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I. "Scarecrow"

Since its premiere six months ago in September, 1984, the film "Scarecrow" ("Chuchelo"), which depicts the brutality and sadism of rural schoolchildren, has aroused impassioned discussion wherever it has been shown. The comment most often heard is "excellent--cruel, truthful ... but excellent." A taxi driver and his passenger, a film director, with whom Volodya and I hitched a ride home one evening, became so vehement in their exhortations that we see "Scarecrow" that they both turned around and were haranguing us in the back seat as the stoplight turned from red to yellow to green and the cars behind us began to honk. "Astonishing, frightening," was the description of an acquaintance, an acquisitions librarian, who said that the film was already being used in some local schools as a springboard for discussions at parent-teacher meetings, and that, in some cases, the children themselves were requesting an opportunity to discuss the film.

"Scarecrow," directed by Rolan Bykov, is a film about children, but not a children's film. Set in the 1980's in a run-down, provincial town, it is the story of Class 6-A, a group of thirteen-year-old schoolchildren, who go to extreme measures in ostracizing their new classmate, Lena Bessol'tseva, dubbed "Scarecrow" because of her gawky figure and long, straw-colored hair.

The cause of Lena's ostracism was an event that only incidentally involved her. Because of a mix-up in class scheduling, the children, tired of waiting for their teacher, took off for the cinema. One boy, Dimka Somov--handsome, brave, a born leader of the sort who would grow up to be the Party activist--failed to dissuade his classmates from leaving, started off with them, but returned to class briefly to retrieve the class' piggy-bank of money, earned for the school's long-awaited vacation trip to Moscow. Lena Bessol'tseva, enamored of him, returned as well, only to find that the teacher had arrived in their absence. Dimka, questioned by the teacher on the whereabouts of the others, told the truth. While not revealing how she learned the truth, the enraged teacher forbade the class to participate in the school trip, scheduled for the impending autumn vacation. Many weeks had been spent by the children working in a nearby orchard to earn money for the trip, and the missed event would have been the one chance for the children to get out of the provincial countryside,

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to see the capital city, with all its tourist sights, shops, metro, and crowded streets. In a painful departure scene, the entire school, including the class' teacher, drove off in busloads, laughing and singing, as the punished children stayed behind and watched. Left alone and determined to discover who in their midst had "betrayed" the class, the children set up a kangaroo court. One girl, nicknamed "Iron Button," becomes a self-appointed guardian of the group's morals. She heads up a tribunal, testing pulse-rates as each child comes forward. Somov, afraid to lose face and, more importantly, his status as leader, remains silent. In an attempt to protect Somov, Lena claims suddenly that it was she who had betrayed the class. The children decide to exclude her completely from the group. Lena Bessol'tseva's punishment is all the more unjust because two other classmates, who had remained hidden in the empty classroom that day in order to tryst, were secret witnesses of the event, but do not choose to speak up: Lena makes a better victim than Somov.

Lena (played by Kristina Orbakaite, daughter of the singer Alla Pugacheva) is both like and unlike the other children. Like them, she lives in a world without parents. Parents are always either away at work, living in a distant, big city, or preoccupied with other duties. Lena herself lives with her grandfather in a house unlike that of the other children. It is filled with old oil paintings, lovingly collected by the grandfather not for their monetary value, but for their depiction of Russian peasants, some of whom were Bessol'tsev's relatives from the last century. The artist of these paintings, Lena's great-great-grandfather, had been a serf, but managed, after the liberation in 1861, to gain an education and earn his living as a painter. One of his works, a portrait of the artist's sister, Mashka—a serf who later became a schoolteacher in this same small town—bears a striking resemblance to Lena. It is Bessol'tsev, the grandfather, who gives chronological coherence to the film; his memory stretches from relatives who themselves had once been serfs, the building of their carved, wooden house, his own father—a rural doctor, who hid wounded soldiers from the Fascists during the war—, his own service in World War II, to his role as caretaker of thirteen-year-old Lena. Her classmates, confused by the grandfather's patched clothes and valuable art collection, call him an eccentric: if he were to sell just one painting, he would be able to dress better than any of them. Under her grandfather's care, Lena is exposed to educated mores and the values of an older Russian culture, whose faded elegance is also still in evidence in the delapidated, late eighteenth-century architecture of the provincial, riverside town.

It is precisely this faded elegance and the grandfather's cultured ways that the film contrasts with the brutal survival skills of the school-children, who turn the streets daily into a kind of late-afternoon battle-zone. Roaming the streets in packs, these children have developed their own gang mentality, their own peculiar sense of loyalty and ethics untempered by the influences of parents or home. The only group portrait of that middle generation occurs when a delegation of tourists on a riverboat excursion stops off at the town long enough to be given a brief guided tour. At every turn they encounter the children, who are as engrossed in chasing down and kicking Lena Bessol'tseva into unconsciousness, as the tourists are in the architectural treasures of the town. The two groups

pass each other as unfamiliar beings, of little emotional or psychological relevance to the other.

Their thirst for punishment still unslaked, the children, excluded from the school trip and unsupervised during the autumn vacation, pursue Lena with taunts. Despite Lena's repeated pleas to Somov that he acknowledge his guilt and clear her name, he finds himself increasingly unable to take on voluntarily the ostracism he witnesses, and gradually is swept along into the group's behavior. Their sadism reaches its peak when they make a gawky scarecrow effigy, dressed in Lena's stolen clothing, and hung with the sign "Traitor," which they burn in her forced presence in an abandoned building, identified variously by critics as a fortress or a church. It is Somov who lights the pyre, as "Iron Button" exhorts him; "Go to the limit, Dimka."

II. Private Responses

"Scarecrow" is based on a short story of the same title by Vladimir Zheleznikov. The story, which won three literary awards, including one international prize, was rewritten as a film scenario jointly by Zheleznikov and Bykov. Bykov himself is a former actor of the Moscow Youth Theatre--or TIUZ (its initials), as it is referred to by Muscovites. He is also a film actor (his portrayal of a happy Akakii Akakievich in Aleksei Batulov's film version of Gogol's "The Overcoat" was one of his more important roles), and director of many films, including "Telegram" and "Caution! Turtle!" (both 1970). He appears here as both director and actor: in the film, he conducts a small orchestra of young cadets from a neighboring military academy, their disciplined, uniformed figures providing a sharp contrast to these latch-key children. Appearing periodically at moments of great tumult in the film, the band is among other things a visual pun, referring obliquely to a universally known song, "The Little Orchestra of Hope," written by the popular 1960's balladeer, Bulat Okudzhava.

Hope is indeed hard to come by in this otherwise despairing portrayal of Soviet youth. If there is any truth to Belinskii's famous remark, often cited in interviews by Bykov himself, that "children are guests of the present and hosts of the future," then contemporary rural Russia, as it is depicted by Bykov, is inviting today's children to take charge of a society bereft of any but material values. The "future hosts" include Vgl'ka, who makes money by catching stray dogs to be turned into soap; "Shaggy," for whom power is everything; and Shmakova, the shallow, acquisitive anti-heroine.

Popular response to a film is impossible to judge with any degree of accuracy in this country, where a film's popularity bears little relation--or even an inverse relation--to its availability; where letters from viewers are selected and edited to suit a variety of purposes; and where the population itself is so heterogeneous--ethnically, geographically, economically--that the impressions and opinions of one's acquaintances can in no sense be claimed as representative.

Representative or not, my Soviet acquaintances have been most struck by the fact that Bykov portrays these events as taking place in what is clearly, by Soviet norms, a good school: the teacher is adored by the students, the school directress is on hand to welcome the children at the start of school and after autumn vacation, discipline is maintained in the school, the children are well-dressed, fed, and clean. The class is of average size—thirty-five students—and the student's behavior, both in class and out of class, is familiar, according to friends who work in Soviet schools. "I know these children," said one elementary school teacher, "I have had them in class; they are not bad children, but these kinds of things really happen. That is why the film is important to us."

Another reason that the film has caused considerable discussion is its harsh portrayal of the darker side of the collectivism so fostered in Soviet schools, Pioneer and Komsomol organizations, work places, and, of course, in the Party itself. "Iron Button's" pitiless rhetoric—"the collective is always right," "it is wrong to pit oneself against the collective"—transforms the notion of collective spirit into tyranny. While addressing contemporary social problems about Soviet youth, the film subtly suggests to older members of the intelligentsia a more penetrating analysis of issues that originate in the grandfather's generation: the children reproduce in the isolation of their own gang a mentality and behavior patterns strikingly reminiscent of the Stalinist period, complete with community ostracism, false confession, denunciation, purge, moral passivity, and lack of individual courage. "Iron Button's" "trial" of her classmates, with its specious insistence on pulse rate as the measure of honesty, manages successfully to search out not the guilty party—if guilt here is even an appropriate term—but the one member of the community who will acquiesce in playing the victim; not surprisingly, the one member clearly demarcated from the outset of the film as coming from the post-revolutionary intelligentsia. In reducing the issues to the microcosm of the children's world, stripped bare of adult myths about the innocence and tenderness of childhood years, Bykov invites the Soviet viewers to be observers rather than powerless participants in a historical process more or less known to all Soviets within twenty years in either direction (forty through eighty) of Bykov's own generation.

What was of interest to me as an outsider was the obliviousness of Soviets my own age and younger—i.e., the post-war, post-Stalin generations—to this dimension of the film. This interpretation, which met with the comment "of course..." from pre-war Soviets, was listened to with uncomprehending stares and emphatic denials by post-war contemporaries, aware of the Stalinist heritage, but untrained in considering the relevance of that historical period to contemporary reality, not to mention the added complexity of its mediation through film art. Nor are they wholly to blame: this dimension was, naturally, never mentioned in any of the major film or critical journals. Stalinism, like de-Stalinization, exists as a remote and encapsulated unit of history, something "out there" and "back then." Its metaphoric reproduction went unnoticed by the younger generations, unmentioned by the older ones. The film, however, is in no sense written à thèse, and has provided Soviet film

viewers with enough to argue about even without this dimension. If the post-Stalinist generations are able to discern any narrative analogy at all, they occasionally identify Lord of the Flies, a much less pointed and less politicized referent than their own native history. More than anything else, the film is seen as being American--for which read brutal, voyeuristic, honest, and pessimistic.

And this is the third aspect of the film that was troublesome for many Soviet acquaintances. Reared on films in which conflict is resolvable in ninety minutes for full-length feature films and in one hundred eighty minutes for two-series films, many found the pessimistic resolution of "Scarecrow" disturbing. In the last minutes of the film, Lena appears uninvited at Somov's birthday celebration. She is wearing the burnt dress, salvaged from the effigy; she has wrapped herself in an old shawl and has shaved her head bald. She has not come to expose Somov; she understands already that the truth alone is not sufficient antidote to the past. In a moment of eerie psychological tension, she performs a dance, declaring herself to be the "Scarecrow" after all. Bidding the children goodbye, she leaves. The birthday celebration breaks up.

Finally, her courage and stamina collapsing, Lena succeeds in convincing her grandfather to abandon the town. The old, wooden house is boarded up. The oil portraits, painted by her great-great-grandfather, are donated to the town as the basis for a future museum; the portrait of Lena's double, Mashka, the serf-school teacher who brought these children's ancestors out of illiteracy, is donated to Lena's classmates. We learn in passing that Somov has finally admitted Lena's innocence. As she appears in the classroom just before her departure from the town, she finds Somov standing on the window ledge, urged by the others to jump. "Rehabilitated" at last, she is invited to join the class' campaign against Somov, an offer she refuses ("I know what it is to be burnt at the stake").

Grandfather and granddaughter, last vestiges of the town's intelligentsia, board the riverboat, leaving behind generations of family history. The brass band of young cadets stands on the dock, playing as usual for departing passengers. In a lyrical moment, deliberately straining the bounds of realistic cinema, the cadets, together with conductor Rolan Bykov, remove their caps and stand, heads shaven, to mark the departure of the Bessol'tsev family.

III. Public Responses

Critical assessment of the film has been overwhelmingly favorable. Film journals, from the popular Soviet Screen (Sovetskii èkran) to Film Art (Iskusstvo kino), the Union of Cinematographer's professional¹ journal, have devoted considerable space to discussions of its merits.¹ The critic

¹ Iurii Bogomolov, "Vse protiv odnoi," Sovetskii èkran, No. 20, 1984, pp. 9-10; Nina Ignat'eva, "Vozmuzhanie," Iskusstvo kino, No. 12, 1984, pp. 45-54.

Nadezhda Zhelezova, in a lengthy article in the monthly journal Literary Review (Literaturnoe obozrenie), one of the Writers' Union periodicals, has described "Scarecrow" as "one of the most significant cultural events of recent years."²

In reading those letters about "Scarecrow" chosen for publication,³ one finds that the reasons cited as the film's major faults are precisely the reasons for which the film had been praised in private conversations: its brutality, pessimism, and the absence of a clear cinemagraphic resolution. Comments range from a request for intervention ("I'm asking that this harmful film be pulled from our cinemas as quickly as possible") to mixed praise:

I congratulate you on this great creative victory-- the making of the marvelous film "Scarecrow" ... I saw the film at the cinema Rossiia and at Prizyv. In each case, with your appearance on the screen-- on the dock at the end of the film-- the audience applauded you! I've never heard of such a thing at any other premier! But then where after all does such cruelty come from among Soviet children, brought up in a humane society, reading humane books? To this the film gives no clear answer...

Indeed, Soviet viewers are for the most part unused to art that poses questions without providing clear answers. In reading such letters, one has an eerie sense of life imitating art: the film is faulted for not pinpointing a single, negative character, who would bear the brunt of the viewer's criticism, just as Lena bears the brunt of her classmates' misdirected anger. In life, as in the film, this would implicitly excuse everyone else from examining their own acquiescence.

Not all letters, however, demanded a formulaic solution. A more philosophic correspondent wrote:

...I can easily imagine that you will be criticized for having raised questions and not having provided answers. This is because you addressed problems to which, essentially, there are no answers: such is life...

Bykov's portrayal of today's schools, so praised for its realism by those I spoke with, was also severely criticized by a number of viewers. Most eloquent among them is this anonymous letter, whose half-educated style I have tried to render into equivalent English:

Today I went with my friend, also a teacher, to the

² Nadezhda Zhelezova, "Golos nashei trevogi," Literaturnoe obozrenie, No. 2, 1985, pp. 80-86.

³ The letters quoted here, taken from Literaturnoe obozrenie, No. 2, 1985, pp. 80-85, accompany Zhelezova's article. The editor is not cited. All letters, except when explicitly identified as anonymous, were signed. The names, however, are not included in this report.

Zar'iade Cinema [in the Rossiia Hotel in Moscow] to the film about schoolchildren. How can such a film be released for the Soviet screen? This film is not about our children of today, not a single positive character, nothing about the role of the school, the parents, but about a group of hooligans, who have grown up like wild animals, how can this film be shown to schoolchildren, nurturing in them the kind of cruelty as in the film "Scarecrow." The indignation of most viewers was so great that the majority of them left in the first half. I think this opinion isn't just mine, but the majority of the viewers'...

Whether it is indeed the majority—and my experiences contradict this—one can only wish that the audience at the Zar'iade, where the majority left in the first half, and the audiences at the Rossiia and Prizyv, who broke into applause at the celluloid appearance of Rolan Bykov, could have had a chance to sit down together and discuss what they had seen.



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