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## Aelita Comes Down to the Earth

### Television Agents in Soviet Films, 1950s–1980s

**Abstract:** The proliferation of a new technological medium—television—led to the emergence of a new kind of screen hero: a TV-man. It also saw the emergence of various characters involved in television for various reasons: owners of television sets, avid viewers, as well as people who wittingly or unwittingly ended up on the small screen. I call these characters ‘television agents’, and the following article will outline the shifting roles of television in Soviet cinema through analysing the changing image of the television agent, which occurred largely due to their structural links with other cultural media such as cinema and poetry. Particular attention will be paid to the evident discrepancy between the reception of television in the official Soviet print media propagating TV as a “powerful tool of the communist education” and artistic discourse (film) deconstructing this statement.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

During the Sixth International Congress of Electricity (held as part of the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris) on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 1900, the Russian engineer Konstantin Perskiy first used the term *television*. Between 1924 and 1928, Russian engineer Boris Rozing demonstrated his fully functional televisual system – the so-called *electrical telescope* – in his electrotechnical experimental laboratory in Leningrad. In fact, Rozing had already demonstrated his invention on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1911, when he transmitted and received the world's first elementary image: four light stripes on a dark background. In 1923, Rozing's book *Electrical Telescopy* was published.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, one of the motifs of Iakov Protazanov's famous 1924 film *Aelita* (made precisely the same year as Rozing's transmission) is the special prototelevisual instrument that allows us to *see into the distance* (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Prototelevision, screenshot from the film *Aelita* (00:07:29)

The transmitting device (at that time it was called an *iconoscope*; the term *television* came into use in Russia from the 1930s onwards) receives and broadcasts much more than white and black stripes. *Aelita* can see the detailed scenes from early Soviet life on Earth (a port, streets full of citizens going about their daily business, close-ups of

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the participants of the Cross-Disciplinary Russian and Eurasian Studies Network (CRES) research seminar at the University of Manchester, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2019, for their invaluable feedback and comments on the text for this article. With special thanks to Adelaide McGinity-Peebles for her support with the translation of this article from Russian into English.

<sup>2</sup> See Urvalov 2015: 63 and 90.

the engineer Los kissing his wife Natasha). The screen of this prototelevision set is as large as a cinema screen, and the images are of such high quality that Rozing himself would be envious of it. In the film, this incredible apparatus is actually an invention of alien intelligence: it is used by the Martian queen, Aelita, to observe the young Soviet land. It is noteworthy that this film serves as a reference point for one of the recurrent tropes in the narratives involving television in Soviet cinema. This new audio-visual medium is cast in the unenviable roles of vapid entertainment, spy and traitor, dangerous entity, and even killing machine.<sup>3</sup> We are thus able to surmise that the future television's 'genetic predisposition' to all of life's negative attributes had already been laid out in *Aelita*. Indeed, Aleksei Tolstoi, the author of the novel upon which the film is based, and the film's screenwriters Fedor Otsep and Aleksei Faiko associated the Martian civilisation that gave birth to television with the 'decadent West' as well as pre-revolutionary Russia.<sup>4</sup> In the film, the Martian civilisation is contrasted with the modern, future-oriented Soviet reality.

It took the Soviet state at least a quarter of a century to make a dream of television a reality. By the mid-1950s, television was "firmly embedded in people's daily life"<sup>5</sup> and, in the words of actor Igor Il'inskii, it "ceased to be a luxury and became a necessity"<sup>6</sup>. At this time, cinema brought television "down to earth with a bump", constructing its own understanding of the new medium, which in fact contravened with the official perspective. The Soviet government had gradually become more open to television and attempted to instrumentalise its educational and propaganda potential, seeing it as a "window onto the world"<sup>7</sup> and a "platform via which the party could speak to the people"<sup>8</sup>. I suggest, that cinema of the 1950s-1970s, in the style of *Aelita*, confidently pronounced the new medium to be decadent rather than progressive — presenting it as the accessory of bourgeois-oriented, and sometimes even anti-Soviet, protagonists.

Picking up on the mood that fuelled the unfolding campaign against philistinism in the sphere of everyday life (which was a revival of the fight against philistinism in the early 1920s)<sup>9</sup>, cinema proclaimed the television set to be an unnecessary extravagance. The current or even future owner of a television set was viewed with suspicion, while, above all, cinema was presented as the effective antidote to the small screen. In the operetta film *Cherëmushki/Cherry Town* (Dmitrii Shostakovich (musical score); Herbert Rappaport (director), 1962), there is no television set in the ordinary apartments. However, along with a bearskin and fancy foreign furniture, there is a television set which forms part of the décor of young fashionista Vava's imaginary boudoir (58:15-

<sup>3</sup> See Zhukova 2018a: 200–201 and 207–208.

<sup>4</sup> See Huber 1998: 40. Tolstoi first published *Aelita*, the novel, in 1923. Arlazorov 1973: 118 has written on the subject of Tolstoi's total lack of involvement with the film script of *Aelita*.

<sup>5</sup> Pashchin 1955:29.

<sup>6</sup> Il'inskii 1956.

<sup>7</sup> Rozov 1961: 19.

<sup>8</sup> Chesnokov 1957: 2.

<sup>9</sup> Lebina 2019: 190–191.



59:35). Vava has ignored all the laws and, together with her husband Drebednev (a corrupt building manager), she has seized hold of two apartments in a new building (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Vava's boudoir, screenshot from the film *Cherry Town* (00:58:46)

In the so-called *village films* of the same period, the rare owners of televisions are those in positions of power, such as the former chairman of the collective farm, Egor Lykov, in the film *Prostaia istoriia/A Simple Story* (Iurii Yegorov, 1961). However, as Sasha Potapova (played by Nonna Mordyukova) describes it, Lykov had “already grabbed enough for himself” i.e. was a very greedy, materialistic individual (03:27).

In Lenfilm studio's *Kogda razvodiut mosty/When The Bridges Are Raised* (Viktor Sokolov, 1962), the irrepressible Inga is forced to earn extra money being filmed for a television programme called *Dance With Us (Tantsuite c nami)*. She tries to defend the legitimacy of her TV pursuits in front of her neighbours, claiming that “it’s just a job, no worse than any other” (00:16:18). However, secretly, the heroine dreams of high art: she wants to dance in the ballet corps and goes to private screenings at the cinema, where perhaps *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Blake Edwards, 1961) with Audrey Hepburn might be shown. This assumption comes from a poster with Hepburn which adorns Inga’s modest room in a Leningrad communal apartment. In *Volshebnaia sila iskusstva/The Magical Power of Art* (Naum Birman, 1970), a Second B class (ages 7–8) vocally express their solidarity with cinema: they go on a *film walk* while singing a song with a refrain that sounds like: “Today’s films are better than television/all of our class is of this

opinion" (Kino nastoiashchee luchshe televizora, èto v nashem klasse vseimi priznano).<sup>10</sup>

Already by the 1950s, a *love triangle* had appeared in Soviet cinema, and until the end of the 1980s, protagonists who gravitated towards the medium of the *big* rather than *small* screen would emerge victorious in the filmic narratives. Asserting itself in the face of a media rival, cinema was implicitly able to challenge the government, since the propaganda role it had once been assigned had now been conferred to television. In the specialist literature, the meaning of "the most important of the arts" (Vladimir Lenin) was thus fundamentally revised. According to Bagirov and Katsev in their 1968 book *Television in the Twentieth Century*, cinema practically had a death sentence imposed on it, since, in their view, there would soon no longer be "cinema *and* television, but one big television"<sup>11</sup>.

## 2. Love triangle: Television agents versus film agents

In Semen Derevianskii's and Rafail Suslovich's film *Ona vas liubit/She Loves You* (1956), pop singer and TV star Ukhov is rejected by the track and field athlete Olga. Ukhov is forced to step aside for "a quiet, shy man (Georgii Vitsin) who has a funny surname, Kanareikin (Canary), and a strange job: he is the Head of the Department of Predators and Monkeys at the local zoo".<sup>12</sup> Kanareikin also keeps a monkey at home for his amusement. Spoiled by guaranteed success, including through TV<sup>13</sup>, Ukhov, led by the logic of TV mediality, counts on immediate and fleeting success with women. According to Marshall McLuhan, television creates a special type of consciousness for which only the "here and now" is relevant, while "all the remote visualized goals of usual culture seem not only unreal but irrelevant, and not only irrelevant but anemic"<sup>14</sup>. As a "TV agent", Ukhov is expecting to win Olga's heart "here and now". In one scene that occurs in a city park, Ukhov unsuccessfully attempts to quickly seduce Olga, supported by the *electrified* sound of his own voice that booms occasionally from a loudspeaker.

In contrast, Kanareikin is closer to cinema in terms of its medial properties. Kanareikin, rather than Ukhov (who is rejected at the cinema ticket office even though he introduces himself as the winner of various singing competitions), is the one who manages to get tickets to the cinema, which is where his beloved Olga dreams of going. A strong connection between the hero and cinema is also provided on a thematic level: the real-life monkey in Kanareikin's house is an obvious reference to

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Valerii V'iugin for telling me about this film.

<sup>11</sup> Bagirov/Katsev 1968:242.

<sup>12</sup> Quote from the author's preamble, given in the form of a title before the beginning of the film.

<sup>13</sup> Ukhov is presented in film as a TV star, admired by his female fans.

<sup>14</sup> McLuhan 1964: 335.

the Soviet film *Obyknovennyi chelovek/The Ordinary Man* (Aleksandr Stolbov, 8 March 1957).<sup>15</sup> It also probably signals the deeper connection that exists between the monkey that imitates everyone and the nature of the film image, which, according to André Bazin, seeks to create a physically comparable impression from the phenomenon of reality, thereby satisfying our need for illusory similarity<sup>16</sup>. Kanareikin's "cinematography" is also reflected at the discursive level of the film. Ukhov's accompanist on the piano describes Kanareikin, Olga and the monkey as "Tarzan, Cheetah and Jane" (Fig. 3), referencing *Tarzan and His Mate* (Cedric Gibbons, 1934), the famous "trophy film"<sup>17</sup> of the post-war years which was a sequel to the film *Tarzan the Ape-Man* (Van Dyke, 1932).



Fig. 3: 'Tarzan, Cheetah and Jane', screenshot from the film *She Loves You* (01:06:51)

<sup>15</sup> In this film, Kira is jealous that her fiancé, the virologist Aleksei Ladygin, spends his time with the experimental chimpanzee, Liliana, rather than her. See Shevtsov 2018 for more details on the film.

<sup>16</sup> See Bazin 1972: 40–41. In this respect, the analogy that Sergei Eisenstein makes about himself and the monkey after visiting the Alma-ata zoo is noteworthy: 'There is only one difference between the Alma-ata monkey and me: I also jump from topic to topic as soon as a new one pops into my conscious. But, unlike the monkey, I still sometimes go back to the original one' (Eisenstein 1997: 6–8).

<sup>17</sup> Foreign films, received as reparation by the Soviet Union after World War II.

The cine-dispositive, according to Jean-Louis Baudry, introduces the subject into an artificial state of regression (e. g. the darkness of the hall, immobility, passivity),<sup>18</sup> analogizing it to Freud's dream theory, which deprives the subject of the ability to relate to his reality. Kanareikin is detached from reality, he is ludicrous and incomplete, as it says at the beginning of the film: "Although, all the excellent heroes were snatched up by directors for other pictures". However, in this period, this less-than-brilliant protagonist was sufficient in order for "cinema" to triumph over "television": the Head of the Department of Predators and Monkeys manages to tame both a live lion that escaped from a cage as well as "television" (personified through Ukhov). Interestingly, the reflections on the "predatory" entity of television seems to be a common place in the Soviet press of the 1960s. It is spoken about "greedy"<sup>19</sup> and "voracious screen"<sup>20</sup> is constantly preoccupied with seeking out and appropriating the other's mediality.<sup>21</sup>

It is noteworthy that in the cinema of the late 1980s, the *love triangle* motif is thematically tied to the same audio-visual rivals. In the cult film *Igla/The Needle* (Rashid Nugmanov, 1988), the drug-addicted and TV-addicted Dina, who owns as many as three televisions, and the drug dealer Artur Yusupovich confront a hero named Moro, whom the audience would recognise first and foremost as the rock poet, musician and lead singer of *Kino*, namely Viktor Tsoi. Thus, it is evident that in *Igla*, the reference to cinema is not intended through the narrative or the protagonists themselves, but is implicitly referenced through the name of the rock band as *kino*, the name of the band, is Russian for *cinema*. Its founder and soloist Viktor Tsoi personified the rock culture that was gaining momentum in the late 1980s, a culture which was in opposition to the government and its mouthpiece: television. Interestingly, it is in this film that Soviet television (to which, in fact, the film gives a dedication on screen) is deconstructed, turning into a part of the subcultural life of the Kazakh capital that is filled with endless quotes from TV and radio broadcasts, which, reinterpreted in the context of the film narrative, construct a separate TV history.<sup>22</sup> This almost intimate relationship between a medium of "secondary orality" i.e. television (Walter Ong), and the oral medium of poetry (in this case, rock poetry) had already begun to take shape in films of the late 1960s.

<sup>18</sup> See Baudry 2003: 68.

<sup>19</sup> Romm 1964: 240.

<sup>20</sup> Bagirov 1968: 175.

<sup>21</sup> Igor Maslennikov, a film director, screenwriter and one of the founders of the Leningrad TV Studio, recalled the following words of its head director, I. F. Ermakov, who liked to repeat: 'Television will eat everything'. See Agapitova 2013: 268.

<sup>22</sup> See Zhukova 2016.

### 3. The poetisation of TV agents in the 1960s–1970s

Despite the poetry boom in the early 1960s, poets were barely tolerated or were actively prevented from being visually represented in Soviet television. The opposite tendency could be observed in Soviet cinema of the 1960s, which included multiple portrayals of poets<sup>23</sup> and indeed, poetry. In 1960s' Soviet cinema, TV was represented as a source of transmission for poetry, like in the film *Perehodnyi vozrast/Transitional Age* (1968), which was directed by Richard Viktorov and adapted from Vladimir Kiselev's novel *Devochka i ptitselët* (1966). The film depicts the transformation of a simple Volgograd schoolgirl Olia Alekseeva (Elena Proklova) into a well-known poet, a transformation that she is able to make through the medium of television. A famous host, the writer Sergei Smirnov<sup>24</sup>, performs a poem by Olia on television that is dedicated to her favorite poet Aleksandr Pushkin (01:16:44-01:17:20), who is, of course, the most important writer in the Russian and Soviet literary canon:

Neither strength nor accuracy will help,  
Nor skill nor steady hands,  
Dantes have heavy eyelids  
And bags under their eyes.  
Know that to poets, neither the steel sword,  
Nor the rifle, nor the sharp knife  
Are useful if they are killed  
For poems that strike outright.<sup>25</sup>

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At the same time, the Volgograd schoolgirl's poem indirectly links the poetry 'mainstream' of the era. This 'mainstream' reflected the untimely death of Boris Pasternak directly (e.g. in the two poems which both had the title "In Memory of Boris Pasternak", one written in 1962 by Bela Akhmadulina and the other in 1966 by Aleksandr Galich). It also reflected Pasternak's death indirectly through references to the Russian classics – the "ridiculed and alienated poets who died in vain" ("And

<sup>23</sup> For example, in the films *Ulitza Niutona dom1/Newton street number 1* (Teodor Vulfovich, 1963) or Marlen Khutsiev's *Zastava Ilycha/Ilyich's gate* (1965).

<sup>24</sup> Smirnov was highly adept at presenting to a live studio audience and was also well-known for the radio show *Stories of Heroism* as well as the TV almanac *The Feat*. See Ilyin 1972: 100, Andronnikov 1990: 267-272.

<sup>25</sup> Ne pomozhet ni sila, ni metkost',  
Ni umen'e, ni tvërdost' ruki.  
U dantesov tiazhëlye veki,  
I u nikh pod glazami meshki.  
Znat', poëtam ni shpaga stal'naia,  
Ni vintovka, ni ostryi kinzhal  
Ne nuzhny, esli ikh ubivaiut  
Za stikhi, chto raziat napoval.  
For the text of the poem see: <https://stihi.ru/diary/maryjune/2010-03-04>.



again like the fires in open hearths...”, 1962, Akhmadulina). Olia’s poem in *Transition Age* restores some balance in relation to the Ukrainian reaction<sup>26</sup> to the events surrounding Pasternak’s Nobel Prize award and the subsequent persecution that the poet received. Additionally, “Vylazka voroga”<sup>27</sup>, an article by the Ukrainian writer Petro Panch that was published in the Kiev *Literature Gazette*, and Pavel Besposhadniy’s poem “Bitaiia Lzhevaga”<sup>28</sup> confront young Kiev poet Leonid Kiselev’s 1962 poem written about the death of Pushkin (which was in fact an implicit homage to Pasternak) – the same year, incidentally, as Akhmadulina’s two aforementioned poems.<sup>29</sup> Kiselev, whose poems were published in *Novy Mir* in 1963 aroused fierce criticism,<sup>30</sup> also wrote all the other verses in the Volgograd schoolgirl’s repertoire in *Transitional Age*, which became public and were heard in this film on television.

The Pasternak theme was continued in the Oscar-winning *Moskva slezam ne verit/ Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1979). There are a lot of small hints and signs throughout the film which collectively construct a Pasternak narrative that runs parallel to the central narrative. 1958, the date shown in the opening scene of the film, is not just the year that the film’s main protagonist, Katia, fails her entrance exam to the University of Chemical Technology. It is also the year in which Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize and the first edition of *Doctor Zhivago* was published in Russian at The Hague at Mutton Publishing House in Holland.<sup>31</sup> The most famous version of Hamlet in Soviet cinema, played by Innokentii Smoktunovskii, has a cameo in *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (Smoktunovskii famously played Hamlet in Grigorii Kozintsev’s 1964 film adaptation which used Pasternak’s translation of Shakespeare’s play).<sup>32</sup>

In the following, I will outline the central Pasternak scene in the film, which brought together reviled and even prohibited poetry and the medium of television, which, as I have previously stated, was used as the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of the

<sup>26</sup> C.f. Galich writes in his aforementioned poem “Dazhe kievskie pis'menniki Na pominki ego pospeli” / “even the Kiev writers made it to his [Pasternak’s] wake”.

<sup>27</sup> Which could be roughly translated as *The enemy sallies forth*.

<sup>28</sup> See Kal'nitskii for further details. It is a play on the title of Pasternak’s famous novel *Doktor Zhivago* and can be roughly translated as *Beaten Lye*.

<sup>29</sup> It is noteworthy that Akhmadulina reads the poem *I snova kak ogni martenov.../ And Again Like the Fires in Open Hearths...* (which was devoted to poets who are part of the literary canon: Mikhail Lermontov and Pushkin) from the stage of the Polytechnic Institute in Marlen Khutsiev’s *Zastava Il'icha/Ilyich's Gate* (1965). This scene at the Polytechnic Institute (about 20 min.) was cut from the film completely, and the audience was only able to see it in 1988, due to the advent of glasnost and perestroika.

<sup>30</sup> Mazepa.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g.: Dandzhelo 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Smoktunovskii was also one of the first Soviet actor to read one of Pasternak’s poems in a film: the poem *Byt znamenitym nekrasivo/A Life of Fame is Crude Ambition* (1934) in *Stepen'riskal/Degree of Risk* (Il'ia Averbakh, 1968), in which he played the mathematician Kirillov.

Soviet Union. During the dinner organised by Katia and her friend Liuda at her uncle's apartment, a long-haired young man (who is evidently affiliated to poetry circles) speaks about modern poetry and its renaissance. Famous Soviet poets like Evgenii Evtushenko and Robert Rozhdestvenskii are mentioned. These words are followed by a cut, which, rather than depicting the conversant guests, captures a table adorned with a music-recorder, a burning candle<sup>33</sup> and a little dog (Fig. 4). It is certainly not coincidental that this scene is redolent of the Dutch genre of painting, still-life<sup>34</sup>, thus referencing Holland, the country in which *Doctor Zhivago* was first published in Russian in 1958.



Fig. 4: Dutch still-life, screenshot from the film *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (00:32:10)

The replica of a Dutch still-life painting and the discussion about modern poetry are evident references to the emerging parallel narrative. The dog could be interpreted not only as a component of a typical Dutch still-life painting, but also as an animal that often represents the poet in European literature<sup>35</sup> (for instance, Ernst Hoffmann's *Nachricht von den neuesten Schicksalen des Hundes Berganza*/A Report on the Latest Adventures of the Dog Berganza (1814), Charles Baudelaire's *Les bons chiens*/Good Dogs (To Mr. Joseph Stevens) (1865) or Rainer Maria Rilke's *Begegnung*/Encounter (1907)). At the same time, the dog is reminiscent of the famous

<sup>33</sup> The burning candle is a reference to the Pasternak poem *Zimniaia noch'*/Winter night, which was included in *Doctor Zhivago*: *Svecha gorela na stole, svecha gorela...* (transl.: A candle burned upon the table, a candle burned).

<sup>34</sup> Dogs were a typical motif of Dutch still-life paintings, for example Gerrit Dou's *Sleeping Dog*, 1650.

<sup>35</sup> See e.g.: Chambers 1971.

literary cabaret, *Brodiachaia sobaka/The Stray Dog*, which was the meeting place of St. Petersburg poets between 1911 and 1915 (the patrons of the establishment associated themselves with stray dogs).

The dinner episode closes with a depiction of a television set, one of the early Soviet models called a *Leningrad* (the name for St. Petersburg between 1924 and 1991). In a close-up shot, the trademark of the television set is discernible. The solidarity of the 'cultural capital' of Russia, St. Petersburg, with the disgraced Moscow poet (Pasternak) can be perceived not only through the model of television, but also through the following filmic reference: on the television screen, there is a scene from Renato Castellani's *Due soldi di speranza/Two Cents Worth of Hope* (1952), reminding on the very first publication of Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* in Italian in November 1957 through the Giangiacomo Fratinelli publishing house in Milan. The following line from *Due soldi di speranza* can be heard from the television set: "If God really had created us, he should be generous and give us at least a thimbleful of hope", which could be interpreted as the maxim of the Petersburg poets who visited the aforementioned *Stray Dog* cabaret. The prophetic meaning of this line is heard from the television, whose etymology is the Ancient Greek word *tele* (far) and the Latin word *video* (see) and is reinforced by the promising musical inclusion of the foxtrot piece *Ozhidanie/Expectation*, written by Alexandr Zfasman (one of Russia's first jazz musicians). This piece plays from the music-recorder on the aforementioned table that is arranged in such a way to look like a Dutch still-life painting. The film thus implicitly expresses a desire for the publication of *Doctor Zhivago* in Russia which did not happen until 1988, nine years after the film was released, when the book was published in the literary magazine *Novy Mir*. Ultimately, these scenes contribute to the fact that cinema was an essential part of Soviet TV broadcasting and manifested a sense of solidarity with disgraced Soviet artists instead of the Soviet government.

#### 4. TV agents and film agents in the late 1980s: A trajectory of convergence

In the heyday of television during the perestroika period (1985-1991)<sup>36</sup>, cinema readily adopts the techniques and aesthetics of television production whilst also favouring television as a subject matter. For example, the Leningrad TV programme *Telekur'er* is shown in detail in the film *Fontan/The Fountain* (Iurii Mamin, 1989), while the machinations of the TV programme *Vremia/Time* are revealed in *Tormozhenie v nebesakh/Braking in Heaven* (Viktor Buturlin, 1989). Valerii Ogorodnikov's *Bumazhnye glaza Prishvina/Prishvin's Paper Eyes*, also released in 1989, immerses the viewer in the

<sup>36</sup> The perestroika years affected both the formats of TV programmes (such as talk shows, discussion panels, etc.) and their subject matter (e.g. the day's current affairs, newly discovered historical sources, etc.).



history of Leningrad TV in the late 1940s and has frequently been discussed in scholarly literature.<sup>37</sup>

However, scholarship to date has almost completely ignored the issues surrounding television presented in this film as well as how it represents the relationship between cinema and TV agents, which are lacunae that I address here. In fact, in my view, the film's main concern is the influence that the perestroika-era television had on cinema.

*Prishvin's Paper Eyes* centres upon eponymous hero Pavel Prishvin (Aleksandr Romatsov), and his work on a film that is being directed by a friend of his (Aleksandr Markov). Prishvin, a TV director, plays the main role in his friend's film but also seeks to influence the film's direction; he wishes to *televisionify* its aesthetics, bringing them closer to real life. Prishvin also seeks to root the film's discourse around Stalin as Russia's *bloody executioner* (reflecting the perestroika-influenced topics that were prevalent in television at that time).

I will now discuss an episode from the film which I deem to be particularly important, since in this scene, cinema, albeit in a faux-ironic manner, intentionally includes its old audio-visual rival television in its own medial orbit (this itself indicates the threat emanating from television – because “watching TV had become more interesting than reading” during this period)<sup>38</sup>. If one observes the characters' disposition in the scene with 'Eisenstein' (in the middle of Fig. 5) in the second part of the film (1:28:48-1:33:39), one can see that another *love triangle* is constructed.

<sup>37</sup> See e. g. Levchenko 2016, Iakobidze-Gitman 2015: 205–208 and 261–262.

<sup>38</sup> Muratov 1991:172.



Fig. 5: 'Love triangle': film (Sergei Eisenstein), television (Pavel Prishvin) and power (Provisional Government), screenshot from the film *Prishvin's Paper Eyes* (1:33:02)

In the corners of the *love triangle* this time around are cinema, personified by the maestro, Sergei Eisenstein, and the film director who accompanies him on the piano; television, represented by Pavel Prishvin and the television set located on the grand piano; and political power, represented by the grey-bearded old men. The sculpture of a peacock in their hands (in one of the shots before discussed screenshot) is a reference to Eisenstein's film *Oktiabr/October* (1927). A common interpretation of the peacock in this film is an allusion to Aleksandr Kerenskii<sup>39</sup>, the Chairman of the Provisional Government in 1917. In fact, the film is not referencing the Provisional Government that was in power for a short period of regime change in 1917. Instead, it alludes to the institution of government and figures of authority in general, which are deemed to be ephemeral in contrast to art, while cinema is "the most important of all the arts" (Lenin).

All elements of the film triangle are equal because in one way or another they have been 'contaminated' by television, and it is due to television that they are all inextricably linked. I will sketch out just a few of the superficial connections between them. In particular, it is known that in his old age, Kerenskii ("power" on the triangle)

<sup>39</sup> See Tsivian 1991: 354.

remarked with regret that “if there had been television in 1917”, he would have “lost to no one”<sup>40</sup>. In turn, it is no secret that Eisenstein (“film” on the triangle) was very interested in the issue of television. He devoted his last years to writing the theory of television<sup>41</sup>, while in the winter of 1940–1941, he was directly involved in editing TV shows at the Moscow TV Studio<sup>42</sup>. It is therefore unsurprising that the television set in the film is located on Eisenstein’s right-hand side. A young film director literally *watches* a TV screen and tirelessly plays along with the maestro on the piano, who, in turn, plays various pieces (a dance, a song, an opera aria) from the TV program that has already been shown in the film.

## 5. Conclusion

Along with the perpetual binary opposition of the TV agent (a negative character) pitted against the film agent (a positive character that can be found in the films of the 1950s, the late 1960s and the 1970s), the motif of solidarity between television and poetry is recurrent in Soviet cinema. In these cinematic representations, television is implicitly linked to subcultural or even countercultural endeavours. Ultimately, in the films of the late 1980s, there is a shift towards a temporary reconciliation between TV and film agents; at the same time, cinema during this period is intrigued by television aesthetics, and with great gusto, it tries to apply television aesthetics to its own mediality.

As I have argued, the negative cinematic depiction of the new medium of television on the one hand is linked to the growing competition between film and television that was already evident in the 1950s, including in English and American cinema.<sup>43</sup> Another reason may be due to the medial specificity of television, which, with its “extension of the sense of touch”, “total involvement in all-inclusive *nowness*”, and “mosaic TV image ... antithetic to literacy”<sup>44</sup>, is unable to promote the ideas of communism, which are frequently articulated in the written word and oriented towards the future. These obvious divergences between television’s means of communication and the state ideology shown in Soviet films will only be revealed and analysed by political scientists and media historians in the years to come.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Borovik 2007.

<sup>41</sup> See Ėizenshtein 1997.

<sup>42</sup> See Iurovskii 1983: 72.

<sup>43</sup> See Stokes 2000.

<sup>44</sup> McLuhan 1964: 334 f.

<sup>45</sup> See Mickiewicz 1988, Roth-Ey 2011.

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## Media

- Aelita*. RUS 1924, Iakov Protazanov, 111 Min.
- Breakfast at Tiffany's*. USA 1961, Blake Edwards, 115 Min.
- Bumazhnye glaza Prishvina/Prishvin's Paper Eyes*. RUS 1989, Valerii Ogorodnikov, 146 Min.
- Cherëmushki/Cherry Town*. RUS 1962. Herbert Rappaport, 92 Min.
- Due soldi di speranza/Two Cents Worth of Hope*. I 1957, Renato Castellani, 110 Min.
- Fontan/The Fountain*. RUS 1989, Iurii Mamin, 101 Min.
- Igla/The Needle*. RUS 1988, Rashid Nugmanov, 76 Min.
- Kogda razvodiat mosty/ When the Bridges Are Raised*. RUS 1962, Viktor Sokolov, 99 Min.
- Moskva slezam ne verit/ Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*. RUS 1979, Vladimir Men'shov, 148 Min.
- Obyknovennyi chelovek/The Ordinary Man*. RUS 1957, Aleksandr Stolbov, 101 Min.
- Ona vas liubit/She Loves You*. RUS 1956, Rafail Suslovich, 85 Min.
- Oktiabr/October*. RUS 1927, Sergei Eisenshtein, 102 Min.
- Perehodnyi vozrast/Transitional Age*. RUS 1968, Richard Viktorov, 89 Min.

*Prostaia istoriia/A Simple Story*. RUS 1961, Iurii Yegorov, 90 Min.

*Stepen'riskha/Degree of Risk*. RUS 1968, Il'ia Averbakh, 95 Min.

*Tarzan and His Mate*. USA 1934, Cedric Gibbons, 104 Min.

*Tarzan the Ape-Man*. USA 1932, Van Dyke, 1932, 99 Min.

*Tormozhenie v nebesakh/Braking in Heaven*. RUS 1989, Viktor Buturlin, 81 Min.

*Ullitsa N'iutona dom 1/Newton Street Number 1*. RUS 1963, Teodor Vul'fovich, 93 Min.

*Volshebnaia sila iskusstva/The Magical Power of Art*. RUS 1970, Naum Birman, 65 Min.

*Zastava Il'icha/Ilyich's Gate*. RUS 1965 (released under the title *Mne dvadtsat' let/ I Am Twenty*), Marlen Khutsiev, 173 Min.

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