

Fondazione Prada

mostra internazionale d'arte cinematografica
mostra internazionale d'arte cinematografica



Press release

The Secret History of Russian Cinema

Fondazione Prada - Milan
1 February - 4 February 2007

Fondazione Prada presents in its space in Via Fogazzaro, 36, Milan, from 1 to 4 February, the film survey *The Secret History of Russian Cinema*. The initiative, undertaken in partnership with the Biennale di Venezia, is just one of the activities of Fondazione Prada, which co-produced the restoration of the films presented.

The event, which was a great success at the 63rd Venice International Film Festival, has been curated by Marco Müller, the Director of the Film Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, together with Alëna Shumakova, Film Sector consultant for the Venice Biennale. It was carried out in collaboration with the Federal Agency for Culture and Filmmaking and Sovexportfilm of Moscow, with the participation of Cineteca Italiana.

For the occasion, AMO/Rem Koolhaas has created an architectural space made up of a spectacular central structure covered with a collage of images from the films to be projected.

The Secret History of Russian Cinema marks the continued collaboration between Fondazione Prada and the Venice Biennale, which in 2004 produced the project entitled *The Secret History of Italian Cinema 1949-1976* (presented at the Tate Modern in London in 2006, as well as in Venice and Milan), and in 2005 the one entitled *The Secret History of Asian Cinema*. This is a further enhancement of the dialogue Fondazione Prada has established with the cinematographic medium, showing another nuance in its identity, between the avant-garde and the mass entertainment product, both influential in the history of film, and a further expansion of the range of Fondazione Prada's field of operations.

The new series of repertory films has as its title *The Secret History of Russian Cinema*, and is dedicated to filmmakers from that milieu and to their works, which remained "invisible," or were made to become so.

During the 63rd Venice International Film Festival, 18 works were presented, ranging from landmark films in Soviet cinematographic history to films condemned to remain in the archives, including 10 films that have been restored. The works and authors of this popular avant-garde cinema, little known in Italy, if at all, have received the strong support of an extraordinary group of “midwives” headed up by the most famous of contemporary Russian directors, Nikita Mikhalkov, who had this to say at the presentation of the survey:

“As a director, I know how difficult it is to strike a balance between intimate film and epic film. Soviet film has achieved this balance through song, creating a cinema that is immediately affecting, and opening the way for new stylistic possibilities. The extraordinary talents that have come together – actors, directors, composers – were and still are a guarantee of the fact that the films have not aged. Splendid inventions by the directors and splendid performances by the actors: above all, by the Soviet divas. As a Russian proverb recites, it is better to see something once than to hear it a hundred times. Even though hearing the magical voices of these musical comedies a hundred times has accompanied us throughout our history...”

The program will highlight the careers of two directors marked by their constant dialectic between old and new, orthodoxy and “heresy”: Grigorij Aleksandrov and Ivan Pyr’ev. 1974 was pinpointed as the culmination of the innovative thrust of the Soviet musical, the year of the very “Nouvelle Vague” musical by Andrei Konchalovsky (another of the “midwives” or “witnesses” who presented the retrospective at the Biennale).

The diversity of the aesthetic proposals of Russian and Soviet cinema today seems to have been forgotten. Yet, there is a fervent call to reconsider a film genre that is both artistic and commercial at the same time, and that can still captivate a broad public while not renouncing its claim to intelligence, a people’s cinema that is in touch with the most ardent avant-garde; this call comes from that cinematographic continent that is no longer visited, though it is still largely unexplored, despite the monographs and festivals that have probed it over the past twenty-five years (in Pesaro, Venice, and Turin).

Since the early Thirties (when Eisenstein and Aleksandrov traveled to Los Angeles, at Upton Sinclair’s invitation), the “New” Russian and Soviet cinema has often harbored the idea, along with the “impossible dream” of reconciling Hollywood and Mosfilm, of a project championed by “non-conformist” filmmakers in love with “pure” and “abstract” cinema, which for them corresponded with the musical: directors, stars (in particular two very highbrow stars who allowed themselves to be “popularized,” Lyubov’ Orlova and Marina Ladynina), scriptwriters, directors of photography, and set and costume designers who were part of a very solid industrial system, testing its extreme limits (and who, therefore, were promptly accused of “formalism” and “cosmopolitanism”), or unleashing, by means of satirical comedy, a critical reading of the society of their day (and, therefore, many of these films were blacklisted).

The selection of the 18 films privileged, alongside the two “pillars” of musical cinema, (Grigorij Aleksandrov and Ivan Pyr’ev, both students and collaborators of Ejzenstein), those that were rarely – if ever – seen in their homeland, such as *Cheriomushki* by Gerbert Rappaport, with the musical score by Dmitrij Shostakovich, or *Save the Drowning Man!* by Pavel Arsenov, which cost the director years of forced silence. Following World War II, Soviet musicals captured the attention of foreign scholars, and met with enthusiasm on the rare occasions of their screenings at festivals. *Jazz Comedy* by Grigorij Aleksandrov triumphed in Venice in 1934, but just a few years after the film’s release,

jazz music (the key element in Aleksandrov's film, with the Leonid Utiosov band) was banned in the Soviet Union. This fate was shared by the scriptwriters and directors of photography of another of Aleksandrov's films: *Volga-Volga*. Though the undesirable names were removed from the credits at the end of the film, the censors still could not purge the Soviet culture of many of the leading lights who appeared in the film (one name among the many: Solomon Mihoels), and who later ended up in the Stalinist prisons in the late Thirties.

The retrospective examines the history of Soviet musical comedy, a cinema poised between Stalin's praise and the danger of serious accusations. A systematic program of this magnitude has never been attempted, and, similarly, the digital restoration of many of the titles, by now in ruinous condition, was a groundbreaking effort.

Event information

Title: ***The Secret History of Russian Cinema***

Dates: Thursday, 1 February - Sunday 4 February

Venue: Fondazione Prada, Via Fogazzaro 36, Milan

Admission : Free

Information: Fondazione Prada - tel. 02 54670981, fax 02 54670258
www.fondazioneprada.org

Press office: Fondazione Prada - tel. 02 54670981, fax 02 54670258
press@fondazioneprada.org
Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia - tel. 041 5218859, fax 041 5200569
ufficiostampa@labiennale.org