Mashenka (*Машенька*, 1942)

Maria Belodubrovskaya

dir. Iulii Raizman; screenplay Evgenii Gabrilovich; photography Evgenii Andrikanis, Galina Pyshkova; music Boris Vol'skii. 35mm, black/white, 72 mins. Mosfilm, distrib. Artkino Pictures.

Mashenka is a love story of an ordinary Russian woman, Masha (the name Mashenka, of the film's title, is a diminutive), and an ordinary Russian man, Aleksei. Masha (played by Valentina Karavaeva) works at the post office at a provincial train station. She meets Aleksei (played by Mikhail Kuznetsov) in May 1939, during an air raid drill. Aleksei, a taxi driver and aspiring engineer, gives her a lift home and invites her on a date to which he never shows up. When Masha discovers that he is sick, she dedicates herself to his care, only to find out that he sees her as nothing but a friend. Yet, when Aleksei suggests that she help him prepare for entrance exams to engineering school, she agrees. Soon Aleksei says that he is in love with her, but she does not know whether to trust him. Indeed, at a party that Masha throws to celebrate Aleksei's exam success, he meets Masha's more attractive friend, Vera (played by Vera Altaiskaia), and by the end of the evening Masha finds them sharing a kiss. Masha and Aleksei part ways. In November 1939, the Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union begins, and Masha, who had been training as a medic, is placed at the Finnish battlefront. One day at an outpost, she accidentally runs into Aleksei. He is also on the frontlines, as a member of a tank crew. Aleksei is on his way to Leningrad for a twelve-day medical leave, but, having seen Masha working tirelessly, he decides to forego his leave. He leaves a letter to Masha, who had already left the outpost, revealing what she means to him. At the end, after Aleksei is wounded in a daring solo attack on machine gunners, the two cross paths again. Masha never received Aleksei's letter, but she knows of its content from others. Under war conditions, letters are read and passed on orally, soldier to soldier, as the likelihood that they would reach the intended addressee is low. Masha is now certain that Aleksei loves her, and they promise to look for each other in the future.

The film clearly is a melodrama: It deals with an unhappy love of a rather bland-looking woman with a heart of gold. Since Aleksei is not an ideal love interest but a deeply flawed man, Masha's love is selfless and surprising for the audience throughout the film. Aleksei is vain, pretends to have read Marx, yet quits school, values money over education, does not volunteer to go to war, socializes with questionable charac-

ters, and takes advantage of Masha's feelings when he asks her to help with his studies. The film portrays him as more attractive than Masha, and some of his friends even mistake Masha for his teacher. We are meant to feel badly for Masha's unreciprocated devotion to an unworthy man, and we are asked to admire her resolve to walk away from the relationship when Aleksei proves fickle and her reserve when she meets him again months later. The film is also melodramatic in its absence of a happy resolution. Though the couple is successfully formed, Masha and Aleksei say goodbye to one another again at the film's end. Having just committed to each other, they are immediately absorbed into a military conflict much bigger than they are, and the war is deadly enough to make their ultimate reunion unlikely.

Superficially, the story of the film follows what Katerina Clark has identified as »the master plot« of socialist realism, the core approach to storytelling practiced in the Soviet Union since the 1930s. The master plot follows a character's progression towards gaining socialist consciousness. However, as opposed to the majority of socialist-realist narratives, Masha, the protagonist, arrives in the film already fully formed, and it is Aleksei who gains consciousness. Thus, the reason the overarching storyline is employed in *Mashenka* is to make the romantic partner worthy of the female protagonist and hence to have the master plot serve the melodrama. Another unusual feature from the perspective of socialist realism is that *Mashenka* lacks an older, wiser Communist Party member—a stock character of Soviet cinema—who can guide the hero's transformation. Instead, it is Masha's love that is the instrument of socialist education in the film. Masha is serious and ideologically settled, but she is not a Party member. In fact, she admits to Aleksei that she had only started reading Lenin and had never tried Marx. Yet, she is a dedicated Soviet citizen: When at work she is handed a telegram that reports only eighty-three percent plan fulfillment, Masha scolds the customer sending the telegram: »When are you going to reach one hundred percent?« At one point, her girlfriends call her »professor,« because, as opposed to them, she thinks only about her studies. Through the logic of the film, it is Masha's convictions as a Soviet citizen that give her love a socially transformative force. And yet, socialist rhetoric is deployed in the service of melodrama.

Other than these subtle and humorous references to plan fulfillment and to Marx and Lenin as well as the obligatory portrait of Stalin that hangs on an office wall, the film is remarkably devoid of political themes. As *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther wrote in his review of the film upon its 1942 U.S. release, »Considering all the grim and gripping pictures which have come along from Russia recently, it is somewhat surprising to encounter a pleasant and affecting Soviet film about love—just plain love—between two people« (Crowther 10). This lack of either specifically »Soviet« or political content was deemed problematic by Soviet censors when the film was in production. One censor complained that a chance encounter between two lovers was a device not appropriate for Soviet cinema (Fomin 90), and another said it would have been much better if Aleksei was a positive character from the start (»Obsuzhdenie stsenariia *Mashen'ka*« 3). These critics attacked the film for being a melodrama, because melodrama, or any plot focused on personal relationships, was considered too Western—that is, too individualistic—to be officially supported under Stalin.

Yet, the film was made and became a great success. It stayed on Moscow's screens for at least a year and a half and was very popular among Russian troops on the German front. In 1943, director Iulii Raizman, screenwriter Evgenii Gabrilovich, and actress

Valentina Karavaeva all received the Stalin Prize, the most important official recognition a film could receive at that time. Why? The film's adherence to the socialist-realist master plot, with an exemplary Soviet citizen converting a failing Soviet citizen into a hero, made the film acceptable. That the vehicle of this conversion was love, and not a Party representative, was likely forgivable due to the general relaxation of filmmaking norms following Germany's attack on Russia in June 1941. However, the film's biggest and most irresistible asset was the figure of Masha. Authenticity, warmth, gentle demeanor, resilience, and humanity all make Masha an irresistible character. Karavaeva's perfectly pitched performance made *Mashenka* not only an unlikely woman's picture to emerge out of Stalinist Russia but also a masterpiece of film portraiture that goes far beyond any confines of socialist realism or Soviet cinema.

References

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