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Dominik Spritzendorfer and Elena Tikhonova: *Elektro Moskva* (2013)

reviewed by Lars Kristensen© 2014

Elektro Moskva opens with the battleship Aurora firing its canon, an image taken from Sergei Eisenstein's film *Oktober* (*Okriabr'*, 1928). The image is small, further indicating its origin in early cinema, and tinted in the color red. The sound of the canon is eerie and hollow, almost like from a space ship and not a battleship. A narrator's voice-over tells us that "once upon a time, a revolution happened in Russia." As more images from *October* follow, the narrator continues: "actually a ghost had been creeping around in the wider world—the ghost of communism." An archival shot of Lenin appears and the voice-over tells us that "Lenin proposed the simple formula—communist is Soviet power plus electrification of the country" and that "apparently, according to Lenin's plan, the ghost of communist would get a huge electric shock and come to life, just like the monster of Frankenstein." As the narrator guides the viewer through the early history of the Soviet Union with particular emphasis on electrification, science and technical progress, he ends with the idea of a power switch that could turn on the ghost of communism: "the switch was turned on, but the ghost of communism never came to life," echoing the opening line of Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).

The credits appear, written on telephone cables in front of a blue sky and white clouds. The telephone lines bounce as we are on a commuter train (*elektrichka*); some of these lines are real, others are added onto the image, but although the music is electronic, similar to what was used in the comedies of the 70s, the camera reveals a contemporary Russia seen through the window of the train. The light bulb is switched on in a small storage room and we are introduced to the film's protagonist, Aleksei Il'inykh, who is rummaging through the storeroom of a musician friend. The two characters muse over different things in the room, for example a synthesizer without a motherboard, or old drums of the pioneers.



Afterwards the two friends share a drink and Sasha introduces us to the film's motto, taken from a Ural miner called Shkvara: "Come what may, for something will come anyway. There was never a time when there was nothing." The motto is introduced when the conversation touches upon the difference between Soviet synthesizers and foreign types. The foreign ones, says Sasha, have quality. They do what one tells them to do. But the Soviet ones do something different, something unique and

unlike no other.

Elektro Moskva is about Soviet musical instruments and the people who were fascinated by them. A key person in this piece of Soviet history is, of course, Léon Theremin (Lev Sergeevich Termen, 1896-1993), who was the guiding light for a generation of scientists and musicians representing Soviet inventiveness and creativity. His endurance and ability to outlive the Soviet empire, which sent him abroad to study but also imprisoned him on his return, encouraged many to follow his example. Theremin is represented in *Elektro Moskva* through old footage taken in the early 1990s, just before his death. Sergei Zeziulkov's footage of Theremin was intended for a documentary, but the project was never realized and, as a consequence, the film was stored under the filmmaker's bed for decades. These images of Theremin now see the light of the day for the first time. Theremin talks about his experiments with television and how his inventions were picked up by the military and never developed for private consumption, a theme that is underlined by the documentary—the close bond between the military and the invention of electronic music. Some scientists were working for the military during the day, while at night they cobbled together music machines in their laboratories.

Andrei Smirnov, the head of the Theremin Center in Moscow, sits in his laboratory—a small and cramped workshop—playing on the world's first rhythm-machine, the Rhythmicon (1932). Although not the original, but a prototype build in the early 1960s, it sounds and looks like something coming from another world. With visible, oversized nuts and bolts, a rotating disc and electric wires all over the place, the Rhythmicon is one of the desirable objects or machines, which the film uses to illuminate the ghost of communism. These unique music machines have no comparison to anything in the world and their sounds, rhythms and tunes cannot be found elsewhere, but have a distinct echo of Soviet communism and Lenin's hanker after Soviet electrification. Not quite possessing the quality sound of American or Japanese synthesizers, and at time working on their own accord (i.e. sometimes not), it is as if through these machines we can hear the ghost of communism or the echo of the people who made them.





These music machines were made by people who had a passion for new technologies and for doing the impossible. The machines were their pet-projects, coming to life through love and affection for science and discovery: for example, Evgenii Murzin, who invented of the world's first studio synthesizer (ANS), which works by converting graphic marks into music. Scientists, such as Murzin and Theremin, laid the foundation for electronic music, which is nowadays more vibrant than ever. Today it is

a new generation of musicians that crave these old synthesizers, like Aleksei Il'nykh, who travels around the country visiting flea markets to buy Soviet-made music machines. Passionate about these machines, Il'nykh would go to great length to get his hands on an Elektronika 322 or the Vektor-manufactured Poliboks, which, as the narrator tells us, are unusable for playing music, but fabricates a beautiful cosmic soundscape that sounds as if from out of space.

Aleksei Borisov, from the classical electro-band Nochnoi Prospekt, is another person who swears on the functionality of the Soviet synthesizer. Still a practicing musician, he loves their unpredictability and their ability to inspire. This is another theme that *Elektro Moskva* picks up: the idea that there is something immensely powerful in lack, since it can trigger unimaginable possibilities. This line is developed not only in terms of professional musicians or hard-core collectors, but also with regard to ordinary Soviet citizens, who had their imagination tested by the lack of crucial components for their devices, such as antennas for TV sets. People had to create these items themselves from scrap metal or everyday objects. The celebration of inventors of unique usable goods from scrap metal can also be seen in the light of an urge to revert the trend of buying gadgets only to dispose of them soon after (mobile phones being a case in point). In other words, there is a lovely ecological feeling in *Elektro Moskva*. The folk inventors, or inventors of the vernacular, thrived on limitation, incompleteness and imperfection. To them, and their professional counterparts in the military, lack sparked a passion to create something beautiful and useful. This passion to create made Soviet electronic music.



In an interview on the website Hungry Shark the filmmakers, Elena Tikhonova and Dominik Spritzendorfer, state that their overarching idea “was to show the charm of Russia.” Despite their passion for electronic music and filmmaking, it took them 8 years to make *Elektro Moskva*. They wanted to celebrate the metaphysical elements of Soviet man: his ingeniousness, his passion and his love for inventing stuff from nothing. If this was the premise for their story, then they also needed a happy fairy-tale quality in order to counter the usual gloomy documentary image of contemporary Russia. Fairy-tale or not, the result

is a sort of “electro-tale,” which celebrates the makers of electronic musical instruments – from the pioneers of Theremin to late Soviet prefabricate brands, such as the Elektronika or the Poliboks, and to the musicians who learned to use the instruments and love them. These men are far from pin-up models, celebrity stars or trendy businessmen, but regular Russians with a passion. They live with the desire to create, to experiment and to build something new, despite the system. And this is a very Russian thing, according to the filmmakers.

When *Elektro Moskva* went up at the Gothenburg International Film Festival this year, the theatre was packed with people. It was a Tuesday night and the two filmmakers were to appear as DJ and VJ later in a nearby restaurant as part of an event mixing film and music. It should be no surprise that a small Russian documentary screened at the festival, since the festival program included a special feature on contemporary Russian cinema. Neither should it be a surprise that *Elektro Moskva* showed, since it had already been travelling around European film festivals. What was a surprise (at least to this reviewer) was the constellation of the audiences and the enthusiasm for the film’s topic of Soviet produced synthesizers. The cinema was full of young trendy people, who would normally be in hip bars and cafes, but certainly not at a festival screening of contemporary Russian cinema. Even so, *Elektro Moskva* received standing ovations after the screening.

Elektro Moskva is not easily classified as a Russian film, since it was produced by Austria, where both filmmakers live and work. Secondly, just because the film is on a Russian topic does not make it a Russian film. However, both Dominik Spritzendorfer and Elena Tikhonova trained at the Film Institute VGIK in Moscow, where they continue to collaborate with friends and colleagues. Despite working several years outside Russia, their cinematic network in Russia is still intact.



This does make *Elektro Moskva* an example of how Russian cinema is increasingly transnationally connected with the rest of Europe, despite the dominant narrative of media, which is telling us that Russian is moving towards increasing isolation from Europe. If politically Russia is on move away from European values, Russian cinema in all its diversity is, and always has been, moving towards greater integration with other European cinemas. The reception of *Elektro Moskva* underlines this, but it is reveals a paradox in this process.

The paradox is that Soviet history is both used by Russia’s political powers to isolate the country from the rest of the world, and by the filmmakers to make the storytelling of *Elektro Moskva* more palatable to audiences worldwide. Thus, in fairy-tale tones, Soviet history is celebrated for different reasons: on the one hand, as the ideological fuel of political Eurasianism and, on the other, as the birthplace of the supernatural sound and metaphysical quality of Soviet synthesizers that endearing Russians care about. Undoubtedly, it was the latter that the audiences applauded in Gothenburg.

Lars Kristensen
University of Skövde

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Elektro Moskva, Austria, 2013

Documentary, 89 minutes

Directors: Dominik Spritzendorfer and Elena Tikhonova:

DoP: Dominik Spritzendorfer

Editing: Michael Palm

Producers: Dominik Spritzendorfer, Petra Popovic, Diana Stoynova

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