Contested Interpretations of the Past in Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian Film

Screen as Battlefield

Edited by

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“Wanna Be in the New York Times?” Epic History and War City as Global Cinema

Lars Kristensen

There is a reason why the eponymous film *La Battaglia di Algeri* (The Battle of Algiers, 1966), directed by the Italian Gillo Pontecorvo, references the city and not the country as a whole.¹ In this postcolonial film *par excellence*, which tells the story of the fight for independence by the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) against the French colonial powers, the city of Algiers became the main battlefield and the Casbah, the old quarter of the capital, its epic centre. By making the struggle for national independence a city narrative, the filmmakers moved away from bourgeois nationalism, to demonstrate their allegiance to Marxism, whose purpose was a liberation of the world-wide proletariat, rather than a specific nation. In the context of Algeria, Frantz Fanon warned against national liberation struggles transforming into bourgeois nationalism, which would lead to new oppression (Lazarus 1993: 82). In *The Battle of Algiers*, it is the insurgence from the oppressed in the Casbah against the colonisers in the cafes and bars of the French tourist city that is elevated to universal struggle of the colonised.

The reason for highlighting *The Battle of Algiers* in this chapter is that the three films I will discuss also have cities as part of their titles, but their liberation struggles are markedly different from that of the Algerians' fight for independence. *Leningrad* (Attack on Leningrad, 2009) is directed by Aleksandr Buravskii and tells the story of the Leningrad siege during the Second World War, with an international cast of well-known actors, such as Gabriel Byrne, Armin Mueller-Stahl and Mira Sorvino. *Rigas Sargi* (Defenders of Riga, 2007), directed by Aigars Grauba, is a co-production with an Estonian film company and centres on the short period when Latvia gained independence after the First World War. Jerzy Hoffman's *1920 Bitwa Warszawska* (Battle of Warsaw 1920, 2011) is also set in the post-

¹ It could be seen as an allusion to Rossini's opera *L'Italiana in Algeri*, about the court intrigues in an Algerian harem, but this would downgrade the film's political intention.

World War I period, focusing on the Miracle at Vistula when the Polish army managed to defeat the approaching Red Army.

These three films are highly commercial products that seek large audiences, and increasingly international audiences, which would return the financial support invested in them. This differentiates them from Pontecorvo's film and the echelons of high art, placing them within the realms of popular and mass culture. However, I will take these films as a manifestation of global tendencies in the film industry, which increasingly projects a transnational audience in its effort to secure approval of its product, here chiefly seen in the casting of international actors, in co-production companies participating in the films or in the cinematic techniques deployed. While this global craving can be seen exclusively in economic terms, i.e. the bigger the budget the higher the number of paying viewers is required, I also believe that these films seek recognition abroad for other reasons, namely a kind of postcommunist, postcolonial recognition for the films' national aspirations.

My chapter will draw firstly on concepts of cinematic representation within a postcolonial framework and secondly look at the representation of the city as a tool with which to look through these films as more than just commercial products unworthy of our attention. On the one hand, the city is what unites these three films; on the other, it is makes them divert from each other both cinematically and nationally. With regard to the postcolonial, I will argue that these films can be examined as expressions of a post-imperial condition. There is a desire to narrate the nation anew, as if liberated from a colonial oppression. However, the old structures of oppression have not disappeared, but rather merged into new ones. Thus, in this perspective, the inclusion in my discussion of *The Battle of Algiers*, a film commissioned by the Algerian government three years after the country gained independence, is fitting.

Representation

In looking at cinematic representations, I will draw a methodology adopted from visual anthropology. If we ignore artistic intention and art film as evidence of a single mind, which has proven so useful in auteur

theory (see Gaut 2010: 152-63), and move towards a methodical approach to filmmaking, then these films' expressions and modes of production become self-evident beyond pamphlet descriptions, such as kitsch cinema, mass production or 'for-export-only' films. In search of a scientific method of analysing cinematic representations, it is useful to look at some of the theoretical discussion that has happened within visual anthropology, because, as a science of people, anthropology has always been concerned with how to represent the Other. The discipline of visual anthropology has been developed from traditional ethnography and anthropology, but, instead of being a written science, it seeks to describe cultures with moving images. Because it seeks to be a proper 'science', belonging to social science rather than the arts, the discipline has taken pains to lay bare its research methods. While this could be seen as the profession's fight to stay inside academia, loosening the ties to subjectivity (and fiction), it nonetheless argues that an object, be it a culture, a people or a community, can correctly be represented on film. Fadwa El Guindi (2004) has developed a distinct method for visual anthropologists, where she divides filmmaking into three categories, self-representation, representation through an informer and representation by the Other. While in the first mode, it is the object of study themselves that makes the film, in the last mode it is the outsider, the anthropologist, who does the filming. The middle mode, filming through an informer, is when a person trained by the anthropologist is doing the filming.

It has to be said that El Guindi considers fictional films outside her scope, since they are not rooted in 'real' life. However, El Guindi's rigorous methodology helps us in defining the position of our three films' expressions, because central to El Guindi's division of the mode of film research are questions of intent related to making the film in the first place. Who is making the film? Why are they making the film? What is to be represented? And for whom is the film made? It is these questions and the division of cinematic modes that I want to apply to the fictional films cited above.

Let me deal with the mode of cinematic expression first. I consider all three films within the mode of self-representation, despite *Defenders of Riga* being a co-production. Co-productions are often seen as complicating pure national expression, but in this case, *Defenders of Riga* is not a national representation of self, but a regional expression that can carry significance for other nations that have experienced the same

struggle for national upheaval. The inclusion of the Estonian production company does not change or modify the expression of the film; it only enhances its appeal outside Latvia. *Attack on Leningrad* is at times described as a co-production with the UK, which makes its place of production complicated, but here the involvement of the London production arm of Prime Focus was limited to post-production, specifically providing digital enhancement. *Battle of Warsaw* is most clearly a self-representation according to the film backers, since it is produced by Zodiak Jerzy Hoffman Film Productions, which was founded by the director of *Battle of Warsaw* and has a string of stylised adaptations and heritage film in its portfolio.

However, detecting the origin of a cinematic expression should not be a money-trailing exercise exclusively, but should also include other professions within the industry, such as scriptwriters or casting directors. In such cases, it is interesting to look at *Attack on Leningrad*, because, although the film was produced at Lenfilm in St. Petersburg, with its digital post-production outsourced to London, the plot of *Leningrad* seems to have been envisioned by Sergio Leone, the iconic director of spaghetti western films. In the late 1980s, Leone wrote the general plot line of the film, but, according to various websites, no script exists. There is a similarity between *Attack on Leningrad* and Leone's ideas for a film on the Leningrad siege, in terms of the plot based on the foreigner perspective. While this again complicates the self-representational mode of the film, it also clearly suggests that the filmmakers intended the film to be targeted to a global audience.²

If the plot on the Leningrad blockade in *Attack on Leningrad* and the script of Sergio Leone is similar, then the plot in Aleksander Sokurov's film *Chitaem 'Blokadnuiu knigu'* (We Read the Book of the Blockade, 2009) is different. This film was made for television and released the same year as *Attack on Leningrad*, marking the 65th anniversary of the lifting of the siege. In Sokurov's film, the historical event becomes un-filmable, and in his usual style of anti-cinema, there is no spectacle, as people read in a

² The fact that the topic and plot of *Attack on Leningrad* has the ability to travel can be detected from the rumours that a US production of the film is being projected with Giuseppe Tornatore as director and Avi Lerner as producer. This would clearly move the mode of production into the category of representation by the Other.

radio studio from a book recounting the suffering of ordinary people. Highlighting Sokurov's version, which explicitly fronts trauma, taboo and healing (Barskova 2010), in connection with *Attack on Leningrad* clearly indicates the different strategies in filmmaking and in the targeted audiences. While Sokurov's film could break into a festival circuit, *Attack on Leningrad* has international stars that can lure popular audiences abroad as well as at home.³

Attack on Leningrad may have an overseas audience as its clear target; the situation is more complex for the other two films. *Defenders of Riga*, as I have argued, is projected to create interest across the Baltic region, predominantly because of its story that is echoed in neighbouring countries. While it failed to make an impact in the other Baltic countries, the film broke a record with its home audience, with 16% of all Latvians attending a cinema screening (Aiano 2012: 28). *Battle of Warsaw* tells a similar story of a crucial point in history when nation formation took centre stage, but without transnational co-operation (except perhaps for the Russian actors employed to play Ukrainians).⁴ *Defenders of Riga* and *Battle of Warsaw* similarly feature a historical moment of nation formation after a period of oppression; this is why I group the two films together since they share the national struggle against an oppressor. Both films can be seen as national epics that clearly share affinities with global cinema, where spectacle is more important than national plot. This is a cinema that looks expensive and thrives on finding a global audience.

³ In an interview for the Russian journal *Ogonek*, Sokurov refuses to pass judgment on *Attack on Leningrad*, stating that fiction film is one thing and what he did was entirely different (Shergina 2009). This is despite the fact that the interviewer finds connections between the two films. The strong dismissal of comparison underlines the difference in style of representation. For a different mode of representation we should look elsewhere, for example by comparing it with *City of Thieves* by David Benioff (2008). This novel is written from the perspective of a second-generation Russian Jewish migrant and tells the story of how his grandfather survived the Leningrad siege by turning over every stone of the city to find a dozen eggs for a wedding cake.

⁴ It should be mentioned, though, that Hoffman's cinematic capital derives partly from his filmmaking education in Moscow at VGIK.

Postcolonialism

In film studies, postcolonialism has come some way since it was introduced in the 1980s by various writers, such as Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha. “In effect, postcolonialism has evolved into a comprehensive category that is not restricted to instances of straightforward domination on the basis of race or colonial dependencies” (Iordanova, Martin-Jones and Vidal 2010: 4). One way of looking at these films from a postcommunist postcolonial perspective is to identify stereotypes of the neighbour (Mazierska, Kristensen & Nāriepa 2013). I could, thus, point to the films’ depiction of German,⁵ Cossack or English characters and affirm the reverse structure of old colonial relationships, where new narrative still rely on old enemies. Identifying the Other, or defining the use of the Other, in the expression of self is not my intention. Rather, I want to use the postcolonial perspective to look at how the cinematic form, the epic film, on the one hand, eludes nationalism, but, on the other, promotes national centrality. This, I believe, is particular to the postcommunist condition, where visibility of the nation is paramount, despite the various transnational forms of the films themselves. In this regard, it is worth looking back at Charles Taylor’s concept of politics of recognition. “Due recognition” writes Taylor (1994: 26), “is not just a courtesy that we owe people. It is a vital human need”. According to Taylor, a people, or a *Volk*, should seek to express their racial, sexual and cultural particularities within a normative majority, because this would grant recognition from the surrounding establishment and thus, affirmative politics would follow. The politics of recognition works “in both benign and malignant forms” of modern nationalism (idem: 31), which, in my opinion, makes this concept useful for my discussion of postcommunist epic films. In these films, I argue that ‘to be’ is ‘to be recognised’, even though this only happens through the historical fiction of an epic film. At one level, these films seek to promote nationalist consolidation by gaining international recognition from transnational audiences. Films can be nationally specific, but only within a postnational framework, and it is here that stylised national epics can give the postcommunist postcolonial state visibility. In many ways,

⁵ *Defenders of Riga* participates in the longstanding Latvian cultural convention influenced by centuries of hostility towards German colonial domination.

visibility places the nation on the international map, or the globe, as happens literally in the Kazakh film *Nomad* (Sergei Bodrov, 2005).⁶ We need a politics of recognition, argues Taylor, because in the modern age identity recognition can fail and become hurtful misrecognition (idem: 35).

Despite the dangers of misrecognition from audiences, the epic film illustrates well the post-national aims of seeking recognition. It is within this postnational totality that we can answer the questions of what is represented and why such films should be made, because it is within this totality that the epic film can function as, on the one hand, signifier of the actual nation or nation formation, and, on the other hand, as a cinematic product that can be consumed by global audiences. As Robert Burgoyne (2011: 2) notes in his introduction to *The Epic Film in World Culture*, for international audiences, it is cinema itself that is the attraction in the epic film. Audiences, who are far removed from the narratives, obviously read these films as something other than nation-centric expression. To these viewers, the films are spectacle itself, and only fail as products where banal nationalism disturbs the pace of the action. One such incident occurs in *Battle of Warsaw*, when a priest on the battlefield leads the Polish army to victory (in slow motion) by divine intervention, which is called "an ill advisedly handheld combat sequence" by *Sight & Sound* reviewer Michael Brooke (2011: 56).⁷ With regard to *Defenders of Riga*, the *Variety* review underlines that other than in Latvia, the film "will find few defenders" (Weissberg 2008). However, these films are, from the perspective of the filmmakers, meant to represent important events, which is equal to the postcolonial filmmaker attempting to form the nation anew after being liberated from oppression. In this way, these films present the perspective of the colonised seeking to overthrow the yoke of foreign exploitation, but, contrary to previous postcolonial

⁶ Also with an international cast, *Nomad* tells of the glorious birth of modern Kazakhstan, including epic battles, and had the support (moral and financial) of the Kazakh president, the all-mighty father of the post-Soviet nation. However, this cinematic exploit of gaining international recognition as a nation backfired as Sacha Baron Cohen's film, *Borat* (2006) entered screens at the same time as *Nomad* was scheduled to hit international audiences. Needless to say, *Borat*'s image of 'Kazakhstan' overtook *Nomad*'s image of the peace-loving people emerging from the steppes of Central Asia.

⁷ Calling it a film of kitsch entertainment value, Brooke identifies the need for spectacle as part of the genre's conventions, conceding that "one hardly expects subtlety in a film clearly conceived as a rousing patriotic flag-waver."

narratives, this happens by glossy spectacle and with the approval of international audiences. In a sense, we are back at the contradiction that Andrew Higson identified in the late 1980s, that in order for a national cinema to be recognised, its films must be recognised abroad (Higson 1989). However, this is epic cinema; popular cinema and not art cinema, which Higson highlighted.

It should come as no surprise that these films are engaging with publicity and press, because it is predominantly within the media that political recognition takes place. To be seen in media is to confirm one's existence in the world, whether as a person or as a nation. The interface of press and nation can be traced back to Benedict Anderson's famous analysis of nation formation, where the circulation of printed news creates a homogeneous space in which the nation could be imagined by its members. But in a postcolonial perspective, as well as in a postcommunist one, the right media exposure might be what makes or breaks you as a new nation. In all these films, journalists and reporters are highlighted through the films as important, not only as witnesses to historical event but also as vessels of meaning, argument and propaganda. The latter is foremost evident in *Battle of Warsaw*, where Lenin and his Bolsheviks hold a press conference, spreading their world communism, which obviously from a Polish perspective is portrayed with hostility. In the film's view, Soviet plan to extend communism is curbing the aspiration of the Polish state and thus seen as a foreign intervention, which, in the perspective of the postcommunist image, makes it a postcolonial survival narrative. In this image, Poland is poised as the victim of Soviet colonisation, despite the fact that the leading protagonist, Jan Krynicky, is sympathetic toward socialist ideas. Interestingly, when the Polish government calls for the Polish people to join the voluntary army, there is no media relay in imparting this important announcement. Instead, the people are addressed directly by the prime minister, through the church and through public agitation. In fact, when the PM addresses the nation, it is as if he is addressing the contemporary viewers, hence completely collapsing the time frame of post-World War I and the postcommunist era. In this regard, *Battle of Warsaw* is unique in this analysis.

In *Defenders of Riga*, the emphasis on being seen through the media is just as explicit, but even more obvious in terms of seeking

international recognition. When the defenders have barricaded themselves in the inner city of Riga, foreign journalists and photographers are in the trenches taking pictures of the people. At one point, a photographer asks, "Wanna be in *The New York Times*?" And who wouldn't. But, in the narrative of the film, being in *The New York Times* would be the recognition that secures the new nation's viability. This is underlined further when the young nation's head of state holds a press conference for foreign media about the atrocities against Latvia, saying that 'the world must know about this'. Implicit in this statement is that, if the international community knows, then they will act accordingly. In *Defenders of Riga*, there is no collapse of time, as in *Battle of Warsaw*; instead, we get a collapse of fact and fiction, as the movement from visual document and documentation progresses fluidly. In several instances, the documentary images progressively evolve into the images of the fictional film, moving, so to speak, from black and white footage into the bright colours of the epic film. This can be viewed as the epic film drawing a direct line between actual historical events and fictional drama, thereby connecting the postcommunist context of the fiction to the visual recognition of the newsreel. In the postcommunist condition, important historical events are narrated as interplay between film and history, in full awareness of the power of the fictional story over the 'objective' news story.

While this also happens in *Battle of Warsaw*, the Polish epic does not feature the same fluidity between history and film. For example, in the opening credits, where we get contextualising information of World War I through a voiceover, the film progresses from enacted 'document' footage of trench warfare to Eisenstein's *October* and the storming of the Winter Place. This is followed by tinted images of a charging horse cavalry with our hero on horseback; he is eventually knocked down and stabbed by a Red Army soldier. Contrary to *Defenders of Riga*, where we watch history progress into present film, in the Polish version, we stay within the fabricated document of history, as the montage focuses in on our hero, Jan Krynicky, falling on the field of battle. As such, *Battle of Warsaw* can be seen as refusing overt reference to a postcolonial condition, instead aiming at projecting the past as solid and irrevocable in thinking the nation anew. Thus, in *Battle of Warsaw*, we are witnessing history as it is and not its making, which would correspond to Jerzy Hoffman's other historical films. In the words of Elzbieta Ostrowska (2011: 508), Hoffman's

filmmaking “offer[s] a singular image of Polishness based on traditional religious and patriotic values”, which is as close to an unconsciousness of Polish national identity as one can get.

In *Attack on Leningrad*, the perspective is somewhat different. Not because it lacks representatives of media persons, which it does not since its leading characters are journalists, but rather because an unanswered question remains: what is to be recognised? Both in *Battle of Warsaw* and *Defenders of Riga*, it was the formation of the new national state that needed to be visualised on screen, but this is not the case in *Attack on Leningrad*, as the Soviet Union is in place before and after the film’s narrative. However, and this is where the issue of postcolonialism in contentious, if we view the Soviet Union and its ideology of world socialism as an active coloniser, despite its anti-imperial rhetoric (see Mazierska, Kristensen & Närke 2013), the Russian people can also be considered as oppressed by a colonial power. In this regard, it can be argued that the siege of Leningrad functions as a prime example of a sacrifice in the name of the Russian people, not the Soviet Union.

The postcommunist postcolonial perspective, in my opinion, is applicable to *Attack on Leningrad*, despite its narrative focus on Russians, the ‘bearing’ people of the Soviet Empire (Martin 2001: 80). An important element in the search for international recognition is that the film is not set in Moscow, the capital, but focus on the plight of Russia’s second city, which is at times projected as the cultural capital. Moreover, it could be argued that *Attack on Leningrad* more overtly than the others two films shows foreigners as important to the narrative. The delegation of foreign reporters is in the Soviet Union to observe the war effort. They are critical reporters, but cannot move freely, since they are forced around by the NKVD, who monitors them vigorously. In the fashion of a press pool, which was firmly established during the first Gulf War (1990-91), they are to report a military guided picture of the Soviet Union. However, once Kate is outside the official delegation and presumed dead by her colleagues, she transforms from journalist to native. During this process, she has shed her ‘Western’ foreignness, absorbing the suffering of the

people of Leningrad.⁸ Kate's gradual identity change ends in her total cross over when she travels back to the city instead of going home. This is what underpins the story. However, midway through the story, Kate is revealed to be the daughter of a Russian white general who fled to Britain and whose identity has been kept a secret because of Kate's profession. This makes her character trajectory, from foreigner to native, postcolonial. She is the link to the pre-colonial era, Tsarist Russia, which has to be fused with the colonial predicament in order to project a postcolonial nation anew. For the postcolonial national poet, it is not enough to dig up history and obliterate colonial oppression; rather, pre-colonial history and colonial suffering have to be narrated in a fluid manner so that the postcolonial nation can be viewed as fresh and firmly beyond the old.

In all three films, media and the act of documenting function on the level of seeking political recognition, as illustrated by Charles Taylor. In this view, a group of people should seek to express themselves as a folk, which would then force political recognition from the political establishment. I argue that these films seek political recognition from international audiences as part of a postcolonial effort of narrating the nation anew.

The City

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith divides city films into "real and imagined" cities: in the former group are those films which show the actual city, whether touristic or hidden, and in the latter, the imagined city as created in studios and by montage to represent any-city, such as the noir city or the sci-fi city (Nowell-Smith 2001: 102). However, I would like to look at the city as soft versus hard, as anti-imperial versus nationalistic, because the digital image has rendered the real vs. imagined nexus partly irrelevant. Warsaw, Riga and Leningrad are both real and imagined in these films, but how the city is dealt with through each narrative differs. In a sense, I want to examine how the films relate to the core city and surrounding outskirts; how the city's centre and periphery are played out in terms of nation and nationalism. My argument is that the harder a city becomes,

⁸ In some ways, this is a reversal of Greta Garbo's transformation in Ernst Lubitch's *Ninotchka* (1939), where Ninotchka has to shed her Sovietness in order to experience love.

the more the city is portrayed as the pinnacle of the imagined nation. In contrast, the softer it becomes, the more this nation dissolves through penetration of an Other or that which makes the homogeneous nation unstable. Following from Jonathan Raben, the soft city can be constantly remade into a space in one's own image, and does not force its inhabitants to live by certain rules. In the soft city, it is the city dwellers that imprint their identity onto the city (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2003: 225). In serious danger of digressing beyond the imaginative, I will give the example of French Banlieue films, which are predominantly located in the suburbs, in contrast to the city centre, which is represented as the political heart seeking to control and police the periphery.

In these films, the city is made soft by focusing on narratives of second-generation immigrants. The suburbs are a contested space where misrecognition takes place, since people are judged by their skin colour rather than their individual identities. As such it is very much a postcolonial space that seeks to contest normative views about crime, unemployment and social unrest. In this connection, surveillance is paramount for the Rule of Law, the paternal symbolic order, which through CCTV, helicopter viewpoints and police control holds its inhabitants in its field of vision. The symbolic order writes its politics on the bodies of its inhabitants. *La haine* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995) is a good example, where a TV crew tries to find subjects to represent a recent riot, but instead the main characters of the film challenge TV crew, as "they demand that the camera be switched off" (Fielder 2001: 274). I would argue that in the films discussed here, the opposite happens, since here it is about establishing the Rule of Law, the normative views of the nation state. Thus the suburbs, which are the actual battleground of these war films, become hard cities, onto which the nation can be written. Once you control the periphery, you control the nation.

If the city develops as part of the war machine, as Paul Virilio has argued (Redhead 2004: 25), then the creation of vantage points, such as hills, towers and aircrafts, are vital in winning the upper hand over your enemy. For Virilio, the city, just like cinema and telecommunication, has explicit connections to war and the development of weapons, and post-World War II, in particular, has changed the modern city into uninhabitable and unsafe spaces, which means that the establishment has to watch and protect the people by surveillance (Brügger 1994: 20). War

has always played out on three levels; above, on and under ground. In these three 'playing fields', the 'art of war' aims at creating an artificial climate, a polluted space, that is uninhabitable for the enemy. The trenches in these films, then, stand for the city at large and for the territory that needs to be polluted. In *Battle of Warsaw*, this space is created in the cemetery of a church, which reinforces the favourable position of the church as part of society that needs to be protected from foreign penetration. However, in *Defenders of Riga*, this under-ground space is created in the middle of the city, where Martin starts to dig up the cobblestones in the street. The city centre is the natural foundation that must be remodelled in order to make it uninhabitable for the advancing German and Russian soldiers. In this sense, where the Polish capital stays off-screen during the fight, the city centre of Riga becomes demolished and polluted by war. Where the centre of Warsaw is never in question, Riga is always in doubt. In *Attack on Leningrad*, we are only at the trenches at the opening of the film, leaving them for good once we are inside the city.⁹ These are at the outskirts of the city, similar to the ones in *Battle of Warsaw*, but without the church and the graveyard. In *Attack on Leningrad*, it is the city centre and its people that suffer from penetration from above, in the form of German bombing raids.

War from above is crucial for Paul Virilio, because as he demonstrates in *War and Cinema* (1989), it is the constant search for above ground level that has characterised the technological drive of the war machine. The better your overview of your enemy is, the better your chances of defeating him. An accurate image, and accurate moving images such as in cinema and television, has this link to the war machine. In these films, above-ground warfare also plays a major role. For example, in *Battle of Warsaw*, the Americans take pictures from aircraft, which are directly transferred to the deck of General Piłsudski, who can then assess the size and formation of the Red Army. It is the Poles through the

⁹ This has been noted by commentators on IMDb indicating their disappointment in *Attack on Leningrad* as a war film. For example, 'nikolobg' from Canada writes, "as a war movie this one is a complete JOKE - from the bad special effects to a director with zero grasp of reality: in one scene 20 Germans are running towards 20 dug in Russians. The Russians counter attack by getting out and running towards the Germans. They shoot once and then they charge, the Germans do the same like a civil war battle and then we have a hand to hand fight of those 40 people?!?!?" (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tto432314/reviews>)

Americans that control the image making, which in itself can be seen as an allegory to the film's borrowing from the Hollywood epic filmmaking. Geopolitically, it is the Soviet colonial overlay, signified through the clip of Eisenstein's *October* in the opening of the film, which needs to be re-imagined, or re-aligned, according to the rules of US image making.

In *Defenders of Riga*, the advantages of vantage points are underscored at the beginning of the film when Martin climbs the outside wall of the church to reach the bell tower to announce his departure with the Latvian Riflemen.¹⁰ However, this vantage point is contested throughout the course of the film, because it is occupied at different points, first by Pavel Bermond, the Russian/Georgian Tsarist general, and later by General Goltz, the Prussian General behind Bermond's attack on the city. These two foreigners are eventually defeated by Martin and his little army of resistance fighters, but not until a prolonged fistfight around the bell tower between a brutal German sergeant and Martin, which settles the score in favour of the Latvians. In this sense, once you reclaim the bell tower, victory is secured, which suggests an acknowledgement of the interchangeable identity of the bell tower. That said, this reclaiming happens outside the city centre and not at the city centre where the first Latvian Prime Minister is located. Thus, the bell tower is part of the periphery and the battleground, just like the trenches outside Warsaw and Leningrad. Furthermore, in *Defenders of Riga*, the political centre, embodied by Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis, is constantly depicted from a city tower, from where Ulmanis can raise the Latvian flag. Thus, the central political power, joined with the periphery's victory of the bell tower, creates the unified nation.¹¹

A completely different image of the unified nation emerges from Aleksandr Sokurov's short film *Prostaia elegiia* (Simple Elegy, 1990), which

¹⁰ It is not clear from the film which division he has joined, the Reds or the Whites.

¹¹ At several points during the film, Martin and Ulmanis actually meet, which prompts the blogger, Latvian Abroad, to explain: "The movie has come under fire for a lot of minor historical inaccuracies. Soldier Mārtiņš ends up talking a lot (and giving advice to!) prime minister Kārlis Ulmanis. Surely, that's not what happened in the real life! But I understand that the moviemakers wanted to show both the perspective of an ordinary soldier (Mārtiņš) and Commander-in-Chief (Ulmanis) and showing the entire chain-of-command in between the two would have made it too complicated... I think the most important thing was showing the moods and emotions of those days and the movie succeeded in that" (Anon. 2008).

centres on Vytautas Landsbergis a couple of months after Lithuania declared its independence from the Soviet Union. In this documentary film, Landsbergis is also seen as elevated in his office position, at the beginning of the film, where he plays the Nocturnes, composed by his famous compatriot Čiurlionis, on the piano, and at the end, behind his huge desk covered with phones and papers. Despite Landsbergis' heroic posture, which is comparable to Ulmanis' in *Defenders of Riga*, in Sokurov's film there is a pronounced mood of loss, despite an atmosphere that something 'can [or should] be rescued' from the disintegration of the Soviet Union.¹² While Ulmanis and Landsbergis are equal in their respective positions, there is a momentous leap between the two representations, one self-representation and postcommunist, the other, a representation of the Other and the Soviet-Russian. In the postcommunist condition, past Latvian nationalism, embodied in Ulmanis, has replaced the actual examination of actual nationalism under the Soviet imperial umbrella, as represented by Landsbergis.

In *Defenders of Riga*, the unison of the centre and the periphery is emphasised through the fact that the central place of fighting is a bridge, which connects the centre with the periphery. This bridge is the symbol of the homogeneous nation during peacetime – a nation that is not divided. There are a lot of bridges in *Attack on Leningrad*, several of them iconic to the cityscape of St Petersburg. As such, these bridges cannot form a liaison between centre and periphery; instead, this is created from the 'bridge' provided by the frozen lake Ladoga, which opens up a corridor into and out of the besieged city. Needless to say, this corridor is fraught with dangers, such as falling through the ice. Therefore, the liaison between centre and periphery—or maybe the other way around, because Leningrad was not the political capital of the Soviet Union—is fragile and vulnerable to continuous negotiations and remakes. The fact that it is a 'ground-level' bridge, as it is neither above- nor under-ground, but on the

¹² There are no flag-waving Lithuanians celebrating gaining national independence, but instead silent women with empty, mournful looks. This obviously leads us to conclude that in Sokurov's film we have shifted the mode of representation and entered into the mode of representation by the Other. That said, Sokurov himself has stated that in *Simply Elegy* there are two heroes, Landsbergis and the Lithuanian people, which, in *Defenders of Riga*, is narrated through establishing the connection between the political centre with the people of the periphery. See the website *The Island of Sokurov* by Aleksandra Tuchninskaia, www.sokurov.spb.ru/isle_en/documentaries.html?num=59

frozen surface of the lake, emphasises the film's horizontal attitudes to history, such as linearity between outside and inside and between past and present. In other words, events are not hierarchical and vertical in an above and under fashion, but placed side by side as equal. In this light, the fusion of Nina, the militia woman, and Kate, the pre-revolution daughter of a white general, needs no 'bridging' as they are equals. The two women are seen as the continuation of the same origin, as within one linear flow of events, because there is no hierarchical status between them as insider/outsider or Russian/non-Russian.

This horizontal feature of the narrative is supported by the fact that the airways are controlled by the Germans, wreaking destruction from above.¹³ However, the city still has its radio station in function, which would play music or warns against coming attacks, infamously through the tic-tac of the metronome. In this way, the metronome and the radio station become the heartbeat of the city, which is central for its survival. The radio station leaves a strong trail of hard city, since its strong connection with the state and authority. Despite inability of the radio station to control the airways, the city keeps its centrality as the provider of law and order by controlling the radiowaves, even when people resort to looting and plunder, or, even worse, cannibalism. It should be mentioned that in Sokurov's film *We Read the Book of the Blockade*, the metaphor of the radio station is taken to its pinnacle. Here, the reading from the book takes place in a radio station, thus restaging it as the institution that gives shape to the retelling of the siege. In Sokurov's image, Leningrad/St Petersburg become hard cities that cannot break from their centrality. Whether as viewers, as reading characters or as the filmmaker himself, we are all collapsed into the single radio station broadcasting history. This creates a strong nationalistic image in *We Read the Book of the Blockade*—an image that is absent from *Attack on Leningrad*.

In *Attack on Leningrad* there is no connection between the characters and the radio station, nor are they seen listening to the radio.

¹³ It is curious to note that the film does not depict underground warfare, for example sheltering in the metro system. To me, this underlines the film's horizontal, on the ground, features. The metro system has a central position in the science fiction novel *Metro 2033* (2011) by Dmitrii Glukhovskii, which, however, is set in Moscow.

The hard city trace in *Attack on Leningrad* does not, though, work against the postcolonial narrative that I have highlighted above, because as a homo-social pair, the two women of *Attack on Leningrad* need to be fused without disruption from the periphery. It is the narrative of the centre projecting the Russian people as the victims of war. Both women die in the city, but they do so heroically, for the sake of future generations of Russians. In the two other films, the priests die, sacrificing their lives for the protagonist lovers to heterosexually produce the future generations.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to throw Paul Virilio into the field of play again. He writes on the first page of *Speed and Politics* (1986: 3) that "the revolution contingent attains its ideal form not in the place of production, but in the street, where for a moment it stops being a cog in the technical machine and itself becomes a motor (machine of attack), in other words a 'producer of speed'". The question is how these films are part of this producer of speed. Are they not part of what Virilio characterises as dromology, where society and technology increase their speed to outperform older formations, for example in developing high-speed aeroplanes or ever higher skyscrapers (1986: 46)? In terms of Virilio's dromology, then, these films are an indictment of the cinema machine outperforming older films. *Battle of Warsaw* was the first Polish film in 3D and had the highest-paid starring role. *Defenders of Riga* was the most expensive film made in Latvia, and *Attack on Leningrad* claims to be one of the biggest Russian film projects telling 'the world about the heroism of the citizens of Leningrad.'

Being a pessimist, Virilio warns against dromology, because any machine, or its society, has the accident ingrained in its make up—ship/shipwreck, plane/plane crash or nuclear bomb/nuclear disaster. It is easy to be pessimistic about these films, which are perceived as popular trash. However, I think it would be going too far to characterise them as accidents of the cinema machine. Rather, they are part of a filmmaking that seeks transnational recognition for their postcolonial endeavours. This is a popular filmmaking that hopes to reach a mass audience, and hence comes across as bland or kitschy. What I have argued is that the city becomes an important entity in this regard, as it softens the

nationalistic message of the films. However, what these big budget ventures thrive on in their mainstream production outlook is placing at the centre of the narrative, not the city, but the nation. And in this case, they are not different from their iconic postcolonial predecessors, such as *Battle of Algiers*, because when *Battle of Algiers* was made, it too wanted to be in *The New York Times*.

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