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OVERTURE: Eight Russian Folk Songs by Liadov; Bamberg Symphony directed by J. Perlea.

SHORT SUBJECT: Song of the Prairie, by Jiri Tyrnka. Produced in Czechoslovakia.

FEATURE: Earth (1930); Direction and scenario by Alexander Dovzhenko.

The era of the silent film in Soviet Russia, between the revolution of 1917 and the early 1930's was one of great productivity and experimentation. Lenin's nationalization of the film industry (1919) created a situation which was for a time ideal for the film makers. The film was recognized by the government as a valuable tool to unify the vast and scattered peoples of Russia by making the inhabitants of the smallest villages aware of what was going on in the big cities and vice versa. Inevitably the government expected that its doctrine would be carried to the people through this new medium and that the films should be sociologically oriented towards communism. But these limitations were not, in this early period, strict enough to subdue the more creative of Russian directors. Nor were men such as Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dziga-Vertov and Dovzhenko opposed to the general dictates of communism at this time. The delicate balance struck in the first part of Dovzhenko's Earth between the beauty of the passing way of life and the vitality of the new does give way in the end to a definite affirmation of progress through collectivization.

But Earth is much more than this. It is best compared to a lyric poem, in which each scene from nature, each arrangement of figures, each facial expression is like a carefully chosen word or phrase: prolonged if not arrested in time, beautiful in itself but owing a deeper meaning and dimension to the sweep of the poem. It is to be "read" slowly; indeed the viewer sees from the very first scenes of the prologue of the ripe apples and waving grain and the gentle death of the smiling old man, that he cannot do otherwise. He is allowed to look long and reflect, and he finds pleasure in his own freedom to absorb and to wonder.

Dovzhenko directed two successful films before Earth: Zvenigora, based on Ukrainian folklore, and Arsenal based on the suppression of a workers' revolt in 1918. Earth is set in the more peaceful times of postrevolutionary Ukraine, where the lingering conflicts between the old and the young, the wealthy landowners (the Kulaki) and the peasants are sharpened by the necessity to adjust to the new communal life. The plot is of the utmost simplicity. The young peasants are trying to set up the system of communal farming, but are opposed by the sons of the Kulaks who believe that the land they have inherited should remain in their hands. A tractor sent by the government is driven into the village amid great excitement by the young village chairman, Vassily. Later, during the harvest, he drives it across the lands of a Kulak who subsequently takes his revenge. Vassily's father sends away the old priest who has come to bury Vassily, and asks that he be buried by his friends, according to the new system. At the funeral Thomas hysterically screams his guilt, but no one pays any attention to him.

The film has been subjected to a variety of interpretations, for all its eloquent simplicity. When it first came out in Russia, official critics were disappointed in its "defeatist" character. Some criticized Dovzhenko for being an escapist, for indifference to the true nature of the class struggle, for unwillingness to be engagé. Others attributed Dovzhenko's love for man and nature to simple pantheism. Today, anyone sniffing out the party message will have no trouble in finding it, but this will not lead him far. It will not explain the smile that lights up Vassily's face, or his expressive dance of joy, or the sight of his crumpled form in the dusty road immediately after. For those seeking a systematic framework of thought by which to understand the film, one critic offers the following interpretation:

The key to all the poignancy in Dovzhenko's films is death...

Death apprehended never as an end...but as a sacrifice, the essential one, a part of the unending process of reviving life...

Pantheism? No. Nature worship? Not at all. Sound

Marxist dialectics: the union of opposites.

Time has worked both ways in affecting our appreciation of this film. Although many of the scenes have gained an exotic value as records of a way of life that is no more it is harder for us now (after decades of travelogues) to appreciate the full originality of the scenes of the prologue and the other nature images, even while we still are affected by their beauty. The impact that this film made upon the more susceptible viewers of the 1930's can best be shown through the following excerpt from a review written at the time:

So moved am I by Dovzhenko's film that I find it difficult to express in words the full meaning of the moving images that are at once lovely in themselves, lovely in sequence, and lovely as a unified work of art...The touches of mysticism, the deep feeling for the soil, the sensitivity to all that is lovely are so new to the art of the cinema that for the moment we are dumbfounded.

We are left with our minds satiated with pleasure...

--M. D. Gorkun