popularity factors characteristic of Soviet films aimed at a mass audience? It seems that for many films (comedies by G. Alexandrov, I. Pyrev, L. Gaidai, E. Ryazanov and G. Daneliya, detective and spy films by B. Barnet, V. Dorman, V. Azarov, V. Basov, melodramas by E. Matveev, V. Menshov, N. Moskalenko, adventure action films by E. Keosayan, V. Motyl, S. Gasparov, etc.), which were included in the top thousand box office films, are certainly characteristic.

Today, the gender theme is quite fashionable and promoted. How does the Soviet film industry look through the prism of gender? What interesting things did you identify while researching films made by women directors in Soviet Russia?

Only 43 films (4.3 %) directed by women directors made the list of the top thousand highest-grossing films of Soviet cinema, and the top 50 highest-grossing films of the USSR included films directed only by men.

And those 43 films made by women directors included mostly films of entertainment genres.

It turned out that only Tatiana Lukashovich (1905-1972), Nadezhda Kosheverova (1902-1989), Tatiana Lioznova (1924-2011) and Alla Surikova managed to make two films each which

were included in the top 300 highest-grossing films of the USSR. Though, of course, one can assume that if Tatyana Lioznova's most famous serial *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (1973) had been first released in a compact version, it would have had, in my opinion, every chance of making not only the top 300, but also the top 30 highest-grossing Soviet films.

How did the outstanding filmmakers of Soviet cinema manage to adapt their talent to the strict requirements of censorship during different periods of the existence and development of cinema? For example, in the era of "exacerbation of the class struggle" or Stalin's mass repressions, etc.?

The level of censorship pressure on cinema varied greatly in different periods of the USSR. For example, in the 1920s, under general ideological control, considerable experimentation was allowed in the field of form.

The advent of sound in Soviet cinema virtually coincided with the elimination of the last islands of creative freedom and the triumph of so-called "socialist realism". Stalin's regime was in a hurry to put almost every "unit" of film production at the time. Thus it is hardly surprising that S. Eisenstein, who returned from a trip abroad, was unable to get his picture *Bezhin Meadow* released (it was eventually destroyed). And other leaders of the 1920s (D. Vertov, L. Kuleshov, V. Pudovkin) in practice felt the iron grip of censorship. The favorite filmmakers of the 1930s were those who had not only mastered the new expressive possibilities of sound, but also created the ideological mythology of the Great Socialist Revolution, which had overturned the world order. The Vasilyev brothers (*Chapaev*), Mikhail Romm (*Lenin in October*, *Lenin in 1918*) and Friedrich Ermler (*The Great Citizen*) joined the list of cinematographers favored by the authorities, who succeeded in adapting their talent to the hard requirements of an era of "worsening class struggle" and mass repression.

But the authorities understood that the film repertoire could not consist only of "ideological hits". Grigory Alexandrov (*Merry Fellows*, *Circus*, *Volga-Volga*) became the official "king of comedy" of the 1930s. And his wife, Lyubov Orlova, became a major screen star.

"Thaw" liberalization of the USSR in the second half of the 1950s caused a sharp increase in film production and an influx of directorial and actorial debuts. The most notable figure of those years, undoubtedly, was Grigory Chukhrai (*Forty-First*, *Ballad of a Soldier*, *Clear Sky*). However, the older cinematographers of the older generation were in no hurry to retire, either. *The Cranes Are Flying*, a true masterpiece by director Mikhail Kalatozov and cinematographer Sergey Urusevsky, deservedly won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Mikhail Romm also got his second wind. In my opinion, it was in the 1960s that he directed his best films – *Nine Days of One Year* and *Ordinary Fascism*.

The refusal of official pomp in favor of the problems of "ordinary people" is particularly vivid in Marlen Khutsiev's modest melodramas *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* (together with F. Mironer) and *Two Fedors*. These films were released in wide distribution unhindered. However, Khutsiev's attempt to raise the level of critical comprehension of modernity (*I am 20 years old*, *July Rain*) provoked harsh resistance from the authorities who started a gradual "freezing" of the cinematic thaw. The most famous victim of this censorship chill was Andrei Tarkovsky's legendary film, *Andrei Rublev*.

The attempt to re-liberalize the socialist system, timid at first, caused a gradual relaxation of censorship pressure in perestroika times (1986 – 1991). Many "shelf" films were finally released in cinemas, and even in mass circulation. This was followed by the abolition of the list of banned topics and genres. Vasily Pichul's *Little Vera* was the first Russian film with an explicitly sexual scene. But neither this film nor the scandalous *Inter-girl* by Petr Todorovsky have been able to affect the overall situation of declining attendance.

The proliferation of video, competition from revived television, the intensive importation of American films, and the "ninth wave" of Russian "blackout films" did their job. Soviet cinema started to lose even its most loyal viewers. Did not bring any substantial box-office dividends either denunciatory tapes about Stalinist camps, or militants speculating on the Afghan war and its consequences and terrorism, or pseudo-erotic comedies, or crime and domestic "black" or fantasy and "horror"... The overwhelming majority of these so-called "films for a mass audience" was marked by the same permanent disease of Soviet B-class cinema: unprofessionalism (plus, of course, technical poverty of staging)...

What new requirements are put forward by the modern socio-cultural context to the media text? Do modern viewers have special requirements for film and media products? What wins when creating a film work: the demands of the public or the talent of the master? Dynamic movies are known to be the perfect form of art for the younger generation raised on MTV. These films have distinctive features: high-speed technical ingenuity, lightning-fast change of stunts and special effects, light pulses of video clips, external gloss and healthy cynicism, an abundance of bloody scenes, and so on. Has it changed the general approaches to the creation of works of cinema?

Thirty years ago, R. Corliss (Corliss, 1990: 35) wrote that modern media texts (movies/tele/clips, computer-game) make higher demands on the eye, because with our eyes we have to follow every inch of the frame in expectation of lightning-fast tricks and special effects, and "dynamic films" are designed (primarily) for teenage audiences. The modern audience of cinemas is teenagers and young people. Representatives of the older generation prefer television and go to the cinema quite rarely. Hence, it is clear that current films that aspire to mass popularity must first and foremost interest the youth audience. Filmmakers who prefer to consider cinema as a form of Art are left with a narrow art-house niche and participation in festivals.

Are you sure that it is important for modern creators of "mass" media texts to work specifically for the youth audience? After all, young people aged 14 to 35 make up only 27% (39.1 million people) of the total population of Russia (145 million).

What does the focus on the youth audience change in the nature of media texts, doesn't it ultimately simplify the quality of the created works? What trends will still prevail in media art? Can one guess in the desire to create a box-office media product a primitive adaptation to the tastes of the "broad masses", including the youth audience?

My words are confirmed by numerous sociological studies: the most frequent visitors to modern cinemas all over the world, including Russia, today are teenagers and young people. And, of course, the focus on a young audience affects the content and form of films designed for mass success, largely reducing their intellectual level and adjusting them to the tastes and views of teenagers.

You divide the history of the development of domestic cinema into certain periods. You emphasize that the last, "perestroika" period (1986-1991) was a time of a strong decline in the popularity of Soviet cinema.

Analyzing the decline in film attendance in the USSR in the second half of the 1980s, you come to the conclusion that this was the result of serious miscalculations in cinema policy, especially considering that the film industry in the USSR has long been an economically profitable production.

What does the state of modern Russian cinema indicate today? Is Russian box office cinema dead? Does it have a future? Can and should we place a bet on it? Don't you see a similarity between the situation that has developed today and the "thaw" era, when the ideology has changed dramatically and many directorial and acting debuts have appeared, and many directors have a second wind, which allowed them to stage some of the best box office films that Russian viewers still like to watch? Or do you think that the current situation is more similar to the era of Cinema Perestroika (1986-1991), when, under the influence of various factors, the gradual decline of Soviet cinema began, which as a result led to a loss of spectator interest in Russian cinema? Is it possible to return the former glory of Soviet cinema and instill a love for visiting cinema halls among modern Russian viewers? What needs to be done for this?

There are no "thawing" trends right now, of course. In my opinion, contemporary Russian cinematography is in crisis. As a rule, private business prefers to avoid financing it because the overwhelming majority of contemporary Russian films are unprofitable. You can literally count Russian films at the box office on your fingers.

This leads to the situation whereby producers and directors make money (i.e. successfully "use" the money they receive from the Russian state budget) at the film production stage, and the subsequent failure of Russian films at the box office is largely of no interest to anyone.

It would seem that more recently, Russian film directors and producers pathos on TV and in the press, saying that the success of Russian cinema in the Russian box office is hampered by stiff competition from Hollywood... And now, in connection with the events of recent months, Hollywood has refused to sell its hits to Russian distributors. There are no more Great Hollywood productions in Russian cinemas.

So what? Attendance at the multiplexes has fallen dramatically. The lack of American competition has not helped the "triumph" of Russian cinema. Viewers hardly ever go to see it... And experts believe that if things go on like this, then most cinemas in Russia will close, and there will be only a minimum number of cinemas, which are subsidized by the Ministry of Culture.

And here we must soberly admit that even if (let's imagine!) Russian cinematography produces ten or twenty masterpieces each year, they will occupy a very modest niche in film distribution. The majority of young viewers will still be attracted by entertainment films of the (Hollywood) genre. If not in cinemas, then on the Internet...

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