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The Youth of an Art

1924-1925

Everything in heaven and earth, in man and in story,
in books and in fancy, acts by Confederacy, by juxta-
position, by circumstance and place

CHARLES LAMB

At some time during the period from February 1924 to February 1925 all those Russian* directors who were to assume places of prime importance in the creative and theoretical history of the silent film had entered the Soviet cinema. Pioneer innovators such as Lev Kuleshov and Dziga Vertov evolved, during this period, films that were complete practical demonstrations of their previously announced aims.

Lenin died in January 1924, but he had already indicated, by his close and constant concern with the tasks of the young industry, the direction it must take to become the communication medium fit for those tasks. Since Lenin's nationalization of the film industry in 1919, it had remained under the direct control, even during the period of NEP, of the People's Commissariat of Education, where Lunacharsky held the post of Commissar, giving particular attention to the carrying on of Lenin's directives, developing them as time presented new problems. Although the first All-Union Party Conference on film questions was not held until 1928, every political leader took a definite stand before 1925 on the needs and purposes of the moving picture in the Soviet Union. People's Commissar of Nationalities Stalin, who had observed the visible educational advance obtained by film-showings among the peoples of the national minorities and the peasants, announced at the Thirteenth Congress of the Communist Party: 'The cinema is the greatest means of mass agitation. Our problem is to take this matter into our own hands'; and the Congress did embody this resolution in a strongly worded decree to give material and financial teeth to the monopoly (chiefly in principle) declared in the previous September. On June 13, 1924, the Council of People's Commissars established a special commission, headed by Leonid Krassin, to form the new company, Sovkino. The new unity of organization and purpose behind the entire industry en-

* Similarly clear evidence of progress in the other republics, especially in the Ukraine and Georgia, cannot be seen until somewhat later.

couraged the people working in the Soviet film to make both social and artistic progress that caused it to become, within the next three years, the most typical art medium of the Soviet Union, judging by its continuing popularity with audiences within the Union and by its fame abroad. What artistic forces appeared in 1924 that assured the international prestige of the Soviet film by 1926?

'Pioneer' is certainly an accurate word to describe Kuleshov, who co-ordinated the loose instincts of dramatic film-structure already existing throughout the film world, and Vertov, who literally revolutionized the newsreel. They were young pioneers: Kuleshov had directed his first film (*Engineer Prite's Project*, 1918) at the age of seventeen, and Vertov at the age of twenty had been put in charge of all newsreels filmed on the front during the Civil War. Although creative responsibilities were not entirely in the hands of such youngsters, it is true that the first great expressive advances in Soviet films came from film-workers in their twenties.

In preceding chapters there is some detail on Kuleshov's studio-work before the Revolution, his group of cameramen and actors at the front during the Civil War, and the formation of his 'workshop' where a group of enthusiasts* doggedly studied film principles without benefit of more than a reel of raw film. Their opportunity came in November 1923, when the First Studio of Goskino in Moscow, immediately after its organization, offered them a chance to show what they could do with the precious imported film-stock. Kuleshov decided that a comedy was the best form in which to make a public demonstration of what they had learned during their three years of preparation. This was *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, made with a sense of humour in character and in action that is as fresh today as it was in 1924. It was not easy to make Soviet comedies, even with satirical content, then. Chaplin's work had been seen by almost none of the film-makers, but the pre-war comedies of Max Linder and André Deed were still in frantic circulation, and formed a concrete rival to any home competition. The collective was also testing their method against all other 'method':

'In 1923 . . . with trained actors, taught in a new method, we engaged in production for the first time. It was very terrifying—for suddenly nothing turned out the way we expected it to.

'The studio had just been organized, the heating system wasn't even working yet, there were no properties at hand, no technical personnel. We had to do nearly everything ourselves. Why was it necessary to make "West?" "West" had to be made to find out if we were right, and to confirm that theatre schools were unsatisfactory for the film, which required its own, a specifically cinematographic school. A decision on this question was extremely important. There were then very few adherents of a pure cinema method.

* In the order of their admission to the workshop: Leonid Obolensky, Alexandra Khokhlova, A. Reich, Porfiri Podobed, Sergei Komarov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Galina Kravchenko, Vladimir Fogel, Pyotr Galadzhnev, Boris Barnet, Valya Lopatina, Valeri Inkizhinov, Pyotr Reppin, Mikhail Doller, and others. Almost all members of the workshop took part in the production of *Mr West*.

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'Everyone defended the theatricalization of the cinema, the Moscow Art Theatre was law, and only in it could be seen future production possibilities, and if not there, then in the continuance of the tradition of Maximov, Runich, Kholodnaya, Lisenko, Mozhukhin, and the like. It was a gloomy heritage. . . .

'Respect in our collective had fallen, but the most difficult task was to show that new actors, specifically trained for film-work, were far better than the psychological-theatrical film-stars. And it was necessary to show this practically, without films, without essential apparatus, without special staffs, and chiefly without production experience.

'Our first experience was recognized as successful. Of course there were many faults in the picture, but it could not have been otherwise in a first work.¹

A proof of the success of *Mr West* with home audiences (the only ones to see it) is that thirty-two copies were put into distribution immediately on the film's initial showing—a number that was exceeded only by two dramas in Goskino's 1924 output. Alexander Wicksteed, an Englishman temporarily resident in Moscow, found the comedy 'perfectly delightful':

'In this an American tourist [played by Podobed] who is full of the horrors that the American press are so fond of describing in Russia falls into the hands of a gang, who proceed to "play up" to him and show him all the things for which he is looking. Finally as he is on the point of paying an enormous ransom, he is rescued by the G.P.U., who proceed to show him the real Moscow. One can but admire the skill and restraint of the producers in realizing that it was not necessary in any way to exaggerate the tales of the foreign press in order to reduce a Moscow audience to helpless laughter.'²

Before the bars of the international blockade against the young Soviet Russian Republic had come down, the country had been deluged with adventure and mystery serial films—such as were entertaining the Tsar at Headquarters in 1916, and Moscow audiences in 1922—the most lively ones coming from America. Kuleshov had tried to introduce not only American cutting methods into the Khanzhonkov Studio,* but had also tried to imitate the widely popular American adventure films. The first films to enter the U.S.S.R. after the lifting of the blockade, and with the help of the new NEP distribution channels, were also westerns and serials, because these were generally regarded as innocent of any harmful thematic content, depending as they did largely upon action, which the Russian public adored. Feuillade's *Judex* became a nationally recognized figure. The popularity of the new *Red Imps* was another persuasive argument for the Kuleshov collective in their choice of the subject for their second film. Based on an idea originating with Kuleshov, the scenario for the workshop's next film was written by Pudovkin—a framework that proposed to include in a Russian and European setting all the tricks and action of the best American and French serials, but to go one better than the lot by employing the workshop's efficient filmic methods.

* 'Fast cutting was then known as American montage—the slow montage was Russian.' —Kuleshov, *Art of the Cinema* (1929).

'The basic mistake of "West" was in several schematic performances by the actors, for what had seemed satisfactory in theory required greater polish in practice. It appeared that, with the less perfected actor, the construction of his action had to be more primitive, but as he matured technically, he could give a more "jewelled" treatment to each of his gestures. After "West" we got recognition and friends, as well as indifferent observers and, chiefly, enemies.

'In order to get more work we had to show that we could solve any technical problem; another pressure was that we must continue to demonstrate the work of the whole membership of the collective. With these aims in mind we sat down to work out a scenario [*The Death Ray*] ourselves:

- 1 To show that, technically, we could make a film no worse than the best American or European work (film technique was in the most deplorable state at that time).
- 2 To demonstrate *each* member of the collective, to display them as in a catalogue.
- 3 To try the "tricks" that the pre-revolutionary and early Soviet cinema could not achieve.
- 4 To prove that crowd-scenes could and should be filmed in an organized rather than in a hit-or-miss fashion.
- 5 To obtain the active participation of the working masses in revolutionary scenes (such scenes of workers were then very rare).

'To set such tasks for one scenario, inexperienced scenarists that we were, was really impossible. To get all this in packed the whole thing too full and drew it out too long. *But we did carry out the tasks we had set ourselves*, which was, most importantly, to push our contemporary film technique out of its rut. Even up to now [1929] the composition principles for mass-scenes, factory locales and scenes of uprisings are filmed in ways that derive from the methods of *The Death Ray*. Difficult montage, carefully clean cinematic acting by the players, a collection of tricks previously untouched by our cinema—all this was given by the so-called failure, *The Death Ray*.

'Comrades Komarov, Pudovkin, Fogel, Khokhlova, Podobed, Obolensky and others were subsequently given an opportunity to do independent, successful work, because they had been demonstrated as players and had been trained as film directors in *The Death Ray*.

'This was not generally comprehended. We were persecuted for our film. Especially for its lack of a firm ideology, and for its experimentalism. The comrades lost sight of the fact that in this film we were pioneering a *film-grammar*, that *The Death Ray* was primarily not a film, but a "primer".

'Though the press raged, *Ray* brought in good profits. There was no commercial fear of our experiments, nor of the unusual appearance of Khokhlova—the best of our actresses, to whom, unhappily, we have paid too little attention, on the mistaken belief that "good people always get along".

'So for a year and a half after *Ray* we did no work. . . .'³

The Death Ray was completed by the end of 1924, but not released until March 16, 1925. Kuleshov's judgment of the film's victories is just except that it leaves the