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*EARLY CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS
OF THE GULAG: THE CAMP AS SOVIET
EXOTICA IN A. CHERKASOV'S SOLOVKI¹*

The Solovki camp opened in 1923 and soon came to function as the main experimentation ground of the Soviet camp system, the place where new ideas about incarceration and social engineering were tested and then exported elsewhere in the Gulag. Alexander Solzhenitsyn thus famously called it "Gulag's alma mater."² Throughout the 1920s, Solovki was probably the most talked about camp both in the Soviet Union and abroad, especially after an escaped prisoner, Sergei Malsagov, branded it in the British press as "An Island Hell" in 1926.³ Solzhenitsyn chose to preface his harrowing account of Solovki in the Gulag Archipelago (*Arkhipelag Gulag*) precisely by an account of its initial striking visibility: "Solovki was not kept secret in the twenties, and in actual fact ears buzzed with Solovki. They were publicly proud of Solovki. (They had the brass to be proud of it!) There were as many jokes in vaudeville acts as you can imagine. . . . Subscriptions to the internal camp magazine, *The Solovetsky Islands*, were boldly sold throughout the Soviet Union."⁴ This quotation was censored from the 1989 Russian edition of *Arkhipelag Gulag*, suggesting that the lack of secrecy of the 1920s had become a secret to be guarded.⁵ However, as late as 1934, Solovki camp commander Berman was cited describing Solovki as nothing less than a good museum! Berman boasted that at Solovki "the counter-revolution is collected

1. A shorter version of this article has been published as "Solovki: The Camp as Soviet Exotica" in Cristina Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 124-35. Permission to reproduce the original text from *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times*, by Cristina Vatulescu. © 2010 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University. By permission of the publisher, www.sup.org.

2. Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn, *Arkhipelag Gulag, 1918-1956: opyt khudozhestvennogo issledovaniia*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Novyi Mir, 1989), 2: 125.

3. Sergei A. Malsagov, *An Island Hell: A Soviet Prison in the Far North* (London: A. M. Philpot, 1926).

4. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 2: 19.

5. The place of the missing quotation is Solzhenitsyn, *Arkhipelag Gulag, 1918-1956: opyt khudozhestvennogo issledovaniia*, 2: 19.

as in a well-arranged museum. . . . In our camp there are living counts, living landowners, princesses, maids of honor of his Majesty's court. There are also spies. . . ."⁶ When I first read Berman's words, the camp museum struck me as a peculiar flight of Chekist rhetoric. In the meantime, I have come to regard the camp museum as a key image that opens the door onto a larger drive toward exhibiting the camps in the 1920s. In this article I will explore this criminal exhibition by focusing on the most ambitious project designed by the secret police to present the camps to the Soviet public in the 1920s, A. Cherkasov's 1928 film *Solovki*.

The 1928 release of A. Cherkasov's *Solovki*, a feature-length documentary film about the camp, marks a new stage in the agency's position toward cinema and its audience.⁷ The very existence of the film testifies to the close collaboration between the secret police and the filmmakers. The access of the camera into a high-security camp bursting at the seams with thousands of prisoners had to be allowed, if not fully choreographed, by the agency running the camp. The OGPU did not only open its vast domain to the camera; a large number of OGPU agents participated in the shooting of the film. The agents played model versions of themselves, and according to contemporary accounts of the shooting, they also played the roles of well-fed, compliant prisoners.⁸ In exchange, the film was explicitly framed as a grateful eulogy to the secret police. In the beginning of the film, terse intertitles announce that socialism is quickly advancing but that there are still wreckers who would like to stall the tempo of its development. The audience is reminded that the defense of the Soviet Union is in "the reliable hands of the Army and Fleet" and that "next to them, stands guard the watchful eye [*nedremlushchee oko*] of the Party." The film ceremoniously introduces this eye of the party as the GPU, and goes so far as to document its founding act by cutting to the cover page of the constitution and then dwelling in close-up on chapter 9 concerning "the unification of the fight against the counterrevolution, spying, and sabotage" under the GPU. It is the vision of this vigilant eye keeping watch over the criminal side of Soviet society that the film follows in training its camera eye on the ordinarily inaccessible camp.

Solovki presents its audience with a vision of a Soviet camp that is diverting in both senses of the word: as a manipulative distraction from the actual reality of the camp and as entertainment. *Solovki* was part of a

6. Berman's reminiscences were published in Maksim Gorky, L. Averbakh, and S. G. Firin, *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal imeni Stalina: istoriia stroitel'stva* (Moscow: Gos. izdvo "Istoriia fabrik i zavodov," 1934), pp. 69, 78.

7. A. A. Cherkasov, *Solovki* (Moscow: Sovkino, 1927-28).

8. B. Solonevich, *Molodezh' i G.P.U.* (Sofia: Golos Rossii 1937), p. 312; cited in Natalia Kuziakina, *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp*, trans. Boris M. Meerovich (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic, 1995), p. 20.

larger campaign to disprove recent revelations about the camp published in England by Malsagov.⁹ The horrors of this camp have since been described in detail in a rich memoir literature.¹⁰ Suffice it to say that at the time the film was made and released, life on Solovki was at its very worst: typhoid fever raged, killing up to half of the camp population, and prisoner abuse by the camp guards and administration reached an all-time high.¹¹ Indeed, the situation was so dire that the OGPU itself was moved to send out a commission, which investigated the abuse and punished some of the culprits.¹² In Cherkasov's film, however, Solovki appears as little less than an exotic summer vacation resort, offering comfortable living accommodations, delicious food, and a full range of cultural attractions such as theater, variety shows, museums, newspapers, and libraries. But *Solovki* does more than just cover up and sanitize the unpleasant realities of the camp; it exoticizes the camp, presenting it as a strange and entertaining spectacle. As camp commander Berman's previously cited comparison of the camp inmates with museum exhibits testifies, the main attraction in this portrait of the camp was its population. Safely quarantined in the camp, and further so in the film, this exhaustive collection of model "others" of the Soviet State was paraded in *Solovki* for the edification and diversion of its audience.

The idea that crime and criminals would make for good museum exhibits was not an OGPU invention. Indeed, crime museums had appeared and quickly spread throughout Europe as the discipline of criminology took flight at the end of the nineteenth century. In Russia, a museum of criminology was founded in 1900 in Petersburg and soon became one of the most sought-after sightseeing attractions in Petersburg; it became a fad to take foreigners visiting the Russian capital to the museum, and its first-class rogues' gallery – an extensive collection of criminals' photo-

9. Sergei A. Malsagov, *An Island Hell: A Soviet Prison in the Far North* (London: A. M. Philpot, 1926). For more on the campaign prompted by Malsagov's memoir see Dariusz Tolezyk, *See No Evil: Literary Cover-Ups and Discoveries of the Soviet Camp Experience* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), p. 118.

10. The most well-known description of Solovki can be found in Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 2:18-70. Another classic memoir devoted to life in Solovki and Belomor is Ivan Luk'ianovich Solonevich, *Rossii v kontslagere* (Moscow: Redaktsiia zhurnala "Moskva," 1999). A courageous, and fascinating, documentary filmed during *glasnost'* is Marina Goldovskaia, *Vlast' solovetskaia/Solovky Power* (Moscow-San Francisco: Kinostudiia "Mosfil'm," The Video project, 1989).

11. The typhus epidemic on Solovki had two peaks, in the winter of 1928 and 1929-30. Kuziakina, *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp*, pp. 21, 88.

12. The reports of the OGPU-appointed Shanin commission, which investigated the performance of supervisory staff in 1928-29 and gave horrifying details on prisoner abuse, are available in Vsesoiuznoe istoriko-prosvetitel'skoe obshchestvo "Memorial," *Zven'ia*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Progress, 1991), 1: 357-88.

graphs – soon became world famous.¹³ During the October Revolution some of the museum holdings had disappeared, and the museum was officially closed for seven years. However, the 1920s were an era of unparalleled development in Soviet criminology; the museum reopened in 1925 after having recovered the best of its exhibits and acquired some new ones. Among the most lurid new acquisitions was the decapitated head of Petersburg's infamous criminal, Len'ka Pantelev.¹⁴ Pantelev had been shot in 1923 by the Cheka, and after a few months of having his head displayed in a shop window on Nevskii Prospekt, the authorities moved it to the Criminology Museum. Museums and museumgoers elsewhere in Europe were no less fascinated with criminal bodies, but most had to content themselves with photographic representations or with less "capital" body parts, such as hands or fragments of tattooed skin. Berman's image of the camp museum played on this public curiosity for criminal bodies but one-upped traditional criminology museums with its loudly trumpeted ability to display "living" criminals.

Besides feeding off a larger culture of displaying criminality, the idea of a camp museum was also firmly founded in the particulars of Soviet criminology dogma of the 1920s, which held that criminality was caused by social and economic inequality, a phenomenon that was bound to disappear in an equal socialist society. Thus, Maksim Gorky explained in his 1929 reportage about Solovki, "In the Soviet Union, it is established that a 'criminal' is formed by the class-based society, and that 'criminality' is a social illness growing in the rotten soil of the system of private property. Criminality will be easily eliminated if one eliminates the condition that created this illness, which is the old, rotten economic basis of the class-based society."¹⁵ Indeed, it was widely asserted in the 1920s that criminals were a species expected soon to become extinct in the Soviet Union. According to this dogma, the Solovki camp did not hold just any criminals but the last generation of criminals in the Soviet Union. It was their imminent fate as historical curiosities (or "vestiges of the past" as Gorky called them) that best qualified them as museum pieces. This idea is echoed almost literally in Sergei Eisenstein's film *Bezhin lug* (*Bezhin lug*), in which a Bolshevik castigated the retrograde kulaks who had set fire to communal property and would end up killing Pavel Moro-

13. This summary of the history of the criminology museum is based on an interview with Rostislav Liubvin, researcher at the Saint Petersburg Museum of the Militia (the present-day name of the museum), published in Oleg Syromiatnikov, "Kastet byl – Kastet Ostalsia." *Kollektsiia N. G.*, <http://dlib.eastview.com/sources/article.jsp?id=3218639>.

14. Viktor Bobykin, "Kartina dnia. Nashlas' golova Len'ki Panteleeva!," *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, <http://dlib.eastview.com/sources/article.jsp?id=3231565>.

15. Maksim Gorky, "V. Solovki," in *Sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1952).

zov, by exclaiming, "Oh, oh, brother . . . these are the last ones! They should be shown in a museum!"¹⁶ The museum is here a transparent euphemism for the camp, since in reality all those suspected of such crimes were typically sent to the camps. But this is also a very particular euphemism, one that suggests that criminals should not only be put away but also publicly displayed.

But how does one publicly display a camp? Having the public visit the camps would have been a rather impractical, and also potentially dangerous, idea. People might see things they need not see, and miss out on some carefully prepared exhibits. Film turned out to be a great solution to this problem. As Eisenstein showed in a famous description of visiting the Acropolis, film is a striking substitute for sightseeing, as it allows its audience to mimic the experience of a tourist's moving gaze while dispensing with the need to travel.¹⁷ By authorizing a film about the camps, the secret police thus killed two birds in one shooting spree: it completely controlled the sightseeing experience while binding the public to its cinema seats. Other arts were also enlisted to the task: photographers, painters, and writers were employed by the secret police to present the camp's image. Party and secret police bosses received lavish photography albums and playing cards painted with images of the camp; a set of postcards with painted views of Solovki was published in the camp in 1926.¹⁸ The Kirov Museum in Saint Petersburg still holds a collection of 148 photographs of the Solovki camp presented by the secret police to Kirov in 1930. Painting also literally covered up the actual view of the camp for the inmates: a monumental image of a new Soviet city sprawled on the walls of the monastery now turned prisoner living quarters.¹⁹ Cherkasov's film was the most ambitious of all these attempts to cover the camps in the 1920s, both by mustering the most extensive resources and by addressing the largest public.

If early cinema functioned, as film scholars have convincingly argued, as a "means of transportation" promising to take its audiences to faraway, otherwise inaccessible places, few cinematic trips could rival a 1928 trip to Solovki.²⁰ An archipelago rising from the waters of the White Sea in the Soviet far north, Solovki boasts a fourteenth-century monastery that has long been recognized as one of the most stunning architectural

16. Sergei Eisenstein *et al.*, "Bezhin Meadow (Reconstruction)," in *Alexander Nevsky* (Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2001).

17. Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage and Architecture," *Assemblage* 10 (1989).

18. On playing cards and postcards, see Kuziakina, *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp*, p. 149.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

20. On cinema as a "spectatorial means of transportation," see Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002), p. 20.

ensembles in the world. Indeed, Solovki was about as dramatic a location as any film could have. In the Soviet imaginary, the archipelago occupied a no less dramatic place. Even after the fall of communism, Solovki preserved some of its mystique. When I announced to my Russian friends that I was going to Solovki, they warned me against it as if I were undertaking a journey to the netherworld, complete with fantastical trials and tribulations.

Cherkasov's careful framing of *Solovki* makes sure to stress that this trip is little short of a magical undertaking. The film starts with a panoramic portrait of Moscow. The camera gravitates to the center of Moscow, Lubyanka Square, dominated by the headquarters of the secret police. Having brought us into the symbolic center of the Soviet empire, the film proposes we take a trip to its very margin, the Solovki Islands. Nothing is easier for our host: a quick animation tracks a straight line from the headquarters of the secret police to the intermediary port of Kem'; an inch later we are in Solovki, just in time to greet the prisoners, who having taken the slower means of transportation, the boat, arrive after us. The onetime use of animation in a film that otherwise sports a factual documentary aesthetic strongly highlights the extraordinary quality of our trip.

Animation is also a literal translation into the medium of film of a leitmotif of the times, the "living map" (*zhivaia karta*). Cherkasov's map animation was not original but rather revisited an iconic moment: the first Russian animation film, Dziga Vertov's *Today* (*Segodnia*, 1923), famously features another map that comes to life. A couple of years after the making of *Solovki*, this striking image of the living map was also used to describe the settlement of labor camps and the inception of the grand projects to be accomplished with convict labor: "In 1931 it seemed as though the map of Russia had come to life. . . . It was the map of a whole country born anew, but it was almost as simple to read as the plan of a city. . . . In Kareliia [the region around Solovki] too, the map was alive."²¹ Both this massive reshaping of the Soviet space and its mapping were supervised by the OGPU. In the Soviet Union, mapping was under the strict control of a special department of the secret police.²² Strategic roads, factories, camps, and sometimes whole towns never made it onto

21. Maxim Gorky et al., *Belomor: An Account of the Construction of the New Canal Between the White Sea and the Baltic Sea* (New York: H. Smith and R. Haas, 1935), pp. 18-21.

22. Some of the activities of this map division are revealed in declassified NKVD documents, Fond R-6890 in the Archives of the Soviet Communist Party and Soviet State in Moscow. The informative finding aid to this Fond is available in the United States: *Opis', Fond r-6890, RSFSR NKVD: Map publishing*, Archives of the Soviet Communist Party and Soviet State; Microfilm Collection, Box no. 3.314, Hoover Institution Archives.

the map. Together with such monumental projects as deportations, the introduction of internal passports, and the building of canals and railroads, the kind of mapping practiced by the secret police was an integral part of its powerful drive to reshape and control the country.²³ The seemingly magical manipulation of space achieved in the film was based on real power; the secret police did not need the tricks of cinematic animation to control space. But what cinematic animation could do was to transform this manipulation of space from a painstakingly calculated strategy into eye-catching magic. *Solovki* used novel cinematic techniques and iconic images, such as the map animation, together with the veteran of the secret police's bag of tricks – mapping – for this dramatic reconfiguration of Soviet space.

Once on Solovki, we are taken on a kaleidoscopic tour of the island. As welcomed guests of the master of the house, the secret police, we are proudly shown around the key landmarks of its domain: the administrative buildings, prisoners' living quarters, the dining hall, hospital, and printing press. But it is immediately apparent that this is not a pious, drawn-out presentation of Soviet achievements. The island is bustling with people: prisoners play soccer, dive into the sea, and learn new trades. The film is out to prove that things are moving on Solovki: with visible fascination, the film inventories all the means of transportation in Solovki – cars, fleet, train, and to top it all off, Solovki's own airplane. The film expresses and dares Solovki's mobility with its own quick cinematic pace. In the spirit of its times, *Solovki* treats movement as a key cinematic spectacle. The movie camera is able to capture movement, and it does. There are practically no shots of static scenes in *Solovki*. According to Gilles Deleuze, "the mobile camera is like a general equivalent of all the means of locomotion that it shows or that it makes use of – airplane, car, boat, bicycle, foot."²⁴ In *Solovki*, the camera takes its audience for quite a ride around the island. Its electrifying pace entertains and leaves the audience the impression that a lot is happening on Solovki; it also leaves that audience little time to think about what exactly is happening there.

The camera inventories the main occupations of the prisoners: fishing, felling, and agricultural and cultural activities. Work, we are told, is carefully regulated in eight-hour shifts, and the film dwells at length on the remaining leisure time in Solovki. It appears that a great number of prisoners seem to be doing exactly what we are doing, that is, watching a

23. For a concise account of the introduction of internal passports, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 120-22.

24. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 22.

show. Solovki is a society of spectacle. The theater is packed with prisoners, who watch a mixed fare of variety numbers: acrobats form a Soviet star out of their bodies, while heavily painted comedians go for slapstick. When the theater is out, prisoners gather round to watch a burly bare-chested man lift weights and a bear cub do its own tricks. The theater, as Natalia Kuziakina has thoroughly documented, was indeed a strong presence on Solovki.²⁵ The main company, *Solovetskii 1st Department*, started performing in 1923, the very year the camp was founded, and staged a varied repertory of classical and contemporary plays. Theater activity boomed in 1925 when two other companies appeared on Solovki: *Trash* and *Our Own*. They became extremely popular and controversial by moving away from traditional theater toward variety revues. *Trash* "borrowed some of its dancing numbers from the repertoire of *The Bat* and *Crooked Mirror*, the best pre-Revolutionary cabarets," and combined "mime, short satirical scenes, recitations to musical accompaniment, and topical couplets."²⁶ *Our Own* relied more on the rich prison folklore and on common prisoners who performed dances, "camp songs, limericks, couplets about everyday life, satire, and polemic."²⁷ The theater was so popular that tickets became prized possessions not everyone in the camp could afford.

25. The following short account of the history of Solovki theater is based on Kuziakina, *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp*.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 69.



Entrance to the Solovki camp theater, *Solovki*, 1928
Frame enlargement

Chekists got the bulk of the seats, and what remained rarely sufficed even for the cast of privileged prisoners who had somehow managed to escape hard labor. By 1927, when *Solovki* was shot, censorship and the overall crisis of the camp had stifled much of the theatrical activity, and the regular progression of the shows was repeatedly interrupted by waves of typhus.²⁸ But while its actual place in the life of the camp was dwindling, the theater became a key image in OGPU-sponsored representations of the camp. Extensively featured in Cherkasov's *Solovki*, the theater made a similarly strong impression on another famous guest of the secret police to Solovki: Maksim Gorky. Written in 1929, Gorky's travelogue also dwells at disproportionate length on the camp's theatrical offerings:

The concert was very interesting and diverse. A small but very well-coordinated "symphonic ensemble" played the overture of the Barber of Seville, a violinist played Wieniavski's "Mazurka," and Rachmaninoff's "Torrents of Spring;" the prologue to "Clowns" was decently sung, they sang Russian songs, danced "cowboy" and "ec-

28. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

centric" dances, somebody splendidly recited Zharov's "Accordion" to the accompaniment of accordion and piano. The group of acrobats was incredible: five men and one woman made such "tricks" as you cannot see even in a good circus. During the intermission, in the "foyer," a great brass band played Rossini, Verdi, and Beethoven's overture to "Egmont." The conductor was by all means a great talent. The concert itself showed many talented artists. All of them are of course "prisoners," and they must work a lot for the stage and on stage.²⁹

Both the filmmakers of *Solovki* and Gorky had ostensibly come to Solovki as "independent outside observers" ready to give the island an objective literary and cinematic representation that would disprove the Western rumors about Soviet camps.³⁰ But at the Solovki theater, they turn from observers of "life caught unawares" into admiring spectators of carefully staged performances. Rather than a virgin island waiting for its travelers to give it a literary or cinematic representation, Solovki already possesses a wide variety of means of self-presentation: besides the theater, Gorky marvels at the newspaper, magazine, ethnographic society, and the museum that give "the full picture of the variety of SLON's domain" (SLON is the acronym for Solovki camp).³¹ The camp's means of representation converge to give such a full picture of the island that there is no need for Gorky or for the filmmakers to fall into "primitive empiricism."³² They can simply propagate the comprehensive picture that the camp has already put so much work into creating.³³ No wonder Gorky's description of the theater is taken over by a proliferation of seemingly redundant quotation marks: his description is truly a compilation of quotations rather than his own words. As a result, the camp loses its reality and becomes a twice-removed representation, the review of a spectacle.

29. Gorky, "V. Solovki," pp. 225-26.

30. Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, p. 118.

31. Gorky, "V. Solovki," p. 226.

32. Gorky, *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, no. 70 (1963), pp. 33-34, quoted in Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, p. 149.

33. Given that Gorky spent three days on Solovki (June 20-23, 1929), he hardly had time to attend all the shows and tours that his OGPU guides had organized for him (Gorky, "V. Solovki," p. 226). As a result there are few spontaneous scenes of camp life described in the travelogue; the few there are, he carefully notes as confirmation of the overall picture of the camp. But from the very first page of the travelogue, Gorky appears more interested in panoramic views of Solovki and in compiling written sources on its history than in detailed empirical observation (p. 201). A telling example is Gorky's account of his trip to Sekirnaia Gora, the mountain where the feared punishment cells on Solovki were located. Gorky glosses over the immediate sight of the punishment cells, and instead turns his gaze to the beauty of the distant panorama offered by the mountain's elevation (p. 201).

The final result of this description is that the prisoners are framed between quotation marks: the actors "are of course 'prisoners.'"



Solovki camp theater actress putting on make-up, *Solovki*, 1928.
Frame enlargement

When the camp becomes a spectacle, prisoners are only so-called prisoners, prisoners in quotations marks. As a result, Gorky can focus on the quality of their performance and praise their hard work on stage rather than bother about their actual working and living conditions in the camp.

Gorky pays as much attention to the show as to its reception by the camp audience. He prefaces his description of the theater by announcing that "Seven hundred people fit into the theatre, and it 'was packed.' A 'socially dangerous' audience is hungry for spectacles just as any other audience is, and it thanks artists as least as warmly."³⁴ The film shows the same interest in the audience of Solovki's spectacles, which becomes a spectacle in itself. In a nondescript theater where *Solovki*'s audience could be watching the film, a group of men laugh out loud at the joke on stage. As we watch their amusement, one of them suddenly turns and

34. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

looks straight at us, as if we were some newcomers just entering the theater. We are invited to the show: in the next shots, we are shown the events on stage unmediated. The film places us in the seats of the local Solovki theater, but not before showing us how an audience is to behave. We see the laughter of the audience before we even see the funny scene; as such, it functions like canned laughter, signaling to us how to react to the joke to come. The film not only carefully stages the camp's presentation but also its reception.

The spectators we are shown on-screen are unfailingly entertained and impressed by the spectacle. We are encouraged to follow their example and simply sit back and enjoy the show. One difference between the camp audience and us is that when the lights in their theater go out and their show is over, ours continues uninterrupted. Just in case we might be at a loss as to how to react to the tour of the camp and its historical heritage, the film introduces a group of "tourists" excitedly listening to their guide's presentation of the island. Even when we are outside the theater, the camera continues to frame the prisoners as amusing objects for our entertainment. By so doing, the camera not only encourages its audience to sit back and enjoy the many spectacles that the camp offers, but more importantly, it invites its audience to enjoy the camp as a spectacle. A group of buff male inmates obligingly strip in front of the camera and then comically display their full-body tattoos.



Displaying the prisoners as camp attractions, *Solovki*, 1928
Frame enlargement

Tattoos were used in Soviet camps to announce a complex hierarchy among the common criminals. Outside of the camps, even the uninitiated passer-by probably got their intimidating message. The patronizing eye of the camera silences the violent language of the tattoos, turning their bearers from a threat into an exotic spectacle.

Female prisoners, or at least women the film presents as prisoners, are prime fare of this spectacle. Given how well-fed and content *Solovki*'s women look, it seems more likely that they are personnel or Chekists' wives playing the role of prisoners. A prisoner's recollections about the shooting of *Solovki* note that the smartly dressed, beaming prisoners shown on-screen were all "dressed-up Red Army and secret service men."³⁵ Substituting Chekists' wives for prisoners in camp presentations was also a well-documented practice.³⁶ In *Solovki*, a woman lasciviously lies on a sofa reading a book and every so often casts inviting glances on the audience. In a similar mood, another woman plays the mandolin smiling flirtatiously at the camera. Since this is a silent film, the audience need not be distracted by her music and can focus instead on her voluptuous figure. The audience is also lured to watch closely various aspects of camp routine. During the roll call, the film focuses on a group of attractive women, ostensibly prisoners, smartly dressed in white silk shirts and dark jackets, heads covered with coquettish hats. Frontally positioned, the camera catches each woman's head movement as she turns from right to left to call out her number. One beautiful face after the other turns to the camera and then away from it. An earring luminously marks the trajectory of the head's movement. The film perversely turns roll call – the moment of pure subjection when one's very gaze is directed by prison routine – into an erotic scene. Provoked by the presence of the camera, one woman looks at the camera and cannot stifle a burst of laughter; the others smile self-consciously. The subject's gaze at the audience is traditionally famed for breaking the spectator's voyeuristic illusion of watching without being seen. Here, the gaze at the audience appears to acquiesce in the camera's invitation to the audience to enjoy this eroticized spectacle.

The roll call, ostensibly a scene of life caught unawares, functions to the same effect as the clearly staged shots of the mandolin player and the reader. The representation of these women prisoners shows how the film collapses the distinction between staged film and "unplayed documen-

35. Solonevich, *Molodezh i G.P.U.*, p. 312; cited in Kuziakina, *Theatre in the Solovki Prison Camp*, p. 20.

36. Tolczyk gives various examples of the Soviet practice of constructing "entire Potemkin villages" to cover up the reality of the camps, including the disguise of OGPU officers' wives as prisoners. Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, p. 114.

tary." At the time, this distinction divided some of the leading figures of Soviet cinema, and as such it was at the heart of the current cinematic scene. Unplayed documentary was famously advocated by Dziga Vertov, whose *Man with a Movie Camera* was partially released the same year as *Solovki*.³⁷ Revitalized in the West in the 1960s through cinema vérité (France) and direct cinema (United States), unplayed documentary was perceived as a reaction against "life in its Sunday best," "official and ritualized."³⁸ In *Solovki*, shots of life caught unawares and staged shots melt into each other. It is often impossible to tell which is which.³⁹ The few actual moments of life caught unawares that do exist into the film are fully integrated in the main narrative. The film mixes fictional and documentary scenes as the variety show combines magic tricks with acrobatics. It matters little that magic requires a sleight of hand and creates illusions that deceive the public's eyes, while acrobatics require strong arms and the risk of getting hurt to create a true image. In the variety theater, magic tricks and acrobatic figures coexist as attractions. The shots of life caught unawares and the whole documentary aesthetic of the film simply add excitement to the attraction, like the removal of the security net from under the acrobats. The audience is presented with "the real thing."

Not just a metaphor and not just another attraction of the camp, the variety theater is the prototypical show on which *Solovki* is modeled. The camp as a whole becomes an extended string of variety numbers. *Solovki*'s quick, often quite disconnected succession of eye-catching episodes harkens back to the days when newsreels featuring faraway places were shown in variety theaters, competing with "numbers" for the attention, or rather distraction, of the audience. As in any show of this kind, some numbers, like the parade of camp resources and technological wonders, are meant to inspire the awe of the audience at the craft and power of the performer. Other numbers simply aim to amuse. The ending of the film wraps this kaleidoscope of attractions into a predictable teleological narrative. In the last shots of the film, we come full circle to the port where the prisoners entered Solovki at the beginning of the film. Now the port witnesses the departure of the prisoners before the completion of their term, thanks to good behavior. Harkening back to the beginning of

37. Dziga Vertov started *The Man with a Movie Camera* in 1926, and showed parts of it first in 1927-28. The first showing of the complete film took place in Kiev in January 1929. Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, p. 171.

38. Edgar Morin, "Chronicle of a Film," *Studies in Visual Communication* 11, no. 1 (1985): 4.

39. One such moment of life-caught-unawares is movingly documented in Marina Goldovkaia's *Solovky Power*, where one of the camp's survivors recognizes himself in *Solovki* as a young man reading a newspaper while unwittingly captured by camera.

the film, the last scenes frame the whole film as a didactic reeducation narrative.

And yet, despite its upbeat ideological message, *Solovki* was not shielded from censorship. After a high-profile release, the film was banned, resurfacing only after the perestroika. The film was so thoroughly purged that in his *Forward, Soviet!*, Graham Roberts asserts that he has found no reference to *Solovki* "or its maker, in any Russian or English language work" other than in Marina Goldovskaia's film *Solovki Power*, and that "there is no evidence of Cherkasov's film ever being shown to paying audiences."⁴⁰ Indeed, it has long been assumed that *Solovki* was shelved without ever being shown to the public. It is Cherkasov's fellow Solovki traveler, Gorky, who provides the hitherto missing evidence of *Solovki*'s public release and gives us a first inkling as to the film's purge. Gorky's famous travelogue about Solovki starts with a paragraph about Cherkasov's film.⁴¹ Gorky reports that as he was writing, the film was still "shown all over the country," having become the most famous representation of Solovki in the Soviet Union. Gorky, however, seemed hardly impressed. He declared that given the rapid rhythm of change in Solovki, the film looked already outdated. Gorky clarified this cryptic comment five years later, when his co-edited volume about the Belomor canal camp imposed a whole new trend in the representation of the camps, thus fully superseding *Solovki*.⁴² What was becoming quickly outdated by 1930 was the framing of the camp as a reeducation spa – the immediate cause of *Solovki*'s undoing seems to have been the indignation of factory workers who complained that their own living standards were lower than those of *Solovki*'s prisoners.⁴³ The secret police representation of the camps in the 1930s changed, with the camp featured as a threatening site of hard labor rather than an exotic summer retreat. What also became outdated in the 1930s was the framing of the camp as an entertaining spectacle, one that cast the prisoners as exotic others for an audience that was presumed innocent. This presumption, together with the exoticized border between audience and prisoners, disappeared in the growingly paranoid atmosphere of the 1930s. Increasingly, the representation

40. Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, p. 163.

41. Gorky, "V. Solovki," p. 201.

42. For more on Gorky's Belomor project and the accompanying films, see Cynthia Ann Ruder, *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 1998), Dariusz Tolczyk, *See No Evil: Literary Cover-Ups and Discoveries of the Soviet Camp Experience* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), and "Secret Police Shots at Filmmaking: The Gulag and Cinema," in Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times*, pp. 123-60.

43. Marina Goldovskaia, *Zhenshchina s kinoapparatom* (Moscow: Materik, 2002), p. 152.

of the camps became haunted by the figure of the dubious spectator, one that doubts the image of the camp and who is, in turn, to be doubted as a potential suspect.

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