

Imagining Stagnation: the Twig Light of the Soviet Union in Contemporary Russian Cinema

The last five years have seen a growing interest in the “long 1970s”, not only as an object of nostalgia, but also as a point of reference for interpreting the political situation in contemporary Russia. Drawing parallels between Putin’s reign and the era of “stagnation” under Leonid Brezhnev has become a common place, especially among members of the political opposition. Although the legitimacy of such parallels is occasionally questioned, most political and social scientists agree that the 1970s loom large in Russia’s social consciousness. According to the editors of the journal *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, which recently devoted a separate issue to the Brezhnev era, the 1970s even have become the “main instrument for legitimizing the present state of affairs in Russia”.

Given this striking interest in and reappraisal of the 1970s during the Putin administration, the question arises how this has affected the depiction of the Brezhnev era, and particularly its *byt*, in TV-series and contemporary cinema. Does the viewer still get any idea of the dreariness of everyday life with which the “long 1970s” became associated in the late 1980s and early 1990s? Are TV makers capable of evoking a sense of “timelessness” or “eternity,” which many people remember as one of the era’s defining features, or do these directors and screenplay writers present a world that is clearly destined to disappear? While there is an impressive number of drama series that are situated in the stagnation era, in this paper I will confine myself to four films that purport to depict Soviet life under Brezhnev and his immediate successors (Andropov and Chernenko) “as it really was”: *Zavist’ bogov* (Men’shov, 2000), the new year melodrama *32-ogo dekabria* (Muratov, 2004), the biopic *Brezhnev* (Snezhkin, 2005) and *Gruz 200* (Balabanov, 2007). Despite their generic heterogeneity, these films betray a shared interest in turning the “spirit of the times” into a theme in its own right.

My approach to these films is informed, first, by a simple observation made by various film historians and narratologists (for example, Seymour Chatman), namely that film is “overly specific” and requires the filling in of various details that literature can leave unspecified; and, second, by a paradox defined and analyzed by Alexei Yurchak in his recent book *Everything Was Forever, Until it Was No More* (2006) that the collapse of the Soviet Union was “...unimaginable before it began, [but] appeared unsurprising when it happened”. How do the aforementioned films resolve the tension between depicting a world that was perceived as “eternal” on one hand, and on the other hand, the “omniscience” of the post-Soviet viewer who knows that he is looking at the past? This is the central question underlying my presentation.

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