

Irina Anisimova

Three-Year course evaluation RUS 306

Russian History through Film

Course Description

RUS 306 uses films produced in the Soviet Union to explore Soviet social and cultural history. The course approaches film as a historical source capable of providing a window onto the past experiences. Students learn about the key events and periods in twentieth-century Russia, such as Stalinism, World War II, Cold War, the Thaw, Stagnation, and Perestroika. Students learn how to treat cinematic representations, place them in their historical contexts of production and reception and explore them critically. The course focuses on the current films as a reflection of the past, that represent hopes, political and aesthetic ideals and material realities of the contemporaries of these films, but it also considers historical dramas that represent the reinterpretation of the past in the given historical moment. The course focuses on the most famous films, that are often seen as the key films of Soviet cinema. Therefore, these films provide an important reflection of Soviet history and culture, and serve as important cultural reference points.

Course Structure

This is a short course for masters students. The students are introduced to Soviet films in their socio-historical contexts. The course starts with Stalinist cinema. It goes over the cinema of the Thaw, Stagnation, and Perestroika. This year the syllabus also included Aleksei Balabanov's *Brother* from the 1990s. The course met three times in the spring of 2020, and five times in the spring of 2021. The majority of meetings took place online via Zoom, with some additional class meetings.

The course combines short lectures with seminar discussions of the films that students watch at home before class. Course instruction is primarily in Russian, accompanied by PowerPoint slides that include English translations for clarification.

Course Materials

Students watch 7 films belonging to different periods, for the list of the films, see attached course schedule. The films were available on Youtube and on GoogleDrive. In addition to watching the films, the students have to read *Russian Cinema Reader*, volume I and II, see course schedule. Two volumes of *Russian Cinema Reader* are a collection of articles by prominent film scholars published by Academic Studies Press. The volume covers historical periods and has articles on different cultural and historical periods, as well as individual articles on each film watched in the course.

Course Assignments

Course assignments consist of an oral presentation and a take-home exam. The presentation has to be in Russian, and the students have to consult with the instructor in choosing their presentation topic. The students also learn Russian terms to prepare for the presentation. In the first year, students' presentations focused on the films from the syllabus.

Students write take home exam over a week. The exam consists of an essay between 3000 and 4000 words in length. The first year, the exam consisted of 3 separate essays, which had to be combined into one file. For each of these essays, students had to choose one film and discuss the films in their historical contexts. I found that the assignment of three essays was too challenging, so this year the assignment was changed to one essay that would compare two films from two historical periods and to discuss the films in their historical context. Both times students were able to choose the films they wanted to discuss in their essays, but the choice was limited by the list of films we watched for the course.

Because this year students had more advanced prior knowledge of Russian cinema, they have selected the films outside of the syllabus.

Learning outcomes

As a short course, it can only serve as an introduction to the topics of Russian film and Russian history. Nevertheless, the students can get an overview of the most significant Soviet films, as well as significant developments and changes in cinematic style. These films provide important background knowledge for Russian culture. Students will be able to write and discuss basic film analysis with the emphasis on cultural and historical context. Students can also review and reexamine cultural and social trends in different periods of Soviet history, such as Stalinism, the Thaw, Stagnation, and Perestroika.

Course Evaluations

In their evaluations, students suggested that they could benefit from more meetings for the course, but this is a shorter course that had to be offered in the current format. The students positively assess the course. However, they point out that the course is too short to cover the material in depth. Given more time, it would be possible to have more time for film analysis and to include more films from each historical period, as well as films belonging to different genres. Online teaching was not ideal, but the course still worked fine in spite of online teaching.

Conclusion

While short, the course can serve as a good introduction to Soviet cinema and as a brief overview of Soviet history. Generally, students were quite happy with the course. Some

students expressed the wish that the material could be covered in more depth, yet, that would require additional course hours. The course would work better with physical teaching, but was still fine as a primarily online course. In comparison with the first year, some adjustments were made to address the difficulties with the take home exam last year.

Appendix: Course schedule

Расписание курса: RUS306, History through Film

Учебники

1. Salys, Rimgaila. Ed. *The Russian Cinema Reader: 1908 to the Stalin Era*. Vol. 1. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013. (RCRV1).
2. Salys, Rimgaila. Ed. *The Russian Cinema Reader: The Thaw to the Present*. Vol. 2. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013 (RCRV2).

Среда, 27 Января

Введение: Советская история и кино

Среда, 10 Февраля

Чтение:

Lilya Kaganovsky "Stalinist Cinema 1928-1953" [RCRV1 pp.208-234], Rimgaila Salys "Chapaev" [RCRV1 pp.235-239], Steven Hutchings "Chapaev" [RCRV1 pp.240-243], Oksana Bulgakova "The Elements and Consciousness: The Commander and the Commissar" [RCRV1 pp.245-248], Rimgaila Salys "Circus" [RCRV1 pp.250-251] (43 pages)

Фильмы:

Братья Васильевы, *Чапаев* (1934), 97 минут

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6KDKMgALps>

Григорий Александров, *Цирк* (1936) 97 минут

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVAN0A6OWE4>

Среда, 24 Февраля

Чтение:

Aleksandr Prokhorov, "Cinema of the Thaw 1953-1967" [RCRV2 pp.14-31], Rimgaila Salys "The Cranes are Flying" [RCRV2 pp.32-37], Rimgaila Salys "Wings" [RCRV2 pp.67-70], Tatiana Mikhailova and Mark Lipovetsky "Flight Without Wings: The Subjectivity of a Female War Veteran in Larisa Shepit'ko's *Wings*" [RCRV2 pp.70-83] (39 pages)

Фильмы:

Михаил Калатозав, *Летят журавли* (1957) 97 минут

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCPzozGveGI>

Лариса Шепитько, *Крылья* (1966) 82 минут

Среда, 10 Марта

Чтение:

Elena Prokhorova, "Cinema of Stagnation: Late 1960s-1985" [RCRV2 pp.104-113],
Rimgaila Salys "*Moscow does not Believe in Tears*" [RCRV2 pp.174-178], Vida Johnson
and Elena Stishova "Perestroika and Post-Soviet Cinema 1985-2000s" [RCRV2 pp.190-
208], Rimgaila Salys "*Little Vera*" [RCRV2 pp.228-230] (33 pages)

Фильмы:

Владимир Меньшов, *Москва слезам не верит* (1979) 145 минут

Василий Пичуль, *Маленькая Вера* (1988) 110 минут

Среда, 21 Апреля

Чтение:

Rimgaila Salys "*Brother*" [RCRV2 pp.257-260] Birgit Beumers, "*Brother*" [RCRV2
pp.261-270]

Фильм:

Алексей Балабанов, *Брат* (1997) 99 минут

**Презентации