

SVALBARD ON THE (POST-) SOVIET SCREEN

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Abstract

A selection of Soviet/Russian and Norwegian documentary and feature films about Svalbard is analysed to account for the recurrent issues raised in cinematic representations of the archipelago. Such issues primarily include Svalbard's ownership and demilitarization, as well as the role that women – and Russia – play in the region. The subject of these representations' verisimilitude is also discussed. The article concludes that both film groups show a mutually observed parallel reality.

Keywords

Svalbard, Spitsbergen, Soviet cinema, Russian cinema, Norwegian cinema

Introduction

Europe's "most marginal geographical space, without an indigenous or permanent population, surrounded on all sides by the Arctic Ocean" (Ryall 2017, 232), Svalbard (aka Spitsbergen) retains its attraction today not only because of its sizeable natural resources and exceptional geopolitical status but also because of its remote location and breathtaking scenery. Visuals therefore play a special role in Svalbard's representations and pulling power, capturing its magnetic looks as mementos for those who have been there and as an enticement for those who have not. Moving pictures apparently do Svalbard better justice than still ones, as a recent visitor to the archipelago seems to imply:

[On Svalbard,] animation comes from the clarity, luminosity and subtle alterations of the famous Arctic light [...] [that] reflects in all directions off snow and ice. [...] You see clearly that everything is in inorganic motion, if at different speeds – waves, ice, strata, continental plates, weather. [...] Ice floes drift like clouds, glacier ice behaves like rock, only speeded up. All landscapes are temporary, as the architect Cedric Price said of buildings, but some are more temporary than others. (Moore 2018).¹

Film crews have been coming to Svalbard almost since the invention of cinema (see, for example, Nédelec 1909). Yet their production is rarely just a record of what is visible. As a filmmaker working on Svalbard has noted, "the demographic constellation, geographical conditions and political constructions particular to Svalbard [...] make the archipelago a great example (or image) of the Arctic as a space widely open for projections" (Haaber Ihle 2015, 259). In other words, Svalbard on screen – and in many

¹ Cf. the impressions of a Svalbard sunset, recorded almost a hundred years previously, in late September 1924, by a Soviet cameraman on board the research vessel *Persei* in Isfjorden: "The sun was moving down towards the horizon. Its rays were changing colour from light pink to dark purple. The colours were fluid, they played with the hues. Everyone was on deck, silent, overwhelmed by the celestial extravaganza, reflected in the still and smooth sea surface. [...] I must have been the only person whose admiration was tinged with bitterness: my movie camera was of no help. Colour film did not yet exist" (Lebedev 1924, 41). All translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

non-visual accounts, which will not be discussed here in much detail for lack of room – is a kind of clean slate, which is used by different, often competing narratives to say something that tells us more about the authors, the context and/or the agenda of these narratives than about Svalbard itself.

Given that Norway and Russia are the two countries with perhaps the longest continuous presence on Svalbard, it would be interesting to analyse Soviet/Russian cinematic representations of the archipelago, in both documentaries and feature films, against the background of similar (select) Norwegian motion pictures about Svalbard. The issues covered will include, in no particular order, Russia's and Norway's views of the archipelago's ownership; the countries' compliance with certain clauses in the Svalbard Treaty (above all, the demand to keep the archipelago demilitarized); the role of women on Svalbard; questions of authenticity and verisimilitude in the portrayal of Svalbard-based events (i.e. where exactly the actual filming was carried out and if the story looks convincing enough); and whether Russia's foothold in the archipelago is perceived as dangerous or benign.

The Background on Fact and Fiction in Soviet Cinematic Representations of the Arctic: The Case of *Semero smelykh* (Gerasimov 1936)

Russia's cinematic depiction of Svalbard should be considered a variation on the Soviet tradition of films about the Arctic, which tended to be "full-length adventures with the power to sweep audiences into a different world" (McCannon 1998, 123). At the same time, such films promoted the Soviet Arctic myth as a form of nation building, by positing, among other things, that "every Soviet citizen was joined together by the responsibility of making exploits in the North succeed" (ibid., 108).² Fictionalising the Arctic experience to a degree, by giving prominence to its thrills at the expense of its tedium, was considered fair play in the mission of generating people's enthusiasm for the Soviet Arctic endeavour, especially as far as feature films were concerned.

Semero smelykh (The Seven Brave Ones, Gerasimov 1936) has nothing to do with Svalbard but is worth a quick look as an epitome of what could be done with the cinematic genre of Soviet Arctic adventure. Released in time for the 10th Komsomol Congress, which took place in April 1936, it was clearly meant to entice the Soviet youth into the USSR's Arctic pursuits. The film depicts a fictional polar station sometime in the 1930s, in the non-existent Bay of Joy, located roughly at 72°N 138°E, i.e. somewhere between the real-life Tiksi and Sannikov polar stations, founded in 1932 and 1942 respectively.

This popular film was partly inspired by the meteorologist Konstantin Zvantsev's 1934 memoir *Zimovka* (The Wintering) about his time at the Wrangel Island polar station in 1929-32. A polar explorer of some years' standing (he started out in 1925 at the Mare-Sale station on the Yamal Peninsula and in 1934 headed the first five-crew Komsomol polar station at Sterligov Cape on the Taymyr Peninsula), Zvantsev did not see the need to embellish the isolated and often reluctant co-existence of a few ill-fitted individuals, whose breaks from the daily polar routine were mostly provided by hunting and, much more rarely, by ships and airplanes that stopped by. The vehicles' and station's imperfect technical equipment was hostage to weather conditions, while quarrels over limited food rations, restricted living quarters and some employees' irresponsible and egotistic behavior occurred too frequently for comfort. Communication with Chukchi and

² Various other aspects of this myth will gradually be revealed in the course of this article.

‘Eskimos’ (i.e. the Siberian Yupik people), who taught Zvantsev how to cope in the Arctic, provided welcome relief (see Zvantsev 1934, 61–63, 65–66, 93, 97–98, 133–34, 146).

However, *Semero smelykh* are set in a spacious polar station filled with altruistic and dedicated staff, who demonstrate their resourcefulness in the face of a harsh environment and fulfil a civilising function with regard to the indigenous peoples of the North. This is hardly surprising, given that the Soviet conquest of the Arctic was touted as “an epic conflict: the might of Soviet technology and heroism ranged against the worst that the forces of nature had to offer” (McCanon 1998, 86). As for the indigenes, the Soviet Arctic “myth assigned to the natives the role of simple, loyal folk whose purpose was to provide exotic colour and to play supporting roles” (ibid., 100).

In addition, *Semero smelykh* bore various hallmarks of the fairy tale genre, which facilitated the viewer’s suspension of disbelief. Seven is a magic number, naturally, and the film’s exotic milieu and absorbing quest for minerals made it easier to tolerate the scenes in which members of the station staff discover tin ore under deep snow, perform a parachute jump off an airplane wing during a blizzard, and deal with Chukchi instead of Yakuts (although it is Yakuts who predominantly populate the area where the imaginary polar station is said to be located). After all, feature films are often valued for their dramatic effects, not for their historical accuracy, and heroes are there “to take superhuman risks, overcome insurmountable obstacles and accomplish unimaginable deeds” (ibid., 100). Besides, the average Soviet filmgoer at the time hardly needed much persuasion as s/he probably had as much first-hand experience of polar exploration and geological prospecting as s/he had of flying, not to speak of the difficulties s/he would likely encounter when trying to distinguish between different indigenous peoples of the North.

Semero smelykh contains a notable Utopian component, too: the station chief dreams of blossoming Arctic gardens of the future, as if in the city of Poltava in Ukraine. This is an example of what is known as “the discourse of ‘warmth’ – of Soviet power bringing with it [...] climate change” (Kaganovsky 2016, 178), to “demonstrate [...] a special way of overcoming the conditions of Nature by means of transforming [them] into their opposite” (Frank 2010, 108).³ All in all, the film is more “a result of the skillful manipulation of mythology and ideology” (Bugueva 2015, 314) than a true-life depiction of the state of affairs with Soviet polar exploration at the time. Needless to say, *Semero smelykh* was shot on the Rybachy and Kola peninsulas, Kildin Island and Mount Elbrus, i.e. not anywhere near its purported location.

Early Soviet documentaries about Svalbard: The Case of *Podvig vo l'dakh* (Vasil'evy 1928)

As for Svalbard, its earliest available Soviet footage was shot entirely on Svalbard itself, by the cameramen who were on board the Soviet vessels that participated in the 1928

³ The sequences about fresh tomatoes, cucumbers and green onions cultivated in the greenhouses at Svalbard’s Soviet settlements of Barentsburg (Gorchilin 1966) and Pyramiden (Naumkin and Ivachev 1976), as well as the boastful information about tomatoes and flowers grown there (Vinitskii 1970, Part 5), stem from this discourse. The documentary *78 grader nord*, made in 1969 for the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK, acknowledges that the Barentsburg greenhouse is bigger and more impressive than the one in Longyearbyen.

rescue of Umberto Nobile's *Italia* airship crew.⁴ This footage, with some additions, was promptly spliced together as *Podvig vo l'dakh* (A Feat on the Ice) by Sergei and Georgii Vasil'ev, who later became famous owing to their 1934 biopic of the Russian Civil War commander Vasilii Chapaev. *Podvig vo l'dakh*, mistakenly believed by some to be lost (see Kaganovsky 2016, 178), includes the fleeting but memorable images of the spectacular icy surroundings of Hopen, Kapp Leigh Smith, Kapp Wrede, Kings Bay and bits of Sjuøyane, taken from the icebreakers *Malygin* and *Krasin*, as well as the airplanes that accompanied them. For the first time ever, many viewers in Soviet Russia and elsewhere could stand in awe of Svalbard sites that had previously been seen only by a select few or "never visited by watercraft" at all (as a *Podvig vo l'dakh* caption put it). Such phrasing emphasized the pioneering nature of this Soviet Arctic voyage across territory that the USSR felt it could call its own (from a historical perspective).⁵ Some claim that the Bolshevik government had opted not to object against the extension of Norwegian jurisdiction over Svalbard, launched by the Svalbard Treaty of 1920 and culminating in the Svalbard Act of 1925, in order to guarantee Norway's diplomatic recognition of Soviet Russia, which took place in 1924 (see, for example, Fedorov, Zlobin and Slobodianik 2005, 14).⁶

It is not that *Podvig vo l'dakh* disseminated a subliminal message in favour of rescinding the Svalbard Treaty merely several years after its conclusion (the USSR did join the Treaty eventually, in 1935, after the country had officially been recognised by some of the key Treaty signatories). Yet the fact of the matter was that in the *Italia*'s international rescue effort, the *Krasin* – claimed by the film to be "the most powerful icebreaker in the world", "from the city of Lenin", moving towards its target with the "stubbornness of a Bolshevik" – succeeded on and near Svalbard where many others did not. After all, it was the *Krasin*-based airplane that spotted, while in flight, two of the *Italia* survivors on an ice flow.⁷ The *Krasin* duly collected them first, and the rest of the survivors later. Shortly afterwards, in Spitsbergen's Recherchefjord, the *Krasin* also helped to repair a leaky German liner called *Monte Cervantes*, with about 1,800

⁴ The same applies to the first known Soviet documentary about Svalbard, *Ekspeditsiia na Shpitsbergen* (A Journey to Spitzbergen 1924), shot by the Sevzapkino (Moscow branch) cameraman Sergei Lebedev on board the research vessel *Persei* in August-October 1924, edited under the supervision of Sergei Vasil'ev and screened in Leningrad, Moscow and a few other Soviet cities. The intertitles were provided by the well-known Soviet author Boris Pil'niak, also an expedition member. Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate this film. For documentary accounts of the journey, see Lebedev 1974, 15-47 and chapter 5 of Vasnetsov 1974. For a fictionalized account, see Pil'niak 1927.

⁵ For more on this, see my discussion below of how Pomors' stays on Svalbard were depicted in Egorov 1954, Gorchilin 1966, Shergova 1987 and Voronov 1991.

⁶ In 1944, however, the Soviet foreign minister Viacheslav Molotov suggested to the Norwegian foreign minister Trygve Lie the abolition of the Svalbard Treaty in favour of sharing the archipelago between Russia and Norway as a condominium (see Portsel' 2012, 45). The suggestion was turned down.

⁷ Incidentally, *Podvig vo l'dakh* contains many aerial shots. According to Emma Widdis (2003, 122), "the aerial shot expresses control over the landscape, rendering it tame". This statement is, of course, fully applicable to those Norwegian films about Svalbard which employ aerial footage to reassert symbolically their own authority over the archipelago (see e.g. the 1974 NRK documentary *Svalbard i forsknings, oljens og turismens tegn*, with its light airplane flight above the Soviet settlements of Grumant and Barentsburg, accompanied by a voiceover explanation that the Soviets came to Svalbard because of the Svalbard Treaty; cf. also similar sequences in Jansen 1975 and Knutzen 1996). The fact that three Norwegian brothers on their two-month tour of barely inhabited Bjørnøya feel it necessary to exhibit a Norwegian flag outside their itinerant camp (Wegge 2014) may indicate that some Norwegians still feel insecure about Svalbard's ownership.

passengers on board. According to an unnamed Norwegian official (in all likelihood, Stavanger mayor Anders Mikal Smedsrud) speaking on board the *Krasin* in Stavanger on 21 August 1928, the USSR thus “demonstrated to the entire world that it’s ahead of European culture” (Vasil’evy 1928, 01:07:56).⁸ This was fully commensurate with the Soviet Arctic myth’s postulate that “the Arctic could be conquered only by the Soviet Union” (McCannon 1998, 109).

As has been observed with regard to the severe difficulties that the icebreaker *Sibiriyakov* and the steamship *Chelyuskin* encountered in the first half of the 1930s on the Northern Sea Route, the contemporary Soviet documentaries about the Arctic conquest, with their focus on successful salvaging operations and not on what and why had gone wrong, were good at effectively turning Soviet “failure into triumph” (Sarkisova 2016, 79). *Podvig vo l’dakh* can be cited as an earlier example of this technique applied even to pre-Soviet times, in the way that it treats Georgii Sedov’s 1912-14 disastrous attempt to reach the North Pole (briefly outlined to account for some of Nobile’s predecessors). Firstly, Sedov’s intentions are attributed to the desire to explore and utilise the shortest sea route between Europe and America, not to beat others in the race to the North Pole. Sedov’s inability to progress beyond Rudolf Island, as well as his death in the process of trying to do so, are not mentioned. Moreover, the information about Rudolf Island as the journey’s end is followed by pictures of eight people throwing hats in the air, next to two tents, as if in celebration of an achievement. In fact, there were only two other expedition members who went with Sedov as far as Rudolf Island, and the crew’s cameraman was not one of them.⁹ This reminds us that fact and fiction in both documentaries and feature films have been intertwined ever since Lumière’s first cinematic experiments (see, for example, Frémaux 2016; and, with regard to films about the Arctic, Potter 2016). It is always worth keeping in mind that the word “documentary” does not necessarily mean “a truthful record of what really happened”.

The Nobile Rescue Revisited: The Case of *Krasnaia palatka* (Kalatozov 1969)

Still, feature films produce even fewer expectations of veracity than documentaries, and the 1969 Soviet-Italian co-production *Krasnaia palatka* (The Red Tent) by Mikhail Kalatozov does not disappoint in this regard, retelling the story of the *Krasin*’s role in the rescue of the *Italia* team in a heavily fictionalized form.¹⁰ To begin with, *Krasnaia palatka* was not shot on Svalbard. Initially, the film crew had gone over to Svalbard and

⁸ The Norwegian memories of the Soviet role in saving the *Italia* crash survivors may have been reflected in Bøe-Waal 2014. In it, a distress signal, sent from the Svalbard area by three lost Norwegian children, is picked up by a Russian radio operator, just like in 1928 a Soviet radio enthusiast was apparently the first to intercept the *Italia*’s SOS. Incidentally, the Russian radio operator is absent from Hamre 1973 (Bøe-Waal 2014’s adaptation source).

⁹ For more on the Sedov expedition, see, for example, Pinegin 2009.

¹⁰ Despite, or perhaps owing to, its “semi-documentary” nature (T. I. 1970). The most serious deviations from the truth, exacerbated by the fact that many of the events’ participants appear on screen under their real names, are carefully listed in Hermansen 1972, who qualifies the liberties that the screenwriters took as a “misrepresentation” and “falsification” of history (see also Fjørtoft 1971a, Flogvall 1972, TV 1972 and especially Roman 1971, whose interviewees – two Norwegian sailors who took part in the *Italia* search and rescue operation – accuse *Krasnaia palatka* of “gross distortion” and “propaganda” for the Soviets). Nobile acted as the film’s consultant but had never seen the final version of the script, despite promises and reminders. His lawyers even issued a temporary injunction stopping the release of the film’s English-language version – but then apparently allowed it to go ahead on the condition that the *Krasnaia palatka* makers would publicly acknowledge the inaccuracies (see Rabben 1970 and Hermansen 1972).

stayed in Barentsburg while looking for suitable filming locations but ultimately decided against returning there because of a Soviet helicopter crash that took place after the filmmakers had left (see Vinitskii 1970, Parts 3-5, 13). What looks like Svalbard icescapes in the film was apparently shot on Franz Josef Land (Hooker Island; for details, see Martynovsky and Vizbor 1969) and somewhere along the coast of Norway, as well as the Gulf of Finland (for pictures of a disintegrating glacier and ice floes). The Kings Bay scenes were filmed in Tallinn.¹¹

Secondly, a great deal of screen time in *Krasnaia palatka* is occupied by the entirely fictional character of a female nurse called Valeria (played by Claudia Cardinale), who works at the Kings Bay hospital and has an affair with the meteorologist Finn Malmgren (1895-1928), a participant in the *Maud, Norge* and *Italia* expeditions (played in the film by Eduard Martsevich). After the *Italia* crash, in exchange for rescuing her beloved, Valeria offers herself to none other than Einar Lundborg (1896-1931), the Swedish pilot famous for bringing General Nobile from the survivors' camp back to safety (Lundborg is played by Hardy Krüger).¹²

Valeria's part was created at the insistence of the film's Italian producer, Franco Cristaldi, Claudia Cardinale's husband (see Vinitskii 1970, Part 15). According to one observation, Cardinale "was never able to make herself at home in this vehicle. Her presence had no real meaning beyond that of decoration" (Michaels 2006, 317). However, by billing Valeria as a central character,¹³ *Krasnaia palatka* creates a historical precedent of paying more attention than ever before, in a film aimed at a mass international audience, to women's presence in the Arctic in general and on Svalbard in particular (in *Semero smelykh*, the role of the polar station's female doctor, played by Gerasimov's wife Tamara Makarova, was somewhat less substantial, while in *Podvig vo l'dakh*, the only woman of prominence one can find is Aleksandra Kollontai, the Soviet plenipotentiary in Norway, who makes an Arctic-related political speech on board the *Krasin* in Stavanger, i.e. rather far from the Arctic).

The only conspicuous woman among polar dwellers and travellers, Valeria reflects a popular (and partially accurate) perception of the Arctic wilderness as "a male stronghold where, until very recently, women were interlopers" (Ryall 2017, 232). Even though Valeria is a foreign national, she does not challenge the Soviet Arctic myth trope maintaining that in the history of Arctic exploits "women remained junior partners – at best" (McCannon 1998, 100).¹⁴ Still, it is in front of Valeria that famous male polar

¹¹ The film crew's ultimate geographical remoteness from Svalbard did not seem to unduly hamper their efforts to conjure up a compelling vision of the Arctic locale: "Never before has the blind silence of the ice desert been presented so splendidly by the camera" (Anninsky 1970, 19).

¹² Malmgren left the camp with two others in an attempt to reach Kings Bay on foot, and died of exhaustion before his splinter group could be found.

¹³ See Senin 1968 for a film set report, particularly appreciative of Cardinale's large role and considerable acting skills.

¹⁴ Cf., however: Soviet non-fiction in the 1930s "often underline[s] the fact of considerable female participation in Arctic exploration and appropriation as a significant difference to Western practices" (Frank 2010, 123). This tendency is evident in Soviet/Russian film, too, and continues well beyond the 1930s. In such documentaries as Boikov 1934, Gorchilin 1966, Naumkin and Ivachev 1976, Gasiuk and Golovnia 1978, as well as Shergova 1987, Kadyrova 2013 and Tverdovskii 2014, women command a considerable screen presence, sometimes outnumbering men in a single frame (even though some female individuals – e.g. a cook called Katia in Tverdovskii 2016 – reportedly refused to be filmed). Women are usually shown in the traditional roles of supporters, carers and entertainers, greeting the arrivals and seeing off departures at the quay, getting married, looking after plants, children and animals, working as medical nurses and

explorers start explaining their *raison d'être* by providing answers to two fundamental questions: 1) why the North Pole? and 2) why the Arctic? As for the first, Malmgren says that Nobile (played by Peter Finch) is going to the North Pole (again) to measure himself against his former collaborator Roald Amundsen (played by Sean Connery);¹⁵ and Malmgren keeps going there because the North Pole has something to do with “emptiness, solitude, beauty and purity”. The second question is addressed by Amundsen, who acts as a moral compass in the film.¹⁶ He says: “Human beings have no business in the Arctic”.

Such a statement coming from a person of such stature and occupation amounts to the negation of mankind's entire exploratory effort in the Arctic, including the Soviet contribution. Does it then signify for Kalatozov a radical reassessment of the late 1920s' (and subsequent pre-WWII) Soviet Arctic heroics, forty years (or less) after the event? Not really. The film's overall message can still be summarized thus:

With the *Krasin's* rescue of the *Italia's* survivors, the Soviet Union demonstrated to the world the bravery of its citizens and the technological advances the Bolshevik regime had achieved a mere decade after the party seized power. That the USSR accomplished this rescue mission when efforts led by Western nations failed, made the Soviet achievement all the sweeter (Michaels 2006, 316; cf. also Kremlev 1970, 11–12).¹⁷

exterior decorators, organizing (and participating in) amateur concerts and preparing and serving meals on the premises of Arktikugol, the coal mining company in charge of Svalbard's Russian settlements (Grumant, Barentsburg and Pyramiden) since the early 1930s. Galin 1976, however, features a female radio operator, a profession that is often male-dominated and requires considerable technical skills. In Tverdovskii 2014, women are even allowed to speak, having been mostly confined to silent parts previously (one female voice claims jokingly: “I have come [to Svalbard] for cryotherapy, to stay younger for longer”). (By contrast, the Longyearbyen women of various backgrounds and occupations have had a voice in Norwegian documentaries since at least the three-part, 80-minute-long TV series *Kvinner på Svalbard*, first broadcast by the NRK in April-May 1978.) A phrase from Shergova 1987 is indicative of the general situation with the female presence at the Russian settlements on Svalbard: “there's not enough work for female hands here, so many [married] miners [the settlements' dominant workforce, recruited on fixed-term contracts from Russia and Ukraine. – AR] leave their families behind” on the mainland (unless miners' wives are prepared to work as cleaners). By contrast, in Svalbard's Norwegian settlements – which have seen several female Governors (in 1995-98 and since 2015) and one female top executive at the Store Norske coal mining company (2015-18) – the traditional gendered division of labour has been eroded. The rise of the female power is also reflected in the gender shift in Bøe-Waal 2014: it is not a teenage boy who overlooks and ensures the children's survival on a desert Svalbard island (as the film's literary source, Hamre 1973, has it) but a teenage girl.

¹⁵ In 1926, Nobile and Amundsen were together on the successful transpolar flight by the airship *Norge*, with Amundsen as the expedition leader and Nobile as the airship's designer and pilot.

¹⁶ It is a moot question whether Amundsen deserves to be depicted as a paragon of virtue. Here is only one example. Just like Nobile was blamed for abandoning his men in the red tent and taking the first available flight to safety, Amundsen could be blamed for leaving behind several men from his South Pole expedition, after the premature start towards the South Pole in September 1911 forced his travelling party of eight to return to the base camp a week later, because of severe weather conditions. Amundsen was among the first three to arrive back in the camp. As his Norwegian biographer puts it, “if one compares the interrupted journey to a shipwreck, it does not look good that the captain saved himself first” (Bomann-Larsen 2011, 162).

¹⁷ For their part, some Scandinavians (and particularly Norwegians, with their highly impressive polar record) probably felt annoyed that Russians were portrayed in the film as “polar explorers who are as good as or, well, better than others” (Karo 1972).

It would perhaps be unreasonable to expect much else, given that quite a few Soviet film crew members belonged to the generation, whose childhood games reenacted enthusiastically the *Krasin's* rescue of the *Italia* (see, for example, Vinitiskii 1970, Part 13).¹⁸ Yet it has to be remembered that *Krasnaia palatka* was an Italo-Soviet co-production, i.e. an ideological and aesthetic compromise, as most, if not all, Cold War Soviet film co-productions with the West were (for more on them, see Siefert 2012). This must have prompted Kalatozov to deviate a little from the early Soviet Arctic canon in a number of ways. For example, Nobile's post-crash strategy of sitting tight and waiting to be saved appears more preferable to the makers of *Krasnaia palatka* than Malmgren's proactive but ultimately futile plan to form a walking party in the hope of finding help. Nobile's passivity, however, would have hardly been welcomed by the *Semero smelykh* characters, who "do not just survive in the Arctic, they are permanently engaged in one search or another" (Bugaeva 2015, 314). Also, *Krasnaia palatka* seems to undermine the traditional Soviet predilection for macho types in men and women alike¹⁹: Martsevich's Malmgren is no less heroic than his teammates but his "personality, lithe body and fate [...] bring to mind a feminine sensibility that stands in sharp contrast to the squarely masculine physiques and personalities of both Nobile and Amundsen" (Michaels 2006, 319).²⁰

Another piece of evidence of a creative compromise is the fact that *Krasnaia palatka* was released in two versions, the English-language cut being a good thirty minutes shorter than the Russian-language one. The two versions were also provided with two different scores (by Ennio Morricone and Aleksandr Zatsepin respectively; the Soviet soundtrack also featured a humorous song by Iurii Vizbor, sung by the red tent dwellers to amuse themselves). Sean Connery got less exposure in the Soviet version, as he was little known in the USSR (his Bond films could not be screened publicly until perestroika). Furthermore, the English version's discussions of the difficulties of leadership were dropped (including the phrase "Leadership is a crime").²¹ In the Soviet version, "Soviet actors enjoy more screen time and more of the *Krasin's* story is told, [...] [which] no doubt contributed to the film's appeal to Soviet audiences" (Michaels 2006, 318).

Whatever the version, the film's title unequivocally "signals a 'red' Soviet ideological investment."²² [...] The USSR [is] being portrayed internationally as a beacon of world peace and progress, [...] which [...] will come to the rescue even of its sworn enemies"

¹⁸ For a satirical take on the *Italia* rescue effort in particular and on exploratory record-breaking (polar) flights in general, see the 1936 short story "Avio-rasskaz" (An Aviation Tale) by the Russian émigré author Mikhail Ivannikov (2012, 69–78). The story's background has been helpfully reconstructed in Danilevskii 2008.

¹⁹ Uncommon strength and resolve were deemed necessary to build communism and roam the Arctic.

²⁰ A Swedish journalist compared Martsevich's Malmgren to a "pillar-saint" (Unger 1972), and a Norwegian, to a "hypersensitive weakling" (TV 1972).

²¹ Some film critics still felt that even in the Soviet version the *Red Tent* makers "have decided to pose the problem [...] of whether Nobile was right or wrong, whether he in fact had the right to trifle with the lives of human beings – even for the sake of the noble aim of the affirmation of the power of human will and reason. They do not state an attitude. It is left to the viewer to think it out" (Dolinsky and Chertok 1969, 29). Such an ambiguity represented a departure from the rife didacticism that was typical of pre-1960s' Soviet cinema.

²² Originally, the red colour of the tent housing the *Italia* survivors had of course nothing to do with the colour of the Soviet flag. The tent was painted with the blood of a polar bear to make it more noticeable.

(Westerståhl Stenport 2015, 167).²³ This picture, largely indicative of the pre- and post-Stalinist USSR, is at variance with the one emerging in the 1930s, when the “Arctic discourse all over the world became increasingly militaristic” (Frank 2010, 106).

(Mostly) Cold War (Mostly) Soviet (Mostly) Documentaries on Who (Mostly) Owns Svalbard: Is Possession Really 90% of the Law?

Zvantsev (1934, 73) describes a shooting competition, under the slogan “Ready for Defence and Hunting” (*Gotovy k oborone i promyslu*), that took place on Wrangel Island one fine spring in the early 1930s, involving “Soviet polar snipers” and the Siberian Yupik people. Similarly, *Daleko na severe* 1932 shows Soviet miners on Svalbard engaged in target-shooting practice, aiming at a large caricature of a monocle-wearing Western capitalist, in a tuxedo and a top hat, astride a donkey. When the target is hit, the capitalist and the donkey swap places. Unless the miners came to the shooting range to learn how to protect themselves against polar bear attacks (another target in the sequence pictures a mini-polar bear),²⁴ or for a bit of hunter training, this footage can be interpreted as a challenge to Article 9 of the Svalbard Treaty, which prohibits the archipelago’s use for warlike purposes.

Alas, war came to Svalbard regardless, and no amount of firearms training for miners could have stopped it. In August-September 1941, the Soviet and Norwegian civilian population on Svalbard had to be evacuated by the Allied Forces, with coal heaps set on fire, mining equipment damaged or taken away and wireless stations destroyed, to prevent them from falling into the Nazi hands. In September 1943, Nazi battleships and destroyers attacked weather stations on Svalbard, manned by the Norwegian military, and subjected two Russian settlements, Grumant and Barentsburg, to heavy bombardment.²⁵ The two settlements were rebuilt soon after World War II had come to an end.

Ever since, Soviet/Russian documentaries about Svalbard tended to shun the images of armed Soviet/Russian-speaking archipelago dwellers. The emphasis has instead fallen on their peaceful occupations, such as mining, prospecting, glaciology, meteorology and archaeology (see Gorchilin 1966, Galin 1976, Gasiuk and Golovnia 1978, Shergova 1987 and Voronov 1991). The nonaggressive nature of Soviet/Russian settlements on Svalbard has been expressed in particular through the images of local kindergarten and primary school children, engaged in various educational and physical activities (see, for instance, Gorchilin 1966, Galin 1976, Naumkin and Ivachev 1976, Voronov 1991 and Tverdovskii 2014). Still, Soviet possessiveness with regard to the archipelago does not seem to have gone away. As if to claim the ownership of Svalbard by right of birth, segments of Boikov 1934, Galin 1976 and Shergova 1987 focus specifically on Soviet children apparently born in Grumant and Barentsburg.²⁶ All in all, it looks as if for Soviet/Russian citizens on

²³ To make a point that the USSR is magnanimous and not vindictive, *Podvig vo l'dakh* does not fail to mention that the *Malygin* icebreaker is sent to save the Western capitalist polar explorers from its berth in Arkhangelsk, “where the memory of the [Allied] Intervention’s victims is still fresh”.

²⁴ Curiously, Wegge 2014 also features a shooting practice, aimed at the picture of a polar bear as a target, by three young Norwegians who are getting ready for a visit to Svalbard to do some surfing.

²⁵ Some of the Svalbard-related World War II footage can be found in Knutzen 1996.

²⁶ These film segments can of course be also interpreted in the light of the absence of an indigenous population and permanent community on Svalbard, and Svalbard dwellers’ concomitant (but not unanimous) desire to take root on the archipelago by begetting a new family generation there. It should, however, be noted that, as a rule, women on Svalbard are not allowed – by convention rather than legislation – to give birth for fear of complications (which Svalbard medical authorities are insufficiently equipped to

Svalbard, especially in post-Stalinist times, the mere fact of working and living there increasingly sufficed to treat parts of the archipelago as Soviet/Russian, without the particular need to refer to the force of arms.

In Christensen and Sigstad 2013 (a documentary about adventure skiing and snowboarding), young Norwegian skiers symbolically reclaim their territory by peaceful means, too, when coming to Barentsburg to perform dangerous stunts over Soviet-built structures, just for fun. When in Barentsburg, the skiers' breathtaking skills are meant to demonstrate Norwegian superiority over the town's denizens, who speak no Norwegian (i.e. do not really belong) and can only take pictures of the skiers' daring acts, utterly unable to repeat (and perhaps even to contemplate) such acts themselves.

It is not that the Norwegian presence on Svalbard is ignored in Soviet films. On the contrary, it gets an almost obligatory mention in every documentary. *Daleko na Severe* 1932, for example, shows a Norwegian mine that "hardly ever works" (presumably because of the Great Depression) – while the nearby Soviet mine is a "hive of activity". After World War II, such Schadenfreude gives way to friendliness exemplified in regular reciprocal Soviet-Norwegian visits to and from each other's settlements on Svalbard that are recorded in Gorchilin 1966, Galin 1976 and Shergova 1987. Yet these visits look more like trips across an invisible border than within the same country,²⁷ even though in Shergova 1987, for instance, the Governor of Svalbard Leif Eldring²⁸ speaks (in English, with a Russian voiceover containing a summary of what he says) of the "international economic cooperation on Svalbard under Norwegian sovereignty; issues are resolved amicably and so it will continue".²⁹ The thinly veiled competitive nature of Soviet-

cope with). Hence those in the last weeks of pregnancy are normally sent to the mainland for delivery. The Soviet/Russian settlements' transport links to the mainland are somewhat less frequent than the Norwegian ones (e.g. currently there is one charter flight from Longyearbyen to Moscow every two months, compared to several commercial passenger flights a day from Longyearbyen to Oslo and Tromsø – not to speak of the 1930s–mid-1970s when there were comparatively few flights to/on the archipelago altogether, apart from postal and supply deliveries by air, on which see *Filmavisen* of 8 April 1954, the 'Postflyet til Svalbard' segment, as well as charter flights by Braathens SAFE since 1958). Unsurprisingly, it is Soviet newly-born babies who are shown in Boikov 1934, Galin 1976 and Shergova 1987. However, at least two of these babies have to leave Svalbard fairly soon (as we learn from Galin 1976 and Shergova 1987), presumably because their parents' employment contract has expired. (Occasionally, children are born in Longyearbyen, too. According to the 8 May 1978 episode of *Kvinner på Svalbard*, between 1973 and 1978 some 40 children were born in Longyearbyen; for a more recent occurrence, see, for example, *Første fødsel* 2006).

²⁷ This is also evident in *Midttun* 1964, part 2, when the Governor of Svalbard Tollef Landsverk comes to Barentsburg, which is heavily decorated with Soviet propaganda posters and slogans that are incomprehensible to most Norwegians.

²⁸ Eldring also makes an appearance in Galin 1976 and Naumkin and Ivachev 1976; and Landsverk, in Gorchilin 1966. It is interesting that Norwegian documentaries, such as *Midttun* 1964, *78 grader nord* (1969) and *Landet med de kalde kyster* (1969) underline the fact that the Governor is the highest civil authority on the archipelago, who comes to the Soviet settlements every so often to inspect them, that the Russians/Soviets pay tax to Norway for every ton of coal they produce and the Arktikugol mines are subjected to regular scrutiny by Norwegian mining inspectors. In Russian/Soviet films, however, Norwegian taxation and inspections are hardly ever mentioned and Soviet/Russian consuls greet Norwegian Governors as their equals.

²⁹ There has of course been international scientific cooperation on Svalbard, too; see, for example, Barr 2002 and Kotliakov and Zinger 2002. A group of Polish glaciologists, led by Professor Jan Szupryczyński, is shown while visiting Svalbard in Naumkin and Ivachev 1976. The Polish meteorologist Stanisław Baranowski is interviewed in *Fjortoft* 1971b. A French and a British geologist, as well as a Norwegian paleontologist of Russian origin, are interviewed while on Svalbard in *Midttun* 1964. Malakhov Jr 2017 is

Norwegian relationship still makes itself felt, for instance, in reports about football and volleyball matches and ski tournaments between Longyearbyen and Barentsburg/Pyramiden dwellers in Gorchilin 1966, Galin 1976 and Naumkin and Ivachev 1976.

Simultaneously, and especially during the Cold War, there is palpable tension arising from mutual (Soviet/Russian and Norwegian) accusations of forbidden military activity on Svalbard. For the Soviet part, such accusations have been summarized by Portsel 2012, 48 (“Norway continued to follow a policy which can be seen as a contravention of the archipelago’s demilitarized status, e.g. the Norwegian Navy calling into Spitsbergen’s waters, as well as the construction of an aerodrome and a radar station”).³⁰ As far as the Norwegians are concerned, their fear of the potential Soviet military threat on Svalbard is exemplified in Solum 1985 (based on the 1977 eponymous bestseller by Jon Michelet and actually filmed on the archipelago): a small Norwegian ship crew comes across a secret Soviet radio bearing station on Svalbard and, in self-defence, has to exchange fire with the Soviet troops (which include a heavily armed Aeroflot helicopter); eventually, some Soviet servicemen and all the Norwegian crew members die. More recently, the Cold War anxieties have been revived in Svendsen 2017 describing a dangerous Tromsø-based present-day journalist’s investigation of conspiracy theories behind the 1962 fatal accident at the Kings Bay mines in Ny-Ålesund that brought down a Norwegian government (one such theory points at Soviet responsibility).

Amundsen 1996 shows that the suspicions about clandestine Soviet military presence on Svalbard were not altogether unfounded. The documentary is based on the confessions of retired Soviet Naval Intelligence Captain (1st rank) Vitalii Khalaman. An engineer by training, Khalaman was posted to Svalbard in 1982-89. He was in charge of the Kapp Heer Soviet helicopter base, a military unit disguised as a Geological Prospecting Expedition, or GRE (*Geologo-razvedochnaia ekspeditsiia*). According to Khalaman, this unit, at some point consisting of eight technicians and two translators and known as the 32nd Arctic Hydrographic Unit of the Soviet Northern Fleet, had been established in the 1970s to maintain reliable radio communication with the Soviet submarines in the region. Radio aerials of different ranges at the top of the Kapp Heer control tower were built in such a way as to gather radio intelligence (in addition to staying in touch with the helicopters, which were of the type Mil MI8 – MT, painted in Aeroflot’s civilian colours – just like in Solum 1985 – and able to carry up to 25 people on board). Helicopter pilots were military personnel under instruction to keep mum about it. They had an order to register all the traffic that they observed on land and sea – and report it in coded messages directly to the Northern Fleet base in Severomorsk.

That was not all. Ever since the establishment of the Svalbard airport near Longyearbyen in the mid-1970s, the Soviet military command had apparently thought of how to use it in the event of war. For such an occurrence, among members of staff at the Soviet Svalbard mines, two plain-clothes military officers were employed, who would become battalion commanders as and when necessary. Two battalions would be formed out of miners, one in Barentsburg and another in Pyramiden (the Grumant mine and town

devoted in its entirety to the Swedish-Russian Arc-of-Meridian Expedition to Svalbard in 1898-1902 (with a heavy emphasis on the Russian part of the enterprise) and the legacy it has left behind.

³⁰ See also: “According to some sources, it is planned to deploy elements of the US missile defense system on the archipelago’s Bjørnøya, Hopen and Kvitøya islands” (Lukin 2009, 352).

were closed down in 1961³¹). One battalion would be tasked with cutting off the road between Longyearbyen and the airport, to stop the Norwegians from coming into it. A group of armed miners would also descend onto the airport, using helicopters or snowmobiles, and take it under control – until a battalion of Northern Fleet marines arrived to guard the aerodrome for the strategic Northern Fleet air force to land there and wage battles in the Arctic.

Soviet miners were recruited for Svalbard in accordance with their military specializations, acquired during their obligatory military service (as radio operators, infantrymen, grenade throwers, etc.). Miners themselves did not know about the real reasons behind their recruitment process, which was designed to simultaneously meet both military and non-military objectives. The same dual approach applied to weaponry and means of transportation. In the 1980s, the GRE held over 2500 hunting rifles of the Los' (Elk) make (there were no weapons hidden in the mines, however, as that would be too easy to spot). Snowmobiles and GT-SM tracked cargo carriers could also be used in both military and non-military operations. To keep miners in good physical shape and familiarize them with the climate and terrain, the workforce was trained by seemingly civilian methods, such as tourist outings, skiing, snowmobiling to Pyramid, Longyearbyen, Sveagruva, etc., and staying overnight in huts, almost every weekend. Sometimes such outings were led by the mine's deputy director for civil defence.

Did the Pomors Discover Svalbard before Anyone Else? The Case of *More studenoe* (Egorov 1954)

Such a practice seems commensurate with the Soviet conduct on Svalbard in general, characterised as tending “to exploit legal grey areas – rather than to challenge [Norway's] sovereignty outright” (Abbott 1993, 20). One way of subtly questioning Norwegian authority over the archipelago has been the Soviet/Russian insistence that the Pomors – i.e. Russian speakers historically populating the shores of the White Sea – discovered (and exploited) Svalbard not only before Willem Barents (the earliest Pomor artefacts found on Svalbard allegedly come from mid-16th century) but even before the Vikings (whose traces on Svalbard have not apparently been come across to this day,³² even though Svalbard borrows its current name from a 1194 entry in the Icelandic Annals;³³ for details, see e.g. Verba 2007, 25–26, Gorchilin 1966, Shergova 1987 and Voronov 1991). Spreading the belief that Svalbard (known to the Pomors as Grumant) had been Russian³⁴ could work as an extra motivation for the Soviets to try and exercise control

³¹ For the disturbing images of Grumant in a state of decay ten years later, see Fjørtoft 1971c.

³² Cf., however, the following statement in a review of Galin 1976: “Vikings were the first to see Spitsbergen” (Zabelin 1977, 10).

³³ Cf.: The Norwegian decision to rename Spitsbergen as Svalbard “was politically motivated. Its goal was to secure Norway's ‘historical rights’ to the archipelago” (Derzhavin 2016, 151).

³⁴ Hieronymus Münzer's 1493 letter to King Juan II of Portugal stating that in the High North, in the realm of the Great Duke of Moscow, there is an island called Grulanda, and Gerardus Mercator's 1569 map, which allegedly depicts Svalbard as one of seven Holy Russian Islands north of Scandinavia, have been used as a proof (see e.g. Verba 2007, 25). Malakhov Jr 2017 even claims that Holy Russian Islands, or “Sviatye Russkie ostrova” (in Russian), are a Pomor moniker for Svalbard. In fact, the so-called Holy Russian Islands are a misinterpretation of Mercator's place names Santi & Rustene, which actually correspond to the Sandøya and Røst islands in Norway's Nordland province, as described by Pietro Querini (see Helland 1908, 868). I am grateful to Leonid S. Chekin for bringing this source to my attention. On the mythopoetic origins of Grulanda, see Chekin 2017.

over the archipelago as a kind of ancestral land, in addition to it being a key strategic location in an anticipated military confrontation between NATO and Warsaw Pact countries.

An important question about the Pomors' presence on Svalbard is whether their stays were short-term, i.e. mostly limited to summer time, or long-term, i.e. involved (more or less regular) overwintering. Soviet/Russian scholars and art professionals tend to argue in favour of the latter, citing as evidence, among other things, an apparently true story of four Pomor sailors surviving on Edge Island (or another smaller island near it) for over six years in 1743-49 after being accidentally marooned there. *Lerua 1772* (republished in 1933, 1955 and 1975) – an authoritative account of the adventure, based on conversations with some of the survivors – has imaginatively been used in the feature film version of the incident (see Egorov 1954).

As the details of how the Pomors kept themselves fed and warm were not enough to make a full-length motion picture, much about their lives before and after their polar Robinsonade was either invented or altered (filling the blanks that had only partly been supplied in *Lerua 1772*). Thus, the film, perhaps unusually for the 1950s' features about the High North, pays a significant amount of attention to the castaways' women on the mainland. These women – portrayed in the traditional roles of selflessly faithful female family members – refuse to believe that their men are dead, and keep waiting for them, no matter what. Among the women, there is a missing sailor's fiancée, who – in a plot move similar to *Krasnaia palatka* – promises her hand in marriage to a local rich man if he funds a search expedition. Unlike in *Krasnaia palatka*, her fiancé is eventually found alive, which heralds a happy ending.

Also, according to *Lerua 1772*, the four Pomors found themselves on the desert island because they had been sent there from an ice-bound ship, to find a place for the ship crew to overwinter. Yet owing to a sudden storm, the ship disappeared off the island's coast and never returned. In the film, however, the four sailors' misfortune comes as a result of a pirate attack by a Dutch captain, hired by a businessman of foreign origin, who wants the Pomors to stop going to sea and start working as lumberjacks for his timber-making enterprise.

The film was made in the wake of the Soviet anti-cosmopolitan campaign of the late 1940s – early 1950s. It is therefore hardly surprising that all the foreigners in it are villains and the priority and superiority of things Russian are extolled at every available opportunity. It is not enough that foreigners crave for quality timber from Russia to build their boats with (which may well be true); and Russians are claimed to have discovered Grumant 500 years before Barents, no more and no less (which sounds rather legendary). Russian nautical maps are said – by none other than the Dutch captain – to be better than foreign ones. This is an overstatement that can easily be disproved by quoting a more reliable Russian source: “In the 1720s-1750s, the Arkhangelsk Admiralty used Dutch nautical charts as the most accurate [of those available]. Russian charts for this area simply did not exist back then” (Belov 1975, 17).³⁵ Veracity not being Egorov 1954's

³⁵ From time to time, maps of Svalbard are shown in films about Svalbard and can occasionally be seen as sending subliminal messages about the archipelago's proprietorship. Thus, the map in Gasiuk and Golovnia 1976 has Cyrillic lettering (which can be interpreted as a hint that Svalbard is a Russian territory) and the word “Barentsburg” on it is larger in size than the word “Longyearbyen” (which can be interpreted as a suggestion that Barentsburg – the Russian consular headquarters on Svalbard – is a more important town than the archipelago's administrative capital). Shergova 1987 displays a map of “XVI-XIX-century Russian

strong side,³⁶ Svalbard was apparently filmed in Crimea (Sudak), at least for the outdoor scenes without snow. The winter scenes with animals, for the most part, must have been shot elsewhere (but not on the archipelago, it seems) – and edited in.

Later Soviet films, even if made in the documentary genre, largely stick to the line adopted by Egorov 1954 with regard to the Pomors' pioneering role on Svalbard. Shergova 1987, for example, when speaking of the first Svalbard explorers (without specifying a particular time period), mentions Pomor *koche*s (small wooden sailing ships, designed for travelling through ice floes) – but not Barents. In an adjacent sequence, Dr Vadim Starkov, head of the Soviet/Russian archaeological expedition on Svalbard (in existence since 1978), is interviewed next to an excavation site. He gives a lengthy description of the remains of Pomors' wooden living quarters on the archipelago, dating six earliest known locations as 16th-century leftovers. Starkov emphasises that the Pomors brought all their wood with them from the mainland (Svalbard is treeless), not only for building huts but also for a bit of fuel, and denies that for their Svalbard huts Pomors could have used driftwood gathered on the archipelago itself (allegedly there was not much driftwood there at the time).³⁷ This is probably because in his research Starkov relies on dendrochronology to establish the age of wood that Pomor huts were made of, and assumes that the huts were built not too long after the trees had been cut into timber.³⁸ This assumption seems a little far-fetched: some huts' wood may well have come from 16th century, but how sensible is it to assert with confidence that it could not, for the most part, have been driftwood?

Also, irrespective of dendrochronology, a question arises: If the Pomors did indeed overwinter on Svalbard, and had to bring all their wood with them to do so, for huts as well as some fuel, how much wood would they then need to carry on board their vessels and would this have been a feasible amount to handle?³⁹ In Shergova 1987 (or, for that matter, in any other film under analysis), this issue is not discussed and the viewer is never informed that the dating of Pomor artefacts on Svalbard is contentious and Starkov's opinion, although influential among his Russian colleagues, is not shared by everyone.⁴⁰ Instead, Voronov 1991 simply repeats the claim that Pomors sailed to Svalbard as early as the 15th-16th centuries, and shows a recently built imitation (in Barentsburg) of a typical wooden Pomor-style dwelling, as if it proves anything. The dwelling is said to house various well-preserved artefacts of everyday Pomor culture,

archaeological sites on Spitsbergen" from Barentsburg's local history museum, with multiple dots indicating locations all over the archipelago, including its northernmost parts.

³⁶ Other improbabilities include a child among the castaways, who does not grow much on screen in the six years on the island.

³⁷ Naumkin and Ivachev 1976, however, state unequivocally that since the 15th century Pomors have been building their Svalbard dwellings from driftwood.

³⁸ See Starkov 1998, 47–48, with reference to Lerua 1772, among others, on the subject of Pomors bringing their own timber to Svalbard. Huts could be built on the mainland and then dismantled for transportation to, and subsequent re-assembling on, Svalbard.

³⁹ Allegedly, old ships could be brought by Pomors to Svalbard, in convoy, to be taken apart and burnt bit by bit, or used as construction material (on the latter practice, see Starkov 1998, 48).

⁴⁰ Cf.: "West European historians [...] regard the period of Russian hunting in Svalbard as a relatively recent phenomenon, [...] more precisely at some point between 1704 and 1710. [...] A theory which views the start of Russian hunting on Svalbard as a result of Peter the Great's grand initiative to establish Russian whaling in the Svalbard area seems to be more in accordance with the source material available today than previous theories" (Hultgreen 2002, 125–26, 143).

which is apparently represented on Svalbard even “fuller and wider than on the [Russian] mainland”.

Svalbard Today: Coal Miners or Tourists? The Case of *Grumant – ostrov kommunizma* (Tverdovskii 2014) and *Velkom tu Piramida* (Tverdovskii 2016)

However old they are, the Pomor artefacts from a distant past do not invalidate the Svalbard Treaty’s demand for today’s residents of Svalbard to engage in an economic activity of some kind to justify their stay. As the coal reserves on Svalbard are dwindling (see e.g. Coal Is King 1993),⁴¹ Russia seems to place its bets on supplanting coal mining with tourism as the country’s rationale for remaining on the archipelago for the foreseeable future.⁴² How promising do such plans look at the moment? Judging by Tverdovskii 2014 and Tverdovskii 2016, prospects for neither industry appear particularly bright, as far as Russian settlements are concerned.

The title of Tverdovskii 2014 ingeniously combines the Pomor and the Soviet past, perhaps hinting at the anomaly of the Russian presence on Svalbard today. The film is mostly about the miners’ community in Barentsburg, presented as a surviving fragment of the Soviet empire, if only because it is predominantly Ukrainian citizens who currently work there for the Russian state-owned company Arktikugol. Even the Soviet anthem (the 1977 version) is heard in the soundtrack at one point as a song that once symbolically hailed the multiethnic USSR as a unity of Soviet peoples. However, unlike the Soviet documentaries about Svalbard that are often eager to exceptionalise the life and work of the Soviet citizens on the archipelago (because of its special location, weather conditions and geopolitical worth), Tverdovskii 2014 is sober and skeptical. Much of this attitude comes from the community itself, which is allowed – almost for the first time ever in a Russian/Soviet film about Svalbard – to use its own voice. (Previously, all the documentaries, apart from a few scenes in Shergova 1987, spoke – via intertitles or a voiceover – on behalf of Soviet residents on, or visitors to, Svalbard, who appeared on screen almost completely silent⁴³).

⁴¹ There apparently exist hitherto unexploited oil reserves on Svalbard. Boikov 1934 (judging by the description in RGAKFD’s film catalogue entry no. 2483) and Gorchilin 1966 speak of oil prospecting on Spitsbergen. So does Midttun 1964, part 1, too, as well as the Norwegian documentaries *Landet med de kalde kyster* (1969) and *Svalbard i forskningsen, oljens og turismens tegn* (1974), made for the NRK. Svendsen 2017 spins a yarn about the dangers of Norway’s choice between the USA and the USSR/Russia as two possible principal strategic partners in oil (and gas) search and extraction on Svalbard. On the real story of oil deposits and oil prospecting on Svalbard, see, for instance, Barr 2002, 142–45 and Verba 2007.

⁴² Cf.: Arktikugol “has served Soviet and later Russian interest in coal and geopolitics at Svalbard since 1931. [...] [After Pyramiden’s closure in 1998,] the company left the town to decay for a number of years. [...] In 2010 the Trust [...] started an ambitious renovation programme, and in spring 2013 the company reopened a hotel to accommodate visitors. [...] [Arktikugol wishes] to develop Pyramiden as a tourist destination, with industrial heritage functioning as a material anchor for evoking a Soviet past [...] selling an experience of Soviet nostalgia, the material remains of mining constructed as authentic and relics of a Soviet community designed in accordance with socialist ideals. The Soviet past that is becoming increasingly invisible in present day Russia may thus be discovered frozen in time in the Arctic. [...] By defining the material remains of its mining operations as heritage, the company can use them as a tool to generate alternative incomes as well as a means of performing political authority. The historical narratives which the Arktikugol Trust produces seem to serve the same interest, building an image of a long and continuous Russian presence at Svalbard” (Avango and Roberts 2016, 136–37).

⁴³ To be fair, Shergova 1987 with its half an hour of screen time is the longest Soviet documentary about Svalbard, while Tverdovskii 2014 is almost twice as long than Shergova 1987.

It is clear from what the present-day community members are saying, men and women alike,⁴⁴ that many of them have come to Barentsburg to earn more than they would have done on the mainland (after the first six months, Arktikugol employees are gradually entitled to up to 50% extra pay to compensate for their difficult working conditions, on contracts that may last for up to five years – and then be renewed if necessary). The company employees who first arrived on Svalbard before the demise of the USSR unanimously praise the Soviet times by comparison with the current state of affairs. They remember how, in the late 1980s – early 1990s, when the population of Barentsburg consisted of some 1,500 people (now it is c. 500 at the most), the canteen worked around the clock serving a smorgasbord with a choice of more than a dozen salads every day, as well as tea and compote on tap, all free (now many Barentsburg dwellers tend to buy foodstuffs in a shop and cook at home). The town's subsidiary farm had pigs, cows and chicken, and employed eleven farmhands (now there are only pigs and just two farmhands looking after them). There apparently were some 5,000 films at the local cinematheque (it is not clear what happened to them but they reportedly do not exist any longer).

The crew of *Tverdovskii 2014* enjoyed privileged access not only to the Barentsburg mine and some of the town dwellers' private quarters (such locations were shown in *Galina 1976*, *Gasiuk and Golovnia 1978* and *Shergova 1987*, too) but also to an operating theatre in the hospital (filming a male doctor and a female nurse at work) and to the local amateur band's rehearsals and performance at the house of culture. With the community's cooperation, the filmmakers also recorded a bizarre ritual of "drowning the bitch",⁴⁵ the New Year celebrations and the public gathering on the occasion of the sun's first appearance on the horizon after many months of absence. The overall impression is that the dominant emotion elicited from the viewer by the filmmakers is that of sympathy towards the community, not admiration, as Barentsburg now is far from a model town for miners that it may have been a mere generation ago.⁴⁶

There are, of course, valuable parts of community life that were not available in the Soviet days, such as a purpose-built Orthodox Christian chapel (*Tverdovskii 2014* films a religious service there) and internet and Skype (which seem to have taken over the function of the key symbolic connection with the mainland, previously fulfilled by the images of radio transmitting equipment⁴⁷). Yet the fact that the film crew went to

⁴⁴ The film relies on the input from ordinary community members, who are not always identified. The Arktikugol managers and the Russian consul in Barentsburg are conspicuous by their absence (*Galina 1976*, for example, depicted the then Soviet consul Nikolai Nechaev; and *Naumkin and Ivachev 1976*, consul Sergei Grebnev).

⁴⁵ A dog effigy is made of paper, metal or some other material and thrown into the water off the Barentsburg embankment by someone who has completed the first six months of working for Arktikugol. One explanation of this ritual goes back to the 1930s: in the early days of its existence Arktikugol had to resort to the help of forced labour. Soviet prisoners with shorter incarceration terms of up to five years would be brought to Svalbard to work in the mines. In six months, their sentence would be considered spent, and they would be free to leave – or remain with Arktikugol on an employment contract. In labour camp slang, such prisoners were referred to as "suki verbovannye", or "recruited [sons of] bitches", hence the "drowning the bitch" expression, i.e. parting with one's prisoner status. Another explanation is more recent. It cites the fact that the probation period for new Arktikugol employees lasts for six months. The ritual therefore denotes a successful passage of the initiation stage.

⁴⁶ Cf.: *Tverdovskii* "revisits the identity of the worker, once heroic and lionized in Soviet cinema, and examines a milieu that represents faded glory and utopia gone astray" (Sarkisova 2019, 242).

⁴⁷ See, for example, the emotional scene in *Gorchilin 1966* featuring a radio communication between the divided members of the Kuleshov family, some staying on Svalbard and some in Moscow. Needless to say,

Barentsburg during the polar night period (something which no other Russian/Soviet filmmaker had done before⁴⁸), and briefly focused on the 1996 Arktikugol charter airplane crash in Operafjellet near the Longyearbyen airport, and on at least two miners (Anton Gofman and Aleksandr Zlobin) who died while on shift in April and June 2013 respectively, attracts audiences' attention to the dark and dangerous side of Svalbard existence (perhaps deliberately overlooked by Tverdovskii's predecessors) that sporadically makes itself felt in a rather overwhelming way and should not be underestimated. Even the film's concluding scene, in which Barentsburg denizens collectively greet the sun, does not fill one with much optimism,⁴⁹ because it suddenly ends with a picture of the arctic fox, or "pesets" in Russian, which is a widespread euphemism for a vulgar expression that means "an extremely undesirable situation" or even "death".⁵⁰

The "pesets" is a recurrent image in Tverdovskii 2016 (a companion piece to Tverdovskii 2014), filmed in the late winter and summer period and portraying a tiny community of one Ukrainian and two Russian speakers on Pyramiden (whose population in late Soviet times used to be in the region of 1,000), engaged in an uphill struggle of bringing in tourists, preferably foreign, to stay overnight, in a hotel with no running water supply and room temperatures of 8°C. Even though Tverdovskii 2016 is the "light", "sunny" part of the diptych complementing the "dark" Tverdovskii 2014, which was illuminated mostly by the moon and electricity,⁵¹ the filmmakers are rather ironic about Pyramiden's chances to attract tourists for longer than a couple of hours; this business scheme is defined as a "big bosses' unbridled fantasy, bound to be propped by the shoulders of indefatigable titans", such as the three Pyramiden occupants.

The tourist season has just begun. The three "titans" – Pyramiden's caretaker-in-chief Petrovich, his deputy Iura and the guide Volodia – perform extraordinary feats of valour trying to overcome the deficiencies of the town's infrastructure and to make the place more attractive and user-friendly to visitors. For example, Petrovich and Iura need to unblock the hotel sewage as an emergency, so that tourists would not have to use an outhouse. Neither deed is easy to accomplish in Arctic temperatures.

Also, Petrovich and Iura have to bring potable water to the hotel in cisterns from an artificial lake, because the water pipes connecting the lake to the settlement have not been operational for decades. To fill the cisterns, one has to turn on a pump. To do this, it is necessary to activate an old power generator (that, incidentally, has been out of use for a while) when it is 30°C below zero outside. The cisterns can only be driven back and forth

transmitter masts in Soviet settlements on Svalbard (and other remote locations, in the Arctic and elsewhere) carried an ideological significance, too, especially in the 1930s: "Stalinism imagined Arctic exploration [...] in colonising terms: the quest was to establish as many outposts as possible (each reachable via radio waves [...])" (Kaganovsky 2016, 177). The erection of one such radio mast was captured in *Daleko na severe* 1932 (as described in film catalogue entry no. 13280 at the Russian State Archive for Documentary Film and Photography, or RGAKFD).

⁴⁸ Kadyrova 2013 is the only exception, but as this is an RT channel documentary made in English for external consumption, it won't be analysed here.

⁴⁹ This scene further utilizes the utopian imagery (a "City of the Sun"), already noticeable in the film's title (a "Communist island"), and can be interpreted as mocking the Soviet utopia, whose remnants miraculously survived in the Norwegian Arctic as a fascinating curio.

⁵⁰ The arctic fox makes a repeated appearance in Wegge 2014, too – representing nothing but itself.

⁵¹ Such a duality reminds the viewer that "the Russian [vision of the] North is as much a place of terror as of enlightenment" (Davidson 2005, 9).

by an old heavy duty KrAZ truck, which is not any easier to start than the power generator, even though the thermometer in the garage shows as much as 2°C. To illustrate how colossal the task of turning on the KrAZ engine is, the countdown at the launch of Gagarin's space flight is inserted in the film's soundtrack.

Meanwhile, the guide Volodia (armed with a gun against polar bears, as Svalbard residents should be when out in nature) has his own important problems to solve. He has to walk around for quite a bit to find a reliable mobile phone signal, to ask his mother to transfer him 500 roubles (is he paid a salary at all, one wonders). Volodia is ready to look after any number of tourist visitors, who may arrive at any time. Yet a cavalcade of twenty snow scooters or so passes Pyramiden by without stopping (organised snow scooter tours from Longyearbyen do not normally include a rest at Pyramiden). Afterwards, Volodia makes a painted wooden sign saying "Hotel, bar" by way of advertising – but this sign falls down on the snowy ground at the end of the film.

Research into the Russian settlements' tourism industry on Svalbard has indicated that even though both Longyearbyen and Barentsburg/Pyramiden "accepted tourism officially only since 1989" (Umbreit 2006, 328), i.e. simultaneously, Longyearbyen's tourist intake has since outperformed that of Barentsburg/Pyramiden by quite a margin. By 2003, 500 tourist beds and c. 70,000 overnight stays per year in Longyearbyen were registered, "giving jobs to more than 100 persons. [...] Today [i.e. in 2006], tourists leave NOK 60-100 million in Longyearbyen per year – more than the total volume of coal sales in Barentsburg" (ibid.).⁵² By contrast, "in Barentsburg, the total annual income from tourism can be estimated to be around roughly NOK 1 million, which equals just a bit more than 1% of the annual touristic income in Longyearbyen" (ibid., 330). Among the problems contributing to the slow advance of tourism on the Arktikugol-run Svalbard territories are apparently mining-mindedness, the lack of experts on tourism, underdeveloped infrastructure (including the absence of an airport in Barentsburg), incalculability, the availability of state funding only and the lack of transparency and clear long-term goals (ibid., 331-32).

The Russian tourism industry on Svalbard is growing, however. In 2016 (the year when Tverdovskii's second part of the diptych was released), 30,000 tourists were served by the Grumant Centre of Arctic Tourism (an Arktikugol subsidiary), compared to 20,000 two years previously (when Tverdovskii 2014 appeared). The vast majority of those were non-Russian tourists spending a couple of hours at the most at Barentsburg and Pyramiden. In 2016, only c. 600 Russian tourists came to Svalbard via the Grumant Centre for a week-long stay, on average, which is six times higher than the comparable figures for 2014 (see Svetozarskii 2015 and Chislo rossiiskikh turistov 2016). Still, 600 is only 2% of 30,000. And does not an increase in Russian tourist numbers on Svalbard spell more trouble than it is actually worth? According to Tverdovskii's cameraman Aleks Mikeladze, "it's not going to be much fun when a Russian middle-class tourist gets there for a quad bike drive, while armed and drunk out of his skull" (Mikeladze 2013).

⁵² In 2015 (the latest figures I could find), the non-Russian segment of the Svalbard tourist industry's annual turnover was in the region of 630 million NOK, while the number of overnight stays per year in Longyearbyen exceeded 130,00 and the number of FTEs in the tourism and culture industry on the archipelago (for Norwegian settlements only) amounted to 480 (out of a total of 1,650) (see Eeg-Henriksen and Sjømæling 2016, 14, 16). In Malakhov Jr 2017, Longyearbyen is even referred to as a "tourist settlement" (*turisticheskii poselok*).

Conclusions

Time will surely tell whether tourism on Svalbard proves to be a boon or a bane for Arktikugol. Meanwhile, let me draw some preliminary conclusions from the film overview. The Soviet cinematic representations of Svalbard more or less conformed to the Soviet treatment of the Arctic as “a venue for defining ideals of Soviet masculinity and demonstrating the triumph of Soviet technology over nature” (Michaels 2006, 313). Only the collapse of the USSR gave filmmakers (such as Tverdovskii) a chance to portray the female Russian speakers on Svalbard through their own words (thus challenging the tradition of Soviet male Svalbardians dominating the screen), and the antiquated Soviet technology on the archipelago, as largely unfit for its purpose.

And yet, even Soviet films about Svalbard, regardless of the prominence in them of aerial footage, inspired by many classical Soviet cinematic productions that deal with substantial geographical distances (and, to a lesser degree, of recurrent images of the wireless and binoculars, as well as maps in Russian, signifying the USSR’s control over land, sea and air) still consider the archipelago a special case because of its Norwegian jurisdiction. In Vasil’evy 1928, and to some extent in Kalatozov 1969, the USSR’s presence in Svalbard’s attractive, exotic and perilous land-/snow-/icescape environment is depicted as that of a well-endowed and benevolent guest of honour in another country. This is made especially obvious by the appearance of Ambassador Kollontai in Vasil’evy 1928, as well as by the fact that in Kalatozov 1969, it is Amundsen who pronounces a final, exonerating judgement on Nobile’s actions.

Otherwise, however, Soviet cinema tended to emphasize the alleged lasting presence of Russian speakers on Svalbard since the 11th century at the earliest (see Egorov 1954),⁵³ and romanticize the archipelago as a place where Soviet life patterns and routines are enacted, despite its particular territorial isolation from things Soviet. If my selection of Norwegian films for this article is anything to go by, they too reflect upon the creeping/residual Sovietization (and suspected concomitant militarization) of Svalbard – without much enthusiasm, though (cf. Solum 1985, Amundsen 1996 and Christensen and Sigstad 2013). Nevertheless, both during and after the Cold War, the USSR/Russia is not necessarily represented as Norway’s enemy, with Solum 1985 and Svendsen 2017 in fact being more critical of the Norwegian authorities’ handling of issues to do with Svalbard.⁵⁴ Bøe-Waal 2014 contributes towards a balanced representation of Norway’s oldest Svalbardian neighbour, by introducing a Russian character from Barentsburg who hears the SOS of the lost Norwegian children and thus helps their rescue (see footnote 8 of the present article for more detail).

In general, the Norwegian films about Svalbard have a more authentic feel, as almost all of them were shot on the archipelago (with the exception of Svendsen 2017, in which Svalbard is often named but never shown). By comparison, only the Soviet/Russian

⁵³ This discourse has been recently reinforced in Malakhov Jr 2017, which accentuates the continuity between Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet residence on Svalbard, and even refers to the Barentsburg, Grumant and Pyramiden settlements as “Russia”.

⁵⁴ Cf.: Solum’s film “shows the inferiority and subordination of the small Norwegian nation to the powerful Russian neighbour and to the East/West political game in which its own national identity is reduced to feebleness, withdrawal and geopolitical loneliness” (Mrozewicz 2018, 43).

documentaries about Svalbard were shot there, while the Soviet/Russian feature films were not.⁵⁵ Kalatozov 1969 and especially Egorov 1954 lack plausibility as a result.

It is somewhat difficult at times to shake off the feeling that many Russian/Soviet films about Svalbard, on the one hand, and at least some Norwegian films about Svalbard, on the other, describe a kind of mutually observed parallel reality (each in their own way).⁵⁶ Still, there are topics and concerns that both film groups share. Among the recurrent themes are the geopolitics of remaining on the archipelago until further notice, under any conceivable pretext; the downsides of a male-dominated environment; the visually arresting yet potentially lethal nature; and the abundance of wildlife (arctic foxes, birds, seals, walruses, reindeer and polar bears), which currently outnumbers humans on the archipelago – but for how long?⁵⁷

Also, there is yet another common feature shared by Soviet/Russian and Norwegian films about Svalbard, where ice covers some 60% of the landmass (and there is fjord ice, drift ice and pack ice, too). These films share this feature not only with each other but with many more films about the Arctic, irrespective of their genre and country of origin: “The expansive sheet of ice [...] serve[s] as an empty canvas on which to reimagine politics and nationalism. [...] The Polar sea ice is a porous, dynamic, and partially impermanent border area between East and West” (Westerståhl Stenport 2015, 168–69).⁵⁸

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⁵⁵ Not only Russian/Soviet features, of course, make other geographical locations stand for Svalbard on screen. Thus, the popular British TV drama mystery series *Fortitude* (Donald 2015-18), inspired by Svalbard and imitating Longyearbyen and Barentsburg communities in anything but name, was mostly shot in Iceland.

⁵⁶ Knutzen 1996 even calls Barentsburg “another planet”.

⁵⁷ The cinematic image of the polar bear is especially important, as it “embodied the Arctic itself: the word denoting the region comes from the Greek *arktikós*, meaning ‘great bear’ [or, to be precise, ‘having to do with the Bear(s), i.e. the constellation(s) Ursae Major (and Minor)’ – AR]. [...] Most frequently, explorers are pictured as triumphant over the bear; by emphasizing their subjugation of the Arctic ‘lord’, the Soviets demonstrated that they were, by extension, the new rulers of the North” (McCannon 1998, 84). The scenes of triumph over polar bears can duly be found in Vasil’evy 1928 (a bear is killed by a rifle shot from on board a Soviet ship, see 00:35:40-00:36:20) – but also in films that are not about Soviet superiority, such as Egorov 1954 (a Pomor kills a bear with a knife in a one-to-one combat) and Bøe-Waal 2014 (to protect her younger sibling, a Norwegian teenager engages in a screaming match with a bear – and wins it). Recent films sometimes exhibit an awareness of polar bears as vulnerable species. While Naumkin and Ivachev 1976 show Pyramiden dwellers in direct contact with a polar bear at large, and Gorchilin 1966 portrays two polar bear cubs in a cage, Tverdovskii 2014 and Tverdovskii 2016 relate a number of stories about recent sightings of polar bears in Barentsburg and Pyramiden but the viewer does not actually see any polar bears that are alive, merely an effigy in the Longyearbyen airport. Similarly, the NRK documentary *Polarlandets planter og dyr* (1969) includes several sequences of swimming and running polar bears and bear cubs, whereas Wegge 2014 can merely demonstrate a polar bear in the form of a tiny plastic toy – the only kind of bear visible at the time of filming on Bjørnøya (a place name that means “Bear Island”).

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