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Retrospective

Arsenal

U.S.S.R., 1929 **Director: Alexander Dovzhenko**

Dist—Darvill. *p.c*—VUFKU-Odessa (restored by Mosfilm, 1972). *asst. d*—Lazar Bodyk, Alexei Kapler. *sc*—Alexander Dovzhenko. *ph*—Danylo Demutsky. *a.d*—Isaac Shpinel, Vladimir Mueller. *m*—(this version) V. Ovchinikov. [*original m*—Igor Belza]. *l.p*—Semen Svashenko (*Tymish*), Amvroziy Buchma (*Gassed German Soldier*), Mykola Nademsky (*Official*), M. Kuchynsky (*Petlyura*), O. Merlatti (*Sadovsky, Actor*), D. Erdman (*German Officer*), S. Petrov (*German Soldier*), G. Khorikov (*Red Army Soldier*), R. Wagner (*Nurse*), K. Mykhaylovsky (*Ukrainian Nationalist*), A. Yevdakov (*Tsar Nicholas II*), B. Zagorsky (*Dead Soldier*). 3,297 ft. 92 mins. (16 mm.). *English titles.*

Additional title—**The January Uprising in Kiev in 1918**

A tentative summary of the film (the numbering does not correspond to formal divisions but marks relatively discrete segments): (1) The Ukraine during the last year of the Great War, which has decimated families and depopulated the villages. The Tsar writes a personal letter; soldiers at the front endure bombardment; and at home a woman lashes out at her hungry child, while in the fields a man beats his emaciated horse. Overcome by laughing gas, a German soldier grimaces insanely; another soldier is threatened by his officer. (2) Demobilisation: Ukrainian troops about to board a train are challenged "In the name of the Ukrainian People's Republic". Despite the driver's warning that the brakes are broken, they set off at breakneck speed; one of them, Tymish, takes the controls—and survives the eventual crash. The revolutionary Committee tells him to return to barracks until he is needed. (3) The Nationalists—whose main support comes from priests, teachers and students, businessmen, actors—celebrate their 'free Ukraine' and try to enlist the loyalty of the returned soldiers. (4) At the All-Ukrainian Congress some of the soldiers prove unexpectedly militant. Tymish insists that they are workers before Ukrainians and proclaims Soviet power; amid consternation he and the other Bolsheviks leave, while the Nationalists complacently continue. (5) Workers at the Arsenal plant in Kiev go on strike and Bolshevik soldiers join them to defend the citadel. (6) News of the strike spreads among the bourgeoisie; some try vainly to leave town, others gather to watch the siege of the Arsenal. (7) In hospital, a soldier dictates his last letter home but dies before giving the address. He is taken back to his native village for burial—a fast and furious journey through the snow by horse-sledge. (8) The 'Free Ukraine Armoured Car' is blown up. A Nationalist accuses a soldier of overthrowing the republic and threatens him with a gun, but the soldier easily turns the tables. (9) Fighting around the Arsenal. After three days and nights the defenders are demoralised. They are overwhelmed by a night attack and—as the victors sing and dance—they are taken out blindfolded to be shot. (10) Tymish alone continues to resist, raking the courtyard with machine-gun fire, until the gun jams and he defiantly bares his chest to the attackers. He is invulnerable to their bullets.

It is instructive to attempt a plot synopsis of *Arsenal*. Quite apart from the difficulty of identifying characters and events with any certainty, the exercise actually creates a largely spurious 'narrative' of spatio-temporal continuity, cause and effect, which is not supported by Dovzhenko's remarkable syntax. Needless to say, it scarcely helps to regard *Arsenal*—as did a contemporary Moscow audience, quoted by Leyda—as a 'poem', and presumably therefore not expected to be coherent. Although Dovzhenko does make extensive use of poetic figures, the central issue remains political. *Arsenal* was in fact a commission, the first of Dovzhenko's problematic attempts to reach an accommodation with Stalin's increasingly rigid policy for the arts. "The assignment to make the film was entirely political, set by the Party", he recalled in his *Autobiography*. "I had two tasks: to unmask reactionary Ukrainian nationalism and chauvinism and to be the bard of the Ukrainian working class, which had accomplished the social revolution". He might have added that the commission coincided with Stalin's drive towards full collectivisation, which particularly affected the agricultural Ukraine (providing the basis for Dovzhenko's next film, *Earth*), and might have been expected to resurrect the separatist nationalism that had dominated the Ukraine from 1917 until as late as 1921. Lenin had recognised the peculiarly intractable problem that the Ukraine posed to orthodox Bolshevism, and insisted on the need for some recognition of national aspirations; but in 1917 the virtual absence of any industrial proletariat meant that the Bolsheviks were unable to make much headway against the tide of Ukrainian nationalism which was released by the February Revolution. The Rada led by Petlyura not only proclaimed an autonomous Ukrainian republic in June 1917, but managed to defy diplomatic and military pressure from Moscow with the aid of French, German and eventually Polish support—by which time the bankruptcy of nationalism was apparent even to those who had originally opposed Soviet domination. But as E. H. Carr concluded, "the national content of social revolution in the Ukraine remained artificial and in some degree fictitious". In effect, it was Stalin's dismissal of this fiction that Dovzhenko had to confront in *Arsenal*. His solution was to use the historical event of the Arsenal strike as centrepiece in a quasi-allegory of the temporary triumph of nationalism over beleaguered Bolshevism, with a series of panels on the ravages of the war and the emergence of a worker-soldier-peasant alliance. Ironically, Dovzhenko had been a nationalist himself and it was due to his connections with the Borotbist party that he was sent as a diplomat to Berlin, where he studied painting. Back in Kharkov in 1923, he became an active member of the nationalist cultural group "Vaplite" and produced posters, cartoons and illustrations under the influence of the prevailing eclectic expressionism. Although Dovzhenko abruptly left this milieu in 1926, the expressionist traces in *Arsenal* are striking: the faces of bereaved women and the defenders of the Arsenal appear in dramatic chiaroscuro; frequent tilted shots create a constant spatial tension; and the actual construction of the screenplay is governed by an expressionistic use of unexpected metaphor, extreme compression/ellipsis and violent juxtaposition. Indeed this has been considered the root cause of *Arsenal*'s incoherence; thus Levedev—"outside the Ukraine the film was regarded as an expressionist work, exciting in parts and incomprehensible as a whole". Now it is possible to argue that expressionism was not merely a stylistic option for Dovzhenko, but a means of containing the multiple contradictions that surrounded the project of *Arsenal*: the heterogeneous material and procedures reflects the confusion of Ukrainian politics after the revolution; the Ukrainian folk heroes invoked are fused into the Bolshevik folk hero of Tymish, whose final transfiguration effectively inaugurates the Stalinist era. But if *Arsenal* marked a personal and political defeat for Dovzhenko, it remains his great achievement in the struggle to "break away from stereotyped narrative", as he had first attempted in *Zvenigora*. Eisenstein, writing as early as April 1929, was quick to link *Arsenal* with his own *October* for its use of associative montage and emotional dynamism to produce "liberation of the whole action from the definition of time and space" in certain sections. Various compositional devices in *Arsenal* depend on an ability and willingness to *read*—to follow deliberate mis-matching for ironic effect, to recognise rhyme and repetition of shots, as in the opening sequence, "The mother had three sons", suggesting a ballad. Even more effective, and reminiscent of Mayakovsky, are the two instances where intertitles are used to give animals a 'voice': the first, the horse/child-beating parallel sequence, ends with the horse saying, "It's not me you should be beating, Ivan". Unfortunately, there is some evidence that the English subtitles (correctly printed on the Russian intertitles) take considerable liberties in translation: in this version, the above title reads, "Misdirected anger". Otherwise this is a most welcome belated arrival in British distribution. The visual quality is often magnificent and if the stretch-printing occasionally produces a slight impression of slow-motion, it does at least allow the film to be shown at 24 f.p.s. with the newly-composed music score, which tends to be literal in its effects and somewhat strident but is generally apt.

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