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TIME AND FILM PROGRAMMING IN MOSCOW CINEMA THEATERS, 1946-1955

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This paper is devoted to the Soviet film market during the first half of the twentieth century. In particular, it consist of introductory text and database on film programming in Moscow cinema theaters between 1946 and 1955. Based on the intersection of two methodological approaches, anthropology of time and new cinema history, this paper traces the multifunctionality and heterogeneity of Soviet time on the example of contracting adopted in the USSR between distributors and different actors of cinema networks. While the database on film programming of Moscow cinema theaters contributes to the issue of cinema audience studies and the known dominant models of film distribution and exhibition, placing the Soviet case into international context.

JEL Classification: Z11.

Keywords: big data, film distribution and exhibition, temporal turn, new cinema history, film programming, USSR.

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Introduction

On 28 March 1949, the schoolgirl Tat'iana Nikolaeva started her day slowly. In the morning, she paced around the room, listening to records and reading Mark Twain, then waited for her slow friend (‘*kopusha’*) Zoya. When she did meet Zoya and they decided to go to the movies, everything changed:

> I quickly grabbed her and dragged her across the street. After looking at the poster for *Poor Student* (*Nishchiĭ student*)[4] in *Teatr Kinoaktera*, we rushed to the phone box. After 5 or 6 vain attempts to call, we finally got it all figured out: the screening starts at 5:15. We rush (changing from one trolleybus to another on the way), and then we arrive. The queue is incredibly long! We stand briskly in different lines. A few minutes later, I see Zoyka flying towards me, gaping her eyes, and letting out wild screams. I am coming to her and it turns out that her turn has arrived. Once inside, we bravely quarreled with some unkind person and took our turn. We are buying tickets, there is a balcony only. It is one hour before the start. Zoya demands a trip home for binoculars. Endless trolleybuses again. We fly home, take the binoculars, and go back. In the trolley bus, I recall that the tickets were still on the table. We ran home. Zoya loses her gumboots one by one, stays, I run home. Hooray! The tickets are not in the trash bag yet! The trolleybus again, Zoya. Another trolleybus. The movie. Just as we sat down, someone started walking in front of us: someone took someone else's place. The movie made no impression. Sweet German banality [Nikolaeva, 1949].

As could be seen above, the quote from Tat’iana’s diary reflects the multiple registers of different times. Firstly, this entry demonstrates how her subjective time rapidly accelerates to follow social rhythms. Secondly, it illustrates the chrono-politics of speed under the conditions of time deficit. Last but not least, this excerpt shows how film programming can serve as a technique for managing human time. Exemplifying the intersection of so-called free time with the temporal practices of film exhibition, Tat’iana's entry opens this paper that introduces in the scholarship the database on film programming of Moscow cinema theatres between 1946 and 1955.

Methodology

Methodologically, this paper is based on the intersection of two research directions: (1) new cinema history and (2) anthropology of time. From new cinema history, it borrows the ambition to integrate the audience's perspective into the cinema history, focusing on film exhibition and cinema’s programming strategies. This research movement, which has widely developed over the last two decades, seeks to examine the viewer’s perspective from a variety of inter- and multidisciplinary

[4] German movie *Der Bettelstudent* (Georg Jacoby, 1936).

approaches. New cinema history's proponents use the methods of ethnographic research, oral history, memory studies, social geography, urban studies, and digital humanities [Maltby et al., 2011]. That is, the focus of attention of researchers is the audience in spatial, temporal, social, economic, and other dimensions, which have previously remained outside the scope of traditional film studies analysis. Among the many strands covered by new cinema history, the research on film programming might follow a twofold direction. Augmented by quantitative data, such as number of seats and screening, ticket price, this type of research, on the one hand, could be used as an indirect index of measuring the film popularity and audiences' preferences [Treveri Gennari & Sedgwick, 2015; Sedgwick, 2000; Jurca & Sedgwick, 2014; Thissen & Zimmerman, 2016]. On the other hand, the analysis of film programming could show tactics and strategies the exhibitors use in order to attract audiences [Stokes, 2019]. The database on film programming in Moscow cinema theatres (1946-1955), presented here, was designed to measure the audience' choice at first [Tanis and Balykova, 2022] but now, our local case study shifts focus from the audience to the exhibitors to reveal the practices of film exhibition in the specific circumstances of the Soviet film market, with the planned economy and socialistic agenda. This introductory text to the database presents an attempt to describe the Soviet film market from a temporal perspective.

Temporal turn, that challenged anthropologists in the 1990s, revealed plurality and asynchronicity of temporal regimes involved in the production of the present [Munn, 1992; Bear, 2014]. Following Aristotelian categories, Laura Bear identified three key paths in the anthropology of time: (1) technē (τέχνη) or time as a technique to act on the world "in order to bring new objects and processes into being," (2) epistemes (ἐπιστήμη) or institutional forms involved in the creation of chronotopes and production of Time as knowledge; (3) phronesis (φρόνησις) or time ethics, ideas about past and future, what time is and what to use it for [Bear, 2016]. In Cinema Studies, the temporal perspective still remains within the framework of film content (Narrative or Film Analysis) [Mroz, 2013] or film-making [Pandian, 2011], yet there are multiple temporal modes at the core of film distribution, exhibition, and circulation. Firstly, the basic unit for measuring both the life cycle of a movie and efficiency of a film projector in the Soviet context is a screening-day, i.e., the temporal metric. The number of screening-days, in turn, indirectly indicates the popularity of films at the box office, literally illustrating the thesis "time is money" and showing how time can serve as an instrument and a medium for profit. Secondly, the screening-day consists of a number of other temporal denominators: film screenings, the formula of which in Soviet film distribution was characterized by a rigid fixation of the time interval. Thirdly, film-programming can act as a technique for managing human time. The quote from Tat'iana's diary that opens this paper is an example of this. In other words, time permeates film distribution on multiple levels. The main purpose of this paper is, if not to problematize it, then at least to make it visible. Tracing the form of contracting between

film distributors and exhibitors from a diachronic perspective, we will explore the nature to the multimodality and multifunctionality of the socialist time.

Film Market and time

Up until the 1970s, the capitalist film market functioned in such a way that time was the key technique for producing capital since the balance of supply and demand here was achieved by regulating the timing of a film screening. In fact, this chrono-politics of film exhibition was based on the principle of price discrimination: in an attempt to maximize the income from a film, distributors passed it through a multi-level system [Sedgwick, 2011]. Starting with the most luxurious cinemas (first-run cinema), the distributors first made money on filmgoers willing to pay more to see the film first, and then moved it down the hierarchical scale (second-run cinema; third-run cinema, etc.), maximizing profits at each level of the system before moving down to the next. As a result, with fixed admission prices in cinemas of different runs, it was exactly the time, or rather the duration of the film exhibiting, that let film market balance between supply and demand.

The key role of time in the film market originates from the silent film era when a film exhibitor, renting film, paid to a distributor not for the film itself, but for a certain period during which the film could have been exhibited. Thus, time became the main metric for regulating the financial relationship between distributor and exhibitor on the one hand, and exhibitor and viewer on the other. In other words, depending on the demand for the film, exhibitors bought from distributors the time during which they could show a movie (or a program of films) and used this purchased time to the maximum, trying to extract profit from it. The technological shock after the coming of sound fundamentally changed the form of contracting between exhibitors and distributors: the flat fees were replaced by revenue sharing. This was due both to the revision of contributions from exhibitors and distributors (with the coming of sound the exhibitor was able to cancel live performances before screenings, while for the film company, in contrast, the film production became more expensive), and to the increased popularity of talkies which, in general, was more profitable as a silent film [Hansen, 2002]. The emergence of talkies led to a sharp decrease in the total number of films in the cinema markets but, at the same time, to an increase in cinema attendance. In this context, the function of time as the main metric for regulating relations among the various actors in the film market shifted from the exhibitor-distributor relationship to the exhibitor-viewer relationship, forming the basis of the principle of price discrimination.

This knowledge about time as a technique of generating revenue lets researchers use time as a technique of measuring film popularity when data on the box office is unavailable. John Sedgwick elaborated POPSTAT index, which formula is calculated on data on period of film exhibition, as well as on the cinema's capacity and its price policy [Sedgwick, 2000]. Put briefly, the index demonstrates that the films with the highest quantitative characteristic were projected the greatest number of days

at each level of the film distribution hierarchy scale. As Sedgwick notes, "using this relative measure of potential revenue, it is possible to approximate more closely the box office earnings of each film in each population of cinemas" [Ibid: 142]. However, what was with time within the framework of the planned economy of the socialist film market? Does the period of a film's exhibition indicate a film's popularity among the public or cultural policy managed from above?

Film market and Soviet time

Totalitarian and revisionist film histories give different answers to this question. The totalitarians argue that the centralization of the film industry resulted in the ideologization of film programming and managing audience demand. According to these studies, Soviet authorities could manipulate the viewers' choice by regulating the period of film exhibition, print runs, release, or withdrawal of the film [Turovskaia, 2010]. For instance, the ideological blockbuster might be printed in more copies and exhibited more widely than a film less relevant to the ideological agenda. As a result, it would have more audience numbers and box office revenue. Put briefly, for the totalitarians, film-programming depended directly on the ideological and cultural policy rather than on audience demand. Yet neo-revisionists, in contrast, insist on that despite the centralisation of the Soviet film industry, film exhibition was structurally separate from film production. This meant that "theaters, state-owned but decentralised, had their own priorities. Because of this dispersed industry structure, the party-state did not have a full grasp of distribution and did not mandate to theatres what to show" [Belodubrovskaya, 2020: 7-8]. In addition, the cinema administration did not have a monopoly on the distribution of films to the population. Alternative institutions to the film industry, such as trade unions and some ministries, had their own network of cinemas and trailers. Besides, they were in charge of showing films across the country. The different actors in the film market were expected to complement one another as they fulfilled an annual profit plan. In practice, they coexisted in competition.

To reveal the role and functions of time in the Soviet film market, we commenced collecting the dataset on Moscow film programming after the Second World war. The first post-war decade provides a unique example of the shift in the Soviet film market model due to the massive influx of foreign movies. After the Second World War, the so-called 'trophy films' (*trofeīnye fil'my*), taken by the Soviet troops as part of the German State Film Archive in 1945, were shown on the Soviet screens from 1947 to 1955. According to the scholarship, their wide distribution fulfilled two functions. Firstly, the mass exploitation of these movies helped to rebuild the Soviet film industry after the war, providing the Soviet government with a valuable source of revenue [Pozner, 2012]. Secondly, the launch of 'trophy films' should support the exhibitors by supplying cinemas with regular new movies under the 'film famine' (*malokartin'e*), as the policy of "fewer but better films" resulted in the drastic

reduction of produced Soviet movies in order to concentrate the industry's investment on the creation of masterpieces [Turovskaia, 2015]. Nevertheless, the launching of 'trophy films' in the USSR contradicted the ideological climate of that time. Among the key measures taken by the Soviet regime to resist any infiltration of Western culture were intensified censorship, administrative centralization, and political campaigns, such as the *Zhdanovshchina*, anti-kowtowing to the West, and anti-cosmopolitanism. On the level of the film market, this cultural transfer of foreign films could not help but lead to a change in the Soviet practices of film exhibition and programming in particular and the model of film distribution in general. Indeed, this tension between commerciality and ideology found its expression literally in the opposition of categories 'Soviet' vs 'Foreign'. It was exactly this opposition that interested us most when we began working on collecting the database.

During the first stage, we collected data on film programming in Moscow cinema theaters between 1947 and 1950. The main goal here was to reveal what the duration of film exhibiting meant in the Soviet context. That is, whether it reflected the prevailing cultural policy orchestrated from above or the audience's choices. Calculation of the POPSTAT formula and further comparison with exhibitors' comments to the annual reports containing information on the number of viewers and box office data demonstrated that socialist time was also seen as a profit-making environment, as the duration of film exhibition implicitly was dependent on the box office and the popularity of the film among the audiences [Tanis & Balykova, 2022]. Nevertheless, this dependence was not direct, and time was closely tied to the imagination of the planned economy. In other words, in the Soviet cinematic landscape, POPSTAT was a point of intersection and the interaction of time as a technique for generating revenues on the one hand, and the imagination of plan on the other. In this paper, we are striving to unwrap this thesis on socialistic time, tracing the history of Soviet film market conceptualisation from the beginning of the Soviet rule to the postwar period.

Ethics of Soviet time: from the capital to equality

As it was in other countries, in Russian Empire, initially, the form of contracting between exhibitor and distributor was based on daily flat fees. This daily renting originated such concept as screening-day (*ekranoden').* However, if in capitalist markets the forms of contracting changed as a result of the coming of sound and further technological renewal of the industry, in the Soviet film industry, this was facilitated by the Revolution and the institutional changes in the film industry that followed it on the one hand, and the conceptual vision of the functions and role of cinema on the other.

Once in power, in 1924, Sovkino, a governmental institution and monopolist in film distribution on the territory of the RSFSR, initiated paradoxical measures to artificially reduce the price for screening-day. These anti-commercial actions were accompanied by the expansion of film networks by increasing the numbers of film screenings in the countryside and in the clubs under the

patronage of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Union and other syndicates. As a result, decreasing the price for a screening-day made the film program more accessible for different actors of film exhibition and, as a consequence, for viewers all over the Soviet Union, not only for urban population. This was precisely the Socialistic idea of universal equality that laid at the root of screening-day's cost reduction and the following increase of film copy's use. In the film industry, this idea resulted in the policy of so-called 'cine-service' (*kinoobsluzhivanie*). This policy implied 'cinefication' of the country, i.e. uniform saturation of the Soviet territory by film projectors so that every resident of the Soviet Union had equal access to a cinema, conceived as a means of education and entertainment. Time, from this perspective, had to be transformed from a technology of production and capital accumulation into a tool for eliminating inequality. Following the classification introduced by Laura Bear, it was to acquire an ethical dimension, from *techné* to *phronesis*.

This ethic of Soviet time was conditioned by the concept of the Soviet film industry itself, declared to be antagonistic to the capitalist film markets. In contrast to 'bourgeois' film markets, the Soviet one was supposed to be oriented not toward commercial relations of supply and demand, but toward social demand. The accessibility of Soviet cinema, even to the detriment of profit, the intention to fulfill social demand and "satisfy the needs <...> of the many millions of working people" — all of these components resulted in state and industry planning and made the planned imagination an essential actor in the film process. In the organization of film distribution, the vision of the viewership's needs was expressed in the establishment of monthly schedules for each cinema venue and film projector.

Nevertheless, contrary to the declared conception, in practice, the Soviet film market presented a hybrid model. By the end of the 1920s, Sovkino modified the terms of contracting for urban cinema theaters, or commercial cinema networks as they were then called. By eliminating the daily fee for urban cinemas, Sovkino introduced revenue sharing, taking 25% of gross receipts after the taxes. However, there were still contracts based on daily flat fees for the cinema clubs managed by trade unions and ministries [Lemberg 1931]. The screening policy of trade unions' and ministries' networks was based on a very low film rental fee and free screenings for workers and peasants. Mostly, syndicates placed the film projectors and theaters in factories, villages and in remote areas. In practice, trade unions and ministries served as very influential actors of screening the movies to the population, composing wide alternative networks in the Soviet Union [Tcherneva, 2020]. These different conditions for different film networks resulted in the coexistence of different times: (1) time as a technique for bringing capital into being and (2) time as a tool for overcoming spatiotemporal inequalities. In linguistic terms, this opposition was expressed into binary categories 'commercial network' (urban cinema theaters covered by Goskino) vs. 'noncommercial network'.

In different periods, the parity of times within the framework of the Soviet film market was not equal. In the 1920s, there was the priority of the alternative network over commercial city cinemas governed by the cinema administration. The dominance of non-commercial, and in fact non-professional actors of film exposure, was due to the intention to meet the needs and demands of peasant and worker audiences over white-collar clientele. On the level of film programming, this tendency found its expression in the system of film rating (‘categories’), which determined the distributional life cycle of a movie. The Main Repertory Control Committee (Glavrepertkom, *Glavnyī repertuarnyī komitet*), responsible for licensing movies for distribution in the RFSFSR, gave category one to "artistically and ideologically "perfect" films, which were granted unlimited release. Category five was assigned to artistically and ideologically "semiliterate products"" [Belodubrovskaya 2017: 168]. In film distribution, this rating system enabled a movie of the first category to circulate over all film networks, while a movie of the lowest classification was projected only in the commercial network, i.e. central city cinemas. In fact, this kind of reversed classification, which allowed the movies of the lowest category to be projected in luxurious cinemas, asserted the priority of time of universal equality over time as a medium for profit.

Technique of Soviet time: from equality to capital

In the 1930s, the balance of power shifted toward commercial networks. The turning point came in 1938-1939 after the cinema administration included the venues of alternative film networks into the annual plan of profits. In practice, this meant that clubs and cultural palaces (*dvorcy cul’tury*) were required to set the ticket prices, pay taxes and share income, as were cinema theaters. The professionalization of film networks included a more flexible film programming policy and the expansion of the audience, which went beyond the worker-peasant audience and opened the doors for all viewers. The commercialization of alternative networks was held under the auspices of the ‘renting’ of their cinema venues by the cinema administration. In 1939, syndicates were ordered to cineficate territorially remote areas, i.e. to saturate them with cinema venues. In this way, the film industry was relieved of all expenses related to the technical maintenance of the venues and the film projection equipment of these facilities, as well as the expenses associated with the delivery of copies [Tcherneva, 2020].

This policy of ‘renting’ alternative venues by cinema administration to use them for commercial screenings and obligating the alternative actors to cineficate remote areas culminated in 1948, with the introduction of the 30 March Decree *On Improving Cine-Service to the Population and Increasing Cinema Revenue*. As could be seen from the title, the decree declared two goals: cinefication and profit. In practice, this decree ordered the transfer of all alternative venues (with

ticket sales) to the Ministry of Cinematography and introduced a complete ban on free film screenings. According to film historian Irina Tcherneva, this decree mobilized all venues for commercial exposure under the control of the cinema administration [Tcherneva, 2016]. At the same time, trade unions were obliged to continue cine-fication of the most remote regions.

These measures were directly linked to the mass launch of 'trophy films', which were supposed to make a profit of no less than 750 million rubles. [Knight, 2017: 131]. Due to the lack of licenses, the American part of 'trophy films' was released through a "closed" cinema network, i.e. actually through the trade union clubs. Under these circumstances, the financial activities of film exhibitors became less transparent, partly due to the extensive network of cinema venues, only some of which were subordinate to the Ministry of Cinematography. Exhibitors could present screenings of 'trophy films' as educational (that is, free of charge) and conceal the circulation of funds. Thus, the decree was aimed at establishing control over the circulation of copies of Soviet and foreign films and the revenues derived from their screenings. Nevertheless, the forced transfer of venues under the control of cinema administration enabled alternative networks to claim the right of supremacy in film screenings, making them a part of a new hierarchy of cinemas.

Established in the USSR by 1948, this film exhibition system hierarchy consisted of 5 different types. The first-run cinemas had to have a large cinema hall, armchairs with reclining seats, a foyer with chairs, armchairs, and sofas, a buffet, a smoking room, and a toilet room. They had to include central heating, ventilation, and cinema equipment consisting of three sound stationary projectors. Second-run cinemas were similar, but were located in regional centers and workers' neighborhoods. Third-run cinemas differed from second-run cinemas in that they might not have had a foyer or buffet. In other words, they constituted the halls adapted only for showing movies. Fourth-run was for rural stationery and mobile cinemas, and there was also fifth-run which consisted of silent mobile film units only [Nashel'skiĭ and Zaĭonts, 1949].

To sum up, by the 1940s the Soviet film market was far from as we called "reversed hierarchy" of the 1920s, on top of which were the interests by worker-peasant audience. Indeed after World War II, the balance of powers in the Soviet film market shifted toward the same commercial system which was adopted in capitalist countries. Initially, the film premiere was released in first-run cinemas, and then it went down the hierarchical scale maximizing profit on each level of the film screening. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of cine-service of the population was still very influential in those years. Still, spatially the non-commercial approach to the film industry was gradually moved to the periphery when the venues opened by syndicates were transferred to the control of the film administration and alternative networks were forced to move to the remote areas of the Soviet Union.

In this paper, we outlined the context within of which the movies were circulated and exhibited in the Soviet Union. The aim of this historical background was to give researchers an inside on the Soviet film distirbution. Despite different views of the issue, totalitarian and neo-revisionist

approaches, this text demonstrated the co-existance of multiple regimes of the socialist time, which switched and put to the fore different modes in different years. The first postwar decade, presented in the database, is characterised by the superiority of commercial time over time of equality. This means that the data presented in our database could be used by researchers to count the popularity and reveal the audience choices, as well as to trace the practices of film exhibitors.

Comments to the database[5]

In collecting data, we focused on the first decade after the Second World War. As a result, the chronological frame of our database spans from 1946 to 1955. The film programming data originates in film listings, which were published in the daily press *Evening Moscow* (*Vecherniaia Moskva*). We looked through 3,025 issues and collected 45 945 records for the film program in Moscow[6]. The Moscow-centered case was chosen due to the availability of the press, its digitized form, and open access. In addition, we collected a part of the data based on the film posters discovered in the archive of the Museum of Moscow.

The dataset consists of five columns: cinema, the first day of screening, number of screening days, title in the original language, and Internet Movie Database (IMDb) identifier. The first column includes the titles of cinemas both in the original language (Russian) and its romanization according to the Library of Congress's system. It should be noted that this database includes information on film screening only in city cinemas governed by the cinema administration. This limitation was due to the availability of information since the repertoire of alternative networks is a blank spot in modern historiography and the sources by which it could be traced are not known to researchers at this time.

As could be seen from the first column, the cinema park of Moscow varied from 37 to 58 cinemas in different years. Daily frequency of changes in the film programs determined the method of counting the film screenings. After inserting the first day of screening in the second column, we counted screening-days in daily film listings, putting the title of a movie in the Russian language in the third column. In order to help researchers identify a movie, we used a unique identifier from the IMDb. For those film titles not listed on IMDb, we used other film databases. The main difficulty was in the identification of all film titles of the dataset because 'trophy films' and other foreign movies, for instance, were distributed under alternatively changed titles. To identify them, we used

[5] The data set can be downloaded here: https://github.com/Ktanis/Moscow-Film-Programming-1946-1955

[6] We express our gratitude to Ivan Karnaukhov for his contribution to this database. Ivan has collected data for two years of the chosen decade, that are 1953-1954 years.

catalogs composed by the archivists of the State Film Fund of the Russian Federation (*Gosfilmofond*) [Katalog zvukovyh fil'mov, n.d.].

Concluding remarks

The integration of two approaches, anthropology of time and digital data collections for historical cinema studies, expanded the boundaries of our research. As could be seen from above, the temporal perspective enabled us to go beyond the limits of Soviet studies, with its binary oppositions, revealing a more complex and dynamic picture of the Soviet film market. While the data set on Moscow film programming might be used by the researchers for further investigation of historical film cultures. Placed in a transnational context, it can be contextualized and scaled up, used to compare different practices of cinema-going and cinema-exhibiting across different countries.

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