

Introduction

I am convinced that by visual means alone one can persuade the viewer to feel joy, to cry, to hate, to love, to experience agitation, to suffer. Everything depends on the passionate heart of the person who, through the eye of his camera, is the first viewer of the film.¹

We came upon no ready-built city with central arteries, side streets running off to the left and right, squares and communal spaces, or little crooked lanes and cul-de-sacs, such as can be found in the stylistic cinemetropolis of today's cinematograph.

We came like bedouins or gold-seekers. To an empty place. To a place with unimaginably great possibilities, only a laughably small fraction of which have been realized even to this day.²

We must discover the visible world. We must revolutionize our visual thinking.³

This monograph is about the visual culture of Soviet avant-garde film during the 1920s, before sound technology and a shift in cultural policy towards Socialist Realism and 'a cinema understood by the millions' rendered the term 'avant-garde' ideologically suspect and thus obsolete. It is a study of the image in its various complex manifestations as a means of communication and stimulation, and treats the medium of cinema as a primarily photographic phenomenon which, in the case of the Soviet avant-garde, was characterized by a particular set of creative practices and aesthetic preferences. At the heart of this study lies a detailed consideration of camerawork, a term that encompasses a whole range of subsidiary phenomena pertaining to the presentation of screen material, but which in essence can be reduced to the poetics of composition and lighting techniques. This is a neglected aspect of cinema studies, and yet it is fundamental to the visual resonance of the filmic image.

On the rare occasions when issues of aesthetics arise in the writing about film, they are attributed largely to the creative intervention of the director and identified as part of his or her visual perception of the world. From a historical point of view, however, this is a simplification of a complex process that involves the creative endeavours of several individuals, the most prominent being the camera operator (in Russian, *kinooperator*), who has formal responsibility for the translation of

dramatic or poetic ideas into visual images. In the case of Soviet cinema, this is demonstrated by the so-called '(camera) operator's scenario', which is drawn up in parallel to the director's scenario (*raskadrovka*, *montazhnyi list*), and contains a detailed description of the compositional mechanics and lighting arrangements that will be adopted in relation to a given screenplay or libretto; as the celebrated cinematographer Sergei Urusevskii once remarked (see the first epigraph above), by virtue of his position in relation to the viewfinder at the moment when filming takes place, the cameraman de facto constitutes the first audience of film material, albeit admittedly in unedited form. Although the names of the Soviet avant-garde camera operators are reasonably well known among specialists, their particular role in the creation of avant-garde cinema during the 1920s has remained relatively neglected. In part, therefore, this monograph is dedicated to the resurrection of these figures, for so long relegated to the margins of cinema history, and to their repositioning as co-authors of avant-garde productions during the silent era. It will challenge a number of myths about the avant-garde, many of them the product of directorial self-promotion and the auteur bias which informs so many studies of cinema, both past and present. If the history of avant-garde cinema in the Soviet Union during the silent era had been written, which it has not, this study would position itself as an alternative and competing version. It considers the works of the four main avant-garde units active at the time and examines the partnerships between the directors and camera operators that formed their core: Sergei Eizenshtein with Eduard Tisse; Vsevolod Pudovkin with Anatolii Golovnia; Grigorii Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg (the so-called FEKS directors) with Andrei Moskvín; and Oleksandr Dovzhenko with Danylo Demuts'kyi.

As a study of the visual language of cinema in its most experimental forms, this monograph will also place Soviet avant-garde film within the context of the modernist revolution in the arts. Eizenshtein's recollection, cited above as the second epigraph to this chapter, suggests that the avant-garde was confronted with a *tabula rasa* when it first came to engage with the material of film. As will be shown in the chapters that follow, however, this is not quite the case. Nevertheless, the directors and camera operators of the avant-garde believed themselves to be engaged in a quest to revolutionize visual thinking. This was expressed concisely by the Constructivist artist Aleksandr Rodchenko (see the third epigraph above), but it was simply his own variation on the concept of 'making it new', one that united otherwise diverse factions within the international avant-garde. The story of cinematic experiment in the Soviet Union during the 1920s is partly the dialogue

with and polemic against developments taking place in related fields, both within the Soviet Union and abroad. Through the reports of correspondents based in Berlin and Paris, their access to the films of the European avant-garde via showings at the ARK and other film organizations, translations of key theoretical treatises, and trips abroad, many of which included visits to film studios and international art exhibitions, Soviet directors and camera operators were relatively well informed about artistic trends and filmmaking practices in Europe.

Although it might be deemed provocative to insist on the auteur status of Soviet cameramen, it is important to stress that this was not a particularly radical position during the 1920s. As the first chapter will demonstrate, this decade was a 'golden age' for Soviet camera operators. Within the film industry as a whole, and to some extent even in the eyes of the film-going public, the cameramen of the 1920s were iconic figures: their creative initiative within the film-production process was encouraged; their names featured prominently alongside directors in posters and other publicity materials; the names of the most important camera operators were relatively well known among critics and industry observers; their individual styles or 'signatures' were discussed in the film press; and there was a burgeoning theoretical discourse around cinema as a visual medium that placed specific emphasis on the importance of cinematography. For the first time in the history of cinema, both in Soviet Russia and elsewhere, the camera operator was regarded as a creative artist rather than merely a technician or craftsman who executed the orders of others. This privileged status was the result of a number of factors: the collective principle adopted by the avant-garde units (the spirit of democracy and equality that prevailed within them and the distrust of the supposedly bourgeois concept of individual authorship); the importance accorded to documentary material and the associated idea of the camera operator as a media 'shock-worker' in the battle of ideas; and the fact that cinema, as an industrial and technological process, was hailed as the proletarian art form of the future. At the heart of this phenomenon, one with strong echoes in the theory and practices of Russian Constructivism, was the concept of the artist-engineer, someone who combined technical expertise with creative vision in the service of revolutionary and utilitarian art. The promotion of the engineer-constructor, encapsulated in El' Lisitskii's 1924 photo-montage entitled *Avtoportret (Konstruktor)* (Self-Portrait (Constructor)), was very much part of the discourse to which the camera operator belonged by virtue of his association with the moving-picture camera, itself an emblem of modernity because of its recent

invention. The contributions of this first generation of Soviet camera operators, in terms of the films they photographed and their writings and pedagogical functions within the institutions that trained future industry cadres, laid the foundations for a system of thought that privileged the visual language of cinema and recognized the contribution of the camera operator to the evolution of its aesthetics. In effect, these cameramen succeeded in engineering their own myth, thus ensuring that the voice of their profession would be heard in future debates about the direction of Soviet cinema. The relative abundance of published material about Soviet camera operators, far more than exists in relation to their European or U.S. counterparts, is a testimony to this powerful, initial impetus.

The emphasis in this monograph on the creative role of the camera operator does not deny the importance of the director in the genesis of visual ideas. With the exceptions of Pudovkin and Trauberg, the directors who feature in this monograph were practising artists themselves and therefore clearly interested in visual concepts. It is important to stress, nevertheless, that those who did draw and paint were not formally trained in the arts. Furthermore, their artworks for the most part (with the exception, perhaps, of Eizenshtein's 'secret' drawings) do not suggest any particular originality. Detailed study of the sketches and designs produced before their move into film, as well as the drawings they executed as part of the preparations for their film productions in subsequent years, reveals on the one hand a set of rather traditional affiliations (their cartoons and caricatures), and on the other hand, a rather modish avant-gardism that was highly imitative (their costumes, set designs and paintings). It is important to distinguish here between the genesis of visual ideas and their realization in photographic form. With the exception of their portrait studies, which manifest themselves in sketches of friends and acquaintances, these directors produced artworks which, in the vast majority of cases, involve little or nothing in the way of direct observation of nature. While the existence of such works indicates sensitivity in relation to visual phenomena, there are important differences between the procedures of the sketch and those that pertain to cinematography. In particular, these would apply to the optical distortion of film lenses, even relatively conventional ones (40mm), when compared to the human eye; the fact that the orthochromatic film stock of the period perceived artificial and natural light in ways different from the human eye; and the fact that images in this era take the form of a gradation of tones ranging from extreme black to extreme white (although this is a neglected aspect of the writing on 1920s Soviet cinema, it would appear that, with the exception of

FEKS, the avant-garde rejected the practice of colour-tinting and toning). Memoirs from the period suggest that, with the exception of Pudovkin, who was actively involved in filmmaking from 1921 onwards, the directors of the future avant-garde had little or no understanding of the technical aspects of filmmaking until they received instruction at the hands of their camera-operating partners. Tisse, Moskvín and Demut's'kyi were amateur or professional photographers prior to their move into film; moreover, they understood how photography worked, and were familiar with recent international trends. They were, in fact, independent artists in their own right. With the passage of time, the creative alliances these figures forged with their partners became so close that they became inseparable, almost doppelgängers of each other.

Although the visual language of Soviet avant-garde cinema is routinely commented upon in studies of individual directors, it has not been systematically investigated in any meaningful sense. The nearest equivalent is the monograph by Jan-Christopher Horak which analyses the phenomenon of European and North American photographers who either became professional camera operators or experimented with the medium of film as a parallel field of artistic enquiry.⁴ Apart from identifying some of the most significant figures who belonged to this tendency – alas, his discussion does not include Russian photographers – the importance of this monograph lies in the author's desire to subvert the boundaries of academic disciplines which, historically speaking, have tended to limit the scope of intellectual enquiry into the relationship between cinema and related art forms.⁵ For the most part, this division also applies to studies of the cultural avant-garde in Soviet Russia, although recently there have been signs of a desire to overcome these artificial barriers. Margarita Tupitsyn's study of the painter Kazimir Malevich offers valuable insights into his interest in cinema, a subject about which he wrote on several occasions during the 1920s.⁶ There have also been studies of the influence of Constructivism on the films of Eizenshtein and Dziga Vertov.⁷ Tim Harte's recent monograph on the binding element of kinaesthesia within the avant-garde, and his analysis of the importance of montage and intra-frame dynamic in the experimental films of the 1920s, is a further welcome correction to the general neglect of cinema in discussions of Soviet avant-garde culture.⁸

Malevich's 1929 assertion that 'Kinetics by itself does not save the day and does not release cinema from the illusory status of painting' is an important insight into the areas of convergence within avant-garde culture in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.⁹ Recognition of this symbiotic relationship explains why frame stills

from avant-garde films (both features and documentaries) were included in the 1929 'Film and Photo' exhibition in Stuttgart, the Soviet pavilion for which was designed by El' Lisitskii; according to Tupitsyn, the Russian section was 'the only one to succeed in presenting the close links between film and photography'.¹⁰ It is also the reason why, between 1926 and 1928, Rodchenko edited a special 'Film and Photo' section in the journal *Sovetskoe kino*, which treated frame stills from recent films as independent artistic entities comparable to works in the sphere of still photography.¹¹ In this sense, avant-garde cinema in the Soviet Union belongs to the phenomenon of experimental art at the beginning of the twentieth century, a period characterized by a radical assault on traditional modes of expression and the creation of new, hybrid genres. The vogue for kinaesthesia, for example, prompted by the advent of cinema, is clearly felt in the experiments of avant-garde painters and still photographers in the second decade of the twentieth century.¹² The temporal dimension notwithstanding, there is also a strong aesthetic kinship between the avant-garde film posters of the period, with their emphasis on the geometric and linear and their deployment of eye-catching blocks of colour, and the visual language of the films they advertise. Some of these posters actually exploit frame stills from the production in question; others incorporate photographic 'cut-outs' or hand-drawn illustrations that replicate images from the production stills.¹³ An interesting meditation on the points of aesthetic convergence can be found in Rodchenko's photographic studies of the Constructivist sets that he designed for Lev Kuleshov's *Vasha znakomaia* (Your Acquaintance, 1928) in the second and third factories of Goskino. These offer unusual perspectives of the sets when compared to the finished film. Indeed, not only do they expose their artifice as 'constructions' (the compositions include the typical studio paraphernalia of the period, for example, the numbered, overhead arc lamps), they also constitute a meticulous enquiry into the material and spatial dynamics of the studios themselves, in particular their glass roofs and metal girders (both were modern architectural features in the sense that they had been designed in the early part of the century for the film entrepreneur Aleksandr Khanzhonkov).¹⁴ The relative neglect of these photographs, in terms of both exhibition and publication, speaks volumes about the lack of interest in cinema's relationship with still photography during this vibrant and dynamic period.¹⁵

If the modernist project can be characterized broadly, and perhaps a little crudely, in terms of the estrangement of perception, then Soviet avant-garde cinema, no less than other experimental art forms, constitutes a statement on the

impact of modernity on visual modes of thinking. Not all the avant-garde units examined in this monograph participate in this project with the same degree of commitment, but the movement as a whole is characterized by the democratization of rigidly codified aesthetic hierarchies and the poeticization of the commonplace. This strategy took the form of photographing objects and locations which, although they had appeared in documentary material in the pre-revolutionary era, had not featured previously within the sphere of feature film. In broad terms, a new landscape unfurls which privileges sites of heavy industry and technology, modern architectural forms and spatial dynamics, the textures of modern materials, boulevard culture and the kinetic energy of the crowd. The revolutionary context means that this landscape is often populated by death, violence, decay, disorder, disorientation, psychological and physical injury, hysteria and emotional extremes. Furthermore, in order to convey the extremes of (revolutionary) experience, there is a strong commitment to maximize the expressive potential of filmic images through recourse to innovative compositional mechanisms. These take a multitude of different forms: unconventional camera angles (known in Russian as *rakurs*), play with differential focus, optical distortion, activation of the frame periphery, truncation, dynamic lighting effects, *contre-jour*, the subversion of devices that had become conventional stylistic markers (the dissolve, iris, wipe and vignette), exploitation of multiple exposure for aesthetic purposes, use of the hand-held camera, the tilting of the camera, and in general a radical and crude departure from the canons of decorative ‘tastefulness’ that had characterized pre-revolutionary cinematography. Lighting techniques, the sphere that belonged exclusively to the camera operator during this period, are consistently interesting in the work of the Soviet avant-garde. In part these were prompted by the general interest in accentuating surface texture, but to some extent, especially in the case of portraiture, they were a response to the challenge of *typage*, i.e., the tendency to use non-professional actors, which reflected the desire on the part of the avant-garde to subvert the glamour conventions of ‘bourgeois’ cinema in favour of authentic, lived experience. While it may be countered that the democratization of the visible world and the embrace of verisimilitude were not uniquely the properties of Soviet avant-garde cinema, these qualities were pursued with a vigour and determination that was exceptional and subsequently proved influential for the development of world cinema generally.

Following the example of John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich, the term ‘avant-garde’ is employed throughout this monograph to refer to the experimental tendencies that began to emerge in the visual arts in the first decade of the twentieth century.¹⁶ The monograph is divided into six chapters. The first chapter charts the discourse that developed in relation to camera operation during the 1920s, in terms of both theory and practice, and the ways in which this reflected the influence of avant-garde aesthetics. The next four chapters examine the dynamics of the avant-garde teams that gravitated around Eizenshtein, Pudovkin, FEKS and Dovzhenko, with particular emphasis on the relationships that were forged between the directors and their respective camera operators. These chapters analyse the films produced by these partnerships from the point of view of visual aesthetics, but also those made independently by the figures concerned. Particular emphasis is placed on the pressure of dramaturgical imperative, the desire to develop new revolutionary genres and the aesthetic interests and artistic practices (if relevant) of the directors, but also the aesthetic inclinations of the camera operators and the evolution of highly individual ‘signatures’. The conclusion pursues the emerging ‘myth’ of the camera-operating profession into the early-to-mid 1930s, a period when the shift to sound and new ideological strictures were bringing the existence of the avant-garde into question. This was a period when camera operators were seeking formal recognition of their authorship rights within the industry. As this chapter also makes clear, while at least three of the avant-garde units continued to work into the sound era, the films made by them, with the exception of Eizenshtein’s *Ivan Grozny* (*Ivan the Terrible*, 1944–46), cannot be called ‘avant-garde’ in the sense in which the term was understood during the 1920s. Those, like Boris Groys, who argue that Socialist Realism continued the ideological agenda of the avant-garde ‘but by different means’, have paid insufficient attention to the visual aesthetics of cinema. The radical differences between the two eras from the stylistic point of view can be demonstrated by reference to any of the films made by these avant-garde units during the 1930s and 1940s when compared to those of the 1920s.¹⁷

Notes

1. 'Vynuzhdennoe vystuplenie kak demonstratsiia protiv otsutstviia doklada ob izobrazitel'nom reshenii fil'ma', in Sergei Urusevskii, *S kinokameroi i za mol'bertom* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2002), pp. 173–75 (p. 173).
2. 'Sredniaia iz trekh', in S. M. Eizenshtein, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, ed. by S. I. Lutkevich, 6 vols (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964–71), V (1968), 53–78 (p. 54) (first publ. in *Sovetskoe kino*, 1934.11–12, 54–83).
3. Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Puti sovremennoi fotografii' [1928], cited (and translated) in Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 202.
4. Jan-Christopher Horak, *Making Images Move: Photographers and Avant-Garde Cinema* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.
6. Margarita Tupitsyn, *Malevich and Film*, with essays by Kazimir Malevich and Victor Tupitsyn (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).
7. François Albera, *Eisenstein et le constructivisme russe* (Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1990); and Vlada Petrić, *Constructivism in Film: The Man with the Movie Camera: A Cinematic Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
8. Tim Harte, *Fast Forward: The Aesthetics and Ideology of Speed in Russian Avant-Garde Culture, 1910–1930* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).
9. Malevich, 'Zhivopisnye zakony v problemakh kino' [1929], in Tupitsyn, *Malevich and Film*, pp. 147–59 (p. 147).
10. Margarita Tupitsyn, *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 56. For examples of the works exhibited, see *Film und Foto der zwanziger Jahre* [catalogue of the 1929 'Film and Photo' exhibition in Stuttgart], publ. by the Württembergischer Kunstverein with articles by Ute Eskildsen and Jan-Christopher Horak (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1979).
11. For more on this initiative, see Chapter One.
12. Harte, *Fast Forward*, pp. 3–29. For the impact of kinaesthesia on photography, see the discussion of 'photodynamism' in Giovanni Lista, *Futurism and Photography* (London: Merrell, 2001), pp. 21–30.
13. Susan Pack, *Film Posters of the Russian Avant-Garde* (Cologne: Taschen, 1995).
14. Aleksandr Rodchenko, 'Khudozhnik i "material'naia sreda" v igrovoi fil'me: Beseda s khudozhnikom A. M. Rodchenko', *Sovetskoe kino*, 1927.5–6, 14–15.
15. For the most recent and largest retrospective, see *Alexander Rodchenko: Revolution in Photography*, ed. by Alexander Lavrentiev (Moscow: Multimedia Complex of Actual Arts/Moscow House of Photography Museum, 2008).
16. See the introduction to *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment*, ed. by John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 1–14.
17. Boris Groys, 'The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde', in *ibid.*, pp. 193–218.