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Lev Kuleshov (1899-1970)

Lev Kuleshov was the first great teacher-theoretician of the Soviet cinema and it was in his workshop at the State Film School (VGIK) that the experiments in montage originated which are still utilized under the name "The Kuleshov effect." Among his students and proteges were the directors V.I. Pudovkin, Boris Barnet, Mikhail Kalatozov, and S.M. Eisenstein.

Although only 21 when he began his workshop, Kuleshov had already worked in several areas of filmmaking since he first assisted the famous director Yevgeni Bauer in 1916, at age 17. He designed sets for Bauer, played the lead role in *After Happiness* (1917), which he also directed as well after Bauer died of pneumonia on location. In 1917, he directed *The Project Of Engineer Prite*, a four-reel detective melodrama, and followed it a year later with another potboiler made for a private studio.

After the revolution, Kuleshov edited newsreels for a time, before being assigned to an agitational train on the

Civil War Front, where during 1918-19 he filmed and edited a number of short polemical films and documentaries. Between 1921 and 1923, Kuleshov and his students experimented with the numerous creative possibilities stemming from the conscious application of two related principles: the basis of cinema art is editing; film "acting" should be external, physical, athletic, gestural, fragmented, never emotive and continuous. Finally, in 1924, Kuleshov and his team got a chance to put theory into visible practice with *The Extraordinary Adventures Of Mr. West In The Land Of The Bolsheviks*, which brilliantly illustrated the workshop's key aesthetic discoveries, and at the same time succeeded in entertaining audiences with its witty satire of fast-moving American adventure-comedies. *The Death Ray* (1925) followed, equally full of tricks, but far less successful in its plot mechanics. In 1926, Kuleshov adapted a Jack London story in *By The Law*, which violated some of his own

theories in achieving great psychological tension in an intimate three-character setting.

Except for parts of his sound film, *The Great Consoler* (1933), none of Kuleshov's subsequent films fulfilled the promise of his theoretical writings, or equalled *The Extraordinary Adventures Of Mr. West In The Land Of The Bolsheviks* and *By The Law*. One reason for the failure of Kuleshov's filmmaking career is that he came under ideological attack as a "formalist": at the 1935 Congress of Film Workers he was forced to confess to the error of preferring form over content. However, in the last 25 years of his life he enjoyed some prestige as a regular lecturer at the film school he helped to found in 1919. A selection of his writings on film, translated and edited with an introduction by Ronald Levaco, is available in English under the title *Kuleshov On Film* (University of California Press, hard and soft cover editions). (TL, YB)

The Extraordinary Adventures Of Mr. West In The Land Of The Bolsheviks

1924 60 min. Silent B&W Rental: \$35.00

Directed by Lev Kuleshov; assistant directors: Pudovkin, Alexandra Khoklova, Leonid Obolensky, Sergei Komarov, Porfiri Podobed, Leo Mur; screenplay by Nikolai Aseyev and Vsevolod Pudovkin; photography by Alexander Levitsky. With Porfiri Podobed, Valya Lopatina, Boris Barnet. English titles.

As Jay Leyda observes: "Kuleshov's film workshop served as a laboratory where principles of film were studied and experimented with although 'without the benefit of more than a reel of raw film.' An unexpected opportunity for the workshop came in November 1923, when the first Studio of Goskino in Moscow, immediately after its organization, offered them a chance to show what they could do with the precious imported film stock. Kuleshov decided that a comedy was the best form in which to make a public demonstration of what they had learned during their three years of preparation. This was *The Extraordinary Adventures Of Mr. West In The Land Of The Bolsheviks*, made with a sense of humour in character and in action that is as fresh today as it was in 1924."



The story concerns an American YMCA Official, Mr. West, who arrives in Moscow believing it to be peopled with Bolshevik savages and Red Bandits. A gang of hooligans and drop-outs "plays up" to him and shows him everything he expects to see. The plot is

delightfully exaggerated in the manner of American serials of the time: the film was a great success in the U.S.S.R., but was not released abroad. All members of the Kuleshov workshop participated in the filming. (TL, YB)