



RESEARCHING WOMEN IN SILENT CINEMA

NEW FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY MONICA DALL'ASTA, VICTORIA DUCKETT, LUCIA TRALLI

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA



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1

Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

Edited by: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett, Lucia Tralli

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Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

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This publication has been edited through a blind peer review process. Papers from the Sixth Women and the Silent Screen Conference (University of Bologna, 2010), a biennial event sponsored by Women and Film History International, were read by the editors and then submitted to at least one anonymous reviewer. When the opinion of the first reader was entirely negative or asked for substantial revision, the essay was submitted to a second anonymous reviewer. In case of a second negative opinion the essay was rejected. When further changes were deemed necessary for publication, the editors worked extensively with the authors to meet the requests advanced by the reviewers.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett <i>Kaleidoscope: Women and Cinematic Change from the Silent Era to Now</i>	2
PROLOGUE TO PART I	12
Heide Schlüpmann <i>An Alliance Between History and Theory</i>	13
I. HISTORICAL IMAGES	27
Martin F. Norden <i>Alice Guy Blaché, Rose Pastor Stokes, and the Birth Control Film That Never Was</i>	28
Veronica Pravadelli <i>Lois Weber's Uneasy Progressive Politics: The Articulation of Class and Gender in Where Are My Children?</i>	42
Donna R. Casella <i>Women and Nationalism in Indigenous Irish Filmmaking of the Silent Period</i>	53
Dunja Dogo <i>The Image of a Revolutionist: Vera Figner in The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty</i>	81
Margaret Hennefeld <i>The Politics of Hyper-Visibility in Leni Riefenstahl's The Blue Light</i>	96
Federico Pierotti <i>Coloring the Figures. Women's Labor in the Early Italian Film Industry</i>	106
Mark Garrett Cooper <i>Archive, Theater, Ship: The Phelps Sisters Film the World</i>	120
PROLOGUE TO PART II	130
Christine Gledhill <i>An Ephemeral History: Women and British Cinema Culture in the Silent Era</i>	131
II. WOMEN AND THE CULTURAL DISCOURSE	149
Mary Desjardins <i>Fading Stars and the Ruined Commodity Form: Star Discourses of Loss in American Fan Magazines, 1914-1929</i>	150
Anne Morey <i>School of Scandal: Alice Duer Miller, Scandal, and the New Woman</i>	163
Mark Lynn Anderson <i>The Impossible Films of Vera, Countess of Cathcart</i>	176

Anke Brouwers	
<i>If it Worked for Mary. . . Mary Pickford's Daily Talks with the Fans</i>	197
Claus Tieber	
<i>Mary Pickford—as Written by Frances Marion</i>	220
Kristen Anderson Wagner	
<i>Silent Comediennes and “The Tragedy of Being Funny”</i>	231
Qin Xiqing	
<i>Pearl White and the New Female Image in Chinese Early Silent Cinema</i>	246
Ansje van Beusekom	
<i>Getting Forgotten. Film Critic Elisabeth de Roos and Dutch Culture Before World War II</i>	263
Luca Mazzei	
<i>The Passionate Eye of Angelina Buracci, Pedagogue</i>	273
PROLOGUE TO PART III	288
Jane M. Gaines	
<i>Wordlessness (to be Continued)</i>	289
III. GENDER ON STAGE	302
Annette Förster	
<i>A Pendulum of Performances: Asta Nielsen on Stage and Screen</i>	303
Victoria Duckett	
<i>The “Voix d’Or” on Silent Film: The Case of Sarah Bernhardt</i>	318
Elena Mosconi	
<i>Silent Singers. The Legacy of Opera and Female Stars in Early Italian Cinema</i>	334
Stella Dagna	
<i>A Tribute to Her Creativity: Maria Gasparini in The Stage</i>	353
Michele Leigh	
<i>Alexander Khanzhonkov and His Queens of the Screen</i>	362
Amy Sargeant	
<i>However Odd—Elsa Lanchester!</i>	374
Laraine Porter	
<i>A Lass and a Lack? Women in British Silent Comedy</i>	384
Johanna Schmertz	
<i>The Leatrice Joy Bob: The Clinging Vine and Gender’s Cutting Edge</i>	402
Viktoria Paranyuk	
<i>Riding Horses, Writing Stories: Josephine Rector’s Career at Western Essanay</i>	414
Luciana Corrêa de Araújo	
<i>Movie Prologues: Cinema, Theater and Female Types on Stage at Cinelândia, Rio de Janeiro</i>	424

Michele Leigh

Alexander Khanzhonkov and His Queens of the Screen

ABSTRACT: The role of women in silent era cinema has become increasingly important in recent cinema scholarship. One aspect of this current scholarship is the appearance of the female star and the social, industrial and ideological forces that contribute to the construction of the star system. The Khanzhonkov studio, founded and directed by Alexander Khanzhonkov, Khanzhonkov & Co., was one of the leading studios in Russia prior to the Revolution. Taking a cue from recent scholarship on the variety of women's roles in the cinema, and building on the work of academics such as historian Denise Youngblood and film scholar Yuri Tsivian, this paper will explore some of the practices and policies of Alexander Khanzhonkov and his studio.

The role of women in silent era cinema has become increasingly important in recent cinema scholarship. One aspect of this current scholarship is the appearance of the female star and the social, industrial and ideological forces that contribute to the construction of the star system. This avenue of cinema scholarship has been complicated by the fact that many of the silent films no longer exist and/or supporting evidence is difficult to find. Luckily, however, the films are not our only source by which to base discussions about the growth of the star system, we can also look to newsprint and trade journals. Many studios in Russia during this period, roughly 1910-1917, published trade journals that provide insight into how they wished to frame their films to exhibitors and viewers.

One such company was the Khanzhonkov studio, founded and directed by Alexander Khanzhonkov. Khanzhonkov & Co. was one of the leading studios in Russia prior to the Revolution. One of the few studios to be vertically integrated before the Revolution, the Khanzhonkov studio was also well known for its rampant commercialism and self-promotion, which makes the study of its business practices a little easier. Another important factor is that many of its films, about twenty percent, still exist, aiding in the study of star performance. Most important, however, is that the Khanzhonkov Studio published two journals: *Vestnik Kinematografii* [the cinematographic herald] from 1910 to 1917 and *Pegas'* *zhurnal isskustva* [pegasus: journal of art] from 1915 to 1917. *Pegas'* was a trade journal that was also released for general consumption and provides us with some insight into one of the many ways in which Khanzhonkov & Co. framed their product and also contributed to the institutionalization and commodification of the star system in Russia in the 1910s.

Taking a cue from recent scholarship on the variety of women's roles in the cinema (see Bean and Negra), and building on the work of academics such as historian Denise Youngblood and film scholar Yuri Tsivian, this paper will explore some of the practices and policies of Alexander Khanzhonkov and the Khanzhonkov Studio. The Khanzhonkov studio poses an interesting case study, due in part to the large number of women employed

by the company and the variety of positions offered to women. I am particularly interested in teasing out the studio's potentially progressive policies in Russia towards female employment; primarily, the hiring of women not only to perform, but also to write scenarios, edit and direct films; and how those policies were geared towards increasing female spectatorship. Through a reading of *Pegas*, I will examine how Khanzhonkov & Co. mythologized his stars, intertwining the actresses with the roles they played. The journal provides us with much needed insight into the evolution of the star system and the studio's relations to its spectators in early Russian cinema.

Aleksandr Khanzhonkov was an extremely savvy businessman and a quick study on what appealed to the viewers of his films. His production company started as a small commission agency in 1906, selling films and projection equipment, and quickly developed into one of the most successful production companies in Russia before the revolution. Khanzhonkov was one of the first producers in Russia to understand the drawing power of the star, not just actors, but also writers and directors. A. Khanzhonkov & Co. made every effort to hire the most well known actors and actresses, but he also sought out additional marketable figures, including experienced directors and crews, along with some of the most popular Russian writers.

That said however, the studio was remarkable for the many actresses that it hired and the level of success they achieved: Vera Kholodnaia, Emma Bauer, Zoia Barantsevich, and Vera Karalli, among others. Unlike other Russian studios, many of the actresses employed by Khanzhonkov played multiple roles within the company, often starting out as actresses and then writing, editing and even directing films for the studio. Denise Youngblood notes that the rise in Russian film production during the 1910s greatly expanded the opportunities for Russian film stars. While there may not have been a Russian Asta Nielsen, Mary Pickford or Lillian Gish, Youngblood does list a few actresses who garnered significant success, noting such top-tiered stars as Olga Gzovskaya, a classically trained actress, who garnered an unprecedented twenty thousand rubles, to make three pictures with the Robert Perskii Studio—still far less than the forty-eight thousand rubles a year offered to Vladimir Vasilevich Maksimov by the Kharitonov Studio (Youngblood 50-52).

Khanzhonkov & Co. may not have had the highest paid actors in the business, however they produced more films *per annum* than any other Russian company. The studio employed renowned directors like Vassily Goncharov, Vladimir Gardin, A. Chargonin, and Evgenii Bauer, who, in addition to being the best paid director in all of Russia, was also referred to as the “woman's director” due in part to his overwhelming success directing urban based, female melodramas. Khanzhonkov's studio made everything from scientific films and public service films discouraging the use of alcohol to comedies, serials and what the studio did best, melodramas. The subjects of these primarily female centered melodramas range from a jaded café singer to naïve young schoolgirls, and from domestic servants to young socialites. For the most part these women were independent, working or upper class girls who navigated

urban space with confidence, curiosity and ingenuity.

By addressing the full range of Russian society in their films, Khanzhonkov & Co. created a space where there was someone for female audience members to identify with in any given film. Film scholar Heide Schlüpmann remarks that, “On an international scale, early cinema responded to the erosion of familial patriarchy precipitated by modernity and, in retrospect, often displayed a remarkable affinity with the female perspective” (2). Khanzhonkov & Co’s productions in particular display a marked “affinity with the female perspective,” capitalizing on melodramatic themes that appealed to women, and on plots that featured sophisticated women in urban settings, caught up in sex, scandal, and even murder. Film companies like Khanzhonkov, the bulk of whose films could be considered “women’s films” struggled not only to legitimate cinema as an art form, but also to legitimate female driven melodrama as a respectable genre. The concept of “women’s films” is further complicated because it also implies the power of women as consumers, in other words, these films are a result of the industry recognizing and addressing the needs of its consumers.¹

The roles portrayed in Khanzhonkov films were played by some of the most popular actresses in Russian cinema, among them, was Vera Kholodnaia, often considered the first star of Russian silent cinema. According to Khanzhonkov, Vera was hired by the firm in 1915 (at the age of twenty-two) after she was discovered by Evgenii Bauer among a crowd of extras. Though she was young and had little theatrical experience, Bauer chose to place her in the lead in his film *The Song of Love Triumphant* (*Pesn torzhestvuyushchey lyubvi*, based on a Turgenev novel). Khanzhonkov goes on to note that “with her beautiful gray eyes and classic profile she made such a sensation that she is at once a ‘kino-star,’ rising on the Russian film horizon” (86). By the time of the Russian revolution, a new Kholodnaia film was being released every three weeks. Khanzhonkov paid the young star very well; by 1916 she was one of the highest paid actresses in Russia during the 1910s, receiving in one month what a theatrical actor earned in a year.

Unlike Kholodnaia, Vera Karalli had a successful career before making her debut on the silver screen. She danced with Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballet Ruse and became a prima ballerina for the Bolshoi Imperial Theater. Despite prohibitions against members of the Imperial Theater acting in films, Khanzhonkov was able to broker an unprecedented deal where she would work for both. Karalli was one of the rare Russian film actresses to garner both critical and public acclaim, and to be defined a “true artist of the screen.”

When Khanzhonkov hired her in 1914, he engaged in a previously unheard of promotion, he took out a two-page advertisement, with letters three inches high, in the trade journal *Vestnik kinematografi* [cinematographic herald], announcing that prima ballerina Vera Karalli had joined the studio (Youngblood 28). In 1916, Khanzhonkov & Co. lost Kholodnaia, one of their highest grossing actresses to rival film studio Kharitonov. When that happened, it

¹ Historian Jeffrey Brooks talks about this specifically (e.g. how the publishing industry addressed the desires of female consumers, a growing customer base, and increased publication on topics of interest to women in the boulevard presses) in regards to the publishing industry in *When Russia Learned to Read*.

was Karalli's performances in films like *Vozmezdie* (retribution, Evgenii Bauer, 1916), *Sestry Bronskie* (the Bronskii sisters, Evgenii Bauer, 1916), and *The Dying Swan* (*Umiraiushchii Lebed*, Evgenii Bauer, 1917) which contributed to keeping the company solvent. Khanzhonkov notes that thanks to her choreographic talent (many of her films utilized her dancing ability) and her talent as an actress, soon there was not a single little town in all of Russia that wasn't waiting for a picture featuring their favorite ballerina (70).

Lina Bauer, née Anchorova, also began her career as a dancer. She danced and acted in Charles Aumont's theater group at the Winter Garden in Moscow. It was here that she met her husband Evgenii Bauer who at the time was, among other things, working as a set designer for Aumont. When Evgenii Bauer began his career in film in 1913 with the Khanzhonkov & Co. studio Lina followed him and became one of his lead actresses. Lina came with an established career and the name recognizability. She acted mainly in her husband's films, but also occasionally made appearances in other Khanzhonkov pictures. Like Karalli, several of Lina's films included sequences that featured her dancing. However, unlike many other actresses working for Khanzhonkov & Co. Lina was a crossover star, acting in both serious melodrama and comedy. In the four-year period prior to the Revolution, the majority of Russian actresses were acting in dramas. A survey of extant films shows actresses appearing in dramas ninety-nine times as opposed to thirty-two appearances in comedies over the four-year period, with only a handful appearing in both genres. Lina Bauer not only performed in both genres, she is also the only actress to utilize a pseudonym, Emma for her dramatic roles and Lina for her comedies.²

Like many other actors and actresses employed by Khanzhonkov & Co., Zoia Fiodorovna Barantsevich began her career as a stage actress but transitioned to cinema in 1914, when she was just eighteen years old. She worked both as a film actress and a scenario writer from 1914 to 1928, with almost half of these films being made between 1914-1917. She is credited with having written at least eight screen scenarios (four of which feature her in a main role).³ At least two of the films for which she wrote the scenarios, were noted as having been based on her own previously published work: *Kto zagubil?* [who spoiled it?] (1916), for instance, was based on her novella *Lesnaia storozhka* [the forest lodge], and *Umiraiushchii lebed* [the dying swan] (1917) was based on her novella of the same title. According to Russian historian Louise McReynolds in *Russia at Play*, Barantsevich was perhaps more popular as a screenwriter than she was as an actress (264). In addition to her role as screenwriter/actress, Zoia Barantsevich was also a frequent contributor to the Khanzhonkov Studio magazine, *Pegas'* which was published from 1915-1917 (only available to 1916). After 1928 it appears that she left the film profession and served in the administration of the all-Russian theatrical

² The reason for using two names, is that at this point comedy is still not considered a serious artistic endeavor and by using two names Lina is able to go back and forth between comedy and more artistic dramas without any repercussions.

³ There are, however, possibly nine films, as she mentions a film entitled "The Procurator's Wife," that I have not yet found mentioned anywhere else.

society (“Zoia Barantsevich”).

Through the studio’s representation of these four talented, successful, and independent actresses on screen and in print we begin to see how they were positioned as stars. Lauren Rabinovitz’s *For the Love of Pleasure* addresses many of the problems (e.g. lack of audience studies and first person accounts) of discussing spectatorship, in particular female spectatorship, in early cinema in the United States. Rabinovitz notes that “what is most important about cinema as *history* is how audiences were taught to make sense of such a spectacle” (3). The Khanzhonkov studio’s monthly publications, *Vestnik Kinematografii* and *Pegas’*, provide us with some examples of how audiences, particularly Russian female audiences, were taught to make sense of the cinema and Khanzhonkov’s films about women in particular.

The invention and propagation of the film industry coincided with a rise in women’s consumer culture in Russia. As industrialization spread throughout Russia, it marked the increase of consumable goods in the Russian markets that was accompanied by the need to promote these goods. More often than not, these goods were marketed to women as the decision makers in household purchases. Advertising agencies, a surprising number of which were run by women (West 35), learned early on that in Russia because of widespread illiteracy, the power of the image exceeded that of the printed word. The connection between the image and advertising directed at women continued even in early cinema.

The Khanzhonkov studio illustrated a decisive understanding of advertising and occasionally used the covers of its film magazines to promote its films and its stars to distributors, exhibitors and to the general public. By including a film still or poster from an upcoming film, or the photograph of a popular actor or actress, Khanzhonkov increased name and face recognition for his films and stars, thus creating a recognizable commodity.

Khanzhonkov & Co. was the first Russian studio to publish a non-trade journal on film that was intended, primarily, for the general public, or more specifically for a middle-class moviegoer, which as film critic Arkadi Bukhov noted “[was] now evolving its own tastes, even beginning to have its favorite actors and actresses . . .” (Bukhov 9 qtd. in Tsivian, *Early Russian Cinema and Its Public* 111). Khanzhonkov named this new journal *Pegas’: zhurnal isskustva* [pegasus: journal of art], drawing on the company’s already well known established brand, the Pegasus. Film fans would associate the winged horse on the cover of *Pegas’* as a Khanzhonkov publication without having to open the journal.

The journal tries to assuage a film viewer’s guilty pleasure by associating film with more elite art forms like literature, painting, and opera. Middle-class moviegoers could justify their cinephilia through connections to socially acceptable art forms. In her article “Gendering the Icon: Marketing Women Writers in Fin-de-Siècle Russia,” Beth Holmgren notes that in literary journals, the names and portraits of women writers began to be placed alongside names and portraits of male writers. By figuratively placing Anastasia Verbitskaia next to Lev Tolstoy, it served to validate her as an authentic writer, Verbitskaia’s writing was now desirable as something one should own and display (322-326). Borrowing from the publishing industry,

Pegas' follows a similar tactic with the images placed on the cover of the journal.

The inaugural issue of *Pegas'* was released with a photograph of Lev Tolstoy on the cover, commemorating the anniversary of his death. Subsequent issue covers feature: Russian stage actor V.I. Kachalov, Italian stage actor Tommaso Salvini (also commemorating his death the month before), film actress Lidiya Koreneva, film actress Vera Kholodnaya, film actor Vitol'd Polonskii, and the original Italian Diva, stage actress Eleonora Duse. The journal covers not only serve to equate cinema with classical arts, especially literature and theater, but they also elevate film actresses and actors to "cultural" star status. Just as Tolstoy was a literary star in Russian culture, by virtue of such reverential treatment, Koreneva and Kholodnaya attained the status of stars of Russian culture, as well as stars of the silver screen. Zoia Barantsevich has the honor of being the only other writer/actress to be featured on the cover of *Pegas'*. The journal privileged female film stars and also further appealed to women by the fact that the cover pictures of the actresses were featured before the one male film star.

In *When Russia Learned to Read*, Jeffrey Brooks comments on how women became the primary readers of boulevard literature—stories about intrigue, sex, scandal and debauchery (xiii-xvii). While Brooks was discussing the audience for popular pulp fiction, he could just as well have been discussing the bulk of the Khanzhonkov & Co. productions and their audience. Capitalizing on success of boulevard literature, *Pegas'* appealed to female readers on several levels. First, rather than giving the story synopses for all the studio's films, the magazine instead chose to highlight films that would appeal to female readers—stories with urban settings, tragic love stories, middle class melodramas, etc.—or as Laura Engelstein notes, the types of stories that "provide ordinary women with the stuff of dreams" (40). A sampling of titles from the pages of *Pegas'* illustrates that Khanzhonkov knew how to provide his female readers/viewers with the "stuff of dreams." For instance, he includes literary retellings of such cinematic stories as: "Mistake of the Heart," "Narcotic," "Optical Illusions: Tragedy of a Beautiful Girl," "Love Tornado," "The Dance of Life," "Lunar Beauty," and "The Heart of Lina." Thus, the Khanzhonkov studio increased their readership as well as their viewership by including stories that would specifically appeal to women.

The images included within *Pegas'* itself were even more important than the images contained on its covers. Khanzhonkov featured his star players in an interesting and subtler manner. Among the core of about forty actors and actresses, the actresses are more prominently featured throughout the run of the magazine. Photographs that display women outnumber those of males by about two to one. In addition to this, more actresses are given solo shots. Aside from the director Evgenii Bauer and actor V.A. Polonskii, no other males were given that much space. The actresses that are highlighted include Vera Kholodnaya, Zoia Barantsevich, Ada Shelepina and Lina Bauer, and Vera Karalli.

The images feature thoughtful, proud, independent and desirable women. The stills give the reader virtually no clues about the type of film she will be seeing; instead the focus of the image is on the woman herself, her personality, her posture, her makeup, and her clothing.

In this, the actress becomes someone to emulate as well as someone to view, and therefore a recognizable/consumable product.

The connection between the image and advertising directed at women is perpetuated in early cinema and in the pages of *Pegas'* through among other things, a focus on women's fashion. In her dissertation, *A Cut Above: Fashion as Meta-culture in Early-Twentieth-Century Russia*, Elizabeth Durst discusses the convergence of contemporary fashion with cinema, in particular she mentions an early Khanzhonkov production entitled *Behind the Drawing Room Door* (*Za gostinnoi dveriami*, Ivan Lazarev, Petr Chardynin, 1913) in which the "references to fashion inform the narrative . . . fashion operates as the film's primary attraction with the narrative stalling on occasion to allow the actress to overtly model a dress" (72). Despite the fact that most studios during this time did not have costume houses from which to choose wardrobes, actresses were still expected to dress in the most current fashions. Khanzhonkov's actresses were no exception, examples can be seen in films such as *Twilight of a Woman's Soul* (*Sumerki zhenskoi dushi*, Evgenii Bauer, 1913), *Child of the Big City* (*Ditya bolchogo goroda*, Evgenii Bauer, 1914), and *Silent Witnesses* (*Nemye svideteli*, Evgenii Bauer, 1914), which all were made after the Tango craze hit Russian and of course all the leading women are wearing the latest in Tango fashion, from their headdresses to their shoes, all supplied at their own expense and one way in which the actresses and the characters they played were conflated, both on screen and in print.

Even when the Khanzhonkov's actresses are shown in the same frame with male actors, they are somehow prefigured and highlighted; most often, this was accomplished by placing the women more prominently within the frame. Figure 1 shows a still found on the pages of *Pegas'* from the Khanzhonkov production *Burning Wings* (*Obozhzhennyya kryl'ia*, Evgenii Bauer, 1915). The lead actress, Vera Karalli, is the focal point of the frame. Karalli holds the position of power over her male counterpart, who is not even identified in the caption. The male actor is in a position of submission/supplication, kneeling and pleading with the female character. Vera Karalli on the other hand is standing, turned away from the man in rejection (and disgust, judging by the look on her face). The woman has the power of choice; does she stay with the man or does she abandon him? This is yet another way in which *Pegas'* reinforces the predominance of the actress over the actor.

Often stills were included that show several actors in the frame, when two of them are women they are shown to form a triangle with the male actor. The focal point of the image is then split between the two women and the male seems lost in the back of the frame. In a still from one of Bauer's films, *Schastye vechnoy nochi* (happiness of eternal night, 1915), we see Ol'ga Rakhmanova, Vera Karalli and Vitol'd Polonskii. The framing of the characters sets Vera Karalli up as the central figure in the frame as well as in the film. The whiteness of Ol'ga Rakhmanova's blouse and Vera's face draws a connection between the two women (who are mother and daughter) and unites them as central figures in the frame. The male character is significantly smaller within the frame implying that, while he is central to the plot,



1. A still from *Burning Wings* (*Obozhzhennyya kryl'ia*, Evgenii Bauer, 1915), *Pegas*.
The caption reads “V.A. Karalli in the picture ‘Burning Wings’.”

he holds a lesser position than the two women. This can also be seen in Figure 2, yet another still from a Bauer film, entitled *Vozmedie* [retribution], starring Vera Karalli, Lydia Ryndina and Vitol'd Polonskii. The center of the frame and main focal point of the photograph are the female characters played by Karalli and Ryndina. Polonskii and another unnamed male are ostracized to the periphery of the frame, weakening their power as agents of the action in the film. Finally, in other cases the stills are shot in such a way that even when a male does hold the predominant space in the frame, there is always something (the use of white, skin, looking at the camera, etc.) that draws one's attention away from the male towards the female character.

The images themselves encourage the reader to become a viewer, to feel free to look at the film star. According to Anne Friedberg, “As an object is transformed in a commodity system, the film star is marketed not for pure use, but for his/her exchange value. The film



2. A still from *Vozmedie* [retribution], a Bauer film starring Vera Karalli, Lydia Ryndina and Vitol'd Polonskii.

star is an institutionally sanctioned fetish” (Friedberg 43). In all of the images, the actresses are glamorously dressed in contemporary urban fashion; this is surprising because despite the vast range of genres produced by the Khanzhonkov studio, the magazine features very few historical or rural films. The actresses become attractions of a sort, something for the female readers to take in, emulate and consume, they become a commodity in themselves. The film stills function as advertisements selling sophistication, independence, sex and, of course, tickets to the films. On the pages of *Pegas'* the Khanzhonkov studio mastered the art of selling a product, by creating and promoting the studio's female stars to female viewers. *Pegas'* provides contemporary scholars insight into how Khanzhonkov placed many of his actresses (not just Kholodnaya and Karalli, but also Barantsevich, Bauer, Shelepina, Rakhmanova, etc.) in the firmament, and in doing so Khanzhonkov ensured name and face recognition for his stars, an audience of female viewers and a healthy box office draw.

The notion of a “woman's cinema” or of a “woman's director,” especially one who is a male, is fraught with all sorts of misogynist associations and undertones. Mary Anne Doane's

early career assertion that the instant the camera is pointed at a woman is equivalent to a terrorist act, points not only to the extremes of feminist scholarship but also to the difficulty feminist scholars have had in reconciling male authored texts with female spectatorship. Such an extreme avenue takes us nowhere in understanding the popularity of certain films, the work of certain directors, and the business policies of certain studio heads.

When read within the contemporary cultural context, the appellation of Evgenii Bauer as a “woman’s director” and Khanzhonkov & Co. as the producer of “women’s films,” was both negative and positive. When one takes into account what that meant for women in Russia at the time, however, I think the positive effects prove stronger. This is especially true when one considers, as we have, the role of the Khanzhonkov studio’s publication *Pegas’*. The nature of the journal, the fact that once a reader purchased it, she would have the freedom to peruse it at her own leisure, allowed spectators (women) to take their time looking over the images, paying attention to detail in such a way that is not possible to do when watching a film. Women were given permission to look and instructed in the art of the gaze throughout the pages of the journal. The magazine indoctrinated women into commodity culture at the same time that it addressed their needs and desires with stories they were interested in reading.

While women were granted full and equal rights immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, ushering in the era of the New Soviet Woman, a super mythic figure of sorts, who juggled these newly earned rights and privileges with work and family, films made by Khanzhonkov prior to the revolution already showed spectators strong independent female characters. By tracing the ways in which Khanzhonkov created, marketed and sold their stars on the pages of *Pegas’*, we can see how the studio acknowledged and encouraged the empowerment of women as protagonists, as audiences and as consumers. A full transformation of the Pre-Revolutionary Russian woman into the New Soviet Woman would not have been possible if Khanzhonkov & Co., directors like Bauer, and *Pegas’* hadn’t been pushing the boundaries of patriarchy and provoking women to look and answer questions for themselves.

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