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The Ban of the Imperial Theatres: Dance and Film in Prerevolutionary Russia

Sept. 3, 2013 - June 12, 2014

Moscow, Russia

Research Abstract

This study has explored state politics in the arts in prerevolutionary Russia by shedding light on the relationship between dance and cinema before 1917. Shortly after the birth of the cinema, the Administration of the Imperial Theatres issued a decree which banned all artists working within the confines of these theatres to participate in the cinema in any way. These artists included dramatic actors, opera singers and ballet dancers. The Administration considered the cinema to be a low brow art form that should be reserved for the poor and illiterate. They thought it to be a disgrace that Imperial artists, who were considered to be employees of the Czar, would taint their image by appearing on the screen. Although Czar Nicolas II and his family were professionally filmed, he felt that the cinema was nothing more than an intriguing novelty that had the potential to spoil the intellect of the masses.

Despite the strictness of the decree, dance appeared on screen to a significant degree during the prerevolutionary years as is shown by the numerous advertisements printed in film journals of the period such as *Cine-fono* and *Screen*. Dance films were advertised consistently in these journals from 1911-1917, an observation which leads to the speculation that they were popular with audiences.

Research Goals

My project has explored the ways in which the Russian cinema industry was able to screen dance despite the administration's decree. The dance figures about whom I planned to gather further information included Imperial ballet dancers such as Alexander Shiryaev and Vera Karalli. These Imperial artists were able to find ways to be filmed despite the ban. The different contexts in which these dancers were filmed point to the creativity and power that they needed to exercise against the administration.

It was my intent that this study would call attention to the State's control of the arts in prerevolutionary Russia. While much scholarship has been done on the relationship between the State and art during Soviet times, this relationship during the prerevolutionary years has been largely neglected. The State not only issued an official opinion on the cinema as an art form, but also controlled the artistic paths of actors, opera singers and dancers. While the ban was official, there was no indication that the State attempted to imprison or persecute artists who attempted to defy the decree. Instead, the State chose to exercise its power by forbidding disobedient artists to continue their work in the theatre.

The ban forced dancers to find creative ways to become involved in the cinema, and the prerevolutionary period produced a significant number of both fiction and non-fiction dance films which have the potential to serve as valuable documents for present day dance historians. Important observations about dancing style and the evolution of technique can be made by viewing these films. Film historians would likewise be able to benefit from my study by furthering their knowledge about the relationship between the State and the cinema and the contribution of ballet dancers, such as Vera Karalli, to the notion of film stardom during the

prerevolutionary years. My objective in carrying out this project was to build on my previous research in order to help fill in the gaps of existing scholarship on prerevolutionary Russian cinema which largely omits the study of dancers who appeared in the medium. The relationship of these dancers to the State and their influence on the growth of stardom are significant and worthy of attention.

Research Activities

During the first half of my grant period in Moscow I have conducted research at the Russian State Library of Art and the Central Academic Library on Strastnoy Boulevard. At these two institutions I gathered information from the following journals: "Женское дело" (1912-1914), "Мир женщин" (1913-1915), "Женская жизнь" (1914-1915), "Новейшие моды" (1915), "Дамский мир" (1915-1917), "Журнал для женщин" (1914-1916), "Вестник моды" (1916), "Пчелка" (1918), "Известия совета императорского общества" (1915), "Кинотеатр и жизнь" 1913, "Театр и кино" (1915-1919) и "Театр М." (1907-1919). The journals found on this list pertain to fashion, theatre, ballet, film and the Imperial Administration. A sound understanding of the relationship between these various topics is necessary when exploring the connections between ballet and Russian silent cinema. The artists who are the central figures of my dissertation appeared in these fashion, theatre and film journals, however their position in Russian culture of the 1910s was articulated in diverse ways depending on the focus of the publication. Therefore, the opportunity to examine this wide array of journals has allowed me to avoid viewing these figures in a narrow manner.

I have gathered a substantial amount of significant information that will be useful when making conclusions about the main topics of my project. These central points include the birth of

Russian film stardom, the New Woman of the 1910s, and the relationship between the cinema, theatre and fashion industries. A significant part of my research up to this point has been devoted to a close analysis of each issue of the "Teatp M.," a daily theatre journal which paid close attention to ballet and by 1913 began including segments on the cinema. Due to my analysis of this journal I have been able to reconstruct the Moscow (and to an extent St. Petersburg) theatre scene. This information has allowed me to develop an accurate sense of artists' stardom in the ballet world before they entered the cinema. Such knowledge is imperative when creating a portrait of the first Russian film stars who came to the new medium from other branches of the arts.

I continued my research during the second half of the grant period by working at the Eisenstein Film Library and RGALI (Russian State Archive of Literature and Art). At the Eisenstein Film Library, I examined a variety of newly-created (in the 1910s) journals that specialized in cinema. This allowed me to compare and contrast the ways in which the cinema was regarded in both theatre and film publications. These include *Pegasus*, *The Cinema Herald*, *Odessa Theatre and Film* and *News of the Season*. RGALI holds a vast amount of documents and I utilized this resource in order to obtain miscellaneous materials that were missing at the libraries in which I had already worked. RGALI holds primary written documents and film-related materials that have permitted me to further develop my project. These items include written memoirs, letters, official documents, cinema memorabilia, and film and theatre programs that can only be viewed in Moscow.

RGALI was arguably the most significant place of research for my project since it gave me the opportunity to view the official documents of the Imperial Theatre and its affiliated school. I have been able to compare this information to that found in the various popular journals and

newspapers that I have mentioned above. This comparison will serve as strong evidence when defending my arguments and has aided me in locating discrepancies in the popular press. The archive also holds the personal memoirs and letters of various figures that are central to my project, including those of Bolshoi ballerina turned film star, Vera Karalli. The letters in which she chronicles her time as Russia's leading performer in film in ballet during the prerevolutionary years are invaluable to my research.

In addition to my formal research, my affiliation with Moscow Art Theatre has given me various opportunities that indirectly relate to my project and allow me to further develop myself as a cinema scholar. During my stay in Moscow I have attended numerous dance and theatre performances, including those at the Bolshoi Theatre which is the artistic home of several figures of my project. For example, I have attended performances of ballets which featured the same choreography that was staged by Alexander Gorsky and danced by Vera Karalli 100 years ago. I also had the privilege of attending an exhibition at the Bolshoi which featured these two artists who are so fundamental to my project.

Important Research Findings

My research in Moscow has led me to several significant conclusions, including the often forgotten influence of Vera Karalli during the most important years of prerevolutionary cinema. The numerous journals and newspapers in which she appears, as well as her own handwritten memoirs have allowed me to draw conclusions that may alter the current understanding of Russian silent cinema history. It is fair to argue that Karalli helped to modernize the cinematic experience in prerevolutionary Russia and this theory will be further explained in the following paragraphs.

Despite the fact that Vera Kholodnaya is usually hailed as the first Russian film star in both academic and popular literature, this title rightfully belongs to Karalli. In the wide array of journals and newspapers that I have researched, Karalli appears much more often than Kholodnaya in advertisements and photographs. Numerous articles about Karalli that pertain to cinema, ballet, fashion and lifestyle, as well as those that Karalli penned herself, can be found on the pages of these publications. The year 1914 is generally recognized as the year in which the first film stars appeared in the U.S., Russia and many other countries. In 1914-1915 Kholodnaya had not reached the peak of her popularity and her name was even omitted in advertisements for films for which she is well-known today. In contrast, during this year Karalli was at the pinnacle of her ballet fame and the Khanzhonkov Studio capitalized on this fame when promoting the actress and her films. Even by 1916, when Kholodnaya gained considerable popularity, Karalli's image was still more predominant in the press and there is evidence that her fan following was much greater than that of her colleague. It was not until Karalli immigrated from Russia in 1917 that Kholodnaya could truly claim role of "queen of the screen."

Karalli's personal documents that are located in RGALI support this argument. In her letters, Karalli gives statistics about the high salaries that she was offered during her short film career. Karalli worked for the Khanzhonkov Studio and in 1916 she was offered a contract by the Drankov Studio which was the largest sum offered to a film actor during the prerevolutionary years.

Karalli's position as most sought-after film actress and ballerina allowed her to navigate Russia's art world in a way that was possible only for an artist of her stature. Prior to beginning my research in Moscow, I hypothesized that financial reasons accounted for the Imperial Administrations willingness to allow Karalli to participate in the cinema, despite the ban which

forbade such practices in the cases of Imperial artists. Indeed, in her memoirs Karalli recounts a conversation with the director of the Imperial Theatres, Telyakovsky, which confirms my suspicions. Telyakovsky was convinced that Karalli's ballet fans would follow her to the new medium, despite its negative social connotations. The director was not willing to risk Karalli leaving the Bolshoi to work in the cinema full time. Karalli's participation in the lead roles of a variety of classical and contemporary ballets meant great financial profits for the Bolshoi. Therefore, Karalli should be considered a significant figure when discussing silent film fandom and reception. There is very little scholarly literature written on fandom and reception studies in the silent era (not only in Russia, but in general as well) due to a lack of surviving materials. While researching the newspapers and magazines I have come across several concrete examples which show how Karalli was responsible for transporting balletomanes to the movie theatres. This is not an insignificant feat when the taste politics of the day are taken into account.

Finally, after using the various sources found in Moscow to reconstruct Karalli's life, careers in ballet and cinema, and immigration, it becomes obvious that she can be understood as a Russian variant of "The New Woman." In addition to being able to successfully navigate the red tape of the Imperial Theatres as a young woman in her 20s, she led a public life which would have brought scandal and ruin to the average woman of the day. From the early days of her career as a Bolshoi ballerina, Karalli was the mistress of famed Bolshoi tenor Leonid Sobinov. Despite the knowledge that information about the personal lives of these two extremely popular figures was sought after by the press, Karalli did not hesitate to appear in public with Sobinov and made no secret of their relationship. These conclusion can be supported by mentions of the couple's public appearances in the popular press as well as Karall's memoirs. Karalli herself claimed that all of Moscow was aware of their relationship.

Shortly after Karalli and Sobinov ended their relationship, the actress became the mistress of Dmitri Pavlovich Yusupov. This liaison would have been even more dangerous for Karalli since it involved the royal family. Karalli states in her memoirs that the Romanovs attempted to intervene and break up the pair, but to no avail. This relationship ultimately got Karalli involved in the murder of Grigory Rasputin. Much literature on this period of Russian history (such as Edvard Radzinsky's *Rasputin Files*) makes mention of Karalli's alleged role in the murder and it is sometimes attributed to legend. However, in her letters located at RGALI Karalli chronicles these events and admits to being present in the Yusupov palace on the night of the murder and served as a tool used to lure Rasputin to the scene of his death. After the murder, the Imperial Administration unofficially forbade Karalli from dancing at the Bolshoi. The public was not to find out the true reason behind her disappearance from the stage so it was printed in the popular press that Karalli was ill for several months. The ban was lifted after the Romanovs were removed from power, but Karalli was never to dance on the Bolshoi stage again as she became ill and immigrated shortly after.

The above information undoubtedly does not describe the typical woman living in prerevolutionary Russia, even as far as artists go. Karalli was unmarried, childless, and the mistress of multiple powerful men. Nonetheless, none of these socially unacceptable roles prevented the public from making her one of the most popular artists of late prerevolutionary Russia. The fact that she broke taste barriers for members of the upper and aristocratic classes who followed her to the cinema is all the more intriguing. Advertisers, producers, members of the cinema industry and Imperial officials understood that Karalli's image could sell everything from theatre and cinema tickets to perfumes and war bonds. Such ads appear frequently throughout the materials I have researched and there is even existing film footage of Karalli

selling war bonds for Khanzhonkov Studios. The image of Karalli as a "New Woman" of Imperial Russia deserves further consideration.

(My attached photos include Vera Karalli as ballerina and actress in prerevolutionary journals. I have also included photos of the "Art in Film" lecture series at the Pushkin Museum and images of myself at the Historic Bolshoi Theatre and the Galina Ulanova Ballet Museum.)

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The Imperial Theatres were located in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and citizens living outside of these areas learned about the most celebrated performers only through theatre journals and tours that took place in select cities throughout the country. It comes as no surprise that the major film studios of prerevolutionary Russia were located in Moscow, a city known for its innovations in the arts, an attraction to performers and artists residing in this city. Moscow also had more movie theatres than any other city in Russia which meant that a significant number of films were shown only to Muscovites and never reached the provinces. Due to this divide Muscovites developed a considerably higher cultural capital and educational level than Russians living in other cities. This divide allowed Muscovites to develop an elitist attitude. Even the government helped to make Moscow superior to other regions by concentrating much of its finances reserved for the arts on institutions in this city.

My study has drawn attention to the fact that this cultural divide existed long before the fall of the Soviet Union and the influence of the New Russians. Very often the current cultural divide between Moscow and the rest of Russia is attributed to the new wealthy class that appeared in the 1990s and gravitated to Moscow, causing the less privileged to migrate elsewhere. These New Russians became wealthy due to newfound capitalist opportunity. The

Soviet government was no longer present to attempt to lessen the cultural divide between the people of these different regions by investing in the circulation of various art forms throughout Russia.

The fact that the government of prerevolutionary Russia did project an elitist attitude indicates that the notion of the cultural divide between Moscow and other regions is ingrained in Russian mentality. Policy makers who are interested in understanding how people of different regions of Russia interact with one another may benefit from this knowledge. The arts are significant to Russian national culture and the many provincial towns in which they are not currently flourishing have experienced serious problems with their youth who often resort to drugs, alcohol abuse, violence and apathy. The recent New Drama and Film Movement has produced a body of work that recognizes these problems and draws their attention to theatre and filmgoers residing in Moscow. This acknowledgement of the problem is a positive beginning, but it is my hope that analysts will find ways to actively improve the situation. I feel that my project acknowledges that the cultural divide has a rich history and therefore has affected Russian mentality. The consideration of the origins of this problem may offer policy makers new insights which might help them to better work with people from various regions of Russia.

Co-Curricular Activity

Three different film classes taught by Dr. Aksenova (my onsite advisor at the Moscow Art Theatre School) have supplemented my research program. I had the opportunity to attend a World Cinema History course and a History of Russian Cinema course at Moscow Art Theatre as well as a series of lectures entitled "Films about Film" at the movie theatre of the State Universal Department Store (GUM). I was also able to attend a new course at the department

store entitled "Fashion in Cinema." The latter course is especially significant for me since it is a topic rarely taught in the United States and relates to my current project. In addition, I was able to attend a lecture series on "Art in Cinema" at the Pushkin Museum. These lectures also related to my research topic. Finally, I had the opportunity to give guest lectures on Russian cinema for the American students from the O'Neil Institute and as well as the ART graduate students of Harvard University.

Conclusions

Overall, my grant period in Moscow was extremely beneficial since it allowed me to obtain the research information needed to complete my dissertation. In fact, I was able to collect more valuable research during the nine month period than I initially thought possible. While all of the research sites that I visited provided me with significant information, I was especially pleased with my findings at RGALI. These original and hand-written documents not only contained important findings for my project, they also gave me a personal connection with the past and the main figures of my dissertation. When conducting a research study of this nature, it is important for the scholar to connect with the given topic on an intimate and emotional level. I believe that this aspect of the research process is necessary and serves as a helpful backdrop when piecing together factual and theoretical information. My time at RGALI allowed me to develop this aspect of my research.

Plans for Future Research Agenda

I plan to present my research at the Society for Film and Media Studies Conference in Montreal, Canada in March of 2015. This research will be used to complete my PhD dissertation at Indiana University Bloomington (Department of Communication and Culture). I would

ultimately like to use this research to write two different books. One would follow the format of my dissertation and present an academic perspective on the connections between dance and Russian silent cinema. The second would cover the life and career of Vera Karalli and be accessible to a broad readership. I am also entertaining the idea of making a documentary film on Karalli's life and art.

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В. А. Каралли.



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