Public Engagement and the State of Attraction

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MARIA KOROLKOVA

ABSTRACT

This articles discusses various strategies and curatorial practises around adapting Russian Film Heritage for contemporary public audiences in the UK.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Maria Korolkova

University of Greenwich, GB

m.korolkova@gre.ac.uk

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On the same day that I was packing my bags to go up to St Andrews for the *Slavic Studies Goes Public* workshop, I was invited to engage the public by giving an introduction to a wonderful Soviet musical comedy, *A Man from the Boulevard des Capucines* (1987), as part of the BFI *Musicals!* season, which took place at various London venues in January 2020. Forced to decline this invitation due to my travel commitments, I nonetheless spent the journey to Scotland re-watching the film and writing *a programme note*, which was circulated to the audience during the screening, while the filmmaker and writer Hope Dickson Leach gave a live introduction in my absence. This coincidence made me realize how much work is necessary to prepare for public engagement material that might be familiar to us through research. Indeed, while this Soviet musical is a delight to watch on its own, to package a screening of it as a public engagement activity entails coming up with a lot of extra materials: an attractive venue, relevant speakers to introduce it, a programme note, a trailer for the season, posters, post-event drinks, and so on. As I was absorbing the presentations about others' public engagement activities at the workshop, I wondered whether these extra materials to attract the public—let us call them "attractions"—were indeed a necessary condition for the success of public engagement? Surprisingly, the answer is hidden in the film.

A Man from the Boulevard des Capucines (Russian: *Chelovek s bulvara Kaputsinov*) alludes directly to the Lumière brothers and their first cinema screening, famously projected onto the walls of a building on the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris in 1895. The film's protagonist, Mr First, is a travelling cinematographer. While attending the first film screening in Paris, he is mesmerized by the beauty of this new art and decides to dedicate his life to spreading it to all corners of the world—a rather commendable public engagement goal. We then follow him to his first stop in the small town of Santa Carolina in the American West (shot, as with many exotic locations in Soviet films, in Crimea), where town life is turned upside down by the arrival of Mr First's film projector. Educated by the power of cinema, the hard-drinking, hard-fighting, hard-swearing cowboys of Santa Carolina give up their bad habits and swap whiskey for milk, bar-room brawls for culture and small talk, and time-wasting for daily cinema visits. Does this not qualify Mr First's efforts as a successful public engagement project? Could he not have packaged them into a brilliant impact case study, were he operating in the university context today?

As a curator of *several seasons and events on Russian and Soviet films across Europe and the UK*, and a film critic who attends such public screenings regularly, I often find myself envying Mr First and his public engagement talents. While all he had to do in order to attract the public was to proclaim "Ladies and Gentlemen, come to see the biggest attraction of our time, the cinematograph! It can change your life!", academics engaged in curatorial and public-facing activities today have to come up with myriad "extra attractions", which at times are only distantly related to the theme of the screening itself. Among such "attractions" and attempts to draw audiences in the UK to Slavic Studies-curated content, just in the past few years, I have witnessed high-profile dinners with VIP audiences and TV stars attending *Russian Film Week*, elaborate *private supper clubs* arranged around a film's theme, screenings with a *live symphony orchestra* and *experimental sound* accompaniments, and—probably the most extreme example of elitist curation—the fully functioning visa centre (complete with applications, rejections, and renewals) that one had to go through to attend the screening of *DAU* by Ilya Khrzhanovsky in Paris in 2019.

On entering the public realm, academics and creative practitioners also engage in a battle for public attention, something that has become especially challenging in the age of digital media and the attention economy—not to mention with the pandemic reshaping the cultural landscape as we speak. In the privileged cultural environments of many of the places where we operate, the appetite for such "attractions" is high. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "attraction" as a "thing or feature which draws people by appealing to their desires, tastes". Yet people's tastes are a fluid matter, and I tend to believe that it is the task of today's academics to influence these too, rather than simply to appeal to them.

The case of Kino Klassika Foundation, a UK cultural charity that is dedicated to creating programmes "*of restorations, publications, art commissions and events to spotlight Russian language cinema—a tradition that remains largely invisible to audiences outside of Russia*", is telling. It was launched in 2015, when very few members of the UK public had an articulated desire to watch Russian movies. As the founder Justine Waddell commented in the *Evening Standard*, "If I type in Eisenstein on my computer it auto-corrects to Einstein! [...] Russia has a film tradition still

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largely invisible outside of Russia." Since then, Kino Klassika has engaged a team of academics and creative professionals, including myself in several instances, to showcase both rare and classical examples of Russian-language cinema, not just to broaden the knowledge of UK audiences but also to shift their desires in the direction of this unfamiliar material. Having gone through a stage of attracting certain privileged publics by appealing to their preferences for the trappings of "high-end" cultural experiences—such as private screenings, prestigious sponsors, and exclusive locations like Soho House and the Electric Cinema in London—Kino Klassika abandoned this elitist strategy in favour seeking more diverse audiences and emphasizing the power of the films' content. In February 2021, it launched a subscription-based online streaming service, *Klassiki Online*, the main attraction of which is its content—classic cinema from Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Apparently subscription numbers are soaring. Yet it would have been impossible for the Foundation to reach the same numbers so quickly without that initial stage of gaining recognition through a number of bespoke events.

A Man from the Boulevard des Capucines, which I was invited to introduce as a part of Kino Klassika's programming back in 2020, became a Soviet box office hit in 1987 not because of any extra features attached to its screening, but because it presented an important and often forgotten metanarrative. It focuses on the pure power of celluloid (think Fellini's *8½*)—praising cinema's force of attraction as a process of engaging with another reality, the power to bring in the public through the "*discontinuity, shock, and confrontation*" of colliding narratives and ideas. When the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein coined the term "montage of attractions", he was thinking about the intellectual power of cinema, its ability to play with different layers of meaning. This idea can be usefully located in *A Man from the Boulevard des Capucines*' exploration of cinema's seductive power and transformative potential.

This concept of the intellectual attraction, borrowed from Eisenstein, can also be applied to the practice of public engagement. Academic curation of public events is always already trying to be an "attraction" in this sense—in order to present our research to broader publics we inevitably collide various materials, adapt them to different temporalities and different media, create a montage of research ideas based on certain primary sources. What *A Man from the Boulevard des Capucines* has reminded me of, though, and what the recent success of Klassiki Online demonstrates, is that we should not underestimate the power of cinema's content, trusting that the public will engage with it in their own unique way. This engagement may not be as striking as Mr First's: unlike him, we are probably not going to be able to boast about such impacts as a change in the drinking habits of our audiences. Yet, like Mr First, I believe that engaging the public in one's intellectual endeavours can have an immanent transformative power: it can influence future decisions and intellectual choices, and it can form new connections regardless of the form in which it is presented. The content we curate is always already an attraction; when negotiating between glittery packaging and the stand-alone excellence of film content, we should rely more on the latter and trust public taste to follow.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Maria Korolkova *orcid.org/0000-0002-1784-3675*
University of Greenwich, GB

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