

Remaking Reality: Marxism, Mass-Society and Pasternak's Dr. Zhivago

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Few deny that Boris Pasternak's (1957) novel was both intensely political and historical. It evokes nearly every concept in political theory in its often disconnected sequences. The chances that such a novel is amenable to popularization in postmodern America are close to zero. This essay tries to explain why.

The original Pasternak novel deals with the Russian Civil War and the establishment of Soviet Marxism. Remaking this for the screen in 2002 is not entirely absurd. From 1914 to 1921 or so, Russia was convulsed. As if the senseless, elite-driven slaughter of World War I was not sufficient, the resulting chaos gave the only chance for that tiny, mostly Jewish, but lavishly funded clique later called the “Bolsheviks” to take power. Civil War was the inevitable result.

Since 1990, Russia has gone through a far worse convulsion. For the first time in cosmic history, about 80% of the Russian economy was liquidated as this colossal Bolshevik empire suddenly fell apart. Not only has this never occurred before – especially in peacetime – but it was also not predicted by those who get paid a lot of money to predict these things. How does an entire group of analysts, funded beyond reason, miss the imminent collapse of a massive, global empire? Even more, how do they keep their jobs afterwards?

Yet again, a tiny, mostly Jewish clique took power and, yet again, transferred Russia's remaining wealth to themselves. First, it was under the guise of “war communism” while the second, far more sophisticated, was under the guise of “the free market.” This led to an oligarchy controlling a huge portion of Russian wealth. The big difference is that in this second instance, there was no war to bring this collapse about. It is historically unprecedented. This clear parallel serves as the context for this movie, but in watching it, you would never know it.

The 2002 movie, adapted by British mogul Andrew Davies, cannot expected to grasp the finer points of Russian history and politics that Pasternak assumed his readers knew. Of course, the limitations of the film medium itself presents problems. The difficulty, however, went far beyond that. Pasternak wrote several decades after the Civil War, but still at a time when issues such as endless mass death and regular proximity to piles of corpses were not met with helpless hand-wringing.

The film forces the viewer to deal with the reality that the Russian reader in 1956 has little in common with the American viewer in 2002 or 2016. In fact, what was made clear by the film is whether or not literature, if it is meant to communicate complex and profound ideals, can ever be reduced to a movie of a few hours. When this film finally ended, the answer had to be no.

The film was extravagantly funded, featured an all-star cast, and used an array of special-effects that a novel cannot imitate. Hence, the next point: special effects is part of the destruction of a work of literature because it redirects attention to the non-essential. The issue is not making battle deaths seem “real,” but what these deaths mean for Russia and the world.

What they mean is that modernity has broken almost all of its promises. The Enlightenment ideology said that religion was superstition, that absolutes are largely a fabrication and that, rather, the proper logical methods of science will permit the advent of peace and plenty. They forgot to warn us that “science” and the “scientific establishment” are not identical. While solving many problems humanity did not know it had, the scientific method, also, was used to build more accurate weapons, poison gas, tanks and later, nuclear weapons.

While moderns might rhapsodize about the “independence” that the automobile brings, they must, at least implicitly, accept that the millions of deaths and mutilations on the highways are an acceptable sacrifice. Since Zhivago is a doctor and quite taken with modern ideas, the fact that men still act like subhumans from Tokyo to Texas is an unmistakable problem for the modern viewer/reader. This contract – mass slaughter in exchange for feelings of independence on the road, says that the Enlightenment idea of man is false.

The concept of “mass society” is brought up again and again when films try to capture a novel. “Massification” is the idea that any object packaged for mass consumption must be focused on the lowest common denominator, since the profit motive requires that the largest market must be reached and convinced of this object's use for them. With that in mind, this writer could almost hear Pasternak pound on the inside of his coffin lid as the screenwriter rewrote his complex vision.

The personal drama here is meant to parallel the political. *Dr. Zhivago* is a political novel. It is not accidentally set during the Russian Civil War. That Yuri is a doctor and Lara a nurse is equally deliberate, since healing, then and now, is precisely what Russia required. How one reacts to the movie seems dependent on two things: a) the viewer's knowledge of the novel and, b) the viewer's awareness of Russian history. Since mass audiences are assumed to have cognizance of neither, a producer can do as he pleases with both the facts of history and the facts of the novel. The number of social and cultural questions this evokes are too much for such a brief essay.

The broader point is that war brutalizes a population. Moral focus is lost when death is everywhere and life is cheap. It is hard to believe that anyone in Russia at the time did not lose at least one close family member to the violence. The swirl of events that brings Zhivago to several women and political camps is not of his own choosing. That he is driven from place to place immediate gives the sense of determinism and the old Epic formula. Events are more powerful than a single person. A single person, the “sovereign individual” of Enlightenment myth, is absolutely powerless, helpless and at the mercy of the nearest person with a gun and a relativistic moral code.

In Erlich's (1959) article, he makes the argument (taken from others) that there is no clear “self” in Pasternak's poetic or novel forms. The self exists just as one object among others that has no particular privilege over other elements of the world. The reality of civil war and the coming reign of death would certainly make this approach rational and almost function as a defense mechanism. Furthermore, the events in the novel cannot be attributed to any “self” at all and these globally significant events drown the person in forces that even elites were incapable of controlling. The self could be buried because that was the empirical reality. It is one thing to say that the writer is taken by fits of inspiration. Here, the self is insignificant. It is quite another to say that – as a matter of social reality – the self was a disposable object of no real significance. In the case of this novel, both are true.

Clowes (1990) totally rejects that view, saying that in the novel under discussion here,

events do not swallow the self but rather are just irrelevant to it. The real action is in how these events are used for the sake of personal moral renewal.

Reading the novel, it is fairly clear that Pasternak is rejecting the idea of a comprehensive, abstract ideology. An abstraction is an ideal, or the outline of one, and is formed with words and often sustained with emotion. Forcing it onto a population with its own traditional life required violence – and lots of it.¹ The manifestation of an ideology in life has no relation to the ideal in its pristine state. In fact, institutionalization is not of the same ontological order as the idea. They cannot be compared in the same sense that strawberries can be compared with commodity futures.

The novel suggests that the events of the revolution and the Civil War preclude any hard and fast ideological labeling. Pasternak shows Zhivago treating all comers because it is far from clear that every soldier in Trotsky's army is a fanatical Marxist ideologue. The abduction by the Forest Brotherhood, for example, shows that ideology is not at issue. Ideology, at best, might justify actions, but it does not inform them. Since the Reds won, the movie was able to show how ideals no longer exist once stump slogans turn into the daily administrative grind.

The “Revolution” is depicted in the film as problematic, though not necessarily evil.² Revolution is a bad thing as such, not because Trotsky's forces won. When a faction comes to power by violence, those who are the most ruthless have the advantage. Since ruthlessness is that precise quality that wins wars, those who use it without regard to morality will take over the state. Worse, when the takeover is then followed by a desire to “transform” the society, the ideas presented in the novel then take on tremendous and profound significance. However, the viewer of the film will not know that.

The often lurid scenes of death both in the novel and film generally give the impression that both Whites and Reds were equally guilty of evil. The obvious point was immediately raised: the Red movement used terror as a matter of ideology. It was the right of the Vanguard Party so as to destroy any challenges from the “bourgeoisie.” Terror was not something “added” to Marxism: it was and is an aspect of its very essence.

Extreme forms of violence were not alien to the Whites either, but to utter this seems unnecessary. All wars and all factions have this problem. However, the Whites did not use it systematically. It was not part of their ideology. This makes a gigantic moral difference. Christianity does not sanction violence, but it has been used by Christian elites on various pretexts. Christianity, as such, cannot be judged by the actions of Charlemagne.

Many readers, well versed in the time period or not, are not prepared for Pasternak. They are prepared for a movie that gives just enough serious moments for it to have intellectual credibility without forcing the viewer to confront anything too disturbing. The visual emphasis of the movies cannot communicate the non-visual, ideal purpose of political movements. Hence, characters are people exclusively, not bearers of ideas. This is a part of the medium itself, not necessarily a consequent of deliberate vulgarization.

Lara, for example, is raped and assaulted in the novel. Disturbing and depressing, it is not meant to focus attention on Lara, but on Russia as a whole. Russia has the same relationship to the 20th century world order as Lara does to Komarovsky (whose character is well played in the film by Sam Neill). The movie, however, makes this a personal tragedy rather than a statement of

1 This was the subject of the author's doctoral dissertation in 1999.

2 “Revolution” is misleading since it implies that there was a mass uprising with the purpose of installing Lenin as dictator. Hence, I use quotes.

social ideas. This is the nature of the distortion that makes the movie elicit constant eye-rolling. The entire nature of the argument is lost when it is over-personalized.

Another example is that the women in Zhivago's life are the possible ideological outcomes for Russia. Traditional, sophisticated, peasant, idealistic and many other interpretations can be applied to different women, but their differences are not accidental. Pasternak is writing when the Bolsheviks were firmly in power, but that was not obvious in 1920, and especially not obvious upon Lenin's death in 1925. The options at the time were wide open, which might be why Yuri was so enthusiastic about the fall of the monarchy.

Clowes suggests that Tonja is a “conformist” heroine in that she seeks the preservation of the old order. Put differently, she has not the ability or desire to “change” with the advent of the reign of blood. This is a terrible interpretation: she is the opposite of a conformist, she is a rebel against the tyranny that is coming: the destruction of the self that anyone except ideologues could see coming. “Adapting to the new world?” Is she kidding? Anyone able to adapt to this “new world” is a pathologue.

Making her interpretation all the worse, she celebrates Lara for her early support of the revolutionaries. This is evidence of her non-conformity. Rather, it is more accurate to say that her thrall to Kamorovskii shows that power is all she seems to recognize. This need not be a moral fault but a mere reaction to the present regime of anarchy that will soon lead to something worse. Bolshevism does not recognize personality: man is merely a bundle of nerve endings that elicit certain demands that a political system can meet or not. The existence or non-existence of such a “person” is of no moral import. Hence, the claim that there is such a thing as a “heroine” that can support the revolutionaries (that is, the Reds of the day) is a contradiction in terms. Bolshevism or materialist socialism – largely financed by western capitalism – has no conception of personality, let alone “heroism.” The very vocabulary she uses in this interpretation makes no sense.

More significantly, the essay by Silbajoris (1965) makes an argument that situates the entire novel and its relation to ideology. He says that “Even Zhivago's 'anti-communism' is best understood in terms of the same opposition between the poetic perception of life, which alone can touch the fountainhead of reality, and an unimaginative (and therefore tyrannical) official system which is irrelevant to the embodiment of truth” (Silbajoris, 20).

What the author fails to realize is that this is precisely the reason to fear the Reds. They are materialists. Corporate capitalism is identical in this respect: both are vehemently anti-poetic, “official,” bureaucratic and conformist in the most unnatural way. He makes the silly statement that “tyrants can easily be found under other names in other societies” (ibid). This is too glib because the tyranny of materialism has little in common with what liberals think tyranny is elsewhere. Only materialism had the temerity to reduce humanity to nothing: mere atoms in the void of no greater significance than the void itself. This is not tyranny, but far beyond: it is the denial of humanity.

The novel, and to a lesser extent, the film, expresses this idea. The Reds, it can be argued, took power for no other reason than they were the most cohesive. By the time the war ended, Russia was a dazed and brutalized people who were willing to accept any power so long as it stopped the bloodshed.

Death is the theme of the novel. It was not the focus of the film. Without much experience with death, especially en masse, Americans are either repulsed by it or morbidly attracted to it.

This is why the ending was changed in the film. Zhivago's demise, though with a reference to resurrection, cannot be permitted to stand. Postmodern audiences cannot process either death or resurrection. Both remain unreal. Instead of Zhivago's death and the dark dystopia of the GULAG, a maudlin scene is substituted that has not the slightest political, moral or literary value. The ending was symbolic of the entire movie: the contradiction between the pretentious desire to remake a "classic" with the inability to either understand it or communicate it. The audience is not prepared for Pasternak.

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