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October 2 - November 18, 1975

ZVENIGORA

SOVIET SILENT CINEMA

Part 2: 1926-1927

By special arrangement with Gosfilmofond, the Soviet State Film Archive, and the Pacific Film Archive of the University Art Museum at Berkeley, the Department of Film will present the second of a three-part retrospective of Soviet cinema in its silent period. This program is the most comprehensive ever mounted outside the U.S.S.R. of the classic and revolutionary films of the Soviet Union.

Part I, comprising 29 titles, covered the years from 1918 through 1925, and was presented in 1974 from March 7th through April 15th. Part 2 limits itself to the two peak years, 1926 and 1927, and will include forty titles to be exhibited from October 2nd through November 18th. Part 3, completing the silent years of Soviet filmmaking, will be announced in the future.

The works in the retrospective were selected from a list of surviving Soviet silents in the Gosfilmofond Archive by Professor Jay Leyda in consultation with Victor Privato, Director of Gosfilmofond, and Tom Luddy, Program Director of the Pacific Film Archive. Professor Leyda is the author of the definitive text in English on the history of Russian and Soviet cinema, Kino.

The majority of the prints in Part 2 will contain only the original Russian intertitles. Some of the films which will complement the program will be from the Museum's own collection, and many of these will have English intertitles. Almost all the films will be in 35mm.

Synopses and detailed information will be distributed at each screening. The documentation for the notes has been supplied through the generosity of Gosfilmofond, Jay Leyda, the Pacific Film Archive, Jacques Ledoux of the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique (Brussels), Vlada Petric and Andy McKay. Additional information is also drawn from the Museum's own Study Center files. The Department of Film owes a special thanks to Sonia Volochova who is not only translating from original Russian sources but who is assisting in the compiling of these notes as well.

Saturday, October 11 at 5:30

ZVENIGORA

Dovzhenko (September 11, 1894 -- November 25, 1956)

"As far as I was concerned, there were no questions of style or form involved. I worked like a soldier who fights the enemy, without thought of rules or theory. I dare say if I had been asked then what I was thinking about, I should have answered, like Courbet to a lady's question, "Madame, I am not thinking - I am excited". Nineteen years after his death and eightysince his birth, the excitement and elation of high poetry still communicate in Dovzhenko's best work - the sheer delirium of ZVENIGORA, the thundering concentration of ARSENAL, the pitch of tension of that humming summer's night in EARTH.

Dovzhenko came impulsively to the cinema, but it was a late impulse. While the other leaders of the Soviet cinema had been recruited in their teens and early twenties, he was an old man, comparatively, when, at 32, he made his first essays in the medium. Peasant born, he had been a teacher, then a diplomat; then took up painting and worked as a cartoonist for a Kharkov newspaper. Only when he read in one of the avant-garde journals of the day that painting was the art of the past did he pack his bag and set

off for the film studios in Odessa. Strangely, considering the lyrical and passionate and patriotic vision of his mature work, he wanted to be a director of comedy, and his first film was a slapstick two-reeler. After another essay, however, this time a rip-roaring adventure story, came the magical ZVENIGORA: and Dovzhenko's career was firmly set. Dovzhenko had his own inimitable poetic means: a profound feeling for the image and for movement, for juxtaposition and rhythm and counterpoint; an ability to assort and assimilate all kinds of experience, myth and history, reality and the fantastic, instinct and experience. But more than this, as Ivor Montagu wrote: "Dovzhenko was a creator and in every one of his films he was expressing his own view, his own apprehension at once simple and complex. He held fast to his peasant background; practically all his films and writings were concerned with the expression of his own land. But he was also a child of the Socialist revolution; regardless of the disappointments (and they were often grave in his case) he never swerved from his faith in the ideal. And beyond this, too, he possessed a sense of the universal, a continuity that comprehended birth and death - the birth and death of man; the renewal of nature; the creation of a hydro-electric dam or the drowning of a village. Dovzhenko was excited. It is more important with him to feel than to comprehend literally. "This unmatched poet of the cinema" wrote Montagu again, "wrings our entrails with his vision of that universal truths."

-David Robinson
National Film Theatre (London), Program Notes, August -
November 1975

TWO QUESTIONS: Which is more advantageous to intellectual development:

--to make a picture which the spectator looks at only passively, being in the theatre with his girl or sweetheart, and after leaving it, lighting a cigarette and five minutes later forgetting all that he has seen; or

--to make a picture which the spectator does not fully understand the first time he sees it, perhaps because of a new method, but which incites in him a certain unrest, which forces him to think, to meditate, to act?"

ONE ANSWER:

"I am convinced that only this latter method is the right one, and that it is just by this method that we are able to disentangle films from their present embryonic state and to create films that may be judged valuable and true works of art."

-Alexander Dovzhenko

Quoted by Vlada Petric in his unpublished essay, "Montage Structure in Dovzhenko's Silent Films."

No U.S. commercial release of ZVENIGORA is known, but a 16mm subtitled version is available from Macmillan Audio Brandon Films, and was shown at the old Bleecker Street Cinema in 1961 for a two-week run (May 19 -- June 1). An unsubtitled 35mm version is in the rotating repertory of the Anthology Film Archive.

ZVENIGORA. 1927. Released April 13, 1928 (Kiev), May 8, 1928 (Moscow). "Cine-poem." 6 reels. YUFKU (Odessa). Russian intertitles. ca. 75 minutes.

Russian alternate title: ZAKOLDOVANOYE MESTO (BEWITCHED PLACE).

Direction: Alexander Dovzhenko. Scenario: Mikhail Johanson (Ioganson), Yuri Yurtik (Tyutyunik). Photography: Boris Zavelyov. Design: Vasili Krichevsky. Director's assistants: L. Bodik, M. Zubov, Chernyayev. Assistant cameraman: A. Pankratyev. Cameraman's assistant: V. Goritsyn. Make-up: Shcherbina.

Cast: Nikolai (or Nikola) Nademsky (Grandad, a symbolic old man; also, Tsarist general); Semyon Svashenko (Timosh, his grandson, Red Army soldier, and later engineer); Alexander Podorozhny (Pavlo, his second grandson, bandit, émigré); G. Astafyev (Scythian chieftain); I. Selyuk (Cossack leader); L. Barbe (Catholic monk); M. Parshina (Timosh's wife); A. Simonov (fat cavalry officer); Dovbish (student on train); Yu. Mikhailev (adjutant); N. Charov (Pavlo's accomplice abroad); P. Sklyar-Otava (Oksana, a peasant girl); V. Uralsky (peasant).

High above the spacious Ukrainian steppes looms Mount Zvenigora. As folklore has it, within its depths are hidden the fabulous riches of the Scythians, who once scourged the Ukrainian earth with fire and sword. For many years old Grandad, custodian of folklore traditions, has been seeking the vanished underground treasure.

This ancient Grandad, symbol of Ukrainian wisdom, appears in a series of episodes that trace the centuries-old history of the Ukraine.

World War I breaks out. The wind of revolution sweeps across the Ukraine. One of the old man's grandsons, Timosh, who is a soldier in the Red Army, is also seeking riches for his people. But he does not seek them in the depths of old Zvenigora. To him, the way to a richer, happier life lies in the day-to-day building of socialism. But Pavlo, Grandad's second grandson, joins the counter-revolutionary White forces and turns bandit. Forced to flee abroad after the defeat of the White Army, he soon returns, with the intention of blowing up the railroad. To fulfill these tasks he enlists the help of Grandad, but the latter is frightened of the onrushing train. Workers take him aboard. The train, symbol of the irresistible surge of the revolution, speeds on.

Soviet Fiction Films:
An Annotated Catalog, Vol. I,
Moscow, 1961, pp. 195-96, No. 456

Translated and revised by Sonia Volochova.

Because ZVENIGORA is so difficult a film, but chiefly because they are as much the work of a poet as the images, and because they are contrapuntally related to these images in so masterly a fashion we are supplementing the synopsis with a translation of the intertitles (courtesy Anthology Film Archives) as follows:

1. Soaked with blood, sealed in secrecy, shrouded in legend, treasures of the country have been buried for ages in Ukrainian soil.
2. The centuries-old guardian, preserver of antiquities, a moss-covered grandfather, watches now as he watched when Cossack robbers roamed the country 300 years - 1,000 years ago -
3. Cossack: "Have you seen any Poles?"
4. grandf.: "At Zvenigora the cursed ones roam! They dig the ground - they search for the vault - they want to steal our hidden Ukrainian treasures."
5. Cossack: "Unharness your horse. Mount and ride with us!"
6. Cossack: "A sword for Grandfather! So he becomes a roaming Cossack robber!"
7. grandf.: "There is Zvenigora!"

8. Cossack: "I'll ride straight, but you, Grandfather, lead the hundred brethren in a flanking movement. Only mind you - do not dig the ground without me! Do not touch the hidden treasures. Forward!"
9. Cossack: "Where are your Poles, Grandfather?"
10. grandf.: "A Pole sat in the oak. There is no Pole anymore."
11. Cossack: "Take your knives, children."
12. grandf.: "To the horses!"
13. Cossack: "Where are your vaults, Grandfather?"
14. grandf.: "My vaults are where the hidden treasures are."
15. Cossack: "Let no enemy's foot tread here! Let the treasures lie in peace!"
16. Centuries passed. People were born and died - trains passed over Ukrainian plains - But the hills and forests and rivers of Zvenigora kept Grandfather's secret.
17. Progress everywhere -
18. - watched by Oksana.
19. In the midsummer night for centuries - year after year - Grandfather's old lips divined the maiden's fate - the fern blossomed in dark nights -
20. Grandfather had a grandson, Pavlo.
21. Grandfather had a grandson, Timoshko.
22. grandf.: "Spit, boys! Spit three times: a devil is in the hut!"
23. grandf.: "Make the Sign of the Cross - plague on you - make the Sign of the Cross - the devil is in the hut - I tell you - make the Sign of the Cross!"
24. You see, they would have lived and grown as corn in the fields - - if only - -
25. Many mothers wept for their sons, fallen on German soil and in the Ukraine.
26. grandf.: "Nation after nation, country after country, revolted. An enemy of the human race rules over us - "
27. grandf.: "You see, the treasure is here."
28. Dogs are not fed when taken hunting. They build roads when they are at war.
29. grandf.: "Treasures should not be buried. Roads are not built with unclean hands. Zvenigoras are not vanquished."
30. At day break on Sunday -
31. grandf.: "Your Most Serene, Most Gracious, Most Righteous, Most Honorable - Stop! - the treasure will be spoiled!"
32. general: "You, Grandfather, are a real engineer. But digging is forbidden."
33. general: "Chase the old man away. Set up a guard."
34. Timoshka planned - And Cossack planned -
35. guard: "Halt! Who's there?"
36. general: "It cannot be! Stop!"
37. general: "I shall speak to them myself. I shall perform a miracle."
38. general: "No, lads."
39. general: "No, lads."
40. general: "Hail, eagles."

41. Timosh: "Hail, eagles - "
42. Timosh: "Your Excellency, an ex-Knight of the Order of St. George requests permission to give the order himself for his own execution."
43. Timosh: "At the one who stands before you - "
44. Timosh: "Fire by platoon - "
45. Timosh: "P-l-a-t-o-o-n-"
46. Timosh: "Aim!"
47. Timosh: "Fire!"
48. My hand creates miracles -
49. grandf.: "In rebellion nation rose against nation, country against country, brother against brother. Sit down, my only consolation and hope."
50. grandf.: "Listen to a secret. A great treasure is hidden here in Zvenigora - in ancient times when strangers walked our lands, they were led by military men."
51. grandf.: "People lived in villages as we do - there was a girl by the name of Oksana -"
52. grandf.: "Cattle died and people died and the leader decided to stop at Zvenigora to collect tribute -"
53. Viking: "Free the people!"
54. Viking: "Shield!"
55. grandf.: "Oksana betrayed her nation. She fell in love with the foreign leader - but not for long -"
56. grandf.: "With a terrible word he cursed Oksana and the treasures -"
57. grandf.: "Where Oksana fell, a lake was formed by the spreading waters - the earth collapsed and became a ravine -"
58. grandf.: "Her hair became rustling reeds, her eyes became wells and caves. Our race has a treasure - we know the secret."
59. Watch out, beloved village. Pavlo attacks on a white horse.
60. Before the sun had risen, Red partisans departed from the village, leaving it at the mercy of bandit Pavlo.
61. Timosh: "Go back!"
62. wife: "I will not go back, my dear Timoshko. I cannot go back!"
63. Timosh: "Go back, crazy woman, I'll be angry!"
64. peasant: "Come on! Leave the women alone!"
65. wife: "Strike me dead, Timoshko, I cannot return! Timoshko! Kill me or come back!"
66. Timosh: "The Revolution is in danger!"
67. Timosh: "The Revolution is in danger!"
68. Timosh: "To horses, Proletarians!"
69. Timosh: "Proletarians - to the machines! Stoke the furnaces! More fire!"
70. Timosh: "The Revolution is in danger!"
71. grandf.: "Ah, it was some time ago!"
72. Meanwhile the refugee Cossack walks in Prague, sweeping the streets with baggy trousers.
73. And Timosh? At workers' high school, he tries to find in the figures and formulae of science the true secret of Zvenigora - the secret of the riches of the Ukraine.
74. Prague - Paris - Poltava -
75. The Duke of Ukraine will read a lecture on the destruction of the Ukraine by Bolsheviks. After the lecture . . .
76. . . . he will shoot himself with his own revolver before the eyes of a respectable audience.

77. Pavlo: "Ladies and gentlemen - I thank you very much for your attention. I know that you are not interested in the Ukraine, or Bolsheviks - especially the ladies - therefore, I shall not keep you waiting any longer -"
78. Pavlo: "Ladies and gentlemen - thank you very much. I am finished."
79. Pavlo: "Excuse me - I forgot to tell - "
80. friend: "\$6,000.00. Excellent. You now have a fund for a new expedition to find the treasure. We are sure that this time you will succeed."
81. Pavlo: "The treasure is ours. Only hurry! Stop the fiery serpent that will crush your treasure underfoot!"
82. grandf.: "Stop the evil force! Disappear - forever!"
83. grandf.: "Fiery monster - stop!"
84. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you. I have finished.

"The film is a legend, or rather, a whole anthology of legends, linked by the symbol of hidden treasure. Because it ranges so widely through history, from the period of Viking invasion up through post-revolutionary Ukraine, it gives the impression of a larger scale than it actually has - at the time, it was referred to as 'an Ukrainian INTOLERANCE'. This is not an apt parallel, for the structure of ZVENIGORA (for which the poet Johansen was probably responsible) is much looser; Grandad feeds Pavlo, a grandson, on such extravagant stories of Zvenigora, the treasure-hill, that the boy, blind to the revolution and dreaming only of sudden wealth, grows up to become a bandit and an émigré-adventurer. The wandering story's climax mounts in a Paris theatre, where Pavlo has attracted a paying audience to witness his public suicide. Instead, he escapes with the box-office receipts, to be used for counter-revolutionary sabotage in the Ukraine. When Grandad (symbol of the past) fails to derail the train (symbol of progress), Pavlo's postponed suicide finally comes off, and Grandad joins his good grandson, Timosh, whom we have watched through the film fighting in the war and staying with the revolution. There is an apotheosis of socialist industry, a neutral conclusion to which Dovzhenko manages to give some personality. But such an account of the film's story conveys nothing of the film's character, full of fantastic surprises, lyrical passages, and a wealth of technical experiments that remind one of the similar wealth in STRIKE. Both films, too, each in its own way, are full of humour. Grandad, for example, in his story-telling, usually assumes the hero's role: he can outwit generals and decimate Viking forces with equal ease.

Dovzhenko had an answer ready for all complaints about his complicated story:

"Do I hear the objection that some people in the audience may not understand my film? Well, I cannot help it. I cannot very well appear before them at each performance and say 'Look here, fellows, if there is anything you do not understand it does not mean that my film is bad or unintelligible. The reason why you don't understand it is within yourself. Maybe you simply are unable to think, whereas my purpose is to prompt your thinking while you see my film.' If your girl friend whispers to you that she finds it boring, do not hesitate, get up and take her to another movie - because my film is a Bolshevik production!"

A wild and wonderful affair like no film before it or since, Dovzhenko's first work as total author was a profound shock to the studio bosses, who called in Eisenstein and Pudovkin to see what they thought about it. Their response was immediate: "a joyful welcome of our new colleague. There was a new film person among us." A fantasy spreading over a thousand years of time, the same characters recur through the ages, wizard monks start up out of the earth, horses are painted in strange colours, man advertises his own suicide as a theatrical entertainment, but makes off with the box-office takings.

National Film Theatre
(London), notes, August - November 1975.