

## Document Citation

Title	<b>By the law (Po zakonu)</b>
Author(s)	Jack Pickford
Source	<i>University of Illinois Film Society</i>
Date	1967 Apr 26
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Khokhlova, Alexandra (1897), Soviet Union Kuleshov, Lev (1899-1970), Russia (Federation) Motion pictures -- Soviet Union
Film Subjects	Po zakonu (By the law), Kuleshov, Lev, 1926

Credits: DIRECTION, Leo Kuleshov. SCREENPLAY, Victor Shklovsky. SOURCE STORY, Jack London. PHOTOGRAPHY, Constantine Kuznetsov. DESIGN, Isaac Makhlis. ASST. DIR., Boris Sveshnikov. PRODUCTION, Goskino First Studio. LENGTH, 51 min. (sound speed). DISTRIBUTION, Museum of Modern Art.

Cast: EDITH NELSON, Alexandra Hokhlova. HANS NELSON, Serge Komarov. MICHAEL DENNIN, Vladimir Fogel. HARKEY, Peter Galajev. DUTCHY, Porfiri Podobed.

Tonight's program consists of early, rarely-shown films by three Soviet masters. Gregory Kozintsev made THE OVERCOAT (1925) in Leningrad, using his stock company which he called the "Factory of the Eccentric Actor" (FEX), and which he made famous by his very loose cinematic adaptations of literary classics. In recent years Kozintsev has directed Soviet versions of Don Quixote (1957) and Hamlet (1954). CHESS FEVER (1925) was the first film directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893-1953), who later became famous for classics like Mother (1926), End of St. Petersburg (1927), and Storm Over Asia (1929). Chess Fever stars Fogel and Pudovkin's wife Anna Zemtsova-Lee, and also has brief appearances by such big name Soviet directors as Protazanov, Raizman, Otsep, Barnet, and Eggert. Pudovkin later became famous for his direction of heavyweight films featuring leading theatrical actors in an emotional film style, but Chess Fever was done in a different manner of "formalism" and "montage," a style going back to Pudovkin's teacher, Leo Kuleshov -- who also helped both Eisenstein and Vertov to get their starts in cinema.

LEO KULESHOV (born Tambov, 1899) is one of the least-known and-honored of the Big Seven of Soviet silent film directors (the others: Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko, Vertov, Romm, Protazanov). In his youth Kuleshov studied at the Moscow School of Art and Architecture and became fascinated with mechanical things (motorcycles, cars, airplanes, typewriters) and with the far-off land of America -- which he has never visited, but which was to serve as the locale for almost all his major films. Kuleshov began working in movies as a set designer (1915-17), then directed his first film just before the Russian Revolution at the tender age of 18: Project of Engineer Prite, a detective picture and the first Russian film to use fast editing ("American montage", later to be known as "Russian montage"). In 1918 Kuleshov went over to the Soviets and became head of the "re-editing" and "newsreel" sections of the Moscow Film Administration, where Vertov worked for a time under his supervision. Kuleshov also served as a combat photographer during the Civil War between the Reds and Whites (1918-19). While re-editing pre-revolutionary film dramas, imported films, and newsreels, Kuleshov began developing theories about the distinctive features of film as compared with all other artistic media, especially concerning the all-powerful effect of editing and the denial of Stanislavsky-type "theatrical acting" (the "Mozzhukhin experiment"); the need to train "non-actors" to perform all kinds of difficult physical actions (fights, falls, etc.) which would be photographed in real surroundings; the desirability of fast-moving adventure and comedy scenarios originally written for the screen (rather than slow-paced, heavy-weight, "psychological" film dramas taken from 19th-century literature; and the need to carefully and rationally organize every aspect of film production, from detailed rehearsals through elaborately organized crowd scenes to the painstaking final editing.

In 1920 Kuleshov joined the newly-opened Moscow Film School (later Institute) as a kind of teaching assistant, and after 47 years of teaching, interrupted by numerous film directing jobs, he is still there today, as a full professor and Ph.D. He gathered around him, in 1920-23, a stock company of young would-be actors and directors (including Pudovkin and Boris Barnet plus the entire cast of By the Law), and when there was no raw film to use, these young enthusiasts explored Kuleshov's theories in a number of playlets performed as if they were being done for the camera. In 1923 film became available, and Kuleshov made three big "American" films: Unusual Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks (1924, comedy about a naive American businessman victimized by swindlers in the USSR), Death Ray (1925, a serial-like thriller about the theft of a secret weapon), and By the Law.

In 1927 Kuleshov found his stock company breaking up for various reasons: Pudovkin, Barnet, and Fogel got married, the former two also were nearly killed in dangerous stunts which misfired; the more conservative Soviet press became more and more hostile

towards his extreme concern for form and technique over Soviet moralizing content (and what content there was derived from American thrillers and comedies); and the studio heads considered Kuleshov's common-law wife and leading actress, Alexandra Hoxhlova, as box-office poison and lacking in sex appeal. And her last star role proved to be in Kuleshov's The Girl Reporter (Zhurnalistka, 1927; a romantic triangle in a modern Soviet setting), after which both her career and his floundered during the period of the first Five Year Plan and controlled, propagandistic art by "social command" (1927-32). Following a number of inferior and even uncompleted films, Kuleshov made a big comeback with two more major "American" pictures, Horizon (1932, the story of a young Russian Jew who emigrates to America to escape Czarist anti-semitism but is disillusioned by the USA too, and returns home after the Soviet Revolution), and Great Consoler (1933, an imaginative account of O'Henry's years in an Ohio prison, brilliantly blended with characters and events from such O'Henry stories as A Retrieved Reformation and Unfinished Story -- as sentimentalized by O'Henry in fiction, and as they "really" were in harsh reality).

Kuleshov was so sharply attacked as the ringleader of the "formalists" during the Stalinist witchhunts against nonconformist artists after 1933 that he stopped directing except for four children's films made during the war. He has devoted himself to teaching and writing at the Moscow Film Institute, and is the author of four books and over sixty articles on film practice and theory, with much more emphasis on the former (unlike Eisenstein's writings, which tend to be excessively vague and theoretical). A long survey of the life and cinema career of Kuleshov, by the author of this note, is scheduled to be published in Film Culture sometime this summer.

By the Law is very untypical of Kuleshov's early film theories, but is being shown tonight because it is the only Kuleshov film available anywhere in the Western hemisphere (like his films, his books and articles have also never been translated, for a variety of reasons), and because 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. Besides Mrs. Kuleshov (Hoxhlova), the other actors were Vladimir Fogel, who was Kuleshov's most daring stuntman but who shot himself in 1929 (he also stars in Chess Fever); Serge Komarov, an ex-P.E. teacher; Ferriri Podobed, who had starred as "Mr. West"; and Peter Galajev, who stayed with Kuleshov till 1943 and is still working as an art director in films today. Besides these familiar actors, 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."

-- S. P. Hill