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BOOK REVIEW

The imperial trace: Recent Russian cinema, by Nancy Condee, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, 360 pp., £14.40 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-19-536676-1

One issue that separates this book from other publications on recent Russian cinema is its elaborative framework of Empire. Nancy Condee approaches contemporary Russian filmmaking through an 'imperial trace', which she attaches to six filmmakers who have come to signify Russian cinema in the post-Soviet era. The book is divided into nine chapters; six chapters are devoted to each individual filmmaker and the rest to an introduction, a discussion of Russian cinema in the post-Soviet era, and a conclusion. The most important part of the book is, however, the introduction, which deals with major developments in literature on empire, nation and nationhood, and it is here that Condee establishes her interpretive framework for the analysis of her filmmakers. She then proceeds to contextualise post-Soviet Russian cinema by examining audience figures and changing viewing patterns, which have progressed from regular cinema visits to a fragmented consumption of cinema. As such, the introduction provides a good guide for newcomers to the tumult of events that has come to signify postcommunist Russian cinema.

In the following six chapters, Condee analyses her chosen filmmakers: Nikita Mikhalkov, Kira Muratova, Vadim Abdrashitov and Aleksandr Mindadze, Aleksandr Sokurov, Aleksei German, and Aleksei Balabanov. For each filmmaker Condee offers biographical details, training background and awards received. While such information is often delivered as superfluous, adding little fuel to the fire of textual/authorial analysis (beyond highlighting that a certain section of audiences, or of the film industry, likes some films more than others), Condee certainly makes the most of, for example, the educational foundation of the filmmakers. This is not new with regard to the study of Russian cinema, but it is highly developed here and put to good use thanks to the way in which Condee relates such details to the imperial context that she also develops.

While Condee's analysis of these six filmmakers does not divert significantly from other accounts, her concept of empire in framing Russian cinema as cultural production does. Scholarship on Russian cinema has in recent times been blessed with publications that track cross-cultural endeavours on screen, for example, *Insiders and Outsiders in Russian Cinema* (Norris and Torlone, 2008) and *Russia and Its Other(s) on Film* (Hutchings, 2008). Through its search for a framework that captures the postcommunist transition, *The Imperial Trace* should be seen as a prolongation of this development: since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Soviet cinema has evolved into Russian cinema, leaving the cinema of the other former Soviet republics untouched. However, Condee's account of the last 50 years of Soviet and Russian cinema is not preoccupied with the re-formation of the other cinemas of the post-Soviet space; instead, it seeks to understand how Soviet Russian cinema became Russian cinema. *The Imperial Trace* aims to explore how the condition of empire has influenced Russian filmmakers, or, as Condee

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states in the introduction, ‘how the work [of these filmmakers] *refracts* the social and political condition of the imperial imagination’ (5, my emphasis).

It is no coincidence that Condee chooses the verb ‘refract’ to indicate the progress from cinematic expression to cultural imagination. Writing with precision and with a remarkable vocabulary (which can feel laboured and inaccessible to some readers), Condee is not interested in easy visual manifestations of empire, such as borders or flag-waving per se. Condee instead seeks to find out how the empire has unconsciously assisted in the formation of each individual filmmaker. Thus, it is a certain consciousness, or imperial context, that in turn makes, or is refracted in, the films and their makers – and not the other way around. Each of the six filmmakers is approached within their own interpretive framework, hence the important role that education and audiences play in defining the differences between cinematic styles and their position within the imperial consciousness. In this way, Condee does not examine individual films that provide evidence of empire, which would be simplistic – or akin to studying dogs in Chekhov and looking at ‘Lady with a Lapdog’ (4) – but instead takes the *oeuvre* of the filmmaker to seek something more subtle, a deeper trace of empire.

While I agree with Condee that we should be careful in our handling of ‘visual evidence’, her *auteur* interpretations run the risk of leaving out important comparative elements. Indeed, the comparative points drawn out by Condee bring *The Imperial Trace* alive and raise it above *auteur* analysis, so it is a pity that there is not more such comparative work here. For example, when German’s cinema is contrasted with Mikhalkov’s retro approach and aligned with Muratova’s affection for objects and props, we get a sense of Russian cinema as a field where plurality and intertextuality reign. And it is when Balabanov’s dark collapse of society ‘marks a new turn in contemporary cinema’ (242) that we sense the profound shift that filmmaking has taken in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. It is at these moments that what Condee calls different ‘concepts of cinema’ (4) become meaningful and significant.

Of the filmmakers’ chapters, the one on director Vadim Abdrashitov and writer (turned director) Aleksandr Mindadze stands out. These two filmmakers are not among the usual suspects to get exposure outside Russia; nonetheless they very well illustrate the benefits of Condee’s imperial framework. Their films are about fractured relationships, where groups of people fail to recognise each other and thereby fail to gain insight into themselves. Their groups of male protagonists have the imperial trace carved into their body, either as wounds, scars or physical impairments, but it is not dissonance that comes out as the final result; rather, it is the constant gravitation of individual and state towards each other. It comes as no surprise that Abdrashitov and Mindadze’s cinema plays out in ‘the army, the navy, the sports competition, the juridical system, and the reservist militia – wherein issues of honour, integrity and loyalty are the key foundational values’ (153). For example, in the opening of *Magnitye buri/Magnetic Storms* (Vadim Abdrashitov, Russia, 2003), which was scripted by Mindadze, two hordes of men charge against each other and clash on a bridge, fighting over the ownership of a factory. In this scene, one character gets caught and, while being beaten, is asked the question, ‘who are you for?’ – as if it mattered. In short, Abdrashitov and Mindadze illustrate how allegiance and loyalty are in flux through a tug of war between agency and social structures.

I would argue that such a tug of war is not particular to postcommunist Russian cinema, but rather can be seen throughout the former communist countries. It seems a pity, then, that Condee is predominantly addressing specialists on specifically Russian cinema. In straddling disciplines, Condee’s knowledge and approach should be of interest

to an increasing range of scholars dealing with cinema and empire. Russian cinema undoubtedly has significant stories to tell, with important ramifications for thinking about film and filmmaking in the Russian context. But while Condee to a great extent elaborates on the literature on nation formation and theories of nationhood, these are almost exclusively from social science, and not from literature on film. It is as if there is a gulf between two different concepts of empire: landlocked and overseas imperial formations, where the latter is dealt with from the side of film studies, drawing on (post)colonial studies, and the former from Eastern European and Russian studies, which take their fuel from ethno-nationalist movements. For example, there is no mention of Russia or landlocked empire in *Film and the End of Empire* (Grieverson and MacCabe 2011), but nor is there mention of overseas empire here. However, I query that these two frameworks for 'Empire' should not be mutually exclusive, but instead have mutual lessons to learn from each other by looking more broadly into the research on imperial formations in cinema.

Despite leaving tracks to be covered, *The Imperial Trace* is, however, the best account to date on how to renew our approach to Soviet and Russian cinema. Condee suggests a path we are about to follow.

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