

REPRESENTING RUSSIA IN THE CITY OF ANGELS: THE CHURCH OF HOLY VIRGIN MARY
Alexander Ortenberg

The improbable tale of the Church of Holy Virgin Mary on Silver Lake is, at the same time, a poignantly Angeleno story. It also seems to be a perfect illustration to Jean Baudrillard's famous critique of representation¹. The church was originally designed as a film set prop for an early Hollywood liberal adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's novel "*The Cossacks*", a dubious choice to represent the culture and architectural environment of Terek's Cossacks, where the action of the eponymous novel took place. Once rebuilt as a permanent structure, it became a simulacrum with no original, the simulacrum of an earlier simulacrum².

And yet, immediately upon its construction in 1928 the church became a beloved place of worship for Russian émigrés in Hollywood and one of the favorite sites of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad in general³. This fact raises a number of difficult questions such as authenticity versus simulacrum, permanence versus temporality, structural honesty versus pastiche. The paper argues that the representational aspects of architecture are especially valued by its users at the times when great social cataclysms threaten the very foundation of their identity.

* * *

The critique of the political economy of representation resonates with the history of the early Hollywood's Russia. Baudrillard's proposition that "in order for ethnology to live, its subject must die" is especially poignant considering the magnitude and the extraordinary violent nature of the Russian Revolution and the Civil War of 1917-1922⁴. The famous exuberance of the Russian aristocracy and its elimination in the course of the Revolution fed well the fascination with the *âme slave*. Its mystique prompted a number of movies that were as melodramatic as they were removed from any resemblance with actual Russia. Russian newcomers to Southern California were present at –and somewhat participated in– the construction of this Hollywood inspired image of Russia.

A large number of Russian émigrés were attracted to Hollywood. Some of them were professionally trained actors with cinematic experience who hoped that their training and their cultural background may find employment in the new booming film industry⁵. Some were former Russian army officers, who had a solid background in engineering and previous experience in taking charge of large groups of people. Both

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994

² Baudrillard (1994: 6).

³ For an excellent account of a series of early Hollywood movies on Russian themes and subjects, and of Russian émigrés' contribution to these and other movies, see Olga Matich, "The White Emigration Goes Hollywood", in *Russian Review* (64/2), 2005: 187-210.

⁴ Baudrillard (1994:7).

⁵ See "Russians in Hollywood: A Historical Chronicle", in *Faces of Russia: Past and Present - The On-Line Journal*.

these skills were in high demand in movie production studios. Some other Russian émigrés were former cavalry men, including the famous Cossacks⁶. They were wild enough to draw appreciation of the crowds yet docile enough to become excellent stunt actors whenever horseback riding skills were in demand, be it Ancient Roman legions or North American Indians. A few Russian aristocrats and intellectuals also came to Hollywood. With some luck, they had a chance to get consulting jobs for a film about their exotic land that had ceased to exist some fifteen years before.

Most of these émigrés were outraged by cheap clichés fabricated by Hollywood to depict the tragedy they had lived through in a very real way⁷. Their desire to give a more balanced image of Russian history, culture, and its natural environment was, however, mixed with attempts to push their political agenda as well as with attempts to make their status of Russian refugees as profitable as possible.

Feodor Lodyzhensky embodied this mix of tragedy and of drawing profit from it. The former pre-revolutionary Russia's army general—or so he was believed to be—Lodyzhensky started his Southern California odyssey as a penniless extra⁸. He soon became one of the best connected Hollywood Russians because of his expertise in "the private life of the Imperial Family of Russia." To no less degree his success was based on his famous *borscht* that was served in the *Double Eagle*, a restaurant on the Sunset Boulevard in Beverly Hills, which was frequented by the likes of Greta Garbo, John Barrymore and Gloria Swanson, and which was owned by Lodyzhensky.

Lodyzhensky became a consultant for *The Cossacks*. According to slavist and historian Olga Matich, the first script that he proposed for the movie transported its action to the time of the Russian Civil War that followed the Revolution of 1917. Not to mention some seventy years that separated it from the period depicted in Tolstoy's novel, the script displayed the strong political bias of its author. It had also a strong anti-Semitic overtone. The Cossacks who fought on the side of the Whites were portrayed as the carriers of the true Russian identity, as opposed to the Marxist Jews who did not have any appreciation for the Russian culture. The

⁶ The Cossacks were a special class of people within the Russian Empire. They had some degree of self-government and the privileges of free farmers. In return, they were to supply the Russian Army with the elite cavalry units. Most of the Cossacks' Commonwealths, or Hosts, such as Don, Kuban, Terek, Stavropol, Asov, Astrakhan, Orenburg, and a number of Siberian Hosts gained their official status between the 18th and the middle of the 19th century. During the Civil War in Russia the Cossacks fought on both sides. However, most of the hosts were either disbanded or lost their privileges. For a brief history of several Cossacks' hosts at the North Caucasus, where the action of Tolstoy's novel takes place, see S. A. Kozlov, *Kavkaz v Sud'bach Kazachestva*, Sankt-Peterburg: Kol'na, 1996. A number of Cossack's cavalry units who left Russia with the White Army in the end of the Civil War joined performing troupes, demonstrating their horseback riding skills throughout Western Europe and the United States, including Hollywood. See Matich (2005: 206).

⁷ They were equally disdained by those of their compatriots—and pure imposters—whose accounts of their proximity to the throne and the magnitude of their losses were greatly exaggerated if not completely fake. A number of articles that appeared in *Los Angeles Times* in the 1920's and the 1930's reported the instances of new-comers to Southern California claiming to be members of Russian aristocracy, eventually to be identified by "true Russians" as imposters.

⁸ Matich reports that Lodyzhensky rank was never confirmed. However, neither it was publicly questioned, apparently because his standing within the Russian émigrés was high enough. Matich (2005: 196).

script that was eventually adopted for production was equally removed from the realism of Tolstoy's novel, which was based on his own experience as a young military officer stationed in the North Caucasus in the 1850's. It brought the action to the 17th century, mixing the customs and costumes of Terek and Zaporozh Cossacks' in an improbable and exotic, even if less political melee.

Equally improbable was the choice of the architectural style of the prop that represented the Cossacks' village's church. It was based on the style of 13th century Pskov, one of Russia's Northernmost cities. Even if the style itself was represented quite faithfully, there is absolutely no chance that a building built according to this style would be found in a Cossack village, be it Zaporozh, Terek, or any other of the Cossacks' Commonwealths of pre-revolutionary Russia.

It is hard to say what dictated the style that A. A. Toluboff –a civil engineer and an assistant art director for the movie– chose for the prop. Perhaps, it was a reflection on the fact that Northern Russia never knew Mongol yoke and suffered a less severe form of serfdom. The spirit of the people living in this part of the country was not unlike that of the Cossacks, whose status of a "military class" gave them in times of peace the privileges of free farmers. The design of the church could also reflect the perception that Northern Russia was less corrupted by the Western European influence than the rest of the country. This perception was held by the Slavophile fraction of the Russian intellectual elite, and was represented in the late nineteenth century Church of the Savior in Abramtsevo⁹.

A number of Russian émigrés were impressed by the set and by the Russian presence during the movie production. An unprecedented number of Russian extras –many of them real Cossacks– participated in the filming of the movie. "The illusion of Russian scenery was so great that it was hard to believe that you are in California," wrote one of the Russian visitors who saw the production¹⁰. Characteristically, among those who approved of the set –if not of the script– were some of the most sophisticated Russian cultural critics.

Apparently, once a degree of authenticity was achieved, the émigrés community was willing to forgive flaws in the representation of Russia, even if some of these flaws were quite evident to them. Matich discusses this phenomenon in the context of another early Hollywood production, the 1926 movie by Joseph von Stenberg, *The Last Command*, which received approbatory critique from Russian émigré reviewers¹¹.

The ubiquitous Lodizhensky was among the consultants for this movie as well and even served as a prototype for its main character¹². This character, a former Russian Army General, ends up working as a humble extra in Hollywood. He is discovered by a visiting director from Soviet Russia, who, because of his anti-government activity before the Revolution, had suffered in the hands of the General.

⁹ Slavophile was an intellectual movement originated in 19th century Russia that opposed the Russian Mysticism to the Rationalism of Western Europe. See "Slavophile" article in *Encyclopedia Britanica*.

¹⁰ Matich (2005: 184).

¹¹ V. Krymskii, "Russkii Kholivud na ekrane", *Novoe russkoe slovo*, 24 January 1928.

¹² Matich argues that there might have been better prototypes for this role than Lodizhensky. See Matich (2005: 197-9).

In revenge, the director forces the General to play himself in a movie which he is about to film. The old man is wearing his high-ranking officer's uniform and his multiple military decorations, but has to take humiliating commands from the man whose life was once in his hands. In the last scene of the movie the poor General develops a delusion that he is given a chance to reverse history. He is giving his "troops" the command –his last command– to charge ahead in the hope that this offensive may prevent the catastrophe of the Revolution. He dies a few minutes later on the set from a heart attack.

The representation of the disastrous Russian engagement in World War I and of the Revolution in the movie is extremely simplified, to say the least. There is also big irony in the fact that the role of the Russian general is played by a German actor Emil Jannings. At the same time the real high ranking officers from the White Army remained in the background or behind the screen. Stenberg writes, in his recollections about the film, that he had a hard time persuading his Russian consultants to hide their disdain for the way the foreigners portrayed their country. And yet in the end the movie was accepted by the Russian community as a success. The work of a great film director, *The Last Command* contains scenes that even now, eighty years after its production, are still moving. Even if not totally authentic, the film touched all the right chords in the souls of the émigrés still grappling with the loss of their homeland and of their identity.

The Russian community's attitude towards the new church of Holy Virgin Mary was similar. The church was built in the Silver Lake district of Los Angeles in 1928. It resembled the church from *The Cossacks* film to the degree that some thought that the prop itself had been transported from the studio grounds in Culver City to the new location on Micheltorena Street. An analysis of the plans for the church shows that it was built from scratch. However, its architect Toluboff –the former film-set designer for *The Cossacks*– must have recycled the design.

The church became one of the most beloved places of the Russian community in Southern California and of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad in general¹³. Weddings and celebrations that included Russian émigrés of high profile took place there. This enthusiastic reception of the church prompts a difficult question. As a permanent structure, the design of the church is even more questionable than as a piece of film scenery. The appropriateness of replicating the style of the past aside, its architectural form was representative of the 13th century's masonry construction. As a pastiche over a California light wood structure, which becomes apparent once a number of its details are examined, it becomes bizarre. What looked somewhat authentic on the silver screen –even if its location in a Cossacks' village was dubious– could not withstand scrutiny at close range.

¹³ Among those who considered the church an important part of their life were intellectuals and artists such as S. L. Bertenson; V. I. Nemerovich-Danchenko who, along with K. S. Stanislavsky was the founder of Moscow Art Theatre; M. Checkov, a brother of the famous playwright and a celebrated actor in his own right; famous Russian composers S. V. Rachmaninov and I. F. Stravinsky. Numerous articles in *Los Angeles Times* report of concerts, weddings, memorial services and other types of high profile social gatherings that involved highly recognized members of the Russian Community. See, for example, *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 1, 1930; Mar. 29 and 30, 1943.

Match's account leads to the conclusion that authentication of a cultural artifact takes a variety of forms. In times of great social cataclysms with one's cultural identity being seriously threatened compromises are possible. People need formal and material confirmation of their belonging to a tradition even if its representation is not perfect. The concept of ideology as developed by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur may be more applicable to the history of the church of Holy Virgin Mary than Baudrillard's critique¹⁴. Ricoeur's theory embraces the Marxist tenet that ideology is a distortion of the true economic conditions, which is also a major premise of Baudrillard's famous essay. However, Ricoeur argues that rather than a sinister invention of the capitalist economy, ideology is a more general attribute of the contemporary world. In order to be successful in obfuscating economic inequality, an ideology has also to embrace those perceptions of reality that are of purely rational nature. Additionally, ideologies give a sense of purpose to members of society, and inspire them in their pursuit of meaningful life. The ideology of the Russian Hollywood community in the 1920's was a complex mix. It fused self-interest with passionate political convictions; dreams of return with the necessity to make sense of day to day practices; a struggle for excellence with the willingness to accept compromises.

Additionally, during the early period of the church's history, its charm derived from its temporary nature. In this respect it could be compared to the Italian chapel built by prisoners of World War II of a Quonset Hut and scrap metal on Shetland Island. The building does not hide its disjunction between the structure and the representation. To borrow another of Ricoeur's concepts, the "violation of the code of pertinence" between the figure and the ground led to new poetic pertinence¹⁵. Rather than simulacra, the chapel reads as a metaphor of the temporary stay in exile, of perseverance and of the hope of return. The church on Micheltorena Street must have triggered similar emotions. In its case the incongruence of the form and the construction was less apparent, but nor less known to the parishioners (Fig.).

Paradoxically, the church of Holy Virgin Mary became embedded in the unstable ground of Los Angeles deeper than much of its "permanent" and "earnest" architecture¹⁶. The great irony of the Russian immigration of the 1920's was that its representatives had to live abroad their entire lives. They saw their children growing acquiring American culture with little ties to Russia. As the congregation of the church grew after World War II, its demographics changed accordingly. Initially a temporary structure, almost literally salvaged from a film set, the church became a stronghold of Orthodox Christianity on the West Coast, catering to a

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, edited by George H. Taylor, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling", in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. V, no. 1 (Autumn 1978: 146).

¹⁶ The house that Joseph von Sternberg—the director of *The Last Command*—commissioned to Richard Neutra, and which was acclaimed by some critics as one of his best, was less fortunate. After changing several hands, the house was finally demolished by an unscrupulous developer. See Thomas Hines, *Richard Neutra and the Search for Modern Architecture: A Biography and History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

variety of ethnic and social groups most of whom would not fancy Russia as their state of permanent residence.

The addition to the church, the new buildings on its expanded grounds reflected these changes. Unfortunately, with these additions much of the charm of the original structure was gone. Their architecture became more generic, simply giving place to a number of mandatory attributes of Russian Orthodox Christian rituals. As it was built in 1928, the church emphasized the loss of the home and the distance from the beloved land, which, according to theorist Alberto Pérez-Gómez, contributes to poetry in film, theatre and architecture¹⁷. As it stands now, the “impertinence” of the metaphor vanished from the cathedral of Holy Virgin Mary.

* * *

The present paper poses more questions than it gives answers. It argues that representation can and should be part of architectural design arsenal, that engaging memory and the power of a metaphor enriches and deepens the experience of the users of our buildings. It recognizes the danger that representation can become a cliché. As Ricoeur pointed out, ideology always has a potential to become petrified and reactionary. However, this recognition leads to a conclusion that it is the architect’s responsibility to approach representation by constantly challenging the “codes of pertinence” and thus creating a new poetic meaning.

FIGURES

Fig. 01. Cathedral of Holy Virgin Mary on Micheltorena Street, Los Angeles.
Photograph by author.

Fig. 02. A. Toluboff’s sketch for *The Cossacks*.

Fig. 03. Church of the Icon of the Savior.

Fig. 04. Consecration of the Church, 1928.

Fig. 05. Italian Chapel, Orkney, Scotland.

Fig. 06. Church of Holy Virgin Mary, an early stage of construction.

¹⁷ Alberto Pérez-Gómez explores the notion of *chora* in several books and essays. See his recent *Built Upon Love: Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass, London, England: The MIT Press, 2006) for a discussion of *distance* form the object of desire as a foundation of poetics in Western European art.



Fig. 01

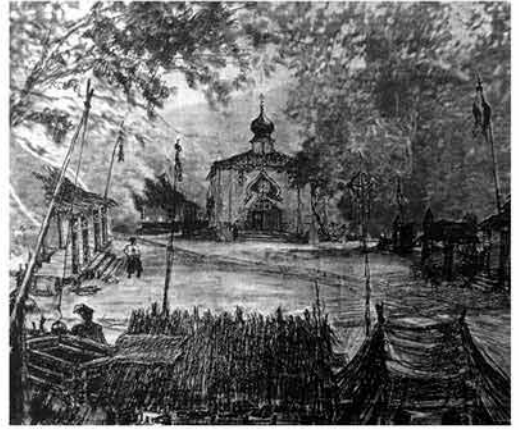


Fig. 02



Fig. 03



Fig. 04



Fig. 05



Fig. 06