



CINEJ CINEMA JOURNAL

ISSN 2159-2411 (PRINT) ISSN 2158-8724 (ONLINE)

Film and Television Genres of the Late Soviet Era

Jeanine Pfahlert

jeaninp@yahoo.com

Volume 7.1 (2018) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2018.202 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

Book Review

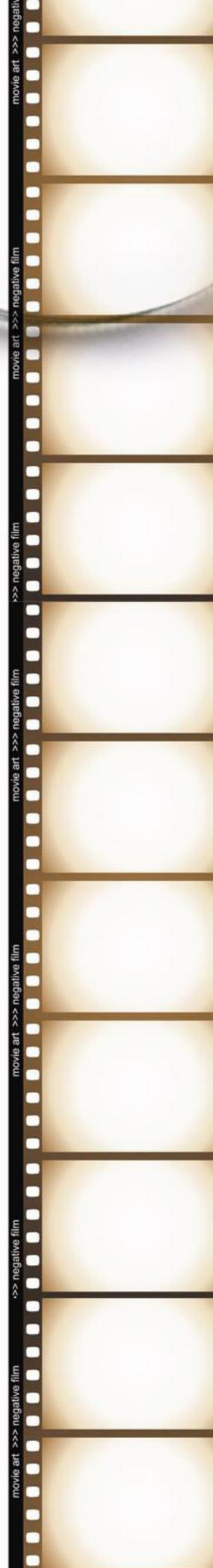
Alexander Prokhorov and Elena Prokhorov, *Film and Television Genres of the Late Soviet Era*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 219pp. ISBN: 9781441134288



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).



Film and Television Genres of the Late Soviet Era

Jeanine Pfahlert

Film and Television Genres of the Late Soviet Era argues that new semantic content led to revisions in cinematic syntax of late Soviet era. In other words, introduction of innovative details challenged the staid Soviet film narrative of the previous era. The term “socialist realist masterplot” refers to this bygone era. The authors explain, “(...) in the late 1960s, new genre formations took shape and replaced the socialist realist syntax” (5). Their argument suggests what might pass as cosmetic alterations of subject, plot, or even costuming to the laity in fact represent serious shifts in psycho-social or political structure not only in film but in the real world also.

The authors name four major kinds of late Soviet film genres. These genres include Prestige Film, Police Procedural, Late-Socialist comedy, and Melodrama. Films examined, respectively for each subgenre, include: War and Peace (Sergei Bondarchuk, 1965-67) and Liberation (Iurii Ozerov, 1968-72), The Investigation is Conducted by Experts (Viacheslav Brovkin et al., 1971-89) and The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed (Stanislav Govorukhin, 1979), notably television series, Irony of Fate (El'dar Riazanov, 1975) and An Ordinary Miracle (Mark Zakharov, 1978), and finally I Want the Floor (Gleb Panfilov, 1976) and Shadows Disappear at Noon (Vladimir Krasnopol'skii and Valerii Uskov, 1971). The rough mean release date for films examined was 1973, ranging roughly from 1965-1979.

Prokhorov and Prokhorov cite the “Hollywood studio system” as methodology (1). This Americana theme crystalizes as authors make reference to auteur theory and the Western film analysis of John Cawelti and Will Wright (2). Based on the book’s interpretation the overt influence of Rick Altman’s genre model exposes American philosophic pragmatism as the root of this Hollywood methodological approach. In other words, and according to the authors’ read on Altman, genre is discursive (3). While the films themselves might represent the analytic units, per

the Hollywood studio system, the populations under study included media critics, the cinema administration, and spectators (7).

This read on Altman clearly explains the authors' ability to believe semantic quality changes syntax. Authors attribute this observation in syntactic change to "Altman's second model" (4). Here authors seem to choose a Narrative Theory approach despite their naming of Auteur Theory, the Frankfurt persuasion, and Slavic Area studies as alternate inquiry paths. This choice narrows the remaining discussion into a "Genre as discourse" format. Flirtation with American Studies then returns. The authors explain the USSR's interest in "(...) adapting Western-style generic models to Soviet ideology" (23). According to the author, the seemingly semantic adaptation to the West eventually rendered a syntactic adaptation reflected in media, social institutions, and everyday life. The authors explain, "As part of the policy of relaxing tension between the two countries, in 1958 the USSR signed an agreement on cultural exchange with the US, which included the exchanges of films between the two countries" (27). The most evident of the exchange manifests itself in the book's use of images of both American actress Audrey Hepburn and Russian actress Lidumila Savelyeva playing Natasha Rostova in each national version of *War and Peace*.

Authors attest that Soviet melodrama adhered to American melodramatic qualities. Perhaps eerie to the viewer would seem the uncanny similarity between the socially out-of-bounds female stars' handling of a professional camera in *I Want the Floor* (1976) and *Stepford Wives* (1972), in front of Saint Basil in Moscow and at the park and around the American town respectively, at their zeniths before each stereotypically hysterical bipolar breakdown. But what similarity exists between the two movies affirms the claims made in this book about how Soviet melodrama reflected American themes.

According to the authors, the syntax of these melodramas typically adhered to one of three models, the daredevil plot (Valerii Chkalov, 1941), the single mother (Tsirk, 1936), or the abused woman (Member of the Government, 1939). Despite the author's hypothesis suggesting semantics can overcome syntax stagnating viewers into a "socialist realist masterplot", the authors claim the following about the characters in these melodramas often associated with the Brezhnev era, "(...) their destiny was the same: to become New Soviet men and women; that is, to give up their individual agency and assume the collective identity of the big family" (150). This statement ironically threatens to overturn the authors' original hypothesis and thus represents the books' major weakness and that is a lack of some internal validity.

Despite this flaw, the authors are able to return to their argument within the discussion. They explain that there were three kinds of melodramas, the television mini-series, the cinematic male melodramas, and the woman's film; *I Want the Floor* being the latter. Generally these kinds of media privilege traditional Russian male and female perspectives, needs, and concerns. Introduced in the mini-series, as exemplified by *Shadows Disappear at Noon*, this new focus develops into a "crisis of patriarchal order" in male melodramas, like *A Lovers' Romance*, and evolve into the woman's subgenre which ultimately valorizes individual agency (173). Thus while they steer away from the socialist realist master-plot, they generally or ultimately capitulate to it no less.

To review, the Prestige genre made visceral use of the Americana motif and the Late Soviet Melodrama flirted with it. Between these two aforementioned genres police shows and comedies steered relatively closer to socialist realism, to the extent of capitulating to modalities associated with circa 1935 Stalinism. For example, the police show used the "re-education" trope (71) while the comedy ironically focused on institutional life and conformity (111-12, 130). Despite

melodramatic flirtation with Americana, however, the Brezhnev Era Late Soviet Melodrama harbored a cult of Soviet personality and myth.

Film Studies students and scholars will want to read the book. It should likewise pique the interest of American Studies aficionados and may likewise for Women's Studies and Semiotics scholars. Finally, the authors likewise serve anyone studying Russian history.

Jeanine Pfahlert
Independent Scholar