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Alternative Empires

*Soviet Montage Cinema,
The British Documentary Movement
& Colonialism*

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D - (between pages 108 and 109). "Project of a Monument to Dziga Vertov". Caricature by Anton Lavinsky, first published in Sovietsky Ekran, January 1927, and reprinted in Jay Leyda, Kino [1960], London, George Allen & Unwin, 1983, p. 221.

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Summary

This is a study of Soviet montage cinema and the British documentary movement of the 1930s which brings together two usually divergent methodologies: postcolonial theory and "new" film history. The first chapter develops new insights into Eisenstein's October and Vertov's The Man With the Movie Camera. The second analyses two less well-known Vertov films, One Sixth of the Earth and Three Songs of Lenin, from the perspective of postcolonial theory. The third considers Pudovkin's Storm Over Asia and traces its reception in both the Soviet Union and England. The fourth and fifth chapters expand general issues and themes raised by the first two, and pursue specific questions raised by the third. These final chapters resituate the work of the British documentary movement in relation to the culture of British imperialism. This shift of focus entails the analysis of the production and contemporary critical reception of a number of films which have been marginalised in most retrospective historical accounts of the movement.

By recontextualising these two groups of films, this study attempts to demonstrate how their various representations of the non-Western world are intertwined with and necessarily involve considering other issues, such as: periodisation within film history; the "influence" of Soviet montage on the British documentary movement; the construction of authorship; the division between "high" and "low" culture; the relationship between politics and film aesthetics; the postcolonial challenge to Marxism; cinematic internationalism. The first two chapters also integrate an ongoing critique of certain trends within post-1968 film theory and criticism, which developed in close association with a retrieval and revaluation of Soviet montage cinema and Soviet avant-garde culture of the 1920s. One of the aims of this thesis is to question some of the assumptions of this work, whilst at the same time demonstrating that historical research, even as it attempts to reconstruct former contexts, need not consign its objects of study to the past, but can be used instead to raise questions relevant to the present. In this respect, the thesis tries to remain closer to the spirit of post-1968 than does much of the more recent, "new" historical research into Soviet cinema and the British documentary movement, to which it is nevertheless greatly indebted.

CHAPTER 7

Montage, Modernity And Ethnicity

CHAPTER 7

I Eisenstein in Western Film Criticism

If Walter Benjamin's famous aphorism about the need to repeatedly "wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it" is to be taken seriously, there can be no exceptions, however cherished the tradition and however painful the process for those who have good reason to defend it.¹ The demise of the Soviet Union, along with postcolonial theory's challenge to Marxism, place a question mark over even the greatest achievements of the world's first revolutionary cinema. These now stand in need of radical reassessment, a wresting away from conformism which is both critical and at the same time demonstrates the contemporaneity of the issues they broach. This chapter will analyse two of the most ambitious examples of Soviet montage cinema: October (Sergei Eisenstein, Sovkino, 1928) and The Man With the Movie Camera (Dziga Vertov, VUFKU, 1928). Insofar as they bear directly upon these films, the theoretical writings of their directors will also be considered. These two films have been selected in order to demonstrate the centrality of orientalism to the Soviet montage canon, and to show how and why Western criticism has hitherto refrained from exploring this dimension.

For a variety of reasons, to be examined in the second half of this thesis, the Western film-theoretical tradition canonised Eisenstein with precipitate haste. He has subsequently been served back and forth like a tennis-ball; the target for lucid polemics, and the object of passionate defences. The ferocity of the debate suggests that more than just the reputation of a single director was and still is at stake. What

Ian Christie has described as Victor Perkins' 1972 "roasting" of the stone lions in Potemkin provides a convenient point of departure.²

Perkins' Film as Film took as one of its polemical targets what it saw as a reigning orthodoxy within English film studies: the Paul Rotha/Roger Manvell/Ernst Lindgren advocacy of montage as the basis of film art. The stone lions animated into movement through editing at the end of Potemkin's Odessa Steps sequence are refuted on several counts. In contrast to those Hollywood films which achieve both "credibility and significance", Perkins argues that this instance from Potemkin fails because the lions are not drawn from the diegetic world of the fiction, and that the only reason for their presence in the film is to achieve an overtly contrived effect. Moreover, the meaning they are intended to convey is not clear; an arbitrary choice of imagery results in vagueness.³

Interestingly, although it derives from a different philosophical background, Jean Mitry's slightly earlier Esthetique et Psychologie du Cinema, which extends and develops lines of argument opened up by Bazin's comments on Soviet cinema, arrives at very similar conclusions with regard to October. For Mitry, many of the more "intellectual" sequences in the film constitute an illegitimate use of the medium. They offend against cinema's nature, which he defines in terms of a dialogue between analogical representation of reality and aesthetic construction, by veering too far towards the latter. Since film is first of all a "concrete art", levels of meaning should only be developed "to the side" of the narrative and not independently of it. Cinema cannot sustain the same type

or degree of logical, abstract argumentation that spoken or written language can. October overreaches itself in this direction, and Eisenstein's unrealised ambition to film Marx's Capital would only have proceeded further into a dead end.⁴

Mitry adheres to the grand tradition of making essentialist judgements on what is appropriate or intrinsic to the medium of cinema per se. Film as Film seeks to avoid normativeness and to judge different categories of film by establishing criteria appropriate to each. It therefore contravenes its own recommendations by applying aesthetic standards to Soviet montage cinema which elsewhere in the book are developed almost exclusively in relation to Hollywood films. Perkin's critique is more valid of the prescriptive English theoretical tradition which formed around Soviet montage cinema than of that cinema itself. Potemkin's stone lions are censured for failing to achieve what they did not set out to do.

More recent scholarship, utilising the wider range of material which has since become available in translation, has sought to delineate the exact nature and purpose of Eisenstein's films. Critics working within the radicalised post-1968 tradition of film scholarship, most notably Jacques Aumont and Peter Wollen, have "taken Eisenstein at his word" and attempted to explicate his aesthetic from within.⁵ Montage as a theoretical concept never simply or solely involved editing, but rather was always about achieving a carefully directed overall intellectual and emotional affect through the coordination of different cinematic elements. Conflictual relations within and

between shots are privileged at the local level inasmuch as they serve this purpose. The construction of a coherent diegetic world is of secondary importance, or even something explicitly to be avoided. Eisenstein's and most other Soviet montage films were not designed as fictional narratives. They refer to histories, information, arguments, anecdotes, colloquialisms, slogans, and aspects of Soviet ideology which it was assumed, perhaps incorrectly, their audiences would already be familiar with, to a greater or lesser degree. Amplification is the aim, and therefore Potemkin's stone lions, which literalise, as Perkins observes, the Russian expression "the very stones roared" (equivalent to "all hell broke loose"), are valid insofar as they are vivid. Their primary function here is to agitate the spectator, to further "pump up" emotions which will already have been pointed in the "correct" direction by the preceding massacre on the steps. Certainly, Eisenstein is not a subtle director; in his work there is always, quite purposefully, a level of directness which does not need to be deciphered. The aim is to energise the spectator, not to contemplate the significance of a fictional world. If the shots of the stone lions are at fault, it is only to the extent to which they fail to contribute to this goal.

Given this recourse to explication from within, the post-1968 reaction against critiques of Eisenstein developed certain blind spots of its own. As David Bordwell has recently pointed out, the era which announced the "death of the auteur" also permitted a high degree of unmediated intentionality to live on and even prosper in critical assessments of avant-garde directors' work.⁶ Eisenstein and Vertov in particular were rarely subjected to the indignities of structuralist or symptomatic

criticism. In part, Bordwell's point must be qualified by taking into account the history outlined above and the often very different production and reception contexts surrounding avant-garde as opposed to Hollywood cinema.⁷ In addition, "founding fathers" were required in order to ground and legitimate the practice of contemporary avant-gardes. The post-1968 wave of criticism was also linked to a continuing pedagogic need to outline the intentions which inform relatively unfamiliar types of film practice.

Now, however, a new threshold has been reached, precipitated as much by developments outside as by developments within the discipline - insofar as the two can be separated. Put simply, Soviet cinema can never again be seen in quite the same light after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Aumont and others have provided the necessary explication from within the Eisensteinian system, as have Annette Michelson and Vlada Petric for Vertov.⁸ However, establishing the relevant "internal" criteria for a film practice, based largely in this case on stated authorial intention, is only ever a first step. The implications of film practices for the wider social situations within which they originate and subsequently circulate also need to be considered. Only by pursuing such questions, which are simultaneously political and historical, can criticism fully do justice to the Soviet montage tradition today.

October has been well served by recent historical criticism. Richard Taylor has researched Soviet responses to the film and translated documents which trace the critical and popular reaction to its release in 1928.⁹ Concern over its

perceived inaccessibility led to October almost inevitably being dragged into the controversial debate around this issue at the 1928 Soviet Congress on Cinema. Questions raised there, as to whether the film was inherently inaccessible or perhaps could have found a wider and more appreciative audience given better distribution, different exhibition formats, and a longer-term commitment by those in positions of power to the type of cinema October represented, require further detailed exploration. Yet since the main issue here is subsequent Western critical response to the film, it could justifiably be argued that a great deal has been done, primarily by post-1968 critics, to finally render this film more accessible. This is indeed true, but it is precisely because of the prestige October now enjoys that the question of accessibility needs to be reformulated. Within Western European and American film studies the film has, in a sense, become almost *too* familiar, too accessible. A close textual analysis, one sensitive to the now partially occluded discourses and intertextual references it activates, can help elucidate October's precise mode of address. ^{To whom} ~~Who exactly,~~ and on what basis, does it grant full access to its vision of modernity, and is this modernity ultimately predicated on the exclusion or marginalisation of others?

II Russia, Modernity and Asia

Marshall Berman's long discussion of the "modernism of underdevelopment" in All That Is Solid Melts Into Air provides a preliminary starting-point for this kind of investigation. Importantly, and unusually for Eisenstein criticism in the West, it situates October within the distinctive cultural tradition associated with Russia's erstwhile capital, St. Petersburg. For Berman, October represents a temporary, triumphant high-point in the endless cycle of human self-development inaugurated by the global process of economic and social modernisation. The film charts and recreates for its viewers the most affirmative aspect of the cultural experience of modernity; the passage, on a mass scale, from autocratic stagnation and "modernisation from above" (represented in the opening sequence by the strenuous labour in armaments factories, workers enslaved to machinery creating further machines of oppression) to "modernisation from below"; ordinary citizens seizing control of the modern environment and determining their own destiny. Russian culture, argues Berman, offers an unparalleled insight into these themes because of its peripheral situation throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century in relation to capitalist development in Western Europe and America. This leads to:

The modernism of underdevelopment..forced to build on fantasies and dreams of modernity, to nourish itself on an intimacy and a struggle with mirages and ghosts..It turns in on itself and tortures itself for its inability to singlehandedly make history - or else throws itself into extravagant attempts to take on itself the whole burden of history..the bizarre reality

from which this modernism grows, and the unbearable pressures under which it moves and lives..infuse it with a desperate incandescence that Western modernism, so much more at home in its world, can rarely hope to match.¹⁰

Berman's discussion is important because it underlines the need to relate October to pre- as well as postrevolutionary Russian culture. He locates the film within a tradition which stretches from Pushkin's The Bronze Horseman (1833) to Bely's Petersburg (1916), its immediate predecessor. It offers a broadly historical and persuasive way of accounting for the alternately agonising and exhilarating intensity of so much modern Russian high cultural production. Yet it remains a somewhat skewed, Eurocentric approach by failing to develop any connections between the struggle for modernity it celebrates and another, concurrent tradition also closely associated with St. Petersburg: the modern Russian quest to formulate a national identity, inescapably defined in terms of an identification with or relationship to Asia.

Asia is essential, implicitly or explicitly, to definitions of Russia for several reasons: the long history of Mongol and Tartar domination during most of the Middle Ages; the close geographical proximity of Russia to its nineteenth and twentieth century Asian colonies; the country's own perceived "backward" or borderline status in relation to the rest of Europe. Hence the vividness and prominence or underlying structural centrality of notions about Asia in conceptualisations and representations of Russia and its destiny provide another reason as to why Russian modernism might seem less "at home in its world" than its Western counterparts.

Milan Hauner, in What is Asia to Us?, discusses the enormously diverse range of thinking produced by Russian intellectuals concerned with this question. One possible answer was to make a virtue out of the supposed affinity between Russia and Asia; for example in the work of Nikolai Fyodorov (1828-1903) and Sergei Yuzhakov (1849-1910) British imperialism is condemned as usurious and detrimental to those it exploits; the necessary antidote is Russia's more benign type of gradual overland expansion which fosters a natural, organic alliance between the Russian peasantry and its Asian equivalents, based upon similar agrarian and communitarian traditions. Dostoevsky's pronouncement in 1881 on what needs to be done regarding Asia is less concerned with justifying expansionism in terms of mutual benefit: "In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, whereas to Asia we shall go as masters. In Europe we were Asiatics, whereas in Asia we, too, are Europeans...Build two railroads: begin with the one to Siberia, and then to Central Asia, and at once you will see the consequences." At the furthest extreme stands the work of Vladimir Solovyov who, returning to the theme of Russia as the threatened barrier between East and West in poems such as Panmongolism (1894), and his last essay The Antichrist (1900), predicts a new Japanese-led Mongol invasion of Europe.¹¹

Despite the diversity of these positions, all relate to Russia's emergence as an imperial power in the nineteenth century: the first two as part of a debate over the nature and purpose of that development; the last to the threat Japan's ascendance posed to that status. They also stress the singularity of Russia: caught in a neither/nor zone between Europe and Asia and experiencing elements of attraction to,

identification with, or repulsion from both. This dilemma of national self-definition problematises Berman's schema of historical development through cultural modernism, and further explains why it is played out with such intensity within the Petersburg tradition. Petersburg, founded in 1703 by Peter I, also symbolically and literally epitomises and incarnates the problems and contradictions resulting from the effort, launched by this great *Westernising* as well as modernising monarch, to open a "window to Europe" and catapult Russia out of its "backward", semi-Asiatic past. Berman's argument relies upon a notion of endless cultural hybridisation as the motor of historical self-renewal. The modern city is seen as the supreme locus for this process, where the meeting and merging of all kinds of differences undermines all prior assumptions and generates new modes of existence. However, his sole, univocal opposition between alternating periods of oppressive, forced "modernisation from above", and spontaneous, positive "modernisation from below", does not adequately take into account the possibility that the connections and positions of domination and subordination linking various social groups may not be reducible to this bipolar axis. Berman's argument is limited by prior assumptions of its own: power is defined as an instrument, something which can only be accrued, seized, or lost, rather than as a set of shifting interrelationships. His discussion shares in the more overt denial by the Russian orientalist surveyed above of any right to truly independent (or equally interdependent) self-development by dominated areas or different cultures, including peasant and regional cultures, which exist both inside and outside the metropolis, and within Russia as well as in the colonies which surround it. Economic modernisation

may well be, as he argues, an irrevocably global process, but Berman's notion of "modernisation from below" overgeneralises and ignores the hierarchies, antagonisms and incommensurable experiences which can persist or develop during even its most progressive phases.

III October: Cultural Transformation

One way of broaching these issues in a more detailed way is through a comparative analysis which situates October in relation to the Russian Symbolist culture that preceded it and which Eisenstein grew up with. As Yuri Tsivian has recently pointed out in his ground-breaking essay on this topic, "almost all analyses of October tend to regard the film as a closed textual entity, with little or no attention being paid to whatever extratextual connotation a particular sequence might have."¹² His work draws attention to a whole range of citations which hitherto went unnoticed or were designated as obscure by Western Soviet cinema specialists. This oversight, deriving to some extent from post-1968 Eisenstein critics' bias towards explication from within his own theoretical system, also forms part of a larger process whereby intellectual and cultural trends with pre-1917 roots have been repressed to the same extent that those trends which were ascendant in the immediate post-Revolutionary period have been exalted. For example, Alexander Blok, the outstanding Symbolist poet, arguably commanded a wider audience than Mayakovsky, at least until his early death in 1921. Andrei Bely, author of Petersburg, a novel Eisenstein was very familiar with, was also an eminent Symbolist who emigrated in the early 1920s but later returned to Russia and was intermittently active until his death in 1934. October itself demonstrates some of the many direct and indirect links between Symbolism and later waves of the avant-garde.¹³

As several scholars have noted, Asia became an almost obsessive theme for the Symbolist generation. Bely's novel, which unfolds over ten days in the turbulent year 1905, links hallucinatory Asiatic imagery to apocalyptic forebodings about the imminent collapse of Russian civilisation and the rise of seething, anonymous revolutionary masses. Blok's later poetry also shares similar concerns, culminating in his valedictory The Scythians (1918), which reworks themes and imagery derived from Solovyov.¹⁴ Both writers, and Petersburg in particular, constitute part of October's intertextual frame of reference, and this was noted by certain contemporary Soviet critics. Adrian Piotrovsky argued that these expressed ideological as well as stylistic instabilities. He wrote:

It is clear that in the film there is a lack of co-ordination between three or four essentially different stylistic devices..[one of which is]..aesthetic symbolism (when the statues, the porcelain and the crystal become the centre of the picture). This stylistic diversity is not just a matter of form, it is rooted in various artistic traditions and the world-view that they each conceal..we are reminded not just of the symbolism of the Tsar's palace and of autocratic Petersburg that derives from Blok and Bryusov but also of the closely related line of Russian aestheticism that is associated with the World of Art group. Thus, beneath the Constructivist exterior of a materialistically conceived October there lurk the vestiges of the decadent and outdated styles of our art.¹⁵

Piotrovsky's comments shed new light on the film's audacious and multivalent opening sequence. The toppling of Tsar

Alexander III's statue announces and underlines October's methods and many of its major thematic concerns. It demonstrates that the film which is going to be projected on the screen is the result of the constructive process of montage. Perceptual and emotional affect, produced by conflictual relations between shots and elements within them, as well as by the exhilaration of depicted destruction, is accompanied by a deductive chain of logical reasoning. The film's critique of autocracy, of religion, and its association of the old order with statuary begin here.

In addition to replicating an image from an early Vertov newsreel, thereby cheekily contributing to their debate about the permissibility of filming staged or reconstructed events, this opening also refers to the conclusion of Alexander Blok's play The King in the Square (1906).¹⁶ The sequence is famously protracted, establishing a pattern which is developed throughout the first half of the film: material is interpolated, often of an "intellectual", commentative nature, resulting in what Russian Formalist theory would describe as a severe and highly noticeable "retardation" of the narrative.¹⁷ In October this has a dual effect; it heightens anticipation and suspense whilst at the same time downgrading the diegetic coherence of the actions narrated. The narration constructs events which are ultimately neither fictional nor "documentary"; rather, they are presented as exemplars of a historical process and lessons in how to make history. Hence Eisenstein's famous remark about "the emancipation of closed action from its conditioning by time and space".¹⁸

October attempts to go beyond either fictional or non-fictional modes of spatial construction. Rosalind Krauss has argued that "there are in [the film], in almost metronomic alternation with the "documentary" spaces, spaces that are rigorously, even fanatically artficed or formalised."¹⁹ She traces in detail the oscillation between these two types of filmic space up to the "raising of the bridge" sequence, the first major setback for the revolutionary process being narrated by the film and also the first point at which the narrative itself seems to have reached a structural impasse. She concludes:

In the image of that upended bridge, the modes of documentary and formal (or constructed) film space, between which the preceding whole sequence has alternated, are finally collapsed..and condemned. To the extent that the field of planking puts one in contact with the actual object, the shot carries the weight of "documentary", and to the extent that the bridge's surface is made to appear synonymous with the surface of the screen, the shot's impact is simultaneously "formal". But the content of the shot - the bridge as a barricade preventing escape - carries with it Eisenstein's criticism of both those modes of filmic vision, insofar as they stand for the terms of historical perception... The rest of October is a gradual movement toward the realization of the Bolshevik position: that the exercise of power belongs to those who go beyond what is given - who act to seize power and to hold it. And the great filmic equivalent that Eisenstein wanted to draw was between the leap of revolutionary consciousness which transcends the limits of the real to open up access to the future, and the

leap of visual consciousness which goes beyond the normal bounds of a film space understood either as the reality of documentary or the reality of "art".²⁰

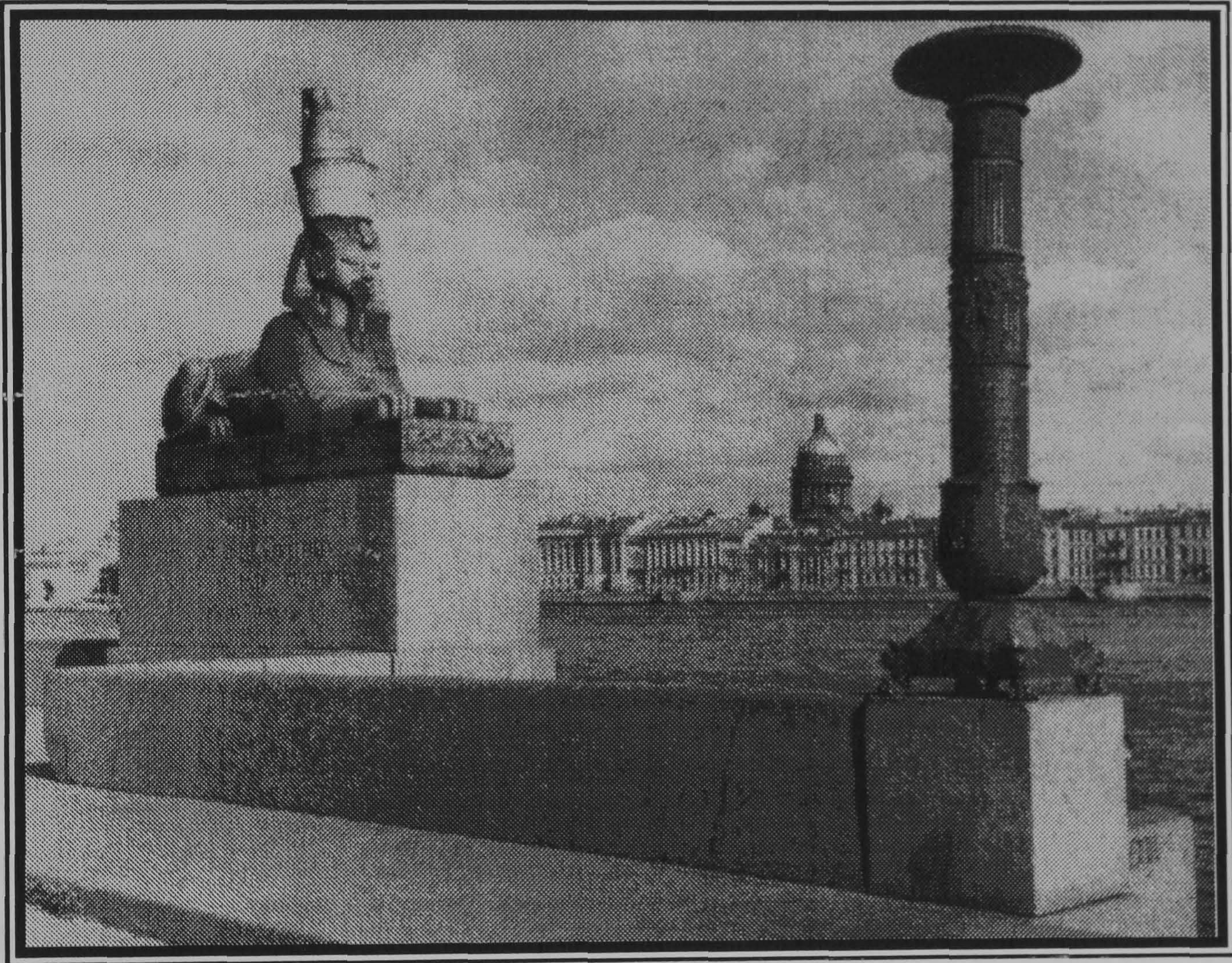
Whether or not Eisenstein's aesthetic strategies were successful is a topic which has provoked much debate. What is remarkable is the extent to which Symbolist or orientalist references in October proliferate whenever a particularly important moment in the process of attempting to leap toward revolutionary consciousness is arrived at. It is as if, interwoven with the attempt to move beyond predefined modes of filmic representation, October is also striving to excise remnants from pre-Revolutionary culture which seem to hold back or threaten the progress of the Revolution and yet seem indispensable to its narration. Tsivian, contrasting the currently available versions of the film with a recently discovered working script, clarifies some apparent obscurities by elucidating the Symbolist references contained within it. This script confirms that October involved a productive dialogue with Russian Symbolism which attempted to move beyond its positions and principles; for example, by beginning where Blok's play concludes. Nevertheless, Tsivian stresses that:

You can control your message but it is more difficult to control your vocabulary, which is something you absorb from your cultural milieu before you are capable of criticising it. The October Revolution was not the first Russian Revolution but the third, the first being the Revolution of 1905. In 1905 the Russian literary scene was dominated by the Symbolists and it was they who established the basic symbolic

*vocabulary for this and for any subsequent revolution. Eisenstein was not a Symbolist as far as his message was concerned, but he used Symbolist vocabulary to formulate his message.*²¹

An image from the Symbolist lexicon appears shortly before the "raising of the bridge" sequence, when a stone sphinx is seen in the background of a brief shot introducing a young Bolshevik protecting a banner who is subsequently stabbed to death by a group of bourgeois women wielding razor-sharp umbrellas. The end of this sequence is intercut with the beginning of the "raising of the bridge", towards the climax of which the sphinx is shown again, this time in two progressively larger close-ups of its weather-beaten face and famously enigmatic expression dominating the frame.

Western critics who are pro-Eisenstein, for the good historical reasons already outlined, have tended either to "tidy up" after him, making sure he is politically correct and thoroughly Marxist, or to attribute obscurities or seemingly idiosyncratic elements in his films directly to him as an individual. Murray Sperber, in his analysis of October, sees a Pharaoh, and interprets it as a literalisation of a common Russian epithet for the hated Tsarist secret police.²² Noël Burch, in his magisterial essay on Eisenstein, is obviously baffled by "the introduction in the bridge sequence of October of a battered stone face: an attraction effect which undoubtedly had a very precise meaning in Eisenstein's mind."²³ Only Andrew Britton and Judith Mayne specifically identify the image as a sphinx and read it against the grain of the text, seeing it as indicative of the film's problematic construction of gender and sexuality.²⁴



These various observations provide an interesting example of how different critical agendas can impinge upon the actual perception or recollection of a film.

None of these readings are necessarily invalid, but the image's immediate reference is almost certainly to the epilogue in Bely's Petersburg, where the novel's protagonist has left Russia to study in Egypt and is visiting the pyramids in Giza. "Before him is an immense moldering head that is on the verge of collapsing into sandstone thousands of years old. Nikolai Appolonovich is sitting before the Sphinx...Culture is a moldering head: everything in it has died; nothing has remained."²⁵ In a review of October, Bely spotted the connection between the "raising of the bridge" sequence and his own work, commenting on the horse which hangs suspended from the bridge as it rises and finally falls head first into the Neva.²⁶ St. Petersburg's most famous monument is the equestrian statue of Peter I located in Senate Square, and Bely's novel contains a prophetic vision of the horse rising from its plinth and galloping into the air. This splits the country in two, exploding the uneasy balance between East and West which defines Russia and instigating a wave of destruction and violence; natural disasters and a resurgent invasion by Mongol forces.²⁷ These fervidly apocalyptic imaginings derive partly from Solovyov. That they seem to have been confirmed for Bely by the 1917 Revolution is indicated by the sentence he added in the 1922 revision of Petersburg to the passage quoted above: "There will be an explosion: everything will be swept away."²⁸

October similarly points to the inevitability of everything prior to 1917 being swept away, but differs from Petersburg in the sense that it envisions this not as a dreadful, unavoidable calamity, but rather as a necessary and welcome process which will lead to the birth of a new and qualitatively different culture. The "raising of the bridge" sequence employs and reworks Symbolist vocabulary in order to develop a less pessimistic representation of the imminent dissolution of the old culture. At one level it is a rejoinder to Petersburg, an attempt to displace the major narrative prior to itself to exhibit a comparable depth of intellectual and artistic ambition in its vision of Russian history. It reprises the novel's imagery and literalises the metaphor of Russia being split in two, albeit with more emphasis here on the division between classes; workers' districts being located mainly on the outlying islands, separated from the centres of power which the bridge controls access to. Petersburg presages a splitting apart, a collapse of precariously balanced opposing forces; October crystallises a contradiction, between the old and the new, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and the rest of the narrative attributes a positive value to the latter as the class with the potential to transcend all contradictions. Yet for Symbolism the East/West opposition operates at a deeper level than class conflict, suffusing almost every page of Bely's novel, and whilst October reverses this priority, the shots of the sphinx nevertheless suggest an underlying riddle: what is the orient's significance within the process of accession to power which the film narrates?

The fact that the sphinx is a statue aligns it with forces hostile to the Revolution, hostile to Russia's future, and associated with the old order of things, along an axis which includes the Tsar's statue and the Napoleon figurines which appear later in the film. The senseless brutality of oriental despotism is also suggested by the sphinx's inclusion in a sequence dramatising an instance of particularly bloody repression. At the same time, the sphinx also augurs the end of the established culture, a culture predicated upon the violent suppression of the masses, the Bolsheviks, and their message. This is underlined, once the bridge has been raised, by the transition from an overhead shot of the young Bolshevik lying sprawled across the banner he died trying to protect, to the victorious bourgeoisie gleefully hurling copies of Pravda into the river. In Bely's novel the sphinx, as well as a whole host of other references to the orient, represents the threat of impending catastrophe. October celebrates this catastrophe: the sphinx still signifies destruction and negation, which have to occur in order for history to move on.

The sphinx in the "raising of the bridge" sequence raises complex questions which the remainder of the film does not resolve. Diegetically it cannot be located on either side of the spatial and social divisions highlighted by the sequence: intellectually it serves as a bridge between them even as it announces the need to sever all links, to move beyond the old bourgeois culture's values. Paradoxically, the imminent transformation and transcendence of this prerevolutionary culture is signified by a symbol whose range of connotations, although mobilised for different reasons, derive largely from it and pass relatively unaltered into the new one, forming an

integral part of the "leap into revolutionary consciousness" the film strives to produce.

IV October: Religion

Krauss suggests that after this sequence the narrative proceeds without any further serious impediments towards the realisation of Bolshevik power through a concomitant "leap into revolutionary consciousness". There are however at least two more major obstacles to be overcome before this is the case, and both of these again involve confronting problems posed by Asia. They occur at the beginning and end of the famous "God and Country" sequence, the initial part of which is constructed as follows:

- (1) Intertitle: "In the name of God and the country!"
- (2) "In the name.."
- (3) "..OF GOD"
- (4) Low angle shot of the top of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Spilled Blood, St. Petersburg.
- (5) Top half of a statuette of Christ, surrounded by cherubs, beams radiating from behind.
- (6) Canted low angle shot of the church, making it appear to slant 45 degrees to the left.
- (7) As above, closer to the church and making it appear to slant to the right.
- (8) Slightly longer shot of the Christ statuette.
- (9) Closer, canted low angle shot of the top of the church, making it appear to slant to the left and foregrounding one of its spiked cupolas.
- (10) Even closer, canted low angle shot of the church, spiked cupola slanting to the right and dominating the frame.
- (11) Top half of a many-armed statuette of the Hindu deity Shiva.

- (12) Longer shot of the whole of the Shiva statuette.
- (13) Canted low angle shot of the top part of the wall and dome of the mosque in Kamennostrovsky Prospekt, St. Petersburg, making it appear to slant 45 degrees to the left.
- (14) As above, making it appear to slant to the right.
- (15) Low angle shot of the mosque.
- (16) to (33) A series of shots with black backgrounds of various other statuettes and masks of deities and idols, some of which are positioned to echo the left/right canted framing employed in some of the shots of the cathedral and mosque.

Brian Henderson, in an essay assessing the achievements of classical film theory, describes Eisenstein as a theorist of the fragment, for whom "cinematic form means precise ordering of the viewer's emotions and..cannot be conceived or spoken of except for relatively short stretches."²⁹ Kristin Thompson has likewise pointed out that in writing on his own films Eisenstein generally "dealt only with individual scenes because they provided examples for his theoretical statements."³⁰ Much Eisenstein criticism has followed the same path, analysing individual groups of shots or single sequences in relation to Eisenstein's theoretical writings without situating either within wider social contexts, or even just to the narratives they form part of or refer to. This has been particularly true of the shots listed above.

The tendency to focus on isolated fragments, linked to the "internalist" trend within post-1968 Eisenstein criticism, has resulted in a certain tension with regard to authorship.

Gregory Taylor argues that this tension has led to different critics emphasising or conflating different Eisensteins, such as "Eisenstein the genius and/or aesthetic visionary..Eisenstein the Constructivist..Eisenstein the Marxist, the cultural and political revolutionary, the champion of dialectical materialism as a determinant of cinematic form."³¹ For example, in the important 1973 "Eisenstein/Brakhage" issue of the American journal Artforum, Annette Michelson's essay stresses both his exceptionality and his typicality, locating him as one of those "men [sic] whose innovative functions and special intensity of energy are radical, defining the possibilities of the medium for their contemporaries," and as one of those artists whose "notions of their art are philosophically informed..shaped by the ideological structure in which they are formed."³² In the same issue Noel Carroll, focusing specifically on the "God and Country" sequence, emphasises the exemplary nature of Eisenstein's work, the way in which it is "not only thematically but also formally committed to Marxism",³³

This oscillation between Eisenstein the radical innovator and Eisenstein the truly authentic embodiment of a "pure" Soviet Marxism feeds back into the romanticisation of 1920s Soviet culture from which it also partly stems. Certain Soviet artists in the twenties were freer, in many important ways, to create and innovate than in the Stalinist period, but freedom is always a relative concept and, as such, needs to be theorised and historicised. In order to be true to the spirit of critical consciousness which the "God and Country" sequence attempts to inculcate, this locus classicus of Eisensteinian intellectual montage must itself be situated in a way which

accounts for the historicity of its uniqueness. Eisenstein wrote his memoirs in the hope that the texture of his life and work could be understood as first and foremost the result of a continuous process of self-development and opportunity which went "beyond "the historical background," beyond "man [sic] in his epoch," and beyond "history reflected in consciousness."³⁴ The first two formulations are clearly reductive when any specific individual's work is studied; the third can be productive only if an author's development, in Raymond Williams' words, "can be grasped as a complex of active relations, within which the emergence of an individual project, and the real history of other contemporary projects and of the developing forms and structures, are continuously and substantially interactive."³⁵

If Eisenstein is rematerialised and resituated as a flesh and blood, rather than an idealised author, very much alive but very definitely constrained, as well as empowered, by historically locatable discourses and particular production contexts, then a different way of reading the "God and Country" sequence becomes possible. Intentionality is not eschewed but neither is it inordinately privileged. The October project was initiated by a Party committee: Eisenstein and his production team were diverted from work on The General Line and assigned to this higher profile assignment following the critical success of The Battleship Potemkin in Western Europe and America. Several epics celebrating the impending tenth anniversary of the Revolution were commissioned at this time, and Eisenstein was widely regarded within the Soviet Union as the greatest director, closely followed by Pudovkin, to have emerged since 1917.

Both filmmakers were granted extensive access to locations within Leningrad and to the city's personnel and resources. Such prestigious commissions carried with them a whole range of obligations as well as privileges.

The "Gods" part of October's "God and Country" sequence is often seen as "entirely" Eisenstein's own invention, but it would in fact have been surprising had the film *not* included some sort of attack upon religion. Trotsky and later Stalin argued that cinema was the institution best suited to replace the two most pernicious and widespread pre-Revolutionary "bad habits": religion and alcohol abuse; i.e. drinking vodka.³⁶ Significantly, both are represented as such in October. The same theme was further elaborated upon at the 1928 Congress on Cinema.³⁷ Eisenstein, having "woken up famous" following the success of Potemkin, was perfectly placed at this point in his career to impress upon the very highest authorities that Soviet montage cinema, and his own film practice in particular, afforded the ideal vehicle through which to achieve this goal. Given moreover that the anti-religious aspects of October were probably the surest way in which Eisenstein could consolidate the fame and notoriety he now commanded abroad, it is therefore quite understandable that he rose to the challenge and chose to locate at exactly this point what he considered, at the time, to be his most ambitious experiment yet in the application of montage.

In his essay on the "God and Country" sequence, Noel Carroll offers an analysis, supported by theoretical texts written by Eisenstein himself, of how it is supposed to work as an example

of intellectual montage. According to Carroll, "God and Country" gives an inkling of what Eisenstein's projected film of Marx's Capital might have been like. In his view, the "Gods" part of the sequence both successfully states an argument against religion as the fundamental form of human alienation, and at the same time seeks to educate the proletarian audience in a form of argumentation: they have to search for connections of similarity and difference and make often quite sophisticated conceptual inferences from the material presented to them on the screen. Carroll postulates a "correct" or "preferred" reading of the shots of the "Gods", which is that they rehearse an argument about the illogicality of a belief in God by illustrating, through juxtaposition and parallelism, the existence of a diversity of incompatible creeds and competing theological institutions. Human beings construct Gods, like statues, yet religious ideas and institutions come to dominate them. That this was the primary meaning Eisenstein himself intended to convey is confirmed by his essay "The Dramaturgy of Film Form (The Dialectical Approach to Film Form)", published in 1929:

Kornilov's march on Petrograd took place under the slogan "In the Name of God and the Fatherland". Here we have an attempt to use the representation for anti-religious ends. A number of images of the divine were shown in succession. From a magnificent Baroque Christ to an Eskimo idol. Here a conflict arises between the concept "God" and its symbolisation. Whereas idea and image are completely synonymous in the first Baroque image, they grow further apart with each successive image. We retain the description "God" and show idols that in no way correspond with our

*own image of this concept. From this we are to draw anti-religious conclusions to what the divine as such really is.*³⁸

Carroll's commentary limits itself to the terms of analysis established by Eisenstein and therefore confirms him in his aspiration: complete mastery and total control over every aspect of the sequence and the spectator's interaction with it, provided it is understood correctly.

October's production context explains why the "Gods" part of the sequence was intentionally designed as a triumphant moment of confluence between the classical Marxist critique of religion and advanced Soviet montage practice, and as a radical leap into a new type of cinema and a new way of thinking. The incorporation of quotations from and references to dialectical materialist thought in Eisenstein's writing, most notably in the essay referred to above, reflects the importance of October as a film which, because it attracted so much critical and official attention, would make or break Soviet montage cinema as a mainstream practice. This is not to suggest that Eisenstein's engagement with Marxism was merely opportunistic or superficial, but it does account for its particular prominence during this period. October is not, strictly speaking, an example of experimental filmmaking, exclusively concerned with exploring the possibilities of the medium; this aspect is inseparably fused with the attempt to communicate, within a specific social situation, to particular audiences. In addition to expanding the scope of what could potentially be achieved by cinema, "God and Country" had to make its immediate points clearly and directly, hammering them home. Hence the high degree of reiteration and the

attempt to pare the polysemicity of individual shots down to a univocality or controlled plurality.³⁹ The placing of statuettes, masks and figurines against a black, one-dimensional background, the urgency in the wording and design of the intertitles, and later in the sequence the repetition of shots from earlier in the film, emphasise that it is an argument rather than a diegesis which is important here.

Eisenstein's theorising and conscious intentionality of design propound a universalised anti-religious thesis, yet they assume a Christian cultural context. The most fascinating aspect of the "Gods" part of October's "God and Country" sequence is the way that it only succeeds to the extent that it draws upon and reproduces certain elements of the religious discourse it sets out to eradicate. One indicator of this is the ratio and composition of the shots of religious institutions; five of the church to three of the mosque in the "Gods" part of the sequence, and ten to one when the comparison is reiterated slightly later on. An obvious reason for the greater number of shots of the church is that Christianity is the dominant religion within Russia and therefore more effort is required, by both the filmmaker and the spectator, to defamiliarise and dislodge it. This is confirmed by the "aggressive" composition: dynamic Constructivist angles abound, achieving some startling effects; shot number ten for example foregrounds the spikes on the cupola so that they seem to be literally bursting through the frame. When the church/mosque comparison is made a second time, two shots of an Orthodox Christian ceremonial incense burner, swinging directly towards the camera, are also included. Supporting the intellectual argument, a physical sensation of Christianity's violent

oppressiveness is produced. Yet as a corollary to all the energy expended on the vilification of Christianity is the assumption that the same amount of reiteration and emphasis is not required in order to make Islam and the other religions appear strange - because they already are.

The sudden irruption of this train of images, and its rapid juxtaposition of a mosque and a series of increasingly bizarre - to Christian eyes - idols with images of Christ and of a revered site of Russian Orthodox worship, is calculated to stimulate thought through shock - but the aesthetics of shock are culturally relative. Eisenstein noted this intermittently, but the general drift of his montage theory, which even when it had discarded Pavlovianism remained posited on a fairly mechanistic, or universalised, conception of art's effect upon the human organism, prevented any sustained extension of this insight. For example, in his 1925 essay, "The Method of Making a Workers' Film", Eisenstein wrote of Strike's closing "butchery" metaphor; "on a peasant, used to slaughtering his own cattle, there will be no effect at all."⁴⁰ Jacques Aumont's comments on this passage are, significantly, relegated to a footnote in his Montage Eisenstein; "in later [written] texts [by Eisenstein], other "failures" will be attributed to causes that are of a more formal nature."⁴¹ His own method of explication parallels Eisenstein's, marginalising any consideration of audience reception and the role played by pre-existent, extra-textual discourses. Andrew Tudor is one of the few critics to have raised these points explicitly in relation to intellectual cinema; he argues that Eisenstein "omits the question of the different effects which culture may have on intellectual as opposed to physical response."⁴² When viewed from this

perspective it becomes clear that, for maximum impact, the "Gods" requires a spectator from a Christian culture for whom the idols and the mosque will immediately register as "strange". Christianity is defamiliarised through scandalous juxtaposition with these other images of Eastern and pagan religions; their status, as representations of barbarous, superstitious illogicality, remains unchanged. The irrationality and falseness of religious belief is demonstrated through a deployment of images which simultaneously reiterates a distinction fundamental to Christian theology.⁴³ The "leap into revolutionary consciousness" is dependent upon this point.

V October: Nationalism

The next part of the "God and Country" sequence similarly contains a kernel of traditionalism within its revolutionary iconoclasm. After the last shot of the "Gods", two intertitles read "In the name../..of the Motherland". A series of shots of medals and epaulettes is succeeded by shots repeated from earlier in the narrative, projected in reverse motion. These are of the statue of Tsar Alexander III, dismantled at the very beginning of the film, reconstituting itself. They are intercut with intertitles proclaiming "Hurrah!" and images from the "Gods" part of the sequence, of the many-armed Shiva, the statuette of Christ, and another smiling deity; Uzume, Japanese goddess of Mirth, edited with such rapidity as to create an explosion-like effect. More shots of the church, one of the mosque (inverted) and, repeated from near the beginning of the film, of a swinging incense burner and the Metropolitan of Novgorod raising a crucifix, precede brief shots of General Kornilov on horseback alternated twice with shots of an equestrian Napoleon figurine. The next image is of a crown-shaped decanter cap, already seen in Kerensky's room in the Winter Palace, just before the "Gods" part of the sequence. A shot of Kerensky striking an vaingloriously affected pose is succeeded by a Napoleon figurine in a similar pose, a comparison which has also been employed earlier in the film. An intertitle announces "Two Bonapartes". A series of progressively closer shots bring a Napoleon figurine standing to screen left, and an identical one standing screen right, into a head to head confrontation. Two identical pagan idols, repeated from the "Gods", are shown facing each other in the same position as the Napoleons. More idols and a figure of

the Virgin Mary rapidly edited together create another explosion effect. Kornilov gives a signal. Matching this action, tanks roll over a ridge. Kerensky continues the general direction of this movement by throwing himself onto a bed in the Winter Palace; this is followed by several shots of a broken Napoleon figurine. The tanks roll on. The screen direction of the advancing tanks parallels that of a train heading towards Petrograd carrying Kornilov's crack troops; the dreaded Wild Division.

Noel Carroll interprets the intended meaning of this part of the sequence as deepening and extending the argument developed in the "Gods". Competing nationalisms, Kerensky's and Kornilov's, reveal the concept of nationalism to be as illogical as that of religion. The cutting, as well as the continued emphasis on statues throughout the whole sequence, highlights the connections between religion and nationalism whilst also stressing the humanly constructed and therefore artificial nature of both. However, the use of Napoleon figurines as a focus for this argument also invokes connotations which run counter to its thrust. In the course of making an abstract Marxist argument against nationalism, October's "God and Country" sequence also mobilises an appeal to a specifically Russian nationalism.

Eisenstein probably borrowed the Napoleon/Kerensky/Kornilov analogy from Bolshevik parlance. There are many instances in October of literalised tropes of speech. David Bordwell points out how Kerensky's interminable rise up a flight of stairs in the Winter Palace prior to the "God and Country" sequence plays upon the Russian

word "lestnitsa" (stairs) as used in the phrase "ierarkhicheskaia lestnitsa" (table of military ranks). The Napoleon reference is, to begin with, more specific: in 1917 Lenin wrote a Pravda article condemning Kerensky; "In Search of a Napoleon".⁴⁴ He was commonly described by the Bolsheviks as a "two-bit Bonaparte," and Trotsky later entitled a chapter in his History of the Russian Revolution "Kerensky and Kornilov (Elements of Bonapartism in the Russian Revolution)".⁴⁵ To the cosmopolitan elite of classically educated Bolshevik leaders, and to a multi-lingual polymath like Eisenstein, Napoleon's significance would derive primarily from his role in French history as a symbol of counter-revolution, military dictatorship, rapprochement with the church, and chauvinistic nationalism. Yet the success of the comparison, the frequent recourse to it across a range of texts, indicates that it contained the potential to reverberate at a more popular level. As Murray Sperber points out, enemies of the Revolution become enemies of Russia: "Napoleon has additional meanings for Russians - a dictator and an invader of their country."⁴⁶ Napoleon, as an image in October and as a more general term of political abuse, is an example of what V.N. Volosinov calls the "multi-accentuality of the sign" whose meanings are not fixed but rather are constantly in negotiation between different social groups.⁴⁷ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have argued that, historically, one of the strategic failings of Communist movements has been their failure to mobilise support around an appeal to "the people", and a corresponding inability to move beyond a more narrowly defined, class-based rhetoric.⁴⁸ However, the resonance of the Napoleon analogy, in the Russian revolutionary context, demonstrates how easily "the people" can revert to a

concept of "the nation", hostile to all those defined as foreigners.

Structurally, the encounter between Bolshevik agitators and Kornilov's Wild Division which concludes the "God and Country" sequence is an extremely important nodus within October's narrative, although one which has received relatively little critical attention. It crystallises, through a "practical" demonstration, the line of argument advanced by this particular sequence, and also resembles two other metacinematic moments in the film, which similarly illustrate how viewers should ideally be reacting to the narrative: Lenin being greeted by cheering crowds at the Finland station near the beginning, and the triumphant applause accorded to the resolutions passed by the Second Soviet Congress at the end. Specifically, this encounter represents and reflects upon the spreading of the Bolshevik message under the most difficult of circumstances to the potentially most intransigent of audiences. Additionally, it marks the point after which machines no longer oppress the proletariat; in the first half of the film they toil like slaves making armaments in capitalist factories; the raising of the bridge routs them; they are threatened by Kornilov's tanks. This advance, and the need to defend Petrograd, forces Kerensky to open the arsenals and allow arms to be distributed. Immediately after the encounter with the Wild Division follow several shots which resemble an instructional film, demonstrating how to assemble a rifle. The Provisional Government's phone lines are blocked; sailors march across a lowered bridge; cannons and the battleship "Aurora" fire upon the Winter Palace. The encounter with the Wild Division hinges upon asserting control over a railway line,

a heroic act which, after the agit-train period during the Civil War, could not fail to retrospectively signify a decisive step in the Bolshevik appropriation of power.

The encounter with the Wild Division attempts to demonstrate the hypothesis advanced by "God and Country" operating in actual practice, convincing a particularly resistant audience. Eisenstein argued that Kornilov "betrayed his tsarist tendency in the form of a curious "crusade" of Mohammedans (!) (his "Wild Division" from the Caucasus) and Christians (all the others) against the..Bolsheviks."⁴⁹ As Noel Carroll suggests, it is reasonable to deduce from this that Eisenstein's intention was both to represent a dramatic episode in the history of the Revolution and to provide further evidence for his argument about the illogicality of religion and nationalism, by discrediting all claimants: Kornilov claims to be acting for God and Country; so does Kerensky; Christians are fighting for God; so are Muslims. However, the abstract logic of the argument reiterated throughout this sequence conflicts sharply here with other discourses which would have been available to Russian audiences. In Russia before, during and after the Revolution Christianity and Islam were not equivalent. Eisenstein suggested they were in his staging of the Ostrovsky play Enough Simplicity for Every Wise Man (1923), where a priest and a mullah are subjected to equal amounts of abuse, but October's more complex structure tacitly acknowledges the dominance of Christianity through the greater emphasis placed upon its defamiliarisation.⁵⁰ Historically, the Tsar's Muslim subjects were allowed to worship, but their religion did not have the same intimate ties to the state and to the monarchy that Russian Orthodox Christianity had. For example,

conversion from Christianity to Islam was illegal, and many other discriminations also existed.⁵¹ Knowledge of this power imbalance makes the encounter with the Wild Division into a showdown which throws October's narrative logic and intellectual framework slightly awry.

The problem posed by the Wild Division intensifies the questions underlying the function of the sphinx in the "raising of the bridge" sequence: do they belong to the old or the new order? Do they represent, like the "bonapartists" Kerensky and Kornilov, a threat to the Revolution, a threat to Russia, or both? How does Asia relate to October? Their arrival coincides with the reconstruction of the statue of Alexander III and the old order; this is the point at which the narrative threatens to lock into reverse gear. Andrew Britton describes this encounter as an opposition and eventual fusion between two versions of masculinity which are found in Eisenstein's work, "the swarthy, menacing darkness of the [Wild Division]..and the muscular, blond ruggedness of the agit-prop posters."⁵² What needs to be added is that, in Eisenstein's work, the former is consistently consigned to the past, as in The Old and the New (Sovkino, 1929), where the evil kulak is played by Chukhmarev, a stocky, dark-haired Muslim, selected for the part after the usual extensive search for the correctly representative "type".⁵³ In October the Wild Division completely disappear from the narrative after they have been won over to the Bolshevik cause. Their relationship to the narrative's complex time-scheme is one of ostensibly being part of the Soviet future - "brothers" of the Bolsheviks, as one intertitle declares - but effectively being strongly identified with the past. The

renewed progress of the narrative depends upon them being removed from or subordinated to its trajectory.

A sense of tension is constructed in the initial stage of the encounter through the stillness of the actors within the frame, the smoke and darkness which surrounds them, and the relatively long duration of the shots. Subsequent close-ups and medium shots isolate details of dress and gesture which stress typically "oriental" savagery: furs and head-dresses decorated with Arabic script; Turkish-style moustaches; beards; bestial snarls; a knife gripped between teeth; two shots of one face positioned to reveal the lack of a left eye. The Wild Division are first seen arriving on a train, and the whole encounter takes place around it after it grinds to a halt, blocked by Bolshevik agitators who have tampered with the track at a junction. The location is crucially important: as Lenin himself pointed out, railways were a potent symbol of imperialist domination as well as of Soviet power. In his 1921 preface to Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism, he wrote:

*The building of railways seems to be a simple, natural, democratic, cultural and civilizing enterprise; that is what it is in the opinion of the bourgeois professors who are paid to depict capitalist slavery in bright colours, and in the opinion of petty-bourgeois philistines. But as a matter of fact the capitalist threads, which in thousands of different intercrossings bind these enterprises with private property in the means of production in general, have converted this railway construction into an instrument for oppressing a **thousand million** people (in the colonies and semi-colonies),*

*that is, more than half the population of the globe that inhabits the dependent countries, as well as the wage-slaves of capital in the "civilised" countries.*⁵⁴

In the encounter with the Wild Division, October represents former Russian proletarian "wage-slaves of capital" seizing control over the railway system. Yet the construction of many routes, such as the Turkestan-Siberia line, began under the Tsarist regime and was left to the Soviets to complete. The reasons for carrying on along the same lines remained very similar: military-strategic importance, and greater access to outlying regions' resources. Recent scholarship has traced a fundamental continuity between Tsarist and Soviet "railroad imperialism in Central Asia", and consequently little effective change in status for the inhabitants of the "colonies and semi-colonies".⁵⁵ Subterranean doubts as to whether the completion and extension under Soviet auspices of railway construction projects begun before the Revolution would, in this respect, signify anything different now, seem to be registered in the poster for the film Turksib (Viktor Turin, Vostokkino, 1928), released in the same year as October. Two Asian faces heralding, or being run over by, an oncoming train express what could be seen as either celebration, fear, or angry opposition. That the Wild Division are potentially hostile to the Revolution for more substantial reasons than false consciousness or simple misguided loyalty to Kornilov is a possibility which haunts this encounter, accentuating its tension. This reaches its highest pitch in a series of seven consecutive close-ups of the Wild Division's swords and scimitars being partially drawn out of their scabbards. The inscription "God is With Us" on the blade in the last of the seven

ТУРКСИБ

TURKSIB

Stenberg
Brothers

1929

производство
ВОСТОККИНО

2 СТЕНБЕРГ 2

Автор и режиссер-ВИКТОР ТУРИН

Ассистент-Е. АРОН.

Операторы:

Б. ФРАНЦИССОН и Е. СЛАВИНСКИЙ.

Author-director Victor Turin/Assistant director E. Aron/Cameramen B. Frantsisson and E. Slavinsky/Production Vostokino, 1929/Released in U.S., 1930/A documentary about the building of the Turkestan-Siberia railway; "a direct, energetic, anti-pretty film" (Jay Leyda).

close-ups is the fulcrum which inaugurates a technically brilliant but ideologically mystifying resolution to this encounter.

Eisenstein wrote "the events of October are accepted, *not as events*, but as the conclusion to a series of theses.. Not an anecdote about the Wild Division, but "methodology of propaganda." "In God's Name" becomes a treatise on deity."⁵⁶ The resolution to this encounter does not however offer any convincing intellectual demonstration as to *why* the Wild Division should join with the Bolsheviks and accept the propositions advanced earlier in the sequence, unless it is assumed that they are universally applicable - which in one sense they are, but only on an abstract level which ignores specific, differentiated histories. The resolution here is purely formal and dependent upon the fact that, in this particular instance, they did defect. In effect, a relatively isolated, albeit famous incident, is seized upon to generalise the argument about nationalism and religion, and cinematic technique fills the breach opened up by intellectual discrepancy, rather than clarifying the ideological issues involved.

As Murray Sperber observes, the encounter up to the point at which the weapons are drawn utilises an oppositional pattern of character framing which places the Bolsheviks to the left and the Wild Division to the right.⁵⁷ Shortly after the close-up of the sword with the inscription, the Bolshevik agitators walk from left to right across the tracks which until now have divided the two groups. Several shots show workers at the Smolny Institute packing and distributing bundles of propaganda leaflets, as if to suggest that the pen can be mightier than the

sword. A Wild Division guard standing on the train turns around, wavering. The next shot shows two more Wild Division troops, now positioned to the left of the frame, listening attentively and linked by an eyeline match to the chief agitator who then turns and addresses the camera directly. This moment highlights the way that October's narration grants a "voice" to the Bolsheviks, but not to the Wild Division, who are there to listen and be convinced, and who are only accorded any importance so long as their swords are drawn. After the pivotal shot of the Bolshevik agitator, members of both groups appear on both sides of the frame and appear together in medium shots for the first time. Five consecutive close-ups show swords being sheathed, clapping and communal dancing begins, and the editing accelerates, eventually to a rate of six or seven shots per second, making it impossible to distinguish the Bolsheviks' from the Wild Division's dancing feet. Temporarily, Russia and Asia merge, in a culmination which distantly evokes the time-honoured orientalist tradition of stressing the cultural affinity between them - to Russia's advantage.

The editing here is remarkable, but what is equally interesting is that at this point of maximum ideological as well as narrative tension, metric montage, the *least* intellectual of Eisenstein's five categories in his list of "methods of montage", provides the technical solution: a display of cinematic virtuosity diverts attention away from Asia as a problem which cannot comfortably be accommodated within the framework of the orthodox Marxist argument advanced earlier in the sequence.⁵⁸ In some respects the resolution provided at this point resembles, in condensed form, the "mediatory function"

of the Hollywood musical which, according to Rick Altman, culminates in the marriage of apparently irreconcilable opposites through a paradigmatic structure which leads towards a formal convergence.⁵⁹ Moreover, if, as Richard Dyer has argued, the musical tends to offer imaginary resolutions to problems created by capitalism but which it cannot actually solve, October operates in a similar fashion in relation to problems internal to Marxist theory and to Soviet culture more generally.⁶⁰

Superficially, the merging of the Bolshevik agitators with the Wild Division seems to represent a vision of cultural hybridity, and of the unlimited and unpredictable possibilities for self-renewal and reformulation Marshall Berman associates with modernity in its most progressive phases. From the perspective of contemporary cultural theory this vision's ultimate provisionality becomes somewhat more apparent. It is a promise glimpsed but never delivered, or rather only delivered to one side in an uneven encounter. In another context, Homi Bhabha describes what could cautiously be described as genuine cultural hybridity as giving:

*rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation...political negotiation is a very important issue, and hybridity is precisely about the fact that when a new situation, a new alliance formulates itself, it may demand that you should translate your principles, rethink them, extend them. On the Left there's too much of a timid traditionalism - always trying to read a new situation in terms of some pre-given model or paradigm.*⁶¹

Although this pinpoints some of the issues at stake, to accuse Eisenstein of "timid traditionalism" would be to stretch a case too far and, with the benefit of hindsight, to do a great disservice to October's boldness and complexity. It is more a matter of the film presciently venturing to the very edge of the ethnocentric ideological horizon within which it was made and within which it generally continues to be viewed. October confronts the problem of Russia's relationship to Asia but finally has no alternative but to assimilate and subordinate the latter to a new Soviet trajectory and a new regime of representation which does not break absolutely with pre-established positions on this question. The close-up of the blade with "God is With Us" inscribed on it being drawn out of its scabbard reassures to the extent that it refers back to the "Gods" abstract argument against religious belief, but unsettles insofar as it invokes the notion of irrational oriental savagery which also subtends the "Gods". Together, these readings relegate to the margins of conscious articulation the possibility that the Wild Division and Soviet Asians more generally might have different but substantive reasons for adhering to their religion and sense of ethnic or national identity: reasons connected to the ambivalent connotations of the railway line which serves as the dramatic location for this encounter. The merging of peoples represented by the conclusion to the dance, and the shots of a broken Napoleon figurine which follow it, herald Kornilov's downfall and conflate Soviet Marxism's nominal anti-nationalism with more traditional concerns: Russia's resilience when faced with foreign invasion, and the realisation of a singular identity through its incorporation of and affinity with Asia. As a metacinematic moment, the encounter with the Wild Division

encapsulates better than any other in October the difficulties and contradictions inherent in its attempt to catapult audiences into a new revolutionary consciousness. This does not justify censoring the film for its limitations; rather, the point is that we can now continue its project by reading it differently.

VI October: World-Historical Significance

The storming of the Winter Palace which ensues after the encounter with the Wild Division is a superbly reconstructed victory pageant, generally less experimental than the first half of the film. The narrative concludes, after the fall of the Provisional Government, with the ecstatic applause of delegates to the Second Soviet Congress intercut with rotating clock faces as Lenin arrives to announce the birth of the new Soviet state. This ending underlines October's world-historical significance and models the response expected from audiences not only in Russia but everywhere across the world. The events and arguments narrated by October radiate and impact around the globe, a premise visually realised through rapid cutting between a lamp-post lighting-up in the Palace courtyard and a circular pattern of fifty-one clock faces showing the time in different parts of the world.

Near the beginning of his book The Film Sense (1942), Eisenstein uses a clock as an example to illustrate the distinction between two concepts which Jay Leyda translates as "representation" and "image" (obraz). The hands pointing to the numbers twelve and five constitute the geometrical "representation" of the time five o'clock. The "image" of five o'clock is compounded from all those mental pictures which we associate with that time of day, "perhaps tea, the end of the day's work, the beginning of rush hour on the subway, perhaps shops closing, or the peculiar late afternoon light."⁶² The example is significant: an essentially metropolitan scene and set of routines is what springs most readily to Eisenstein's mind. Leaving aside the controversy over the extent to which

his later theory and practice fundamentally break with his earlier formulations, one thing is clear: Eisensteinian montage, at least when October was being made, was indebted to notions of Taylorised or Fordist "man", as well as to Pavlovian reflexology.⁶³ Cinema's task was to tap into the responses and sensory perceptions already being conditioned within the human organism by the modern industrial environment and develop them in a revolutionary direction. As Richard Stites has noted, clocks, particularly during the mid-1920s, emerged as an important symbol of Soviet modernity. Time-keeping, precise synchronisation and working to deadlines were habits which had to be imposed upon and internalised by the population at large if the country was to revolutionise its social organisation and achieve or even surpass Western standards of industrial efficiency.⁶⁴

Eisenstein's next example in The Film Sense is the conclusion to October. For him, "a work of art, understood dynamically, is just this process of arranging images in the feelings and mind of the spectator...[who is]...drawn into this process as it occurs."⁶⁵ He describes in detail how the final moment in his film was constructed to convey much more than simply information about the particular time at which Soviet power was established:

While we are on the subject of clocks and hours, I am reminded of an example from my own practice. During the filming of October, we came across, in the Winter Palace, a curious specimen of a clock: in addition to the main clock dial, it possessed also a wreath of small dials ranged around the rim of the large one. On each of the dials was the name

of a city: Paris, London, New York, Shanghai, and so on. Each told the time as it happened to be in each city, in contrast with the time in Petrograd shown by the main face. The appearance of this clock stuck in our memory. And when in our film we needed to drive home especially forcefully the historic moment of victory and establishment of Soviet power, this clock suggested a specific montage solution: we repeated the hour of the fall of the Provisional Government, depicted on the main dial in Petrograd time, throughout the whole series of subsidiary dials recording the time in London, Paris, New York, Shanghai. [In the film, the clock-faces shown in extreme close-up are, successively: St. Petersburg; Moscow; New York; Berlin; London; Paris. Shanghai is probably substituted for Berlin in this later description because The Film Sense was written and published during the Second World War.] Thus this hour, unique in history and in the destiny of peoples, emerged through all the multitudinous variety of local readings of time, as though uniting and fusing all peoples in the perception of the moment of victory. The same concept was also illuminated by a rotating movement of the wreath of dials itself, a movement which as it grew and accelerated, also made a plastic fusion of all the different and separate indices of time in the sensation of one single historic hour...⁶⁶

Two points need to be added to Eisenstein's account. What October's conclusion also drives home is that Soviet Russia has ascended to Western modernity, as embodied by the sensation of time speeding up which is produced by the accelerated rotation of the clocks, and by those capital cities whose times are selected for special attention in

extreme close-up. Of course, as this is the proletariat's moment of victory, the emphasis, in the context of the rest of the film, falls decisively only on the benefits and progressive aspects of advanced industrial capitalism being appropriated by the new socialist order. There is however one benefit, or limitation, which is not transformed by this process. The "montage solution" here parallels the structure of the encounter with the Wild Division, insofar as the "uniting and fusing all peoples in the perception of the moment of victory" is concerned. The "image" of this single historic hour contains within its global aspirations a hierarchy between the capital cities of the West and their colonial peripheries. This suggests that the liberatory impact of October is unevenly distributed, privileging a vision of modernity which is also identified as primarily Western. It would seem that this film's "extravagant attempt to take on the whole burden of history" (Berman) has complex ramifications. The "multitudinous variety" of other times, other histories, other experiences and other places are "local" and secondary, drawn into the orbit of this great development but denied specific recognition.

VII Vertov and Mayakovsky at Year Zero: Pulling the Republic Out of the Mud

For Dziga Vertov, montage was part of the fabric of Soviet society: inconceivable without it; intimately bound up within its production processes; and a means through which to advance that society's progress into a new millenium. Consequently, he was even more emphatic than Eisenstein on the need to sever all links with the past, and for film theory and practice to begin again from "year zero". The calendar change which accompanied the Revolution, abandoning the Julian and adopting the Gregorian system, similarly marked the sense of a new epoch dawning, and a chance to begin afresh.

Long denied recognition, Vertov's The Man With the Movie Camera (Vufku, 1928) has become a cornerstone of post-1968 cinema studies, one of the very few films to have had an entire book devoted to it: Vlada Petric's Constructivism in Film. For many critics and filmmakers, The Man With the Movie Camera is perhaps the greatest cinematic legacy bequeathed to posterity by the October revolution: a political-aesthetic breakthrough; "a lighthouse illuminating the path that leads cinema toward a revolutionary art form", a new beginning not yet realised.⁶⁷ Its status within cultural history as an exemplary cultural artifact is now assured. However, as with October, the apparent suddenness of the collapse and dissolution of the Soviet Union suggests that Western European and North American evaluations of Soviet culture, even avant-garde culture from the "heroic" early days, may have rested for too long upon certain unexamined assumptions, particularly in

relation to questions of ethnicity and national identity. This involves asking sometimes difficult questions, with perhaps the most difficult of all being whether or not the wheel has come full circle and the early Soviet cultural experiments themselves have been, or should be, invalidated by the most recent Russian revolution's new "year zero".

According to P. Adams Sitney, "Vertov objected to all cinematic fictions and attempts to represent historical scenes which occurred before the invention of cinema."⁶⁸ The really important moment, however, is of course October 1917: although some of the footage used in Vertov's films is archival, and might date from before then, most of it is postrevolutionary, and the overall context is always contemporary. Unlike Eisenstein, Vertov worked exclusively in film production, beginning his career with the Moscow Cinema Committee in 1918, six years before his eventually more illustrious counterpart switched over from theatre to cinema. Of Eisenstein's completed film projects, only The Old and the New is actually set in a post-Revolutionary situation; his whole career, and particularly his later theoretical writings, involved much more of an overt dialogue with history and with the art of the past than did Vertov's. Vertov's practice was orientated exclusively towards the present and the future; antagonism within The Man With the Movie Camera occurs not so much between progressive forces and remnants from the past as between productive and unproductive or undesirable elements within the contemporary Soviet social formation: between, primarily, the proletariat absorbed in work and the NEP bourgeoisie who pamper themselves, absorbed in egocentrism, staring idly at the camera. In this

respect, Vertov is very close to the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose life and work he admired and took to a certain extent as a model for his own:

I loved Mayakovsky immediately, unhesitatingly...He called me not Vertov, but Dziga. I liked that. "Well Dziga, how's kino-eye doing?" he once asked me. That was in passing, at a train station somewhere. Our trains met. "Kino-eye is learning", I answered.⁶⁹

Mayakovsky's unforgettably abrasive Order Number 2 to the Army of the Arts (1921) is addressed to various factions within Soviet culture, and to young recruits like Vertov, whom the poem exhorts to fall into line and submit to the poet's leadership by following his example. The first four stanzas excoriate almost everyone who isn't Mayakovsky, "imaginists/ acmeists/...men of the Proletcult/who keep patching/Pushkin's faded tailcoat."⁷⁰ Their work is rejected as irrelevant and outmoded, blinkered by deference to traditional formulae, and the order barked at them is:

*Give it up!
Forget it.
Spit
on rhymes
and arias
and the rose bush
and other such mawkishness
from the arsenal of the arts.
Who's interested now
in - "Ah, wretched soul!*

How he loved,
how he suffered..."?
Good workers -
these are the men we need
rather than long-haired preachers.
Listen!
The locomotives groan,
and a draft blows through crannies and floor:
"Give us coal from the Don!
Metal workers
and mechanics for the depot!"
At each river's outlet, steamers
with an aching hole in their side,
howl through the docks:
"Give us oil from Baku!"
While we dawdle and quarrel
in search of fundamental answers,
all things yell:
"give us new forms!"

There are no fools today
to crowd, open-mouthed, round a "maestro"
and await his pronouncement.
Comrades,
give us a new form of art -
an art
that will pull the republic out of the mud.⁷¹

This poem shares with Vertov's work what Raymond Williams would describe as a complex "structure of feeling" which emerged during the immediate post-Revolutionary period.

Order Number 2 and The Man With the Movie Camera are stylistically and programmatically similar: machines are anthropomorphised, human beings are "mechanised", new forms appropriate to the new society are demanded and generated by these works. In both, the artist is simultaneously dethroned and placed at the centre of Soviet cultural and material production. There is no room any more for "pronouncing maestros", but there is an urgent need for "good workers" who do not distance themselves from or consider themselves superior to metal workers and mechanics, and who approach their artistic tasks in the same spirit as these manual labourers do. Yet Mayakovsky's poem positions itself midway between an allegiance to Soviet state power and an affinity with the everyday lives and hopes of ordinary working people - although of course it does not see the need to make any clear distinction between the two. Its form - basically an abrupt, staccato series of orders and directives as to what must be done - is isomorphic with the general mobilisation and "militarisation of labour" policies predominant during the period of War Communism (1918-21) within which the poem was produced. This conflation of ordinary people's experiences and the role of the artist with the interests of the state ominously foreshadows Stalinism and the principles of socialist realism, but to read the poem retrospectively only in the light of later developments would be to ignore other equally important aspects of the structure of feeling it articulates. When Order Number 2 was written and Vertov was beginning his cinema career, the Soviet state was inchoate, emerging from a fight for survival in a bitterly protracted Civil War. At the time it must have seemed like this battered and skeletal infrastructure could potentially

develop into anything, provided it survived. Alec Nove has argued that War Communism can be seen as the result of, on the one hand, pragmatic and often harsh responses to the exigencies brought about by military and economic circumstances, and, on the other, of attempts by more radical Bolsheviks and supporters of the new regime to proceed immediately towards the implementation of the Communist millennium.⁷² Even Lenin, astute political tactician and strategist, was described by H.G. Wells in his book Russia in the Shadows (1920) as "the dreamer in the Kremlin", able to find time to discuss with the novelist plans for the electrification of the countryside and the total reconstruction of Russia's transport system.⁷³ Hardship and the sudden opening up of new horizons combined, in the immediate post-Revolutionary period, to produce an intense and varied outpouring of what Richard Stites calls "utopian social daydreaming".⁷⁴ This certainly informed Mayakovsky's and Vertov's work and partly accounts for the optimism, zest and sense of genuine idealism which distinguishes them from many of their socialist realist successors.

The title Order Number 2 to the Army of the Arts refers internally within Mayakovsky's oeuvre (Order Number 1 was published in 1918), as well as to a decisive action in the run-up to the Revolution which epitomises the double movement exemplified by the poem: the promise that a radical break with the past will lead to a utopian, egalitarian future, and the (re)establishment of disciplinary structures and centres of authority. Mary McAuley describes how, in 1917:

The Petrograd Soviet or Council of Workers and Soldiers' Deputies issued an Order Number 1 which abolished the existing draconian rules on discipline and sanctioned soldiers' committees. By such a move, it put on the agenda not only the question of the future structure, discipline, and authority within the army, but also the question of who within society should be the authority over the army.⁷⁵

This move by the Soviet opened up further questions of particular relevance to both Order Number 2 and The Man With the Movie Camera:

A second issue, which increasingly came to the fore as the economy went into decline, involved the factories. Initially the conflicts were over wages, hours of work, and workers' rights but gradually they began to include the question of who should actually manage the factories...Meanwhile in the countryside the question of ownership was being settled by peasants simply taking the land, and village communities engaging in redistribution. We might suppose that this rural revolution in an 80 per cent peasant country should occupy pride of place in any account of what happened in 1917. But..it was developments within the major industrial centres, Petrograd and Moscow in particular, and within the army that mattered for the resolution of those key questions of authority and power.⁷⁶

The Man With the Movie Camera is constructed entirely from within the perspective of the "major industrial centres", creating a composite super city by combining footage shot in Moscow, Kiev and Odessa. How exactly the peasantry and

everyone and everywhere located outside this metropolis are to relate to it is something which the film does not make explicit. Neither does The Man With the Movie Camera investigate the structure of factory management and ownership, nor, even more importantly, does it reflect upon the rationale behind the ideal of "production" it so gloriously celebrates. Similarly, Order Number 2 reiterates certain economic imperatives which would not have sounded completely out of place in a pre-Revolutionary context: "Give us oil from Baku!" - the location of oil fields in Azerbaidjan, a colony acquired during Russia's expansionist phase in the nineteenth century, and a coveted possession temporarily seized by British interventionist forces during the Civil War. Mayakovsky's poem and Vertov's film avoid specific literary allusion, adamantly refusing to "patch Pushkin's faded tailcoat". Nevertheless, they necessarily touch upon many issues well established within Russian culture long before the arrival of Soviet power, and in one sense their return to year zero reenacts a scenario over two hundred years old. The final line of Order Number 2 recalls the mythology of the Petersburg tradition: building the city on a swamp symbolically represented Peter I's determined attempt, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, to pull Russia out of the mud and into modernity. During the nineteenth century industrial development fuelled by the exploitation of Central Asia came to be seen as one way of achieving this.⁷⁷

These specifically Russian emphases intersect, within Mayakovsky's and Vertov's work, with what Raymond Williams in The Country and the City (1974) points to as an ambiguity within the Marxist tradition; one which has had an enormous

impact upon Soviet history and culture, partly because the ground was already so well prepared. The Communist Manifesto (1848) refers to the "gradual abolition of the distinction (or antithesis) between town and country" as being a goal of its revolutionary programme.⁷⁸ This connects with the elements of utopian egalitarianism within Vertov and Mayakovsky's work. However, the Manifesto also recognises and even praises the unprecedented cultural and scientific achievements brought about by capitalism, which serve as the historical precondition for any transition to Communism:

*The bourgeoisie..has created enormous cities..and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made the barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilised ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West.*⁷⁹

Williams argues that these relations of dependency, and the value judgements implied by the language used here, rapidly became synonymous with notions of development and progress within Soviet culture, obscuring the emphasis on demographic and geographical parity also to be found in the Manifesto. Studies of the avant-garde have tended to overlook this area of overlap (but not, it should be stressed, of equivalence), between Soviet and capitalist modernity, and between pre- and post-Revolutionary Russia. Yet this is one of the broader contexts within which The Man With the Movie Camera, despite its undeniable originality, needs to be placed.

VIII Critical Evaluations of The Man With the Movie Camera: From "Stupendous Montage" to Marxist Reflexivity

To stress that analysis of Vertov's classic film should be expanded to include such questions as are raised above is not to obviate the detailed work which has already been done on The Man With the Movie Camera by Western critics. Much of this dates from after 1968 when interest in Vertov revived and more of his writings became available in translation. Prior to this, the situation in the West to a certain extent paralleled that in the Soviet Union, insofar as in both cases a variety of factors led to The Man With the Movie Camera's marginalisation or suppression. The film was released in the Soviet Union in January 1929 to limited distribution and lukewarm or hostile reviews. RAPP (the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) denounced it as a formalist work, "devoid of social content", and even Vertov's avant-garde colleagues at Novy Lef, themselves in the process of developing a critical position which granted "raw", "unplayed" filmic material priority over any directorial manipulation, were less than enthusiastic in their response to the film.⁸⁰ In England, there seems at first to have been a relatively clear division, between critics associated with the specialist film journal Close-Up who drew attention to The Man With the Movie Camera's "stupendous montage", and the more reserved assessment typified by John Grierson's February 1931 review in the socialist monthly The Clarion.⁸¹ He acknowledged the film's technical and experimental accomplishments but saw it as poorly structured and lacking purposiveness. As the 1930s progressed and the documentary movement established itself as the leading arbiter of taste within English film

intellectual circles, this dismissal prevailed, and The Man With the Movie Camera was consigned to relative obscurity for nearly four decades.

In France also it was Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Kuleshov, rather than Vertov, whose reputations were most firmly established and therefore eventually most open to attack. Apart from brief references to The Man With the Movie Camera by some of the other theorists of cinéma-vérité, Georges Sadoul was one of the very few major French critics to write on Vertov at any length prior to 1968.⁸² The absence of any mention of Vertov in André Bazin's famous critiques of Soviet montage cinema is indicative of Vertov's generally marginal status at this time. Yet when outlining in his essay "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage" (1953,57) those few exceptional instances in which montage can reveal something of reality, Bazin partly anticipates the re-evaluation of The Man With the Movie Camera by a post-1968 generation of critics:

*Take, for example, a documentary about conjuring. If its object is to show the extraordinary feats of a great master then the film must proceed in a series of individual shots; but if the film is required subsequently to explain one of these tricks, it becomes necessary to edit them.*⁸³

Radical French critics after Bazin reacted against him by, in effect, generalising these comments: dominant "bourgeois" cinema came to be seen as ideologically suspicious, the perpetrator of a devious sleight-of-hand, and its tendency towards "illusionistic" deception was condemned.⁸⁴ Vertov was invoked in order to garner support for these attitudes,

and The Man With the Movie Camera became extremely relevant to contemporary cultural and political debates.

Anglo-American film theory and criticism inflected these lines of argument in two principal directions - phenomenological and Marxist - which it also sought to bring into convergence. Annette Michelson, in her important essay "From Magician to Epistemologist" (1972), argued that The Man With the Movie Camera's project was to use all the resources available to Soviet cinema in 1928: reverse motion; superimposition; split screen and other image distortion/abstraction techniques, but not simply in order to display an endless succession of astonishing trick effects. Instead, these strategies are employed alongside a continuous reflexivity with regard to the process of film production and viewing, as part of "an exposure of the terms and dynamics of cinematic illusionism", and in the service of a "Communist decoding of the world".⁸⁵ What interests Michelson most in this essay is the first of these two aspects; the maieutic properties of The Man With the Movie Camera, arising from the way the film resembles "a loop which runs as in a Möbius strip, twisting from "live" to "fictive" and back again".⁸⁶ After the publication of Michelson's work it was no longer so easy to be blithe or flippant when discussing this film; she established new standards of rigour and seriousness which subsequent European and American work on The Man With the Movie Camera sought to match. Concentrated around the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 80s, this included Stephen Crofts and Olivia Rose's close textual analysis (1977); Alan Williams' investigation into the film's idiosyncratic narrative organisation (1979); and Michelson's

later lengthy introduction to the collection of Vertov's writings she edited (1984).⁸⁷ All of these critics attempt to explain how The Man With the Movie Camera integrates its thoroughgoing reflexivity with a Communist reading of the city (or cities) it so obliquely represents.

Constance Penley, in an analysis of the phenomenological theory implicitly or explicitly underpinning the work of certain post-1968 filmmakers and theorists, such as Peter Gidal, Malcolm Le Grice and Annette Michelson, contests their claim that the work they produce or favour leads unproblematically to the creation of a "new revolutionary consciousness through extending the possibilities of perception".⁸⁸ Her observations apply to The Man With the Movie Camera as well, because for these modern theorists it is a privileged forerunner, anticipating more recent works which seek to produce an active spectator who is alert to the reality of the viewing situation rather than being lost in fantasy. This ideal spectator is aware of the materiality of the film on the screen and the technical apparatus which has produced it, and also conscious of his/her changing perceptual responses to what is seen and experienced. Penley argues that what films in this particular avant-garde tradition solicit is not so much scopophilia as epistemophilia; ideally "we come to them..knowing they will be difficult, challenging, and that we are coming to learn something..we are asked by the films and the viewing situation to investigate."⁸⁹ She goes on to suggest that the reflexivity and expansion of perception offered by films like The Man With the Movie Camera participate in and help to construct a fantasy of the spectator as "an absolute being to whom is transferred the quality of all-

seeing".⁹⁰ This leads to an illusory sensation of mastery and virtual omniscience which arises from the heightened (self)consciousness that the films and the discourses around them - in Vertov's case, his numerous proclamations - claim to be producing:

Come out, please, into life. This is where we work - we, the masters of vision, the organizers of visible life, armed with the omnipresent kino-eye. (1923)

[The Man With the Movie Camera] sharply opposes "life as it is," seen by the aided eye of the movie camera (kino-eye), to "life as it is," seen by the imperfect human eye. (1928)⁹¹

Penley develops this insight further with reference to the metapsychological approaches to cinema formulated by Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry, but in the present context another line of enquiry is also worth pursuing: namely, in what ways might these fantasies of heightened perception and knowledge be linked to The Man With the Movie Camera's "Communist decoding of the world", its privileging of the city, and, within the city, the urban proletariat as the class with the potential to cancel out all contradictions and construct a harmoniously integrated socialist society?

IX Magicians and Their Audiences

Annette Michelson's argument in "From Magician to Epistemologist" hinges upon a reading of what she identifies as a pivotal sequence in The Man With the Movie Camera: the Chinese magician's performance of tricks and illusions in front of an audience. She relates this back to Vertov's first feature-length Kino-Eye production, Kinoglaz (1924), the source for some of the shots in this particular sequence.⁹² The redeployment of images, both within a particular film (most especially in The Man With the Movie Camera), and also across Vertov's oeuvre, was not something Vertov theorised about at any great length. However, the practice seems to have served two main purposes within his work. Firstly, and regardless of the image's content or composition, it emphasises that the raw material of film, as in any other industry, is in process, a process of productive transformation, worked upon in various ways by the cinematic apparatus and also by the consciousness of the viewer, to achieve a clearer and more comprehensive vision of the world. Secondly, what distinguishes cinema from many other industries is that the process is never quite complete; the redeployment of images within different contexts can produce new connotations and delimit or alter old ones; no shot or sequence ever possesses an absolutely fixed or finite meaning. As Judith Mayne points out, the demonstrations of editing in The Man With the Movie Camera never show pieces of film actually being joined together, thus suggesting "a constant process and not a resolution in the form of a final product..elements may be brought together in one direction, only to be taken apart in another."⁹³

This textual "openness" in The Man With the Movie Camera only operates within certain limits. As Stephen Crofts and Olivia Rose argue, the film does not attempt to "expel signified and referent to concentrate exclusively on the material substrate of film."⁹⁴ The Man With the Movie Camera's commitment to a "Communist decoding of the world" requires it, within the overall process outlined above, to nudge its viewer towards preferential readings of the images it presents. One effect of this stress on openness and continual transformation of meanings, however, is that those which *are* provisionally generated acquire an added edge of veracity precisely because they have been arrived at via this process. Consequently, deeply embedded ideological assumptions within these preferential readings are perhaps *more* likely to be overlooked than in more conventional types of film, since The Man With the Movie Camera's viewer has to expend a great deal more energy simply to decode these readings, leaving less time or space in which to be critical of them. The significant thing about the images from Kinoglaz reutilised in The Man With the Movie Camera is that, whilst in the latter film they are indeed productively transformed, and form part of a much more complex construction, in both cases they evince an uncertainty as to what place members of non-European ethnic groups can or should occupy in the new and supposedly internationalist Soviet society celebrated and investigated by these two films.⁹⁵

In Kinoglaz the intertitle preceding the magician's first appearance reads - "How the Chinese magician Chan-Ti-Chan earns his bread." The next sequence, after he has

performed his tricks, commences with the title - "From a pioneer's diary [most of Kinoglaz is concerned with the activity of a group of Soviet pioneers]: if time went backwards, the bread would return to the bakery."⁹⁶ Then animated script announces that Kino-Eye will put the pioneer's idea into practice. Subsequently, in a reverse motion sequence, bread returns, via a bakery and a mill, back into a field as grain. The sequence preceding the magician's performance similarly traces the passage of meat backwards from a market via an abattoir to the flesh of the live bull it originated from. Michelson's description and analysis is as follows:

*The transition, then, between the two reversals of action is the image of the magician. Vertov is presenting him, of course, as a worker, someone who earns his bread by the creation of illusion, that worker whose prestidigitation is perhaps closest in effect to that of the filmmaker..If the filmmaker is, like the magician, a manufacturer of illusions, he can, unlike the prestidigitator, and in the interests of instruction and of a heightening of consciousness, destroy illusion.*⁹⁷

If this is the case, then the Chinese magician's status within the film and within Soviet society is at best ambiguous, and his ethnicity is inseparable from this ambiguity, inasmuch as in The Man With the Movie Camera he is the only Asian to appear within the film, and in Kinoglaz the Russian intertitles describing him and his actions are deliberately misspelled in order to simulate a pseudo-Chinese accent.⁹⁸ The wording of these titles declares the magician to be an honest worker, but their imitation of Chinese speech marks him out as different;

perhaps an honest worker but possibly someone who is not truly productive, earning his bread by dishonest illusion, rather than through honest work, as Kino-Eye filmmakers and pioneers do.

A similar equivocation underlies the reappearance of the Chinese magician and his tricks in The Man With the Movie Camera, entailing, within this more elaborate work, a correspondingly wider range of ambiguous relationships between ethnicity and the ^{oppositions} ~~oppositions~~ and analogies which structure the text. Here, the sequence in which he features is, unusually for this film, relatively self-contained, recalling an earlier and similarly autonomous sequence in which Elizaveta Svilova, The Man With the Movie Camera's editor, works on the film. The two sequences are also linked by the fact that some of the shots of pieces of celluloid (single frames and sprocket holes) and freeze-framed images of smiling children which appear in Svilova's editing room sequence are redeployed, in motion, as members of the crowd watching the magician's performance. The seventeen shots which make up this sequence are:

- (1) Close-up of a boy's face, puzzled, looking to screen right.
- (2) Medium close-up of the Chinese magician whirling hoops, performing in front of trees and bushes, facing the camera.
- (3) Close-up of a girl's face, smiling, looking to screen left. The framing obscures the edge of her face. She blinks once.
- (4) Similar to shot 2.

- (5) Close-up of another boy's face, wearing a cap, smiling, looking to screen left. Blinks once.
- (6) Medium close-up of the magician, hand extended and in profile facing screen left; a tiny idol rises up magically in the palm of his hand.
- (7) Close-up of another girl, smiling, looking to screen left, but eyes move to look screen right. Unlike the other children, who are photographed with people in a crowd behind them, she is isolated, in front of some window shutters.
- (8) High angle medium close-up, frontally framed, of the magician's hands over a mat on the ground; a mouse appears from under a bowl.
- (9) Similar to 5, with the boy now actively laughing.
- (10) Similar to 8, the magician picks up the mouse.
- (11) Similar to shot 3, but more centrally framed. The girl smiles and blinks twice.
- (12) Similar to 8; medium shot (excluding the magician's head); he puts the mouse back into the bowl.
- (13) Medium close-up of two boys, intrigued, looking to screen left. One of the boys picks his nose.
- (14) Similar to 12; the magician produces a spring from the bowl.
- (15) Similar to 13; one of the boys smiles.
- (16) Similar to 14.
- (17) Similar to 11; the girl smiles and blinks twice whilst cocking her head to the right and then left again.

Compared to much of the rest of The Man With the Movie Camera this sequence is atypical in being, on one level, quite conventionally constructed: a magician performs tricks and a

crowd watches, within what might seem to be a fairly consistent diegetic space. However, in other respects it conforms to strategies which recur throughout the film: there is no establishing shot; the magician and the crowd are never shown inhabiting the same space within a single shot; screen direction is inconsistent, with eyelines conflicting rather than converging. In repeatedly cutting back and forth between the magician and the children the sequence obeys a pattern of "alternation of subjects which should "match" but..do not", which Alan Williams identifies as one of The Man With the Movie Camera's basic structural principles.⁹⁹ Reflexivity is also built into the sequence by the fact that shots are redeployed and repeated not only from Kinoglaz but also from earlier within the film; except for the first, transitional shot, all of the images of children here have previously been seen as *pieces of film* in the "editing room" sequence (XVII).¹⁰⁰ Finally, the girl seen in shot seven is framed against a different background to the other children, thereby further disturbing any sense of this sequence occupying a stable diegetic space.

The "magician" sequence also works to undermine any type of identification which might arise from the presence of people within an apparently coherent diegetic scene. Each shot, like most in the film, is brief, and the framing persistently cuts off part of the children's' faces and, from shot eight onwards, all of the magician's head. The boys and girls are not completely enraptured with what they see; between and within shots their expressions waver between critical disengagement and obvious enjoyment, rather than, as might be expected, progressing straightforwardly from the former to the latter. The high incidence of blinking augments this sense

of oscillation between two types of vision and two states of mind and, along with the presence of the shutters behind the girl in shot seven, echoes the "waking and blinking" sequence (IX) which takes place near to the beginning of the film. In this, a woman who has just woken up and washed blinks repeatedly as she dries her face, and so do her window shutters, opening and closing rapidly, and the sequence ends with one of the many close-ups of a camera lens which punctuate the film. Earlier, shots of the sleeping woman are intercut with a poster for a Soviet entertainment film entitled The Awakening of a Woman (sequences VI and VII). Yuri Tsivian suggests that this comparison ties the expansion of vision signified in this sequence - literally enacted by the inclusion of shots from a variety of other locations and perspectives - to the idea of an awakening from "the bad dream of artistic cinema."¹⁰¹ The film poster, linked to the circuit of commercial entertainment cinema which dominated Soviet screens in 1928, depicts a man with a finger to his lips, clearly not wanting the slumber to end. This sense of being poised between two types of cinema also informs the interplay between the children and the spectacle in the "magician" sequence.

As in Kinoglaz, but in a more sophisticated manner, the "magician" sequence in The Man With the Movie Camera contrasts conventional filmic practice with what Kino-Eye can achieve. It does this by metaphorically, and through the actual construction of the sequence itself, demonstrating the kind of cinematic illusionism Vertov opposed, whilst simultaneously undermining it. Paradoxically, what at one level appears to be a surprisingly coherent diegetic

sequence within this unique film is also one of its most completely reflexive. Yet its ramifications extend beyond this: if, as Noël Burch has argued, "one may safely say that there is not a single shot in this entire film whose place in the editing scheme is not overdetermined by a whole set of intertwined chains of signification", then how The Man With the Movie Camera positions the Chinese magician in relation to the rest of Soviet society also needs to be explored.¹⁰² One of Vertov's earlier statements anticipates in very precise detail the ways in which this sequence intertwines with some of the other "chains of signification" permeating The Man With the Movie Camera:

Consciousness or the Subconscious

(From a kinok proclamation)

We oppose the collusion of the "director-as-magician" and a bewitched public.

Only consciousness can fight the sway of magic in all its forms.

Only consciousness can form a man of firm opinion, firm conviction.

We need conscious men, not an unconscious mass submissive to any passing suggestion.

Long live the class consciousness of the healthy with eyes and ears to see and hear with!

Away with the fragrant veil of kisses, murders, doves and sleight-of-hand!

Long live the class vision!

Long live kino-eye!

(1924)¹⁰³

This passage establishes several oppositions which recur again and again in Vertov's films and writings: consciousness versus subconscious; instruction versus entertainment; clarity versus magic; (class) solidarity against (individual) emotions; the hard and healthy versus the delicate or unfit; technology and technologised vision against nature.¹⁰⁴ The Chinese magician, the only Asian in The Man With the Movie Camera, is explicitly or indirectly placed closer to the negative than to the positive poles of all these oppositions.

Vlada Petric describes one of the major strategies employed in The Man With the Movie Camera as "disruptive-associative montage", an editing procedure which

*develops through several phases; a sequence establishes its initial topic and develops its full potential through an appropriate editing pace until a seemingly incongruous shot (announcing a new topic) is intercut, foreshadowing another theme that, although disconcerting at first glance, serves as a dialectical commentary on the previously recorded event.*¹⁰⁵

This is how the Chinese magician is first introduced. A shot of the bald, crouching magician, preparing his props in medium long shot, follows an overhead long shot of regimented, exercising Soviet citizens being instructed in how to swim. After the appearance of the magician, a second overhead long shot shows some of the people seen previously, now practising their strokes in water (sequence XXXV). These shots are linked in that all three employ a stop-frame technique to materialise their human subjects roughly half way through

each shot. There is also a minor graphic link; the exercise instructor is, like the magician, completely bald. Given that this part of the film stresses the interpenetration of work and play in Soviet society, one of the implied conceptual links here could be that recreation for some (the exercisers) involves work for others (the instructor, the magician). This reiterates the earlier presentation of the magician in Kinoglaz, which allows for the possibility of reading the magician as an honest worker. But a contrast is also suggested, between desirable and undesirable recreation; exercise which increases physical fitness and therefore work capacity, as opposed to distractive, purposeless tricks.

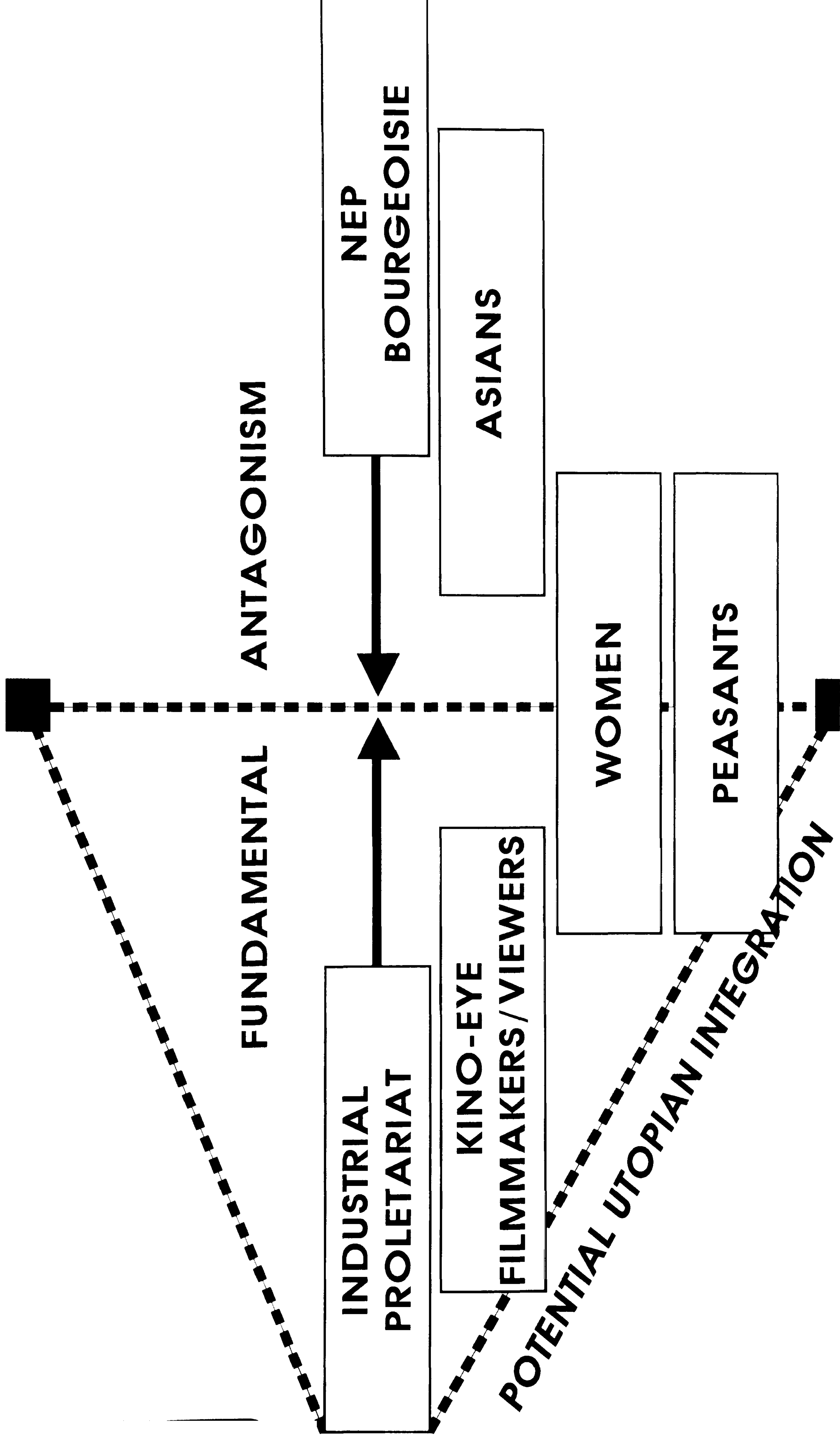
After this single shot of the magician, the sequence featuring him and his tricks does not appear for some time. The final shot before the beginning of the "magician" sequence proper is a close-up of a woman half-submerged in water, who has previously been seen applying a mudpack to her face and body, and is now attempting unsuccessfully to wash it from her eyes. Elsewhere in the film, as Crofts and Rose point out, the wastefulness of cosmetics is insistently contrasted with the usefulness of productive labour and the need for only perfunctory grooming.¹⁰⁶ A graphic match links the close-up of the woman to the close-up of the boy which opens the "magician" sequence. The smoothness of the transition suggests a similarity between the woman's closed eyes and the boy's puzzled gaze; a connection which further serves to render the magician's activities suspicious. Shots preceding the close-up of the woman depict Mikhail Kaufman, the eponymous cameraman, lying on his back in shallow water with the tripod also partly submerged. These shots can be

read as building up an elaborate visual conceit about what happens when kino-eye lacks vigilance. The editing associates unproductive beautification with blurred vision and unconscious submersion. As if this were not bad enough, the magician does something during his performance which borders on the worst possible kind of enchantment: in shot six he makes a tiny idol rise up in his hand; religion, magic and illusionist cinema are shown to be connected, and their imputed puniness and insubstantiality is caricatured. The "magician" sequence is succeeded by one depicting large women doing "weight reducing exercises" (XLI); this has already been anticipated by "disruptive-associative" shots which cut into the "crowd on the beach" sequence immediately preceding the "magician". At first, these interpolated images of women working out suggest a contrast between useless beautification and useful exercise, since they are juxtaposed with shots of women on the beach applying mudpack, but when the "weight reducing exercises" sequence is shown in full, it becomes clear that this particular activity is considered to be equally vain; the women are photographed from angles which emphasise their weight and make their exertions look foolish. Therefore, the Chinese magician, who has previously been contrasted with a group of people taking exercise, is further associated, through contiguity, with unproductive, unhealthy bodies. Vertov himself stated that one of The Man With the Movie Camera's themes was "athletics against debauchery".¹⁰⁷ Finally, the Chinese magician is also aligned with another negative value (or at the very least an element which needs to be totally transformed) within The Man With the Movie Camera's structural oppositions. He appears against a background of

trees and bushes; not only does this link him to nature, it also places him to a certain extent apart from modern technology and "outside" of the city itself. There are hardly any other images of nature in The Man With the Movie Camera; it is as if the metropolitan space it constructs is partly defined by their absence. The implication is that to be Asian within the Soviet city and, by extension, Soviet society of the 1920s, is to be marginal.

None of these comparisons and contrasts are as pointed or explicit as the fundamental antagonism the film sets up between the industrial proletariat and the NEP bourgeoisie; for example in the remarkable cut between a NEPman's neck being shaved and a labourer sharpening an axe in the "various kinds of work" sequence (XXV). Certainly the Chinese magician is associated with what The Man With the Movie Camera posits as negative values, but in a less immediately visible way. The film's structuring of antagonisms between different social groups can be represented diagrammatically.

Those on the left-hand side of the diagram are valued for the positive contributions they are making to Soviet society, those on the right are not.¹⁰⁸ The less fundamental the antagonism is considered to be, the less clearly it is articulated. Nevertheless, the secondary ones, although less noticeable, are there, intertwined with the primary one between proletariat and NEP bourgeoisie.



To say this, however, is not to suggest that the representation of these groups within The Man With the Movie Camera is solely a matter to be rectified by a new interpretation of the film, or one which has had little or no practical import up until now. The necessary complement to an analysis of ethnic representation is an examination into how and why The Man With the Movie Camera and the contexts within which it has been viewed have kept certain questions off the agenda for so long. This requires some consideration of how audiences function, both inside and outside The Man With the Movie Camera, insofar as the film allows that distinction. Alan Williams has analysed the film's "overture" (sequences I-V in Petric's segmentation) as establishing the basic montage patterns and filmic strategies operative throughout The Man With the Movie Camera as a whole.¹⁰⁹ The opening of any film is of course important as the first point of intersection between it and an audience. Vertov wrote of his The Eleventh Year (1928) that "the fourth and fifth reels have the same relationship to the first ones that college does to high school"; The Man With the Movie Camera is similar.¹¹⁰ The audience seen arriving during the "overture" (in sequence III) is integral to The Man With the Movie Camera's project, and the film as it progresses elaborates upon the basic building-blocks established here, culminating in an accelerating montage at the end (sequences LIV and LV) which signifies and attempts to achieve, amongst other things, a complex fusion between the film, the audience represented within it, and whichever audience is actually watching it at a particular screening. Alan Williams describes the audience within The Man With the Movie Camera as "classless", but Vance Kepley in a recent essay identifies the auditorium, and the people who fill it, as

being a typical example of a screening in a very particular location: a Soviet urban workers' club of the 1920s.¹¹¹ This audience is composed overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, of ethnic Russians or Ukrainians. Therefore, built into the basic structure of The Man With the Movie Camera is the assumption that this kind of audience is its norm. Furthermore, Vertov's theory of filmic practice as "class vision" does not necessarily exclude, to use his own militant terminology, "the collusion of the "director-as-magician" and a bewitched public."

Although, contrary to what many of its first critics tended to think, The Man With the Movie Camera is neither unmotivated nor unstructured, the fact remains that it *is*, as some of them pointed out, an unsurpassed exercise in cinematic wizardry. Kino-Eye's power ranges over space and time, making people and objects appear, disappear, and reappear; in order to be fully carried along by this, and to realise the kind of response the film solicits, its viewer has to adopt the perspective The Man With the Movie Camera attributes to the very specific audience represented within the film. This is the particular, idealised social group of spectators The Man With the Movie Camera performs its magical tricks for.

X The Metropolis, Cotton and Pleasure

Workers' clubs in the Soviet Union during the 1920s were institutions originally created to achieve many of the things The Man With the Movie Camera set out to do. Often located within or very near to factories in major industrial centres, they offered their membership a relatively inexpensive range of cultural activities intended to combine education with recreation and to dissolve the distinction between private, home life and the public sphere of politics and industrial work, two areas already partially overlapping due to the severe housing shortage and consequent overcrowding in the cities.¹¹² Political speakers would provide explanation and commentary before or after film screenings and during reel changes or projector breakdowns. Club premises tended to be decorated with revolutionary posters, as is the one represented in The Man With the Movie Camera where Vertov is seen playing chess (sequences XLVII and XLIX). As Seth Feldman notes, the construction of Vertov's films, edited so as to take into account breaks for reel changes, also indicates their orientation towards this particular non-theatrical circuit, "where single projector systems would almost universally prevail."¹¹³

In The Man With the Movie Camera, the games and reading room of a workers' club is contrasted with a beerhall, appropriately decorated with posters for entertainment films (sequence XLVI). The cameraman appears through superimposition to be drowning in a pint of beer, but he manages to stand up and hoist the camera and tripod onto his shoulder, as if it were an instrument of labour. Yet the pub in

The Man With the Movie Camera, in comparison to the workers' club, is crowded, lively and undisciplined. Despite Vertov's intentions, it is possible to see from this brief sequence what its appeal to Soviet workers in the 1920s might have been.¹¹⁴ The people seen seated around a pub table form an enclosed circle, and at the end of this sequence the camera sways and wobbles, conveying the sense both of temporary drunkenness and of having entered a hostile or resistant space. Soviet workers in the 1920s seem to have gravitated towards leisure institutions which were less thoroughly permeated with Soviet ideology than the clubs tended to be, and towards types of entertainment which offered to release them from, rather than reinforce, their class identity. One reader's letter, sent to the editor of a film magazine in 1927, expresses this lucidly:

It's boring, comrade editor, in a country busy with the replacement of the plough with the tractor, where peasants and cooks run the government, where lovers of the electric light bulb don't understand the tales of Baghdad. [The 1924 American film version was an enormous hit in the Soviet Union.] It's boring, and I'm tired of life. Life has become loathesome. I want to forget myself. I want romance. For that reason I love Harry [Piel] and Doug [Fairbanks] and Conrad [Veidt].¹¹⁵

The cultural and political ramifications of such preferences are complex and require more substantiation and further investigation; they are not simply reducible to an ahistorical, vaguely transcultural predilection for "entertainment". Within the urban workers' clubs themselves, struggles between

organisers and rank and file membership led to a general realisation that programming had to be "balanced": as Kepley points out, Trotsky theorised this in terms of aiming for a synthesis between "Kul'tura" (organised education, high culture) and "byt" (popular culture and everyday life experience, habits and customs). He recommended a principled, but also "realistic and practical" approach to club cultural policy, as opposed to "visionary fantasising" about immediate, total change.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, since workers' clubs occupied roughly the same position within the Soviet cinema economy of the 1920s as did second-run theatres in the United States, urban workers would, when income permitted, also attend the considerably more expensive commercial cinemas which offered luxurious environments, better quality prints, larger orchestras and newly released films. Perhaps part of the reason for the generally unenthusiastic response The Man With the Movie Camera met with when it first came out was its rigid adherence to the original ideals behind the workers' clubs; as one of the most demanding and militant films to emerge from the milieu of Soviet avant-garde cinematic "Kul'tura", it made few concessions to "byt".

The Man With the Movie Camera was ahead of its time in that it only made and sustained contact with a supportive audience forty years after its initial release. This audience, and the post-1968 situations in which the film was seen and finally appreciated, in some respects resembled an idealised, albeit non-proletarian version of the Soviet workers' club it was originally aimed at. In Western capitalist democracies repeated screenings, expert commentary, detailed textual

analysis and an ongoing commitment to the exploration of different forms of cinema are on the whole only possible within radical cultural-political study circles or within institutions of higher education, and the latter case involves a potentially more resistant, albeit captive audience. The critical literature generated by and informing these situations tends to emulate Vertov's writing in stressing rigour and rejecting popular pleasures. Yet although Vertov's polemical, written definitions of what is politically permissible in terms of entertainment or enjoyment were rather narrowly repressive, his aesthetic of "efficiency as beauty", and the almost sensual celebration of the power of montage exemplified in the films, particularly The Man With the Movie Camera, do offer their own particular types of pleasure to the spectator who is prepared to accept them.¹¹⁷ This is something which post-1968 theoretical work on the film has tended to divert attention away from, but it was an aspect some of the earliest critical responses in the West picked up on. Even early reviews which were neutral or dismissive characterised The Man With the Movie Camera's style in terms of "arabesques..acrobatic masterpieces of poetic jigsaw, brilliant conjuring of filmic association".¹¹⁸ Grierson expressed his sarcasm through similar imagery: "there are rabbits to be taken out of the hat (or bin) of montage which are infinitely magical".¹¹⁹ Now, in the context of postmodernism, pop video, and virtual reality, The Man With the Movie Camera's pleasures are potentially more accessible than ever before.

The most pleasurable moments in The Man With the Movie Camera are also its most utopian. Specific criticisms of the contemporary social formation alternate with a vision of what

Soviet society should and will develop into. Social criticism in The Man With the Movie Camera is directed towards some of the consequences of the New Economic Policy (NEP) which many avant-garde intellectuals like Vertov regarded as a dangerous diversion from the true revolutionary path. This is one of the things that distinguishes avant-garde work produced towards the end of the 1920s from earlier productions like Order Number Two to the Army of the Arts. Mayakovsky's later plays, The Bedbug (1929) and The Bathhouse (1930), are also much more critical of certain tendencies within Soviet society. Crofts and Rose locate several instances in The Man With the Movie Camera where the production of luxury goods and the provision of services which benefit the NEP bourgeoisie are critiqued. Yet, over and above these local observations, the film clearly celebrates mechanisation and industrial production as intrinsic to socialism and necessary to Soviet development. There is one motif which epitomises this: the image of bobbins spinning in a textile factory. This motif is repeated and elaborated upon throughout The Man With the Movie Camera (for example, in sequences VI, XI and XXXIII), building up to an incredible, kinetically overwhelming climax in which 152 shots flash onto the screen in the space of 49 seconds, merging the cameraman, camera slung over his shoulder, and himself turning around, with shots of a hydroelectric plant, mines, and various machines in motion (sequence XXXI). The spinning bobbins feature very prominently here, and the sequence prior to this one cuts between bobbins, cameramen filming rushing water at the plant, other moving machine parts, and the cranking of a camera handle (XXX). Towards the end of the film, the motif is again reprised; a woman textile worker's

optimistically smiling face is superimposed upon a shot of the rapidly spinning bobbins (sequence LII).

Annette Michelson, in her introduction to the English language edition of Vertov's writings, reproduces a still of this image and describes the bobbin motif, and the utopian sensation produced by The Man With the Movie Camera's handling of it, as forming part of a "mighty accelerando" leading to a culmination of the "rhythmic pulsing energy that binds together the movements of industrial labor."¹²⁰ Judith Mayne adds that the emphasis on women workers, particularly through the final image in the series, also hints at the possibility of a radical reformulation of gender, an egalitarian "unity of male and female" lying at the heart of The Man With the Movie Camera's utopianism.¹²¹ Even if this is the case, there is still something missing. Michelson turns to Marx and Engels' The German Ideology (1847) to explain why textile production is located at the centre of Vertov's film, citing their argument about the crucial role this industry played in the Western world's long but inexorable transition from feudalism to capitalism. The Man With the Movie Camera, she argues, privileges textile production in order to show how in the Soviet context it, and industrialisation more generally, is equally important to development but essentially different in that:

the fragmentation and contradictions "naturally" generated by the industrial system of production in its urban scene are annulled, as it were, by the rhymes and rhythms that link and propel them all. The rhythms and rhymes are in fact the formal instantiation of a general community, of the common stake in the project that retains both division of labor as

*indispensable to industrialization and rationalization as indispensable to the construction of socialism.*¹²²

In one sense this is a definite mystification of the historical conditions of labour in the Soviet Union during the 1920s, but since The Man With the Movie Camera does itself engage in a limited critique of certain aspects of the contemporary social formation, its utopianism needs to be analysed on its own terms, as a vision and a visceral, aesthetic experience of a possible socialist future. To begin with, the magnificent imagery of the roaring water harnessed by the hydroelectric plant shares with Marx what, according to Raymond Williams, "Marx shared with his capitalist enemies: an open triumphalism in the transformation of nature."¹²³ In this particular instance, this is not as significant as its corollary: the disappearance of human figures conventionally associated with the natural landscape. In The German Ideology Marx and Engels argue that the rise of manufacturing, the development of capitalism, and the emergence of the modern world market, symbolised by the growth and predominance of the textile industry, "completed the victory of the commercial town over the countryside."¹²⁴ The Man With the Movie Camera does not explore the relationship between the country and the city; in terms of the film the latter is an autonomous entity. Asians, in particular, are shown as virtually non-existent, non-urban, and non-essential to its functioning; their role in its vision of production is nil, and the Chinese magician is a marginal figure, linked to dubious and dispensable forms of entertainment.

The urban utopianism of The Man With the Movie Camera only incorporates those groups on the left-hand side of the vertical dotted line in the diagram. Yet the economic (over)development of certain areas implies the underdevelopment of others: as most historians of Soviet imperialism point out, post-Revolutionary planning, which dictated that particular dominated regions produced specialised crops in order to supply the major industrial centres with raw materials, was fundamentally consistent with pre-Revolutionary as well as contemporaneous Western capitalist priorities: "the analogy between the Soviet insistence on cotton in Turkestan and the British forced development of cotton in Egypt is striking."¹²⁵ From a global perspective, cotton carries with it unavoidable connotations of exploitation and oppression which form the underside to its world-historical role in the development of industrialisation and the growth of great cities. In its own small way, this is something which the utopianism of The Man With the Movie Camera encourages us to overlook.

Many critics have contrasted The Man With the Movie Camera with other examples of the "city symphony" genre which developed in several European capitals during the 1920s and includes such films as Rien que les Heures (Alberto Cavalcanti, Néofilm, 1926) and Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (Walter Ruttmann, Fox-Europa, 1927). The differences between these films are significant, but what does unite them is that they are all very much constructed from inside a perspective which abstracts and isolates the metropolitan cities they represent from the national and international structures of power which sustain them. Much of what

Raymond Williams has to say about "the new metropolis" of the twentieth century is pertinent to these films, especially to The Man With the Movie Camera:

In current descriptions of the world, the major industrial societies are often described as "metropolitan". At first glance this can often be taken as a simple description of their internal development, in which the metropolitan cities have become dominant. But when we look at it more closely, in its real historical development, we find that what is meant is an extension to the whole world of that division of functions which in the nineteenth century was a division of functions within a single state. The "metropolitan" societies of Western Europe and North America [and in this case, the Soviet Union as well] are the "advanced", "developed" industrialised states; centres of economic, political and cultural power. In sharp contrast with them, though there are many intermediate stages, are societies which are seen as "underdeveloped": still mainly agricultural or "under-industrialised". The "metropolitan" states, through a system of trade, but also through a complex of economic and political controls, draw food and, more critically, raw materials from these areas of supply, this effective hinterland, that is also the greater part of the earth's surface and that contains the great majority of its peoples. Thus a model of city and country, in economic and political relationships, has gone beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, and is seen but also challenged as a model of the world.¹²⁶

Vertov described The Man With the Movie Camera as "kino-eye's new experimental work [which] aims to create a truly international film-language."¹²⁷ The emphasis on a politically internationalist rather than a more aesthetically conceived universal film-language is important to note; Vertov's cultural "leftism" in this respect parallels the political "leftism" of Trotsky and some of his supporters, who insisted that a socialist revolution, in order to succeed, must ultimately be generalised into a global one which goes beyond the boundaries of any particular nation-state. The preceding analysis has explored some of the difficulties attendant upon this laudable ambition, highlighting in particular the tenacity of (neo)imperialist modes of thought and ways of seeing, their reformulation within even strikingly original work produced in cultural "year zero" at the extreme cutting edge of the avant-garde. The Man With the Movie Camera succeeds as a truly internationalist film only if its particular vision of the metropolitan supercity, where European workers are the implicitly privileged norm, is accepted as ideologically non-problematic. Yet The Man With the Movie Camera remains a key text precisely because it indicates the importance of addressing these issues in any subsequent socialist visions of the future. By itself demonstrating how underlying continuities and blindspots can be obscured by advocating a complete break from the past, it recommends the need for continued critical dialogue with the justly renowned achievements of the Soviet avant-garde.

This continued dialogue also needs to engage with a wider range of Vertov's work, and to take more account of the contexts he emerged from and worked within. The breadth of

his achievements and interests extend beyond The Man With the Movie Camera. Two of his other productions, namely One Sixth of the Earth (Goskino/Sovkino, 1926) and Three Songs of Lenin (Mezhrabpomfilm, 1934), focus directly upon the non-metropolitan part of the earth's surface, occupied by the majority of the Soviet Union's ethnically diverse population. Whether or not these films constitute a departure from or even a challenge to the model of the city and of the world found in The Man With the Movie Camera is something the next chapter will explore.

CHAPTER ONE: MONTAGE, MODERNITY AND ETHNICITY

I Eisenstein in Western Film Criticism

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IX Magicians and Their Audiences

92. I am indebted to Seth Feldman for information on this point.

93. Judith Mayne, Kino and the Woman Question, op. cit., p. 174.

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95. "European", for the sake of the argument here, includes ethnic Russians and Ukrainians.

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99. Alan Williams, op. cit., p. 13.

100. From this point onwards, roman numerals in brackets refer to Vlada Petric's segmentation of the film into fifty-five sequences in Constructivism in Film, op. cit., pp. 74-6.

101. Yuri Tsivian, "L'Homme à la Caméra de Dziga Vertov en tant que Texte Constructiviste", Revue du Cinéma 351, June 1980, pp. 124-5, cited in Mayne, Kino and the Woman Question, op. cit., p. 204.

102. Noël Burch, "Film's Institutional Mode of Representation and the Soviet Response", October 11, 1979, pp. 77-96; p. 94.

103. Vertov, "Kino-Eye" [1926], in Kino-Eye, op. cit., pp. 60-79; p. 66.

104. Many of these oppositions also occur in Mayakovsky's "Order Number 2 to the Army of the Arts". The question of gender in Vertov's work, implied by the language used here, is addressed in Mayne, Kino and the Woman Question, op. cit., pp. 154-92.

105. Petric, Constructivism in Film, op. cit., p. 95.

106. Crofts and Rose, op. cit., p. 38.

107. Vertov, "The Man With a Movie Camera (A Visual Symphony)" [1928], in Kino-Eye, op. cit., pp. 283-9; p. 288.

108. The Man With the Movie Camera insistently parallels Kino-Eye filmmaking and industrial labour, but at certain points also contrasts the two activities. Judith Mayne discusses the representation of women in the film in the last two chapters of Kino and the Woman Question, op. cit. The question of peasants and how cinema mediates their place within the new society will be broached in chapter two.

109. Alan Williams, op. cit.

110. Vertov, "On The Eleventh Year" [1928], in Kino-Eye, op. cit., pp. 79-82; p. 81.

111. Alan Williams, op. cit., p. 16; Vance Kepley, "Cinema and Everyday Life: Soviet Worker Clubs of the 1920s", in Robert Sklar and Charles Musser eds., Resisting Images, Temple University Press, pp. 108-25; p. 117.

X The Metropolis, Cotton and Pleasure

112. In Kino and the Woman Question, op. cit., Judith Mayne has much to say about the refiguration of public and private spheres and the way this relates to constructions of gender in Soviet montage cinema.

113. Feldman, op. cit., p. xii.

114. Once again, questions of gender are also relevant here, inasmuch as the pubs were presumably patronised mainly by male workers. There is only one woman drinking in the "beerhall" sequence and the framing and editing positions her as being at the centre of this "debauchery".

115. Quoted by Khrisanf Khersonskii, "Khochu Snimatsia", Kino-Front 5, 1927, cited in Denise Youngblood, Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era, 1918-1935, UMI Research Press, 1985, p. 118.

116. Leon Trotsky, "Leninism and Workers' Clubs" [1924], in Problems of Everyday Life, Pathfinder Press, 1973, pp. 288-319; p. 306; p. 307.

117. Vertov, "From the History of the Kinoks" [1929], in Kino-Eye, op. cit., pp. 92-101; pp. 98-9.

118. A. Kraszna-Krausz, Close-Up 8:4, December, 1931, pp. 300-3, cited in Michelson, "Introduction" to Kino-Eye, op. cit., p. xx.

119. Grierson, op. cit., p. 140.

120. Michelson, "Introduction" to Kino-Eye, op. cit., p. xxxix.

121. Mayne, Kino and the Woman Question, op. cit., p. 164. One route into exploring this further, and perhaps providing reasons for it, would be more research into the contributions Elizaveta Svilova made to the planning and execution of all "Vertov"s major films.

122. Michelson, "Introduction" to Kino-Eye, op. cit., p. xxxvii.

123. Raymond Williams, Towards 2000, Pelican, 1985, p. 264. For more recent contributions to this debate, see Ted Benton, "Marx and Natural Limits: An Ecological Critique and Reconstruction", New Left Review 178, Nov/Dec 1989, pp. 51-86; Reiner Grundmann, "The Ecological Challenge to Marxism", New Left Review 187, May/June 1991, pp. 103-120; Ted Benton, "Ecology, Socialism and the Mastery of Nature: A Reply to Reiner Grundmann", New Left Review 194, July/Aug 1992, pp. 55-74.

124. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The German Ideology [1847], Lawrence and Wishart, 1970, p. 78.

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126. Raymond Williams, The Country and the City, op. cit., p. 279.

127. Vertov, "The Man With a Movie Camera (A Visual Symphony)", op. cit., p. 283.

CHAPTER 2

Kino-Eye's Global Vision

I Constructing Dziga Vertov: Bialystok, Moscow, Internationalism, Anti-Semitism

Within post-1968 Western film culture, the name "Dziga Vertov" brings to mind an altogether leaner, more austere, more rigorous and less effusive figure than Eisenstein. Jean-Luc Godard's famous throwaway comparison between the three most well known Soviet montage filmmakers, made whilst being interviewed in 1970 when he was a member of the Groupe Dziga Vertov, typically characterises the man they borrowed their name from as the most militant and resolute of directors:

Why Dziga Vertov? Because..he was really a Marxist moviemaker. He was a progressive artist who joined the revolution and became a revolutionary artist through struggle..In that way there was a big difference between him and those fellows Eisenstein and Pudovkin, who were not revolutionaries.¹

The difficulties Vertov experienced during and after the 1930s, once Stalinism became entrenched and the film industry was reorganised, are often cited to further authenticate the pure revolutionary credentials attributed to him after 1968. This assessment relies, however, upon a troubling disparity: The Man With the Movie Camera is isolated from the rest of Vertov's oeuvre and rarely discussed in relation to his other work; contextual, biographical and extra-textual factors which might be relevant to the production and reception of this exemplary film are seldom investigated, whereas they become all-important in explaining why Vertov's career

nosedived after the late 1930s. One of the aims of this chapter is to produce a more nuanced account of Vertov's development, which approaches the question of orientalism and internationalism within his work by viewing it as a continuous, ongoing project. He himself saw it in these terms: "Three Songs of Lenin [Mezhrabpomfilm, 1934] required exceptionally complex editing. In this respect the experience of The Man With the Movie Camera [Vufku, 1928], One Sixth of the Earth [Goskino, 1928], and The Eleventh Year [Vufku, 1927], were of great help to our production group. They were, so to speak, "films that beget films"¹¹.

Rather than being flatly contradicted, the post-1968 image of Vertov needs to be updated and elaborated upon, and the reasons for its formation need to be outlined. Because radical critics and filmmakers outside the Soviet Union found it necessary to construct a brief historical moment and a set of exemplary figures which could be pointed to as proof that socialism could, at least potentially, deliver a utopia, "Dziga Vertov" as a truly radical avant-garde artist, faithful to the original ideals of the Revolution, is an image which has facilitated but also hampered critical assessments of his work. Likewise with "Trotsky", another prophet without honour in his own country, who has also in some discourses been extracted from history and preserved in amber as the true spirit of the Revolution, the man who got it right in theory before it all went terribly wrong in practice. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that both Vertov and Trotsky, in different ways, have served as "if only" figures within a retrospectively constructed historical melodrama. Respective failure to realise their dreams has also to some

extent protected those dreams, and their actual work, from the sustained but respectful critique they now require.

Partly because Vertov re-emerged in the West riding on the crest of a wave of post-1968 criticism which reacted against classical auteurism, no book-length biographical study of him has as yet been written in English or any other European language, and very little detailed information about his co-workers is available. Conclusions derived from what is currently extant can therefore only be speculative. Nevertheless, a hint as to why Eisenstein's and Vertov's work is so particularly interesting in relation to questions of ethnicity is contained in Jacques Aumont's biographical comments in Montage Eisenstein. He suggests that the "ephebophilic bloneness" of many of the positive figures in Eisenstein's films may have something to do with his assimilated Jewish ancestry as well as his homosexuality.³ There is indeed a marked investment in his work in an idealised image of the "new Soviet man", described by Milan Hauner as "that artificial homunculus of Soviet propaganda, a creature of no certain racial or ethnic origin, but speaking and feeling, of course, Russian."⁴ In this respect, Eisenstein's film practice harmonises with official Soviet policy during the 1920s, which favoured complete Jewish assimilation whilst mounting propaganda campaigns against anti-Semitism: Battleship Potemkin [Sovkino, 1926] contributes to the latter part of this process when one bourgeois man, in the crowd which gathers in the Odessa harbour around the sailor Vakulinchuk's body, shouts "Down with the Jews!", and immediately receives a hostile reaction from the other people surrounding him.⁵ Vertov, as another assimilated Jew from the periphery of the old Russian Empire,

presents a similar yet also different case. His idealised types are often Komsomols and Pioneers, repeatedly privileged in his films, for example in Kinoglaz [Goskino, 1924], but usually filmed in a less overtly eroticised way than in Eisenstein's work. Vertov's work is more notable for its deep-rooted and pervasive internationalism, which relates to a very specific personal history.

In his sociology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century socialist Russian-Jewish intelligentsia, Robert Brym contests the conventional wisdom which would emphasise only their double marginality, as Jews and as intellectuals, and their consequent exclusion from that society's central processes. He restores the equally important notion of their agency by pointing out that the Russian-Jewish socialist intelligentsia "forged the ideologies of Labour Zionism, Bundism, Menshevism and, to a much lesser degree, Bolshevism. They were both products and key architects of socio-historical changes which permanently altered the texture of social life in Russia, the Middle East and therefore the world."⁶ Brym suggests that ideological developments and divergences among and between members of this broad social category can be clarified by relating individual socio-biographical data to an "embedding" process which subdivides into three theoretically distinct and often historically consecutive phases: "classification", "declassification" and "reclassification". Classification refers to the degree to which a particular family was connected, geographically, occupationally, socially and/or educationally, to either a specific Jewish community, or the larger class system within Russian society as a whole. Vertov

was born in 1896 in Bialystok, Poland, an area which was at that time included within the Russian Empire and also formed part of the northern Pale of Settlement. Both his parents were librarians, and Vertov seems not to have received a traditionally Jewish education, attending instead the Bialystok Conservatory of Music for three years after 1912. The family were socially mobile and affluent enough to be able to relocate to Moscow during the First World War in order to escape the German attack on Poland. They appear to have moved fairly comfortably within the larger ambit of Russian society, rather than identifying strongly with any particular Jewish community.⁷

Declassification, according to Brym, refers to the stage of the embedding process which marginality theory overemphasises. The Russian education system produced a surfeit of intellectuals and, due to the relative weakness of the emergent middle class and the autocracy's imposition of severe restrictions on freedom of speech and publication, there were not enough politically "acceptable" institutions in existence capable of absorbing them. Vertov's situation in 1916-17 was far from untypical: he was a student, an unknown, unemployed, technophile poet-musician, and therefore also an habitu   of Petrograd's bohemian caf  s. His future prospects were uncertain: it was October which changed everything and opened up the possibility of a hitherto unimagined career for him. Many established artists and intellectuals, accustomed to the old social and political order, and perhaps also fearing reprisals should the White army defeat the Bolsheviks, were initially reluctant to associate themselves with the new regime. Therefore, as

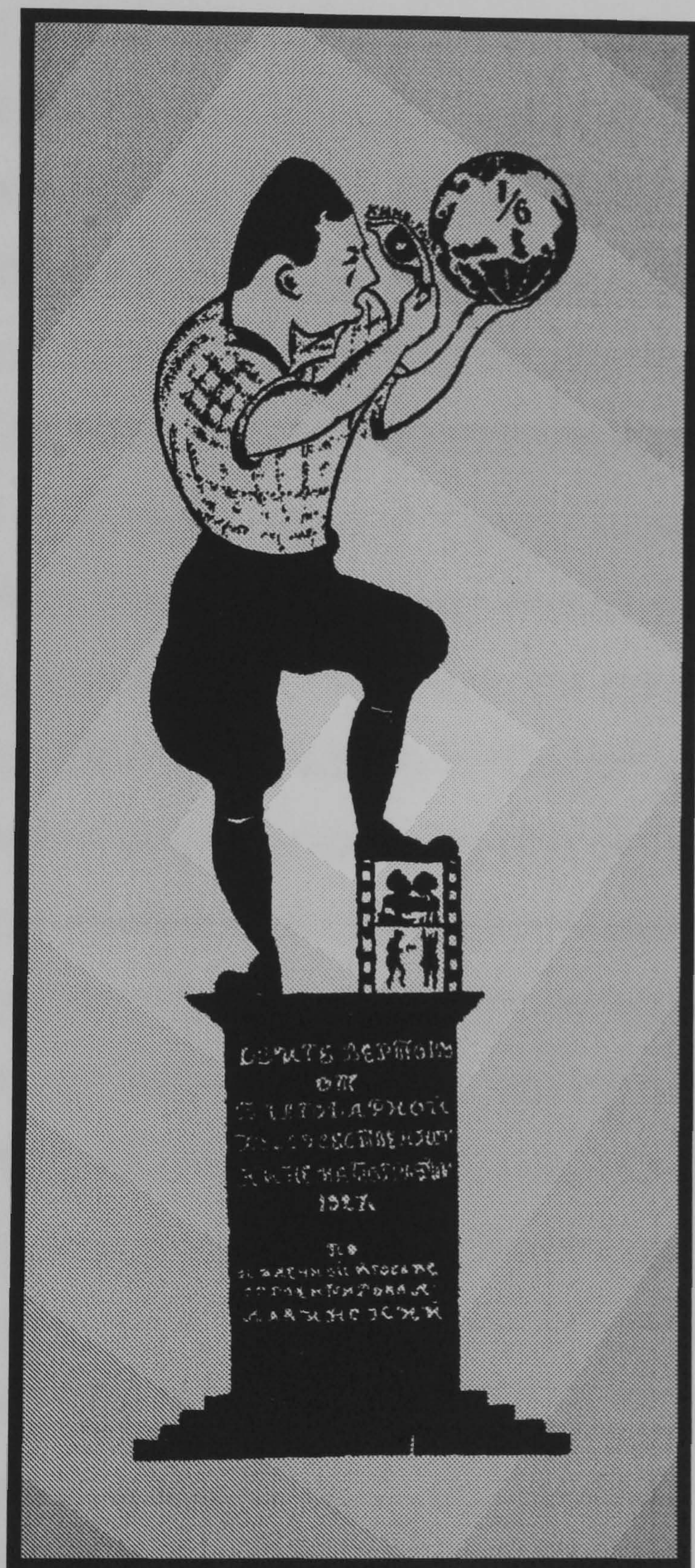
Robert Williams has argued, "the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 provided new opportunities previously denied to many artists: the non-Russian, the provincial, the young, women."⁸

In Brym's schema, reclassification entails the radical intellectual making a commitment to a particular class fraction, party or social movement, the choice being determined by his/her previous experience and also by the temporal and regional availability of a particular group to commit to. Vertov's adherence to an abstract internationalism predicated upon the apparent transcendence, through technology, of regional and even temporal specificity, relates to the intersection between his own social background and to the situation he found himself in immediately after the Revolution. He was offered a job, in 1918, as Mikhail Koltsov's secretary on the government-supported Moscow Cinema Committee. As a result, Vertov became involved in cataloguing and editing newsreel material obtained from all parts of the Soviet Union. This unique position allowed him to combine his recently cultivated avant-garde sensibility with privileged visual access to images from a variety of locations - long before the advent of television - and a commitment to Soviet power, which after all had opened up this unprecedented opportunity to him. Through daily, tactile contact with their images, the slogan "workers of the world unite" would have acquired a very tangible meaning for Vertov.

In his historical survey of Jewish life in the Soviet Union, Benjamin Pinkus outlines how, in the period prior to and just after the Revolution, the Bolsheviks never even went through the motions of offering Russian Jews self-determination because they classified them as a non-territorial ethnic group already well en route to assimilation. Pinkus also refers to "the generally held belief that socialism would be a panacea for the nationalist contradictions inherent in the capitalist system and would solve all the problems connected with the nationality question" as surviving the transition from Marxist theory into Soviet practice after 1917.⁹ Vertov, operating within the cultural sphere, and less trammelled by the exigencies and compromises involved in the nitty-gritty of government policy-making on these questions, was able to carry on expounding these ideas in relatively pure form in films such as One Sixth of the Earth and Three Songs of Lenin. It is not that his own personal history simply shielded him from the worst manifestations of anti-Semitism: eighty people were murdered in a major pogrom in Bialystok in 1906, and one of the factors prompting his family's move in 1915 could well have been that, during the First World War, Jews living in border areas were routinely scapegoated as supposed collaborators and spies. What is decisive is that the particular way in which Vertov became "embedded" within Russian society, and the transformation in his situation after the advent of Soviet power, led him to the conclusion that assimilation, the creation of new Soviet man, and internationalism could provide the answers to the problems of ethnic conflict and discrimination: self-determination or territorial autonomy never formed part of his agenda. In his film practice he

generalised these solutions, projecting them onto other ethnic groups as well.

The way Vertov made a name for himself, both literally and in terms of establishing and furthering his career, through building up a recognisably distinct image, is indissociable from questions of empire and ethnicity. Vertov's image, aggressively elaborated in articles and public appearances throughout the 1920s, generated a certain amount of notoriety, but also a reputation as a mercurial director which enabled him to secure sometimes prestigious assignments within the nascent Soviet film industry. The general contours of his image became well-known enough in film-cultural circles to make it a fair target for satire in the lively Soviet film press of the period. In Anton Lavinsky's caricature, Vertov's strident insistence upon kino-eye's power to encompass the globe features prominently, and he is presented as a mock-heroic figure, fittingly memorialised. The cartoon also highlights several connotations of the Vertov image which relate to the construction of gender differences: frames from a romance and an action film - the archetypal female and male genres - are shown being crushed underfoot, to be replaced solely by the new, kino-eye way of seeing. But the crushing is being done by a man, and the new point-of-view is still identifiably male. Similarly, elements of Vertov's image which construct him as an heroic, pioneering figure substantiate Martin Green's claim that "adventure..is the energizing myth of empire; and empire is to be found everywhere in the modern world, disguised as [in this case socialist] development or improvement."¹⁰ The globe held in the palm of Vertov's hand



**'Project of a monument to
Dziga Vertov'**

suggests, in addition to observation, conquest, possession and control.

In Vertov's case it is perhaps more appropriate to say that residual and reformulated myths of empire operate coterminously with ideals of development and improvement, rather than simply being disguised by them. There is nothing in Vertov's known personal history or professional practice which casts any doubt whatsoever upon the sincerity and integrity with which he held to his stated ideals throughout his entire career, often at considerable cost to himself. Indeed, his change of name testifies to a total commitment to the kino-eye project. Most accounts accept Vertov's own explanation as to why Dennis Abramovich Kaufman renamed himself Dziga Arkadevich Vertov: Seth Feldman, for instance, reports that Vertov told Jay Leyda in 1934 that "Dziga" was an onomatopoeia for the sound made by film on the editing table, whilst "Vertov" replicated the noise made when rewinding the negative.¹¹ In Annette Michelson's version of this anecdote, "Dziga" reproduces the repetitive sound of a camera crank turning.¹² The very fact of a change of name indicates an absolute commitment to Soviet revolutionary society, and to a radically innovative use of verbal and film language which participates in the creation "through montage..[of]..a new, perfect man [sic]", totally integrated with modern technology.¹³ Interestingly, Vertov's self-reconstruction parallels that undertaken by some of those at the opposite end of the Russian-Jewish socialist ideological spectrum: Zionists who adopted new names with Biblical resonances, signifying their determination to build a better life elsewhere, in an exclusively Jewish homeland; David Ben-

Gurion, né David Green, being perhaps the single most famous example. Both extremes represent Russian-Jewish responses to modernity: one emphasising total commitment to modernity, the other the need for a specifically Jewish response to it.

The idiosyncratic uniqueness of the new name Dziga Vertov is a reminder that not everyone in the Soviet Union occupied the same position as its bearer or believed in the egalitarian internationalism which it and the principles of kino-eye proclaim. The use of onomatopoeia in its construction relates to Vertov's musical training, his life-long interest in experimenting with sound, and to his related ambition to develop internationally comprehensible forms of communication: an ambition which through a stroke of good fortune he found himself in a privileged position to attempt to realise after 1917. Seth Feldman also notes that Dziga Vertov's new name can be translated either, in Russian, as "spinning top", indicative of the Constructivist fascination with mechanical motion, or, in Ukrainian, as "spinning gypsy".¹⁴ This last connotation suggests an opposition to precise geographical or ethnic specification, yet also hints at other reasons for choosing to change to a new name, which become even more pertinent within the pre-Revolutionary context within which the choice was actually made. Herbert Marshall points out that Vertov, the director Abram Room, who retained his original name, and Mikhail Koltsov/Friedland, the journalist who was Vertov's early patron, all attended the Psycho-Neurological Institute in Petrograd. They enrolled there because it was one of the few institutions of higher education which did not impose the discriminatory numerus

clausus: i.e. it accepted Jewish students without any percentage limitations. These were abolished by the Revolution but reintroduced in the late Stalinist period. For Marshall, Vertov and his fellow students provide examples demonstrating how "people only changed their names in Russia because they were Jewish or as revolutionaries adopting pseudonyms".¹⁵ The multiple connotations of the name and image "Dziga Vertov" combined both these factors, but sought to stress the latter at the expense of the former.

Unfortunately, creators cannot limit the uses to which their creations are put, and the ethnic connotations of such name changes were forcibly foregrounded and even used as a weapon against them as Soviet rivalry with Nazi Germany intensified during the 1930s, and also when the Cold War locked into place after the "hot" superpower conflicts of the Second World War had ended. It is no accident that Eisenstein was called upon to write an open letter attacking Joseph Goebbels in 1934, nor that he was chosen to produce the Wagner opera Die Walküre in 1940, during the period of Soviet-Nazi rapprochement.¹⁶ The later case involved more of a mixed message; German high culture in Moscow to put the seal on the 1939 non-aggression pact but, at the same time, by giving the supervision of the project to someone known to be of Jewish descent, a barbed reminder that alliances could shift again if the need arose. During the war itself, Eisenstein was compelled to make a radio broadcast to "brother Jews of the whole world".¹⁷ Had he lived beyond 1948, and had Vertov not been effectively banished from the public sphere by then, both of them would possibly have

been targets in the most overtly anti-Semitic phase of Stalinist oppression: the overlapping campaigns against "Jewish nationalism" and "rootless cosmopolitanism" which began in earnest after the war, and also fed into attempts to impose pressure to conform to the norms of the day upon those artists who had earlier been associated with the avant-garde. Jay Leyda records that members of the film community targeted in the first 1949 issue of Iskusstvo Kino included the directors Leonid Trauberg, Grigori Kosintsev and Sergei Yutkevich.¹⁸ Simultaneously, as Benjamin Pinkus notes, other sectors of the press "began using the anti-Semitic device of disclosing the pseudonyms" and unmasking the "treacherous" activities of allegedly anti-Soviet Jews.¹⁹ This culminated in the infamous "Doctors' plot" of 1953, the year in which both Stalin and Vertov died. Again, most of the physicians accused of conspiring to poison members of the politbureau were Jewish. Discrimination on the basis of ethnicity occurred in various forms throughout the history of the Soviet Union and impinged upon even the relatively privileged cultural elite of the film community. Whether or not Vertov, who earnestly desired to do so, actually managed to eliminate it within the partly imaginary space of his films is another question altogether.

II Whose Soviet Cinema/Whose Sixth of the Earth?

One of the things which distinguished Vertov from his peers, the other Soviet montage theorists and practitioners, was his consistent advocacy of revolutionary change in the social relations of cinema production and exhibition. This was also one of the factors which endeared him to filmmakers like the post-1968 Godard, who wanted to reject the capitalist system as a whole, and in its specific forms within the film industry, and to work as far outside them as possible. Eisenstein also certainly wanted to alter what he saw as the conventional relationship between audience and spectacle, but his ideas in this area focused more around the immediate transaction between text and spectator, and were less explicitly addressed to the contemporary situation of cinema within the Soviet Union than Vertov's were. Vertov's proclamations on the subject, a mixture of polemical slogans and detailed practical proposals, were necessitated by his particular position within that situation.

After the Civil War ended, Soviet cinema's economic priorities reasserted precedence over its ideological ones, although debates continued to rage about which was more important, and how or whether these two spheres could be brought into convergence. Fundamentally, however, with the Soviet economy as a whole severely damaged by the war, and with other sectors requiring more immediate attention, only a minimal amount of state funding could be directed into the film industry. Sovkino was capitalised by other state bodies buying shares in it, but the bottom line was that after this it had to finance itself by generating profits, and the prevailing view

was that the only way to do this, at least until stability was achieved, was to maximise income through the distribution of domestic and foreign entertainment features.²⁰ Non-fiction film was again relegated to secondary status in both production and programming, and from the introduction of NEP onwards Vertov was essentially involved in ceding more and more ground in a rearguard defence of his conception of the decisive contribution the non-fiction sector of the industry could make to the reconstruction of Soviet society. Paradoxically, as he lost this battle, Vertov's spirited defence in support of a losing cause raised his own individual profile as a director.

These issues cut across the reception as well as the production of Vertov's films: as Denise Youngblood has pointed out, it is significant that one of the major criticisms directed at One Sixth of the Earth by the prominent, pro-entertainment film critic Ippolit Sokolov was that, rather than an estimated eight months and 80,000 roubles, it had in fact taken nineteen months and 130,000 roubles to make it. Once completed, even though the film was relatively successful compared to Vertov's other productions, it only earned 8,500 roubles in the first six days of its run, as opposed to the average fiction film's takings of between 12-13,000 over the same period.²¹ For his part, Vertov bitterly opposed what he perceived as counterrevolutionary organisational measures within the industry, and he expressed contempt for this kind of short-sighted, short-term financial evaluation. For Vertov, this frame of mind explained "the unwillingness, or rather, *inability* of I. Sokolov to understand the structure of One Sixth of the Earth."²² It was partly the forced adoption of this defensively

uncompromising tone which eventually led to so much enmity accumulating against Vertov within the industry. Underlying Vertov's rejoinder are two assumptions: that Sokolov's limited powers of comprehension relate to his bourgeois consciousness rather than to a lack of aesthetic sophistication; and that it is the opposition of obstructive, pettifogging film critics, and not anything internal to Vertov's project itself, which prevents kino-eye from fully reaching out to and being appreciated by the Soviet masses.

Exchanges such as this one with Sokolov serve as a reminder that it is necessary at all times to bear in mind when tracing the development of Vertov's montage theory and practice that, whilst they aspire to a largely unrealised, well-nigh utopian dream of a revolutionised role for cinema in society, they also derive from the discourses of that society and relate to Vertov's position within it: the dream cannot be entirely separated from its context. Like so many of the actors on the political and cultural scene after 1924, Vertov articulated his demands for an ideal cinema by invoking the authority of the Soviet state's deceased founder, Lenin. In his book on Vertov's work, Vlada Petric repudiates Annette Michelson's comparison of Vertov to Trotsky, considering him instead a practitioner and theorist whose originality and achievement within cinema is of equal stature to Lenin's in politics.²³ The problem with comparisons at this level of generality, whether they be to Trotsky or Lenin, is that whilst they express modern Western critics' estimations of Vertov's seminal importance, they are also simplifications which suggest that, against the tide of history, a few isolated geniuses have managed to

produce, if only momentarily, a pure, almost totally exemplary praxis.

Certainly, Vertov invoked Lenin's authority in the 1920s and characterised himself as the authentic representative of the dead leader's wishes within cinema, but, as subsequent modifications in his position demonstrate, this is more usefully understood in terms of what it was part of at the time: a fierce power struggle over the right to interpret Lenin's legacy, which intersected with Vertov's jostling for position within the Soviet film industry. The production of Three Songs of Lenin was his most effective yet also last significant move within this complex contest regulated by shifting and uncertain ground rules. Vertov's argument for the importance of the non-fiction film was justified by repeated references to the "Leninist proportion": statements made by Lenin about the exhibition of propaganda films. In the 1922 text being referred to, Lenin recommended that a definite proportion should be established *firstly* for entertainment films, "for publicity purposes and for their receipts", and *secondly*, "under the heading From the Life of the Peoples of the World films of a particular propaganda content, such as the colonial policy of the British in India, the work of the League of Nations, the starving in Berlin, etc., etc."²⁴ Vertov's initial outright rejection of the entertainment or "artistic" film's right to exist; "[conventional] "cinematography" must die..*WE call for its death to be hastened*" [1922], was later tempered, under changing political and economic circumstances, by an interpretation of Lenin's statement which reversed its priorities, maximising the import of the second directive and minimising the first: "Against this chart: Artistic cinema - 95%, Scientific,

educational films; travelogues - 5%, we've got to promote this chart: Kino-eye (everyday life) - 45%, Scientific, educational - 30%, Artistic drama - 25%." [1925]²⁵ Yet although, over time, Vertov was forced to concede ground on the right of the entertainment film to co-exist with non-fiction, and on the actual proportion in which each could exist, he never wavered from the internationalist principles expressed in Lenin's second recommendation.

Vertov's persistent hope was to reorganise all aspects of the cinema industry and to develop and generalise the newly developing range of kino-eye production techniques.

Together, these two measures would facilitate a system of communication which would create international proletarian solidarity by giving "everyone working behind a plow or a machine the opportunity to see his brothers at work with him simultaneously in different parts of the world and to see all his enemies, the exploiters."²⁶ Apart from the gender bias of the language there seems to be nothing else in this statement of purpose which suggests that anything but an equal exchange between all the world's oppressed is envisaged. Yet a survey of Vertov's other available statement on this topic reveals a tendency towards elision: a difficulty in placing groups who cannot be defined as straightforwardly proletarian.

"Proletarians" and "workers" are the terms most often used when referring to the groups who will be linked together: one formulation wavers between "our basic, programmatic objective [which] is to aid each oppressed individual and [or?] the proletariat as a whole in their effort to understand the phenomena of life around them."²⁷ Later in the same article, workers and peasants are mentioned separately, then

subsumed under the generic term "proletariat". Although, of course, proletarian can technically mean anyone without capital who is forced to sell his/her labour in return for a wage, the emphasis in actual Soviet usage, which gives material and historical weight to the word, strongly suggests urbanised, male, predominantly Russian workers located in the major cities, particularly Leningrad and Moscow. The "obvious" description of Eisenstein's The Old and the New [Sovkino, 1929] would be "a film about the collectivisation of the peasants", *not* the workers or the proletariat. Conversely, October [Sovkino, 1928] is very much "a film about the seizure of power by the Petrograd proletariat/ workers". Power and priority is vested in the proletariat, whereas the peasantry is more often represented as the object rather than the putative agent of social change. The hammer and sickle, foremost symbol of "smychka" - unity between the urban proletariat and the peasants - was only adopted as an emblem for the Soviet flag after Lenin had pragmatically rejected the proposal that a hammer and rifle, the latter referring to the army, be used instead. Representation of the official aspirations of the Soviet state was considered to be more appropriate to the task of symbolising and constructing unity than the explicit valorisation of the army and the use of force. Yet War Communism at the beginning of the 1920s, and the First Five Year Plan at the end of the decade, both involved often extremely violent expropriation of the peasantry's resources. Throughout the early part of the 1920s the reconquest of various former colonies of the old Russian empire was also undertaken. All things considered, discretion in the choice of emblem for the Soviet flag outweighed the celebration of military valour.

The slippage between "proletariat" as an all-embracing term, and as a privileging of city-based industrial workers, is of course not specific to Vertov: it is a problem within Bolshevik and Marxist discourse more generally. Nevertheless, it is an extremely significant factor in the structure of his projects. In his orthodox adherence to the principles underlying the "Leninist proportion" Vertov also upholds one of the basic assumptions incorporated within the text in which Lenin first suggested this scheme. Lenin's text pointedly concludes that "we should pay special attention to the organisation of cinemas in the countryside and in the East, where they are novelties and where, therefore, our propaganda will be particularly successful."²⁸ As Geoffrey Wheeler points out, the problem posed by the peasantry was often considered to be very close if not analogous to that posed by Central Asia and other "backward" former colonies.²⁹ The Communist Manifesto, within the space of a single sentence, establishes an analogy between the rule of the bourgeoisie over the peasantry and the rule of the West over the East.³⁰ Soviet discourse implicitly inserts the Russian proletariat into the position previously occupied by the Western bourgeoisie. The assumption in Lenin's text is that the urban proletariat form the Bolsheviks' "natural" constituency, whereas the peasantry and Soviet Union's oriental populations require more careful supervision. It also assumes two other things: firstly, that there wasn't, or shouldn't be, any independent cinematic production activity among these groups, apart from what is sent out to them from the centre; secondly, that peasant and oriental audiences are more impressionable and less critical than other groups, especially when exposed to modern technology, and consequently these defects can be turned

to the Soviet state's advantage, by in effect exploiting their supposed credulity. Imbalances of power and cultural and material differences are to be perpetuated, and to serve as the basis for the division, control and regulation of the Soviet population at the same time as worker-peasant unity and internationalism are being asserted.

Vertov's mature work, effectively assuming as its norm proletarian audiences who are supposedly acclimatised to the rapid pace of the city, makes few concessions to audiences with other kinds of cultural backgrounds. Instead, they are treated as a separate and secondary consideration. That there might be a practical as well as theoretical contradiction here between this and Vertov's professed internationalism is indicated by the fact that, *before* he firmly established his reputation and had more power to dictate his own projects, he was required by Goskino to produce a relatively conventional newsreel series, Goskinokalendar, which ran from July 1923 to May 1925, to "compensate" for his more experimental work on later issues of Kinopravda, which ran from June 1922 to mid-1925.³¹

Rashit Yangirov's work on national alternatives within Soviet cinema draws attention to the fact that most historical discussions of Soviet cinema in the 1920s typically ignore such audiences and limit themselves to work produced within the major, but by no means only centres of filmmaking activity: Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. This bias has retarded research into other cinemas by replicating the assumption contained in Lenin's text about there being no substantial history of independent production outside of these centres, and no

need to develop one. Yangirov's work makes visible the fact that what is often discussed as Soviet cinema should perhaps more correctly be identified as Russian or Ukrainian cinema produced within a Soviet context. The "disorganisation" of Soviet cinema in the 1920s: i.e. competition between a variety of relatively uncoordinated and sometimes parallel organisations, was in some respects advantageous to the development of non-Russian cinema initiatives. These included the Soviet Yiddish cinema which flourished between 1924 and 1936.³² The increasing rationalisation and centralisation of the industry towards the end of the decade steadily "eradicated any opportunity for the emergence of individual cinemas in the autonomous national regions [of the Russian Federation, and of the Soviet Union as a whole] which were so stoutly defending their sovereign rights to independent cultural construction."³³ During the 1920s an extensive campaign was sustained, aimed at ensuring that all aspects of cinematic activity in these areas developed in a way which was commensurate with what one critic, writing in 1925, described as the tactful but firm "fight against the basic prejudices of oriental peoples."³⁴

Vertov's formulations for the organisation of Soviet non-fiction cinema complied with the general direction of this process: the effect of his theory and practice was, on the whole, to deny autonomy by default. He wrote several essays outlining his plans for a centralised "creative laboratory" and "factory of facts": a permanent fixed base from where kino-eye films could be manufactured. To support the gathering of footage for this factory, he at one point proposed a tiered system of provincial camera correspondents, preferably trained in kino-

eye principles, who would supply filmed material from all parts of the Soviet Union in those cases where it was not feasible to dispatch a team of kinoks from the centre to do the work themselves.³⁵ One Sixth of the Earth was partly produced in this way, although here, as in later, films Vertov's ambitions outstripped the resources available to him, and he also had to utilise archive material. In all cases, the final stage of the editing would be completed at the centre of the whole organisation: this phase developed into such an important process that only Vertov and Elizaveta Svilova considered themselves experienced enough to undertake it.³⁶ In practice, division and specialisation of labour was still inherent within kino-eye.

Although the full implementation of Vertov's proposals would in many respects have involved a radical restructuring of the Soviet film industry, control over image production, the means of representation, and the uses to which representations were to be put would have remained quite firmly directed from the centre. In conjunction with "centralised" editing, the hidden camera techniques which Vertov and Mikhail Kaufman designed, in order not to interfere with the activities they recorded, also by definition denied filmed subjects the option of negotiation or refusing to be caught unawares by the kino-eye. By not extending beyond the actual moment of filming itself, this ostensible respect for people's independence and autonomy contributed to an unacknowledged disregard for these very same factors at a more global level. Vertov's insistence upon "continuous montage" taking place throughout all stages of the production process, and not just in the final editing phase, allowed camera people a degree

of flexibility within an overall shooting plan, but still left those being filmed with little or no room for manoeuvre. Therefore, despite his stated intention about wanting to create an egalitarian, reciprocal system of communication which would lead to the ending of oppression, it could be argued that there was a sense in which Vertov was inadvertently exploiting the people and places he filmed, by expropriating their images without their knowledge, let alone their informed consent. This is not simply an ethical question: as Bill Nichols has recently argued, the framework often used to discuss questions of representation within non-fiction film, that of the individual morality of a particular filmmaker's project, needs to be expanded:

Ethical conduct can..be considered politically motivated..both ethics and politics can be seen as instances of ideological discourse aimed at the constitution of the appropriate forms of subjectivity for a given mode of social organization. There is clearly a politics to ethics as there is an ethics to politics: both are ideological discourses not simply in the sense that they seek to affect individual conduct by means of rhetoric, but in the more basic sense that they establish and maintain a specific "ensemble of social relations" that form the tissue and texture of a given cultural economy.³⁷

Once again, given his background and stated aspirations, there is no doubting Vertov's integrity or the genuineness of his desire, through kino-eye, to bring about radical change within the given "ensemble of social relations" prevailing at the time he made his films. What is at issue here is the range of subtle

and complex pressures exerted by that ensemble, permeating and placing constraints and limitations upon the very conception of his theories as well as the nature of his practice. If shooting according to the dictates of "life caught unawares" effectively blocked off, at the point of production, any possibility for negotiation between the camera person and the people he/she filmed, Vertov's published references to audience reception also blocked out or limited the attribution of critical faculties to peasant spectators in particular. Like Lenin, he employed the image of the "uninitiated" rural viewer, who would supposedly respond more immediately and positively to kino-eye productions because not already corrupted by bourgeois cinema culture. Vertov remarks upon how absolutely absorbed in the representations they become when shown "life" on the screen.³⁸ Yet most of the examples he cites actually relate to the Civil War period, before the advent of kino-eye, when he was working with the agit-trains exhibiting "simplified" newsreels and "agitka" films. This vagueness and inaccuracy suggests that what is really happening here is the construction of the image of a *hypothetical* rather than empirical peasant viewer: a figure who could be used as a foil to defend kino-eye against the complaints of critics like Sokolov, and who could also serve as an imaginary representative of the uncorrupted masses still eagerly waiting to be reached by Vertov's often unpopular and therefore not widely distributed films.

At a more basic theoretical rather than strategic level of Vertov's discourse, these references to peasant audiences form an interesting counterpoint to the simultaneously life-observing *and* self-reflexive urban proletarian viewer which

The Man With the Movie Camera posits as its ideal audience. Significantly, the cinema audience seen twice in One Sixth of the Earth is, as in The Man With the Movie Camera, a Russian proletarian one, whereas those who are seen but do not, as it were, also see their own viewing activity represented within the film are mainly from the wide range of non-European ethnic groups it surveys. Vertov's work, both filmic and written, is structured around an implicit divide which hierarchises viewers who are members of the urban proletariat above viewers who are not. Kino-eye links understanding of one's place and proper role within society to understanding of one's relation to cinematic technology, but not everyone is allowed equal participation in this production of knowledge. Implicitly, peasants and oriental viewers are fobbed off with passive spectatorship, mystification, and naive absorption in the realism of the cinematic spectacle - rather than scientific, socialist enlightenment and a degree of critical distance. Despite the egalitarian claims made for the kino-eye project as a whole, viewers in the latter category are not represented as having the capacity to develop a fully critical consciousness. Ultimately, however, this impedes the internationalist rapprochement kino-eye ostensibly strives for: the proletarian audience self-reflexively privileged within both The Man With the Movie Camera and One Sixth of the Earth is discouraged from examining the relativity of its own position vis-à-vis those ethnic groups it observes but is not, in turn, observed by. These films, and Vertov's writings more generally, neglect to reflect upon or make explicit the fact that they were produced from within a centralising perspective, using terms of reference derived from discourses associated with state power. Consequently, non-oriental viewers and readers

are prevented from investigating whether those "basic prejudices of oriental peoples", which Soviet cinema, culture and power is dedicated to "fighting against", relate not so much to the innate backwardness of oriental culture or psychology as to the very context of the fight itself and therefore to resistance to new forms of colonial domination.

The distinctive and innovative use of intertitles in One Sixth of the Earth illustrates how this film as a whole combines elements of what Bill Nichols in Representing Reality has categorised as "expository" and "reflexive" modes of non-fiction filmmaking, without ever reflecting upon this adversarial context or even admitting that it might exist.³⁹ Erik Barnouw employs the terms "incantation" and "invocation" to describe One Sixth of the Earth as a tribute to the geographical and historical expansiveness of the Soviet Union, in which "a long series of short, intermittent [inter]titles form a continuing apostrophe, in a style reminiscent of Walt Whitman, a poet much admired by Vertov."⁴⁰ The rhythmic punctuation provided by the alternation between intertitles and shots, the repetition of particular words and phrases, and the lyricism of some of the language used certainly contributes to a sense of political harmony emerging in the new Soviet Union, linking and unifying its various peoples. Nichols' definition of non-fictional "poetic exposition", functioning "bardically, to draw us together into a social collectivity of shared values", is evinced here on a very grand scale, as a model for possible future global organisation: the film concludes with images and intertitles broadening its argument to suggest that this will or should be the eventual fate of all "workers from the West" and "peoples from the East".⁴¹

Within this desired collectivity, the Russian proletariat is promoted above all other sectors of Soviet society. An intertitle placed between the two brief shots of the proletarian cinema audience included within the film reads: "In your hands/is the sixth/part/of the earth". This is the only point at which the film's title is quoted within the text, and in the second of these two shots the audience claps vigorously as if in response to the words which have just appeared upon the screen. "One sixth of the earth" was not a new phrase: it dates back to before the Revolution, when what became the Soviet Union was officially an empire. Prior to its appearance, a series of intertitles label images of representatives of various ethnic or national groups as "Tartars", "Buriats", "Uzbeks", "Kalmucks" and so on. Various customs practised by these peoples are also depicted, including the eating of reindeer flesh, a Central Asian "goat tearing" competition, and a woman washing clothes with her feet. An intertitle later in the film explains how in some places the old ways "still linger on" - the choice of words consigning all this activity to the past. Significantly, it is only those cultures considered to be primitive or traditional which are identified in this way: the labelling device is never applied to Russians or other European nationalities within the Soviet Union. The assumption operative here is that the former need to be located within a frame of reference comprehensible to the latter, but not vice-versa. The exclusive use of Russian for One Sixth of the Earth's intertitles consents to that language's hegemony within the new collectivity being elaborated: the titles could of course be translated, but to defer this consideration to an optional or secondary stage in the production process is to relegate it to an afterthought, especially when, given Vertov and Svilova's

ingenuity, multilingual forms of address within the text would have been well within the realms of technical possibility. The speed with which the titles are edited, conforming to the overall rapidity of One Sixth of the Earth's montage, also assumes a proficiency in reading Russian which favours literate native speakers.⁴²

The linking of intertitles and shots from widely diverse and seemingly divergent locales proceeds according to the logic of what Bill Nichols calls "evidentiary" editing, in which the arrangement of shots supports an explicit or implicit argument by using examples from the historical world, rather than constructing a coherent but fictional diegetic space. He credits Soviet montage cinema with having contributed a great deal to the development of this technique, and Vertov in particular with also having been one of the pioneers of the reflexive mode of non-fiction filmmaking, in which a "thickened, denser sense of the textuality of the viewing experience is in operation".⁴³ One Sixth of the Earth's editing speed, its constant change of locale, continual interjection of intertitles and use of direct address in their wording, are self-reflexive in the sense that they seek to heighten audience awareness of the fact that the representation of the world offered by the film is the product of labour and technological mediation. Yet this is as far as its reflexivity goes: no alternatives to the ideological direction outlined by the film are seriously considered, and dialogue with its presuppositions is not encouraged, either within the film or in the way it addresses its audiences. Andrew Britton's comments on The Man With the Movie Camera apply at least in part to One Sixth of the Earth as well:

No film goes further out of its way to remind us that the images we are seeing are the product of a complex process of selection and manufacture and that they embody a specific point of view, but the crucial problem is that this point of view is conceived of entirely in technological terms. We cannot fail to be aware that the narrative world has been constructed by the film-maker, but [the film] has not a word to say about its own value system.⁴⁴

This opposition to surface textual transparency does not in any way guarantee a multiplicity of ideological perspectives, or that the dominant voice embedded within the structure of the film will be openly acknowledged as such. What One Sixth of the Earth's reflexivity does do is continually emphasise that the panoptic vision the film aspires to can only be attained through modern technology, and is therefore *superior* to and more truthful than ordinary, unaided individual human vision for precisely that reason. By wearing its production processes on its sleeve, One Sixth of the Earth also stresses that it is produced through labour, and thereby posits an (in fact tenuous or at best partial) analogy between filmmaker and industrial worker. Consequently, this aspect of the film's textual construction further shores up the prominence granted to the urban proletariat and the way they are ideally supposed to see the world: the world is construed as belonging to them, and virtually to them alone, because it is seen primarily as the product of industrial rather than domestic, agricultural, artisanal or any other type of labour. One Sixth of the Earth seeks to force this acceptance of this presupposition through both expository and reflexive techniques.

III Marxism, Postcolonial Theory and the Chocolate Kiddies

If One Sixth of the Earth's ideological horizon is governed, and ultimately limited, by a form of what could be called "proletarian imperialism", two questions arise: where to place Vertov's work in relation to what in recent cultural theory has become known as orientalist or colonialist discourse and, to do justice to the intentions which informed its construction, how to evaluate its political effectiveness? Does One Sixth of the Earth stand revealed as yet another example of a "colonial text"? Aijaz Ahmad, in his analysis of Edward Said's Orientalism, is one of several critics to have noted a tendency towards ahistoricism in this seminal book and much of the work on this topic which followed in its wake. Ahmad opposes what he identifies as Orientalism's "transhistorical" bias: its implication that a relatively consistent "orientalist discourse" consolidates itself across more than two thousand years of European history, continually reproducing "Asia's loss, Europe's victory; Asia's muteness, Europe's mastery of discourse; Asia's inability to represent itself; Europe's will to represent itself in accordance with its own authority." Ahmad points out that this type of approach breaks quite decisively with Marxism in that it minimises the potential for resistance or change, or even just the mere possibility of producing representations of or knowledge about the Orient which is not thoroughly complicit with Europe's will to power over it. For Ahmad this is unacceptably repetitive: "the terms are set, and there is little that later centuries will contribute to the *essential* structure, though they will doubtless proliferate the discourse in enormous quantities."⁴⁵ Soviet culture, especially during what is generally considered to be its most progressive phase,

would therefore seem to be particularly appropriate ground upon which to explore this important debate between Said and his Marxist critics, as well as to test the assertion of those amongst the latter, such as Ahmad and Samir Amin, who claim that Eurocentrism and orientalism are primarily of significance and more precisely defined as ideological adjuncts to colonial capitalism.⁴⁶ This move tacitly exempts Soviet culture and Marxist theory from critical analysis.

Bill Nichols argues that in non-fiction film "what provides the litmus test for political [as distinct from purely formal] reflexivity is the specific form of the representation, the extent to which it does not reinforce existing categories of consciousness, structures of feeling, ways of seeing".⁴⁷ To analyse textual features in isolation is not sufficient: the way a film or a series of films operate as a practice, interact with other practices, and mesh or conflict with already established structures of feeling and ways of seeing within a given social formation all need to be taken into account. One Sixth of the Earth's enormous geographical range and representation of global interconnectedness was certainly quite new within Soviet cinema and, indeed, there is hardly anything in the history of any national cinema prior to 1926 which bears much resemblance to it. Vertov's film does not however break away completely from either preceding Russian culture or from ways of seeing generated in the new American heartland of capitalism, as its novelty does in part derive from the way it transposes certain ideas and structural techniques from another medium. Between 1905 and 1922 Walt Whitman's epic poem Leaves of Grass (1863) went through six editions and sold roughly 67,000 copies in Russia: Vertov, who dabbled

in poetry before becoming a filmmaker, makes several admiring references to him in his writings, and there are definite general and specific points of similarity - as well as, of course, important differences - between Whitman's famous poem and One Sixth of the Earth.⁴⁸ Leaves of Grass celebrates labour, welcomes industrial development, and views the world from a global perspective within which separate lines or verses present and relate particular details through a kind of poetic kino-eye. One of the most significant similarities between Whitman's and Vertov's work is the way in which the non-Western world, and the world's non-white population, is invoked. "Salut Au Monde!", the most panoramic section of Whitman's poem, is typical in this respect. At one point a declaration of extraordinary egalitarianism is made; "I see ranks, colours, barbarisms, civilizations, I go among them, I mix indiscriminately/ And I salute all the inhabitants of the earth."⁴⁹ Yet just prior to this a shift between verses from the verb "to be" to the verb "to see" sets up a crucial distinction between different parts of the world:

9

*I see the cities of the earth and make myself at random a part
of them,*

I am a real Parisian,

I am a habitan of Vienna, St. Petersburg, Berlin,

Constantinople,

I am of Adelaide, Sidney, Melbourne,

I am of London, Manchester, Bristol, Edinburgh, Limerick,

I am of Madrid, Cadiz, Barcelona, Oporto, Lyons, Brussels,

Berne, Frankfort, Stuttgart, Turin, Florence,

*I belong in Moscow, Cracow, Warsaw or northward in
Christiania or Stockholm, or in Siberian Irkutsk, or in some
street in Iceland,
I descend upon all those cities, and rise from them again.*

10

*I see vapors exhaling from unexplored countries,
I see the savage types, the bow and arrow, the poison'd
splint, the fetich, and the obi.*

*I see African and Asiatic towns,
I see Algiers, Tripoli, Derne, Mogadore, Timbuctoo, Monrovia,
I see the swarms of Pekin, Canton, Benares, Delhi, Calcutta,
Tokio,
I see the Kruman in his hut, and the Dahoman and the
Ashantee-man in their huts,
I see the Turk smoking opium in Aleppo,
I see the picturesque crowds at the fairs of Khiva and those of
Herat,
I see Teheran, I see Muscat and Medina and the intervening
sands, I see the caravans toiling onward,
I see Egypt and the Egyptians, I see the pyramids and
obelisks,
I look on chisell'd histories, records of conquering kings,
dynasties, cut in slabs of sand-stone, or on granite blocks,
I see at Memphis mummy-pits containing mummies
embalm'd, swathed in linen cloth, lying there many centuries,
I look on the fall'n Theban, the large-ball'd eyes, the side-
drooping neck, the hands folded across the breast.⁵⁰*

The first part of this breathtaking inventory ranges across "cities", the second across "towns", although all of the places named here are in fact cities. In the second verse repose, inactivity and picturesqueness colour the scenes, and the past rather than the present glory of the orient is emphasised, through the relics of ancient history inspected towards the end. The verbal shift and the display presented by the second verse would seem to provide another example which conforms to what Edward Said has to say about the various accounts of actual and imaginary journeys to the orient produced during the nineteenth century: "In all cases the Orient is *for* the European observer..certain motifs recur consistently..the vision of Orient as spectacle or *tableau vivant*."51

The advertising for One Sixth of the Earth provides some evidence which makes it possible to argue, albeit speculatively, that one of the things Vertov's film does is disseminate this tradition to Soviet and other audiences, including those who may not have read Whitman, or may not have been able to read at all. Erik Barnouw suggests that the reason for the film's relative success, compared to some of Vertov's other work, is that "to men and women with only a dim awareness of the scope and resources of their land, and with a deep desire to believe in its destiny, One Sixth of the Earth was a prideful pageant".52 This begs the question: a pageant of what and for whom? In their comparison between two posters advertising One Sixth of the Earth, Mildred Constantine and Alan Fern argue that "while Konstantin Vyalov's..is a reasonably bold design, it becomes meaningless and confused next to the poetic simplicity of Rodchenko's poster

for the same film."⁵³ Considered as autonomous works of art, Rodchenko's semi-abstract poster depicting a woman's face against an unfurling background may well be superior, but in terms of enticing people into a cinema, Vyalov's seems much more effective, and can serve as a partial and limited guide to One Sixth of the Earth's reception. Conventional posters tend to proffer a taste of the pleasures to be experienced within the cinema, by foregrounding those elements of a film the designer feels will appeal to an audience.⁵⁴ From Vyalov's poster one can quickly glean that One Sixth of the Earth is likely to show exotic inhabitants from remote corners of the world, unusual animals, and black entertainers: the last very rare and much in demand in the Soviet Union at the time. Word of mouth would probably have supplemented this by confirming that the film included footage of Sam Wooding's Chocolate Kiddies, an American jazz troupe whose three month tour caused a minor sensation amongst Soviet fans in early 1926.⁵⁵

As a whole, Vyalov's poster for One Sixth of the Earth does reinforce the notion that the non-Western world, and black people within the West, are primarily a source of exotic spectacle. Putting an eskimo face on display within a globe, but with eyes averted, reproduces the unequal access to visual power embedded within the film itself. At the same time the small circle located at the top of the globe, with lines radiating outwards from it, creates an ambiguous perspectival effect. The observer of this poster is placed in a position above, and therefore in some sense superior to the scene represented within the globe, and is given the impression of being able to see disparate things

simultaneously. Yet since the circle also indicates the north pole, and emanates from the eskimo's forehead, it suggests that the new Soviet world is integrally connected to, and even rotates around, its most peripheral inhabitants' thoughts and wishes - at least, insofar as these are relayed by the director and this film, whose name and title are centrally placed within the small circle, which also dominates the top half of the overall composition of the poster. What seems to unbalance the design, possibly provoking Constantine and Fern's description of the poster as "confused", is the location of the black performers near the bottom. They appear quite detached from the rest of the composition, and bear no direct relation to the globe's play upon the film's title. Whilst this is a little disorientating to the discerning eye, it does suggest that the film can afford sensuous pleasures which are not entirely subordinated to its official ideological thrust.

There was a recent precedent for this: as S. Frederick Starr points out in Red and Hot, his history of jazz in the Soviet Union, Vsevolod Meyerhold's production of Ilya Ehrenburg's The Trust D.E., which premièred in 1924 and ran to full houses for several years, included Valentin Parnakh's jazz band providing music for scenes featuring its capitalist villains. Although the play was described in the programme as "a sharp agitational weapon aimed against the bourgeoisie", Starr argues that Meyerhold, in order to pull in as large a crowd as possible, quite consciously engineered a situation where "the Red Army..won the war on stage, but Parnakh's jazz band clearly won the audience."⁵⁶ One Sixth of the Earth, helped, or hindered, by Vyalov's poster, may have inadvertently reproduced the unstable compound of hard-headed Communist ideology

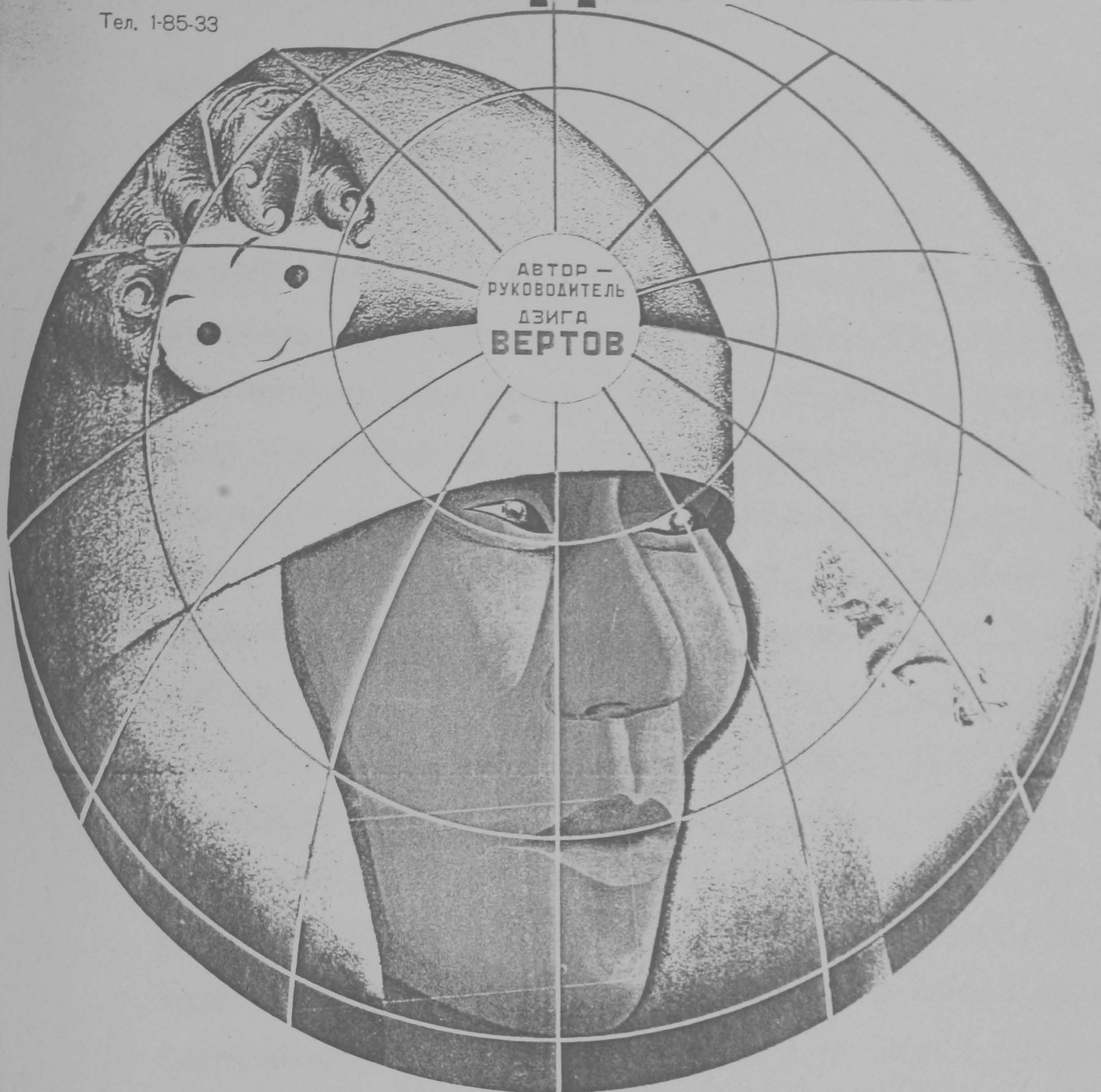
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*Konstantin
Vyalov*

1927



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Татарский оркестр под управлением
ШЕРФЕТДИНОВА

ТЕАТР ОТКРЫТ С 12 Ч. ДНЯ
ДО 12 Ч. НОЧИ
2 ОРКЕСТРА
ДЖАЗ-БАНД

ШЕСТАЯ ЧАСТЬ МИРА



К. ВЯЛОВ

Author-manager Dziga Vertov / Production First Factory of Goskino, 1926 / A lyrical cinema-poem to the vast expanses of the Soviet Union: "An internationally circulated advertisement of Soviet resources and possibilities" (Jay Leyda).

and popular pleasure which Meyerhold's production deliberately aimed at.

What all this hints at is that One Sixth of the Earth engaged its contemporary Soviet audiences in multiple and complex interactions which cannot simply be reduced to the perpetuation, via Whitman and other routes, of orientalist discourse, although this is a major factor in the way it operates as a text and the manner in which it was likely to have been read at the time. One Sixth of the Earth's moderately successful reception can also be linked to the popularity, during the 1920s, of the Soviet "exotic" romance and adventure genre, lambasted by most serious critics. This included films with such lurid titles as The Minaret of Death (Vyacheslav Viskovsky, 1925), The Seething East (Dmitri Bassalygo, 1926) and In the Grip of Tradition (Vladimir Kasyanov, 1926), made by more traditionalist directors who, according to Rashit Yangirov, catered to "an audience which was not weighted down with [official Soviet] ideological complexes and was therefore more favourably inclined to film spectacles."⁵⁷ Given this context, Soviet audiences familiar with these films would already be partially predisposed to read and possibly enjoy One Sixth of the Earth for whatever exoticism and spectacle they could extract from it. Whether this preference should be totally reviled as debased orientalism, which is the position usually taken by Said whenever he writes on popular culture, or whether it can also be read as evidence of a highly problematic, but also understandable and perhaps legitimate desire for sensuality and extravagance in a time of austerity, is open to debate.

From the quite different perspective of Vertov's intentions, the radicalism of what he was trying to do, and his actual achievements, should not be overlooked: One Sixth of the Earth was virtually unprecedented in its attempt to demonstrate that in the struggle for socialism the local and national must be linked to the global, and that cinema could potentially contribute a great deal towards facilitating this goal. Even if the specific manner in which it articulated that basic premise was extremely problematic, elevating the urban proletariat of the Soviet Union to a position of dominance over all other oppressed groups, the very fact of opening up the possibility that cinema could potentially be used as a global means of communication which benefited the underprivileged and dispossessed can only be counted as a small but important progressive gain. One Sixth of the Earth attempts to shift the ideal of mixing "indiscriminately" and "saluting all the inhabitants of the earth" away from the broadly humanist and spiritual context surrounding it in Leaves of Grass and into a more sharply defined socialist one. Whilst it could be argued that this intention is completely undermined by the orientalist structures which permeate Vertov's film, a more optimistic conclusion could be that these two emphases co-exist within it without either cancelling the other out.

example

One Sixth of the Earth prefaces its exposition of revolutionary internationalism with a trenchant condemnation of capitalism, and this was the main factor which antagonised its sponsors, the state foreign trade agency Gostorg. They objected to what was seen as Vertov's unwarranted authorial intervention into a project designed simply to serve, in line with the general

NEP emphasis on encouraging foreign trade, as "an internationally circulated advertisement of Soviet resources and possibilities", to use Jay Leyda's description.⁵⁸ This tension is encoded in the film's full and rather ungainly title, One Sixth of the Earth (Gostorg's Import-Export): Kino-Eye's Travels Through the USSR. Vertov records how he reworked this assignment to suit his own agenda: "the theme of import-export was expanded and transformed into that of emancipation from dependence on foreign capital"; and the immediate consequences of his action: "once again I was without work for several months".⁵⁹ It was a history of incidents like this, along with his avant-gardism, which contributed to Vertov, after the mid-1930s, being marginalised and denied the opportunity to undertake any more major projects, despite the late success of Three Songs of Lenin.

Retrospectively, this situation helped to fuel the perception, prevalent outside the Soviet Union after 1968, of Vertov as an artist who had more or less perfected a truly revolutionary film praxis before being crushed by Stalinism. Vertov was obviously prepared to take professional risks in order to maintain a margin of authorial independence, but that praxis needs to be reexamined without any a priori assumptions regarding its progressiveness.

The contentious first reel of One Sixth of the Earth represents the decadence of the capitalist countries Gostorg was hoping to increase its level of trade with. Shots of factories, Africans living in straw huts, and people working in fields, identified by intertitles as "slaves" in the colonies, are intercut with people dancing the foxtrot, and a cabaret performance featuring the Chocolate Kiddies. In several shots a white

woman and a black man dance together: a combination which the film presents within the general context of decadence, thereby reinforcing rather than rethinking conventional codes of sexual conduct. Soviet critical reaction to the Chocolate Kiddies' tour was divided between enthusiasts and those, like Vertov's friend, the journalist Mikhail Koltsov, who "fulminated against the dancers' blatant sexuality and concluded that jazz was an unwholesome import."⁶⁰ Meyerhold's production of The Trust D.E. may have made the bourgeois lifestyle appear too attractive and negated the play's critique of capitalism: Koltsov's dismissal of what the Chocolate Kiddies stood for, and the similarly purist stance adopted by One Sixth of the Earth, demonstrate the consequences of going to the other extreme. Starr argues that:

If the Bolshevik ideal of mass culture pertained most directly to the harnessing of collective man's physical energy through work, the message of American jazz spoke to the individual's free use of his bodily powers on his [sic] own time. If the emancipation movement spawned by the October Revolution and the culture it spawned was directed to the perfection of society in some utopian future, jazz epitomized the desire of each human being to express all the passions of the imperfect present - sadness, laughter, love, hate - through a Dionysian blend of rhythm, melody, and dance.⁶¹

Within the opposition between these two poles, black American performers could figure as either dangerously or attractively sexualised tokens of individual liberation from productive discipline and the indefinite postponement of

pleasure to the future. This could lead to either condemnation or celebration of what they signified. Both options are problematic - the latter because it projects essentialist notions about authenticity, sexuality and natural spontaneity onto black culture - but both relate to tensions within Soviet culture as well as to the construction of and denial of agency to an "other".

If One Sixth of the Earth is read according to what we can presume were Vertov's intentions, the contrasts between labour and pleasure in the first reel are clearly designed to connote bourgeois excess, by pointing up the system of exploitation which it is based upon, and to underline the conclusion that only socialism can free people from the slavery of capitalism.

Unfortunately, it is the uncompromising, blanket rejectionism of this sequence which leads to the film's first instance of failing to implement its own programme of broadening the international struggle for socialism. The black musicians and dancers are filmed and edited so as to make their movements appear ridiculous and contorted rather than carefully choreographed and dynamically executed. There is no attempt to film the performance on its own terms: the possibility that jazz might have a specific and substantive history of its own, not unrelated to black subcultural resistance to slavery, racism and economic exploitation, is evacuated by making it serve as a generalised sign for the convulsive spasms of a dying capitalism and the pitiable condition of the apparently helpless ethnic minorities who suffer under its yoke. The net effect is to compartmentalise Soviet socialism and black culture, or even to deny that the latter exists at all, rather

than build any bridges between them by recognising that struggles take place on a wide variety of different terrains.

One Sixth of the Earth is more socialist but also less open to difference, to accepting the variety of experience, than Whitman's Leaves of Grass is. Vertov's film also declines to explore the reason for the phenomenal success of the Chocolate Kiddies in the Soviet Union, falling into line with the explanation which attributed their reception, and the popularity of the foxtrot, to the corrupting influence of NEP's bourgeois liberality and cheap commercialism. It therefore forfeits the chance to effectively build upon what might have been the less reprehensible aspects of this particular Soviet enthusiasm, such as the desire to broaden cultural horizons or, for many people, to seek relief from the regimentation of a demanding work routine, and to experience a world containing elements different from but not necessarily opposed to those defined by the Soviet state's official utopian programme. One Sixth of the Earth is implicated in colonial discourse, but is not solely reducible to being just another example of its endless reiteration. This particular question is intertwined with other equally important issues, all of which need to be addressed simultaneously.

IV "Vertov" Versus Kino-Eye: Authorship and Property Rights

Vertov's struggle to assert his authorial rights throughout all stages of the production process, from opposing the dictates of sponsors like Gostorg and the various studio bosses he worked for, through to doing battle with critics like Ippolit Sokolov in the pages of Soviet film journals, resulted in the construction of distinctive films which could be marketed partly on the strength of his name and the persona associated with it, as both Vyalov and Rodchenko's posters for One Sixth of the Earth illustrate. There is a sense, however, in which this partly incidental and partly deliberate fashioning of a unique authorial identity contradicts what Vertov claimed was kino-eye's primary task: facilitating communication between differently located oppressed groups. In her analysis of One Sixth of the Earth's intertitles, Annette Michelson notes how their wording progresses from an "I see.." structure at the beginning of the film, to "Yours are the factories/the cotton" and so on, concluding with "We want/to make/Ourselves". She deduces that this "complex pronominal shifting..instructs us in Vertov's sense of his centrality of presence as filmmaker within the early stages of the economy and culture of the postrevolutionary era."⁶² But it is only by uncritically concurring with Vertov's sense of his and kino-eye's potential centrality, as a force which somehow speaks from an authentic core within Soviet culture, that the conflation involved in these pronominal shifts become invisible.

Through the progression of intertitles described by Michelson, One Sixth of the Earth begins by declaring and demonstrating what an extremely imaginative Soviet filmmaker can do given access to sufficient funding and modern cinematic

technology: the "I see" of the opening is meant, as with all the titles, to speak for everyone, but it speaks most clearly for the choices made, from a privileged position, by Vertov and his team as to which people and events were worth recording and combining into a visual interpretation of the world. "Yours are the factories", interspersed with images of industrial workers, *is* a radical step; a simple statement whose revolutionary implications continue to resonate, but it is a breakthrough compromised by the "Yours the cotton" and "Yours the oil" which follow it. At that point in history, less than ten years since the places which these titles refer to were Russian colonial possessions, "*Theirs* is the cotton/the oil/let us cooperate/to use them for our mutual benefit" would have constituted much more of a radical break with the past, by acknowledging differences but attempting to negotiate within them. As it is, in a film which everywhere places the Russian proletariat on a pedestal, the inevitable implication is that the proletarian audience, or whoever effectively takes decisions on their behalf - and in the cultural sphere, Vertov must be counted amongst this group - has more right to determine what is done with those resources than the actual inhabitants of the non-Russian regions they are located within. To then go on to claim, without any intermediate "delinking" stage, that One Sixth of the Earth furthers the desire of all in Soviet society to "want/to make/Ourselves", is to make a statement which is largely rhetorical.

Analysis of textual and contextual evidence reveals Vertov to have been a filmmaker devoted to what he saw as the ideals of the Soviet state, committed to revolutionary internationalism, but resistant to interference from state

institutions whenever he perceived them to be threatening the authorial integrity of his projects. He also strongly identified with the urban proletariat: hence the pains he took, in making his films, to build into their texture the sense of them being constructed by technology and labour. Yet this involves a certain amount of elision: the theory of "social command", subscribed to in practice by Vertov and Eisenstein and most of their colleagues at Lef and Novy Lef, was a rationalisation which balanced traditional notions of artistic autonomy with the more utilitarian function and obligations they also saw art fulfilling within a socialist society. The criterion for any cultural production was to be that it should serve and advance the interests of the proletariat, but the crucial proviso was that the artist's role was to decide exactly *how* these should be furthered. Answering to "social command" therefore allows space for the development of differentiated, individual styles, which enabled some of the artists and work associated with Lef/Novy Lef and constructivism to be canonised in the West, in stark contrast to the more anonymous productions of the Proletcult. Proletcult, as the term suggests, was also almost exclusively proletarian in emphasis, but it prioritised the broadening of access to cultural production and the development of collective modes of authorship. As Peter Wollen puts it, for constructivists "artists must not just take art to the workers; they must become workers." At worst, this could degenerate into one relatively privileged social group posturing as another; at best it results in the rhetorical conflations found in a film like One Sixth of the Earth. Wollen continues; "the ideology of the Proletcult demanded exactly the reverse - workers must become artists."⁶³

Clearly, during the immediate postrevolutionary period, established understandings of authorship were challenged or at the very least disturbed. Yet within the brief history of Vertov and Eisenstein's early careers it is possible to see the more radical implications of this development being suppressed by factors *internal* to the dynamic of the emergence of film montage as a social practice, rather than by more external ones, such as the consolidation of Stalinism. In fact, three tendencies can be distinguished within Eisenstein and Vertov's practices of authorship: (1) Proletcult's collective authorship model, based upon the assumption that the proletariat had the right to produce art as well as benefit from it; (2) the emergence of various "star" cultural producers, such as Eisenstein and Vertov, partly as a result of foreign recognition; (3) from a standpoint combining elements of both the other tendencies, the familiar notion that the artist must be subordinated to the dictates of the Stalinist state and the various regulatory bodies which form part of it. Most Western writing about individual Soviet artists has predictably focused on the second and third tendency, to the exclusion of the first: the most extreme example being Herbert Marshall's simplistic portrayal of Eisenstein, Vertov and others as stifled "geniuses", "crippled" by Stalinism.⁶⁴ Yet Eisenstein also serves as an example of someone whose reputation was constructed by breaking away from the Proletcult model once it became possible for him to control relatively well-financed, prestigious film projects, but who retained the general aura of working directly for and on behalf of the proletariat which his early association with Proletcult gave him. His first famous manifesto, "The Montage of Attractions", actually begins with a declaration as to why he was dissociating himself from the

Moscow Proletcult theatre he had been working with.⁶⁵ Intertwined with their theoretical and artistic differences was a dispute as to who should take credit for Strike [Sovkino, 1925]: Eisenstein or the collective as a whole.⁶⁶

To trace this history is not to suggest that Proletcult had in fact discovered all the answers to the problems raised by the question of the role of the author in a socialist society. What it does help to do is define the context within which Vertov asserted or negotiated his rights to sole authorship of One Sixth of the Earth. Losing his job over this film demonstrated that he was prepared to do whatever he could to defend these rights against interfering sponsors. He was also prepared to defend them against other directors: in a further contribution to their ongoing debate, Vertov's critical nemesis Ippolit Sokolov attempted to discredit him by identifying uncredited footage in One Sixth of the Earth which "belonged" to at least four other filmmakers.⁶⁷ Although he does not appear to have responded publicly to this charge, Vertov acknowledged acceptance of the principle of author's rights over filmed material by later complaining that other filmmakers had in turn plundered One Sixth of the Earth's footage for use in their own films. A further, constant complaint was that the studios he worked for consistently denied him the right to his own personal archive or, as he put it, "creative stockpile".⁶⁸ Yet these concerns, on a mundane level the understandable anxieties of a cultural worker simply wishing to be allowed to get on with his job and receive due recognition for it, stand at something of a tangent to Vertov's conviction, expressed elsewhere, that kino-eye productions, as the voice,

eyes and later ears of the oppressed, involved mass authorship.

The overall situation with regard to film authorship during the production of One Sixth of the Earth can be described as complex and unsettled, in a period generally characterised by the rapid and often conflicting transmutation of ideas and practices. The only constituencies that Vertov is recorded as acknowledging any practical responsibility towards were the cinema professionals' organisation ARK (Association of Revolutionary Cinematography) and the broader-based ODSK (Society of Friends of Soviet Cinema). Both were nominally "proletarian" organisations: the former was purged for the first time of "bourgeois" elements in July 1926, the latter's membership comprised workers and Communists and its titular president was Felix Dzerzhinsky, head of the NKVD (secret police). Although a grass-roots, "anti-bureaucratic" organisation, ODSK's remit was to cooperate closely with the network of workers' clubs and local Party branches to ensure the "proletarianisation" of cinema, as well as to monitor the successes, or more often the failures, of the "cinefication of the countryside" campaign, mainly by recording the vagaries of actual audience response.⁶⁹ In a sub-section of his 1930 essay on "The Soviet Cinema", entitled "A Collective Art", the American journalist Joseph Freeman recalls his attendance during the winter of 1926 at a joint meeting in Moscow of both these organisations, at which One Sixth of the Earth was discussed. After a screening and comments from the floor, Vertov agreed to make both technical and ideological modifications according to recommendations submitted by ARK and ODSK members respectively.⁷⁰

Notwithstanding the likelihood that Vertov, fiercely protective of "his" films, perhaps only attended this event under duress, three main points are worth noting. The first is that the diversion of the energy of "star" cultural producers like Eisenstein and Vertov away from the unresolved questions of authorship, and their pursuit of a chimerical independence, led to them being held accountable by organisations such as ARK and ODSK which themselves became increasingly subservient to central authority rather than, in any direct way, to the proletariat on whose behalf all cinematic production activity was supposed to be conducted. The second is that the feedback of rural audiences is mediated by these so-called "proletarian" organisations, replicating the hierarchical distinctions also found within Vertov's work. The final and most far-reaching point is that, in this slight practical concession to mass authorship, the non-Russian populations of the Soviet Union, rarely mentioned as distinct groupings in Vertov's writings about the social function of kino-eye, are also not considered here: they have no authorship rights, even though the film under discussion was largely about them. Nothing in either Vertov's practice of authorship, or in the structures of accountability emerging within the Soviet film industry, encouraged dialogue along this East/West axis or even suggested that not to engage in it was anything other than normal.

In Orientalism Edward Said argues that most accounts of travel to the Orient revolve around "the sheer egoistic powers of the European consciousness at their center".⁷¹ This is not to suggest that these accounts are held together by some immaterial act of will, but rather to pinpoint a structural factor

usually taken for granted in the production and reading of these texts. Why this continued to be taken for granted even during a period in Soviet cultural history which witnessed the partial reformulation of concepts and practices of authorship can be explained by considering the idea of an author's "right" to his or her creative product. Jane Gaines, working out of a tradition inaugurated by Vertov's contemporary, the Soviet legal theorist E.B. Pashukanis, points out that the principle of the right to control or possess and effectively patent a representation, as codified in, for example, the American laws of trademark, fair dealing and copyright, derives from the philosophical justification of the right to private property which finds its earliest comprehensive elaboration in John Locke's Two Treatises of Government [1689/90]. Locke's first and second principles regarding private property are, in Gaines' summary, that "property is premised upon freedom, the ownership of oneself and one's labour. Hence property in things is contingent on property in the self."⁷² The meeting called to discuss and enforce amendments to One Sixth of the Earth, and Vertov's own conception of kino-eye as, in theory if not in practice, producing work which in some sense "belonged" to Soviet society as a whole, both indicate that these principles were undergoing a process of being redefined within certain parts of the Soviet film industry during the 1920s. Freedom for all implied public ownership and the recognition of interdependence, and the artist was beginning to be seen as responsible to the collective rather than as an autonomous creator (and the usually unacknowledged corollary to this: a producer for the "free" market). The fruits of his or her labour,

especially if state-subsidised, became, again in theory, cultural "properties" which everyone had a stake in.

These were dramatic changes which, even if only very imperfectly realised in practice, and soon, with the onset of Stalinism, reversed or drained of virtually any progressive content whatsoever, heralded *potentially* radical implications for the social relations of cultural production. Locke's third principle, as Gaines puts it, that "property is the product of man's labor, which he has "mixed" with nature", also lends itself to socialisation rather than individualisation in this context.⁷³ Hence One Sixth of the Earth can be seen as both the product of Vertov's labour, and of the labour of the proletariat as a whole, because the resources used to fund it are generated by the latter rather than by private capital, and because Vertov and his kino-eye team identify themselves as industrial workers, in their self-image and in the self-reflexive texture of their film which seeks to demonstrate itself as the result of productive industrial labour. Yet at this point the precise definition of productivity becomes crucial. Locke *denied* native Americans the right to private property, and therefore to their own land, because he considered the way they used it to be fundamentally unproductive. Similarly, over two hundred years later, non-Russian ethnic groups within the Soviet Union were denied the collective right to have any say in the use made of their own images because, as Three Songs of Lenin would demonstrate even more eloquently and convincingly than One Sixth of the Earth, their economies and cultures were judged to be stagnant, undeveloped and in need of deliberate, radical reconstruction from the outside. At one level, this illustrates the sheer historical tenacity of the

"egoistic powers of the European consciousness" identified by Said. At the same time, the roots of the intellectual traditions, and the historical precedents which enable us to now ask these questions about authorship, can be traced back to Marxist methodology and to the period of Soviet culture examined here.

V Three Songs of Lenin and Soviet Film History: Crossing the Great Divides

In the Soviet Union Three Songs of Lenin was acclaimed as Vertov's canonical film: a critical and popular success significant enough to be reedited and rereleased in 1938 and again in 1970 as part of the centenary celebrations of Lenin's birth. In Western Europe and America the reverse holds true: post-1968 interest in Vertov has focused very narrowly on The Man With the Movie Camera, to the exclusion of Vertov's other films. Juxtaposing these two traditions can help to illuminate the ways in which each of them repress or emphasise particular aspects of Vertov's overall project for their own strategic purposes. Three Songs of Lenin is in fact pivotal not only to an investigation of Soviet montage cinema and orientalism but also as the single film which best demonstrates how the ramifications of this issue modify or challenge a range of assumptions about the development and history of that cinema. The film has been apotheosized inside the Soviet Union and increasingly marginalised outside of it: both approaches divorce Three Songs of Lenin from the kino-eye project as a whole, preventing the emergence of a fully rounded critical assessment of that project's political and aesthetic significance.

The only major piece of Western scholarship devoted exclusively to Three Songs of Lenin is Annette Michelson's essay first published in 1990 by the journal October. She describes the film as a "kinetic icon" engaged in a "work of mourning", and relates it to two interconnected traditions: Russian religious art and the cult of Lenin. The links she

suggests are provocative but somewhat hastily established. Her argument jumps precipitously from the micro-level of a single film text to the macro-level of widely disseminated cultural discourses, filtered through an appeal to abstract psychoanalytic theory. At the same time, Michelson's essay hints at an incipient shift away from her earlier position on Vertov, and at the possible opening up of a different understanding, not only of Vertov but also of Soviet film history. What halts further analysis along these lines is the familiar situating of Three Songs of Lenin as an aberrant text within Vertov's oeuvre: Michelson sharply distinguishes it from the film whose reputation her earlier work decisively established; "The Man With the Movie Camera [which] stands alone as Vertov's wholly autonomous meta-cinematic celebration of filmmaking as a mode of production and..a mode of epistemological enquiry."⁷⁴ Both films stand alone and apart from each other, the only relationship between the two being that the later one is seen as a negative inversion of the earlier one, a movingly effective yet nonetheless ideologically complicit "monument of cinematic hagiography" which marks an end to the mourning period for Lenin and actively makes space for this to be superseded by Stalin's personality cult.⁷⁵ Michelson concludes that the battery of cinematic techniques employed in Three Songs of Lenin which, in The Man With the Movie Camera were:

originally constituted as an arsenal in the assault upon the conditions and ideology of cinematic representation..are now deployed as an admittedly powerful instrument in the working through, in the obsessive rehearsal of the past, in that labor of repetition, deceleration, distension, arrest,

release and fixation which characterize the work of mourning; in the infinitely varied and deeply cathected image of the Founder and Liberator..this translation of Lenin into the sublime inane defines, in fact, the space in which The Beckoning Substitute [Stalin] is now installed -enthroned - as Successor. It is as though Vertov, in fulfilling his assignment (an anniversary film), has seized upon the occasion for the national rehearsal of the work of mourning in the resolution, the transcending of a depressive position, nationally conceived, for the recall, in narcissistic triumph, to the impending task, the present imperative: the construction, under the Party Leader and Secretary-General, of an industrial power and a military machine.⁷⁶

Michelson raises several important issues, but, as far as historiography is concerned, her innovative analysis is still guided, on a number of levels, by the strict logic of either/or and consequent valorisation of the "heroic" 1920s which has dominated a great deal of writing on Soviet cinema. As one of the founding editors of the avant-garde "art/theory/criticism/ politics" journal October, the development of Michelson's work relates very directly to this wider context. The journal's title is a homage to Eisenstein's film, yet the editorial collective state firmly that this choice was not born from a nostalgic desire "to perpetuate the myth of the revolution". Instead, they argue that their committed interest in the "unfinished analytic project of Constructivism - aborted by the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy, distorted by the recuperation of the Soviet avant-garde into the mainstream of Western idealist aesthetics" is justified by the relevance of that project to contemporary cultural practices.⁷⁷ The need

for a renewed left retrieval and critique of these practices is now even more pressing, due to the added strength rightwing revisionist discourses have gained by appropriating the collapse of the Soviet Union as "proof" for their arguments. These, according to Hal Foster, advance along two main lines: "Russian constructivism is to be rescued from the Revolution, now revealed to be an error, and/or trashed as the precedent of Stalinist culture."⁷⁸ Neither option is admissible, and to assume that the Soviet avant-garde somehow automatically engendered Stalinism is the worst kind of teleology. However, the limit-point of October's own recuperation of constructivism is created by assuming from the outset that it and Stalinism were completely antithetical: this assumption implants a contradiction into the heart of Michelson's work on Three Songs of Lenin.

The unbridgeable gulf between Three Songs of Lenin and The Man With the Movie Camera which structures Michelson's essay also perpetuates a tendency within post-1968 criticism of Soviet cinema which equates the popular with the ideologically contaminated. This supposition entails another: that only the "difficult", self-reflexive work can be truly progressive, because it delivers knowledge about the "conditions and ideology of cinematic representation". Transported into the received historical map of the first two decades of Soviet cinema, these categories further underwrite the judgement that the 1920s were creative years, characterised by the experimental freedom to produce radical work, whereas the 1930s were largely sterile. This later decade is characterised as an era during which the gains made by montage were destroyed by the advent of sound,

and a stream of routine cinematic paeans to the status quo were imposed by fiat onto a largely subservient, manipulable population. Michelson's analysis of Three Songs of Lenin acknowledges its intrinsic interest as a Vertov film, but nevertheless implies that it too ultimately testifies to a uniform national regression, by audiences and cultural producers alike, into political conformity and pseudoreligious traditionalism.

In fact, Three Songs of Lenin demands that the dichotomous categories often used to conceptualise Soviet montage cinema's history be refined and at least partially rethought. The film did, and still does, cross several great divides. It has been marginalised by post-1968 Western film history because it problematises a number of deep-rooted assumptions. Theoretically it proves that, under certain circumstances, an avant-garde work can be popular, retain its integrity, but be variegated in its effects. Three Songs of Lenin was neither completely assimilated into the popular mainstream nor totally subversive of it. The very use of such stark oppositions tends to block off more nuanced assessments, ignore the complex and changing dynamics of the popular, and deny the relativity of the critic's own position. Historically, Three Songs of Lenin provides a model for the successful adaptation of the avant-garde project of the 1920s to the new industrial conditions and political context which prevailed within Soviet cinema and culture during the 1930s. In so doing, it highlights links as well as differences between the two periods and points to the fact that, albeit precariously and with often widely differing emphases and consequences, popular audiences, montage cinema, official state policies

and avant-garde theory could all partially converge around the representation of the Soviet East.

VI Common Ground Lost and Regained

During the Civil War (1917-21) artists loosely grouped under the banner of Futurism were predominant amongst those who, not having much to lose, and with possibly the materialisation of their utopian dreams to gain, pledged nearly unconditional support to the new regime, thereby facilitating a brief, mutually tentative "romance" between their movement and the Bolshevik authorities. For a short time the Soviet political and cultural avant-garde appeared to be marching together in the same direction, united in common purpose. Vertov, commencing his cinema career during this period, would probably have found little to disagree with in the programmatic speech given by the Futurist painter Nadezhda Udaltsova in the summer of 1918, when she was head of the Cinema and Theatre Subsection of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment [Narkompros]:

The vast majority of the Russian people do not merely live in extremely hideous, unhygienic and unsuitable conditions and surroundings, but, alas they seem themselves to want that filth and nonsense. Nonetheless we must not tolerate it but must throw it into the dustbin, like old rubbish. On this we must insist..All Russian must be "assembled" anew, fundamentally "restructured". We are faced with the need for a new reform, which is matched only by the reforms of Peter the Great..Our whole way of life is profoundly reactionary. It will have to be completely destroyed because of the conditions which are necessary for life. It is not just the "cherry orchards" that will disappear, but the "outbuildings round the courtyard", the overblown and shabby cosiness in

*our inner and outer lives, in our work and in our leisure. Everyone will be **forced** [her emphasis] to live in a new way, if he does not consciously choose this new road. We have to change more than our domestic situation, which is broken-down and crippled, we have to change the way we talk, behave and move. All these things must change and "catch up". And above all, of course, our tastes, our habits, and our practices.⁷⁹*

Udal'tsova invokes a range of concerns which were to remain common currency throughout every strata of Soviet cultural, intellectual and political life for at least the next two decades. All of them are addressed in Three Songs of Lenin as well as in Vertov's other films and writings. One fundamental issue, which subsumes the other oppositions such as healthy/crippled and hygienic/filthy, and which recurs time and again, is the conflict between the old and the new. For Udal'tsova there are no exceptions or qualifications: references to the Chekhovian "cherry orchards" and to the "outbuildings round the courtyard" indicate the early and short-lived hope, expressed by some sections of the avant-garde, that most if not all of the dilapidated high, as well as the corrupted low, culture of the past could either be radically transformed or swept away, "completely destroyed" and superseded by new, more rational constructions. The "orchards/outbuildings" metaphor simultaneously resonates throughout the entire demographic and geographic range. Everywhere will be restructured: this applies in equal measure to the smallest as well as to the largest population units, and to the peripheries as well as to the centre of the former Tsarist domain.

When Udaltsova delivered her speech the harsh, visionary regime of War Communism was in operation, and divergences between popular, avant-garde and official uses of the metaphors she employed had not yet begun to become apparent. Throughout the next twenty years, demands for the Soviet Union to be "restructured" and "assembled anew" fluctuated in intensity, and within each of those phases controversies raged over how exactly this was to be achieved. Except for a brief interregnum during the cultural revolution (1928-31) the priorities of Soviet state policy were generally opposed to the avant-garde tendency to denigrate the old "bourgeois" high culture, insisting instead that it ought to be delivered into the hands of the masses, who needed to master it before they could hope to surpass it. Complementing this partial appropriation and attempted popular dissemination of pre-Revolutionary high cultural "tastes", "habits" and "practices", Russian Orthodox religious traditions were consciously or unconsciously emulated in the forms and trappings of the Lenin cult. NEP, instituted in 1921, slowed the process of industrialisation and reconstruction down to a pace which proved intolerable to both Communist radicals and Constructivist artists like Vertov. The relative cultural pluralism this new policy facilitated decisively terminated the always tenuous position of strength which avant-garde groups had briefly enjoyed during the Civil War period.

The First Five Year Plan (1928-33) and the Cultural Revolution (1928-31) have often been portrayed as completely disastrous for the proponents of montage cinema. Certainly, the reorganisation of the film industry which formed part of

these changes did not necessarily benefit filmmakers like Vertov, whose working methods required greater flexibility than was generally allowed for by the new emphasis on closer ideological regulation, strict budgets, tight schedules, pre-scripted projects and standardised technical resources. Three Songs of Lenin, continually hampered by a lack of appropriate equipment and organisation, took three years to make. The critical climate had also become more hostile: directors like Vertov and Eisenstein were routinely attacked for their avant-gardeism and non-proletarian origins. On the other hand, as Denise Youngblood has observed, "many members of the cinema avant-garde supported the attack on [foreign and domestic] entertainment films and urged greater centralization and control over the arts throughout the twenties - assuming, wrongly as it turned out, that *they* would be the beneficiaries."⁸⁰ Most important of all, whatever the difficulties experienced by Vertov within the film industry - and it is significant that even in his diaries he always attributes these solely to petty bureaucratism and malign individuals - the First Five Year Plan did seem to promise, for Soviet society as a whole, a return to many of the original principles of the revolution, and to offer cinema the opportunity to act as the spearhead of this new, intensive phase of industrialisation and cultural reconstruction. The realisation of the social transformation outlined in Udaltsova's speech once again began to seem like a distinct possibility, even an imminent outcome.

Sheila Fitzpatrick, stressing the complex interplay rather than schematic opposition of different interests during this period, points out how in the 1920s, against the grain of NEP, radical

Communists and "visionaries" like Vertov dreamed of a "future society, transformed by collective spirit, rational scientific organization, and technology. In the Civil War period, and again during the cultural revolution, this vision tended to become intensified and at the same time divorced from practical reality."⁸¹ It is therefore possible to see how, despite the "practical realities" within the film industry which impeded its production, Three Songs of Lenin could be conceived of by Vertov as a genuine continuation of kino-eye's project. The film represents a positive intervention into the immediate situation of early 1930s Soviet cinema, and into the wider cultural process, rather than, as Michelson's critique implies, a cynical or enforced capitulation to expediency. What it does tacitly acknowledge is that, given the general shift, especially after the end of the cultural revolution in 1931, towards reintegrating aspects of pre-Revolutionary Russian traditions into Soviet culture, the protean ambition of the avant-garde to remould the Soviet Union and achieve total social reconstruction could, for the time being at least, most fully be realised by directing attention towards the development of the peripheries. It is in this area, and on the "great turning-point" - the post-1928 absolute commitment to rapid industrialisation - that avant-garde and official political objectives could still find common cause.

VII Production, Panopticism and the Cult of Lenin

No comrades,...the pace must not be slackened! On the contrary, we must quicken it as much as is within our powers and possibilities...To slacken the pace would mean to lag behind; and those who lag behind are beaten...Russia...was ceaselessly beaten for her backwardness. She was beaten by the Mongol khans..Turkish beys..Anglo-French capitalists..Japanese barons...We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this lag in ten years. Either we do it or they crush us.

[Stalin, speech to Soviet business executives, February 1931.]

A feeling for the value of time, notwithstanding all "rationalization", is not met with even in the capital of Russia...In his use of time..the Russian will remain "Asiatic" longest of all..

[Walter Benjamin, "Moscow", 1927.]

asiatskaia beskul'turnost'

["Asiatic lack of culture": a phrase commonly used in the 1920s and 1930s to express despair about the Soviet Union's poorly developed educational infrastructure.]

The shooting of [Three Songs of Lenin] was done in Central Asia under abnormal conditions, in the midst of typhus, with no means of transport and irregular pay. Sometimes we wouldn't eat for three days at a time. Sometimes we repaired

watches for the local people in order to earn money for a meager dinner. We went about covered from head to foot with naphthaline [flea powder], our irritated skins unable to breathe, smeared with stinking, caustic liquids, fighting off attacks of lice. Our nerves were always on edge, and we controlled them by willpower. We did not want to give up. We had decided to fight to the finish.⁸²

[Dziga Vertov, "On My Illness", 1934.]

In diverse statements about Russia, its condition, prospects, and future direction, East/West binarisms are regularly used to define concerns about industrialisation, rationalisation, and the general development and prestige of the Soviet Union. Stalin's message is clear: in order to become fighting fit and occupy its rightful place among the leading industrial nations, Russia has to decisively jettison its former status as a semi-colony of Europe and a victim of oriental invaders. The successful continuation of the Revolution is made dependent upon the eradication of all traces of oriental backwardness. Walter Benjamin, interested in the more minute, lived experience of time, implicitly distinguishes between regulated, carefully apportioned Western chronometry, and its "Asiatic" opposite, which lacks exactitude and clearly defined intervals. Benjamin did not speak Russian, but his usage parallels the positing, in colloquial phrases from this period, of Asiatic culture as a void, which development and modernisation in all parts of the Soviet Union will fill up. In yet another context, Dziga Vertov's observations on the making of Three Songs of Lenin are often quoted by critics as evidence of the "beginning of the end" for him, the onset of personal

and professional decline, painfully manifested in a series of physical and mental afflictions: tooth extractions; recurrent depressive illness; eventual terminal cancer. Yet without denying this personal suffering, or the squandering, after the late 1930s, of Vertov's talent and energy, what is striking about these private reflections is the way they too resonate with imagery employed in the other more public statements. Central Asia is diseased, dirty, and technologically backward. Time has literally come to a halt, and nothing indigenous is of any value. The region epitomises everything Nadezhda Udaltsova railed against but, and this is the crucial point, the dedicated work and willpower invested into the making of Three Songs of Lenin, and which the film itself recommends to all citizens of the Soviet Union, represent a triumph over all the negative, retarding forces she condemned.

The presence of East/West binarisms within definitions of Soviet modernity also prevail within the construction of Vertov's films. The average duration of shots in Three Songs of Lenin is notably longer than in The Man With the Movie Camera. This can partly be accounted for by the vicious and now firmly institutionalised opposition to montage experimentation which prevailed within Soviet cinema during the making of Three Songs of Lenin. Yet within the film itself there is differentiation: the film's slowest editing and least dynamic shot compositions occur in the opening sequences, filmed in Central Asia, which attempt to convey a sense of this area's stagnation prior to the advent of the Revolution and the arrival of Leninism. Three Songs of Lenin culminates, as do so many other Soviet montage films, with sequences whose images, in comparison, are more quickly edited and boldly

constructed. By this time, the film has moved away from Central Asia, and the location which recurs most frequently towards the end is Moscow. The speed, bustle, energy and power of the capital of international socialism are emphasised as the film's own final destination and the goal towards which all should aspire. This visual privileging of Moscow city life partly contradicts the message, excerpted from a Stalin speech, which is relayed by revolving intertitles very near to the end of the 1938 and 1970 versions of the film: "Centuries will pass, and people will forget the names of the countries in which their ancestors lived but they will never forget the name Lenin, the name Vladimir Ilyich Lenin." Three Songs of Lenin's conclusion does "forget" Central Asia, where it began, but not the Russian city which operates as the site of production for the type of authoritative statements contained in the Stalin speech and reiterated within the film, itself also produced from a Moscow base.

As with The Man With the Movie Camera and One Sixth of the Earth, the contradiction between urban Russian hegemony, and a vision of modernity which supersedes both national boundaries and town/country divisions, subtends Three Songs of Lenin. The film does however attempt to negotiate a solution to another contradiction: the emergence and widespread proliferation of a pseudoreligious cult of Lenin in an avowedly secular socialist state. Reflections upon this topic have become an almost obligatory part of the tradition of Western journalistic and travel writing about the Soviet Union. H.G. Wells, for example, recounting his visit to Moscow in July 1934, compares the Lenin mausoleum to a shrine and then moves on to a description of the newly released Three

Songs of Lenin: "it is Passion Music for Lenin and he has become a Messiah. One must see and hear it to realize how the queer Russian mind has emotionalized Socialism and subordinated it to the personal worship of its prophets."⁸³ Yet a couple of years later, Walter Benjamin, who had concluded his 1927 essay on Moscow with some similar if less bluntly expressed reservations about the Lenin cult in general, took a diametrically opposed position with regard to Vertov's film. In his famous 1936 essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" he cites Three Songs of Lenin as one of the few films to have actualised the democratic and progressive potentials assumed to be inherent within the new mass reproductive technologies.⁸⁴ For him, Vertov's work anticipates possible future developments which could secularise cultural production and narrow the gap between writers and readers, directors and spectators, by acknowledging that modern industrialisation makes everyone an expert in their own particular specialisation and therefore entitles them to equal access to the media on that basis. If this now seems to have been a misjudgement, it must be remembered that at the time Three Songs of Lenin's inclusion of industrial and collective farm workers, speaking directly and apparently spontaneously to the camera about their experiences, was a remarkable innovation, predating the British film Housing Problems (Edgar Anstey, Gas Board, 1935) which was also celebrated by progressive critics for allowing working-class people to speak for themselves.

In Benjamin's reading, Three Songs of Lenin opposes both what he sees as the entertainment film's adoration of the star, and the conventional newsreel's cult of the political

personality. He does seem to be responding, albeit perhaps too generously, to a conscious intention within the Soviet avant-garde tradition the film belongs to. Written in 1924, Mayakovsky's long poem Vladimir Ilyich Lenin attempts to create an interpretation of Lenin which will redeem admiration for him from any similarity to the traditional religious veneration of the Christian saviour and his saints. Mayakovsky states at the outset:

I fear

these eulogies

line upon line..

They'll rig up an aura

round any head:

the very idea-

I abhor it,

that such a halo

poetry-bred

should hide

Lenin's real,

huge,

human forehead.

I'm anxious lest rituals,

mausoleums

and processions,

the honeyed incense

of homage and publicity

should

obscure

Lenin's essential

*simplicity.*⁸⁵

Three Songs of Lenin follows in this tradition. The Lenin cult, whose emergence and widespread proliferation has been documented by Nina Tumarkin in her book Lenin Lives!, was too important a social phenomenon for avant-garde artists to ignore or reject outright.⁸⁶ Insofar as it obviously did incorporate elements of Russian Orthodox tradition, these would also come through in Mayakovsky's and Vertov's contributions, no matter how strenuously they might deny this. This does not mean, however, that Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Three Songs of Lenin simply dissolve into a generalised pseudoreligious morass. What is distinctive about Mayakovsky's and Vertov's work is precisely the way they attempt to wrest the Lenin cult away from traditionalism and link it to the forward march of the proletariat and the accelerating pace of industrialisation.

Annette Michelson is correct in her characterisation of Three Songs of Lenin as a "work of mourning" which seeks to guide its viewers through that emotion and out into the light at the end of the tunnel illuminating the collective happiness attainable through (perpetually) renewed productive effort. The political impulse which fuels the film, however, does not recommend subservience to Stalinism, but rather the reanimation of Leninism. The distinction is important: Three Songs of Lenin is less concerned with deifying Lenin, or any political leader, than it is with implanting the desire to emulate his exemplary but *human* achievement in each and every one of its spectators. In his work on the Soviet avant-garde's attitudes towards death and immortality, Robert Williams distinguishes between three different conceptions which can, very roughly, be associated with successive generations of artists. The first is

the more traditional notion of the immaterial soul and some form of afterlife; the second the idea that an individual can live on in the collective memory; the third that advances in science, technology and health care will eventually be able to increase physical longevity.⁸⁷ Vertov's film invests heavily in the second option, invoking the memory of Lenin, purging it of grief and injecting it with enthusiasm, in order to help advance Soviet society to a point where it will be able to realise the third. As in Mayakovsky's poem, Three Songs of Lenin stresses the dead leader's down-to-earth approach, his "common touch", and his extraordinary self-discipline. Intertitles accompanying newsreel footage of Lenin draw attention to the "keen spark in his eyes", his "amiable smile", his "inspiring speeches", and his untiring devotion to working for the masses. Lenin is exceptional, but *not* unique: Vertov's film plays out a delicate balancing-act, paying tribute to and acknowledging the loss of a remarkable man, whilst also emphasising his closeness to the masses and underlining that they too, collectively and individually, can carry on his work, taking his life as a model for their own.

Mayakovsky's Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, after describing the Soviet leader as the product of historical forces - the struggle between socialism and capitalism - and the "younger brother" of Marx, also attempts to articulate the reciprocal nature of the relationship between Lenin and the masses during his lifetime:

*The class
drank its fill
of Lenin's light
and,
enlightened,
broke
from the gloom of millenia
And in turn,
imbibing
the masses' might,
together with the class
grew Lenin.⁸⁸*

Three Songs of Lenin attempts to perpetuate this mutual enrichment, even after Lenin's death, by greatly elaborating a minor point in Mayakovsky's poem:

*We're burying
the earthliest
of beings
that ever came to play
an earthly part.
Earthly, yes:
but not the earth-bound kind
who'll never peer
beyond the precincts of their sty.
He took in
all the planet
at a time,
saw things
out of reach
for the common eye.⁸⁹*

Three Songs of Lenin equates the superior socialist vision attainable through kino-eye with the way Lenin or a true Leninist would see things. The film begins with Soviet Central Asia and impaired vision: a preponderance of enclosed, impenetrable oriental spaces which seem to forbid the camera access to them. Completely veiled women walk from one edge of the frame to the other; a group of men walk away from the camera, down a flight of steps, as if denying its powers of vision. At one point the camera "loses control", swaying and panning up and down in front of a mosque, recalling the similar camera movement enacted outside a church in The Man With the Movie Camera. Intertitles refer to the "blind life" previously led by veiled women: after two unveil, close-ups of liberated Soviet Asian women smiling and looking towards the camera suggest the vast array of facts and new possibilities kino-eye and Leninism have opened up for them. Once Central Asia has been left behind, and as the film approaches its crescendo, a statue of Lenin is silhouetted next to an artificial waterfall created by the Dneprostroi dam. At first sight, the statue could easily be mistaken for a living person, and the waterfall equals or surpasses the impressiveness of any natural one. The image is repeated several times, along with the intertitle: "If only Lenin could see our country now!". The inference is clear: technology, cinematic and otherwise, can in effect outdo nature and resurrect the dead. Lenin lives on through us, through what we see and what we do.

Annette Michelson asserts that "the appearance of Lenin, frequently enhaloed in soft focus, and in superimposition, establishes him in a space of transcendental irrationality."⁹⁰

Inevitably, but more by default than by design, Three Songs of Lenin accrues to itself some of the religious connotations of the Lenin cult. Similarly, advertising the film partly on the basis of the previously unseen shots of Lenin assiduously rescued from archival vaults by Elizaveta Svilova's painstaking diligence emphasises the preciousness or even sacredness of these surviving relics. Michelson also notes that the slowing-down, freeze-framing and looped repetition of much of the Lenin footage lends these moments more of a photographic than a filmic quality, inserting "within our experience of lived time, the extratemporality of death."⁹¹ However, in addition to serving as memento mori, these points in the film also contribute to the mythology of the old and the new which relies upon the notion of the Revolution as a clean and definite break with the past, and a distinction between Lenin as someone who inaugurated this break but, sadly, has been and gone, and Leninism as something new that has only just begun to develop. As Susan Sontag has observed, still photography can serve as "a reminder of death..[but]..also an invitation to sentimentality..scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgements by the generalized pathos of looking at time past."⁹² Three Songs of Lenin's semi-photographic reminiscences of the dead leader are intercut with nostalgic newsreel footage from Civil War battles, fought against the forces of reaction and their capitalist allies. The film seeks to harness the combined emotional charge - much more intense for contemporary Russian audiences than for people watching it now - of these images of the Soviet state's founder and the military struggles that many of its original viewers would have lived through or lost friends and relatives to. Sentimentality and pathos help to disarm nuanced

historical and moral judgements, generating the feeling that Lenin and this war ushered in the start of a new and better era. The rest of the film seeks to channel or convert this emotionality into enthusiasm for the Soviet state's current programme of rapid, forced industrialisation.

Three Songs of Lenin mythologises the new and rejects what it defines as the old, and drives a wedge between pre- and postrevolutionary history. Nevertheless, kino-eye is indebted to, and further develops, a deep-rooted Russian tradition. That the sweeping societal changes enthusiastically proposed by the Soviet avant-garde might not be entirely unprecedented is hinted at in Nadezhda Udaltsova's 1918 speech, where she compares the current "need for a new reform" with the reforms of "Peter the Great", Russia's legendary modernising, Westernising monarch. In his survey of Revolutionary Dreams, Richard Stites analyses the breathtakingly diverse range of utopian visions generated by all levels of Soviet society in the decades immediately after the Revolution. He traces the genealogy of these utopian cultural artefacts and practices, relating them to three complex, historically modulating and interactive traditions, associated with the state (administrative utopia), the people (peasant utopia), and the radical intelligentsia (socialist utopia):

Each...sought welfare and justice but through different means. For administrative utopians, the dominant metaphor was parade - marching and laboring under benevolent orderly authority; for peasant utopians it was "volya", untrammelled freedom combined with village order or

*religious rule. Among the radical intelligentsia, order and freedom intermixed in their visions.*⁹³

The success of the revolution created a paradox. Large sectors of the radical intelligentsia moved from opposing the state to becoming its devoted supporters and administrators, shouldering the responsibility for the transformation of Russia into a modern industrial superpower. All the evidence suggests that Vertov never abandoned his formative commitment to the Soviet state, and in Three Songs of Lenin, order certainly predominates over untrammelled freedom. Stites describes administrative utopia as especially characteristic of Peter the Great's reign, and as enjoying a resurgence after the revolution. It was a vision of society animated by an impulse not "to impose repressive slavery upon the masses, but to create order and purvey justice..to organize, shape, and train (not educate) the rural population on the model of an army, to regulate life, symmetricize living space."⁹⁴

Three Songs of Lenin expands and "popularises" this tradition by attempting to make its audiences see and feel the need for this kind of rationalisation, and to internalise the necessary self-discipline it entails, by becoming both the overseers and the willingly overseen in this process. The film progresses away from the initial stagnation and slowness of traditional Central Asia, leaving behind this area's religious and historical architecture, to concentrate more upon the orderly clubs, workplaces and schools Leninism has delivered. The region's women and children are seen receiving a Leninist education (or training): in a synchronised sound shot one woman is

instructed in how to fire a rifle; many work on collective farms and in cotton factories as efficient, regulated producers within the all-encompassing state plan. The logic of this development leads the film towards a predictable conclusion: military parades and athletic displays in Red Square, and images of the greatest Soviet industrial achievements; the Dneprostroi dam; the Magnitostroi factory complex, and the Moscow-Volga Belomor canal. As more and more progress is revealed by Three Songs of Lenin's panoptic survey of the Soviet Union, and as kino-eye enables the spectator to see ever more clearly through Lenin's eyes, Central Asia recedes further and further out of sight.

Although Central Asia gradually disappears from Three Songs of Lenin, it is nevertheless central to its structure. Even though the orient repeatedly appears as a devalued term in the quotations from Stalin, Benjamin, Vertov and the Soviet street cited earlier, their various concepts of modernity would be much more difficult to visualise without it. Likewise with Three Songs of Lenin. Richard Stites' historical description of administrative utopianism in Russia closely resembles Michel Foucault's theoretical mapping of modern power in Discipline and Punish.⁹⁵ In Colonising Egypt, a work which combines sophisticated theoretical reflection with detailed historical research, Timothy Mitchell notes that the panopticon, the disciplinary/observational architectural mechanism so central to Foucault's exposition, was actually first constructed in a colonial context, by Samuel Bentham's brother Jeremy who was responsible for supervising the Potemkin estates, established on land conquered by Russia from Turkey in the late eighteenth century.⁹⁶ Mitchell extrapolates from

Foucault's argument, citing this instance and others as evidence that one of panopticism's inherent epistemological limitations is the construction, in order to justify its own operation, of an indolent, unproductive population category which requires remoulding and careful ordering. For colonial powers, their colonial subjects are the ones who most immediately fall into this category. Three Songs of Lenin, from this perspective, is Vertov's most successful attempt to exercise the panoptic powers of kino-eye in the service of the Soviet state. As a result, the film is unable to acknowledge the validity of differences within its own, finally, rather narrow view of the world -precisely because it defines any deviation from the disciplinary norm it espouses in wholly negative terms. This has to be the case, because they provide the only guarantee that Soviet society is proceeding in the right direction for a better future.

VIII Sound, Music and the Voices of the Oppressed

Three Songs of Lenin does more than just develop the Soviet variant of Russian administrative utopia, updating it through Leninism: it also seeks to appropriate new developments in cinematic technology for the long-term kino-eye objective of enabling the proletariat not only to see but also to speak to each other. The film goes beyond One Sixth of the Earth in that it actively seeks to open up a channel through which representatives of that previously most oppressed group, the now "doubly..triple emancipated woman of the Soviet East", can communicate freely with the rest of the world.⁹⁷ Vertov acknowledged the sound engineer Shtro's contribution to Three Songs of Lenin, and like Basil Wright's Song of Ceylon (EMB/Ceylon Tea Marketing Board 1935), the title of the film foregrounds this dimension.⁹⁸ In Three Songs of Lenin music dedicated to the great liberator's living legacy is even more significant than his nonetheless treasured visual image. Vertov defined the immediate challenge as a purely practical one, involving the transcendence of limitations imposed by unavoidable material constraints:

Everyone knows there's almost no documentary footage of Lenin made during his life. The individual bits remaining have been used over and over again... Three Songs of Lenin is a heroic feat of labour, the only correct solution to the problem of making a film-document of Lenin without (almost without) his image.⁹⁹

Three Songs of Lenin's enduring popularity and the official recognition it eventually received would seem to vindicate

the position Vertov adopted within the debate which took place in Soviet film circles during the period of speculation just prior to, and during the early part of, the industry's extended transition to sound (1930-36). The central text in this debate has traditionally been held to be the Eisenstein/Pudovkin/Alexandrov "Statement on the Sound Film" (1928), which calls for a contrapuntal use of sound and image.¹⁰⁰ It is an important document but until quite recently it has, within Western film scholarship, been regarded as almost the *only* significant one. Deference to the authority of Eisenstein and Pudovkin, and the valorisation of the 1920s, ensured the "Statement"'s wide availability in translation and encouraged the view that it alone offers the key to understanding the history of Soviet cinema's transition to sound. The "Statement" has been read as a testament to good intentions which a subsequent period of decline made impossible to realise. The corollary to this is that the document itself has often been interpreted ahistorically, without due attention to its place within contemporary Soviet discourses. This has led to reductive assessments of important films from the transitional period: a tendency evinced, for example, in Kristin Thompson's claim that "Vertov seems to have played it safe with Three Songs of Lenin, which contains virtually no tension between sound and image; the sound consists entirely of reverent music and bits of on-screen diegetic voice."¹⁰¹ This critique, like Michelson's, again implies that the film's success depended upon capitulation to the political status quo and deviation from the principles of montage. This was not the case, and Thomson's argument can only be sustained by abstracting the film from the wider historical context of its

production and reception and ignoring its socially and culturally specific modes of address.

Ian Christie has pointed out that one of the "Statement"'s primary justifications for its rejection of "talkies" is the argument that the production of such films would destroy the internationalism of silent cinema.¹⁰² For those working within the avant-garde sector of Soviet cinema at that time, this scenario would have invoked potential danger on at least two levels. In addition to possibly preventing montage cinema from aspiring to the internationalist ideals outlined in films like One Sixth of the Earth, there was also a more tangible danger. Sound threatened to sever established links with foreign audiences whose support and hard currency during the silent period generated much of the prestige which accrued to Soviet montage films and their makers. Yet whilst Vertov agreed with the "Statement"'s signatories that internationalist links and aspirations were vitally important, he argued that for kino-eye the introduction of sound technology represented a fulfilment rather than a threat. His contributions to the debate were delivered in a positive tone, and for him there appeared to be no need to prescribe particular cinematic strategies:

We maintain our previous position on the question of sound in documentary film. We regard radio-eye as a very powerful weapon in the hands of the proletariat, as the opportunity for proletarians of all nations to see and hear one another in an organized manner...Declarations on the necessity for nonsynchronization of the visible and audible, like declarations on the exclusive necessity for sound films or for

*talking films don't amount to a hill of beans, as the saying goes. In both sound and silent cinema we sharply distinguish between only two types of film: documentary..and acted.*¹⁰³

For Vertov and his production group, the continuation of the long-term project they initiated during the silent era required a flexible strategy of "complex interaction of sound with image", the precise details of which would be determined by the nature of the particular assignment they were working on at any given time.¹⁰⁴ Any means could be used in any way so long as they produced legitimate kinopravda which furthered the goal of linking and enabling communication between proletarians of all nations. Commenting on the positive remarks made by foreign visitors who saw Three Songs of Lenin in Moscow, despite the fact that not all of the intertitles or song lyrics had been translated, Vertov wrote:

*The point is that the exposition..develops not through the channel of words, but through other channels, through the interaction of sound and image, through the combination of many channels..The movement of thought, the movement of ideas, travels along many wires but in a single direction, to a single goal. Thoughts fly out from the screen, entering without verbal translations into the viewer's consciousness..Before us is a huge symphony orchestra of thoughts..The flow of thoughts continues even if one of the interconnecting wires is broken.*¹⁰⁵

In the same article, published in August 1934, Vertov also cited H.G. Wells' immediate verbal response to Three Songs of Lenin: "Had not a single word been translated for me I should

have understood the entire film from the first shot to the last. The thoughts and nuances of the film all reach me and act upon me without the help of words."¹⁰⁶ Wells was widely known and respected within the Soviet Union as a socialist-internationalist who, through his science-fiction and factual writing, argued for global government and the rational management of technology. Vertov's record of his response amounts to an authoritative validation of Three Songs of Lenin. August 1934 was also the date of the Soviet Writers' Congress headed by Andrei Zhdanov and Maxim Gorky, which many eminent foreign writers and intellectuals attended.¹⁰⁷ Soviet foreign policy was moving towards its Popular Front phase, and although Wells was neither a Marxist nor a revolutionary, publicising his reaction would have added strength to Vertov's campaign for wider distribution of Three Songs of Lenin both at home and abroad. In his diary later that year, Vertov also noted the enthusiastic responses of various other Western European socialist intellectuals, such as André Malraux and Jean-Richard Bloch.¹⁰⁸ According to Herbert Marshall, the many luminaries who endorsed the film included Louis Aragon, William Bullitt (the American ambassador), Henri Barbusse, Harold Lloyd, Romain Rolland, and even Cecil B. de Mille.¹⁰⁹

Three Songs of Lenin was less openly critical of capitalism than One Sixth of the Earth, and the later film's more concentrated focus on industrial and colonial development was one of the elements which would have helped broaden its appeal beyond the established foreign audience for Soviet montage cinema. Claiming that the Soviet Union could achieve or exceed the same targets as Western Europe or America, only

without exploitation, and more quickly, was less of a challenge to foreign, non-Communist sensibilities than explicitly highlighting the slavery of capitalist colonialism, as the earlier film had. Tacitly, Three Songs of Lenin and the means used to promote it pointed towards the possibility of Soviet and capitalist co-existence, and to certain underlying parallels between the two otherwise opposed socio-economic systems.

The London Film Society screening of Three Songs of Lenin on October 27th 1935 featured subtitles and intertitle translations by another left intellectual, W.H. Auden. Only the Russian used in the film was translated, and not the other languages which are heard being spoken or sung, apart from those lyrics already translated into Russian intertitles on the Soviet print. For the programme notes Jay Leyda translated some of the speeches given by workers direct to camera towards the end of the film.¹¹⁰ On one level the choice of what to translate was dictated by necessity. Members of the LFS' committee would have encountered difficulties had they tried to find film-literate translators competent in the languages and dialects of Soviet Central Asia. Nevertheless, this omission does testify to a general acceptance, within this milieu, of the idea that all of the Soviet nationalities speak, metaphorically if not literally, with the same voice, and therefore it does not matter if, as Vertov put it, in this "symphony orchestra of thoughts..one of the interconnecting wires is broken." The LFS' translation reinforces, at the exhibition and reception stage, Three Songs of Lenin's ideological norms, which privilege supposedly authentic Russian proletarian voices, posit the apparently unproblematic, gradual incorporation of Central Asian into

Soviet culture, and represent the Leninist regime under whose aegis all this takes place as basically benevolent and non-coercive.

On Three Songs of Lenin's soundtrack, this is perhaps best exemplified by the carefully selective use of synchronisation: the first instance occurs in the opening sequence, in an overhead long shot of Central Asian men at prayer in a mosque's courtyard, with a muezzin reciting the one phrase, "Allah akbar", which so often in films produced from a non-Islamic perspective is sufficient to place this religion as alien, aggressive or barbaric. Subsequent synch shots, at regular intervals throughout Three Songs of Lenin, chart the literal "synchronisation" of people and state. A few untranslated sentences of a Turkic language are heard as a Central Asian woman receives rifle instruction; later another woman and a child tune into a radio broadcast of the "Internationale"; the process culminates in the series of direct to camera addresses by industrial and collective farm workers, interspersed with the production crescendo which builds up at the end of the film. Their style of delivery, and unqualified praise for everything Soviet, suggests that the participants were vetted and reading from scripts. Yet Central Asian workers are not even granted this semblance of access to unmediated verbal communication. Their contribution is confined to the comparatively more "primitive" level of simple folk songs, the translation and interpretation of which the LFS and other foreign audiences were happy to leave to Vertov and his collaborators.

To some observers, the presence of folk motifs in modern Soviet composition in the 1930s seemed to offer ample proof of the healthy evolution of a distinctive musical culture expressing the new society's progressive ethos. The relationship between the three main types of music used on Three Songs of Lenin's soundtrack: modern Soviet; nineteenth century European classical; and the folk songs collected from Central Asia, can best be understood by situating them within this broader contemporary context. Gerald Abraham, a British commentator on Soviet music, profiled Three Songs of Lenin's composer Yuri Shaporin in a 1943 book which also summarised the main factors contributing to the development of a uniquely Soviet style in the 1930s. The first was a renewed interest in Asian music, which led to:

a considerable quantity of music evolved from oriental musical idioms: such works as Shekhter's Turkmenia and Knipper's orchestral suites Vanch and Stalinabad [both produced in the early 1930s and based on Tajik themes]. "But is there anything new in that?" someone may be asking. "Has not a certain amount of orientalism always been one of the most attractive ingredients of Russian music?" To which the reply is that the genuine orientalism of, say, Vanch differs from the pseudo-orientalism of Scheherazade as a Hebridean folk-song differs from Max Bruch's Scottish Fantasia. The orientalism of the Russian classics is either pure fake or the genuine article more or less Russified; the oriental essays of composers like Knipper and Shekhter and Khachaturyan are the fruit of their attempts to saturate themselves in Asiatic folk-music..to evolve from it a higher type of musical organism

*playable by ordinary Western instruments or orchestras, yet otherwise free from the conventions of European music. Next to this interest in the music of the non-Russian peoples of the U.S.S.R., the most characteristic product of contemporary Russian music is a vast, epic type of symphony for chorus and orchestra, spiritually descended from Beethoven's Ninth, Berlioz's Symphonie Funèbre et Triomphale and the symphonies of Mahler...The epic, the heroic, the monumental; these are the highest aims of the good Soviet composer.*¹¹¹

More recent work has questioned whether, at least institutionally, the break between pre-Revolutionary Russian musical orientalism and Soviet compositions which claim to give equal expression to the "genuine article" is quite as fundamental as earlier assessments suggested.¹¹² Even in its own terms, Abraham's account admits to a hierarchy within Soviet music of the 1930s, with symphonic forms derived from the dominant Western classical tradition occupying the commanding position: they remain the good Soviet composer's "highest aim". This in turn raises doubts about the subsidiary trend; rather than representing the beginnings of a true synthesis of different national elements into a new "higher type of organism", this appearance of the seemingly genuine musical voice of the East might instead be partly the *product* of a demand for authenticity arising from the Soviet regime's insistence that it has broken with the traditions and practices of Western imperialism.

The musical arrangement in Three Songs of Lenin, Vertov's "huge symphony orchestra of thoughts", establishes a hierarchy which corresponds very closely to the one implied by Abraham. Shaporin's modern Soviet music, closer to the European classical tradition than the Central Asian folk songs, rates higher than they do. The latter however add colour and credibility to the film. This hierarchical schema also dictates that each type of music enters into a different relationship with Three Songs of Lenin's own filmic time and its invocation of historical and anticipated time. Modern Soviet music is most closely associated with utopianism: it is Shaporin's piece, "The March of the Shock Workers", specially composed for the film, which points the way to a brighter future. The very first sound heard in Three Songs of Lenin is not a song, but an up-tempo, military-style composition typical of Soviet 1930s "mass" music. Playing alongside the title sequence and credits, Shaporin's "March" announces at the outset that the premise and goal of Three Songs of Lenin is productive discipline through Leninism: the film's ultimate aim is not the celebration of oriental culture but the creation of viewers such as the ideal ones Vertov describes advancing through the streets of Moscow demanding to see the film, "the Proletarian Division...band music...banners unfurled, carrying signs: "We're going to see Three Songs of Lenin".¹¹³ Shaporin's "March" returns at various points throughout the film, whenever production or modern transportation shifts into top gear. In the final, sound-image "crescendo", a choral accompaniment is introduced. This supplies the finishing touch to the epic sweep of Shaporin's music which should by this point have given the audience a new or renewed sense of collective identity, and infused them with enthusiasm which

they can take away from the film and put into practice in their own lives.

Shaporin was considered to be a "safe" Soviet composer, one of the few to avoid severe criticism or harassment from regulatory bodies and censors. Nevertheless, the ideological, even instrumental use to which his music lends itself co-exists with Three Songs of Lenin's continued, albeit subdued experimentation with the possibilities of sound-image interaction. In an article analysing the film's success, Vertov discusses continuity and change within his oeuvre, stating that "in previous work I frequently presented my shooting methods outright. I left the construction of those methods open and visible..And this was wrong."¹¹⁴ Partly an attempt to protectively distance himself from his earlier work's "formalist" self-reflexivity, this comment also indicates through omission that Three Songs of Lenin's soundtrack is the place in which to listen out for an avant-garde approach to cinematic construction. Although less self-reflexive with regard to sound technology than Enthusiasm (Vufku, 1931), Vertov's previous film, Three Songs of Lenin does emphasise aural materiality: music especially is employed throughout the film overtly rather subtly. Usually loud, rarely absent, it has a physically palpable resonance which it is difficult not to be consciously aware of. Its role is more prominent than that of smoothing transitions between images or simply enhancing or providing a background for them. Music co-exists with the visual images and enters into a variety of sound-image interactions: cueing as well accompanying shots; playing off and alongside non-musical sound; signifying as a semi-independent entity in its own right. Rapid changes in volume and type of music strive to

ensure that the soundtrack is experienced as a constructed object and that viewers relate to it as such. Vertov's concept of "radio-eye" is epitomised in the synch shots of a Central Asian woman and child listening to and, importantly, tuning a radio: the "Internationale" is heard before the camera pans down to the pair, and after good reception has been obtained the music continues, bridging a cut to a military parade in Red Square. Ideological integration and the demystification of sound technology are achieved simultaneously. As these shots illustrate, there is therefore no fundamental conflict between the foregrounded materiality of Three Songs of Lenin's soundtrack and Shaporin's utopian score. Both techniques combine in the attempt, through different means, to generate a harmonious community by engendering, respectively, conscious and positive feelings towards work, technology and Soviet development.

Jane Feuer has argued that the Hollywood musical, also no stranger to self-reflexivity, seeks to fabricate community through the experience of entertainment. Life, in the final analysis, is experienced as being not about work but about pleasure, about feeling good spontaneously. Work, and the work that goes into producing professional entertainment within capitalism, tends to be elided even when, as in the backstage musical, it is ostensibly what the film is about.¹¹⁵ Utopian tendencies in Soviet cinema of the 1930s offer different solutions to the same equation. Life *is* about work, but work is a pleasure. Conversely, leisure time can and should be enjoyably spent in productive self-improvement. In Three Songs of Lenin Central Asian women spend their spare time reading Lenin, going to school, and attending officially

sanctioned Soviet clubs. For the film's spectators, "The March of the Shock Workers" embodies the film's telos, the utopia which these and other visual images augment as being just within sight, although just out of reach, but a destination towards which the film, the people it represents, and the viewers who watch it are inexorably heading. As Pudovkin wrote of Shaporin's music for his film Deserter (Mezhrabpomfilm, 1933), it conveys, despite any possible appearances to the contrary, the "profound inner quality of reality" which guarantees eventual happiness and victory.¹¹⁶ "The March of the Shock Workers" in Three Songs of Lenin evokes a culturally specific structure of feeling akin to that subsequently elaborated in certain otherwise quite dissimilar 1930s Soviet film productions. In the contemporary popular musicals of Grigori Alexandrov and Ivan Pyriev, music, marches and parades attempt to make militarised industrialisation seem an attractive, purposeful and pleasurable experience. As Maria Enzensberger points out, because Soviet society is officially on the right course for achieving socialism, the Soviet musical tends to enact "its utopia in the here and now, the present-day Soviet reality in which everyone..works and, for that matter, works miracles."¹¹⁷ Utopianism is subordinated to production: it is to be experienced not so much as an alternative to the present order of things, or a return to things as they were before industrialisation, but rather as a definite although always receding date in the very near future, whose advent can be hastened by extra effort and further development. Sound and music in Three Songs of Lenin contribute powerfully to an aesthetic orientation which Herbert Marcuse has identified as characteristic of much Soviet art during this period:

*Certain shortcomings, blunders and lags in [Soviet] reality are criticized, but neither the individual nor his [sic] society are referred to a sphere of fulfilment other than that prescribed by and enclosed in the prevailing system. To be sure, they are referred to the communist **future**, but the latter is presented as evolving from the present without "exploding" the existing contradictions.*¹¹⁸

Three Songs of Lenin attempts to neutralise a range of potential contradictions and march on into the future by predicting the transformation of both bourgeois and oriental into Soviet culture, through the organisation of different types of music. Initially it is very surprising to hear pieces of nineteenth century classical music in a Vertov film, and their presence does represent a development from the early Constructivist hostility towards the bourgeois art of the past. The cultural configuration of the mid-1930s was different to that of the earlier period: anything defined as experimentation for its own sake was disapproved of, and the Bolshevik tenet, that selected parts of the pre-Soviet artistic inheritance should be delivered to the masses, was in the process of being implemented. However, to suggest as Kristin Thompson does, that Vertov simply capitulated to external pressures by sticking bits of reverential background music onto Three Songs of Lenin's soundtrack, is to drastically simplify the complexities of the film and its contemporary situation. Classical music functions elegiacally in Three Songs of Lenin: it is first heard in the sequence following the credits which depicts the house in Gorky where Lenin died and the snow-covered, now empty bench on which he sat. A dirge by Wagner, and Chopin's "Funeral March", are used alternately

with a song of lamentation from Central Asia in the central sequences where Lenin's lying in state is shown. The visual images here are largely recycled from Vertov's earlier Leninist Kinopravda (Kinopravda no. 21) (Goskino, 1925). What is new is the carefully calculated use of recorded music which adds a further and decisive level of significance to old and familiar images.

At one level the choice of classical music simply accords with Vertov's policy of always aspiring to use "film-facts". Chopin's "Funeral March" and other suitably sombre pieces of classical music were played during Lenin's funeral and at other memorial meetings around the country.¹¹⁹ Vertov does not however just simply record or duplicate these facts: he deploys them in a very precise way. In one of the most remarkable moments in the history of Soviet cinema, the film stops at 4.00 pm, just after the sequence of Lenin lying in state, and silence is observed, punctuated only by bells ringing and cannons and rifles firing a ceremonial salute. This is followed by the sounds, increasing in volume, and mixed with Shaporin's music, of a factory whistle and industrial machinery starting up. For Leninism to live, and grief to be overcome, industry, transportation and Soviet productivity must roll on. The images here are firstly of motion arrested: people, industrial activity, trains and boats held in freeze-frame, in the same way that the image of Lenin has been frozen at several points throughout the film. After this, movement begins again, and steadily builds across a further two reels to the closing crescendo of triumphant industrial achievement in which Shaporin's composition predominates.

Apart from a few brief snatches of Strauss' "Beautiful Blue Danube", no more classical music is heard after the film, out of respect for Lenin, stops and then restarts. This type of music, in its traditional form, is almost entirely associated in Three Songs of Lenin with the sadness of mourning, but it does not belong to the Soviet future, or to the metaphorical life of Lenin in the present. The same is true of the oral tradition of Soviet Asia, which has also run its course and disappeared from the soundtrack by the time the final reel and a half of the film is reached. The logic of the musical hierarchy incorporated within Three Songs of Lenin dictates that the songs from Central Asia will inevitably disappear once they have served their purpose, which, as with the classical music in the film, is a circumscribed and limited one. The musical culture of the orient relates to Three Songs of Lenin's temporality in the same way as the Wild Division relates to October's. Both, in the final analysis, are transient elements which will be left behind once the films' utopian goals, of an integrated community and access to modernity, have been attained. However, one important difference between October and Three Songs of Lenin is that the latter produces apparently authentic evidence of oriental culture's desire to negate itself completely in pursuit of these higher ideals.

Unlike the uniformly sombre selection of classical pieces, the Soviet Asian songs are also celebratory or, more precisely, they function as such within the film. They connote joy as well as sadness: whether or not this is what they signify within a Central Asian context is not relevant to the film's purposes. Such lyrics as are translated into Russian convey happiness in release as well as grief, for example:

(10) *FIRST SONG (hand-lettered)*

"Under a Black Veil My Face..."

(11) *"-- In a black prison my soul..."*

(12) *"-- My life was blind..."*

(13) *"--In darkness they held me..."*

(14) *"--Till at dawn they set me free.*

The dawn of Lenin's Truth..."

(77) *"Go in your grief to that "tent"*

[Lenin's Moscow Mausoleum]

(78) *"Look at Lenin..and.."*

(79) *"Your sorrow will dissolve as in water.."120*

Three Songs of Lenin showcases these songs as the authentic voice of Soviet Central Asia. This move parallels, in some respects, the use of authentic material in the otherwise very different contemporary British films Sanders of the River (Zoltan Korda, London Films, 1935) and King Solomon's Mines (Robert Stevenson, Gainsborough, 1937), where semi-documentary sequences featuring African songs and dances lend a certain amount of credence to these narratives' overall ideological construction.¹²¹ Yet in each of these cases, the very category "authentic" is problematic, since it presupposes that the genuine expression or essence of a culture could be recorded on film, and ignores the relationships of power which inform any intra- or intercultural situation.¹²² As Nina Tumarkin observes, Soviet cultural institutions had actively been seeking evidence of grassroots loyalty to and love for Lenin ever since his death. In 1924 Glavpolitprosvet (the Political Education Department of the Commissariat of Enlightenment) issued a directive instructing its regional workers to search out and

record all the examples of songs, stories, poems and proverbs about Lenin they could find.¹²³ In 1930 some of this material was published in an anthology, Lenin in Russian Folk Stories and Legends, which seemed to provide convincing evidence of various Soviet nationalities' sincere adherence to Leninism. Similarly, Vertov attributed Three Songs of Lenin's basic strength and success to one of its "most important features: the documents of popular creation, folk songs about Lenin...generated by the emancipated masses."¹²⁴ He presents his film, like the anthology, as a relatively transparent medium through which the authentic, singular voice of Soviet Eastern women is disseminated - the possibility that they might be plural or dissonant is not admitted. However, in sharp contrast to the investigation of modern Soviet industrial and cultural production processes undertaken throughout Vertov's oeuvre, Three Songs of Lenin actively *discourages* speculation about the provenance of the songs it presents. The first intertitles read:

- (1) *In Asia, in Europe and America, in African jungles and beyond the Arctic Circle, songs of Lenin are sung.*
- (2) *Who writes these songs? No one knows. They pass magically from hut to hut, from village to village...*¹²⁵

Three Songs of Lenin defers to the "magical" origins of the Soviet Asian songs it incorporates. As Nina Tumarkin remarks of the documents collected in Lenin in Russian Folk Stories and Eastern Legends, "most are undated and their genesis remains mysterious."¹²⁶ The songs in Vertov's film are the paramount example of the limitations of kino-eye's "epistemological" investigation into production processes.

The *technical* construction of industrial and cultural artefacts is repeatedly demonstrated, and built into the texture of the films themselves, but the social relations of production, including the relationship between kino-eye and what it records, are generally assumed to be non-coercive and non-problematic. Since the songs involve only very low-level technology, one synch shot of Soviet Asian musicians playing in a club is sufficient to illustrate this. That the very existence of the songs may in part be due to the Soviet cultural authorities' coordinated demands for such material, and the resultant incentive to produce it, is a possibility which Three Songs of Lenin completely elides.

To recontextualise the songs in this way is not to deem them somehow "inauthentic": to label them as such would be to imply the existence, somewhere beyond them, of more "authentic" examples of 1930s Soviet Asian culture. It is to suggest that, rather than being listened to as evidence of a developmental process, the first tentatively joyous steps on the straight and narrow, unidirectional road towards Leninism, which is how Three Songs of Lenin frames them, they should instead be seen as hybridised creations. They represent one of the ways in which certain cultural producers in Central Asia attempted to negotiate a new historical situation.

IX Displacing the Veil

If the collecting of oriental folk songs celebrating Lenin was a well-established practice within Soviet culture prior to Three Songs of Lenin's production, the image of the veil was equally prominent, albeit as a barrier to progress, an object of almost absolute opprobrium. Several Soviet fiction films had already broached this issue in the late 1920s, articulating the theme of the old and the new through love stories which involved female protagonists defying oriental tradition by unveiling.¹²⁷ At the same time, Party strategists singled out women of the East as the social group with the most to gain from Soviet development in Central Asia and the means through which traditional society there could be undermined. As Vertov put it, the October revolution offered them, as women, formerly colonised subjects, and workers, a double or even triple emancipation. Gregory Massell recounts the way in which they came to be perceived, within Soviet discourses of the period, as virtually a "surrogate proletariat" whose conditions of oppression were exhaustively catalogued in contemporary ethnographic scholarship. Legal and administrative measures, as well as extensive propaganda campaigns, sought to mobilise the revolutionary potential of Soviet Asian women. The attempt to precipitate cultural revolution in Central Asia peaked between 1926 and 1929, with perhaps the most concerted effort taking place on March 8th 1927, when Zhenotdel (Department for Work among Women) activists, protected by police, led crowds of Uzbek women to public meetings in city squares, many of which also contained recently erected statues of Lenin. Military bands and local musicians fanfared the womens' arrival, whilst speakers and

performers inveighed against traditionalism and extolled the Soviet regime's virtues. "The prime emphasis in speeches, poems, and songs was on unveiling..small groups of veiled native women (probably held in reserve and coached by the Zhenotdel) stepped up to the podium and, in full view of the crowds, ostentatiously tore the veils from their faces.",¹²⁸

Three Songs of Lenin follows a similar pattern, isolating the veil as an emotive symbol, a cultural "lag" to be criticised and discarded. Two shots of unveiling present women turning to face the camera, throwing the despised item of clothing back over their head, and then smiling. In both cases the action is accompanied by instrumental passages from the first song. Prior to this all the women seen in the film are completely swathed in black, apart from one who is either blind or sick and who hobbles aimlessly along a dirty street. Afterwards, unveiled women are represented taking part in positive, pro-Soviet activities: reading Lenin, driving tractors, working on a collective farm and in a cotton factory. The images of unveiling are the first to "securely" frame Soviet Central Asian women within a balanced shot composition. In his study of early twentieth century French postcards depicting Algerian women, in which the removal of the veil becomes an obsessively repeated motif, Malek Alloula suggests that the image of the veiled woman represents a potential challenge to the colonial photographer:

The first thing the foreign eye catches..is that they are concealed from sight...These veiled women are not only an embarrassing enigma to the photographer but an outright attack upon him..concentrated by the tiny orifice for the eye,

*this womanly gaze is a little like the eye of a camera, like the photographic lens that takes aim at everything.*¹²⁹

At the beginning of Three Songs of Lenin kino-eye is confronted with the possibility of a way of seeing resistant to the panoptic power idealised by the film. Consequently, it attempts to bring the gaze of Central Asian women into alignment with Leninism, identified as the only true perspective on the future. Alloula's analysis concentrates on the erotic component of the French colonial postcards he scrutinises: Three Songs of Lenin, following on from the fiction films preceding it, does to a limited extent link possession of and control over Central Asia to the right to look at exotic objects of desire: all of the unveiled women are young and conventionally attractive. However, this aspect is subordinated to overriding developmental imperatives: (self-)imposed productive discipline rather than desire guides the appropriation of Soviet Asian womens' bodies and kino-eye's access to forbidden spaces. They are marshalled and regulated, and attention is directed to their potential capacity for work and growing devotion to Leninism. An intertitle between shots of women harvesting a field reads "hands of steel", and later close-ups of immobile, grieving faces are intercut with the footage of Lenin's corpse lying in state.

The veil has become a key issue within non-Islamic discourses, often immediately evoking condemnation of a monolithically oppressive "Islam", and condensing within a single image the putative essence of a diverse range of polyglot, internally differentiated Arabic, North African and Asian cultures.

Opposing this reductionist stance, Frantz Fanon in his 1959 essay "Algeria Unveiled" argued that an anti-colonialist analysis could not afford such absolutism and should instead seek to elucidate the "historical dynamism of the veil": the ways in which it could also be mobilised, by women as well as men, as a symbol and a means of resistance.¹³⁰ As part of a renewed debate in the 1980/90s, some feminist scholars have argued that "the veil like all forms of clothing is a signifier; what it signifies is determined by the social and political context in which it is used", and that, depending upon where they are being articulated from, demands for its removal can sometimes be as oppressive as legislation or social pressures enforcing its imposition.¹³¹ Leila Ahmed, in Women and Gender in Islam, traces a brief history of the veil's emergence as a politically and emotionally explosive, specifically *modern* issue. Taking Egypt as her example, she demonstrates how British colonialist discourses, and conservative nationalist or traditionalist Islamic discourses, developed interdependently as well as in opposition to each other. The former sought to abolish the veil as an impediment to progress; the latter promoted it as a sign of national and religious integrity, but both accorded to this item of clothing an importance it had not possessed prior to the advent of colonialism. From the British side, the veil assumed such prominence because it could unite conservatives, progressives and feminists around an easily identifiable symbol. Egyptian feminists were from the beginning always more divided on the question of whether to unveil or not was of primary strategic significance.¹³²

Three Songs of Lenin therefore follows broad trends in Western imperialism as well as being linked to specifically Soviet developments. On this particular issue at least, self-styled proponents of modernity appear to have developed a remarkably rigid, inflexible fixation: an attitude usually attributed to the traditionalist cultures various modernising projects have defined themselves as differing from. Despite local or short-term successes, the intensive assault launched against the veil in Soviet Asia during the late 1920s met with various forms of resistance, not only from Central Asian men but also from many women disillusioned by the disparity between Soviet promises of liberation and their experience of dislocation, structural inequality, and exploitation within the Soviet state as a source of cheap, unskilled labour. Massell describes the subsequent decade as one in which an uneasy *modus vivendi* established itself, with the Soviet regime effectively prioritising economic over cultural development and settling for less than total transformation, although, as Three Songs of Lenin attests, this remained the ultimate goal.

Set within this social context, the shots of women unveiling in Three Songs of Lenin parallel in certain respects the situation informing the French colonial postcard photographer's Algerian studio, described by Alloula as "a pacified microcosm where his desire, his scopic instinct, can find satisfaction...props, carefully disposed upon and around the model..suggest the existence of a natural frame whose feigned "realism" is expected to provide a supplementary, yet by no means superfluous, touch of authenticity."¹³³ The shots in Three Songs of Lenin in which women approach the camera and throw back their veils are, more clearly than

anything else in the film, carefully choreographed, "acted" moments, typical of the kind of staging Vertov continued to attack in other people's films. They require the support of the apparent authenticity of the music from the first song, lent to them by the soundtrack, to lessen the obviousness of this fact. These two moments provide perhaps the best examples in Three Songs of Lenin's failure to reflect upon the possibility that Soviet development might involve coercion, and that kino-eye might be implicated in this.

X Three Songs of Lenin: 1934 to 1994

Despite obstruction at both the production and distribution stages, Three Songs of Lenin was a success. Scheduled for a premiere on 21st January 1934, as part of the tenth anniversary of Lenin's death, the film was finally released in Moscow on 1st November 1934, and then in a range of foreign cities either simultaneously or shortly afterwards. The last in a series of montage films to be so received, it was heralded as a great work by audiences outside the Soviet Union, and won a prize at the 1935 Venice Film Festival. Vertov was subsequently decorated by the Soviet state with the Order of the Red Star early in 1935.

In January 1938, rather than being suppressed, as was the case with many older montage classics during this period, Three Songs of Lenin was actually reedited and rereleased. Approximately seven extra minutes of footage were inserted to demonstrate further Soviet achievements and to emphasise Stalin's role as Lenin's legitimate successor. These amendments brought Three Songs of Lenin closer into line with the nascent genre of fiction films "starring" Stalin, beginning with Lenin in October (Mikhail Romm, Sovkino, 1938).

Eighteen ~~Eight~~ years later, Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech", denounced aspects of Stalin's regime to the 20th Party Congress in 1956, and a return to Leninism and the Lenin cult was officially endorsed, in order to relegitimise Soviet authority and fill the gap opened up by de-Stalinisation. In 1970, to mark the hundredth anniversary of Lenin's birth, Elizaveta Svilova helped to prepare another version of Three Songs of Lenin, minus Stalin and closer to the 1934 print. As

recently as 1982, this edition was considered marketable and topical enough to be transferred onto video. After Stalinism, Three Songs of Lenin served as rearticulation of fundamentals, a useful vehicle for reviving the spirit and principles of authentic Leninism.

However as my analysis of Vertov's work has attempted to demonstrate, no automatic correlation can be made between popular responses and the perceptions or intentions of the relatively privileged elite who work as cultural producers. Nina Tumarkin points to the existence of this gulf when she notes a tension, an undercurrent dating back to the very beginnings of the Lenin cult, which is hinted at by the anxieties of those officially responsible for propagating and standardising it. Certain members of the intelligentsia expressed marked reservations about the way that some of the popular responses to Leninism, and some of the more spontaneous manifestations of Leninania, seemed to be degenerating into kitsch. They feared that "the Lenin cult, established [by the upper echelons of the Party and cultural elite] with such feverish energy in 1924, [might] become a systematic series of routine and meaningless gestures".¹³⁴ By the time of the 1970 celebrations, which in some instances collapsed or were subverted into virtual farce or parody, scurrilous jokes about Lenin provided one of the main sources of pleasure for the participants, as well as evidence of muted but widespread popular disaffection with the regime. There is something ironic about the way Three Songs of Lenin, the work of someone who paid dearly for remaining loyal to the Constructivist distrust of conventionality and disrespect for established cultural authority, became a classic in the

pantheon of great socialist realist art, and therefore susceptible to a later generation's ridicule.

It is probable that popular responses towards the drive to develop Soviet Central Asia which, as Three Songs of Lenin makes clear, is an integral aspect of Leninism, were always more perverse or cynical than Vertov would have liked them to be. Yet if people throughout the Western world have now largely given up on the spurious dream of modernising Islamic cultures (on Western terms), the image of the veil continues to symbolise their now apparently perennial backwardness, and to maintain the East/West divide. Paradoxically, however, the only way to critique Three Songs of Lenin's treatment of this and other issues has been through adopting a global rather than a parochial perspective, which is what kino-eye advocated in the first place. Even though Three Songs of Lenin helped to perpetuate these East/West divisions, this does not necessarily mean that kino-eye's ideals are completely invalid. As Brian Winston has argued, the canonisation of non-fiction films which seek to effect social change, whether through revolutionary or reformist means, often indicates the continued topicality of the "problems" they address, and therefore the films' failure to change them.¹³⁵ This is corroborated by the fact that films on unveiling were still being produced in the Soviet Union long after Three Songs of Lenin: Along Lenin's Road (Mosfilm, 1968), for example, which tells the story of a Tashkent university student's defiance of oriental tradition and eventual integration into Soviet culture. Obviously, films cannot be indicted as the primary reason for the persistence of social problems, but if, as in the Soviet tradition, they do seek to

make an intervention which contributes towards positive social change, and this change does not occur, then the most effective way forward might be to reframe the definition of the "problem" and the filmmakers' own possible implication within or relationship to it. Otherwise, long-term liberation projects, like Vertov's cinematic socialist internationalism, supporting the underprivileged and the oppressed through kino-eye's global vision, may well fail, even if, as was the case with Three Songs of Lenin in the Soviet Union, particular films which form part of that project are, in conventional terms, successful.

CHAPTER TWO: KINO-EYE'S GLOBAL VISION

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IX Displacing the Veil

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CHAPTER 3

Storm Over Asia, Russia, England

I Factography and Colonialism

Although a postcolonial critique of Soviet montage cinema is only possible now, this does not mean that the issues it explores are necessarily an ex post facto interpretation, artificially grafted onto films made before this approach began to be elaborated. During the latter part of the 1920s, certain critics from within constructivism's orbit chose to analyse a small number of films, including One Sixth of the Earth and Storm Over Asia/The Heir to Genghiz Khan (Vsevelod Pudovkin, Mezhrabpomfilm, 1928), in terms which, albeit incidentally, suggested that representation of the non-Western world was a particularly problematic area for Soviet montage cinema. Progressive English critics differed markedly from their Soviet counterparts in that they adopted a more affirmative stance towards this cinema and did not even tangentially raise the issue of non-Western representation. There are therefore two good reasons for revisiting the debate on Soviet montage cinema within Soviet constructivist circles during this period: firstly, in order to demonstrate that although the postcolonial perspective is new, the textual analysis which supports it is neither unprecedented nor completely arbitrary; secondly, to begin to highlight, through contrast, how and why the English tradition of critical writing about Soviet cinema developed along the lines that it did.

One of the arguments Christine Lodder advances in her book on Russian Constructivism is that its history in the 1920s can be seen as one of increasing confinement and compromise with

the de facto reality which overtook this movement, as opposed to the projected reality many of the artists within its orbit originally hoped their work would help create. Lack of resources, fierce competition from rival cultural groupings, isolation from peasant, proletarian and non-Russian culture, lukewarm or openly hostile official attitudes towards interim experiments, along with the introduction of NEP, all combined to curtail the early postrevolutionary aspiration to remove art from the museum or the bourgeois salon and make it into the agent of a total, continuous transformation of everyday life. Instead, this ambition was increasingly restricted to particular micro-environments: for example, certain theatre and film productions.¹

One of the dangers inherent in this limited success of a maximalist programme was, as some contemporary cultural theorists pointed out, a drift towards mere stylisation: constructivism as a new type of set design or an ensemble of innovative film techniques, *rather than* a radical break with tradition notions of cultural production per se. Writing in Novy Lef towards the end of 1927, Sergei Tretyakov warned that although "new inventions in the field of form" were necessary, there was also the danger of their becoming "no longer weapons for cultural advance, but merely a new ornament, a new embellishing device, a new addition to the assortment of aesthetic embroideries and rattles offered to the public."² This refusal to separate the formal from the contextual also derives from specialised Formalist research into the way literary devices lose their effectiveness by becoming conventionalised, and periodically need to be overturned.³

Osip Brik, who moved between and linked Formalist and constructivist circles was, for a time, the staunchest exponent of a styleless, unaesthetic "factography" as the route out of the avant-garde's impasse. In "The Fixation of Fact", published in the same issue of Novy Lef as Tretyakov's warning, Brik railed against those artists who "even now..maintain their right to treat real facts in an aesthetic manner."⁴ What they failed to realise, according to Brik, was that in all media the relationship between art - if indeed the word was still valid - and its audience had altered fundamentally. "The contemporary consumer is not concerned about the method of treating the raw material. The contemporary consumer views a work of art not as a valuable but as a means, a method of communicating raw material."⁵ The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty (Esfir Shub, Sovkino, 1927) was held up as an exemplary work and, as Mikhail Yampolsky points out, absolute deference towards the "raw material" led to a situation where the film archive was recognised as the ultimate "author", the matrix out of which films were generated, and into which they could and inevitably would be dissolved when no longer necessary.⁶

In effect, this theoretical position tacitly sanctions the suppression or re-editing of films, as happened for example with Three Songs of Lenin, and reduces the role of the artist to little more than that of a faithful Soviet state functionary. Ultra-utilitarianism implicitly concedes the right to critical commentary, or the exploration of alternatives. The Party line, along with the current version of history, are taken as absolutes which need only to be communicated, even though, paradoxically, their absolute relativity is also

recognised. As Yampolsky observes, the attempt by writers like Tretyakov and Brik to preserve "the character of left-wing art as one of struggle and dynamism" ran up against an "involuntary recognition of the stability of actuality", returning them, in effect, to the crisis factography was supposed to resolve.⁷ The mode of communication proposed by Brik and others in Novy Lef was, moreover, an incredibly monolithic and austere one, where the state's interests are assumed to be identical with the audience's and pleasure, aesthetic or otherwise, is marginalised. The "contemporary consumer"'s cultural requirements are assumed to be solely for a standardised supply of dryly factual and apparently objective information.

Despite factography's shortcomings as a model for the development of Soviet cinema, it did facilitate the opening up of a novel perspective on the various forms of film montage being practised. Viktor Shklovsky, whose critical style tended to be more playful than Brik's, nevertheless followed the general trend, broadly concurring with Novy Lef's platform but always insisting upon the need for some kind of textual organisation, even in non-fiction film. In one of several articles on One Sixth of the Earth he insisted that the film "needs a scriptwriter. It needs a plot, but not one based on the fate of a hero. A plot is after all only a semantic construction of things. It is nothing to be ashamed of."⁸ Semantically and ideologically, One Sixth of the Earth was weak, squeezing its diverse material into a simplistic and reductive "straightforward parallelism: then and now, or here and there."⁹ What also troubled Shklovsky was that Vertov's method of construction and standards of cinematography

were artistic, whereas his material was factual. Shklovsky censured him for conflating irreconcilable approaches to cinema, producing "newsreel material..deprived of its soul."¹⁰ Compositional considerations predominated over factual specificity: rarely was there any indication of exactly when or where any particular shot had been filmed. Consequently, the most significant thing about One Sixth of the Earth's cinematography was that "first and foremost the factual frame has disappeared and the staged frame appeared." Structurally, the film approximated "verse, red verse with the rhythms of the cinema", a conclusion reiterated at more length in Shklovsky's 1927 essay on "Poetry and Prose in Cinema".¹¹

According to Shklovsky, One Sixth of the Earth only engaged superficially with the issues it raised. He cited examples from the film which epitomised the triumph of aesthetics over actuality:

The man who departs on broad skis into the snow-covered distance is no longer a man but a symbol of the departing past. The object has lost its substance..

*We are not able to see how the Tungus people eating raw meat wipe their lips and hands with earth, because with Vertov's method in order to show such an incident you would immediately have to show a bourgeois character wiping his lips with some kind of very fine towel.*¹²

Shklovsky's comments conform to the reaction against rapid editing and the predilection for "long sequence"s which also characterised the emergent Novy Lef position. In wanting to see how the Tungus people eat raw meat, or the man on skis as a man, rather than as a symbol, Shklovsky is not challenging the opposition between the old and the new as an ultimate conceptual framework, but only its immediate relevance to each and every incident encountered in Vertov's film.

The tendency towards idealised abstraction and ideological generalisation which Shklovsky detects in Vertov's work seems to be at its most pronounced when the non-Western world is being represented. The link is never made explicit in Shklovsky's analysis, but it occurs again in another of the films which both he and Brik were unhappy with: Pudovkin's Storm Over Asia/The Heir to Genghiz Khan.

II Potomok Chingis-Khan: "Beware of Music"

Storm Over Asia/The Heir to Genghiz Khan resembles Pudovkin's earlier film Mother in that both films' eponymous central characters are representatives of social groups - women and colonised peoples - whose relationship to key social and economic processes is typically considered, within classical Marxism, to be secondary to the main driving force of class conflict. This consistent and explicit focus on marginal figures is something which distinguishes Pudovkin's work from the general trend within Soviet montage cinema.

Nevertheless, although Mother does assert that women can and should become part of the revolutionary process, Judith Mayne's analysis of the film demonstrates how it does not in any way redefine the traditional hierarchy separating private, apolitical domestic space from the public sphere as the site of all significant action. Instead, the film simply erases the former as the mother acquires revolutionary consciousness. Conversely, the equally conventional notion of motherhood as a natural, nurturing role is transplanted into becoming a support for male revolutionary action, rather than being questioned or transformed.¹³ The Heir to Genghiz Khan, despite being centred around a Mongolian protagonist, Bair, played by the former Kuleshov workshop and Meyerhold theatre actor Valeri Inkizhinov, similarly rearticulates old truisms about oriental characteristics into the new context of a Soviet revolutionary narrative.

Jay Leyda, discussing the planning and rehearsals for The Heir to Genghiz Khan, describes Inkizhinov's preparation for his part: "Buriat-Mongol by birth, although Russian by

education..the role required him to begin a completely new training: he had to transform himself into a "restored" Mongol."¹⁴ Not unlike many of Hollywood's black actors and actresses, Inkizhinov was required to recondition his behaviour according to a predetermined range of assumptions about how non-white people typically behave. In an article written by the actor listing the physical gestures and emotional qualities Pudovkin asked him to project in order, as Leyda puts it, to "neutralize [his] westernized behaviour", foremost among them were: "*Reserve* - a deliberately narrowed range of movement to indicate emotion", and "*explosions* of accumulated energy in sudden fury."¹⁵ These instructions delineate Bair as an essentially unsophisticated character, prone to acting on instinct: a representative of the Mongol people whom Pudovkin elsewhere described, in a lecture delivered to the London Film Society, as "absolutely uncultured" and therefore, by implication, closer to nature than either himself or his English audience.¹⁶

Inkizhinov/Bair's carefully constructed primitive character traits, alternating between reserve and explosion, serve at crucial moments within The Heir to Genghiz Khan to advance his progress towards full revolutionary consciousness and total revolt against British imperial authority. Yet within this context these traits, and the narrative situations within which they are given expression, also convey a sense of uncertainty. The oriental type Bair represents is an ideologically unstable element, hovering on the border of otherness in relation to the western modernity which the Soviet revolutionary project remained, in many ways, deeply committed to - even whilst, paradoxically, it called for colonial revolution. Bair initially

responds in a politically unfocused, knee-jerk manner to the lamas who try to, and the American merchant who successfully cheats him out of his family's prized silver fox fur. By doing so, he is set up as an example to the mass of Mongolians, who, at this stage, remain subservient to the authority of these reactionary forces, as yet unwilling to challenge them. Unlike, the other Mongolians, who receive the coins the trader throws at them over a counter in sullen, cowed postures, and who are framed in slightly higher angle medium shots and a less dominant position within the frame than the American, emphasising their submission, Bair pauses then directly confronts the foreign capitalist oppressor. He has taken the first step towards emancipation. A struggle ensues, Bair stabs the merchant's assistant, and then manages to escape. The sequence concludes with the assistant staggering outside, an intertitle screaming "A white man's blood has been shed!", and troops harassing a panic-stricken Mongolian crowd. The most dramatic images here are four close-ups, of the assistant's rigid, bleeding hand, held aloft first against a black background and then against a cloudy sky. These four shots contrast strongly with the frenetic movement of the troops and the crowd. Clearly, Bair's action is completely justified by the preceding events, but these four shots nevertheless emphasise the enormity of the taboo which has been transgressed. Within the narrative, this incident denotes an initial blow against reactionary forces, but on another level it relies for part of its impact upon established notions about the violent, savage tendencies of primitive people.

The Heir to Genghiz Khan stages a colonial revolution, but does not redefine the colonial subjects who make it. An encounter similar to the one in the trading post occurs near to the end of the film, and the same factors come into play. Bair has been executed then resuscitated by the British when they discover among his belongings an amulet describing him as a descendant of Genghiz Khan. In a state of stupor, he responds stiffly but obediently to all their commands, until he is led into a hall in the British military headquarters where he is shortly to sign an Anglo-Mongolian treaty. A fashionably-dressed young woman, wearing the silver fox fur around her neck, is seen in two medium close-ups alternated with long shots of Bair and the British entourage in the hall. In the second her head tilts slightly and a faint smile appears on her face, recalling the overtones of sexual interest in an earlier sequence where she and two other women clustered around Bair, regarding him like some exotic trophy. Subsequent events in the hall serve as a kind of "punishment" for these earlier actions, as well as playing upon some of the fears, discussed by Paul Hoch in White Hero, Black Beast, surrounding contact between white women and non-white men.¹⁷ The next shot shows Bair and his British trainer: the upper part of Bair's face is lit to highlight his eyes which move to the left, followed by his whole head turning to look at the woman. Further close-ups of Bair, the woman, and the American merchant who gave her the fur in an earlier romantic interlude establish a triangular interplay of looks between them with the entourage providing an audience for what is about to happen. The pivotal action takes place when Bair turns and walks towards the woman. The two of them are isolated in medium shot: the black suit Bair has been

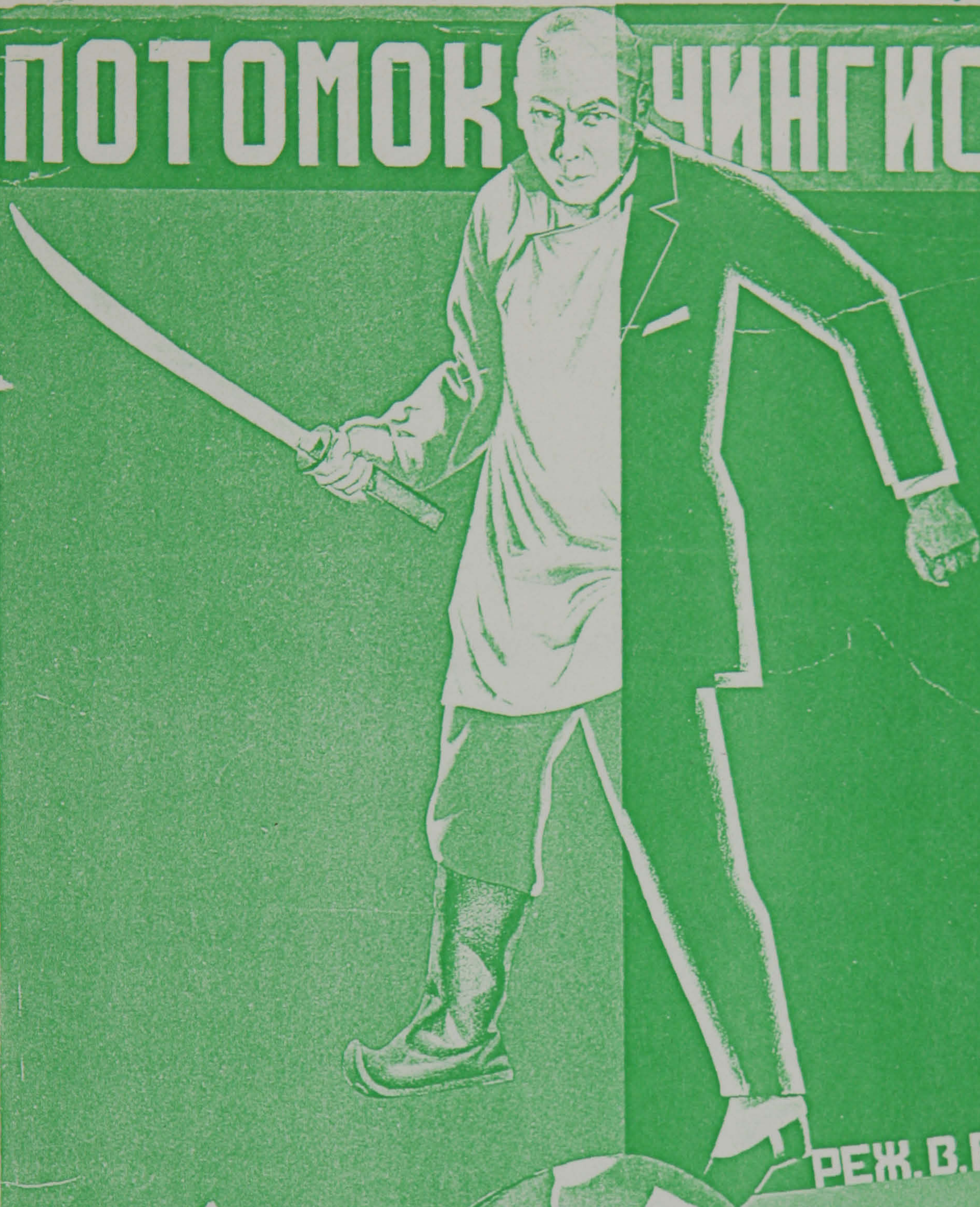
blends
dressed in ~~blends~~ almost completely into the background; the young woman, brightly lit, clutches the fur with both hands and looks away nervously. Tighter, more quickly edited close-ups of Bair's head, the woman's face expressing fear, her hands clutching the fur, and the American merchant looking anxious, are followed by a close-up of Bair's hand, almost disembodied due to the effect of his suit blending with the background. In the next close-up his fingers glide almost sensually across the surface of the fur draped around her neck: he grabs it and she backs away in panic, with concentration cuts magnifying her frenzied movements. The merchant intervenes but is restrained by the British general, filmed from a low angle to emphasise his overbearing authority, with smoke rising from behind him in one shot, lending a diabolical aura to his presence.

The incident here parallels the earlier one in the trading post and anticipates Bair's final, politically rebellious explosion of rage which ensues after another Mongolian prisoner is shot in front of him. The conclusion does not provide any information as to what actually happens to the fur: it is a narrative device which in itself is of no importance in relation to the larger, revolutionary scheme of things. The interplay between the woman, Bair, the merchant, and the general neatly exemplifies the hypocrisy of the imperial authorities, willing to overlook even as serious an offence as this - a native assault upon a white woman - in order to protect their wider interests. The extent of this hypocrisy, however, emerges partly as a consequence of the magnitude of what it is prepared to ignore: the threat potentially posed to a white woman by the unbridled sexuality of a "black beast". The British general, here

and elsewhere, is clearly coded as an evil figure: so calculating in his wickedness, in fact, that he avoids taking action against an incident which, in its disturbing conflation of violence with erotic frisson, metaphorically suggests an attempted rape. This highly charged moment is singled out to provide the basis for one of the Soviet posters for The Heir to Genghiz Khan, which features the young woman surrounded by "yellow peril": the colour common to the skull, the mask and the glowering Mongolian's tunic. ingeniously dividing his body into two parts, the poster advertises the film as one whose pleasures relate to the uncertain, fluctuating status of its central character. By placing a sabre, his head, and a larger proportion of his body to the left also suggesting movement in that direction, the wilder side predominates.

The Heir to Genghiz Khan turns imputed oriental characteristics against reactionary opponents, harnessing these qualities to the revolutionary cause rather than overturning them. This is carried right through to the end of the film. Just prior to his final explosion and escape, Bair is dressed in the traditional Mongolian ceremonial silk tunic depicted in the poster. In the film's concluding sequence, where he leads a Mongolian cavalry charge amidst a symbolic storm, he is still wearing this costume. The formal black suit he had previously been forced to wear signifies both his state of captivity and a futile attempt by the British to impose a Western charade of civility upon him. In the final sequence he is indeed revealed as the true heir to Genghiz Khan, but not in the sense that the British had intended. Their expectations of him are confounded, but Russian ones are confirmed, albeit within a revolutionary framework. The resonance of the film's Russian

ПОТОМОК ЧИНГИСХАНА



РЕЖ. В. ПУДОВКИН



МЕЖРАБПОМ-ФИЛЬМ

В ГЛАВ. РОЛИ

В. И. ИНКИЖИНОВ

ОПЕР. А. ГОЛОВНЯ

title, Potomok Chingis-Khan, is important. This heir to Genghiz Khan retains all the elemental, destructive power associated with the legendary founder of the Mongol dynasty and army which conquered Russia in the thirteenth century. The film's main innovation is to redirect that dreadful energy against British imperialism. This is largely in accordance with Lenin's vaguely apocalyptic revision of classical Marxism, which later came to stress the revolutionary potential of the East. As he wrote in the last article published during his lifetime, in 1923:

*In the last analysis, the outcome of the struggle will be determined by the fact that Russia, India, China, etc., account for the overwhelming majority of the population of the globe..so that in this respect there cannot be the slightest doubt what the final outcome of the world struggle will be.*¹⁸

The Heir to Genghiz Khan is very much about Mongolians conforming to the Soviet programme for world revolution, but is not concerned with altering Russian preconceptions about Asia, beyond annexing them to Lenin's predictions. Bair's induction into the band of Soviet partisans he encounters in a forest after escaping from the trading post is staged in terms of him learning about them, and not vice-versa, or as a reciprocal exchange, despite the fact that they are in his country. Here, Inkizhinov projects another aspect of Bair's character, as defined by Pudovkin: "*many shy smiles* (or rather.."*reasons for smiling*")", suggesting, contrary to those attributes activated in relation to foreign capitalists, an acceptance of Soviet tutelage and an affinity between Russians and Mongolians, albeit with the latter as junior partners.¹⁹ The partisan whose horse Bair shares and whom

he initially thinks is a man turns out to be a woman when she begins breast-feeding her child. Bair laughs affably with the rest of the group upon realising his mistake: clearly he has much to learn about Soviet norms. Obliquely, this moment invokes the common assumption that oriental men's attitudes towards women need to be changed, whilst also reiterating Mother's insistence that child-rearing, albeit for the sake of the collective as well as the family, must remain a central factor in the definition of the new Soviet woman. When the partisans realise their leader is dying of his wounds, the mood changes, and Bair's integration into Soviet values is cemented. He observes sadly, drawn into sharing the rest of the group's grief, and the leader's last whispered words, "Fight for your Homeland/Listen to Moscow!", are sufficient to determine his new political orientation. The gravity of the circumstances surrounding their delivery glosses over any potential incompatibility between these two requests, or the ambiguity of the pronoun "your" in the first one.

The famous sequence which immediately follows this encounter reiterates Soviet prescriptions about the inevitability of colonial revolution, whilst also reaffirming long-established notions about the forces involved. It alternates between the British general and his wife preening themselves, preparing to meet with the Mongolian religious authorities who are also beautifying themselves and their temple and preparing to meet with the British. Crosscutting, gestural and shot-compositional similarities, and matches on action across these enclosed spaces connect the two forces and suggest an underlying affinity between them, similar to that established between Bair and the partisans as

representatives of the Mongolian and Soviet masses. The connection between the general, his wife, and the lamas is reinforced by intertitles which read "There are ceremonies/and rites/among all races." Underlining a parallelism between priests and occupiers, this sequence reinforces established perceptions even as it strives to produce new ones. Although less ambitious and more grounded in a surrounding diegesis than October's "Gods" sequence, there are significant parallels between Pudovkin and Eisenstein's montage elaborations on the links between religion and oppression. Assumed knowledge informs the comparison between the British general, his wife, and the lamas. Pudovkin's sequence articulates two ideas whose lineage stretches back to well before the revolution: denigration of the British, Russia's long-term imperial rivals, especially in buffer zones such as Mongolia and Afghanistan; and a dismissive attitude towards Eastern religions and their institutions. Interestingly, this reductive representation was actually revealed as such by circumstances arising during the actual location shooting. Leyda recounts how:

The most delicate problem, filming at the lamasery of Tomchinsk, almost produced an impasse: before the group came, the lamas had divided into two camps, one absolutely opposed to the filming, and the other willing to wait and see, but with no enthusiasm for relaxing the institution's rules. [Pudovkin's] group asked the intercession of the Grand Lama of Buriat-Mongolia, and his word to the Tomchinsk lamas settled everything.²⁰

The lamas' eventual decision to collaborate with the Soviet film crew suggests that this was a strategy which could be employed with all those perceived as foreign intruders, and not only the British. The debate which preceded the decision demonstrates that compliance was not the only possible outcome, and that active opposition was also seriously considered. Either way, the complex tensions The Heir to Genghiz Khan's filming provoked did not lead to any revision of the film's analysis of imperialism, because to do so would have upset the fundamental presuppositions which inform its basic structure.

The sequence comparing the lamas, the British general, and his wife also contains an indication of how these reactionary forces will be overcome. Three times, between each alternation, there is a single extremely short shot, barely perceptible, of an upright sabre moving rapidly across a neutral grey background, from the right to the left side of the screen. This prefigures the sabre wielded by Bair in the final montage crescendo where he leads the Mongolian cavalry charge. Shots of the sabre appear at several other points during the second half of the film: they are "flashforwards" which, rather than being motivated by any character's prescience, or any character even being aware of them, are presented directly and exclusively to the film's primary implied audience. The flashforwards, if perceived - usually only in retrospect or after a second or third viewing of the film - indicate that the revolutionary uprising which concludes The Heir to Genghiz Khan is a preordained outcome, as all good Soviet viewers, following Lenin's pronouncements on colonial revolution, should know. The relative abstraction images of

these images of the sabre - slicing from on edge of the frame to the other, a shot is literally "cut" on screen - also announce the power of Soviet montage as a structural, narrative and rhetorical device, able to clarify and resolve the issues and problems the film explores.

The Heir to Genghiz Khan's conclusion does indeed weave together many of the formal patterns developed throughout the film. The Genghiz Khan and sabre motifs, signifying a final explosion of oriental wildness, culminate here, as does the use of landscape imagery to support two disparate conceptions of nature. These are, on the one hand, nature as a state of being which Bair and the "absolutely uncultured" Mongolian people he leads are close to; on the other nature as a portent pointing to the inevitability of revolution. Mongolian closeness to nature is established at the very beginning of The Heir to Genghiz Khan, where images of mountains and ravines are followed by three shots of a single yurt, framed against the steppes, cited by Paul Rotha in The Film Till Now as an example of how the passing of time can be suggested by "the gradual fading of one image into another by a process of overlapping", in this case "a dissolve from a long shot of an object [the yurt] into a medium shot into a close-up".²¹ In this instance the idea conveyed is of time passing without much changing, of a location on the edge of history. More images of the landscape, a handful of Mongolians travelling across it, and horses and dogs tied to, posts construct The Heir to Genghiz Khan's sense of place which many commentators, such as Peter Harcourt, so admire: "its great feeling for natural space and the slow rhythms of life of the Mongol trapper."²²

This evocation of a primitive society, close to nature, is combined with the opposition between oppressive, claustrophobic interiors and free, revolutionary space which also shapes Mother's structure. Bair's jump out of the window at the British headquarters where he has been held captive and into the concluding sequence is an escape from one kind of space into the other. Throughout the film the general and his staff, the American trader, and the Mongolian lamas who collude with the occupying forces are associated with confined, dark, smoke-filled areas, separate from the starkly beautiful nature they have no access to but which sustains their revolutionary opponents. This is reinforced by small, telling details, such as the British soldier responsible for executing Bair stepping into a puddle on the way back to base and finding that his puttee has unrolled in the mud. The Soviet partisans, on the other hand, move through and merge with the landscape as easily as the Mongolians do, and when their leader dies, in a serene, soft focus close-up, the sun sets elegiacally behind a hill. This equation between landscape and revolutionary liberation is magnified and shifted onto an altogether more utopian plane by the conclusion, where stop-motion photography produces the effect of Mongolian cavalry magically appearing out of the ground, generated by a nature itself in revolt.

The storm metaphor, which European distributors adopted in their replacement to The Heir to Genghiz Khan's original title, is what bridges the inconsistency between landscape as geographical determinism, fixing the slow, repetitive, primitive character of Mongolian society, and nature as a guarantor of the radical change to be brought about by revolution.

Images of the landscape auguring a revolutionary storm recur throughout the film: an important motif, appearing in several sequences, is a tree on a hillside bending in the breeze. In the sequence where Bair is led to the site of execution by a British soldier, a tree with rustling leaves fills the background space between them. Nature divides the frame and irreconcilably opposes the British and the Mongolians. At the end of the film the cavalry charge is accompanied by shots of trees finally being uprooted by an enormous, overpowering whirlwind. In The Heir to Genghiz Khan nature fills the conceptual gap left by classical Marxism's inattention to social groups considered peripheral to the dynamics of class conflict. Seasonal change and the more violent aspects of the natural world are used in the film to make a revolution for the Mongolians, without redefining the Eurocentric view of them as people essentially lacking a developed culture of their own.

The Heir to Genghiz Khan's treatment of nature and its representation of the relationship between characters and their environment, particularly in its finale, was in fact one of the aspects of the film severely criticised by Viktor Shklovsky in his January 1929 article entitled "Beware of Music". He opposed Pudovkin's view, asserted in Film Technique (1926), reserving the director's right, for the sake of unity of construction and the creation of a specifically filmic realisation of the theme, to "go through the scenario, removing anything foreign to him, maybe altering separate parts and sequences, maybe the entire subject-construction."²³ Pudovkin was chided by Shklovsky for disregarding Osip Brik's original script, refusing constraints and instead allowing a spurious adherence to (his own)

independent creative inspiration to unbalance his direction and render the film ideologically flawed and overly dependent upon clichés. Shklovsky noted, in passing, both the orientalist perspective on Mongolia offered by Pudovkin's film: "while in[†]the script there was little that was exotic, there was a certain irony at the expense of the exotic"; and also the reliance on the storm as a device to produce a revolution without deviating from this exoticism: "A miracle: the elements depersonalise man.[sic] .A propeller and the elementary realisation of a metaphor - "the whirlwind of revolution" - saves the situation."²⁴ Brik agreed, also dissatisfied with the amendments to his script. In a 1936 essay reflecting upon the means by which he produced the scenario, he considered Pudovkin's ending "a little too cinematic"; it provokes the impression of a staged effect."²⁵

Brik's preferred ending would have been less spectacular. As Shklovsky described it:

*A real escaped Mongolian gallops through a real town. Nature changes around him: the leaves grow larger, the forests grow sparser, to greet him flowers bloom that have never blossomed in Mongolia. The horseman gallops. The partisans are with him and something appears in the distance coming nearer. Moscow becomes visible. The Kremlin. The Mongolian gets off his horse and comes like a friend.*²⁶

Brik's version would have presented Bair's action as determined mainly by political rationality, and would have given more prominence to the role of the Soviet partisans who, after the scene in the forest, disappear completely from

Pudokin's narrative. Whilst clearly not pure factography, Brik's script would have remained close to the notion of "raw material" which was such a priority for Novy Lef, concluding the film by referring to a specific historical event, rather than invoking the general conditions, from a Leninist perspective, for a colonial revolution. This event was the 1921 ride of Sukhe-Bator, founder of the tiny Mongolian Communist Party, from Mongolia to Moscow, to request Lenin to send the Red Army to his country to expel White Russian and foreign forces and help install a Communist regime. By terminating the narrative at the point of solidifying this Soviet-Mongol-alliance, and visually separating Bair from the Mongolian masses who magically appear at the end of Pudovkin's version, Brik would have made very explicit the fact that the film's telos, narratively and ideologically, was Moscow, and would perhaps have inadvertently created some space for wondering whether, so soon after the farcical attempt at an Anglo-Mongolian pact, this ending possibly implied the substitution of one form of foreign domination for another.

Brik's conclusion would have utilised the details of a changing landscape on the way to Moscow as an "authentic" background to his narrative. Pudovkin's stipulations in Film Technique for how background should be used were quite different:

*Even a simple landscape - a piece of nature so often encountered in films - must, by some inner guiding line, be bound up with the developing action. I repeat that the film is exceptionally economical and precise in its work. There is, and must be, in it no superfluous element. There is no such thing as a neutral background, and every factor must be collected and directed upon the single aim of solving the given problem.*²⁷

The images of nature in The Heir to Genghiz Khan do, in one sense, resolve the difficult problems created by the need to combine Lenin's theses on colonial revolution with a Eurocentric view of its agents. As in October's encounter with the Wild Division, montage virtuosity in Soviet cinema tends to offer aesthetic innovation and emotional impact rather than conceptual clarification whenever the problem of representing Asia in a postrevolutionary context, or Asia's relationship to the revolutionary process, is broached. For Shklovsky, the "music" of the obligatory crescendo ending to The Heir to Genghiz Khan - 471 shots out of a total of roughly 2,000 in the original release print - had become a somewhat outmoded convention, and he was not impressed: "in the excitement of the search for rhythmical cinema, we must not forget the semantic side of cinema, its plot-semantic baggage"²⁸

For less jaded English enthusiasts, such as Ivor Montagu, who-in his notes to the translation of Film Technique described the storm as Pudovkin's "most daring and remarkable achievement", this was all very new and exciting. For Montagu and his contemporaries Pudovkin's conclusion to Storm Over

Asia provided indubitable proof of the Soviet aesthetic breakthrough which heralded the foundation of film as an art.²⁹ The European title change reflects this shift of emphasis, away from the history of interaction between Russia and Asia evoked by the name Genghiz Khan, and towards a narrower focus on the film's aesthetic properties.

III Soviet Montage Cinema, Censorship and English Criticism

Even as they argued their case, with a rare combination of humour and commitment, the Novy Lef critics' acuity extended to an awareness of the relativity of their own positions, within both the Soviet and a more global context. Boris Arvatov, comparing One Sixth of the Earth with The Thief of Baghdad (1926), stressed the importance of extending non-theatrical distribution in the Soviet Union, locating "the essence of bourgeois cinema..in the existence of the network of film theatres which gather together film audiences..Seen from this point of view..both films are watched for the film itself, as an art product."³⁰ Osip Brik pointedly drew attention to the cross-cultural context which needed to be considered when discussing a major Soviet prestige production like October. In his opinion, Eisenstein, "having decided that he himself was a genius", following the international critical success of Battleship Potemkin, "began working in a manner that relied on his world-wide recognition", and consequently this had diverted him from the perhaps more mundane utilitarian tasks now facing Soviet cinema.³¹ At the same time, Brik recognised that Eisenstein's predicament was not simply the result of individual waywardness: "It is of course very difficult for a young director not to make use of all the material and organisational advantages that flow from the honorary title of "genius".³²

The Novy Lef theorists acknowledged in principle that the reception of Soviet montage cinema was partly dependent upon factors external to the films themselves, and as Brik

pointed out, that these factors could also feed back into the way that cinema was developing. In England, the debate generated around the very possibility that Storm Over Asia might be exhibited, and might moreover be a film worthy of serious critical attention, provides a useful point of entry into an analysis of the dynamic and reciprocal nature of these processes, and of their operation within and between different national film cultures. Soviet montage cinema was initially evaluated by vanguard English critics along very different lines to those advanced by their contemporaries writing for Novy Lef. The criteria evolved by English critics related to the positions they adopted on several highly contentious issues specific to their own film culture. Yet Soviet montage cinema was not simply assimilated and rigidly interpreted according to a pre-established set of concerns: it was also an important factor in actively provoking the complex reconfigurations within British film culture which took place during this period. One effect of this cultural shift was to close down the possibility of mounting a critique of ethnic representation within Soviet cinema, even though it was being opened up by some of the same critics as far as Hollywood was concerned.

The controversy provoked by Storm Over Asia in England exemplifies the way in which the critical reception of Soviet montage cinema in England was in part a response moulded by conservative fears about the spread of dangerous Soviet propaganda which, particularly in this case, clearly seemed to threaten to undermine the stability of the British Empire if it continued unchecked. Progressive critics intervened over the issue of Soviet cinema as part of a wider struggle against

what was seen as an unduly restrictive and short-sighted censorship system. These critics defended the work of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, et al., as a genuine contribution to the art of cinema. Ultimately this debate produced neither winners nor losers, but nevertheless had important ramifications for film culture in the 30s.

By the time Storm Over Asia began to attract attention in England, the exhibition of Soviet montage cinema had already arrived at a temporary but fragile equilibrium. The British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) refused to certificate many Soviet montage films, on the grounds that films defined as containing political or moral propaganda were distinct from ordinary entertainment features and therefore beyond their sphere of competence, which extended only to the latter category. Since, by the mid-1920s, court rulings had set a precedent for local authorities to follow the BBFC's lead, and the Home Office were also advising local councils to accept the judgement of this self-regulating body established by the film industry, little space was left for the exhibition of Soviet montage cinema.³³ However, final legal authority, under the provisions of the 1909 Cinematograph Act, lay with local government, and the London Film Society, founded in 1925, had been granted special permission by the London County Council to exhibit Soviet films, along with many other less politically contentious works, as part of their special Sunday screenings held at the New Gallery Kinema in Regent Street, and later at the Tivoli on the Strand. Two definite provisos underpinned this permission. The first was that the films were screened solely "to make available for study films (whether entertaining or not, whether 100 per cent of them or

only as little as 5 per cent is worth study), not available elsewhere."³⁴ Consequently, Film Society programmes politely requested audience members to refrain from overt expressions of emotion during performances.³⁵ The second proviso was that membership fees would be fixed at the rate of 25 shillings per annum, effectively restricting the audience to a fairly select clientele drawn mainly from the metropolitan intellectual elite.

Pudovkin's first two major productions, Mother [Mezhrabpomfilm, 1926] and The End of St. Petersburg [Mezhrabpomfilm 1928], were exhibited during the Film Society's 1928-29 season, but it was the mere possibility that his third, Storm Over Asia, might be shown in England or anywhere in the British Empire, which generated perhaps the fiercest controversy and upset the already precarious balance of forces. This was because, in certain quarters, Pudovkin's latest film seemed to epitomise the threat Soviet propaganda posed to the stability of the British Empire. A review article by The Times' Berlin correspondent, published on January 12th 1929, castigated the film on several counts. First and foremost, it insisted that the film could only be classified as a *Hetzfilm*: roughly translatable as one likely to incite hatred and cause disturbances. The Times article vividly echoed sentiments already voiced in the very highest government circles. As early as 1925, Stanley Baldwin, then Conservative Prime Minister, alluded during a parliamentary debate on unemployment "to the enormous power which the film is developing for propaganda purposes, and the danger to which we in this country and our Empire subject ourselves if we allow that method of propaganda to be entirely in the

hands of foreign countries."³⁶ Although a blanket censorship of Soviet films was never imposed, this threat was taken seriously. On the basis of The Times review, a Special Branch agent applied to the Home Office for a warrant to intercept any copies of Storm Over Asia sent to England, but the film managed to slip through customs.³⁷

The Times review did however also tacitly acknowledge that there was now, unlike in 1925 when Baldwin made his comments, before the arrival of Soviet montage cinema, another issue which had to be addressed: the aesthetic quality of Storm Over Asia. This the reviewer was prepared to judge independently of its propaganda content but, unsurprisingly, the film was found to be of an appallingly low standard, apart from sequences depicting the landscape. Clearly the writer was not favourably disposed towards the idea of Soviet montage cinema as a valid form of film art. The concluding paragraph reiterated the opening proposition, ending by warning that "the picture is evidently intended for the Indian bazaars and the native quarter of Shanghai."³⁸

Unless situated within its immediate context, it seems strange that a review of a film not then available in England should appear in The Times, and that it should be so vitriolic about a film it described as "silly" and "irritating". Clearly the review was primarily addressed to the cosmopolitan audience clustered around the Film Society. By refusing Storm Over Asia consideration as a work of art, and again raising the spectre haunting conservative commentators on British film culture - the fear of what might happen if revolutionary films were exhibited to colonial or working-class audiences - it was

implicitly attacking even the minor concessions made to the London Film Society with regard to the exhibition of Soviet montage cinema. The review accepted the legitimacy of appreciating films for their aesthetic qualities, but could not admit Soviet propaganda into this category, particularly when it represented as blatant a threat to the Empire as this particular film seemed to. Kenneth Macpherson, editor of Close-Up, who had also seen the film in Berlin, responded to this veiled argument for even tighter censorship in the February 1929 issue, which was devoted to this topic, and even included a protest form requesting signatures for a petition which formed part of the journal's ongoing campaign against current regulations. With regard to Storm Over Asia Macpherson argued that The Times review read as if it were talking about a completely different film to the one he had seen, and he challenged the reviewer's right to take it upon himself "to give England's answer..to a film which was - in his own words - silly enough and irritating enough to presume to criticise British foreign jurisdiction."³⁹

Throughout 1929 Macpherson and Bryher, who was the assistant editor, financial administrator and sponsor of Close-Up, invested a considerable amount of energy into their attempt to formulate an appropriate English response to Storm Over Asia. Their writing on this and other Soviet films was particularly important because unlike most criticism it not only preceded but also attempted to justify the exhibition of the films it described, and is therefore likely to have been a key factor framing the way they were seen when eventually screened in England. Both critics defended Storm Over Asia against various charges, and the positions they developed

formed part of a general reaction amongst what could loosely be described as the London Film Society and/or Close-Up reading cognoscenti who opposed the kind of attitude towards Soviet montage cinema instanced by The Times review. In her Film Problems of Soviet Russia (1929), the first book-length study of Soviet cinema to be published in English, Bryher referred again to that review, and discussed Storm Over Asia at greater length than any other film mentioned in the book.⁴⁰

Bryher and Macpherson's central argument was that Storm Over Asia was not propaganda, but it was most definitely art. As such it did not lie: it was accurate and truthful; for example the British general, his officers and his wife were not "^{exaggerated} ~~exaggerated~~ types". Such people, according to their argument, did indeed exist amongst the upper bourgeoisie, but the important qualification was added that other kinds of English people were also doing more useful work within the British Empire. In order to refute The Times reviewer's criticism, and to show that Pudovkin was an even-handed observer, certain human qualities were attributed to the general and his wife. Bryher described the encounter between them and the sacred child in the Mongolian temple in the following manner: "both the general and his wife, having a sentimental love of children, pity. Pity the child because it is there, denied play and denied air, and pity because it is said that these children die young."⁴¹ In Storm Over Asia the general and his wife do indeed smile after seeing the child, but Bryher's interpretation of their motivation for this action is hardly consistent with the way these representatives of British militarism are depicted throughout the rest of the narrative. Their smiles are more

plausibly read as denoting derision or at best as a facile attempt at diplomacy.

Bryher's reading of this sequence can be related to her professional involvement in educational reform, and to Close-Up's more general strategy of softening the harsher aspects of Soviet montage cinema's critique of the British Empire, which is particularly prominent in Storm Over Asia. Bryher and Macpherson carefully dissociated themselves, and Soviet montage cinema, from the kind of accusation published in the January 15th edition of The Daily Express and reprinted in Close-Up's February 1929 anti-censorship issue: "[There is] a pro-Russian propagandist organisation [i.e. Close-Up] operating from Territet, Switzerland to remove the ban imposed by the Government and the BBFC on about forty Russian propagandist films now in cold storage in this country."⁴² Reproduced within the context of a serious film journal containing elaborate discussion of Soviet montage cinema's aesthetic qualities, this accusation seems crude and ludicrous. However, by scrupulously distancing themselves from these charges and emphasising film art above all else, important considerations were omitted. The American Marxist critic Harry Alan Potamkin pointed this out in his 1930 review of Film Problems of Soviet Russia in the first issue of Experimental Cinema. As Anne Friedberg observes:

Potamkin hit upon Bryher's tone exactly - to mute the threat of the Russian film. Potamkin was probably correct to call Bryher's strategy to task for its sidestepping of the the Russian goals of social revolution, criticism of the bourgeoisie, of collectivism, of a dictatorship of the proletariat. These phrases

were strikingly absent from Bryher's book and from Close-Up itself.⁴³

If "the threat of the Russian film" was muted, so was potential criticism of the way it dealt with social and political issues specific to the the Soviet Union. To have explored this at any great length would have been to risk conceding too much to the enemy camp populated by dismissive Times and Daily Express reviewers. The same pressures pushing Bryher and Macpherson towards an avoidance of any engagement with Soviet revolutionary politics also inhibited discussion of Soviet montage cinema's colonial dimension. In Macpherson's very first article on Storm Over Asia, published just *before* The Times delivered its verdict, he was generally enthusiastic about the film but, like Shklovsky, criticised its conclusion. For him, "the problem dealt with through the film is not resolved by a hurricane", with its "suggestion of supernatural intervention".⁴⁴ Given that Close-Up also pioneered the critique of Hollywood's representation of blacks, this could have provided a starting-point for a similar perspective on Soviet montage cinema.⁴⁵ Too many other factors, however, were weighted against this. After The Times attack, neither Bryher nor Macpherson returned to the questions raised by Storm Over Asia's conclusion.

The only point on which Macpherson and Bryher did agree with the review which had prompted their defence of Storm Over Asia was with regard to its "documentary" sequences. Bryher declared that it was worth seeing the film "over and over again from merely the ethnographical point of view..If an Englishman had brought this record back, all the school

children possible would be taken to see it by empire and educational leagues and societies."⁴⁶ All parties to the debate over Storm Over Asia found it easy to accept its Eurocentric perspective on Mongolian life. For the Close-Up critics, Pudovkin was seen as being able to capture and convey the truth about these primitive people because of, paradoxically, what Macpherson described as:

*The unfathomable thing we call the Pudovkin method..a thing that is not style or mannerism, but a state of mind or soul..[which] reaches here its classic zenith..In his meticulous statement of a great, impersonal theme, he has also caused us to say, "Ah, this is the real Pudovkin completely revealed."*⁴⁷

According to Bryher and Macpherson Pudovkin spoke in this film with an unmistakably unique voice, and yet it was precisely because he was an artist that he did not misrepresent the Mongolian people he portrayed.⁴⁸ The analysis of authorship is very far removed from the debates about cultural practice being conducted within the Soviet Union, and holds together mainly through the use of relatively imprecise language which gestures towards the ultimately "unfathomable" nature of artistic creation. For Bryher and Macpherson, the only block to the work of Soviet film artists being shown more widely, or at all, within England was the unthinking prejudice of officialdom against all things Soviet. The Times review did not once mention who the director of Storm Over Asia was: for the Close-Up critics the name "Pudovkin" justified and explained a great many things; for example the comparison between the general, his wife, and the lamas, which might otherwise be

construed as crudely propagandistic and offensive to both British military honour and native sensibilities. Macpherson argued that:

*The analogy made between the preparation of the commander's wife and the devil dancers, both donning absurd trinkets, absurd head-dress, absurd clothes and absurd masks, is obvious, and because it is Pudovkin, not obvious. It is, apart from anything else, a consummate piece of pure cinema.*⁴⁹

Circumventing the "obvious", in other words Storm Over Asia's attack upon British imperialism, and its problematic representation of Mongolian society, the main task for progressive English criticism was defined as the study of montage and the construction and identification of artistic personalities as a means through which to classify Soviet cinema. Bryher's book devoted its first three chapters to Lev Kuleshov, Pudovkin and Eisenstein. The big names were celebrated, their oeuvres delineated, their achievements taken as undeniable proof of the fact that cinema was a medium which could produce great art.

The struggle for film art was the other running battle Close-Up had to fight: "serious" film reviewing only emerged in England during the 1920s, and many critics from more established disciplines continued to deny cinema artistic status. The Leavisite William Hunter, for example, derided in his 1932 pamphlet The Scrutiny of Cinema "the customary tone of the more pretentious criticism of today (eg. Close-Up) [which] is to speak of Storm Over Asia as if it were on the level of King Lear,

of Eisenstein as a second Leonardo da Vinci..and so on."⁵⁰ Close-Up, although unlike Scrutiny in its internationalism and its acceptance of the possibility that a mass medium could produce art, did contribute much to the idea of a "great tradition" of film classics worthy of study. The battle against censorship, either complete or in the form of cuts, and the struggle for film's recognition as art, led Close-Up critics to defend the physical and aesthetic integrity of the films they valued. Macpherson pointed out how tampering with an artist's work would be considered monstrous in any other medium, ignoring the way in which, at least in theory, films like One Sixth of the Earth were held accountable to and subject to alteration by (some of) the Soviet audiences they sought to represent.⁵¹ In England Soviet montage cinema's aesthetic value had to be fought for before social utility could even begin to be considered. Close-Up was the first English journal to publish many of Pudovkin's and particularly Eisenstein's theoretical essays. This further enhanced their films' status as art and added to their authority as artists, building up reputations which, as Brik noted, fed back into production practices in the Soviet Union. But the work on Soviet montage cinema published in Close-Up did more than establish a canon: it also dovetailed with directions in the subsequent development of cinema in England.

IV From "Storm Over Asia" to "Dawn Over Africa"

Close-Up's struggle for film as art in England tended to separate film aesthetics from questions about the social and political function of cinema, but the latter did not disappear entirely from the scene. One aspect of The Times reviewer's attack upon Storm Over Asia touched upon an area soon to be a key concern for the emergent British documentary film movement. The attack provoked a counterattack which not only defended Pudovkin and Soviet montage cinema, but also doubled back into an assault upon the definition of cinema, upheld by the BBFC, as primarily an entertainment medium. Whilst Macpherson and Bryher refused the label of propaganda for films like Storm Over Asia, they did concede that it was not an ordinary entertainment feature, but turned this around to argue instead that the public deserved a more thought-provoking type of cinema, of which this film was an exemplar. Macpherson scoffed at the idea that film could of itself cause disturbances: "you can't foment unrest and discontent ^{unless} ~~unless~~ it is already there, and is anybody going to do anything about it?"⁵² He argued that films like Storm Over Asia would, if widely exhibited, have the opposite effect to that which their more conservative critics dreaded. They would in fact educate the working-class and colonial population: audiences which less enlightened critics feared they would incite. Insofar as an explicit political agenda informed Close-Up's general line on Soviet montage cinema, it was one which was actually more optimistic than their conservative opponents' about the long-term stability of the British Empire and the potential for progressive development within its existing framework. In response to The Times

reviewer's remarks about Storm Over Asia being intended "for the Indian bazaars and the native quarters of Shanghai", Macpherson added "apparently he does not mean [that] as a compliment!".⁵³ Bryher concluded her section on Storm Over Asia in Film Problems of Soviet Russia by declaring that "where we have failed in England, and lamentably failed, is in our lack of provision of educational facilities for the natives. Now this is not a "red" statement. I read it almost weekly in the pages of The Times Educational Supplement."⁵⁴

At the beginning of 1930, all this discussion about a film which had not yet been publicly exhibited in England might have seemed pointless. The situation with regard to the exhibition of Soviet films remained the same, and Bryher's book concluded with an appendix advising readers about the availability of the films she discussed in various European countries, offering suggestions as to the most convenient routes by which to travel to them.⁵⁵ Due to the fact that Mezhrabpom-Rus, the studio Pudovkin worked for, was part German-owned, and thanks to its thriving radical counter-culture, Berlin remained the only place outside of the Soviet Union where one could see an extensive selection of Soviet films.⁵⁶ Due to the high cost of travel, the "popular internationalism" of these years, which Bryher referred to in her autobiography as being epitomised in films from this period, could only be fully experienced by those who had a considerable degree of financial mobility.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the debate over Storm Over Asia anticipated a significant shift in British film culture which eventually reached beyond these privileged confines. The film itself was shown publicly in

England for the first time by the London Film Society in February 1930. Ralph Bond recorded the event:

The Film Society announces that it will show Storm Over Asia at the Tivoli on 23 February. Great sensation. The Lord's Day Observance Council is very upset and calls on the LCC to prohibit the exhibition. The audience at the Tivoli is assembled. A copy of the letter received by the Tivoli management is flashed on the screen. Fearing the worst, and straining our eyes we read:

"Clause 8 (a) of the Rules of Management, etc., etc. No cinematograph film shall be exhibited which is likely to be injurious to morality or to encourage or to incite to crime, or to lead to disorder, or to be in any way offensive in the circumstances to public feeling or which contains any offensive representation of living persons.

I am to add (proceeds the letter) that should any disorder occur at the premises during the exhibition of Storm Over Asia the Council will hold the licensee of the premises responsible.

I am Sir,

Your obedient servant."

The Film Society laughed. So would a cat. But can you beat it? 58

The Film Society audience's reaction signified that, at least to the elite element within British film culture, such fears as the letter expressed were starting to seem increasingly outmoded. Nonetheless, official indignation was expressed

at a much higher level when the Workers' Film Society and associated organisations began to arrange screenings of Soviet films in England for specifically proletarian audiences. Mother was shown publicly for the first time outside the London Film Society at the Imperial Palace in Canning Town in April 1930. The intention was to provide a service similar to the London Film Society's, albeit with a more exclusive focus on Soviet cinema rather than on a range of films from around the world. The Workers' Film Society also emphasised these films' political rather than aesthetic aspects, and aimed to make screenings accessible to anyone by keeping membership fees low. Kenneth Macpherson, Ivor Montagu and Ralph Bond were among its founders. Throughout the 1930s the Workers' Film Society and related organisations were subjected to persistent official and semi-official harassment: police raids, bookings cancelled at the last moment due to local council or police pressure on exhibitors, and so on. The establishment of Kino, to distribute 16mm films, non-flammable and therefore technically not subject to the provisions of the 1909 Cinematograph Act, provided a firmer basis for this kind of activity, and 120 screenings of Storm Over Asia were recorded in 1936.⁵⁹ The total audience for all films shown by Kino that year was estimated at 250,000. Closer to Boris Arvatov's thinking on the importance of modes of exhibition, Kino and the Workers' Film Society successfully developed, despite determined opposition, a non-theatrical space where Soviet montage cinema could contribute to sharpening the class struggle in England. This tradition of using Soviet films certainly differed from the use made of them by the Close-Up/London Film Society axis, although as the list of Workers' Film Society founders indicates, the divisions were far from absolute.

However, it is unlikely, given the pro-Soviet context of the Kino screenings, that this militant tradition would have been any more inclined to produce a critique of Soviet montage cinema's Eurocentrism than the other, more respectable one.

The showing of Storm Over Asia by a workers' film organisation led to a couple of heated exchanges in the Houses of Parliament. On March 3rd 1931 Waldron Smithers, Conservative MP for Chislehurst, Kent, raised the matter with the Financial secretary to the Treasury, and again with the Home Secretary two days later. He demanded to know which agency had brought the film into the country, and whether West Ham Council would be reprimanded for allowing it to be shown. He condemned the exhibition of the film as unpatriotic, and called for a state censorship bill.⁶⁰ These outbursts were deftly evaded by the members of the government they were directed at. Much as any individual MP might object to a particular film, there was little likelihood of any government introducing a state censorship bill: it had taken many years to arrive at the current understanding between the Home Office, local councils, and the BBFC. The final decision as to whether 35mm films could be screened publicly in any particular area rested with the local councils, although pressure could be exercised behind the scenes by the Home Office. A system of official state censorship would potentially expose central government to criticism from either pro- or anti-censorship factions on each decision it made, create a large administrative workload, and open the door to charges of class bias. Under the present arrangement, the government could disclaim responsibility, as the Home Secretary did when challenged by Smithers.

Smithers' anxieties about Storm Over Asia and his demands for a tough state censorship bill may have been unrealistic, but they cannot be dismissed as inconsequential examples of backbench murmuring. They do indicate a growing concern in government and establishment circles with the deleterious effects of foreign propaganda on imperial morale and Britain's image abroad. This concern was formulated in a less reactive and more productive fashion by those who favoured the newly developed concept of "national projection".⁶¹ Chief among these was Stephen Tallents, Secretary of the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) and patron of John Grierson and the British documentary film movement. His pamphlet The Projection of England (1932) outlined the philosophy behind the way he had been running the EMB since its establishment in May 1926. It sought to accommodate not only the fears of people like Smithers, but also picked up on some of Close-Up's concerns, by addressing the debate about censorship and the perceived need for artistic and educationally progressive films. Bryher had pointed out that the "documentary" sequences in Storm Over Asia would have been exhibited by Empire leagues all over the country, if only they had been filmed by an English director. Tallents proposed doing just that: positively advocating the production of material which would fit this description. Macpherson had suggested that films could not of themselves cause disturbances, but could exacerbate underlying social factors: "you can't foment unrest and discontent unless it is already there, and is anybody going to do anything about it?" Tallents' work at the EMB was in effect a response to the rhetorical gauntlet thrown down in the second part of this sentence. Unlike Smithers and other

reactionary critics of Soviet montage cinema, Tallents did concede that these films had some artistic value and could not simply be eradicated. This did not abate the concern he shared with Smithers about the unrest they might provoke. Therefore, what he proposed doing about it was, not to address the underlying causes of disorder, but rather to provide education and information through film and other modern media which, he hoped, could play their part in incorporating the working-class and colonial population into a new, enlightened, progressive imperialism. He acknowledged that:

Two or three small schools of Russian producers, working at no great cost and producing a mere handful of films, have done more than all the studios of the world together to show us what an incomparable instrument of national expression the cinema might be.. this small library, in spite of its relatively scanty theatrical circulation, has established for Russia in the modern world a prestige comparable to that which her ballets and her novels won for her before the War.⁶²

For Tallents, the appropriate English response was clear. "We have ready to our hand all the material to outmatch Storm Over Asia by a film that should be entitled Dawn Over Africa."⁶³

John Grierson secured the post of EMB Films Officer because of - or despite - the fact that he had re-edited Battleship Potemkin for its American release and was an active member of the London Film Society. His divergent affiliations positioned him as a film expert who could appreciate Storm

Over Asia but who was also prepared to supervise the production of a hypothetical Dawn Over Africa. This expertise served different purposes in different contexts. In 1930, for example, he went to Cambridge to lecture on and project Storm Over Asia and Turksib (Viktor Turin, Vostokkino, 1928) for the Easter conference of the National Union of Students (NUS). He is reported to have commented to the conference organisers:

*I've brought a couple of films with me and I'd like to run them after my talk. I don't think we should announce the titles because I've just smuggled them into the country from France in my suitcase. They've never been shown in Britain and the less said about them the better.*⁶⁴

On the other hand, at some point either shortly before or after this event, he exhibited these and other Soviet films as part of a series of private screenings arranged at the Imperial (now Commonwealth) Institute's cinema, for EMB officials and members of the government. These were organised in order to demonstrate how vital it was for Britain to have a state-sponsored film unit, and also to provide a graphic illustration of the political challenge that had to be met, as well as the artistic standards that had to be equalled.⁶⁵

From the very beginning, then, the British documentary movement found itself forced into a Janus-like situation, striving to establish the credentials necessary to its acceptance. Grierson, as its leading representative, needed in some respects to present it as Soviet montage cinema's disciple, basking in the light reflected by its artistic prestige,

and, to a certain extent, in the fashionable notoriety associated with its contraband politics: for example, the NUS screenings of Storm Over Asia and Turksib, or the London Film Society's famous double-bill of Battleship Potemkin and Drifters (John Grierson, 1929).⁶⁶ In other contexts, the British documentary movement was effectively to serve as Soviet montage cinema's replacement. The development of 16mm films and projectors for educational purposes provided a technical basis for the emergence of a non-theatrical distribution network which film historians have claimed as one of the British documentary movement's biggest achievements, overshadowing the use made of the same technology by Kino and the Workers' Film Society in their struggle to show Soviet films in England. The British documentary movement was also fostered by the EMB in order to outstrip or supplant Soviet montage cinema in ideological terms: to present the official English response to the erroneous, anti-British Empire propaganda it contained.

CHAPTER THREE: STORM OVER ASIA, RUSSIA, ENGLAND

I. Factography and Colonialism

1. Christine Lodder, Russian Constructivism, Yale University Press, 1983, p.181.
2. Sergei Tretyakov, "We Raise the Alarm", Novy Lef 11/12, Nov/Dec 1927, in Screen Reader 1, SEFT, 1977, pp. 298-304; p. 302.
3. See Victor Ehrlich, Russian Formalism [1955], Mouton-Hague, 1980.
4. Osip Brik, "The Fixation of Fact" [1927] (Extract), in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie eds., The Film Factory, Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1988, document 73, pp. 184-5; p. 184.
5. Ibid., p. 185.
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CHAPTER 4

Imperialist Internationalism: The British Documentary Movement

I British Documentary Film Criticism

The vexed question as to the nature of the relationship between Soviet montage cinema and the British documentary movement during the 1930s can only begin to be answered by reexamining the changing critical evaluations of the latter body of work, and by placing it within the larger context of Anglo-Soviet relations and British imperialist propaganda. English critical writing on the British documentary movement can be divided into two distinct phases: the first tended to be celebratory, and stressed the links between Soviet montage cinema and the work of Grierson's colleagues and protégés; the second challenged this earlier positive emphasis through an interrogation of the British documentary film tradition's paternalistic, social reformist politics. This later trend explores Griersonian documentary mainly in terms of its relationship to specifically English cultural and political antecedents, generally overlooking both the movement's equally important internationalist aspirations, and the connection with Soviet montage cinema which featured so prominently in earlier critics' discussions. Neither phase of criticism has fully addressed the role of the various audiences for documentary in its development during the 1930s, nor the ways in which many of these films promote a distinctive British variant of the overlap between imperialist and internationalist perspectives also prevalent in Soviet montage cinema.

Paul Rotha's publications during the 1930s furnished a historical explanation for the emergence of the British documentary movement which provided a model for subsequent writers and was not seriously contested until the early 1970s. Both Rotha and Grierson were prolific essayists and article-writers, but it was Rotha who produced the first book to survey and classify the type of filmmaking they championed: Documentary Film, published in 1936, with new editions appearing in 1939 and 1952.¹ His credentials as a film historian had already been established by the 1930 publication of The Film Till Now, a seminal text which was revised and enlarged in 1949 and 1960, and remained a standard reference book well into the 1960s and beyond. Written before Rotha became personally involved with the documentary movement, it classifies Grierson's recently produced Drifters (Empire Marketing Board, 1930) as a "sociological film", alongside "most of the ordinary Soviet films," and notes that it registers the influence of Battleship Potemkin.² However, in The Film Till Now's section on "The British Film", shorter by far than those on other national cinemas, the perceived lack of any consistent tradition of indigenous achievement is deplored. Yet Rotha argues that there is potentially "wonderful material" just waiting to be exploited, asking, for example:

*What has been done with the Empire? It is well, first, to recall Epstein's Finis Terrae, Flaherty's Moana, Turin's Turksib, and Pudovkin's Storm Over Asia. The material lying unused in all parts of India, Kenya, Nigeria, Malta, Cyprus, is vast...Without proper methods of film construction, without a knowledge of the capabilities of cinema, it were best for this wonderful material to be left untouched.*³

Six years later, after Rotha had been working for some time as a director and independent documentary producer, he published Documentary Film. The book's title, and the direction Rotha's career had taken, indicate that for its author, "a proper method of film construction" had been found, and a viable film tradition had finally emerged in Britain. Documentary Film explores the links between Soviet montage cinema and the British documentary movement in considerable depth. In the book's historical section, "The Evolution of Documentary", both groups of films are placed within "the propagandist tradition". The achievements and shortcomings of particular Soviet films are discussed, but their general influence upon British documentary practice is repeatedly acknowledged. The importance within this mode of filmmaking of thematic over narrative structure is asserted, as is the use of "types", real locations, and a "dialectic" textual structure. Moving away from the earlier, more narrowly aesthetic criteria advanced in The Film Till Now, Rotha claims that great art is public rather than esoteric, and specific to its period. He suggests that, on the whole, state-sponsored work has produced better results than commercial feature films, and notes approvingly that the EMB documentary film unit was the only one which could be compared to the Russians in this

respect. Soviet organisation of production, and the films themselves, are not held up as pristine examples to be slavishly imitated, but their role as a precedent for the British documentary movement is acknowledged.

Much the same relationship between Soviet montage cinema and the British documentary movement is proposed in Roger Manvell's widely read Film, first published in paperback by Penguin in 1944 and reprinted several times. In its short bibliography recommending further reading in film history, both of Rotha's books are highlighted as being of special importance. Film's first page announces, amongst other things, that the book will look at "what they have done with the film in Russia..why Britain is catching up in world cinema..[and]..why Britain is the source of great documentary."⁴ Soviet montage cinema and British documentary productions are discussed at greater length than any other corpus of films, and the Odessa Steps sequence from Battleship Potemkin, accompanied by fifteen stills, is examined in detail and awarded the accolade of being "the most influential six minutes in cinema history." Manvell also states that it "was the model from which Grierson and the British documentary movement received their first education in cinema technique."⁵

Similarity of technique is only one aspect of the connection between Soviet montage cinema and British documentary production explored in Film. Chapter twelve, "The Cinema in the U.S.S.R.", synthesises research from several articles published in Cinema Quarterly, Documentary News Letter and Sight and Sound during the 1930s. It seeks to explain why "the Russian cinema is organised on a plan unlike that of any other film-producing country," and how "the industry as a whole is planned for state education first and entertainment second."⁶ What is important here is not the accuracy of the research referred to, but rather the keen interest in Soviet cinema displayed by critics sympathetic to the British documentary movement. Manvell concludes this chapter with a significant turn of phrase, describing the situation in the Soviet Union as "that of documentary turned feature, with the entertainment film as such developed as a side-line and welcomed in its due place."⁷ In other words, the film industry in the Soviet Union is depicted as being organised according to priorities similar to those which, for many years, Grierson and Rotha had been arguing should be applied to Britain. This is seen as the only sensible route for world cinema to follow: Manvell cites Pudovkin on the promise implicit in "the great international art of cinematography," and Film concludes with uplifting speculations about what the future could hold for cinema after the war.⁸ The last question the book asks is "do we go forward..to a vigorous international art in a vigorous international community?"⁹ Film posits an essential continuity between Soviet montage cinema and the British documentary movement, not only in terms of technique but also in the way they are judged to have both already contributed greatly to the furtherance of this noble cause.

As Ian Christie has suggested, critics in Western Europe and America have often constructed Soviet cinema as an "other" which, as it were, fills the perceived gap in their own film cultures.¹⁰ This was certainly true, to an extent, of post-1968 criticism, where The Man With the Movie Camera came to occupy the privileged place accorded to Battleship Potemkin by critics of Manvell's generation.¹¹ A revaluation of Griersonian documentary also began during this period, although the two processes were not explicitly related until later. Alan Lovell's section on the British documentary movement in Studies in Documentary (1972) was the first extended analysis of this body of work from a non-partisan perspective. He noted Grierson's indebtedness to the English tradition of social reformism, and also the assumption, deriving in part from Walter Lippmann's Public Opinion (1920), that modern society was too complex and fast-moving for the average citizen to ever be fully informed about all the relevant issues at any one time. Consequently, the "expert"'s role becomes one of filtering simplified information and conveying it in an accessible, engaging manner. Lovell suggests that the documentary movement's films therefore tended to be "not critical but inspirational": seeking to build a consensus which would integrate their audiences into an acceptance of the benevolent nature of the state and the progressive potential of modern capitalist industry.¹² These premises were subsequently explored further in similarly critical essays by Roy Armes, Stuart Hood, Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, and Andrew Higson, but Sylvia Harvey's 1986 article, "Who Wants to Know What and Why?", was the first to directly

contrast Griersonian documentary with Soviet, particularly Vertov's work.¹³

Harvey opens up important areas of investigation by asking why it is that knowledge produced by documentary has repeatedly been found to be neither "useful, relevant [n]or pleasurable" - or at least why it has only been found to be so by fairly restricted audiences?¹⁴ In addressing this problem she distinguishes between two documentary tendencies: the "social democratic" tradition espoused by John Grierson, and the "left radical" traditions of Bertolt Brecht and Dziga Vertov. The claim she makes for the latter, revolutionary tradition is that "the images and analyses presented in the works of Vertov and Brecht are not intended to arouse the pity or the sympathy of the better-off, but to serve both the cognitive and emotional needs of those in struggle for change."¹⁵ However, a consistent application of the "who wants to know what and why" methodology would need to specify who exactly are "those" referred to above, and what kind of change are they struggling for? Do societies divide neatly into oppressors and oppressed, or can differently oppressed sectors often be struggling for change in directions different from or even antagonistic to each other? In Vertov's case, for example, do "those" include all or only some of the following: (a) men, (b) women, (c) avant-garde intellectuals, (d) Communist Party activists, (e) the urban proletariat, (f) the peasantry, (g) non-Russian national and ethnic minorities? Are some groups, or particular fractions within them, consistently placed in a hierarchical or privileged relationship to the others?

The problem with Harvey's use of the distinction between "social democrats" and "left radicals" as negative and positive descriptions is that it immediately favours Vertov and Brecht over Grierson by tagging the latter with what has traditionally been a derogatory term within the Marxist tradition. No continuity or overlap between Soviet montage cinema and British documentary is admitted, and the latter's self-proclaimed internationalism also drops out of the picture. However, by returning, initially, to the period just prior to the emergence of both these bodies of work, these elements can be restored without necessarily reinstating Manvell's uncritical celebration of British documentary. Moreover, only by doing this can the intersection between internationalism and imperialism promoted by the movement be historically located.

II Secret Sharers: British and Soviet Propaganda

The relationship between British and Soviet state propaganda involved rivalry, parallelism and direct emulation, within a history which precedes and encompasses both Soviet montage cinema and the British documentary film movement. Many factors contributed to the movement's emergence, but this is one which in its broadest ramifications remains relatively unexplored. Too many accounts centre around individual personalities, particularly John Grierson: what follows seeks to redress the balance, by adopting a wider focus before narrowing down to a consideration of the films themselves.

The British and Tsarist governments, along with other combatants, initiated a variety of patriotic propaganda campaigns during the First World War. Film production featured as an element of both allies' output, and the Skobelev committee's film section, instituted in 1914 to produce and distribute suitable Russian newsreel material, provided one of the few propaganda infrastructures immediately available to the Bolsheviks after they seized power in 1917. It was transformed into the Moscow Cinema Committee which gave the young Dziga Vertov his first film job in 1918. As Viktor Listov has emphasised, the advent of the revolution did not bring about instant change insofar as the relationship between cinema and state in Russia was concerned. Various schemes for the nationalisation and political or moral regulation of the film industry had already been mooted by Tsarist intellectuals prior to 1917. Proposals for state intervention into film production were common to

both pre- and postrevolutionary regimes, although only the latter was able to eventually carry them through to any significant extent.¹⁶

The sudden and drastic change of government posed problems for British propaganda in Russia. On the film front, one of the most enterprising campaigns launched by the British during the First World War was, in 1916, to despatch Captain A.C. Bromhead, managing director of British Gaumont, to organise the distribution and exhibition of films such as Britain Prepared (1915) and The Battle of the Somme (1916) to Russian troops and civilian audiences. Despite logistical problems, his diary and reports describe the open-air screenings at rest camps near various fronts as particularly successful morale raisers, also commenting, as Vertov was later to do, on the impact of these events on those apparently exposed to films for the first time: "Often the military audience in the open has been swelled by large numbers of villagers and peasants who, like many of the soldiers, have never before seen or heard of the cinema."¹⁷ The October Revolution of 1917 and Bolshevik moves towards withdrawing Russia from the war brought Bromhead's work to an end but, as M.L. Sanders points out, "his activities could not have gone unobserved by the Bolsheviks, who were to mount their own mobile propaganda campaign with their agitprop trains in July 1918 when they too found themselves in the grip of [civil and foreign interventionary] war."¹⁸

For most of the 1920s the British and Soviet governments remained at loggerheads over the sensitive issue of propaganda, with infiltration of the British Empire becoming a major bone of contention. After the end of the Bolshevik military drive westward, with the failure of the Red Army's march on Warsaw in 1920, potential revolution in the East became a key focus for Soviet propaganda in the early 1920s: a shift heralded by the Baku conference held later in the same year. One consequence of this was the issuing of the famous May 1923 "note" by the Conservative Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon, demanding amongst other things that the Soviet government desist from anti-British propaganda in areas like Persia and Afghanistan. The middle name of the composite caricature Coolidge Curzonovitch Poincaré in Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg's The Adventures of Oktyabrina (Sevzapkino, 1924) testifies to the negative reception this received in Russia. The "Zinoviev letter", published by the Daily Mail and the Foreign Office in 1924, but of dubious authenticity, raised the profile of the propaganda issue even higher. Subsequent struggles over the exhibition of Soviet films in Britain were another factor which kept it alive well into the late 1920s and beyond. Negotiations between the Soviet and British governments repeatedly hinged around an insistence that both desist from propaganda detrimental to each other's interests: this was a condition essential to the resumption of diplomatic relations and to the signing of the temporary Anglo-Soviet treaty which was concluded in April 1930.¹⁹

John Grierson's programme of screening Soviet and other films to members of the Empire Marketing Board and selected guests at the Imperial Institute cinema therefore falls squarely within this overlapping history of British and Soviet state propaganda. He was well aware that if documentary filmmaking was to receive official sponsorship, the Soviet menace was something he had to capitalise upon. As he put it later: "it was perhaps more than historic whimsy that the Conservative Cabinet of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin should have seen Eisenstein's masterpiece [Battleship Potemkin] before the rebels of the Film Society first laid eyes on it."²⁰ Yet although anxiety about Soviet propaganda was generally expressed more violently by those on the political right, as the questions in the Commons about Storm Over Asia demonstrate, it was also prominent in Labour policy during this period, as Andrew Williams has shown in his study Labour and Russia.²¹ Stephen Constantine's brief history of the EMB illustrates that, although it was established in 1926 under a Tory administration during the year in which the General Strike took place, it was perceived by those within the parliamentary political spectrum as essentially a neutral state institution. Some of the prime movers behind the creation of the EMB were Tory ministers, Leo Amery and Philip Cunliffe-Lister in particular, but the subsequent Labour government fully supported its existence and took pains to ensure that its board and committees represented a cross-section, albeit from within the ruling elite, of political and professional interests.²²

In a postscript to Grierson on Documentary, Forsyth Hardy's 1946 compilation of selected articles and essays, Grierson, perhaps a little disingenuously, underlined the interventionary intent of his prolific critical writing: "I never kept my stuff nor thought it important beyond the critical battles of the moment."²³ His writings on Soviet cinema and on the British documentary movement's relationship to this predecessor are certainly full of subtle manoeuvring, playing to different galleries in their attempt to justify the usefulness and argue the achievements of the movement whose figurehead he became. As the Film Society's 1929 double-bill of Battleship Potemkin with Drifters suggests, the two groups of films were indeed recognised by certain contemporary audiences as closely connected. Yet for another larger and less specialist set of audiences, British documentary film was intended by its official sponsors precisely to replace Soviet montage cinema, to dominate the area of public space it might otherwise have come to occupy. As Stephen Tallents, the Secretary of the EMB, put it in The Projection of England:

*There are growing up to-day in England scores of small Film Societies at whose performances week after week throughout the winter are gathered those whose interest is in cinema as an art of propaganda. These Russian films are the mainstay of their performances. They can scarcely find a single English film of interest to their purpose.*²⁴

From Tallents' point of view it was far better that these audiences should be watching a British documentary film, rather than its Soviet equivalent.

As a Civil Service employee initially working under Tallents Grierson obviously could not publicly endorse Marxist theory or Soviet ideology, even though many of the readers he addressed, for example through socialist journals like The Clarion, were on the left. Rotha, in Documentary Diary, his account of the period written from the vantage-point of the 1970s, recalls Grierson's reaction to reading the manuscript of Documentary Film in 1935: "Why the hell do you have to mention Marx in the thing, it'll only make it more difficult for me with the Treasury."²⁵ During the same year, Grierson published an important piece, "Summary and Survey: 1935". In it, he notes the dominance of purely commercial considerations within the film industries of the West, with the result that "seldom is a grave or present issue struck."²⁶ Without denigrating their entire output, he refers to the average "cinema magnate" as a "dope pedlar": as Don Macpherson has shown, a metaphor common to many left-wing critiques in the 1930s.²⁷ Qualified praise is accorded to the British documentary movement, as the only current viable alternative tradition able to deal adequately with "the material of commerce and industry, the new bewildering world of invention and science and the modern complex of human relationship."²⁸ Soviet cinema is given relatively short shrift: Grierson's conclusion on recent work is that it is still fixated upon revolution rather than the workaday world, and that "when some of the art and all of the bohemian self-indulgence have been knocked out of [the directors], the Russian cinema will fulfil its high promise of the

late twenties."²⁹ This echoes some of the criticism prevalent at the 1934 Party Conference on Cinema, reported by Marie Seton in the documentary movement journal Cinema Quarterly.³⁰ Grierson's summary implicitly places British progress in film propaganda, for the time being at least, as surpassing or even superseding the Soviet precedent. It reflects increasing confidence, now that a substantial body of British documentary movement work had been produced, compared to an earlier assessment in 1930: "It would take a giant..to produce anything comparable to the Russian films..for there would be no public thought or public urging behind the job. That is what we lack, and if the critics can create it, so much the better for all of us."³¹ By 1935, the provisional verdict is that "after the first flush of exciting cinema, the Russian talent faded," whereas British documentary, on the other hand, is seen as being in the ascendant.³²

The critical context Grierson called for in 1930, and which he himself attempted to create, is one in which the failures and shortcomings, as well as the successes, of Soviet montage cinema are constructed as lessons which the British documentary movement is learning from. Throughout his writings on Soviet cinema, Grierson selects certain films as worthy of special mention, and the factors he concentrates upon are significant. In his various discussions of Earth (Alexander Dovzhenko, Vufku, 1930), Grierson praises the film's lyrical qualities, its evocation of nature, and its "demonstration of the continuity of history" or its "timelessness."³³ As Paul Burns and Vance Kepley have pointed out, these are precisely the grounds it was criticised on in the Soviet press.³⁴ Elsewhere,

Grierson expressed the view that, despite its beauty, Earth "only managed to melodramatize the issue between peasant and kulak."³⁵ For many Soviet critics, the film did not proceed far enough in this direction: they judged its representation of the class war in the countryside provoked by the collectivisation of agriculture as evasive or lacking sufficiently sharp definition.

The differences of opinion between Grierson and the Soviet line on Earth highlight an emphasis which is consistent throughout the former's discursions on Soviet montage cinema: that revolution is easier to dramatise than peaceful construction and rational economic development. His argument is that "peace-in-the-mass", in the sense of a new, state-directed, planned economy, is a more urgent task than representing or advocating (class) "war-in-the mass." Of Pudovkin he wrote in 1930: "Who in the name of sense can believe in revolution as a true climax? As a first act climax perhaps, but not as a fifth."³⁶ In "Summary and Survey: 1935" he restates the point: "It is a commonplace of modern teaching that even with revolution, revolution has only begun."³⁷ The "even" in this sentence suggests that revolution is not necessarily required outside of Russia, and that a peaceful, gradualist one is possible in Britain. Here he coincides with Bryher and the Close-Up position on different roads to somewhere vaguely socialist: "In the long course of evolution Russia and England probably will meet, but England will go by a quite different path and it will develop in a quite other manner."³⁸ Similar assumptions inform Grierson's sympathetic but not uncritical account of the politics of Soviet cinema, one which is left-wing enough in its general implications and its

allusions to Hollywood "dope pedlars" to appeal to that constituency, but which is also conservative enough not to offend enlightened imperialists like his boss Stephen Tallents, to whom he paid repeated tribute throughout his career.

Turksib [Viktor Turin, Vostokkino, 1928], the Soviet documentary about the construction of the Turkestan-Siberia railway line, was, for Grierson, different to Earth. His criticisms of the film were technical rather than political. It is described as, "for all its patches of really bad articulation..the single job that takes us into the future. Turksib is an affair of economics, which is the only sort of affair worth one's time or patience." As far as Soviet cinema was concerned, it was "the single job that takes us into the future."³⁹ The development of backward regions within their respective spheres of influence, and the improvement of transport and communication systems linking them to the centre, was one area where the British Empire and the Soviet Union could "meet", to use Bryher's description. This was undoubtedly one of the reasons as to why Three Songs of Lenin also received such widespread acclaim in the West. Grierson's reference, in his review of Turksib, to economics as "the only sort of affair worth one's time or patience", is a broad, vague generalisation which in this case could cut right across the political spectrum. Andrew Williams notes in Labour and Russia that, although English socialists on the non-Communist left criticised the Soviet Union for its lack of democracy, its role as an "exemplar", apparently proving during the 1930s that a planned, equitably organised economy could work, was an endless source of fascination.⁴⁰ Grierson wrote approvingly about the Soviet Five Year Plans in "Summary and Survey: 1935", predicting that proper

reorganisation of the film industry there would possibly lead to further cinematic triumphs being produced. He concluded the essay by stressing the importance and inevitability of at least some measure of state control over cinema and intervention into film production in Britain. The Empire Marketing Board's sponsorship of the British documentary movement was, for Grierson, a first small step in this direction. Plans for reorganising the British film industry, and Turksib's "affair of economics", could easily appeal to the left: equally, the same things were of great interest to the EMB, and Turksib was one of the Soviet films Tallents earmarked for emulation in The Projection of England. Grierson's skill as a writer was to allow room for both interpretations and in so doing bring them closer together.

III Exhibiting Empire

To concur with Grierson and posit the Empire Marketing Board as standing at the beginning of a history of enlightened British state sponsorship of film would be, at best, to give only a partial picture. The EMB had a prehistory which is equally, if not more relevant to what the documentary movement achieved. In an article written for Cinema Quarterly in 1933, the year the Board was closed down, Grierson took a retrospective look at what he considered to be its accomplishments:

Its principal effect..was to change the connotations of the word "Empire". Our original command of peoples was becoming slowly a co-operative effort in the tilling of soil, the reaping of harvest, and the organization of a world economy. For the old flags of exploitation it substituted the new flags of common labour; for the old frontiers of conquest it substituted the new frontiers of research and world-wide organisation. Whatever one's politics, and however cynical one might be about the factors destructive of a world economy, this change of emphasis had an ultimate historical importance. History is determined by just such building on new sentiments.⁴¹

Once again, the wording slides skilfully across different registers. Elsewhere in the same article, Grierson notes that the EMB and the film unit's brief was "to bring the Empire alive": here he tries to kill it off.⁴² There was no way of denying that the EMB's very *raison d'être* was to promote the Empire, and that to some though by no means all readers on the left, this

might have distasteful connotations which placed a question mark over the work Grierson and his colleagues had been doing. The solution is to emphasise the changes which have taken place, invoking more palatable phrases like "co-operative effort", "common labour", and "the organization of a world economy." Yet it is not clear, in the space between the first and second sentence, whether this passage is referring to *actual* changes, or simply to a change in connotations. The crucial question is whether the "new sentiments" the documentary movement sought to build on consolidated a basically imperialist framework or contributed to the "internationalisation of mens' [sic] minds" which Grierson in later years read back into his earlier work.⁴³ The Canadian writer Joyce Nelson, surveying Grierson's entire career in The Colonised Eye, argues that his project effectively sought to create consensus around an emergent neocolonial world order, and that its "internationalism" only served to legitimise the "new frontiers" marked out by an alliance between First World states and multinational capitalist concerns located in the West.⁴⁴ This is at least partly corroborated by Grierson's article: what is good for the Empire is transformed into what is good for the world as a whole.

Nelson raises important questions, but care must be taken not to adopt an ahistorical or teleological perspective. The only way to gauge the extent to which the documentary movement in the 1930s did in fact serve to smoothe a long process of transition, from direct imperial domination to a new kind of exploitative relationship between the First and Third world, is to reconstruct the production, distribution and exhibition context surrounding the films it produced. To trace

the factors contributing to the EMB's venture into film production requires considerable backtracking. The organisation Tallents led was a remarkable but not altogether unprecedented institution. In The Projection of England he certainly considered that one of the reasons for creating an EMB film section was to counter Soviet propaganda, but the Board's activities also operated across many other media, and its overall objective, to "bring the Empire alive", relates to a long tradition of state involvement in projecting Britain's imperial status. This began on a major scale with the first Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851.

In Ephemeral Vistas, Paul Greenhalgh's history of the exhibition tradition, the rationale behind Britain's staging of and participation in these enormously costly and elaborate events is examined. Increasing competition with other industrialising nation-states was a major factor: in one sense the very emergence of exhibitions is predicated upon the long, slow process of British economic and political decline, and is a tacit acknowledgement of a gradual relinquishing of the country's mid-nineteenth century status as the world's leading industrial power. Britain's exhibitions and contributions to foreign events were designed to help in the struggle to retain or regain this position of dominance, through impressive displays of the Empire's resources and the technological advances used to develop them. The other significant intervention exhibitions sought to make was into the field of popular instruction. With the gradual extension of voting rights, education, the spread of new communications media, and the apparent threat posed by the rise of nascent socialist or potentially anti-imperialist ideologies, addressing and

enthusing the "masses" with the exhibitions' ideals emerged as one of their organisers' major objectives.

British exhibitions, typically funded by a combination of state and industrial sponsorship, often centred around the display of imperial "possessions", sometimes literally becoming what Greenhalgh calls "human showcases". This practice was still in evidence as late as the 1924 Wembley British Empire Exhibition, where the Official Guide lists the "races in residence": inhabitants from various parts of the Empire actually living on-site in reconstructed versions of their "natural" environments.⁴⁵ However, compared to certain other countries' exhibitions, British ones tended to also stress peace, stability and interdependent co-operation. The reasons for this emphasis, Greenhalgh argues, can be located within the international context: "it helped maintain the status quo. A peaceful world..meant one thing alone to the British, that the empire was safe."⁴⁶ After the First World War, concern about possible American disapproval was another factor contributing to a British tendency to avoid more bellicose expressions of imperial sentiment.

Tallents' The Projection of England picks up many of these themes and makes passing reference to the precedent set by imperial exhibitions.⁴⁷ He acknowledges at the outset that the need for "national projection" arises from the fact that the heyday of Empire is past: "when England by her sea power won her place in the sun, her shadow was the longest of them all. To-day that morning of the world is past..The shadows of the peoples are more equal and the long shadows have grown less."⁴⁸ However, like Grierson, he combines an appeal

for internationalism with a desire to hold on to that imperial "place in the sun":

*whereas in the age of shadows countries were mainly self-contained..to-day they depend upon each other alike for their bread and for their peace. No civilized country can to-day afford either to neglect the projection of its national personality or to resign its projection to others. Least of all countries can England afford either that neglect or that resignation.*⁴⁹

England must lead the way because it is the centre of a "novel political organization" evolving into an "imperial partnership" of Dominions and Colonies.⁵⁰ The sponsorship and initiative necessary to make this undertaking possible should come, as with the exhibitions, and as with the documentary movement as a whole, from "the borderland which lies between Government and private enterprise."⁵¹ The spirit in which this national projection should be conducted must be appropriately modest, involving "neither self-advertisement, as distinct from honest self-expression, nor self-righteousness, as distinct from honest confidence."⁵² Modern media and means of communication are considered to be crucial to this process.

During the interwar years, this discourse on the need for the "national projection" which Tallents refers to began to emerge from within certain sectors of the British ruling elite. As Philip Taylor shows in his study The Projection of Britain, it attempted to build upon the experience gained through conducting state propaganda during the First World War, and

was alive to the possibilities inherent in relatively new forms of mass media. How national projection was to be achieved, and what exactly was to be projected, and to whom, was a matter for debate between its proponents. Nonetheless, certain fundamental tenets began to be taken as axiomatic: peacetime propaganda was held to be necessary, to enable the dissemination of knowledge about the British way of life, and to strengthen affective bonds within the Empire - between the home population and the scattered populations of white settlers, also between all its various white and non-white inhabitants. National projection was also held to be essential in order to counter the propaganda emanating from rival European states which might sway neutral countries or allies, sow discontent and fuel resistance within the Empire, or even inflame social unrest within Britain itself.⁵³

The EMB was the first of a series of organisations created during this period to engage in officially sanctioned cultural and commercial peacetime propaganda. Subsequent bodies involved in national projection included the Travel Association (founded 1928), the British Council (1934), the Colonial Film Unit (1939), and the work of existing institutions was also extended: for example, BBC radio established an Empire Service in 1932, and Arabic and Foreign Language services in 1938. Although each had different priorities and areas of responsibility, and employed a variety of media, they had a shared purpose insofar as they all sought to deploy education and propaganda in order to move towards the somewhat oxymoronic ~~the~~ goal defined by Tallents: "good

international understanding, within the Empire and without it."⁵⁴

One of the most immediate threats national projection was pitched against was the expansionist or generally more aggressive propaganda disseminated by the Soviet Union, Germany and Italy. The established, settled imperialism Britain espoused in response to these developments was forced to present itself, in some respects, as moderate, just, and completely justifiable. There were therefore a number of factors, some inherited from the exhibition tradition and others stemming from the exigencies of contemporary international relations, which combined to shape and define a peculiarly British propaganda practice which advocated what could be described as, to coin a phrase, a form of imperialist internationalism. Grierson and the documentary movement's work during the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s needs to be located within this context.

IV John Grierson's Job Application

"Imperialist internationalism" is a very general description, which can be applied to a range of relatively heterogeneous practices. In order to avoid reductionism, it should only serve as a starting-point for further detailed analysis. The main reasons for coining it are to highlight certain connections between otherwise disparate texts, and to contest the assumption, in Joyce Nelson's assessment of Grierson and the documentary movement's work, that imperialist and internationalist discourse are polar opposites. Her account of how the state and the (neo)colonial world order operate is also too monolithic. More nuanced and useful, insofar as the British state in particular is concerned, is Ralph Milliband's analysis of the way that, over a long period of time, capitalist democracy in Britain has developed a formally and informally interlocking system of official institutions which, within certain limits, effectively "manage" class and other kinds of conflict, and co-opt or incorporate pressures from below.⁵⁵ The EMB is a very good example of how this works in practice: an organisation expressly created to promote the Empire which nevertheless provided a home for what was long considered to be the most socially progressive school of British filmmaking.

The Board's commitment to "bringing the Empire alive" for the modern world necessitated the utilisation of new means of communication and the recruitment of personnel able to work innovatively within this context. The promotions it launched or took part in during its short existence were varied and imaginative, including Empire shopping weeks; BBC radio

talks; a "Buy British" slogan emblazoned on the side of Amy Johnson's plane; advertisements in the Radio Times; the production of materials, maps and posters for school geography lessons; and a highly commended poster campaign featuring work by artists like E. McKnight Kauffer.⁵⁶ Basil Wright and Paul Rotha cut their teeth in the film unit designing short loop films shown continuously on railway station platforms. As all these activities indicate, the Board's Secretary, Stephen Tallents, was eager to exploit new media and exhibition opportunities. Grierson, returning to England after spending three years in America, initially doing research on the socialisation of immigrants through the medium of the "yellow press" before moving on to develop a keen critical interest in film, managed to arrange a meeting with him early in 1927.⁵⁷ Out of this arose a commission for a memorandum, "Notes for English Producers", written between February and April, which Tallents received enthusiastically and circulated to other senior figures within or associated with the Board.

"Notes for English Producers" is extremely important not only because it was the key which gave Grierson access to his first job in film production, but also because it is an early statement of position from someone who was, as Ian Jarvie and Robert Macmillan put it, "an inveterate re-user and cannibalizer of his own work", who "published ideas from this memorandum in many other places."⁵⁸ The topics it explores anticipate the subsequent development of British documentary, and the memorandum is very explicit on how Grierson envisaged the relationship between audiences, the state, and the types of film it should sponsor. After making the

point that the analysis of cinema as a social institution is still in its infancy, he goes on to declare that:

Where education and propaganda are concerned - or indeed where any scheme of popular production is concerned - one must be prepared to start with the realisation that the public is the final arbiter of form in matters cinematic. Theoretically and ideally there may be no limits to cinema's powers..but practically the limits are set by the actual wants of the masses and the terms of their appreciation as these are shewn in actual attention. The future of cinema is a problem really of how profoundly cinema may develop within those terms; and a realistic and not unimaginative understanding of those limits..is as essential to a producing intelligence as, say, Machiavelli's analysis was to a despot of Renaissance Italy.⁵⁹

The use in the last sentence here, and again later in the memorandum, of a simile much favoured by Antonio Gramsci, a near historical contemporary of Grierson's, invites analysis of this document in terms of the latter's theory of hegemony. Grierson argues that for film propaganda to succeed, it requires a modern Machiavelli - preferably himself - who is equipped with a knowledge of cinema aesthetics and who, even more importantly, is sensitive to the "wants of the masses", knows how to win their consent, and is willing to use his or her expertise in the service of the British state.

Moving on to an analysis of the difference between English and American producers' attitudes towards the public, Grierson commends the latter for their ability to consistently generate films which have "vivid appeal", are "vital", "positive" and "encouraging", which make their audiences "feel great." On occasion, distinguished productions like Birth of a Nation and The Covered Wagon do all this but also something more: they "get under the skin of the people and touch them deeply," and "represent the dim gropings of Barnum for the role of prophet."⁶⁰ As Jarvie and Macmillan point out, Grierson's argument, although couched in sociological terms, "relies more on confident assertion than evidence": he ignores, for example, the intensely controversial public debate over Birth of a Nation in America, the fact that it only made certain parts of the population "feel great", and others quite the opposite.⁶¹ Research which follows various films' "fluctuating fortunes among different types of audience and even among different nationalities" is briefly mentioned, but its implications are not pursued any further.⁶²

Grierson's advice to those in power is to produce films which "instil optimism rather than..suggest a reason for pessimism" - or radical change.⁶³ Grierson repeatedly claims that cinema is an essentially "non-intellectual" medium. The approach which should be taken is to deal with everyday concerns, but not to wallow in "drabness". Instead, labour and industry across the Empire should be depicted within the context of "the romance of fulfilment rather than the romance of escape."⁶⁴ "Naturalistic" filmmaking, provided it pays due attention to the proper "cinematic treatment" of its subject matter, has a vast field to explore:

The Empire is so rich in dramatic material..There are subjects aplenty in the progress of industry, the story of invention, the pioneering and developing of new lands and exploration of lost ones, the widening horizons of commerce, the complexities of manufacture, and the range of communications: indeed in all the steam and smoke, dazzle and speed, of the world at hand, and all the strangeness and sweep of affairs more distant. If this material were treated imaginatively and energetically with all due regard to the nature of the medium and the nature of the institution, it would cut through to the very sources of Western pride.⁶⁵

This passage contains a hint of the emphasis, in films subsequently produced by the documentary movement, on the "nobility of labour", but it also suggests that by stressing this as one component of the exciting, dynamic imperial system already in existence and just waiting to be properly depicted, the status quo can be made to seem utopian. Herbert Marcuse's comments on a similar appropriation within Soviet culture, where "neither the individual nor his [sic] society are referred to a sphere of fulfilment other than that prescribed by and enclosed in the prevailing system," are equally apposite here.⁶⁶ Yet the terminology employed by Grierson, describing the possibility of generating an enthusiastic imperial consensus through film, is itself divided. Although later in the document he talks about capturing "the larger enthusiasm of an international public", in this passage the Eurocentrism is more evident, the aim being "to cut through to the very sources of Western pride," rather than "the pride of class" Soviet films like Battleship Potemkin are seen as appealing

to.⁶⁷ Internal British divisions with regard to matters of taste, a split between "mass" and "cultivated" appreciation of different films, or the same film for different reasons, are also recognised and rhetorically negotiated. Accommodating and moulding the former is held to be of paramount importance, but addressing and utilising the lessons which can be learned from the latter is also seen as necessary, insofar as they are subordinated to the primary purpose of the films to be produced. They "must stand as films", and their production and direction should be undertaken by people "advanced in cinematic feeling and in the mastery of cinema technique."⁶⁸

This final caveat is the sting in the tail of the hegemonic process. Grierson closes by impressing upon his prospective patrons that, insofar as cinematic judgements are concerned, they should defer to him or whichever expert eventually produces the films envisaged in the memorandum. This assertion of autonomy is softened by claiming that it is necessary in order to further the overall aim of disseminating British imperial propaganda, and the language employed, along with the fact that the document was written, make it clear that Grierson felt he could work within the limits imposed by the state. Nevertheless, a two-way process is in motion, and both sides of the equation have to be taken into account. The EMB acquired and incorporated the expertise of one of the most knowledgeable and charismatic intellectuals within British contemporary film culture; Grierson moved into a position from where he could establish himself as a dominant figure within that culture, making films which he hoped would both arouse interest amongst influential critics with more "cultivated" tastes and, even more importantly,

propagate what he considered to be a progressively internationalist perspective on the modern world.

"Notes for English Producers" marks the beginning of a transition: the emergence of a new and significantly different configuration of imperialist internationalism, still linked to precursors such as the exhibition tradition, but undergoing transformation as it passes into film culture. This transition did not entail a clean break with the past: a minor debate about continuity and change was provoked by the release of Walter Creighton's One Family (1930). The production of this film was approved at the same meeting, in Whitehall on April 27th 1928, which also gave the go-ahead to Grierson's now much more famous Drifters (1929).⁶⁹ Most historical accounts of filmmaking at the EMB make only passing reference to Creighton's film, if they mention it at all, before quickly moving on to consider the work produced under Grierson. This is symptomatic of a general tendency to overlook the imperialist dimension to British documentary film production. Yet although One Family is in certain respects very different to what came later, it is also a missing link, and a bridge between earlier and later emphases, which needs to be restored.

V Walter Creighton's Christmas Pudding

It was some time before Grierson could really begin to build his own little empire at the EMB film unit. "Notes for English Producers" definitely attracted a great deal of interest amongst those who read it: Tallents made sure it was seen by the Board's film committee and also by several MPs, including Amery, Cunliffe-Lister, Walter Elliot and John Buchan. However, the Treasury in particular was reluctant to commit funds to an ongoing programme of film production, and Walter Creighton, a friend of Rudyard Kipling with previous experience of staging the Aldershot tattoo, was actually the first film officer appointed by the EMB. Grierson was not employed on a permanent basis until May 15th 1928, when he was taken on as assistant film officer.⁷⁰ Prior to that he was hired on an essentially ad hoc basis, to do research and organise film presentations. Certainly his star was rising, and he was personally closer to Tallents than Creighton. Nevertheless, it was not until both One Family and Drifters had been released, and assessments of audience and critical reception began to filter back to the Board's film committee, that Grierson's ascendancy was assured.

One Family [EMB, 1930], an early sound film scripted by Creighton and Rudyard Kipling, combines semi-documentary sequences with elements of fantasy in a narrative about a small boy's dream journey across the Empire to collect ingredients for the King's Empire Christmas pudding. This particular version of a traditional English delicacy featured prominently in various EMB campaigns because it exemplified the way in which everyday objects, ordinarily taken for

granted, were made up from materials drawn from the Empire's vast resources. A seven feet high pudding was proudly displayed at the Olympia Cookery Exhibition in December 1928, and the recipe proved very popular, with 20,000 more copies being required after the initial print-run of 15,000 was exhausted.⁷¹ One Family is more than just an early, forgotten example of EMB film propaganda; it also refers back to and provides a further platform for campaigns already underway in other media.

A key moment in the film is when the boy attends a geography lesson at school. The teacher asks questions about the Empire, referring to an EMB map on the wall which, she explains, shows Britain's overseas possessions in red. The boy, preoccupied with a King's Christmas pudding shop-window display he spotted on his way to school, gradually drifts off to sleep. This is conveyed through a series of close-ups of the teacher's eyes, the boy's eyes, his shuffling feet below the desk, the map, and the boy's tired face. The sequence, whilst reinforcing the EMB message by linking together several of the different contexts in which it was expounded, also implies that innovation is required in order to keep it fresh and relevant. The teacher's method of address fails in this instance to entirely captivate the boy's attention, but the film itself subsequently sends him off on a wondrously exciting adventure across the Empire. At the planning meeting which secured Treasury money for both One Family and Drifters, the argument which won the day was that films should not be used to advertise specific products but rather to inculcate a deeper sense of the importance and centrality of Empire. The Empire Christmas pudding was not sold ready-

made; the idea behind it was that people should be motivated to go out and assemble it themselves from imperial ingredients. Having a small boy as the hero of One Family emphasises the importance of capturing enthusiasts at an early age - the EMB was heavily involved in producing materials, including short films, for schools - but the classroom sequence also acknowledges that more traditional forms of pedagogy are not always the most effective, and that new techniques continually need to be developed. The boy, on his Empire tour, exclaims at one point "I want to see everything", and the film attempts to show it to him and the presumably spellbound audience he implies. In certain respects, One Family operates like a compressed exhibition, displaying the technology, industry, and resources of Empire by collapsing the vast physical distances which separate its disparate parts. The boy is transported from the imperial centre, Buckingham Palace, where he is led after falling asleep, to New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, and so on, through liberal use of the basic editing device of splicing together shots from different locations which Lev Kuleshov, experimenting in his Soviet film workshop around 1920, labelled "creative geography".

What some contemporary critics found problematic was the structure and tone of One Family's imperial display. Robert Herring, film critic for The Manchester Guardian, The London Mercury, and a contributor to Close-Up, praised the "excellent sequences showing the resources of the Empire and their bearing on the life of an ordinary family."⁷² However, he criticised the "flimsily whimsical" story, described the apparent triviality of the Christmas pudding plot device as "really hard to

swallow", noted the resemblance of certain sequences to a society matinée or antiquated and somewhat ludicrous stage revue, and contrasted them with the more consistent seriousness and conviction of Soviet productions.⁷³ One Family is indeed replete with what would have seemed, to progressive critics in 1930, like rather old-fashioned flag-waving and blinkered traditionalism. The Dominions are personified by women wearing the elaborate costumes which prompted Herring's comparison to a society matinée, and a robust, slightly rotund comic policeman, also pressed into an extravagant costume when in Buckingham Palace, serves as the boy's guide around the Empire. Towards the end of the film the policeman and a tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, gentleman etc., all go into a pub and drink from steel tankards. The gentleman is treated with due deference, and the thief who inevitably arrives is prevented from stealing a pint with a curt but supposedly jovial "that's for your betters." Although the film sporadically makes innovative use of sound, the score is suffused with military marches, including the ubiquitous "Colonel Bogie", and its première at the Palace Theatre in London was opened with music from the band of the Irish Guards. When the boy finishes his globe-trotting to return home and go to bed, he stops joking with his father and begins to pray on hearing carol singers outside the house strike up a heavenly chorus. One Family concludes with shots of St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster at dusk, with bell-ringing and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" on the soundtrack blissfully testifying to the divinely ordained permanence of the glorious British Empire.

One Family is an interesting first attempt to transpose the exhibition tradition into cinematic terms. It emphasises peace, stability and the moral rightness of a time-honoured imperial order. Many of its tableaux appear ponderous, however, when compared to the generally more fast-moving editing pace of Drifters and other documentary movement films. The sequences set in Buckingham Palace, with the boy dwarfed and overawed by its overpowering architecture, endless staircases and halls, connote a sense of respect for an instantly evident, stolid social hierarchy. Following a brief meeting with the king, an off-screen presence who is too removed from everyday experience to be represented in the flesh, the boy is allowed to sit in his place, at the head of the table in the Council chamber where he is introduced to the Dominions. One Family's absolute obeisance towards the royal personage contradicts the apparently democratic notion of taking an ordinary boy on a fantastic Empire trip. Herring was quite scathing about the use of a dream structure in this context, arguing that a more straightforward presentation of facts would have been better. He also felt that One Family evaded pressing social concerns, such as unemployment, and recommended only certain of its technical qualities and "the portions of the film dealing with men at work."⁷⁴ Yet Herring expressed no reservations about the film's basic objective, "the glorifying of the British Empire"; his only regret was that "One Family should have answered Soviet films on their own ground, and here it fails."⁷⁵

One of the reasons why Drifters and the documentary movement prospered, whereas One Family sunk almost without trace and failed to recoup its production costs, was because Grierson was far more in touch with the contemporary critical climate than Creighton was, and more realistic about what could be achieved with a first film produced on what might well prove to be a one-off basis. He also effectively outmaneuvred his senior colleague by completing his own film first. One Family was an ambitious project, requiring costumes, elaborate scenery, stock footage from various sources, casting, rehearsal, and the construction of a soundtrack. Drifters, whilst far from easy to make, was shot with a small crew and relied much more heavily on editing, which although demanding in itself, was less prone to delay than all the variables Creighton had to contend with. Making Drifters a silent film also saved time, as well as increasing the likelihood that it would get a sympathetic reception from those critics, such as Rotha in The Film Till Now, who were worried about the impact sound might have on film art. Drifters was ready for presentation to the EMB film committee in July 1929, and to the Film Society in November of the same year. One Family was not released until July 1930, and Tallents reported bluntly to the film committee that, on the whole, it "had not been well received."⁷⁶

Grierson made sure that One Family, shortly after its release, received the benefit of his own critical scrutiny. Like Herring, he gently ridiculed the Christmas pudding pretext, declaring that, given the intrinsic drama of the Empire, to make a film about it should be "as easy as pie", but Creighton's attempt proved

that, clearly, it was not. Appealing to the advanced tastes of intellectual readers, he goes on to argue that "in making art in our new world we are called upon to build in new forms altogether."⁷⁷ Yet many years later made an interesting comparison between One Family, by 1970 a virtually forgotten curio, and Eisenstein, "the greatest master of public spectacle in the history of the cinema."⁷⁸ He recollects that the Whitehall officials gathered at his Imperial Institute screenings were less impressed by the "documentary" aspects of Soviet montage cinema than by this element of spectacle. Kipling is reported as saying, at a meeting convened to discuss British official film production, that "these Russians..are doing all over again what we do so splendidly in our own country. They are making tattoos, and what we ought to be doing ourselves is making tattoos in film form."⁷⁹

By 1970 Grierson was far enough removed from the critical battles of the 1930s to be able to indulge in fond remembrances after the fact. During that crucial decade he realised, as his writings on the subject show, that in order to play the Soviet cinema card for all it was worth, montage rather than spectacle was what needed to be emphasised in discussions outside Whitehall, amongst progressive film intellectuals whose support he canvassed. Yet as October, Storm Over Asia, and other examples from Soviet montage cinema demonstrate, montage and spectacle are by no means binary opposites, especially when it comes to representing the non-Western world. Unfortunately for Creighton, One Family's overt and at times heavy-handed reliance on traditional forms of spectacle outweighed its merits in the eyes of most critics. Its director was not, like

Grierson, also an eloquent writer able to produce articles and essays carefully attuned to current trends within British film culture. However, although the work produced by the British documentary movement in the 1930s proceeded along a very different direction to that staked out by Creighton, it definitely did not sever all links to the exhibition tradition and the enthralling global perspectives it afforded.

VI Paul Rotha and the Aerial Genre

Grierson's tenure as Film Officer at the EMB allowed him to recruit a number of young filmmakers who formed the nucleus of the British documentary film movement. Of these, Paul Rotha was the one who, in a series of films produced for Imperial Airways during the 1930s, made the most significant contribution to new ways of seeing the Empire. He only worked at the EMB for six months in 1931 before moving on to establish himself as an independent producer, working for both industrial sponsors and various campaigning organisations. Rotha acknowledged Grierson's seminal influence, later describing his work as "the mainspring of documentary thinking and development," but there were also important differences between their respective *modi operandi*.⁸⁰ Less closely tied to the state than Grierson, Rotha was able to work on a wider range of projects, including the short pro-internationalism, anti-rearmament The Peace Film (Freenat Films, 1936) partly sponsored by the radical Labour politician Stafford Cripps. The film carried a message urging viewers to write to their MPs protesting against the government's newly adopted rearmament policy.⁸¹ In October of the same year a Labour Party fringe conference on film propaganda was convened, and Rotha submitted a lengthy memorandum attacking the capitalist structure of the film industry and the patronising stereotypes of black and working-class people it perpetuated. He stressed the need for Labour to back the production of socialist documentaries.⁸² Unfortunately this remained a fringe concern, but it confirmed Rotha's status as the most actively committed left-wing member of the original nucleus of

filmmakers gathered around Grierson at the EMB. The fact that he also produced a whole new sub-genre of documentaries for Imperial Airways therefore demonstrates very clearly how it was possible for a socialist-inclined internationalism to co-exist with an enlightened imperialist outlook in films produced by the movement during this period.

After his departure from the EMB, Rotha experienced financial hardship during what he describes in Documentary Diary as "a year's semi-employment."⁸³ He became involved in several unsuccessful ventures, one of which was scripting a proposed East African adventure film, Jungle Skies, for John Amery, neo-fascist son of the Conservative Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs. The project never came to fruition. Another almost equally strange confluence of interests, which did materialise, was the commission to make Contact (British Instructional, 1933), Rotha's first documentary film. Jack Beddington, then head of publicity and advertising for Shell-Mex and British Petroleum, secured the money for a film celebrating aviation to be made in conjunction with Imperial Airways. The basic intention was to trace the route taken by one of their planes across the Empire and to illustrate the linking together of various peoples and places through this new means of transport. Since Shell could not contract directly with an individual, Contact had to be produced through British Instructional Films, headed by Bruce Woolfe whom Rotha characterised as "a fervent Empire loyalist."⁸⁴ These complex arrangements inevitably led to a certain amount of conflict and various organisational problems, but what is significant is that not only was the assignment completed more or less on schedule: it also paved the way

for several other imperial aviation documentary films constructed along the same lines. This flourishing aerial genre included The Future's in the Air (Alexander Shaw, 1937), Watch and Ward in the Air (Ralph Keene, 1937), Air Outpost (John Taylor, 1937), Wings Over Empire (Stuart Legg, 1939) and African Skyway (Stanley Hawes, 1939). They were produced by Strand Films, the independent documentary production company Rotha was instrumental in setting-up in 1935, and he was the producer on all except the final two. As Paul Swann points out, Strand's documentaries for Imperial Airways were in a sense the most direct descendants of the field of British film production opened up by the EMB.⁸⁵

Although they were not among the projects Rotha was most personally committed to, they were widely seen and appreciated during the 1930s. Films like The Future's in the Air, Air Outpost and Watch and Ward in the Air were bread and butter productions which helped to keep Strand Films afloat: according to Rotha, they all did well on general release, with the first and longest of the three more than recouping its production costs.⁸⁶ Imperial Airways, whose motive for financing these films was publicity rather than profit, allowed Strand to keep all of this revenue; a gesture Rotha describes as "generous".⁸⁷ Imperial Airways were regarded during the 1930s as being less efficient than their European competitors, and the modernisation of their image which these films sought to effect must have been gratifying to its executives. Moreover, not only could they easily afford to write off these relatively minor costs, this in itself could be interpreted as a clever public relations ploy, since another common criticism was of the excessive dividends Imperial Airways, a state-

subsidised company, was paying to its shareholders.⁸⁸ Yet beyond these local concerns, what this relatively harmonious relationship between sponsors, film producer and audiences indicates is a wider, catch-all consensus around these films and the variant of imperialism they espouse than, for example, around the much more explicitly socialist, controversial Peace Film. The aerial genre provided a comparatively stable backdrop to Rotha's more exceptional interventions. They were typical, non-provocative documentary productions which did good business and embodied an emergent consensus rather than a challenge to action.

There are several reasons why the aerial genre has largely been neglected by film historians, even those who specialise in the British documentary film movement. As prime examples of the movement's imperialist internationalism, these films have been marginalised by accounts of its history which overlook this dimension. On a more general level, the neglect suffered by the aerial genre relates to certain technical oversights within film history. The aerial shot, of which they contain many, is barely even recognised as a distinct unit at the basic descriptive level of film analysis. If mentioned at all by standard text books like Bordwell and Thompson's Film Art: An Introduction it is reduced to a minor variant of the long shot or crane shot.⁸⁹ Yet, if it is legitimate to make a clear distinction between, for example, the slight difference distinguishing the plan américain from the medium shot, then surely the unique degree of distance and mobility afforded by aerial cinematography deserves to be further specified descriptively. Similarly, exhaustive technical histories, of which Barry Salt's Film Style and Technology is the apogee,

downplay the importance if not the very existence of aerial cinematography. The omission is significant: in principle a comprehensive, objective survey concerned primarily with establishing empirical details should contain information about the period and circumstances within which aerial cinematography emerged, the possibilities and constraints it involves, and so on. Yet Salt's book contains only one brief reference to this subject.⁹⁰

This point opens up larger and more important considerations. The exclusion of aerial cinematography is significant because it reveals that even a book which wishes to focus on the study of film texts and cinematic technology cannot, even within those limits, produce a pure empiricism which is not also guided by theoretical preferences. The aspects of technique and technology which Salt's history concentrates on are those which he establishes as having been particularly original or influential within film history. Yet film history, and within that, the history of film technology, are both conceived of in almost completely hermetic terms. Salt's work refuses to acknowledge that their borders might be permeable, and that an adequate study of any aspect of film history cannot be written if this is ignored. By default, it demonstrates that if the focus of film study is to encompass film as a component of national and international cultures, and collective as well as subjective identities and pleasures, then different technological histories will be required. This applies both to the aspects of film style and technology which are privileged as objects of study, and to the degree to which those histories are written as autonomous or as responsive to developments in the communication, transport, arms-

manufacturing and surveillance industries. Aerial film photography demands analysis in these terms.

Paul Virilio has much to say on this topic in his idiosyncratic and ground-breaking book War and Cinema, where he claims that the cinematic aspiration to ubiquitous orbital vision is almost always a simulated act of war, or indeed *is* in effect an act of war in a century where all war is simulated, and simulations are lethal. According to Virilio, modern warfare takes place in an "abstract zone of derealisation", a space beyond the scope of ordinary human vision.⁹¹ However, aerial photo- and cinematography, satellite and surveillance systems, and other technologies whose development intersects with the history of film, television and video, have played an equally important part in another undertaking: marking out the boundaries which separate and connect the Western and the non-Western world. Certainly this is a salient feature of the 1930s aerial genre. Virilio's thesis is a Eurocentric one: if the history of warfare over the last two centuries is considered from a non-Eurocentric perspective, then it becomes apparent, as V.G. Kiernan has demonstrated, that the vast majority of wars have been fought by European nations against less "advanced" ones.⁹² An important factor in defining these wars has been the possession by the Europeans of superior - or rather, more destructive - technology. From the end of the First World War onwards, official discourse in England fastened on the aeroplane as a potential saviour of Empire, with its ability to survey, regulate and dispense retribution with gratifying - or horrific - efficiency. This dimension cuts across Virilio's "derealisation" thesis: the technologies of modern war and cinema may indeed partly

disperse the identities of participants/spectators, but they can also, as the 1991 Gulf War demonstrated, reconstruct an East/West divide.

The connotations of the aeroplane were not however entirely captured by either war or imperialism in the 1930s, and the fact that there were also counter-claims, that it was a symbol to be struggled over, may well be another reason why the aerial genre seems to have been a particularly workable cycle of films and a reasonably pleasurable experience for a variety of audiences. Gillian Beer has commented on how the sight of a plane in this period could also signify, at least for Western observers, a playful, egalitarian or liberatory potential, and on how it was appropriated by women writers like Virginia Woolf as well as by famous women aviators such as Amy Johnson and Amelia Earhart.⁹³ The aeroplane certainly featured prominently in the renegotiation of cultural borders, both in terms of gender and national frontiers. The notion that, after the advent of aviation, "Britain [was] no longer an island" is attributed to the press baron Northcliffe, and this could be seen as either good reason for strengthening and modernising the air force in order to protect the Empire, or as a positive step towards internationalism.⁹⁴ David Edgerton has argued that, insofar as interwar left-liberal views of England's relationship to the aeroplane were concerned, "faith in technology as essentially civil and liberating remained undaunted," with wartime and nakedly imperialist uses of air power being seen as regrettable aberrations rather than the norm.⁹⁵ He suggests that although this faith had little impact on actual aviation policy, which gave priority to defence of the Empire, it

did impede critical analysis of the aeroplane as a cultural icon. Grierson, for example, began to link it automatically to internationalism and improved intracultural dialogue shortly after his departure for Canada in 1939:

I cite this case of Canada, because it demonstrates how much the democratic way of discussing things depends on a quick and living system of communications..The new factor which has come into the situation is the airplane..People are getting together more quickly..Understanding between isolated localities and centres of opinion is becoming a simpler matter than it was yesterday.⁹⁶

Grierson's words, although not referring explicitly to the aerial genre, participate in the progressive image of aviation which all the films within it seek to construct.

Contact contributes to this celebration of the aeroplane by applauding the closer links and better understanding between various parts of the global community apparently made possible by the imperial air routes. It opens with shots of road, rail and sea transport, edited in an accelerating rhythm which leads up to boldly lettered intertitles reading "NOW/AIR", followed by aerial shots above clouds and the noise of an aircraft engine. Next, a sequence in a Coventry factory shows the construction of an aeroplane, from the planning to final assembly phase. As with Vertov's films, photography and editing explore the minutiae of industrial and technical processes, but critical analysis of the current social relations of production is abjured. The feeling conveyed here is of all grades of workers operating together

in aesthetically pleasing harmony, and this is followed shortly afterwards by a sequence shot at Croydon airport which emphasises immaculate synchronisation and faultless organisation. Passengers, baggage and freight are weighed in, airmail letters are sorted, planes guided by flags taxi gracefully across the runway and then take-off occurs as soon as the prescribed hour arrives and a hand clicks into place on the airport clock. Contact then embarks, as an intertitle declares, into "the freedom of the air": a tour around the Empire, surveying locations in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Africa, before returning back to England.

Notwithstanding its exotic itinerary, Rotha sought to make it quite clear that he did not conceive of Contact as simply a standard travel film. In "Making Contact", an article published in Cinema Quarterly whilst the film was being edited back in England, he asserted that "it was never the question of shooting just anything of interest."⁹⁷ Rotha as well as other writers publishing in the documentary movement journals in the 1930s generally derided the commercial travel film shorts which, as far as they were concerned, rarely rose above "the post-card school of motion-picture production."⁹⁸ Rotha was aiming for higher cultural status than this. In "Making Contact" he is coyly evasive about what kind of project he was engaged on: descriptions attributed by others, such as "depicting the "history of civilization" and the "conquest of the air"" are held at a slight distance as being somewhat grandiose, but they are not rejected.⁹⁹ Later in the article his prose suddenly soars to dizzy heights:

★

I remember:

Light rippling on the wings of the seaplane. Vistas of small islands, like spattered jewels in a dark setting. Pointed needles of cypresses stretching up in jagged rows. Every few minutes the toy towns of the Balkans: multiplications of little square, coloured houses. The ever-changing light and shade on the rounded moulded mountains..

A crumbling dust-heap beneath a blistering sun. Broken-off columns of flat bricks rising up against a dark sky. A native boy stumbles and, in so doing, demolishes a portion of Babylon. The clatter of the falling mud bricks ceases in a thick cloud of dust and all is again silent. It was night, I remember, before we reached the filthy hotel in Baghdad....

The amazing colour of Uganda, where native women wear cloth bindings of brilliant ultramarines, scarlets and purples.. Johannesburg. From the roof of the highest building you can see the gold-rift splitting the newly born city in two. A veritable Cimarron city, built on gold.¹⁰⁰

The range and rapidity evokes Walt Whitman as well as Vertov's One Sixth of the Earth. "Making Contact" seeks to heighten its readers' anticipation for a film which will be not a valorisation of "civilisation" in the abstract, but more specifically of the civilisation able to produce such a wonderful piece of cinema and an invention like the aeroplane which together can provide privileged observers with so thrilling a vantage-point. Conquest of space entails conquest of time, hence the rapid concatenation of colourful images, linked together and made available by the historical dynamism of Western civilisation, zooming into the future, compared to the picturesque stasis or atrophy of Africa and

the Orient, which are locked into and co-existent with classical and Biblical references; Cimmarron and Babylon, slowly decaying. Yet Rotha's article ends, within its own terms, on a positive note: the natives are eagerly awaiting the further penetration of the West to spur on their development, "waiting for sensible, straightforward films which they are not getting."¹⁰¹ Africa and the Orient are seen at this level as empty vessels, ready and willing to be modernised through an infusion of Western technology, values and culture.

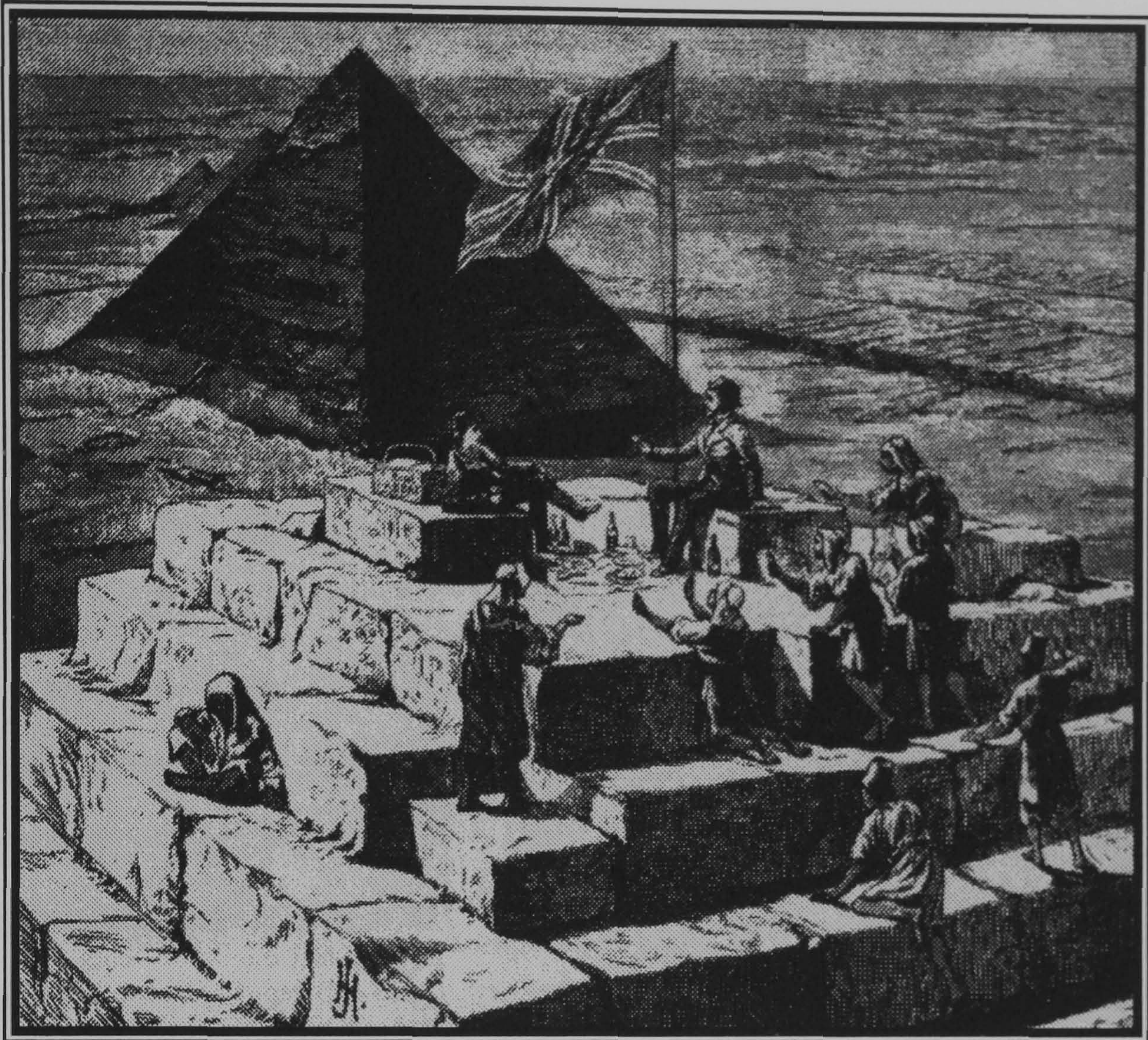
In some respects the aerial genre represents a quantum leap forward in a very long tradition of questing for the ideal European presence in the Orient: the attainment of, in Timothy Mitchell's words, "a position from where, like the authorities in the panopticon, one could see and yet not be seen."¹⁰² The panopticon, described by Michel Foucault in Discipline and Punish as the emblem of modern power, is a means of surveying and supervising every aspect of social and personal life as well as of economic production. Factories, workplaces, villages, schools, prisons and so on are all monitored from a position where the observing authority cannot be seen, so as to enhance efficiency through invisible yet continuous regulation.¹⁰³ Mitchell employs this concept in his study of the representation and modernisation of nineteenth century Egypt not to imply the absolute ubiquity of its operation, as Foucault often tends to, but as an *ideal* aspired to by certain coercive agencies. He relates the fantasy of panoramic, all-encompassing vision to the exhibition tradition, and also to the passionate pursuit of accuracy and detachment by foreign visitors to the Middle East, which often led them to the top of a pyramid or into a minaret in order to escape any

interference or resistance to the way things should be seen. As early as 1844, Alexander Kinglake was able in his whimsical travel narrative Eothen to present this aspiration as a given: "I of course ascended to the summit of the great Pyramid, and also explored its chambers; but these I need not describe."¹⁰⁴ Climbing to the top of, and perhaps picnicking on the great pyramid became de rigeur if one was to "do" Egypt properly. It is no coincidence, then, that planes in the aerial genre often fly over this location, signalling a further, higher stage in this ongoing process of the West's mastery over the East. In African Skyway, the narrator intones:

As the flying boat leaves Cairo, she passes close to the pyramids. For sixty centuries men have looked up at them as a great monument of the ancient world. Today, men can gaze down on them, from the windows of the newest triumph of the modern world.

In The Future's in the Air the narration, written by Graham Greene, makes a similar point, albeit with more subtlety and haunting lyricism. As the camera pans over engravings on the walls of Egyptian temples before cutting to an aeroplane which then continues the movement within the frame, the narration quotes from the Book of the Dead:

Thou doest travel over unknown spaces, needing millions of years to pass over. Thou passest through them in peace, and thou steerest thy way across the watery abyss, to the place which thou lovest. This thou doest in one little moment of time. Thou passest over the sky, and every face watchest



'A Picnic on the Great Pyramid', 1874.

Eight years before the Occupation the British had little doubt who was destined to control Egypt.

thee in thy course, and then thou doest sink down, and thus make an end of the hours.

Here, the dominant connotation is of magical or spiritual power appropriated and surpassed by modern technology. In African Skyway there is no room for ambiguity: the crisp, upper-middle class voice-over unhesitatingly articulates a triumphalist celebration of progress, and accompanying images of both old and new Cairo suggest that, although modernising, the Orient would probably never be quite modernised enough. Judged by the standards of modernity, the West will always keep at least one step ahead. Usually, this is not presented as bluntly as in African Skyway's pyramid sequence, but it is always implicit. At one point in The Future's in the Air the narration takes pains to ensure that the audience registers that it is a "small army of mechanics, some white, some dark," who service the plane at Bahrain airport. There are very few derogatory stereotypes in the aerial genre, and native workers, minor officials, soldiers and policemen are generally shown performing their duties with decorum and efficiency. Yet to draw attention to the "white" and "dark" composition of the team of mechanics at Bahrain is to acknowledge a degree of cultural ambivalence about the status and capacities of non-Western people within the Empire. Here the narration explicitly seeks to deny any difference by stressing equality at work. Rarely, however, is the fact that non-Western workers are only ever seen in these films doing manual or very low-level administrative work addressed. Elsewhere, the ambivalence denied here is itself asserted within the films: the narrator in Air Outpost wryly points out to the audience that if anything goes wrong at Sharjah

airport each Arab worker there is liable to be punished by the local sheikh in "traditional Arab fashion, by the loss of eye or limb." This comment, superimposed upon a line of impeccably uniformed Arab men performing their duties in perfect unison, dramatises the two poles that the aerial genre oscillates between. At one extreme stands the potential integration of non-Western people into Western industrial modernity: at the other are the tell-tale inferences of a cultural incorrigibility which can never quite be completely overcome.

A shot sequence common to most of the films in the aerial genre demonstrates just how fundamental this polarity is to their structure. Typically, this sequence operates in the following manner: in an initial establishing shot a very large area is seen from the perspective of the plane; this is succeeded by another aerial shot when the plane is lower down and its moving shadow can be seen reflected on the land beneath it. These two shots are answered by a long or medium shot, from ground level, of a native inhabitant of whichever colony the plane happens to be passing over. This is followed by a medium shot or a medium close-up where the person momentarily stops whatever they were doing to look up at the plane and perhaps smile or wave, although barely able to see it. The plane is rarely even visible in the distance in these shots, and it is often the noise of its engines which alerts those on the ground. Sometimes the contrast between rootedness and mobility is further accentuated by showing the figures on the ground using primitive means of transport: horses, donkeys, ox-carts, etc. The effect of these images is to stage a partial internationalist convergence: the plane

moves closer to the ground, the natives seem cheered by this symbol of modernity. Yet it is fleeting; something they could never really hope to catch up with. Paul Virilio stresses the connections between aerial photography, speed, and the (post)modern condition: this repeated scenario in the aerial genre locates non-Western people as partly outside of this process. It also establishes dominant and subordinate relations of looking along an imperial power axis. The shadow on the ground testifies to a tenuous, non-reciprocal link between the imperial observer and the native who is observed. The aerial spectator is simply passing through imperial space, unlike those contained within it, upon whom a momentary flash of interest and sympathy is extended, before moving on. For those confined to the ground, the barely perceptible yet disruptive intrusion of the aeroplane is a reminder of their position. They are fixed in place by an authority which is out of reach but always able to watch.

Rotha kept a diary during the making of Contact, and the extracts from it published forty years later in Documentary Diary confirm that he was never an imperialist, in any traditional or conventional sense of the word. It does, given its looser structure and private nature, contain comments which are more critical of imperialism than Contact, as an Imperial Airways and oil company commission, could ever be. What is just as significant as these reflections, however, are the unquestioned assumptions it shares with the films produced within the aerial genre. The diary also adds flesh to the bones of the theoretical debates about war, the aeroplane and the Empire during the 1930s. It is not presented here as an exposé or as a more "authentic" record of Rotha's trip than Contact. Rather, his diary is work in another mode which partly diverges from and partly overlaps with the film he was directing at the same time as he was writing it.

One chilling entry records an overnight stop at the RAF aerodrome in Basra: "The bar full of air-force types jokingly telling each other how they "bombed up" a village that afternoon. I asked them why. I was told, "Just to let them know we're here, old boy."¹⁰⁵ Further on, in Palestine, Rotha observes the lengths to which his employers, who were unreliable in other respects, went to in order to ensure that no traces of colonial strife appeared in Contact: "Saw the wreck of a Hannibal class aircraft minus wings, which had been blown to pieces on the ground. Imperial Airways had been smart enough to have its name and their name obliterated before we arrived in case we might film it."¹⁰⁶ In Johannesburg certain areas are found to be off-limits: "They work the Africans hard. We watched them coming up in cages after an 8°5 hour

shift. Each with a brass bangle bearing his number. They live in a compound (which we were not allowed to visit)."¹⁰⁷ Yet at the same time, a strange lack of concern, mingled with a curiously fascinated interest in apparently endemic Arabian cruelty, characterises a remark later repeated in Air Outpost: "Sharjah. The guard which the sheikh has ordered to surround the camp and the plane has been told that if anything is stolen or anything should happen to any of the passengers, then the eyes of the whole guard will be put out. Nothing happened."¹⁰⁸

At other points, Rotha admits that certain symbolic sequences in Contact were carefully staged. In Babylon he "had what could be a good idea when I saw some masonry crumble and fall of its own accord. In all shots thereafter I had our guide kick dust and stones down, he himself being out of the picture of course. Perhaps in this way I can get the effect of the past crumbling before the future. The present being, of course, the airplane."¹⁰⁹ The idea that this little reconstruction attempts to enact, that the orient is somehow linked to historical atrophy, is heightened by several comments in the diary about the almost intrinsic filth and dilapidation encountered there. As in Vertov's work, the Western observer's relationship to, implication in, or responsibility to what is seen is never questioned. On this issue, a clear dividing-line is maintained, and those who cross it are treated with impatience. Resistance to filming is condemned as simple stubborn illogicality. For example, Rotha considers it "remarkable how this hostility has been met all the time so far. No one welcomes a film camera."¹¹⁰ Elsewhere he laments how "the moment we produce a camera a crowd of

hundreds collect, swarming like flies around us, jeering, laughing, mocking, pushing, touching - anything to stop us filming. My God, to have a hidden camera!".¹¹¹ His article, "Making Contact", similarly expresses exasperation bordering on anger with the "swarming onlookers in a pox-ridden bazaar when you are trying to take a close shot."¹¹² Contact does not connect with these contemporary people who, by reacting to an intrusion in their midst, get represented in Rotha's prose as an irrational oriental mob. It is more in tune with the nineteenth century British travellers who ascended to the top of the great pyramid in Egypt in order to enjoy the view undisturbed.

CHAPTER FOUR: IMPERIALIST INTERNATIONALISM: THE BRITISH DOCUMENTARY MOVEMENT

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104. Alexander Kinglake, Eothen [1844], Icon Books, n.d., p. 173.
105. Rotha, Documentary Diary, op. cit., p. 77.

106. Ibid., p. 79.

107. Ibid., pp. 83-4.

108. Ibid., p. 77.

109. Ibid., p. 78.

110. Ibid., p. 76.

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112. Rotha, "Making Contact", op. cit., p. 87.

CHAPTER 5

British Film Culture Or Imperialism?

I Documentary Audiences and the Dominant Ideology Thesis

If British documentary films in the 1930s can be credited with having created, as texts, their own distinct brand of imperialist internationalism, one question remains: what did audiences at the time make of these films, and how did they relate to this aspect of them? The extent of the distribution of documentary films both during and before the Second World War is a much-debated subject, with various estimates being proposed.¹ Whatever the figures, it must be remembered that the exhibition of newsreels and features dwarfed that of documentary films during the 1930s. Even more important than bare audience statistics are the types of contexts within which documentary films were seen, and the range of ways different groups of people within those statistics were likely to have interacted with them. To try to even partially reconstruct this is, of course, a highly speculative undertaking fraught with difficulties, and what follows are merely some pointers which would require much more empirical research before they could be either refuted or substantiated. The currently available evidence from the period, mainly written documents, also inevitably leads to a perhaps unwarranted concentration upon restricted audiences with access, as readers or writers, to relatively specialist film journals. Nevertheless, given the new claims made in this thesis about British documentary's imperialist internationalism, it is important to begin to break down and analyse the statement made by Grierson that the purpose and, by implication, the effect of the films produced by the movement was "to command, and cumulatively command, the mind of a generation."²

One area of consensus amongst historians of the documentary movement is that the EMB and later the GPO film unit did make significant inroads into the burgeoning educational film market. As The Observer's film critic C.A. Lejeune wrote in 1933, the unit's higher profile productions, such as the "Imperial Six" which received theatrical distribution after being acquired by a subsidiary of Gaumont-British, tended to obscure how "all the time, week in and week out, the unit is operating in another and more important field..so great is the demand for [films from the Empire Film Library] that schools often have to wait weeks for a delivery."³ An important centre for exhibiting films to schoolchildren was the cinema at the Imperial Institute, where Grierson had originally run his programme of screenings for EMB officials and other establishment luminaries during the late 1920s. After the dissolution of the EMB in 1933, the Institute agreed to house the Empire Film Library, compiled by Grierson and his colleagues during the previous five years. From this base, EMB, GPO and other documentary films were supplied for carriage cost only to schools, scout and girl guide groups, boys brigades, YM and YWCAs, orphanages, and so on. In addition to this outreach work, which continued throughout the 1930s, several million schoolchildren, according to statistics compiled by the Institute, also attended screenings at the cinema on its premises.⁴

The Imperial (now Commonwealth) Institute, which dates back to the late nineteenth century, was designed to serve as a "permanent exhibition"; an ongoing display of the wealth and wonder contained within the British Empire, very much in the tradition inaugurated by the Crystal Palace event in 1851.⁵ In

an article published in the documentary movement journal World Film News Harry Lindsay, the Institute's director, describes its layout: "four great galleries running east, west, south and north", containing "photographs, dioramas, specimens and other exhibits" illustrating "the life, scenery, and industries" of the Empire, from Canada to Ceylon. He also writes in a mode shared by Grierson when arguing that education, whether of children or of adults, is only truly effective when it "inspires", through stories of progress and industry "told with something of the art which at once disarms and charms."⁶ The Imperial Institute cinema was certainly a popular venue during the 1930s, so much so that contemporary publicists felt obliged to emphasise, as does Lindsay, that there were other exhibits within the complex equally worth visiting. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that it was school authorities and individual teachers who actually made the decision to take their students there, hoping to educate them through a medium usually associated with pleasure. As John Mackenzie points out, the impressive cinema attendance figures issued by the Institute refer mainly to "involuntary" audiences, with all the potential inattention, lack of interest, or muted resistance which that entails.⁷ Grierson's aspiration to "command the mind of a generation" must be weighted against these circumstances.

Records from the Imperial Institute reveal that many quotidian and now forgotten documentary productions, including the early films re-edited at the EMB from archive and stock footage, as well as more prestigious productions, for example Windmill in Barbados (Basil Wright, EMB/P&O shipping, 1933), were exhibited at its cinema and distributed by the Empire

Film Library. Yet in other contexts prestige documentary films could on occasion be presented quite differently, as containing encrypted but nonetheless politically progressive commentary on issues such as imperialism. Here, the link between British documentary films and Soviet montage cinema was often foregrounded, providing justification for this type of interpretation. Ralph Bond, a political activist, critic and filmmaker, was closely associated with the documentary movement as well as being a co-founder of the Federation of Workers' Film Societies and a regular contributor to Close-Up and various socialist publications. Four decades later, reflecting back upon his experience in the 1930s, he drew a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, popular "escapist" Hollywood and British feature films shown in commercial cinemas, and on the other, Soviet montage cinema, films produced by the radical left Workers' Film and Photo League, and British documentary movement films. He recalls how Kino Films, established in 1933 to supply 16mm prints to socialist audiences, distributed as many films as they could from each of these latter three categories. The British documentary directors are praised for, on the whole, being "socially aware", and Bond argues that at the end of Drifters, for example, the "social implications" of exploitation in the fishing industry are "subtly indicated."⁸ In an article published in December 1933, also illustrated with stills from Contact, he adopts a similar interpretive approach to the newly released Cargo from Jamaica (Basil Wright, EMB, 1933), which deals with the harvesting and transportation of a banana crop. For Bond, the most significant thing about the film was that "incidentally it lands a wallop at one of the most fantastic contradictions of our social system." His analysis hinges upon

an editing strategy used at the end of the film, from which he seeks to extrapolate an underlying political intention:

We see the natives of Jamaica cutting the bananas in the fields and transporting them to the coast for shipment. An endless chain of cheap human labour hurries to and from the boat, jostling, shoving, pushing and sweating, great stacks of bananas on their shoulders, heaving the produce on to the boat. Rhythmically and insistently the camera records the scene as bananas are thrown from shore coolie to boat coolie and stacked in the hold.

*Then - a dramatic contrast and biting comment. The boat arrives in the London docks and all that is required to **unload** this great cargo is the moving belt, with one insignificant man standing by. One sharp cut focuses our minds on the whole meaning of rationalisation and the unemployment it brings in its train. From boat to warehouse the belt conveys its cargo and we visualise the throngs of unemployed dockers waiting at the gates for the jobs that never come.⁹*

What is most equivocal here are the pronouns in the last two sentences. Whether or not a viewing of the film would "focus our minds on the whole meaning of rationalisation and.. unemployment" would very much depend upon where it was seen, who was watching, and also whether she or he had read Bond's article. It is extremely unlikely that this kind of reading would have been encouraged in a schools context, or at the Imperial Institute cinema. Whether it would necessarily be arrived at outside of a specifically socialist environment, for example at a screening by one of the chain of film societies

promoted by the British Film Institute, is very much open to debate. Insofar as the perceived meaning of the sequence in Cargo from Jamaica described by Bond is concerned, there are many ways in which it could feasibly have been understood. For example, it could be seen as suggesting: (a) the modern speed and efficiency with which empire products, in this case bananas, could be shipped from one place to another by P&O; (b) the need for updating dockside technology in Jamaican ports, under the auspices of the benign colonial government; (c) the endemic backwardness of Jamaican culture, compared to advanced industrialisation in Britain; (d) the natural physical prowess of native labour, working in the sun, untainted by modern technology; (e) the exploitation of colonial labour. Within the context of the film, and the range of venues at which it was shown, the images and the editing at the end of Cargo from Jamaica could quite conceivably support any of these readings.

In fact, even the faint possibility that an EMB production might be perceived as critical of imperialism was something which Grierson, as head of an official institution, had to handle with extreme care. According to Wright, Cargo from Jamaica "just got dropped": in a 1975 interview with Elizabeth Sussex he expressed doubt as to whether even an archive print remained in existence (it does).¹⁰ Bond's article partly contradicts Wright's later statement, providing evidence that the film did not sink entirely without trace, and did, at least initially, attract some supportive critical attention. However, it is significant that Windmill in Barbados rather than Cargo from Jamaica was the one film from Wright's trip to the West Indies included in the second package of six EMB productions to be

distributed commercially, by Associated Talking Pictures in 1934. This suggests Grierson was aware that Cargo from Jamaica was potentially amenable to radical interpretation. He effectively withheld it from general release in order to avoid possible controversy at a time when the documentary movement was under considerable pressure from not only the Treasury but also representatives from the private sector of the British film industry who were busy lodging protests against unfair state-sponsored competition in the short films market. Yet as producer and critic of Cargo from Jamaica he dabbled with the film's implicit potential for slightly subversive social commentary, without ever letting this get out of hand by making it too explicit or attempting to distribute the film as widely as it possibly could have been. It is therefore more than a little ironic that the final sentence in Bond's review laments that the film "merit[s] a much wider distribution than I fear [it] will get."¹¹ He was obviously unaware that Grierson himself restricted access to the film.

It also difficult, in this particular case, to definitively establish even the intentions of Cargo from Jamaica's director. The EMB unit was orientated towards a group method of filmmaking, and although Grierson allowed Wright more creative freedom than any other director under his supervision, he wielded considerable authority over his junior colleagues and acted as the final arbiter of their work. This comes across very clearly in Wright's account of Cargo from Jamaica's editing stage. The film:

was quite a considerable experiment in a type of film cutting at the time. I spent a long time on it. I'd got this material

*which I knew was going to lead up to this appalling scene on the dockside, with all these men being paid about a farthing a day for doing this tremendously hard work. I filmed it from every possible dynamic angle, because my desire was to show the toil and sweat involved in this particular work - and, indeed, the exploitation. Then it was Grierson who said, "Of course, we've got a lovely contrast," because when he was shooting some stuff preliminary to the film he never finished - the Port of London film - he'd done some of these very calm shots of the bananas in London coming along these endless belts with nobody touching them, nobody doing any hard work at all. He said, "You can have that. You can stick that on the end and make your contrast, so you can have your violence."*¹²

Cargo from Jamaica's ending was a collective piece of work. As far as Grierson and Wright were concerned, exploitation was certainly a meaning which could be extracted from it, but the qualifier "indeed" implies that this was only one way of reading the ending; the furthest extreme to which it could be taken. The sequence of images mentioned above could have been experienced - depending upon the screening context and the audience - as producing a predominantly aesthetic frisson. The wording of Wright's recollection, referring to the film as an "experiment", utilising "dynamic angles", allows for this possibility. Moreover, if Wright has recalled Grierson's comments accurately, "lovely contrast" seems an inappropriate phrase to use in relation to exploitation. It suggests, more than a political point, a delight in having achieved an *aesthetic* effect, a juxtaposition between calm and violent movements.

Grierson, switching from producer to critic, discussed Cargo from Jamaica's combination of "symphonic form" and social commentary in a 1934 Cinema Quarterly article. He simultaneously encouraged, and sought to mitigate, aesthetic and political interpretations of the film:

Basil Wright..is almost exclusively interested in movement, and will build up movement in a fury of design and nuances of design; and for those whose eye is sufficiently trained and sufficiently fine will convey emotion in a thousand variations on a theme so simple as the portage of bananas..Some have attempted to relate this movement to the symphonics of pure form, but there was never any such animal. (1) The quality of Wright's sense of movement and of his patterns is distinctively his own and recognizably delicate. As with good painters, there is character in his line and attitude in his composition. (2) There is an over-tone in his work which - sometimes after seeming monotony - makes his description uniquely memorable. (3) His patterns invariably weave - not seeming to do so - a positive attitude to the material, which may conceivably relate to (2). The patterns of Cargo from Jamaica were more scathing comment on labour at twopence a hundred bunches (or whatever it is) than mere sociological stricture. His movements - (a) easily down; (b) horizontal; (c) arduously 45° up; (d) down again - conceal, or perhaps construct, a comment.¹³

As with much of Grierson's writing from the 1930s, this paragraph engages in complex negotiations, appealing to different formations within contemporary British film culture

and seeking to lead them by whichever route is necessary into the documentary camp. There is a continuation of the emphasis found in much Close-Up writing, particularly about Soviet montage directors, on artistic self-expression in film. Wright's name is cited twice, and the film's aesthetic qualities are described as emanating directly from him: his "sense of movement", "his patterns" - this despite the fact that parts of the film were a collaborative venture. Fine art and its appreciation is invoked: Wright is compared to a painter, and only a "sufficiently trained eye" is able to pick up all of Cargo from Jamaica's nuances. The casual mention of "an over-tone in his work" is a deftly placed, underplayed reference to Eisenstein's theory of "overtonal montage", first published in English translation in the April 1930 issue of Close-Up. Eisenstein and montage link British documentary to Soviet cinema, and therefore to politics as well as to aesthetics. The tone of the argument gradually shifts, paving the way for a reading of Cargo from Jamaica as concealing a "scathing comment" on the condition of colonial labour. This, presumably, is a concession to readers like Ralph Bond and the constituency he represents. Grierson, however, avoids criticism of the social or economic system as a whole. He never pushed this line of subversive reading as far as Bond tried to: to do so would have narrowed the range of his writing's appeal, contravened his official mandate, and even endangered his position as a government employee.

In Documentary Film Paul Rotha, perhaps less cautious because less closely tied to the state than Grierson, reiterated Bond's comments on Cargo from Jamaica, as well as extending them to Windmill in Barbados and Song of

Ceylon.¹⁴ Elsewhere in the same book, however, he argues that "the EMB films..avoided the major issues provoked by their material. That was inevitable under their powers of production..The directors concerned knew this and wisely..avoided any economic or important social analysis."¹⁵ This vacillation is significant. Even though both Rotha and Bond were particularly keen on pursuing radical readings of documentary, the latter was similarly forced to later admit that "some directors claimed that they had hidden away some profound social message in their films, but it was generally so well hidden that no one else could detect it."¹⁶ Audiences had to be primed to read documentary films in this way, and reviews which helped them along this road were few and far between. Graham Greene's 1940 Spectator review of African Skyway is a rare exception; the film is described as "for the most part routine travelogue..but when we reach Durban something happens: the camera swings from the subject of Imperial Airways to record a horrifying vision of the Rand, the awful squalor of the mining compounds of Johannesburg, the hollow-chested queues for the daily ration of food."¹⁷ However, criticism like this remained a minority pursuit, largely restricted to those "in the know"; Greene had after all previously worked for Rotha at Strand Films, on The Future's in the Air, and the Spectator was a relatively highbrow magazine. Moreover, most of the radical readings sporadically proposed by left-leaning critics concentrate upon endings. In all types of film texts these tend, on the whole, to be more open than what has gone before and therefore more difficult to stamp with one definitive meaning. Audiences can cut both ways: if schoolchildren visiting the Imperial Institute might well have wriggled out of absorbing

the lessons they should have learned, there was equally no guarantee that adult viewers would focus on the moments in 1930s documentary films that Bond, Rotha and Greene wanted them to, or would interpret them in the way they preferred.

Despite the various difficulties inherent in any attempt to classify modes of audience response and to attribute them to actual historical groupings, very broadly defined subdivisions can be suggested. In early July 1933, Contact was first screened at what Rotha described in a letter as a "gala performance..after a slap-up dinner at the Dorchester Hall" in London. The "well-fed, cigar-smoking audience" which included "the bloody P.M. and sundry members of the Cabinet" applauded enthusiastically.¹⁸ The film was later well-received at the 1934 Venice Film Festival, much to Rotha's distaste, considering that "the great mass of Italian people [were] suffering under the Mussolini lash."¹⁹ The Venice event that year was not however excessively nationalistic; the catholic choice of films it awarded prizes to also included Vertov's Three Songs of Lenin. Audience responses at premières and festivals are slightly easier to reconstruct than the myriad less prestigious, more diverse screenings of a film after its initial release. Contact's success at the Dorchester Hall and the plaudits it received at the world's first film festival, promoted by a European state undergoing a period of enforced modernisation and imperial expansion, would seem to imply that the documentary movement's imperialist internationalism played a significant role in projecting a "progressive", technocratic vision of Western ascendancy to elite audiences both at home and

abroad. The success of Drifters and then Contact, the first major documentary films to be financed, respectively, by the state and by the corporate sector, helped cement a temporary, pragmatic alliance between slightly more forward-looking sectors of the British ruling elite and filmmakers seeking to reform but not to overthrow or fundamentally restructure the established status quo. Outside of this small but important axis, however, it becomes even more difficult to speculate about what kind of ideological impact these films had in relation to notions of imperialism circulating within popular culture.

The authors of The Dominant Ideology Thesis, a sophisticated reinstatement of a form of "vulgar Marxism", hitherto largely avoided by elaborately refined Western Marxist theory, argue that too much emphasis has been placed upon the concept of ideology as a cohering factor within Western capitalist societies. Their hypothesis, which seems to be borne out in the case of the documentary movement's imperialist internationalism, is that ideology *may* contribute to holding together privileged elites, although not without sometimes considerable internal tension between different dominant class fractions. However, according to the anti-dominant ideology thesis, subordinate classes and groups quite often do not share these values, adhering instead to contradictory ones, or simply remaining indifferent to them. Yet this does not mean that the subordinated majority is necessarily predisposed, potentially or actually, to articulate or act upon oppositional values. At the lower reaches of the social scale, what Marx referred to as "the dull compulsion of economic relationships", the struggle to make ends meet and also

perhaps obtain a small amount of pleasure, predominates as perhaps the overriding concern of everyday life.²⁰

Only detailed historical research into popular audiences, an area lacking in conventional forms of documentation, can gauge the extent to which this thesis, in any given period, holds true. Clearly, certain British film intellectuals during the 1930s pushed for more radical readings of at least certain instances of the documentary movement's work, and certain audiences, such as those catered to by Kino Films, might have been receptive to this. However, the extent to which this was successful in transforming popular ideas about imperialism, or fostering a sense of internationalism amongst the populace at large, is a subject for further research. It could just as easily be argued that this strategy of occasionally insinuating radical readings into 1930s documentary films helped to prevent a more comprehensive, effective contemporary critique of their imperialist internationalism from emerging. The same could be said of another mode of appreciating documentary films also current amongst certain film-literate audiences during the 1930s: an "aesthetic" or "experimental" attitude which was partly a carry-over from some of the ways of seeing film encouraged by Close-Up.

II Advertising Art and Imperialism

There were differences but few absolute divisions within British film culture during the 1930s, which was in a state of flux, characterised by convergences as well as divergences. Ralph Bond may have been a leading proponent of politically radical readings of documentary films, but his review of Cargo from Jamaica appeared in the final issue of Close-Up, and also praised the aesthetic qualities of Wright's film: "the most perfect of all documentary forms, telling its story in terms of visual movement, without recourse to a single title or a word of commentary."²¹ Politics and aesthetics were seen not necessarily as identical, but certainly as closely linked to each other. Different critics articulated this link in different ways. Close-Up's editor Kenneth Macpherson was one of the people who along with Bond established the Federation of Workers' Film Societies, and although his magazine had clearly marked aesthetic priorities, it never excluded political considerations altogether. Nevertheless, Close-Up's interest in generating discussion about film art, and the London Film Society's charter, which stipulated that its screenings were to be held *solely* in order to study aesthetics, helped create a small enclave within British film culture where close attention to film form and an appreciation of the experimental or "advance-guard" aspects of cinema predominated.

The poet H.D., a regular contributor to Close-Up, took this approach to an extreme. As Anne Friedberg argues, "her fascination was for a privatized form of reception, of viewing."²² Probably equipped with a "Jacky" home

projector, which as the advertisements appearing in Close-Up stated "can be stopped for any length of time on one image", she developed a rarefied mode of film criticism which cut across the films she wrote about, triggering a chain of seemingly tangential associations which ascended to dizzy heights of poetic reverie. H.D.'s December 1929 review of Turksib differs markedly from what Grierson and other more prosaic critics had to say about the film. The one shared assumption is that Turksib successfully transcends outdated polarities: for H.D. it disproves the truism "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet [which] did and had to do..for an older generation."²³ However, H.D.'s review is primarily concerned not with politics as such but with a particular experience of modernity which certain films give access to. Turksib is seen as one of those rare pieces of cinema which provoke, rather than represent, new ways of envisaging the world: modern cinematic technology, properly used, delivers mystical insights and new forms of intellection. The cryptic, allusive language of her review duplicates the process perceived within the film itself:

*Vision sweeps, we move, invisible, are ourselves gifted with invisibility and wear about our worthless ankles the very sandal straps of the god Messenger. We are ourselves almost too deeply involved with the beauty and the miracle of sheer thought transfiguration to realise what a stride forward **art** has taken, **film** art if you wish to deride and to deify that much maligned abstraction.*²⁴

Once again, as in Ralph Bond's plainly written analysis of Cargo from Jamaica, the rhetorical move towards inclusiveness attempted through the use of the pronoun "we" has definite limitations. H.D. makes grand, universal claims about Turksib which fail to acknowledge the minority modernist poetic culture they emerge from, or her own privileged access to the elitist London Film Society screening context and to state of the art technology (the Jacky) which allows her to develop them. Close-Up was heavily subsidised by Bryher's considerable private income, and the intimate relationship to the film image this enabled the magazine's readers and particularly its inner circle (Bryher, H.D., and Macpherson) to enjoy is reflected, for example, in the large number of luxurious film stills reproduced in its pages on expensive high quality enamel stock.²⁵

This aesthetic radicalism and preoccupation with the minutiae of film form impacted upon and was in turn reinforced by adjacent filmmaking practices. Deke Dusinberre, in an essay on this particular "attitude" towards cinema in the 1930s, suggests that it entailed an "intricate relationship" between specialist film criticism, the documentary movement, and also certain advertising films.²⁶ This was established at the outset by Grierson's editing of Drifters. The EMB film committee, its first audience, objected to the more adventurous montage sequences and insisted that they be removed before the film could be released. Grierson complied, received their approval after a second screening, then reinserted these sequences prior to Drifters' successful London Film Society première: another example of skilful manoeuvring in order to seize and hold the centre

ground by appealing to differently located influential minority audiences.²⁷ Alan Lovell and subsequent writers have argued that the documentary movement "captured" the interest in film as art in the 1930s, but the process was more interactive than this suggests.²⁸ The enthusiasm for film art persisted and developed throughout the decade, and had an impact upon documentary production practices. The London Film Society continued its screenings until 1939, and although Close-Up ceased publication in 1933, a new journal, Film Art, published between 1933 and 1937, picked up where its predecessor left off. In a 1934 manifesto drafted by its editor, B. Vivian Braun, the magazine's aims were outlined: first and foremost "TO ANALYSE THE POTENTIALITIES AND SOLVE THE AESTHETIC PROBLEMS OF CINEMA ART."²⁹

Critics writing for Film Art reviewed documentary films in what Dusiñberre describes as a "highly selective" manner, "stressing [only] certain qualities or points," and using a vocabulary which alluded to poetry, painting and sculpture.³⁰ For H.D., cinematic technology, correctly employed, could produce real beauty, genuine artistic advance, and a stimulus to new thinking which "miraculously" moved beyond tired old boundaries such as those opposing the East to the West. Film Art critics pursued similar concerns and made similar assumptions in their reviews of selected British documentary films. For Irene Nicholson, Liner Cruising South (Basil Wright, EMB/P&O, 1933) opened and closed with sequences of "pure poetry", and she commended the film's "fine feeling for surface textures".³¹ B. Vivian Braun praised Cargo from Jamaica for being an "exquisitely photographed, beautifully mounted essay," noting in particular that "I don't think anyone

has ever photographed the lovely heads of negroes with such an eye for pure sculptural beauty."³²

This last comment glosses over the implications of some information published by Wright just a few months earlier in two brief Cinema Quarterly articles about work in progress:

"Shooting in the Tropics" and "Films in the West Indies". In the latter he wryly notes the different responses, from effectively segregated black and white audiences, to the same films shown in the same cinemas in Jamaica: "I had the (personal) pleasure of hearing Michael and Mary very nearly

"raspberried" off the screen by a negro pit, while a white upper circle squirmed in horrified righteousness."³³ In

"Shooting in the Tropics" Wright discusses in detail how he had to manipulate his camera and lighting equipment, shoot mainly in the shade, and employ special reflectors covered with tinfoil in order to compensate for the "blindingly brilliant" light and capture facial detail, given the dark skin tones of most of his subjects.³⁴ Together, these observations

problematise the presumably asocial purity of the "sculptural beauty" Braun perceives in the end product. It is not merely a matter of having an "eye" for fixed aesthetic verities. Wright's technical difficulties demonstrate that Western-manufactured film technology generally tends to operate most effectively within certain climactic conditions and in relation to a normative range of skin tones. Most critics in the Close-Up/Film Art mould felt that currently available film technology had the inherent potential to create great art, but was rarely being used to do so, except by a few gifted directors. Paul Rotha stated this position cogently in The Film Till Now: "so wide are the resources in technical devices that theoretically there

should be no reason for the making of bad films save the sheer incompetence of the director."³⁵ Yet the "pure" beauty Braun praised in Cargo from Jamaica was relative rather than absolute. Wright had to exercise ingenuity and adapt the given equipment to achieve "good shooting", judged by the standards of discerning audiences back in England.³⁶ He did not link the practical lessons he learned about film technology, or his own project, to wider questions about the cultural variability of cinematic pleasure and ideals of beauty, even though throughout the filming audiences in the cinemas he was visiting provided evidence to support this.

On one level this would seem to support Don Macpherson's speculation that the lure of "film art" in the 1930s fulfilled a "masking function..in relation to propaganda by and for the imperialist state."³⁷ However, this implies that film art in the 1930s simply sweetened an otherwise bitter ideological pill. Aesthetic standards may be relative, but this does not mean they cannot overlap or be acceptable to groups other than those who formulate them. Wright and other documentary movement directors took care to avoid in their work what most progressive white critics at the time considered to be ugly and demeaning black stereotypes. Rotha, for example, harshly rebuked Sanders of the River for its representation of Africans as "toad[ies] to the White Man" and plethora of references to "stabbing and killing."³⁸ There were of course no prominent black British film critics publishing during the 1930s, and therefore the possibility of defining a black film aesthetic was not on the agenda, but within this situation directors like Wright's attempts to create a more beautiful image of black people can be considered to have been at

least partially progressive. If aesthetic standards are ultimately relative and linked to historical and cultural contexts, then by the same token political evaluations, especially retrospective ones, also need to be sensitive to these factors.

The wider question of how the perception of British documentaries in terms of "film art" relates to imperialism in the 1930s also requires careful consideration. On the one hand, appreciating documentaries mainly in terms of their aesthetic qualities partly circumvents the immediate ideological impact of the particular films appraised in this way. Whether or not Cargo from Jamaica is a pro- or anti-imperialist text is largely irrelevant to Braun's discussion and the mode of viewing he proposes. On the other hand, such a strategy tacitly legitimises the system of production and the social context which makes such work possible. As both Ian Aitken and Paul Swann have recently pointed out, the history of public relations and advertising in the interwar period was a factor crucial to the documentary movement's development.³⁹ Stephen Tallents was the first but by no means the only public relations specialist willing to support Grierson and his colleague's endeavours. Other like-minded experts working for large corporations helped to keep documentary movement filmmakers in work by offering them a series of contracts. They included Jack Beddington at Shell and BP (Contact); C.F. Snowden-Gamble at Imperial Airways (the aerial genre); Col Medlicott at Anglo-Iranian Oil (Dawn of Iran); S.C. Leslie and A.P. Ryan working for the gas industry (Housing Problems and Enough to Eat); Gervas Huxley at the Ceylon Tea Marketing Board (Song of Ceylon).⁴⁰

William Crawford, who served on the GPO's as well as the EMB's publicity committee, and whose own advertising agency dominated the field during the 1930s, was perhaps the leading contemporary advocate of innovative market techniques. He argued that advertising need not be manipulative or deceitful, and could in fact be educational and of service to the community. As Paul Swann points out, in some respects Crawford's philosophy resembled Grierson's, in that he believed the "public"'s interests were not incompatible with those pursued by the state and big business.⁴¹ In his book How to Succeed in Advertising (1931) Crawford recommended, as particularly appropriate for large corporations seeking to consolidate their share of already saturated markets, the further development of strategies designed to maintain a relationship of trust and a sense of identity between producers and consumers. The aim in this kind of campaign would be to foster long-term image-building, rather than to sell specific products.⁴²

Another of Crawford's tips for success was that modern artists should be employed on advertising and publicity campaigns; this would help the sponsor to appear vital, up to date, and progressive. Under Tallents' leadership, the EMB establishing a reputation for commissioning work not only from the documentary filmmakers but also from noted artists in other media. The organisation's poster campaign, for example, featured work by Charles Pear, F.C. Herrick, Paul Nash and Clive Gardiner. Commissions were given to E. McKnight Kauffer, who also designed the London Film Society's logo and the cover for Tallents' The Projection of England.⁴³ Rotha recalls in Documentary Diary that Jack Beddington in

THE FILM SOCIETY



THE PROJECTION OF ENGLAND



BY S. G. TALLENTS

particular used his position at Shell and BP to patronise rising young painters and writers, including Graham Sutherland, Edward Ardizzone and John Betjeman.⁴⁴ Shell also regularly placed humorous cartoon sketch advertisements by Nicholas Bentley in World Film News, and the Shell Film unit was established under Edgar Anstey in 1934. The growth and development of the public relations and advertising industry during the 1930s created an interface between modern art and the promotion of corporate images. It also channelled money into a range of documentary movement activities and generated material which could be appreciated as film art.

One of the contexts the documentary movement located itself within was therefore between progressive corporate and official sponsors sympathetic towards or at least tolerant of modern or experimental art - insofar as it furthered their long-range objectives - and a small but significant audience which evaluated their films primarily in terms of aesthetics. The extent to which this attitude permeated more widely, in a diluted form, to viewers not directly exposed to criticism produced by journals like Film Art, is a subject for further research. It certainly fed back into the work of the documentary filmmakers themselves. Len Lye's short Trade Tattoo (GPO, 1937) provides a good example of how sponsors' and aesthetically inclined audiences' imperatives impacted upon documentary production, as well as illustrating the complexities of the relationship between advertising, film art and imperialism. Combined with purely abstract animation sequences, Lye's short utilised footage from Drifters, Cargo from Jamaica, Coal Face (GPO, 1935), Nightmail (GPO, 1936) and other documentary movement

films, over which coloured lines, shapes and patterns were hand painted. The editing relates more to the breezy jazz soundtrack provided by the Lecuona band than to the content of the images. Titles, some of them hand-written, convey messages such as "the rhythm of trade is maintained by the mails", repeated three times and interspersed with images of various types of work and transportation. Editing heightens the sense of speed, interconnection and harmonious social and economic orchestration set up by the relationship between the music, animated abstract patterns, and shots of tropical landscapes and the ocean taken from fast-moving trains and boats. The final title, linked to photographic and animated images of clock faces and hands, reminds viewers that "they must post before 2pm."

The GPO's main interest in Trade Tattoo may have been to advertise the efficiency of their service, and to get audiences to post their letters on time, but articles written by Len Lye during the mid-1930s indicate that its director was almost exclusively concerned with technical and aesthetic issues. In a book review published just after Trade Tattoo's release, he regretted that perhaps too much mental energy was being expended "on problems of economics, social organisation, human annihilation, liberties and so on; so that we have hardly any mind left for creating or approaching mind gems in any aesthetic medium."⁴⁵ That Trade Tattoo is an experiment in and exploration of the possibilities of film as art is explicitly signified near its beginning, where canted pieces of celluloid glide across the screen from right to left and left to right. In several instances, the content of shots which have been heavily painted over is hard to identify; the work of the artist,

his own distinctive imprint, predominates over the informational and rhetorical aspects of the text.

This aesthetic dimension cannot be separated from, but neither should it be completely subordinated to, Trade Tattoo's politics. To a certain extent, artistic innovation is indeed a sweetener which enhances, and is harnessed to, a celebration of the postal service as a cog in the wheel of an integrated, non-conflictual imperial trading system. Yet it would be just as plausible to argue that Trade Tattoo simply pays lip service to "economics, social organisation..and so on" and that, at least insofar as Lye and audiences looking for film art were concerned, these serve merely as a pretext for experiment in the possibilities and pleasures of cinematic form. However, neither option quite catches all the factors involved in appreciating experiments in film art in the 1930s. For many critics, aesthetics was not opposed to social and political concerns. Ending his book review, Lye expanded a little on what he meant by "mind gems", referring to the importance of "the only thing that matters finally apart from bread and butter and behaviour, namely the subtleties of mind content invested with beauty."⁴⁶ The wording suggests that current economic and social relationships are less important than the aspiration, activated by art, to transcend them, to move onto a higher, utopian plane of thought and feeling.

III Utopian Film Aesthetics

Richard Griffith, writing in 1949, argued that the most important trend within British film culture during the 1930s was a gradual move towards a more socially concerned type of film criticism and production. For him, Paul Rotha's career exemplifies this:

With each film he made from Contact onwards, he moved closer to the social implications of his subjects. Documentary Film first published in 1936 was a long, long way from The Film Till Now of 1930 in theory and philosophic base.. Quite precisely, he performed the strategic task of bringing into the international documentary camp the very considerable number of persons - some of them in key positions in relation to documentary's interests - who were in the first instance concerned with the film for its own sake, and who could only be led to a consideration of its social role by the exhortation and example of a filmmaker and film historian who, they knew, shared their own basic love for the medium.⁴⁷

This brief sketch is true up to a point, in that there was a broad historical shift, typified by the difference between the two books Griffith mentions. Yet it was not so much a question of opposing camps strategically brought together, with film aesthetes on one side and those concerned with cinema's "social role" on the other, as of differences of emphasis related to the political and cultural location of particular filmmakers, critics and audiences. For example, Norman McLaren's trajectory can be contrasted to Rotha's: he began making films as a student at Glasgow School of Art and, as a Communist Party member, co-directed Hell Unltd.

(McLaren/Helen Biggar, 1936), an experimental propaganda film attacking the arms trade. After being inducted into the GPO film unit by Grierson, McLaren established a reputation, along with Len Lye, as an animator primarily concerned with innovative film aesthetics. This suggests that traffic between "film as art" and the political function of cinema went in both directions during the 1930s, and that the two were not considered to be antithetical.

Griffith's account is an example of how retrospectively formulated theoretical definitions and historical schemas can sometimes tend to flatten out such nuances. More recently, in After the Great Divide, Andreas Huyssen offers, as a methodological starting-point, a distinction between interwar modernist and avant-garde cultural practices.⁴⁸ Paul Willemen, relating these concepts to cinema, suggests that "the avant-garde is not prescriptive about the precise characteristics of any given art practice, while modernism most definitely is used as a normative category, distinguishing between objects on the grounds of attributes such as self-reflexivity, immanence and indeterminacy."⁴⁹ An avant-garde stance privileges the notion of art as cultural practice, intervening into everyday life through whichever medium or combination of media is appropriate. Modernism remains more closely wedded to the notion of the art object as an autonomous, self-contained entity, and is therefore primarily interested in "experiments with visual perspective, narrative structure, temporal logic, etc."⁵⁰ According to this definition, modernism sees itself as essentially apolitical, whereas "the avant-garde assumes, rightly or wrongly..a symbiotic relationship between artistic and political radicalness", as in,

for example, the extreme anti-art, utilitarian position advocated by some of the Soviet intellectuals associated with Novy Lef.⁵¹

Both Huyssen and Willemsen are careful to point out that further research needs to be done in order to explore the avant-garde/modernist distinction more thoroughly and ground it historically. They also insist that each of these tendencies co-exist within most early twentieth century artistic movements as well as, very often, within individual oeuvres. In the final analysis, it is not so much the actual terms as the issues they raise which are important. Willemsen recognises this when he describes the opposition as historically manifesting itself in "simultaneous but antagonistic tendencies."⁵² Yet within British film culture in the 1930s, it is simultaneity rather than antagonism which predominates, to the extent that the distinction may even be untenable. For example, Film Art's front page describes the journal as a "review of the advance-guard cinema", but on first impressions the general position it and Close-Up developed would seem to conform more to Willemsen's retrospective definition of a modernist attitude. These magazines' tendency to express critical appreciation of experimental work in a new medium, cinema, through repeated reference to the highest standards achieved within established arts, does lend a certain amount of credence to Willemsen's assertion that modernism "runs merely in order to remain in the same place."⁵³ However, many of the critics did argue or assume that the new ways of seeing elaborated within favoured films would or could eventually contribute to the dissemination of progressive attitudes and open people's eyes to the wondrous potential and beauty inherent in the

modern world. Documentary practice and criticism evinced similar concerns, but in a different order of priority. Grierson's conception of the role film should play in society was in a certain sense an interventionist, even an avant-garde one, albeit informed by non-revolutionary objectives. Aesthetics was subordinated to social utility, but clearly the creation of film art, even if only as a "by-product", was important, and was reflected in the personnel he employed.⁵⁴

The British documentary movement's perceived link to Soviet montage cinema helped to legitimise its artistic as well as its political aspirations. When Rotha was employed by Grierson to work at the EMB film unit in 1931, his main claim to fame was as a film aesthetician. In some respects, his later writings do differ from The Film Till Now, acquiring an explicitly socialist edge, so that, for example, Documentary Film is more favourably disposed towards Soviet montage cinema as a social institution. Yet what remains consistent across the two books is a certain conception of montage as both the basis of film art and a powerful propaganda weapon. In The Film Till Now Rotha suggests that the postrevolutionary directors' great contribution to film technique should be separated out and considered in isolation from the uses to which it has been put, precisely because montage has the potential to be so politically effective. "The Soviet cinema is immensely powerful. Its films carry social and political contents expressed so emotionally and with such a degree of technical perfection that the content may be accepted in the temporary admiration of the method."⁵⁵ The "method", it is assumed, is detachable from the content. Later, when Rotha became a director, and abandoned this early rejection of

cinema as propaganda, the political as well as the artistic kudos associated with montage attached itself to his and other documentary filmmakers' work.

The Film Till Now's theoretical section is heavily indebted to Close-Up's pioneering work on film aesthetics, and to English translations of Eisenstein and Pudovkin. Much of what is written about in Rotha's first book appears in Contact. The film's overall rate of cutting is very fast, but within this there are carefully structured periods of relatively calm or urgent rhythms, quite consistent with the advice given in Pudovkin's Film Technique (1929) and in The Film Till Now.⁵⁶ The close-ups of people looking into the sky at the passing aeroplane are clearly modelled on "the amazing types in Eisenstein's The General Line [The Old and the New] and Turin's Turksib" with their "wonderful wrinkled features and twisted beards" which "recall the heads of Dürer and Holbein in their rich quality."⁵⁷ Contact's intertitles are also very "Soviet": they employ a small number of words, graphically designed for maximum impact, and provide information or commentary not immediately deducible from the images. The Film Till Now discusses the advantages and disadvantages of intertitles, and particularly commends the bold "split-titling and dynamic use of lettering" designed by Grierson for the version of Turksib exhibited in England.⁵⁸ In Contact intertitles are also rapidly edited and sometimes "launched" from the back of the screen; increasing in size and giving the effect of being hurled directly at the viewer.

The connection established between British documentary and Soviet montage cinema within British film culture in the

1930s therefore served a dual role: as a focus for audiences interested in aesthetic experimentation, as well as a rallying-point for those hoping to create a politically radical film culture which could challenged Hollywood commercial cinema and the values it was felt to perpetuate. Although one or other of these aspirations might be emphasised by different critics or in different exhibition situations, they were rarely if ever totally exclusive of each other. This crossover emerges in Bryher's use, in Film Problems of Soviet Russia, of aviation as a metaphor through which to talk about *both* aesthetics and, if not exactly politics, issues of social and personal identity. In her autobiography, she also makes this connection, in a description of her first flight, travelling from London to Paris with H.D. in May 1921:

*I knew nothing about aeroplanes, it was the "being modern" that appealed to me..My immediate reaction as we started towards France was surprise. In a flash, I understood modern painting. The geometric pattern of the fields, the curves of the rivers and the thick lines of sudden, oblong pools explained the canvases that till then had meant so little to me.*⁵⁹

Bryher opens Film Problems of Soviet Russia with a reminiscence of an aeroplane journey to Berlin to see Soviet films, and asks "whoever started the idea that it was impossible to appreciate the view from an altitude? It is the only way really to see a country, to see it from a plane." Her next sentence locates a connection between this peculiarly modern experience and the films she is about to discuss: "fields and tiny hills and woods mass themselves together like a crowd Eisenstein is directing; their place in a whole becomes apparent, all their characteristics and problems, instead of a tiny piece of them, become revealed."⁶⁰ Later she writes of October "I have seen it three times, and each time it lifts the mind higher until one feels as actually as if one were in a swift aeroplane, that indescribable sensation of leaving the ground with engines gathering speed and mountains dropping behind one."⁶¹ Eisenstein's film transports Bryher into another dimension, beyond worldly concerns, and its exhilarating technique gives her access to what she feels is a comprehensive overview of the political and historical situations it deals with. Aviation is likened to Soviet montage cinema because it fuses an excitingly new aesthetic experience with a synoptic, almost revelatory insight into the modern world.

In Film Problems of Soviet Russia Bryher attaches her utopian hopes for social progress through aesthetic advancement to Soviet cinema and assumes, without any real evidence, that the films she discusses are beginning to inaugurate this process in Russia. For her, the social and aesthetic experience she describes as "being modern" can be universalised. As Richard Griffith later pointed out, writers like Bryher "seem to

have wanted at one and the same time to sophisticate the film and to exploit its mass-appeal..After the success of the great Russian films, ideologically complex but [apparently] reaching illiterate peasants with great force and lucidity, it seemed that they must be right."⁶² This last, erroneous assumption about the extent of the distribution and impact of montage cinema within the Soviet Union is linked to a failure to fully acknowledge that air travel and watching Soviet films were at the time of writing the privilege of a tiny minority within England.

These oversights and factual inaccuracies do not however invalidate the vague but nevertheless strongly felt yearning, within Film Problems of Soviet Russia and also present as an undercurrent in much English appreciation of film art during the 1930s, for what Bryher described as "an *entirely different life*."⁶³ The comprehensiveness, as well as the vagueness, of this desire prevents it from being linked to any clearly articulated political or social programme. Film Problems of Soviet Russia eschews conventional politics and avoids entering into current sectarian debates. Nothing specific is delineated except for broad gestures towards education and modernisation, words which are never defined in detail. This is of course partly due to the highly charged context she wrote within, where Close-Up sought to separate its defence of montage cinema from the accusation that the magazine was slavishly pro-Soviet. On the other hand, the integrity of her argument, that "politics seldom touch vital aspects of the soul of the world", should be respected as expressing an earnest desire for cultural and spiritual development.⁶⁴

This elusive belief in a definite but indefinable connection between the promotion of film art and the goal of social progress partly scotches, or at least greatly complicates, the avant-garde/modernism distinction proposed by Huyssen and Willemen. The last capitalised sentence in B.Vivian Braun's Film Art manifesto declared that, alongside the study of film aesthetics, his journal was also dedicated to encouraging "THE USE OF THE CINEMA AS A SOCIAL REFORMER, AS A MEANS FOR INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING AND FOR GENERAL EDUCATION."⁶⁵ The generality of this aspiration can be criticised as hopelessly unrealistic and blithely utopian. However, it must also be counterposed to the fact that in England during this period avant-gardeism, insofar as this involves bringing art into everyday life and demanding that it fulfil a social function, had already been preempted by advertising companies and state propaganda services like the EMB and the GPO publicity departments. As T.R. Nevett points out:

These years..witnessed the appearance of a remarkable range of miscellaneous media. Advertisers could have their names towed through the sky on banners, emblazoned on the sides of cruising dirigibles, or written overhead in letters of smoke. At night these same names could be projected on to the clouds by powerful searchlights, or picked out in neon signs carried on the undersides of aircraft. Messages could be boomed aloft by airborne loudspeakers, or recorded on unbreakable plastic records to find their way into the recipient's home. In the streets the new motor-vans often resembled the original advertising carts, as they carried on their roofs some enormous company emblem, such as the

*Mazawattee teapot. Moving models tapped shop windows to attract the attention of the passer-by, and continuous films made sure that the required selling-points were repeated ad nauseam. City centre walls, drab by day, came alive with scintillating neon by night. Some local authorities allowed advertising on pavements. The Treasury even permitted it on the backs of dog-licences.*⁶⁶

Sophisticated critics contributing to Film Art and Close-Up would no doubt have been appalled at the suggestion that the films they studied so closely and admired so much should also be located alongside such vulgar practices. Their contiguity nevertheless problematises the aesthetic approach, which was premised upon ignoring *detailed* exploration of production and exhibition contexts, particularly of British documentary films. Fighting for the recognition of certain films as art, they failed to see their relationship to interwar developments in advertising and the range of new cultural practices this entailed. Yet, paradoxically, the close study of film art was not perceived as something separate from social concerns, but as an activity which in the long run would contribute towards, in Braun's words, "social reform", "international understanding" and "general education." Rotha, in his 1933 preface to the first English translation of Rudolph Arnheim's Film, wrote optimistically about the importance of this conjunction. "In the whole history of cinema as a community stimulant, I do not believe that there has been a time such as the present, when a "good" film has been so assured of public support or when the demand for the proper use of the cinema has been so plainly manifest."⁶⁷ One problem here, as also with so much of Grierson's writing, is

the generalised conception of the "public", which not only elides any distinction between audiences within England but also includes, in the previous paragraph, film enthusiasts Rotha met in the Middle East and Africa whilst making Contact.

"Good" film art and the "proper" use of cinema are attractive but undefined terms, nevertheless posited as universal standards. Their mutual implication is assumed to be so self-evident that no attempt is made to explore their interrelationship.

The elisions contained within Braun's manifesto and Rotha's preface frame Irene Nicholson's appreciative Film Art review of Contact. Like H.D.'s review of Turksib, albeit less poetic, her response claims a general validity for its socially and culturally specific stance. She discusses the finer points of photography, lighting, editing, intertitles and music, running through a checklist, developed by Close-Up and by Rotha himself in The Film Till Now, of qualities to consider when assessing a film's aesthetic value. Contact's actual provenance, the objectives of the sponsors who financed its production, and the restricted nature of the "public" for "good" films, are not discussed at all. Nevertheless, in this case, all of these factors permeate to the very heart of Nicholson's experience of Contact as film art. She notes the novel way in which Rotha's work manages to capture the "aviation sense": "panning is a little too frequent and conveys [it] not nearly so effectively as the scared birds and the upturned heads of [sic] niggers."⁶⁸ The tradition which Nicholson writes out of enables her to comment with great accuracy on the film's technical and aesthetic features, and to identify its innovations, but not to assess the imperialist internationalism these build into its basic

structure. The "aviation sense" lifts her up but also disconnects her from the people left behind on the ground.

IV Authoring Otherness: Song of Ceylon

Nicholson attributes Contact's excellence to the fact that it was "a film directed, mounted and photographed by one man, an artist."⁶⁹ In the same issue of Film Art Braun's review of Cargo from Jamaica similarly praises Basil Wright as "one of the few men in England making real films which he writes, directs, AND EDITS."⁷⁰ This identification of an individual creative sensibility as the source of all that is important within a film effectively transfers to British documentary productions the strategy Close-Up employed in relation to Soviet montage cinema. Rotha insisted in The Film Till Now that "there lies something beyond a theme and its technical expression, namely, the conception, attitude of mind, or *creative impulse* of the director himself."⁷¹ Insight into this mystified "something beyond", which constitutes the highest level of film appreciation, is governed by the "sensitivity" of the "individual spectator", in contradistinction to "the collective acceptance of a film by a number of persons."⁷² This formula elevates the film artist by advocating deference to a reified, gendered creativity, as opposed to the sociological analysis of audience reception. Its dominance enabled Basil Wright's Song of Ceylon (EMB/Ceylon Tea Marketing Board, 1934), perhaps the single most interesting British documentary movement film about the Empire, to be acclaimed as an artistic triumph and as evidence of the flowering of a uniquely poetic talent.

Film art needs artists, but artists do not emerge from a vacuum. Many years later, in a modest and faithful tribute to his mentor, Wright acknowledged that "it was Grierson who

built a protective wall around me, and stood sentry at the gates, so that I could finish Song of Ceylon." ⁷³ Annette Kuhn has suggested that the collective ethos and apprenticeship structure Grierson established within the EMB and GPO film units created an atmosphere which would, he hoped, nurture what was best in, and at the same time constrain the excesses of, individual talents. She points out that the interplay between constraint and excess also pertains to the film units' institutional relationship to the state, which "had built into its structure a certain distance from the sponsor." ⁷⁴ Most of the creative personnel were temporary, non-unionised workers nominally employed by small commercial firms contracted by the EMB and GPO for specific projects. Until his resignation in 1937, all directors were therefore answerable only to Grierson, who was the one member of staff to actually hold a tenured post. These arrangements positioned him as both the chief mediator of the state's and other sponsors' requirements, and as an enlightened film producer able to allow and even encourage artistic experimentation amongst the people working for him. Grierson's general strategy was to try to balance conformity to the demands of senior management and Treasury officials responsible for approving the units' yearly grants, with the production of films which would attract critical kudos and generate a level of support for the movement's work within the wider film culture. Wright's "protective wall" metaphor is apt because Song of Ceylon was very much a film which fulfilled the second objective. Grierson resolutely defended the project against the charge, which as Kuhn points out was particularly prevalent during the 1933/34 transition from the EMB to the GPO, that the unit was "exceeding its brief." ⁷⁵ He realised that occasional

"excesses", which could not be justified on purely instrumental or economic grounds, were necessary in order to sustain the documentary movement's cultural legitimacy. If his filmmakers were to be praised as artists, they had to be perceived as more than simply state functionaries.

"Exceeding the brief", in Treasury terms, allowed Song of Ceylon to introduce a new artist into British film culture.

Sympathetic critics celebrated Wright's arrival and did not attempt to contextualise his subtle and lyrical film or relate it to anything apart from the talent of its creator and debates about film art. Marie Seton, for example, wrote in her Film Art review that, although "Song of Ceylon is a travelogue designed to "sell more tea", it is as remote from the usual "Magic Carpet" trip to foreign climes as the travels of Marco Polo are from a Baedeker handbook."⁷⁶ The film's production context, relating as it does to the rather mundane business of selling tea, is transcended because Wright is compared to, and himself awarded the status of, an author with a distinctive, serious style.

Song of Ceylon is also referred to in the "Manifesto: Dialogue on Sound" between Braun and Wright which appeared in a slightly earlier, 1934 issue of Film Art.⁷⁷ The ideas about sound-image counterpoint as opposed to synchronised "talkies" discussed within it develop arguments advanced a few years earlier in the Eisenstein/Alexandrov/Pudovkin "Statement on the Sound Film". In another article, Wright described Song of Ceylon as "a problem calling for very solid experimentation in sound technique."⁷⁸ These ruminations, and later experiments in films like Coal Face, make it clear that the acquisition of

sound studios after the move to the GPO enabled the documentary movement to represent itself as, in yet another respect, the inheritor of worthy traditions established by Soviet montage cinema. Again, these links could be interpreted in various ways. Song of Ceylon incorporates sound effects, music by Walter Leigh, and extracts from Robert Knox's seventeenth century account of a trip to Ceylon, read by the pianist Lionel Wendt, whose "remote, grave voice", according to one critic, "exactly suits the film's atmosphere."⁷⁹ In Song of Ceylon's third section, "the Voices of Commerce", different, more standard middle-class accents pronounce orders and requests over images of "traditional" forms of Ceylonese manual labour. Forsyth Hardy, writing in the late 1970s, misremembers some of the detail of this sequence and describes it exclusively in terms of "experimentation": "the crossing of a chorus of market cries and a rigmarole of international commerce with a scene of Buddhist ceremonials was only one of the experiments in sound which excitingly emerged from the completed film."⁸⁰ In Documentary Film Paul Rotha, unsurprisingly, gave the sequence a more politicised slant:

*The rhythmic noise of a mountain train is continued over an elephant pushing down a tree, an association of power and at the same time a comment. The market prices of tea, spoken by radio-announcers and dictated in letter form by business executives, are overlaid on scenes of natives picking in the tea gardens, the "Yours truly" and "Your obedient servant" of the dictation being ironically synchronised over the natives at their respective tasks.*⁸¹

Within the framework of British film culture in the 1930s, both readings would have been possible and not at all mutually exclusive. The Film Till Now called for a contrapuntal use of sound and image as the way forward for film art. Song of Ceylon was one of the first British films to deliver this, within a sequence which could also be read, according to Rotha's later criteria, as a veiled critique of imperialism.

An eloquently incisive analysis of the film as a whole was offered by Graham Greene in his Spectator column. He argued that Wright had achieved "perfect construction and the perfect application of montage."⁸² As Greene subsequently confessed, when a selection of his film criticism was edited into a book in the 1970s, he too had been a "passionate" reader of Close-Up and was quite familiar with its vocabulary.⁸³ Song of Ceylon's circular structure is noted; the way the film begins and ends with religious imagery and opening and closing shots of "fans of foliage." This natural barrier, evoking a sense of separation between Western audiences and Ceylonese culture, suggests, in Greene's words, "something sealed away from us..we are left outside with the bills of lading and the loud-speakers."⁸⁴ These observations, and the obvious esteem with which Greene regarded Song of Ceylon, are reiterated in a later review which incidentally refers to the film: "Mr Basil Wright was content to accept the limitations of ignorance, of a European mind, to be "on the outside, looking in"; the film is a visual record of the effect on a sensitive Western brain of old, communal, religious appearances, not of a life which Mr Wright pretends to *know*."⁸⁵

Greene's perceptive commentary locates Song of Ceylon as an exceptional film, both aesthetically and in terms of its unusual respect for the integrity and value of an ultimately inaccessible non-Western culture. By focusing upon ancient traditions, monuments, and religious rituals, and utilising slower editing rhythms than in the aerial genre films, Song of Ceylon evokes empathy for a different way of life whilst also shrouding it in mystery. These achievements, in style and, in Greene's view, successfully realised intentions, construct a perspective on the non-Western world which contrasts markedly with the energetic imperialist internationalism of a film like Contact. The reason for Song of Ceylon's uniqueness is traced by Greene back to one unitary source: the sensitive Western brain" of "Mr Wright." In doing so he perpetuates the discourse on authorship already established by The Film Till Now, Close-Up, and Film Art. To point this out is not to suggest that Greene was totally misguided: clearly Song of Ceylon's distinctive qualities have a lot to do with Basil Wright and the production situation Grierson placed him in. This discourse does however discourage any further exploration of authorship beyond the mere recognition of its presence.

Gervas Huxley initially approached Grierson with the idea that a film could be made for the Ceylon Tea Marketing Board, and Wright was assigned to this project on the strength of his previous work in the West Indies. He spent two months researching Ceylon and then set off to begin filming. The original plan was to produce four one-reel films, but after seeing the rushes, Grierson decided that they could be combined into a longer, more ambitious production.⁸⁶ In

another of the short articles on work in progress which Wright submitted to Cinema Quarterly in the early 1930s, he described Song of Ceylon as carrying a "conviction, not of what Ceylon now superficially is, but of what Ceylon stands for in the line of that vital history which is measured in terms of statues, monuments, religions, and of human activity."⁸⁷ Three "highspots" are identified: "(a) Sri Pada (Adam's Peak) - the world's holiest mountain - for over 2,000 years a centre of pilgrimage in the East"; "(b) the buried cities," sites containing astounding "architectural remains"; (c) "Kandyan dancing." For Wright, their interrelation formed "the controlling factor of all the material."⁸⁸

The ancient monuments, sites and statues which appear in Song of Ceylon are filmed amidst natural surroundings, whilst careful lighting emphasises their scale, enhances their beauty, and accentuates connotations of awesomeness and permanence. This is quite different to the treatment meted out to Babylon in Contact, where its decay is speeded up, the better to move the whole world into the future. In fact, Song of Ceylon reverses the aerial genre's priorities without escaping from the double bind of its logic. The East is associated with a slow, methodical rhythm, essentially repeating the patterns of the past. Wright describes, for example, the Ceylonese dancers' bodies' "primitive movements formalised and classicised by tradition and religion, yet retaining the vigour of prehistoric origin."⁸⁹ Western modernity is still linked to speed, although here it speaks with the hurried and intrusive "Voices of Commerce". Despite this brief moment of not altogether happy interaction, the East and the West are represented as, in essence, diametric opposites. Although less emphatic

about the benefit or the wisdom of trying to bring them together, this is what Song of Ceylon shares with the aerial genre. Wright's film is uncommonly cautious about the possibility of knowing the East, but what it is sure of is that the East is "other" to the West. That which is implicit in Contact is explicit in Song of Ceylon. The unusual production situation Wright found himself in, despatched to the other side of the world and encouraged by Grierson to develop his individual talent as a film artist, allowed him to construct a quietly lyrical, meditative reflection which harks back to the English Romantic tradition of valorising an imaginary orient as a viable alternative to the West. However, this focus on the isolated artist's individual sympathy and sensitivity obscures the larger question of the Western observer's designation of part of the world as "oriental", and indeed the problematic nature of the East/West distinction itself.

One contemporary critic's response did begin to broach these issues. Charles Davy, writing in Cinema Quarterly, acknowledged Wright's artistry but considered the "Voices of Commerce" section "the weakest part..for the voices are ghostly, and the influence of England on Ceylon is not at all ghostly; it is a forcibly transforming influence, leading to fever and conflict." He continues; "too much of the film belongs to Wright's private world; it is too nearly a meditation, not quite enough of a communication."⁹⁰ Song of Ceylon's sensitive, privatised encounter with the East as a place where tradition and religion persist suggests, as Wright put it, that Ceylon has only been "superficially" touched by industrial and cultural modernity. Mingling extracts from Robert Knox's seventeenth century text with images of 1930s Ceylon implies that time has

virtually stood still, and that life there is characterised by fundamental continuities which bypass any consideration of what happened in the intervening period. To posit British imperialism as a recent, relatively minor intrusion into a hitherto self-contained, integral Eastern culture is to uphold the basic procedure of representing a world divided into East and West which, as Edward Said and others have argued, intensified and proliferated from the eighteenth century onwards.⁹¹ Societies which considered themselves to be part of the West consolidated their political and economic control over those projected as existing outside this charmed circle, and characterised them as oriental or undeveloped. Even sympathetic representations of the East, precisely to the extent that they define the object of their sympathy as the "other", as the East, deny this long, radically differentiated but also *shared* history of "forcible transformation". The money to make Song of Ceylon was, after all, provided by an organisation dedicated to marketing that indispensable drink, tea, which is both a quintessential icon of Britishness and a product absolutely central to this history.

One enigmatic, minor motif in both Windmill in Barbados and Song of Ceylon perhaps unintentionally dramatises what is at stake in Wright's authoring of otherness. In both films an elegant white man, in a dapper white suit, wearing a pith helmet, makes a fleeting appearance. He can be seen briefly in the background to one shot inside a windmill in the first film, whereas in the second he walks away from the camera, down a busy street, at the end of the "Voices of Commerce" section. Possibly this is Wright. Even if it isn't, it is tempting to suggest that the tantalising man in white, almost hidden but

noticeable if one looks carefully enough, signifies Wright's attempt to immerse himself in his exotic surroundings, as well as his acknowledgement that this will never be entirely possible. To "sign" these films in this way is to offer a witty and perceptive comment on the existential problems faced by a filmmaker in a foreign environment. Yet it is also to reaffirm a Romantic notion of the singular, self-sufficient artist, struggling to commune with the essence of a culture. Unfortunately, this stands in the way of the diverse collective dialogues which could potentially open up a shared, reciprocal understanding of how both global communality and complex historical differences in economic, social and cultural location came to be constituted.

V Popular British Film Imperialism

Song of Ceylon carried on the tradition, established by Contact, of promoting British documentary's reputation abroad, by winning the Prix du Gouvernement Belge at the 1935 Brussels film festival. Such events were however far removed from the experience of everyday cinemagoers, as were the debates on aesthetics in the pages of specialist film journals. Popular film audiences encountered representations of the British Empire largely through the cycle of imperial epics produced by Alexander Korda's London Films, Michael Balcon's Gaumont-British, and also various Hollywood studios. Typical films within this genre include: Lives of a Bengal Lancer (Henry Hathaway, Paramount, 1934); Sanders of the River (Zoltan Korda, London Films, 1935); The Drum (Zoltan Korda, London Films, 1938); The Four Feathers (Zoltan Korda, London Films, 1939); Stanley and Livingstone (Henry King, Fox, 1939); Rhodes of Africa (Berthold Viertel, Gaumont-British, 1937); and King Solomon's Mines (Robert Stevenson, Gainsborough, 1937). The genre intersects with other contemporary cycles; the Livingstone and Rhodes films could also be classed as biopics, and both Sanders of the River and King Solomon's Mines utilise the vocal talents of their star, Paul Robeson, to maximise and diversify their appeal through the inclusion of musical numbers and dances.

Critics associated with the documentary movement repeatedly disparaged these films, with the single exception of Elephant Boy (Zoltan Korda, Robert Flaherty, London Films, 1937), which to a certain extent could be classed as a documentary due to Robert Flaherty's involvement with the

project. Overwhelmingly, however, the imperial epic cycle was attacked for its lack of realism and crass commercialism. Rotha, reviewing Sanders of the River, drew an implicit parallel between the documentary aerial genre and Korda's production: "Just one moment in this film lives. Those aeroplane scenes of galloping herds across the Attic Plains. It is important to remember that the multitudes of this country who see Africa in this film are being encouraged to believe this fudge is real. It is a disturbing thought."⁹² To argue that the film as a whole does not "live" is to adhere to a hierarchy of taste which renders the pleasure popular audiences took in Sanders of the River completely invalid. A refined sense of aesthetic achievement, allied to the representation of the "real", a term which is not defined, are assumed to be innately superior to fictionalisation and ruder forms of enjoyment. Similar values inform Basil Wright's comments on The Drum, which "could have told us something of the fundamental importance of the Empire and in particular of the political and social problems which the British Raj represents", but instead prefers to play upon the "shallower herd instinct, which..is too willingly moved to tears by a regiment marching."⁹³ The popular audience's base emotionality and apparently infinite gullibility is taken for granted, whilst the relativity of the highbrow critic's own judgement is never considered.

The sustained assault on the imperial epic by critics such as Rotha and Wright can in part be explained by exasperation at the way their own films about the Empire were failing to connect with popular audiences. Yet dismissiveness and sourness are not the only tones adopted by this criticism. Some of it betrays an unacknowledged fascination with the

supposedly degraded material being condemned. Russell Ferguson's 1938 review of The Drum, published in World Film News, sarcastically exposes the film's reactionary politics but at the same time conveys a sense that it might nevertheless be fun to watch, if only for a good laugh:

[After] preliminaries have taken place, it is time for feast, massacre and rescue. It is not unusual for the rescue to prevent the massacre, but if it does not, the main tradition to be observed is that no officers are to be killed, only common soldiers. Generally, determined attempts are made to kill the British commanding officer ..but never with serious consequences.

At the end, the Pathan chief is killed, preferably by the man who had his tongue cut out, and peace reigns once more. Another page of British history has been written.

All this, set out in Technicolour, makes a magnificent record of life in North-West India, the same yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow. There are those who say that our old traditions are decaying - so they may be elsewhere, but not on the Frontier.

Mr A.E.W. Mason, in introducing Sabu and Desmond Tester at the première of the film, said "We had no idea of propaganda, but we hope you will see, in the friendship we have tried to portray between these young people, a symbol of the friendship which is so common between British people and the Pathans of North-West India."

*This was well said, for these people, though treacherous, are very loyal, and we must always remember that although at regular intervals we have to go up among them with machine guns and artillery and knock hell out of them, they are our friends.*⁹⁴

Numerous objections can be made to these films on ideological grounds. Marcia Landy list some of them in her summary of the arguments of cultural historians such as Jeffrey Richards who have written about the genre. The values upheld in these films are those of the adventurous, authoritative male protagonist, upper or upper-middle class, and stiff upper lipped, but represented as exemplifying the very best kind of "Britishness". In the narrative "either he is unswerving in his commitments and dedicated to the mission of providing responsible law, order and a system of morality based on British values, or he undergoes a conversion whereby he discovers the imperatives of the British imperial project after having questioned or evaded his responsibility", as in The Four Feathers.⁹⁵ Sometimes aided by likeable but generally servile intermediaries, such as Robeson's Bosambo in Sanders of the River or the various characters played by Sabu in the Korda films, he has to contend with "childlike natives who are easily misled", but ultimately pacified, and "unscrupulous native leaders who seek to oust the British authority and establish their own", and who have to be dealt with more severely.⁹⁶ If any attempt is made to represent the grievances which lead to rebellion, they are never shown to be justified. Non-European characters speak in ridiculously accented, broken or pidgin English, and when their own languages are spoken they are not translated. Aspects of

African, Middle Eastern and Indian culture shown in the films "are designed to enhance the sense of spectacle and of difference", and are usually characterised by a randomly conflated exoticism which conveys a generalised sense of "darkest Africa" or the "mysterious East".⁹⁷

Much could be added to this list, but more pertinent in the present context is another question: to what extent were popular audiences "captured" by these ideologically retrograde films? Jeffrey Richards and John Mackenzie have argued that the weight of historical evidence suggests there was indeed a "dominant ideology" of Empire in the interwar years, and that it held sway amongst the majority of the population.⁹⁸ At the same time, Richards is careful to stress the attraction of these films specifically as *films*, screened in the often almost phantasmagoric "dream palace" cinemas which formed part of the urban landscape in the 1930s. These venues and many of the films shown within them provided their audiences with a brief respite, away from oppressive or mundane everyday experience and into an exciting, sensuous, colourful fantasy world.⁹⁹ Colourful in this particular case applies literally as well as metaphorically: the later Korda films The Drum and The Four Feathers were two of the earliest British films to boast the added attraction of Technicolor. Steve Neale's hypothesis, that colour in film was initially associated with fantasy and spectacle, rather than realism, is borne out here by Korda's insistence that actors in the regimental ball sequence in The Four Feathers wear dazzling red rather than militarily correct blue uniforms.¹⁰⁰ Even had they wanted to use it, documentary filmmakers

could rarely afford this luxury, and their work was predominantly filmed in black and white.

As Ferguson's review of The Drum demonstrates, a preference for documentary did not mean that the pleasures the imperial epic cycle had to offer could not be surreptitiously enjoyed. Ralph Bond, whose working life in the 1930s was dedicated to advancing a socialist British film culture opposed to Hollywood as well as to Korda's type of filmmaking, nevertheless recollects both the pleasure of popular cinemagoing *and* being consciously aware of why he participated in it:

Despite unemployment ranging from between two and three million, and widespread poverty, the thirties could be described as golden years for the movies. Never had the cinemas been so prosperous, never had the queues for admission been so long and so persistent. This apparent paradox was really not so mysterious. For the great mass of the people housing conditions were abominable, and to get out of their homes to the warmth of a cinema and for a few coppers enjoy three hours of entertainment was luxury indeed. There was no other form of entertainment so cheap and so easily accessible.

I was "signing on" at Camden Town Labour Exchange for some of these years, and if we had threepence in our pockets we went to the local cinema for the whole afternoon with often a cup of tea thrown in. Of course, for the unemployed this was highly improper. We were supposed to be "genuinely seeking work" or be struck off benefit; but as there was no work to seek, and as officialdom could not

*follow everyone all the time, we thumbed our noses and only argued as to which cinema in the area would receive our valuable patronage.*¹⁰¹

Obviously, Bond and Ferguson were not typical 1930s cinemagoers: they were critical activists, consciously committed to alternative or oppositional forms of film practice. Yet if they were able to maintain an ambiguous relationship to popular cinema and the imperial epic cycle, one which was distanced as well as participatory, then it is also possible that these factors co-existed, albeit to different degrees, in more general audiences' responses to these films. This possibility would not have caused undue concern to film producers like Korda, whose primary concern was to generate profits, but it did worry some of the people responsible for organising British imperial exhibitions. As Paul Greenhalgh points out, certain educators feared that "the masses" treated these events like visits to a funfair or an amusement park, and were not properly absorbing the information and the values they were designed to transmit.¹⁰² This tension could also have existed within the cinema, and therefore Jeffrey Richards' assertion that the ideological effect of 1930s imperial epics on popular audiences "must have been immense" needs to be qualified.¹⁰³

A film like Old Bones of the River (Marcel Varnel, Gainsborough, 1938), a Will Hay spoof of Sanders of the River, suggests that audience pleasure in these films involved complex interactions which complicate any historical assessment of their ideological impact. Old Bones of the River

parodies the conventions of the imperial epic genre, and assumes that its audience will recognise them as such and will not react adversely to their inversion. Benjamin Tibbetts (Hay), a teacher working for T.W.I.R.P. (Teaching and Welfare Institution for Reforming Pagans), discovers to his bewilderment that his African students know more than he does. Later when he is standing in for the absent "Lord Sandi", he completely fails to provide an assembly of tribal chiefs with any coherent explanation as to why they should pay their taxes. The narrative consists of a string of similar incidents, and ends equivocally, with Tibbetts and his equally inept stooges Harbottle (Moore Marriott) and Albert (Graham Moffatt) saving a garrison besieged by rebellious natives but inadvertently blowing it up in the process.

Marcia Landy argues that Old Bones of the River "provides a critique of imperialism and of the empire film."¹⁰⁴ This is too bold a claim. The chain of disasters only ensues after Commissioner Sanders and his deputy Captain Hamilton disappear from the narrative, one through leave and absence, the other through illness. They are played straight, and the film does not directly attack the ideal of selfless, upstanding imperial service they embody. Will Hay's star personae in the 1930s was that of a comic blunderer unaware of the magnitude of his own incompetence, and the film was clearly conceived as a vehicle within which he could cause further mayhem. Old Bones of the River is not a critique of imperialism and the imperial epic, but it does suggest that the values the genre upheld might not have been taken too seriously and could even be travestied on occasion, albeit without offering any hint of an alternative to them. These films

revolve around stereotypes and stock situations which would have been partly visible as such, since many of them were derived from late nineteenth or early twentieth century novels and short stories by writers like Rudyard Kipling, Rider Haggard, Edgar Wallace and A.E.W. Mason. Critics hostile to the genre drew attention to the antiquated and offensive attitudes it espoused. Much of the British characters' dialogue in the Korda films, written by Lajos Biro and Arthur Wimperis, seems to register this in its overblown grandiosity, which could have been read as carrying with it a slight edge of tongue-in-cheekness. The politically contentious implications of the imperial epic cycle became a public issue: the British press featured reports on the conflict between Zoltan and Alexander Korda over whether Bosambo and Sanders (Leslie Banks) should shake hands at the end of Sanders of the River, and Robeson's refusal to appear on stage at the première also attracted attention.¹⁰⁵

More research, for example into how British fan magazines like Picturegoer helped to frame popular responses to these films, would be required before Richards' unequivocal assertion about their "immense" ideological impact can be accepted. However, the possibility that popular reception of these films was slightly more complex and nuanced than has hitherto been suggested should not obscure the fact that some audiences took them very seriously indeed. The black press in America slated Sanders of the River.¹⁰⁶ The Drum, when exhibited in Bombay and Madras, provoked rioting which led to the film being banned in India for fear of further disturbances.¹⁰⁷ Whatever the nuances of popular reception of these films in England, they were perceived very differently

in some of those places where the brute fact of imperial domination was an ever present, unavoidable reality.

VI British Film Culture Till Now: Theory and Imperialism

As John Hill has recently argued, the shift within British and American film studies in the 1980s and 1990s towards a consideration of the active audience has introduced a much more sophisticated awareness of historical and social context into the study of film history, and has limited some of the more totalising, abstract claims, current during the 1970s, about the ideological effects of film texts. Yet he also points out that one consequence of this new emphasis, which is allied to the increasing professionalisation of film studies as an intellectual discipline, has been to widen the gulf between academic research and commitment to the promotion of new and different types of film production. Moreover, audience study has "directed attention away from questions of ownership and control of the media and the ways in which these relations may be seen to curtail the range and diversity of media forms and representations."¹⁰⁸ The riots protesting against The Drum and similar films were the only means of redress available to people effectively denied any say in, or control over, productions which purported to represent them to themselves and to the rest of the world.

British documentary films of the 1930s were less obviously offensive, and probably did not provoke such violent reactions amongst non-European audiences, although this is yet another area which requires further research. What can be said of British film intellectuals' and filmmakers' during this period is that they established traditions of debate, ways of conceiving film history and theory, and ideas about the role they should play within film culture which set both positive and

negative precedents which continue to reverberate today. It is now possible, within the context of institutionalised academic research that this thesis was written in, to investigate the relationship between montage, modernity and ethnicity in Soviet cinema, and the British documentary movement's imperialist internationalism. This should not be interpreted as a dismissal of their work. These filmmakers' commitment to what they considered to be a revolutionary or progressive programme of long-term intervention, into both film criticism and production, deserves acknowledgement.

The impetus to develop new forms of cinema partly derived from a desire to realise what both the British documentary and the Soviet filmmakers who preceded them believed was inherent in the medium: the ability to transcend national barriers and promote global solidarity amongst the oppressed or, in the more moderate British version, "international understanding". Entranced by such all-encompassing ambitions, they failed to address certain problems closer to home. There is little evidence of any sustained engagement, except dismissively in the case of the British documentary filmmakers, and rhetorically in the case of the Soviets, with the question of popular pleasure and the need to start from where the majority of people are at, rather than from where they ought to be. Bertolt Brecht's comments on Gunga Din openly admit an ambivalence which Rotha's, Wright's, and Ferguson's reviews of similar films deny. He confesses that, along with the audience around him:

My heart was touched too: I felt like applauding and laughed in all the right places. Despite the fact that I knew all the time that there was something wrong, that the Indians are not primitive and uncultured people but have a magnificent and age-old culture, and that this Gunga Din could also be seen in a very different light, e.g. as a traitor to his people, I was amused and touched because this utterly distorted account was an artistic success and considerable resources in talent and ingenuity had been applied in making it.¹⁰⁹

Brecht in his theatre work attempted to mobilise popular pleasure within the context of an oppositional didacticism. Grierson and the documentary filmmakers, operating within a very different situation, employed a populist rhetoric which, as Ian Aitken suggests, obscured the limited distribution their films were actually receiving. Largely confined to specialist and educational exhibition circuits, one of the ways the documentary filmmakers legitimated their project was by appealing to a particular interpretation, prevalent within British film culture at the time, of montage as the basis of film art. This indirect connection with Soviet cinema also enhanced their credibility with left-wing and liberal intellectuals, without associating them too closely with the pernicious propaganda British state officials like Stephen Tallents hoped their films would displace.

Books like Roger Manvell's Film, written during the Second World War, when censorship of Soviet films had been relaxed, reiterated the view that the torch of artistic excellence and social relevance had been passed on from Eisenstein and Pudovkin in the 1920s to the British documentary filmmakers of

the 1930s and 40s. Film also carried on the tradition of denigrating the commercialism and crudity of most popular cinema. The iconoclastic 1960s film journal Movie, providing a platform for critics like Robin Wood and V.F. Perkins, rearranged the terms of the debate. In Film as Film Perkins attacked the deference towards montage which had developed within British film theory and, scandalously, championed the pleasures to be found within popular Hollywood cinema. However, this defence rested upon relocating relatively traditional notions of art and authorship in order to argue that the work of certain Hollywood directors was worthy of serious consideration. Movie's position was in turn refuted by critics associated with Screen in the 1970s, and popular cinematic pleasure was again, albeit for different reasons, treated with extreme suspicion. The post-1968 interest in certain forms of Marxism and avant-garde cultural practice encouraged also revitalised the study of Soviet cinema. Yet this rediscovery omitted any consideration of the way that the documentary movement, in its day, had also traded on the Soviet classics' political and artistic kudos. To do so might have highlighted the relativity of both appropriations, and the idealised view of Soviet montage cinema each helped to construct.

Resituating these debates and developments in relation to a postcolonial critique of Soviet montage cinema and the documentary movement unsettles the notion, implied in the way this type of critique has largely been applied only to popular cinema, that other forms of filmmaking are necessarily less implicated in the culture of imperialism. Clearly, they are, albeit in different ways. To return to Huyssen

and Willemen's modernist/avant-garde distinction: if these films are viewed as modernist art objects, then the optimistic visions of modernity they project are of a bright new world still characterised by imperialist hierarchies; if they are assessed as avant-garde interventions, seeking to transform everyday life, then their closeness, in both cases, to state power, and the discriminatory panoptic and orientalist practices and discourses associated with it, renders them problematic. To argue this does not in any way preclude the possible development of future, less compromised modes of internationalist film practice. The work of Paul Rotha and Joris Iven in the 1940s and 50s, Jean-Luc Godard and Chris Marker in the 1960s and 70s, and black and Asian British filmmakers now could be analysed in similar terms, and different conclusions might be arrived at. However, what has remained remarkably consistent, ever since Close-Up first initiated the critique of cinematic representations of race and ethnicity, at the same time as they elevated Soviet montage cinema to the status of film art, to be discussed more or less exclusively in terms of theory and aesthetics, is the effective separation of these two areas of investigation. The latter cannot simply be collapsed into the former, but the wedge which British film culture has driven between them needs to be removed.

CHAPTER FIVE: BRITISH FILM CULTURE OR IMPERIALISM?

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October 1928

Production company: Sovkino
Direction: Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Alexandrov
Cinematography: Eduard Tisse

The Heir to Genghiz Khan/Storm Over Asia 1928

Production company: Mezhrabpomfilm
Direction: Vsevelod Pudovkin
Script: Osip Brik
Cinematography: Anatoli Golovnya
Lead character: Valeri Inkizhinov (Bair)

One Sixth of the Earth 1926

Production company: Goskino for Gostorg
Direction: Dziga Vertov
Editing: Elizaveta Svilova
Cinematography: Mikhail Kaufman and others.

The Man With the Movie Camera 1928

Production company: Vufku
Direction: Dziga Vertov
Editing: Elizaveta Svilova
Cinematography: Mikhail Kaufman

Three Songs of Lenin 1934

Production company: Mezhrabpomifilm
Direction: Dziga Vertov
Editing: Elizaveta Svilova
Music: Yuri Shaporin

II British Films

One Family 1930

Production company: Empire Marketing Board
Direction: Walter Creighton
Script: From an idea by Rudyard Kipling (uncredited)

Cargo From Jamaica 1933

Production company: EMB for P&O shipping
Producer: John Grierson
Direction: Basil Wright

Song of Ceylon 1934

Production company: EMB for Ceylon Tea Marketing Board
Producer: John Grierson
Direction: Basil Wright
Music: Walter Leigh

Trade Tattoo 1937

Production company: GPO film unit
Producer: John Grierson
Direction: Len Lye

Contact 1933

Production company: British Instructional for Shell-Mex/BP
Producer: Bruce Woolfe
Direction: Paul Rotha

The Future's in the Air 1937

Production company: Strand Films
Producer: Paul Rotha
Direction: Alex Shaw
Commentary: Written by Graham Greene

Air Outpost 1937

Production company: Strand Films
Producer: Paul Rotha
Direction: John Taylor

African Skyway 1937

Production company: Strand Films

Producer: Stuart Legg

Direction: Stanley Hawes

Old Bones of the River 1938

Production company: Gainsborough

Producer: Edward Black

Direction: Marcel Varnel

Lead character: Will Hay (Benjamin Tibbetts)

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