During the mid-1970s, at the high-water mark of the period of détente in the Cold War, Soviet and American filmmakers collaborated to produce a fantasy-musical entitled *The Blue Bird* (*Sinyaya ptitsa*). This now-forgotten film, which had its premiere in Moscow and Washington in 1976, was based on a play first performed in 1908. Not exactly a hot property, perhaps, but the film’s director was the veteran George Cukor, whose long list of Hollywood hits included *Dinner at Eight, Little Women, David Copperfield, Camille, The Philadelphia Story, Gaslight, Born Yesterday, A Star is Born*, and *My Fair Lady*. Celebrated as Hollywood’s best director of actresses, Cukor was blessed with no fewer than four Academy-Award winners or nominees in the cast of *The Blue Bird*: Elizabeth Taylor, Ava Gardner, Cicely Tyson, and Jane Fonda. Shooting in Leningrad, he could also draw on the talents of some of the best Soviet ballet dancers of the time. This elaborate Soviet-American co-production was intended not only to contribute to the spirit of détente, but also to open the door to future profitable collaborations between American and Soviet filmmakers. Alas, the film was a flop, so disastrous that it put the kibosh on any further Soviet-American co-productions. What had gone wrong?

Tony Shaw’s article “Nightmare on Nevsky Prospekt” offers not only a detailed account of the film’s complicated genesis and ill-starred production, but also a comprehensive analysis of its place in the history of Cold War cinema.

He begins with a concise overview of that subject, of which he is a master. From the late forties through the mid-1950s, filmmakers on both sides of the conflict produced “crudely

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1 For overviews of Cold War cinema see Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000); Tony Shaw and Denise Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold*
made spy thrillers” and “melodramas warning about the threat of domestic subversion” (5), while each side purged its film industry of anyone suspected of sympathy with the other. Revisionist tendencies began to assert themselves in the late 1950s and early 1960s: in the Soviet Union, negative portraits of the enemy and stentorian propaganda gave way to “modest, unembellished images of everyday life”;2 in the United States, a cycle of films by independent American directors began to cast doubt “on the role of the military in politics and the rationality of nuclear deterrence” (7).

Shaw traces the remote origins of The Blue Bird back to the first U.S.-Soviet cultural exchange agreement of the Cold War, signed in 1958 during the ‘Khrushchev Thaw.’ Efforts to mount a U.S.-Soviet co-production during the 1960s foundered, however, “on the rocks of miscommunication, political suspicion, the highly bureaucratic nature of Soviet filmmaking, the vagaries of Hollywood financing, and the difficulty of finding a topic acceptable to both countries” (8). But in 1969, Clara Reece, a Romanian-born business executive based in Cleveland, approached independent producer Edward Lewis with the idea of initiating a joint Soviet-American film production. As Tony Shaw notes, Lewis had produced Seven Days in May, one of the American films that questioned the role of the military in politics. (And, although Shaw does not mention this point, Lewis was co-producer, with the actor Kirk Douglas, of the 1960 epic Spartacus, the film that broke the Hollywood blacklist by hiring Dalton Trumbo as screenwriter and allowing him to receive credit for his work without a pseudonym.) Reece, for her part, was vice president of Tower International Corporation, owned by wealthy Canadian industrialist Cyrus Eaton. ‘The Kremlin’s favorite capitalist,’ Eaton had received the 1960 Lenin Peace Prize for his efforts to promote commerce and cooperation between East and West.

The Reece-Lewis initiative coincided with the Nixon-Brezhnev era of arms-control agreements and cultural exchanges. The deal for The Blue Bird came together in 1973, at a moment when the Soviet film industry was attempting not only to expand its influence and prestige but also to generate hard-currency profits. But why choose a play by Maurice Maeterlinck, a Belgian Symbolist writer who had won the Nobel Prize for Literature several years before the First World War? Reece knew that Lewis had the screen rights to the play, which Tony Shaw describes as “a quaint turn-of-the-century fantasy about two children searching for the Blue Bird of Happiness to help their sick friend” (11). Perhaps a narrative that featured witches and fairies, talking animals and talismanic objects, and travels through enchanted landscapes, all the while emphasizing the comforts and joys of home, was as far removed from the politics of the Cold War as any story could be.

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Moreover, the play had a history in both societies: Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theater had hosted its premiere in 1908, and in the United States, Shirley Temple starred in a film adaptation in 1940.3

George Cukor’s record of successful film adaptations of plays began as far back as 1930, when he directed The Royal Family of Broadway, based on a Broadway hit by George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber, and extended through My Fair Lady (1964). Why, then, did he fail so spectacularly with The Blue Bird? At the heart of Tony Shaw’s article is a detailed reconstruction, based on Cukor’s letters and papers, of the many difficulties the film encountered. The fact that the Americans and the Russians could not agree on a single version of the script led to confusion and delays in production, causing the budget to soar from $2.4 million to $8 million (twice the Hollywood average of that era and twenty times the budget of the average Soviet film). The Americans complained about inadequate technical facilities: “You won’t believe it, but this picture is being edited on a 1921 moviola like the one Eisenstein used on Potemkin” (19). The Russian and American composers could not agree on an overarching style for the film’s score. Russian birds died from toxic shock after being painted blue; and American actors complained about unpalatable Russian food. Elizabeth Taylor needed a month of recuperation in London after acquiring amoebic dysentery.

These difficulties might have been overcome, but Tony Shaw argues persuasively that Cukor’s treatment of Maeterlinck’s play was bound to produce a dull film. Cukor excised the playwright’s “wordy moralizing” (26), but by eliminating Maeterlinck’s more frightening scenes and softening the play’s focus on death and suffering, he also deprived his film of dramatic tension. “The star-studded cast has nothing much to do, with the exception of the occasional song and dance,” while “most of the Soviet actors and ballet stars are relegated to the status of local color, creating a feeling of collaborative imbalance for the discerning viewer” (p. 26). Shaw’s final verdict places most of the blame for the film’s failure on its director:

In short, the film is a pastiche that makes sense only in view of its unusual and troubled production history. The film’s lack of audience appeal—for either children or adults—is painfully obvious. Cukor needed the imagination of a Walt Disney to translate Maeterlinck’s highly dated play to the screen nearly seventy years after its first production. He did not have it. The Blue Bird is at once too literal (in following the play’s slow plot so closely)—and not literal enough (in rejecting Maeterlinck’s phantasmagoric fantasy world as too scary for contemporary children) (27).

3 A 1918 version by Maurice Tourneur, one of the outstanding directors of the silent period, has been designated as an American classic by the Library of Congress and selected for preservation by the National Film Registry.
American filmmakers returned to business as usual in dealing with the Cold War: Sylvester Stallone’s Rambo movies, for example, and, as late as 1990, the very popular film version of Tom Clancy’s Cold War submarine thriller, The Hunt for Red October, in which the Soviet naval defector played by Sean Connery creates his own version of détente by collaborating with the CIA. Red October, Tony Shaw reminds us, was a blockbuster, grossing more than $122 million in the United States alone.

Shaw mentions in passing another cross-cultural collaboration of the mid-1970s, the Soviet-Japanese co-production, Dersu Uzala, directed by Akira Kurosawa, the winner of the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 1975. Why did Kurosawa succeed in his collaboration with the Soviet film industry, while Cukor failed? The answer seems to be that Kurosawa, in the story of a friendship between an elderly Siberian guide and a Russian explorer, found material and themes that suited his artistic vision. The themes of the film—an unlikely master-disciple relationship that matures into a genuine partnership, pride in skills carefully honed and meticulously practiced, and nostalgia for a vanishing way of life—resonated profoundly with the great director’s vision of life and history. With The Blue Bird, George Cukor was working in a genre that was foreign to him and under conditions that did not suit his great gifts as a director. But with Kurosawa’s Dersu Uzala, the era of détente produced one of the masterpieces of modern cinema.

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