Journal of e-Media Studies
Special Issue: Early Cinema Compendium, Mark Williams (editor)
Volume 7, Issue 1, 2024 Dartmouth College

Daydreams: Cinema of the Russian Empire and Beyond, a Database

Anna Kovalova
University of Pittsburgh

Abstract

The essay provides a detailed description of Daydreams, the first scholarly database of feature films produced in the Russian Empire and its former territories from the first years after the October Revolution until the end of private film production. This database contains the most complete filmographies, synopses, iconographic materials (such as promotional stills, posters, and frame enlargements), and video clips for more than 2,500 films. Tracing its goals, scope, sources, and structure, the article discusses a fundamental digital platform of materials related to the cinema of the Russian Empire which is about to open in the fall of 2023.

Daydreams is the first scholarly database of feature films produced in the Russian Empire and its former territories from the first years after the October Revolution until the end of private film production. It contains the most complete filmographies, synopses, iconographic materials (such as promotional stills, posters, frame enlargements), and video clips for more than 2,500 films. This unique bilingual online database will become an essential tool for film historians, Slavic scholars, and everyone interested in early cinema.

The title of the database comes from a canonical film by Evgenii Bauer, *Daydreams* (*Грезы*; 1915), an adaptation of Georges Rodenbach's short novel *The Dead Bruges*. At the time, the concept of daydreams was among the most important in various reflections on and discussions of early Russian film; Maxim Gorky was the first to use the word "daydreams" in his groundbreaking essay about cinema written in 1896.[1] Daydreams, Light Daydreams, Magical Daydreams—dozens of motion picture theaters all over the country had such names.

Scope

"Very little has been written on the ties and connections between these two periods, and the films from the 1917–1921 interregnum remain among the most unexplored, and yet significant, objects in the field."

With the exception of a few odd, pioneering experiments, cinema of the Russian Empire lasted but a decade; the first feature films were produced in 1907, and the October Revolution of 1917 marked the end of the empire. However, cinema did not become Soviet

Figure 1. Postcard featuring *Be Silent, My Sorrow, Be Silent* (*Молчи, грусть . . . молчи . . .* ; Chardynin, 1918).

overnight; until 1921 private studios all over the former empire kept producing films in the prerevolutionary tradition. Piotr Chardynin's *Be Silent, My Sorrow, Be Silent* (*Молчи, грусть . . . молчи . . .*; 1918—Figure 1), starring the most famous actors of the time, became a kind of an encyclopedia of Silver Age cinema, yet it was released in May 1918, eight months after the revolution. It is no coincidence that Soviet distributors, who were still screening it in the 1920s, provided the following disclaimer as an intertitle: "One of the most typical films of Russian revolutionary [meaning "created during the time of the revolution"] cinema, produced in 1918. Its content is inferior and pathetic."

In Soviet literature on film history, there was a strict borderline between prerevolutionary and Soviet-era Russian productions. Very little has been written on the ties and connections between these two periods, and the films from the 1917–1921 interregnum remain among the most unexplored, and yet significant, objects in the field. The sections of the database focused on this most mysterious period in Russian film history are a definitive guide for anyone who might want to investigate it. Films of this period may be of particular interest, and not just for film scholars. They provide a fundamental source for understanding the early postrevolutionary years and the way society was changing as new Soviet institutions and mores were being established. A considerable number of extant films from that period, complete or fragmentary, have yet to be properly introduced into the scholarly discourse. Some of them, such as Yakov Protazanov's *Chambermaid Jenny* (*Горничная Дженни*; 1918) and Aleksandr Volkov's or Yakov Protazanov's (the director is yet to be

determined) *People Die for Metal* (*Люди гибнут за металл*; 1919) are groundbreaking in their approach to genre and acting, yet we know almost nothing about their making or reception by contemporary audiences. It is crucially important to examine the many short-lived periodicals of the time, as well as archival sources, to gather as much information as possible.

Diversity of the Cinema in the Russian Empire

Thorough research of the pioneer years is critical in order to help us understand the formation of the national cinema and culture. Yet for decades, cinema of the Russian Empire was consciously dismissed by Soviet scholars, which led to a worldwide notion that Russian film history begins only in the Soviet years, in the mid-1920s. A number of scholars have tried to correct this misperception, particularly following a groundbreaking retrospective of early Russian cinema at Le Giornate del cinema muto in Pordenone in 1989. Yet it still remains a generally neglected area, with just a few names—Bauer, Protazanov, Wladyslaw Starewicz—standing out.

"Films that form the canon of what has been considered early Russian cinema were made by people of various nationalities and backgrounds."

Figure 2. Postcard featuring Vera Kholodnaya with her daughter.

Traditionally, scholars called this area of study “early Russian cinema.” This widely used term requires reconsideration: is this cinema Russian only? Films that form the canon of what has been considered early Russian cinema were made by people of various nationalities and backgrounds. For instance, the greatest film star in the Russian Empire, Vera Kholodnaya (née Levchenko; Figure 2) was Ukrainian by origin; she was born in Poltava in 1893 and died in Odessa in 1919. Her popularity at home was unparalleled—thousands of postcards with her photographs were published and sold in Russia. When she was introduced to the United States, American film periodicals were also very much interested in “the Russian ‘vamp’”: “This girl is confidently expected by Pathé officials to prove such a sensation that arrangements have already been made looking toward surmounting the difficulties to be encountered in bringing her to this country.”[2] For generations Kholodnaya has been the face of early Russian cinema.

Although the majority of film studios were based in Moscow and St. Petersburg, many films were produced elsewhere: in Kyiv (Ukraine), Baku (Azerbaijan), Riga (Latvia), Warsaw (Poland), and other cities that are not located in the Russian Federation today. One of the most interesting films shot in Riga is the drama *Where Is Justice?* (*Где правда?*; 1913), which tells the story of a female Jewish student who becomes a victim of antisemitism. In a risky political flashback, the heroine recalls her happy childhood, crushed by a pogrom in which her parents were murdered. No wonder this film had so many issues with Tsarist censorship—pogroms were known to have been initiated by the secret police. [3]

"The phenomenon of Jewish films, shot by both Jewish and non-Jewish filmmakers, was a very significant part of the cinema of the Russian Empire."

The phenomenon of Jewish films, shot by both Jewish and non-Jewish filmmakers, was a very significant part of the cinema of the Russian Empire. Such films as *L'Chaim* (*Л'Хаим*; Maitre, 1910) and *Sarrah's Sorrow* (*Горе Сарры*; Arkatov, 1913) became box office hits. Mizrakh, a studio in Odessa, specialized in Jewish films.

Most Jewish-related films were set in shtetls and passed as dramas "from the Jewish life," as film historian Veniamin Vishnevskii puts it.[4] But there was another significant project closely connected with the theme of *Son'ka the Golden Hand* (1914–1916), the first Russian serial. The adventures of a young woman of Jewish origin who becomes a thief and always finds a way to fool the police became sensationally popular. It could hardly be taken as antisemitic, as viewers were supposed to sympathize with Son'ka rather than the police. Besides, the producer, Alexander Drankov, was Jewish himself. Clearly the *Son'ka* series belongs to the group of "cinema's first nasty women"; some of these have been recently released in the groundbreaking four-disc DVD/Blu-ray set curated by Laura Horak, Maggie Hennefeld, and Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi: "The women included are indeed very 'nasty'—they organize labor strikes, bake (and weaponize) inedible desserts, explode out of the chimney, electrocute the police force, and assume a range of identities that gleefully dismantle traditional gender norms and sexual constraints." [5]

Early Polish cinema, which also happens to be part of the cinema of the Russian Empire, is another productive field for study and scholarly reflection. For example, the career of the future Hollywood star Pola Negri started in Poland. Her first film, *The Slave of Sin* (*Niewolnica zmyslów*; Ordynski and Pawlowski, 1914) was widely advertised all over the country (Figure 3). Outside Congress Poland it was distributed under the title *The Slave of Passions, the Slave of Sin* (*Раба страстей, раба порока*), which is a quote from a popular Russian poet of the time, Semyon Nadson.[6] Interestingly enough, the second film starring Negri also had two titles: in Congress Poland, it was called *Wife* (*Zona*; Hertz, 1915); in the rest of the empire, the distribution title was *And Everything Is Mourned Over . . . Laughed at . . . Broken* (*И все оплакано . . . осмеяно . . . разбито*), a line from a popular Romany romance. Polish films were considered foreign and required "russification," just like French or American ones.

Figure 3. Advertisement for *The Slave of Sin* (*Niewolnica zmyslów*; Ordynski and Pawlowski, 1914) [Source: *Zhivoi ekran*, no. 7–8 (1914)]

There seems to have been a lot of tension in Polish-Russian film relations. In January 1912, the magazine *Sine-Fono* reported that in Białystok, audiences decided to boycott motion picture theaters that did not include subtitles in Polish. Theater owners tried to defend themselves:

> It is not us but the distribution companies who make the explanatory intertitles. [. . .] The best proof of the fact that the making of intertitles does not depend on us is the absence of Yiddish and German intertitles that would correspond with the needs of a significant if not major part of our target audience. [7]

The audience in the Russian Empire was indeed extremely diverse—people of all nationalities and religious backgrounds went to the movies.

Lost (and Found) Films

The database will be an essential tool for scholars because the overwhelming majority of early Russian films are considered lost. Of more than 2,700 Russian films, less than 367 are currently known to exist, which amounts to only 13.6 percent. Most of these are incomplete, often in small fragments. Among those completely lost are the only cinematic works of two great stage directors, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Aleksandr Tairov; works of the legendary stage actors Michael Chekhov, Mamont Daslky, Ekaterina Roshchina-Insarova, Konstantin Varlamov, and many others; and the major body of work of the leading cinematic directors of the time: Bauer, Protazanov, and Vladimir Gardin. Some of these artists had a significant impact on film and theater of the twentieth century, in Russia and worldwide. Meyerhold was the teacher of Sergei Eisenstein. Gardin founded the still-existing State Film School (now University) in Moscow, among the graduates of which are Vsevolod Pudovkin, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Aleksandr Sokurov. Chekhov had a crucial influence on a very wide range of actors, from his direct pupils Ingrid Bergman, Gregory Peck, Marilyn Monroe, and Clint Eastwood to Jack Nicholson and Johnny Depp.

"Thanks to the efforts of film historians and archivists, a considerable number of lost films have been discovered or identified recently."

"The audience in the Russian Empire was indeed extremely diverse—people of all nationalities and religious backgrounds went to the movies."

Thanks to the efforts of film historians and archivists, a considerable number of lost films have been discovered or identified recently. Among them is the first Estonian fiction film, *Borrowed Wife* (*Laenatud naene*; 1913); this film was preserved at the Gosfilmofond of Russia under the title *Glupyshkin* (*Глупышкин*; in prerevolutionary Russia, this name was used for the French comic actor André Deed and his numerous imitators). Before Peter Bagrov identified this film in 2014, it was common to consider *Bear Hunt in Pärnu County* (*Karujaht Pärnumaal*; Pääsuke, 1914) the starting point of Estonian narrative film history.[8] In 2016 Bagrov and Natalia Noussinova identified fifteen films produced in the Russian Empire at La Cinémathèque française—this extraordinary contribution to the corpus of surviving films includes works by the major film directors Bauer, Protazanov, and Cheslav Sabinskii, as well as rare film appearances of leading stage actors Rafail Adelgeim and Vera Pashennaia. Several films in the collection of Gosfilmofond of Russia have been recently identified by Tamara Shvediuk, among them *The Tragedy of Two Sisters* (*Трагедия двух сестёр*; 1914—Figure 4), starring the famous actress Diana Karenn, who also wrote the screenplay. [9] There

is a vast field for new finds, and a database with iconographic materials will become an indispensable tool for archivists.

Figure 4. Advertisement for the recently discovered film *The Tragedy of Two Sisters* (*Трагедия двух сестер*; 1914) starring Diana Karenn. [Source: *Sine-Fono*, no. 7 (1914).]

"One of the principal tasks of an early film historian is the 'recovery' of lost films through all existing sources, from frame enlargements and production stills to film reviews and memoirs."

Even the small percentage of extant films from the time are rarely preserved in their original format; the majority have been reedited for commercial or political reasons, and only a handful exist in their original color version (tinting, toning, stenciling) and with authentic intertitles. Only by combining all the existing historical resources would it be possible to reconstruct the lost and mutilated films, shed new light on the artistic accomplishments of the time, and provide proper context for those achievements of the later generations that are rooted in early Russian cinema.

Sources

The first historians of cinema of the Russian Empire were born at the turn of the twentieth century, and therefore it was possible for them to see some of the early films before the prints disappeared. However, today it is extremely difficult to describe and analyze what they were writing about, and one of the principal tasks of an early film historian is the “recovery” of lost films through all existing sources, from frame enlargements and production stills to film reviews and memoirs.

Therein lies the essence of the method of “paper reconstruction,” which I have already applied to two prominent prerevolutionary films. The results of my paper reconstructions of Gardin’s *Anna Karenina*

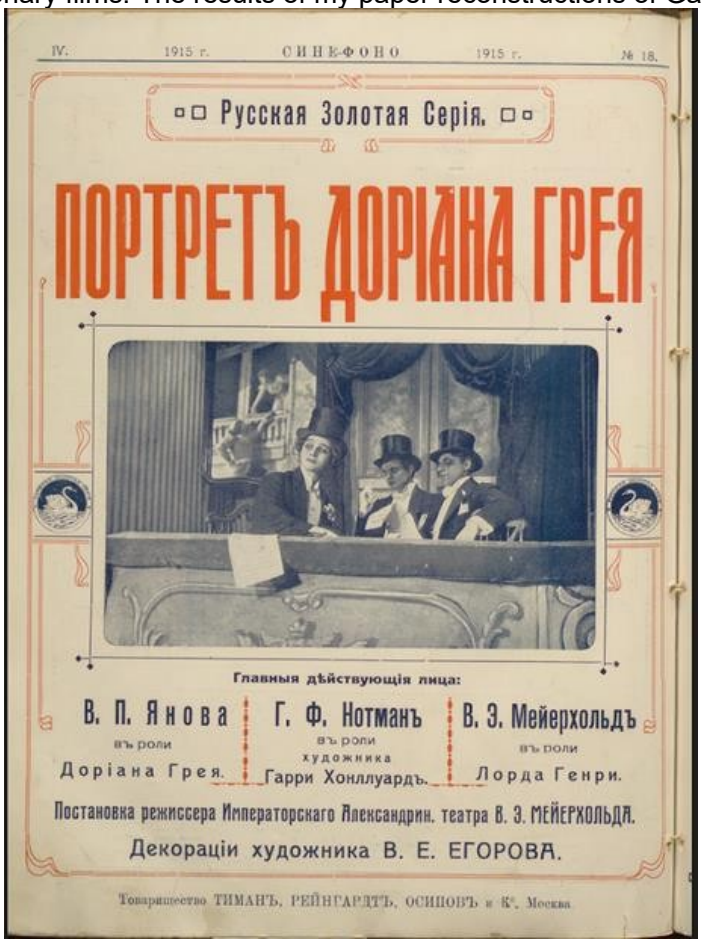

Figure 5. Advertisement for the lost film *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (*Портрет Дориана Грея*; Meyerhold, 1915). [Source: *Sine-Fono*, no. 18 (1915)]

(1914) and Meyerhold’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1915—Figure 5) have already been published; both publications are based on a wide range of textual and visual sources. [10]

It is essential to reconstruct second-tier films, not only those within the canon. A true history of cinema cannot be based exclusively on major titles—it should cover as many films as possible. At the same time, it is obvious that it would not be possible to collect a complete dossier of sources for every early film with materials scattered across archives and periodicals all over the world. That’s why, rather than researching information title by title, we must start building up the database by investigating the most relevant sources (periodicals, archives, museums, and private collections) and adding the material to the web pages of its respective films.

The principal sources for collecting synopses and iconographic materials are film periodicals of 1907 to 1921, which include:

Kinematograf (The Cinematograph), Rostov-on-Don, 1915
Kinematograf (The Cinematograph), St. Petersburg, 1915–1916
Kinematograficheskii teatr (The Cinematograph Theatre), St. Petersburg, 1910–1911
Kine-zhurnal (Cine-Journal), Moscow, 1910–1917

Kino (Cinema), Riga, 1916
Kino-kur´er (Cine-Courier), St. Petersburg, 1913–1914
Kino-teatr (Motion Picture Theater), Moscow, 1918–1919
Kino-teatr i sport (Cinema, Theater, and Sport), Warsaw, 1914 (Figure 6)
Kur´er sinematografii (The Cinematography Courier), Revel (now Tallinn), 1913
Mel'pomena (Melpomene), Odessa, 1918–1919
Mir ekrana (Screen World), Moscow, 1918
Pegas (Pegasus), Moscow, 1915–1917
Proektor (Projector), Moscow, 1915–1918
Sine-Fono (Cine-Phono), Moscow, 1907–1918
Vestnik kinematografii (The Herald of Cinematography), Moscow, 1911–1917
Vestnik zhivoi fotografii (The Herald of Living Photography), St. Petersburg, 1909
Zhivoi ekran (The Living Screen), Rostov-on-Don, 1912–1917

Figure 6. Cover of *Kino-teatr i sport*.

Various archival collections must also be taken into account, including the ones in the Central State Film Museum in Moscow (Samuil Benderskii, Aleksandr Levitskii, and Aleksandr Michurin collections), Columbia University libraries (Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European Culture), Gosfilmofond of Russia (Nikolai Boloban, Vera Khanzonkova, Vishnevskii, and Svetlana Skovorodnikova papers), the Russian National Library (Gardin and Vladimir Gaidarov collections), New York University's Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive (Jay Leyda and Si-Lan Chen Leyda Papers).

Figure 7. Handbill for films starring Konstantin Varlamov, Russian National Library.

Major libraries and many provincial museums in Russia have preserved film handbills from the 1900s and 1910s. For instance, in the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg, there is an advertising handbill for lost films *The Romance of a Russian Ballerina* and *Noch solomennogo vdovtsa*, starring the famous Russian actor Konstantin Varlamov (Figure 7).[11] These films were a part of the Russian German Series film project launched by the Tanagra studio in St. Petersburg and the German studio Bioscope. This unique collaboration, which came to its end because of World War I, is potentially compelling for historians of European early cinema yet remains underinvestigated. The database offers materials that shed light on this international film venture.

It is also very important to use materials from private collections. I am planning to use photographs and postcards from my own collection, and I am very grateful to the people who were kind enough to share their materials with me. Tatiana Kolovskaia has generously provided film-related photographs and postcards from her family archive—her great-aunt Zinaida Shpor was an actress and allegedly the first female assistant director in Russia.[12] According to existing filmographies, Shpor acted in only a few

films, which were not extremely popular. I have identified her in a major film by Bauer, *Children of the Age* (*Дети века*; 1915), starring Kholodnaya. In this film, Shpor has a bright cameo appearance as a nanny who is sad to witness her mistress's downfall and her master's sorrow.

In her family collection, Kolovskaia has found a photograph that confirms my guess (Figure 8).

In the database, this unique photograph will be displayed along with other images related to *Children of the Age*.

It is crucial to use as many sources as possible. Of course, it is impossible to review all the books, periodicals, archives, and family documents that might contain information on early films. That is why the main method of building up the database will be reviewing the film press. Texts and images found in early periodicals will become the foundation of the database, but all other sources that come to light in the course of our research will also be included upon discovery.

Figure 8. Photograph from *Children of the Age* (*Дети века*; Bauer, 1915).

Database Structure

The database is divided into sections chronologically, each section representing a year. Within the year, films are arranged alphabetically. Each film has its own web page, where a filmography is followed by information on the film's survival status and the location of its script, if one exists. When it is possible to locate a film libretto—an original film synopsis—its full text is published after the filmography. If there is no libretto, a new synopsis based on other existing sources is substituted whenever possible. Illustrations such as production stills, posters, and frame enlargements are added to the page.

The database is bilingual, Russian and English. Many sources, such as film posters and photos, do not require a translation, but all the filmographic and bibliographical references for each film, as well as the plot summaries, are being translated into English. Thus, the database will become an essential instrument for scholars from many fields and backgrounds. At the same time, the website will be of interest to cinephiles all over the world.

Filmography

Filmographic references were prepared by film scholar Alexander Deriabin based on all available filmographies and catalogs relevant to the period:

Kino-biulleten' Kino-komiteta Narodnogo komissariata prosveshcheniia: ukazatel' kartin, prosmotrennykh otdelom retsenzii Kinematograficheskogo komiteta Narodnogo komissariata prosvesh'eniia, vyp. 1 and 2. Moscow, 1918.

Deriabin, Alexander, and Valerii Fomin, eds. *Letopis' rossiiskogo kino 1863–1929*. Moscow: Materik, 2004.

Mislavskii, Vladimir. *Faktograficheskaia istoriia kino v Ukraine*, vols. 1 and 2. Kharkiv: Toring-plus, 2013.

Semerchuk, Vladimir. *V starinnom rossiiskon illiuzione . . . annotirovannyi katalog sokharanivshikhsia igrovykh i animatsionnykh fil'mov Rossii (1908–1919)*. Moscow: Gosfilmofond Rossii, 2013.
Sovetskie khudozhesvennye fil'my. Annotirovannyi katalog, vol. 1. Iskusstvo, 1961.
Velikii kinemo: Katalog sokhranivshikhsia igrovykh fil´mov Rossii 1908–1919. Moscow: NLO, 2002.
Vishnevskii, Veniamin. "Katalog fil'mov chastnogo proizvodstva." *Sovetskie khudozhesvennye fil'my. Annotirovannyi katalog*, vol. 3. Iskusstvo, 1961, 248–305.
Vishnevskii, Veniamin. *Khudozhestvennye fil'my dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii*. Moscow: Goskinoizdat, 1945.

Deriabin and his colleagues (Bagrov, Viktoriia Safronova, and Irina Zubatenko, among others) updated information from these catalogs based on various sources, mainly original ones. Of course, as long as we continue research, new information will appear. The case with Shpor's appearance in *Children of the Age* is one of the many examples. The periodical *Kinematograficheskii teatr* suggests that the adaptation of Alexander Pushkin's *Song of the Wise Oleg* was produced by the trading house Prodafil'm—not Prodalent, as indicated in Vishnevskii's fundamental filmography; this mistake should be corrected.[13] Scholarly editing of filmographic sources is an ongoing task that cannot be completed within certain time limits. Filmographies will be updated regularly, and all the database users willing to provide relevant information are welcome to take part in this process.

Librettos

"The new project should use a different corpus of librettos."

Synopses, or librettos, as they were known in Russia—short descriptions of film plots—were an important part of the film industry. In the first decade of narrative filmmaking in Russia (1907–1918), the trade press published librettos regularly; they were also reproduced in handbills that viewers could get at the motion picture theaters. The first attempt to collect film librettos in a scholarly database was made by me and my former students at the Higher School of Economics University, Moscow. At the beginning of 2018, I launched a research team project, Early Russian Film Prose. The principal aim of this group was to gather the most complete collection of Russian film librettos from 1908 to 1917. The database we have built is now available online.[14] Currently it contains 886 librettos, and twenty-one prerevolutionary periodicals have been reviewed to collect them. We have presented our database at conferences and invited talks, and the project was awarded the Russian Film Scholars' and Critics' Guild Prize in 2019. We consider this material representative, and it has been actively used not only by film historians but also by scholars with different areas of expertise.

However, in many ways, this database is imperfect. The new project should use a different corpus of librettos. First, the database includes librettos of films produced before 1917; the new one will also have librettos from 1918 to 1921. Second, since the first database was published, many new librettos from 1907 to 1917 have been found. For instance, we did not have a libretto for *Anna Karenina* (Gardin, 1914)—an adaptation of Tolstoy's novel—which was very popular at the time and remains a canonical prerevolutionary film (Figure 9). Now we have two different librettos for this film.

Figure 9. Promotional photographs for *Anna Karenina* (Gardin, 1914) [Source: *Iskry*, no. 20 (1914)].

The text published in the periodical *Zhivoi ekran* is a typical narrative synopsis that presents the plot from beginning to end. Whoever compiled it did not try to adopt Tolstoy's style and wrote in a rather frivolous manner ("Kitty is head over heels in love with Vronsky"). [15] The second text was published in a motion picture theater handbill. The form of this libretto is very peculiar; it consists of numbered paragraphs quite different from each other in their structure:

7. Everything was in confusion in the Oblonskys' house. The wife had discovered that the husband was carrying on an intrigue with a French girl, who had been a governess in their family.
8. I wanted to call you from the house yesterday, but I saw madame near the door and got scared. I will wait for you at my place then. Kisses, Julie.
9. Let everyone know you are a scoundrel! I am going away at once, and you may live here with your mistress![16]

This choppy libretto is not a proper synopsis—it is most likely a list of intertitles, all of them very close to the original text, which was typical for adaptations in the 1910s. [17] That makes this text even more valuable for scholars, as the film is mostly lost—only one reel is preserved at Gosfilmofond. Both *Anna Karenina* librettos, missing from the first database, are included in the new one.

Third, we constructed the 2018 database according to a hierarchy of periodicals that does not appear relevant anymore:

> If the libretto for a film was published in a number of journals without any changes or with insignificant changes (subdivision into paragraphs or failure to do so, the omission of

individual words or sentences) then the version used as the basic one in the database was the one published in the most important (most widely circulated) film journal and the other versions were noted as additional (in the section “Other sources of the libretto”). While we understand that the concepts of importance or wide dissemination are relative ones, we have, with the aim of taking a more systematized approach to the material, compiled an order of pre-Revolutionary film journals in which the first places are occupied by the longest-lived Moscow journals as the publications which had the greatest influence on the film process. Thus our list is as follows: *Sine-Fono* [Cine-Phono], Moscow, 1907–1918; *Kine-zhurnal* [Cine-Journal] Moscow, 1910–1917; *Vestnik kinematografii* [The Herald of Cinematography] Moscow, 1911–1917; *Proektor* [Projector] Moscow, 1915-1918; *Zhivoi ekran* [The Living Screen] Rostov on Don, 1912–1917; *Sinema* (also known as Kinema) [Cinema] Rostov on Don, 1913–1916.[18]

Following this system, when we had different versions of the same libretto, we always chose the one published in *Sine-Fono*. This journal was indeed the main film periodical in the Russian Empire, and that is exactly why it did not have enough space to publish the most complete versions of librettos. As one can see now, the *Sine-Fono* librettos are often slightly shortened and usually lack lists of film parts that could be found in other sources. From this perspective, *Sine-Fono* should be the last source to take a libretto from; in most cases, it seems reasonable to look in other sources when possible. One should consider each case individually, compare all versions, and choose the one which is the most complete. The periodical *Sinema-Pathe*, published by Pathé Frêres, usually provides the most detailed librettos for films produced by that studio. For instance, the *Sine-Fono* libretto for *Katerina* (Hansen, 1911)—an adaptation of the poem by Taras Shevchenko—which is reproduced in the old database is shorter than the *Sinema-Pathe* version that is to be published in

Figure 10. Advertisement for Katerina (Hansen, 1911) [Source: Sinema-Pathe, no. 13 (1911)].

the new database (Figure 10).[19]

The *Sinema-Pathe Katerina* has a list of tableaux (film parts) which resemble intertitles:

1. Katerina and Ivan go together to take part in the games.
2. The gallant Ivan wins the heart of the trustful Katerina very quickly.
3. It is late. Time to go home.
4. **One month later**. The young Cossack says goodbye to his fiancée before going to the military service.
5. **One year later**. Katerina's parents, who have become the talk of the village because of their daughter's sin, kick the girl out of the house.
6. Where is your father, my child?
7. The good chumaks sheltered the poor girl and took care of her.
8. Katerina is dreaming of her beloved and continues to look for him.
9. The Cossacks are coming! . . . Is my Ivan here?
10. Ivan! . . . Vania! . . . Vania! . . .
11. I am sorry, my child! . . . Let some good soul take care of you, but my life is over . . . [20]

For decades, this drama of Ukrainian life was considered lost. In the Centre National du cinéma et de l'image animée, a French distribution copy entitled *Le Roman de Macha* has been identified recently.[21] This list of tableaux can now be very helpful for the film's reconstruction.

Illustrations

Iconographic materials presented in the database are of many different kinds, yet most of them can be classified into three main groups: promotional stills, film posters, and postcards.

Promotional stills

"And yet a single promotional still from a lost film can provide more information than a detailed libretto or a script, even though the lighting and framing may be misleading."

These were the basic tool for film producers and distributors to advertise a film. They were published widely in film and theater periodicals and on handbills, as well as distributed as window cards—of which very few have survived. For scholars promotional stills turn out to be the main source for reconstructing the visual style of a film that has been lost. They give an idea of the setting and costumes; often they identify the actors. However, one should not rely on promotional stills too much; these photographs were rarely printed from the film itself—they are not frame enlargements. Usually the studio photographer made them specifically for advertising purposes. That is why the lighting and setup are different from what one could see in the actual film. In some cases, the contrast between a frame enlargement and a promotional still is evident. Figure 11 is a still from Bauer's famous film *The Dying Swan* (*Умирающий лебедь*; 1916) published in the magazine *Proektor*.

Figure 11. Promotional still for *The Dying Swan* (*Умирающий лебедь*; Bauer, 1916) [Source: *Proektor*, no. 16 (1916)]

In her nightmare, the heroine, Gizella, meets a mysterious woman in white who predicts her tragic death. Numerous hands appear all around Gizella, and she is terrified. However, in the film, the woman in white disappears before Gizella sees the hands.

In the photograph, the light allows us to see the actors who reach out their hands to Gizella. In the film, Bauer and his cameraman Boris Zavelev used different lighting—the hands seem to appear out of nowhere, and the whole scene becomes more fantastic and haunting.

And yet a single promotional still from a lost film can provide more information than a detailed libretto or a script, even though the lighting and framing may be misleading. Very little is known of the lost film *Mask of Death* (*Маска смерти*; Gardin, 1914), the screenplay for which was probably written by symbolist author Alexander Kursinskii.[22] According to the libretto, Rita, a young baroness, is terminally ill, and the horror of death leads her to suicide:

> And even at the feast, among the Epicurean artists, where Rita dances the “hymn of life,” invisibly to others, the insatiable ghost of death passes before her eyes. Under the yoke of inevitability, exhausted . . . Rita thinks: “What is the mask of death . . . “ Fear of a terrible end inspires Rita with the idea of epicurean liberation from life and, catching the moment, she, like a burnt out lamp, opens her veins in a warm fragrant bath. [23]

One could think that in this film, epicureanism was presented somewhat metaphorically, but the only promotional still we have found so far suggests that the libretto should be taken literally—Rita is indeed wearing antique period clothing and accessories (Figure 12).

Apparently, in this little-known film, Gardin introduced period costumes in a contemporary story two years before Bauer did something similar in his famous drama *Life for Life* (*Жизнь за жизнь*; 1916).

Figure 12. Promotional still for *Mask of Death* (*Маска смерти*; Gardin, 1914) [Source: *Sine-Fono*, no. 3 (1914)].

Film posters

Posters for films produced in the Russian Empire have been preserved in many museums and libraries; some of them are published in first-rate albums and coffee-table books.[24] Many of these posters reproduce promotional stills that could not be found in the trade press. The poster for *The Jewish Volunteer Fighter* (*Еврей-доброволец*; Koiranskii, 1915) presents eleven stills with comments that reconstruct the film’s plot: David Girshman is a talented pianist, and he happily marries the beautiful Sarrah, but when World War I starts, he goes to fight, and Sarrah becomes a nurse (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Poster for *The Jewish Volunteer Fighter* (*Еврей-доброволец*; Koiranskii, 1915), Russian National Library.

Figure 14. Poster for *Who Is To Blame?* (*Кто виноват?*; Kasianov, 1917), Russian National Library.

Other posters do not reproduce any photographs, only graphic images. These can also provide significant information on films and the cinema of the period in general. The poster for *Who Is To Blame?* (*Кто виноват?*; Kasianov, 1917—Figure 14) pictures the protagonist, played by the famous Vitold Polonskii, shot in the head. Indeed, according to the libretto, the film ends with his suicide.[25] It might seem puzzling that producers decided to put a spoiler on the advertising poster so the audience would know the ending of the story before seeing the film. This idea seems more productive in the context of the 1910s—in the cinema of the Russian Empire, tragic endings were common and supposed to meet the audience's expectations. It was, in fact, common for European studios to make alternative tragic endings for Russian distribution.[26]

One should be careful with interpreting poster graphics, as sometimes they can be far more misleading than promotional stills. The poster for *Give Me This Night* (*Отдай мне эту ночь*; Doronin, 1916—Figure 15) suggests this film

was about rape or some violent sexual relationship. However, Vishnevskii's filmography and the existing libretto indicate that this was a lyrical drama featuring a night conversation between newlyweds.[27] This provocative poster with an exclamation point at the end of the title (lacking in other textual sources on the film) was probably designed solely to attract attention, not to reflect the contents of the film.

Figure 15. Poster for *Give Me This Night* (*Отдай мне эту ночь*; Doronin, 1916).

Postcards

In the Russian Empire, most film-related postcards were portraits of the biggest stars: Ivan Mozzhukhin, Kholodnaya, Polonskii, Zoia Barantsevich, and others. There were also postcards reproducing scenes from specific films. Many of these images duplicate promotional stills, but it is important to use them in the database whenever possible since postcards are usually of better quality than the stills, which are mainly available in periodicals. See, for instance, the difference between a still for *The Last Tango* (*Последнее танго*; Viskovskii, 1918) published in the magazine *Mir ekrana* and a postcard (Figure 16).

Figure 16. Promotional still (left) and postcard (right) for *The Last Tango* (*Последнее танго*; Viskovskii, 1918) [Source: *Mir ekrana*, no. 1 (1918)]

Figure 17. Postcard for *Be Silent, My Sorrow, Be Silent* (*Молчи, грусть . . . молчи*; Chardynin, 1918).

In rare cases, postcards reproduce behind-the-scenes photographs rather than promotional stills. The postcard advertising *Be Silent, My Sorrow, Be Silent* (1918), a film released to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Chardynin's work in cinema, pictures the director with Kholodnaya, Ossip Runitsch, Polonskii, Vladimir Maksimov, Konstantin Khoklov, and Ivan Khudoleiev—all major film stars—sitting around the poster of the film (see Figure 17).

Occasionally one can find postcards that have comments about the plot. One of the rare examples was discussed by Noussinova, who presented a collection of promotional postcards for the film *A Nest of the Gentlefolk* (*Дворянское гнездо*; Gardin, 1914)—an adaptation of Ivan Turgenev's novel—at a conference, "The First Vishnevskii Readings," in Moscow in June 2019 and in an article for the conference proceedings. Each card in this unique set contains an inscription that probably corresponded with one of the film's intertitles. In Figure 18 the inscription is "The next day, Lavretsky found many guests at the Kalitins."

Figure 18. Postcard for *A Nest of the Gentlefolk* (*Дворянское гнездо*; Gardin, 1914).

Project Agenda and Contributors

This project was launched in January 2022 when I started to teach an online course, "Cinema of the Russian Empire: History, Poetics, and Iconography," at Brīvā Universitāte in Riga. This course consisted of three parts: (1) work on the database project, (2) film screenings and discussions, and (3) guest lectures and Q and As with historians of early cinema. All students enrolled in the course were collecting images for the database by reviewing the trade press, handbills, and other sources. Some of them were making copies at libraries; others are working with digitized materials. Members of the research team who initially started building the database are Aliona Chekina, Andrei Ikko, Anna Kandaurova, Nikita Kalinovskii, Maria Kirillova, Ekaterina Komarova, Varvara Latysheva, Oleg Lugovoi, Anna Nazaruk, Artiom Nikitin, Anna Pletneva, Anastasiia Plotnikova, Marfa Rusanova, Ekaterina Tarasova, Alexandra Ustiuzhanina, Anastasia Zheltova, and Irina Zubatenko. Nikita Ermolaev, Malika Kuldashbaeva, Magdalena Leiman, Olesia Rybalkina, Sergei Yasinskii, and Glafira Zhuk have also contributed to the project. In early 2023, Alisa Ageieva, Ekaterina Bakk, Olga Dereviankina, Kristina Iniakina, Yulia Kartashova, Maiia Kliain, Anna Kopaieva, Stasia Korotkova, Galina Kukenko, Vasilii

Malykhin, Antonina Men'shikova, Ilia Pogadai, and Mariam Zakoian joined our team. Stasia Korotkova and Alexandra Ustiazhanina became managers of the project. As of June 2023, we had collected more than 5,500 promotional stills. We are now turning our attention to librettos and hope to finish the new collection so the demo version of the database can come out in fall 2023. The database and website were developed by Alexander Grebenkov, data engineer and research fellow at Nancy-Université. Our research team is deeply grateful to the scholars who have supported this project and agreed to give guest lectures: Peter Bagrov, Philip Cavendish, Paolo Cherchi Usai, Stanislav Dedinskii, Marianna Kireeva, Evgenii Margolit, Rachel Morley, Tamara Shvediuk, and Yuri Tsivian.

Conclusion

Daydreams will become the first scholarly database of films produced in the Russian Empire. We hope it will help shatter some myths that have formed around this subject. It will show that filmmaking of this period was rich and varied, not just a prelude to the great Soviet cinema of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. It will also stress the diversity of cinema of the Russian Empire, which was created by people of different backgrounds and never limited to St. Petersburg and Moscow. Finally, it will open up a broader field for discussion on how this cinema corresponded with European and American traditions—was it really so different in terms of plot and pacing?

Once this project is completed, a productive way to expand it will be to broaden the database to all the films, including foreign ones, that were shown in the Russian Empire before 1921. This will undoubtedly add a lot to our knowledge of early American and European films and their influence on Slavic culture. In the trade press of the Russian Empire, one can come across photos, reviews, and librettos that might not be found in the American and European sources. Thus, the Daydreams database might become the foundation of a new international database that will cover silent films produced all over the world. The database is accessible at https://daydreams.museum/.

A list of external links featured in this essay can be found here. [28]

About the Author

Anna Kovalova, PhD, is an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh. She is the author of *Kinematograf v Peterburge* 1896-1917 (with Yuri Tsivian, 2011). In 2015—2019, she taught film history and literature at the Higher School of Economics (Moscow). She has published in *Film History, The Russian Review, Slavonic and East European Review, Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema, Osteuropa*, and other journals. As the head of the research team project *Early Russian Film Prose*, she has edited the most complete electronic database of early Russian narrative film texts. She is the editor-in-chief of Daydreams, the first scholarly database of feature films produced in the Russian Empire that also includes films produced in its former territories during the first years after the October Revolution.

---

[1] I. M. Pacatus, "Beglye zametki," *Nizhegorodskii listok* (Nizhnii Novgorod), July 4, 1896, 3; A. P-v, "S vserossiiskoi vystavki (ot nashego korrespondenta). Sinematograf Lumiera," *Odesskie Novosti*, July 6, 1896, 2. See the English translation by Leda Swan of one of Gorky's texts reproduced in Jay Leyda's *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (George Allen & Unwin, 1960), 407–9.

[2] "Pathe promises ingenue-vampire in Russian film," *Motion Picture News*, November–December 1917, 4008.

[3] On *Where Is Justice?*, see Armands Vijups, *Kur patiesība par ebreju kursistes traģēdiju* (Ventspils muzejs, 2022).

[4] Veniamin Vishnevskii, *Khudozhestvennye fil'my dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii* (Goskinoizdat, 1945).

[5] Women Film Pioneers Project, “Cinema’s First Nasty Women.” https://wfpp.columbia.edu/cinemas-first-nasty-women/#:~:text=The%20Project,-Cinema’s%20First%20Nasty&text=The%20women%20included%20are%20indeed,gender%20norms%20and%20sexual%20constraints. Accessed July 24, 2022.

[6] Semyon Nadson, *Stikhotvoreniia* (Tipografiia V. V. Islenieva, 1887), 120.

[7] “Boikot iz-za nadpisei,” *Sine-Fono*, no. 8 (1912): 16.

[8] On this newly discovered film and others, see Peter Bagrov, “Novye nakhodki na Gosfil’mofonde,” *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, no. 111 (2018): 219–46.

[9] Tamara Shvediuk presented this find at the international conference “Off- and On-Screen. The ‘New Woman’ in the Cinema of the Russian Empire,” September 1–3, 2022, University of Basel, Switzerland.

[10] Anna Kovalova, “*Anna Karenina* (1914): Reconstructing and Interpreting a Lost Russian Film,” trans. Natalie Ryabchikova, *Film History* 30, no. 2 (2018): 35–78, and “*The Picture of Dorian Gray* Painted by Meyerhold,” trans. Richard Taylor, *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 13, no. 1 (2019): 59–90.

[11] *Roman russkoi balleriny*, *Noch solomennogo vdovtsa* (Tipografiia “Trud,” 1913).

[12] For more on Zinaida Shpor, see Anna Kovalova, “Business for Individuals (Women Included)”: On Women Film Professionals in Early Russian Cinema,” *Film History* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 118–41.

[13] Veniamin Vishnevskii, *Khudozhestvennye fil’my dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii* (Goskinoizdat, 1945), 17.

[14] HSE University, Librettos of Russian Films 1908–1917. https://hum.hse.ru/en/ditl/filmprose/libretti/. This database was created by members of the research team: Anna Andreeva, Alexander Anisimov, Anna Gudkova, Yulia Kozitskaya, Arina Ranneva, Sabina Shmakova, Nadezhda Shmulevich, Alexandra Zakharova, Julian Graffy, and me.

[15] “Novosti kinematograficheskogo rynka,” *Zhivoi ekran*, no. 7–8 (1914): 50–51.

[16] Vologda film poster from one hundred years ago [electronic resource]: a virtual exhibition of the Vologda Museum-Preserve. http://www.vologdamuseum.ru/images/kinoaf/20.html. Accessed July 24, 2022.

[17] It was not rare for a libretto to reflect intertitles. On different types of librettos, see Anna Kovalova, “Librettos As Source Material for Film History: The Case of Early Russian Cinema,” in *New Perspectives on Early Cinema History*, Daniel Biltereyst and Mario Slugan, eds. (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 145–65. See also Elena Komissarova, “Russkie kinolibretto 1908–1916 godov: problemy atributsii i istochnikovedeniia (po materialam Rossiiskoi Natsional’noi biblioteki i Sankt-Peterburgskoi gosudarstvennoi teatral’noi biblioteki),” *Zapiski Sankt-Peterburgskoi gosudarstvennoi Teatral’noi biblioteki* 12/13 (2014): 45–53.

[18] Anna Kovalova, “The Principles of Constructing the Database and Its Structure,” trans. Julian Graffy. https://hum.hse.ru/en/ditl/filmprose/libretti/. Accessed July 24, 2022.

[19] “Novye lenty,” *Sine-Fono*, no. 4 (1911): 23.

[20] “Katerina,” *Sinema-Pathe*, no. 13 (1911): 5.

[21] The French synopsis for *Katerina* (*Le Roman de Macha*) is published on the Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé website. http://filmographie.fondation-jeromeseydoux-pathe.com/10343-roman-de-macha. Accessed July 23, 2022.

[22] For more on Alexander Kursinskii, see Anna Kovalova and Arina Ranneva, “Symbolism in Early Russian Cinema

and the Ghost Screenwriter Alexander Kursinskii," *Russian Review* 79, no. 3 (2020): 366–88.

[23] "Novye lenty," *Sine-Fono*, no. 3 (1914): 39.

[24] Nina Baburina, ed., *Plakat nemogo kino. Rossiia*, 1900–1930 (Moscow: Art-rodnik, 2001); Maria Terekhova, ed., *Plakat nemogo kino v sobranii Gosudarstvennogo muzeia istorii Sankt-Peterburgs*, 1914–1919 (St. Petersburg: GMI SPb, 2018); E. V. Barkhatova, M. U. Mel'nikova, and A. F. Esono, eds., *Rannii russkii kinoplakat 1908–1919 gg. iz sobraniia Rossiiskoi natsional'noi biblioteki* (Moscow: RNB, 2019).

[25] "Novye lenty," *Sine-Fono*, no. 13–14 (1917): 72–81.

[26] For Russian tragic endings, see Yuri Tsivian, "New Notes on Russian Film Culture between 1908 and 1919," in *The Silent Cinema Reader*, Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer, eds. (London: Routledge, 2003), 339–48; Casper Tybjerg, "1910–19: Spekulanter og Himmelstormere," *Kosmorama*, no. 220 (1997): 18–41; A. Kovalova, "Russkie finaly: kakimi oni byli na samom dele?", in *I Vishnevskii sbornik*, P. Bagrov and A. Kovalova, eds. (Moscow: 1895, forthcoming in 2023).

[27] "Opisaniia kartin," *Proektor*, no. 18 (1916): 19.

[28] Links Featured in "Daydreams: Cinema of the Russian Empire and Beyond, a Database"
Daydreams Database: https://daydreams.museum/
Clip 1. *Daydreams* (Bauer, 1915): https://www.youtube.com/embed/4M3lmTj5_yo?start=35&end=85
Clip 2. *Where is Justice?* (1913):
https://mediaecology.dartmouth.edu/collections/other/Where%20is%20Justice_%20(1913)%20Clip%202%20-%20Kovalova.mp4
Clip 3. *Children of the Age* (Bauer, 1915):
https://mediaecology.dartmouth.edu/collections/other/Children%20of%20the%20Age%20(1915)%20Clip%203%20-%20Kovalova.mp4
Clip 4. *The Dying Swan* (Bauer, 1916):
https://mediaecology.dartmouth.edu/collections/other/The%20Dying%20Swan%20(1916)%20Clip%204%20-%20Kovalova.mp4
Clip 5. *Life for Life* (Bauer, 1916):
https://mediaecology.dartmouth.edu/collections/other/Life%20for%20Life%20(1916)%20Clip%205%20-%20Kovalova.mp4

Published by the Dartmouth College Library.

http://journals.dartmouth.edu/joems/
Article DOI: 10.1349/PS1.1938-6060.A.495