The plot of *Venchal ikh Satana* was taken from the novel *Hell’s Delights* (*Adskie chary*), by the theosophist writer and medium Vera Kryzhansovskaia whose occult novels had appeared in the pages of *The Petersburg Flyer*. The film told the story of beautiful young Elena, who

is in love with Prince Basargin, but he prefers another. On the advice of her maid, Elena goes to see Sibilla the fortune teller, who “by the power of Great Source”, unites her soul with the prince. They are wed by Satan (we actually see this!), the prince then asks for Elena’s hand in the conventional way and marries her. True, it seems to her that he smells like a corpse and that there is a skeleton beside her. […] Next Elena falls in love with her childhood friend Ivnev, and is unfaithful to her husband. But the fortune-teller helps out here too: she whispers something to Satan […] and some time later disaster befalls the prince. Six months pass and Elena marries Ivnev […]. But the ghost of the late Prince Basargin begins to torment her. Once again, the fortune-teller wants to help Elena, but alas!—Elena’s heart gives out, unable to cope with the nightmares of reproach. And this is where the picture ends.69

Although educated critics were adamant about the low artistic quality of films such as *Married by Satan*, film scripts that treated the occult were very popular with the audiences. Some of these films left the public with the impression that ghosts and devils really existed, while others—much like in popular literature—had a rational denouement. In 1914, *The Mysterious Someone* (*Tainstvennyi nekto*) and *The Unknown World* (*Nevedomyi mir*) were shot in the style of a horror story. The latter’s plot was “taken from the mysterious world and [made use of] the notion of life in ‘the beyond’. On the background of mystical yearning, the heroes’ drama evolves but is ended by the triumph of science.”70 The triumph of rational reasoning was also celebrated in 1915 in *The Adventures of I.D. Putilin, the Renowned head of the Petrograd CID* (*Priklucheniiia znamenitogo nachal’nika petrogradskoi sysknoi politsii I. D. Putilina*), which was a great success at the box office. In this detective story, the clever policeman appears to a murderer as the ghost of his victim and thereby extracts the much needed confession.71

71 Alternative titles of this film were *Phantoms of the Past* (*Prizraki proshlogo*), *On Murderer’s Trails* (*Po sledam ubitits*) and *The Russian Sherlock Holmes* (*Russkii Sherlok Kholms*). Usai et al., eds., *Silent Witnesses*, 290–292.
Post-revolutionary Continuities

The appeal of the supernatural in light entertainment was so prevalent that it did not stop immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Indeed, Jay Leyda has argued that there was little change to film production in the first months after the Bolshevik revolution; sensational and macabre subjects continued to thrill audiences. The Face of Fate (Lite sud’by, 1918), for example, turned on the curse of an Indian Brahmin and thus also continued the pre-revolutionary fascination with Asian mystical exoticism. It told the story of Leonid, who inherits a talisman mask that his father had received from an Indian sage. Before long, the mask turns into a threatening object, the ghost of the Brahmin appears and Leonid eventually finds refuge only in madness. Only in the early twenties did the mysterious slowly fade from Soviet cinema.

The supernatural, especially in the form of hypnosis remained a common feature in Soviet circuses until the 1930s. Special renown has been attributed to Ornal’do, also known as Nikokai Aleksandrovich Smirnov, who quite literally hypnotized his audiences, a routine which gained him much fame (fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Ornal’do hypnotizing audiences in the ring and front rows (1930s).

---

72 Leyda, Kino, 12.
74 Muzei tsirkogo iskusstva.
One of Ornal’do’s stunts included the catalepsia of his female assistant, whereby the lady’s body would become so stiff that she could be laid on the backs of two chairs, one supporting her heels, the other supporting her head. This feat echoed the trick of the hapless prerevolutionary fairground magician and his assistant in a mental harness and thus continued another older tradition. Even much later, when anything alluding to the occult was officially banned from Soviet mass entertainment, an aura of mystery seems to have lingered in Russian circuses. The Soviet illusionist Kio remembered that hypnosis was especially popular with female circus goers, who frequently asked to be put to sleep in this manner. Kio’s reminiscences are also full of encounters from the 1950s in which respectable Soviet women begged him to read their fortunes.75

Conclusion

The hidden forces of the supernatural featured prominently in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century entertainment. Newspapers reported supernatural events, instruction manuals advertised the diverting qualities of spiritualist séances and of fortune-telling, fun fairs and circuses staged hypnotic sessions while theatres and film used the latest technological innovations to make vampires fly through the air and ghosts appear on the silver screen. Consumer culture called for entertainment that involved supernatural forces and, as court cases and newspapers suggest, some illusionists were able to earn a living by displaying their “mediumistic abilities” or “hypnotic forces.” The occult was thus not only a means of inexpensive self-entertainment; it became highly marketable. Serious money could be earned by publishers, at book-stalls, box offices and in shops that sold technical devices for magicians. The mysterious in entertainment fascinated contemporaries in the late imperial era and remained an undercurrent to official culture for much longer.

The message of newspapers, pamphlets, fairbooths, circuses, theatres and films regarding the occult was mixed. Parodies of gullible spiritualists were printed or staged alongside factual reports about supernatural engagement in human affairs. Popular entertainment blurred the borders between light-hearted satire and rational demystification on the one hand, and the acknowledgment of the existence of higher powers on the other. In popular entertainment, the explicable and predictable laws of physics coalesced with hypnosis, horror, madness, ghosts and death. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-

75 Renard-Kio, Fokusy.
century Russian press along with other vehicles of public communication, such as the stage and the cinema, then, was far from embracing the rationalizing, enlightening mission which historians have commonly attributed to these intelligentsia organs. Instead, their pronouncements suggested a widely shared uncertainty on the part of contemporaries about the forces that governed individual fates. This uneasiness cannot be captured with labels such as “secularization” or “religious revival”, the two terms commonly employed in regard to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century worldviews. Instead, Russian popular culture suggests that a mood of uncertainty was prevalent, which was open to numerous possible denouements.

Of course, we do not know how individual consumers reacted to the opposing messages they encountered in print, on stage and on the silver screen. It is possible, that contemporaries—depending on personal opinions and preconceptions—choose to follow and believe in either rational or supernatural accounts. Even if this should have been the case, it does not change the fact that single news outlets, such as The Petersburg Flyer, The Cinematographer, theatres and cinemas expressed contradictory messages, in the case of newspapers at times even in one single page. The close association of pronouncements supporting and debunking supernatural forces suggest that neither traditional institutions such as religious institutions, nor the new, nineteenth-century authority of the scientific and technological community was in a position to assert a dominant worldview. Instead, supernatural notions coexisted with scientific teaching and also incorporated other, folkloric notions. The symbiosis of these different strands was not free of conflict. It was this conflict, which informed the character of the supernatural. Without serious spiritual search, parody would not have been possible; and technological imports allowed the supernatural to retain its contemporary relevance. In incorporating these diverse notions newspapers, theatres and cinemas truly became organs of mass culture.

One is tempted to surmise that this polyphony, which can be seen as the basis for ideological tolerance, was overcome after the revolution through staunch Soviet materialism. But as the magician Kio’s reminiscences indicate—as do the subsequent articles in this book—this presumption is misleading. Russian culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries remained open to various worldviews and interpretations, even if the spheres in which this openness was expressed changed.