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Arsenal

SUBSTITUTION: "LENINGRAD IN BATTLE" has not arrived as scheduled from The Soviet Union.

In its place, we will be showing a new 35mm English titled print of Alexander Dovzhenko's ARSENAL (1929, 90 mins)

See description below from Museum of Modern Art's Showing.

THE SOVIET FILM

(September 25 - November 11, 1969)

Monday, October 6, 1969 (2:00 and 5:30)

ARSENAL* (1928-29). Produced by VUFKU. Written and directed by Alexander Dovzhenko. Assistant director: Lazar Bodik. Photography by Danylo Demutzki. Design by Josef Shpinel.

CAST: Semyon Svashenko, Nikolai Nademsky, Ambrose Buchma, Nikolai Kuchinsky, Piotr Masokha.

2:00	ENGLISH TITLES.	Ca. 90 minutes.
5:30	NO ENGLISH TITLES.	Ca. 90 minutes.

ARSENAL is distributed theatrically in the U.S.A. by Artkino Pictures, Inc., and is distributed non-theatrically by Brandon Films, Inc., and The Department of Film of The Museum of Modern Art.

*Silent film, piano accompaniment by Charles Hofmann.

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The first masterpiece of the Ukrainian cinema broke entirely with traditional film structure and subject, depending solely on a flow of ideas and emotions rather than upon conflicts between individual characters to give continuity to its work. Although it is true that the extraordinary dependence on images and symbolism in ARSENAL can no more be fully translated into concrete meanings than the imagery and rhythm and color of a poem, yet some knowledge of the historical period in which it is laid is necessary for a full understanding of the film.

ARSENAL is a film-poem about the Ukraine from the World War, through the February and October Revolutions in Russia, to the suppression of a revolt of workers barricaded in a Kiev munitions factory, January 1918. Ukrainians, with no voice in the government of the Russian Empire, had been sent to protect Russia's alliance with the Western Powers against the Central European Powers. With the break-down of the Eastern Front in 1916, hatred for the Tsarist government sharpened the fight for national independence. Nationalist leaders seized the overthrow of the autocracy in February 1917 as their opportunity to demand autonomy, which the Russian Provisional Government postponed. By August the

separatists had elected a Council of Government (the Rada) and then forced a decision upon Kerensky, already too weakened in power to protest. Contemporaneously with the Bolshevik (October) Revolution, the Rada proclaimed a People's Republic and in December the first All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets met at Kharkov. The Rada, in a panic at this turn of events towards the Ukrainian Bolsheviks, proclaimed nationalistic slogans, and carefully keeping their tone liberal, organized a movement within their own numbers to break off relations with the Moscow Government. They found their move ill-timed, as their campaign of confusion had not yet turned Ukrainian workers' sympathies away from socialist ideas and, in fact, sections of the returned army and the whole Black Sea Fleet dropped their support of the Rada (one of the most ironical scenes in the film). As a consequence of this failure, the separatists encouraged an anti-Bolshevik uprising under Petlura (represented in the film only through his followers) with a slogan -- "A Free Ukraine." When workers, including those of the Kiev arsenal, took up arms against this uprising the Rada invited German forces to occupy the Ukraine under the same slogan. But rival personal ambitions prevented the opposition from successfully uniting, and after the rich prize passed from power to power, the Ukrainian workers finally won -- a victory symbolized at the end of ARSENAL.

Dovzhenko has written of his aims: "I wrote the scenario for ARSENAL in a fortnight, and filmed it in six months. ARSENAL is entirely a political film. I set myself two tasks: to unmask Ukrainian reactionary nationalism and chauvinism, and to sing of the Ukrainian working class which had accomplished the social revolution...However, at that time I did not possess the necessary theoretical knowledge and in my experiments I often acted like a fighter who battles the enemy without considering if his method is in accordance with theory. If you had asked me how I worked and what I thought, I should have given Courbet's answer to a lady's question about what he was thinking when he painted: 'Madam, I am not thinking, I am excited.' This excitement, which like a red thread runs through all my films, I have preserved to this day, eternally kindled by the indomitable rise of the revolution, by its constructive forces."

As Coleridge's genius fused the most miscellaneous of reading into great poetry, so the widest variety of elements became grist to the mill of Dovzhenko's excited experiment. Folk-tales, political caricature (Dovzhenko's newspaper cartoons should not be forgotten), the impressive power of monuments, political tracts, Nikolai II's diary, memories of home, all were subjected to the heat of a powerful artistic personality and made into a single experience. The elements and subjects of ARSENAL fit into no ordinary film form -- Dovzhenko has said that "it contains material enough for five or six films"; it pretends to no unity of form, but employs a wide variety of methods as well as some methods never before seen in films, and yet it is unified in purpose, and accomplishes a totality of effect beyond that of more formal directors. Its cameraman Demutzki photographed ARSENAL as if he too were Dovzhenko, keeping within no known limits or superficial unity, and illuminating the multitude of concepts and symbols with a photography so real and brilliant that the most universal statements in the film have the grip and conviction of tangibility. Yet little of its imagery can be grasped with one seeing. James Shelley Hamilton, who made the sensitive American adaptation, said

in the National Board of Review Magazine, "It is a picture that, like sublime music or poetry, gives up its meanings slowly, more and more eloquently and movingly the more often it is seen." And Henri Barbusse devoted an enthusiastic chapter in his "Russie" to ARSENAL, in which he comments on its structure, "...even when the connecting thread seemed to disappear, the sense of drama was never absent; it grew in cumulative effect, and it carried with the unity and the coherence necessary for the understanding of the drama...."

In a few instances the "connecting thread" hangs on an immediate recognition of a visual statement with local meaning, such as the ikon-portraits of Taras Shevchenko carried in the nationalist parade. Shevchenko was a nineteenth-century Ukrainian poet-patriot, adopted by the nationalists as the hero of their cause. Dovzhenko's comment on this is to have Shevchenko's haloed portrait blow out his own ikon-lamp in disgust at the misuse of his memory. But the majority of images need no special information -- the penetrating war-time scenes of nightmare horror at the front and misery at home; the train carrying the desperate, careless returning soldiers (perhaps suggesting the leaderless Peoples Republic); Timosh (powerfully played by Svashenko), representing the Ukrainian worker, who fought somebody else's battle and learned to fight his own; the speaking horses and the frantic dash to the waiting grave; questions addressed directly to the audience; and the arsenal -- both historical fact and embracing symbol of the encircled fighters for socialism. The greatest innovation of ARSENAL lies in Dovzhenko's courage in building a film out of poetry-filled images, caught at a constant high pitch, ranging in movement all the way from reflective shots as still as a monument or death to episodes as breathless in speed as a heart-beat in panic.

Viewed when it first appeared as an experiment in technique, it has achieved the stature of an Ukrainian classic with the passing of time. Rarely shown outside the Soviet Union, ARSENAL was particularly fortunate in this country in acquiring critical champions (James Shelley Hamilton, Alexander Bakshy and Harry Alan Potamkin were the first to rally) and a steadily widening circle of American admirers. ARSENAL acquired much the same audience, with similar reasons, that Picasso's mural of "Guernica" gained when exhibited in America. The two works have much in common -- a relentless hatred of brutality, a passionate lyricism, a burning faith in humanity, both at once universal and national in the most profound way, metaphors expressed in anguish and pain, and an artistic expression of all this in a form that repels and attracts at a first seeing and grows in significance with every further examination.

-- Jay Leyda, Museum of Modern Art Film Notes.

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After the Revolution the Ukrainian cinema was forced to make its start at the very foundation by erecting studios and by creating a new staff of film-workers.

I began my film-work in the VUFKU Studios, which are now known as "Ukrainian-Film."

Two pictures form the main turning-points of my work: ARSENAL and SOIL (EARTH). I create my pictures on the basis of social motives. The story itself has no value for me unless it is the resultant of a certain social form. This point of view determines also the method of my work. I call it Synthetic Method:

Out of a great quantity of material, which would suffice for the creation of five or six pictures, I make one single film, linked together by unusually strong tension. It represents a certain condensation of the material into one single whole.

I choose my characters in such a way that they have the ear-marks not only of a film-hero, but of whole social groups. It is the well-known "method of types" of Soviet cinematography.

ARSENAL is the first turning point of my work.

(Dovzhenko considers his two preceding pictures, DIPLOMATIC LUGGAGE and ZVENIGORA, purely as the studies for his creative work. L.L.)

It has a historical basis:

- the end of the Imperialist War of 1914-1918
- the decay of the Russian lines
- the return of the soldiers to their homes
- their stay in the territory of the Ukraine
- and the first outbursts of revolution.

There arose in Ukraine during the Revolution, two chief problems: national and social.

The national problem was the object of activity of the Ukrainian bourgeoisie and of a section of the intellectual workers. These men, in order to attain their national interests, sacrificed the social ones which were defended by workers, farmers and the remaining intellectual workers. This conflict of interests was the reason for the disunion between the bourgeoisie on the one side and the proletariat on the other side.

This is the very idea on which ARSENAL is based. It contains material which would really do for five or six pictures. But it is made in such a way that through the smallest amount of material, which is at hand, is expressed the greatest quantity of ideas and social emotions.

ARSENAL expresses the struggle of the workers to achieve a Soviet government in the Ukraine. It is a fighting-picture which condenses the above-mentioned events; it comprises not only Kiev (Kyjiv) with its environs and outlying districts, but Ukraine as a whole.

-- A. Dovzhenko (As related to L. Linhart and translated by K. Santor.)