The Barber of Siberia

McCracken (Richard Harris) in front of his invention, the Barber of Siberia.
While the first Russian film discussed in this book, *The Battleship Potemkin* (1926), ranks among the world’s best films, *The Barber of Siberia* (*Sibirskii tsiriul’nik*, 1998) is one of the most expensive feature films ever made outside Hollywood ($49 million). While Eisenstein had a hand-painted red flag in his film, emphasising the triumphant spirit of the Revolution and turning its success forward in time, Mikhalkov turned time backwards by having the red stars, symbol of Soviet power, removed from the Kremlin towers to allow for the film’s setting in pre-Revolutionary Russia. While Eisenstein constructed Soviet history, Mikhalkov remembers Russia’s past values with nostalgia. The temporal axes of the two films are thus diametrically opposed, although both film-makers look towards the future in their reassessment of the past. They represent in their spirit the beginning and the end of the Soviet era, and of a century of film-making.

*The Barber of Siberia* is a rare film in its combination of English and Russian dialogue, its production history, its use of star actors from Russia, the USA and the UK, but, above all, because of the director’s aim to provide a model of direction and to offer moral guidance to an audience at a time when the mainstream of Russian film-makers portray the bleakness, the abyss and the degeneration surrounding them. Mikhalkov’s *The Barber of Siberia* shapes the values of the future by telling a story about Russia’s past, which elevates the traditions of the east above those of the west, tells a fairy tale without a happy ending, and stands in both form and content aloof from Hollywood expectations.

It is more than surprising that such a film should come from a country like Russia, shaken by economic crises and trying to define its national identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Soviet film industry had been state-controlled and state-managed, so that film-makers could work almost independently of audience taste, but were subjected instead to ideological control. The industry almost collapsed after 1991 when the country entered the free market which forced producers to raise money in a system that offered no tax incentives to investors in the arts. To make the situation worse, the cinema infrastructure was outdated and video piracy undermined any chance of recouping production costs. Mikhalkov’s successful collaboration on earlier film projects with the French producer Michel Seydoux secured him a business