

**CULTURAL SYLLABUS**

Series Editor:

**MARK LIPOVETSKY** (University of Colorado Boulder)



# **THE RUSSIAN CINEMA READER**

Volume One

***1908 to the Stalin Era***

**EDITED BY RIMGAILA SALYS**



**BOSTON / 2013**

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

## CONTENTS

Preface .....	8
Acknowledgments .....	10
<b>PART ONE</b>	
Early Russian Cinema 1908-1919 .....	14
<i>Denise J. Youngblood</i>	
New Notes on Russian Film Culture between 1908 and 1919 .....	32
<i>Yuri Tsvivan</i>	
<i>Sten'ka Razin</i> .....	43
<i>Rimgaila Salys</i>	
<i>The Cameraman's Revenge</i> .....	48
<i>Rimgaila Salys</i>	
<i>The Merchant Bashkirov's Daughter</i> .....	52
<i>Rimgaila Salys</i>	
<i>Child of the Big City</i> Introduction .....	55
<i>The Scheherazade of the Boulevard Novel</i> .....	61
<i>Oksana Bulgakova</i>	
<b>PART TWO</b>	
Soviet Silent Cinema 1918-1930 .....	66
<i>Denise J. Youngblood</i>	
<i>The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks</i> Introduction .....	87
<i>Mr. Kuleshov in the Land of the Modernists</i> .....	95
<i>Vance Kepley, Jr.</i>	
A Subtextual Reading of Kuleshov's Satire <i>The Extraordinary ...</i> 101 <i>Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks (1924)</i> <i>Vlada Petrić</i>	

Copyright © 2013 Academic Studies Press  
All rights reserved

ISBN 978-1-61811-212-5 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-1-61811-213-2 (electronic)

Cover design by Ivan Grave  
On the cover: Lior, *Battleship Potemkin*

Published by Academic Studies Press in 2013  
28 Montfern Avenue  
Brighton, MA 02135, USA  
press@academicstudiespress.com  
www.academicstudiespress.com

courses and festivals, with Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* regularly appearing on lists of the greatest films ever made. Today, the editing style of music videos owes a great deal to "Russian montage," particularly to Dziga Vertov, whether or not the directors are aware of it. The style of the radical Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s has become part of the cinematic vernacular. In the Soviet Union, the revival of cinema during Khrushchev's Thaw was made possible in part by the filmmakers who learned the art of the cinema from the masters of the Golden Age.

#### FURTHER READING

- Cavendish, Philip. *Soviet Mainstream Cinematography: The Silent Era*. London: UCL Arts and Humanities, 2007.
- Taylor, Richard. *The Politics of the Soviet Cinema, 1917-1929*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_, and Ian Christie, eds. *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939*. Translated by Richard Taylor. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Youngblood, Denise J. *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era, 1918-1935*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

#### FURTHER VIEWING

- Arsenal*. DVD. Mr. Bongo Films, 2011.
- Landmarks of Early Soviet Film (Stride, Soviet!, The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty, The House on Trubnaia Square, By the Law, The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks, The Old and the New, Turksib, Salt for Sannetia)*. DVD. Flicker Alley, 2011.
- October. DVD. Image Entertainment, 1998.
- Strike. DVD. Kino International, 2011.
- Three Soviet Classics (Earth/The End of St. Petersburg/Chess Fever)*. DVD. Kino Video, 2003.
- Zvenigora*. DVD. Mr. Bongo Films, 2011.

## THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF MR. WEST IN THE LAND OF THE BOLSHEVIKS

*Neobychnaiye priklucheniia mistera Vesta v strane bol'shevikov*

1924

86 minutes

Director: Lev Kuleshov

Screenplay: Nikolai Aseev, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Lev Kuleshov

Cinematography: Aleksandr Levitskii

Art Design: Vsevolod Pudovkin

Production Company: Goskino

Cast: Porfirii Podobed (Mr. West), Aleksandra Khokhlova

("Countess" von Saks), Boris Barnet (Jeddy), Vsevolod

Pudovkin (Zhan), Valia Lopatina (Ellie), Sergei Komarov

(One-eye), Leonid Obolenskii (Dandy)

Lev Vladimirovich Kuleshov (1899-1970) came from an impoverished Tambov gentry family and studied art at the Moscow School of Painting, Architecture and Sculpture during 1915-16, but soon fell in love with cinema and went to work for Khanzhonkov's company, eventually becoming set designer for Bauer's later films and even acting in *Toward Happiness (Za schast'ei)*, 1917). Many film industry workers emigrated after 1917, but as an enthusiastic supporter of the Bolsheviks, Kuleshov stayed, seeing an opportunity to build a new Soviet cinema. His workshop at the State Film School trained actors according to his theories; among the participants were future directors Boris Barnet and Vsevolod Pudovkin, as well as successful actors, such as Kuleshov's wife, Aleksandra Khokhlova, Sergei Komarov, Vladimir Fogel' and Leonid Obolenskii. When film stock was not available during the early twenties, Kuleshov's collective delighted Moscow audiences by performing "films without film,"

sketches and miniatures in cinematic style. As an American-style comedy with elements of slapstick, the action-adventure film and the western, with heroes modeled on Harold Lloyd (Mr. West) and Douglas Fairbanks (Jeddy), *Mr. West* was a hit with Soviet audiences.

The remainder of Kuleshov's career was difficult. In later years he had only two successful films, *By the Law* (*Po zakonu*, 1926) and *The Great Consoler* (*Velikii uteshitel'*, 1933), and stopped directing after 1943. During the late 1920s-30s he was attacked as a formalist and his *The Merry Canary* (*Veselaia kanar'eika*) and *Two-Bul'di-Two* (*Dva-Bul'di-Dva*), both 1929, were labeled apolitical and bourgeois. Refused funding for his films, Kuleshov turned to teaching and administrative work at VGIK, the state film school, where he remained for the rest of this life, making only films on juvenile topics during World War II. At VGIK his teaching influenced several generations of filmmakers.

Kuleshov made theoretical contributions in two areas: montage and acting. He studied the creative potential of montage, defining what came to be called the "Kuleshov effect" (the alteration in meaning of an image through juxtaposition with another image) and "creative geography" (the cinematic construction of fictional entities, whether locations or human beings, through editing together different shots). Kuleshov's ideas about the actor derive from contemporary theatre practice, as in Meyerhold's biomechanics. Kuleshov described the actor as a "model" (*naturshchik*), as opposed to the Stanislavskian psychological actor. Rather than emphasizing inner feeling, the model is trained, through metrical-spatial exercises and the cultivation of physical skills, such as acrobatics, to control all parts of the body to be expressive. Facial movements are separated from inner psychological feeling and any part of the body can express any emotion.<sup>1</sup> The actor-model uses little makeup, instead exploiting his or her individuality: "We know that film

does not need stage actors, we know that an ordinary person with a body mechanism perfect in a humdrum way is unacceptable to the cinema. We need unusual, striking people, we need 'monsters'."<sup>2</sup>

Poet Nikolai Aseev wrote a scenario for *Mr. West* which turned out to be unfilmable and was radically rewritten by Pudovkin and Kuleshov so as not to lose the commission. The Russian film industry had still not returned to normalcy after the Civil War; in the face of shortages of construction materials and technical staff, Kuleshov's actors pitched in on all aspects of the production process.<sup>3</sup> The plot of the film is as follows: The naïve Mr. West, president of the YMCA, must travel to Russia, but has been convinced by the American media that the Bolsheviks are murderous savages. At his wife's insistence, he takes cowboy Jeddy with him as a bodyguard but is kidnapped by a gang of thieves soon after his arrival. Meanwhile, Jeddy gets into various scrapes which land him in prison, but he is soon released by an affable Bolshevik with the help of Jeddy's American friend and love interest, Ellie. The gang plays upon Mr. West's fears, showing him a ruined Moscow and using various stratagems, from a mock troika-style trial to a staged rescue to seduction-blackmail to get Mr. West's dollars. In the end he is rescued by a black leather-clad Bolshevik secret police officer, who shows him the real Moscow and convinces him that the Soviet Union is an enlightened country.

The unusually long title of *Mr. West* references the literary tradition of the foreign adventure tale e.g., *The Legend of the Glorious Adventures of Tyl Ullenspiegel in the Land of Flanders and Elsewhere* or *20,000 Leagues Under the Seas or the Marvellous and Exciting Adventures of Pierre Aronnax, Conseil His Servant, and Ned Land, a Canadian Harpooner*. Mr. West was not alone in his fear of the Bolsheviks. Western countries were horrified by the excesses of the 1917 revolution, the execution of the tsar and his family, and

2 "Now if..." in Lev Kuleshov, *Fifty Years in Films*, trans. D. Agrachev and N. Belenkaya (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1987), 56. (First published in *Kino-fot*, no. 3 [1922]).

3 The director described the difficult working conditions in Lev Kuleshov, *The Art of the Cinema*, in *Fifty Years in Films*, 161-62.

1 See Mikhail Yampolsky, "Kuleshov's Experiments and the New Anthropology of the Actor," in *Inside the Film Factory*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (London: Routledge, 1994), 31-50, and Mikhail Yampolsky, "Mask Face and Machine Face," *The Drama Review* 38, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 60-74.

the brutality of the civil war. The United States officially recognized the Soviet Union only in 1933. The New Economic Policy (NEP), Lenin's return to a limited form of free enterprise in business and agriculture to promote economic recovery after the civil war, was in full swing during the mid-twenties. NEP created a wealthy new business-professional class with a concomitant criminal world of conmen and thieves. The boy who steals Mr. West's briefcase is a *bezprizornik*, a civil war orphan who survives by working for the gang. Zhban ("Jug," a thief's nickname) and his associates are thus a mix of former members of the upper classes who have degenerated into crime and lower class criminal elements.

Mr. West both satirized the American bourgeoisie and adopted American cinematic discoveries. The film contains passing moments of serious social criticism, such as gender inequality in American business, as opposed to early communist initiatives on women's issues: a male office worker at the American company notices the paper in which Mr. West's briefcase had been wrapped lying on the floor and with a glance directs a woman secretary to pick up the offending object. The film pokes fun at American ethnocentrism in the broadest sense: Mr. West's almost unconscious materialism (his Rudy Vallee fur coat and sock garters, his pile of suitcases, his endless supply of dollars); his reflexive and defensive patriotism (flag-waving upon arrival to protect against attackers, Fig. 10) and the famous flag socks that lead Zhban to salute America as the most cultured nation; his attempt to behave "like a real American," i.e., fight hard when attacked by the false Bolsheviks, and his middle-class sexual mores (his prudish reaction to the Countess's advances and the oversized framed picture of his wife he carries next to his heart). In a foreign country Jeddy dresses and behaves like the cowboy he is—shooting bottles for target practice, riding atop Mr. West's car, lassoing a coachman, and getting into fist fights. But he is also a working man, having repaired electric lights in the US, and his eccentricities disappear after his release from jail and acquaintance with the understanding Bolshevik. The satire is relatively gentle and good-natured, for Mr. West and Jeddy—the innocents abroad—are naïve and well-intentioned, much more positive types than the villainous Russian conmen.



Fig. 10. Mr. West Arrives in Moscow

Mr. West has also been read against the grain (but not always fully convincingly) as inverted commentary on the Soviet system, and it is tempting to see comic scenes such as the imprisonment of Mr. West's briefcase and Jeddy's vision of Soviet cavemen roasting a well-dressed woman over a fire as allusions to Bolshevik methods. (See Petric article in this section.) A more subtle reading suggests that Kuleshov's choice of American subjects here and in other films, such as *The Death Ray*, *By the Law* and *The Great Consoler*, allowed him to take up vexed ethical-moral issues which were equally relevant, though unmentionable, in Soviet society. The object of parody in *Mr. West* then becomes the preconceived notion itself, not only in relation to the American bourgeois hero, but as it bears upon Soviet filmmakers. Kuleshov warns against superficial, illusory, propagandistic thinking, utopian simplification of the past and present, and the filming of ideological stereotypes in place of an understanding of reality and human concerns.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> I.M. Stulova, "Vremia stat' inostrantsem," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 6 (1990): 6.

Mr. West adheres to the machine and efficiency principles of Russian Constructivism (influenced by American efficiency engineering), as applied to acting style, developing the film to narrative and the production process. In introducing the film to audiences, Kuleshov wrote: "We are presenting this picture not as a demonstration but as a *verification* of our working methods in montage and in the structuring of the frame."<sup>5</sup> In many ways, the film is a compendium of Kuleshov's early ideas on the principles governing cinema. Influenced by American cinema, in *Mr. West* Kuleshov uses continuity editing, close framing, fast cutting, chases, stunts (Jeddy crosses hand over hand on a rope suspended between two buildings),<sup>6</sup> slapstick (Mr. West hooks the Countess's garter on his glasses and loses his pants escaping prison) and chaplinesque tricks (one of the trial "judges" produces a bowl for ink from his sleeve and a quill pen from his collar). In a visual pun, Zhban is accidentally hit by a namesake jug. Peace-loving Mr. West's kissing two doves (possibly a poke at Woodrow Wilson) was filmed in a slow tempo and the fake Bolshevik prison followed *Dr. Caligari* and *Dr. Mabuse*, both parodies of the psychological style. Kuleshov also employs creative geography in the Red Square episode. (See Kempley article in this section.) The director argued that a good intertitle must function exactly like a shot, for it is the same kind of cinematic material as the exposed pieces of film lying on the table before the director.<sup>7</sup> In *Mr. West* intertitles like "Comfort is a relative concept" do not recount action, but instead supply additional meanings.

The acting in the film illustrates Kuleshov's discoveries. Aleksandra Khokhlova uses her distinctive physical traits (large eyes, huge mouth, angular body) to grotesque effect (Fig. 11).

<sup>5</sup> Kuleshov, "Mr. West," in *Fifty Years in Films*, 58. (First published in *Zrelishtcha*, no. 79 [1924]: 14).

<sup>6</sup> According to Kuleshov, Barnet did not train properly for the stunt and had to be rescued by firemen. He was replaced by one of the best actors in the collective, Vladimir Fogel' (Lev Kuleshov, *Praktika kinorezhissury*, in *Sobranie sochinenii o trekh tomakh*, vol. 1 [Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987], 294).

<sup>7</sup> Kuleshov, *The Art of Cinema*, 163.



Fig. 11. The Countess

Kuleshov attached importance to developing smooth, horizontal eye movements, which she also uses to advantage. When tied to a stake (a parodic reference to homoerotic images of St. Sebastian), the Countess expresses her glee at the progress of the scam by wiggling sensuously with her entire body. Since any part of the trained body may express any emotion, the executioner at the mock trial repeatedly sucks in and releases his bare stomach, an expression of threat. Following Delsarte, Kuleshov defined opposing facial movements as expressions of extreme emotion; when Zhban is annoyed by noise outside the room, his jaw moves right and eyes left in quick succession. The woman who is frightened by Jeddy's street antics exemplifies action within Kuleshov's metric-spatial grid, an imaginary three-dimensional network of squares along which actors move rhythmically, so as to exist most effectively within the horizontals and verticals of the film frame. The woman leans back from the pole, pauses, leans forward, grasps the pole and pauses, slides down the pole, throwing her legs out in front of her, pauses just above the ground, then falls to the

ground and ultimately turns a somersault, ending in a position of prayer.<sup>8</sup>

In the avant-garde's reaction to pre-revolutionary cinema's preoccupation with depth and a surfeit of realistic objects, Kuleshov advocated the emptiness of the film frame (*pustiota kadra*) and an emphasis on surface: "The ideal shots are those that look like the flat and primitive paintings on antique vases."<sup>9</sup> The sets of *Mr. West* are geometrically simple, mostly constructed of reversed sheets of plywood. (This was also necessitated by the shortages of the time.) Kuleshov believed that the human face, objects and movements are best filmed against a dark background. "In a number of foreign films, we saw the merest suggestion of décor, just enough for one to imagine the setting in which the action unfolded."<sup>10</sup> Hence the early episode of *Mr. West* and his wife was filmed against a black background with only a desk and chair on the set.

## MR. KULESHOV IN THE LAND OF THE MODERNISTS

Vance Kepley, Jr.

The Constructivist ethos, as the phrase might suggest, covered a range of artistic ambitions that cut across several media; but in all its manifestations it was identified with the modern experience. The ethos typically dismissed the received view of the artist as visionary, substituting a notion of the artist as engineer. "Art is finished!" Aleksei Gan hyperbolized in 1922. "It has no place in the human labor apparatus. Labor, technology, organization!"<sup>11</sup> And, as Gan's industrial analogies indicate, Constructivism hailed the process of industrialization.

If the artist was to be an engineer, organizing raw materials into a workable whole, the art work itself was to take on the characteristics of a machine—practical, efficient, utilitarian. The art work's function—and the emphasis was decidedly on the functional—was to alter public consciousness, to help prepare the Soviet population for the machine age.

[...] Most compelling, perhaps, for Kuleshov was the Constructivist argument that a machine aesthetic promoted a modern sensibility, and he set out to explore the presumed affinity between cinema and modernity. He endorsed the Soviet proposition that "a good piece of film educates the viewer." That educational function, however, resided not simply in the film's ideology, but in its form: "If we take a film perfectly well worked out ideologically and produce it poorly from the standpoint of form, despite ideological skill, it will turn out to be a counterrevolutionary film."<sup>12</sup> A film must manifest efficiency in order to *advocate* efficiency.

<sup>8</sup> See Kuleshov, *The Art of the Cinema*, 170-77, and Gerry Large, "Lev Kuleshov and the Metrical-Spatial Web: Postmodern Body Training in Space and Time," *Theatre Topics* 10, no.1 (March 2000): 65-75.

<sup>9</sup> Lev Kuleshov, "The Art of Creating with Light," in *Fifty Years in Films*, 35-6. (First published in *Kinogazeta* 12 [March 1918]: 12).

<sup>10</sup> Kuleshov, *The Art of Cinema*, 150-51.

<sup>11</sup> Aleksei Gan, "Constructivism, 1922," in John E. Bowlt (ed.), *The Russian Art of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 223.

<sup>12</sup> L. Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film*, ed. and trans. Ronald Levaco (Berkeley, CA: