

BEARR/CEELBAS Forum

The Arts and Attitudes to Disability in Russia and Eastern Europe

22 March 2013

Report

The forum was the third joint event organised by the BEARR Trust with CEELBAS (the UK Centre for East European Language-based Area Studies). The aim of the forum was to explore the depiction of disability in different artistic media in Russia and eastern Europe; and to assess how its depiction might be influencing public attitudes to people with disabilities, and how the arts might be used to change these attitudes.

The forum was opened by the Chairman of the BEARR Trust, Robert Brinkley, who welcomed all participants and chaired the first panel. The first speaker was **Irina Yasina** from Moscow, a journalist and campaigner.



She said that disabled people in Russia still had great difficulty in getting around and participating in normal activities, like going to theatres and concerts. This was especially the case outside the main cities; in Moscow, however, access and facilities were improving. For disabled people both accessing and creating art is still difficult. Many disabled children go to special schools with very limited opportunities, while others now attend mainstream schools, but this arrangement also had its downsides. As for university entrance, this is very difficult for young people with disabilities.

Patrons: The Duchess of Abercorn, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Elena Bashkirova Barenboim, Myra Green OBE, Professor Geoffrey Hosking, Sir Roderic Lyne KBE CMG, Sir Jonathan Miller, Anthony Oppenheimer, Rair Simonyan, Sir Andrew Wood GCMG

Trustees: Robert Brinkley CMG MA (Chairman), Megan Bick BA (Russian) MA, Janet Gunn CMG BA, Daryl Ann Hardman BA (Russian) MA, Her Honour Judge Marcia Levy, Ann Lewis CMG BA, Jo Lucas BSc MSc, Nicola Ramsden MA MBA, Robert Scallon MA, Michael Simmonds

Yasina gave examples of two children, a little girl who had a stroke at the age of eight and a boy written off as a “vegetable” at birth. Their parents were real heroes and had helped them to achieve a great deal in painting. Another talented artist is a young woman who developed MS at the age of nineteen and paints African scenes without ever having been to Africa. Disabled artists have few opportunities to show their work apart from on the internet. Galleries are not interested in disabled artists, and if the artist does not live in Moscow, where opportunities to hold exhibitions are greater, travel is very difficult.

The next speaker, **Professor Jose Alaniz**, from the University of Washington, Seattle, focused on “Disability in Russian Visual Art”.



He gave a historical overview of the depiction of people with mental disabilities in art, such as the “holy fool” in the Middle Ages, in paintings by Nesterov, among others. Such people were considered the result of divine intervention. Paintings of *yuroduviye*, as they were known, often showed them naked and in chains, with pagan overtones. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a more secular representation in, for example, paintings by Vasily Perov. Repin included disabled people in his painting of a religious procession, showing them barefoot in the snow, and at the same time objects of pity but treated cruelly. Prior to the Russian Revolution, disabled people continued to be treated as objects of both love and pity, as God’s children carrying the burden of mankind’s sins. There was, however, no attempt to integrate them into society – they remained outsiders, awaiting their reward in the afterlife.

In the Soviet period, images of people with physical disabilities were used to convey social propaganda messages, such as blame for misconduct, in pictures of amputees who were victims of car accidents. After the Second World War, their treatment was more sympathetic and on occasion positive, such as in the case of a fighter pilot who overcame the loss of his leg and returned to action, about whom a film was made. By the 1960s, when disabled war veterans began to be removed from major cities and hidden away in remote regions, this trend ended. Sculptures of this period, such as by Vadim Sidur, showed a darker side of disability, in which the victims were objects of pity. After the collapse of the Soviet system, the situation of disabled people

became very difficult indeed, and this was shown more often than previously in the media as they had to go on to the streets to beg and were once again visible to the rest of the population, but in abject circumstances. More recently, however, they are more often depicted as normal people with differences. The film *Strana Glukhikh*, about a deaf criminal mafia, became extremely popular. Its characters are not objects of pity, but articulate, active, and highly communicative. Many comics also depict people with disabilities in various situations.

Dr Oliver Ready, Research Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford, spoke about "Attitudes towards mental disability in recent Russian fiction".



He said he would only deal with characters with cognitive disability, such as Downs or autism, but not people with psychiatric illness. In today's Russia attitudes are more open and taboos much weaker than in the past. Instead of describing someone like the historical clever fool, writers try to inhabit the life of people with mental disability. The Russian holy fool sometimes gets lucky but is not quick-witted like the British medieval fool. In the 19th century Russian romantic writers began to identify with fools, but not in the sense of western rationalists. After the Soviet period, though, intellectuals and writers began to take a more rationalist view, and to consider the ethical challenges. Parents started to take babies with disabilities home rather than give them up to children's homes, since the cruelty of these establishments had been exposed. Parents wrote about their experience of bringing up a disabled child. Quite a lot of writing about disability is in the genre of "women's writing", such as magazine articles and interviews, and stories about how families care for children with disabilities, such as works by Ulitskaya. In Russia women writers tend to write more realistically about disability than men, who tend more often to depict the children as gifted or ultimately able to overcome the disability. In the discussion which followed, participants commented on how disabled people are depicted on television in Russia. There is apparently a tendency for able actors to play the parts of disabled people, and for the storyline in soaps and dramas still to end with the disabled person cured of their disability.

The second panel was chaired by **Michael Rasell**, from the University of Lincoln.

The first speaker was **Artur Kocharyan**, President of the NGO New Life in Konotop, Ukraine. His presentation, "Recipe for success: understanding

through art” was about a project in 2009 which had received funding from the BEARR small grants scheme.



First he provided some statistics for disabled people in Ukraine (6% of the population –much lower than the 10% for the UK, and thus thought to be only those with severe disabilities), and their monthly state benefits. Then he described the project, which involved seeking out disabled people who had achieved success, and showing them to young people, but without highlighting their disabilities. Young people were invited to become volunteers to work with children with disabilities in art work, such as at a summer art camp, and other activities, such as a painting competition for children with disabilities. They also produced a programme for local television. The presenters did not mention the disabilities, but these were of course visible. As previous presenters in the forum had also commented, it was not easy to persuade disabled people to allow themselves to be shown on television or in public. They do not like to attract attention to themselves. Artur showed two videos, both made by a young woman with mental disabilities. She made the first when she was thirteen years old, and had never done any art work before. It showed homeless children and adolescents, hinted at the difficult family situations they had grown up in, and appealed to other members of the population not to ignore them or judge them. The second video was much more sophisticated from a technical point of view, showing her singing in a pastoral, folksy scene in the Ukrainian countryside. She made it when she was sixteen years old. She now works as a volunteer in the children’s home where she grew up.

Dr Claire Shaw, a lecturer at the University of Bristol, gave a presentation on “The Silent Screen: Deafness in Post-Soviet Russian Film”.



Soviet film tended to show stereotypes of the deaf as isolated and disturbed individuals. Prior to 1991 deaf people in Russia

moved within their own community, in clubs and theatres set up for them. All those state-run facilities collapsed in 1991, and deaf people had to integrate into the mainstream of life. Today's films show deaf people engaging in layers of communication, using signing, vibration, speech – altogether quite noisy films and not easy for hearing people to watch. She showed clips from two post-Soviet films, of which one was also mentioned by Professor Alaniz - Todorovsky's *Land of the Deaf (Strana Glukhikh)* about a young woman working as a prostitute in a gang of deaf mafia criminals. Far from showing silent and isolated people, the film shows animated, emotional and vocal discussion and negotiation between the deaf and hearing characters. The film was a big hit, but brought the disadvantage of a stereotype of deaf people as part of mafia groups. Dr Shaw also showed clips from *Shapito Shou*, about life at a Crimean holiday resort and funfair, also with realistic portrayal of interaction between deaf people and between deaf and hearing people.

Denise Roza, Director of the NGO *Perspektiva* in Moscow, has worked for 20 years with disabled people in Russia. Her theme was "Mobilising and Raising Awareness with Disability Film Festivals".

Denise described *Perspektiva's* annual international festivals of films about disability, "Cinema without barriers" which shows films at many art house cinemas in Moscow and in several other Russian cities. The festival has been running for twelve years, and shows films from all over the world. Many Russian were astonished when they first saw films which showed how independently disabled people can live in the US. About eighty films are shown at each festival. The films submitted are chosen by a steering committee which includes members of disability NGOs. It is often difficult to find suitably accessible venues to show the films, however, especially outside Moscow. Denise is now sharing her experience with organisations in Armenia, Abkhazia and Tajikistan.

In her closing remarks, BEARR Trustee Nicola Ramsden said she had learned a great deal that was new to her. The change over time from the historical portrayal of disabled people in Russian art and film to today's much more realistic depiction, and with disabled people playing the parts of disabled characters, showed how much had moved forward. At the same time exclusion remained a major problem. The NGOs represented in the panels had shown how much they were contributing but there is still a lot of vital work for NGOs to do in this area.

BEARR would like to thank CEELBAS for co-sponsoring and helping to organise the forum, and all the volunteers who helped on the day, especially Tatiana King, for her excellent interpreting.