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Cinema in Sakha (Yakutia) Republic: Renegotiating Film History

By Caroline Damiens (Inalco, Paris)

The post-Soviet years saw the emergence of “regional”^[1] cinematography in the Russian Federation’s ethno-territorial units: Buryatia, Khakassia, Tuva, Bashkortostan and Tatarstan. The Sakha (Yakutia) Republic (RS[Ya]) is no exception, and a diversity of cinematic activities has flourished there since 1991. New Yakut^[2] cinema distinguishes itself by its great variety. Almost every film genre is represented: comedy, art house, horror, drama or war film. The production has been quite important and stable for a few years: in 2010 about fifteen full-length feature films were made (Anashkin 2011), in 2011 seventeen were distributed in Yakut cinemas (Vanina 2012). Considering the population of the Republic (a little less than a million inhabitants), this is quite a significant figure. And the cinematic surge is no recent phenomenon: it is already more than ten years old and seems to be there to stay. The Russian-language specialized press has already shown an interest in this filmic case (Anashkin 2006) and even national TV broadcast a report on the Yakut sensation (Deriagin 2014).

Alongside this new film industry, a “historicization” of cinema in Yakutia was initiated. A sort of “archeological move” toward a “pre-history” of the current film production was carried out, thanks to the publication of archives, the writing of new film histories and academic works or collections of Yakut film veterans’ memoirs. Likewise, these last years, a National Film Archive and a Cinema Museum opened in Yakutsk. Therefore a whole range of memory work complements the birth of the industry. What relations does the current Yakut cinema maintain with its “pre-history”? On what grounds has the new generation of filmmakers emerged? What vision of film history is being set up after the fall of USSR? How does Yakut cinema renegotiate the terms of its integration into Russo-Soviet cinema? To examine these questions, this article will focus on institutions, which participated, through the production of a “prehistory”, to the creation and the invention of current

Yakut cinema in both its material and imagined dimensions. It will also concentrate on the careers of the key actors who established continuity with the Soviet film industry. Often, the same people have been involved in the creation of production studios and memorial initiatives, looking at the future through focusing on the past.

Professional organizations: between local anchoring and federal belonging

The National Film Company Sakhafil'm was officially born on June 23, 1992 from a decree (*ukaz*) by Mikhail Nikolaev, then president of RS(Ya). The company was established on the basis of the creative production unit (*tvorcheskoe proizvodstvennoe ob"edinenie*) Severfil'm. It is the only state film company in Yakutia:^[3] various institutions of the region-state finance it and all its productions are commissioned. Although numerous private film companies were created from the 2000s onwards (Almazfil'm, Tuimafil'm, Arctic Cinema, Sindis, Detsat, Costa Production, Magdis Studio, etc.), Sakhafil'm unquestionably opened the way.



In 1992, when the company was founded, Vasili Parfenov was appointed managing director and Aleksei Romanov took the post of artistic director. Both are former students of the Moscow-based All-Union State Film Institute (VGIK) and have been active in the Soviet film industry for years. Parfenov graduated in 1964 and worked mostly for Kazakhfil'm. He returned to Yakutia to work at Sakhafil'm. Romanov graduated in 1987, and is the first Yakut-Sakha who majored in directing. After his graduation, he moved back to RS(Ya) to establish a studio—he is the founder of the creative production unit Severfil'm in Yakutsk in 1990—in line with his idea that every people must be able to “tell the world its own culture, traditions, point of view on the world” (Romanov 2012). At the same time he started the production of his first full-length feature film *Middle World* (*Seredinnyi mir/Orto doydu*)

conceived as an “ethnographic fiction” about Yakut identity.

When Soviet institutions handed over some political competences to RS(Ya), the new National Film Company Sakhafil'm took Severfil'm's place. Severfil'm provided an almost complete production studio. In addition, support—especially financial funding—from the region-state's institutions played a decisive role in the creation of Yakut cinema. Thanks to active film professionals on the one hand, and a studio-to-be already established on the other hand, the National Film Company could materialize and be effective almost overnight. The first Sakhafil'm production was *Middle World*—Romanov's film was released in 1993—already in production at the time the company was being founded.

RS(Ya) Filmmakers' Union was also founded in 1992 (on December 4) during a meeting of cinema workers with the then new Cinema and Video Department of RS(Ya). The Union's functions are to set up and develop Yakut cinema in all its dimensions: organize film festivals, days of Yakut cinema, film presentations, and help young filmmakers. Its first secretary was, until 1995, Nikolai Santaev, another Yakut film professional who had graduated from VGIK (in 1967). Santaev made a

career as a cameraman at Yakut television. The Filmmakers' Union remained an independent body until its integration in the Russian Filmmakers' Union in 2004.

Although subsequent to Soviet professional organizations and using the talent of people who were formed by the Soviet education system, these new Yakut institutions strongly insist on their national anchoring within the republic. They advocate the development of a strictly Yakut cinema, which, according to Sakhafil'm statutes, displays Yakut cultures,^[4] traditions and views, at the same time as contributing to their preservation. This cinema is destined to the internal market, thus reinforcing the imaginary geography of the national republic. However, these institutions do not wish to break up with the Russian Federation. Still according to Sakhafil'm statutes, films ought to play a part in the preservation and strengthening of a unified Russian cultural space. Both national and firmly settled within the republic's borders on the one hand, integrated to federal territory on the other hand, professional institutions demonstrate an ambivalent wish for autonomy whilst remaining connected to the Russian space.

Nascent Yakut cinema relied on "ready-to-film" organizations (professional organizations, studios, unions) to get started. In order to fully account for the birth of Yakut cinema, technological advances in the 2000s (the development of the Internet and digital technologies involving change in production and distribution) must be taken into consideration. But they do not alone explain the inception of the industry in the 1990s. Then, it was the commitment and skill of a few people, combined with a strong political will (through passing laws and funding) which allowed the emergence of Yakut cinema.

Memorial institutions: building a national film heritage

Memorial institutions appeared in parallel with professional organizations. The State National Film Archive of RS(Ya) (GNKhKD, or *goskinokhranilishche*) was established on April 10, 1996. According to GNKhKD's website, their goal is to collect "every film (cinema or video) made or to be made on the history, culture and life of the peoples inhabiting Yakutia territory." The Film and Video Veteran Republican Organization (*RO veteranov kino*) launched the Film Archives' project. This group, created in March 1993, unites former "cinefication" (*kinofikatsiia*) workers in Yakutia. It was originally founded to organize help amongst impoverished film pensioners and originated the republican law "On cinematography" (passed on May 22, 1997: the law plans social benefits for former film industry workers). The region-state's government actively supported the Film Archives scheme with another law "On RS(Ya) audiovisual heritage", passed in 2005 (and completed by a presidential decree in 2010) legally binding producers to deposit one copy of their audiovisual documents in the Archives.

Ivan Zharaev and Vissarion Tomskii, both former heads of Yakut cinefication, are amongst the most active members of the Veteran Organization. The group initiated another enterprise, where veterans are particularly highlighted: the Cinema Museum of RS(Ya). It was instituted in



the aftermath of GNKhKD and is indeed part of the Archives, its full name being *Muzei kinematografii Gosudarstvennogo natsional'nogo khranilishcha kinodokumentov o respublike Sakha (Yakutia)*. In Yakutia, like elsewhere, the creation of a museum was concomitant to the inception of film archive storage, adding value to the collected material. The Cinema Museum opened in 2001^[5] with a similar approach film memorial institutions take around the world, that is collect Yakut pioneers' accounts and non-film archives in order to create a national filmography. In addition, Ivan Zharaev has turned historian and wrote a national film history (Zharaev 2011).



This “Yakut cinematheque” not only ennobles film veterans' work and practices, but also turns their work within Soviet cinefication into an active participation to the Soviet film industry. It operates as a Yakut “memorial site” (*lieu de mémoire*) where memory is being produced both in the real site of the museum and in the imagined site of film archives. The construction of a national heritage also proves a political gesture through the “repatriation” of images, which signifies taking back

and controlling national memory (Bulane-Hopa 2011). Although this repatriation is for the most part symbolic (GNKhKD orders and purchases copies from archives located elsewhere), it can be compared to the economic sovereignty gained by the region-state in the 1990s with the quota policy on natural resources (gold and diamonds for the most part). Amid the criteria to enter the GNKhKD collections, the territorial dimension is essential and once again emphasizes the strong anchoring within the Republic's borders. The memorial institutions express a wish to gain greater independence from the Russian “elder brother” through repatriation of the audiovisual heritage and controlling of it. Alongside political action (RS[Ya] declared its state sovereignty in 1990), they operate as a declaration of sovereignty on the visual level.

Festivals: relocation in the Arctic space and integration of Soviet heritage

To address the question of festivals, a detour from the transition period of the 1990s into the present is needed. The Yakutsk International Film Festival has indeed become an institution in its own right, both in terms of film diffusion and filmmakers' recognition. After the first festival on republican scale in September 2011—“Cinema of the Arctic”—a change in dimensions occurred two years later, when the festival became international. From 2013 onwards, thanks to connections forged with foreign festivals (Toronto “ImagineNative” Festival in Canada, Inari “Skábmagovat” Festival in Finland), the Yakutsk Film Festival can take pride in showing films from around the world while centering around the Arctic region. Indeed, many films in competition come from circumpolar countries: the Russian Federation, Canada, Iceland, Finland, Norway, Denmark, etc.

This extension of the territorial anchoring to the Arctic sphere can be seen as a move beyond a strictly national vision. That national vision of territoriality happened earlier, during the immediate post-Soviet years, in a historical period more favorable to self-assertion. But this de-centering towards the North is also a way to find one's own place in the global age. This relocation in the northern space, however, does not break up continuity with the Russian geographical space. According to Andrei Borisov, then RS(Ya) Minister for Culture, the 2014 Film Festival underlines "Yakut cinema's integration into Russian and world cinema" (Anon. 2014). This integration into Russian cinema can be interpreted as a sign of regaining control from the federal center at the time of Vladimir Putin's arrival at power at the beginning of the 2000s. It is sufficient to remember that in 2009 the RS(Ya) Parliament "freely accepted" removing the article claiming state sovereignty from the Republic's constitution (Maj 2012). As a matter of fact, the dual direction of Yakut cinema's integration (into Russian and World/Arctic cinemas)[6] is a way to reintegrate the Russian fold whilst at the same time withdraw from it. Such a move allows Yakut cinema to gain an international visibility. At the same time national (Yakut), transnational (integrated into the Arctic sphere) and sub-national (within the Russian space), Yakut cinema relocates itself in a global context. Doing so, it does not reject its Soviet heritage. The 2014 Film Festival presented a contemporary selection interspersed with Soviet films with the "Nashi v kino" (Ours at the Cinema) program that consisted of films taken from what I call the "Yakut Soviet filmography": a series of films shot during Soviet era with Yakut actors and/or on a Yakut theme.[7] It should be noted that the first festival, "Cinema of the Arctic", held in 2011 already presented such a retrospective.

This detour demonstrates that the Soviet heritage is being fully integrated into the new Yakut cinema. The fabrication of the Yakut Soviet filmography did not appear in the 2000s, but dates back to the 1970s. The Yakut Soviet filmography was constituted through film festivals organized in the Communist Bloc within the framework of the "Days of Yakut literature and art." Over time, these festivals established a national film repertoire. As early as 1964, the cameraman Nikandr Savvinov,[8], the first Yakut film professional, began to list Soviet films on Yakutia (Savvinov 1976). Updated in 1976, his inventory amounted to 10 full-length feature films and 85 documentaries. Once established, the Yakut Soviet filmography was converted into a "national repertoire" that circulated in the course of time. It now functions as an important part of the "pre-history" of the new Yakut cinema under construction. This integration of Soviet heritage can also be found within films through homages or references. For example, *Sniper Sakha (Snaiper Sakha)*, Sakhafil'm's foremost production for 2010, can be read as a homage to this filmography. Firstly, because the film uses veteran Yakut actor Spartak Fedotov, who played the role of the Yakut soldier in the 1963 Soviet war film *The Third Rocket (Tret'ia raketa, Belarusfil'm)*. Secondly, because it refers to another Soviet Yakut actor, Afanasii Fedorov, impersonating the Yakut sniper Togo in the 1974 war film *The Flame (Plamia, Belarusfil'm)*.

An interesting point to note about the "Nashi v kino" program at the 2014 Yakutsk Film Festival is that it was not limited to the Yakut Soviet filmography.



It included post-Soviet films, such as *The Horde* (*Orda*, 2011; starring Innokentii Dakaiarov, Fedot L'vov, Aleksei Egorov, Gennadii Turantaev) and *White Moss* (*Belyi iagel'*, 2014; starring Petr Basnaev, Irina Mikhailova,



Efim Stepanov, Galina Tikhonova, Matrena Kornilova), employing Yakut actors (although not impersonating Yakut characters) and even non-Russian production, such as the French film *Shaman* (*Chamane*, 1996; starring Spartak Fedotov). Thus the program does not establish a discontinuity between Soviet and post-Soviet cinema, or between Russian and international cinema. New Yakut cinema posits itself in a longer timeframe that is not limited to strictly national films. In this timeframe, former Yakut workers of the Soviet cinema industry (in the present case, actors) are fully recognized as professionals actively participating in this industry. The relationship to the Soviet film heritage engages in a reconfiguration of the relationship with the center: a reconfiguration both “towards the outside”, that is the Russian Federation (Yakut professionals’ active participation in Soviet cinema) and “towards the inside”, that is the Republic (the creation of a patrimonial film repertoire).

Writing a “native” film history

Alongside this constitution of a film patrimony, the Yakut Soviet filmography is closely associated with the writing of a “native” film history, native in the sense of “local” (not necessarily being indigenous in the ethnic meaning of the term). In parallel to new memorial institutions (Cinema Museum, Film Archives, festivals), new film histories are being written. Those new Yakut film historians (Sivtsev 2005; [9] Zharaev 2011) date the arrival of cinema in Yakutia to 1911. The publication of Zharaev’s book on film history in Yakutia in 2011 coincides with the centenary of the event. It thus celebrates a commemoration on republican scale. By so doing, this native film history does not align itself with Russian film history or any other one. It produces its own timeframe. Furthermore, this timeframe creates no discontinuity between Soviet and post-Soviet eras, nor between pre-Revolutionary and Soviet cinema. In this native film history, Soviet heritage is essentially treated from the point of view of Soviet cinefication and based on accounts and memoirs of local professionals, especially ambulant projectionists (*kinomekhanik*). But historians also point out the importance of amateur cinema, seen as a cinema strictly entrenched in RS(Ya)’s territory.

Amateur cinema as such appeared in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Some informal screenings took place as early as 1961. Amateur filmmakers rapidly organized themselves, gathered and mingled with film professionals, who were invited to screenings in order to provide advice. In 1965 the first amateur “festival” (*smotr-konkurs*) was established in the Yakut ASSR under the auspices of the Yakut Regional Committee of Trade-Unions and the Cinefication Direction. Yakut professionals were present as members of the jury panel: the cameraman Nikandr Savvinov, the scriptwriter Lev Gabyshev [10] and the television cameraman Nikolai Santaev. The films were not restricted to family films. On the contrary, they demonstrated a wish to move beyond the amateur genre: documentaries, film sketches, animation. Some amateur “studios” were established in Yakutsk and

others regions. They can be considered as the “ancestors” of today’s studios. Altogether more than 350 amateur films were made. Today they form a non-negligible part of the Yakutsk Film Archive collection. In 1970 an Amateur Filmmakers’ Club (*Klub kinoliubitelei*) was established under the aegis of the Cinema Committee of the Yakut Regional Committee of Trade-Unions. Soviet amateur cinema production was institutionalized and even sometimes semi-professionalized. Yakut amateur filmmakers were occasionally in charge of the filming of official events (such as the first visit in Yakutsk of a governmental delegation from the Mongolian People’s Republic). Thanks to their connections with film institutions, amateurs could even take part in professional shootings (for example during the filming of Mosfil’m production *Urgent... Secret... Gubcheka* [*Srochno... Sekretno... Gubcheka*, 1982] through the intercession of Yakutia ASSR Goskino and the Cinema Committee of the Central All-Union Committee of Trade-Unions).



It is therefore a whole “native” film production that has developed outside of the usual film industry channels. Because it expanded within the territory of the Yakut ASSR, amateur cinema has occupied a unique place in Yakut film history. Usually neglected in traditional film histories, Yakut amateur cinema, on the contrary, has attracted the attention of film historians. Their focus on this cinema entrenches Yakut film production in a longer timeframe.

This indicates an endeavor to de-center film history. It is no longer seen from the point of view of Moscow, but taking Yakutia as a center. By so doing, recent film histories (Sivtsev 2005; Zharaev 2011) contrast with those written during Soviet era (Kletskin 1973; Savvinov 1977), which inscribed film history in Yakutia in Russian film history and made it start with the October Revolution and the arrival of the Bolsheviks. For the new Yakut historians, there is no significant difference between amateur and professional filmmakers as they all worked for the emergence of Yakutia on screen. The most important thing for those historians is the production of films on Yakut territory. They highlight a “native” cinema that has developed concurrently with Soviet cinema. In their writings, this “native” cinema demonstrates autonomy in artistic creation within a nationalized, de-centered, sovereign film history settled in its own timeframe and not viewed as the product of a post-Soviet discontinuity. In this regard, the rewriting of film history can be interpreted as a replication of the new relations RS(Ya) government with the federal center in the 1990s by means of bilateral agreements and treaties widening political and economical authority of the Republic in the aftermath of RS(Ya) declaration of state sovereignty (September 27, 1990) and the collapse of Soviet Union.

Film dubbing in Yakut language: the return of a Soviet practice?

Today the majority of Yakut films are in Yakut language, subtitled in Russian in order to be understood by non Yakut-speaking persons, although a substantial part is shot directly in Russian. Language operates as an important marker denoting the

specificity and originality of Yakut cinema. It also functions as a response to the hegemony of Russian language (Damiens 2014). In the 2010s, some projects of dubbing into Yakut language appeared: the director of the newly built multiplex Cinema Center (Sinema Tsentr) announced his plan to dub Russian and international films while his competitor, the director of the oldest cinema in Yakutsk, the Central (Tsentral'nyi; he is also CEO of the film production company Almazfil'm), started the dubbing of the Chinese TV series *Genghis Khan* (*Chingiskhan*, CCTV 2004) in 2012. Thus they renew a practice dating from the 1930s, when subtitling began in Yakutia. The majority of spectators then did not understand Russian. The practice of subtitling persisted until 1969, when the Council of Ministers of the Yakut ASSR ordered film dubbing into Yakut language. Dubbing was performed until the mid-1980s, when political institutions put an end to it and funding ceased. The reason given was that the majority of the population understood Russian then. The total number of Soviet films dubbed into Yakut language varies in different sources from 98 (Zharaev 2011:196) to over 200 (Tomskii 2012; Sivtsev 2005: 94). In each case, it is a small proportion of Soviet films (between 4 and 9 per cent) that was dubbed.

The decision to reestablish this practice whilst the Yakut population understands Russian (the very reason to renounce dubbing in the 1980s) expresses an aspiration of visibility (or rather *audibility*) of Yakut language for its speakers as well as non-speakers. Beyond the cultural expression communicated by films on Yakut themes shot in Yakut language, dubbing Russian and foreign films indicates that Yakut culture is compatible with a global culture and not confined to a particular era or territory. In a more down-to-earth manner, it can also be used in order to strengthen language use (Yakut language, although not endangered, is described by UNESCO as vulnerable). In this case, it is the symbolic dimension of language which is being asserted, as there is no practical purpose when RS(Ya)'s population is largely Russian-speaking. It has to be noted that no republican institution supports the initiative so far. Only private companies consider such a project, which makes its implementation even more difficult. Besides, the lack of a necessity of dubbing is the source of a consensus deficit on the subject within Yakut society. The context is therefore very different from the Soviet period. Dubbing then benefited from the Soviet language policy. Current projects, supposing that they are achieved on a regular and continual basis, lie within the scope of globalization and at the same time act as a reaction to Russian language hegemony.

Conclusion: decentering cinema and renegotiating imperial relations

Yakut cinema has emerged in the 1990s on the ashes of the Soviet regime and in the aftermath of the declaration of state sovereignty of RS(Ya). Therefore it must be related to the reconstruction of national identity that was expressed at the same period. The strong support of local political authorities to the inception of a national cinema is a key factor. However, Yakut cinema's birth and development is best comprehended in terms of transition rather than as a discontinuity with the Soviet era. Cinema professionals, particularly those involved during the transition period, have ensured continuity and operated as a bridge between both eras. Drawing on the first generation of Yakuts graduating from the Film Institute (VGIK) in the 1960s— active, although in small numbers—, a new Yakut cinema has emerged in the 1990s.

This new cinema seeks to fully exist without denying the legacies of the past. On the contrary, it undertakes a renegotiation of the terms of its integration into Russo-Soviet cinema where Yakut cinema is considered an active participant in the Soviet film industry rather than a mere by-product. Both creating (through film production) and managing (through the control of the images of the past) a national vision, the nascent Yakut film industry aspires to “visual sovereignty” (Raheja 2010), at least in a symbolic dimension. Although institutions (professional organizations, museum, archives, festival), as well as the history they contribute to write, emphasize a strong local dimension, advocating a specific Yakut identity, they nevertheless do not cut themselves off other geographical spaces, be they historical (Russian space) or global (Arctic space). As a result, the center-periphery relation within the Russian space is reconfigured. History and film are de-centered, thus renegotiating the relations to the imperial and historical center.

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Notes

1] “Regional” is here in inverted commas as Yakut cinema is thought of more as a “national” cinema in Sakha (Yakutia) Republic. The term echoes the Russian word *natsional’nyi* which refers both to the main ethnic group of the Republic, the Yakuts-Sakhas, and to the territory of the Republic within the multiethnic Russian Federation. It is expressed in the names of the institutions: *National Film Archives on RS(Ya)* (*Gosudarstvennoe natsional’noe khranilishche kinodokumentov o respublike Sakha [Yakutiia]—GNKhKD*), *National Film Company Sakhafil’m* (*Gosudarstvennaia natsional’naia kinokompaniia “Sakhafil’m”*), for example.

2] The word “Yakut” will be used in this article to refer to the citizens of the multi-ethnic RS(Ya) as a whole and not only to members of the Yakut-Sakha ethnic group, as it is the way local film professionals name the phenomenon. This being said, it should be noted that Yakuts-Sakhas form a majority of those film professionals.

3] Although formally an independent body, its director, Stepan Sivtsev, considers it a state company.

4] Sakhafil’m statutes advocate the development and preservation of traditional cultures of Yakutia’s indigenous peoples, emphasizing the plural. But the other peoples, especially small-number (*malochislennye*) indigenous peoples (Chukchis, Evens, Evenks, Yukagirs, Dolgans), are very much, if not completely, unrepresented in new cinema. This fact is reflected in the very name of the company, which emphasizes “Sakha-ness”.

5] The Cinema Museum has not yet found a definitive address and is currently split up between two locations in Yakutsk.

6] Another direction toward the Asian space appears in the films themselves. It must be linked to the successful development of the neo-Eurasian political tendency in RS(Ya) (Damiens 2014).

7] Films from the “Yakut Soviet filmography” were produced by the RSFSR or Soviet Republican studios, as there were no studio devoted to Siberia or the North in Soviet film industry. They include such films as: *Aerograd* (*Ukrainfil’m-Mosfil’m*, 1935), *Traces on Snow* (*Sledy na snegu*, Lenfil’m, 1955), *Way to the Sea* (*Doroga k mor’iu*, Mosfil’m, 1965), *Morning of a Long Day* (*Utro dolgogo dnia*, Riga Studio, 1968), *Secret of the Ancestors* (*Taina predkov*, Tadzhiikfil’m, 1972), *Urgent... Secret... Gubcheka* (*Srochno... Sekretno... Gubcheka*, Mosfil’m, 1982), *Semen Dezhnev* (Svedlovsk studio, 1983).

8] 1933-1993. Savvinov graduated from VGIK in 1962 as a cameraman. He worked as a correspondent

in Yakutia for the Oriental Siberia Studio of Documentary Chronicles from 1962 to 1985. He directed several documentaries on Yakutia and authored three books on cinema and Yakutia.

9] Sivtsev is also director of the National Film Company Sakhafil'm.

10] 1920-1994. Writer of prose, plays and translator of Russian literature into Yakut and vice-versa, Gabyshev is considered the first Yakut scriptwriter. He co-wrote the script of 1972 Tadzhiikfil'm production on a Yakut theme: *Secret of the Ancestors (Taina predkov)*.

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