Reading Between the Lines: History and the Studio Owner's Wife

Michele Leigh

As a historian of early cinema, one of my favorite courses to teach is a graduate course on Historical Research Methods. Students come to the class not quite sure what to expect and without a clear understanding of how history will serve their research agendas; in other words, they don't see themselves as historians of film or television. After reassuring them that we are all historians, I often compare the labor involved in historical research to the work done by those now famous television crime scene investigators. As in the television show, rarely does one find a history/case where all the clues are readily available and the subject/criminal is waiting to tell his or her story.

More often than not, the work of the historian/CSI involves hunting down clues, some obvious, some obscure and some that lead nowhere. The historian/CSI soon learns that sometimes it is the seemingly small or insignificant bits of information that shed light on or unravel the mystery. The clues of course, when they are found, do not of themselves make up a road map; they require careful and sometimes ingenious piecing together until the full picture can be seen. Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier call this the 'central paradox' of our profession, commenting further that “historians are prisoners of sources that can never be made fully reliable, but if they are skilled readers of sources and always mindful of their captivity, they can make their sources yield meaningful stories about the past and our relationship to it” (Howell & Prevenier 2001, 3). By emphasizing that historians piece together information to create meaningful stories, Howell and Prevenier inadvertently point out the primary way in which the historian (especially the film historian) and the CSI are different – the end result.

The CSI is looking for a logical connection between the clues that will result in THE answer as to who committed the crime. The historian, on the other hand, realizes that sometimes the puzzle is not solved, that the stories created while meaningful, cannot be complete. As investigators we are held captive, not only by our 'never fully reliable' sources, but by the seeming lack of sources. This is

especially true for historians working on uncovering details about women working in the film industry during the silent era. Film scholar Radha Vatsal (2002) notes that, as many of us know, not only are the films that were made by women in the silent era difficult and often impossible to see, but perhaps more importantly the "textual documentation [of their work] is extremely idiosyncratic," as it was not common for women to receive proper credit in title sequences that were, in any case, inconsistent as to roles acknowledged, whether by men or women (120). Vatsal's article is in essence a call to action; she asks us as historians to embrace the uncertainty and instability of the industry itself--and by extension, its documentation--and to foreground this as part of our research.

In some national contexts this means that uncertainty and idiosyncrasy are all the historian has to work with. Such is the case in Russia, where the fledgling cinema, which began in 1908, was just gaining a foothold as a new art form, when the country was plunged into a World War and a Revolution; documents, if they existed in the first place were either destroyed by war and ignorance or were squirreled away in special collections and deemed dangerous because of their bourgeois associations. What researching Russian cinema from 1908 to 1917 has taught me is that sometimes histories must be pieced together and told, not through a chain of primary sources and personal documents, but rather through a mindful attention to a series of asides and off-hand comments.

My interest in early Russian cinema and the A. Khanzhonkov & Co. film studio began in graduate school with three off-hand comments made by my professor, Yuri Tsivian: that while male actors in pre-Revolutionary Russian cinema were relatively interchangeable, the actresses were the real stars; that Khanzhonkov's studio had more famous actresses than any other pre-1917 studio in Russia; and that Evgenii Bauer was often referred to as the "woman's director." I am grateful for this course for several reasons, one being that it piqued and solidified my interest in early Russian cinema, but also because it taught me the importance of the off-hand remark, the comment made as an interesting aside, but perhaps not the focus of discussion. I realized that sometimes the most interesting and fruitful research may be sparked by those less than significant comments, by the space found between the lines

of discussion. Thus began the research and thinking that led to my dissertation exploring the significance of Evgenii Bauer's role as a Women's Director.

While, captive to sources for Bauer and perusing Silent Witnesses (Usai, et al 1989) in search of his extant films among the credits for the Khanzhonkov studio, I came across names of several women who worked there not only as actresses, but also as screenwriters, editors, and even directors. Regardless of this fascinating discovery, I put the information aside to focus on writing my dissertation. With that out of the way, I was finally able to return to these women, among them Zoia Barantsevich, Vera Popova, Olga Rakhmanova, and Antonina Khanzhonkova, who have now become the foundation of my current research on female industrial practice in early Russian cinema.

Of these women, one in particular stands out as exemplifying the caprices and idiosyncrasies of conducting research in the silent era, and she is Antonina Khanzhonkova, the first wife of studio owner Alexander Khanzhonkov.[i] I first became aware of Antonina as someone other than the studio owner's wife through Tsivian's comment during my class that Khanzhonkov and his wife frequently worked together to write scenarios. At the time, I thought it interesting and mentally filed it away for possible later use. Then while conducting my research on Bauer I found among his directorial credits a 1917 entry that listed Antonina Khanzhonkova as one of the editors for the film Nabat (The Alarm) (Usai, et al 1989, 410).[ii] I became very curious as to how the wife of the studio owner came to edit a film by one of the studio's leading directors, but again put the information aside.

Later, in an attempt to learn more about women working as screenwriters, directors and editors in the early years of the Russian film industry and more particularly, to find information about Antonina Nikolaevna Khanzhonkova, I began looking to see what other scholars had uncovered about her. What I found, or rather didn't find, led me to further understand that sometimes historians must piece together off-hand comments that seem initially to lead nowhere. What follows records my somewhat meandering journey through various historical texts and sources, saving perhaps the most obvious for last, but all in an attempt to flesh out the details of this woman who piqued my curiosity.

After searching for entries (in English and in Russian) on Antonina Khanzhonkova in books on silent cinema, in histories of Russian and Soviet cinema, and, in case new archival materials might have surfaced, on the internet, I was able to piece together a few basic biographic details. I then searched Antonina's husband's autobiography in an attempt to corroborate what I learned about her (this too proved futile, but more about that later). She was born Antonina Nikolaevna Batorovskaia in the Rostov region, an area of Russia bordering eastern Ukraine. Her father supposedly owned a shop that sold Singer sewing machines. She married Alexander Alekseivich Khanzhonkov sometime between 1898-1900 and they had two children, Nikolai and Nina (Orlova 2007, 16-17).[iii] She died some time between 1922-1923, most likely in Germany, while the Khanzhonkov family was in exile after the Revolution. In 1922 Alexander was invited to return to Moscow to work in the fledgling Soviet film industry; he accepted the offer and Antonina chose to stay in Germany.[iv] This information is compiled from a variety of sources, ranging from Soviet era histories and memoirs, to a film festival program, and contemporary histories of Russian and Soviet film (all listed in the References). When she is mentioned, it is more often than not as the wife of Alexander Khanzhonkov, with a few exceptions outline below. Not one of these sources, even her own husband's memoir, refers to Antonina as a filmmaker in her own right. In fact, most recent histories do not mention her at all, let alone attribute any agency to her in helping to shape the Russian film industry.

Rather than giving up under the assumption that Antonina's possible editorship of The Alarm was an anomaly, the CSI in me kicked into gear. No one source was able to provide a decent account of her life or her hypothetical film career; but this preliminary scouring of histories of Russian cinema, made me particularly curious as to why past and current texts have relegated her to the periphery of history. For, by piecing together various scraps of information and casual asides, one begins to suspect she played a larger role than any one source gives her credit for.

One of my first encounters with an off-hand mention of Antonina was in Jay Leyda's seminal text on Russian cinema, Kino: A History of Russian and Soviet Film. For an English speaking scholar

of Russian cinema, this is often one of the first places to consult as grounding for research. In his discussion of pre-Revolutionary Russian cinema, Leyda mentioned Antonina only once, in passing, noting that in the early 1910s both the Pathé and Khanzhonkov companies were competing to see which studio could sign screenwriting contracts with the largest number of great literary figures. For both companies, this was a concerted effort to increase their respective prestige and to draw in audiences familiar with popular literature (Leyda 1973, 57). According to Leyda,

> Khanzhonkov signed contracts with Arkadi Averchenko, Osip Dymov, Fyodor Sologub, Amfiteatrov, Chirikov, Alexander Kuprin and Leonid Andreyev – but it soon appeared that the majority of these were to contribute no more than their names, for, as Mr. Dymov has said, Madame Khanzhonkova did all the real scenario work. (57-58)

What appears as a throw away comment turns into a significant piece of information. In other words, in addition to her role as wife of the studio owner, Antonina Khanzhonkova may have significantly contributed to the studio's production roster by ghost writing the scenarios for popular male authors. For the historian/CSI this is an exciting lead, but also a dangerous one. We can now compile a list of films supposedly penned by popular authors, which may in fact have been penned by Antonina. The danger comes of course in the verification process; without corroborating evidence is may be difficult to say definitively that she in fact was the actual screenwriter.

Another reference to her possible writing career was found on the website, Chastnyi Korrespondent /Private Correspondent in a short biographical piece on Alexander Khanzhonkov by Maxim Medvedev (2013), who notes, again as an aside, that “One of Khanzhonkov’s [sic], best known companions was his wife who was especially strong-willed and enterprising. She was busy with the organization of the company and she wrote together with her husband under the pseudonym Antalek; they wrote scenarios and made films" (my translation).[v] So in addition to ghost writing for popular authors, a fact that is tough to corroborate, Antonina is credited with co-writing with her husband. It turns out that there are at least two films (non-extant) directed by Evgenii Bauer, Irina Kirsanova

(1915) and Iamshchik, ne goni loshadei / Stagecoach driver, don't rush the horse (1916), that have their scenarios credited to the pseudonym Antalek, a combination of their two names: Ant(onina) plus Alek(sander). Interestingly, the pseudonym is not arranged alphabetically and Antonina gets first billing, perhaps alluding to her larger role in the partnership. One other issue raised by this article but frustratingly not elaborated is the mention of Antonina's being busy with the organization of the company, thereby implying that her role as writer was just one of the many she played for Khanzhonkov & Co.[vi] The reference also implies that she had some power within the company if she was involved in its organizational structure, meaning she may have exercised significant influence in the production of the company's films, a very intriguing clue.

Another clue as to the extent of Antonina's involvement in the fledgling film industry can be found in S. Ginzburg's 1963 history, Kinematografiia dorevoliutsionnio rossii/Cinema in Pre-Revolutionary Russia. Ginzburg (1963) mentions Antonina only once in passing, in regards to a collective of filmmakers who hoped to create a permanent governing body for entrepreneurs in the film industry. This group was comprised of:

> V. Akhramovich-Ashmarin (a worker for A. Khanzhonkov), Agranovich (from the society of filmworkers), M. Brailovskii (film critic), V. Viskovskii and N. Turkin (from the Union of Workers of Artistic Cinema, "SRKhK"), A. N. Khanzhonkova, editor and publisher of "Sine Fono," S. Lur'e, M. Trofimov (the owner of the film studio "Rus'"), P. Antik (industrialist and theater owner), theater owner Shlezinger, distributors Khapsaev, Kerre and Shchigel'skii. (332)

There is no further mention of Antonina N. Khanzhonkova or her involvement in the group; however her inclusion brings up some interesting points. First and foremost, she is the only woman included in the group. While we know that other women were working making films during this period, her involvement in the group is possibly a testament to the influence and power she may have held within the industry. Secondly, she is the only person listed who is not qualified in some way by what work she/he does or what business she/he owns. On the one hand, this marks her as not having one

identifiable job within the industry or not owning a film related business. On the other hand, perhaps she needed no further qualification. Finally, this text was published in the Soviet period under Khrushchev, when all things pre-Revolutionary were taboo and one had to tread carefully. The fact that she is mentioned at all is a testament to the fact that she was more than she seemed to be. It would have been easy, if not advantageous to ignore the bourgeois wife of a bourgeois businessman, especially one who emigrated after the Revolution and never returned. This suggests that perhaps among these male power players, she was well known and her opinions respected. Not to mention the fact that, as one of the two representatives from Khanzhonkov and Company and the wife of Alexander Khanzhonkov, she perhaps held the most decision-making power.

Antonina's involvement in decision-making within the Khanzhonkov film studio is corroborated in a series of casual remarks by two people working in the Russian film industry at the time, Zoia Barantsevich and Alexander Khanzhonkov himself. While conducting research on film actress-cum-screenwriter, Zoia Barantsevich, I came across in her autobiographical musings "Liudy i vstrechi v kino/People and Acquaintances in Film," a brief remark about Antonina Khanzhonkova (in Barantsevich 1965). The first time Zoia met Antonina was when she was invited to sign her contract with Khanzhonkov and Company film studio, not at the studio offices but rather at the home of the owner, Alexander Khanzhonkov. Zoia notes: "When I went there, I was pleased to meet a tall, beautiful brunette dressed in black, with a very energetic appearance and pleasant high voice – this was Antonina Nikolaevna Khanzhonkova" (158). Holding this first meeting at their private residence with Antonina's present probably put a very young actress at ease, therefore making it easier to get the eighteen-year old Zoia to sign a three-year exclusive contract. While this reference does not overtly speak to Antonina's role in the company, it does imply that Khanzhonkov saw no need to keep his business dealings separate from his home life and his wife. A further implication is that perhaps it made is easier for his wife to participate in the decision-making process, while at the same time caring for their two children.

Alexander Khanzhonkov himself also briefly mentions his wife Antonina's involvement in the company in his memoirs, Pervye gody russkoi Kinematografii/The First Years of the Russian Cinematograf (1937). Unfortunately, his comments too, are nothing but an aside in his account of his own role in Russian film history; Antonina is randomly mentioned twice and never addressed again. These comments serve to both titillate and frustrate by both acknowledging her importance to the company and by burying that importance with claims about all the great things accomplished by the men who worked for Khanzhonkov & Co. Khanzhonkov noted that his "wife was elected to the board of members, but not because she was the person closest to me. In the opinions of all our employees, she was an active worker in our firm, she knew the work well, having participated in all stages (of film production)" (64). Antonina it seems served on the board of directors for Khanzhonkov and Co. Her election to the board of directors, speaks volumes about the level of her involvement in her husband's company and the value that his employees placed on her opinions. Yet Khanzhonkov felt it necessary to qualify her involvement, reassuring posterity that she wasn't chosen to be a board member just because she was his wife, she actually had extensive knowledge of the business.

Khanzhonkov elaborates briefly on Antonina's involvement in the company, providing some details as to her extensive knowledge and what he means by participating in all stages of production:

> She especially brought her artistic influence to the process and worked with enthusiasm, developing scripts with directors and ensuring the correctness of the filming and so on …
>
> She was indispensable, since I was buried under the commercial and organizational side of the business and had to frequently travel around Russia and abroad. (64)

Despite the brevity of these two comments, Khanzhonkov proves himself invaluable as he corroborates almost all of the information I gleaned from other sources. He reinforces Antonina's role as writer, and basically implies that she oversaw all film productions for the company. In other words, while her husband was occupied with the commercial side of the business, Antonina controlled the creative side. Khanzhonkov's business acumen was legendary and by the early 1910s he had built one of the most

successful film companies in Russia. While he downplays Antonina's role--he was busy and she was not so she was able to help out--being the business person he was, he would not have left her as the de facto head of production of his lucrative production company had he not trusted and valued her creative decision-making skills. Additionally, one issue that Khanzhonkov's comments seem to gloss over is that his successful company, while vertically integrated--meaning the company not only produced films, they also distributed and exhibited films (their own and other companies)--relied on the quality and success of its films on the big screen. Khanzhonkov himself would not have been quite so busy if his wife were not so successful running the creative side of the business.

So while I hoped that Khanzhonkov's memoirs would prove a gold mine of information and perhaps provide insight into and solve the mystery that is Antonina Khanzhonkova, I was not so lucky. He did corroborate much of the information I had deduced from other sources, but he also left me with more questions. The above-mentioned citations are just the beginning and in no way exhaust the search for details about Antonina's role within the Russian film industry. Not referenced, are the numerous texts both old and new that do not mention her at all when discussing the Pre-Revolutionary period in Russian film history, most notably works published within the last twenty years by film scholars/historians such as: Birgit Beumers, Yuri Tsivian and Denise Youngblood. This is not to discredit these scholars, since each has made immeasurable contributions to the field of Russian and Soviet film history; instead, it is a reminder of the fact that there is still much to do to recuperate Antonina's and other women's labor in early Russian cinema.

The scarcity of information about Antonina and other female film workers is both infuriating, though par for the course in silent cinema research, and intriguing. Conducting research on the silent era in general is often an exercise in frustration, caused in part by a lack of respect at the time for this budding form of mass entertainment, by inconsistent record keeping, and, of course, by destruction of records during various wars. These issues are compounded when attempting to uncover details about women working in the industry, many of whom worked behind-the-scenes. This includes women like

Zoia Barantsevich and Olga Rakhmanova, who began their careers as actresses and then transitioned to other roles in the industry. Their work behind the camera is often forgotten or pushed to the periphery in favor of their more visible and therefore verifiable work in front of the camera. Occasionally, the behind-the-scenes work was done by women who chose to avoid the limelight; women like Vera Popova, whose work as editor for director Evgenii Bauer remains largely uncredited. And finally, behind-the-scenes work was done quite literally by women like Antonina Khanzhonkova and Elizaveta Vladimirovna Theimann,[vii] women whose work was subsumed by their more famous/more vocal husbands or partners. This situation of course is not singular to Russia; it is a common occurrence in other countries as well, that women's work gets lost or hidden behind the work of a male protégé.[viii], What interests me most is how one goes about delineating the level of female agency in an industry and a history that was and is male dominated.

As an historian interested in the illusive female industrial worker in the silent era, I myself embrace my inner Crime Scene Investigator. The crimes in question revolve around: women not receiving the acknowledgements and credits for their labor; men unjustly being given or taking credit for the work of their female counterparts; and historians who unwittingly or willfully perpetuate the crime by repeating the suppression of women's contributions to the industry. Very rarely in silent cinema research does one find a source or archive that provides all the necessary information for reconstructing the crime/history. More frequently, we are required to don the white gloves, figuratively and literally, as we get dirty in dusty archives, mired in our sources that are never as neat and succinct as we would like them to be. This is part of the 'central paradox' discussed by Howell and Prevenir in the passage I quoted earlier; the historian and CSI are often held prisoners by the sources/clues that 'can never be made fully reliable' on their own. It is only through careful/skilled/scientific reading of the clues that we are able to free ourselves from their hold on us in order to piece together meaningful histories/recountings of the crimes in question. We, historians/CSI, must embrace the unconventional sources: the asides, the off-hand comments, and even the omissions, because sometimes they provide us with important clues. Sometimes what is left out of a history provides us with insight not only into the historian, but also the moment in which the history was written, which in turn helps to explain the omission.[ix] Seen separately, then, these details, often appear insignificant. However when taken together, as in the example of Antonina Khanzhonkova, they paint a fuller more complete picture of the woman Russian film history left--and still leaves(?)--in the periphery.

I am reminded again of Radha Vatsal, when she asks scholars to utilize the footnote as a means of recording and sharing the idiosyncrasies, the red herrings and even the dead ends of silent cinema research; for your red herring may be the linchpin to my meaningful history (Vatsal 2002, 120-140). As a researcher and educator, I couldn't agree with her more. To expand the CSI analogy, each

crime/history is not solved by one person alone. It sometimes takes a constellation of experts in different fields, from different moments in time and with different theoretical perspectives, p to piecing together their clues to recreate the history that has yet to be written. Let, the case of Antonina Khanzhonkova: wife, mother, welcoming face, ghost writer, representative of the film industry, board member, line producer, creative director and head of production, be our inspiration.

Notes

i Alexander Khanzhonkov was married twice: first Antonina Nikolaevna. then later in 1923 to Vera Popova, one of his former film editors.

ii The citation notes that the film was re-edited by Antonina Khanzhonkova and Vera Popova. There is currently no evidence to suggest that Antonina worked as an editor; however, Alexander Khanzhonkov's second wife, Vera Popova, edited almost every film made by Evgenii Bauer. Despite that fact, this is one of the only films for which she is given credit – but that is part of my larger research project.

iii The Khanzhonkovs' granddaughter, Nina Orlova published a book entitled A Life Dedicated to Cinema, intended to highlight the greatness of Alexander's career and as such some of the details about Antonina are a little vague. For instance the year of their marriage is my estimate based on details provided by Orlova – Khanzhonkov was promoted in his military service in 1897 then served 4 years in the capital as an officer. At some point during this time he met, courted for 6 months and then married Antonina, their son was born one year later and their daughter was born after another 5 years.

iv Currently this is the end of the trail for information about Antonina's life.

v Ironically, the article mentions how little is known about Alexander Khanzhonkov and the difficulty of finding archival materials. Unfortunately, it does not directly cite any of its sources, though it does mention that Khanzhonkovs' granddaughter, Irina Alexandrovna Orlova, cobbled together memoirs from a variety of sources to make her documentary Slave of Love about her grandfather's contribution to Russian film history. I have not yet managed to track down the film.

vi While not cited, this little tidbit may have come from Khanzhonkov's own memoir, which I will discuss in more detail later on.

vii Elizaveta Theimann was the wife of studio owner Pavel Theimann of Theimann & Reinhardt and like Antonina, she too managed the creative side of her husband's production company (Youngblood 1999, 29).

viii A case in point is Jill Nelmes's work on the screenwriting team, Muriel and Sydney Box, presented at the 2011 Doing Women's Film History conference, University of Sunderland, UK.

ix _