

Detstvo Gorkovo

("The Childhood of Maxim Gorky")

U.S.S.R. : 1938 : dir. Mark Donskoi : Soyuzfilm / Sovyeztetfilm : 101 min

prod: : scr: Mark Donskoi & I. Grudzev : dir.ph.: I. Malov & Pyotr Yermolov

Alyosha Lyarsky; Igor Smirnov; V. Khoroshenichikov; Y. Mamayev

Mark Troyanovski; Varvara Massalitinova; E. Alexeyeva; V. Novikov; A. Zhukov; K. Ziubkov;
Daniil Sagal; S. Tikhonravov

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ∅ Z ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
5440	7	8	7	2,351	3 3 3 3 7	No	Unseen



Alyosha Lyarski left, with Igor Smirnoff as the cheerful crippled Lyonya

Source: The Moving Picture Boy

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"First part of the Maxim Gorki trilogy after Gorki's three-part autobiography (1913-1923). The story is set in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century and paints the life full of deprivations in which the child Gorki grows up. In terms of conception and directing (of the children) this is the best part of the trilogy. Central to the closely interwoven trilogy is the process of the individual's awakening consciousness. This much-praised film is among Donskoy's best achievements. Part II is entitled "V LYUDYAKH", part III "MOI UNIVERSITETI". *** "

Halliwell's Film Guide review

"Orphan Gorky is raised by his grandparents and becomes a ship's cook and a painter before going on to university. This simple and direct story is told in three beautifully detailed if rather overlong films:

"THE CHILDHOOD OF MAXIM GORKY"
– 101 min

"OUT IN THE WORLD" – 98 min

"MY UNIVERSITIES" – 104 min *** "



Source: *The International Encyclopedia of Film*

The Critics' Film Guide review:

"Poor, small-town childhood of a writer (Alexei Lyarsky) in Czarist Russia. First part of Mark Donskoi's famous trilogy, based on Maxim Gorky's memoirs: the others are **"MY APPRENTICESHIP"** (aka **"OUT IN THE WORLD"**) and **"MY UNIVERSITIES"**. This beautiful rites-of-passage film lacks a strong story and unsurprisingly romanticises its hero's revolutionary leanings, but creates memorable characters in the young hero, his grandfather (Mark Troyanovski) and grandmother (Varvara Massalitinova). 6/10 "

"Remarkable realism, force and charm ... A powerful cast."
- MFB, 1943

"Has the substance of good literature."
- **The Times**

"To an extraordinary degree [it has] the ability to communicate the poetic quality in human relationships and the inquiries of the human mind."
- **Sunday Times**

"The most inspired screen projection of a major piece of writing I have yet seen, for [it] truly lights up and even extends the original [holding] you spellbound."

- **News Chronicle**, 1945

"It's the expressiveness of the images of the Volga that stays with you." - **Pauline Kael**

The Good Film and Video Guide review of the trilogy:

"The first two of these three films, based on Gorki's autobiography, provide an extraordinarily rich experience. Part one has him arriving to live with his poverty-stricken grandparents in a small town by a wide river; part two finds him on the river, grown to adolescence and working in the galley of a ferry, between jobs as a servant in a large house and apprentice in a studio of ikon-painters. These are films about the vastness of Russia, of a boy's wonder, of his learning from both books and observation, of the repressive Tsarist regime. Part three, in which N. Valbert replaces Alyosha as Gorki, is a conventional movie about strikers in a factory and, set now in a large city, it does not even have the glowing locations of the earlier films. The ending, heralding the coming of the 1917 Revolution, is particularly trite but you may well sit through it haunted by the first two parts. *** "



"Alexei (surrogate for Maxim Gorky as a child) has two horrid, selfish uncles who quarrel unceasingly over their inheritance. At a welcome-home for Alexei and his mother (just bereaved of father and husband), the two greedy brutes spoil the affair with a bloodthirsty fight."

All captions and stills below – source: Classics of the Foreign Film



"Alexei's grandfather, actually a childish simpleton, has his benevolent side, instanced when the boy shows his surprising aptitude for learning."

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"Donskoi's Gorki Trilogy, completed by **"MY APPRENTICESHIP"** (1939, 98 min b/w) and **"MY UNIVERSITIES"** (1940, 104 min, b/w) is still widely revered as one of the all-time humanist classics, and it's true that the film's expert balance between guileless simplicity and rustic myth-making (seen to best advantage in **"CHILDHOOD"**) does give them a quality not often found outside the work of John Ford. But it's interesting to note that Donskoi's direction couldn't lie further from the mainstream of Russian film culture. Not only is he not very concerned about montage, but his concern with the lyricism of individual images leads him to neglect continuity of almost any sort: at one level, the film plays like an anthology of continuity errors. That said, though, all three films do contain images of great strength in the Dovzhenko tradition. And Donskoi's handling of his actors (always encouraging them to play up to emotion, never shy of excess or sentimentality) certainly has the courage of its convictions."

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"The famous first film of director Donskoy's trilogy about the great Russian writer, this instalment examines Gorki's humble beginnings with careful, evocative detail and a sympathy for his characters' peasant simplicity which rivals that of John Ford, Henry King, or Donskoy's colleague Dovzhenko. The spare storyline tells of the young, orphaned Gorky (touchingly played by Lyarski) being raised by a tyrannical grandfather and a crew of conniving uncles. While not as innovative or as overwhelming as the great experimental Soviet cinema of the 1920s, this film's warm, rich humanity and seemingly personalised touches keep it from being just another example of the mundane socialist realism Stalin was starting to enforce. * "

Classics of the Foreign Film analysis:

"Unfortunately ignored in some standard books on the film, **"THE CHILDHOOD OF MAXIM GORKY"** is still shown widely as a Russian classic and deserves every word of praise ever bestowed on it. Subtly contrary to the aggressive formalism for which Eisenstein is noted, this heartfelt presentation of the Old Russia, made in 1938, is wisely, beautifully,

spontaneously candid, though the idealism of the New Russia obviously motivates its post-Revolutionary note of hope for the new social order.

Its director, Mark Donskoi, unhesitatingly accepted the Russia of his country's fiction masters, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoi and Chekhov; yet, unlike Dostoevsky, who in *"The Possessed"* had arraigned the New Russia with burlesque irony, Donskoi portrays, by way of Gorky's own authoritative story, the drive toward the Revolution as man's insistent desire for an enlightened human consciousness. Surely, whatever the situation today, the bespectacled, bearded adult friend of the boy Alexei (Gorky's surrogate), represents the early hardships of those plotting to overthrow the stifling, hopelessly outdated Czarism. At the end setting forth to "conquer the world" like a boy in a fairy tale, Alexei encounters his former friend, a convicted revolutionary, on his way to prison in manacles.

Yet the luminous substance of this film does not lie in revolutionary idealism, least of all in the pretentious formula known as Socialist Realism; it lies, rather, in a wonderful feeling for human truth, good or evil, despicable or admirable. A masterly portrait of a struggling provincial tradesman's class is exposed through a human glass with ominous shadows and tenderly preserved nuances. Classic Russian "moodiness", the intoxicating sunlight of merriment crazily alternating with the gloom of beastly greed, cruelty and despair, emerges at the start with the behaviour of two grown heirs to an old man's modest fortune. His sons fear he will make their sister a gift of his "wealth" as her dowry. The gay-sad party welcoming her return home with her son Alexei, following her husband's death, is wrecked by a brutal fight between her brothers, superbly rendered by impeccable camera work and magnificent impersonations.

Madcap tricks by both child and adult come into play: spiteful little things that act like fuses to powder cans. The ferocity of the Russian temperament, home-destroying and self-destroying, assumes a horrible truthfulness, its edges softened and sweetened, however, by unsullied kindness. The latter is concentrated in the testy patriarch's wife, Alexei's grandmother, acted by an old woman who suggests a great painting brought to life; her broad, flattish, humorous peasant face, the large, compact, suffering female body, have the

look of the most ancient visible things -

monuments natural or man-made - a face of



experience to support those who claim that

"The two heirs, not without some dark chicanery, finally wrest the remains of their father's real estate from his unwilling hands; in turn, the evil-tempered old patriarch beats his wife, Alexei's grandmother, an angelic soul untouched by the vileness and degradation around her."



"A sunny little cripple pinpoints the film's dramatic mixture of the world's sordid gloom and poverty with humour and innocent [sic] goodness."

goodness, not evil, is the product of mature human understanding. Her husband, owner of a dye works, is finally manoeuvred out of everything by his unscrupulous sons, in whom greed has become a demoralising vice. The old man himself is an almost terrifying picture of human weakness in a male of given time, place and class: giddy, selfish, whining, childish, cruel and stupid – not by turns but all at once! That the spectator feels an iota of sympathy or pity for him is due to the twin miracle of acting and directing.

Inveigling though not brilliant, the film's forthright style has unusual nicety. Inspired touches of visual angle, characterisation and human essence blend together unpretentiously but surely; take the crouching Alexei's view of another small boy's whipping through the boots of a pair of men, or his grandmother's ritual gesture of crossing herself, interrupted in its horizontal by gliding into a gesture of impatience with him because he is not yet asleep. The death of another adult friend of Alexei's, a young peasant whose "golden hands" are employed in the dye works, is brought about through a revolting trick engineered by the vicious heirs. It is done with the visual effectiveness of scenes whose method had already been postulated in works by Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Dovzhenko. Strangely like it, in substance and pictorial effect, is the scene from "EARTH" in which the murdered peasant's corpse is carried over a hill to its burial place. The boy Alexei's friend, the young worker, is enjoined by his uncles to carry a huge wooden cross to where it must be planted; venomously cruel, they only pretend to help him with the load. Reaching the top of the hill, he falls and is fatally crushed by it. Alexei is inconsolable. One thinks of the medieval Dance of Death as Ingmar Bergman photographed it in silhouette on a hilltop at the end of "THE SEVENTH SEAL"; likewise, of course, it recalls the burden of the cross carried up Golgotha.

Now Alexei, living with his impoverished grandparents and going to school, strikes up a friendship with the local gamins, those "boys of the road" whose reformation has been a prominent theme in Russian and Italian films. Reduction to abject poverty is the most

touching theme in this film; it sears, and wilts the very heart, but the heart is revived with the lifeblood of gaiety. This gaiety is the sweetness and goodness of what we may be allowed to call "natural man": the grandmother, the sunny young peasant employed in the dye works, the little orphan, a cripple, who believes "a mouse can be fed to the size of a horse" - *there* is Russian romanticism for you! If certain sentimental "sound" conventions (such as the invisible female chorus sending Alexei off on his journey at the end) are reprehensible, they can be forgiven in a film having such persuasive powers of showing good and evil on equal terms in human society."

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Lyarsky:

"Mark Donskoi's trio of films based on Maxim Gorki's autobiographical trilogy, produced by the Moscow Children's Film Studio within a few years of the great writer's death, is one of the glories of the Russian cinema. Its first two parts, in which the dogged, puzzled Lyarski plays the hero, are unforgettable. (The older Young Gorki of "MY UNIVERSITIES" is rather wet by comparison.)

Driven by poverty, Aleksei Peshkoff (Gorki's real name) and his widowed mother come to live with her parents in a provincial village. There he lives with, and works for, a hateful old grandfather – a monster of rage and avarice – lazy, scheming uncles and mean, sneaky little cousins. His only comforts, apart from his mother (but she soon goes away) are the extrovert young peasant who acts as the family's factotum (but he dies through an inane act of spite by the uncles) and his huge earth-mother of a Grandma (played with unique warmth and emotion by Massalitinova, like a sweet, wise, smiling old hippo – one of the world's great screen characterisations).

Young Aleksei sees greed, exploitation and injustice at close range, but he's not yet strong enough to fight it. For instance, one of the few people who is kind to him is an old man employed in a cloth-dyeing vat, in conditions that eventually cause him to lose his eyesight. Yet when his old friend is too blind to work

and has to go out as a beggar, Aleksei shamefacedly avoids him. This kind of jolting truthfulness makes the film unforgettable.

Notable among the other boys in **"DETSTVO GORKOVO"** are Igor Smirnoff as the little bedridden cripple Lyonya, indomitably sunny

with his white mouse and his games, and the two weasely cousins (V.Khoroshenchikov and Y.Mamayev), plus the multi-ethnic gang of locals that Aleksei roams the fields with. Smirnoff appeared two years later in **"YAKOV SVERDLOFF"** and in the Soviet youth classic **"TIMUR I YEVO KOMANDA"**.



"Perennial frieze of outcast boys in Czardom's heyday. Maxim Gorky's surrogate, becoming their hero, bids them goodbye to make his way in the world just appearing on the horizon."

Aleksei Lyarski, the enormously touching young Gorki, was killed in action during World War Two, joining Jimmy Butler, Robert Lynen, Robin Ordell, Hans-Joachim Schaufuss Claus-Detlef Sierck, Rolf Wenkhaus and others in the boy actors' Elysium."

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "World Cinema – a Short History"]

Rather shamefacedly, I have to admit I've never seen any of this trilogy, though I've known it by reputation for twenty years. Nothing then to be added to these commentaries, other than that Holmstrom guesses Lyarski's age to be 13. He was dead within six years of this. If young blood has an appetite for war, war has always had a stronger appetite for young blood.

Unseen by me, but clearly a seminal work from the archive's perspective, and consequently **Recommended.**

See also "V LYUDYAKH", shot the same year, and subject index under **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TITLES, CHILDHOODS OF THE FAMOUS, DISABLED / HANDICAPPED, EASTERN EUROPE / SOVIET BLOC, GRANDPARENTS, HISTORY, ORPHANS / ADOPTION, RECOMMENDED TITLES** and **STREET KIDS.**