

Cross-cultural Adaptations and Culture Wars: An Analysis of Andrei Yermash's Cinematic Adaptation of Asimov's *End of Eternity* *

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Abstract

This paper is devoted to a critical analysis of the 1987 Russian-language cinematic adaptation of Isaac Asimov's novel The End of Eternity (1955), written and directed by Andrei Yermash. It aims to evaluate how the adaptation's movement from one politico-cultural space to another is shaped by policing, and which can be seen in the significant deviation of the film's opening and ending from the novel. The paper, subsequently, highlights how this transformation becomes the basis of a line of argument that the Soviet Union had been consistently pushing forth in the Cold War era's culture wars.

Keywords: Cross-cultural adaptation, Time-travel, Science-fiction, Social engineering, End of Eternity,

Introduction

The film director/screenplay-writer's dilemma of remaining faithful to the source text or using the literary source as raw material always throws up an interesting spectacle. While the use of different narrative techniques, cinematic styles and tropes can result in the film becoming a hybrid entity (Bortolotti and Hutcheon, 2007, 447, McEntee, 2015, 307), cinematic adaptations also move across cultural and/or national boundaries. In such a case, the adaptation is often impacted by the policing that takes place during cross-cultural adaptation (Leitch, 2018, 11). In the name of facilitating an exploration of alternate thematic and intellectual concerns in the source text, such policing pushes for reimagining of embedded cultural meanings inside the text (Burry, 2016, 7). The question of fidelity to the source text, then, is relevant only when one adaptation is to be compared with another. This paper attempts to highlight how Andrei Yermash's *Konets Vechnosti* (1987) is not an inferior trans-national adaptation as suggested by ratings across film-aggregator websites. The paper highlights how the act of wilful policing necessitated by Cold War's cultural tussle transforms the novel's central idea—change, and its nature—in order to align the film's message with Soviet philosophy's politico-cultural assumptions about “man.”

‘Change’: The Real Site of Contestation in Cold War

Asimov's novel was not the first science-fiction work that Andrei Yermash translated/adapted for the screen. However, it was his first, and last, screen adaptation of a major Western science-fiction author. Owing to this, Yermash had to contend with the popular binary oppositions of

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liberalism/totalitarianism and autonomous individual/totalitarian man that dominated popular perception of the West and the Soviet Union (Krylova, 2000, 120). Not only were the novel's philosophical arguments of classical Utilitarianism to be re-mediated for the 'safe' consumption of the Soviet audience, faith in the suppression of individual liberty for the "will of history" that informed Socialist ideology (Krylova, 2000, 125) had to be reinforced. This was important since, despite Gorbachev's attempt to reorganize Soviet cinema industry along the principles of market economics (Kepley, 1996, 31; Faraday, 2000, 23), the Soviet audience were served only commissioned films approved by the Goskino, or the State Committee of the USSR on Cinematography (Faraday, 2000, 23). Thus, Yermash was expected to adhere to the Goskino's demand for ideological conformity of artistic expression that had been in place since Stalin's Cultural Revolution (Youngblood, 1991, 149; Kepley, 1996, 31). This was also important because conformity would have determined Yermash's place within the formal and informal system of prestige that had developed amongst Soviet filmmakers during the years leading up to the revolution of 1986. He, thus, seems to willingly accept policing his adaptation in order to make the script 'fit for the Soviet market.'

Yermash's biggest challenge that he encountered in the novel are the concepts of Minimum Necessary Change (M.N.C.) and Maximum Desired Response (M.D.R.). Both are central to for an Eternal's telos of social engineering in Asimov's *The End of Eternity*. They use Computaplex analyses (a substitute for the 'science' of psychohistory in Asimov's another famous novel, *Foundation*) that easily crunch voluminous social data fed in by Observers such as Harlan, in order to draw up that 'change' which, when introduced in 'Reality', would set that society on course to a happy social future. Importantly, the Eternals attempt to contain and align the outcomes of the radical "grandfather paradox" as well as ergodic hypotheses with their humanist agenda through reconfiguring change as "M.N.C, or Minimum Change Necessary" and "Maximum Desired Change." The over-arching objective of M.N.C. and M.D.C. is to bring about a positive change, even if it "involves induction of an accident in space and the immediate death by fairly horrible means of a dozen or more men." (Asimov, 1955, 7). However, keeping in mind theses of history and philosophy related to ergodicity or non-ergodicity of history, the Eternals take utmost care to limit the amount of change desired in order to avoid significant deviations in the plotting of "reality changes" so as to avoid radical alterations to the life-plot of individuals being subjected to these changes. Further, the changes implemented do not affect every point in the life of that period. Consequently, deviations in reality do not fork out over a life history and instead join back after some time. Alternately, and instead of killing people, "displacement of a container from one shelf to another" is deemed to work equally well (Asimov, 1955, 8) in order to bring about the M.N.C. In fact, the Eternals necessitate that such M.N.C.s are devised after a thorough consultation with Sociologists and Technicians in order to suppress their randomness. Only in this way would the ergodicity of these changes could be contained within a reasonable limit, and which would not radically change the characteristics of the age in which these changes are introduced.

Asimov's assumptions that inform the concepts of Minimum Necessary Change (M.N.C.) and Maximum Desired Response (M.D.R.) were always going to create a problem in the Soviet context since the Soviet idea of change was grounded within historical-materialist and scientific discourse shaped by Lenin's philosophy. Lenin had followed classical Marxists in seeing an outright workers' revolution to overthrow the bourgeoisie as the most important change, and in which technology was seen as occupying a key role in realizing not only social and economic development but also advancing communist revolutions in societies across the world (Rapp, 1985, 2). However, and since cinematic adaptations oscillate between fidelity and remediation, Yermash's challenge was how to retain both M.N.C. and M.D.R in the script while simultaneously avoiding Goskino's censorship owing to the incompatibility of the two with Soviet political philosophy. Yermash addresses it by downplaying their significance in

the telos of Eternity in his cinematic adaptation; the two concepts do not make an appearance on the screen until halfway through the film. When the film does refer to them, it only mentions them in passing. Most importantly, Yermash chooses to explain the telos of Eternity by substituting the idea embedded in the two terms with the phrase “forces of extremes” (Yermash, 1987, 56:38-59:37). In a post-structuralist, post-modern world where the reader/audience is the source of meaning since the author has been subjected to a technology-induced version of Roland Barthes’ “death of the author” (Brooker, 2007, 107), the ambiguity in the term “forces of extremes” liberated the meanings of M.N.C. and M.D.R. from all authorial control. The audience were now free to understand it in whatever way they wished to. While the ideas insinuated by the phrase remained faithful to the telos of Eternity in the novel since mitigating the uncertainty and chaos introduced by “forces of extremes” unleashed by unmoderated creative impulses also increased happiness, it also evoked anti-Capitalist sentiment since Capitalism pushed economic disparity in society, along with associated misery, to extreme levels by privatizing profit and socializing labour. In this way, Yermash aligned the larger message of the film with Socialist philosophy while offsetting the problematic concepts of MNC and MDR, thereby circumventing any censorship that the Goskino might have imposed upon the film. In fact, the ambiguity even allowed Yermash to bring home the anti-totalitarian position stressed by Noÿs in her criticism of Eternity, if he ever intended to do so. To the section of audience that possessed a nuanced understanding of history and historical change but were afraid of uttering anything that could be deemed anti-Party, “forces of extremes” would also capture the cause of their impoverished and miserable lives under Soviet rule, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. When led by psychopaths such as those who helmed Eternity, M.N.C., M.D.R. or any other method of change undertaken by a powerful organization would have a detrimental effect on the subjects of these changes as they would liberate extreme creative energies that, historically, had not only differentiated one epoch from the another but also went on to destabilize social, political, and economic institutions. The primary attribute of such phases of extreme change was widespread and long-lasting negative impacts on society. A few prominent European examples would include the French Revolution, the Industrial revolution, the two World Wars, the October Revolution, Five-year Plans, the Cold War, etc. Thus, that section of the Soviet audience would have agreed with Noÿs that alternate entities that “forces of extreme” needed to be countered in order to contain their negative impact. This brings us to the next important departure that Yermash makes from the novel’s plot. In what could be seen as a utilitarian argument for abandoning utilitarianism Noÿs questions the very purpose of Eternity:

Then what is it the Eternals consider good? I’ll tell you. Safety and security. Moderation. Nothing in *excess*. No risks without overwhelming certainty of an adequate return.”

(Asimov, 1955, pp. 196, emphasis added)

Noÿs highlights how the Eternals’ ploy of avoiding excesses and institutionalizing moderation undermines the very entity that helped realize the things that provided happiness—creativity. Noÿs’ criticism, thus, forms an important part of Asimov’s revaluation of Eternity’s over-emphasis on utilitarian approach to social engineering, including social evolution. She highlights how the logical conclusion of scientific enterprise should have been interstellar travel, allowing mankind to find other inhabitable planets and replicate the (capitalist) social, economic and political systems in the societies set up there. Yermash could have built upon this argument by highlighting how the stifling of creativity also results in abandoning the pursuit of social progress to its logical conclusion and, instead, ends up maintaining the status quo. Instead of this extremely valuable suggestion that could have provided critical insights into why society’s progression from Feudalism to Capitalism to Socialism and, eventually, Communism, does not take place in the intended manner, Yermash chooses to focus exclusively on the modern individualist tendency as the premise of his film from the very

beginning. Unlike Asimov's circuitous opening that builds curiosity in readers' mind, he opens the film with a Committee of Eternals conducting a hearing and reprimanding a fellow Eternal for a liaison with a woman. The scene subsequently shifts to a school where instructions are being passed on by someone who looks like a Party official to educator Yarrow to introduce more stringent emotional training to the Cubs in pursuit of Eternity's telos. Though Harlan is the hero of this film, he is shown as only one of the many Cubs being trained at the academy. This opening not only makes the film stand out as an oddity by destroying any semblance to the novel from the beginning itself, it sets the premise for reimagining the primary struggle at the heart of the novel's plot. During her time spent in Harlan's company, Noys insinuates that like the collective, an individual too could stake an equal and legitimate claim to happiness: "There are many happinesses, many goods, infinite variety.... That is the Basic State of mankind." (Asimov, 1955, pp. 198). However, unlike the novel, the film does not highlight the competing pulls exerted by the demands made by the collective and the individual as a part of the larger argument against Eternity. The film clearly suggests that being a human it would be impossible for an Eternal to remain emotionally detached all the time. Further, utilitarianism as a philosophy of ethics cannot sustain itself beyond a point since the pursuit of happiness for the maximum 'number' comes at the cost of denying individual happiness would be eventually brought into question. Like humans from 'Reality', the Eternals take birth, attain maturity, grow old, and eventually die. Like them, they also have the propensity to harbour strong likes, and dislikes, to people, things, or situations. However, unlike the non-Eternals, they cannot allow themselves to be governed by these likes and dislikes, especially in the case of an emotional relationship with non-Eternals. "Liaisons require permission; liaisons require computations; liaisons require status; liaisons are tricky things." (Asimov, 1955, pp. 147). Further, as can be seen in Harlan holding Eternity's *Mallansohn Project* hostage till the time Twissell restores Noys back to him by lifting what Harlan has presumed to be an energy barrier, utilitarianism ignores the fact that human beings seek immediate happiness rather than one that materializes over a long term-horizon. All this has come to highlight that if an individual has to work for Eternity, then staying emotionally detached while introducing Minimum Necessary Changes and, most importantly, attempting to contain the Maximum Desired Response is critical for them. Thus, the Eternals are expected to resist the competing pull of their individual likes and dislikes since it can interfere with the telos of Eternity. However, the novel's eventual criticism of Eternity overshadows this critique. In fact, it makes Harlan briefly wonder if Noys' love for him had been merely a charade, a 'means to an end' in a larger game being played by people from the future centuries. In the novel the indignation at this is overcome easily since utilitarianism is a moral theory which ignores the relationship between means and end. Hence, Harlan eventually accepts Noys' argument that she grew a liking for him from the very beginning of her assignment. However, that Eternity too is governed by psychopaths who similarly advocate the same ethical strategy and, hence, it must be destroyed is something that makes Harlan choose to let Eternity get destroyed by not fixing Cooper's arrival into the right place and time. While this sets up the novel's eventual end, in which Harlan and Noys find themselves liberated to enter into a happy union, it seems to provide the basis of Yermash's alternate ending of his adaptation.

In the film Yermash retains the element of irony in an Eternal's life, as well as the psychopathic traits in the personality of Eternals. In fact, the spectacle of this irony would have rung a bell in his Soviet audience since most of them had been similarly forced to work tirelessly by Communist Party officials to raise the level of technological advancement and material prosperity in the Soviet Union at the cost of their own happiness. As it is, the opening scene would have brought back memories of the 'Levada affair', reminding the discerning audiences of a similar meeting held by the Academy of Sciences to critique Professor Yuriy Levada's book 'Lectures on Sociology', and in which the Academy heavily criticized what it interpreted

as a declining respect for the foundations of Marxist-Leninist philosophy of Socialist way of life (Dahm and Blakeley, 1981, 268). Thus, for an ideologically-driven social milieu in which any anti-party intellectual position or even a dilution of ideological principles was abhorred, it would have been necessary for Yermash to contain Noys' argument about the equal claim of individual happiness since it undermined the basic premise upon which Socialist philosophy, including its moral philosophy, rested. Also, since it was imperative to align the film's message with the idea of the Socialist way of life, understood as "conditions in the life-activity of men, to behave and think in their mode, *in the norms of social relations*, in the forms of communication and discourse" (Dahm and Swiderski, 1982, 59, emphasis added), an alternate strategy to criticise the utilitarian approach to Eternity's social engineering was necessary. In this regard, Yermash falls back upon contemporary discussions on the incompatibility of utilitarian philosophy with socialist philosophy and morality. The grounds for such a comparison were already present in Asimov's novel. As is seen in Eternity's attempts at social-engineering, Western utilitarian philosophy advocated that the means adopted in the pursuit of improvement in material conditions were irrelevant in the face of the end attained, an assertion that had highly contentious moral and ethical implications. Such a realization had come to gain primacy for the Soviets, as seen in Mikhail Gorbachev's speech in the 1986th Party Program, in which he pointed out that *perestroika* had destabilized the socialist way of life by releasing pent-up forces of individualism and disregard of ethics and morality in the Soviet Union (Feldman, 1989, 148). Since a blind eye could not be turned to the abandonment of the Socialist spiritual and moral basis of life, it was important to take up and reinforce the idea of the Soviet hero, and how Harlan was to be projected as one.

Conclusion

Yermash's most important reconfiguration of the novel comes in the form of the film's ending. In it, he presents Harlan as a Soviet hero, and not merely the central protagonist of Asimov's novel. When Harlan realizes that he has been reduced to a mere pawn in the pincer-movement carried out by those fighting Eternity, he re-examines his choices. In the film, he chooses to destroy Eternity by blasting the very "kettle" that brought him and Noys to the different-than-intended part of the twentieth-century. However, by actively destroying Eternity, he has allowed his selfless dedication and loyalty to the efforts of Eternity to be placed under doubt. What follows next is even more perplexing: he does not accept Noys back into his life. His outburst directed at her not only points to an unresolved emotional crisis, but also the guilt of having upheld the sanctimony of his individual needs in place of his organization's needs, forcing us to wonder as to where do his loyalties now lie, both social and emotional. Yermash furthers the cross-cultural transformation of Asimov's Harlan by offering Harlan's growth from a Cub to an Observer as grounded in socialist values that are derived not from Stalin, but from Marx and Lenin's socialist philosophy: individualism is the expression of the fact that man had become an object for himself, that human essence is no abstraction residing in each single individual; in reality it is the ensemble of social relationships (Marx, 1888, 13-15).

However, Yermash does not intend to make Harlan's life as a tale of caution and attempts to save him from further condemnation. His rejection of Noys is a rejection of the individualism that is insinuated in Noys' argument. It restores primacy of the collective that is the central idea in the Soviet philosophy of personality as developed since Marx and Engels' *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and *German Ideology*. Yermash continues this salvation act by adding an episode not found in the novel—we see Harlan walking away from Noys and towards the city. There he is perplexed to find Finge and Twissell having survived the destruction of Eternity and now living in the same 'Reality' as his. They are shown alighting from a silver Rolls Royce Ghost, clad in expensive suits, and moving towards what could be their office in an impressive-looking glass building, all of which are popular cinematic tropes

to represent the Capitalist West. Yermash makes the three of them make eye contact. However, Harlan doesn't say anything to the two of them throughout the scene, eventually breaking eye contact and choosing to walk away from it all. The scene completes Harlan's transformation in the film's argument. Recalling Twissell's approval to restore Noys to Harlan in exchange for bringing the *Mallansohn Project* back on track, the scene indicates that the *Mallansohn Project* was merely a ruse to realize the material interests of the men who lead Eternity. Harlan, as a conscientious proletariat-worker, was only working to accrue greater gains for his 'employers'. Through the spectacle of him, a representative of the property-less proletariat who has rejected capitalism's exploitative relations-of-production, walking all by himself down the long road and away from shining buildings, luxury cars and a procession of vehicles, the film positions itself within the culture wars of the 1980s quite explicitly. Under capitalism man loves property, thereby denying himself; under Socialism, man would not need anyone since he would be in love with himself. The ending, thus, makes for a concerted effort to show that it is only the Soviet man who is capable of giving up private property, material possessions, and pursuit of satisfaction of individual needs, and moving towards the realization of a truly social, all-round developed self (Dahm and Swiderski, 1982, 41). This indicated the moral superiority of the Soviet man (as had been envisioned by Brezhnev at the 24th Party Congress of 1971) over Capitalism. It suggests to its Soviet audience that even if the scientific, technological and economic situation in Soviet Union was not as advanced as the one captured in the shots of West Germany, the Soviet man possessed a higher moral worth over that found in capitalist West, and which was worth emulating. Most importantly, the ending indicates that while there are numerous points of convergences in the Soviet and Western ways of solving the problems inherent in transforming society through a reliance on science and technology, that this material progress and satisfaction of needs should be realized at a moral and spiritual cost is a distinctively Western tendency, not a Soviet one.

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(Russian subtitles embedded)