

## Document Citation

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LETTER FROM SIBERIA - Argos Film with Procinex. Original Music by Pierre Barbaud. Orchestra by Georges Delerue. With Chris Marker

## I. IN GENERAL

Few Western people know much about Siberia aside from its stereotypes as a cold vast wasteland whose salt mines are a place of banishment for Soviet political dissenters. Letter from Siberia, created by a group of talented French film makers, represents an attempt to give a fuller picture of a land of great variety (both technological and natural) where some people choose to live. The style is sometimes reportorial, sometimes poetic, often playful. In true pedagogical fashion referents to Western culture are used. For example, a contemporary favorite of the Siberians is Yves Montand, a French singer and screen actor (Grand Prix, Z, La Guerre Est Finie, The Confession). American parallels are also used.

The style is varied. Animation illustrates the fanciful legend of the mammoth, a "commercials format" is used to praise reindeer, and news-reel documentary footage evokes the past.

## II. USING THE FILM

For an informed person Letter from Siberia can stand on its own as a delightful exploration of a country foreign to the explorers. The accent is decidedly French. But like any good instructional film, Letter must be used with other materials. A lesson or two with a map is mandatory to familiarize students with the names of cities, rivers, and the general topography. Cities whose names appear in the film (Iakoutsk, Irkoutsk, Montrouge, Anarsk and Aldan) and the two rivers (Lena and Angara) should be identified.

A followup discussion is essential to understanding the film.

## III. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kind of film did you expect to see when you first heard or saw the title? A dreary "letter" from a prison? A message of great, gray Loneliness? A propaganda film?
2. The film makers are foreigners to Siberia. In your opinion, did they really get "inside" the people and the spirit of Siberia?
  - a) Were the people permitted to speak for themselves in interviews, thru their art, or any other way?
  - b) Were any closeup shots used in the live-action photography? Does the lack of them reveal anything about the film maker's attitude toward the people and the country of Siberia?
3. In form, the film is a documentary. How does it differ from other documentaries you have seen such as the usual fact film about other countries, American TV documentaries, etc.? Might the film maker have used another form of the documentary with greater effect? How does it differ from a travelogue? At one point, the film crew inject themselves into the film. Was their appearance an intrusion?

4. Original music was composed by Pierre Barbaud and directed by Georges Delerue, a renowned film composer. Was it effective in conveying the "flavor" of Siberia or might the music of the country (or at least of Russia) have been more appropriate. Were the operatically-cast folk songs about foxes, reindeer, and eagles effective?
5. Some of the cultural and historical references were French (Yves Montand and Andre Gide) and American (the gold rush). Were these effective or merely patronizing?
6. Comment on some of the metaphorical descriptions of Siberia: "... the biggest vacant lot in the world"; "She lies somewhere between the middle ages and the twentieth century ... between the earth and the moon ... between humiliation and happiness".
7. The statement is made that "... spiritual development will come after the wasteland is conquered by electricity". Do you agree or is this statement one of the myths held by those whose belief in technological progress is absolute?

Recommended for Social Studies, Film Study, Adult Education