

The Film Palaces of Nevsky Prospect: A History of St Petersburg's Cinemas, 1900–1910

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“Fog ... and a solid wall of lights from the electro-theatres on Nevsky” (P. 1915) – this is what a Muscovite would remember in the first instance after a visit to St Petersburg in the mid-1910s. Since Moscow was the center of the film press before the Revolution, the cinemas on Nevsky Prospect (Avenue) were first of all seen through Moscow’s eyes, and this picture is quite fantastic: “A continuous strip of cinemas extends from Nikolaev Station to Anichkov Bridge. For all the money in the world, I couldn’t list all of them by name. In almost every house there are two cinemas” (Rex 1915).

This information may nonplus us: where were all these innumerable cinemas? On pre-Revolutionary photographs of Nevsky Prospect, quite a few of which have been preserved, they are rather difficult to spot. This is no surprise: almost all the cinemas were situated either within the buildings, or in courtyards, because it was just impossible to build up the capital’s central street with new cinemas. For the Edison, which was popular in the late 1900s, an entire covered gallery was built, which led visitors into the courtyard; this was distinct from the other “yard” cinemas on Nevsky (Anon. 1909). The smart entrance of the Crystal Palace [Kristall-Palas] cinema was visible from within the courtyard that could be accessed through tall and splendidly decorated gates (Khronika 1910c).

Indeed, a similar picture can be observed today. However, Nevsky Prospect was, and remains, St Petersburg’s main cinema street. During the pre-Revolutionary era, when St Petersburg hugely surpassed Moscow by the number of cinemas, the Nevsky was the largest cinematic center in the whole of Russia: in the evenings, the projectors showed films to thousands of spectators. Thus the history of cinemas on Nevsky goes far beyond the study of local lore and has a direct relation to the hermeneutics of early Russian cinema. Imagining the cinemas on Nevsky

means imagining the world of the film viewer in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century.

According to available data, the first cinema opened on Nevsky in the spring of 1897, the year following the first film screenings in Russia in the Aquarium Park and the Hermitage Gardens. Boris Diushen, a pioneer of Russian cinema, left his memoirs about this cinema, which was located in the Passage [Passazh]:

Occasional events would take place in this venue: an exhibition of wax figures, a visiting magician guest-performer, etc. The venue held no more than 50–60 persons. Curiously, it was called “Edison’s Hall” before it became a cinema, and you could listen there to a tremendous novelty: Edison’s phonograph. In those days people would listen by inserting small rubber tubules into their ears that connected to the phonograph, since a loud-speaking sound record did not yet exist. The cinema, which was referred to as “living photograph,” opened almost unnoticed, and it was mainly children who visited it. They showed three films. The first was shown all around the world: a gardener watering the lawn and a boy stepping on the hose. In perplexity the gardener examines the end of the hose to find out why the water had stopped. The boy takes the foot from the hose, and a strong jet of water hits the gardener’s face. Overall delight! The gardener rushes after the boy and scolds him. The second film showed Nevsky Prospect with a horse-drawn tram and carriages. And the last, third film, showed the arrival of a train. The steam locomotive came directly towards the audience. The spectators were frightened. Then the session was over. There was no musical accompaniment. The session lasted no more than 30 minutes, with two intervals. The first cinema in Russia quickly went bust. (Diushen 2003, 175)

The famous fire in Paris at the annual Charity Bazaar (1897) killed about two hundred people and led to the first big cinema crisis, which continued in Russia until the first Russian revolution of 1905. The demonstration of the “living photograph” created a huge public resonance in 1896, but the cinema soon disappeared onto the periphery of Russian cultural life. Films were shown off and on, more often in the provinces than in the capitals.

The cinema returned to Nevsky Prospect in the middle of the 1900s when house owners, who had earlier reluctantly rented their premises to cinemas, readily handed them over so they would be reconstructed. Between 1904 and 1908, a cinema consisted of one room only, without foyer or lobby. If, as was most often the case, the cinema was a converted apartment with the partitions removed, the spectators entered from the public staircase, obtaining tickets in the hall, at a small table by the door. Thus cinemas located on the premises of stores were set up, as Viktor Shklovskii remembered: “Small cinemas appeared in empty shops in quiet streets, where the doorbell rang all the time, indicating that the screening was about to begin. Actually they let people in at any time [...]. The bell rang with a thin, continuous electric jingle” (Shklovskii 1966, 46).

The transformations of the first Russian cinemas are described in detail and analyzed in Iurii Tsiv’ian’s monograph (1991, 14–69), and his concept is applicable

to the history of St Petersburg cinemas. In the second half of the 1900s the above-mentioned smaller cinemas began to move from the center to the suburbs, leaving Nevsky Prospect which had become a street for film palaces only.

Boris Diushen remembered: "Somehow, 'suddenly' some cinemas opened on Nevsky, some rather 'magnificently' furbished" (Diushen 2003, 176). Feozva Vasil'eva, the daughter of the famous gold producer from Omsk, distributed on charitable terms films from Pathé in Russia and opened several cinemas; the actor Nikolai Orlov remembers the details of such an event: "The first cinema which received the name 'As in Paris' was in a cozy, private residence in a courtyard of Nevsky Prospect. The exterior was decorated with huge, colorful Parisian posters, and the entrance was garnered with flowers in the summer and fir-trees in the winter. The public entered a splendid foyer along a magnificent carpet. The second cinema was called 'As in Nice' and was located opposite, on the corner of Nevsky and Liteiny. It had two halls: on the ground floor they showed serious, scientific films. The setting was rather smart: gilded furniture, huge mirrors in golden frames, wonderful carpets, the walls upholstered with silk, and the doors also" (Orlov 1999, 204). Orlov emphasized that these cinemas served, as Vasil'eva said, for rendezvous: they were a meeting place for rich visitors. After midnight special screenings of the "Parisian kind" were arranged for very important persons – showing openly pornographic films.

At this time the writer Ivan Shcheglov-Leont'ev wrote a malicious feuilleton, in which he likened cinematography to the image of the cheap German cocotte Bertha Kukelvan, and called the St Petersburg Royal Vio cinema a "grandiose pissoir." Shcheglov, once a protégé of the writer Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin and the historian and journalist Mikhail Stasiulevich, had the reputation of being a weird old man, almost a city madman, in St Petersburg at the beginning of the century: he was afraid of steamships, trams, and even carriages. Nobody paid particular attention to his words, yet in more than one way Shcheglov was right: in the 1900s the magnificent cinema was associated with the brothel. The entrepreneur Vasil'eva ran her cinema business together with her husband Vasili Ipatovich, and they owned some ten impressive cinemas, of which – according to the journal *Artist i stsenarist* – only one was "decent": the Casino de Paris at the corner of Nevsky and Liteiny. The monopolists Vasili'ev occupied a visible place in the film-process of the capital, and their business approach in many respects reflected the shape of St Petersburg's film distribution of those years.

The first film theater owners in the capital were parvenus and enterprising merchants, and usually did not distinguish themselves by intelligence or a high level of culture. A repulsive scene took place in the Folies Bergère theater on Nevsky at the end of the 1900s: the wife of the owner Nakhman-Geev attacked Vera G-n, whom she suspected of an affair with her husband. The girl was beaten up and suffered bruises and concussions. Vera G-n brought a court case against both Geevs (Anon. 1910b). The feuilleton published in the magazine *Artist i stsenarist* also gives some clues about the social origin of the first generation of St Petersburg

theatre owners: "Conversation of a doctor without practice and a merchant without credit in a mossy small restaurant," where the opening of a cinema is described simply: "Let's stop arguing and get to business. And business is good: we shall open it on Nevsky, we shall arrange it in the Parisian fashion, and it won't be business but a red mill that will spin money" (Anon. 1910a). A red mill was the emblem of the well-known cinema, the Moulin Rouge, which operated on Nevsky Prospect 51 for over ten years.

The press quite often bantered at the manners of the cinema owners, who were clearly unable to communicate with the visitors. The *Vestnik kinematografii* gave theater owners ironical advice that reflected, apparently, the true state of affairs:

Make sure that in your theatre orange peel, sunflower seeds, stubs and boxes roll about on the floor. It very much brings alive the general view of the theatre and eloquently proves that it is visited by numerous spectators. [...] On the whole, if to you are asked any question, it is recommended, for self-respect, to inspect the customer from head down to the feet with a contemptuous look and to say through clenched teeth: "get off"; it is also good to stare point blank and growl: "piss off." (Anon 1911c)

Such theater owners would continue for a long time to dominate film culture in the provinces, while in the capital cinemas had been pushed out of the center. In the summer of 1910 Vasilii Vasil'ev died of cholera (Khronika 1910b), and his widow quickly sold all the cinemas and left the cinematic life of the capital. Although it was of course impossible to eradicate the "Parisian genre," the time of serious film palaces, which were managed by new people, had come. The cinemas on Nevsky at the turn of the 1900s and 1910s passed into the hands of "cultured" (as they were called in the press) entrepreneurs.

Above all, this concerns the owners of the Edison (Malaia Koniushennaia St 3) and The Royal Star (Nevsky Pr. 48) cinemas – the best St Petersburg cinemas of that time: "At the Edison and The Royal Star people 'dress up to go there', as they do for the ballet or the drama theatre, and during the intervals the magnificent foyers and grandiose halls of these two cinemas represent a vivid picture of the beau monde, who have come to the cinema as if it were the theater" (Obozrenie teatrov 1910). Contrary to the tradition to have several screenings per day in a cinema, the administration of the Edison held only one screening, and that was set to the "theater time" and lasted usually from 8.30 pm until 11.30 pm (Obozrenie teatrov 1911b). The press wrote that this cinema played to a full house of "its audience" every day: "The white hall of the Edison reminds us of a subscription performance at the Mariinsky. There is the habitual audience, on their favorite places, strutting before their friends in their tuxedos and gowns" (Obozrenie teatrov 1911a). There are, it is true, also unexpected visitors: in the spring of 1910 the Minister of Finance V.N. Kokovtsev made an appearance at the Edison to look at the new program and discuss the success of cinematography and state of this industry in Russia with the administration (Khronika 1910a).

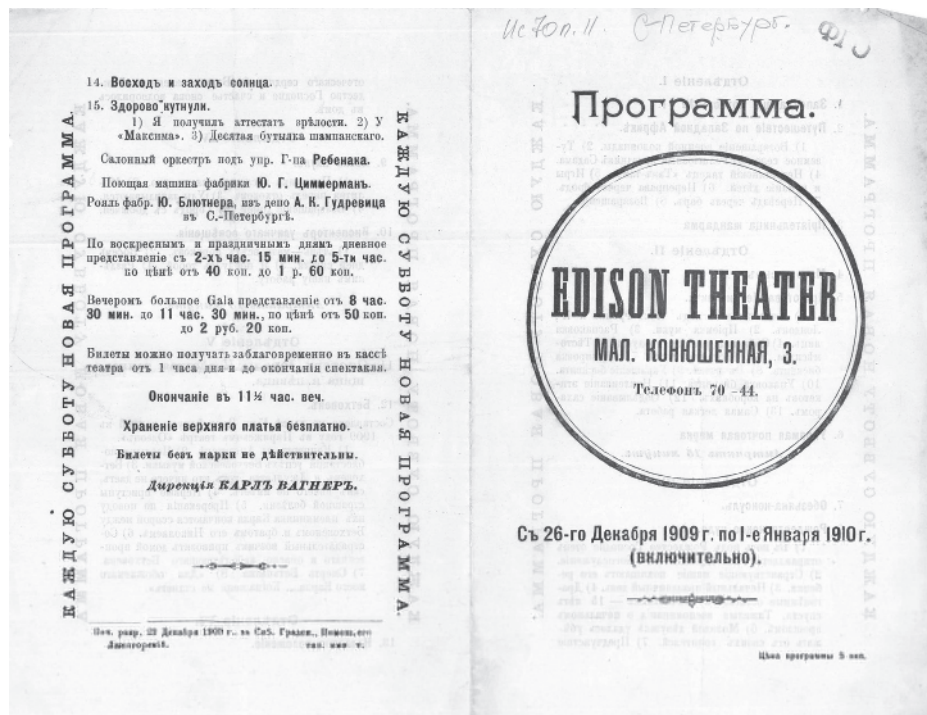


Figure 1.1 Program of the Edison Theater, December 1909–January 1910.

The Royal Star did not have a long life-span (1909–1911); however, during this time its sparkling star had become a new symbol of Nevsky Prospect: “In the evening, when the noisy, brightly lit Nevsky Prospect hardly contains an infinite flow of people, among the uncountable lights of cinemas the bright electric star on one of the enormous central buildings of the needle-shaped avenue remains visible from the distance. This star is the ‘mark’ of one of the best cinemas in Russia, The Royal Star” (Khronika 1910d). This cinema was located in the building of the Passage (Nevsky Prospect 48): on the third floor there was a large auditorium, on the second – a foyer and a bar, and for the services of the public there was a special “elevating machine,” a lift. The furniture of the cinema was expensive, but austere and refined: hall and foyer were decorated in black-and-white tones with black drapery. The Royal Star belonged to the joint-stock company Apollo, a St Petersburg film firm which released mainly newsreels (Kovalova 2012, 44–49).

Apollo’s films defined the repertoire of The Royal Star: fiction films were rare, but the transfer speed of the city’s news was unusual for those times: what was filmed in the capital in the morning was shown in the cinema by the evening (Khronika 1911). Even Grand Duke Mikhail Aleksandrovich once visited this cinema (Khronika 1909b). Apollo’s bankruptcy led to the closure of The Royal Star; however, the Passage remained the major cinema center on Nevsky: a new

fashionable cinema opened soon after, called the *Soleil*, which had an elongated hall with 1000 seats, magnificently equipped boxes and a symphonic orchestra from the Imperial theatres (Anon. 1911a).

Talking about the well-known cinemas on Nevsky, we must also mention the *Saturn*, popular in its time, which was located at Nevsky Prospect 67, on the site now occupied by the *Khudozhestvennyi* [Arts] cinema. At first it was a small cinema with a single hall, and the annual turnover was 30,000 rubles. By the time of its closure in 1914 the *Saturn* had three halls and a revenue of 200,000 rubles (Khronika 1914e). The cinema had a magnificent foyer decorated with tropical plants. In 1909 the owner of the *Saturn*, Iaroslav Krynskii, was one of the first to rent films (instead of buying them), and to change the program twice a week (Khronika 1909a). Within two years such a repertoire approach became common practice for all cinemas. The popularity of the *Saturn* was legendary. Judging by reports in the press, the well-known actor Konstantin Varlamov was a regular visitor of this cinema.

The closure of the cinema, which for over eight years enjoyed exclusive popularity and authority, was a sad event for the town: "Three halls perish with the *Saturn* where, like in a mirror, the whole cinema life was reflected until recently, all the creativity of world cinema; where on three screens for several seasons the best, most beautiful, most gripping events took place before the eyes of spectators" (Khronika 1914h). The *Saturn* had passed to the well-known theater owners Mullert, who were going to reconstruct it, apparently, and open an even more grandiose cinema. However, the Mullerts hugely suffered from the anti-German campaign during World War I (Kovalova and Tsiv'ian 2011, 128) and they never opened a new cinema on Nevsky 67. At this time the Mullerts were seriously in danger of being expelled from Russia, and it was a miracle that they managed to keep their cinemas on Nevsky: the *Union* (Nevsky 88), the *Khudozhestvennyi* (Nevsky 102) and the *Crystal Palace* (Nevsky 72). These cinemas, following the *Edison* and *The Royal Star*, were guided by a model of luxurious and cultural cinema for an intelligent audience. About the *Crystal Palace*, which opened in 1910, the papers wrote: "The auditorium, with a height over both circles [two floors], is held in a strict Empire style and it is especially beautiful because of its whiteness and absence of all those ornaments, portieres, upholsteries and so on, which most of our cinemas strut with" (Anon. 1910c). Obviously the Mullerts tried to depart from the pretentiousness of film palaces in the mid-1900s; however, the love for external effects stayed with the vigorous Natalia Frantseva Mullert. In 1913, when she opened the *Khudozhestvennyi*, the press savored the purchase of an incredible crystal luster for the new cinema which cost 6000 rubles (Khronika 1913).

In 1913, a year which became for Russia's economy the most successful in all its history, two magnificent film palaces were constructed on Nevsky, which could not be surpassed in splendor neither before nor after the Revolution: the *Piccadilly* (Nevsky 60) and the *Parisiana* (Nevsky 80). They instantly drew the attention of

the public, and in 1915 they had already confidently settled in the center of cinema life on Nevsky:

The Piccadilly sees motor cars at its entrance, there are representatives of our beau monde. If a film has been shown at the Piccadilly, the distributors say, it is already in high demand, and they make all reasonable efforts for the film to be shown first in this cinema. But, on the other hand, the audience has strict rules here. They say that once a film seemed too frank for one of the influential visitors, and, on her insistence, the censors made cuts as suggested by this same visitor. Next to the Piccadilly comes the Parisiana in terms of the quality of the audience. And here, too, there are motorcars. (Obozrenie kinematografov 1915)

Nevsky 60 is probably the most English cinema address on Nevsky Prospect. In 1900, long before the Piccadilly opened, there was a cinema called Bristol here. Foreign names were characteristic for Russian cinemas of that time, but on the whole these were French names: Moulin Rouge, Folies Bergère, Casino de Paris, Mon Plaisir, and many others. However, the Bristol occupied probably several



Figure 1.2 Entrance to the Piccadilly Cinema (Nevsky Prospect 60), 1913.

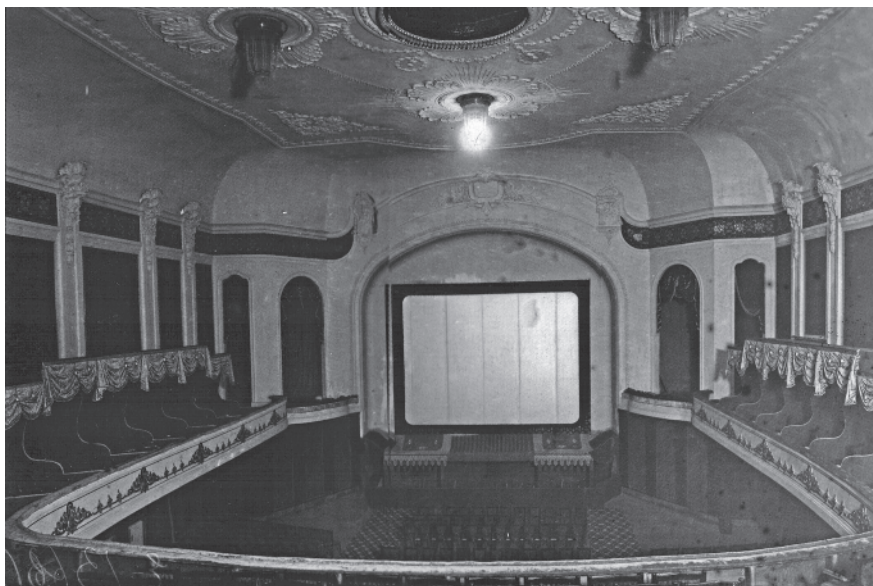


Figure 1.3 Auditorium of the Piccadilly Cinema (Nevsky Prospect 60), 1913. Photo by Viktor Bulla.

apartments in the house on Nevsky 60, while the new Piccadilly was located in a purpose-built house in the court yard. Today, with the building gone, it is difficult to imagine the architectural shape of Nevsky. The cinema, with columns, bas-reliefs, statues in niches surprised the St Petersburgers of the 1910s (Khronika 1914b: 26). The building was not huge (otherwise it would not have fitted into a courtyard of Nevsky), but graceful and therefore the townspeople called the Piccadilly the *bonbonniere* [chocolate box] (A-fer 1914).

The construction of the cinema cost Iurii Iablonskii, who also owned the Majestique on Nevsky 50, some 200,000 rubles (A-fer 1914). Iablonskii, who had two large central cinemas, became a new kind of “owner of the Nevsky”: he was not a casual businessman, but a well-known publisher in the city, the owner of a large printing house, where the Leningrad branch of the publishing house Molodaia Gvardiia [Young Guard] opened after the Revolution (Anon. 1910d).

The two-storey auditorium of the Piccadilly had also been planned in a special manner: the screen was equally well visible from any row, and any seat (Khronika 1914b, 26–27). The interior was in the style *moderne*, the hall had been decorated with yellow silk, and the “charming foyer and spectacular lobby,” in the opinion of the correspondent from the *Vestnik kinematografii*, could “transport you straight to Europe” (Khronika 1914f). The projection booth of the Piccadilly had been equipped along the latest standard of technology, as is visible on a photograph that has been preserved, probably the only picture showing the projection equipment in pre-Revolutionary St Petersburg.

The composer Dmitri Tiomkin left his memoirs about the musical life at the Piccadilly; in his youth he had worked there as ballroom pianist:

St Petersburg had many cinemas. One of the most luxurious was called the Piccadilly, since Western names were considered smart. The piano player there was Barere, a great virtuoso whose rapid fingers would play Chopin's Minute Waltz in fifty-six seconds. He was much applauded in concerts, but he had a knack of not being able to get along financially, and so he made his living in the movie house, where he was also able to keep up his keyboard technique. While the screen showed scenes that evoked tears or laughter, he would practice complicated passages, finger exercises, studies in how to surmount technical problems, regardless of whether the film was *Vera Cold* in a love scene, a comic skit, or a moment of tragic peril.

I couldn't take such liberties. As a mere boy in a humbler theater I had to make music to fit the picture, more or less. One night I was playing to a farce of Max Linder, a popular French comic actor. There was a close-up scene of a woman being choked, her head going back and back. As I played the music, I couldn't help throwing my head back and emitting terrible grunts and roars. The audience broke into laughter. The theater manager told me I must do it at every performance. So I also became the sound effects. (Tiomkin and Buranelli 1959, 24)

However, usually those working in the magnificent cinemas had no time for jokes. Remembering life in pre-Revolutionary St Petersburg, Dmitrii Likhachev noted: "Once we were on Nevsky in the Parisiana or Piccadilly, I can't remember. We were amazed at the valets in liveries and with wigs" (Likhachev 2007, 18). Apparently, he is talking about the Parisiana, because a similar response to its employees comes from the correspondent of *Kino-kur'er* after his first visit to this cinema: "My fur coat was almost pulled off me by court lackeys in long stockings, dense and beautifully skin-tight around the leg, dandy shoes with buckles, short trousers and colored camisoles; they made the coat quickly disappear somewhere into a vault and after several seconds of anxiety gave me a coupon. The same men guarded the entrances to the stalls and the balcony" (A-fer 1914, 9).

The Parisiana opened after the Piccadilly, at the very beginning of 1914 (Khronika 1914d). St Petersburgers soon learnt about the magnificence of the new cinema, because it could be appreciated even without coming inside: "A sea of lights, which fills the magnificent entrance that is situated in a semicircle and looks onto Nevsky Prospect, involuntarily draws attention" (Khronika 1914f). The colonnade of the Parisiana, filled with light, was decorated with bright electric images of laughter and satire (Khronika 1914f); however, this luxury even nonplused the townspeople: "the lobby of new theatre constantly attracts huge crowds of spectators, who cannot bring themselves to step across the tempting threshold (as is well known, cleanliness and comfort always inspire in a Russian man above all fear: suddenly one must not spit?)" (A-fer 1914).

The furniture inside the Parisiana matched the exterior. The hall was enormous for the times, decorated in the style of Louis XVI with rich stucco. The wide marble



Figure 1.4 Entrance to the Parisiana Cinema (Nevsky Prospect 80), 1915. Photo by Viktor Bulla.

staircase led to a spacious balcony, and the boxes were isolated from each other, so everyone had a separate entrance; and they were equipped with phones (A-fer 1914). The cinema had an enormous ceiling which could be opened automatically to either side. Iurii Tsiv'ian remarked that such a cinema features in the films *Moon* (*Luna*, 1979) by Bernardo Bertolucci and *Splendor* (1989) by Ettore Scola (Tsiv'ian 1991, 39). The novelty of the Parisiana also gave rise to ironic comments: it was alleged that the ceiling could douse the smart public in St Petersburg rain, while the phones in the boxes also naturally led to questions: "I keep thinking how convenient it will be to use this phone during the interval, let alone during the screening, and would I not become the center of attention if, during the most pathetic point in the drama, I'd start a business call or an intimate conversation, or I receive a call ..." (A-fer 1914).

So far my concern here has been the architecture of cinemas on Nevsky, and little has been said about the program. If the best cinemas at the end of the 1900s and early 1910s placed their stake on newsreels, then the emphasis distinctly shifted onto fiction films later. During the first months of the war, newsreels regained their former popularity, but as Russia was drawn into the international conflict, the military theme moved to the periphery: scared, the townspeople were looking for oblivion in the "illusions."

In 1910 the journal *Artist i stsena* remarked that Nevsky's cinemas were all supplied by the same distribution office, therefore frequently all the cinemas

showed the same films, only occasionally changing the titles. During the 1910s the situation was complicated further and began to change; however, the satirist and playwright Arkadii Averchenko produced a feuilleton, parodying a typical film program. It certainly has not lost its bite and is quite applicable to all the fashionable cinemas in the capital.

PROGRAM¹

Electro-magnetic illusory-realistic kinemo-biograph (the real cinematic miracle of the twentieth century CE)

Section I

CATCHING FLEAS IN NORWAY (useful)

That's what the insects are called which live not only in night rests of the workers, but also on the body, causing great anxiety among the inhabitants of this small vigorous country. Old and young are busy catching these small, brisk animals, and although the hunt is on without profit (their meat cannot be used in food, and the skin is useless because of their size), nevertheless these predators are caught by brave Norwegians, young and old, all along the coast.

KITTY RESCUED! OR A HEART IS NO STONE (touching, 400 meters)

In the apartment of the rich merchant Gribul everybody is asleep; but the impudent robbers, who have thought of stealing the Gribul's fireproof wooden casket in which the landlord stacks his fortune, are not asleep... And here come, knives between their teeth, the two convicts Jules and Ivan; with shameful skill they climb up. But foresight has not been asleep and placed on their way, near the casket, the favorite doll of Kitty, the juvenile merchant and daughter of the old Gribul. So the robbers drop the knives, moved by the doll's show: remembering their youth, they shower the doll with kisses. But the young mistress Yvonna, having heard the noise, jumps from her bed and rushes towards the robbers. The latter want to kill her, but then they don't want to kill her and caress the little girl, and she caresses them. Some sergeants with revolvers come along and throw themselves at the murderers; Yvonna goes between them and meekly murmurs that they must not..., that they are kind, and she forces the robbers to make peace with the policemen. The latter kiss the first, daddy Gribul kisses his darling naughty little girl. The latter kisses the doll which has saved their life, and everyone cries.

Section II

THE HILARIOUS ADVENTURES OF COLLEGIATE
ASSESSOR TUPITSYN

(very comic! A load of laughter, 500 meters)

Having donned coat and hat, our Tupitsyn goes for a walk. But here he encounters disaster. He overtakes a porter who is carrying empty boxes and drops them on the head of our Tupitsyn. But here comes another woe: the yard keeper waters the street and pours water over this odd fellow. It is clear that now the porter, the yard keeper and the indignant public latch onto our Tupitsyn and beat him up. This picture makes the audience laugh unremittingly.

FATAL MISUNDERSTANDING, OR HAND AND
HEART OF AN INNOCENT GIRL

(tragic)

The young count George, having met the modest Madeleine on a walk, is enamored – but no! The latter has vowed to enter a monastery. But the count is persistent and always gets his way. He writes to his friend de Planchette: “Dear Planchette, go to the above-mentioned Madeleine and demand her hand and heart for me in memory of our friendship. You shall do this with perfect respect, yours count George Gvozdilin.” De Planchette, carrying out the last will of his friend, goes to the girl, but here a fatal misunderstanding occurs: the persistent Planchette, taking the will of his friend literally, cuts off the unfortunate and meek Madeleine’s hand and heart, and brings them to a shaken count. The latter runs to Madeleine, but too late! She dies in his arms, blessing the count because she secretly loved him. The erroneous Planchette sobs inconsolably.

PENCIL SHARPENING IN CENTRAL RUSSIA
(ethnographic)

Teenagers of central Russia, and occasionally adults, engage in this business. The sharpening of pencils demands great skill and dexterity, as it is very easy to cut oneself when holding the knife in one hand, or to cut someone who stands nearby. Look how dexterously the teenager in our picture carries out the task. This picture, both scientific and decent, can be recommended for pupils of middle schools.

THE SECRET OF THE COURTESAN
(Drama in color from Roman life)

People who lived in Greece and had aggressive bents to debauchery are referred to as Romans. So their courtesans (girls) fell in love and repeatedly took up relationships without being married or betrothed. Here on the screen we see the story of the courtesan Epikharisa who acted from her heart, and what came of that.

Epikharisa made a living by selling herself, until she met the Greek young Roman Bitullio. She lost her young heart, but that was not what the Greek Patrician Centurion thought, to whom she sold herself earlier and who loved with an animalistic passion. So what? Having learned about her love for Bitullio, whom she appointed a meeting at six o'clock, Centurion rushes to kill the brave young man. But his sand-glass lags behind, and consequently he comes to the well when the happy lover has already left and only Epikharisa remains there, this unfortunate victim of the public temperature. So what? In the dark, he snatches the ancient gun and kills her, mistaking her in her white clothes for Bitullio. The courageous girl falls like a sheaf, and Centurion, realizing his sad mistake, pierces his body with his own sword. The two victims of public temperature lay side by side. So, as they say, bad deeds follow you, the good ones flee.

FINAL SENSATIONAL FILM: MOTHER-IN-LAW HAS ARRIVED!
(Hermetic laughter!! 300 meters)

Upon hearing about the imminent arrival of his mother-in-law, Adolf instigates the servants to poison the life of this malicious Shrew. She has hardly arrived when misfortunes happen. From the roof an automobile falls on her, then the cook throws her in a tub with boiling water, then the children beat her on the head with batons in a dream and all this comes to an end when, persuaded by her son-in-law, the mother-in-law examines a threshing machine in the floor, gets her head in there and has it chopped off to the general laughter of all participants.

Unable to bear these jokes and mockeries, the old woman collects her things and returns home on the first bus.

Composed from sources
Arkadii Averchenko (Anon. 1912)²

Actually, it was largely the program and the content of the screenings that preoccupied the audience in the capital. Now it seems axiomatic, but in the 1910s such an approach to cinema was unusual and it was the topic for an entire

physiological sketch, which a Moscow journalist wrote about the St Petersburg film public:

The enormous crowd, scurrying back and forth along Nevsky Prospect, pours in a huge wave through the doors of the cinema and back again. This enormous demand shown in the attraction of the Petrograd population to the cinema is the best proof of the status that cinematography has assumed in Petrograd. For the cinematograph to achieve the audience sympathy in Moscow, it had to resort to significant 'collateral expenditure'. A lot of enormously costly film palaces had to be built, expensive orchestras employed, massive advertising campaigns launched. In Petrograd things are not as acute. Would it be possible to imagine a cinema in Moscow somewhere in a courtyard? [...] The expense of the premises forced cinemas to be located in courtyards, even such theatres as the Piccadilly and the Crystal Palace. [...] One just has to visit the Piccadilly and the Parisiana to understand that the foyers of these theatres are miles away from the foyers of the Moscow film palaces. Hence, the public is reconciled with inconveniences to which Muscovites would not accustom, or else it appreciates the cinema not for the appearance or the furnishing or structure of orchestras as in Moscow, but mainly for the content of the programs. (Rex 1915)

In memoirs, letters, diaries, and also in works of art where the old St Petersburg cinemas are mentioned (for example, in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Other Shores* [*Drugie berega*, 1954]), their architecture and furniture is indeed hardly touched upon; there are only descriptions of old films, often in great detail. The same can be said about those few responses that appeared in the film-press of those years. Nobody complains about the deficiencies of cinemas, but what gave rise to questions and doubts was the program. Surprisingly, the questions raised by this cinemagoer in 1911 are still valid today.

Sir, Mister Editor

I'm a simple fan, often visiting electro-theaters. The backstage of the cinema business is completely unknown to me, and therefore I ask you out of ignorance to explain to me: why do the majority of electro-theaters present such terribly monotonous programs during the same period?

It is sufficient to compare the programs of the local cinemas, well, on Nevsky from Znamensky Square up to Liteiny and Vladimirsky Prospects. I take this area, because I live nearby and normally visit these theatres. During the week their programs are identical like two drops of water, and if not all the films are the same then nearly two or three of the most interesting ones. Therefore, instead of going to the cinema three times a week, you go only once, because there is no joy in watching a picture which you have already seen, even at another theatre. On the other side, if circumstances prevent you from watching a battle film during one week, then the next week you can already not find it anywhere: it has disappeared completely from all theatres. So it happened with *The Divine Comedy*, *The Fall of Troy*, *The Foreman*

(or *The Sergeant*, I can't remember) *Roland, Victim of Alcoholism*. All of them appeared simultaneously at all theatres, and I did not get around to seeing them, but they have already vanished completely. Though there were even queues.

Theatres think in vain that they compete with each other that way. The audience will be satisfied, and such a system only cuts the number of visits by half, even three times.

Please accept, etc.

A film buff (Anon. 1911b)

The film audiences of St Petersburg at the beginning of the century are a topic for another study. Undoubtedly, though, in a short period the audience underwent significant evolution. In 1915 the writer Arkadii Bukhov remarked: "The type of spectator nibbling seeds and guffawing during the drama is already dying out. In the cinemas you find the same people who also go to the theatres. The audience develops its taste, if you like, and even fandom for one or another actor ... The public who initially came to the cinema in passing and who very much liked that they could 'not take off their galoshes and overcoats,' as the posters alerted, is now already beginning to watch film series and follow a story over two and three evenings ..." (Bukhov 1915). One might say that the public had grown and developed along with the cinemas. However, if in the capital – even on Nevsky Prospect (for example in the nameless cinema in house No. 86) (Rex 1915) – there were still plain cinemas of the old type, and the audience traditions concerning cinema easily went side by side with the custom "to dress up and go to the movies." In 1913 the star of the Russian stage Konstantin Varlamov explained his love for the cinema simply: "Say, I get called to the theatre, and I think: is it worth it? I have to dress up, don a tuxedo, put on a collar, clasp on the cufflinks. I'm better off in the cinema. I can just go in what I am wearing" (Varlamov 1913).

Sometimes it is argued that the simple audience before the Revolution was content with cinemas on the outskirts, and that the palaces on Nevsky were visited by capital's beau-monde. This is not quite true. In the Parisiana a box cost eight rubles, but for the same screening people could buy an ordinary ticket for 30 kopecks (A-fer 1914). The film historian Edgar Arnoldi remarked in his *Memoirs of a Bicycle Era* [*Vospominaniia o velosipednoi epokhi*]:

The cinema, like the tram, the record player and the bicycle, was a product that displayed the triumph of democracy. Despite the gravitation of cinemas towards class stratification, the spectators both in the center and on the periphery were a rather motley crowd. The cost of tickets on Nevsky certainly blocked access for the "common people," but in the halls of first-rate cinemas an officer and a milliner, a student and a salesman, an official and a lady of light conduct would sit next to each other. Such combinations were most of all characteristic for the tram. And away from the center, the broad masses dominated. But here also, alongside caps and peak-caps, bowler hats, kerchiefs and even hats with veils could be seen. In front of the screen everyone had equal rights, and class and property distinctions were insignificant.

Thus cinema sharply differed from the theatre, where certain categories of spectators clearly prevailed. The regulars of the Mariinsky opera theatre were not typical in any way of the Passage or Suvorin's Maly Theatre, and the visitors of the Farces or Bouffe would not appear at the Aleksandrinsky Theatre. (RIII 12/1/5a: 10)³

About the cinema Soleil, which was traditionally considered one of the best and dearest in the city, a contemporary wrote: "In the hall the soft ring of heels and pleasant French speech can be heard. But right there, you may see a merchant and a student in a raincoat" (Argus 1915b). The audience of the famous Crystal Palace was also motley: "You can meet a street fairy, who has come to entertain herself with a melodrama and share the heroine's woe; next to her a grammar-school boy, admiring the feats and boldness of the detectives; and somewhere in a corner, a maid released from her duties, affectionately smiling at the gallantry of Polidor" (Argus 1915b).

The sometimes polyvalent structure of the Petersburg cinema audience was shrouded in troubles. The press wrote about a scandalous case at the Piccadilly, where a mink fur coat with beaver collar (price: 6000 rubles) was stolen from a British citizen, along with valuable documents. The thieves acted artfully: they simply retrieved the fur coat of the unlucky man under a false ticket from the wardrobe, and then, taking advantage of the general panic, frisked the pockets of the other visitors (Khronika 1915b).

The social composition of the cinema audience on Nevsky was truly varied and practically showed a cross-section of the capital's society as a whole. However, preferences and tastes of these cinema-goers apparently did not differ greatly. Travel films and scientific films were a success even in the 1900s, when the phenomenon of the "living photo" amazed and engaged the spectator. In the 1910s the chronicle was much less popular than comedies and dramas, which gained in popularity. The aristocratic public, hesitant in its love for the cinema, usually denied it: "I go to the cinema only because of the pictures of outstanding real events. The cinema is a live magazine for me," said one intellectual (K-vich 1916). In audience conversations one could hear impatient, but more sincere attitudes to travel and science films which were still included in the programs: "Awfully interesting [...] Why should I know how galoshes are made when I buy them ready-made in a shop all the same!" (G.M. 1910).

Another important factor for the cinemagoer was the novelty of the film. There is no doubt that new films are more interesting than old ones, at least those that have not yet been seen are more interesting than ones already watched. In this sense, the cinemas on Nevsky were in an advantageous position, because usually (with rare exceptions) they functioned as "first screens," that is they specialized on premiers and showed films that had not previously been shown in the city. The beginning of World War I hugely changed that situation.

The capital was hit by a genuine repertoire famine. Because of the political situation, distributors had a hard time obtaining new foreign films, and prices soared. The import of films from Germany stopped altogether.

In the conditions of a film crisis everybody had to “freshen up” films and show old titles, purchased a long time ago and already forgotten by the spectator, under the guise of new releases. The concept of “first screen” became rather relative. In the summer of 1915 St Petersburg cinema-owners faced an unprecedented problem: the complete absence of new films. Russian producers, considering the summer to be a dead season, usually prepared their novelties for the autumn. But western firms could hardly offer anything new, except for some Italian films and some ten pictures of the Society of Swedish Biograph. The Danish firm Nordisk, which had earlier delivered some popular films, presented only a few pictures. And nothing at all came from France: the branches of the French firms Gaumont and Pathé Frères rented other companies’ films. As a result, the Piccadilly and the Union presented films that had been shown in Udelny a month and a half ago under the guise of new releases. Some dramas, which adverts had been shouting about on Nevsky, also turned out to be an old product accidentally found in the stacks of a city monopolist (Argus 1915a). For want of something better and against the tradition of changing the program twice a week, the Moulin Rouge showed Petr Chardynin’s sensational film *Mar’ia Lus’eva* (1915) for a whole month (Khronika 1915a).

Censorship was reinforced as early as spring 1914, when the pre-war tension heightened. The Belgian film of Pathé Frères, *Maudite soit la guerre* (1914), directed by Alfred Machin, was shown in the spring of 1914 in Russian cinemas; the popular *Kino* magazine even placed the advert for this film on the cover. However, in May, even before the beginning of military action, its pacifistic pathos raised serious concerns. The Russian State Archive of History [RGIA, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv] preserves the curious correspondence between two censors about the anti-war film (as it appeared to them); it was released in the cinemas of the capital under the title *Krovavaia niva* [*The Bloody Field*], *Uzhasy voiny* [*Horrors of War*] and *Smertel’nye uzhasy voiny* [*Fatal Horrors of War*]. The Official with Special Assignments Rebrov retells the quite ordinary plot of this film about the young soldier Khardef, who tragically dies in the war, and his young bride who has entered a monastery: “Here is the content of the drama, which, as your Highness can see, is tendentious. This tendentiousness is emphasized by the conditions of the cinema, constantly changing images, which are selected with skill. [...] I cite some inscriptions to the drama: ‘the friendship of people,’ ‘the opportunity of a war which has arisen from an insignificant border incident,’ ‘Khardef, obeying strict discipline, goes to war and sows the death of people for whom he feels no hatred.’ Certainly, the tendency which can be characterized with the very words of the cinema ‘Damnation of War,’ without any note of patriotism, is undesirable and on the cinema screen sounds like a sermon of antimilitarism” (RGIA 776/25/1123: 5–6). This film was, nevertheless, not pulled from the screens; however, all the intertitles that so disturbed the censor were removed.

During the war the cinema-owners of the capital, and especially those on Nevsky, took an active part in charities and voluntarily contributed substantial sums from their profits to the treasury. The law about a military tax on cinema



Figure 1.5 Poster for the film *Maudite soit la guerre* [*War is Hell*, 1914], directed by Alfred Machin.

tickets came into force on 1 February 1916, and it became a new stable source for the army's income. In 1916 the government had, apparently, the absolutely mad idea to requisition the largest cinemas of the city as hospitals. While in Petrograd dozens of hotels and tea rooms were empty, the best cinemas – such as the Piccadilly and the Parisiana on Nevsky, and Molniia [*Lightning*] on the Petrograd side, were required to close – precisely those cinemas that had brought in huge sums for the treasury through the military tax (Anon. 1916). However, the actions of the authorities were possibly not so reckless. Apparently it was assumed that the owners of large theatres would do anything to keep their premises and build infirmaries in another place. And precisely that happened. The government received both free infirmaries and the military tax.

All these burdens of military life led to a mass closure of smaller cinemas, which caused serious fears among filmmakers as Russian distribution was indissolubly connected with small cinemas and the move was thus directly connected to production. The cinemas of Nevsky would get through this crisis, but in the second half of the 1910s not a single new cinema opened there. The war prevented the further growth of the film industry on Nevsky; in fact, in February 1914, although the capital's main artery boasted a great variety of cinemas, this was insufficient for spectators: "Despite the huge number of cinemas, on holidays, especially on Nevsky Prospect, they are besieged by crowds of people so there is a serious danger of all sorts of accidents. [...] The box offices of cinemas sell an unlimited

quantity of tickets, not at all taking into account the number of available seats after each film. As a result, people are crushed in the foyer. When the doors open, the crowd energetically rushes into the hall, and it emerges there are no seats. They start to put additional chairs in the aisles which are almost blocked. Those people who have not got into the hall roughly protest, demanding the return of their money, and the box office has to deal with a number of misunderstandings" (Khronika 1914g).

In May 1914 Eduard Mullert specially went abroad to learn more about the way in which the best film-palaces in Europe are set up: together with his wife he planned to open a grandiose cinema on Nevsky as soon as possible, on the most prominent place he could think of: house No. 67 where the well-known Saturn had been situated earlier (Khronika 1914a). This and many other plans for the creation of new film-palaces on Nevsky would not come true.

During the Soviet era the cinema map of Nevsky Prospect changed drastically. The owners of Nevsky cinemas (the Mullerts, Madame Iablonskaia who, after the death of her husband, owned the Piccadilly) emigrated or were out of work. In rare cases a former cinema owner was allowed to head his now "Soviet" cinema as managing director. The directors of Soviet cinemas on Nevsky were the former managers. So, Nikolai Grigor, who had worked with Iablonskii, headed for many years the Piccadilly, which would subsequently become the Aurora (Bagrov 2004, 10–11). But there could be no renewal of the tradition of the film-palaces of the 1910s. The concept of the palace, the idea to build a grandiose cultural institution decorated with ornaments and accessories for the citizens was perfectly integrated into the Soviet model of life in a big city. However, the genuine life and development of film-palaces was possible only in conditions of competition, when cinema-owners, wishing to attract audiences, repaired endlessly, went to Europe for new ideas, thought up more and more attractions. During NEP (New Economic Policy) there was no money for this, and when the film industry was finally nationalized, competition between cinemas came to naught.

There were fewer cinemas, though the main venues on Nevsky remained: on the place of old, pre-Revolutionary cinemas there were new, Soviet ones. The names, of course, changed in most cases: the Parisiana became the October, the Piccadilly changed to Aurora, and on the place of the Saturn, a cinema with the rhetorical name Cinema For The Masses opened. Some cinemas returned to their old names in the 1990s: The Crystal Palace does not do badly today on Nevsky. Sadly, the Parisiana has not survived: this once magnificent cinema, half-empty, dark and cold, awaited reconstruction for a long time until it eventually closed in 2009. Contrary to the promises of the municipal authorities to keep the ancient cinema, Nevsky 80 now accommodates a huge H&M store. However, this does not worry the townspeople, since St Petersburg has long lost that selfless love of cinema for which it was famous in the 1910s.

When the Piccadilly opened in 1913, its charming building was compared to an "ancient Greek temple" (Khronika 1914c). Since Shcheglov-Leont'ev named the large

Royal Vio a “grandiose pissoir” less than ten years passed for the cinemas on Nevsky to live through more than one era. At first, the narrow illusion-halls of the store type, then the Parisiana-style cinemas with a doubtful reputation, and finally the film-palaces, the new cultural centers of the capital. The evolution of cinemas in the 1900s and 1910s reminds us of the evolution of cinema, which in less than a decade turned from the attraction of the “living photograph” to a new art. And this is not surprising: at the beginning of the century film production and cinemas were connected as tightly as never before and lived a single life. That is why the study of early cinemas is not only study of local lore, but first of all of the history of cinema.

Translated by Birgit Beumers

Notes

- 1 “This program was prepared for the ball ‘Satirikon’ and could not be implemented due to circumstances beyond the organizers’ control.”
- 2 The first version of this feuilleton was published in *Vestnik kinematografii* (Anon. 1911d). Later Averchenko reworked the feuilleton and included the novella “The Courtesan’s Secret” into the text, which is missing in the original version.
- 3 Ob osmotre Chinovnikom Osob[ogo] Poruch[eniia] pri Gl[avnom] Upravl[enii] po d.p. Stat[skim] Sov[etnikom] Rebrovym nekotorykh petersburgskikh kinematografov; Russian Institute for Art History RIII [Rossiiskii institut istorii iskusstv].

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