

***Cinemasaurus: Russian film in contemporary context*, edited by Nancy Condee, Alexander Prokhorov and Elena Prokhorova, Boston, Academic Studies Press, 2020, 310 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index, £25.53 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-6446-9271-4**

Cinemasaurus – an evocative neologism coined by phonological and semantic analogy with ‘thesaurus’ and ‘Kinotavr’, the name of Russia’s largest and most successful film festival – is an appropriate title for this novel ‘treasure chest of a book’ (p. 9), which has three aims: to provide a theorised characterisation of Russia cinema since the Soviet Union’s collapse; to showcase the scholarship of early-career academics; and to celebrate and develop the work of key promoters of post-1991 Russian cinema.

The book’s twelve chapters – grouped into four thematically organised parts, which open with a brief framing essay – offer analyses of case-study films, which aim to illuminate their individual themes, narratives and aesthetics and, when considered together, to highlight how key concerns and approaches recur across the period. They all follow the same format, providing useful context (biographical, social, ideological, political, historical and/or cinematic) and an outline of the theoretical approach that the author then applies to their chosen films. Each chapter has merits; I therefore offer a brief overview of all twelve.

In Part one, which addresses ‘the irresolvable challenges of empire and periphery’ (p. 15), Olga Kim discusses ‘recurrent figures [...] of state construction and ruination’ (pp. 32-33) in films by Vadim Abdrashitov, Aleksandr Veledinskii and Andrei Zviagintsev. Justin Wilmes – building on Nancy Condee’s *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (2009) – examines the themes of war, spiritual messianism and neoliberal leadership in post-2010 Russian ‘neo-imperial’ (p. 49) blockbusters. Ellina Sattarova provides an insightful comparative analysis of the use of silence in Dmitrii Mamuliia’s *Another Sky* and Aleksandr Kott’s *The Test*.

Part two concentrates on Russian ‘neo-noir’ (p. 82) filmmakers, who exploit genre conventions to analyse present-day Russian society. The focus of Daria Ezerova’s incisive analysis of Aleksei Balabanov’s *Cargo 200* and Vasilii Sigarev’s *The Land of Oz* is their intermingling of horror and comedy. Robert Crane discusses eccentricity, theatricality and the grotesque, while Denis Saltykov explores violence in films set in both male and female communities.

Part three considers marginality and the representation of various types of alterity (social, geographic, identity-based) through Zhanna Budenkova’s perceptive analysis of cinematic representations of Russia’s heartland, Tetyana Shlikhar’s timely discussion of films that reveal Russia’s anxiety about its cultural status vis-à-vis the West and the ‘near-abroad’ (p. 158), particularly Ukraine, and Trevor Wilson’s thoughtful reading of films that apparently represent alternative identities and sexualities.

Part four examines recent cinematic attempts to restore the imperial project. Theodora Trimble’s engaging and contextually rich chapter considers Russian cinema’s promotion of patrimonial and patriarchal structures, exemplified by Nikolai Lebedev’s *Legend No 17* and *Flight Crew*, both starring Danila Kozlovskii. Olga Mukhortova discusses two ‘auteurs’, Nikita Mikhalkov and Timur Bekmambetov, and Beach Gray offers a fascinating analysis of the *Elki* films’ adoption of a hyperreal style that serves to highlight the positive aspects of Putin-era Russia while downplaying the negatives.

The unusual Part five comprises interviews with important champions of post-1991 Russian cinema: Alexander Rodnyansky, Russia's most prominent media executive; Sitara Alieva, Kinotavr's programme director; Paul Heth, the American entrepreneur who helped develop Russia's post-Soviet exhibition system; Birgit Beumers, *KinoKultura*'s founding editor; and Vladimir Padunov, the originator (with Condee) of the Pittsburgh Russian Film Symposium. The volume concludes with an idiosyncratic timeline (1990-2018), listing the films that won Russia's main awards, a 'word of the year' and a significant political event. It has a comprehensive bibliography and a useful index.

Cinemasaurus's range is impressive. Its thirteen filmographies include over 100 Soviet and Russian films, from Abdrashitov to Zviagintsev, via Bondarchuk, Vyrypaev and many others in between, and numerous films made elsewhere. Survey volumes inevitably, however, provoke opinions about coverage. For this reader, the most glaring omission is the lack of attention paid to women filmmakers. Some receive brief mention: Wilmes references Natal'ia Kudriashova's *Pioneer Heroes* (p. 61); Ezerova salutes – albeit in a footnote and without naming her – the huge contribution made to *Cargo 200* by Nadezhda Vasil'eva, Balabanov's long-term costume designer and, from 2000, his wife (p. 93); Wilson briefly discusses Avdot'ia Smirnova's *Kokoko* (p. 192) alongside three films co-directed by women. However, of the fifty or so films selected as the chapters' main case studies, only two are by women: Valeriia Gai Germanika's *Everybody Dies but Me* (pp. 127-129) and Lidiia Bobrova's *In that Land* (pp. 143-146). This oversight matters because, while early post-Soviet Russian cinema was (as in Soviet times) a male-dominated industry, since the mid-2000s the number of Russian women filmmakers has increased dramatically, as has their success. At the 2014 Kinotavr, eight of the fourteen competition films were by women, for the first time in the majority. Since 2010, when Svetlana Proskurina became the first woman to win Kinotavr's coveted Grand Prix, three further women have done so: Anna Melikian (2015), Oksana Karas (2016), Nataliia Meshchaninova (2018). This 'female explosion' (*zhenskii vzryv*), to borrow Anzhelika Artiukh's (2015, 128) powerful term, has brought underexplored concerns to the fore and introduced new perspectives and approaches, changing the face of contemporary Russian cinema in ways that *Cinemasaurus* does not adequately represent.

As a UK-based reviewer, I must also correct a factual error: the 2018 poisoning of Sergei and Iuliia Skripal' occurred not 'in London' (p. 287), but in the provincial city of Salisbury, which the alleged attackers claimed (when interviewed by RT's Margarita Simonyan) to have visited as tourists.

These observations do not, of course, detract from the achievements of this ambitious, generous and capacious volume. *Cinemasaurus* makes a significant contribution, containing much to interest, inform and inspire scholars and students of Russian cinema and culture. Its chapters are sure to feature on university reading lists. I have already added them to mine.

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References

Artiukh, Anzhelika. 2015. "Kinokul'tura i vzryv: Zhenshchiny-rezhissery v sovremennoi Rossii." *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 5 (103): 126-141.