Cloé Drieu, Fictions nationales, Cinéma, empire et nation en Ouzbékistan (1919-1937)

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Cloé DRIEU, *Fictions nationales, Cinéma, empire et nation en Ouzbékistan (1919-1937)*, Paris : Éditions Karthala, 2013, 392 p.

- 1 This fine book by Cloé Drieu is a major contribution to the history of Soviet Central Asia and Soviet history in general. It uses the history of film in Uzbekistan to investigate several crucial features of the multinational Soviet state : the interplay between the centre and the periphery, between “internationalism” and nationalism, or colonialism and revolution. Drieu’s book is a work of cultural history located in the overlapping and intertwined histories of the Uzbek nation and the Soviet revolutionary project. The two subjects are usually dealt with in separate literatures, but Drieu is comfortable with both and deals with them deftly.
- 2 If only at the level of film history, the book is a success. There exists no other serious study of film in Uzbekistan (or, for that matter, in any part of the Soviet “Orient”). The general contours of the film history of the period are not well known, most of the figures involved have long been forgotten, and the films themselves are all but impossible to find. Drieu has done impressive detective work to track down all the films made in Uzbekistan until 1937—a total of fourteen feature-length films. She provides an excellent overview of the institutional structures of film production ; of film technique ; and of the conception and reception of these films. Drieu has tracked down published and many unpublished reviews (including censors’ reports), and provides an excellent view of (1) what the films were expected to be (an important means of mobilization, agitation, and propaganda for the regime, and the very symbol of

modernity and revolution); (2) the material and technical difficulties faced by Soviet filmmakers in the implementation of these hopes; and (3) the indifferent reception they often received. Ordinary Uzbek viewers had to be taught the language of film before the films could convey their message, and therefore the films were often accompanied by commentary that attempted to fix the meaning of the films for the audience. The Uzbek intelligentsia was often critical of the films' representation of Uzbek life, even as its members saw the advent of film as a major cultural advance.

- 3 Ultimately, the key issue for Drieu is that of representation. It is here she makes her most significant interventions, which are in the debate on the nature of the Soviet state. Cinema is an unusual window for looking into these issues. Literature and drama were sites of a great cultural efflorescence in the 1920s, in which the Central Asian intelligentsia elaborated a vision of the nation and its future. The same cannot be said about film, which was new to the region and whose production required an expensive technological infrastructure. There were cinema houses before the revolution and one or two amateur filmmakers among the indigenous population, but no studios and no film technology. Initially at least, film had to be the work of outsiders. The first "Uzbek" films were made under contract by studios in Leningrad and Moscow, but even after film production came to Uzbekistan (the Sharq Yulduzi [Star of the East] studio was established in 1926), filmmaking remained mainly in European hands: films were made by European crews according to scripts written by Europeans, and featured mostly European actors. The issue of representation was thus cast in a particularly clear light. Soviet-European representations of Central Asia remained in the realm of the exotic, and the early productions fit perfectly in the broader tradition of colonial film, from which they borrowed with ease. The exotic and the picturesque predominated, while the natives were primitive and often dangerous, and remained so. This applied even to *Musul'manka* (The Muslim Woman), a consciousness-raising film commissioned by the Central Asian Zhenotdel. Proletkino, the Leningrad studio that made the film, transformed the original script drastically, adding several new developments largely out of commercial considerations, so that the mobilisational film became the tale of an amorous adventure. Later films made an effort to depict "national form" and to showcase the Party-state's efforts at building a new life. The campaigns against veiling and religion both found reflection in film. Yet, all too often the national was depicted by the folkloric, while internationalism (and the universalism to which the revolution aspired) resided in the Russians. If proletarian universalism was embodied by ethnic Russians, Drieu asks, what was "national form" to be?
- 4 By the early 1930s, the first Uzbek film professionals had appeared on the scene and provided one answer. For them, the camera and the projector were the means of inscribing the nation into history, of crafting their own narrative that would be national and revolutionary at the same time. Drieu traces the contrasting careers of the first two Uzbek directors in the context of an increasingly hegemonic Soviet discourse. Nabi Ganiev made three films in the 1930s on Soviet topics (a Stakhanovite factory worker, an antireligious campaign, struggle with the Basmachi), in which Uzbek characters (played by Uzbek actors) take centre place. Though Drieu finds subtle forms of resistance to the official discourse in Ganiev's films, he nonetheless presented the Russians in a positive light and did not challenge the fundamental postulates of socialist realism. He had his setbacks during the Terror but survived and was anointed "father of Uzbek cinema" after the war. Suleiman Khodzhaev, on the other hand, made *Tong oldidan* (Before the Dawn), a film about the 1916 uprising in Central Asia, in which

he depicted Tsarist rule as brutally oppressive and the uprising as an anticolonial revolt. The film was made but never released and Khodzhaev himself perished in the purge that swept Uzbekistan's cultural elite in 1937-1938.

- 5 Class had subjugated the nation in the early Soviet Union, but the triumphant class—the agent of salvation—was nationally marked as Russian. The national discourses of all other nationalities had to work themselves out in the context of this hegemony. There has been lively debate over whether the USSR was an empire or not. Drieu finds considerable use of the notion of “empire” in thinking about the Soviet Union. It was, as she puts it in the title of the last chapter of the book, an empire of the proletariat. Proletarian ideologies could easily serve to uphold empire. Drieu's book is an excellent reminder that (non-Russian) national discourses occupied a precarious place in the Soviet 1930s, a decade in which national intelligentsias were decimated in one republic after another. The crystallisation and consolidation of Soviet nations was a phenomenon of the post-war (and indeed post-Stalin) era.
- 6 If there is a criticism to be made of the book, it will be of its indifferent treatment of the hopes and aspirations of the Uzbek intelligentsia. The 1920s were a period of extraordinary creativity in the realms of literature, drama, and historiography that contested, passively or otherwise, official discourses. A discussion of this intellectual production would have provided some background for the arrival on the scene of Ganiev and Khodzhaev. It would also have put the Europeans' representations of Uzbeks and Uzbekistan in a comparative framework and thus highlighted the contestation over representation that the book describes. But what the book does present is an achievement. It will be the standard reference for the study of Soviet film and of the representation of empire in general.

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