History 201: The Historian's Craft
Film and Censorship in the Soviet Union

Fall 2025
Tuesdays 11am – 12:55pm
Humanities 5245

Still from *Solaris,* dir. Andrei Tarkovsky (1975).

Emily Lobenstein
Department of History
elobenstein@wisc.edu
Office Hours: Wednesdays 10-12 and by appointment (both in-person and virtual)
Office: Mosse Humanities Building

Course Description

Long considered simply propaganda, Soviet film is, in fact, a rich source of both artistic value and historical understanding. Soviet filmmakers navigated the challenges of state censorship, material shortages, and creative isolation while striving to create engaging entertainment within an authoritarian regime. This course will look at the nearly seventy-year history of the Soviet Union through the lens of the films produced during its tenure and the laws and discourse surrounding the censorship and release of said films. We will consider these films as historical records in their own right; they reflect the ideas and currents of their time, offering a more nuanced understanding of life under the regime than traditional narratives suggest. We will examine how Soviet life was presented through film and discuss the impact of censorship and how events occurring both within and outside the Soviet Union impacted the tone, style, and content of the films produced by Soviet directors.

Format

This course meets once a week. Students should expect to watch films and complete readings on their own in preparation for each week's meeting. Each meeting will be

comprised of a short lecture, discussion, and skill-building activities. Students will be required to post a short, weekly response to Canvas the evening before class.

Course Objectives –

- Identify key concepts and themes in the history of the Soviet Union
- Be able to analyze and identify primary and secondary sources
- Conduct original research using the methods of professional historians
- Communicate research findings through written work, discussion, and oral presentations
- Engage critically with film as a primary source and analyze it from a historical perspective -
- Develop historical questions through engagement with primary sources, secondary literature, and/or broader ethical, theoretical, or political questions
- Identify the purposes, limitations, authorities, and parameters of various search engines available both through the library and on the world-wide web.

Credit Statement

The credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit), which include regularly scheduled instructor/student meeting times, reading, writing, and independent research. You must come meet with me at least once during my office hours (or at another scheduled time) this semester.

Accommodations and Resources

McBurney Disability Resource Center

"The University of Wisconsin – Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12), and UW-Madison policy (Faculty Document 1071) require that students with disabilities be reasonably accommodated in instruction and campus life. Reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities is a shared faculty and student responsibility. Students are expected to inform faculty [me] of their need for instructional accommodations by the end of the third week of the semester, or as soon as possible after a disability has been incurred or recognized. Faculty [I], will work either directly with the student [you] or in coordination with the McBurney Center to identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA." http://mcburney.wisc.edu/facstaffother/faculty/syllabus.php

Institutional statement on diversity

"Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for UW-Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. The University of Wisconsin-Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world."
https://diversity.wisc.edu/

Readings/Films
There are no required books to purchase however I will occasionally ask you to print certain texts from canvas.
All readings will be uploaded to Canvas. Films will be available as links on Canvas.

Academic Integrity and AI Policy

> *By virtue of enrollment, you agree to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin-Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary action include, but is not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension, or expulsion.*
>
> For detailed information, please see https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/
>
> Students should not use AI for any part of this course (including brainstorming, outlining and drafting). Writing is a muscle. If you don't train it, it won't get stronger. For the same reason you wouldn't send a robot to work out for you in the gym, you are not allowed to use AI for any portion of this course (yes, including brainstorming). The more you practice each part of the research and writing process, the better you get and the more second nature it becomes.

Assignments/Grades – all assignments must be emailed to me. I will return paper copies to you with grades and comments.
Written Assignments
Students will complete six written assignments: a research proposal (600 words), a research paper outline (1 page), one primary source analysis (3 pages), an annotated bibliography, a rough draft (12-15 pages), and a final draft (12-15 pages) of an original research paper. Assignments should be uploaded on time. Extensions will be considered for disability accommodation and in the event of personal hardship.

Oral Presentations
Students will give two presentations over the course of the semester. The first will be a brief summary of the student's research proposal and the second will be a presentation of the student's completed research at the end of the semester.

Participation and weekly responses
Students will be expected to attend all discussions and to post a weekly response on canvas. These responses will be more casual reactions to the films that will ask students to take on the role of filmgoer.

Final grades will be calculated accordingly:
Participation – 20%
Proposal – 5%
Outline – 5%
Primary Source Analysis – 10%

Annotated Bibliography – 10%
Rough Draft – 10%
Peer Review – 5%
Oral Presentations – 5% each
Final Paper – 25%

Grading Scale:
A = 92.5-100
AB = 87.5-92.4
B = 82.5-87.4
BC = 77.5-82.4
C = 70-77.4
D = 60-69.9
F = below 60

Schedule

Week Zero (9/3)
- No meeting/reading this week!

Week One (9/9)
Discussion: syllabus, introductions, what is censorship?
Reading: none!
Activity: important film term worksheet

Week Two (9/16)
Discussion: "Revolution and Civil War", film as history maker
Film: *Battleship Potemkin* (directed by Sergei Eisenstein, 1925)
Reading: Eduard M. Dune, *Notes of a Red Guard*, ed. and trans. Diane P. Koenker and S. A. Smith (1993), pp. 27-87; Jason Hellerman, "Who is Sergei Eisenstein, and What Was Soviet Montage Theory?," (2021).
Activity: types of sources and how to use them

Week Three (9/23)
Discussion: "Living the Revolution and its Aftermath"
Film: *Bed and Sofa* (directed by Abram Room, 1927)
Reading: V. I. Lenin, "The New Economic Policy" (1921); Svetlana Boym, "Welcome to the Communal Apartment," in *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (1994), 139-144; Alexandra Kollontai, *Love of Worker Bees* (1924); Anirudh Deshpande, "Films as Historical Sources or Alternative History" (2004).
Activity: what is historiography? How to annotate reading

Week Four (9/30)
Discussion: "Stalin and the Rewriting of the Revolution"
Film: *Lenin in October* (directed by Mikhail Romm and Dmitri Vasilyev, 1937)

Reading: Lev Kopelev, "The Education of a True Believer" (1933); Karl Schloegel, *Moscow 1937* (2012), p. TBA; *The Testament of Lenin* (1923)
Activity: asking historical questions

Week Five (10/7) – **Make appointment with me for next week to discuss paper topic!**

Discussion: sharing project ideas!
Film: No film this week!
Reading: none!
Activity: visit to the Wisconsin Historical Society
Due: Primary Source Analysis Paper

Week Six (10/14)

Discussion: "The Great Patriotic War"
Film: *The Vow* (directed by Mikheil Chiaureli, 1946) and *Life at the Zoo* (1946)
Reading: Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1983), p. TBA; *Memorandum in Russian from Joseph Stalin about opening a second front in Europe during World War II, with English translation of same,* 13 August 1942; peruse the official Oscar site for the 19th Academy Award, 1947 (link on canvas).
Activity: writing thesis statements; analyzing scenes and posters

Week Seven (10/21)

- **Discussion:** "Another rewriting: destalinization and portraying the recent Soviet past"
- **Film:** *The Cranes are Flying* (directed by Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957)
- **Reading:** Nikita Khruschev, "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences" (1956)
- **Activity:** Research Proposal Presentations!
- **Due: Research Proposal**

Week Eight (10/28)

- **Discussion:** "Stagnation? Re-Stalinization?"
- **Film:** *Viy* (directed by Konstantin Yershov and Georgi Kropachyov, 1967) -or- *Solaris* (directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972) -or- *Office Romance* (directed by Eldar Ryazanov, 1977)
- **Reading:** TBA
- **Activity**: thinking about genre film, structuring an essay, bibliography activity
- **Due: Outline**

Week Nine (11/4)

- **Discussion:** "The Soviet Union in the Global Imagination"
- **Film:** *Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears* (directed by Vladimir Menshov, 1979) -and- linked compilation of Ivan Drago scenes from *Rocky IV* (directed by Sylvester Stallone, 1985) – **feel free to watch the whole movie but not required!**
- **Reading:** Vincent Canby, "Film: The Oscar Winner from Moscow Opens," *New York Times,* May 8th, 1981; Joaquín Saravia, "Good vs. Evil: The Construction of Soviet 'Otherness' in Rocky IV," (2020)
- **Activity:** using sources to prove your argument
- **Due: Annotated Bibliography**

Week Ten (11/11)

- **Discussion:** "Russo-centrism and the Soviet peripheries"

- **Film:** *Color of the Pomegranates* (directed by Sergei Parajanov, 1969) -and- *Wind* (directed by Robert Sahakyants, 1988)
- **Reading:** Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations,* (2005), p 145-186.
- **Activity:** how to give and receive feedback
- **Due: Research Paper Rough Draft (you will be graded solely on completion for this paper)**

Week Eleven (11/18)
- **Discussion:** "Perestroika, Glasnost, Collapse"
- **Film:** *Little Vera* (directed by Vasili Pachul, 1988)
- **Reading:** Agata Pyzik, "Dark art for dark times" in *Poor but Sexy: Culture Clashes in Europe East and West* (2014), 62-65; Mikhail Gorbachev, "Speech to the Supreme Soviet," October 2, 1988; Boris Yeltsin, "Address to the Russian People," August 19th, 1991
- **Activity:** peer review worksheet

Week Twelve (11/25) – Emily out of town due to conference, no in-person meeting this week!
- **Discussion:** "Movies for Kids – pure propaganda?"
- **Film:** *Hedgehog in the Fog* (directed by Yuri Norstein, 1975) -and- *Vinnie Pookh* (directed by Fyodor Khitruk, 1969)
- **Due: Long-form discussion post**

Week Thirteen (12/2)

-Final Presentations-

Week Thirteen (12/9)

-Final Presentations-

Final Paper due during Exam Period