

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Soviet Documentary Filmmaking Under *Glasnost*'

Students and faculty of the Harriman Institute had the rare opportunity to meet a group of Soviet documentary filmmakers on March 31, 1989. The group, led by Leonid Gurevich, was visiting New York to present their films at the *Glasnost*' Film Festival, which has traveled across the country. The festival was the brainchild of Gurevich, a well known scriptwriter and film critic in the Soviet Union. Participants in the open discussion included Nikolai Obukhovich, Nadezhda Khorova, Joseph Pasternak, and Sergei Muratov.

### Film Distribution and Financing

Gurevich complained that the current system of film distribution in the Soviet Union is petty. A department of film rentals sends out films arbitrarily to the various republics, often to theaters where documentaries are poorly attended. For a short time recently, documentaries enjoyed wider distribution and screening through new film cooperatives, which are privately operated. But, as Gurevich explained, "as soon as this opportunity appeared it was immediately taken away by the government." Documentarists are currently trying to get it back. Under what seems to be a promising new system of marketing, directors are allowed to sell their works directly to theaters. Some of the more "sensational" films are selling very well.

Until recently, the Soviet government almost exclusively financed films, giving it control over the industry. Reforms going into effect will allow "like-minded artists," independent of the Union of Cinematographers, to collaborate on projects which they deem worthy. This new freedom from government influence will not be without cost, however. The collaborative enterprises will be self-financed, and filmmakers will thus lose their state subsidies. Nikolai Obukhovich expressed the hope that some subsidies would still be forthcoming, and that *khozaschet* (self-financing) would be introduced slowly. The directors also expect films with mass appeal to finance more artistic and experimental projects. Some cooperatives are even

investing in documentary film studios. Joseph Pasternak revealed that a Kiev cooperative had invested 400,000 rubles in *Black Square*, his film about "the tyrants of the twentieth century."

A recent survey showed that Soviet television viewers are more interested in documentaries than in feature films. Yet the success of *khozaschet* may be to the detriment of these viewers. Since television studios do not have the resources to spend on higher-cost documentaries, such films will have to run mainly in theaters. Hence, according to Gurevich, the better the films, the less accessible they will be to the public.

### Documentaries and Television

A recent seminar of documentary film makers in the USSR ended with the circulation of a memorandum entitled, "Why Don't Documentaries Belong to the People?" Obukhovich believes this is an accurate lament on the state of documentaries in his country. Many films are shown on television, but often at inconvenient times. And even though Soviet authorities showed the entire *Glasnost*' Film Festival on television in early April, they aired it on Channel 2, the less popular channel. Muratov and Gurevich urge television stations to broadcast the best documentaries, and noted that because television managers "are afraid of us, they are now paying more attention to us, and sometimes amazing things happen."

As an example of how the relationship between television managers and film directors is changing, Gurevich recounted an episode involving a Belorussian film by Aleksei Adamovich called *The Theater and Times of Glasnost*'. Belorussian authorities refused to fund the completion of the film and prevented its release. Still, an illegal video copy of the film was shown at the Sverdlovsk Film Festival, where it won two prestigious prizes. At the urging of documentary film directors, television producers taped a discussion of this film. Within the framework of the television program, most of the film was shown. Shortly



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after the program was announced in the newspaper, the Central Committee of the Belorussian Communist Party tried to prevent its broadcast.

The day before the program was due to air, high officials from the Belorussian Party summoned the producers and insisted that the show be canceled. But local journalists supported the film and had agreed to leave the announcement in the newspaper, so the producers were able to tell the Party that cancellation would provoke a scandal. In the end the program was broadcast as scheduled, but the film still has not been released.

Gurevich explained that creative freedom in the film industry is especially jeopardized in Belorussia because the republic is slowly recovering from having been "de-nationalized." *Glasnost* and *perestroika* have tapped the consciousness of members of many nationalities, and have "aroused the creativity" of controversial Belorussian filmmakers like Adamovich and Vasilii Bykov. But the leadership is skittish and has begun to "take harsh decisions without any culture or intelligence." In the March elections, though, both Bykov and Adamovich were elected to the

new Congress of Peoples' Deputies, representing the Filmmakers' Union and Writers' Union, respectively.

## Whither Aesthetics?

It seems that the whirl of *glasnost* has pushed the fictional into the background. Gurevich recognized that the "current preoccupation with facticity," while "critical and necessary, can be dangerous in the long run for cinema." Choosing a "hot topic" might release a director from the artistic responsibility of making a good film.

Gurevich admitted that his young students "want nothing to do with what they call the 'cinema of *perestroika*.'" But he defended the current documentaries, maintaining that many of them have aesthetic value. He also defended *perestroika*'s contribution to higher-quality film: "The role of the documentarists in *perestroika* is the discovery of ourselves, the possibility of becoming independent, to break our own taboos." In the past it was too easy to excuse low quality films by saying, "they don't let us." Now, Gurevich emphasized, "they let us."

*Reported by Rachel Denber*

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