The Most Important of All Ages (Paris, 4-6 May 25)

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The Most Important of All Ages. Children, Childhood(s) and Childlikeness in Soviet Cinema.

“Save the starving children!!!” the title card of the opening episode of Dziga Vertov’s Kino-Pravda urges the spectator just before the images of street children looking desperately for food are displayed on screen. The fact that this first episode of the “film-truth” by the Soviet director, released in the birth-year of the USSR, took as its key subject the tragic fate of children, perfectly symbolizes the fundamental link between the new political regime and childhood: the most important of all ages, one could say, paraphrasing the famous quote from Lenin about the Seventh Art. The attention that the new socialist power paid to children, whose living conditions during the civil war caused a huge number of deaths and abandonment, is indeed immediate and lasting in the young country. This country presents itself as the “country for children,” built for them and shortly by them: the revolutionaries of those days were not certain that they would see their work finished during their lifetime, therefore it is tomorrow’s generation that will enjoy it when they complete its edification.
The attention that the new power paid to childhood would be strongly reflected in cinema, whose educational value would be officially claimed during the very first days following the Bolshevik Revolution (Leyda, 1960: 121). The alliance wanted between art of the masses and the education of youth (including its ideological indoctrination) would, throughout Soviet history, be channeled through the desire to produce films dedicated to children. Such films would come to constitute a unique genre—with sometimes porous boundaries (Arkus et al., 2002: 100)—of “children’s cinema” (detskoe kino), which would at certain times draw on huge resources and generate great success, and which would also be expressed by the production of a more specifically school film (škol’nyj fil’m) (Arkus, 2010; Serov, 2023).
Far from being limited to these latter two categories, the attachment of Soviet culture to childhood and its universe is so frequently expressed in current film production that Evgeny Margolit (2000), the author of several seminal studies on this subject, was able to speak of the child as “the symbol that most fully expresses the essence of Soviet cinema”. He has stressed how the child’s appearance or disappearance on screen narrates the political history of the country and its tragic events. As Margolit (2000) has astutely summarized, this symbol of the child shifts from a new world in the silent films of the 1920s – a world in complete rupture with the past which is overturned or erased – , to the end of history in the carnivalesque world—the “eternal festival of labour”—of the mid-1930s: a joyful image of the country thus stands in complete opposition with a reality even more violent than that shown by Vertov in 1922. The symbol of the child becomes less important with the climax of the Stalin cult, when the place of the worshipped child is taken

by the idolized figure of the leader; it is subsequently renewed in the shape of a “martyr” of the war that had shaken the country and its people (Hicks, 2016). At the same time, the figure of Stalin turned from “father” to “brother”.

Finally, during the Thaw the childhood theme changes significantly in its cinematic representation, offering a rich variety of characters alongside the equally abundant portrayals of adolescents and young adults. Filmmakers lent an unprecedented maturity to the child figure, partly due to the absence of fathers, who had perished during the war or fallen victim to the country’s criminal history, as well as a newly found joyfulness in the innocence of play that stands in sharp contrast with the solemn rigidity of the mythologized children of Stalinist propaganda, acting only for the benefit of the collective. If, as this brief historical summary shows, the highly symbolic significance of the child figure made it such a central point, or even the “essence” of Soviet cinema, then it calls for a return to the child-figure, with renewed and sustained attention to the shifts and continuities in order to map further its historical, ideological, mythopoetic, poetic and philosophical metamorphosis within the Soviet cinematographic space.

Beyond single figures of children, the child as symbol could even be expressed “independent of the age” of the protagonists, Margolit (2000) argued, revealing a “childlike principle” which inhabits Soviet film characters. Therefore, we should not reduce our field of investigation to the numerous child characters, such as Misha, Dunyasha, and Tom (Red Imps, 1923), Yasha and Galya (The House in the Snowdrifts, 1928), Mustapha and Kolka (Road to Life, 1931), Nastenka and Katya (Once There Was a Girl, 1944), Seryozha (1960), Vika and Roman (The Girl and the Echo, 1964), Ivan and Marichka (Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors, 1965), Seit (Jamilya, 1969), Lena and Dima (Scarecrow, 1984), etc., but, on the contrary, to apprehend such a “childlike principle” in the multiplicity and heterogeneity of its expressions, as long as it is theoretically justified. Finally, the investigation focuses on the representation of childhood itself: its characteristics, its cultural plurality, its beginnings and ends, its memory, its nostalgia, etc., as well as on the historical bias that influences its conception and limits its perception.

Among the themes that the contributors are invited to explore, without any limitation in their scholarly approaches (historical, aesthetic, cultural, etc.) and the genres studied (feature films, documentaries, children’s films, educational films, animated films, TV shows, etc.), the following examples may form focal points:

• Figures and representations of childhood, children’s itineraries: specific case studies, of fictional or real child characters portrayed on screen, of the staging and acting of children and their history; archetypes such as the pioneers (pionery) or the komsomols (komsomol’tsy), the martyr (of Revolution or war), or orphans and homeless children (besprizorniki), whose appearance spans the entire history of Soviet cinema from Kino-Pravda (1922) or Mr West… (1924) to, at least, Freeze – Die – Come to Life (1990), including films such as The Destiny of a Man (1959) or Dead Man’s Letters (1986).

• Childhood memories and children’s visions: the staging of the memory of early years of childhood; the contribution of memory to filmmaking at its different stages (script, shooting, etc.); the manifestation of personal memory within images, or, on the contrary, its dissimulation; the cinematographic forms of childlike perception (child gaze).

• Russian cultural imperialism and childhood(s): representation and obliteration (or rendering invisible) of children from other ethnicities than Russian in Soviet films; manipulation of representations (and a comparative perspective with Soviet visual culture, where appropriate) (e.g. Red Imps [1923], Circus [1936]), or on the contrary the affirmation of a cultural identity (My Name is Kozha,

1964; The Sky of Our Childhood, 1966); pluralities of childhood (telescoping, fusion or conflict in childhood of different cultures, such as Russian, Jewish, Ukrainian, Georgian, Latvian, Kyrgyz); Soviet education across the “Sixth part of the world” (e.g. Alone [1931], The First Teacher [1965]).
• The symbolism of childhood: symbolic and allegorical dimensions of the subject of childhood; political aims or subtexts; variations of the “childlike principle” and links with the historical trajectory of the country; the embodiment of values or entities (utopia, people, future, goodness, etc.); the status of mother/father/daughter/son, links and symbolic variations; generational conflicts; the “feminine”/“masculine”/“childlike” poles (Margolit), and their dialectic.
• Childhood in history, history in childhood: the child’s position in or out of the communist utopia. The constant emphasis on his role for the future tends to deny the child any carefree moments in his (filmic) existence, a dimension considered characteristic of this period of life. Could the child exist outside of the task the ideology attributed to him/her? Or is s/he led to struggle against this task to retrieve his/her innocence? (e.g. Sandu in Man Follows the Sun by Mikhail Kalik [1962], Kostya Inochkin in Welcome, or No Trespassing by Elem Klimov [1964]).
• Childhood in war: the impossible place of childhood in the war, its negation through conflict, its shaping through violence; the trauma during and after the war, etc. (e.g. Red Imps [1923], The House in the Snowdrifts [1928], Chapaev [1934], Once There Was a Girl [1944], The Taras Family [1945], Ivan’s Childhood [1962], Wounded Game [1977], Come and See [1985], The Commissar [1967, 1987]).
• The child and death: the death of a child as greatest injustice; the impossibility to build the future on sacrifice (or tears) of children; the reproduction of violence (living in death). From Polikushka (1922) and Battleship Potemkin (1925), or from Cross and Mauser (1925) and The White Eagle (1928), to I Want the Floor (1976), Come and See (1985) or Among Grey Stones (1983), not forgetting Road to Life (1931), Torn Boots (1933), Bezhin Meadow (1935-1937), Alexander Nevsky (1938), The Rainbow (1944), Triumph Over Violence (1965) and others, the death of a child is a haunting theme in Soviet cinema.
• “As strong as death”: giving birth and coming into the world (pregnancy, childbirth, the plan for a child, rejection of the unborn child, etc.); the symbolism of reproduction (e.g. Katka’s Reinette Apples [1926], Bed and Sofa [1927], Salt for Svanetia [1930], Seryozha [1960], The Story of Asya Klyachina [1967], The Commissar [1967, 1987]).
• Cinema and the great literary (re)constructions of childhood: Tarkovsky and The Life of Arseniev by Ivan Bunin; My Childhood by Gorky, and Socialist Realism; but also Childhood by Tolstoy, Kotik Letaev by Bely, The Diary of a Communist Schoolboy by Ognyov, Story of My Dovecote by Babel, The Noise of Time by Mandelstam, Before Sunrise by Zoshchenko, etc., and their possible or certain echoes in films; comparative approaches between cinema and literature to the symbolism of childhood (both in pre-Soviet literary sources and in Soviet literature), influence of Russian and Soviet literary myths of childhood: Tolstoy’s aristocratic childhood, Gorky’s proletarian one.
• History and physiognomy of children’s film: creation and development of children’s film in the USSR; history of its productions and institutions (Soyuzdetfil’m); characteristics of children’s films; images of childhood promoted; figures in the history of this cinema (Margarita Barskaya).

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Submission guidelines:
Proposals for presentations, in the form of abstracts (maximum 300 words), written in English or French, must be submitted to stanislasdecourville@gmail.com before January 18, 2026, and accompanied by brief bio-bibliographies from the author(s). Presentations may be given in French or English. Applicants will be notified of the Scientific Committee's decision during the month of February.

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French version of the CFP:
https://www.estca.univ-paris8.fr/le-plus-important-de-tous-les-ages-enfants-enfances-et-enfantin-dans-le-cinema-sovietique/

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