CINEMATOGRAPHIC STYLE IN SOVIET FILM

ARDEN RASMUSSEN

Soviet era films were either approved by the government, or they where suppressed by the government. The primary distinction between these different sets of films was their portrayal of soviet society, and communist ideals. Many of the films that were suppressed by the government were critical of soviet society, or they could be interpreted as critical of society. The films that were officially supported by the government, there was no possible way to interpret them as critical of soviet society, they were inarguably pro communism. Soviet films of the 1970-1980s possess two distinct cinematographic style. Films which have been categorized as non-approved films share a simpler cinematographic style, which is distance from the style government approved films.

Camera movement represents an important role in modern film, and in the early days of film, cameras were not able to be moved as freely. In many of the earliest films, most of the scenes consisted of static wide camera, because it was not possible for easy camera motion or angling. The cinematography of films can be split into three different components, the angle, the distance, and the cameras movement. The combinations of these components distinguish different types of cinematography. Each of the different components of the framing can be used to affect ones interpretation of the film. For example, a camera that is very mobile could infer a more fast paced scene, or a more frantic one.

In non-approved films, such as those by German, specifically *Hard to be a God*(2013), use large amounts of motion, lots of not straight framing, and significantly more dynamic and active camera motion, to convey an air of confusion, and disorientation. Contrastingly films that were approved by the government such as Viktorov's *Per Aspera Ad Astra*(1981), primary use table cameras, and smooth directed motion, resulting in a more grounded and clear film. Although these films came out at significantly different dates, *Hard to be a God* exemplifies Aleksei German's cinematographic style which he had already developed by his earlier films, and in his film *My Friend Ivan Lapshin*(1984), which is a contemporary of *Per Aspera Ad Astra*, also clearly demonstrates this cinematographic style.

Outline

Per Aspera Ad Astra was clearly a critique of capitalist society, it is clear that the planet Dessa represents a capitalist society, which needed to be saved by the superior technology of the communist Earth. This clear support of communism and critique of capitalism is why this film was approved by the government, as it at no point raised any questions about communism.

Hard to be a God is not unabashedly supportive of communist society. In fact, there are many connections that can be made to the film directly commenting on the shortcomings of communism and the soviet union. Throughout the film there is a connection from the Greys and the Blacks to the Soviet union and the government leaders. This relatively clear critique on soviet society and communist ideals would have clearly resulted in this film being disapproved of by the government.

Camera stability. HG is very shaky, and appears to be hand held, and lots of movement, while PAAA was very stable, and for the most part either appeared to

be on a tripod, or a dolly, but for the most part it was stationary or a simple pan. The instability of HG results in a more chaotic feeling film. This chaotic feeling results in some estrangement, forcing the viewer to more actively pay attention to what is happening causing more critical though, this forced attention that the viewer must allows for a more nuanced critique of soviet society.

Framing. All camera motion in PAAA is intended to keep the focus in frame at all times. In HG the camera appears to have a mind of its own, frequently loosing attention and drifting off of the main focus. The cameras tendency to leave the focus, and to wanders about the scene, or the number of times that the camera was obstructed by a different object, or other characters, removed the ability for passive viewing of the film. Without the ability to view the film passively forces the audience to more closely consider the social critiques of that are presented in the film. The audience is no longer able to passively view the movie and enjoyed as a mindless spectator, but they are required to think about the meaning and commentary that is presented in the film.

- PAAA In their house the camera moves very slowly and deliberately. A clear example of this is (16:25-16:50) the camera moves across a small room very slowly and smoothly, primarily to keep the mothers face in frame.
- I need to find a specific instance where HG has the camera wander off in to some random direction.

Use of 4th wall break? In both films the characters often look directly at the camera, but only in HG do the characters actively interact with the camera, there are many instances of characters tapping on or waving at the camera. This makes the viewer feel more like a part of the action, and that the are another character in

the film. The placement of the view as another character of the film, encourages the viewer to consider how they would feel if they live in that kind of society, and how they would react to the connections to communism and the soviet union. The placement of the view in the film, provides a better connection to with their current lives and they are better able to relate the critiques that the film presents to their modern lives, and consider how it effects them personally.

- Opening shots from HG with people in street making motions to camera
- Right after he wakes up on the street, I'm pretty sure that someone tapped on the camera.
- PAAA Will very occasionally place the camera in the point of view of a character, this is most clearly one with the octopus thing, that they are transporting (58:35).

Conclusion

The soviet films that were critical of communist society, employ a number of cinematographic techniques that are intended to cause estrangement in the user, and providing a better relation between the viewer and the world that is depicted in the film. This estrangement and the confusion caused by the cameras motion force the viewer to consider the social critique that has been presented in the film. Contrastingly films that were government approved, and were primarily critical of capitalist society, allowed the user to more passively view the film, and did not require any additional consideration on the viewers part.

The cinematographic style of the films that were critical of soviet society, were commonly the same, this style is clearly represented in German's films. This style of film forces the viewer to more actively engage in the film, and removed the ability

for passive viewing leading to a more critical consideration of the social commentary that is presented in the film. It has been noticed that this style of cinematography is similar to American films of the time that were critical of American society. This is reasonable as all the of the techniques are not directly commenting on any specific society, but are instead forcing the audience to more critically think about the film that they are watching So it would make sense that the same techniques could be used to encourage critique of any society.