

Living Archive – Dying Archive. Acquiring “Looted” Films

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On September 30, 1994, the last units of the former Soviet Army left reunified Germany. The 15,000 train carriages needed for the military withdrawal had room for pretty much everything apart from the 60,000 film prints used to entertain troops, which had been stored at the central Soviet Army film depot in Fürstenwalde near Berlin for decades. To prevent this cinematic flotsam from being destroyed, several western European film archives bought as many prints as they were able to, with Arsenal, then still called Friends of the German Film Archive, also taking up the trail. Erika Gregor managed to wrest the necessary amount of money from the Culture Senator of the time literally overnight, as time was of the essence. So we hired a small van and made several trips over there together with Erika and Ulrich Gregor.

The film collection was stored in long, low sheds on the grounds of a former Soviet military airfield hidden deep in the forest. The airfield was built as a training ground for imperial planes in 1915 and shut down in 1925 before being rebuilt in 1937 to house part of the Hindenburg Bomber Wing. It is from there that they were supposed to provide support for the final battle for Berlin in 1945.

The gates were now painted Russian green and the red brick buildings surrounding the tower were already empty, while the lonely boss of the film depot held sway over just one single room, in front of an empty safe whose only remaining contents were a sack of buckwheat which he gave us as a spontaneous gift once we'd made the deal. Several Russian women were sitting in the room opposite, each of them decked out with an abacas. Calmly, as if they still had all the time in the world, they entered the endless list of film titles into tables pre-printed on rough, yellowing, former Soviet foolscap paper, their handwriting illegible and in purple ink that cannot be found anywhere else, as they moved the large abacus beads from left to right and back and forth for each individual film. The tin film containers, referred to as “jaufs”¹, were standing in the corridor with the prints to be saved. A sheet filled out by hand had been placed meticulously in each film canister at the time, upon which projectionist no. X stated that all 293 meters of film had been rewound back to

¹ Jauf (lashchik dlia upakovki filma): Container for packing a film

the start and that the print was without any scratches or tears. There were already dozens of open film canisters lying around in front of the building with little piles of black ash in them – were they films? They had once been black and white films, with this representing a (hardly skilled) attempt to turn them into cash by extracting the silver residue they contained. For no one was able to take the film prints back with them, as there was no use for them at home, unlike the curved cast iron radiators from the imperial era, which were soon to be installed in the Ukraine, as one sergeant showed us with pride.

Although the 154 prints rescued in this way were catalogued and archived by the Friends of German Film Archive at the time, they have hardly been shown since. Many of these peacefully acquired “looted films” are merely average product, the sort of productions made on a day-to-day basis within a large-scale film industry. There were neither made for festivals nor selected by them, and were certainly not bought by foreign distributors. Over time, the names of their makers have been forgotten even by Russian audiences, no longer even functioning particularly well as entertainment by today’s standards. But they were devoured by hundreds of thousands of soldiers, at whose numbers the local inhabitants were only able to hazard a guess based on the tons of potatoes and sacks of flour they shifted. These films served a substitute for dreams, just like everywhere in the world, except within the strict confines of a barrack.

Today, these forgotten films convey different views of a lost world that was called the Soviet Union until 1991, allowing fashions, relationship models, values, ideas of history, memory, the present, childhood, love, family and the world of work desired by society to be revived. The images, sounds and colors they contain stand in stark contrast to the new dream worlds, social roles and film trends of today’s Russia. The famously unhurried narration has gone, bodies now conform to new aesthetic ideals and the goals that today’s film heroes set themselves (to become rich and successful and stand up to the world) are diametrically opposed to those from before (to find truth and to become reconciled with the world).

The story of the purchase of the Soviet loot films, which thus found their way into the Arsenal film depot in Berlin-Spandau (!) much like they did into the Munich Film

Museum or into the Cinémathèque suisse in Lausanne (Jean-Luc Godard paid for the acquisition of some of his favorite films), inevitably brings back memories of a similar story that unfolded in the other direction – the story of the transfer of the German “loot” films that ended up in the Soviet Film Archive in May 1945, concealed within Russian woodland on the outskirts of Moscow. Back then, Film Minister Ivan Bolshakov sent one of his employers, dramaturge Iosif Manevich, on a mission to Berlin to find German color films and bring them back to Moscow as quickly as possible. On May 11, Manevich received official confirmation of this business trip, which also included promotion to the rank of major. His uniform was taken from the Mosfilm props store, having been used as a costume for *The Vow*, a film about Stalin’s victory near Stalingrad in production at the time. The newly appointed major found the Reich Film Archive in the forest near Babelsberg and discovered that “Hitler’s film world was characterized by almost caste-like restrictions. The Germans were hardly able to see any foreign films. The only Soviet one to be shown was *Captain Grant’s Children*. In the meantime, all the Soviet films that could be looted on occupied territory were held in the Reich Film Archive.”² Soviet soldiers with grenades in their hands demanded that the German entertainment films be released despite their major not knowing how he would be able to stand guard over the depot, until an order by the Berlin City Commandant arrived and the Potsdam Commandant ensured the safety of the objects. 3700 prints were removed from the Reich Film Archive at the time, including several hundred American cartoon films in color. 250 prints of Soviet films were made available for screening purposes in Berlin and the surrounding area. The UFA and Hollywood productions taken back to Moscow back were shown far and wide, given that they contained the first images of a alien world now able to penetrate the Soviet system, which had itself been hermetically sealed off in similar fashion: a world that the Russians had liberated without having much more than an inkling of. Marika Röck bathing in the role of the “girl of everyone’s dreams” became the victors’ first erotic film experience. These images had a profound impression on the imaginations of the post-war generation. Joseph Brodsky ironically suggested that the Tarzan films alone had done more for the De-Stalinization of the Soviet Union than all the Khrushchev speeches at the 20th Party Congress and afterwards put together. “One should take

² Oksana Bulgakowa (Ed.), *Die ungewöhnlichen Abenteuer des Dr. Mabuse im Lande der Bolschewiki*, Berlin 1995, p. 255

into account our latitudes, our buttoned-up, rigid, inhibited, winter-minded standards of public and private conduct, in order to appreciate the impact of a long-haired naked loner pursuing a blonde through the thick of a tropical rain forest with his chimpanzee version of Sancho Panza and lianas as means of transportation. Add to that the view of New York (in the last bit of the series that was played in Russia), with Tarzan jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge - and almost an entire generation's opting out will become understandable.”³

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“The work necessary to transport the Reich Film Archive’s holdings was started on June 9th and completed on July 4th” is what Manevich wrote in his final report. We printed his recollections in the catalogue for the retrospective which accompanied the *Moscow-Berlin. Berlin-Moscow. 1900-1950* exhibition under the title *The Adventures of Dr. Mabuse in the Land of the Bolsheviks*. Although the opening of the exhibition itself in 1995 was supposed to be celebrated by the two heads of state Yeltsin and Kohl, they ended up not attending at the last minute, due to a scandal at the time that formed part of the ongoing tale of the whereabouts of German looted art in Russian museums, a story in which films had never actually played a role.

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These two stories that unfold in different directions bring together places in the areas around Berlin and Moscow that remain unmentioned in reflections about the fate of the films. Films exist as fantasy images created from shadows projected on to the imagination of the viewer and are hardly ever brought into connection with rusty metal cans and cold storage rooms kept at a temperature of 11°C. The complex in Fürstenwalde that also served as a film depot is still contaminated with oil today and could only be leased to a solar energy producer thus far. The empty hangars no longer evoke the images of a past life captured on the famous light resistant SVEMA material,⁴ whose production was discontinued long before that of Kodak. There are hardly any remaining Russian signs on the sheds and barracks on the airfield, which only allude to the tons of rusty iron, the rockets and tanks that stood here for more than four decades as a deterrent, much as they do to the soldiers who oversaw these iron instruments. Their bodies were captured in several DEFA films shot on ORWO

³ Joseph Brodsky, *Spoils of War*. In: *On Grief and Reason*. New York 1995, p. 8–9.

⁴ SVEMA (Svetochuvstvitelnye Materialy) was the largest national manufacturer of film material in the USSR; it was based in Shostka in modern-day Ukraine.

film, which has also vanished today. For when concentration camp films were being shot in Babelsberg, a request was often sent out for Soviet tank soldiers from the surrounding area ("our friends in the forest", as they were called back then). They were the only extras available in the vicinity whose credibly thin stature would enable them play the starving inmates in "authentic" fashion.

As such, this place, even without a screen and the shadows projected on to it, evokes the heavy material of war and the dreams possibly experienced by the now long gone audiences of these films up until 20 years ago. Only sometimes does it seem as if the soundtracks of Russian war films echo like distant ghosts across the airfield and the yawning hangars.

A place like a film. A living archive, far from both Berlin and Moscow.