Celluloid Spring

Soviet cinema has come out of the deep freeze. Adrienne McKibbins looks at a new festival touring the country from July.

Like many national cinemas, especially those wholly funded by the state, the Soviet cinema is strikingly influenced by the current political climate.

The emergence of the 'new wave' of Chinese filmmakers in the period of liberalisation prior to Tiananmen Square is one obvious example of the effects of political trends on the cinema of the socialist countries.

Up until 1986, when a number of substantial changes were set in motion, Soviet cinema was a lifeless and most unexciting medium. True, an occasional film of merit found its way to the film festival circuit, and there were undoubtedly films of quality not suppressed or shelved. But, on the whole, Soviet cinema did not elicit the excitement or respect it had during the period when Sergei Eisenstein, Alexander Dovzhenko, Dziga Vertov and Vsevolod Pudovkin were working. These directors influenced not just Soviet cinema but the world.

In recent years filmmakers have been forced to work outside the Soviet Union for artistic freedom. Two of the best known, Andrei Mikhailov-Konchalovsky and the late Andrei Tarkovsky, are both represented in a season of "Glasnost Cinema" presented in Australia by Ronin Films. A new colour print of Tarkovsky's Violin and Roller will be seen. Tarkovsky worked in Italy and France before making his final film The Sacrifice in Sweden. Andrei Konchalovsky (as he is now known) has had substantial success in America with the films Maria's Lovers, Shy People and The Runaway Train. The most recent film to bear his name, Tango and Cash, should not be taken as a real example of his work. Unhappy with the project, he left the film before production was completed.

This incident apart, Konchalovsky has a secure career in America, though he has not broken ties with Russia completely. He has a long-cherished project on Sergei Rachmaninov that he hopes can be made as an American/Soviet co-production.

Some of the changes taking place in the Soviet cinema will not be immediately apparent, but younger filmmakers have recently expressed themselves in such a way that Russian cinema seems to have experienced an overnight revitalisation. The season of "Glasnost Cinema" presently touring Australia will highlight the dramatic difference in cinema trends, illustrated by six recent features:

Zero City (1989), directed by Karen Shaknazarov - who will visit Australia with the season. His film is a subversive yet humorous political satire set in a town without co-ordinates where the inhabitants treat the most bizarre happenings as normal.

Cold Summer of '53 (1987), directed by Alexander Prochkine. A film about one of the many suppressed aspects of Soviet history. 1953 saw the end of Stalinism. Prochkine recreates a vivid atmosphere of lawlessness that developed in '52, much of it attributable to the late dictator himself.

Dolly (1989), directed by Isaac Fridberg. An uncompromising and chilling portrait of a system that strives to create champions only to throw them away without compensation when they have served their purpose. The story of a young gymnast, this film is regarded as controversial even today. It promises to be a highlight of the season.

Relieve My Sorrow (1989), directed by Victor Prokhorov and Alexander Alexandrov. A stark and unremitting look at contemporary life in the suburbs. A hard-hitting film which raises the questions of who and what is responsible for the conditions in which the workers are forced to live.

The Kerosene Seller's Wife (1989), directed by Alexander Kaidanovsky. Another film set at the end of the Stalin era. Here, the story is told in the form of a fable full of unexpected imagery strongly following in the tradition of Tarkovsky. The director was originally known as an actor, and is well remembered as the lead in Tarkovsky's The Mirror.

Guard (1989), directed by Alexander Rogozhkin. A gripping drama based on an actual event when a guard on a prison train decides to rebel against the petty stupidity and rigidity that society tries to impose on him.

Apart from the ability of filmmakers to take a critical perspective of their society, the most gratifying and, at this stage, the most obvious result of glasnost is the releasing of films which have supposedly been lost, suppressed or shelved for many years. This season will see the first Australian screenings of two films.
made in 1965 and 1971: Andrei Konchalovsky’s The Story of Asya Klashin, Who Loved A Man But Did Not Marry Him Because She Was Proud (aka Asya’s Happiness); and Alexei Gherman’s Trial on the Road (aka Roadcheck).

Konchalovsky made Asya’s Happiness shortly after he had scripted Tarkovsky’s masterpiece Andrei Rublev and completed his brilliant first feature The First Teacher. His next feature was awaited with great anticipation but it was almost thirty years before that anticipation would be fulfilled.

Asya is set in the remote area of Kirgizia in 1923. Filmed on location (not a common practice in the ‘sixties when most films were studio-bound), it is a magnificent looking film: the story of a young Bolshevik zealot bent on educating and therefore emancipating the women in this remote feudal-based society. This topic might not seem unduly controversial. However, as with many of Konchalovsky’s films, both in Russia and the West, his earthy depiction of physicality between men and women, the forces of nature, and explicit nudity were bound to put the film in some contention. Over the years, material has been published in interviews that would suggest Konchalovsky’s filming methods were considered radical and unacceptable.

Konchalovsky cites Robert Altman as being influential on his attitude to improvisation, and he chose to work in this movie with only two professional actors, using locals from the Volga region for the rest of the cast. Many were unable to speak the scripted dialogue convincingly so they were encouraged to improvise in their own dialect. The result is a naturalism and idiomatic speech unheard in Soviet cinema until very recently. Despite all these factors it still seems strange that Asya should be unseen for so many years except perhaps for one scene where, as English critic Mark LeFanu pointed out, “the old man in documentary-like manner reminisces about his return from the camps”. This was an issue not to be raised in Soviet cinema and combined with the film’s unorthodoxy to ensure that it was shelved.

It is, perhaps, easier to see how Trial on the Road met with the same fate. As Mark LeFanu notes, it “was not only blacklisted but judged to be so irresponsible that the studio was forced to pay back all the production costs to the state”.

Trial is set during World War Two, its focus a small patrol which captures a German soldier only to discover he is a Russian who has joined the German advance. He is put to trial by the patrol. Its content notwithstanding, it is hard not to see Trial as, first and foremost, a very strong statement of humanism illustrating the arbitrary and illogical ramifications of Soviet censorship.

The reforms in the Soviet film industry which this season highlights began in 1986 when the Fifth Congress of Filmmakers set in motion a number of strategies to reshape the industry. These included scrapping the bureaucratic methods of running the industry; ending the ideological witch hunts and bans on films considered objectionable (for whatever reason); and removing the privileges given to a small group of so-called ‘official directors’.

After the historic meeting of the 5th
Congress which heralded more dramatic changes than those involved realised, the Union of Soviet Filmmakers secretary Elem Klimov (a director often at odds with the system) undertook a world tour to promote and discuss Soviet film.

These initiatives, however, were overtaken by an event which changed not just the film industry but affected many of the arts and society itself: perestroika. In a very short time it saw 19 major Soviet studios being given independence, not just to choose projects but also to raise finance and organise distribution. Of course, these changes will create new pressures like the need for films to be commercially viable. How this will ultimately affect the industry is not entirely clear. Audiences in the USSR tend to prefer their own cinema. The attendances

The Charm of the Naked Valley 22.0
The Blackmailer 16.0
ASSA 15.2
(Unless stated otherwise, all films are Soviet.)

The season of ten films will be seen in all capital cities. It will give Australian audiences a first-hand opportunity to judge the impact of glasnost on the Soviet film industry.

Glasnost Film Festival
Sydney season commences July 26 at the Pitt Centre.
Melbourne season commences July 27 at the Trak Cinema.
Other states to follow.

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Protecting the Patch


I remember attending a seminar last year in Sydney on the topic covered by this book. It was sponsored by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal and the Australian Institute of Criminology, and it is the institution from whence both these authors come.

One of the interesting memories I have of that occasion was the contribution made by Tom Molomby, former ABC journalist, producer and presenter of The Law Report and nowadays a fully-fledged practising barrister at that endive known as the Sydney Bar. Molomby, as so many ex-journalists turned barristers do, gave the media a scarifying serve. It wasn't so much that there is a problem with the law of defamation, he said, but more that the journalists who get into trouble in the libel courts are the ones who get it wrong. They make mistakes.

I have heard that former journalist turned advocate, Stuart Littlemore, preach the evils of a public figure test and how undesirable it would be to adopt the defamation defences available in the United States. Overall the legal profession, along with most members of the community, believe the media has too much freedom, is out of control, and is irresponsible.

There is much unsourced anecdotal material in Journalism and Justice from reporters and editors saying that they were not unduly fussed about the current uncertain state of the law. There were just as many practitioners of the craft telling the learned authors that they had severe trouble with the law, that its uncertainty constrains them and its application is unfair. Indeed I know of at least one leading defamation adviser for a major newspaper group who says he's lost his nerve in advising in this area. As far as he can see everything is defamatory.

Consider the lottery of recent damages that flow from the following successful actions by plaintiffs:

- A NSW Supreme Court jury awarded Sydney businessman Jimmy Chan only $10,500 damages after finding it had been falsely imputed by SBS TV that he was a notorious criminal, a heroin dealer, owned and operated illegal casinos, and was a leader of and actively involved in organised crime.

- A few weeks earlier another Supreme Court jury awarded a Sydney restaurant owner $100,000 over an unfavourable review of his cooked lobsters.

- Somewhat after this $600,000 was awarded to solicitor N R Carson after the jury found the Sydney Morning Herald had published articles which imputed he had conducted himself unethically as a solicitor.

It can be readily seen that the range of money verdicts for imputations that would tend to have people of good repute shun and avoid the plaintiffs is very wide. This is the fault of juries.

The thrust of the reform proposals now is to have judges determine the money verdicts in defamation actions. In other words the jury would determine whether the defences had been made out, and the judge would determine the amount. At least this is what NSW attorney general John Dowd is talking about.
But in the area of contempt law, where amounts are already determined by judges all around Australia, consistency is by no means apparent. Consider the following:

- The full bench in Victoria ultimately settled on a fine of $15,000 and 28 days imprisonment for the Hinch contempt case, while Macquarie Broadcasting was fined $15,000 and $25,000 on two counts in the same matter. In the Hinch case there was no aborting of a trial or discharge of a jury involved in the contempt.

- In the Wran case of the same year the fine imposed for remarks about the innocence of former High Court judge Lionel Murphy was $25,000. Nationwide News was fined $200,000 for publishing Wran's remarks in the Sydney *Daily Telegraph*. There was no delay to the second Murphy trial as a result of this publication.

- In December 1986 the NSW Court of Appeal fined the ABC $100,000 for broadcasting material about the *Age* tapes after Justice Murphy had been charge with attempting to pervert the course of justice. Murphy's trial was not aborted or delayed as a result of the broadcast.

- In the 1988 the *Daily Liberal* of Dubbo, NSW, was fined $10,000 for sub judice contempt for publishing the prior convictions of an accused person.

- Around the same time the Sydney *Sun* was fined $20,000 for describing one of the accused in the Anita Cobby case as a prison escapee one day after the commencement of the trial. The jury was discharged and a new jury sworn in a week later.

- Late last year a Melbourne barrister, Wanda Browne, said on a radio program during the course of Victoria's first toxic shock trial that the plaintiff "would get up on this and it's going to cost Johnson and Johnson a fair whack". The jury in the case was discharged. The Barrister's Disciplinary Tribunal subsequently suspended her from practice for six weeks.

It can be seen that there have been a considerable range of fines and even imprisonment applied by the courts in recent times for sub judice contempt by the media. Again, the authors of *Journalism and Justice* have recorded a lot of interesting observations from journalists, albeit most unattributed, about contempt.

The point to remember, however, is that the anodyne quality of much reporting in Australia is due to the uncertainty engendered by the laws of defamation and contempt. The reform movement is slowly building to get something done about defamation. Certainly in NSW and Queensland it is being addressed. As for contempt, it is not on the agenda anywhere, despite the excellent reform proposals by the Australian Law Reform Commission.

Grabosky and Wilson's book provides some interesting insights for non-journalists into the difficulties the media faces in reporting the justice system. Not surprisingly the lawyers lead the charge against the media for the way it reports trials and publishes 'investigatory' work.

There is much vested interest in protecting the status quo, born of the tribal instincts of lawyers to protect their patch. The protection of the patch, for my money, should make way for a vigilant media, less constrained in its capacity to expose the rorts and racketes and those perpetuating them, no matter how exalted their station.

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Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs tells the story of a northern NSW community of Aboriginal people and their association with part of their traditional land.

Primarily we accompany Patsy Cohen, taken from her mother as an infant, as she traces back through her life and discovers her identity, kinfolk and place. It is through Patsy we meet others, now residing in Armidale and the surrounding districts, and learn of the five Black women, the matriarchs who lived at Ingelba in the last century, from whom these people are descended.

The work is the result of a collaboration between Patsy and Margaret Somerville, who teaches at the University of New England, and their quest for facts and memories about Patsy’s background and relationship with the people and history of the area. This is often a painful story for Patsy to tell. A grandmother and part-time teacher, Patsy vividly recalls the details of how, while living in a series of institutions and foster homes at an early age, she came to regard herself as white. At about nine years old she was told she had relatives to whom she was to be returned.

So anyhow the train pulled up and I was lookin’ for a white grandmother and grandfather and the next minute this old black woman came to the winder of the train and I saw these old black arms stretched out to me. The welfare officer put the winder up and I just sprung onto her and I said, “What are those people doin’ here?” And

she said, “That’s your grandmother.”, and I said, “I’m not going with them,” and all this and that. “I’m not going with them.”

Over time we meet aunts, uncles, cousins, extended kin and their descendants, and by recordings of group events organised in the locality to stimulate collective memories, we learn of the matriarchs and their lifestyle of five or six generations ago. There was a huge risk in this approach that the research could have unearthed disconnected threads of information which, while interesting, were not part of a coherent whole. But, thankfully, this is not the case. An important strength of the work is that the reader is left with a firm sense of the completeness of the picture of Aboriginal occupancy of the area by these matriarchs and their forebears, as well as their descendants, and of Aboriginal cultural notions of continuity and ongoing association with land and ‘place’. In this way Margaret Somerville has done a wonderful job of preserving the integrity of the collaboration.

My criticism of the book stems from my own personal dislike of the use of incorrect spelling (such as ‘winder’ for ‘window’), dropping ‘gs’ and ‘hs’ (as in comin’ ‘ome for ‘coming home’), and convoluted sentence structure as a means of trying to show that interviewees didn’t speak standard English. I know of no one who speaks the perfect pronunciation and sentence structure of the written form, an excellent and superior form which ends up being reserved for the writer - to the detriment of the interviewees.

We Are Staying: The Alyawarre Struggle for Land at Lake Nash, by Pamela Lyon and Michael Parsons, was written for the Central Land Council and published by the Aboriginal-controlled adult education institute in Alice Springs. It tells the long and painful story of a small group of people and their determination, over decades, to win their place. We Are Staying documents the procession of pastoralists, politicians, lawyers, administrators and journalists, as well as union and religious representatives, who, over a period since the ‘twenties, were aware of - and in one form or another, involved in - the struggle and deprivations endured by the Alyawarre people.

We Are Staying is the story not only of the Alyawarre people but of many hundreds of similar Aboriginal communities who have been, and are, obliged to battle the Goliaths of the so-called development industries. In the Lake Nash instance, wealthy pastoralists, evolved from the earlier squatterocracy responsible for the initial destruction of local Aboriginal family groups, refused to concede to the modest demands of the people whose land they had assumed. In their effort to force the Alyawarre to move, they created a situation of starvation and ill-health by denying the people access to both work and water.

The Alyawarre eventually triumphed, gaining security of tenure to a small holding in 1989. But how many other evil and ungodly stories of this nature must unfold before the federal government establishes a treaty, a reconciliation, with Aboriginal people so that justice is not always paid for in Black lives?

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REVIEWS

Little Sir Eco


"How would you like to review this?" Jane said. "You're writing your own thriller. You might get some clues from Castro." Always ready to learn and looking for something light to read on the day-train to Melbourne, I flicked over to the cover blurb.

Pomeroy's an investigative journalist who uncovers blackmail and corruption and survives a murder attempt as he invades privileged and perverse lives. Sounds a reasonable read.

What followed left me a little worried: "But what reads at first like a compelling mix of spy thriller, moral tale and postmodern playfulness serves the darker purpose of exploding presumptions, as Castro unleashes storms which will disgorge the flotsam and jetsam of autobiography, love and betrayal."

Postmodern playfulness? Last time I heard a postmodernist trying to be playful I went to sleep. Still, I said I'd give it a go.

We all make mistakes. Pomeroy is not a thriller, although about half way through Castro remembers that's what he's supposed to be writing. So what begins as some fancy writing in the first part descends into ordinariness as he tries to give the determined reader some idea of what there is of a plot. After the first eighty pages of 'playfulness', I was accepting the book for what it was. Although it's hard to accept the heroine Estrella on any terms.

Castro just finds women impossible to portray and his heroine is like something out of a Playboy centrefold or, alternatively, GH. Maybe that's why it's called a spy book, so that we can be told endlessly about his lost love, "the most beautiful woman I knew". I reckon Ian Fleming did it better.

But maybe that's just postmodern playfulness. And of course that is why even the most venal or simple-minded of his characters speak like semiotic lecturers trying to impress a first year English class. Like Frisco, the fellow reporter in Hong Kong, who offers us such gems as:

"One thing about crime, it's closely tied to myth, and myth is pretty international."

"How do you mean?"

I'd caught him with a nice cultural jab.

"The least realistic people in the world are criminals. They tend to follow codes."

"That's because myth is tied to money," Frisco said, "and money tries to represent. It drowns in its own abstraction. Realism is a hoax anyway, although it tries to be respectable. But myth interests me," Frisco said, his eyes squinting. "Innocence last summer. Someone could market that as a fragrance."

"They already have." And so on. See what I mean?

Frisco, by the way, was accompanied by a "tall and slender girl. She had piercing green eyes and a long neck. He introduced her by saying she was of Dutch nobility. She was charming in an emu-like way, and followed our conversation with a lack of interest that suggested boredom, and perhaps vast experience."

The boredom would be understandable and as for that vast experience, well, maybe it was with postmodernists being playful.

Still, I've got to admit that once I stopped worrying about who dunnit or rather, what was done for someone to do - I found Brian Castro's little word plays and in-jokes amusing enough to push on. Sometimes he went a bit overboard: "Pope Pius X, who had declared that modernism was 'not a heresy, but the summation and essence of every heresy', walked up the aisle to the altar and suddenly rose three or four feet above the ground. It was clear that he already had a vision of post-modernism."

Old Umberto, of course, played all sorts of games too, though a little less clumsily. But he could also tell a yarn well enough for a film to be made from it. Which is what writing crime fiction is all about, isn't it?

Consistency is what this novel hasn't. Playing postmodernist games with form is all very well, but if you start that way you shouldn't switch to some very ordinary writing and structure halfway through to get it on the crime fiction shelves. Brian Castro at his best writes very well. He just needs something to write about.

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JUDY HORACEK

All these independance movements are so exciting

Yeah - it's a crying shame that we're already a democracy

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