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A Khakassian Sends a Postcard Home: The Strange Career of Evgenii “Debil” Kondrat'ev

[Kondrat'ev] is one of those people who can be described with Joseph Brodsky's line: “Each thing's a space, beyond which there can be no thing.” You could describe all of space minus Evgenii Kondrat'ev, and this would be a description of Kondrat'ev.

—Mikhail Trofimenkov

[<http://kolonna.mitin.com/archive.php?address=http://kolonna.mitin.com/archive/mj28/trofim.shtml>]

Petersburg's “second” culture is a milieu that thrives on outrageous legends. Many of these legends center on the numerous eccentrics, outsiders, autodidacts, and *iurodivye* without whose (sometimes only virtual or remembered) presence the scene would be much duller, something closer to the “contemporary art world” that many of the city's newfangled curators and glossy magazine critics are keen to erect in its place. What, for example, would they do with Valerii Cherkasov (1946–1984), the outsider artist who (among other feats) created a composition in which forks and knives spell out the words *Khochu est'* (“I want to eat”), set the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to music, and tried to commit suicide by attaching razorblades to his eyelids and falling on the floor (see *Pervoprokhodets*)?

**Fig. 1:** Postcard from Evgenii Kondrat'ev (April 2006)

What unites many of these legendary figures is the way they incarnated the do-it-yourself ethos central to the underground scene. The Soviet state attempted to license and regulate the practice of art, but as war and Stalinist terror gave way to Khrushchevian thaw and Brezhnevian stagnation, more and more Soviet citizens came to adhere, in deed if not in word, to the avant-garde notion that everyone is (or rather, can be) an artist. Booted from the Art Academy's high school in the 1950s for their suspicious interest in impressionism, the members of Leningrad's

Arefev Circle (Aleksandr Arefev, Rikhard Vasmi, Sholomon Shvarts, Vladimir Shagin, Valentin Gromov) created a stunning body of post-Fauvist work, which is only now getting its minimal critical due, in conditions that most contemporary artists would find unbearable. More important, they set a standard of independence, devotion to art, and sometimes quiet, sometimes brash defiance of society and state that inspired younger generations of artists—especially the Mitki group, whose name derives from the nickname of Shagin’s own son, Dmitrii (see Druzhinina).

**Fig. 2: Boris Koshelokhov**

A more direct influence on the second group of Leningrad artists who became synonymous with the perestroika years, the so-called New Artists, was Boris Koshelokhov. Having grown up an orphan in Siberia, Koshelokhov moved to Leningrad in the 1960s and enrolled in medical school. He was kicked out a year later for his participation in an existentialist reading circle. Surviving on a series of odd jobs, he continued his pursuit of philosophy at the Public Library and became a well-known habitu  of the legendary Saigon caf  (on the corner of Nevskii and Vladimirkii now occupied by an SAS Radisson hotel). There, he made friends with the city’s burgeoning crowd of unofficial artists, which included Valerii Kleverov. Koshelokhov began working as Kleverov’s “dealer,” selling the artist’s works from the impromptu gallery he opened in his room in a communal flat. Apparently stunned by this selflessness (Koshelokhov took no commission and ignored the denunciations of his neighbors), Kleverov one day announced to his young friend that he, too, was an artist.

Although Koshelokhov later realized that this “annunciation” had been a “Taoist joke,” he took Kleverov at his word and set to work. Thirty years later, his single-minded pursuit of the answer to the questions inadvertently posed by his “master” and his own amateur philosophical

studies—What does it mean to be an artist? What does it mean to be human?—has generated thousands of powerful, life-affirming assemblages, pastels, and paintings. Just as important, however, was Koshelokhov's adoption of other, younger amateurs. In 1976, he organized the Letopis' (Chronicle) group, whose members met once a week to discuss each other's works and whose first exhibition ended with a raid by the police and the people's militia (see Andreeva; Campbell). Among these novice unofficial artists was the painter Elena Figurina, now a doyenne of the Petersburg art world, and latter-day alt-art Diaghilev Timur Novikov. True to Koshelokhov's example, Novikov tried to turn all his friends into artists; true to Mikhail Larionov's notion of *vsëchestvo* and Russian symbolist *zhiznetvorchestvo*, he and his New Artists tried to turn their lives and everything around them into art.

**Fig. 3:** Evgenii Kondrat'ev

Evgenii Kondrat'ev would come to head, along with Evgenii Iufit and his necrorealists, the cinematic wing of the New Artists. This group later united with a small group of Moscow cinephiles and underground filmmakers in the Soviet “parallel cinema” (*parallel'noe kino*) movement. As Igor' Aleinikov, the group's indefatigable whip and founding editor of its initially samizdat house organ *Cine Fantom*, later admitted, the parallelists necessarily embraced “social mythmaking” in order to undermine Goskino's monopoly on cinematic production and distribution (7). Among these endlessly repeated legends (some of them based partly in fact) is the arrest of Iufit and his camera during shooting of his first short, *Werewolf Orderlies* (*Sanitary-oborotni*, 1984). When the authorities developed the reel and saw what was on it, they concluded its harmless idiocy represented no threat to the public order, releasing filmmaker and film without charge. Just as ballyhooed are the clashes with police and spectators that allegedly erupted at the second parallel cinema festival in Leningrad's Dom Kino in 1988.<sup>1</sup>

When perestroika went into full gear in the late 1980s, the parallelists had thus already accumulated the symbolic capital necessary for their break into the limelight. Igor' Aleinikov and his brother Gleb directed two films—*Someone Was Here* (*Zdes' kto-to byl*, 1989) and *Tractor Drivers-2* (*Traktoristy-2*, 1992), both featuring Kondrat'ev in the lead roles—under the auspices of Mosfilm. Iufit and other necrorealists notoriously and briefly interned with Aleksandr Sokurov, who nevertheless signed off on his first “serious” film, *Knights of Heaven* (*Rytsari podnebes'ia*, 1989). Aleksei German's backing was a key to the production of Iufit's first feature, the award-winning *Daddy, Father Frost Is Dead* (*Papa, umer Ded Moroz*, 1991). Almost as important to the growing aura of hipness around these filmmakers and the larger movement of which they were part was establishment director Sergei Solov'ev's crude co-optation of the entire New Artist/parallelist aesthetic in his film *ASSA* (1987). With a starring role for New Artist Sergei “Afrika” Bugaev and a performance in the finale by New Artist pop band Kino, the film also included a dream sequence lifted from Kondrat'ev's *Nanainana* (1985). Gleb Aleinikov now confesses that parallel cinema made “correct use” of the political situation: “[The authorities] needed to show something, to demonstrate the changes happening in society. And since there were no changes in society, they got their hooks into parallel cinema” (“Dlia tekhn, kto ne spit” [[http://www.otkakva.ru/interview/dul\\_al/index.htm](http://www.otkakva.ru/interview/dul_al/index.htm)]).<sup>2</sup>

Kondrat'ev says he has never been able to watch Solov'ev's *ASSA* from beginning to end.<sup>3</sup> While there is no reason not to take him at his word, this claim does remind us of the set of legends that have grown up around his own life and career. In the first and only thorough appreciation of Kondrat'ev's work, film critic Sergei Dobrotvorskii catalogues some of these myths: that Kondrat'ev began making films having never seen a single film himself; that he has never violated a filmstrip with scissors and glue because he edits right in the camera; that in

order to achieve the immediacy he was after he would often strip his camera down to the basics—which entailed removing the lens (“Debil kak medium” 98).

A later myth centers on the circumstances of his departure from Petersburg in 1995. In love with a young German composer and exhausted by conditions at the famous Pushkinskaia-10 art squat (where Kondrat'ev slept in a camping tent to keep warm in his unheated studio), the filmmaker left for a new life in Berlin.<sup>4</sup> Before he left, however, he discarded all his films in a dumpster; or (as another version has it) he abandoned the films to their fate in his now-empty, unsecured studio. Some of the films were rescued and restored by concerned friends; one film, *I, Debil, Forgot* (*Ia, debil, zabyl*, 1986), which all parallel cinema critics acknowledge as a minor masterpiece and the first specimen of “Leningrad conceptualism,” has apparently been lost forever.<sup>5</sup>

Kondrat'ev denies that he ever threw away or abandoned his own films as vehemently as he rues the mysterious disappearance of *I, Debil, Forgot*. He does admit, however, that he is comfortable with some of the myths that permeate accounts of his work, especially his portrayal as an uncouth Siberian upstart who took to cinema and camera the way a cargo cult takes to a discarded household appliance. Hence, he happily accepts his bizarre nickname, Debil—a hangover from the period in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Leningrad’s inchoate punk movement, headed by Iufit, was slowly transmogrifying into a group of artists engaged in the production of films, performance art, painting, and photography. When you watch Kondrat'ev on screen in necrorealist films by Iufit, Andrei “Mertvyi” Kurmoiartsev, Igor' Bezrukov, and Aleksandr Anikeenko, the moniker seems well earned. For Kondrat'ev, it is also a happy fit because, as he explains, “in Latin, *debil* means ‘weakling.’ And any artist is a weakling socially and personally” (“Organika absurda” 4-5).<sup>6</sup>

**Fig. 4:** Evgenii Kondrat'ev in Igor' Bezrukov's *Man Is the City's Last Refuge* (1985)

**Fig. 5:** Evgenii Kondrat'ev in Aleksandr Anikeenko's *Ikar. Pensive Bird* (1989)

While it would be impossible entirely to separate the facts of Kondrat'ev's biography from the legends, the “weakness” for art illuminates even those details of his life that are common to many other members of the “last Soviet generation” (see Yurchak). Born in Rybinsk in 1959, Kondrat'ev moved to Chernogorsk, Khakassia, as a six-month-old infant. He was raised by his mother, who has worked all her life as a seamstress. At the age of fourteen, he was granted the insight that would determine his path in life. Climbing in the Siberian hills with school friends on a sunny day at the end of March, he suddenly saw a red vixen dart out from a crevice in a white sandstone outcropping and dash away in the opposite direction. He was struck by the fox's bright, fiery red coat—and by the absolutely clear thought that he had to make films.

What strikes me about this revelation is the way it echoes the similarly “flimsy” inauguration into art making of Boris Koshelokhov—the subject of Kondrat'ev's *The Creative Path of Boris Koshelokhov (Tvorcheskii put' Borisa Koshelokhova, 1988)*, one in a cycle of Kondrat'ev films about Petersburg alternative artists. It is the occasion, the sudden irruption of a truth where until then there had been only a particular collection of circumstances—what Alain Badiou calls the “event”—that is critical, not any of the circumstances, or even all of them taken as a sum. Hence, in Kondrat'ev's account, it wasn't the desire to capture on film what he had seen that gave rise to the conviction that he had to make films. Instead, the vision of the fox acted as the vehicle for an idea that might just as well have never occurred to him, or been ignored for its impracticality.

**Fig. 6 — Fig. 8:** *The Creative Path of Boris Koshelokhov*

The way Kondrat'ev came to decide to make films has everything to do with his method of filmmaking. Dobrotvorskii neatly describes this optics: Kondrat'ev is a “medium” who lets the visual environment pass through him on its way to the “magic whiteness” of the movie screen; the objects that flash (usually briefly) on this screen are not elements of a preconceived, pre-scripted *mise en scène* that is then recorded. Rather, Dobrotvorskii argues, Kondrat'ev thinks via what he sees through camera lens and projector. The filmstrip's downward descent recreates the primordial descent of idea into matter. In turn, the technical conditions of filmmaking and cinema projection help us rediscover an environment whose things, shapes, and colors are already “saturated” with meaning before they are appropriated by culture and language. The filmstrip is, thus, a substitute for the “bark of the axis mundi,” whose surface links high and low, large and small, reuniting the fragmented, poorly recollected whole of human experience and the natural world (“Debil kak medium” 99-100). To help this transmission process along and to underscore the connections between things, ideas, and human eye and hand, Kondrat'ev the “shaman” resorts to in-camera and lightning-fast montage, double exposure, and (most interestingly) “cinecalligraphy.” This last method involves making scratches and drawing and/or painting lines, squiggles, and washes on the filmstrip. According to Kondrat'ev, its primary purpose is to cover up lapses in filming, printing, and editing.<sup>7</sup>

Dobrotvorskii suggested that Kondrat'ev's role in the postmodernist culture of perestroika was that of a provincial loner who was “untainted by culture and, thus, takes on the universe with his bare hands” (“Debil kak medium” 98). In between the vision of the red fox and his assumption of that role, however, lies the passage through a material culture and alternative art world peculiar to the late Soviet period. As Kondrat'ev's friend and disciple Vadim Kazakevich puts it, the Soviet central planners who decided to permit the sale of amateur movie cameras in

the 1960s are the real fathers of parallel cinema (Cherniakov 99). Kondrat'ev's first camera was a 16mm Kiev, purchased in 1981 at the cost of 540 rubles—the equivalent of three or four average monthly paychecks. The first subject he filmed on this camera was his mother, who had helped him pay for it. Kondrat'ev's first venture into full-on filmmaking was *Provincial Life* (1982), a work that does not figure in any of the standard filmographies. The film's plot is simple enough: artists working in an agit-prop studio in the provinces get drunk. The next morning, they wake up in various comic poses. The hero, an educated city-dweller who has come to visit them, returns to the city. Kondrat'ev developed and edited the film himself, but because neither he nor anyone else in Chernogorsk owned a projector, the film's premiere took place in the science lab at a local school.

Contrary to the legends, Kondrat'ev had seen movies before he began making them. In fact, he attended daily matinees at Chernogorsk's central movie theater, across the street from his house. Although he now cannot recall the titles of the films he saw in his childhood, he does remember it was only at the rather ripe of age of thirteen that he realized the action in the movies he watched, which included American and Mexican westerns, was not for real. This childhood psychological dilemma—of wanting to believe in screened reality and in one's own make-believe of being in the movies—is reflected in the exaggerated home-movie acting style prominent in his own movies.<sup>8</sup>

Kondrat'ev was able to develop *Provincial Life* successfully because he had already had formal training in photography. Beginning in 1979, he periodically traveled to Leningrad, where he stayed with his older brother (a poet who was in contact with the underground artists Kondrat'ev would later befriend) and took classes at the Druzhba amateur photography club, housed in the Gor'kii Palace of Culture. In 1982, Kondrat'ev moved to Leningrad, in part

because he realized he would be unable to learn and practice filmmaking on his own in Siberia.<sup>9</sup> Like many other young Leningrad bohemians of the period, he found employment as a stoker in a boiler plant, a job he would stay at until 1987 (as a *limitchik*, it was doubly imperative, of course, that Kondrat'ev be gainfully employed in a “foreign” city). With money from his first paycheck, he purchased a simple editing table and began looking for a projector in secondhand stores.

Six months later, Kondrat'ev spotted a notice in the *Vechernii Leningrad* newspaper for a three-week beginner's amateur film course at the People's Film Studio in the Lensovet Palace of Culture, which in addition to its “adult recreation” functions served as a kind of incubator for nearby Lenfilm Studios. After he completed the initial three-week course, Kondrat'ev was invited to continue his studies. The People's Film Studio offered its pupils practical courses, theoretical lectures, and technical consultations as well as access to equipment and labs. The studio also sponsored an annual White Nights festival for the amateur filmmakers of Leningrad and Leningrad Oblast. Kondrat'ev's teachers at the studio included twin brothers Igor' and Oleg Plaksin (who now run the SFX studio at Lenfilm), and screenwriter Vladimir Vardunas, whose credits include Iurii Mamin's *Window to Paris* (*Okno v Parizh*, 1993). During the first two years of study at the studio, Kondrat'ev devoted himself wholly to theoretical work; he kept his camera under his bed, not allowing himself the (barely affordable) luxury of shooting new material until he had mastered cinema basics.<sup>10</sup>

Somewhat later, beginning in 1987, his classes at the studio would be supplemented by visits to the so-called *kino-universitet*, run by film scholar and future filmmaker Oleg Kovalov at Spartak theater (housed in a former Lutheran church in Leningrad's Liteiny district). These lecture-plus-screening sessions, with films supplied by Gosfil'mofond, were heavily attended by

Kondrat'ev, Iufit, and their friends in the alternative film and art subculture. It was the first time they were exposed to the filmmakers, aesthetic schools, and cult films—Fritz Lang and the German expressionists, Buñuel, Cocteau and the surrealists, Room's *A Strict Youth* (*Strogii iunosha*, 1936), *et al.*—that would have a formative influence on necrorealism, the New Artists, and Timur Novikov's later po-mo neoclassicist venture, the New Academy of Fine Arts. Kondrat'ev now recalls state-sponsored amateur art classes as one of the few genuinely positive aspects of Soviet reality, and during his recent *Cine Fantom*-sponsored retrospective at Petersburg's Rodina theater (November 2006), he made a point of acknowledging his special debt to Kovalov, who was seated in the front row.

Kondrat'ev had returned to active filmmaking in 1984, encouraged by a gift of ten reels of expired film stock from the People's Studio. Not having to spend money from his monthly ninety-ruble salary on film proved psychologically and creatively liberating. He began shooting the places and people around him: colleagues at the boiler plant, the streets of Leningrad, the *blokadnitsa* in his communal flat—this picturesque old woman appears briefly in the film Kondratiev considers his “first-born,” *Nanainana*. This new relative sense of freedom coincided with Kondrat'ev's growing involvement with young underground artists such as Evgenii Iufit, Oleg Kotel'nikov, Vadim Ovchinnikov (who by coincidence at this time moved with his wife into a vacated room in Kondrat'ev's communal flat, in the Leningrad suburb of Rzhevka), and Vadim's younger brother Aleksandr. Not only did these artists serve as collaborators and actors in Kondrat'ev's first films (now regarded as parallel cinema classics), they also encouraged and inspired him through the example of their reckless independence.<sup>11</sup> They made art without the benefits (which included studio space and easier access to materials) that accrued from having graduated from one of the city's art colleges and acceded to membership in the Union of Artists.

Partly by circumstance, partly by choice, they were thus forced to fall back on their own resources and imaginations, turning anything (and anyone) at hand into raw material, subject, and collaborator.

This rough-and-ready aesthetic has been the trademark of Kondrat'ev's work ever since. All his mature films are directly or indirectly autobiographical: they are peculiar records of his wanderings in the world, reworked and anarchically montaged snapshots of the human environments and subcultures of which he has been a part. In this sense, Kondrat'ev has continued a tradition of (mostly American) independent filmmaking—Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, Andy Warhol—of which he then could have only been dimly aware at best. Kondrat'ev claims that the term “parallel cinema” itself was borrowed from the title of an article, “Parallel'noe kino v Amerike,” in a copy of the Soviet journal *Amerika* that Kotel'nikov found in a trash dump and gave to Kondrat'ev. He recalls that the article mentioned such films as Warhol's 1964 film *Empire*.<sup>12</sup> As the twenty-fifth anniversary of his cinematic career approaches, Kondrat'ev echoes Warhol when he explains how films should be made: “Cinema is very simple. You take an episode, slap on the opening titles, slap on the closing titles, and that's it—the film is ready.”

In fact, as the still-too-few happy viewers who have seen his films would attest, Kondrat'ev's film are anything but so simple. Critics tend to be tongue-tied when they try to describe his work; even Kondrat'ev's longtime friend and collaborator Gleb Aleinikov admits that it is difficult for him to talk about Kondrat'ev and his films (“Debil v Moskve” 2). Part of the difficulty lies in their “ethnographic” intensity. Kondrat'ev's Leningrad/Petersburg films, in particular, plunge the viewer, usually at high speed, into the visually dense chaos of late-Soviet punk silliness, misery, and defiance, performed by a strange cast of characters amidst the

wreckage of the city. I can imagine that Kondrat'ev's bewildering optics defamiliarizes this *ethnos* even for its own members, especially now, at a distance of twenty years.<sup>13</sup> A partial product of this environment himself (through his work with the Che-Paev Society, another branch of Leningrad parallel cinema), Sergei Dobrotvorskii gives the most apt description of Kondrat'ev's milieu:

Having developed in an absolutely repressive society, this was an absolutely asocial milieu. These were people who had crossed the boundary between good and evil; they didn't evince the skeptical attitude toward these concepts that characterized the previous generation. And terrifying as it is to say, they aren't afraid of perestroika. Because they were free before [perestroika began] and they're [still] free today. ("Besedy" [<http://kolonna.mitin.com/archive.php?address=http://kolonna.mitin.com/archive/mj28/dobrot.shtml>])

Future historians (and young contemporary Russians, as the crowds at recent screenings of Iufit's and Kondrat'ev's films in Petersburg attest to) will be grateful for this glimpse into the "freedom" that a few maladjusted late-Soviet subjects created for themselves. Although, like nearly all his Petersburg colleagues, Kondrat'ev reflexively rejects the baleful influence of politics on artistic production, he himself explains the origins of his creative stance in political terms: a precise sense of society's stagnation combined with the realization that Soviet cinema had reached a dead end. Back in their heyday, Dobrotvorskii argued that the Leningrad parallelists were engaged in making one big collective film, as it were; the energy (or inertia, as in Iufit's work) that permeates them is a recoding of the energy of the milieu itself ("Debil kak medium" 100). This energy sought release and feedback, first, in the filming process itself as well as the multiple apartment screenings that immediately followed completion of the films; second, after the parallelists came out of the cold, in the media scandals and favorable attention generated by their public appearances. Even today Kondrat'ev argues that movie viewing has to be a "social ritual" for cinema to have any power; he calls the act of viewing a film alone at

home “debauchery.” Although none of them would have said it exactly this way at the time, the parallelists and their comrades aimed to reanimate the cinematic economy and, in the process, society itself.

It is no wonder, then, that this reanimation necessitated a return (albeit often in caricatured form) to origins, to the styles and senses of a younger, bolder cinema—to the slapstick, chases, and close-ups of the silent movie era; to movement and contrast for movement and contrast’s sake; to expressionism and surrealism. Similarly, perestroika involved the imaginary return to various points in Soviet/Russian history before the “fatal” mistake was made. As Andrei Rudnev puts it: “Despite their superficial idiocy, one has the impression that Kondrat’ev’s films are a collection of citations from avant-garde cinema” (6). Both in terms of his “plots” (such that they are) and acting style, Kondrat’ev’s debt to Mack Sennett, Buster Keaton, Max Linder, and Soviet film “heroics” (for example, *Chapaev*) is just as obvious.

**Fig. 9 — Fig. 10: *ASSA***

Appropriately, the first film in Kondrat’ev’s official filmography, *ASSA* (1984), is a literal reanimation. Kondrat’ev, Oleg Kotel’nikov, and Konstantin “Podnatruzhennyi” Glazunov bought a plucked fryer hen at the market for two rubles and brought it back to Kondrat’ev’s flat, where the entire shoot took place. The hen performs a wild stop-motion animated dance (the New Artist battle slogan “*Assa!*” is allegedly a Caucasian dancing cry) before crawling into the pants of the sleeping Podnatruzhennyi, who then masturbates it. This sequence is intercut with a crude collage made from magazine photos of “real” Soviet men. In keeping with Kondrat’ev’s dogma of simplicity, cited above, the film was shot on a single three-minute 16mm roll, and all montage was done in camera. Kondrat’ev and his collaborators would also continue to employ the *arte povera* approach to animation on display in this debut film. And, beginning with *A Supporter of*

*Olf* (*Storonnik Olf'a*, 1987), varieties of scratch animation and filmstrip manipulation appear in his repertoire as well, becoming a kind of “Debilian” signature.

**Fig. 11 — Fig. 13: *Nanainana***

*Nanainana*, which Kondrat'ev considers his “first genuine film,” is also the opening entry in what he calls his “Petersburg cycle.” The titles sequence, designed by Vadim Ovchinnikov, recalls and improves on the magazine-clippings collage of *ASSA*; the title, a reference to a typical pop-song refrain of the period, was also supplied by Ovchinnikov. Kondrat'ev interprets the live-action sequences that follow as a “film about cinema and for cinema.” This is borne out by the opening scene, in which a naked Kondrat'ev is shown seated in the front rows of a movie theater. Returning periodically to this theater, *Nanainana* bombards the viewer with a montage that re-enacts the prototypical concerns of cinema: chases, fights, murders, romantic entanglements, the mapping of exterior and interior spaces, the recording of daily life. In keeping with the “ready-to-hand” principle that Kondrat'ev had adopted, this enthusiastic homage to cinema is performed by Kondrat'ev, his artist friends, neighbors, and boiler plant co-workers. Kondrat'ev edited the film (which, unlike *ASSA*, contains a huge number of discrete cuts despite its short length) over a week in late August. During this time Kondrat'ev failed to show up for work at the boiler plant; were it not for a sympathetic boss—to whom he honestly admitted he was working on a film—he would have lost his Leningrad *propiska* and *zhilploshchad'* (residence permit and living space). As soon as the film was completed, Kondrat'ev and Iufit held a series of home screenings for friends and acquaintances—public screenings of their works would commence only a few years later. Their approval was unanimous: this was *nashe kino* (our kind of movie).

**Fig. 14: Aleksandr Ovchinnikov and Evgenii Kondrat'ev**

Kondrat'ev would later explain that all the films during his Petersburg period were created for a precise circle of viewers, from whom he could expect instant recognition and understanding. In retrospect, he has realized that making films in this manner was also a means for magically conjuring a community of spectator-actors into existence:

During those years I was a madman. I could ask someone—a stranger, anyone—to act in front of the camera for me. And it was like this stream of people came my way: it's a kind of magic when you start doing something and you get this response. . . . You make films and the actors just show up on their own. . . . [Aleksandr Ovchinnikov] said to me at some point in the late 1980s that soon, Zhenia, they'll be offering you money to act in your films. . . . This was on the verge of becoming reality. There was this counterflow.

This communal energy did indeed carry Kondrat'ev through a dozen-some films over the course of the next decade. Other highlights of his Petersburg cycle include *Work and Hunger* (*Trud i golod*, 1985), *Lena's Men* (*Leniny muzhchiny*, 1989), and *Maksim Maksimych* (1995).

**Fig. 15 – 19: *Work and Hunger***

*Work and Hunger* takes its title from three words found in a text by Andrei Platonov, but its sense comes from the harsh facts of Kondrat'ev's existence at the time: "I worked in a Leningrad boiler plant then, times were rough; my salary was tiny, and it was hard to obtain food" ("Debil v Moskve" 2). Set in a *kapitalka* (an abandoned building slated for general renovation: such buildings were already being squatted by underground artists and other ne'er-do-wells), the film recounts the misadventures of two damsels in distress (a classmate from the People's Film Studio and her friend), the crazed, semi-suicidal fireman who comes to their rescue (Kondrat'ev), and a Civil War-era Red Army soldier (Kotel'nikov). A five-minute amphetamine-paced evocation of the entire silent era, the film ends with an intertitle ("The fire was extinguished by the victims themselves") and a brief scene of Kondrat'ev, now dressed as a peasant woman, gaily dancing in the kitchen of his communal flat. Aside from attempting to

create a “living cinema” amidst a collapsing society, Kondrat'ev claims also to have discovered, while making the film, that four was the “optimal” number of characters for the viewer: three kinds of shots (close-up, medium shot, long shot) and four actors are all that is required to express the entire *combinatoire* of psychological states, links between events, and historical roles.

**Fig. 20 — Fig. 21: *Lena's Men***

Despite this dictum, *Lena's Men* and *Maksim Maksimych* feature large casts. Many of the cast members are well-known contemporary artists, and the two most influential art squats of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period—NCh/VCh and Pushkinskaia-10—serve as sets. *Lena's Men* (based on a lost script, “Lena and Her 10 Men”)<sup>14</sup> is a wild deconstruction of the mechanics and semiotics of passion, and art's role as a “lubricant” of desire. The film opens with a mock-Komsomolesque intertitle—“Sex and caresses aren't tenderness, [but] work and study”—and the scene of Lena (Timur Novikov) and one of her men (Kondrat'ev) frantically trying to undress one another. The film manages to send up and affirm Lacan's maxim (“There is no sexual relationship”) and the absurd claim, made during the 1986 Soviet-American Telebridge, that there was no sex in the Soviet Union.

**Fig. 22 — 24: *Maksim Maksimych***

*Maksim Maksimych* is also a deconstruction—in this case, of the Brezhnev-era TV cult classic *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (*Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny*; dir. Tat'iana Lioznova, 1973). Kondrat'ev the actor takes on the role of Soviet super-spy Maksim Isaev/Max Otto von Stirlitz, originally played by Viacheslav Tikhonov. Kondrat'ev inverts Tikhonov's intellectual *übermensch* coolness: his Stirlitz is a sentimental drunkard stumbling through a mission whose meaning he has forgotten. Kondrat'ev the director reduces the plot to a twenty-minute high-

school disco musical performed without rehearsals by a cast of badly costumed SS officers, concentration camp inmates, and Nazi barmaids. Given the later rise of neo-Nazism and the increasing frequency of racist attacks in Petersburg and other parts of Russia, one could be forgiven for seeing the film as a hidden warning against the peculiar attractions of a once-defeated enemy for a people defeated, allegedly, by a different enemy in the present.<sup>15</sup> Filmed in the abandoned lot next to Pushkinskaia-10 and in the squat's Gallery 103, *Maksim Maksimych* is also a swansong to the place and its inhabitants. In 1997, the Free Culture Foundation would cede most of the building to the city and developers in exchange for the renovated, but much-less-free corner of controlled bohemianism it occupies to this day. Along with the deaths of such influential figures as Vadim Ovchinnikov and bandleader/trickster Sergei Kurëkhin (1996), this change marked the end of the “golden age” of Petersburg nonconformist art. Kondrat'ev, whose films chronicle this age marvelously albeit obliquely, had by then already departed (ironically) for Stirlitz's real home—Berlin.

**Fig. 25:** *Someone Was Here* (Brothers Aleinikov)

Between his arrival in Leningrad and his departure for Berlin, however, Kondrat'ev performed two other signal services for parallel cinema. The first was his work as the movement's leading man. In the Aleinikov Brothers' short feature *Someone Was Here*, he plays the role of an anonymous man in pursuit of a stranger who, he thinks, has broken into his apartment. By film's end, the viewer realizes that the protagonist is pursuing himself. Quietly photographed and edited, the film is a meditation on the thinness of human self-presence and the constructedness of cinema. It is a masterpiece of the conceptualist wing of the parallel cinema, as represented by the Aleinikovs. Most of the cast, though, was drawn from the Leningrad (necrorealist) wing (Iufit, Mertvyi, Konstantin Mitenev): they brought their own odd touch to the

film. Its first viewers were probably baffled, for example, by the bulky appearance of Kondrat'ev's cheeks throughout much of the film. As it turns out, he stuffed his cheeks with cotton padding. This device was already a part of the necrorealist arsenal, a technique of *nekrogrim* (necro-makeup) meant to indicate a stage in corpse decomposition and a certain (Russian) obliviousness to the world. Soon after the film was released, the Aleinikovs and Kondrat'ev were happy to discover a kindred spirit in the character portrayed by Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man* (1988; dir. Barry Levinson). As Kondrat'ev recalls, they dubbed Hoffman's Raymond Babbitt *nash russkii chelovek* (our kind of Russian guy).

**Fig. 26 — Fig. 27: *Tractor-Drivers-2* (Brothers Aleinikov)**

The Aleinikovs' first and last full-length feature, *Tractor Drivers-2*, was advertised as the “first Russian remake” (of Ivan Pyr'ev's 1939 film *Traktoristy*). Kondrat'ev's hero is a demobbed tank mechanic-cum-tractor driver who finds himself drawn into a conflict between a *kolkhoz* of millionaires and a neighboring *kolkhoz* run by marauding terrorists, and into a romance with a *femme fatale* tractor brigadier. The misfit between the parallelist aesthetic and the requirements of mainstream cinema made itself felt more acutely than in *Someone Was Here*. It was incredibly difficult, for example, to persuade studio bosses to include Kondrat'ev's scratch-animation sequences. Likewise, the contrast between Kondrat'ev's *stëb*, over-the-top acting style, and the rather more polished (albeit duller) approach of well-known actors like Anatolii Kuznetsov is apparent. Nowadays, the film seems both dated and quasi-prophetic. Film critic Kirill Razlogov, who had a hand in securing funding for *Tractor Drivers-2*, was disappointed by the movie when it came out, but later wrote that it had proved to be ahead of its time: the brothers had anticipated the pop-cultural yearning for “the good old days,” as exemplified by ORT's *Old Songs about the Main Thing* (*Starye pesni o glavnom*), that would re-

emerge in the late 1990s (Razlogov; [<http://www.otkakva.ru/archiv/14/index.htm>]). For his part, Kondrat'ev says he predicted, at the time, that the film would be understood only *eighteen* years later. That leaves three more years of waiting, although it is already clear that the millionaires and terrorists really have ruined the “Russian land.”

**Fig. 28:** *Daydreams* (Courtesy of *Cine Fantom Week*)

Nevertheless, parallel cinema would have been impoverished without Kondrat'ev's deliberately backward-looking actorly talents and his genuinely photogenic face. It would be immeasurably more impoverished without his own undisputed masterpiece, *Daydreams* (*Grezy*, 1988). As Dobrotvorskii wrote: “*Daydreams* could be taken right now to the Cinematheque Française, put on a shelf, and marked off-limits. It's a hyper-masterpiece” (“Besedy”).<sup>16</sup> Along with *The Drops Stay on the Trees* (*Kapli ostaiutsia na derev'iakh*, 1990) and *Stone Wind* (*Kamennyi veter*, 1995), *Daydreams* forms Kondrat'ev's Siberian cycle. The film opens with a glimpse of life in and around a desperate-looking native Khakassian village. This sequence is then followed by scenes of a man (Kondrat'ev) who is seemingly lost in this wilderness. It is a testament to the film's power that one of its most thrilling moments shows the men of the village castrating a flock of sheep. This thrill is secured, as nowhere else in Kondrat'ev's oeuvre, by his having struck a pitch-perfect balance among grungy but absolutely captivating 16mm black-and-white images, a rapid-fire montage that never holds our gaze on any of these images a millisecond longer than necessary, and a use of his trademark cinecalligraphy and (literally) dirt-poor stop-motion animation that retranslates and reinforces Kondrat'ev's gospel of the universe as a riot of movement, line, and pattern that cinema helps us to recover. His greatest advocate, Dobrotvorskii, formulated the mission of this kind of cinema thus: “Cinema isn't a reflection of

reality. Reality is only an excuse for making cinema. And cinema is nothing but improved reality.”

As Kondrat'ev nowadays explains his mission in making *Daydreams*, he compares himself to those quintessential reality-improvers, the *narodniki*, and their “going to the people” (*khozhdenie v narod*). When I asked him whether his (onscreen and behind-the-camera) hero in this and other films wasn't in fact a kind of punch-drunk ethnographer, he confessed that, as a teenager, he had studied ethnography as a hobby and planned to enroll in Siberian State University's ethnography program. As an ethnographer *manqué* “with a camera,” his role model has been the pioneer documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty. In this sense, *Daydreams* is an homage to *Nanook of the North* (1922; dir. Robert Flaherty), which Kondrat'ev admits he never grows tired of watching.

**Fig. 29 — Fig. 31: *Verlorene tage***

Kondrat'ev jokingly claims to be continuing this ethnographic career in his voluntary German exile. Whether this is the case or not, his post-Russian/post-perestroika career has been one of the stranger “afterlives” of his generation of underground artists. With the help of time, a much-gentler social system, and friends (for example, Gleb Aleinikov, who bought him a TV-quality video camera), Kondrat'ev has now adapted to a new country and new conditions of filmmaking-as-lifestyle. In 2002, Kondrat'ev spent a year teaching his cinecalligraphy technique to a group of troubled teenagers at a Berlin youth center. He registered the learning process as well as the film he and the teenagers made together in *Cinecalligraphie* (2002), which had its premiere on Berlin public-access TV.<sup>17</sup> An even more-stunning example of social welfare-turned-art is *Verlorene tage* (*Lost Days*, 2005), which was commissioned for screening in Berlin retirement homes. Shot on video in a nature park on the outskirts of Berlin, the film abandons

the shotgun montage of the Russian period (although not cinecalligraphy, which Kondrat'ev uses to bridge episodes). Apart from the circumstances of its creation, what is most shocking about the film is that it unveils Kondrat'ev's gifts as a painterly photographer/cinematographer. Each frame could be repackaged as a picture postcard. *Skizzen zu Mozart* (*Sketches for Mozart*, 2006), commissioned by the Plug In: Amadeus festival (part of the Augsburg 2006 Mozart celebrations), represents a different set of postcards sent home. With a disturbing soundtrack by the German electronica duo Interzone Perceptible and settings in Germany, France, Russia, and Greece, the film is a peculiar catalogue of Kondrat'ev's career as actor and *kinoglaz*.

**Fig. 32:** Evgenii Kondrat'ev at the premiere of *Skizzen zu Mozart* (Augsburg, March 2006)

**Fig. 33 — 34:** *Skizzen zu Mozart*

Considering this new work and the recent retrospective in Moscow and Petersburg, Kondrat'ev seems, then, to be undergoing something of a renaissance these days. This heartening thought is dampened slightly, however, when we examine the physical state of Kondrat'ev's legacy and the accessibility of his work. It is high time that some well-meaning cinephiles did for his catalogue what the Criterion Collection has done for Kondrat'ev's late American "uncle," Stan Brakhage.<sup>18</sup>

**Slide Show:** *Skizzen zu Mozart*

Before that happens, we're left to examine the meaning of Kondrat'ev's work as best we can. Perhaps immodestly, Kondrat'ev himself confesses that sometimes he feels like a prophet. This self-image is realized on film in one episode of *Skizzen zu Mozart*, in which Kondrat'ev performs a Rudi Valentino-like version of the life of St. John of Patmos. Maksim Stepanov, writing on the occasion of Kondrat'ev's recent homecoming, develops this notion: "[Kondrat'ev's films] are precisely apocalyptic films [. . .] and their lyric hero is the sense of the end of time."

\* \* \* \* \*

Debil the prophet? It's hard to reconcile this grand claim with the clown-prince image he has cultivated over the years. And yet when I interviewed him by phone recently, he tried to explain to me that a prophet is someone who brings people a "universal knowledge" that will otherwise take them centuries of suffering, warfare, and stupidity to arrive at. For example, he said, "It's clear that driving in cars and burning oil is simply stupid." And right then the line went dead.<sup>19</sup>

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Perestroika-era screenings of parallel and necrorealist cinema were often followed by reprisals against the local officials and Culture Palace managers who gave permission for them to take place. For example, *Red Fish in America* gives an account of the aftermath of a necrorealist screening in Kirov in 1988 (22-23).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Russian, here and throughout, are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all information about Kondrat'ev's life and career, as well as direct quotations, are taken from two author interviews (29 April 2006, Berlin; and 9 March 2007, by telephone from Berlin).

<sup>4</sup> See Igor Khadikov, “The Life and Times of Debil Kondratiev.” In *Free St. Petersburg Now!* (film screening program), 23 October 2003, New Haven, Connecticut. It was also not always safe for Kondrat'ev to screen films at Pushkinskaia. As Vadim Kazakevich recounts, during one summertime screening in the courtyard, a disgruntled neighbor opened fire on the audience. The lamp of Kondrat'ev's projector was either hit by a bullet or broken in the ensuing confusion. Two friends were dispatched to disarm the neighbor, while Kondrat'ev fixed the projector. The screening was eventually resumed (author interview with Vadim Kazakevich, 11 February 2007, Saint Petersburg).

<sup>5</sup> Parallel cinema director, actor, and theorist Boris Iukhananov recalls how Kondrat'ev contributed to his own legend by delivering a memorable “lecture” on world cinema at a seminar: “The emcee said, ‘And now dear friends, Evgenii Kondrat'ev aka Evgenii Debil will speak to you.’ Zhenia walked out and started limbering up as it were. Something like seven or eight minutes have gone by, and he's still stretching and limbering up in silence. The audience is already prostrate with laughter; their heads are filled with ‘daydreams’ about Kondrat'ev's films. Then he made faces for another five minutes or so, moaned a bit—and that was that. Twenty minutes had passed: that was his entire lecture about world cinema. He exited the stage to thunderous applause”; <http://www.otkakva.ru/interviews/parallel.index.htm>

<sup>6</sup> During a post-screening Q&A session at the Cine Fantom Club film series (Moscow) in 2004, Kondrat'ev had a slightly different explanation for the origin of his nickname: “In the 1980s, the term *debilism* appeared. Accordingly, a *debil* had to appear as well, since there was *debilism*. And so I appeared. Partly, this is a social position, because the period was so specific. In any

age the artist has to be anomalous in order to express himself.” See “Ia ne znaiu, chto skazat'. Ia by luchshe spliasal. Obsuzhdenie programmy fil'mov Evgeniia Kondrat'eva (Debila)”;  
<http://www.cinefantom.ru/html/discussions/2004-10-06.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> According to Kondrat'ev, it was New Artist Inal Savchenkov who, during the editing of *A Supporter of Olf* (*Storonnik Ol'fa*, 1987), hit upon the idea of scratching the surface of an already shot and printed filmstrip. Savchenkov justified his “vandalism” by pointing out that the scene “lacked energy.” Obviously, the parallelists here joined a tradition in avant-garde filmmaking—best represented by Stan Brakhage—about which they had little or no information.

<sup>8</sup> For Kondrat'ev, however, “amateurishness” is still a matter of high art: “An actor is someone who arouses emotions in the spectator, while the non-actor arouses emotions only in himself. [And] the actor can step out of the role, while the non-actor doesn't come out of the role. With some folks this goes on for years” (“Ia ne znaiu, chto skazat'”). As Kondrat'ev explained to me, even the New Artist credo should be taken with a grain of salt: “Everyone is an artist, but life tells us, nevertheless, that it isn't given to everyone [to be an artist].”

<sup>9</sup> According to Kondrat'ev, “Saint Petersburg is the city that made me a person; in general, one could say that it was there that I was born” (“Ia ne znaiu, chto skazat'”).

<sup>10</sup> Kondrat'ev also briefly discusses the role the People's Studio played in his formation in “Ia ne znaiu, chto skazat'.”

<sup>11</sup> Iufit was a particularly strong influence on Kondrat'ev's decision to make his own films: “The second time I understood I could make cinema myself was when I saw Iufit's *Woodcutter* and *Werewolf Orderlies*” (see “Ia ne znaiu, chto skazat'”).

<sup>12</sup> Dobrotvorskii defines parallel cinema thus: “Parallel cinema is not an aesthetic category. Parallel cinema is cinema made outside the system of centralized production and distribution. The bases for its having abandoned the centralized system are another matter: they might be political, aesthetic, [or] ethical.” See Dobrotvorskii, “Besedy”  
[\[http://kolonna.mitin.com/archive.php?address=http://kolonna.mitin.com/archive/mj28/dobrot.shtml\]](http://kolonna.mitin.com/archive.php?address=http://kolonna.mitin.com/archive/mj28/dobrot.shtml).

<sup>13</sup> Kondrat'ev gives a more prosaic, materialist explanation for the dizzying speed of his early works: “You buy a two-and-a-half-minute reel for two rubles fifty kopecks. On a salary of ninety rubles a month, you economize. And you try to fill [to the maximum] every twenty seconds of this film because time is money (“Ia ne znaiu, chto skazat'”).

<sup>14</sup> The Russian title is also a play on words: *Leniny muzhchiny* = “Lenin and Men,” or “Lenin's Men.” Thanks to Igor' Khadikov for pointing out this out to me.

<sup>15</sup> Last night (14 March 2007), I was again reminded of the “attractiveness” of Nazism for contemporary Russians: around midnight, a group of young men marched down our street (ulitsa Pushkinskaia) shouting “Sieg heil!”

<sup>16</sup> A portion of the film can be viewed at <http://vision.rambler.ru/users/cinefantom/1/grezy>.

<sup>17</sup> Among his self-acknowledged Russian disciples is the animator Boris Kazakov.

<sup>18</sup> *by Brakhage: An Anthology*. 2-DVD set and booklet. The Criterion Collection, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Fortunately, I succeeded in calling Kondrat'ev right back.