
Reviews

Lev Anninsky. *Okhota na L'va*. Tula: Izdvo Shar, 1998. 295 pp. *

It's hard to say who stands to profit more from L. A. Anninsky's recent book *Okhota na L'va* (a title one might take as either *Lion Hunt* or *Hunt for Leo*—both are encouraged in the book): Tolstoy scholars and biographers or historians of the early Russian cinematographic industry. For decades, film has been used in cultural studies as a convenient canvas upon which to chart cultural phenomena, the underlying premise being that cinema—a medium without peer in its reach and appeal during the twentieth century—both reflects and affects the course of history. In its infancy during the first years of the twentieth century, however, cinema was everywhere seen as little more than a marginal, lowbrow distraction, possibly a dangerous one, and certainly one to be scorned by the middle class and social élite. Nicholas II called movie theatres “dangerous establishments” where “miscreants will do the devil knows what.”

It is precisely at the end of the first decade of the new century, when cinematography was striving to establish itself as a “serious” medium, that Anninsky starts his tale. Rather than seeking to understand cultural phenomena writ large on the movie screen, Anninsky's approach is to view the early history of film on what was at the time a much grander canvas: the life and works of Leo Tolstoy.

The two heroes of *Hunt for Leo* met for the first time, Anninsky notes, at the end of August 1908, when the “Great Writer of the Russian Land” was turning eighty and “the cinematograph” was about to become a teenager. In retrospect, historians of cinema have named this period “the crisis of plot,” a time when the initial novelty of moving pictures was fading and there was a real danger of film disappearing like some faddish pop phenomenon, an electric hula-hoop. Casting about for a way to reenergize the medium, the film

moguls in Europe and America independently reached the same conclusion, viz., that film should return to its origin as a means to chronicle important current events. They sent their cameramen out in all directions to record history in the making, and in 1908 they descended upon Iasnaia Poliana as all of Russia was preparing to mark Tolstoy's eightieth birthday.

Here begins the hunt for Leo, who proved an elusive prey. Anninsky tells the tale digressively but engagingly of what we would today call a media circus that arose around Tolstoy's birthday. Amid the hordes of correspondents that flocked to Iasnaia Poliana in March of 1908 appeared A. O. Drankov, a small man carrying his big, “camel-shaped,” boxy film camera. Tolstoy had earlier been besieged by requests from, among others, Edison to allow a cameraman to visit Iasnaia Poliana. All previous requests had brusquely been refused by either Tolstoy or a member of his family. Drankov's request to film Tolstoy, though, was granted by Sof'ia Andreevna who intuitively understood the public-relations potential of the camera and invited Drankov to hide in the garden and film her and Tolstoy on an afternoon walk together: “But do it so we don't see you.” The gambit in the garden failed, but Drankov did manage later to capture Sof'ia Andreevna and Lev Nikolaevich sitting on the balcony laughing while conversing with a group of students. The reason why they are laughing is contested, Anninsky explains, but the mere fact that they were laughing *together* was of the greatest importance for Sof'ia Andreevna. With her blessing, Drankov set off at full speed for Petersburg, where he quickly developed his film and began to distribute it.

The five meters of the Tolstoys that Drankov caught on film created a furor in the public: Many people doubted that they were seeing the first moving pictures of Tolstoy, charging that the figure laughing on the balcony with Sof'ia Andreevna was probably an actor in makeup. Sof'ia

Andreevna quickly sent off a letter to the papers where she averred the authenticity of Drankov's images. She also requested that the film be shown only in programs of "landscape and science films." Drankov was a businessman, however, and he cranked the film during any program. Anninsky quotes Drankov: "We turned out about 100 copies for which we received 75 kopecks per meter—at that time the going rate was 40-45 kopecks. The film was 80 meters long, so each copy cost a bit more than 50 rubles. We made 5000."

Interestingly, Anninsky's account of the first filmic images of Tolstoy is at odds with the account we read in *The Tragedy of the Tolstoy's* by Tolstoy's daughter, Alexandra Tolstaya. She writes that her father was exhausted and in pain from an ailing leg, and that the cameramen caught only images of Tolstoy as he "sat motionless, looking before him with a melancholy stare." Jay Leyda, in *Kino*, likewise reports that Tolstoy "glared" at the camera. I tend to trust Anninsky's account, since he claims to have watched the footage at VGIK, while it's unlikely that Alexandra L'vovna and Leyda had the opportunity.

The lion hunt only intensifies in second chapter of *Hunt for Leo*. Following Drankov's success, cameramen began stalking Tolstoy everywhere, capturing him on walks, at train stations, on the street, sawing wood (Sof'ia Andreevna was predictably enraged), etc. Anninsky recounts each of these episodes in excellent detail, relying on some fairly obscure sources, like reminiscences of cameramen decades later. Tolstoy's biographers will find some rich material here, though Anninsky largely fails to attribute any of his sources anywhere in the book.

Being the subject of so many film cameras, Tolstoy naturally wanted to see the latest entertainment of "city folks." While visiting Moscow in September 1909, he on impulse set out for the nearest movie theatre. Anninsky provides a rich description of the scene Tolstoy found at the "The Great Paris Movie Theatre" (to add to the sense of geographical dislocation, the façade was painted with scenes from sub-Saharan Africa). Given the surroundings and program, Tolstoy's most famous statement about the cinema, "Оч. нехорошо"

("very bad"), makes much more sense. Later that year, back at Iasnaia Poliana, cinematography returned Tolstoy's visit when a representative from Pathé showed the Tolstoy household a copy of the film of Tolstoy's departure from Moscow, an event that had drawn hundreds of well wishers. Tolstoy apparently enjoyed seeing himself on the screen ("It's precisely as though I've been divided in twain!" he later remarked to L. Andreev). However, the projectionist made a fatal error when, after Tolstoy had excused himself, he showed a silly vaudeville show to the peasants. Tolstoy returned and, furious at the potential corruption of his peasants, forbade any further filming or projecting at Iasnaia Poliana.

In the next chapter, Anninsky creatively reconstructs a private conversation on cinema that Leonid Andreev and Tolstoy had in April 1910. Relying largely on Andreev's remarks about film in newspaper articles, his "Letter on the Theatre," and on books Andreev had read about film, Anninsky tries to recapture how this very progressive and popular author—and by extension his peers, the leading intellectual figures of the day—viewed cinema's social and artistic potential. Andreev's views undoubtedly swayed Tolstoy, and Anninsky is probably correct in suggesting that we can better understand Tolstoy's views by surveying Andreev's. In any case, Andreev's excitement about cinema certainly infected Tolstoy. The next morning after their conversation, Tolstoy told Andreev that he had thought of cinema "all night long" and he pledged to write a screenplay "if I have time." "You know, the cinema is comprehensible to the masses of all nations," he remarked. Tolstoy added that he was attracted to the canvas screen because, unlike drama, in cinema one could have "not four or five, but ten or fifteen scenes." He repeated these plans to Goldenweizer and Bulgakov in the following days. Bear in mind that at this early stage in the history of film, hardly any serious artists considered writing for cinema, so Tolstoy's enthusiasm is certainly noteworthy. This enthusiasm for film quickly waned, however, when he saw more movies while visiting, of all places, two insane asylums outfitted with movie theatres near Chertkov's Otradnoe estate. He remarked to Goldenweizer

soon after that “film quickly gets boring, and what’s more, all the movement in it comes off as unnatural.” Any plans to write for the cinema were left unrealized—his “flight from Iasnaia Poliana” and death at Astapovo (which was extensively documented on film by Drankov and company) were a few months away.

Anninsky ends the chapter by collecting and synthesizing Tolstoy’s often-contradictory observations on film. He draws several striking conclusions, probably the most significant of which is the observation that Tolstoy never once said anything about film as an *artistic* medium: he related to it solely as a social phenomenon, and more particularly as yet another example of, in Anninsky’s words, the “incurable, lie-ridden seigniorial civilization,” another variant on the Herzenian formula “Genghis Khan with a telegraph.”

Anninsky observes that at first glance the meeting between Tolstoy and cinematography seems to be a “marvel and a portent: they could have missed one another, and yet they met. But if you look into the matter, into these initial contacts, you realize that they nonetheless missed one another. Not on the level of empirical phenomena, rather on the level of spiritual reciprocity. Henceforth, the interaction becomes one-sided, [...] the cinematograph was fated to search for contact, ceaselessly attacking Tolstoy’s legacy.” As another Tolstoy specialist has remarked, Tolstoy was one of the very first figures “upon whom the newly-born mass media tried its strength...”

The rest of *Hunt for Leo* is of much less broad appeal, though by no means is it uninteresting. In the next half dozen chapters, Anninsky gives a detailed recounting of dozens of cinematic productions of Tolstoy’s works (there have been at least ninety), beginning with Persky’s 1910 *Living Corpse* and ending with Rose’s 1996 *Anna Karenina*. Anninsky has a historian’s respect for details, an impressive knowledge of Tolstoy’s life and oeuvre, and an artist’s knack for choosing inherently interesting material. We learn, for instance, that the two most famous early Russian movie stars, Ivan Mozzhukhin and Vera Kholodnaya, both got their acting starts in films based on Tolstoy’s works. Kholodnaya’s first attempt to break

into film was as an extra in Gardin’s 1914 *Anna Karenina* as Anna’s Italian wet-nurse. Gardin found her insipid, and sent her off to Bauer with a letter of recommendation. Mozzhukhin’s debut was as a simpering Trukhachevsky in Chardynin’s and Khanzhankov’s 1911 *Kreutzer Sonata*.

Despite the lively writing and inherently engaging material, even I, an avid Tolstoyan and a film fan, felt a little overwhelmed by the sheer scope of the last 200 pages of exhaustively detailed film production history that make up *Hunt for Leo*. I doubt there are many who will read this second half of the book from start to finish, but certainly anyone interested in a given production—say Bondarchuk’s “epic” (well, at least epically long) *War and Peace*—should turn to Anninsky’s book first for information.

I should point out that Anninsky often gets his facts wrong when it comes to American adaptations of Tolstoy. For instance, he remarks that D. W. Griffith never shot a film based on Tolstoy, which is wrong: While working for Biograph in 1909, Griffith directed a filmic version of *Resurrection*. Now, granted, the film was only twelve minutes long, so perhaps Anninsky’s remark is correct on a certain level. Another American gaffe occurs in the last chapter of the book, where Anninsky gives a sardonic accounting of Bernard Rose’s 1997 film—shot in 1996 in St. Petersburg—*Leo Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina*, a movie Anninsky calls “an American dream in a French realization” (it was also the first Western film shot exclusively in Russia). Anninsky repeatedly refers to Rose as an American: he is thoroughly British. (Rose recently finished another film based on Tolstoy’s work, *Ivans xtc.*, a reworking of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* set in contemporary Hollywood, notable chiefly for its having been shot entirely digitally.)

It is a pity that *Hunt for Leo* has no index and, worse still, almost no documentation of sources, though in that respect Anninsky departs little from cinema history and criticism as it is practised in Russia. Another distracting deficit in the book is its lack of introduction: Clearly the book is made up of articles originally published separately. I gather from some comments in the text that the book was written over the course of at least a couple of

decades. An introduction that contextualized the work as what it clearly is—a lifelong labour of love of film and Tolstoy—might have lent the book a bit more coherence and significance. Finally, if one is to trust the typographical notes at the end of the book, only three hundred copies of *Hunt for Leo* were printed, and given the state of today's Russian academic press I doubt there will be more runs. Anyone who wants a copy of *Hunt for Leo* might indeed be faced with a challenging hunt for Lev Anninsky's book.

**Editor's note.* There is now a complete filmography of Tolstoy's works, prepared by Michael Denner, on the Tolstoy web site. See www.tolstoystudies.org.

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A. D. Donskov, ed., Z. N. Ivanova and L. D. Gromova, compilers. *Iz arkhiva N. N. Guseva: Novye materialy o L. N. Tolstom*. Ottawa: Slavic Research Group at the University of Ottawa and State L. N. Tolstoy Museum, Moscow, 2002.*

Robert Whittaker, writing in volume IX (1997) of this journal, wrote that this editorial collective's first anthology of extracts from Gusev's Tolstoy archive "sparkles like a colorful, multifaceted mosaic of brilliant gems" and "reflects the highest standards of Russian textual criticism." Just the same may be said of this second volume, containing 45 letters from Gusev to Tolstoy and eight reminiscences of Tolstoy by divers hands. Indeed, Tolstoy studies generally owe a continuing debt to the very productive collaboration of the Slavic Research Group at the University of Ottawa and the State L. N. Tolstoy Museum in Moscow.

Nikolai Nikolaevich Gusev (1882-1967) may be said to have devoted his life to the study of Tolstoy and his teachings. From his first letter to Tolstoy, in 1903, through his two years (1907-09) of service as Tolstoy's personal secretary (his "priceless assistant," as Tolstoy called him) and

two years in exile (1909-11) following his arrest for spreading the teachings of his mentor, and culminating in a long and very fruitful research career which lasted right up until his death. He is best remembered for his monumental biographical research (*Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva L. N. Tolstogo* [*Chronicle of the Life and Work of L. N. Tolstoy*, 1958], four volumes of *Materialy k biografii L. N. Tolstogo* [*Materials for the Biography of L. N. Tolstoy*, 1954, 1958, 1963, 1970], and his personal reminiscence of his years as Tolstoy's secretary (*Dva goda s L. N. Tolstym* [*Two Years with Tolstoy*, ed. V. V. Grigorenko, 1973]). He was also instrumental in the production of the Jubilee Edition of Tolstoy's *Complete Collected Works*.

The letters from Gusev to Tolstoy cover the entire period of their acquaintance. The earliest letters offer a wonderful insight into the inner world of an idealistic young man beginning for the first time to grapple with Tolstoy's most serious questions and his answers to them. In this regard, Gusev's letter of 2 January 1910 (119-122) supplements the account of Gusev's own first acquaintance with Tolstoy with a description of Tolstoy's influence on the development of a young revolutionary.

Especially instructive are the letters Gusev wrote to Tolstoy while Gusev was in exile between August, 1909, and Tolstoy's death in November, 1910. One gains a new appreciation of what condemnation and exile for political reasons entailed, both physically and emotionally, in those days. The letter of 3 November 1909 (98-102) provides interesting comments on the reasons underlying the enmity of the Orthodox Church toward Tolstoy. The same letter asserts Gusev's opinion that Dostoevsky was, of all Tolstoy's contemporaries, closest to him in the spirit of his ideas. He singled out several passages from Dostoevsky's *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* (*Notes from the Dead House*) as being particularly in sympathy with Tolstoy's ideas. There is also an interesting comment about Dostoevsky in the letter of 18 April 1910.

Of the reminiscences, that of Morozov called "Pozhar v Iasnoi Poliane" ("A Fire at Iasnaia Poliana," 201-210) has a wonderful portrait of Tolstoy's kindness and charity toward the peasants