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Filming the Classics: Tolstoy's *Resurrection* as 'Thaw' Narrative

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Abstract

This paper examines Mikhail Shveitser's film version of Lev Tolstoy's last major novel, *Resurrection,* released in two parts in 1960 and 1962. The timing of the production and release is significant, and this paper analyzes the relevance of Tolstoy's novel for soviet society during the post-Stalin 'Thaw'. The themes of social injustice and spiritual rebirth are equally valid for Russian society in the late nineteenth century as in the immediate post-Stalin period. Of special interest is the director's use of the illustrations to the novel by Leonid Pasternak in the 1898 publication.

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1. Introduction

Resurrection (*Воскресение*) was the first of Tolstoy's "big" novels to be adapted for the Soviet screen (not counting the filmed MKhAT version of *Anna Karenina*, directed in 1953 by Tat'iana Lukashevich). Released in two parts in 1960 and 1962, it was directed by the relative newcomer Mikhail Shveitser (1920-2000). The release of a film about a miscarriage of justice, arbitrary punishment and the iniquities of the legal system at this time in post-Stalin history would, of course, have had a resonance beyond the immediate cultural context, and more of this will be said later.

Resurrection was Tolstoy's last long novel, which he began in 1889-90, working on it again in 1895-96 and finally completing it in 1899, although apparently he regarded it as still unfinished. The novel itself has a social

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conscience impossible to ignore, and was written with a specific social purpose in mind: Tolstoy intended the proceeds to finance the fundamentalist Christian Dukhobors' emigration to Canada, and was rushed to complete it in time (and thus his seeming dissatisfaction with the final product). As it was his first novel in twenty years it was eagerly awaited by the international community. It was also his most successful in terms of copies sold, and provoked a storm of debate.[†1] It should be noted that its first Russian publication was heavily censored, especially Tolstoy's criticism of the Church, and the "sex scene" was cut from the American translation.[2] With its attack on the Church and institutions of the state, the novel undoubtedly contributed to Tolstoy's excommunication by the Orthodox Church in 1901.

2. Mikhail Shveitser's film of Tolstoy's novel 'Resurrection'

2.1. Characterization

The central male character is Prince Nikolai Nekhliudov, who at the beginning of the novel is an indolent, rather cynical and world-weary representative of the idle rich, but who by the end of the novel has been reborn morally and spiritually, renouncing his class and turning his property over to the peasants. Nekhliudov's "resurrection" is occasioned by his presence as a jury member at the trial of Katerina Maslova, a prostitute accused of robbery and murder. Nekhliudov recognises in her the girl he seduced and abandoned three years previously, and is immediately overcome with remorse, believing himself to blame for her dramatic fall. He visits her in prison, and offers to marry her. He then follows her to Siberia, where she has been sentenced to hard labour. She rejects his proposal, choosing instead a platonic relationship in exile with Simonson, a People's Will revolutionary.

It is accepted that the novel began in Tolstoy's mind as a denunciation of the consequences of male lechery and sexual exploitation, to end with the motif of repentance, but as it progresses it becomes a wholesale attack on the upper classes, the criminal justice system, and the Orthodox Church. Mass destitution and hunger of the peasantry are similarly deplored and condemned.

Tolstoy's interest lies not so much in the fallen woman motif, a common one in nineteenth-century Russian literature, or even the inner torment and regeneration of Nekhliudov, but rather in broader questions of social justice, the corruption of the criminal justice system, and the hypocritical ways of the upper classes. Tolstoy lists with increasing indignation the crimes for which some of Maslova's cellmates have been convicted, including the farcical but tragic plight of a woman about to be exiled to Siberia despite her reconciliation with the husband she tried to poison. It is clear in the novel that all the women in prison have known nothing but pain and violence all their lives, and all at the hands of men.

Maslova is convicted of attempting to murder a client by administering him poison. The jury believes her when she insists she simply wanted to put him to sleep so he would stop pestering her. The intent is missing from the action, but the judge fails to remind the jury of this, and she is sentenced to four years hard labour. In other words, although everyone realises that a mistake has been made, largely through the judge's incompetence, nothing can be done to rectify it. This farce is heavily satirized by Tolstoy, as is the whole appeals procedure, where lawyers and judges realise a miscarriage of justice has taken place, but shrug their shoulders. Nekhliudov's attempt to have her pardoned is eventually successful.

2.2. Themes and motifs

Tolstoy's attitude to the land question is also evident in the novel. Nekhliudov plans to give his lands away to the peasants, outraged that since the abolition of serfdom in 1861 the lot of most peasants has actually worsened, placing

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[1] All page references to Tolstoy's text are to the following edition: Tolstoy, L. (1982). Voskresenie. Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo. All translations are my own.

For details, see Figes, O. (2002). *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (pp. 343-344). London: Allen Lane.

[2] Tolstoy's criticism of the Church still upset Western scholars many decades later. R. F. Christian wrote in 1969 that the scene of the prison chapel service was "bitterly ironical, polemical and blasphemous" (Christian, R. F. (1969). *Tolstoy: A Critical Introduction* (p.228).Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), while Ernest J. Simmons in 1973 similarly complained that this scene was one of several "lapses of taste" and was "blasphemously satiric" (Simmons, E. J. (1973). *Tolstoy* (p. 194). London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.)