

Deborah Allison

Author of *The Films of Aleksandr Rou: Father of Soviet Fairy-Tale Cinema*

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What first drew you to Rou's work and how did this book come together?

Way back in 1990, when I was in my late teens, a restored print of *The Singing Ringing Tree* (1957), which is a wonderful fairy-tale film made by East Germany's DEFA studio, did the rounds of the London repertory cinemas. I went to see it three times in the space of a few weeks! This was around the same time that I first watched Jean Cocteau's ravishing *La Belle et la Bête* (1946). Ever since then, I've been an international fairy-tale film addict – always looking for more to discover, whether in the cinema, on disc or online.

It was this quest that eventually led me to Aleksandr Rou. I'd never heard of him until I stumbled across one of his films on YouTube, after which I simply had to see another and another. Three films in, I was completely hooked and knew I had to watch them all. I was keen to read about these films, too, but quickly discovered there was very little available in English. Eventually, I decided to research and write the kind of book I'd hoped to read: one that would introduce and contextualize his films for western audiences.

For readers new to Aleksandr Rou, how would you describe his films and their significance in a few sentences?

Aleksandr Rou worked mostly within the fairy-tale and fantasy genres, creating films that were not just for children but for audiences of all ages. Usually adapted from Russian and Slavic folklore, they're generally bright, playful, imaginative and often very funny – although there are also some sinister moments here and there. All his fantasies are characterized by terrific production design and loaded with inventive special effects. They're also widely celebrated for their memorable characters and quirky performances – particularly those of the versatile comic actor Georgii Milliar, who appears in almost all of Rou's films (often playing multiple roles) and who I simply adore!

What makes Rou's approach to folklore and fantasy unique within Soviet cinema?

In 1938, Rou directed the Soviet Union's first live-action fairy-tale feature film (which, a few years later, had a limited release in the UK under the title of *The Magic Fish*). He was a genuine pioneer and his technical innovations, coupled with his commitment to preserving folkloric heritage while adapting it to speak to new generations, played a major role in shaping the conventions of the genre.

Rou genuinely loved fairy tales and he also loved travelling around to present them to audiences in person – to young people, especially. That passion still shines through. If you look at Russian-language online discussion forums you'll see words such as 'heart' and 'soul' and 'sincerity' cropping up a lot. With many viewers expressing a sense that today's studio-made blockbusters are often cynically manufactured, the idea that Rou could make films for a mass market while maintaining a real connection to his audiences, to their shared heritage and to a mutual will to believe in beauty, goodness, hope and happily-ever-after is seen as something truly worthy of celebration – perhaps now more than ever.

Rou's films were immensely popular upon first release and have since taken on the status of true classics. They are – alongside those of the Soviet director Aleksandr Ptushko, Rou's almost-exact contemporary and his main rival to the crown of 'King of the Fairy Tales' – still cited by twenty-first century filmmakers such as Dmitry Dyachenko, director of the box-office record-breaking *The Last Warrior* trilogy (2017–2021), as representing the gold standard of fairy-tale filmmaking.

Why is it important to revisit and reassess Rou's films today?

Although Rou's films remain popular and well-known in Russia and much of Eastern Europe, his name is unfamiliar to most British and American audiences because, until quite recently, they had little chance to see them.

In the UK, foreign-language cinema has been disproportionately dominated by art-house films dealing with serious themes, often at the expense of more popular and family-oriented entertainment. This has a lot to do with our national culture of subtitling live-action films. In many mainland European countries, dubbing is more widely accepted and this has helped films to move more easily across borders. The UK custom, by contrast, has encouraged distribution and programming decisions that have often left audiences with a rather restricted view of other national cinemas.

I would urge anyone who cares about cinema to look beyond the western critical canon. There are great discoveries to be made, purely on the level of personal viewing pleasure. But widening our perspective also gives us a richer understanding of the histories, peoples and cultures of the world around us.

How do Rou's films reflect the cultural and political environment in which they were made?

Rou's first film was made and released in 1938, while Stalin was in power. It was the height of the so-called Great Terror, during which numerous filmmakers were arrested. While Rou was engaged in work on *The Magic Fish*, Boris Shumiatskii, head of the Soviet film industry, was executed by firing squad. Being seen to toe the political line was mandatory for survival.

Rou's Stalin-era films endorse the three key tenets of the period: ideological correctness, Party-mindedness and folk-mindedness, or popular spirit. Yet they never feel like a lecture. Most of us will gladly root for the underdog, so watching a peasant hero winning out over a greedy ruler, for instance, isn't a big ask for audiences – even if that narrative does happen to dovetail neatly with socialist ideology. In fact, it was the political realization, in the mid-1930s, that folklore and fairy tales could be very easily adapted to spread suitable messages to working people all across the land that enabled Rou to forge a career in this genre in the first place.

In later years, we see Rou's films, and the characters within them, adapted to reflect the shifting culture of their times. Rou made films for mass audiences and he clearly always had his finger on the popular pulse. But one of the very striking things about Rou's career is the extent to which – despite a few setbacks during the especially challenging filmmaking environment of the decade following the Second World War – he consistently managed to preserve his own distinctive voice and sensibility, no matter what was going on at political and industrial policy level.

Given the current war involving Russia, how do you approach discussing Russian and Soviet cinema while ensuring a clear distinction between historical and cultural analysis and present-day politics?

It was while I was making post-peer-review revisions to the first draft of my manuscript that news arrived of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Whether, and how far, to address this was much on my mind throughout the revision process. Ultimately, I decided not to tackle the subject head on – partly because it felt, at the time, like a fast-changing situation that I doubted the book publication process could keep pace with, but also because I wanted the book to remain tightly focused on the historical period it covers. So the current war isn't discussed explicitly in my book. Nevertheless, I think readers are likely to get a sense of some elements of history repeating themselves.

This is particularly the case with my discussion of Rou's film *Kashchei the Immortal*, which was filmed during wartime and released in 1945. Its events unfold in the ancient East Slavic state of Kievan Rus, drawing both from fairy tales and from epic poems about the bogatyrs: the warrior folk heroes who defended it from foreign invaders. In 1945, this story was presented as an allegorical rallying cry to defend the Soviet motherland against the Nazi invasion.

In more recent years, we've seen a resurgence of Russian animated and live-action fairy-tale and fantasy films that return to Kievan Rus and which treat its history and folklore as a locus of national identity and pride. However, that medieval territory now extends across present-day national borders, including Ukraine and Russia. This can make fairy-tale and fantasy films celebrating its heroic defence by the bogatyrs ideologically tricky, to put it mildly. Once again, we're able to see how easily folklore and fairy tales can be adapted to suit contemporary political narratives.

Who is your intended audience for this book and how does it speak to both academic readers and cinema audiences?

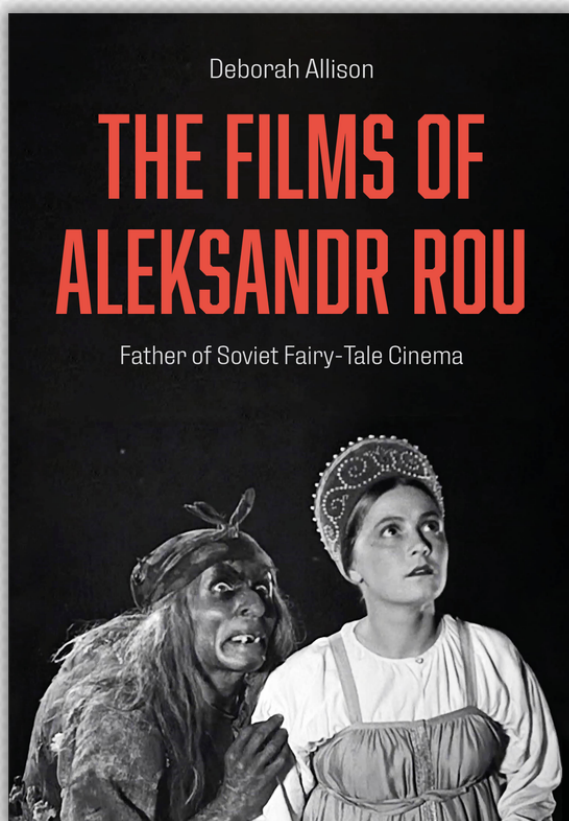
My starting point was to share the joy of my own discovery of Rou's films with other enthusiasts of fairy-tale and fantasy cinema, of Soviet cinema and of world cinema more broadly – to say: you've probably never heard of these movies, but I really think you'll find them worth your time. Scholars of Soviet and Russian cinema will have more familiarity, of course, but even within academic circles Rou has received far less attention than either the silent-era montage pioneers or later art-house directors such as Andrei Tarkovsky and Aleksandr Sokurov.

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My goal was to write a book that would be interesting and accessible to a wide audience of world cinema fans while also being underpinned by scholarly rigour. I had a lot of help with this. One of the reviewers of the original manuscript was Professor Birgit Beumers. I've never met her in person, but her advice and support was amazing. Among other things, she encouraged me to be more precise about the periodization of political events that had an impact on Soviet cinema (and thus Rou's work), emphasising that a great deal could change within the space of a single year. Coming to it from the opposite end was my partner, Vic Pratt, who would tell me when I was being boring and needed to pep things up a bit. Thanks to their input, I hope the final result will prove an engaging read for scholars and more casual film fans alike.

Finally, what do you hope readers will take away from *The Films of Aleksandr Rou*?

Above all, I hope my book will inspire more English-speaking viewers to watch and enjoy Rou's films! I hope it will help to raise awareness that there's more to Soviet cinema than Eisenstein and Tarkovsky and serve as a reminder that technical artistry and cultural richness can be found in films made for popular audiences as much as in those aspiring to the status of high art. If I succeed in my first goal, then I hope this will also encourage readers to explore other films off the beaten track, whatever country or director they may come from.



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Rou: Father of Soviet
Fairy-Tale Cinema*

by Deborah Allison