Burke: This is a deed of gift for the transcript of the interview. If you sign this you will give us the right to use the interview in our research. This document also protects your rights in how we use your interview.

Sorkina: Yes

Burke: We will be conducting an interview with you for a film project that is studying the social, political, and cultural history of Russia through film. We would like it if you could talk with us about your memories of going to the movies. We are especially interested in the details. In accordance with your answers we will write an essay, in which we will analyze the results of the questionnaire and write about the **experience of going** to the movies in Russia. The goal of this interview for us is to discover more about concrete people and the place of the movies in their lives. Thank you very much for your help and for your readiness to share your memories with us. This interview will be included for future listening on the film project’s website. If you’re not against it, let’s get started.

Sorkina: Let’s.

Burke: For the project, please tell us your first name, patronymic, and last name, and the year you were born.

Sorkina: My name is Victoria Mikhailovna Sorkina. I was born in 1975.

Burke: Thank you. Tell me about your first memories at the movies.

Sorkina: Do you mean the movie theater itself, or just the movies in general?

Burke: Either.

Sorkina: Either. (A black cat enters the room.) We don’t have any food. That’s interesting. Ok, a black cat.

Burke: Well, anything you’d like. The buildings or the films.

Sorkina: My very first memories. I think that…my very first memories about the movies are connected of course with my childhood. But as a child, when I was really very little, my family wasn’t used to it, there wasn’t a tradition of going to the movies…and therefore I usually watched cartoons at home. And in Russia there’s also that popular show “Good Night, Little Ones!”, that is, the program that kids watch. And it’s still on even now, this show. And my first memory about the movies, as you say, were of course cartoons. But what kinds were there earlier in Russia…we didn’t watch American cartoons or any other kind. Therefore we watched those typical Soviet, really good cartoons, which I love even to this day. That is, **they** were my first memory. And then, then, for sure, the movie theater started already in my school-age years. That is, when I was a student, my parents took me to the movies, and we also went to the movies with school. **Perhaps** when I was on vacation with my grandmother and grandfather, that is, in Sverdlovsk, but now that city is called Ekaterinburg. There was also a movie theater there. And I went to see only children’s films. This was my absolute first memory about the movies. And the first film I probably saw was *A First Grade Student*. Then it was really well known, and the book was also really well known. That’s what it’s called, *A First Grade Student*. And this was, let’s say, probably in my first years at school. Then, maybe I’ve already said, then I remember already another such big impression from the movies, when I went to the movie theater and saw the film *Roman Holiday*. You’ve probably seen this movie too?

Burke: I haven’t seen it, but I know it.

Sorkina: Yes, with the famous and magnificent Gregory Peck, right? And Audrey Hepburn. And this was a big impression on me, the big screen and a wonderful film, right, which I also saw on vacation. It was somehow fitting. That sounds about right. In school I didn’t go to the movies very often. But it’s possible this only strikes me because the other children went more often. I don’t know. What else?

Burke: Well, when did you go to the movies? Was it with your parents or your friends?

Sorkina: **When I was in school**? Well of course I went with my parents. There were also some sort of these school events, trips…trips to the movies with everyone from school together. But this…this I don’t remember very well. Then when I was already in high school, in the upper grades at school, when I was almost finishing school, I went to the movies with my friends. Yes. Well, it was probably just like that for everyone. I don’t know. I also remember a really big impact from the film...*Gone with the Wind*. Do you know that film or not? “Gone with the Wind?” *Gone with the Wind*? It was a really, really big impression. I’m sorry. It’s not important.

Burke: Excellent!

Sorkina: (phone rings) Yes? Yes. Can I call you back later? Yes. Sorry.

Burke: Did you watch many Soviet movies or only cartoons?

Sorkina: As a child, as a child…I just watched cartoons. Because all kids love ‘kids films,’ as we call them, cartoons. And there were also some sort of kids films that I remember, they were **great**. Yes, but what I watched as a child, these children’s movies, I don’t remember them well. I remember that I saw the film *The Adventures of Captain Grant* based on Jules Verne. Yes, that I remember well. There was also something. **I cannot quite recall though what it was.** Practically everything’s gone. Yes. I watched Soviet movies too. But for these at any rate, I think, I didn’t go to the movie theater. I saw them on television. But I know that, for example, my parents often went to the movies. They watched those movies that came out every time. Yes, a new film. For example those movies by Eldar Ryazanov and all other Soviet directors, who did something then, **filmed something .** But in order to watch Soviet films I don’t think I went to the movies. In any case, I don’t remember it. I remember when the movie *Moscow does not Believe in Tears* came out. I was just a young girl. And my parents went to the late showing of the film. When they came back, I was really interested in what it was about. And my mom told me the plot of the movie, just as well as she was able, because in general it’s hard for a little girl to understand what the movie’s about. As I understood it, there was a prince, as my mom explained to me then, and that the film’s about a princess. How a woman can become a princess. Right? Well, it was something like that. Later I watched that film when I was already a university student, I think.

Burke: When you saw that film was it on television?

Sorkina: I watched it on television, yes.

Burke: Well then, do you remember the movie theater buildings?

Sorkina: The buildings? Of course **I remember** the buildings. I don’t think that those movie theaters were really comfortable, like today. They were those really typical ones, all of them just like to others. But then I didn’t think about that. I remember that then there was a tradition, when I went to the movie theater I always ate ice cream. Yes, in America it’s popcorn, right? For example, now they also sell popcorn in the movie theater. But I remember, that then they sold ice cream. It was, as we say, part of the show. That is, a part of the whole experience. And it’s possible that for me, when I was young, it was actually even in general the main part. Because I don’t know what was more interesting, the ice cream or the movies. But in any case, of course, when you go and see the big screen, for you it’s like a miracle, magic. And in general you forget about everything**.** I remember, that yes there is still another memory. I remembered, that we went to the movies once with school, once a month. It was a that subscription, children’s film. I really loved that. But what precisely we watched, I remember that they were some sort of fairy tales. Maybe it was a film about Vasilisa the Wise. Yes? Well anyway, I don’t remember. That is, then there was just the impression, that it was the movies. But for some reason no one film has stuck in my memory…from that time.

Burke: In your youth, when you went to the movies with your friends and didn’t watch cartoons? What types of movies do you like?

Sorkina: Well, I liked and still like dramas, I like a good romantic comedy, I like thrillers. But for a thriller I don’t go the movies. I like alternative cinema. What is that? Well done artistic cinema with an alterative outlook, with the director’s own outlook on things. There, just like that. That is in my taste the films of Ingmar Bergman, and Woody Allen, and something of the type, I don’t know, of that Forman, Milos Forman. Yes? That is I like that classic, untraditional, good cinema.

Burke: Woody Allen and Ingmar Bergman that’s foreign art cinema. Did you also watch Russian art cinema?

Sorkina: Do you mean some Russian art cinema? Yes, of course, naturally, of course I’ve seen it. Or do you have in mind that I prefer to watch Russian cinema?

Burke: Do you remember?

Sorkina: Of course. I like Tarkovsky. Well, and went to see him at the movies. And now I also like to just watch Tarkovsky’s films wherever, even on my own laptop. Yes? **That is, what else from Russian classics**? Now I can’t say. Probably I’m more engrossed by foreign cinema. But that’s me. Maybe other Russians would say something completely different. That is, I prefer, probably, as it turned out, that my tastes congealed more around foreign directors. It seems that way to me. But there’s still one more name I can’t at all remember. Maybe you can kindle my memory – the taste of a pomegranate.

Burke: Pomegranate?

Sorkina: Yes. The taste of a pomegranate.

Burke: I don’t know.

Sorkina: It’s also a Russian director, but he, as we say, is of Armenian descent. If I remember I’ll tell you a bit later. Yeah…there’s no way, now way it’ll come to me. Of course I love Fellini’s films, and everything, for example, written by Tonino Guerra. There, probably something like that. I also like Chinese cinema. Now, this last time the very famous director Wong Kar-wai almost mesmerized me. And I’ve seen almost everything that he’s done. And that’s how it is.

Burke: And now, have you seen international art films like at Cannes, or festivals?

Sorkina: I follow them. I follow the festivals, and let’s say, those they invite there. And once not long ago I saw how the festival in Cannes was, and a director from Vietnam won there. And it was the first time for Vietnam, and the film is called *Uncle Boonmee.* There’s a long name for the film. **It seems** it’s something like *Uncle Boonmee* *and who he was in a Previous Life*. Something like that. I don’t exactly remember the title. But of course I really wanted to see this film, but it still hasn’t gone into Russian distribution. Let’s say. Also, of course I follow the festival in Berlin, at Cannes, I often watch the Oscar ceremonies. And I remember, that last time at Cannes, I think Pedro Almodovar won. Well, I don’t remember exactly. The time before…yes, I think it was the time before. I’m also interested in what happens, what the outcomes are at the Moscow festivals, but I can’t say that now Russian cinema is very successful. One can name very few directors, whom they would actually like to see. That’s how it is.

Burke: Do you know in St. Petersburg or, maybe, do you know movie theaters in which they, in which one can see international art films?

Sorkina: Actually international films about art, right? Yes, there are, do you have in mind art, like something, that there is, wasn’t let’s say like a blockbuster, right?

Burke: Not a blockbuster, like…

Sorkina: That is cinema like art cinema.

Burke: Yes.

Sorkina: **I think that there aren’t any theaters of precisely this kind. It does happen, that a film is playing, a film is showing in the theaters. For example, a director’s entire corpus. Yes, for example, in a movie theater of ours** all of Ingmar Bergman is showing, yes, the whole month. Yes. Of course, there’s also that movie theater, the Dom Kino. At the Dom Kino the classics are often showing. One can always watch something good. There are also festivals around the city. For example, the Polish film festival, Japanese film festival, American and so on. Or just a showing of a certain director. And there, yes, probably at the Movie House in St. Petersburg, most often of all you’ll see something serious.

Burke: Did you like to go to the festival?

Sorkina: I go often, yes. I happens that I go and often even watch some sort of classic, but it also happens that I watch something new. There, there it’s somehow like that. But when my friends really say to me, that there’s a good film and it’s worth seeing it, then I go too.

Burke: How else would you watch new films, if you didn’t want to watch blockbusters or popular films?

Sorkina: How else, what do I usually watch?

Burke: Yes.

Sorkina: Well, when it concerns blockbusters? Yes, that…I very rarely watch them. But if I watch, that’s most of all over the internet. Yes. And probably more than any other way. As far as this serious cinema is concerned, like I already said generally I go to the movie theaters. Or again I watch something at home. That’s more often, of course, at home. But also at the movie theater. But for blockbusters I really don’t go.

Burke: Now you didn’t go to the movie theater because you don’t like new films or movie theaters as they are now, or is it something else?

Sorkina: It’s hard to say. I go, but not very often, probably because there just isn’t time. Generally, you remember, that you can watch a given film at home and in general you’re lazy to get up and go. Generally…generally it’s like that, that you go and you can take some sort of little piece of your time and devote it anyway to going to the movie theater. I think that because of that now it’s more comfortable to watch everything at home. There’s no time for going there. But it happens that I do go. Yes, that is, I would probably say, possibly, 50% or 70% of the time I watch at home and the remaining 30% I watch at the movie theater. I go to the movie theater, when it’s that sort of mood and when I know that there’s a film that I would really like to watch on the big screen, let’s say. Because there are films that are just hard to watch on the little screen. For example, there was that, I think two or three years ago, was that film out *The Island*. The well made movie, *The Island*, maybe you’ve heard about it. With Peter Mamonov. There, and I went to the movies. Because it’s not always good to watch a movie on television or over the internet, for some you need a big screen for it. That’s from these considerations.

Burke: Do you think, that you prefer to watch the same genres now as…

Sorkina: Just the same. I think that there’s a tendency in that, I think. Well, of course as a child you watch everything that interests you, and it interests you with what it ends. That is you’re interested in the ending. Therefore you can watch adventure films – you’re always interested in a fairy tale. ***When young maybe I watched romantic films more often.*** Like all young girls, right? Who love romantic stories. But now that I’m already, let’s say, in my grown-up years, I watch more for the quality of the film. And the director is even more important to me, rather than that. That is it’s important to me how it’s done. Of course genre, of course, one might even say not genre, but rather say simply that it’s for the topic of the movie. Let’s say, it’s more about how the film speaks to me. But it seems to me, that the great directors, they always explore, talk about the timeless. About timeless themes, timeless questions for which they don’t have answers. And since, most of all it’s generally never important what genre it’s made as. But it is important how it’s done, and about what, let’s say, and that’s that.

Burke: Do you like directors more than genres?

Sorkina: Than genres, of course. I select a director regardless of the genre because it might be a really good genre, but the film turns out to be completely uninteresting.

Burke: But what films don’t you like?

Sorkina: Actively don’t like, actively?

Burke: Yes

Sorkina: I don’t like movies that are made for, how to say…the general audience of people. Movies that…when the director plays with the audience. And when we know that they’ll be here everyone cries, and when they’ll be here everyone laughs. And this I don’t like, because the last time Mikhalkov works on this, let’s say, on these tropes…such patterns, right? That means they use this trope. And I don’t like this, when everything is all, let’s say, painfully mundane. Yes, and when it’s all made for the general populace, for the common people and so on, that is, I don’t like that right now, the popular Russian theme, let’s say, of who we are, that is what sort of people all Russians are, right? That is, I don’t like these techniques. And yes, there I don’t like films that are made for everyone, let’s say. I don’t like movies where you don’t have to think. And in general, where you know that here you have to cry a little and here you have to laugh a little. And overall, it just doesn’t interest me.

Burke: Well, okay, have you seen new movies, like *Burnt by the Sun* *2* or *Admiral*? New Russian films?

Sorkina: I saw *Admiral*, but I didn’t see *Burnt by the Sun 2* because it didn’t interest me, what Mikhalkov did, because I know that it’s not high art cinema, I know, that earlier Mikhalkov made outstanding films, he’s an outstanding actor, and a very good director, but now it’s not so simple, and he’s completely concentrated on this Russian Orthodox idea, and it’s all very rough. There, and I don’t like these tendentious, false films. There it apropos of…apropos of Mikhalkov. Apropos of *The Admiral*, I saw it, but in general I also think that it’s completely done, let’s say, like black and white, somehow completely for the masses. I think that it isn’t Kolchak’s story. I think that it has practically nothing in common with what happened then. Because it’s like so, and the tendency, earlier old films were against the whites, against the white guards, right? For the reds. Now they’re making films against the reds, right? Against the communists, for the white guards, right? Well, in any case it’s all very narrow. And you can never confine it into some sort of formula. Kolchak was too complex of a person for such a simplistic film. Besides, the film deals with lives of female characters and for me it looked ridiculous how the film handled that aspect of the plot.

Burke: And what do you think about the difference between new movies like *The Admiral* and old movies, like *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* or *The Irony of Fate*.

Sorkina: Well, the entire thing is in the director, let’s say, since because *The Irony of Fate* was made by Vladimir Menshov, it seems to me that it’s an excellent film and made very well. And the entire matter, on the first level, is in the screenplay, and secondly, in the actors, and of course in the entire story. And it seems to me that *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* is an excellent Soviet film, where, in general it’s half comedy, sure, and half drama, I don’t really know but in any case, there’s no kitchiness[[1]](#footnote-1) there, and I would say that. And in general in Soviet cinema, in good Soviet cinema, it was different from this, and it’s possible, yes possible, that now it seems a little funny, but it seems to me that even now, if some, even a foreigner were to see this cinema, that they would like it because these were films of high quality. Good directors who are able to deliver now and were able to then too. As far as new cinema is concerned now, it has in general no relation at all to good artistic cinema. Unfortunately. That’s my opinion, because now everything is done quickly, in order to please, let’s say, it’s necessary that it be film in favor of the government, in order to please first of all the government, there, and this tendency is outlined by this very stringent, streamlined cinema, which anyone in general can understand. Right? And in general I don’t think that, how to say, that this is cinema on which I need to spend time to see. Although now there’s also good cinema, probably, but possibly not in this large scope, like it was before, but really it can’t be like that, since there just weren’t good directors. That is, there is something, but mostly, let’s say, in small portions. Probably because there exists the tendency, that cinema always exists, just like any form of art, it’s just like some sort of flow, right, and ebb, like when sometime there was that period in Italy, right, of good cinema, when Antonioni, Fellini, etc. were working. Today when watching Italian cinema there’s practically nothing interesting. And it’s just the same in Russia, there was such a time, now, probably, we’re on a break. That’s what I think.

Burke: Well, I think that that’s everything I can ask, but do you have something you would like to ask me, or something you’d like to say?

Sorkina: Ask, yes, I would like to ask whether there exists now in America alternative cinema, for example, like you’re thinking of?

Burke: I often watch alternative movies, in America, I know that we have those kind of directors, who make movies for the festivals, like Cannes, or Sundance, but I rarely watch these movies…

Sorkina: What do you like?

Burke: I don’t remember something, but I think, that that aspect of culture in America is called “Indie,” it’s alternative culture, which now exists as popular and new movies like *Juno*. That was two or three years ago. It’s a really popular movie, but anyway, I don’t know how to say this in Russian, but it (shows) aspects from this culture.

Sorkina: Understood. I would also like to ask, what do Americans like from our movies?

Burke: I think that, unfortunately, it’s really just blockbusters, like American movies, which in Russia, it’s like big American movies and…

Sorkina: No, no, I would like to know, what do Americans like in Russian cinema?

Burke: In Russian cinema! Sure, it’s rare that Americans watched Russian cinema before 1990 and then, I think that if…if someone already knows something about Russia, they might watch Mikhalkov’s films, or old movies like *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* or *Irony of Fate*[[2]](#footnote-2) would…would be more rare than *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*, but I think that many Americans have never seen Russian movies.

Sorkina: Yes, certainly, but it’s really hard to find Russian who’ve not seen American movies, because with us now American cinema has such a draw, I would say, of the American blockbuster in Russia. Because in the theaters and on television, there’s a lot of American movies. Probably because in Russian now they are making so few movies. They’re only making a few new Russian films, and it’s these that are shown over and over again on television.Well anyway, something like that.

Burke: Well, you know I think that directors like Mikhalkov want to make Russian films like American blockbusters.

1. In her 1994 book *Common Places* (Harvard University Press) Svetalana Boym defines poshlost’ as “the Russian version of banality, with a characteristic national flavoring of metaphysics and high morality, and a peculiar conjunction of the sexual and the spiritual. This one word encompasses triviality, vulgarity, sexual promiscuity, and a lack of spirituality. The war against poshlost’ was a cultural obsession of the Russian and Soviet intelligentsia from the 1860s to 1960s” (41). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Here Burke references the film as *Enjoy Your Bath*, a common alternate title for the film *The Irony of Fate*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)