

Title: Brezhnev's Builders

Author: Raymond DeLuca, Harvard University

Abstract:

Unfolding in the summer of 1963, Georgii Daneliia's "Walking the Streets of Moscow" (*Ya shagaju po Moskve*, 1964) presents a sunny cityscape in which characters' spatial encounters are fluid and fragmentary. Continual shots of reflective surfaces, spinning wheels, carnival rides, and pedestrian feet distort and mobilize Daneliia's cinematic topography. The film's motility conveys the vitality of Thaw-era society. Its optimism, however, is undercut by one of Daneliia's later films, "Autumn Marathon" (*Osennii marafon*, 1979) in which urban space (this time Leningrad) is encountered as static, confined, dolorous. Images of cluttered apartments, dark thoroughfares, and lonely joggers dwarfed by towering complexes suggest a vitiated landscape incapable of enlivening individuals' spatial experiences. These two films, then, materially and conceptually, expose the pessimistic transformation of Soviet space between 1964 and 1979. This presentation foregrounds Brezhnev's decision to intervene in Prague in 1968 as the wellspring of such a spatial reconceptualization. Throughout the 1970s, as variously articulated by Stagnation-era cinema, Soviet space becomes a depersonalizing, claustrophobic force.

The multitude of mainstream '70s-era films focusing on the ordinary lives of Soviet architects, builders, and urban planners – often written and produced by former architects themselves – became active participants in the development of visual culture under Brezhnev. This Brezhnevian genre of "architecture cinema" both reflected and inflected Soviet audiences' perceptions of Stagnation-era space. My presentation thus seeks to examine the ways in which the production of virtual, cinematic space was shaped by the construction of literal space, i.e., Soviet architecture, and vice-versa. It advocates for a capacious understanding of Stagnation cinema that distances itself from both formalist and auteurist interpretive frameworks in favor of an approach premised on material culture. It reveals how the sensation of cultural stagnation (and resistance to it) expressed itself materially and spatially – concretely – on the Soviet screen.