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Mark Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy* and the Stalinist Biopic

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The great Russian writer Maxim Gorky died on June 18, 1936, at the age of 68. His funeral was attended by some 800,000 people, including Stalin and other dignitaries (Yedlin 1999: 214). Although Gorky was once considered the conscience of the Revolution for defending Soviet writers against persecution from the regime during the Russian Civil War, his words and actions after his return to the USSR in 1928 gave lie to that reputation and sullied his memory. Supporters have argued that his "irrepressible idealism" (180) caused him to look the other way during Stalin's brutal campaign to collectivize the countryside, for example; but it is also possible that an aging writer's vanity and a deep-rooted sense of insecurity due to his humble origins took the upper hand. The boy from the slums of Nizhnyi Novgorod was a celebrated writer in pre-revolutionary Russia; but, for the Soviet people, Gorky had become a literary lion. He was hailed as the first "proletarian writer" by the Soviet dictatorship of the proletariat (ibid.).

The year 1932 was the fortieth jubilee of the publication of his first story. In honor of this anniversary, streets, towns, cities, schools, factories, and collective farms were named after him. His boyhood hometown Nizhnyi Novgorod was renamed Gorky; the famed Moscow Art Theater (so intimately connected to the plays of Anton Chekhov) became Gorky's Art Theater; the new Institute of Literature was also named for him (196–197). Gorky was no longer a mere writer, but an "icon" whose participation was required at ceremonial events and congresses. His attendance at the 1934 Writers' Congress, where the doctrine of socialist realism[1] was enshrined as the state's official aesthetics, was especially important (207). In return, Gorky became not only a "yes man" for Stalin's policies and programs, but also a mouthpiece for the regime (190). To give but one example, after the Leningrad Party boss Sergei Kirov's murder in 1934, the once renowned humanist Gorky declared, in response to the widening circle of state terror, that "the enemy

A Companion to the Historical Film, First Edition. Edited by Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu.

must be exterminated ruthlessly and without pity, paying no attention to the gasps and groans of professional humanists'' (as quoted in Yedlin 1999: 209).

Given Gorky's stature, it comes as no surprise that the Soviet film industry, still struggling to recover from the Cultural Revolution (1928–1932)[2] and the advent of sound cinema, decided to commemorate the great man with a big-budget biopic based on Gorky's classic autobiographical trilogy: *My Childhood* (*Moe detstvo*, 1913), *In the World* (*V liudiakh*, 1916) and *My Universities* (*Moi universitety*, 1922). Indeed, actress Varvara Massalitinova, who played Gorky's grandmother in the first two films of the trilogy, had a conversation with Gorky about a screen adaptation as early as 1928 (Massalitinova 1973: 226). Director Mark Donskoi (1901–1981), a rising star in the world of Soviet cinema, had also discussed filming the trilogy with Gorky shortly before the latter's death in 1936 (Dobrenko 2008: 158). Gorky's trilogy was widely and justly considered the author's best work, offering Donskoi a rich array of characters and situations with which to work.

Films – even screen adaptations of the most beloved books of Russian and Soviet literature – had faced great difficulties with the censorship since the advent of socialist realism in 1934, and especially during the Great Terror of 1936–1939. With its thick description of the self-inflicted horrors of everyday life for the Russian underclass in the 1870s and 1880s, Gorky's trilogy offered the potential for serious trouble, given that romanticizing and heroicizing Russian history became a national pastime in the 1930s. If the typical Soviet biopic of the late 1930s was a ''heritage film'' demonstrating the superiority of Russia and the Russian people, an honest adaptation of Gorky's trilogy could not fit into this category. On the contrary, such an adaption could be considered an ''anti-heritage film.'' Despite the potential dangers of the project, Donskoi forged boldly ahead. *Gorky's Childhood* (*Detstvo Gorkogo*) appeared in 1938, *In the World* (*V liudiakh*) in 1939, and *My Universities* (*Moi universitet*) in 1940 (although it, too, was finished in 1939). An analysis of these three films has therefore the potential to shed new light on the possibilities and limitations for directors of Soviet historical films during high Stalinism.

Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy*: The Film Texts

Donskoi's films were remarkably faithful to the originals – in spirit, if not always in fact (differences from the books, and the interpretation of those differences, shall be noted in a later section of this essay). *Gorky's Childhood* opens with young Aleksei (Alyosha) Peshkov (Gorky's real name) arriving in the Volga River town of Nizhnyi Novgorod on a steamboat, with his widowed mother Varvara and maternal grandmother Akulina Kashirina. Right away, the viewer is introduced to Donskoi's brand of naturalism: a long tracking shot takes in a decrepit street crowded with drunken revellers. At home in the overcrowded Kashirin household, the scene is equally chaotic. A merry vision of singing, drinking, and Russian dancing featuring the apprentice Tsyganok (Gypsy) and Grandmother Akulina

quickly gives way to a bitter argument over the division of property that leads to a fistfight between Alyosha's uncles, Mikhail and Yakov. Although Alyosha's boy cousins are amused (obviously fisticuffs are common between Mikhail and Yakov), the shocked Alyosha cowers in a corner and begins to understand why his mother sought to flee this rough life. As an intertitle reads: ''This was the beginning of a swift, eventful, inexpressibly strange life.''

Even though the Kashirins had clawed their way to a comfortable petit-bourgeois lifestyle through their ownership of a dyeworks, their crude habits and behavior mark them as distinctly (and negatively) plebeian, in scenes reminiscent of Gorky's famous play *The Lower Depths* (*Na dne*, 1902). As Tsyganok tells Alyosha: ''Only a devil could like the Kashirins.'' Physical violence is endemic to the household, led as this is by the patriarch Grandfather Kashirin, who ties his grandsons to a bench and savagely beats them, for infractions major and minor. Alyosha quickly learns to be terrified of him and refuses to be mollified when Grandfather brings him a little present after beating him unconscious. As if his relations with his grandfather were not bad enough, his uncles prove to be cut from the same cloth as their father, although Grandfather blames his wife for their bad character (''These are the brutes you brought into the world, you old witch!''). Alyosha learns that Uncle Yakov battered his wife to death and, along with Uncle Mikhail, is complicit in the ''accidental'' death of Tsyganok – the apprentice dye worker who had been raised in the Kashirin household and was also the favorite of Grandfather Kashirin, as well as Alyosha's friend and protector. (Tsyganok is crushed beneath a huge cross he is forced to carry up a hill to mark the grave of Yakov's murdered wife; the religious symbolism in this scene is potent.)

Alyosha's young cousin Sasha, son of Uncle Yakov, is a brute in the making, especially as he is encouraged by the devious Uncle Mikhail. Sasha lies, steals, and plays dirty tricks on both Alyosha and Grandfather, heating up the latter's thimble so that he will burn his finger. Sasha also teases the faithful Grigory, a dye worker who is going blind from exposure to the chemicals. Among the few bright spots in Alyosha's new life is his grandmother, who is a ''true Russian,'' with a full repertoire of charming folk tales, proverbs, and other folk wisdom. Her God, to whom she fervently prays, allows for the existence of the spirit world (she believes that a ''house goblin'' protects the homestead). This kindly matriarchal deity, alien to the vengeful patriarchal God of her husband, makes a deep impression on young Alyosha.

Unfortunately for Alyosha, whose mother has abandoned him to his grandparents, the Kashirins' fortunes are in a downward spiral. Already worried about the business and the bitter squabbling between his sons, Grandfather becomes unhinged when his son Mikhail sets the dyeworks ablaze, out of jealousy that his younger brother Yakov is favored and that Varvara and her ''pup'' (Alyosha) might get a share of the property. The family is forced to move to a series of ever smaller and more squalid quarters (Donskoi is unsparing in his vision of encroaching impoverishment). Alyosha quickly learns that the only way to survive in this harsh

Figure 6.1 Alyosha's band of friends.
Source: Artkino Corp. / Photofest

environment, where even other children are his antagonists, is by fighting. He eventually hooks up with his own band of little ruffians, after being beaten by a rival gang (see Figure 6.1). (Alyosha is set upon because, true to character, he attempts to defend a half-wit, tattered beggar from being stoned).

Apart from his grandmother, his good-hearted hooligan friends, and a small crippled boy Lyonka, the only other bright spot in Alyosha's life is learning to read; in this he is, ironically, taught by his brutal grandfather, when the latter is in a rare good mood. Reading becomes Alyosha's passion. But real life continually interferes. The Kashirins go completely bankrupt, Grandfather is reduced to begging, Alyosha is forced to work as a ragpicker, and he is eventually kicked out of the reduced Kashirin household to make his own way in the world. He is no more than 12 years old.

The next installment in the trilogy, *In the World*, opens with Alyosha working as a skivvy for his grandmother's sister. His great aunt and her daughter-in-law are harpies whose goal is to make Alyosha's life miserable. The hot-tempered, beleaguered Alyosha is equally quick to lash out at them, and the never-ending conflict makes everyone's life impossible. Alyosha has become quite a hellion: as he confesses to the priest, he never obeys orders, he steals and throws stones at the priest's dog. But to the question ''Have you read forbidden books?'' he has no answer, although the idea of forbidden books intrigues him.

Finally Alyosha catches a break. Through his friendship with a beautiful, well-dressed woman, whom he dubs ''Queen Margot'' after Alexandre Dumas's

Figure 6.2 Alyosha and Queen Margot.
Source: Artkino Corp./Photofest

1845 novel *La Reine Margot*, Alyosha has access to books that the woman kindly lends him (see Figure 6.2). Queen Margot quickly realizes that the boy is highly intelligent, needing richer and more substantive reading than her French novels. She obtains the collected works of the great Russian poet Pushkin for him, which Alyosha reads by moonlight until he falls asleep near dawn.

After one beating too many (for supposedly stealing a drunken soldier's wallet), Alyosha leaves his great aunt's home. This occurs despite his grandmother's pleading that Alyosha stay the two years that he has been indentured, so that she will receive the money the family so badly needs. Instead, drawn by the promise of a free life ''at sea,'' he signs on as a dishwasher on the steamship *Dobryi* (*Good*). The only good thing about life on the ship is Alyosha's friendship with the cook Smury, who enjoys having the boy read him Nikolai Gogol's fantastical Cossack novella *Taras Bulba* (1842). Reading, whether for himself or others, has become Alyosha's escape from the evil deeds of those who surround him.

His education interrupted once more, Alyosha is accused, wrongly, of stealing dishware to sell to a treacherous waiter and is forced to leave the ship. He ends up in an icon shop as a painter's assistant, again making himself popular through reading, this time Mikhail Lermontov's immortal 1842 poem *The Demon*. After getting into a physical fight with the unctuous, dishonest shop manager over the latter's attempt to bribe Alyosha to steal an icon painter's notebook, a truculent Alyosha returns to Nizhnyi Novgorod to find his grandparents living in deep poverty in a squalid shack. When his grandfather criticizes his smoking, Alyosha

immediately (and shockingly) slugs the old man, knocking him to the ground. His horrified grandmother slaps Alyosha and orders him to respect his grandfather despite everything that the latter has done.

Alyosha seems to look for every opportunity to fight. When he sees a man who is kicking and dragging his old friend, the washerwoman Natalia, now a drunk and a prostitute, he intervenes. But poor Alyosha cannot find appreciation for his good deeds. After he takes Natalia into a bar to sober her up with a cup of tea, she tells him to "Go to hell." A chastened Alyosha ends up "on the road" of the river Volga again, sailing to Kazan, with utopian dreams of attending the university there.

My Universities is generally considered the weakest of the three films, but it has the most famous opening scene (Khaniutin 1973: 48, 50–51): a long traveling shot of windows on a street in Kazan, behind which the viewer sees vignettes of nasty city life – as well as on the street itself (a man beating his wife, a woman emptying a slop bucket, a drunken clergyman). Behind one of these windows sits Alyosha, now determined to become a writer but struggling, like every student of the Russian language, to master its devilishly difficult grammar. When Alyosha sees (and hears) the man attacking his wife, he comes to the rescue, only to find himself again rebuffed by the victim, who wants Alyosha to mind his own business and keep away from her husband.

Importantly, Alyosha has now become involved with revolutionaries, populists (although they are never so identified in the film, only in the book) led by the "baker" Derenkov, whose shop is a front for his underground activities. As a genuine representative of "the people," Alyosha is welcomed to the group, but with some condescension. Dressed in rags, he is in financial straits so dire that the gang of unemployed men and thieves hanging out by the docks gives him the bottoms of a pair of stolen boots. He is thrilled to have his new "shoes." When a barge begins sinking just shy of the port, Alyosha joins the men who will earn a little money saving its cargo. The next day he rebuffs a thief who wants to partner up with him and instead goes to work in a pretzel bakery (the scene of Gorky's famous story "Twenty-six men and one girl"/"Dvadtsat shest i odna"). The closest Alyosha gets to the university is to sell rolls on the street outside and to associate with the students in Derenkov's revolutionary circle.

As Derenkov piously declaims "the people's life is hard, and they must be enlightened," Alyosha is living this life. When the bakery owner Semyonov tries to burn a history of the Russian people that Derenkov gave Alyosha, Alyosha defies him and talks to the workers about the importance of fighting for respect. Alyosha sinks even further in the bakery owner's eyes when Semyonov discovers that Alyosha has published an exposé about the bakery in the *Liberal Gazette*. Reading and writing are, after all, suspect. "History," Semyonov snorts derisively as Alyosha protects his precious book.

After an abortive uprising of the bakers against Semyonov's authoritarian ways ("I'm the boss and I rule"), Alyosha joins a student riot and soon thereafter hears that his friend Pletnyov has been arrested. Alyosha impulsively decides to commit

suicide (because of his ''toothache of the heart,'' *pace* Heinrich Heine) but cannot quite manage it. Although he shoots himself twice in the chest, he misses his pained heart. Afterwards, however, he decides to live, rejecting the doctor's dire prognostication (''I won't die! I won't die!''). He is overjoyed that his ''brother'' bakers come to see him in the hospital, rather than reject him for his foolishness (''I'll get well to live a long, stubborn life''). The result of all this is that Alyosha now has a police file – ''subject to arrest as a dangerous person'' – as well as a medical one.

Once again he hits the road. On the move, Alyosha joins a line of refugees from famine-stricken districts and gives them his bread. Alone again, he hears a woman in the toils of the childbirth and goes to assist her. Holding the baby high, Alyosha proclaims him a ''person'' (*chelovek*) and encourages the baby to ''Yell, new citizen of the Russian land!'' The film ends with Alyosha on the road again, walking, presumably, to the bright future of Soviet power that is some 25 years away.

The Trilogy's Reception

On the surface, Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy* may seem to be an example of socialist–realist filmmaking. After all, its literary source is Gorky, whom the Soviets declared to be the father of socialist realism. Gorky's social origins were indisputably proletarian, and his story demonstrated the talents that lay hidden in the lower classes and remained hidden due to lack of opportunity in tsarist Russia. Despite his proclivity for violence, Alyosha is a good-hearted soul and might be considered a ''positive hero.'' The third film in the trilogy, *My Universities*, pays *de rigeur* obeisance to the rise of the revolutionary movement in Russia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and shows that Alyosha was at least tangentially involved.

If it only *seems* to be an example of socialist realism, it definitely *is* a first-rate film, up to Hollywood standards in its production values. The trilogy's big budget is apparent in every frame, as is Donskoi's talent as a filmmaker. The *mise-en-scène* is as rich in detail as Gorky's books, no small feat, and the many crowd scenes are well choreographed, to give the impression of teeming chaos. The acting is generally excellent, especially Massalitinova as Grandmother.

Not surprisingly therefore, Donskoi's trilogy met with generally good reviews especially *Gorky's Childhood*, which Mikhail Koltsov proclaimed ''high art'' and a ''victory'' for Soviet cinematography (Koltsov 1973: 47). Stalin prizes, second degree, were awarded in 1941 to both Donskoi and Massalitinova for *Gorky's Childhood* and *In the World*. (Although the prizes were not first degree, it was still a major honor to receive a Stalin Prize.) After Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (*Aleksandr Nevskii*, 1938), Donskoi's films are arguably the best, or at least the most interesting and entertaining, of the biopics of the late 1930s.

After World War II there was a flurry of international interest in Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy*. The films made the international festival circuit, winning special

prizes in Venice (1948), Stockholm (1949), and Edinburgh (1955). In fact the trilogy was more celebrated in France than in the USSR (Rollberg 2009: 182), where it did not make any canon in the Soviet cinematographic pantheon – either as a socialist–realist classic or as a biographical film. In her article on film and socialist realism in the monumental post-Soviet anthology *The Socialist–Realist Canon* (*Sotsrealisticheskii kanon*), Oksana Bulgakowa mentions it only as a rare example of shooting on location (Bulgakowa 2000: 158). L. M. Budiak's tendentious *The Soviet Historical–Biographical Film* (*Sovetskii istoriko–biograficheskii film*, 1978) contains no mention of Donskoi's work. Nor does Elena Vasilyeva's useful recent dissertation (2009) on the genesis and evolution of the Soviet biopic, the only study on this subject available in any western language, refer to it. The films *are* discussed in two encomia to Donskoi – Albert Cervoni's *Marc Donskoi* (1966) and L. I. Pazhitova's *Mark Donskoi* (1973) – but only as precursors to Donskoi's famed neo-realistic style of later and better known films like *The Rainbow* (*Raduga*, 1944), a masterpiece recognized by Soviet and western film critics alike.

It was therefore left to the Russian scholars Yevgeny Margolit and Evgeny Dobrenko to rescue the trilogy from undeserved obscurity – Margolit in an appreciative short essay in *Russian Illusion* (*Rossiiskii illiuzion*; Margolit 2003) and Dobrenko in a chapter devoted to the films in his provocative monograph *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History* (Dobrenko 2008). Dobrenko's piece is the more important one, at least for the English-speaking world. Dobrenko is, however, underwhelmed by Donskoi's artistic achievement, labeling the series as an example of socialist–realist ''hagiography'' (143).

But is Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy* a hagiography? Does it fit the mold of the Soviet biopic? Is it a valid representation of socialist realism? I would argue that, unlike most Soviet biopics, Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy* is open to conflicting interpretations and not easily pigeonholed, just as Maxim Gorky himself is a contested figure in history. The complications of analyzing the films are underscored by the fact that they fall into multiple cinematic categories: literary adaptation, historical biopic, and socialist–realist film. The contemporary parameters of each of these categories must be considered, although the boundaries are overlapping.

Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy* as Literary Adaptation

The literary adaptation has been a time-honored tradition in Russian cinema since the latter's inception in 1908, being sanctioned by no less a literary eminence than Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy was fascinated by the movies and the possibilities for bringing literary works to life on the screen. As he wrote about cinema: ''It is closer to life [than the written word]. In life, too, changes and transitions flash by before our eyes and emotions of the soul are like a hurricane'' (quoted by Welehan 1999: 5). Tolstoy believed, in other words, that the film medium offered an enhanced representation of reality when compared to literature (ibid.).

Screen adaptations of well-known works of Russian and Soviet literature were also very common in Soviet cinema throughout the history of the USSR, helping to reinforce the regime's foundations (Hutchings and Vernitski 2005: 1). This was especially true in the 1930s. Cultural studies scholars Stephen Hutchings and Anat Vernitski note that "Soviet adaptations of socialist–realist texts [. . .] filter the literary original through the stock of myths surrounding the central figure" (6). They argue that this process of filtering leads to a "three-way struggle for representation pre-eminence between film, legend, and text" (7–8).

The question of whether Gorky's trilogy (as opposed to Donskoi's) is in fact a socialist–realist text is also open to debate, despite Gorky's impeccable proletarian credentials. From the Soviet perspective Gorky was, after all, the father of socialist realism *avant la lettre*, famously in his 1906 novel *The Mother* (*Mat*), which not coincidentally became the well-known eponymous 1926 film by Vsevolod Pudovkin. As already noted, the trilogy's dense, naturalistic detail argues against a traditional socialist–realist interpretation. Dobrenko disagrees, believing that the books "read like a socialist–realist *bildungsroman*" (2008: 149), presumably because the narrative deals in part (but only in part) with Gorky's rise from deep poverty to the status of aspiring young proletarian writer.

Gorky was, however, writing from a pre-revolutionary literary context, that of the pseudo-autobiography of childhood. As Andrew Baruch Wachtel demonstrates, Gorky's trilogy was not the story of a gentrified childhood, which was so common in nineteenth-century Russian literature, but its calculated opposite: a kind of *anti-childhood* tale, "that is, an attempt to overturn gentry myths of childhood" (Wachtel 1990: 134). As we have seen, Gorky had the sort of horrific, traumatic childhood that is the stuff of memoirs today.

Nevertheless, throughout the 1930s and 1940s, there was an effort on the part of the Soviet cultural establishment to ground "socialist realism in pre-revolutionary culture" regardless of whether the fit was right (Hutchings and Vernitski 2005: 15). Filtered through the legend of Gorky as the putative father of socialist realism, Gorky's autobiographical text may have been *invented* as a socialist–realist text by the cultural authorities, hence its approval for adaptation to the screen. I would suggest, on the basis of the film adaptations, that Donskoi knew that Gorky's books were *not* genuine examples of socialist realism, although they contain a few of the signifiers (like optimism for the future), hence Donskoi's efforts to augment the works with socialist–realist flourishes to comply with the aesthetic politics of his times.

What was Donskoi's philosophy in adapting Gorky's trilogy? This must be inferred from the evidence on the screen. As mentioned above, the films, with the partial exception of *My Universities*, bore a remarkable resemblance to the sprawling books – not an easy feat, considering the relatively compact total running time of four-and-one-half hours. (Today the material would easily translate into a 12-part television miniseries.) A cursory reading and viewing of the two texts (films and books) might conclude that Donskoi's adaptation was a

''faithful'' one. This is, however, not quite true. Donskoi's adaptation respected the original text but was not slavish, which surely disappointed some Gorky devotees (as is always the case with screen adaptations).

Some of the changes Donskoi made were doubtless due to political pressures. For example, in the preposterous ending of *My Universities*, Alyosha delivers a peasant woman's baby and holds it high against the backdrop of ''Mother'' Volga, declaiming the poor child's citizenship. Not only is this not from Gorky, it is jarring in the context of the prevailing naturalism of the rest of Donskoi's film. Another example, also from *My Universities*, is the virtual omission of Gorky's struggle to become a writer, in favor of emphasizing his revolutionary ties, however weak and suspect. What Donskoi retained from the books – their emphatic naturalism – was a reflection of his own aesthetic preferences (as seen in his *oeuvre*). This emphasis on Gorky's naturalism may in fact be considered Donskoi's attempt to subvert socialist realism.

Despite Donskoi's deviations from the original text, I am not sure that he would have agreed with film theorist George Bluestone, who considered the relationship between literature and film to be a kind of underground competition, ''overtly compatible, secretly hostile'' (1961). The evidence of the films suggests, rather, that Donskoi would have subscribed to the views of the well-known Russian film scholar Maya Turovskaya (quoted in Hutchings and Vernitski 2005: 11) in believing that movies are ''individual artistic statements,'' separate from, but equal to, the original text. In other words, screen adaptations are fully autonomous works of art that should, according to film theorist André Bazin, be ''equal [to the literature] in the eyes of the critic'' (Bazin 2000: 26). Although Gorky's trilogy had become a kind of ''sacred'' text, read by tens of thousands, Donskoi's films would be seen by the millions. The adaptation process had to be foregrounded, given the fame of the source; but, this fact notwithstanding, the films were not ''made'' from the books. Actually Donskoi borrowed, omitted, and augmented according to his own (and his political watchdogs') purposes. The films and the books are each distinctive and equal representations of a single story – that of Aleksei (Alyosha) Peshkov.

Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy* as Stalinist Biopic

If Donskoi did not sanctify the literary text, did he sanctify the biographical subject? In order to understand how Donskoi's films function as biopics, we must first return to their source, Gorky's trilogy. According to Evgeny Dobrenko, the apparently autobiographical trilogy is, instead, ''precisely a biography'' (2008: 149). By this Dobrenko means that the world famous author Maxim Gorky and the beleaguered boy Aleksei Peshkov were distinctive constructions, not representations of the same person. Maxim the Bitter (*gorkii* means ''bitter'' in Russian), world famous writer, was himself a constructed persona. Gorky was not in fact writing about

''himself,'' Maxim Gorky, but about a character presented in the guise of the boy he used to be: Alyosha Peshkov. (This relates back to Wachtel's ideas about ''pseudo-autobiography'' as a Russian literary genre.)

Alyosha stood in for Gorky's ideas about Russian life. As Gorky wrote in his trilogy, ''I'm not telling the story of myself, but rather of that close, oppressive circle of terrifying impressions in which the simple Russian man lived, and indeed, still lives, even to this day'' (quoted in Dobrenko 2008: 147). Dobrenko takes this statement to be the ''structural principle of [Gorky's] narrative of himself'' (ibid.). Even if the reader does not accept Dobrenko's argument that Gorky's autobiography is ''biography,'' there is no question that Donskoi's films, one step removed as they are from the books, are biopics.

The Soviet biopic rose to prominence in the 1930s and became synonymous with the rise of history, that is, with the state's search for a usable past to present to the Soviet public (Vasilyeva 2009: 50). This interest in history marked the transition from revolutionary to traditional and conservative forms of life (Khrenov 1994: 179). On the basis of her exhaustive analysis of Stalinist biopics, Elena Vasilyeva has determined that the ''central theme of the Soviet biopic is the defense of Russia or its honor'' or ''representing Russian history as a superior national tradition'' (Vasilyeva 2009: 44, 52). As a result, biopics were conceived as part of the state's educational and enlightenment agenda (22). This may explain why Donskoi's trilogy was produced by the children's film studio, Soiuzdetfilm (now, and not coincidentally, called the Gorky Film Studio).

Right away, we see that Donskoi's movies deviate from this central norm of the Soviet biopic (this is perhaps the reason why Vasilyeva overlooked them in her dissertation). Gorky emphatically did not see Russian history as a superior national tradition, or his autobiography as a defense of Russian honor. In fact it was the opposite. Gorky believed that Russian life was brutish, nasty, and mean, not because of the bourgeoisie or the gentry or the autocracy (as in the official Soviet interpretation), but because the Russian *people* (*narod*) was at its core brutish, nasty, and mean. This idea is absolutely antithetical to the Soviet sacralization of the ''common man.'' In most Soviet biopics, the ''great man'' is shown as identifying with the ''common man'' (54), but Alyosha stands defiantly apart from the human rabble, an individualist to his core.

Presumably Donskoi agreed with Gorky because he retained these elements and elaborated upon them visually. Alyosha's uncles Mikhail and Yakov are mean excuses for human beings, as is his grandfather, his great aunt, her daughter-in-law, and the ordinary drunkards, beggars, thieves, hooligans, and wife beaters who populate the city streets. Unlike the contemporaneous laudatory biopics of writers like Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov or of national heroes like Peter the Great and Alexander Nevsky, Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy* focuses on an *unusable* past. To some perceptive viewers (and Soviet film-goers were accustomed to ''reading between the lines''), this was a past that, in its imperfection, might have borne all too obvious a resemblance to the ''shining future'' that was Soviet power. Beggars

were no longer seen in the Soviet streets, but poverty, brutality, and a pervasive lack of culture (*nekulturnost*) remained part of Soviet life.

The other defining tenet of the Stalinist biopic according to Vasilyeva is that it tells ''the story of an exceptional individual who had advanced his community in socially significant ways'' (8). For all his innate kindness and sense of justice (often subsumed under his fierce temper), Alyosha has accomplished nothing for the collective. To be sure, through his reading aloud, he brings some light to the miserable existences of the icon painters and pretzel bakers, but this pales by comparison with the national achievements of Alexander Nevsky's defeating the Teutonic knights, or of Peter I's building St. Petersburg, or even of Maxim's rise to a position of power in the revolutionary government (as shown in Kozintsev and Trauberg's 1934–1938 film series *The Maxim Trilogy*). Alyosha also makes many *attempts* to rescue individuals (the crazy beggar, Natalia the washerwoman, the battered woman, and so on), but he never actually succeeds (see Figure 6.3).

In fact, as a biopic hero, Alyosha occupies a transitional space between the ''youngish passionate characters of the 1930s [who] gave way to the older, somber, wise statesmen of the 1940s'' (Vasilyeva 2009: 6). He is neither the stereotypical ''great man'' of other Soviet biopics (he is too flawed a character), nor is he a representative of the Russian people (154). The biopic ''trope of the common man/men seeking out the Great Man'' (161) is nowhere to be found in Donskoi's trilogy. Not only is Alyosha not great; his future greatness is not even anticipated in the film. Alyosha is certainly young and passionate, but, unlike Pushkin in

Figure 6.3 Alyosha and Natalia the washerwoman.
Source: Artkino Corp./Photofest

Arkady Naroditsky's *The Youth of the Poet* (*Iunost poeta*, 1937), his passions are not focused. Always the consummate non-conformist, Alyosha is in the process of finding himself – but never does.

As Vasilyeva demonstrates through the bulk of her numerous examples, ''Soviet biopics show the moment and causality of the protagonist's inspiration'' and tend to ''focus on a decisive moment in an already established career'' (2009: 146, 138). Yet there is no ''moment and causality'' in Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy*. Unlike Gorky in *In the World*, Donskoi chooses not to foreground the relationship with Queen Margot, who is the first to encourage Alyosha's reading. Certainly Donskoi never helps the viewer to understand why Alyosha decides to become a writer. As already noted, the struggles of his early writing career, so prominent in the latter part of Gorky's *My Universities*, are virtually absent from Donskoi's *My Universities*.

Alyosha does, however, face the ''hostile environment'' that is necessary to build dramatic tension in the Soviet biopic (181). The violence that he faces every day, both within and without his family, is ever present. As importantly, perhaps, his passion for reading is constantly being criticized as foolish or dangerous, although his mother once told him that ''a learned person can do anything'' (*Gorky's Childhood*) (see Figure 6.4). Alyosha has learned about forbidden books from the priest and from Semyonov's attempt at book burning, as noted above; but there are other scenes in which reading is condemned. The great aunt's son-in-law, the contractor Vanya, flatly tells Alyosha that ''books are harmful,'' and Alexander II's

Figure 6.4 Grandfather teaches Alyosha to read.
Source: Artkino Corp./Photofest

assassination at the hands of the intellectuals of the People's Will in 1881 is blamed on "readers": "That's those readers for you" (*In the World*).

These deviations from Vasilyeva's taxonomy of the Stalinist biopic may not matter, because Dobrenko argues that Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy* is a special kind of biopic, a hagiography, although he also admits that Donskoi's *style* is "anti-hagiographical" (2008: 151) – that is, powerfully naturalistic. (Whether form and content can truly be separated in this fashion is debatable.) The Russian biographical tradition was strongly influenced by hagiography (Vasilyeva 2009: 26), and Gorky himself was steeped in hagiography through his religious upbringing, which was especially evident in *The Mother* (Ziolkowski 1988: 191–192). Dobrenko (2008: 152) quite reasonably defines a hagiography as showing "the coming into being of the heroes; their maturation and service to an ideal; their faith and heroic deeds; and ultimately, their 'posthumous miracles.'"

Yet, as we have already seen, Alyosha is an unlikely candidate for sainthood. He does mature over the course of Donskoi's trilogy, but he is still remarkably quick to resort to violence to solve problems (not an official Soviet value). He serves himself, unless, improbably, one considers his fanatic protection of his books to be the sort of ideal Dobrenko is writing about. Alyosha's lack of faith in the Russian people is pronounced. His heroic deeds are limited to his unsuccessful efforts to protect women (like Natalia the washerwoman) and other defenseless creatures (like Lyonka) from the violence of the men (and boys) of the streets.

Dobrenko argues that, in Russian (as opposed to western) hagiography, "the saint must come from honest parents, manifest from childhood an aptitude for learning, early heroic deeds, and piety and so on" (2008: 154). Alyosha's father, Maxim Peshkov, dies before Donskoi's *Gorky's Childhood* begins, but by all accounts he was a good man, a hard worker, and a person devoted to his family. (Tsyganok tells Alyosha that the Kashirins "can't stand any good" and wanted to drown Alyosha's father.) Alyosha's mother, Varvara, is another story. Beautiful, proud, and intelligent, she once had the strength to get away from her own horrific childhood by marrying Maxim Peshkov against her father's wishes. Yet she abandons her child to this very same man, shortly after the scene in which Grandfather mercilessly beats Alyosha. Varvara pounds her fists futilely against the door, sobbing, but does no more. ("I was frightened," she tells her mother.) Alyosha keeps hoping that his mother will come for him and send him to school. When she finally does come, she has a wastrel husband in tow, and she does not stay long, although she promises that she will take Alyosha to Moscow and educate him.

Alyosha's *de facto* parents are, of course, his grandparents. Enough has been said about old Kashirin's quality of character. In his defense, he also had a brutal and impoverished childhood, but the only good thing he does for Alyosha is to teach him to read. Akulina Kashirina, brilliantly portrayed by Varvara Massalitinova, is another story. She is a true Russian, close to the time-honored customs of the people. After she tells one of her folktales, their eccentric neighbor, the chemist

''Good Deed,'' admiringly murmurs that her stories are ''ours, the people's'' (*nasha, narodnaia*); he urges Alyosha to record them. In Gorky's books, however, Grandmother had a vice, also ''of the people'': she drank to excess. As Dobrenko correctly notes, Donskoi cleaned up Grandmother's character, so that all that was left was her sweetness (154). Even in the scene where she slaps Alyosha, she has done it to appease her husband and apologetically asks Alyosha afterwards whether she has hurt him. In addition, it is Grandmother who introduces Alyosha to the beauties of Russian nature; these are especially prominent in the scene of *In the World* where Alyosha collects songbirds to sell while his grandmother gathers mushrooms and herbs (and his grandfather chops wood and mocks them). Grandmother is also the only person in the films who really loves Alyosha (see Figure 6.5). This ''cleansing'' was no doubt necessary: it satisfied the censors by creating an indubitably positive character. But Donskoi does not cleanse Grandmother of her religion, which is presented in earnest, without a trace of irony (and therefore it runs against the official view of religion).

Despite his ''unhealthy'' origins, Alyosha the putative saint fits one of Dobrenko's characteristics of a saint by manifesting an aptitude for learning at an early age. Except for a brief period in a real school (which features only in Gorky's trilogy, not in Donskoi's), Alyosha is home-schooled or self-taught, which makes his becoming a great writer all the more remarkable. But Alyosha is not pious in a religious sense – or any other. The only time we see him in church is when his great aunt forces him to go to confession. (Of course, this is not a problem for a Soviet hero.)

Figure 6.5 Alyosha and his grandmother.
Source: Artkino Corp. / Photofest

He is a born iconoclast, always questioning and rebelling against the status quo, be that reflected in positions of authority (like those of his grandfather, or the priest) or just in the many injustices of a poor man's life. In the end, then, it is possible to argue with Dobrenko that Donskoi's films only partially construct Alyosha's life as a hagiography. He is a ''hero,'' not a ''saint.''

Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy* as Socialist Realism

Donskoi's films are, therefore, a free-flowing adaptation of Gorky's trilogy that fits uneasily within the genre confines of the Stalinist biopic. To what extent are the movies socialist–realist? They certainly are socialist–realist in part; but Donskoi, subtly and not so subtly, dissents from socialist realism. This could not have been accidental.

Gorky's books were considered suitable for adaptation not only because of his stature as a proletarian writer, but also because ''early twentieth-century works which openly embraced the coming revolution (such as [Gorky's] autobiographical trilogy) [. . .] were prominent amongst 1930s and 1940s adaptations'' (Hutchings and Vernitski 2005: 15). They were safe in the sense that their contents had already been endorsed by the state. As dark as Gorky's recollections were, and despite his doubts about them, a note of hope was occasionally interjected. For example, Gorky writes: ''Fact must be traced back to its source and uprooted from our memories, from the souls of our people, from our confused and squalid lives,'' for alongside the brute ''grows a brilliant, creative, wholesome human type, which encourages us to seek our regeneration, a future of peace and human living for all'' (Gorky 1949: 199). This regeneration of mankind (through social engineering, which Gorky did not have in mind when he wrote his autobiography) was central to the Stalinist value system.

Socialist–realist cinema focused on the protagonist, in opposition to Soviet avant-garde silent cinema's focus on the (revolutionary) event (Vasilyeva 2009: 77). Donskoi's Alyosha (and, by extension, Gorky's) can certainly be considered ''a brilliant, creative, wholesome human type''; but is he a good example of the positive hero? As an intertitle in *Gorky's Childhood* notes, ''Alyosha developed a deep concern for all people'' (threatening to become the ''professional humanist'' that Gorky bemoaned in connection with the reign of terror that followed the Kirov assassination). Although Alyosha is sometimes forced to resort to violence when he helps people, help them he does, regardless of consequences to his own safety. He pities poor Grigory, the dyeworker, when Grandfather Kashirin throws him out on the streets after the sulphuric acid unleashed by the great fire in the dyeworks scorches his eyes. Alyosha fights with a gang of kids who are throwing stones at the wild-eyed beggar, which leads to his own beating. He befriends the crippled boy Lyonka, and he and his gang of friends make a wagon for Lyonka, so that he can leave his basement flat. At the end of *Gorky's Childhood* they wheel

Lyonka out, to an open field where he can release his pet bugs to freedom. Alyosha also takes pleasure in "real" (physical) labor, as when he and the unemployed men who hang out by the docks rescue the cargo from the sinking barge (*My Universities*).

But there are limits to how much Alyosha can serve as a socialist–realist model or a guide to life. He is highly individualistic and deliberately disobeys orders, often responding to problems and crises with his fists rather than his brains. He is not under the influence of a right-thinking mentor, as are most young socialist–realist heroes. Even Alyosha's stalwart friend Romas (who is more prominent in the books than in the films) is a populist, after all (not the right kind of socialist). So, although "to some extent Gorky's model of childhood did attain mythical status," this model had a strictly limited application (Wachtel 1990: 149). It could only be used by writers of Gorky's generation, because, owing to Comrade Stalin, the Soviet period brought after all a "bright future" and a happy childhood (151).

Perhaps to compensate for Alyosha's shortcomings as a positive hero, Donskoi exaggerates the role of the revolutionary movement in the films by comparison with Gorky's autobiography, especially in *My Universities*. Donskoi's emphasis on revolutionary activity is reinforced by his virtual omission of the genesis of Gorky's writing career. Alyosha's first encounter with a revolutionary comes in *Gorky's Childhood* through "Good Deed," the odd neighbor who rents a room from the Kashirins (see Figure 6.6). "Good Deed" is regarded with suspicion by the Kashirins because of his love of books and his mysterious chemistry experiments. Although "Good Deed" initially tries to warn Alyosha off, they eventually become friends,

Figure 6.6 The revolutionary chemist "Good Deed" and Alyosha.
Source: Artkino Corp./Photofest

and the man encourages Alyosha to learn to write as well as to read. Grandfather quickly kicks ''Good Deed'' out; soon after, the Kashirins receive a visit from the police (which interrupts the old man beating his wife). It seems that ''Good Deed'' is a revolutionary after all; later Alyosha runs into him on a chain gang. (Chain gangs populate Donskoi's trilogy; on the assumption that these represent the political criminals of tsarist times, Donskoi is mirroring the waves of political arrest taking place when the films were being made.)

Alyosha's next brush with the revolutionary movement occurs when he bespies a reading circle through a window at night, reading forbidden books aloud (*In the World*). He is entranced. For Alyosha, reading is always an act of rebellion. His third revolutionary encounter is with the populist Derenkov Circle, which consists primarily of students who look down upon the ragged Alyosha (*My Universities*). His only true friend in the circle is Pletnyov, with whom he shared a room in the past, until Pletnyov flees to avoid arrest. Because Alyosha's visits to the Derenkov Circle are known to the Okhrana (the tsarist secret police), he is recruited as an informer by the neighborhood policeman. Naturally, Alyosha firmly resists the cop's blandishments.

Donskoi consistently portrays the Derenkov Circle as extremely naïve – perhaps a bit more than Gorky did.[3] When Alyosha urges another revolutionary, Romas, to flee, Romas ingenuously declares: ''I'm pure as a dove. They can't touch me!'' (In Gorky's trilogy, but not in Donskoi's, Alyosha joins Romas in the countryside, in order to propagandize peasants, and he discovers that the peasantry are as dark and cruel as city folk.)

Finally, Alyosha stirs up his own revolt among the pretzel bakers. He has been urging them to stand up for themselves as human beings and to reject their squalid working conditions. But the men seek instead to retaliate against the owner, Semyonov, by poisoning his prized pigs. When Semyonov rants at them, the bakers have suddenly had enough, scaring Semyonov with their rage so that he flees. Surprised at themselves, they go to the nearby tavern to celebrate, embracing and kissing. But, when Semyonov arrives, they timorously offer him a drink. ''You're convicts, not people,'' he smugly declares, accepting the drink. This ''revolution'' is over, and the baker and his employees start drinking and dancing together. These are definitely not the motivated workers of Eisenstein's *Strike* (*Stachka*, 1925). So, even though Donskoi foregrounds revolution in a way in which Gorky does not, this depiction of revolution and revolutionary values does not fit the party line because none of the ''revolutionaries'' displays any revolutionary consciousness – not even Alyosha.

Another hallmark of socialist realism in film was a romanticized emphasis on nature and the beauties of the Russian land. In this Donskoi excels. The Volga River, with its wide expanses and shining waters, is almost a character in the films. Although Volga boatmen labor alongside it in several scenes, in general the Volga and nature bring calm to Alyosha's chaotic life, especially in *Gorky's Childhood* and *In the World*. In *Gorky's Childhood* Alyosha enjoys serious conversations in the wide

outdoors, not only with his grandmother but also with Tsyganok. While Alyosha is walking with Tsyganok on the high bluffs overlooking the river, he learns that his uncles wanted to kill his father. The open meadow, where Alyosha's gang brings Lyonka to release his menagerie of bugs, represents freedom from the crowded, filthy, overwrought city. Donskoi does nothing to undercut the joy that nature brings to the boys. In *In the World*, Alyosha enjoys the views available from the steamship ''Dobryi'' and the beautiful moonscapes along the river.

Nevertheless, Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy* deviates from socialist realism in an important way. Naturalism permeates Gorky's books as well as Donskoi's films. Vasilyeva writes that, over the course of the 1930s, the biopic moved through three stages: from ''revolutionary romanticism'' to ''melodramatic novelistic realism'' to ''monumental epic form'' (2009: 20). The biopics of the 1930s sought to ''reframe naturalism'' (13) by stripping it of its sordid details, to leave a realistic core behind. The *mise-en-scène* of socialist–realist cinema was intended to be simple and sterile; ''simplicity'' is a virtue often touted by critics. Therefore ''images of food consumption, blood, disease, poverty, marriage, untidiness, wounds, signs of aging, dying – were progressively removed [from films] [. . .] under the rubric of excessive naturalism'' (100). Yet, as the important Soviet film critic Yury Khaniutin writes, ''[p]erhaps in not a single other film did the screen raise to such cruel merciless truth the depiction of Russian pre-revolutionary life'' (quoted in Dobrenko 2008: 161). This is what Dobrenko meant when he dubbed Donskoi's style ''anti-hagiographical.'' Donskoi treads a fine line between Gorky's full-blown naturalism and the demands of socialist realism. As already noted, Donskoi cleans up the character of the grandmother. He also omits Varvara's sordid second marriage (although Varvara does drop in, to introduce Alyosha to her fiancé) and her pathetic death. He excises Gorky's scene in *In the World* where Alyosha finds Queen Margot and her lover in bed.

On the other hand, images of food consumption and drunkenness were shown from the very early scenes in the Kashirin household, and they punctuate the films. In *Gorky's Childhood* there is a close-up, at the fair, of two men eating on the streets, with food dribbling down their chins. After the cross crushes Tsyganok with the complicity of the uncles, the dead man lies on the floor at the Kashirins, in a welling pool of blood. Poverty is everywhere evident, and it is especially emphasized through the sharply individualized beggars (Donskoi's ability to elicit good performances from extras is remarkable). When Grandfather is out begging at the fair, another beggar (their former employee Grigory, who was blinded in the fire at the dyeworks) takes pity on the old man and offers him a crust of bread, which he derisively tosses away. Alyosha and his little friends are in rags; like Alyosha, the other boys live in dire circumstances, one with a drunken mother, another without parents or without home altogether. Although Grandmother attempts to tidy even their lowest dwelling, the streets outside are full of litter, as is Lyonka's basement hovel, where he keeps his pet cockroach. Other roaches skitter across the floor. Grandmother and Grandfather grow progressively older

Figure 6.7 The icon painters.
Source: Artkino Corp. / Photofest

and more haggard, both of them diminished by age and poverty. A consumptive icon painter's skinny body is racked with coughing (see Figure 6.7). Wounds and festering sores are everywhere evident, from the whip marks covering Alyosha's body to Tsyganok's gaping head wound and Grandmother's bruised and bleeding face after Grandfather has beaten her. No other picture from the 1930s, biopic or not, could compete with Donskoi's *Gorky Trilogy* for its brutally realistic depiction of pre-revolutionary life. Donskoi's pronounced naturalism, like Gorky's, marked a major deviation from the tenets of socialist realism.

Conclusion

If Gorky was a writer who drew "with words" (Gorky, quoted by Kozhinov 1972: 19), then Donskoi was a director who brought Gorky's words to life, especially because he did not consider them written in stone. This analysis of Donskoi's trilogy makes it impossible to agree with post-Soviet critic E. Levin, who posits that the films resemble most socialist–realist screen adaptations of their time: "black and white," "static," "simple" (Levin 1994: 77). On the contrary, along with the cinematic Civil War hero Vasily Chapaev (*Chapaev*, Vasiliev Brothers, 1934), Alyosha Peshkov is one of the most genuine and paradoxical characters in the Stalinist biopic. No icon, he behaves like a real boy, with all the confusion of mind and soul that characterizes a living child. The films' representation of the

pre-revolutionary lower classes is far from static and simple. Indeed, the films teem with life in all its contradictions. Black and white? Donskoi even shows a human side to Grandfather, when the old man talks about the poverty of his youth, hard work from an early age, and the many beatings he sustained.

Why has Donskoi's trilogy gotten such short shrift over the decades since its release? After all, it broke the mold of the Stalinist biopic and of the socialist–realist film in ways that challenge paradigms, both about Soviet biopics and about socialist realism. It is all too easy to accept that, with a few rare exceptions by *auteurs* like Sergei Eisenstein or Grigory Alexandrov, Soviet cinema during the Great Terror was a conformist wasteland. As Donskoi shows, even in the terrible years 1938–1939, it was possible for a Soviet director to break with genre and aesthetic conventions and make a film that treated Russia's harsh past with refreshing frankness. By making a trio of historical films that did not bend to the demands of Stalinist history and dared to deviate from the strictures of socialist realism, Donskoi succeeded in following his own creative path, despite the very real pressures to conform. Alyosha Peshkov would have approved.

Notes

1 Socialist realism was an elastic doctrine, intended to celebrate the positive, action-oriented hero, the values of socialism, and a future-oriented attitude (''life as it should be''). Stylistically it celebrated simplicity and monumentalism, in contradistinction to formalism and naturalism.

2 The Cultural Revolution was an attack on artists and intellectuals and other ''specialists'' (*spetsy*), with special emphasis on the avant-garde and the ''formalism'' that supposedly characterized the films of the 1920s.

3 After the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, Russia was sunk in the gloom of Alexander III's era of counter-reforms, which intended to turn the clock back on his father's many liberalizing reforms. The revolutionary movement was relatively quiet in the 1880s, being crushed by the reactionary government. Revolutionary populists dominated the political landscape, as they would throughout 1917, the Bolshevik coup notwithstanding.

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