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October 2 - November 18, 1975

SOVIET SILENT CINEMA

BY THE LAW
YOUR ACQUAINTANCE

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.

Tuesday, October 14 at 2:00

BY THE LAW (PO ZAKONU). 1926. Released December 3, 1926. Adaptation of Jack London story "The Unexpected." 6 reels. Goskino (First Studio). English intertitles. ca. 75-80 minutes.

Alternate English titles: EXPIATION, DURA LEX, ACCORDING TO THE LAW. German title: SUHNE. Alternate Russian title: TROYE (THREESOME).

Scenario: Victor Shklovsky, Lev Kuleshov. Direction: Kuleshov. Photography: Konstantin Kuznetsov. Design: Isaac Makhlis. Director's assistant: B. Sveshnikov.

Cast: Alexandra Khokhlova (Edith); Sergei Komarov (Hans Nielsen, her husband); Vladimir Fogel (Michael Dennin, the murderer); Porfiri Podobed (Detchi); Pyotr Galadzhev (Harker).

"Kuleshov (January 1, 1899 - March 29, 1970) had grown up in films, gaining his first experience in the Khazhonkov studios under the guidance of Yevgeni Bauer, the most inquiring of the pre-revolutionary Russian directors. Hired as a set-designer, Kuleshov's opportunity to direct came in 1918, and ENGINEER PRITE'S PROJECT (PROYEKT INZHENERA PRAITA) showed the influence of the American film upon him.

During the Civil War, he was assigned to newsreel work at the front and his famous Workshop dates from a conversation with a young film enthusiast, Leonid Obolensky, who was fighting in the Red Army. Kuleshov arranged admission for him into the newly opened State School of Cinematography in Moscow and, on Kuleshov's next visit to the capital, the two discussed their mutual interests further and broached the idea of an experimental group. Two other students of the school joined them, and the Kuleshov Workshop volunteered to start its practical work with RED FRONT (1920), half-enacted and half-newsreel. Before the group returned to the front for the second time, Kuleshov's enthusiastic conversations had attracted other young people to the State School, Pudovkin among them. In Moscow, the group doggedly studied film principles without benefit of more than a reel of raw movie film, but with inexhaustible stores of self-confidence and finished films to examine.

Alongside the practical training, the workshop accumulated a body of theory which would alone make the Kuleshov group important in film history. Stated simply, this contribution was the discovery that there were, inherent in a single piece of unedited film, two powers: its own, and the strength of its relation to other pieces of film. Kuleshov claimed that it is with this second strength that all emotional effect is produced in film, and offered the often-quoted experiment of Kuleshov and Pudovkin to prove this hypothesis; three static and similar close-ups of the actor Mozhukhin were joined "with other bits of film in three different combinations. In the first combination the close-up of Mozhukhin was immediately followed by a shot of a plate of soup on a table...In the second combination the face of Mozhukhin was joined by shots showing a coffin in which lay a dead woman. In the third the close-up was followed by a shot of a little girl playing with a funny toy bear." The deceived public that witnessed these combinations, as edited into a dramatic film, praised the variety of Mozhukhin's acting, but the group knew that "in all three cases the face was exactly the same."

The workshop's opportunity came towards the end of 1923 when the First Studio of Goskino offered them the chance to show what they could do with the precious imported raw film... the Kuleshov group decided upon a comedy, and cooperatively worked upon THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF MR. WEST IN THE LAND OF THE BOLSHEVIKS. It was successful, but their next, THE DEATH RAY (1925), a fantastic melodrama, was not. Goskino, in an economy drive, gave them a third and last chance ... BY THE LAW.

Kuleshov and his literary advisor, Victor Shklovsky, sought a subject that would offer an opportunity for serious experiment but would require a minimum of expense. It had to be done cheaply and quickly -- with few actors, few sets, and no sumptuous costumes. A cast of three characters offered the cheapest dramatic possibilities, but there had to be some reason for isolating the three -- they had to be in a desert, or snow-bound, or flood-bound, making the unsalaried elements play roles. They chose Jack London's grim Alaskan story, "The Unexpected," in which three people, related by murder, are isolated from civilization by winter storms and spring floods. The Alaskan atmosphere was understandably of less importance to Kuleshov than the essential drama of Jack London's story. Although the finished film shows faithful respect for the work of London, its visualization seems to us peculiarly Russian. Incidentally, Shklovsky has told how he drew one of the added episodes -- the birthday party -- from a scene in Dostoyevsky. The writing team finished the adaptation and shooting-script in one night and submitted it to the studio, which rejected its subject and its proposed heroine, Alexandra Khokhlova, as "not attractive enough." These obstacles were overcome by placing the production in the category of experiment, on a restricted budget.

Only one interior set was built, in the courtyard of the studio. Three actors were put on salary; the other two, being former members of the Workshop, helped out by taking time off from their regular jobs. As the studio had placed Levitzky on another film, he supervised a younger cameraman, Kuznetsov. Evenings were used for rehearsals of the action and camera set-ups for the next morning's shooting -- a great economy of time and raw film. *BY THE LAW* is still the least expensive feature film ever produced in Russia.

When finished and exported, the studio was amazed at its critical reception abroad. The absence of all orthodox film devices (no hero, no villain, no variety of locale, no parallel action, etc.) surprised and attracted advance-guard film-goers. Above all, its physiological tension was unique on European screens. A record of its unusual effect is provided by H.D.'s review in *Close Up* (May 1928) communicating the sensations of catalepsy and hysteria she experienced on seeing it in a little Lausanne theatre. It is interesting that no effort was made to analyze the experience or understand the technique that produced it, although its influence abroad can, perhaps, be detected in Carl Dreyer's *PASSION OF JOAN OF ARC* (1928).

In "Voices of October" Joseph Freeman comes closer to the means by which the film's intensity was achieved: "*BY THE LAW* was worked out in the spirit of an algebraic formula, seeking to obtain the maximum of effect with the minimum of effort." The mathematical precision of every gesture and movement contributes to the total effect of each character and episode. Kuleshov taught his workshop that the hands, arms and legs are the most expressive parts of the film actor's body and we can observe that their movements create as much of the film's tension as does the facial expression. The same intensity of "performance" by Khokhlova and Fogel that amazed critics only proved how correct was Kuleshov's avoidance of "performance."

This calculated isolation and intensification of significant detail and gesture, accumulated for totality of effect, Kuleshov had learned from Griffith and from Chaplin's *A WOMAN OF PARIS*. It was his function as assimilator and analyst, apart from his considerable individual talents, that made Kuleshov's contribution so vital to Soviet film theory. The introduction to Kuleshov's "Art of the Cinema," signed by Pudovkin, Obolensky, Komarov and Fogel, concludes: "We make films -- Kuleshov makes cinematography."/

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

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BY THE LAW is very untypical of Kuleshov's early film theories but it is an excellent psychological drama. Unlike Kuleshov's first pictures, BY THE LAW uses only two or three settings, takes place almost entirely in interiors, and has very little action, instead emphasizing psychology and internal dynamism. This was necessitated by the circumstances of its production: by 1926 Kuleshov was practically persona non grata with the Sovkino Studio No. 1, and was allowed to make a film only on a C-picture budget of around 15,000 rubles (big Soviet films at that time cost 50,000 - 100,000 rubles). Kuleshov and writer-critic Victor Shklovsky deliberately chose a story whose location and climate would isolate a very small group of characters whose drama could be photographed in one interior setting. They settled on London's "The Unexpected," originally published in McClure's Magazine (Aug. '06), a story itself inspired by a similar tragedy that actually happened in the Klondike in 1900.

Kuleshov used five of the more loyal members of his stock company for the acting parts, shot the interior scenes in an inexpensive setting at the First Studio located near what is now the Kiev Station, and did the exteriors on the flooding Moscow River a few miles from Moscow; the "hanging tree" (not a fake, by the way) was found and photographed at Tsaritsyno, near Moscow. BY THE LAW is also typical of Kuleshov in revealing his rational, calculating approach to film production, his interest in directing the audience rather than the actors (like Hitchcock), achieving effects in inverse proportion to his limited resources and budget (he has always been more interested in how to do something more than for what reason).

The ending of the film can be disputed. London's story ends with the hanging, and concentrates on how the pressure of events ("the unexpected") brings out the strength of Edith's character. Kuleshov shifted some of the emphasis to a criticism of Anglo-Saxon concern for the letter of the law, and invented a new ending, about which he writes (letter to Hill, 4/18/67: "I would keep the old ending [if allowed to remake the film today]. The ending contains my own views: I believe in the victory of life! Jack London's ending was too cruel and exotic for me."

-- Steven P. Hill, University of Illinois
Film Society program note.

Much of the powerful impact of *BY THE LAW* is generated by the performance of Alexandra Khokhlova (October 4, 1897--), cast in the pivotal role of the psychologically distraught Edith. Kuleshov's wife, lifelong collaborator, and leading lady, she was attuned to his theories and complemented his thinking by her acting. The periods of obscurity imposed upon him for "ideological deviations," were periods of obscurity for her, too. In addition her acting career was cut short by her "unattractiveness." Her last important role was in her husband's *THE GREAT CONSOLER* (*VELIKY UTESHITEL*), 1933. She entered films in 1916, joined Kuleshov's Workshop in 1920, and in addition to *BY THE LAW* and *THE GREAT CONSOLER* - appeared in the following Kuleshov films: *ON THE RED FRONT* (*NA KRASNOM FRONTE*), 1920, *THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF MR. WEST IN THE LAND OF THE BOLSHEVIKS* (*ZEOBYCHAINIYE PRIKLUCHENIYA MISTERA VESTA V STRANE BOLSHEVIKOV*), 1924 and *DEATH RAY* (*LUCH SMERTI*), 1925. She also assisted him in directing *HORIZON* (*GORIZONT*), 1932, *THE SIBERIANS* (*SIBIRIKI*), 1940, *TIMUR'S OATH* (*KLYATVA TIMURA*), 1942, and *WE ARE FROM THE URALS* (*MY S URALA*), 1943; was his colleague on the staff of the Film Institute; and is joint author of his memoirs, *The Fifty Years*. The handful of films she directed alone... e.g. *THE AFFAIR OF THE CLASPS* (*DELO S ZASTYOZHkami*), 1929, *SASHA*, 1930, *TOYS* (*IGRUSHKI*), 1931 -- are of little importance, except as a record of her activities.

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For fuller information on Kuleshov's career, theories, and films see:

Leyda, Jay, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (paperback edition), Macmillan, 1973.

Hill, Steven P., "Kuleshov -- Prophet Without Honor," *Film Culture*, Vol. 44, Spring 1967, pp. 2-37. Contains an annotated filmography.

Levaco, Ronald, trans. and ed., *Kuleshov on Film: Writings by Lev Kuleshov*, University of California Press, 1974. Contains filmography.

-Sonia Volochova

YOUR ACQUAINTANCE (*VASHA ZNAKOMAYA*). 1927. Released October 25, 1927. Drama. 6 reels. Sovkino (Moscow). Reel 2 only, all that survives. Russian Intertitles. ca. 10 minutes.

Russian alternate title: *ZHURNALISTKA* (*THE FEMALE JOURNALIST*, or *JOURNALIST*).

Direction: Lev Kuleshov. Scenario: Alexander Kurs; Photography: Konstantin Kuznetsov; Design: Vasili Rakhals, A. Rodchenko. (The above credits are from the Soviet catalog of fiction films. Jay Leyda (*Kino*, p. 432) adds the following: Scenario (from story by Alexander Kurs): Kurs, V. Ashmarin, Lev Kuleshov .

Cast: Alexandra Khokhlova (Khokhlova, girl-journalist); Pyotr Galadzhev (editorial secretary); Yuri Vasilchikov (Vasilchikov, department head and publisher); Boris Ferdinandov (Petrovsky, head of Iron Combine); A. Chekulayeva (his wife); A. Gromov (newspaper's make-up man).