

Images of the Native Peoples of Siberia and the Far East in Russian Film

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During the past three decades, we have witnessed a dramatic expansion of the various usages of the term “Orientalism,” coined by Edward Said. As a means of representing race, nationality, and otherness, the notion of Orientalism has already been applied to the examination of Russian relations with the so-called small peoples of the North, most notably by Yuri Slezkine.¹ Although visual media (photography, film, television, etc.) have not yet much attention from researchers, several novels examined in the aforementioned monograph by Slezkine have been adapted to film and are now better known by their film versions available on DVD and are often broadcast on television. There is also a considerable number of films and TV dramas about the peoples of Siberia (the Chukchi, Nenets, and Yakut) based on the original stories, and some of them have been directed by such world-renowned individuals as Grigorii Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, as well as by the most prominent post-Soviet directors—Aleksy Balabanov and Alexander Rogozhkin.

Operating on the assumption that the cinematic image of the indigenous peoples of Siberia and the Far East was and still is a crucial point of reference for speculations on Soviet and Russian identity in Russian film, I examine Alexander Rogozhkin’s film *Transit (Peregon, 2006)* and explore popular Soviet films treating the natives of Siberia that provided material for the intertextual play in *Transit*. I address Soviet feature films made between the 1920s and 1980s, identifying three discrete periods: 1920-40, 1940-60, and 1960-80. I give brief analyses of the strategies of representation in the following distinguished films: *Alone (Odna, 1931)*, *Alitet Leaves for the Hills (Alitet ukhodit v gori, 1949)*, and *The Chief of Chukotka (Nachal’nik Chukotki, 1967)*.

My argument is that the racially and culturally different native peoples of Siberia and the Far East provided contradictory images primarily depicting Russia (or Soviet Russia)’s view of itself, and so inspired the imaginations of those who shot and watched the films. It is significant that these visions were not necessarily constructed along the tropes of colonial domination. The images of pure but deprived, or tricky and enterprising, natives of Asia represented the reflections of the artistic intelligentsia on their own ethical and even existential problems.

***Transit (Peregon, 2006)* by Alexander Rogozhkin**

A recent film dealing with the Chukotka region is Rogozhkin’s *Transit (Peregon, 2006)*. The

¹ Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994).

story is set in the winter of 1942-43 and depicts life at the first military airdrome serving American lend-lease planes from Alaska on their way to the Russian front. In the film, the planes are delivered from Alaska to Chukotka by young American girls, whereas in reality, they were maintained only by Russian pilots, who obtained them in Alaska and went further across Siberia to war. Introducing American heroes (female pilots, male mechanics, and military personnel) enables the creator of the film not only to probe Russian identity against the American “other” and to generate lyrical collisions (flirting between the American girls and the Russian mail pilots), but also to revisit the trope of Soviet-American geopolitical rivalry often visible in Soviet films about Chukotka.

Among more than thirty characters appearing in the 146-minute film are some natives of the Chukotka peninsula. They are not necessarily Chukchi; for example, the ethnic origins of the local canteen waitress, Valentina, are not obvious. The commander of the military airdrome, an alcoholic and bully suffering the aftereffects of a concussion, teases and sexually exploits Valentina, contemptuously calling her “Zyiryan mug,” but this does not mean that she is ethnic Zyiryan (Komi). At the end of the film, Valentina becomes fluent in the Chukchi language and excellent at shooting and hunting (an evocation of ethno-cultural hybridity). The Chukchi truck driver Semyon and seventeen-year-old casual worker Vasili are often presented as a comical duo. Vasili tries to amuse Semyon by telling jokes about Chukchi, which was, in fact, a specific and popular subject of Soviet jokes in the 1970s that parodied Soviet claims of rapid cultural advances made by the formerly backward. The driver Semyon fails to catch the essence of the humor based on a presupposition of Chukchi backwardness and ignorance (“otherness”). The scriptwriter and director of the film, Alexander Rogozhkin, is well aware of the fact that *anecdote* about the naïve and slow-witted Chukchi are more telling of the Russians’ own complexes and sense of self-esteem than of the Chukchi themselves.

The first shot in the film is a bare northern landscape with a Chukchi hunter in national fur dress and traditional sunglasses made of whalebone; only the roar of the airplanes over his head breaks the idyllic scene. In the epilogue, which is set in 1953 (the year of Stalin’s death), we see Valentina with a blue-eyed boy. Valentina’s son Roma was fathered by the bully commander, and then claimed as the child of a Gulag convict and the representative of the old Russian intelligentsia who sympathized with Valentina; finally, we see him adopted as a symbolic ward by the native hunter’s community. The boy and his mother Valentina are members of a Chukchi clan whose native son, Vasili, died in the war. The boy is presumably endowed with the best human qualities among the wise Chukchi hunters. In this way, the film addresses the basic Soviet myth of the family with the patronizing Russian “Big Brother.” In Rogozhkin’s film, the Chukchi are teachers and instructors to a Caucasian-looking boy, Roma, subverting the usual representation of Chukchi children as the diligent pupils of blue-eyed teachers from the mainland.

We should not neglect to mention the hint that the boy’s biological father, who raped and humiliated Valentina, was shot dead with her hunting rifle. As the film is overcrowded with heroes, not much is told about the results of the investigation, but we are supposed to guess that it was the submissive and modest Valentina who killed her torturer. It is quite obvious that the director aimed

to create an image contrasting with the Orientalistic “native victim of the male colonial conqueror.” Valentina is the same type of heroine as the Sami reindeer herds woman Anni from another of Rogozhkin’s films, *Cuckoo* (*Kukushka*, 2002). In 1944, when the war is nearing its end, the Sami widow Anni, living alone in the tundra region of Finland, rescues two soldiers, one Russian, the other Finnish. Anni somehow makes them both come along to her tiny hut without understanding a word, and they leave her with two blue-eyed boys. In *Transit*, Rogozhkin continues to challenge stereotypes about national character and cultural differences as he did in his previous films.

One of the most vivid and versatile characters in the film *Transit* is the young Chukchi Vasilii. Vasilii is cast in a very different mold from his predecessors in Soviet film even in his appearance. He is tiny and skinny, somewhat childlike even for his seventeen years of age, whereas the Asian characters in Soviet and Russian films have been tall and handsome. The Chukchi and Nenets were often represented by professional actors with Kazakh or Buryat origins, or even by Koreans and Chinese. The smart and ingenious Vasilii engages in trade with the Americans for the bullets that his family use for hunting, and progresses in learning English. One day, with the assistance of the American technical personnel, he even goes to Alaska packed in a cargo box—for the sole reason that he is curious about the other land. Vasilii is lazy and roguish, practical and provident, keen on befriending Americans and cheating the authorities—he is everything but the conventional image of a good young Communist Party League (Komsomol) member or young native seeking Russian and Soviet guidance. Yet his heroic death as a military pilot at war makes him a full-fledged member of the big Soviet family.

Like many other post-Soviet films keen on intertextuality, *Transit* subverts some of the Soviet myths constructed through official and popular culture. In fact, a Chukchi youth was represented as a Soviet pilot as early as 1941, in the film *Romantics* (*Romantiki*) by M. Donskoi, which was intended to illustrate the successful leap from primitivism to modern technology. The image of the airplane is crucial for the ideas of overcoming spatial distance, breaking the isolation of nomadic tribes, and controlling and cultivating national space. The motif of rushing toward adventure in a cargo box is also used in the popular Soviet film *Seven Brave Men* (*Semero smelykh*, 1936), in which a young Komsomol member wanting to join an Arctic expedition steals into the cargo hold.

It might be argued that Vasilii in the post-Soviet film *Transit* embodies the combination of the archetypal status of “heroic Soviet pilot,” one of “Stalin’s hawks,” and the characteristics of the enterprising trader, rarely visible in Soviet novels and film except in narratives of “liberating the oppressed nomadic peoples from the yoke of colonialism,” wherein the fur trade and bartering constitute the basis of the local economy. V. Pudovkin’s world-renowned film *Storm over Asia* (*Potomok Chingis-Khana*, 1928) presents an impressive scene at a British trading post in which a Mongol hunter is given scant pay for a precious fox fur and his protest triggers a “storm over Asia.” This scene was reproduced in Soviet films over and over again. As Soviet authorities and Marxist theorists throughout the 1930s changed their attitudes toward primitive societies, which were previously cherished for their classlessness and communality, the figure of the class enemy and exploiter of native origins emerged. In reality, this meant that the native “kulaks” were to be

“liquidated as a class” in the very same way as all the “kulaks” in Russian villages so that, in literature and film, the exploiter of natives came to don the colorful mask of “the villain.” The film *Alitet Leaves for the Hills* (*Alitet ukhodit v gory*, 1949) by Mark Donskoi presents the image of the Chukchi Alitet conducting business with American traders in the 1920s and calling himself “the big trade man” (*bol’shoi torgovyi chelovek*). Leaving aside the strictly negative interpretation of this image in Soviet film, I suggest that it may have acted as an indirect influence on the post-Soviet image of the business-oriented Chukchi Vasilii in the 2006 film *Transit*.

Let us move on to an exploration of some of the key images of interaction with “the native peoples of Siberia and the Far East” produced by Soviet and Russian cinema.

Surveying the Utopian Space—Cinema’s Ethnographical Quest, 1920-40

The very first Russian film with images of northern nomadic peoples was the aptly named *Revolutionary* (*Revoliutsioner*, 1918), directed by Yakov Protazanov. The image of a political convict in Siberia alongside an Asiatic man in loose fur overalls with his dog sledges appeared for the first time on screen soon after the revolution. In this early silent film, the revolutionary and the native man do not communicate at all; the role of the native is confined to that of provider of transportation. Ten years passed before the new Soviet film industry embraced the Communist vision of revolutionaries coming from the center and began to shoot films about the Yakut, Gilyak, Nenets, and Chukchi.

During the first Five-Year Plan (1928-32), industrialization and collectivization fundamentally altered the national space. Cinema was Lenin’s “most important of all arts” in communicating with an illiterate population and creating a single ideological space. Moreover, the new cinematic industry itself was organized as a network of communication. Along with maintaining the great number of mobile projectors with which groups of propagandists travelled in each region, filmmakers were urged to travel across the territory and explore its most distant parts in order to “preserve” the present and provide a means of involving the periphery in the construction of socialism.

Of course, the cinematic images of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic North and the Far East were also interrelated with practices in international cinema. For example, such innovative documentary films as *Nanook of the North* (1922) by Robert Flaherty, an ethnographic film about an Eskimo family’s struggle for survival, were screened in the USSR and made a considerable impact on the professional moviemakers of the 1920s. However, in the USSR it was believed that Soviet cinema after the revolution had a unique task because the country was the only place in the world where many nationalities shared a position of total equality. This attests to the specificity of regionally based local filmmaking organizations, such as the East Siberian Studio, that were established in the early 1920s. The East Siberian Studio even released a feature film about the life of the Tungus (Evenk) people shot on location in a village near Turukhansk, but unfortunately, the

film (*Tungus s Khenichara*, 1929) did not survive.²

In 1928, the joint-stock company Vostokkino (Cinema East) was founded. Its aim was to produce feature and documentary films “correctly representing the revolutionary struggle and socialist construction among the peoples of the Soviet East” and “making, through Vostokkino, connections between the working people of the Soviet and foreign East.”³ Vostokkino did not last for long (1928-35), but no fewer than twenty-five full-length films were released during this period, the most prominent being the documentary *Turksib* by V. Turin. Several feature films were shot about the native peoples of Siberia and the Far East, for example *The Blue Mink* (*Goluboi pesets*, 1930) about Komi and Nenets reindeer herders and trappers, and *Igdenbu* (1930) about the Goldi tribe in the Far East. The former is a narrative about exploitation on the part of fur traders, and the latter combines the same motif with melodrama: the main hero’s wife taken by a rich tribesman as compensation for a debt is happily returned with the help of Red Army soldiers. Very similar stories were filmed by the Leningrad studio Sovkino (renamed Soyuzkino in 1930), which was considered to be in closer proximity to the tundra location. To mention just a few such films (not all of them survive), *Habu* (1928) is based on a novel of Vsevolod Ivanov about local railroad construction in the Siberian taiga, which was meant to help incorporate the Tungus into the Soviet economical structure. *Kaan-Kerede* (1929) dealt instead with air transportation: the Soviet pilots not only bring medicine to the local people of Altai, but also rescue the Americans whose plane has crashed nearby.

The only feature film bearing the traits of the genre mentioned above available today is *Alone* (*Odna*, 1931), made by the famous Leningrad tandem of film directors Grigorii Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, who also wrote the script. Like many novels and movies of the 1930s, the film was claimed to be based on real-life events as documented by a newspaper article—the story of the expedition to rescue a Russian female teacher suffering frostbite in the northern parts of the Karelia region, where she was sent to teach at the local school. The fact that the airplane was sent to save a school teacher was used as propaganda about how greatly the center looked after the periphery and how much the country cared about each individual citizen. Some authors mention that the rescue expedition was filmed by the documentary cameraman who was also on board.⁴ Though the accident took place in Karelia (the town of Pudozh), which was not very far from Leningrad and often used as the set for films about Siberia, Chukotka, and the Far East, Kozintsev and Trauberg chose to go on location to Altai (the villages of Kuyegan and Nijnii Onos).⁵ Though

² *Ватолин В.А.* Голливуд за Каменкой. Очерки зарождения и становления производства фильмов в Сибири // Киноведческие записки. 2005. № 74 .

³ *Вишневский В., Михайлов П. и др.* Летопись российского кино: 1863-1929. М.: Материк, 2004.

⁴ *Бутовский Я.* Андрей Москвин, кинооператор. Спб., 2000. С. 119-120.

⁵ The Altai Republic borders Mongolia to the south and contains most of the Altai mountains. The Altaians, now numbering about forty-five thousand, are a Turkic-speaking people with Mongolian ancestry. Some are nomadic herders and hunters, but most have settled on farms. In 1756, the Altaians came under Russian sovereignty. Between 1922 and 1948, the territory was called the Oirat or Oiroi Autonomous Region. It was renamed Gorno-Altai in 1948, and was given republic status in 1991.

both directors were only in their early thirties, they were already founders of the FEKS⁶ cinema school, having just returned from Paris where they shot their film about the days of the Paris Commune, *New Babylon* (*Novyi Vavilon*, 1929). They recollected later that it was their own wish to go deep into the East after their expedition to the West.⁷ They cast their favorite, Elena Kuzmina (who also starred in *New Babylon*) in the role of the teacher, and also other FEKS actors in minor roles, for example Sergei Gerasimov (very soon to become a famous film director himself) in the role of the Russian representative of the local authorities, the head of the village soviet. The local people of Altai were scouted on location and literally played themselves.

The film *Alone* was experimental in its usage of soundtrack, talkie features having been common practice in the USA and Europe but not yet developed in the USSR. The actors do not speak in the film (subtitles are used instead), but the sound track—an original opus by Dmitrii Shostakovich—and background sounds are used extensively. The film strikes a contrast between the first twenty minutes, in which the heroine and her betrothed are living together in Leningrad, and the following sixty minutes set in the Altai village where the heroine, a fresh graduate from the teachers' college, has been sent to work. The music of Dmitrii Shostakovich and the superb camera work of Andrei Moskvin⁸ add to the film's reputation as a work of art.

Space considerations oblige me to leave out some interesting details concerning the representation of the basic conflict between the personal and private interests of the young female teacher (a comfortable life in a big city, plans for marriage) and the need of the state to politically educate and enlighten every corner of the vast and diverse Soviet territory. Here, I am mostly interested in the representation of the Altai people in the film, which approaches ethnographic in its methods. The majority of them are women and children, the pupils of the main heroine. Small naked children making their first steps near the primitive conical *yurta* tents and women tenderly watching them are cut with pastoral scenes of animals with their young, which is a very commonplace symbol of the life of “the children of nature.” The interior of the Altaic home is shown during the height of a shamanistic ritual performed to cure the sick. New sound-recording technology used in the film lets us not only see but also hear the ritual. A mummified horse stretched on a high pole and decorated with ribbons and a bell serves as a visual symbol of barbarity, savagery, backwardness, and mystic unintelligibility. Only from the memoirs of the film expedition members can we learn that the horse skin called *tailga* marked the place of shamanistic ritual of the Altai people, while the horse was killed as an offering to the spirits. The actress Kuzmina writes in her book how the horse mummy puzzled and frightened them at first sight.⁹

We can see the Altai people through the gaze of the camera, which is exclusively the gaze of

⁶ FEKS (the Factory of the Eccentric Actor) was a formalism-oriented group of young cinematographers composed of G. Kozintsev, L. Trauberg, S. Yutkevich, the cameraman A. Moskvin, and the pupils of their acting school (Y. Zheimo, E. Kuzmina, S. Filippov, and others). The silent films produced by FEKS were *Pokhozhdeniia Oktiabriny*, 1925; *Chertovo koleso*, 1926; *Shinel'*, 1926; *SVD*, 1927; *Novyi Vavilon*, 1929; and *Odna*, 1931. The film *Odna* marked a shift towards talking film and the esthetics of socialist realism.

⁷ Зоркая Н.М. «Одна» на перекрестках // Киноведческие записки. 2005. № 74. С. 154–155.

⁸ A. Moskvin (1901-1961) was the cameraman for all the films directed by G. Kozintsev and worked with S. Eisenstein as a chief cameraman for *Ivan Groznyi*.

⁹ Кузьмина Е. О том, что помню. М., 1976. С.146.

the young teacher and which merges with the gaze of the film's creators. To them, the local people seem uncultivated and in urgent need of schooling; consequently, one of the major concerns is the content of their education. In Leningrad, the young teacher dreams of telling her pupils about "the miracles of technology," but once in the Altai village, she understands that her pupils need much more. The theme of class struggle and village collectivization and its enemies, the "kulaks," is also present in the film, which is no surprise considering its release date of 1931.

The kulak, whose part was performed by a Chinese trader scouted at one of the market places in Leningrad (the only Asian performer not cast on location but coming with the group), exploits children as shepherds and prevents them from going to school. He also kills his animals for meat so as not to give them to the collective farm. The teacher, who initially thinks that she has nothing to do with the sheep and should not bother with the herdsman economy, feels sorry for the children and comes to the pasture to give her classes (in fact, we see her singing revolutionary songs with the children and dancing with them to make them move and keep warm). The teacher also gives the children her best lesson by trying to intervene in the kulak's schemes and asking for advice from the regional authorities, but as there is no other provider of transportation other than the kulak, he takes the opportunity to carry the teacher to the wrong place, leaving her alone to die in the cold. Though she survives, she is terribly frostbitten. The sixth part of the film with scenes of the woman dying alone in the boundless desert of ice was lost during the war (1942). In the last scenes, we see the bedridden teacher on the verge of death among her loving pupils and the airplane taking her to the mainland hospital, the subtitles promising: "I'll be back."

It is noteworthy how the film addresses geographical space, ethnicity, and gender. The Leningrad locus and the Altai village are literally different worlds, and once in Altai, the teacher never recalls her betrothed in Leningrad. The local space is controlled by the kulak, the elderly male who knows the roads and owns the means of transportation (horses). Thus, the image of the female teacher is different from the familiar images of colonial voyagers, who are usually male. But the central authorities are more powerful than the kulak, though they are not yet embodied in portraits of Lenin or speeches by Stalin in newspapers, as we can see in later films. In *Alone*, the radio is the entity that broadcasts the orders of the center and condemns those not willing to go to the periphery. So the teacher goes, leaving her betrothed. As the representative of the center, the young non-native female is more powerful than the elderly native male, the kulak. What about native females? The camera singles out one beautiful Altai woman who is suspicious at first, but later, seeing how good the Russian teacher is to the children and how much she cares about the needs of the community, is inspired to become socially active herself. She is elected by the community to become the head of the village soviet, which is a typical narrative of the socialist realistic novel. The problem with the film is that the village already has its soviet headed by a Russian man (the only Russian other than his wife and the teacher, and the only man other than the kulak).

The Russian head of the soviet shows no interest in the education of the local children and does not support the teacher in her conflict with the kulak, which means that he has not properly understood the message from the center. On the contrary, the Russian head of the village soviet is

shown in the film to be just as backward as the natives, but in his own way. His home is an epitome of “the old mode of life” of the Russian peasantry. We see the husband snoring on the stove and his wife sitting by the cradle singing a plaintive lullaby. The tableau is controversial—especially when seen today—and evokes images of Russian peasants ravaged by collectivization when considered alongside the Russian folksong about poor hungry orphans performed by Maria Babanova, the theater actress famous for her beautiful voice. Was the creators’ critical approach aimed at the old patriarchal ways of life, or was it a denunciation of the nationalistic disposition to place the Russian peasant higher than the Altai herdsman in the cultural hierarchy? I read the scene as a formalistic counterbalance to the discriminatory images of local culture presented in the film, but more important than this is the fact that the picture is open to different interpretations. The film was released on the threshold of a new stage in the development of socialism in the USSR; in the terminology of Vladimir Paperny, it was the end of “Culture One” and the beginning of “Culture Two.”

Socialist Realist Cinema

The next film by G. Kozintsev and L. Trauberg was *The Youth of Maxim* (*Yunost' Maksima*, 1934), which became the first trilogy about a factory boy who became a real Bolshevik and even a Communist leader. This archetypal socialist realist saga was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1941. Socialist realist films about the peoples of Siberia and the Far East were not as quick to appear as novels about nomads coming to a full realization of revolutionary truth (“consciousness”). One of the first was by the leading socialist realist writer Aleksandr Fadeev, *The Last of the Udege* (*Poslednii iz Udege*). Fadeev published in installments (1929-1940) a novel about a pure and honest Udege man of the forest who follows the Bolsheviks and decides to abandon the old ways and build a better future for his people (the novel was never finished). Novels and stories of this type were numerous but only a few of them were filmed, mostly in the 1940-60s, or even later, in the 1980s, when Soviet official culture was undergoing a deep crisis.¹⁰ In this section, I examine Mark Donskoi’s film *Alitet Leaves for the Hills* (*Alitet ukhodit v gory*, 1949) based on T. Z. Semushkin’s novel about Chukotka, and also compare it to *Romantics* (*Romantiki*, 1941), another film by Donskoi also based on a Semushkin novel. First, however, it will be helpful to survey images of the indigenous peoples of Siberia and the Far East in the films of 1935-57, which were not central to the narration but often used as recognizable markers of the Siberian and Far Eastern locus.

Sergei Gerasimov, who played the role of the incapable soviet head in *Alone*, began his career as a film director in the 1930s. In his immensely popular films *Seven Brave Men* (*Semero smelykh*, 1936) and *Komsomolsk* (1939), which follow respectively the Arctic expedition of young Komsomol members and the construction of the frontier city Komsomolsk on the banks of the

¹⁰ The TV serial *White Shaman* (*Belyi Shaman*, 1982), based on the novel by Nikolai Shundik and set in Chukotka of the 1920s, and *The Great Samoed* (*Velikii Samoed*, 1981), the biographical film about the Nenets artist Tiko Vilka, are good examples.

Amur River on the eastern border, he continued to examine the themes of conquest of real space and the elements and the construction of a new society in the periphery. In the two films mentioned above, Gerasimov also depicts indigenous peoples, whereas many films of the same genre and period represent Siberia under socialist reconstruction as a completely uninhabited place waiting for the “new people” to come.

In *Seven Brave Men*, a sick local Chukchi in need of medical aid makes a timely appearance to prove the bravery and selflessness of the members of the Arctic expedition, partly to justify the need for such expeditions. In *Komsomolsk*, an unidentified native tribe helps to unmask the Russian spy collaborating with the Japanese military from the opposite side of the Amur River. Both motifs are characteristic of cinema in the 1930s, and all the films without exception show the native people as loyal to and supportive of the Soviet authorities. As many native peoples of Siberia and the Far East live near the borders of the USSR, their potential role as enemies, spies, and mediators between conspirators on both sides of the border is often used to heighten tension in the plot, but in contrast to some kulaks and shamans in the literary works of the same period, in the films, they never become spies or terrorists.¹¹ One possible explanation for this phenomenon lies in strong antiracist concerns.

In her book about the socialist realist novel, Katerina Clark writes about its structure, which involves an encounter between a character who is well-intentioned but not ideologically “conscious” and a mentor figure who can direct the character.¹² This model was widely used in socialist realist novels about native peoples’ path to socialist “consciousness.” Yuri Slezkine defines them as the “the long journey” type and summarizes the novels of A. Koptelov, M. Osharov, R. Fraerman, T. Semushkin, and many others as follows:

The master plot of socialist realism was thus the ultimate story of conquered backwardness, and as far as many iconographers were concerned, the greater the backwardness, the sharper the focus. Indians, savages, children of nature, and all sorts of former aliens emerged from the wilderness to stand beside the workers and peasants. The “wandering” kind was particularly appropriate: the most spontaneous, immature, and artless dwellers in the Russian imagination, they were the quintessential young proletarians—nomads in search of homes. They were also the closest one could get to primitive communism, which meant that their path to scientific communism would be particularly well rounded, truly dialectical, and universal in its significance.¹³

Tikhon Semushkin’s novel *Alitet Leaves for the Hills* (*Alitet ukhodit v gory*, 1949), set in the 1920s, constitutes a variation of “the long journey” type skillfully adapted for the needs of the political moment of the escalating Cold War and the 1948-49 Communist Party resolutions about the necessity to study “the ethnic peculiarities of given peoples” and move away from “abstract

¹¹ See *Гор Г.* Большие пихтовые леса. Л.: Советский писатель, 1968; *Крамм И.* Моя земля. Колымские рассказы. М.: Советский писатель, 1938.

¹² Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp.15-16.

¹³ Yuri Slezkine, *Ibid.* p. 292.

sociology.”¹⁴ This encouraged T. Semushkin to add color to the novel in the form of exotic and detailed descriptions of Chukchi everyday life and rituals, the titillating peculiarities of group marriage and rites of passage, and specific “primitive” logic and language patterns. The colonial attitudes of American traders are contrasted with the selflessness of the Soviet heroes, who are cast as wise and generous benefactors of Chukotka in the best populist tradition. In the novel, these are the Ukrainian Los, a Red partisan in the past and Communist functionary at present, and the Russian ethnographer Zhukov, who has just graduated from university.

The film story evinces significant changes as compared with the book. The long descriptions of the “savage” ways of the Chukchi—for example, group marriage—are cut, as are details of socialist reorganization, which take many pages in the novel. In the end, we simply see the arrival of a ship and the unloading of many goods (motorboats, school desks, etc.) The role of the party functionary Los is reduced to pure proselytizing, and the ethnographer is used as a translator. Los tells the Chukchi about Lenin, reads Stalin’s newspaper article on national policy to the ethnographer Zhukov, and cautions the American trader against using terms like “savage.” He is also busy issuing all sorts of certificates: the certificate for the newly appointed head of the tribe soviet, and marriage certificates for the young couple of Chukchi. The Soviet representative also gently patronizes a Chukchi boy during a walrus hunt, taking his harpoon and giving him a gun instead. The symbolic meaning of these episodes is quite clear—the Chukchi need Lenin, the new gun, and the legislative status to be incorporated into the state structure.

Compared to the film *Romantics*, shot eight years earlier by the same director and based on a script by the same novelist, *Alitet* is very different. *Romantics* is a film about the optimism of teachers and doctors who go to Chukotka in 1925 and persuade the Chukchi to change their way of life, to send their children to boarding school, and to consult the doctor, not the shaman. They cope with their task and, coming to Chukotka fifteen years later, are happy to see that their native pupils have become teachers and pilots.

In *Alitet*, culture is not at stake; nature is celebrated instead. The roles of the Chukchi characters are performed in *Alitet* by actors of Kazakh and Central Asian origin. The film is very beautifully shot by the cameraman Sergei Urusevskii, one of the most outstanding and innovative cameramen in the USSR of the 1950s-60s. The Chukchi in the film are beautiful people with innately beautiful hearts. The film also makes full use of romantic imagery more evocative of Jack London than Semushkin. The screen impresses with its arctic scenery, numerous episodes of hunting and chasing, dynamic fights (a man fights a wolf, two naked Chukchi men wrestle for a woman). As a contrast to the beauty and grandeur of nature and the outdoors, the American tradesman and his son, who secretly come from the USA to survey the natural resources of Siberia, are always shot in dark interiors. The face of the old trader Charlie is distorted by an artificially big nose, which also serves as a contrast to the beautiful Chukchi faces. The father and son rudely quarrel over money at a birthday feast, and their fight, which is presented as disgusting,

¹⁴ On the new tendencies in Soviet ethnography after the Great Patriotic War, see: Ibid. p. 309-310. In 1950, when Stalin published his “Marxism and Problems of Linguistics,” ethnic issues became especially urgent.

undermines the notion of “Western culture” as the heroes are eating a beautiful birthday cake. It should be mentioned that in *Romantics*, the boarding school is provisioned with beautiful Western-style furniture and tableware, and Chukchi children just taken from their tents are supposed to eat with knives and forks. In 1949, this all changed and good table manners could be interpreted as “the worship of Western ways.”

The Chukchi Alitet, son of the shaman whom the American tradesman Charlie uses as an intermediary in his commercial deals with the Chukchi and Koriak people, worships Charlie and his “big American head,” which in itself is a marker of his defectiveness. The film turns out to be rather unusual in its focus on the antihero Alitet. Alitet is depicted in all the vividness of his savage strength, as cunning, selfish, and voluptuous yet comical. The role was performed by Lev Sverdlin, who played many Asians during his career (Uzbek, Mongol, Turk, Chinese, and even Chukchi in *Romantiki*). The closest character to Alitet in cinema of this period is that of the Japanese colonel Usijima in the film *Volochaevka Days (Volochaevskie dni, 1937)*, which was the first Soviet film aiming to construct an image of an enemy having to do not only with class but also with ethnicity. Sverdlin plays his Asian heroes in such a way that the image is never fully realistic and the skillful actor wearing a mask is visible along with the character he is playing. Strangely enough, Sverdlin’s Chukchi Alitet resonates with the character of Hodzha Nasreddin, the folkloric hero trickster in Turkey and other Islamic countries, who became the central character in the immensely popular Soviet film *Nasreddin in Bukhara (Nasreddin v Bukhare, 1943)*, also starring Sverdlin. It is fair enough to suggest that Alitet in the film wears not only the mask of a comical villain, but also that of a folkloric trickster.

Although, prompted by the Americans, Alitet schemes against the Soviet newcomers and even tries to do away with them by sending them the wrong way, they survive, even after their sledges fall from the precipice. So, Alitet “leaves for the hills” and the Americans go home.

It is a well-known fact that the film was not approved by Stalin in its original version and was significantly reedited according to the complaints of the authorities; however, the details are worthy of especial research that is beyond the scope of this article. After *Alitet*, the film director M. Donskoi, who was highly praised in the USA for his war film *Rainbow (Raduga, 1944)* and recognized as the founder of neorealist cinema in Italy, was “exiled” from Moscow to the Kiev Film Studio.

It is no surprise that actualization of a political picture dealing with “ethnic peculiarities” and addressing Soviet-American geopolitical rivalry was entrusted to Donskoi, who began his successful cinema career with a film about the Mari people of the Volga region (*Song of Happiness [Pesnia o schast’e]*, 1934) and had already made a film about the Chukchi in 1941 (*Romantiki*). It should be understood, however, that it was a very difficult task to represent “the other” at the time of the “anti-cosmopolitan” campaign, which was in fact anti-Semitic.

In the films of the 1950s dealing with the present, the taiga and the tundra are represented as already “conquered,” and nature is represented as tamed; the hunters have been replaced by settled farmers breeding mink, fox, or other animals. The native people are shown as completely assimilated and often having high social status, as in *Incident in the Taiga (Sluchai v taige, 1953)*,

where we see a native forestry officer and a young female zoologist, who is a university graduate.

The Thaw and the Stagnation

The second half of the 1950s saw dramatic changes in all spheres of life in the USSR. After Stalin's death and his denunciation in Khrushchev's famous speech of 1956, cultural policy became much more liberal and the number of films produced grew every year. In 1961, Arseniev's *Dersu Uzala* was filmed, and though it was released by a studio producing cultural films, the picture was widely shown and proved successful with its audiences.¹⁵ The young film directors took advantage of the adventure genre and romantic love stories for which Siberia was often suited as the best location. The film version of R. Fraerman's novel *The Wild Dog Dingo*, or *The Story of the First Love* (*Dikaia sobaka Dingo*, 1962), was the first to make a romantic hero of a native boy, fifteen-year-old Nenets Filka, the faithful knight of his Russian classmate Tanya.¹⁶

Even basic myths about the revolution and the civil war were reinterpreted. Very often, the new generation of cinematographers set their films in the periphery and concentrated on young, inexperienced heroes. One such film was *The Chief of Chukotka* (*Nachal'nik Chukotki*, 1967), the debut film of scriptwriter Vladimir Valutskii and director Vitalii Melnikov. They jointly wrote the script, which was a parody of the "long journey" genre. According to its code, the first Soviet representative comes to Chukotka in 1922. He begins with a speech about big cities, factories, and railway roads soon to be seen, and then turns to more practical needs, distributing factory goods among the starving natives that originally belonged to an American trader. Paying the former Russian official for lessons in the basics of foreign trade, the new "chief of Chukotka," with the help of a native Russian-speaking youth, manages to earn a profit for the benefit of the natives and the Soviet state. With a million dollars in his stocking, he goes to Petrograd via the USA to deliver the money. In Petrograd, he is robbed by a street boy, and after the fortuitous handing in of his million (which, to his great disappointment, is not intended by the state officials for the needs of the Chukchi), again makes his way towards Chukotka.

The hero of the film turns out to be a "substitute" for the wise and strong-willed Communist character. A boy of nineteen years who just has accompanied the first official representative of the Soviet authorities to Chukotka, he unexpectedly finds himself in the position of "the chief of Chukotka" because the true commissioner dies on the way to his destination. The image of the "false chief of Chukotka" enables the authors to tell the story of building a new life for the Chukchi with irony and humor, and it is easy to guess that, in a very similar vein, the "new life" will pose problems for all destined to try it. The creators of the film poke fun at Soviet dogmas and slogans, whose total absurdity becomes apparent in the snows of Chukotka. The new chief of Chukotka seems exotic and funny to the old Russian official, the natives, and the American trader,

¹⁵ This version of *Dersu Uzala* was directed by the documentalist A. Babayan at Moskovskaia Studiia Nauchno Populiarnykh Filmov, and continued to circulate even after A. Kurosawa's famous *Dersu Uzala* was released in 1975. Babayan's version has its fans up to the present day.

¹⁶ *Dikaya sobaka Dingo* released by the studio Lenfilm was directed by Yurii Karasik.

whereas usually it was the opposite way round. The familiar image of a Communist proselytizing among the oppressed peoples of Asia was thus totally revised.

In his latest film, the director Melnikov again projects the image of a Siberian native, the Ostyak¹⁷ trapper Stepan. The film *Agitation Brigade "Strike the Enemy!"* (*Agitbrigada 'Bei Vraga!'*, 2007) tells the story of a group of "cultural workers" with a movie projector who travel by boat down the Ob River during the war (1943). An encounter with the group ends tragically for the Ostyak hunter because he is a deserter (he does not see any reason for himself to be at war). A KGB officer shoots the hunter in cold blood in the taiga so as not to bother himself with an investigation.

The Thaw period lasted until the end of the 1960s and gave way to "the stagnant 1970s," which often meant the reverse of the decrepit Stalinist visions of the previous decade. Many themes were desperately lost for cinema because they were banned from production plans. The primary medium for visual representations of northern and Far Eastern minorities switched to the folkloric fantasy genre of literary sources as provided by books of native writers such as Yurii Rytkheu. Three of Rytkheu's novels were adapted to film before perestroika, not for cinema but for television: *The Most Beautiful Ships* (*Samye krasivye korabli*, 1973), *The Footprints of the Glutton* (*Sled rosomakhi*, 1978), and *When the Whales Leave* (*Kogda ukhodyat kity*, 1981). The last of the three is a film version of a legend about two lovers with elements of ballet. One more of Y. Rytkheu's novels was staged for TV soon after perestroika: *The Dream at the Beginning of the Fog* (*Son v nachale tumana*, 1994). This film is notable because it projects the cultural dilemma of a frostbitten American left by his mates among the Chukchi and unable to reject his new American/Chukchi identity even when there is a chance for him to return to the USA.

The most innovative and promising project with images of native peoples (Yakut) was undertaken in 2000 by director Aleksey Balabanov, but the tragic death of the lead actress Tuyara Svinoboeva prevented its completion. The story, adapted from a novel by V. Serashevsky, a Polish writer of the nineteenth century and a former Siberian convict, centers on the life of a tiny colony of lepers in the isolated Yakut taiga. All the actors performed using the Yakut language, and there were no Russian heroes at all. A year later, the director edited the existing footage and provided narration for the missing scenes, which now stands as a complete film, *River* (*Reka*, 2002).

Conclusion

Images of the native peoples of Siberia and the Far East who were colonized by the Russian Empire and conceptualized for centuries as an extreme case of backwardness (barbaric and beastly or pure and innocent) served as convenient material for Soviet visual discourse on culture and nature, progress and retardation, ethnicity and class, and colonial liberation and global domination. In the silent films made before 1935, the panorama of numerous native peoples living on the periphery totally unknown to the majority of the population helped to construct the new

¹⁷ The Ostyak (Khanti) live in the territory of Khanti-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, historically known as Yugra.

geographical space and to legitimize socialist reorganization as beneficial for the most deprived. In the artistic imagination of such outstanding directors as G. Kozintsev and L. Trauberg or M. Donskoi, even the paradigm of socialist realist plot structure was operative for the production of controversial and provocative imagery, which enabled the cinema of the Thaw and the post-Soviet period to make use of intertextual play.