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## ARSENAL (1928-29)

Produced by VUFKU, Kiev. Written and directed by Alexander Dovzhenko. Photography by Danylo Demutzki. Cast: Semyon Svashenko, Nikolai Nademsky, Ambrose Buchma, Nikolai Kuchinsky, Piotr Masokha.

The first important Ukrainian production 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: 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. For 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.

Dovzhenko says 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."

The widest variety of elements nourished 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 welded 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, employs a wide variety of methods and yet is unified in purpose. Its cameraman, Demutzki, observes no known limits or superficial unity, 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. James Shelley Hamilton, who made the American adaption, said in the *National Board of Review Magazine*, "It is a picture that, like sublime music or poetry, gives up its meaning slowly, more and more eloquently and movingly the more often it is seen."

In a few instances complete understanding hangs on the 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 the images need no special information — the penetrating wartime 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. 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.

This showing of "Arsenal" is in the nature of a memorial to one of the great film poets of our time: Alexander Dovzhenko, born in the Ukraine in 1894, died November 25, 1956. Of peasant stock, he was a painter and cartoonist in his early life and turned to films only in 1926. His work is characterized by an extremely subjective, poetic approach, deliberately slow and static. The tempo is speeded up only at moments of conflict or of enthusiasm. His most famous films include ZVENIGORA (1927-8), ARSENAL (1928-9), EARTH (1929-30), AEROGRAD (1935), SHCHORS (1938-9) and LIFE IN BLOSSOM (1948). Hailed as a director of extraordinary originality and power, Dovzhenko's greatest works are no doubt also his most difficult ones; an unorthodox continuity defies established methods and forms of narrative construction; there is much dependence on both dynamic and visual associations, an extensive exploitation of metaphor, pantomime, poetic imagery, purposive fantasy and symbolism. This is especially true of ARSENAL — a film that failed universally in terms of immediate audience response, and simultaneously was hailed by critics everywhere as a landmark of filmic lyricism and screen experimentation.

The film will be projected at its original, silent speed. To run it at faster sound speed might make it more acceptable to general audiences, but would change its tempo and mood, thereby violating the film maker's intentions. The extremely slow and static quality of the film is a good example of Dovzhenko's stylized, poetic approach.

more on "Arsenal" over leaf





"Some knowledge of the historical period in which ARSENAL 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 nationalist 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."

"Film Notes", Museum of Modern Art Film Library, November '35

References: Kenneth Macpherson in Close-up, January 1930; James Shelley Hamilton, National Board of Review Magazine, November 1929; Henri Barbusse, One Looks At Russia, London, Dent, 1931; Alexander Bakshy, Nation, November 27, 1929; A.Y. Arosev, Soviet Cinema, Moscow, Voks, 1935; Thorold Dickinson, Soviet Cinema; Jay Leyda; Index to the Creative Work of Dovzhenko; Bardeche and Brasillach, History of Motion Pictures; Paul Rotha; The Film Till Now, and Documentary Film; John Grierson, On Documentary; Ivar Montagu, Dovzhenko, Sight and Sound

"To the structural contributions of his associates Dovzhenko has added a deep personal and poetic insight, which not only gives his films a mystical quality but makes them utterly unusual. Both "Arsenal" and "Soil" are laconic in style, with a strange, wonderfully imaginative quality difficult to describe. Says Dovzhenko, "Excitement runs like a red thread through all my films." Neither of these works has a story; both spring from moods, concepts, and images of Ukrainian legends. Both contain some of the most sensitive pictorial compositions the screen has ever known, superbly related in angle, tone, and movement. So personalized are these pictures that they achieve the emotional intensity of great lyrical poems; so concentrated, rich, and unexpected are their images that Dovzhenko, perhaps more than anyone else, can be called the first poet of movies." Jacobs, The Rise of the American Film

"ARSENAL 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."

"One of the Ten Best Pictures of 1929", National Board of Review