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## **Screening Soviet Nationalities: Kulturfilms from the Far North to Central Asia**

OKSANA SARKISOVA, 2017

London and New York, I.B. Tauris

pp. xi-xviii + 291, illustrations, notes, glossary

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*Screening Soviet Nationalities: Kulturfilms from the Far North to Central Asia* aims to give an insight into the corpus of Soviet kulturfilms made between 1926 and 1941. The outstanding transnational socio-political and textual analysis of this rather unknown cinematic map of Soviet 'culturedness' (p. 11) sketched by Sarkisova makes the project an outstanding and fascinating contribution to film and ethnographic studies, and for scholars interested in the development of the Soviet colonial and anti-colonial visual rhetoric.

While focusing on the work of the central studies in Moscow, Sarkisova's book dissects the figuration of Soviet nationalities on film and establishes a whole new framework to Soviet film studies. As an under-negotiated area itself, the study of the institutional, contextual and diegetic layers of Soviet kulturfilms provides us with a survey of 'emerging visual conventions of filming Soviet diversity and unity' (p. 14). These productions also trace back to the origins of cinema as tool for reproducing reality, up to its ideological role as mediator of class solidarity. Focusing on culturally heterogenous communities and their representation within the Soviet framework, *Screening Soviet Nationalities: Kulturfilms from the Far North to Central Asia* not only highlights the significant role non-fiction cinema has played in mass education, but deals with the very heavy questions of Soviet homogeneity and nationalism of the post-revolutionary era, while sketching a genealogy of the films' visual grammar.

Sarkisova's overview and analysis of the Soviet expedition-films starts with the history and clarification of the term *kulturfilm* that, as she explains, refers to non-fictional 'didactic films implying the status of objective truth' (p. 3). Whether they had an ethnographic, educational, scientific or scenic objective, kulturfilms were made to supply 'new knowledge' informing 'the audience's ideas about the world' (p. 3). With the primary aim to reflect upon the great achievement of the industrialization and modernisation of the state, and to unify the diverse nationalities of the Soviet Union under a shared ideological concept, kulturfilms thus served a very political purpose. A crucial factor is, as Sarkisova goes on to illustrate, some of the films downplayed real aesthetic merit. For instance, the excellent textual analysis of Vertov's *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926) and his concept of cine-race – a new film form that fused space into a single entity by means of editing – draws attention to the fusion of a profound visual language and the ideological and political power of the colonizing gaze of the camera.

The further chapters of *Screening Soviet Nationalities: Kulturfilms from the Far North to Central Asia* survey kulturfilms through individual contributions to filming diverse geographical areas within the Soviet Union. While emphasising that the genre had no single prototype per se, Sarkisova analyses kulturfilms exploring the Soviet Far North, Far East, the Caucasus, Southern Siberia and Central Asia. The author's profound analysis of films consists of a fusion of lesser-known and well-established productions, such as Dziga Vertov's *A Sixth Part of the World* (*Shestaia chast' mira*, 1926) and *Three Songs of Lenin* (*Tri Presni o Lenine*, 1934); Vladimir Erofeev and Vera Popova's *Beyond the Arctic Circle* (*Ya poliarnym krugrom*, 1927), Viktor Turin's *Turksib* (1929), Nikolai Lebedev's *Land of the Nakcho* (*Strana Nakcho*, 1929) and *Gates of the Caucasus* (*Vorota Kavkaza*, 1929), and Mihail Kalatozov's *Salt for Svanetia* (*Sol'*

Svanetii, 1930). Throughout her brilliant textual evaluation that sheds light on the influential role of the films' *mise-en-scène* in structuring power-relations, Sarkisova embeds her analysis within the discourse of gender and national identity policy, archaic practices, cultural plurality and the Sovietization of landscape.

The significance of the study of the colonial visual topoi of Soviet kulturfilms cannot be stressed enough. As the author highlights, the visual language developed by Soviet filmmakers was exported to the post-World War II colonies, thus endorsing the anti-colonial grammar of the oppressed territories. In the current age of cosmopolitanism, multi-culturalism and mass-migration, the understanding of the representation of colonised groups becomes even more topical. By contributing to the understanding of how Soviet kulturfilms demonstrated film's power to create a homogeneous national construction and space while keeping up the symbolic hierarchy of the centres and peripheries through the re-appropriation of landscape, Sarkisova's book points towards the genre's contemporary legacy present in anthropological and experimental cinema that deal with questions of identity, belonging and political and cultural inferiority. The book also sheds light on the visual topoi of hierarchy, screen tourism, the representation of religion and traditions of ethnic representation within the post-revolutionary ideological framework of economic and cultural modernization.

*Screening Soviet Nationalities: Kulturfilms from the Far North to Central Asia* is thus an outstanding contribution and a fascinating read that guides us through engaging stories about Soviet expeditions and the (visual) conquest of nature, and frames the very origins of Soviet spatial and medical metaphors and film language.

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