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Bolshevism and the Avant-Garde: Marxist Ideology and the Aesthetics of Soviet Film, 1923-28

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BOLSHEVISM AND THE AVANT-GARDE:

MARXIST IDEOLOGY AND THE AESTHETICS OF SOVIET FILM, 1923-28

by

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ABSTRACT

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Old Dominion University, 2001
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When Eisenstein's *Strike* burst onto the cultural scene in 1925, Soviet cinema began a creative odyssey that left to posterity a brilliant collection of films that redefined the manner in which audiences viewed them. Not only was the form of these films dynamic and innovative, but their content captured the heroic actions of a new historical subject, the revolutionary proletariat. As the Soviet State assumed control over the production of films, politics imprinted its indelible mark on the content of these films, especially as Stalin tightened his grip over all aspects of artistic life. The author of this project will draw upon a rich tradition of writings on Marxist aesthetics to evaluate the politics of Soviet film and to determine their contribution to communist aesthetics. Soviet film of the 1920s and 30s reflected the ideological currents present in the cultural life of Soviet society in these decades and the extent to which politics influenced the course of its evolution.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The achievements of Soviet directors during cinema's silent era of the 1920s were remarkable not only for the artistic quality of the films they produced, but also for their contribution to the debate among artists from all areas of creative activity concerning the development of culture in a socialist society. The great directors from that era were not only committed to promoting the revolution through their art but also to devising techniques that would enhance the artistic merits of the cinematic medium. They viewed cinema primarily as an art form, yet because it was a mass medium, they also believed that it had great potential as a tool for the political education of the masses.

Because of the nature of Soviet society that emerged from the civil war era, the film industry was able to foster a plurality of styles and schools dedicated to nurturing a Soviet cinema that reflected the values of socialism. The most prominent of these schools was labeled the avant-garde because the approach to cinema stressed experimentation and a break with the techniques of the past. A group of artists and writers known as the futurists had a particularly strong influence on the avant-garde directors, who adapted the formalist and constructivist theories of futurist literature and poetry to their approach to cinema. Such an approach allowed avant-garde filmmakers to rely on a single image or a carefully organized series of images to convey ideas and tell a story.

The style manual for this thesis is Kate L. Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, sixth edition.

The formalist approach to cinema enabled the avant-garde to emphasize the individual image as the foundation for the reconstruction of a cinematic reality. These images, they emphasized, were supposed to reflect an objective reality, but nonetheless failed to present a reflection of actually existing conditions traditionally promoted by Marxist aestheticians. When writing on the topic of aesthetics, Marx and Engels articulated their predilection for realism to other existing schools of art and literature. Realism, they argued, allowed the artist to depict social relations in a manner that accurately reflected existing social conditions. Literary and artistic realism was, however, a trend that emerged from capitalist society and would be considered by Marx and Engels as an alienated form of expression. Nevertheless, realism henceforth became the signature trend in Marxist aesthetics, and was considered by many theorists, Lenin included, as the only form of bourgeois art that could guide the proletariat in the creation of a socialist art and aesthetic.

The Bolsheviks, upon coming to power, did not attempt to mandate realism as the only acceptable approach to art in Soviet society. They realized that there were a number of schools tied to modernism that wholeheartedly supported the revolution, if not the Bolsheviks as well.[1] Notwithstanding the conflicting stylistic approaches of modernism to those of realism, the Bolsheviks required the aid of artists who were willing to act as propagandists for the revolution, especially during the civil war. Even after the crisis of war ended, the Bolsheviks allowed these artists to create in order to preserve a vital cultural life from which the proletariat and peasants could benefit and learn. Hence, in the period of transition from capitalism to socialism, the artist, whether a votary of

[1] For a more thorough analysis of modernism's aesthetic relation to Marxism see Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: A Historical Study of Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

realism or formalism, promoted the cultivation of a rich cultural life that would lay the foundation for the construction of a socialist society and culture.

Artists enjoyed a climate of relative openness and freedom to practice their craft as long as they did not use their art to oppose the policies of the Bolshevik regime. During the twenties, especially under the New Economic Policy, artists were encouraged to contribute to Soviet culture through the creation of art that not only achieved a high degree of aesthetic merit but also that could be used to educate the masses. Throughout this period, unorthodox artistic styles and trends were tolerated because art was considered by the party to be an essential element to socialist construction. Under the surface of this façade of diversity, there lay those who refused to believe that artists employing petty-bourgeois ideologies could serve the revolution and aid in the construction of socialism.

Those that opposed the party's support of the petty-bourgeois fellow travelers instead advocated the cultivation of a distinctively proletarian culture that renounced the Bohemian origins and formalist experimentation of the avant-garde and instead advocated the training of worker artists to articulate a proletarian worldview based on the tenets of socialist realism. In the late twenties, when the Stalinists prepared for their campaign of rapid industrialization and collectivization of agriculture, these forces were employed to promote a 'proletarian line' in culture that was defined largely by party ideologists. Cinema became an arena where this struggle was waged with intense ferocity as the avant-garde came under attack for its promotion of a petty-bourgeois ideology. The ultimate suppression of the avant-garde was not, however, an inevitability dictated by Marxist theory but, rather, a tragic result of political expediency as the

Stalinist Communist Party enlisted art to promote the party line and legitimize the bureaucratic regime that, by the 1930s, had little in common with Marxism as originally understood by the revolution's intellectual leader, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

It is the intention of this author to argue that though the avant-garde directors were committed to the development of a new aesthetic for cinema that may have conflicted with a strictly realist approach, this did not exclude them from articulating film theories that sought to explore social phenomena in a manner consistent with the tenets of dialectical materialism. The formalist approach to cinema was developed specifically to address the problems associated with communicating complex ideas and ideology through the medium of silent film. And though this method was rightly criticized for its tendency to reconstruct rather that reflect objective reality, the theories developed by the avant-garde filmmakers represented a sincere attempt by these artists to render accurately the class dynamics at work in Soviet society during the twenties. To accomplish this aim, the author will present an analysis of the films of two of the most radical avant-garde directors, Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein, to demonstrate that their art was not only politically committed to the revolution but attempted to devise an approach to filmmaking that remained faithful to the methodology of Marxism, namely that only through a dialectical portrayal of reality can the filmmaker capture the essence of social transformation.

The purpose of this study is twofold: to outline the theoretical debates surrounding the development of culture in the Soviet Union, and to understand better the artistic contributions of avant-garde filmmakers in the context of those debates. In the academic literature, the subjects of film and culture are usually treated separately and without

consideration for their mutual relevance to one another. Cinema, in contemporary society, has proven to be an essential component to any consideration of mass culture. Because of its ability to reach millions, filmmakers have the potential to convey their own values and ideology through the stories they portray on film. In a revolutionary society such as the Soviet Union of the 1920s, cinema became a powerful medium for the dissemination of socialist values. A controversy emerged, however, between those who believed that film demanded the elaboration of a visual language based on formalist principles, and those who believed that the role of cinema was to present a reflection of objective conditions in a manner more consistent with a realist aesthetic approach.

The aesthetic theories utilized and developed by avant-garde directors originated in the pre-war years from a radical petty-bourgeois intellectual milieu that refused to see the utility of bourgeois art to the task of defining a socialist aesthetic. Despite their subversive attitude toward bourgeois art, the artistic trends upon which the futurists based their art nonetheless emerged from alienated art forms that matured during the initial decades of the twentieth century. The various and diverse modernist currents sought to innovate new forms of expression that could better capture the vast changes in the human environment caused by the rapid expansion of industrial technology. And as the Russian avant-garde adapted itself to the political and cultural requirements of the revolution, it adapted these new forms of expression to extol Bolshevik ideology as a political current that could most effectively fuse industrial technology with a humanist socio-economic system. Thus, the motifs of alienation and despair that coursed through the works of modernist art were transformed into themes of hope and even faith in the power of socialism, coupled with technology, to transform human lives.

The cinema of the avant-garde filmmakers was propelled by their fierce political commitment. However, their success at producing art films with propaganda value was not forthcoming. The avant-garde films made during the twenties did not enjoy popular success despite approbation from critics and tolerance by the state film agencies. It was the films' foreign successes, particularly in Germany, that gave stature to the new Soviet film industry and established Soviet cinema as among the most innovative in Europe. The party, however, disapproved of the avant-garde's complex formalist style that made their films difficult for the average worker or peasant to understand. Furthermore, as factional fights inside the party intensified from the mid to late twenties, there emerged a growing trend within the party not to tolerate either political dissent or cultural heterogeneity. By the middle of the 1930s the avant-garde filmmakers were no longer able to practice unless they agreed to acquiesce to the dictates of the party's official aesthetic theory, socialist realism.

The demise of avant-garde cinema is both tragic and complicated. In its early days, the association of avant-garde film theory with formalism did not hamper the filmmakers' ability to produce and distribute their films nearly as much as did the market demands of NEP society. Nevertheless, guided by the liberal regime of Anatoli Lunacharsky at Narkompros[2] and the enlightened cultural theory of Leon Trotsky, the party tolerated and, to an extent, supported the avant-garde directors as consistent with both Marxist cultural theory and the spirit of NEP. Only after the party confronted a crisis of dissension within its ranks did its policy towards art and artists change abruptly. The defeat of Trotsky's

[2] Russian acronym for the Commissariat of Enlightenment established by the Soviet government at the time of the October revolution. Anatoli Lunacharsky was appointed by Lenin as its first Commissar, and he directed Narkompros to lead the effort to achieve full literacy in the Soviet Union in addition to formulating educational policy for the Soviet government.

Left Opposition in 1927 resulted in the triumph of the Stalinist faction, which was eager to alter the party's position toward the fellow travelers. In order to succeed in their campaign, the Stalinists sought to discredit the methods of the avant-garde filmmakers by ridiculing their formalist tendencies as antithetical to Marxism and to the official doctrine of socialist realism. In such a hostile climate, the avant-garde was compelled to either submit to the party's dictates or perish as artists. The formalist methods of the avant-garde did not, however, prevent these filmmakers from pursuing a rational inquiry, consistent with the tenets of historical materialism, into the social and economic dynamics of a society embarking on the transitional period of socialist construction.

In order to achieve the objectives established for this thesis, the structure of the paper must allow for the author to pursue two mutually relevant yet distinct themes. In the first and fourth chapters of the paper, the author will discuss the political climate from which the Soviet film industry and the avant-garde emerged, and the unfortunate circumstances surrounding its suppression from 1928-1935. In the second and third, the films of avant-garde directors Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein will be surveyed and their formalist film theories compared to a Marxian aesthetic framework. Furthermore, the discussion of politics and culture in general will aid the author in illuminating the theoretical problems associated with the application of formalist film theory to films intended to assume a particular propaganda role. Following this logic, the author will better be able to link the political environment to the artistic development of silent cinema.

An important limitation here is that of all the myriad films produced during the silent era, the author will focus only on the films of Vertov and Eisenstein. The reason

for this is clear. Of all the Soviet directors of the period, including the avant-garde, Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein represented two of the most politically tendentious and overtly Marxist filmmakers of their era. Both men made films specifically in order to demonstrate the necessary course of events that culminated in the October revolution or to underscore the correctness of the party line. Whether fiction or non-fiction, their films projected the ideas that fueled the revolution and made no apologies in their respective support of them. This author's choice of Vertov and Eisenstein provides two excellent examples that help to clarify the lengths to which the party was willing to go in order to secure control over the artistic and political development of the film industry in the thirties.

During the twenties, both men were considered by many to be at the epitome of revolutionary film in the Soviet Union. They were highly esteemed filmmakers, who both were attacked and sometimes even vilified in the early thirties for their adherence to formalist methods that were considered by the party to be petty bourgeois and, thus, counterrevolutionary. The demise of their careers personified the tragedy of the party's turn towards a totalitarian domination of culture and thought that marked the Stalinist era.[3] The study of these two men and their art will, therefore, enable the author to demonstrate the severe degree to which the party's policies towards art and culture changed from the twenties, prior to the defeat of Trotsky and the Left Opposition, to that of the thirties when bureaucratic Thermidor altered the nature and purpose of the party and the revolution it had led.

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[3] For a more complete analysis of the effects of Stalinism on Soviet society see Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977). For the influence of Stalinism on Soviet culture of the late twenties and early thirties see Shelia Fitzpatrick, ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-31* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

Of the myriad sources referenced in this paper, the most important are articles that appeared in the cinema periodicals of the era and, of course, the films themselves. Although the author was limited to using sources translated into English, a good number of important articles from Soviet filmmakers and critics are available in translation. However, the majority of film periodicals published in the Soviet Union during the twenties has yet to be translated from the original Russian language and remain cloistered in the state archives of the Russian Federation. They are thus inaccessible to the author. Another important primary source are the writings of party theorists, primarily those of Lenin, Lunacharsky, and Trotsky, which enabled the author to reconstruct party attitudes toward aesthetics and art during the twenties. Understanding the philosophical attitudes of these important Bolshevik theorists is of great assistance in the task of penetrating the political and cultural environment from which avant-garde cinema emerged.

The purpose of this study is by no means to make a purely aesthetic analysis of Soviet avant-garde cinema. There already exist in English a vast number of studies that concentrate their focus on the aesthetic merits and cinematographic contributions of these innovative films. Furthermore, considering that this is a thesis in history, it would not be germane to the discipline for the author to make an exclusively artistic evaluation of these films. Therefore, the author has combined an aesthetic analysis of the films of Vertov and Eisenstein with an attempt to understand the evolution of Soviet cultural policies throughout the twenties and early thirties. The study of these often forgotten films provides the opportunity to investigate another facet of Soviet achievement that was ruthlessly eliminated by the authoritarian regime of Stalin. However, more importantly, to understand the contributions of these films to Soviet culture is to better comprehend

the nature of the Bolshevik regime before its destruction by the bloody purges of the thirties. It is therefore the hope of the author that this thesis will be of interest not only to historians and students of cinema, but to all those interested in the political dynamics surrounding the bureaucratic deformation of the Soviet State.

CHAPTER II

POLITICAL ATTITUDES TOWARD THE AVANT-GARDE

THE BIRTH OF SOVIET CINEMA

Lenin is often quoted as having proclaimed in a conversation with Anatoli Lunacharsky, "Of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important."[1] Conveying his confidence in the power of cinema as a propaganda weapon, Lenin's remarks seem uncharacteristically idealistic considering that when he made them, at the height of the civil war, there was hardly a film industry of which to speak. During the war, what did exist of Soviet cinema was utilized for propaganda and agitation as a fleet of agit-trains brought newsreels and short films to the peasants living and fighting at the front.[2] The *agitki* films produced during the civil war, particularly Dziga Vertov's innovative Kino-Pravda newsreels, represented an initial step in bringing propaganda films into the countryside to educate the peasants politically. At the conclusion of the devastating civil conflict, the Soviet regime was eager to further the development of cinema, having recognized from the experience of the civil war film's potential as propaganda. However, due to the strain on the country's resources from years of war and civil conflict, the Bolsheviks could not hope to wield the power of cinema as an aid in socialist construction with film stocks depleted and the existing equipment worn out from lack of available replacement parts. Yet because of its effectiveness as propaganda during the civil war, Bolshevik leaders saw in cinema the potential to foster a medium that could

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[1] Richard Taylor, "The Birth of the Soviet Cinema," in *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution*, ed. Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 190.

[2] Ibid., 195.

communicate the party's Marxist ideology to the masses of Russian peasants whose support remained crucial to the success of the socialist revolution.

At the conclusion of the civil conflict, the fledgling film industry required intense capital investment to revitalize production, yet the devastated Soviet economy was ill equipped to divert precious state resources into film production. Nevertheless, because of the flight of private capital from the Soviet territories after the revolution the few remaining cinema entrepreneurs lacked the necessary capital to inject into what remained of the film industry. In order to rescue the industry from total collapse, the party was compelled to nationalize the industry on August 27, 1919. State controlled production did not, however, save the film industry from ruin. On paper, private studios were eliminated and oversight of film production fell under the direct administration of Anatoli Lunacharsky and the Commissariat of Enlightenment or Narkompros, yet in reality the state continued to rely on private initiative for film production especially during the post-civil war era.[3] Film Historian Vance Kepley, Jr. characterizes the development of the cinema in this period as having passed through two stages of economic development. During the period of war communism, the film industry experienced "net capital consumption" as available film resources were depleted rapidly by the demands of war. Once the civil war was concluded and the New Economic Policy initiated, the film industry began to recover and enjoy a period of "capital accumulation" as film production increased by a factor of ten from 1919 to 1925.[4] The new Soviet government could ill afford to invest its meager resources in film production, so it encouraged pre-

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[3] Ibid., 193.

[4] Vance Kepley Jr., "The Origins of Soviet Cinema: A Study in Industry Development," in *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (London: Routledge, 1991), 60-61.

revolutionary film capitalists, many of whom had fled to White controlled areas during the civil war, to return to Soviet Russia and help reconstruct Soviet cinema.

Throughout much of the 1920s, while the Soviet government officially supported the party's New Economic Policy, the film industry relied on private capital to revitalize Soviet cinema. As the Soviet film industry lay dormant from the devastation of the civil war years, private capitalists imported popular foreign films as a means of generating sufficient revenue to begin the production of Soviet films. By 1923 Soviet film industry was beginning to make its own entertainment films yet continued to show films from Germany and America to satisfy the demand for movies. And while artistically the majority of films made during the period of NEP were influenced by the foreign imports, particularly the American films, artists from the theater and other creative disciplines began to show an interest in cinema as the medium for a new form of art. The party faced the contradiction of fostering an artistic movement that was committed to the ideas of the revolution, while at the same time reaping the financial rewards of the studios that imported popular foreign films that satisfied the population's thirst for escapism, despite their being ideologically questionable at best. In the short term, the government allowed the importation of foreign films to raise capital to sustain the industry and enable it to initiate Soviet sponsored film projects. And while most Soviet projects continued to emulate the popular styles and genres from the West, some reflected the emergence of a movement among film workers and directors committed to the cultivation of a cinema that reflected the socialist values of Soviet society.

Early film projects by experimental directors were encouraged by the state film industry during the civil war because they demonstrated a political commitment to the

revolution and the Bolshevik party; however, during the era of NEP the financial demands on the industry required that it largely abandon experimental films in favor of projects with mass appeal. In reaction to this trend, innovative film directors began to form their own organizations to promote the production and distribution of films that sought to educate audiences to the necessity of constructing socialism in Russia. By 1923, Proletkino was organized as an independent association of film producers committed to the development of Soviet propaganda films. Unlike the state agency for cinema, Goskino, Proletkino and related organizations sought the creation of a Soviet cinema that would realize the potential of film as Lenin envisioned.

Film workers and critics working in the industry after the initiation of the NEP lamented the lack of commitment by the state to the establishment of a viable organ for the production of politically conscious proletarian cinema. The founding document of Proletkino attacks Narkompros for essentially retreating from the 1919 nationalization when it introduced limited private enterprise in film production.[5] The idea of a Soviet cinema was replaced by foreign imports and entrepreneurial expediency. Proletkino proposed instead that proletarian cinema be developed under its direction by recruiting workers into its ranks and remaining committed to a cinematic vision for a future socialist culture.[6] Many film workers were attracted to the notion of proletarian cinema because it represented a direct alternative to the prevailing domination of foreign films and their deleterious ideological content.

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[5] "Pochti tezisy," *Proletkino*, nos. 1,2 (May/June 1923): 3-4, in *Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, trans. Richard Taylor (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 84. Henceforth, all new citations from articles compiled in this document collection will be followed by the short form of the *Film Factory* bibliographic entry.

[6] Ibid., 85.

Other groups of cinema workers echoed Proletkino's resistance to the policies of the private film enterprises. In a 1923 article, prominent film critic Alexei Gan noted that a lack of sufficiently numerous and class-conscious film industry workers weakened the position of those advocating a proletarian cinema. The result of such a climate would in Gan's estimation lead to the continued domination of film production by those committed only to the creation of more entertainment films based primarily on the aesthetics of the bourgeois literary tradition.[7] Many film directors protested this trend. In 1924 a group of experimental cinematographers founded ARK, or the Association of Revolutionary Cinematography, and echoed Gan's accusations in their "Declaration of the Association of Revolutionary Cinematography." As in the "Quasi-Theses" of Proletkino, ARK included in its manifesto a criticism of the lack of any substantial production in the nationalized studios, especially in the areas of scientific and educational films. They proposed above all strengthening party control over ideological content of Soviet films, creating cadres committed to proletarian cinema for work in the industry, and organizing cinema workers to develop the means of creating quality educational films for consumption by workers and peasants.[8] These organizations, though influential among party circles, were unable to convince the party leadership of the importance of cultivating a politically committed cinema to educate the most revolutionary layers of society, the masses of militant workers and peasants. Instead, the party encouraged the establishment of a self-sustaining enterprise that prioritized the showing of foreign films

[7] Alexei Gan, "Po dvum putyam," *Kino-Fot*, no. 6, 8 January 1923, 1, in *Film Factory*, 83.

[8] "Declaration of the Association of Revolutionary Cinematography," *Pravda*, 27 February 1924, in *Film Factory*, 103.

in order to generate sufficient revenue to invest the surplus in new equipment and production of entertainment films.

This group of experimental film directors from ARK that stepped into the wasteland of Soviet film production in the years following the conclusion of the civil war set out to make films that exemplified a new form of art in addition to effective propaganda for the Soviet regime. The impetus for the professional association of these avant-garde directors came, not from the Nepmen of the film industry, but from an organization that thrived during the civil war as purveyors of propaganda art that exemplified innovative new forms of expression to convey to the workers and peasants that a new era had dawned in Russia. This organization, called the Proletkult, was established in 1917 in response to the Provisional Government's phlegmatic attempts to organize educational forums for workers. Trade unions and factory councils began to organize their own educational institutions. The soviets as well assumed responsibility for developing an educational agenda; however, the unions and factory committees felt that their educational organizations were best able to serve the cultural needs of the proletariat.[9]

As the first conference of proletarian cultural-educational organizations convened in Petrograd in the autumn of 1917, the participants agreed that the struggle for proletarian culture must be considered as vital to the revolution as other forms of organization, i.e. political, economic, etc. Most Proletkult members considered education the primary means by which a proletarian culture would emerge and, therefore, spent considerable resources to facilitate the process of workers' education. Drawing inspiration from the

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[9] Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 23.

ideas of former Bolshevik Alexander Bogdanov,[10] the founders of Proletkult considered it the task of workers to preside over the construction of their own cultural organizations. Its mission was to apply Bogdanov's theory that the proletariat must be sufficiently class-conscious and cultured in order to construct a worldview that, through sheer will alone could transform bourgeois culture into a relic of the past and mold the proletariat into architects of a new communist society.[11]

According to Bogdanov, the proletariat must first be cognizant of its contributions to human culture before it may dominate the construction of a socialist society. This implied an understanding of the various cultural arenas where the ideology and social power of the proletariat finds expression. In its myriad forms, i.e. language, law, custom, etc., ideology facilitates social cohesion and the articulation of a proletarian worldview.[12] Social existence and social consciousness become synonymous and, therefore, art and ideology represent more than mere reflections of productive relations but mental

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[10] An early member of the Bolshevik faction, Alexander A. Bogdanov clashed with Lenin over Bolshevik participation in the Third Duma. Counterposed to Lenin's position, Bogdanov argued for abstention from the Duma elections on the grounds that participation, in principle, would be a betrayal of proletarian interests to satisfy opportunist appetites among the party leadership. Lenin opposed Bogdanov's position arguing that abstention would have more in common with syndicalism than with Marxism. Later, after Bogdanov's expulsion from the Bolshevik faction, Lenin continued to oppose the influence of Bogdanov's cultural theories on the party and, after the revolution, on Soviet society. Bogdanov posited that the question of proletarian political power should be subordinated to the task of creating a proletarian culture that would raise the consciousness of the working class on a slower more evolutionary basis. Lenin, therefore, concluded that Bogdanov's theories were reformist and antithetical to Marxism. For a contemporary, yet highly polemical, account of Lenin's struggle with Bogdanov and his political tendency within the Bolshevik faction, see Lenin's article, "The Faction of Supporters of Otzovism and God-Building," in *Collected Works*, vol. 16 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1963), 29-61; see also Lenin's philosophical treatise against neo-Kantian empiricism and positivism, *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* in *CW*, vol. 14. For a scholarly account of the political struggles between the factions of Lenin and Bogdanov, see the special issue on Alexander Bogdanov in *The Russian Review* vol. 49, 1990.

[11] Davis G. Rowley, "Millenarian Bolshevism: Empiriomonism, God-Building, Proletarian Culture," (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1982), 60.

[12] Zenovia A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 29.

constructs of a collective consciousness.[13] Consequently, Bogdanov continually asserted that a vital and broad proletarian culture must develop in order to counter the prevailing yet decadent culture of the bourgeoisie. He insisted that proletarian cultural development and edification *must* precede any attempt to acquire political supremacy because, in Bogdanov's estimation, "political hegemony of the proletariat could never be attained without its cultural leg."[14] Bogdanov's assertions, though cloaked in Marxian terminology, contradict Marx's emphasis on class-consciousness and the primacy of political hegemony, especially as interpreted by the revolution's leader, Lenin.

Lenin consistently treated the concept of culture dialectically and in terms of class hegemony. In the Marxist tradition, Lenin realized that the prospects for socialism inherently depended on economic and technological achievements of society. Though politically immature, the Western proletariat, because of its relation to an advanced level of capitalist development, was better prepared culturally to assume power. The Russian proletariat, while politically more astute, lacked the cultural development upon which the construction of a socialist society depended. As the military crisis of the civil war waned, Soviet workers looked to the cultural achievements of Western Europe's capitalist economy as a model, not for its inequitable distribution of goods, but rather of efficiency and rationality in production.[15] Carmen Claudin-Urondo, in his study of Lenin's attitudes towards culture, characterizes Lenin's position as recognizing that revolution, while

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[13] Rowley, "Millenarian Bolshevism," 53.

[14] N. Maksimov [Bogdanov's pseudonym], "Ne nado zatemniat," in *Ko vsem tovarishcham* (Paris, 1910), 5, quoted in Jutta Scherrer, "The Cultural Hegemony of the Proletariat: The Origins of Bogdanov's Vision of Proletarian Culture," *Studies in History* 5, no. 2 (1989): 201, n. 11.

[15] Robert C. Tucker, "Lenin's Bolshevism as a Culture in the Making," in *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution*, ed. Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 36.

invariably eliminating the moral values and ideology of capitalist culture, must seek to place the proletariat in control of capitalism's cultural achievements so that they can be reorganized to serve the collective needs of the masses.[16]

Civilization, the accumulated achievements of human material culture, represented the cultural inheritance from previous modes of production. The proletariat, Lenin argued, must understand and master the instruments of civilization as a prerequisite to socialist construction. Lenin realized, however, that under capitalism, the bourgeoisie dominated the means of production, which allowed them to construct a culture in their own image to serve their own material interests. Only when society is cleansed of the harmful ideological influences of bourgeois culture can civilization further the historical aims of the revolutionary proletariat. For Lenin, class consciousness preceded cultural development, which led him to conclude that only after political power is consolidated can the proletariat hope to acquire the cultural edification required to construct a classless, socialist culture.

Lenin articulated a Marxist critique of the Proletkult when, in October 1920, he published a draft resolution for the organization's upcoming national congress. Lenin attempted to devise a critique of the Proletkult that reflected his belief that the party encouraged the construction of a socialist culture according to Marxist principles because only Marxism expressed the historical interests of the proletariat. To this end, Lenin agreed that the party in conjunction with proletarian organizations must take the lead in educating the masses; however, Marxist theory, itself a product of historical development in philosophy, requires that the socialist revolution assimilate the achievements of

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[16] Carmen Claudin-Urondo, *Lenin and the Cultural Revolution*, trans. Brian Pearce (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1977), 23.

bourgeois culture as a prerequisite to the emergence of a genuine socialist culture. His official recommendation to the Proletkult was for it to merge with Narkompros in order to strengthen its educational mission and avoid cultural isolation.[17] Lenin's draft resolution marked the beginning of the end of Proletkult's independence from the Soviet state.

The departure of Bogdanov's philosophical position from that of orthodox Marxism provided the basis for the party's persecution of the Proletkult for its adherence to his heretical ideas and its commitment to the creation of a viable proletarian culture. However, Lynn Mally, historian of the Proletkult, opposes any attempt to characterize the Proletkult as dominated exclusively by Bogdanov's ideas as a gross simplification of a diverse movement. She cites the Soviet scholar L. A. Piregina, who argues that Proletkult was as much, if not more, inspired by Lenin's vision of culture as Bogdanov's.[18] Nevertheless, once the NEP became official policy, the party's tolerance for ultra-left organizations like the Proletkult diminished. Ultimately the Proletkult would be absorbed into Narkompros, yet the party's disapproval of the philosophical orientation of the Proletkult would remain latent as the working class mobilized its allies to direct its energies solely to the victory of the Red Army.

During the civil war years, the most pressing task of proletarian educational and cultural organizations was to promote propaganda and agitation among the peasant masses, especially to those living near the front. The Bolsheviks utilized the talents of these so-called proletarian cultural groups to serve the cause of the revolution and, out of

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[17] V. I. Lenin, "On Proletarian Culture," in *Collected Works*, vol. 31, 316-317.

[18] Mally, *Culture of the Future*, xxii-xxiii.

necessity, remained quite lenient of lingering allegiances to Bogdanov's unorthodox cultural theories. Once the civil war was concluded in 1921 and the Workers' Opposition faction defeated at the Tenth Party Congress, advocates of an independent proletarian culture movement fell victim to a campaign initiated by the party to quash Proletkult's organizational autonomy. Sochor quotes one party worker, purportedly a Leninist, as having stated that "some elements of 'fantasy' were indispensable in the initial period of the revolution, ... but 'fantasy' was no longer necessary and [now was] harmful."[19] While the organizational independence of the Proletkult may have ended, it continued to influence the development of Soviet art and culture throughout the twenties.

AESTHETIC TRENDS IN THE PROLETKULT

The utilization of the cinema during the civil war for purposes of agitation and the reconstruction of the film industry afterward provide an example of how the party chose to use art to serve its educational and cultural ends. Although several early film projects were completed in collaboration with the Proletkult and its various affiliates, the bulk of the film industry was developed under the auspices of Narkompros and its allies in private film production. Contrary to the early experience of the Proletkult, cinema never enjoyed official autonomy from the state. The party considered it too important a medium to be developed independently of state oversight. Nevertheless, the cinema fell under the influence of the very same artistic styles and influences that theater and other visual arts did under the Proletkult.

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[19] Ia. Iakovlev, "O proletarskoi kul'ture i Proletkul'te," *Pravda,* 24 and 25 October 1922, reprinted in V. I. Lenin, *O literature i iskusstva* (Moscow, 1969), 603, quoted in Sochor, *Revolution and Culture*, 204, n. 1.

Central to the educational mission of the Proletkult was an insistence that its activists demonstrate a commitment to the cultural edification of the Soviet working class and its allies among the peasantry. The leadership of the Proletkult vigorously promoted artistic expression that drew inspiration from the everyday life experiences of working people. Production art became the term used to describe art that attempted to merge creativity and the artistic process with industry and the realities of industrial labor. Posters, banners and murals were the media utilized to mobilize the population around the program of the party and the revolution.[20] Proletkult excelled especially in the arena of theater production, which became the most dynamic and popular instrument for the communication of these experiences to the masses. Myriad agitation plays were produced. Themes were drawn from the experiences of the civil war in plays such as "For the Red Soviets" ("Za Krasnye Sovety") and those like "The Bricklayer," which promoted international proletarian solidarity. Art that promoted bourgeois tastes and sensibility, i.e. opera and ballet, was denounced along with any attempts by artists to extol folklore and myth.[21] Artists from many different schools of thought became enamored with the idealistic mission of the Proletkult and joined often with the intention of influencing the organization's artistic direction.

Once established, Proletkult became a magnet for a variety of cultural and educational groups who sought to use the medium of art, literature and theater to promote the revolution. Vsevolod Meyerhold, theatrical director and innovator of an acting technique called biomechanics, produced plays by the great playwrights of the past, such

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[20] Mally, *Culture of the Future*, 151.

[21] Ibid.,141-145.

as Ibsen, Shakespeare, and Goethe, in addition to propaganda plays that allowed worker casts to communicate the ideas of the revolution to the masses.[22] Sergei Eisenstein, in addition to producing several plays under the auspices of the Proletkult, directed and produced his 1925 film *Strike* in collaboration with Valerian Pletnev and the First Workers' Theater.[23] Mayakovsky and the Russian Futurists collaborated with Proletkult in an attempt to develop and disseminate new forms of proletarian poetry and prose. The Futurists were considered the most innovative of Proletkult's petty bourgeois supporters, and their artistic influence and obsession with experimentation would attract significant criticism from those in the organization that sought to cultivate a reputation for the Proletkult as a promoter of a purely proletarian cultural agenda.

The "Futurist rebellion" as defined by literary scholar Victor Erlich envisioned a role for the proletarian artist as builder of a new art and aesthetic to be constructed on the "ash heap" of a defeated bourgeois art and culture. Originally defined in 1909 by the Italian Futurist Filippo Marinetti in "The Initial Manifesto of Futurism," Futurism in art encouraged artists to redefine the language and imagery of art:

> We shall sing of the great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot, of the multicolored, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals, of greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents, factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke.[24]

The Russian Futurists interpreted Marinetti's words to mean that proletarian art must acknowledge that, in the words of Alexey Kruchonykh, "a new verbal form creates a new

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[22] Henri Arvon, *Marxist Esthetics*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 61.

[23] Mally, *Culture of the Future*, 241.

[24] Filippo Marinetti, *Selected Writings*, ed. R. W. Flint (New York, 1971), 42; quoted in Victor Erlich, *Modernism and Revolution: Russian Literature in Transition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 36, n. 15.

content and not vice versa."[25] Politics, however, came between the Italian Futurists and their Russian protégés, especially over the issue of World War I, which the Russians refused to support calling Marinetti's writing "poetic imperialism."[26] The Russian Futurist movement itself became vulnerable to political developments, which produced a split in the movement following the February Revolution in St. Petersburg. The rift resulted in the establishment of the Left Front of the Arts or Lef, which included those Futurists committed to a radical transformation of society through proletarian revolution.

The Left Front of the Arts organized around its journal *Lef* and agitated for an alliance with those groups that supported revolutionary politics and a new art that reflected the social transformation initiated by the October Revolution:

> *Lef must bring together the leftist forces. Lef must survey its ranks*, after having discarded the past that stuck to them. *Lef must create a united front* to blow up old junk, to fight for the integration of a new culture.[27]

Many in Lef looked to members of the Proletkult as potential allies of the Futurist project, yet others rejected such an alliance, condemning Proletkult artists as "reactionaries in the area of form."[28] From its inception, Proletkult was as interested in the cultural education of the working class as it was in fostering a new aesthetic. The Futurists, on the other hand, viewed the creation of new forms of artistic expression as a fundamental component in the transition to a socialist art and culture. This sentiment was expressed best in the following proclamation from a Futurist manifesto, "To throw

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[25] Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism, A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 384; quoted in Erlich, *Modernism and Revolution*, 36, n. 16.

[26] "Left Front of the Arts," in *Russian Futurism Through its Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, ed. and trans. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 192.

[27] Ibid., 194.

[28] Ibid., 192.

Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy from the ship of modernity is our 1912 slogan."[29] Many in the Proletkult were uncomfortable with the Futurists' intellectualism and pompous pronouncements about the rebirth of culture and, consequently, harshly criticized their commitment to new art forms as too closely associated with the trends in art that included impressionism, cubism and abstract art. These styles were considered to be bourgeois, formalistic, and incomprehensible to the average worker.[30] This conflict became especially acute during the period of the NEP, as the Proletkult was subordinated to party control and began to abandon its experimental pretensions for a post-revolutionary role as promoter of cultural education among workers. Futurists, though supportive of the party's revolutionary program, continued to argue that culture in the transition period required experimentation with radical new forms of artistic expression.

FUTURISM, MARXISM AND CINEMA

As the marriage between Futurism and the Proletkult splintered, the Futurists that broke away declared the formation of a new group, the Left Front of the Arts or Lef, and pledged to devote its energy to create experimental forms of artistic expression that reflected a deep commitment to a Marxian vision of a socialist society as championed by the Bolshevik Party. Influenced by the aesthetic theories being developed by the constructivist and formalist schools, Futurists aspired to create radically new forms of artistic expression that could penetrate the appearance of reality to reveal to the proletarian consciousness the extent to which its yearning for a socialist society was

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[29] "Whom does Lef wrangle with?" in *Russian Futurism Through its Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, ed. and trans. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 196.

[30] Mally, *Culture of the Future*, 145.

intrinsically tied to technology and economic modernization. Critic Alexei Gan celebrated Soviet Russia's radical social experiment and emphasized that art must seek to capture the essence of man's relationship to the machine in order to demonstrate to a proletarian audience its liberating effects. The constructivist Gan, though optimistic about Futurism's challenge to the old art forms, remained critical of formalist experimentation that ignored the Marxist imperative that art reflect and clarify the interaction of man, i.e. proletarian man, with the means of social reproduction.

Though the Futurists declared themselves to be champions of communism, their approach to art differed from that traditionally advocated by the founders of Marxism. According to Marx and Engels, the essence of man is expressed through his or her life activity, i.e., labor, which consequently is the primary means by which he or she manipulates natural forces in order to satisfy basic needs. Man's labor becomes, as Marx writes, "the object of his will and of his consciousness," which enables him to project himself through the product of his labor, i.e., culture.[31] During the process of mastering the environment, man reconstructs the natural landscape and develops a culture and an art that reflects this activity.[32] In *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx argues that:

> Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form - in short, *senses* capable of human gratifications, senses confirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being.[33]

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[31] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings*, ed. Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1973), 51.

[32] Stefan Morawski, "The Aesthetic Views of Marx and Engels," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28, no. 3 (spring 1970): 305.

[33] Marx, *Economic and Philosophic manuscripts*, in *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, 52.

Over the course of time, as the mode of production becomes more advanced and social classes develop, the product of artistic activity will reflect the perceptions and values of the dominant class, even if simultaneously critical of them. Marx and Engels encountered this problem in their study of nineteenth-century literary realism.

In their exegesis of the great works of literary realism, Marx and Engels recognized that even when the artist's politics were reactionary, subjective values of the artist were not always overtly apparent in the work of art. They also recognized that the realist style, while attempting to depict social relations objectively, did not imply a progressive rendering of society.[34] The artist, like all producers under capitalism, suffered the affliction of alienation no matter how insightful his observations of social forces. Nevertheless, the anathema of alienation would not prevent *absolutely* an artist's ability to experiment with a rational study of social relations, revealing implicitly the historical advancement of progressive social forces. And it was realism, Marx argues, in its capacity as a methodological approach to creative activity, most accurately reflects the spirit of historical materialism, which insists that art depict social relations in an objective and dialectical manner. For this reason most of Marx's literary heirs criticized formalism as both a product of bourgeois society and as overly preoccupied with form and with constructing reality rather than reflecting it.

Those constructivists that were committed to the development of art forms that reflected both modernist experimentation and Marxist aesthetics remained critical of formalist preoccupation with manipulating reality to conform to a predetermined ideological framework. In his 1922 article "The 'Left Front' and Cinema," Gan, while

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[34] Morawski, "Aesthetic views of Marx and Engels," 309.

recognizing the Futurists struggle against art of the past, argues that Lef must expand its challenge from narrow experiments in form to the establishment of a new aesthetic that defines the tasks of the artist as using innovations in form to capture and relate the impact of real events to the consciousness of man. Gan declares that if Lef is not able to inspire a transformation of the old society into the new then the momentum of Futurism will dissipate and its efforts will result in naught.[35] Though Gan asserts that the vagueness of the Marxist position that art reflects reality must be further developed, he agrees with the Marxist theorists who assert that art's content and form must be firmly grounded in man's material existence. And on this point Gan argues that 'left front' aesthetics fail to achieve this level of understanding:

> Everything about this front that is connected with the attempts somehow to link with art, somehow through art to be included in the working family of the struggling proletariat, appears to be a psychological feature of a declassed milieu rather than a class-based social phenomenon of a sociological kind.[36]

Gan's criticism of Futurist aestheticism and epistemology reflected what would become a fierce debate among party theorists and cultural commentators as to whether or not constructivism could be reconciled to Marxist theory and, thus, tolerated by the Bolshevik party.

Gan's characterization of the Futurist aesthetic as somehow rooted in culturally alienated petty bourgeois elements rather than in the working class establishes the basis for the attack on Lef and Futurism from leaders in the Bolshevik Party. Many in the party criticized the Futurist approach to culture and aesthetics as inconsistent with a

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[35] Alexei Gan, "'Levyi front' i kinematografiya," *Kino-Fot*, no. 5, 10 December 1922, 1-3, in *Film Factory*, 77.

[36] Ibid.

Marxian position. Nevertheless, those Futurists who became enamored of the alluring new medium of cinema insisted that the visual nature of the film form required the application of experimental methods to communicate communist ideology to a backward and largely illiterate population. Their ambitions were constantly challenged by a skeptical party leadership who refused to believe that Futurist art could provide a model for the development of a socialist aesthetic in the arts.

From the inception of the motion picture, Lenin considered the cinema a powerful means by which to infuse the Russian masses with the political education they required to continue the struggle for socialism on a world scale.[37] Lenin was attracted especially to the documentary newsreel because of its effectiveness as a medium that could accurately portray events and educate the viewer. Lenin, however, also recognized the real demand for entertainment films, although he hoped that by providing the population with insipid dramas from abroad, the Soviet state could use the proceeds to invest in the production of more educational newsreels and documentaries. In a conversation with Anatoli Lunacharsky, Lenin remarked, "If you have a good newsreel, serious and educational pictures, then it doesn't matter if, to attract the public, you have some kind of useless picture of the more or less usual type."[38] It is difficult to determine exactly what position Lenin would have taken concerning the emergence of the cinematic avant-garde whose experiments with the film form began to flourish only after his death; however, his opinion of the literary avant-garde provides us with some insight into the suspicions he harbored toward new forms of artistic expression.

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[37] Louis Harris Cohen, "The Cultural-Political Traditions and Developments of the Soviet Cinema, 1917-1972" (Ph.D. diss. University of Southern California, 1973), 28.

[38] G. M. Boltyanskii, ed., *Lenin i kino* (Moscow/Leningrad, 1925), 16-19, in *Film Factory*, 57.

In a conversation with Clara Zetkin,[39] Lenin revealed his reluctance to accept modernist schools as models for the development of a future socialist art. While he recognized that the purpose of the revolution, in terms of creative activity, was to liberate the artist from the tyranny of the market, he stated unequivocally that the party must be instrumental in directing this process in a direction consistent with Marxist theory and the political requirements of the proletarian dictatorship. For him, the art forms of the past should be studied and mastered not summarily dismissed as anachronistic or reactionary.[40] However, he rejected any attempt by Marxist revolutionaries to canonize contemporary art as the model for the future. In fact, he expressed little but contempt for it when he remarked to Zetkin that:

> We are good revolutionaries, but for some reason we feel obliged to prove that we too stand "at the peak of contemporary culture." I however have the audacity to declare myself a "barbarian." I cannot bring myself to regard the works of Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism and the other "isms" as the highest manifestation of artistic genius. I do not understand them. I do not derive any pleasure from them.[41]

Like Marx, Lenin recognized that the art of the past must be comprehended before a socialist art could emerge. The above passage, however, does not reveal anything other than Lenin's personal distaste for various trends in contemporary art. Though skeptical of their artistic merit, Lenin does not reject out of hand their progressive attributes. He

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[39] Clara Zetkin was a member of the German Social Democrats (SPD) until the outbreak of World War I. At that time she sided with Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in opposition to the war and joined their group, the Sparticist League. The Sparticists lasted until early in January 1919 when they fused with revolutionary elements from the Independent Social Democrats (USPD) to form the German Communist Party (KPD). The KPD was inspired by the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution and quickly affiliated with the Third International.

[40] K. Tsetkin, *Vospominaniya o Lenine* (Moscow, 1966), 9-13, in *Film Factory*, 50.

[41] Ibid.

only objects to communists who revere the avant-garde irrespective of its commitment to the edification of the masses.

What was important to Lenin was that art be directed towards and comprehensible to the masses of working people. New forms of art that could not reach the consciousness of the proletariat and the peasants could not be considered revolutionary art. In the same conversation with Clara Zetkin, Lenin stated:

> Art belongs to the people. It should reach with its deepest roots into the very thick of the broad working masses. It should be understood by these masses and loved by them. It should unite the feeling, thought and will of these masses, and elevate them.[42]

The implications of Lenin's words for cinema were profound. Cinema, unlike the other arts, was by definition a mass medium, and its message could potentially reach millions. For the party, this meant that the development of the cinema must be firmly grounded in the aesthetic needs and political aspirations of the great masses of working people. During the era of the NEP, cinematic innovation to these ends was subordinated to the demands of the market as the film industry was directed to finance itself. The man placed in charge of this process was, ironically, the same man who in 1908 left the party with Bogdanov over their mutual disagreements with Lenin, Anatoli Lunacharsky.

From the moment of his appointment as Commissar of Enlightenment, Lunacharsky enthusiastically embraced the development of Soviet cinema. In a 1919 article, "The Tasks of the State Cinema in the RSFSR," Lunacharsky proposed several tasks for the recently nationalized film industry in accordance with Lenin's vision for Soviet cinema. As with Lenin, Lunacharsky believed that the primary purpose of cinema in Soviet society, whether through newsreels or feature films, was to disseminate propaganda

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[42] Ibid., 51.

imbued with the spirit of socialism. Film, Lunacharsky writes, must decisively accomplish the following in terms of propaganda:

> It [film] constitutes, on the one hand, a visual clarion for the dissemination of ideas and, on the other hand, if we introduce elements of the refined, the poetic, the pathetic etc., it is capable of touching the emotions and thus becomes an apparatus of agitation.[43]

One must not, however, interpret Lunacharsky's remarks as advocating the use of film for crude propaganda that simply touts the party line in political and cultural affairs. Throughout his tenure as head of Narkompros, Lunacharsky's regime encouraged a diversity of styles and artistic experimentation that granted a degree of artistic license to those artists committed to the revolution and to communism.

The so-called avant-garde directors who founded the Association of Revolutionary Cinematographers (ARK) carved a niche for themselves under the Lunacharsky regime primarily because of their talent for making films and their enthusiasm for promoting party ideology. Lunacharsky did not object to the tendentiousness of the avant-garde, because he recognized that film's mass appeal required that ideological content be considered.[44] Furthermore, he resisted the notion, promoted by many in the party, that ideas could only be communicated in film through a strictly realist methodological framework. He recognized that, unlike print media, film was a visual medium that demanded the creation of a comprehensible visual language that would enable filmmakers to overcome language and literacy barriers.[45] He therefore tolerated the

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[43] Anatoli Lunacharsky, "Zadachi gosudarstvennogo kinodela v R.S.F.S.R.," *Kinematograf. Sbornik statei* (Moscow, 1919), 5-7, in *Film Factory*, 47.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Richard Taylor, *The Politics of the Soviet Cinema 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 30.

avant-garde's predilection for formalist experimentation because he realized the importance of its development both as an art form and as an effective medium of propaganda. Lunacharsky's enthusiasm for the medium of film cannot, however, be misinterpreted as an uncritical endorsement of the avant-garde. Lunacharsky preferred films that were structured around a traditional plot and communicated the heroism of the proletariat through the deeds of a protagonist. The hero, he argued, inspired the masses and, through his moral acts, imbued them with the values that would strengthen their commitment to socialism. Film, he believed, represented "the art form of the machine age," and as such warranted the resources necessary to develop its potential for "educating and lifting the spirit."[46]

Throughout the twenties Lunacharsky remained optimistic about the potential of film as a means by which the Soviet government could disseminate propaganda to educate the masses and raise political consciousness. The precarious financial state of cinema in the early twenties did, however, hinder the young government's attempts to realize the full potential of the medium as a propaganda weapon. In a 1924 article, "Revolutionary Ideology and Cinema," Lunacharsky contrasts how the bourgeoisie used cinema versus how the proletariat must utilize the powerful medium. He was interested especially in the methods by which bourgeois film insinuated its ideological message in romantic narratives where the exploits of the hero invoke a variety of envious emotions from the viewer. Soviet film, he argued, must strive to entertain using similar methods but substituting the bourgeois heroes with proletarian heroes and themes.[47]

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[46] Ibid., 33.

[47] Anatoli Lunacharsky, "Revolyutsionnaya ideologiya i kino – tezisy," *Kino-Nedelya*, no. 46, 29-31 March 1924, in *Film Factory*, 109.

Lunacharsky's thesis differs from that of Lenin in that he accepted the necessity of producing a genre of Soviet supported entertainment films rather than developing the medium primarily for informational and educational purposes. His views are consistent with his earlier idea of God-building, where the proletariat promotes its own heroes and historical triumphs as a foundation for the cultivation of a hegemonic proletarian culture. Furthermore, they reflect the artistic climate of the NEP, which abandoned Proletkult-like experimentation in favor of films that appealed to the bourgeois prejudices of pre-revolutionary Soviet society.

Lunacharsky admired bourgeois cinema for its ability to excite its audiences with psychologically uplifting narratives, yet he remained highly critical of bourgeois cinema's harmful ideological influence. He despised the melodramatic drivel that bourgeois films exuded in order to divert the attention of the masses from more important matters. The films were not propagandistic in nature but certainly made to satisfy the masses yearning for fantasy and escapism.[48] He proposed, instead, that state cinema exploit popular cinematic genres that entertained and promoted revolutionary virtues. These types of films would encourage the population to see the films as entertainment, yet Lunacharsky never abandoned Lenin's vision for the production of scientific and educational films for the edification of the Soviet masses. Newsreels and short documentaries would be shown before features in order to relay newsworthy information and provide the viewer with a brief political lesson.

Lenin's greatest hope for the cinema was for it to be nurtured as an educational tool for intelligent propaganda. Lunacharsky acknowledged this and attempted to encourage

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[48] Anatoli Lunacharsky, "Kino – velichaishee iz iskusstv," *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, 15 December 1926, in *Film Factory*, 155.

the production of newsreels to serve as a companion to feature films. Newsreel production would enable the government to disseminate political propaganda and introduce the population to new scientific discoveries, all in an attempt to raise political consciousness and foster support for the Soviet system. On this issue, Lunacharsky wrote:

> We are extremely interested in developing the purely scientific knowledge of the masses. For this reason there must be a place in our cinema for interesting and fairly short films that depict particular scientific laboratory experiments, various geographical, astronomical, meteorological or biological materials etc.[49]

Lunacharsky, rather than repeat his earlier attempts to foster a proletarian culture through the Proletkult, instead seems to have directed Soviet cinema in the direction Lenin would have desired. The economic demands of the NEP also affected the policy he pursued with regard to cinematic development. He realized that since the party chose to allow privately funded film projects and foreign imports, Lenin's vision for film would have to be moderated to coincide with economic reality.

As overseer of the state film industry and its distributors, Lunacharsky was compelled to balance the demands of the market with the needs of the party and the working class. On the one hand, he insisted that cinema be accessible to the masses:

> The cinema public often wants something that it finds especially interesting and if you do not produce a sensation to provide this interest it will not want to eat the dish you offer and will push it away, and, if it does eat it, it will only do it very unwillingly. So we have to combine this interest in film with ideological and artistic consistency.[50]

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[49] Lunacharsky, "Revolyutsionnaya ideologiya," in *Film Factory*, 110.

[50] Anatoli Lunacharsky, "Speech to Film Workers," *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 4, 24 January 1928, in *Film Factory*, 197.

He did not advocate, however, that Soviet cinema simply cater to the unrefined tastes of the masses, who for several years had only been exposed to domestic and foreign entertainment films fed to them by the bourgeoisie. In the same speech he delivered to film workers in 1928, he outlined a formula for film production:

> We must choose and find a line that ensures that *the picture is both artistic and ideologically consistent and contains romantic experiences and experiences of an intimate and psychological character.*[51]

Lunacharsky's statement conveys his desire to see quality films produced that would provide Soviet audiences with a proletarian hero through which to relate their daily experiences and derive moral lessons. This vision for cinema contradicted somewhat the intention of avant-garde directors, who were interested in creating films that promoted socialist morality through inspirational stories, yet that also rejected the traditional plot and hero and created a visual language that was often incomprehensible to the average moviegoer. It was this contradiction between means and ends that not only complicated support for avant-garde projects but also attracted the disapproval of critics and party bureaucrats who objected to the self-indulgent formalism of the films that obscured their ideological statements and moral lessons.

Throughout the twenties, avant-garde directors experienced difficulties eliciting the support of the state film apparatus for the production and distribution of their films. The climate worsened by the late 1920s as the party became increasingly hostile to the use of scarce resources for the cinema to invest in avant-garde projects that attracted inadequate numbers of workers and peasants to see them. By 1928, the film directors considered to be avant-garde experienced an acute erosion of state support for their artistic efforts. Lunacharsky, despite his tentative support for the avant-garde while head of Narkompros,

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[51] Ibid.

nevertheless embodied the party's wavering attitudes towards film's value as both ideologically fortified entertainment and cinematic art with extraordinary possibilities as political propaganda. This ambivalence would turn into outright hostility as it became clear to the party that, despite the artistic achievements of the avant-garde films, their stylistic complexity hindered their effectiveness as political propaganda and, thus, could not longer be tolerated.

The Lunacharsky regime created an environment of diversity as the various artistic schools competed for official favor. Narkompros tolerated most of the radical left in the arts in part because they served the state yet also as a concession to the spirit of NEP. NEP nevertheless preserved a class structure of Soviet society, which for cinema, resulted in emphasizing film production that could attract substantial audiences. As a result, the purveyors of NEP in cinema hindered the production of films that served an educational purpose and sought to raise the cultural level of the masses through films with meaningful themes and artistic merit. Beginning in the late twenties, the state film industry increasingly demanded that film serve party policies in a style that could be easily comprehended and attract mass audiences. This marked a qualitative shift in the priority of the state film industry in relation to the avant-garde. Whereas during the twenties, the avant-garde experienced difficulties finding financial support for their projects despite tolerance by the party and film industry, in the thirties they became the victims of the party's determined efforts to suppress avant-garde projects for political and ideological reasons.

CHAPTER III

FORMALISM AND THE CINEMA OF DZIGA VERTOV

SOVIET CINEMA'S AESTHETIC BREAK WITH THEATER

Before the dark days of the early thirties, avant-garde filmmakers experimented with theories and techniques that revolutionized the production of silent films. And while it is not unusual to see radical experiments in art emerge from societies undergoing revolutionary social and political change, the film theories that inspired avant-garde cinema were encouraged by the relative openness and creative tolerance of the early Bolshevik regime. The avant-garde's experimentation with the film medium required, at least, the party's tacit approval because of its control of film studios and cinema technology, yet also because these filmmakers were inspired by aesthetic trends whose methods deviated from the realist approach favored by Marxist theoreticians. The avant-garde directors were, however, more concerned with severing ties with the literary and theatrical movements of the past than offending Marxist theory with their unique aesthetic perspectives.

When the Futurists emerged on the literary scene in the years prior to the outbreak of the First World War their passionate quest to define a new aesthetic reached a crescendo as developments in cinema led many to believe that the reign of theater would end in the face of the seemingly unlimited aesthetic possibilities of film. In a series of speeches delivered in the summer of 1913, the charismatic Futurist Vladimir Mayakovsky elaborated his position on how cinema would transcend the aesthetic limitations of theater. The artistic directors of the theater attempted to reproduce

objective reality through elaborate set designs, sound effects and lighting, yet their efforts failed to capture life's dynamism. Mayakovsky asserted that due to the physical nature of the actor's craft, confinement to a stage decorated with sets constructed to imitate reality confined the actor's mobility to the narrow parameters established by the creation of a specific artificial environment. Only through the use of cinematic technology, he argued, can the artificial environment of the stage be replaced with a device that "harmoniously fixes the movements of the real."[1] Cinema, because of its association with the machine, could reproduce reality in all of its manifest forms. Such a dynamic medium, while unable to escape its debt to the art of the past, ultimately needs to define its own set of aesthetic criteria. Several Soviet directors set about to define these criteria as distinct from previous art forms that were associated closely with aesthetic trends of pre-revolutionary theater and cinema.

Lev Kuleshov represented one of the key figures in early Soviet cinema who led the effort to define film theory in contrast to the generally accepted aesthetic theories associated with pre-revolutionary cinema. Kuleshov insisted that the artistic development of the cinema suffered from an inability among artists of the more traditional mediums of theater and painting to renounce the application of old methods and aesthetic criteria.[2] In particular, Kuleshov emphasized that the film director must take into consideration that in the theater, the perception of an audience is quantitatively and qualitatively distinct from cinema. Individuals in a theater view the stage from

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[1] Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Teatr, kinematograf, futurizm," *Kine-Zhurnal*, 27 July 1913, in *Film Factory*, 34.

[2] Lev Kuleshov, "O zadachakh khudozhnika v kinematografe," *Vestnik kinematografii*, no. 126, (1917): 15-16, in *Film Factory*, 41.

different angles depending on their position in the auditorium, where an audience viewing a film, no matter where they are placed, perceives all angles from the single perspective of the lens.[3] Composition of the individual shot, therefore, becomes essential, as does its organization into a coherent whole through the vital process of montage.

Though in cinema the individual shot contains the essential elements for the construction of the moving picture, Kuleshov warns that the shot must not be considered as anything more than raw material for the construction of cinema art through montage. For instance, he concedes that theatrical devices such as costumes, sets, lighting, etc., instead of simply complimenting the actor's movements on the stage, become important considerations in the composition of each shot.[4] Film, however, is a medium that captures the dynamic motion of real life, and since the actor's physical gestures are not conveyed through the individual shot, montage becomes the central aesthetic concern as it provides movement with a rhythm and tempo that advances the action. In the 1922 article "Art Cinema" Kuleshov writes, "We shall have to state that we cannot uncover the art of cinema within the confines of the separate living photographs that constitute a film."[5] He extends this assertion to include the application of other media to cinema art. Photography, for example, is mere reproduction, while the motions of the actor are theatrical, but the art of the cinema cannot be defined by the individual accomplishments of any one facet of film production. All these elements that contribute to the internal

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[3] Ibid., 42.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Lev Kuleshov, "'Khudozhestvennaya' kinematografiya," *Ermitazh*, no. 11, 25-31 July 1922, 16, in *Film Factory*, 66.

composition of each shot must not be judged separately. The film is a medium of motion, and the shot can only contribute to film art insofar as it is aesthetically linked to other shots through the montage sequence.

Montage, then, is the central method by which cinema distinguishes itself aesthetically from more traditional art forms. This especially was germane to film production in the silent era, where the director was compelled to communicate ideas solely through visual imagery. It became necessary to organize shots in a manner that clearly communicated the plot and the ideas contained within to the audience. And it was this necessity that led Kuleshov to declare that film, in order to establish itself as a legitimate art form, must confront the issue of intelligibility. On this point Kuleshov cannot be misconstrued, "Art is only bewitching and attractive when it is not quite intelligible."[6] It therefore became imperative, according to Kuleshov, to develop a complex and intricate method of communication in order to cultivate cinema as serious art form. Henceforth began Soviet cinema's love affair with formalist methods of film production, which provided the director with a coherent, if not entirely intelligible, means of structuring the film to make the desired impact on its audience.

IMPACT OF FORMALISM ON CINEMA'S AVANT-GARDE

In the history of early Soviet culture, the debate among formalists and Marxists represented not only a disagreement over aesthetics but raised the question of what role art would play in the development of a socialist society. Though many Soviet cultural and literary theorists believed that Marxian aesthetics was grounded firmly in the

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[6] Lev Kuleshov, "Iskusstvo svetotvorchestva," *Kinogazeta*, no. 12 (March 1918): 12, in *Film Factory*, 45.

nineteenth-century realist tradition, a growing faction of the literary intelligentsia argued that a socialist aesthetic must not necessarily conform to the literary realism of the nineteenth century. Among this group, the formalists generally agreed that it was necessary to develop a new theoretical approach to art, especially film, because of its radical differences from other expressive media, particularly the theater.

A mechanical eye captures the cinematic subject and records details the human eye cannot hope to discern. In that respect film's potential as a dynamic visual medium far surpasses that of the theater; however, since the cinema was at the time a silent medium, dialogue and oratory were substituted through a concentration on emotion and thought, what is termed by formalists as "internal speech."[7] Formalist theorist Boris Eichenbaum describes the approach this way:

> The cameraman is the artist of the photogenic. When used as 'expressiveness,' the photogenic is transformed into the language of mimicry, gestures, objects, camera angles, distances, etc. These are the basis of cinema stylistics.[8]

In this respect, when Vsevolod Meyerhold and Sergei Eisenstein developed the theory of biomechanics, their intention was to shape a method of acting that relied more on the expressive gestures and countenance of the actor rather than in his or her oratorical skills. Lofty rhetoric and emotional soliloquies were no longer relevant to cinema, and the actor was conditioned to communicate through movement rather than speech.[9] The contributions of actors, however, were secondary to the entire composition of the individual shot, the foundation of what comprised the essence of the medium, montage.

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[7] Boris Eichenbaum, "Problems of Cinema Stylistics," in Herbert Eagle, *Russian Formalist Film Theory* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1981), 62.

[8] Ibid., 57.

[9] Herbert Eagle, introduction to *Russian Formalist Film Theory*, 19.

The shot represented a single foundational element in a string of images juxtaposed to one another through the process of montage or editing. Herbert Eagle considers the shot to be the foundation for film semiotics, since the objects contained within it act as signifiers or metaphors.[10] In the introduction to his book he writes, "Within the frames of a single shot, objects and people are not merely represented, but are defined and correlated with respect to one another – they become semantic signs."[11] The shot also represents the basic grammatical element in the film sentence or string of images linked through montage. Eichenbaum, however, objects to the commonly held belief that montage only facilitates plot construction. For him and the other formalists, montage is also stylistic, acting to link shots together or arranging them into a logical and comprehensible structure or syntax.[12] And it was the formalist theories of montage that enthusiastically attracted the admiration of avant-garde filmmakers, who elaborated on their theories and revolutionized the manner in which films were structured.

Montage allowed the filmmaker to control the pace and rhythm of the action sequences in order to shape the viewer's perception and comprehension of events portrayed in the film. As Eichenbaum argues, "spatial and temporal relationships in the cinema play the role of fundamental semantic links, without which the viewer cannot orient himself to the flow of the shots."[13] While allowing the viewer to comprehend the images flashing before him, montage can also be used to provide the illusion of space-time continuity. In other words, the editor can manipulate the very flow of objects in

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[10] Ibid., 9.

[11] Ibid., 6.

[12] Eichenbaum, "Problems of Cinema Stylistics," in *Russian Formalist Film Theory*, 67-68.

[13] Ibid., 74.

time and space in order to condense the flow of events or to leap back and forth in time.[14] Many of the notable theorists on montage utilized formalist theories on montage to make their films. By the late 1920s they came under attack for their formalist deviations, which were considered to be bourgeois and detached from the cultural needs of the masses; however, throughout the early and mid twenties, the avant-garde films were considered by many critics to be the most revolutionary Soviet films.

The theories and films of two of the most prominent directors of Soviet avant-garde cinema, Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein demonstrate that formalism in cinema was not a single unified theory but, rather, a methodology utilized by those in the visual arts to construct a means of communicating ideas to an audience through images. And though formalism emerged from a bourgeois literary milieu, its approach to the visual arts was not necessarily incompatible with a Marxist approach to art.

VERTOV'S FORMALISM AND "FILM-TRUTH"

Just as the 1912 Futurist manifesto renounced the great Russian writers of the nineteenth century, filmmaker Dziga Vertov and his co-conspirators, the *kinoks*, called for a break with the cinema of the West, in particular German and American films. The *kinoks* believed that the German psychological thriller and the American detective genre exemplified Western cinema's dependence on theater and fictional drama. Vertov considered the October Revolution as the catalyst urging artists to renounce the art of the past, destroy its icons, and seize the opportunity presented by the proletarian revolution to develop new forms of expression reflecting the turn of the historical tide. In response to

[14] Ibid., 77.

the continued production of films based on works of fictional literature after the revolution, Vertov wrote in the 1923 manifesto, "The Cine-Eyes. A Revolution":

> Cinema's organism has been poisoned by *habit. We demand that we be given the chance to experiment on this dying organism in order to test the antidote that we have discovered.*[15]

The antidote for Vertov and the *kinoks* lay in the development of a documentary cinema that could capture the dynamics of the class struggle; the potential of modern technology to liberate man from necessary social labor; and ultimately to project a vision for the building of a socialist society.

The motion picture camera represented for the *kinoks* the essential piece of technology that could adequately capture the pace and rhythm of Soviet socialist construction. In fact, Vertov's 1929 film *The Man with a Movie Camera* depicts the camera as the central protagonist, only assisted by its operator, ubiquitously recording "film facts" from the daily happenings of a city. Vertov recognized the camera's infinite superiority to the human eye as a means by which to document the details of modern life, yet he acknowledged that the camera was limited to recording only the appearance of its subjects. The camera's superior ability to record the minute details of daily existence required, in Vertov's terms, that it be "liberated" to capture reality at the speed of the machine rather that at speeds the human eye could comprehend.[16] Where the human eye observes phenomena haphazardly and isolated from related phenomena, the camera is equipped to capture in each frame an impression of all objects in its view.[17] Though this

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[15] Dziga Vertov, "Kinoki. Perevorot," *Lef*, no. 23 (June/July 1923): 135-43, in *Film Factory*, 90.

[16] Ibid., 91.

[17] Dziga Vertov, "Resolution of the Council of Three 10/IV," in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 3-4.

technique appears to ignore the haphazard and often random movements of the camera, Vertov compensates by positing that the scenes captured on film represent "film facts" that can only make sense once organized according to a theme.

The filming of phenomena produced raw footage to be organized into a coherent whole according to themes which emerged from the "film facts" themselves once the *kinoks* analyzed and evaluated them. In other words, the filmmaker, rather than develop a theme in advance of shooting as a script does, relied on organizing scenes around themes revealed by the facts.[18] Only through a careful aesthetic organization of the "film facts" could Vertov undertake a study of the rational movements of both man and machine in the context of a modern industrial environment. In *Man with a Movie Camera*, several sequences of shots depict the interaction of man and machine as a rhythmic ballet of harmonious movement which allowed Vertov to provide a model of man's productive capacity when aided by modern technology. As man gradually asserts his mastery over the machine through automation of the productive process, humanity will slowly liberate itself from compulsive abstract labor.[19] This symbiosis between man and machine revealed the possibility of realizing Marx's seemingly utopian vision of a socialist society once a high level of technological development and labor productivity is achieved.

Vertov, as with most of the Soviet cinematic avant-garde, viewed film's aesthetic potential as dependent on its effectiveness as a means of conveying the revolutionary ideology of Bolshevism. In was in the pages of *Lef* that Vertov collaborated with the Futurists to develop aesthetic theories that complimented the socio-economic ambitions

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[18] Ibid., 4.

[19] Dziga Vertov, dir., *Man with a Movie Camera* (New York: Kino International, 1996).

of Bolshevism's Marxist ideology. Artists associated with *Lef* usually made no pretense to avoid tendentiousness in art. They considered the desired aim of art to be the transformation of the viewer's consciousness to an awareness of the moral and material necessity of the proletarian dictatorship and the party's drive towards socialism. No longer would the artist indulge the viewer's subjective impulses. Art, instead, would be elevated to arouse the individual to recognize the historic tasks of the proletariat and to urge him to act to further those ends.[20] Essentially, Vertov desired to employ the documentary film to convey through "film facts" a communist worldview. There arises, however, an apparently glaring contradiction between Vertov's ambition to capture on film "life-as-it-is" and his compulsion to use film to shape consciousness according to his own ideological ends.

The montage theories developed by Vertov reflected his epistemological approach to problems of perception and mental comprehension of visual phenomena. Organizing film objects through montage, Vertov allowed for the expression of the subjective, i.e. the filmmaker's personal philosophical views.[21] In this way only artists committed to the communist cause could be permitted artistic expression. For Vertov, this meant organizing the reality captured in the "film facts" in a way that anticipated the communist reorganization of society. Vertov's application of the constructivist concept of tectonics, assembling a film through an organization of the "film facts," according to Vertov scholar Vlada Petric, reflects a methodology derived from the tenets of dialectical

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[20] Marsha Enzenberger, "Dziga Vertov," *Screen* 13, no. 4 (winter 1972/73): 92.

[21] Vlada Petric, *Constructivism in Film: The Man with a Movie Camera, A Cinematic Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 8.

materialism.[22] More precisely, as Petric writes elsewhere, Vertov's philosophical orientation can be considered "Hegelian in essence and Marxist in form."[23] Yet Marxist aesthetics generally assert that art must seek to reflect in a representational form the dynamics of class society. Even Petric admits that Vertov's style represents "reconstructed reality rather than representational reflection."[24] Therefore, the problem arises that Vertov, though politically committed to Bolshevism, was not consequently aesthetically committed to Marxism.

The controversy surrounding Vertov's use of "film facts" was compounded by his development of a "theory of intervals" as a formalist approach to montage. The "theory of intervals" comprised the final stage of the *kinok's* three-stage process of film construction. Initially film facts are selected according to a theme that emerges from the shots themselves in a process termed Montage of Evaluation. Second, in the Montage Synthesis, a plan is formulated for the organization of the selected facts. Finally, as the shots are arranged a formula for the film's overall structure emerges, and it is during this stage that the "theory of intervals" is applied. The *kinoks* defined their theory in the following passage from a 1929 article:

> The school of kino-eye calls for construction of the film-object upon "intervals," that is, upon the movement between shots, upon the visual correlation of shots with one another, upon transitions from one visual stimulus to another.[25]

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[22] Ibid., 15.

[23] Vlada Petric, "Dziga Vertov as Theorist," *Cinema Journal* 18, no. 1 (fall 1978): 34.

[24] Petric, *Constructivism*, 10.

[25] Dziga Vertov, "From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 90.

The kinoks established the criteria for the construction of intervals according to the following characteristics:

1. the correlation of planes (close-up, long shot, etc.);
2. the correlation of foreshortenings;
3. the correlation of movements within the frame;
4. the correlation of light and shadow;
5. the correlation of recording speeds.[26]

And although Vertov applied this theory to several of his films, the most experimental application of intervals came in his 1929 masterpiece, *The Man with a Movie Camera*.

Politically, *Man with a Movie Camera* demonstrates, through the documentary recording of film facts, the feverish pace and glaring contradictions of a Soviet city striving to establish a modern industrial economy in a backward society still ridden with the class antagonisms of the pre-revolutionary era. In this sense, as Vertov scholar Annette Michelson writes, *Man with a Movie Camera* represents Vertov's desire to capture the essence of Marxist philosophy through an artistic rendition of a society being transformed at the point of production.[27] Michelson argues that given Vertov's political sympathies, the medium of film and his formalist approach enter in as conditions of his ideological message:

> That production includes filmmaking (itself presented as a range of productive labor processes), mining, steel production, communications, postal service, construction, hydroelectric power installation, and the textile industry in a seamless, organic continuum, whose integrity is continually asserted by the strategies of visual analogy and rhyme, rhythmic patterning, parallel editing, superimposition, accelerated and decelerated motion, camera movement - in short, the use of every optical device and filming strategy then available to film technology.[28]

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[26] Ibid.

[27] Annette Michelson, introduction to *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, by Dziga Vertov (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xxxvii.

[28] Ibid.

The central problem Vertov strives to overcome is represented by the paradox of a filmmaker celebrating the benefits, in human terms, of industrialization and the transition to socialism, while also underscoring the extreme poverty experienced by many Soviet citizens remaining under the yoke of class oppression.

Vertov approached the problem of effectively conveying political or ideological messages through film by developing a distinct cinematic language based on formalist principles. Primary among these techniques was Vertov's employment of a "disruptive-associative" montage to juxtapose ideologically conflicting images.[29] In Vertov's 1931 film *Symphony of the Donbas* or *Enthusiasm*, his first sound film, he masterfully applies this technique to demonstrate the enormous historical obstacles impeding the Party's effort to industrialize the Soviet Union. Images of orthodox Christians standing in line to kiss the feet of Christ are juxtaposed with scenes of villagers tearing down the sacred cross of Christianity from atop cathedrals. In a dynamic montage sequence, Vertov visually deconstructs religion, displaying cross after cross being destroyed and replaced with the Red Flag of socialist revolution.[30] Although these techniques are effective in cajoling the viewer to arrive at the appropriate ideological conclusions, Vertov's manipulation of reality for political ends runs counter to the principles of Marxist aesthetics not to mention his own assertion that his documentary style captures "life-as-it-is."

The first step in the creation of cinematic art, according to Vertov, was to film "life unawares," to capture real people going about their everyday lives. He did not, however, believe that a realistic portrayal of life would lead the audience to the proper conclusion.

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[29] Petric, *Constructivism in Film*, 107.

[30] Dziga Vertov, dir., *Enthusiasm* and *Kino-Pravda* (Chicago: Facets Multimedia, 1995).

He posited that the appearance of the film object must be penetrated to reveal its inherent contradictions, and only through the dialectical process is its essence, a synthesis of form and content, revealed. And, as Petric argues, the organization of contradictory images by means of skillful juxtaposition produces "a more meaningful structural whole."[31] As the various segments of "film facts" are compiled according to the aforementioned architectonic approach to montage, a "film-truth" emerges. And it is at this point where Vertov's often disjointed and idealistic style is reconciled with a materialist approach to art. Instead of manipulating images to conform to a preconceived theme, Vertov argues that "film truth" is a method whereby through a dialectical organization of associated images, the "film facts" themselves reveal a particular truth about the objective conditions caught on film. His method, however, remained controversial and assimilated techniques that could be considered as inconsistent with Marxism, despite their being necessary to adequately convey the intended ideological message.

Vertov's style of montage enabled him to organize scenes from everyday life in a way that extrapolated from these images an ideological message that conveyed the importance of the proletarian's historic task of transforming the existing forces of production into an efficient and rationally planned modern industrial economy. The cinematic language that Vertov formulated to relay this message, Enzenberger argues, represented a cinematic alphabet of signs that were isolated then organized to clarify the seemingly chaotic stream of events from everyday life.[32] Vlada Petric argues that Vertov's method for organizing apparently contradictory images was founded on the

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[31] Petric, *Constructivism in Film*, 4.

[32] Enzenberger, "Dziga Vertov," 97.

Gestalt principle. The theory posits that the filmmaker's creation of a visual dynamic must be confronted and then synthesized by the viewer. Each set of images evoked a particular set of psychological responses that are enhanced by the transition of one set of images to another.[33] An excellent example of this phenomenon can be seen in Vertov's 1926 film *Kino-Glaz* where he uses reverse projection to demonstrate that all commodities are products of labor and, thus, belong to the producer not the owner of the means of production. In the sequence, Vertov uses rapid montage to show a loaf of bread being deconstructed through reverse action to reveal its origins as freshly harvested wheat.[34] While the intent of the sequence is self-evident, Vertov's manipulation of images taken from real life is often criticized for abandoning the objective study of social phenomenon for which the documentary film is known. Yet, as Enzensberger reminds us, Vertov made no apologies for his tendentious art. In fact, political commitment in art was a cornerstone of his aesthetic and did not preclude the discovery of "film truth."[35]

Vertov's 1934 film *Three Songs of Lenin*, which was to be has last, exemplifies the aesthetic and philosophical quandaries raised by his selective use of film facts to produce a documentary that exalted a party leader. Composed of three parts, *Three Songs of Lenin* is a thoughtful and reverent tribute to the late Bolshevik leader Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov. Since little documentary footage of the communist leader existed at the time of his death and was shown repeatedly to Soviet audiences in newsreel format, Vertov sought to construct a portrait of Lenin as defined by the millions of Soviet citizens whose lives Lenin profoundly effected. In the film, Vertov toned down the cinematic

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[33] Petric, "Dziga Vertov as Theorist," 36.

[34] Dziga Vertov, dir., *Kino-Eye* (New York: Kino International, 1999).

[35] Enzensberger, "Dziga Vertov," 102.

pretensions of *Man with a Movie Camera*, yet challenged the basic tenets of the official doctrine of socialist realism through a "subjective and poetic presentation of the communist leader."[36]

In the tradition of the Supremacist poets, Vertov set about to create a visual poem based on the poetic language of *Zaum*. In the following passage, Vertov translates how *Zaum* applies to the film:

> The contents of *Three Songs* develop in spiral-fashion, now in the sound, now in the image, now in a voice, now in an intertitle, now through facial expression alone-with no music or words-now through movement within the shot, now in the collision of one group shot with another, now smoothly, now by jolts from dark to light, from slow to fast, from tired to the vigorous, now through noise, now through silent song, a song without words, through thoughts that fly from screen to viewer without the viewer-listener having to translate thought into words.[37]

The passage reveals Vertov's desire to apply his "theory of intervals" to construct a poetic homage to the revolutionary leader through a study of his impact on ordinary Soviet citizens.[38] The film employs images of the Soviet Union's cultural accomplishments to depict Lenin's legacy to his people, and intermixes those images with images of peasants singing folk songs written in Lenin's honor to demonstrate the intimate connection between the party and the hopes and dreams of the proletarian masses. Along the way, however, Vertov organizes the "film facts" to depict a continuity between Lenin's philosophy and the brutal collectivization policies being decreed by the Stalinist leadership. One intertitle from the film reads, "If Lenin could only see our country now!" Such a declaration by Vertov implies that Lenin conceived communism as

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[36] Vlada Petric, "Vertov's Cinematic Transposition of Reality," in *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film*, ed. Charles Warren (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England for Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 272.

[37] Vertov, "Without Words," in *Kino-Eye*, 118.

[38] Vlada Petric, "The Vertov Dilemma: Film-Eye vs. Film-Truth," *The Spectator* 12, no. 1 (1991): 12.

merely a great Soviet modernization campaign and, thus, would have approved of Stalin's leadership and methods.[39] The construction of this "film truth" exemplifies the danger of manipulating reality to convey an ideological message. Such a method forces reality to conform to an ideological framework hardly suggested by the "facts" themselves.

Vertov's innovative use of dialectic through montage established a radical new form of cinematic propaganda, yet he often confused ideological correctness with a Marxist understanding of how knowledge is revealed to the observer. Vlada Petric identifies this problem in her article on Vertov's cinematic epistemology:

> Paradoxical as it is, such dialectical nature of the montage structure is the crux of Vertov's theoretical dilemma: how to reconcile truth as captured by the camera with truth grasped by a "montage way of seeing" (montazhnoe vizhu)?[40]

Vertov could not conceive of a documentary film that simply displayed the film footage chronologically separated by titles to inform the viewer. He insisted that the recorded images must "undergo a complex structural and aesthetic transposition," so that the appearance of objects on the screen does not merely reflect reality as in a photograph.[41] In this sense, Vertov's epistemology was dialectical rather than empirical and sought to reveal the essence of social dynamics, as Dai Vaughan comments of *The Man with a Movie Camera*:

> It refuses to allow us to accept the screen as a plane of reference for reality, and instead seeks to dissolve all such planes of reference successively, as soon as they

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[39] Dziga Vertov, dir., *Three Songs about Lenin* (New York: Kino International, 1991).

[40] Petric, "The Vertov Dilemma," 9.

[41] Petric, "Vertov's Cinematic Transposition of Reality," in *Beyond Document*, 272.

> are formed, in the hope that reality will "emerge" from the process, not as a creature of screen illusion but as liberated spirit.[42]

The party and its state film production agencies, however, did not concur with Vertov on the nature of "film truth," especially as it was interpreted by the official doctrine of Marxism-Leninism.

By 1931, the party intensified its efforts to consolidate its direction and oversight of all aspects of creative human activity, especially the cinema. The first Five-Year Plan required the commitment of the entire population in order to succeed, and the party went to great lengths to ensure that the state media outlets provided their enthusiastic support. In that same year, the repentant Trotskyist, Karl Radek, wrote a scathing review of *Enthusiasm*. Radek was critical of Vertov's unrelenting celebration of collectivization rather than demonstrating the historic necessity for industrialization and collective agriculture and then showing how to attain them. Ultimately Radek concludes that Vertov's film "is the very model of how not to make propaganda."[43] Michelson suggests that the tone of Radek's critique may have originated in his attempts to reconcile with the Stalinist leadership after the defeat of the Left Opposition in 1927. Nevertheless, Radek's remarks presaged the intensified attacks on Vertov's projects that did not reflect the party's attitudes towards film aesthetics. By the time *Three Songs* was released in 1934, the party was prepared to make a concerted effort to suppress the film and to ensure that it would be Vertov's final project, which it was.

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[42] Dai Vaughan, "The Man with a Movie Camera," in *The Documentary Tradition: From Nanook to Woodstock*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Hobson and Blake, 1971), 56.

[43] Karl Radek, "Deux Films," *Mir*, 5 December 1931, quoted in Anette Michelson, introduction to *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, by Dziga Vertov (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), lviii, n.39.

Vertov's career long struggle to produce film that reflected Soviet society's commitment to socialism ended in a fury of criticism over his "unorthodox" film theories that clashed with the official aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism imposed on all artists and writers by the mid thirties. It was in this climate that the party initiated its campaign to eliminate formalist influences from Soviet cinema. The party required from artists total submission to the aesthetic requirements of socialist realism in order to satisfy the party's need for art to portray society in a manner that conformed to its political line. The aesthetic requirements of socialist realism did not, however, reflect the party's only opposition to formalist cinema. By the time the first Five-Year Plan was initiated, the party was in the process of eliminating the influence of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia from Soviet society. Formalism was attacked as the embodiment of the intelligentsia's corrosive effect on the proletarian culture that the party was in the process of cultivating.

Much of the party's campaign to rid cinema of its formalist pretensions was directed towards individual filmmakers rather than specifically at their formalist methods. The party realized that despite the complications formalism presented to a strictly Marxist aesthetic, the avant-garde filmmakers were committed to the revolution and, in the case of a few, synthesizing formalist theory with a Marxist approach to art. For this reason, the party confined its criticism to personal attacks on the filmmakers themselves. Sergei Eisenstein, the most brilliant and distinguished of the avant-garde directors, while considered to be an influential and innovative formalist theorist, also remained committed to developing formalist methods in a manner that reflected his desire to create a thoroughly Marxist method for the cinema. And though Eisenstein was renowned internationally for his films, by the thirties he too became vulnerable to attack from party

theorists who insisted that his formalist methods did not adequately reflect the party's commitment to socialist realism. As a result, Eisenstein was forced to adapt his methods to satisfy party censors in order to continue making films in the Soviet Union.

CHAPTER IV

SERGEI EISENSTEIN'S FORMALIST MATERIALISM

EISENSTEIN AND FORMALIST FILM THEORY

Though both were considered to be formalist filmmakers, the artistic differences that separated Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein caused a rift in the formalist approach to cinema that simultaneously weakened the Futurist project in film and invited intensified criticism from "orthodox" Marxist aestheticians as to the compatibility of formalist methods with a Marxist approach to art. The essence of the conflict between the two men lay in their conflicting interpretations of formalist theory, yet the actual rupture was a result of ideological differences. One criticism Eisenstein leveled at his colleague was the dominance of form over content in Vertov's films. Eisenstein wrote, "The *Cine-Eye* is not just a symbol *of vision*: it is also a symbol *of contemplation.* But we need *not contemplation but action.* It is not a 'Cine-Eye' that we need but a 'Cine-Fist.'"[1] And although Vertov and Eisenstein concurred that the primary function of cinema was to relay an ideological message, they fiercely disagreed as to the means by which this aim could be achieved. While Vertov considered the formalist approach as a means by which to reorganize a series of specific moments in time to conform to an ideological framework, Eisenstein sought to employ his method to reveal the dialectical movement of history, especially as it applied to the forces unleashed by the Russian revolution.

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[1] Sergei Eisenstein, "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form," in *The Eisenstein Reader,* ed. Richard Taylor (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 59.

Vertov used cinema to present a vision of the world in the process of transformation, and sought, through a montage of intervals, to underscore the vital role of technology in the realization of socialist utopia. Eisenstein, on the other hand, envisioned cinema as a dynamic propaganda medium, where the viewer is educated to the historical necessity of Soviet power through a visual exploration of dialectic. His films during the silent era demonstrated the progression of revolutionary forces over the pre-revolutionary years, as in *Strike* and *Potemkin*, the triumph of the proletariat in *October*, and the building of socialism in *Old and New*. And whereas Vertov advocated 'non-played' or documentary films as the genre most able to capture and relay the accomplishments of the revolutionary proletariat, Eisenstein believed that the 'played' or fictional film was a legitimate means of communicating the accomplishments of the revolution accurately and with an authentic sense of realism. Whether applied to the 'played' or 'non-played' film, formalism as conceived of by Eisenstein should not dominate content to the detriment of ideological impact.

Eisenstein's political commitment to Bolshevism compels the student of his film theory to understand the relationship he establishes between formalist technique and a Marxist approach to art. Much of the scholarship expresses an uneasy ambivalence towards the contribution of Eisenstein's theories to Marxist aesthetics. Film scholar Dana Polan explains that this is so because few academics have made any serious attempts to relate Eisenstein's work to a Marxist theory of art.[2] The French critic and theorist Andre Bazin, who considers Eisenstein's formalism, particularly his montage technique, as the negation of a commitment to objective truth, best expresses this

[2] Dana B. Polan, *The Political Language of Film and the Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 33.

reluctance to interpret Eisenstein's aesthetic in a Marxian framework.[3] Polan, however, argues that Eisenstein's film theory must be understood within the Marxist tradition because his formalism, despite its indulgences, does not necessarily conflict with the principles of realism.[4] David Bordwell concurs with Polan's assertion on the basis of Eisenstein's concept of "Leninist formalism," whereby certain forms associated with the past, in this case formalist theory, can be used to serve the historic interests of the proletariat and the Soviet state.[5]

Despite the aesthetic iconoclasm of the Futurists, most of them consciously or unconsciously acknowledge the legacy of bourgeois artists. Bordwell asserts that much of the inspiration for Eisenstein's montage sequences was derived from past forms of literature and painting.[6] The problem Eisenstein encountered with bourgeois trends in art forms like photography and cinema was that their epistemology was grounded in Kantian metaphysics, where objective reality is presented as only an appearance or perception. For Eisenstein, the appearance of phenomena in nature remains incomprehensible until the Marxist dialectical method is applied by the artist to reveal the hidden logic or *essence* of the recorded object.[7] In this way, the cinematic epistemology of Eisenstein and Vertov collide. As Polan argues, whereas "Vertov hoped to reorganize ways of

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[3] Ibid., 38.

[4] Ibid., 36-37.

[5] David Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 137.

[6] Ibid., 42.

[7] Polan, *The Political Language of Film*, 39.

seeing at the level of initial perception...Eisenstein, to a much greater extent, saw film as no more than a social means, albeit the most effective one, to a social end."[8]

Where Vertov and Eisenstein agreed, they recognized that to communicate ideology through the film medium, a cinematic grammar had to be developed to convey to the viewer images able to provoke an emotional or intellectual response, depending on the intention of the director. And in this way the director, through the montage process, transformed perceptions into allegorical or symbolic signifiers representing the myriad forces involved in class struggle.[9] Drawing from his experiences in the theater, Eisenstein recognized that the purpose of the theatrical arts was, primarily, to utilize the various "attractions," i.e. set design, actors, dialogue, to evoke a response from the audience.[10] And from this experience, Eisenstein developed his concept of pathos, which was the reaction of the viewer to carefully organized imagery that visualized themes explored in other forms of political propaganda and Marxist theory.

Eisenstein devised a three stage process through which an emotional response is the intended byproduct: "Perception of an event triggers some motor activity, which in turn yields an emotion; the emotion then launches a process of thought."[11] For Eisenstein, it is the effect of the spectacle on the audience that facilitated the impact of the film's theme on the individual's sub-conscious mind.[12] In his essay, "Montage of Attractions," Eisenstein posited that cinema's ability to evoke an emotional response must be directed

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[8] Ibid., 52.

[9] Ibid., 43.

[10] Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 115.

[11] Ibid., 125.

[12] Ibid., 117.

toward the communication of an ideological message, which he based on Pavlov's theory of reflexology:

> Eisenstein resorts to Pavlov's theories, aiming not so much at eliciting a certain response as at linking these responses to produce a final thematic effect of an ideological kind.[13]

These ideas contributed to Eisenstein's cinematic grammar and theory of montage, two elements that would be combined to create a dynamic propaganda medium that could edify the masses through the universal language of film.

Eisenstein developed several principles upon which a theory of montage was to be established. The basis of his theory centered on cinematography and organization of images that would convey an idea or emotion, a concept Eisenstein compared to the combination of Chinese hieroglyphs to form ideograms.[14] His concept of montage cannot, however, be considered simply as the construction of an idea through images. Images, according to his theory, were not merely organized in sequence to propel the action on the screen. They had to be made to collide in order to reveal dialectical contradictions inherent in the film objects.[15] Eisenstein, like Vertov, owed an aesthetic debt to the montage theories of Lev Kuleshov yet broke with him over the essential function of montage in film art. Kuleshov conceived of montage as a means by which to shape the viewer's perception of the action on the screen without necessarily making an ideological statement.[16] Whereas Eisenstein's protégé, Vsevolod Pudovkin, remained

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[13] Vincente Sanchez-Biosca, "Montage and the Spectator: Eisenstein and the Avant-Garde," *Semiotica* 81, nos. 3,4 (1998): 283.

[14] Sergei Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), 30.

[15] Ibid., 36.

[16] Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 122.

committed to Kuleshov's concept of montage as "bricks, arranged in a series to *expound* an idea," Eisenstein pursued a more dialectical approach, where conflicting images were juxtaposed in order for a particular ideological concept to emerge.[17]

Eisenstein's political commitment is revealed in his dialectical approach to film objects, which translated into a style of montage that sought to employ formalist methods to communicate his materialist philosophy. Bordwell characterizes Eisenstein's concept of art as defined by "a dialectical interaction of organic and rational form," whereby the artist, like the propagandist, must direct his energies to a study of these forms in order to reveal their inherent contradictions and illuminate the course that leads to their resolution.[18] Eisenstein confirms this depiction in a passage written on the importance of the camera as the mediator between artist and object:

> The camera position, as materialization of the conflict between organizing logic of the director and the inherent logic of the object, in collision, reflects the dialectic of the camera angle.[19]

The individual image or shot is the foundation of montage and must display any contradictions contained within the single frame in addition to those that arise between them.[20] The organization of shots into a sequence will demonstrate further contradictions between shots and direct the viewer, through montage, to their resolution. Bordwell writes that conflict within a shot is only "potential" montage, which is realized in total

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[17] Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle," in *Film Form*, 37.

[18] Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 128.

[19] Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle," 40.

[20] Ibid.

through a dialectical interaction of shots organized in a sequence.[21] Eisenstein's principles of montage, though eloquently elaborated in his theoretical writings, could only be fully appreciated through a careful study of his films.

THE EARLY FILMS

Eisenstein released his first two films in 1925, *Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin*, both of which astounded film critics and audiences with innovative montage sequences that changed forever the manner in which films were viewed. Russian and Soviet filmmakers always considered montage as vital to the plot's internal cohesion, yet before Eisenstein none adequately contemplated its potential power to evoke thought and emotion. Eisenstein was one of the first Soviet directors to develop a theory of montage that was both formalist and dialectical in a Marxian sense of the term:

> *Revolutionary form is the product of correctly ascertained technical methods for the concretization of a new attitude and approach to objects and phenomena* – of a new class ideology – of the true renewal not just of the *social significance but also of the material-technical essence of cinema*, disclosed in what we call 'our content'.[22]

Central to his theory was a style of montage that emphasized conflict between competing forms both within and between the shot that would convey to the viewer a particular emotion or ideological point:

> *Conflict within a thesis* (an abstract idea) – *formulates* itself in the dialectics of the sub-title – *forms* itself spatially in the conflict within a shot – and *explodes* with increasing intensity in montage-conflict among the separate shots.

Eisenstein's first two film projects, though released in the same year, vary significantly in their approach to film objects and political content. In *Strike*, Eisenstein employs

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[21] Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 129.

[22] Eisenstein, "The Materialist Approach to Form," in *The Eisenstein Reader*, 55.

complex imagery and visual poetics to convey the dynamics of a factory strike. Whereas in *Potemkin*, he tones down the formalist techniques and, instead, uses stark camera angles and close-ups to communicate the triumph and tragedy associated with the 1905 revolution. And though many film critics and historians consider *Potemkin* as Eisenstein's masterpiece, both films represent extraordinary cinematic accomplishments despite their contrasting application of montage for visual effect.

Eisenstein's debut film *Strike*, released in 1925, reconstructed the events surrounding the progression of an industrial strike, based loosely on the 1903 strike in Rostov-on-the-Don. The film, produced in association with the Proletkult, was unique in that it was not centered on a traditional plot and lacked a single protagonist. The only discernable plot depicts the actions of Bolshevik factory workers as they agitated to direct a spontaneous protest, ignited by the tragic suicide of a factory worker, into an organized workers' struggle against brutal exploitation by the factory's owners. Though fiercely political in content, Eisenstein declared *Strike* as "the first instance of revolutionary art where the form has turned out to be more revolutionary than the content."[23] Nevertheless, it was Eisenstein's intention to make a film that would educate the Soviet masses to the adversities confronted by activists in the early period of the labor movement in Russia. And to convey these problems, Eisenstein structured the montage sequences to relay the Marxist philosophy that guided the Bolsheviks in their attempts to organize the workers.

For Marxists, the most basic contradiction between labor and capital lay at the point of production, where the capitalist, enriching himself while impoverishing the workers

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[23] Ibid., 53.

whose labor generated the wealth in the first place, appropriates the value created by labor in the form of commodities. The most elemental feature of the class struggle emerges once workers, realizing their vital role in commodity production, organize in an attempt to secure from the capitalist class an improved standard of living and a safe working environment. In *Strike*, Eisenstein attempts to express visually the importance of the strike, not only to their material interests, but to their political education as well. Yet, prior to the 1905 revolution, Russian workers had only begun to organize into unions, and for the Bolsheviks, it became crucial to provide leadership to spontaneous workers' protests in order to successfully agitate for them to take strike action. Eisenstein, therefore, concentrates the content of the film on the potentially explosive contradictions inherent in the relations of production.

Eisenstein underscores class antagonism inherent in the factory structure through a montage sequence where spies employed by the owners to gather information on the workers submit their reports, which are passed on to the owners through a series of communications, up the bureaucratic chain of command demonstrating the intricate hierarchy of the bureaucracy as compared to the horizontal and more democratic organizations of the workers.[24] The various levels of the bureaucracy are represented by individual archetypes that embody the myriad layers of middle management all the way up to the factory owners. Eisenstein, however, also focuses on the personal conflicts and tragedies to humanize the workers by emphasizing that individuals with real needs and desires comprise the mass of humanity known to Marxian theorists as the proletariat.

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[24] James Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema, and History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 39.

The film's inciting incident is illustrated by the suicide of Jacob Strongine, whose anxiety from being accused of the theft of a shop tool leads him to take his own life. While the event acts as the spark which ignites the strike, it also allows Eisenstein to demonstrate the despair associated with alienation as each individual worker is estranged from the product of his own labor.[25] It also demonstrates how the actions of a single worker unified the factory workers and solidified their resolve to take collective action against those perceived to have driven Jacob into taking his own life, the factory owners and their myriad agents on the shop floor. Eisenstein exploits the audiences' compassion for the senseless death of Jacob to arouse its sympathies in support of the strike and to demonstrate that the actions of individual workers can have a great impact on the collective strength and solidarity of the striking proletariat.[26] He employs similar techniques to the montage sequences to illustrate that only through disciplined and militant solidarity and revolutionary confidence can the proletariat prevail in their historic struggle against capitalism.

The film's final scene exemplifies Eisenstein's commitment to use formalist techniques to convey an ideological point. As the strike wears on and the workers become demoralized by external pressure exerted by the capitalist class and their police forces and through betrayals from within their own ranks, the political unity of the workers begins to falter and a collective panic overwhelms them. In a frenzied display of brutality, the police and military attack the strikers, who flee in the face of their destruction. To underscore the utter carnage that ensues, Eisenstein cuts images of the

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[25] Ibid., 42.

[26] Bordwell, *Cinema of Eisenstein*, 52.

workers being shot down with a bull being slaughtered. The once virile and powerful beast is reduced to a defenseless victim at the hands of the butcher, as are the workers at the hands of an armed militia.[27] The sheer scale of the violence cajoles the viewer into drawing the conclusion that once the leadership and solidarity of the strikers is broken, they become open prey to the sanguinary mercenaries of the bourgeoisie. In his next film, *The Battleship Potemkin*, Eisenstein changes his focus from the ideologically directed montage of *Strike* to a style of cinematography intended to arouse the emotions of the audience in the tradition of the foreign dramas that graced the screens of Soviet theaters throughout the twenties.

Potemkin signaled a slight alteration of the constructivist and formalist methods of *Strike*. Eisenstein, instead, attempted to make a film in the spirit of 'heroic realism' as portrayed in the films produced under the auspices of private studios that flourished under the New Economic Policy. David Bordwell characterizes Eisenstein's thinking in terms of the cultural milieu of the NEP years:

> As the NEP assimilated market economics...so *Potemkin* deliberately adopts the "pathos" of "right art": sentiment, lyricism, psychological portrayal, and passionate fervor.[28]

In addition to his concern with pathos, Eisenstein resurrected the individual protagonist in the characters of the agitator, Matyushenko, and the leader and martyr of the mutiny, Valkulinchuk, to foster proletarian heroes for whom the audience can sympathize and

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[27] Sergei Eisenstein, dir., *Strike* (New York: Kino International, 1999).

[28] Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 61.

revere.[29] Despite these digressions, Eisenstein created in *Potemkin* a revolutionary epic that maintained a tightly organized and coherent structure from beginning to end.

One of Eisenstein's primary ambitions for *Potemkin* was the evocation of pathos, which he considered to be a way to elicit an emotional response from the viewer. In the film, the most striking example of the use of montage to this end is the "Odessa steps" sequence. After the somber funeral of Valkulinchuk and the other martyrs of the *Potemkin* mutiny, the mourners transform the funeral into a rally to celebrate the victory of the heroic sailors. In the shots prior to the massacre, Eisenstein focuses the camera on the felicitous expressions on the faces of Odessa's citizens. A single title then interrupts the images with the word "Suddenly!" indicating an abrupt change of mood and action. The viewer then sees the boot of a gendarme, which confirms the purpose of the title.[30] Once the viewer comprehends the meaning of the images, he is likely to conclude, as is Eienstein's intention, that when a people are involved in a revolutionary act, they must not stall their momentum to celebrate past victories in a sentimental fashion. The premature celebration and a lack of vigilance on the part of the sailors involved in the mutiny leads to shock and horror as the soldiers move decisively to quash the rebellion.[31] Furthermore, the scene conveys to the viewer a poignant ideological message, which demonstrates why the people of Odessa failed to learn that, in order to succeed, an act of mutiny must expand and incorporate proletarian elements to defend itself against the murderous repression of the Tsarist gendarmes.

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[29] Ibid., 63.

[30] Sergei Eisenstein, dir., *Battleship Potemkin* (West Long Branch, NJ: Corinth Films, 1990).

[31] Maureen Kiernan, "Making Films Politically: Marxism in Eisenstein and Godard," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* no. 10 (1990): 101.

The scene that ensues illustrates the savage violence the Tsarist regime is willing to perpetrate against its people. As the soldiers march in line slowly down the steps, with their bayoneted rifles pointed in unison towards the fleeing protesters, Eisenstein cuts shots of the stark formation of the soldiers with the random and chaotic movements of the scattering people. And as the people are cut down by rifle fire, Eisenstein uses close-up shots of the expressions of horror and the pain felt by the victims as they are gradually executed.[32] In a review of the film Soviet critic Adrian Piotrovsky aptly states that "the effect of his 'Odessa Steps' sequence is so irresistible: the wide white steps down which the crowd, pursued by gendarmes, runs, slides and cowers – a genuine staircase into hell, real steps of horror," conveying the intense emotional catharsis of the scene.[33] Similarly, in a more contemporary commentary, Bordwell considers the example of the Odessa Steps sequence as indicative of the film's overall unity in form:

> Its blend of broad action, sharply developed detail, and metaphorical richness makes the Odessa Steps sequence profoundly typical of *Potemkin* as a whole. In these respects it also instantiates a trend in Left art of the mid-1920s away from modernist fragmentation and toward socialist "epics."[34]

The purpose of Eisenstein's dialectical montage, in *Potemkin*, was primarily to elicit an emotional response from the viewer. As Bordwell again writes, "Like the agitational *poema*, *Potemkin* subordinates experimentation to the interests of emotional exploration."[35] Ideological content, though present and vital to the film's political orientation was subordinated to the goal mentioned above. However, in his next film,

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[32] Eisenstein, dir., *Battleship Potemkin*.

[33] Adrian Piotrovsky, "Bronenosets Potemkin," *Krasnaya gazeta*, 20 January 1926, in *Film Factory*, 139.

[34] Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 78.

[35] Ibid.

October, Eisenstein concerns himself with using formalist methods of montage to provoke thought as well as emotion from his audience.

INTELLECTUAL MONTAGE

October was commissioned by the Soviet State to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the revolution of 25 October 1917. The film was intended to recreate the events surrounding the Bolshevik lead insurrection of the Petrograd workers and soldiers that propelled the soviets into political power for the first time in history. Eisenstein drew inspiration for the film from John Reed's extraordinary eyewitness account of the revolution, *Ten Days that Shook the World* and Mayakovsky's poem *Lenin*.[36] *October* represented the third installment of films that depicted particular stages in the evolution of the workers' movement in Russia. *Strike* illustrated the myriad problems in organizing and leading a successful strike in an era when the self-consciousness of the proletariat was in its infancy. *Potemkin* demonstrates that though a united action by revolutionary sailors may result in a temporary victory, revolutionaries must continually struggle to expand the battle against the oppressors of the proletariat until they are defeated outright. *October*, of course, vindicates this point as the workers and soldiers of Petrograd rise to defeat not only Tsarism but bourgeois capitalism as well. Eisenstein also continues to experiment with new techniques in montage, yet in *October* he is not as concerned with evoking pathos as he is in drawing the viewer to the correct ideological conclusion. Thus, he embarks on a quest to develop the concept of intellectual montage, where

[36] Ibid., 81.

signifiers are organized through montage to communicate, in visual terms, a specific idea or ideological statement.

The initial scene of *October* is an excellent example of the principle behind intellectual montage. Compiled with newsreel footage, Eisenstein constructs a sequence from shots of workers tearing town a statue of Alexander II to signify the triumph of the February Revolution in Petrograd. The sequence begins with revolutionary workers scaling the statue in order to secure ropes around the head and torso of the Tsar. The statue dominates the frame and shots filmed from below demonstrate the colossal power of Tsarism, which dominated the lives of Russia's people for centuries.[37] Although even the enormous power of the Tsar could not resist the inexorable will of a people determined to rid themselves of tyranny. Sorensen writes that movement within each shot of climbers scaling the statue "destabilizes the monument's claims to universal authority."[38] The tempo of the montage increases as Eisenstein arranges shots of huge sections of the statue being ripped apart and crashing to the ground. The representation of masses of people working in apparent unison to destroy a cultural icon acts to signify the moment when the struggles of the masses result in a permanent break with the past and a new chapter in Russian history is inaugurated.[39] The viewer understands once the sequence is complete that a tremendously important event has transpired, an event that though great signifies only the beginning of revolution in permanence, as outlined by Marx and later elaborated by Trotsky.

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[37] Eisenstein, dir., *October* (West Long Branch, NJ: Corinth Films, 1990).

[38] Janet Sorensen, "*Lef*, Eisenstein, and the Politics of Form," *Film Criticism* 19, no. 2 (winter 1994-95): 65.

[39] Ibid., 60.

Eisenstein argues the necessity for revolution in permanence after February, as Trotsky posited after 1905, rather than revolution in stages – as the Mensheviks argued – and illustrates his point in several sequences that demonstrate the political ambitions of the Provisional Government in general and Kerensky in particular as incompatible with the interests of the working class and socialism. After the Provisional Government assumes power, Eisenstein depicts Kerensky's rise to power in a scene where he gradually, through the use of montage to extend time, ascends the several flights of the grand staircase of the Winter Palace until he finally reached the top, and the position of Prime Minister. Yet, despite the grandeur of his surroundings, Kerensky is portrayed as a weak leader, detached from the needs of the masses. Once in the Winter Palace, Kerensky is often depicted as wandering around frustrated by the course of events that discredit his government and strengthen the soviets. In contrast, Lenin is always depicted as an extremely competent and able leader who expends all his energies to further the cause of the revolution. Where Kerensky is consistently stationary while surrounded by his reactionary cohorts, Lenin is constantly in motion agitating crowds of workers or avoiding arrest in Petrograd.[40] Eisenstein's use of contradictory images of the two leaders, Kerensky as static and impotent, Lenin as dynamic and intrepid, allows him to make a point about the impossibility of dual power. The bourgeoisie, though triumphant in the February Revolution, cannot sustain its power due to the insurgent strength of the Petrograd proletariat.[41] The path to power for the soviets was not, however, a foregone

[40] Eisenstein, dir., *October*.

[41] Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 83.

conclusion, and required the leadership of the Bolshevik party to achieve its ultimate success.

The montage sequence of the July Days uprising clarifies, using a variety of experimental techniques, the danger inherent in a spontaneous revolutionary action. In one scene, Eisenstein uses montage and a variety of different camera angles to slow the progression of time as the bridges rise to cut the workers off from their home districts. The loyal soldiers of the Provisional Government have defeated the workers and the bridge operators have been ordered to cut off the retreating workers by raising the bridges. Following a tense series of images of workers fleeing for their lives, panicked workers rush to cross the bridge before it opens. Where the bridge splits apart, a woman and a horse lie dead. Eisenstein combined the image of the dead woman and her horse with shots of the rising bridge filmed from various angles to expand the amount of time required for the bridge to rise completely.[42] In a review of the film, Vsevolod Pudovkin comments on the extraordinary use of camera work and montage to create a scene of intense suspense:

> The bridge has ceased to be a photograph of a real bridge, it has gone beyond the laws of real time and space and completely taken root in the screen, subject only to the will of the artist and acting through his mastery of the audience.[43]

Eisenstein's manipulation of time and, thus, the audience attracted the criticisms of writers who condemned his films for their formalist excesses.

Among the myriad critics who reviewed *October* at the time of its release, a common theme in their writings is a criticism of Eisenstein's preoccupation with

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[42] Eisenstein, dir., *October*.

[43] Vsevolod Pudovkin, "S. M. Eizenshtein. (Ot *Potemkina k Oktyabryu*)," *Zhizn' iskusstva*, 14 February 1928, 2-3, in *Film Factory*, 200.

formalist technique and excessive symbolism to the detriment of historical continuity and ideological content. One Soviet critic writing a review of the film at the time of its release reproaches Eisenstein for his omission of significant historical processes:

> But we think that the task of a feature film consists not in the slavish imitation of historical facts but in something quite different. The film must furnish the general background against which the events reproduced in it unfold. And it is against this background that some fundamental idea that infuses the entire script must lift, seize and lead the audience behind it. That is precisely what is missing from *October*.[44]

Bordwell argues that to some extent Eisenstein agreed that *October* "failed to integrate its official purpose with its experimental aspirations."[45] Eisenstein, however, insisted that in order to pose a serious challenge to bourgeois ideology and its official lexicon, which prioritizes meaning over context, required the use of innovative formalist techniques that would better communicate the new class ideology of the proletariat.[46] Eisenstein conveyed his commitment to Marxist ideology through his cinematic language that he believed was necessary in order to communicate efficaciously the principles of the ideology to the masses. The problem that the party encountered with Eisenstein's work became the highly stylistic means of communicating the ideology to a population of workers and peasants ill equipped to comprehend it. Eisenstein, however, attempted to disarm his critics with his 1929 film *Old and New*, where he would employ more traditional techniques to communicate the new party line that canceled NEP policies in agriculture and formulated a more aggressive policy towards the rich peasant or kulak.

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[44] T. Rokotov, "Pochemu malodostupen *Oktyabr*," *Zhizn' iskusstva*, 10 April 1928, 16-17, in *Film Factory*, 220.

[45] Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 94.

[46] Sorensen, "*Lef*, Eisenstein, and the Politics of Form," 67.

The film was commissioned to promote the resolution of the Fourteenth Party Congress that urged peasants to form agricultural cooperatives. Eisenstein also wanted to seize the opportunity to demonstrate his adherence to the resolution put forth by the 1928 Party Conference on Cinema to make films "intelligible to the millions." Bordwell argues that "consequently, many of Eisenstein's earlier stylistic innovations become less arcane here."[47] And to compensate for his earlier formalistic transgressions, Eisenstein toned down his use of symbolism and resuscitated the individual protagonist that appeared periodically in *Potemkin*.

The film's protagonist, Marfa, is a poor peasant woman who rises to the challenge of the party to form cooperatives as an initial step in the collectivization of agriculture. The creation of a heroine was intended to emulate the films of western cinema that many Soviet people had been viewing for years and to demonstrate that collectivization requires the voluntary cooperation of individual peasant farmers, as Marfa herself represents.[48] In fact, Eisenstein's use of metaphor allows him to create a rural allegory of the class dynamics of the Soviet countryside. The class enemies, the kulaks, are depicted as an obese and indolent couple who conspire against the cooperative by attempting, and eventually succeeding, in murdering their communal bull, Tommy, in order to sabotage and discredit their efforts. Marfa, however, strengthens the cooperative by forming alliances with a Komsomol activist, represented by a young blond man, and agricultural "experts" like the agronomist that help Marfa to obtain a cream separator from the

[47] Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 96.

[48] Ibid., 101.

reluctant bureaucrats.[49] It is, however, Marfa and, thus, the peasants' will that strives for the improvement of the farm and the ultimate triumph of cooperative farming over the capitalist methods of the kulak. Her allies can only guide her and her comrades towards collectivization and socialism in accordance with Leninist principles laid out in the policies of the party.[50] Eisenstein's desire to communicate the party's policies clearly and in a way peasants could understand did not, however, preclude him from employing various techniques to make more profound ideological statements.

The official position on the countryside stressed that party activists educate the peasants by agitating among poor peasants (bednyak) and rural proletarians (betrak) to come together in voluntary cooperatives to improve production and defeat the main impediment to collectivization, the independent farmer or middle peasant (serednyak). To dissuade the poor peasants and rural proletariat from becoming enamored with private property, Eisenstein focuses the camera on an open field where fences suddenly appear, dividing the land among individual peasants. Yet once the peasants agree to form a cooperative, Eisenstein revisits the field ridden with white fences only to make them disappear to leave the land, once again, undivided.[51] This innovative use of trick photography allows Eisenstein to make an ideological statement purely through visual imagery, the essence of intellectual montage. These innovations, however, were considered by many film critics and cultural writers to be formalist abstractions that confused rather than clarified party policy. The scene was criticized in particular for

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[49] Paul Burns, "Cultural Revolution, Collectivization, and Soviet Cinema: Eisenstein's *Old and New* and Dovzhenko's *Earth*," *Film & History* 11, no. 4 (Dec. 1981): 88.

[50] Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 105.

[51] Eisenstein, dir., *Old and New* (Chicago: Facets Multimedia, 1995).

treating the process of collectivization superficially and for not demonstrating how the peasants are to proceed from individually farmed plots to collective farms.[52] Such considerations were considered by the party to be especially important in light of intense factional struggles and controversy surrounding the initiation of the first Five-Year Plan.

The intensifying vitriol that flowed from the critics' pens against Eisenstein's formalism coincided with the beginning of a tumultuous period of early Soviet history. In 1927 Stalin's faction defeated the Left Opposition and banished its leader, Leon Trotsky, to internal exile in Alma Ata. The following year, a grain crisis compelled the Stalinists to make a severe turn left in economic policy as the NEP was abandoned in favor of the first Five-Year Plan. To garner support for the industrialization campaign, a cultural revolution was declared against all remnants of bourgeois ideology still prevalent in Soviet social and artistic life. The phenomenon of cultural revolution, which will be addressed in greater detail in the next chapter, incorporated principles considered contradictory by Lenin in his earlier struggle against Bogdanov and his concept of proletarian culture.

The notion of cultural revolution emphasized cultural edification, of which Lenin approved, yet the Stalinists believed that this could be achieved only through the mechanism of a militant, though state sanctioned, proletarian culture.[53] In the context of this ideological climate, the complexity of Eisenstein's formalism attracted the hostility of the party leadership and its legions of propagandists that objected to his highbrow style, which they considered an ineffective means of communicating the official line.

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[52] Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 106.

[53] Burns, "Cultural Revolution," 85.

Peter Burns cites a review of the film from *Pravda* that echoes this sentiment. While the review praised *Old and New* for its political support for collectivization, it warned of a "formalist aestheticism and abstractness."[54] The party, however, did not even approve of the film as propaganda to sell its new agricultural policy and, hence, compelled Eisenstein to change the title from *The General Line* to *Old and New.*

The party's icy reception of the film obviously affected Eisenstein's creative ambition and marked a turning point in his career. Within a few years, Eisenstein would travel to the United States then Mexico, where he filmed scenes for *Que Viva Mexico*, a film suppressed by authorities immediately upon his return to the Soviet Union. It was compiled and edited only after his death by his former colleague Gregori Alexandrov, who used Eisenstein's own notes as a blueprint. Eisenstein would not make another feature film until he reconciled with the Stalinists and their dogma of socialist realism in 1938 with the release of the nationalist epic *Alexander Nevsky.* This film substituted the heroism of Prince Nevsky and grandiose battle scenes for the collective protagonist and innovative montage sequences of his earlier films. And though Soviet leaders extolled the cinema of Eisenstein, their single-minded quest to control all means of human communication and creative activity prohibited the continuation of an artistic climate where such genius would be allowed to flourish.

VERTOV, EISENSTEIN AND FORMALIST AESTHETICS

Despite their aesthetic and epistemological differences, the cinema of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein revolutionized the manner in which objects were explored through

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[54] *Pravda* (Moscow), 13 October 1929, quoted in Paul Burns, "Cultural Revolution, Collectivization, and Soviet Cinema: Eisenstein's *Old and New* and Dovzhenko's *Earth*," *Film & History* 11, no. 4 (Dec. 1981): 89, n. 24.

cinematography. The disagreements that arose from their conflicting approach to the film object and its integration with other objects through montage created significant friction between the two artists, which resulted in a schism among those associated with Lef committed to articulating a 'proletarian line' in cinema. In general terms, the conflict can be described as one inherent in the varying approaches to the 'played' versus the 'non-played' film. However, upon closer investigation, the conflict centered specifically on the presentation of the film object as a single aspect of an integrated visual document, whose purpose is to communicate a particular ideological statement or, more generally, a worldview.

Though the two filmmakers shared the same communist philosophy, and sought to communicate the tenets of that ideology to their audiences, they differed in their approach to the development of a film language. For Vertov, the primary device was the camera, which would enable the director to capture moments of reality and, thus, provide the basis for a universal language that would be entirely different from that of literature and theater.[55] He drew inspiration from the Futurists and "strove to reproduce Mayakovsky's lyricism to create cinematic poetry devoid of conventional narrative linearity and theatrical presentation of reality."[56] Eisenstein, on the other hand, centered his aesthetic on the image, "one that is grounded in semantics and in the pragmatics of the cinematic experience."[57] He too acknowledged a debt to Mayakovsky's style of "deconstructing of

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[55] Gerald Pirog, "Iconicity and Narrative: the Vertov-Eisenstein Controversy," *Semiotica* 39, nos. 3,4 (1982): 299.

[56] Petric, *Constructivism in Film*, 35-36.

[57] Pirog, "Iconicity and Narrative," 298.

rhymes in order to achieve stronger auditory and visual effects and new meanings."[58] Despite their common interest in Futurist aesthetics, Vertov and Eisenstein developed different approaches to the internal and external dynamics of the shot, which ultimately resulted in mutually antagonistic theories of montage.

Much of the theoretical disagreement between the two men stemmed from their differing definitions of "ontological authenticity" or to what extent the viewer accepts the film image as an actual reflection of existing reality.[59] Vertov was concerned primarily with the film fact as somehow inherently meaningful and "as purely denotational, having no other meaning than the one that arises from its referent in the world."[60] In an review of Vertov's *The Eleventh Year*, Osip Brik demonstrates the limitations of such an approach by asserting that because of the conscious manipulation of these facts, Vertov erroneously attempts to give otherwise disjunctive images a coherent meaning through a montage approach that stresses movement between shots as a synthetic mechanism that produces deeper social meaning. He asserts that there can be no meaning separate from that provided by the content of the individual shot, and any attempt to compensate by employing external means, i.e. the intertitle or intervals, to derive meaning from the images is futile.[61] Eisenstein, in contrast, because of his predilection for the fictional rather than documentary format, can ascribe meaning to the image contained within the shot through its organization with other associated images:

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[58] Petric, *Constructivism in Film*, 36.

[59] Ibid., 50.

[60] Pirog, "Iconicity and Narrative," 303.

[61] Osip Brik, "Ring Lefa, Tovarishchi! Sshibaites' mneniyami!" *Novyi Lef*, no. 4 (April 1928): 27-36, in *Film Factory*, 226.

> It should be clear from the start, Eisenstein's conception of the shot included an understanding of the film unit as both static, i.e., denotational, and semantically dynamic, 'accumulating' meaning in time by its membership in a series.[62]

This approach by Eisenstein, though more aesthetically and epistemologically sound, in terms of historical materialism than Vertov's, nevertheless makes him vulnerable to criticism from cinematic purists who assert that literary approaches have no place in the cinema.

The crux of this dilemma for Eisenstein manifests itself in the contradiction of using a contrived image to denote a visual representation of an existing reality. As Victor Pertsov argues in his commentary on *October*, "in a film we cannot construct a metaphor from objects that do not have their own real existence."[63] Such an approach, he asserts, "will be literary rather than cinematic."[64] The problem becomes, simply, that the use of metaphor as a representation of reality is limited in the fact that the representation is manufactured rather an accurate reflection of an actually existing reality. Thus, the result is that "the agitational impulse predominates, while the material shown takes an auxiliary position."[65] Yet with Vertov, "the informational impulse predominates and the material itself is most important."[66] Hence, because of their commitment to formalist techniques, both Vertov and Eisenstein place severe limitations on the legitimacy of their art as a means by which to reflect an objective reality in the Marxian sense of the term. Though

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[62] Pirog, "Iconicity and Narrative," 309.

[63] Victor Pertsov, "Ring Lefa, Tovarishchi! Sshibaites' mneniyami!" *Novyi Lef*, no. 4 (April 1928): 27-36, in *Film Factory*, 229.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Sergei Tretyakov, "Symposium on Soviet Documentary," in *The Documentary Tradition:From Nanook to Woodstock*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1971), 29.

[66] Ibid.

their stylistic approaches by no means warranted suppression by a regime truly committed to Marxian principles, their unorthodox styles did provide a pretext for bureaucratic censorship on the grounds that the artistic approach of the two filmmakers employs a method alien to Marxism and, thus, anti-proletarian.

In the ensuing chapter, the author will demonstrate that certain currents within the Bolshevik party, namely Trotsky's Left Opposition, rejected the contention of the Stalinist faction that art in Soviet society must conform to the dictates of a Marxian aesthetic, which became a means for the party to exclude non-conforming artists from access to the cultural mainstream. Trotsky's position on the avant-garde and all other artists considered to be fellow travelers was to accept that they could provide a unique perspective on the revolution because of their origins among the pre-war radical intelligentsia. Because these artists and intellectuals were exceptionally trained in the various pre-war schools of art and theory, they were able to provide a bridge that could link these trends to the movement of the revolutionary Russian proletariat. It was inconceivable, according to Trotsky, that the Russian working class would either have the time or be able to acquire the training to construct a proletarian aesthetic during the revolutionary period. Soviet society would have little choice but to support the creative efforts of the fellow travelers while the proletariat remained "distracted" with the task of world revolution.

Rather than continue to follow the careers of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein, in the following pages the author will discuss the trials and tribulations of the avant-garde filmmakers in general as they struggled to continue producing their art despite growing opposition from critics and elements in the industry that rejected their approach to

cinema. While the avant-garde enjoyed the support of critics throughout much of the twenties, once the Stalinists defeated the Left Opposition and initiated the first Five-Year Plan, political tolerance for them evaporated. Socialist realism henceforth became a compulsory aesthetic method for artists wanting to create in the Soviet Union.

CHAPTER V

POLITICAL STRUGGLES AND THEIR EFFECT ON CINEMA

THE SOVIET FILM INDUSTRY, 1924-28

Although audiences and critics in the West, particularly in Germany, were impressed with the films of the Soviet avant-garde, in the Soviet Union these films never achieved the same level of popular success. While this cannot be attributed entirely to a lack of critical support, both the critics and the film industry, throughout the twenties, were reluctant to support wholeheartedly the aesthetic aspirations of the avant-garde due primarily to the complexity of their formalist style, which was attributed to their class origins among petty-bourgeois intellectuals. The careers of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein exemplified this dilemma. While many critics and film industry officials recognized the extraordinary ability of these directors, by the early 1930s the state film industry was either unwilling or very reluctant to invest scarce state resources in their projects due to a belief that their films would not attract substantial audiences among the Soviet population to justify expensive financial expenditures. The establishment of a new state agency for film production in 1924, though rhetorically devoted to the cultivation of a soviet cinema, largely continued the policies of its predecessor by producing trite melodramas intended only to entertain Soviet audiences.

At the Thirteenth Party Congress on Cinema, held in May of 1924, the party created a new agency for the production and distribution of film, Sovkino. Sovkino replaced its predecessor, Goskino, and was directed by the party to maintain film production as an economically self-sustaining enterprise. The resolution on cinema published by the

Thirteenth Party Congress was replete with lofty projections on the production and distribution of films that emphasized agitation and propaganda, especially to the culturally deficient countryside. However, Sovkino officials were compelled to recognize that the vast majority of film enthusiasts hailed from the urban intelligentsia. Kenez cites surveys conducted between 1926 and 1928 that reveal cinema audiences as primarily consisting of "white-collar professionals, students and the young."[1] Among these viewers, foreign and Soviet entertainment films were most popular and the film industry organized distribution to appeal to their tastes. Sovkino was well known for its financial support of pre-revolutionary film directors who could attract an audience with American style movies.[2] Kenez, however, demonstrates that while indulging the bourgeois tastes of the intelligentsia, Sovkino was established, in part, to produce educational films for the workers, soldiers and peasants, which were often shown by the Cultural Department of the Trade Unions in the various worker clubs and organizations.[3] Such organizations sought to promote the production of documentaries that would both agitate and educate.

The trade unions and workers' clubs became a focal point for the production of educational documentaries. An editorial from the film journal *Kino i zhizn* in fact emphasizes that film producers must distinguish between the typical urban audience and the potential viewers from the workers' clubs. The author goes on to argue that the class-conscious workers' organizations desired more than the usual foreign melodrama. They

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[1] Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society, 1917-1953* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 83.

[2] Denise J. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 45.

[3] Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 83-85.

wanted to view quality educational films that satisfied their hunger for knowledge.[4] The congress officially acknowledged that cinema was a powerful weapon by which to educate the Soviet worker, if properly wielded by the party. It therefore resolved to improve the quality of Soviet film through organizing greater numbers of communists to work in the field. This, the congress concluded, would allow the party to affect both the ideological content and economic viability of film production.[5] The establishment of Sovkino and the congress's resolution did not, however, result in the agency's encouragement of avant-garde projects due to a perception among film industry officials that avant-garde films suffered from an inability to attract a mass audience, particularly among the urban working class. Sovkino, therefore, essentially continued the Goskino policy of encouraging projects that would satisfy Soviet audiences' desire for entertainment films. Those concerned with developing a Soviet cinema that focused on propaganda through documentary film production were forced to establish separate organizations to pursue these ends.

One example of an independent film organization that supported the production of educational documentaries for worker consumption was Glavpolitprosvet. Many film directors involved with Glavpolitprosvet remained faithful to the idea of producing non-fictional films that reflected a commitment to proletarian culture.[6] The leadership of the organization included the peasantry with urban workers as the intended recipients of its educational documentaries. Its director, Vladimir Meshcheriakov, believed that the

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[4] "Kinotvorchestvo i massovyi zritel," *Kino i zhizn*, no. 18 (June 1930): 5-6, in *Film Factory*, 297.

[5] *Trinadtsatyi s"ezd R.K.P.(b). 23-31maya 1924g. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1924), 702-703, in *Film Factory*, 111.

[6] Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses*, 38.

peasant masses especially were too backward to be allowed the harmful themes of foreign films and advocated the continuation of the *kinofikatsiia* or cinefication campaign, which brought educational films to villages in the rural areas. Kenez argues that since the Bolsheviks were eager to transform the peasant economy, they recognized that a massive propaganda campaign was necessary to raise the political consciousness of the peasant to accept the idea of collectivization.[7] It was on this pretext that Glavpolitprosvet set fourth to reinvigorate the cinefication campaign interrupted by the inauguration of the NEP.

Glavprolitprosvet was assigned the task of organizing and educating the peasants to continue the task begun in 1925 by the Society of Friends of Soviet Cinema (ODSK) under Feliks Dzerzhinsky to promote cinefication. Though cinefication eventually lost momentum due to inadequate resources, deteriorating equipment, and lack of suitable films, Glavpolitprosvet continued to exist and affect Soviet film production.[8] However, like Sovkino, Glavpolitprosvet eschewed production of avant-garde films since such films were unpopular with the masses.[9] It was concerned primarily with the cultivation of scientific film that could be distributed among the broad masses to agitate support for Bolshevik policies and counter the ideological influence of foreign melodramas. These organizations encountered considerable difficulty in gaining access to the costly technology necessary to produce quality documentaries, and eventually collapsed from a

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[7] Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 78.

[8] Ibid., 87.

[9] Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses*, 39.

lack of resources. Furthermore, their political commitment to proletarian cinema directly conflicted with the prevailing demand for entertainment films encouraged by the NEP.

Directors and critics advocating the establishment of a proletarian cinema or 'proletarian line' in Soviet cinema continued to be disappointed by the aesthetic course pursued by Sovkino and the private film enterprises. In a 1926 article, critic Alexander Dubrovsky commented on the decaying state of Soviet film production. He lamented that film production was at a dismal level, and the organizations founded to develop proletarian cinema, i.e. Proletkino and Kultkino, had disbanded by spring of 1926.[10] Vladimir Mayakovsky eloquently articulated opposition to this trend in Soviet cinema in a speech on the topic of Sovkino's policy course. He railed against the oppressive bureaucratism that stifled creative initiative in the film arts. Urging Sovkino to raise the artistic level of its films, Mayakovsky warned that progress in cinema art would cease without the formation of new cadres and a renewed commitment to a proletarian film culture.[11] Mayakovsky was interested primarily in an increase in the quantity and quality of newsreel documentaries as opposed to the continued production of fictional films, experimental or otherwise. Others argued for both a revitalization of newsreel production and the nurturing of avant-garde filmmakers whose films sought to energize the masses behind the Soviet government through the creation of a dynamic visual medium. Those filmmakers considered to be avant-garde increasingly came under attack by those advocating strict adherence to a proletarian line in cinema, who believed the avant-garde

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[10] Alexander Dubrovsky, "Sovetskoe kino v opasnosti," *Pravda*, 20 July 1926, in *Film Factory*, 149.

[11] Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 12 (Moscow, 1959), 353-359, in *Film Factory*, 172.

were preoccupied with experimentation rather than in satisfying the cultural needs of the masses with their art.

In the debate that raged throughout the twenties among workers in the cinema, the so-called avant-garde films attracted a great deal of controversy and ambivalence. The primary objects of criticism for the advocates of the proletarian line in cinema were the foreign films from American and Germany and their Soviet equivalents. These films were considered to be ideologically harmful and artistically bourgeois in the sense that form was subordinated to a content that was reactionary and counterproductive to a society struggling to establish socialism. Some critics included the avant-garde films in this category since their formalist methods were considered to have originated among the pre-war petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, and, though never considered reactionary or ideologically deleterious to the masses, their style was labeled as incomprehensible to the masses of workers and peasants for whom the films were made. This ambivalence among filmmakers and critics toward the avant-garde film would later be exploited by the Stalinists to attack and eventually suppress the avant-garde as stylistically anti-Marxist and, thus, counterrevolutionary.

At the outset of the NEP, those films with overtly bourgeois themes were vociferously castigated as ideologically harmful poison that would hinder the government's attempts to lead the masses in the direction of a socialist society. By the late 1920s, the attacks began to include films that may have been ideologically correct yet made the mistake of indulging in stylistic excess and formalist experimentation. In an article that appeared in 1928 under the provocative title, "The Rightist Danger in Cinema," the author denounced several trends in cinema considered to be antithetical to

the 'proletarian line.' The article focuses mainly on the colossal waste of resources being invested in the perpetuation of decadent bourgeois films at the expense of quality educational films for the working class. The author extends the critique to those influenced by bourgeois literary and film traditions:

> Formalist madness, the play on the 'film shot' and its combination, are almost the besetting sin of our cinema, or rather, not of our Soviet cinema but a sin passed on to us from the hostile bourgeois camp.[12]

The author essentially condemns any bourgeois influence on Soviet art as an affront to the proletariat and its cultural interests. In fact, in a subsequent passage, a war is declared on any ideological deviation from the 'proletarian line' in cinema and a plea made to articulate an official line for cinema.[13] With these words, a struggle was initiated against all bourgeois influences in the cinema under the banner of cultural revolution and the struggle for proletarian culture.

The Party Conference on Cinema, held from 15 to 21 March 1928, proved to be the initial arena in which this war was waged. Just prior to the opening of the conference, several groups came out in support of the 'proletarian line' in cinema. Sovkino workers published a document lending support to the main tenets of the conference: strengthening of cadres, improvement of artistic quality of films, and asserting party control of the industry.[14] While the Sovkino representatives rejected the contention that only educational films should be produced for consumption by the workers and peasants, they

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[12] "O pravoi opasnosti v kino," *Sovietskii ekran*, 18 December 1928, 3, in *Film Factory*, 246.

[13] Ibid.

[14] "Novyi kurs Sovkino. Rezolyutsiya," *Sovietskii ekran*, 8 January 1929, 4-7, in *Film Factory*, 242.

also asserted, in carefully worded phrases, that high-art cinema was inconsistent with the aspirations of Soviet cinema:

> The Conference, considering experimental work that facilitates the development of new forms of artistic language to be necessary, deems an essential part of any experimental work to be *artistic expression that is intelligible to the millions* and the observation of the limits of the budget resources.[15]

The delegates to the conference consciously avoid antagonizing any particular artistic trend with overheated rhetoric, yet their references to avant-garde cinema are unmistakable. Sovkino never represented a radical organization of workers committed only to the 'proletarian line'; however, as an organization under party control, it certainly was influenced by the party's growing disapproval of the fellow traveling avant-garde. In general the conferee's call for a cultural revolution echoed the party's preparations for a renewed class struggle to eliminate the influence of non-proletarian elements in culture and in society as a whole.

The general tone of the conference was swollen with class struggle rhetoric. Early in the resolution the conferees declared that a struggle was necessary to wrest control of culture away from bourgeois influences:

> Bourgeois and petty bourgeois forces are fighting against the proletariat, trying to take hold of the levers for the cultural improvement of the masses, their education and influence over them. The task of the proletariat and the Party is to keep these levers for cultural development in their own hands, to reinforce the increasingly proletarian cadres of cultural workers and to secure the socialist path of cultural development.[16]

The tone established at the conference marked the beginning of a trend in the state film industry to quash the artistic voice of experimental directors. The avant-garde

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[15] Ibid., 243.

[16] B. S. Ol'khovyi, ed., *Puti kino. Vsesoyuznoe partiinoe soveshchanie po kinematografii* (Moscow, 1929), 429-444, in *Film Factory*, 208.

filmmakers would never recover from the initial blow they suffered at the 1928 conference. As the party consolidated its grip over Soviet cultural life, its literary minions intensified their attack on the avant-garde and formalism.

Defenders of a 'proletarian line' in cinema were often as critical of the avant-garde as they were disdainful of the entertainment films of the NEP era. Many of the artists and critics calling for a proletarian cinema envisioned propaganda films made in the documentary style that would serve as a vital educational tool in the campaign to direct the workers and peasants to follow the course of socialist construction. Ippolit Sokolov was one such critic. In an essay titled "The Legend of 'Left' Cinema," Sokolov rendered as pointless any attempt by intellectuals and artists to categorize the avant-garde as left or right. Instead, he characterized all 'left' directors as subscribing to an alien class ideology:

> From a sociological point of view left cinema is *petty bourgeois* rather than proletarian cinema. Revolutionary art may be either *petty bourgeois* (Populist art or the art of the radical intelligentsia, for example) *or proletarian*. Futurist 'leftism' in art is not the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat but the ideology of revolutionary petty bourgeoisie (in our country) or the ideology of the reactionary technological intelligentsia (in the West).[17]

And while Sokolov praised the accomplishments of particular avant-garde films like Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and Pudovkin's *Mother*, he considered them to be merely prototypes from which a truly proletarian cinema would emulate.[18] Sokolov's evaluation of formalist cinema was soon to gain widespread acceptance among critics, especially as the party geared up for its industrialization and collectivization campaigns.

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[17] Ippolit Sokolov, "Legenda o 'levom' kino," *Kino i zhizn*, no. 5 (February 1930): 16-17, in *Film Factory*, 288.

[18] Ibid., 290.

The attacks on formalism would gradually increase until formalist technique was discredited as a viable artistic trend in Soviet cinema.

In the late twenties, as the party established control over the film industry, those who claimed to represent a 'proletarian line' in cinema muzzled the cultural voice of the avant-garde. Even organizations that supported avant-garde directors and their films throughout the twenties were repudiating them by the early 1930s. One such organization was established in 1928 as ARRK, or the Association of Revolutionary Workers of Cinematography. ARRK's predecessor, ARK, was founded in 1924 by experimental filmmakers opposed to the commercialization of cinema under NEP. It included prominent avant-garde directors like Kuleshov, Vertov, Eisenstein and Pudovkin. In the late twenties, however, ARRK became active supporters of cultural revolution and the campaign against formalism. Many of these voices found expression in a journal aptly titled *Proletarskoe kino* (*Proletarian Cinema*) that was established as ARRK's official organ in December 1931.

In an editorial of that year, the journal called for a "socialist reconstruction" of Soviet cinema as a means to overcome all remaining bourgeois elements in film production. The editors asserted that Marxism would be deployed to counteract bourgeois ideology and convert fellow travelers to a proletarian position.[19] The ideology to which they referred was, of course, formalism. In another editorial of the following year, the journal's editors confidently asserted their readiness to wage a decisive struggle against formalist influences in cinema. They were concerned particularly with the formalist 'documentarism' of Vertov, who claimed to be motivated by Leninist principles

[19] "Chto znachit 'Proletarskoe kino'?" *Proletarskoe kino*, no. 1 (January 1931): 3-5, in *Film Factory*, 318.

notwithstanding his commitment to formalism.[20] Vertov was not the only formalist to become susceptible to attack by critics loyal to the 'proletarian line':

> Kuleshov and Vertov were under heavy fire, as was FEKS (meaning Kozintsev and Trauberg) for "romanticism," and Dovzhenko for "biologism." Even Eisenstein was not sacred; he was accused of "mechanical materialism."[21]

Because formalism was crudely labeled as a petty bourgeois ideology, anyone associated with it, irrespective of his or her past accomplishments, was ripe for attack as a class enemy. Soon the campaign against formalist influences in cinema degenerated into an *ad hominem* attack on anyone suspected to be associated with not only formalism but also the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia.

In this hostile climate, the avant-garde was placed on the defensive and, eventually, yielded to the extraordinary political pressure exerted by the party's propaganda machine. No longer were the independent associations of cinematographers granted any functional autonomy. Party cadres were organized to combat formalist influences in the film industry and especially in the associations that harbored these elements. And while a film like Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* was held up as a model for proletarian cinema, his more experimental films such as *Strike* and *October*, and all the films of Dziga Vertov were attacked for their excessive experimentation and incomprehensible form. The film industry's campaign to eliminate formalist influences from the cinema was not motivated by aesthetic concerns alone. The party pressured its representatives in the culture industry to comply with its aesthetic dictates in order to compliment its all out campaign to quell dissident voices from Soviet society.

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[20] "My prodolzhaem bor'bu," *Proletarskoe kino*, no. 5 (February 1932): 1-2, in *Film Factory*, 321.

[21] Ia. Rudoi, "Zametki o tvorcheskikh putiakh sovetskoi kinematografii," *Kino i zhizn'*, no. 24 (1930): 7-11, quoted in Denise Youngblood, "On the Kino Front: The Evolution of Soviet Cinema in the 1920s" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1980), 369, n. 69.

CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND THE AVANT-GARDE

As the party greased the cogs of its propaganda machine to prepare the population for the initiation of the first Five-Year Plan, artists and writers were enlisted to aid in the campaign by creating art that conformed to the party's political aims. However, unlike the Proletkult during the years of civil war, the associations of artists and writers recruited to support the party's cultural revolution were not encouraged to experiment with various forms of propaganda. In fact, the party compelled them to conform to the aesthetic standards defined by party theorists. No longer would the party tolerate the diversity of styles nurtured during the years of the NEP, particularly since the party increasingly began to distrust the influence of petty-bourgeois art on the political consciousness of the masses. This was especially true considering that it was commonly believed that the petty-bourgeois elements thriving in Soviet society during those years, particularly the peasantry, were responsible for the economic crisis that compelled the party to increase the pace of industrialization. Thus, the party waged a struggle to eliminate the influence of alien class elements in the economy and in culture for political reasons, although they justified their actions as necessary preparation for the final push towards socialism that the Five-Year Plan was to represent.

The intensification of cultural revolution after 1928 was in large part due to the internal political dynamics within the party in the late twenties; however, it also was reacting to an economic crisis that it perceived as potentially threatening to its authority and political power. In response, the party exerted its authority to compel the population to endure the exertions of rapid industrialization and to quash the creative initiative of artists whose independence was considered to be an aberration of the NEP era. Lenin's

earlier struggle against the Proletkult provides a loosely comparable example of how the party refused to tolerate the artistic freedom of groups and associations not directly administered by the state apparatus.

Lenin waged an intense political struggle against Bogdanovism in culture on the grounds that his theories represented a philosophical trend alien to Marxism and, thus, the working class. His critique of the Proletkult reflected his belief that the party encouraged the construction of a socialist culture according to Marxist principles because only Marxism expressed the historical interests of the proletariat. To this end, Lenin agreed that the party in conjunction with proletarian organizations must take the lead in educating the masses; however, Marxist theory, itself a product of historical development in philosophy, requires that the socialist revolution assimilate the achievements of bourgeois culture as a prerequisite to the emergence of an authentic socialist culture.

Lenin ascribed a central role to the party and the state in the cultivation of a socialist culture during the transition period. The question thus arises, to what extent did Lenin's writings reveal a propensity to suppress independent creative expression? Margaret Bullitt argues that Lenin's cultural views, as articulated in his article "Party Organization and Party Literature," reveal his support of strict party control over artistic activity.[22] Bullitt's position assumes that Lenin's 1905 article summarizes his entire position on culture and its relation to the party. Certainly, Lenin scoffed at any attempt of a cultural organization to assert independence from the state on the grounds that it represented a genuine proletarian position in the arts. He insisted that Marxists guide the

[22] Margaret M. Bullitt, "Toward a Marxist Theory of Aesthetics: The Development of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union," *The Russian Review* 35, no. 1 (1976): 68-69.

masses to build socialism on the foundations laid down by preceding socio-economic systems, which included learning from bourgeois and petty bourgeois artistic trends.

Perhaps the most eloquent voice to translate Lenin's views into a practical policy towards non-proletarian artists was Leon Trotsky. Trotsky, perhaps more than any other leading party theorist, expended a great deal of time and energy to contribute articles and essays in the party press on cultural and aesthetic issues. Trotsky's literary range was vast, yet he is best remembered for his 1924 work *Literature and Revolution*, in which he not only provides commentary concerning the various literary currents from the twenties but also outlines a communist policy toward art. In that enduring work of literary criticism, Trotsky is careful to distinguish the difference, both in practical terms and in terms of semantics, between revolutionary and socialist art. He recognizes that during a revolutionary period, artistic trends will invariably reflect the extraordinary expansion of political consciousness unleashed by events. Yet truly socialist art will emerge only after socio-economic contradictions disappear and art can be pursued in a state of absolute freedom. Trotsky understood that in the Soviet Union a socialist culture and aesthetic would only emerge after the triumph of the world revolution. Furthermore, even by 1923, he did not yet recognize any literature or art produced in Soviet Russia as revolutionary.[23] He did, however, conduct an exhaustive study of the myriad artistic trends in the literature of the twenties from the standpoint of Marxist philosophy.

In his myriad writings on culture and art, Trotsky was especially disparaging of the claim among Futurists that they alone represented a trend in art that sought to define a truly proletarian art. Based on what he claimed was a class analysis of the Futurist

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[23] Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 229.

aesthetic, Trotsky posited that its origins among petty-bourgeois bohemians explained its ability to adapt to disparate and antagonistic political trends, conveniently attaching itself to both communism in Russia and to fascism in Italy.[24] In a sardonic tone typical of Trotsky's polemics, he declared, "We [Marxists] stepped into the Revolution while Futurism fell into it."[25] Furthermore, he concluded, its claims to be forming an entirely new aesthetic, breaking completely with the old, were highly suspect. All art forms, he argued, no matter how new and experimental, invariably emerge from a mastery of past forms.[26]

Trotsky believed, as did Lenin, that Marxists must utilize and assimilate all previous forms of culture and art in order to develop a socialist aesthetic. He rejected categorically the notion that a socialist culture and aesthetic could be developed separately from an understanding of past culture, particularly the highest artistic expressions of bourgeois culture. In one instance, Trotsky compared culture to an army division, "in general, the place of art is in the rear of the historic advance."[27] He also recognized that revolutionary art would not be the exclusive creation of the proletariat. On the contrary, during and after the revolutionary period, the proletariat would have to rely on the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia to take the lead in artistic production and education:

> Just because the Revolution is a working-class revolution, it releases - to repeat what was said before - very little working class energy for art...The intelligentsia, aside from the advantages of its qualifications in form, has also the odious privilege

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[24] Ibid., 128-129.

[25] Ibid., 132.

[26] Ibid., 130.

[27] Ibid., 236.

> of holding a passive political position, which is marked by a greater or lesser degree of hostility towards the October Revolution. It is not surprising, then, that this contemplative intelligentsia is able to give, and does give, a better artistic reproduction of the Revolution than the proletariat which has made the Revolution, though the re-creations of the intelligentsia are somewhat off line.[28]

In a sense, those artists who do not have a vital stake in the immediate success of the revolution are best able to render its artistic achievements. Furthermore, the various styles and forms employed by these artists to capture the spirit of the revolution were to be tolerated because the proletariat had neither the time nor the training to devote to the creation of socialist art.

Trotsky explains that proletarian art did not yet exist in the Soviet Union by 1923 because the material foundations for the production of such art had not emerged. The task of the proletariat during and in the aftermath of the revolution was to seize and maintain its control of the instruments of the state and expand the revolution internationally. Both proletarian and socialist culture would not emerge until after the proletarian revolution engulfed the entire globe and class contradictions began to wither away.[29] In her article on Marxist and Bolshevik aesthetics, Margaret Bullitt argues that Trotsky's position recognized that proletarian artists must master and then democratize the old forms of art. And though the artist must not be allowed to betray the revolution ideologically, bourgeois art could benefit the education of worker artists in the areas of technique and form.[30] As a result of the party's liberal attitude towards non-proletarian artists, what emerged during the twenties was a well intentioned group of artists and

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[28] Ibid., 217.

[29] Leon Trotsky, "Class and Art," in *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*, ed. Paul N. Siegel (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 66-67.

[30] Bullitt, "Toward a Marxist Theory of Aesthetics," 62-63.

writers, referred to as fellow travelers, who, in Trotsky's estimation, must be allowed to produce their art in relative freedom from direct party control, because their contributions would lay the groundwork for the emergence of a revolutionary art firmly grounded in the interests of the proletariat.

Trotsky's support of the fellow travelers was predicated on his recognition that workers would be able to contribute to the construction of a socialist culture only after the business of establishing a proletarian dictatorship was completed. In the meantime, the fellow travelers were to be granted the freedom to make artistic contributions to Soviet society without requiring that their methods conform to the dictates of Marxist aesthetics. Interestingly, Trotsky arrived at this position as a result of his conclusion that Marxism was insufficient as a means by which to critique pre-revolutionary artistic forms. In *Literature and Revolution*, he writes:

> The Marxian method affords an opportunity to estimate the development of the new art, to trace all its sources, to help the most progressive tendencies by a critical illumination of the road, but it does not do more than that. Art must make its own way and by its own means. The Marxian methods are not the same as the artistic. The Party leads the proletariat but not the historic processes of history.[31]

Trotsky believed that once proletarian artists did emerge, they would no doubt owe an aesthetic debt to the innovations of petty-bourgeois fellow travelers like Mayakovsky and Pasternak.[32] Trotsky's critical support of the fellow travelers eventually became an issue that the party leaders used against him and the opposition in their attempts to defeat the dissident faction. As the twenties rolled on, the issue of proletarian culture would once

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[31] Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 218.

[32] Trotsky, "Class and Art," 70.

again rise to prominence, but this time as a political weapon of the growing Soviet bureaucracy in their campaign to stifle worker democracy and eliminate political rivals.

After the party unveiled the NEP, the fellow travelers did in fact enjoy the support of the party as a whole and were able to create in an atmosphere of relative freedom. Vladimir Mayakovsky and Osip Brik declared a 'left front in the arts' and developed their theories on constructivism in the pages of its journal, *Lef*.[33] Artists began to organize into independent associations, which the party encouraged as long as they submitted to the political control of the state.[34] Despite its support for artistic freedom in theory, the party could not allow artistic freedom to threaten the forward momentum of the revolution. John Biggart argues that ever since the NEP was unveiled at the Tenth Party Congress, there were those in the party who feared counter-revolutionary forces might seek to exploit the party's liberal policies towards artistic activity.[35] Biggart attributes the party's paranoid mood to its decision to adopt certain tenets of proletarian culture to complement its political line.

The evolution of the party's position on cultural issues eventually became an extension of the factional political squabbles and bureaucratic maneuvering. Biggart attributes the growing dogmatism in both political and cultural affairs to the party leadership's insecurity over the intensification of political dissent within its ranks. Kemp-Welch, however, dismisses the contention that the debate over culture was little more than a maneuver by the Stalinist bureaucracy. According to him, the artistic groups

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[33] A. Kemp-Welch, "New Economic Policy in Culture and its Enemies," *Journal of Contemporary History* 13, no. 3 (1978): 452.

[34] Ibid., 453.

[35] John Biggart, "Bukharin and the Origins of the 'Proletarian Culture' Debate," *Soviet Studies* 39, no. 2 (April 1987): 235.

were the source of much of the pressure that was brought to bear on the party to adopt a clear position.[36] In fact he argues that the most palpable source of friction originated with *Agit-prop* as its leadership lobbied forcefully that the party reject the cultural trends of the NEP and adopt a more partisan stance toward artistic production. They feared bourgeois restoration in culture and demanded that the fellow travelers be compelled to adopt a 'proletarian line' in their artistic activity.[37] In the ensuing years, the party would condemn those members that supported the fellow travelers, including Trotsky and, later, even Bukharin, as the bureaucracy adopted the position that the fellow travelers propagated a petty-bourgeois ideology and, thus, were counter-revolutionary.

Once the Stalinist faction succeeded in defeating the Left Opposition and exiling Trotsky to Alma Ata, they were anxious to turn their attention to defeating the right wing, represented by Bukharin and his supporters. Essential to this task was to discredit the NEP as indicative of Bukharin's opportunistic economic policies, which the Stalinists achieved by initiating a severe left turn in economic policy known as the Five-Year Plan. In order to garner sufficient support among the workers and peasants for this abrupt policy change, the party was compelled to raise the call for a cultural revolution in order to tighten its control over artistic activity. Historian Sheila Fitzpatrick was one of the first scholars to categorize cultural revolution as a specific era in Soviet history that began with the Shakhty trial of 1928[38] and lasted until the completion of the first Five-Year Plan in 1932. And while she dismisses as superficial the explanation of cultural

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[36] Kemp-Welch, "The NEP in Culture," 459.

[37] Ibid., 460-461.

[38] The trial resulted from the arrest of technical specialists working in the Shakhty mines in the Donbass industrial complex. The specialists were accused of plotting with foreign powers to sabotage production at the mines. After the security forces discovered the counter-revolutionary plot, the specialists were detained and placed on trial after many of them confessed.

revolution as merely a transition from the cultural pluralism of NEP to the homogenization of culture under Stalinism, she contends that cultural revolution was a byproduct of irreconcilable contradictions inherent in NEP society. Specifically, she refers to the reliance on bourgeois specialists during NEP as the social basis for a renewed class struggle to eliminate these elements from Soviet cultural life and replace them with a new proletarian intelligentsia.[39] She recognizes, however, that the catalyst for cultural revolution was initiated by the party leadership as a pretext for the suppression of political opponents under the guise of waging a struggle against petty bourgeois elements in the economy and culture.[40] Nonetheless, the party could not have mobilized the ranks as successfully as it did unless the political forces that supported the cultivation of a proletarian culture were sufficiently influential.

During the years of civil war, the party relied on the initiative of party activists and workers' cultural organizations to agitate among the peasantry to enlist their support for the Red Army and the revolution. At this time independent artistic and cultural expression, even that which urged the creation of a proletarian culture was harnessed to further the aims of socialist revolution and continued under NEP despite the party's imposition of greater political restrictions. By 1928, cultural freedom and plurality was being sacrificed in the name of a class struggle in culture. The enemy became the kulak, the Nepmen, and their "allies" in the cultural industry. The emergence of a 'proletarian line' in culture and art during this time represented a trend encouraged by the party that fused elements of Bogdanov's cultural theory with elements from Lenin's in order to

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[39] Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Cultural Revolution as Class War," in *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-31* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 11.

[40] Ibid., 17.

fashion a policy towards the arts that compelled the artist to emphasize political content over concerns with form. And though the cultural revolutionaries borrowed ideas from those earlier advocated by the Proletkult, the phenomenon of cultural revolution was a specific policy oriented to defeat class enemies and stifle political and cultural opposition to the frenzied pace and coercive force of the first Five-Year Plan.[41]

Those in the party and state apparatus that helped to define the aesthetics of cultural revolution based their ideas not in the philosophy of Marx but rather on the political requirements of the party. Although the first Five-Year Plan was initiated during a period of political and economic crisis, it was hailed by the party as the final push towards the completion of socialist construction. Consequently those in the party responsible for advertising cultural revolution proclaimed as its aim the definitive triumph of socialist realism over all non-proletarian trends in art and literature. Socialist realism, Margaret Bullitt argues, was not justified as a temporary response to the political needs of the party, but rather as a permanent solution to the discordant aesthetic debates of the twenties.[42] The method of socialist realism was declared to be the legitimate product of Lenin's views on art and literature and, thus, the only acceptable approach to artistic and literary creation. The party's subsequent attacks on artists that did not conform to the dictates of socialist realism soon marginalized them and, ultimately, relegated them to social obscurity since they no longer were able to practice their craft in the Soviet Union.

The cultural revolution deeply affected the film industry as it did all other areas of creative expression. By the early thirties party activists and film critics focused their

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[41] Sochor, *Revolution and Culture*, 216.

[42] Bullitt, "Toward a Marxist Theory of Aesthetics," 75.

vitriol on the experimental films of the avant-garde. Formalist technique, in particular, came under attack as a petty-bourgeois ideology inconsistent with Marxist aesthetics. As applied to cinema, the cultural revolution "aimed to remedy what seemed a major fault to the Bolshevik leaders: the artistically most interesting and experimental works remained inaccessible to simple people."[43] Even if one is to accept the party's argument that these films were difficult to comprehend, does this fact alone warrant the complete suppression of these directors and their art in the name of Marxist doctrine, as defined by the Stalinists? This question must be answered in the negative, because the suppression of the avant-garde in cinema exemplified the drastic and severe policies adopted by the party against independent creative initiative during this period of cultural and economic transformation, not the inauguration of a truly socialist aesthetic.

In addition to political factors that influenced the struggle against the avant-garde, their emphasis on montage and film language became the focal point of the attack by film critics and party bureaucrats. Much of the reason for this was the party's objection to an emphasis on form that subordinated the importance of political or ideological content. This contention is weakened by the fact that the avant-garde directors, almost without exception, were intensely committed to the production of politically tendentious films that would be utilized for the purpose of propaganda. And because the silent film relied on visual images to convey ideas, the avant-garde directors were able to create a visual language with its own syntactic structure that enhanced the artistic value of the medium

[43] Peter Kenez, "Soviet Cinema in the Age of Stalin," in *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, ed. Richard Taylor and Derek Spring (London: Routledge, 1993), 55.

in addition to its effectiveness as propaganda.[44] The party eventually objected to the production of these films because the formalist language of the avant-garde was difficult to comprehend and failed to serve the political needs of the party in a manner that satisfied the leadership.

A significant factor that contributed to the demise of the avant-garde was the advent of sound film. The Soviet film industry was unprepared and ill equipped to face the technological challenge of mastering sound film once it burst onto the scene in the late twenties. Many avant-garde directors feared that sound would provide filmmakers with an excuse to make films that de-emphasized the importance of montage. In their 1928 "Statement on Sound," avant-garde directors Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigori Alexandrov warned that synchronous sound could provide only the illusion of realism and would be exploited in order to generate entertainment films with commercial appeal.[45] They also recognized that the Soviet industry was not in a position to develop the new technology, and the only solution, for the time, was to utilize sound in conjunction with montage. On this topic they wrote, "*only the contrapuntal use* of sound vis-à-vis the visual fragment of montage will open up new possibilities for the development and perfection of montage."[46] Critics of the avant-garde tended to harbor a more optimistic view of sound film since many saw in it the potential to counter the influence of formalist montage. For them, the advent of sound provided the opportunity

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[44] Denise Youngblood, "On the Kino Front: The Evolution of Soviet Cinema in the 1920s" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1980), 360.

[45] Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Grigori Alexandrov, "Statement on Sound," in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 80.

[46] Ibid., 81.

to argue for a new direction in cinema, which rejected the experimentation of the past and, instead, emphasized a realist approach to cinematography.[47]

Critics loyal to the Party's interpretation of cultural revolution worried that if developing sound films were left to the avant-garde, they would be concerned primarily with experimentation rather than cultivating a medium that could effectively relay party policies and ideology in cinematic form. Commentators on culture began emphasizing the practical political uses of cinema in contrast to its development as an art form with propaganda value. One such writer, Nikolai Anoshchenko, advocated the use of sound film for the production of educational films and newsreels. Only the development of sound cinema in this way could aid in the revitalization of political work in rural villages.[48] The renewed call for cinefication was initiated under the guise of educating the peasants to raise their cultural level and, thus, their willingness to accept collectivization. The party understood that any significant resistance to the Five-Year Plan would most likely originate in the countryside. Strenuous efforts were, therefore, made to ensure that the peasantry rallied behind the party. Cinema aided in this effort, yet the employment of film to aid in the achievement of such deeply political ambitions ensured the degradation of cinema as art and as incisive propaganda.

The party's campaign to industrialize the Soviet Union was accompanied by a concerted effort to neutralize independent voices in culture and art. To this end, critics and cultural writers that supported the party's rejection of bourgeois trends in art began to elaborate an aesthetic theory that jibed with the party's political agenda and rigid

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[47] Youngblood, "On the Kino Front," 413.

[48] Nikolai Anoshchenko, "Zvukovoe kino na sluzhbe kul'turnoi revolyutsii," *Kino i zhizn*, no. 7 (February 1930): 15-16, in *Film Factory*, 293.

interpretation of Marxist theory. The result was the development of the theory of socialist realism, which Kenez describes as a doctrine which, " by replacing genuine realism with an appearance of realism it prevents contemplation of the human condition and the investigation of social issues."[49] In order for such an approach to be effective, it must be sanctioned by the state and protected from competition by dissident artistic trends. Moreover, as Kenez writes, "stylistic heterodoxy is bound to lead to ambiguity of meaning, and that is something that a totalitarian political order cannot tolerate."[50] Thus, the final assault on formalism began as all artistic expression was compelled by the party's coercive force to submit to the new doctrine of socialist realism.

Socialist realism not only portrayed as reality as it ought to be rather than what is was, but it represented an approach to art that revitalized the same petty bourgeois philistinism that the avant-garde despised and struggled to overcome. The party fostered a cult of the proletarian and the peasant as heroes and prototypes of *homo Sovieticus*. Nikolai Anonshchenko captured this sentiment when he wrote, "Our Soviet sound cinema must be, and is, a powerful instrument for Communist culture, for the new way of life and the new man."[51] Interestingly, juxtaposed to the militant call for proletarian culture was the revitalization of populist rhetoric and nationalist themes to generate a sense of social patriotism, as was the case in Eisenstein's historical epics *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*.[52] Art was to capture the presumed yearnings of the masses, to probe the soul of the Soviet people. Denise Youngblood writes:

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[49] Kenez, "Cinema in the Age of Stalin," in *Stalinism in Soviet Cinema*, 55.

[50] Ibid., 56.

[51] Anonshchenko, "Zvukovoe kino na sluzhbe kul'turnoi revolyutsii," in *Film Factory*, 293.

[52] Kenez, "Cinema in the Age of Stalin," 56.

> In the early days of Soviet cinema, the idea of cinema as a mass art meant that cinema was an art potentially accessible to the masses in a way no other art was. Now it meant the cinema's raison d'etre was the masses, that a true "artist" should see with the "eyes of the masses."[53]

An entirely new approach to art was foisted on artists that essentially negated the subjective factor in creative activity. Instead of art being a reproduction of an objective reality reflected through a single consciousness, art became a manifestation of the will of the vanguard to shape reality to serve its purposes.

The effect of socialist realism on cinema was profound to the extent that by 1936 many of the most prominent avant-garde films had been banned "including all the films of Kuleshov, several of the works of Dovzhenko, Protazanov, Kozintsev and Trauberg."[54] Dziga Vertov made his last film in 1934, *Three Songs of Lenin*, which, though celebratory of Lenin and his legacy, proved unacceptable to the party leadership because of its emphasis on subjective and personal attitudes towards the great Bolshevik leader. By 1940, Vertov was editing indoctrination films and newsreels for the army. Eisenstein, after the suppression of *Que Viva Mexico*, experienced a period of inactivity until he began work on his last two films: *Alexander Nevsky*, released in 1938; and *Ivan the Terrible*, part one being released in 1944 and part two in 1946. These two films, however, represented a severe break from his formalist style of the twenties and revitalized nationalist themes, in the case of the former, and, in the latter, celebrated the cult of the Russian autocrat to reinforce popular acceptance of the Stalinist leadership. Eisenstein's ability to endure was, however, an aberration as by 1936 the avant-garde ceased to exist.

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[53] Youngblood, "On the Kino Front," 364.

[54] Kenez, "Cinema in the Age of Stalin," in *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, 66.

In evaluating the legacy of Soviet avant-garde cinema it is important to emphasize that the rise and fall of these extraordinary films and their producers mirrored the tumultuous political environment from which they sprang. The revolutionary spirit of 1917 inspired pre-revolutionary radicals to serve the movement by applying their theories of art to various forms of propaganda that were utilized by the Bolsheviks to publicize their cause. This enthusiasm continued after the conclusion of the civil war as artists realized that art was essential to the task of articulating a vision of socialist utopia. However, as utopia degenerated into repression and tyranny, Soviet artists and writers were forced to conform to the aesthetic dictates of the party or perish. Soviet filmmakers associated with avant-garde cinema fell victim to the same repressive forces as other art forms. Their collective demise was not simply a result of ideological non-conformity or artistic anachronism. The disciples of formalism in cinema, while continuing to develop their theories into the sound era, were halted abruptly by a regime that became hostile to creative independence and initiative not due to its commitment to Marxian aesthetics, but due to its own political insecurity and national narrowness.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Although the marriage between Bolshevism and avant-garde cinema was brief, the artistic achievements of these films were significant not only in the history of film but also in the history of Soviet society during the twenties. The twenties were undoubtedly a unique period in Soviet history. During the civil war and NEP years, the party, although jealously protective of their political control of the state, nevertheless functioned with a certain degree of internal democracy and tolerance towards the various and diverse artistic currents that existed prior to the October revolution. Both factors were a result of Lenin's legacy as political leader of the Bolshevik party and chief theoretician behind its policies during war communism and the early years of the NEP. Lenin's guidance provided the party's policies with a firm foundation in Marxist theory and recognition that socialism would only be constructed on the cultural achievements of the past.

As avant-garde cinema emerged from the radical artistic milieu of the Proletkult, the filmmakers that committed themselves to develop cinema as an art form also understood the great burden placed on them by the events of the revolution. They understood that as a mass medium, cinema was endowed with the potential to influence the consciousness of millions. And as communists, men like Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein sought to cultivate their art to achieve both aesthetic perfection and ideological potency. In fact, due to their dialectical approach, they both sought a harmonious synthesis of form and content, which their respective formalist styles were devised to accomplish. They considered themselves to be materialists, yet because of the peculiar

requirements of the silent film medium, they were compelled to create a new visual aesthetic that could adequately convey the complex ideological statements revealed by the revolutionary movement in Russia to audiences often unfamiliar with the communist lexicon.

The formalist approach to cinema provided Vertov, Eisenstein, and others with a method that could communicate ideas and arouse emotions exclusively through their visual language. This required that the images they shot were carefully constructed and the ideas conveyed in them elaborated by their organization with other images. For Vertov, this translated into an attempt to utilize the images captured by the camera to recast reality to reflect his personal ideological statements and worldview. It was the director and his editor that controlled completely the process of constructing the visual document. And although Vertov insisted that the organization of the images was dictated to the editor by the filmed objects themselves, ultimately the editor dominated the process of montage. Vertov's manipulation of objective reality for aesthetic and, occasionally, for ideological purposes complicated his commitment to developing a film method consistent with the materialist tenets of Marxism-Leninism. Nevertheless, in his mind he strove to project a vision of reality that effectively synthesized the content revealed by the film objects with his formalist inspired style of communicating it.

While Vertov succeeded in creating a dynamic style of portraying life captured by the camera, it was his artistic rival Sergei Eisenstein that succeeded in devising an approach to film that was able to achieve a portrayal of reality more consistent with the tenets of dialectical materialism. Although Vertov insisted that the documentary film represented the only approach to cinema consistent with Lenin's vision for the medium,

Eisenstein was able to transform the fictional plot into an incisive visual record of the historical stages of proletarian struggle that culminated in the October revolution. While there is no denying that formalist thought influenced Eisenstein's film theories, his style was merely a means to an end. Eisenstein believed that to capture accurately the conflicts inherent in historical events, he needed to devise a style that reflected these antagonisms and presented them on the screen in a comprehensible form. To this end, Eisenstein's formalism was also a means by which to synthesize historical content with visual style; however, unlike with Vertov, Eisenstein was interested in organizing visual images to project reality as it existed, with all of its inherent conflicts, rather than constructing a reality that was more an idealization of objective reality rather than an accurate reflection of an actually existing one.

Despite the attempts by avant-garde filmmakers to devise a film aesthetic consistent with Marxian aesthetics, their efforts were complicated by political maneuvers within the Bolshevik party that transpired around them. Because the avant-garde borrowed techniques from aesthetic theories alien to Marxism, their art was always suspect as being the product of an alien class ideology. This impression was difficult to overcome for many filmmakers because notwithstanding the revolutionary content of many of their films, the formalist style used to communicate this content was branded as incomprehensible to the average worker or peasant viewer. The suppression of the avant-garde films in the early to mid 1930s did not represent a logical outcome of the party's Marxist orientation, but rather a bureaucratic reaction to the diverse cultural environment of the twenties that it could no longer tolerate.

Because Lenin understood that the foundations for the construction of a socialist society were provided by the cultural achievements of previous societies, the party during the twenties outlined a policy towards writers, artists, and filmmakers that reflected Lenin's views. Consequently, the twenties were an extraordinary period of artistic creation, which reflected the enormous outpouring of creative energy unleashed by revolution and the victory of the Russian proletariat. However, as events in Europe failed to produce a proletarian victory in Germany, non-Leninist tendencies grew within the Bolshevik party that reflected the enormous pressure brought to bear on the Soviet Union as a result of capitalist stabilization in Germany and elsewhere. The Bolshevik leadership after 1923, represented by the triumvirate of Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Stalin, began to orient party policy to the perceived reality that the Soviet Union would be surrounded by hostile capitalist nations indefinitely. The party's adoption of Stalin's perverse notion of "socialism in one country" radically altered the proletarian view developed by Marx and Lenin that insisted that socialism could only be realized once the proletariat completed the arduous task of world revolution. As a result, the party's leadership was circumvented by a bureaucratic caste intent on accommodating itself to the world market and, thus, the bourgeois leadership of capitalist Europe.

The consequences of bureaucratic Thermidor for Soviet society were profound. As the regime abandoned its task of expanding the proletarian revolution into Germany and the rest of Europe, the party leadership and the state bureaucracy began to adopt a more autocratic style of leadership that reflected its political insecurities. By the 1930s this resulted in the regime's abandonment of many of its social policies that benefited women and the nationalities in favor of a return to more traditional Russian values and

chauvinistic attitudes towards the non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union. And, of course, these attitudes did not fail to affect the cultural climate that had once nurtured a diverse and vibrant community of artists, writers, and filmmakers that sought to challenge the attitudes and traditions of the past with their art.

Many of the avant-garde directors, particularly Eisenstein, achieved international recognition for their films produced in the Soviet Union during the silent era. It was understood by film critics of the time that the Soviet avant-garde were developing techniques that revolutionized the manner in which audiences viewed films. Furthermore, most of the avant-garde directors were using their films to popularize Russia's revolution to the peoples of the world. In the Soviet Union, however, critics and party ideologists alike attacked the films of the avant-garde as preoccupied with experimentation and form to the detriment of political content. This was particularly true once the Stalinist faction consolidated its power and initiated the first Five-Year Plan in 1928. The Five-Year Plan severely disrupted the Soviet economy under the NEP and required blind obedience by party cadres and the masses in order to be implemented. For this reason the party required that all art, and especially film, conform to its aesthetic decrees, which translated into subordinating the initiative of the artist to the political requirements of the party.

The party's establishment of socialist realism as the official aesthetic doctrine of the Soviet Union hardly signified an attempt by the party to redirect artistic creation in a direction more consistent with Marxism, but rather represented a cynical attempt by party ideologists to stifle independent creative voices and ensure that Soviet art serve the political aspirations of the party. The result was disastrous for avant-garde cinema.

Directors either had their scripts rejected outright or their films ignored due to inadequate distribution by the state film industry. Eisenstein's experimental documentary *Que Viva Mexico* was never made in his lifetime, and Vertov would see *Three Songs about Lenin* scorned by the party leadership and discretely swept under the rug by Soviet theaters. Vertov's career effectively ended with the production of *Three Songs*, as he was subsequently unable to have any of his scripts approved for production by the state film apparatus. Eisenstein would go on to make two more films; however, neither of which achieved the artistic quality of his silent films. And although the avant-garde was extinguished by 1935, the suppression of these films was not a foregone conclusion dictated to history by iron necessity. The course of Soviet art could have been significantly different had the Left Opposition succeeded in preventing the bureaucratic degeneration of the party and the Soviet state.

It is often precarious for a historian to discuss what might have been in the inexorable march of history, but in the case of the Soviet Union during the 1920s, the Left Opposition presented a viable alternative to the policies of the Stalinist leadership that may very well have resulted in an entirely different formulation of policy towards art and artists over the course of the 1930s. The argument can be made for the simply reason that the Trotsky and others of the Left Opposition helped to formulate cultural policy during the twenties, particularly the party's relationship to the fellow travelers. Trotsky understood that the proletariat would have neither the time nor the aptitude to forge a proletarian art until the time when capitalism was defeated throughout the globe. Until then, the proletariat would be compelled to indulge the artistic tastes of the intelligentsia in order that they may learn the techniques upon which a proletarian art would emerge.

For Trotsky, it was vital that Soviet society encourage the artistic creations of the fellow travelers in order for the proletariat to appreciate the techniques and forms devised by the creative elite. Furthermore, he realized that Marxism had little to contribute to the evaluation of the various forms and techniques utilized by writers, artists, and filmmakers to convey what they understood to be objective truths. Had the avant-garde enjoyed the political leadership of the Left Opposition during the thirties, they may have been given the opportunity to further develop their film theories and devise methods to incorporate the advent of sound with their respective methods of montage. Trotsky and his comrades understood that there was a place in Soviet society for a plurality of artistic styles and forms as long as their creators supported the revolutionary project of the Soviet working class. And since the avant-garde directors overwhelmingly supported the revolution, their fate as artists may not have resulted in the denunciation and repression that befell upon them under the autocratic and puritanical Stalinist leadership.

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