TOWARDS A SOVIET CINEMA

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Soviet montage cinema, it would appear from critical writings on the period[1], rose like the proverbial phoenix from the wreckage of the disregarded Tsarist past, with the sophisticated *mise-en-scène* cinema of that era, epitomised by the work of Yevgenij Bauer, being displaced almost overnight by Soviet montage aesthetics. While the existence of a distinctive pre-revolutionary cinema has been recognized since, at least, Leyda's account in *Kino*, and has since attracted a great deal of critical attention, the early post-Revolutionary period, «with its fascinating array of experimental hybrids»[2], has been consigned to something of a critical black hole. The difficulties of establishing a coherent account of the period immediately following the Bolshevik revolution were highlighted in a brief reference by Leyda:

> *I was conscious of an important transitional period after 1917 – when the new Bolshevik films contained some repudiated ideologies as well as new, and the continuing productions from private firms were often the work of artists committed to the future (Mayakovsky is only the most notable instance of this) – for which I did not know the necessary films and evidence*[3].

This article[4] will attempt to throw light on some crucial features of the period, an undertaking necessarily limited by the fact that the problem of access to primary sources that affects research on early cinema is particularly serious for this period, as so many of the films produced exist nowadays only in fragments or are not available at all. The general problem of the fragility of nitrate stock was compounded in the Soviet case by the very poor quality of the stock available back then. Given these limitations, and on the evidence of a close viewing of as many of the films as possible, what emerges is a situation where films made during the immediate post-revolutionary period, while striving towards revolutionary relevance for agitational purposes, may display both obvious thematic continuities with Tsarist cinema as well as its distinctive compositions in depth. In addition, while the influence of modernism in the shape of Kuleshov's, Mayakovsky's and Vertov's works intersects this paradigm, the impact of *amerikanshchina* (Americanism) is not a significant factor until after 1922 at the earliest[5].

The social and political upheaval initiated by October revolution meant that film production was from necessity very limited during the period; in addition, at least half of the known directors and producers emigrated. Enough remained however to provide some sort of continuity between pre- and post-October cinema. It was at least a year before the impact of the revolution began to influence the themes of Russian fictional films[6].

Many drew on the respectable literary sources popular in pre-revolutionary cinema – Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Gogol and Lermontov, as well as foreign sources including Maupassant, Zola, Thomas Hardy and others – and included the nine films made by veteran filmmaker Yakov Protazanov for Yermoliev between his universally acclaimed *Otec Sergej* (Father Sergius, 1918) and his period in exile, as well as Peter Chardynin's accomplished *Molchi, grust'... molchi* (Still, Sadness... Still, 1918), a two-part drama in eleven reels of which only six have been preserved. Others, particularly those films which had been in production prior to the revolution and which were released in the months immediately following it, were infused with the sensational and macabre subject matter characteristic of the war years.

Coming into wider use, in the face of what were considered to be not only artistic and ideological shortcomings, but also the colossal problems of educating a largely illiterate public in the new Soviet way of life, was the use of agitational material in film form, the *agitka*[7], one of the first distinctive forms of revolutionary film[8]. These *agitki*, while owing much to contemporary political conditions, have a number of obvious antecedents. First of all, they are linked with the documentary inserts that had previously made an appearance in pre-revolutionary cinema[9]; secondly, they bear a close resemblance to the propaganda films produced in Russia, and elsewhere, during WW1. In June 1918, the first of these, *Signal* (Signal, Aleksandr Arkatov; photographed by Eduard Tissé, then a newsreel photographer) was produced by the new Soviet Cinema Committee. By November two films were ready for the first anniversary of the Revolution: *Podpolye* (Underground, Vladimir Kasyanov), and *Vosstaniye* (Uprising) a semi-documentary directed by Aleksandr Razumny (the first of the pre-revolutionary directors to join the Communist Party). The Petrograd Cinema Committee began its production in October with an "agit-comedy", *Congestion* (Uplotnenie, Aleksandr Panteleyev), from a script by Lunacharsky. Filmed on location rather than in a studio, the film is the story of a pampered professor who is forced to give up some rooms in his large house to workers; after a shaky start, all turns out well. In keeping with its educational message, the film's two reels have a rudimentary and vaguely humorous plot and limited character development. The missing titles[10] are an added obstacle in a film where the action and relationships of the characters are confusing. The style is old-fashioned, as it is the *décor*: the blend of pre-revolutionary stylistic sensibility and revolutionary theme creates an uneasy mixture that will be repeated with varying range of success in the following years.

However, it was not until 1919 that the state made a concerted effort at collaboration with the "old guard", with the aim of disseminating the new political ideology to the public in a more rigorous manner. Each of the large studios was commissioned to produce *agitki* for the Moscow and Petrograd committees, chiefly to celebrate the first year of the Red Army[11]. By February 1919, the Cinema Committee had released thirteen single-reel *agitki*, with subjects drawn from the year-old Civil War, and supervised by one of the most important of the pre-revolutionary directors, Vladimir Gardin. An examination of production details[12] demonstrates the extent to which the old studios and pre-revolutionary personnel – among them Cheslav Sabinski, Yuri Zhelyabushky, Ivan Perestiani, Nikandr Turkin and Pyotr Chardynin – were still dominating production. The titles: *Daredevil*, *We Are Above Vengeance*, *For the Red Banner*, among others, indicate the target audience for these films: the Red Army in training as well as at the Front. What they also definitively indicate is a rejection of the literary sources so common in the pre- and immediate post-revolutionary period and the effect of the changes in cinema production as the revolution took hold.

Zhelyabushky shared direction with Fyodr Otsep and Aleksandr Sanin of *Dev'i gory* (Maids of the Mountain, 1919) and *Polikushka* (Polikushka, 1919, released in October 1922). *Maids of the Mountain* is incomplete (four reels of seven), a condition which, combined with the film's mys-

tical and religious overtones makes it quite mystifying throughout. Formally, there is no great use of close shot scales and little scene dissection; again, however, the cutting rate is noticeably fast. *Polikushka* stars the famous Moscow Art Theatre actor Ivan Moskvin in his first screen role. A comedy which was one of the first Soviet films to become popular abroad, the film is a tale of a drunken peasant, Polikei, who kills himself after he fails to fulfill a mission entrusted to him by his masters. The two social strata in the film are the basis for a demonstration of the mixed style which characterises this era. The sumptuous pillored interiors in the house of the rich landowners activate the old shooting style of long shot and huge depth of field, while the scenes in Polikei's cottage invariably utilize a much shallower depth of field. There is little camera movement, however, throughout the film; and the use of space is decidedly "primitive", with numerous shots of characters moving towards the camera, and then out of frame left or right. In this context, an extreme close-up, worthy of Eisenstein, of a screaming Polikei when he realises the money entrusted to him has been stolen, is startlingly advanced.

Razumny's *Tovarisch Abram* (Comrade Abram, 1919) is more ambitious in scope. The eponymous Abram is a Jew who survived the miseries of imperialist war, the horrors of a pogrom, and finally comes to see that the Bolsheviks are his only salvation, eventually volunteering in a Red Army detachment where he becomes a commander and beats the Whites in battle. Again, the style is at odds with the agitational content: made by the Yermoliev studios, the *mise-en-scène* is at times highly decorative; the transitions are very often marked by dissolves. The outdoor scenes are beautifully photographed; the biggest problem is the sometimes clumsy welding of form and content.

Later, *agitki* mirror changing social conditions, particularly the problems accruing from the Civil War. Aleksandr Ivanov-Gai's *Golod... golod... golod* (Hunger ... hunger... hunger, 1921) has survived in good condition (though not in its entirety) but is very badly made, with scenes tacked together and noticeably bad eyeline matching. The documentary scenes of country life are grimly realistic (not surprising in view of the fact that the film had been one of a number commissioned to provoke sympathy and gather funds for the victims of the post-civil war famine). Vladimir Gardin's *Serp i molot* (Hammer and Sickle, co-director Vsevolod Pudovkin, shot by Eduard Tissé; preserved in very good conditions with titles) is an altogether more ambitious undertaking with a theme that was to recur throughout the early Soviet period: the necessity for peasants to share their food with the cities. While the film is predominantly well made and smoothly edited (as befitted a very experienced pre-revolutionary director) the distinguishing features again are its use of documentary inserts and fast cutting. Tcheslav Sabinski's *Derevnya na perelome* (Countryside at the Time of Change, 1921) would seem to have the function of justifying a forced surplus-appropriation policy (the lack of titles in many of these films makes the task of deciphering the thematic concern a matter of guesswork at times). The use of close-ups of icons and bottles of vodka as signifiers for the *kulak* class in the film is noteworthy as an early example of this sort of semiotic signaling, as are the close-ups at moments of heightened tension. The static camera in any kind of extended conversation scene is offset by a moving camera in the exterior scenes. The fact that the film was made by «a crew of old hands in Russian filmmaking»[13] may account for these sophisticated stylistics, but make the startlingly disruptive errors in direction matching in one scene all the more surprising.

A later Gardin film, *Prizrak brodit po Evrope* (A Spectre is Haunting Europe, 1922-23), may be linked with an earlier *agitka*, Boris Sushkevich's *Proletary vsekh stran, soedinyaites!* (Workers of All Lands, Unite!, 1919; survives only in fragments) as a response to Proletkult ideologist Platon Kerzhentsev's call to aspiring Soviet filmmakers to turn to Marx's Communist Manifesto as a source for inspirational storylines[14], and is one of the last films from this true "transitional"

period. Tsivian considers the film's extreme stylization to be somewhat at odds with burgeoning Soviet film poetics; my own impression is that the film is rather typical for the period in its mixing of old and new styles, as we have seen. Loosely based on Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*, the film's somewhat incoherent plot revolves around the rich ruler of an unnamed European country haunted by the spectre of communism. Formally, the film is a mishmash of styles. The Bauer-like staging of the opening high society scenes and the virtuosity of some of the camerawork in later scenes is unsurprising in light of Bauer's former cameraman, Boris Zavelev's contribution. While there is very little camera movement up and down, there are frequent changes of camera placement, which coupled with direction shifts in a sequence where the hero is walking along a cliff by the sea produces almost a facsimile of a scene in Bauer's *Grezy* (Daydreams, 1915). A stylistic development, however, is evident in the frequent use of insert shots, often accompanied with a panning movement, of various characters as well as objects, and in particular a very deftly executed match on action cut in the masked ball scene, where a shot of the hero holding up his arms is perfectly matched, using an iris-in, to a shot of the orchestra conductor holding his baton aloft. Coupled with this, there are occasional startling changes of focus, as in a scene where a frontal shot of the hero sitting in a chair with a woman looking at him from a distance cuts straight along the camera axis to a close-up of her face. As had become commonplace by this time, the cutting rate is much faster than in any pre-revolutionary film. Intersecting oddly with Gardin's attempts to carry the ornate *mise-en-scène* of the pre-revolutionary style into the new Soviet age are numerous Méliès-like superimpositions of the spectres haunting the hero – executed with no more skill than Méliès himself had demonstrated twenty years previously incidentally – and recurring mass crowd scenes which betray the influence of Proletkult theories of genuine creativity being a collective endeavour.

As it is apparent from this brief discussion, production of this hybrid form was dominated to a large extent by personnel from the pre-revolutionary industry. The "young Turks" of the nascent Soviet industry, most prominently Kuleshov and Vertov, were gaining experience in other areas, such as newsreel and agitational work[15].

As regards the putative impact of "Americanism" in this period, Kuleshov was one of the few directors to have experimented extensively with American modes of filmmaking, that is, filming «done by editing, using close-ups and conscious application of editing»[16] as referred to by Kuleshov himself in relation to *Proekt inzhenera Prayta* (Engineer Prait's Project, 1917-8). Kuleshov's *Na krasnom fronte* (On The Red Front, 1920; not surviving) was an *agitka* in drama-documentary form. The innovation of the film lies in its incorporation of acted scenes based on the espionage/adventure film genre into documentary footage shot on location in Smolensk-Polotsk section of the Red Army campaign, which renders it at odds with the more usual pictorialist/documentary hybrid form common in the period, but precocious in its prefiguring of the fascination with the so-called "low genres" of American filmmaking of the later Soviet montage cinema. Kuleshov explicitly referred to having «succeeded in, so to speak, maximally applying editing techniques and editing transitions»[17]. Vertov, on the other hand, who worked exclusively in newsreel and non-fiction filmmaking, was at pains to point out that he had worked out an ultra-rapid editing style in *Boi pod Tsaritsynom* (The Battle of Tsaritsyn, 1920; no longer extant) which owed nothing to American techniques[18].

All together then, the putative influence of Americanism appears in very muted form in films of the post-revolutionary period, at least until Perestiani's *Krasnye diavol'yata* (Little Red Devils, 1923). This film, an action-packed adventure tale set during the Civil War can also be considered precocious in its extensive use of American continuity techniques, but as it is not strictly speaking an *agitka* (though it does contain the by then almost obligatory documentary sequence at the

end) it is somewhat outside the terms of reference of this study. More accurately, the period can be examined from the vantage point of mixed production styles, and the lingering on of pre-revolutionary aesthetics. The films are characterized by a mixture of stylistic features from the previous period, and an awareness of certain features of American editing, specifically a much increased cutting rate. A degree of intercutting is also evident, but this had begun to develop prior to the revolution. In fact, the most important transition point, on the filmic evidence available to me, would appear to be after 1922. The films I have viewed made in the years up to 1922 exhibit a number of stylistic and thematic characteristics which mark them off from the previous period in certain ways and at the same time contain stratagems which implicate them with the immediate past. One of the most striking elements is the use of documentary inserts to convey revolutionary themes. The latter seem to motivate faster cutting, while more conventional themes – mainly those of a romantic nature – show an adherence to pre-revolutionary stylistic guidelines. This can happen even within a single film.

These considerations, while necessarily limited, give an indication of how analysis of the productions of the early Soviet period can yield fruitful insights into the dynamics of continuity and break between pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary Russian cinema, and demonstrate how the transition period is one which still merits further study in advancing the understanding of the development of Soviet montage cinema in the 1920s.

1 In recent years, Yuri Tsivian has produced several articles concerned with aspects of this period. See Yuri Tsivian, "Cutting and Framing in Bauer's and Kuleshov's Films", in *Kintop1*, 1992, pp. 103-113; Id., "Between the Old and the New: Soviet Film Culture in 1918-1924", in *Griffithiana*, nos. 55-56, 1996, pp. 15-63. Prior to this, we can find a brief discussion of the immediate post-revolution *agitki* in Ian Christie's article "Russians", in *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 52, no. 3, 1983, pp. 174-180 and most importantly Jay Leyda's *Kino. A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, Allen and Unwin, London 1960, which was the first to devote considerable attention not only to the large and important pre-revolutionary film industry, but also to its many links with the emerging Soviet film. Jay Leyda, "Between Explosions", in *Film Quarterly*, Summer 1970, pp. 33-38, revisits the period briefly, though without adding much to what is already a very adequate account in *Kino*.

2 See Richard Taylor, Ian Christie (eds.), *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, Routledge, London-New York 1994, p. 17, for a brief observation on the period.

3 Jay Leyda, *Kino. A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, cit., p. 34.

4 Part of an unpublished Ph.D. thesis (2002) on the wider evolution of editing in Russian and Early Soviet fiction and non-fiction film by the author.

5 See Yuri Tsivian, "Cutting and Framing in Bauer's and Kuleshov's Films", cit.; Id.,"Between the Old and the New: Soviet Film Culture in 1918-1924", cit.; Miriam Hansen, *The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism*, in Christine Gledhill, Linda Williams (eds.), *Reinventing Film Studies*, Arnold/Oxford University, London-New York 2000, pp. 332-350.

6 As Leyda reports, Viktor E. Vishnevsky's *Catalogue of Films of Private Production (1917-1921)*, published in 1961, listed 350 films made in those years; of these parts of 48 films were reported as preserved in Gosfilmofond: Jay Leyda, *Kino. A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, cit., p. 34.

7 Literally, "little agitation pieces".

8 See Yuri Tsivian, "Between the Old and the New: Soviet Film Culture in 1918-1924", cit., for a discussion of some other forms in this period, such as what he terms "cinematic neo-primitivism". The *agitki* are referred to only briefly.

9 The Protozanov/Thiemann production of *Ukhod velikogo startsa* (The Passing of a Great Old Man, 1912), a drama documentary on some episodes in the life of Tolstoy contains some documentary footage of the writer himself inserted into the action, while Bauer's *Revoliutsioner* (A Revolutionary, 1917) contains some documentary footage of a queue in the street as well as two documentary montage sequences

where the Grandfather (the revolutionary of the title) is shown in the middle of some unstaged action going on around him.

10 The titles had rotted and were removed in order to stop the decay from spreading. See Denise Youngblood, *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era*, University of Texas, Austin 1991, p. 250.

11 The use of that other peculiarly Soviet form, the agit-train, on which Kuleshov and Vertov acquired their first film experience, had originated in 1918.

12 See Jay Leyda, *Kino. A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, cit., p. 135 for a detailed list; most however have not survived.

13 As observed by Yuri Tsivian, in *Pordenone Silent Film Festival Catalogue*, XV edition, October 12-19, 1996, p. 26.

14 See discussion in Yuri Tsivian, "Between the Old and the New: Soviet Film Culture in 1918-1924", cit., p. 21.

15 Kuleshov began working for the Moscow Cinema Committee in 1918 under Vladimir Gardin in the re-editing section, editing newsreel footage while continuing his experiments in editing. He also worked as a cameraman on the Civil War fronts. Vertov worked under his supervision while editing *Kinonedelija* (The Film Weekly) in 1918-1919, and also worked on the Front.

16 Stephen Hill, "Kuleshov – Prophet Without Honour?", in *Film Culture*, no. 44, 1969, pp. 1-40, here p. 6.

17 *Idem*, pp. 7-8.

18 Dziga Vertov, *Stat'i, Dnevniki, Zamysly* (Articles, Notebooks, Projects), Isskustvo, Moskva 1966, p. 116.