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Cinema, Nation, and Empire in Uzbekistan (1919–1937)

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BOOK REVIEW

Cinema, Nation, and Empire in Uzbekistan (1919–1937), by Cloé Drieu (translated by Adrian Morfee), Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2018, xiv + 293 pp., $42.00, ISBN: 978-0-253-03784-8

Cloé Drieu's *Cinema, Nation, and Empire in Uzbekistan (1919–1937)*, translated from the original French by Adrian Morfee, is a welcome addition to the fields of Soviet and Central Asian studies. Drieu dissects the early development of cinema in Uzbekistan as it intersects with nation- and empire-building in the Soviet Union. Her monograph focuses on fiction films produced during the interwar period, and it explains the methods of film production, their intended messages, and the audience's reception of those messages. Using cinema as her focal point, Drieu delves into this complex chapter of Soviet history to explore the construction of Uzbek nationalism as the party apparatus began consolidating control. Cinema served as a tool for the creation of – and often challenge to – Soviet conceptions of Uzbek nationalism during the 1920s and 1930s by giving Muscovites and Uzbeks a medium to express their visions in this newly formed colonial space.

To accomplish her task, Drieu uses 14 cited films (some of which have not survived), substantial archival materials from Russia and Uzbekistan, journals and newspapers, interviews, and published and unpublished sources. Her catalogue of these materials makes this work worthwhile, but her narrative and analysis make it even more valuable. Drieu explains in her introduction that her task is to explore the contention of power between the Soviet centre (Moscow) and the periphery (Turkestan, turned Uzbekistan in 1924) through the production of films, their influence and their reception. The films Drieu analyzes were produced between 1924 and 1937, two significant years in Uzbekistan's history. First, as Drieu explains, 1924 serves as the national territorial delimitations as well as being the year the first full-length fiction film, *The Minaret of Death* by Viacheslav Viskovskii, was produced in Central Asia. The year 1937 serves as a logical conclusion for Drieu as it introduced the first talking film, *The Oath* by Aleksandr Ulos'stev-Garf. Naturally, 1937 also marks the start of the Stalinist terror (3). She provides six chapters comprising three broad chronological categories, along with an introduction, a conclusion, an appendix, and a glossary. Drieu's appendix of information is a meticulous catalogue of theatres in Turkestan, theatres with sound in Uzbekistan, films produced, sales numbers, and some attendance figures for the period of her study.

Part 1 of the book, 'Decolonizing Central Asia: Film Structures and Representations', covers 1919 to 1927, explaining the development of the film industry in Central Asia. Film was not a completely new concept to the region, as she describes in the opening vignette of her book. At Registan Square in 1901 for Qurbon Bayrami (*ʿayd al-ʾaḍḥā*), an event heralding the arrival of film was held where images of magic lanterns were projected in the Shir Dor madrasa alongside a reading of Tolstoy's 'What Men Live By' by a certain young mullah (xi). The medium of film was present throughout the Near East and Central Asia before the outbreak of World War I, but the production of film in Turkestan only occurred after the Soviet takeover. Drieu adroitly lays out this short but crucial era in Soviet history through her exploration of the competing narratives set forth by the Soviet regime. Local cultures were meant to be portrayed in 'realistic' fashion, yet the realities of Central Asia were drowned out by the European (i.e. Russian) domination of the film industry during this period. Film companies operated predominantly out of Moscow and Leningrad, and because of their funding and style of production, films during this period reified conceptions of 'Russia's Orient', meaning they were written,

staffed, featured and meant to be watched by Europeans. Central Asia continued to be portrayed as a suppositive East that was unmoored by the constraints of specificity. By the period's end, films began incorporating greater party messaging, where the local (national) was depicted by tradition and the more important universal (international) was portrayed by Russia. This bifurcation of Soviet ideology in film sets up Drieu's argument in the next part of her monograph.

The second, 'Cultural Revolution and Its Paradoxes: Nation, Modernity, and Empire', focuses on the period from 1927 to 1931, which saw a drastic increase of Moscow-directed oversight and greater centralization of institutions for the implementation and dissemination of 'nationalist in form, socialist in content' messaging in the move toward 'imperial domination' (123). The era coincided directly with the 'liberalization' of Islamic societies in Eurasia, which is visible through the productions promoted by Soiuzkino (founded in 1930). While Uzbekkino, the autonomous film production and distribution organization of Uzbekistan, continued to produce films, the effort of having a centralized authority over messaging is seen clearly in Soiuzkino's control of film funding in Central Asia. The move towards empire is embodied by the themes and imageries, in which local – and often viewed as antithetical – cultures of Central Asians were diminished in films, such as 1925's *The Muslim Woman*, paralleling the era's jadidist movement of cultural reawakening and reformation.

The concluding part of the book, 'The Paradoxes of the Nationalities Policy: Nationalism versus Internationalism', focuses on 1931 to 1937. She delves extensively into two of the era's national filmmakers, Nabi Ganiev and Suleiman Khodjaev. Drieu analyzes these films and explores how and to what extent these films fulfil the Stalinist conception of national in form and socialist in content. Ganiev produced three films that starred Uzbek actors (previous films had featured Russian actors) and supported the overall Soviet messaging of the period. For example, in his 1932 film, *Ramazan*, he pushes the anti-religious directives from Moscow, yet Drieu also points to the subtle resistances in the techniques he used. Unlike the second filmmaker Drieu discusses, Ganiev survived the purges through his general pro-Russian depictions and lack of overt dissent. Khodjaev did not fare as well as Ganiev in his narrative attempts at film. *Before Dawn*, Khodjaev's 1933 film, was censored for its depictions of Tsarist Russia as oppressive and the resulting 1916 revolt as anticolonial. His use of cinematic technique was meant to elicit anti-Russian feeling given the era of collectivization of that time.

Drieu's monograph is an excellent resource for anyone interested in Uzbek cinema specifically or Central Asia generally. Her clear parsing of the era's complexities and coherent narrative make the text accessible even to those who may not be familiar with Central Asian cinematic history or film studies. She provides extensive analyses of films, and she contextualizes them in ways that illustrate the endeavours undertaken by the regime to propagate notions of modernity to a population that needed to be taught how to receive and comprehend these messages (218). Of note to scholars of Central Asia are new understandings of how films were produced, what the technical challenges were of imbuing films with national and international messaging, and the impacts individual films had in a Soviet context. Drieu's skill at concisely tackling these issues by using Uzbekistan as a case study makes her monograph a captivating account of the early Soviet cinematic experience.

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