Avant-garde culture and media strategies: the networks and discourses of the European film avant-garde, 1919-39

Hagener, M.

Publication date
2005

Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter 5: Vanishing Point Soviet Union – Soviet Cinema and the West between Innovation and Repression

In those first decades after the October Revolution we can already recognize the roots of cold war – the bipolar division of the territories of the globe and the frantic competition between the two systems. The New Deal legislation itself, along with the construction of comparable welfare systems in Western Europe, might be cast as a response to the threat conjured up by the Soviet experience, that is, to the increasing power of workers' movement both at home and abroad.


In the 1920s the young and dynamic society of the Soviet Union appealed to avant-garde sensibilities in many places. In the field of cinema, the Soviet Union did not only produce innovative and lasting works of art – retrospectively often collectively grouped in formalist terms as »montage cinema« or more politically minded called »revolutionary cinema« –, but, more importantly for my purpose here, it also attempted to change cinema as an institution: its mode of production, exhibition and the reception process, as well as film criticism and censorship, acting style, exhibition practice and anything else connected to the field. What was at stake in the Soviet Union was not just another style or school of filmmaking, but the attempt to build a radically different institution cinema than in the capitalist states. The Soviet experiment did, to many curious and well-meaning observers in Western countries, adhere to avant-gardistic ideals of breaking down the barrier that separated art and life, theory and practice, thinking and doing. It was after the premiere of Eisenstein’s BRONENONEZ »POTEMKIN« (SU 1925, »Battleship Potemkin«) in Berlin that the Soviet montage cinema started its triumphal march across Europe. Even though this was sometimes retrospectively seen as an appearance out of nowhere, the Soviet filmmakers had sharpened their eyes, intellect and scissors on Western film – the technique of remontage with which Western films had been adapted for Soviet audiences fitted perfectly well into the project of reshaping the cinematic discourse. For some years, until roughly 1929/30 the »Russenfilme«, as they came to be known in Germany which was the main conduit of exchange between Western Europe and the Soviet Union, carried the brightly burning torch of hope and future before the introduction of sound cast long shadows across the vast landscape of the Soviet cinema. At the same time the restructuring introduced by the Stalinist administration, industrially manifested in the first Five-Year-Plan (1928–32) which succeeded the NEP-phase of a limited market economy and culturally present in the ascending dogma of Socialist Realism, changed the self-organisation of the film industry, altered the governing
aesthetic assumptions and generally led to an increasing suffocation of freedoms. The dominant cultural movement shifted from avant-gardistic and wide-ranging experiments to academic and formal Social Realism – this is how the traditional story goes. Some years later, the Soviet Union turned for many emigrants, as well as for Soviet citizens, from an imaginary and metaphorical vanishing point, from a hopeful beacon guiding the path into a brighter future of a just society, to a vanishing point in a very literal sense when many artists and intellectuals perished in the Stalinist purges of the mid-1930s. It is this development that I will present in more detailed form on the following pages.

The archaeology of the European avant-garde would be incomplete without a chapter on the interaction between the Soviet Union and the West. The Soviet cinema does therefore occupy a special place in my scheme: It can be seen as encapsulating the other developments in nuce. The Soviet cinema experience partly acts as an allegory of the European avant-garde as a whole on their labyrinthine journeys from hopeful beginnings to war, extermination, and exile. While I will flesh out the general trajectory sketched above, I will also propose another reading stressing the utopianism of the avant-garde that had to remain unfulfilled, yet did prove important for providing a goal that seemed to many elusive in the mid-1920s. The second layer of this chapter will thus be dealing with the paradoxical temporal structures inherent in the cultural logic of the avant-garde. At the time of the coming of sound the discrepancy between the proclaimed utopian situation hailed in the avant-garde classics and the harsh reality manifest in the desolate state of the Soviet cities and countryside became too wide, thus art and reality had to be aligned again. The ensuing changes took up the avant-garde idea of transforming life into art and art into life, only in a very different way from the Constructivists. While in the 1920s artists strove to be »engineers of material reality«, in the 1930s they were asked (or rather: ordered) to become »engineers of human souls« (Stalin). Or, to put it differently: The avant-garde, in its concentration on the material basis of creation (abstraction, isolating elements and elemental building blocks, modularisation, recombination), in fact worked towards an increased autonomy of art. In Marxist logic, the constructivist avant-garde was tampering with the superstructure which was according to this logic determined by the basis anyway. The specific avant-garde art of the 1920s did thus appear as completely useless (in social-revolutionary terms) to orthodox Marxists looking back at the earlier phase from the 1930s. Therefore, constructivism and montage cinema was denounced as formalism and academic art, meaning un-Sovietic. This outward pressure was echoed by an internal contradiction as the avant-garde had in general opposed the autonomy of bourgeois art. In the course of the 1920s constructivism seemed increasingly to lose its status as an agent of change. The true calling of art in orthodox Marxism was to change the consciousness of the people which in turn would change the basis of society (paired with the transformations of their life resulting from Soviet culture). To accommodate an
avant-garde in the sense that it was used in the 1920s meant to accommodate a bourgeois art in the long run (because any avant-garde that is successful will get rid of itself) which was unthinkable in a "classless" society like the Soviet proclaimed itself to be. It is not the coming of sound that shattered the accomplishments of the avant-garde, but it is rather the changed social, cultural, technological and economic context that acts as a catalyst for the dramatic restructurings of the networks of the avant-garde.

A disclaimer to begin with: I am not concerned here with Soviet cinema per se, but rather with questions of interdependence, projection, overlap, influence, resonance, retrospection and historiography. I will try to give an overview of how the Soviet cinema developed within a few years first into a utopia and subsequently into a dystopia. This is neither an industry study nor an account of the aesthetic developments of a specific national cinema (there are many accounts easily available that I have benefited from using), but rather an inquiry into "the imaginary dimension of the Soviet cinema" – its circulation abroad, in the form of films, persons, ideas, discourses, but also the circulation and influence of other cinemas in the Soviet Union. In this vein I will examine the origins of the Soviet cinema from the refashioning of Griffith, Lang and Lubitsch, I will look at the reception of some classics of the Soviet cinema of the 1920s, I will deal with the travels of the luminaries Eisenstein, Vertov, Pudovkin in the West, I will examine how the cult of personality was reintroduced into a constructivist avant-garde, I will try to understand the logic behind attracting Western filmmakers like Ivens, Ruttman, Piscator or Richter and I will look at the exile in the Soviet Union when many people were killed in the purges who had only escaped Hitler’s deadly grip shortly before. I will also consider how the avant-garde practices of combining filmmaking with vocational training and theorisation, exhibition with network building and publishing were adapted or innovated in the Soviet Union.

5.1 The avant-garde in the Soviet context

Part of the Soviet experiment years ago, as Eisenstein explained it to me, was to abolish art because it was useless. Of course, that theory is not easily put into practice as this apparent uselessness is the chief virtue of art. 

Josef von Sternberg (1965)

Even when considering the imaginary dimension of the Soviet cinema it is important to see how it developed internally in broad strokes. Understanding the self-organisation of the film industry (or the organisation from above through state intervention) is necessary in order to compare the Soviet situation with the West. Around 1920 the Soviet film administration faced two interrelated problems simultaneously. The first issue was how to restart the cinema sector as everything from production to exhibition had broken down after war, two revolutions, civil war, famine and general disorder. The second difficulty was how to create a new
kind of cinema – and what kind of new cinema. The conflict that resulted from these interrelated problems was possibly inevitable and could be summed up in the dramatic question if it was more important to have a functioning economy at the expense of a traditional aesthetic or whether it was more important for a new aesthetic to be developed which would then also create its own form of organisation. Basically, this dilemma was as unsolvable as the chicken-or-egg question because both are two sides of the same coin. This dialectical tension returns and haunts the filmmaking practice as well as the theoretical debates in many respects from the discussion around the dearth of suitable scenarios (unsuitable in terms of commercial potential or ideological content?) and the question of the acted or the non-acted film (and non-fiction vs. documentary) to the debate about Sovkino’s production policy (orientation towards export or home market?) and the question of entertainment or enlightenment (what is the function of cinema?). At the basis of this problem was the question of dependency and political programme also faced by avant-gardists in the West: how is it possible to make an avant-garde film in a context that is not (yet) ready to follow the avant-garde? Is it possible to make a critical film while affirming the very structures that one works against because the film is being financed, distributed or screened exactly by those circles that the avant-garde is fighting against? How can one work in an art system if one ultimately wants to get rid of exactly this structure?

In the first years of its existence, the economic problems did not allow the Soviet film industry to start production in sufficient numbers to satisfy the cinemas’ demand. The reality for audiences in Soviet cinemas after the Revolution therefore consisted mainly of German films; in the early 1920s approximately 80-90% of films in cinemas across the young country were of German origin. A few years later, from approximately 1922 onwards, US products were screened increasingly in Soviet cinemas as the German market had opened up to Hollywood import; Germany continued to be the main conduit for import as well as for export. The two companies forming the »commercial wing« of the film industry, Sovkino and Mezhrabpom’, had to recoup their investment on the market. In the 1920s, the Soviet government expected economic independence from the film industry: the money necessary for reopening film theatres or for rebuilding studios had to be acquired on the market. Indeed, even though imported foreign films were considered to be problematic in terms of ideology, they were guaranteed money makers as Soviet audiences loved Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, and especially the German action star Harry Piel. On average, a foreign film made ten times more money than a Soviet film at the box office. Soviet officials only tolerated foreign films as long as the domestic film industry could not meet the demand of the cinemas. All through the 1920s, the number of Soviet films steadily rose and by the end of the first Five-Year-Plan (1928–32) foreign films had disappeared altogether. Thus, the aim of autonomy that the authorities had worked towards was achieved, yet only after returning to a limited kind of market
economy for the transitional period of the New Economic Policy (NEP), a further paradoxical split that the industry had to deal with.\textsuperscript{10}

It has to be remembered that the Soviet cinema up to 1928 was largely free of state intervention in economic terms. The distribution and exhibition sector was dominated by commercial production, either from abroad (at first Germany, later Hollywood) or from the Soviet Union itself. The New Economic Policy forced artists, entrepreneurs, and institutional personnel alike to follow strictly commercial rules.\textsuperscript{11} It was only in 1927 that the leadership of the country began to change the economical and political frame under which film and cinema industry had to function. In a slow process the transformation of the film sector took place from 1928 onwards until the increasingly repressive policy culminated in the Stalinist purges 1936–38.\textsuperscript{12} The majority of the famous works of the Soviet cinema was indeed made at a time when a shift in policy was imminent in the second half of the 1920s. The relative instability of the transitional situation, the openness of an unknown future did contribute to the innovative push of the Soviet cinema. As the avant-garde is by definition a transitory and fleeting phenomenon characterised by flux and constant movement, it has historically flourished in periods of uncertainty, crisis, upheaval and transition.

After this brief sketch of the general situation let us now return to the beginning film activities in the Soviet Union. One of the first activities of the new government after it had taken control in October 1918 was the equipment of an agit-train that was sent to the front line of the civil war. The principle combined new methods of persuasion with economic necessity because the state of the industry was depressing. The aim was to have a self-contained unit of cultural and artistic workers that responded directly to the situation found at the front. The train »contained a printing-plant equipped for the publication of newspapers and leaflets, a theatre company prepared to write as well as to perform plays, and a film-crew, headed by the young veteran of both newsreel and studio work, Edward Tisse.«\textsuperscript{13} Later, film studios were incorporated into these trains, creating self-contained and independent cultural-political units that were meant to break down the distinction between production and reception in the process of reacting to the reception of the audience. Films and programmes were continually altered in this feedback loop of answering to the situation found at the place of exhibition and performance. Clearly, this integration of different steps of the filmmaking process was typical of an avant-garde ethos in which art and life are integrated. The Soviet experience offers many examples of such barrier-breaking cinema events.

The earliest films produced in these years – \textit{The Miracle of Vistula} (SU 1919, Richard Boleslawski) and \textit{Na Krosnom Fronte} (SU 1920, Lev Kuleshov, »On the Red Front«) are two examples from the period of the civil war – were curious mixtures of newsreel and enacted scenes, partly due to shortage of raw stock, partly due to ideological considerations.\textsuperscript{14} It cannot be stressed enough how the film avant-garde generated much of its energy from moments of unrest
and uncertainty, how a situation in which the imminent day-to-day dealings as much as the wider future are unpredictable underscore the absolute and unconditional desire for the new as one of the strongest features of all avant-garde activity.

The Bolshevik government had taken control of the cinema directly after the Revolution; in January 1918 a Division of Photography and Cinema was formed as part of the Commissariat of Enlightenment and in April 1918 a monopoly on foreign trade was introduced. As one of the first measures, the film trader Jacques Roberto Cibrario was sent to New York the same year in order to acquire cameras, lighting equipment and film stock. After he embezzled one million dollars assigned to him for purchasing equipment, a substantial part of the Soviet Union's little foreign capital, that had been deposited in a New York bank, the Soviet Union resorted to a market completely closed to the outside. More than an often told anecdote, the »Cibrario affair«, as it came to be known, might have taught Soviet authorities that poor self-sufficiency with few resources was preferable to more wealthy dependency on capitalist trade. From 1924 onwards the acquisition of foreign films was restricted to the two large companies Sovkino and Mezhrabpom', also the main producers of commercial fare all through the 1920s. Both were heavily attacked in the intellectual film magazines of that time for their output of genre films and sentimental tearjerkers. While Sovkino was liquidated in 1930, Mezhrabpom', hugely important in the interchange, projections, translations and dependencies between the Soviet Union and the West, was able to survive until the mid-1930s. While film-makers were also attacked for unpopular films and experimentation (Vertov, Eisenstein and others), Sovkino and Mezhrabpom' were under fire for »commercialism« illustrating once again the tension between an economically self-sufficient cinema sector and a revolutionary art breaking with older models and formulas. Neither the »studio solution« (making genre films, only now with communists as heroes and capitalists as villains) nor the »avant-garde solution« (making films that only few intellectuals would appreciate) proved to be acceptable in the Soviet Union. Either intellectuals and functionaries turned up their noses at the reactionary trash that contaminated audiences that should be won for Communism or the masses stayed away from obscure and esoteric trials. Experimentation as well as traditional film style persisted for some time, yet tension increased as different factions fought fiercely over the course to be taken by Soviet cinema. Different from the other arts which had directly fallen into the hands of the avant-garde after the Revolution as most established academic and moderately modernist artists initially refused to co-operate with the Bolshevik government the cinema sector was dominated by the old guards of the Tsarist cinema. Not coincidentally, the forces that later brought the Soviet cinema to the forefront of interest internationally gathered in theatre, in painting and in architecture.

It has to be remembered that the NEP phase of the mid-1920s meant for the film industry a return to a market economy. Thus, even in the Soviet Union - which saw itself striding ahead of the capitalist countries in their march towards
Avant-garde Culture

socialism – the tension between economic necessity and artistic integrity persisted. The discussions of the mid-1920s charged films either with »commercialism« (a large part of the genre production of Mezhrabpom' and Sovkino) or with »left deviation« (later often termed »formalism«; initially Dziga Vertov was the target, later also Sergei Eisenstein and others). In fact, it was only with the advent of socialist realism that a dialectical synthesis presented a solution from those warring positions – albeit a cruel one that most avant-garde activists of the 1920s were not willing to embrace. In this perspective, Socialist Realism was a logical outcome from tensions and paradoxes that the Soviet cinema never was able to overcome in its first 15 years of existence. Boris Groys who has offered one of the most original readings of the Soviet avant-garde has pointed out that the Soviet avant-garde can be understood as a defensive movement at first attempting to cover up the effects of a technologically mediated modernity characterised by mass culture. Later, it became in a perverse logic assimilated into Socialist Realism.\textsuperscript{18}

Traditional film history tells the story of the Soviet cinema as a Phoenix-like rise from the ashes of war and civil unrest with a subsequent terrible crushing at the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy. While I do not want to deny the validity of such a perspective in absolute terms (for many well-meaning observers as well as for film-makers directly involved in it, it must have appeared this way), I want to propose a slightly different picture. Socialist Realism which was introduced in the 1930s in fact solved problems that the canonical avant-garde addressed forcefully, but was unable to disentangle. The contribution of the avant-garde was to raise a number of paradoxes (in/independence of art, commercialism or elitism, socialism or fascism, abstraction or realism) to the level of consciousness.\textsuperscript{19} The avant-garde promised a remedy from the modern fragmentation by reuniting art and life, yet it proved unable to fulfil that promise. Indeed, the Soviet solution was not particularly untypical and a wider pattern of emergence of answers to the challenges of the 1920s avant-garde can be discerned in the 1930s. In this way, the Stalinist cinema of the 1930s (and art under Stalin in general) took a similar path to the British documentary movement, to the French \textit{front populaire} or the Fascist avant-gardes in Germany, Portugal and Italy. The specific contribution of the »realist« developments in the 1930s was to offer another way out of the impasses opened by the avant-garde. While the avant-garde of the 1920s rebelled against the romantic cult of the genius, it nevertheless invented another myth: that of individual creation. In the 1930s this was replaced by the myth of the absolute artist and leader that commands everything and everybody, be it Stalin, Mussolini or Hitler. It is important to remember that this kind of realism was markedly different from the »critical realism« that flourished especially in literature and painting of the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} Century (Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac, Emile Zola, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Anton Chechov, Gustave Courbet, Adolph Menzel). At least in the countries under totalitarian rule, the Fascist and Socialist Realism did not have the function to criticise the status quo,
but it was a utopian realism that promised the beauty and perfection of the future that the society was in the process of achieving (or had already achieved).

The Soviet Union was a focus of interest everywhere in the Western countries as it attempted to create an entirely new organisation of the state and an entirely new society. The country was run in an avant-gardistic spirit in the way the governing group treated the country as one big laboratory with millions of inhabitants. The new state was not only a staging ground in socio-economic and organisational terms where state-of-the-art theories would be put into practice. The realm of culture and art in fact formed a synecdoche or metonymy for the whole country. The most advanced art of the most advanced country – so it seemed to many sympathetic observers – was by definition the avant-garde of the avant-garde. Not only did the arts reflect the developments going on at the time – all canonised classics deal explicitly either with the situation leading up to the revolution, with the revolution or with the life ever since – but they also worked within a context that was markedly different from that of filmmakers in the West. In fact, the contradictory situation of the NEP in the mid-1920s, a communist state in the making reverting to market economy, heightened the importance of culture as hopes and dreams for achieving a final and happy stage of communism had to be postponed further and further into the future. Peter Kenez has described this contradictory situation:

On the one hand the Bolsheviks had far-reaching ambitions in remaking society and man, and on the other they did not possess the means to assert their will in the existing society. Their reach exceeded their grasp. Bolshevik utopianism was born out of weakness: It makes little sense to develop modest plans at a time when they lacked the tools for accomplishing even these; they felt free to allow their imagination to roam. As a result, they disliked gradualist, ameliorist methods, and instead were attracted to all sorts of ephemeral schemes. Many of the unusual features of Soviet life in the period can be explained by keeping in mind the contradiction between great ambition and limited means.²⁰

As a result of NEP and the general economic situation, the promised paradise had to be located in other spheres than daily life which had made little change since the Revolution (and if any, then rather to the worse). Here, the arts and culture at large became an arena in which the government hoped to achieve in fairly short time a utopian ideal which was unattainable in daily life. Culture was ahead of society as a whole and presented the goal of the development. Culture was the sector where progress appeared most visible, thus making it the ideal showcase both to the population at home and to observers in capitalist countries in order to demonstrate the achievements of the revolution even if they were only imaginary at this point. Quite logically, this discrepancy between illusionary self-image and harsh reality could only be upheld for a limited period of time and soon the internal contradiction between the two became too strong. With Socialist Realism and the
Avant-garde Culture

Stalinist purges in the 1930s, this dislocation of the self-image in Soviet cinema was shifted to another register and brought on the same level with daily life again, albeit in a brutal and utterly cynical fashion.

In fact, right after the revolution the country had been violently thrown backwards through destruction and demontage resulting in a breakdown of major industries, shortages of food, collapses of communication networks and generally a setback to earlier times. It was out of this moment that the avant-garde received its energy: because nothing was working, everything became possible; present reality could not offer anything, so there was no measuring stick whatsoever against which projections into the future had to come up. Even retrospectively this spirit would be re-evoked as in Victor Skhlovski’s description written in 1927 in which freedom triumphs over necessity:

Die Sache ist die, dass damals der Sozialismus als ein Vorschuss verwirklicht wurde. Die Luft der Freiheit und nicht die Notwendigkeit, eine paradoxe Vorahnung der Zukunft ersetze damals in Piter das Fett, das Brennholz und war die Atmosphäre überhaupt. [...] Wir flogen auf einer eisernen Kugel aus der Vergangenheit in die Zukunft – und die Gravitation existierte nicht mehr, wie in der Kugel von Jules Verne.  

Flying on a cannon ball from the past to the future: it is this paradoxical temporal construction that is characteristic of the avant-garde. While being steeped in the past against which their artistic rebellion is directed, the avant-garde nevertheless is wholly fixed on the future which promises a bright time. Yet, what is missing from this mental image is the present. This co-existence of past and future has also been remarked upon by Janina Urassowa as a typical feature of the post-revolutionary decade: »Die gleichzeitige Präsenz der Vergangenheit und der Zukunft im heimatlosen Alltag der jungen sowjetischen Gesellschaft war für das erste postrevolutionäre Jahrzehnt charakteristisch...«

Typical artistic activity consisted of devising new architecture and city plans that would never be put into practice. A classic example is Vladimir Tatlin’s monument to the Third International that was constructed as a model and presented all over the country, yet it was never build. I have already discussed the »films without film« that the Kuleshov workshop staged in a similar spirit. Similar moments of »utopian possibility« or »dream architecture« can be found in Eisenstein’s film-architecture devised for his unrealised project Glass House, and outside the Soviet Union in Mies van der Rohe’s Turmhaus at Berlin’s Friedrichstraße (and in many avant-garde designs of the early 1920s when nothing could be built for lack of money and architects devoted their energy to imaginary projects), and even in Abel Gance’s cinema bursting installation pieces NAPOLÉON (FR 1925-27) and LA FIN DU MONDE (FR 1930). This de-valueation of the past in favour of a future that is nonetheless unattainable, is a crucial characteristic of the avant-garde.
5.2 The Birth of Montage Cinema from the Spirit of Re-editing

The basic technical contribution of Kuleshov [...] was the discovery that there were, inherent in a single piece of unedited film two strength: its own, and the strength of its relation to other pieces of film. Jay Leyda (1960)²⁶

In the first years after the Revolution, the young Soviet Union hardly produced any feature films, but concentrated instead on two other forms of filmmaking which are treated marginally in classic film histories: re-montage and non-fiction. I will deal in this section with the re-editing of existing films while the following section will treat the categorisation of Soviet films in relation to the fiction / non-fiction divide in more detail. Interestingly, the two most famous filmmakers who took up film right after the Revolution (and before the triumvirate Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Alexander Dovshenko rose to prominence) could be seen as embodiments of these two larger trends in the Soviet cinema of the interwar period: Lev Kuleshov is known for his montage experiments, most famously the formulation of the proverbial »Kuleshov effect«, and Dziga Vertov stands for the category-bursting non-fiction production of the first fifteen years of the Soviet cinema. Without wanting to personify these larger trends and while trying to undermine the fetishising of biographies in many avant-garde studies (the overriding auteur theory of art history), the oeuvre of these two celebrated directors could also provide a genealogy of re-editing and non-fiction.

As mentioned before, in the early years of the Soviet Union most films exhibited were of foreign origin, either German or American as film production had basically broken down altogether after World War One and the revolution. Yet, these films were often shown in different versions from the original as the film committee had already in early 1919 founded a section for the re-montage of foreign films (and of films produced under the Tsar), a practice common during the whole existence of the Soviet Union.²⁷ A good many filmmakers sharpened their eyes and scissors on these transformations, the most famous ones were Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein and Esfir Shub. First of all, excessively violent or overtly sexual scenes were cut and discarded, much like the censorship would have worked in Western countries. More importantly though, far-reaching changes were made when films were converted ideologically: whole sequences were edited in completely different ways, titles were changed, shots were removed and so on to give a film a different political thrust. The classic example of the »bolshevication« of Western films is the transformation of DR. MABUSE, DER SPIELER (DE 1921/22, Fritz Lang) into THE GILDED ROT (SU 1924, Eisenstein/Shub).²⁸ Arguably, the Soviet montage school is unthinkable without this practice of creating new meaning by cutting, repositioning or exchanging shots.

This practice fitted on several levels into the logic of the avant-garde: In terms of formal technique, a re-montage was akin to collage because the creative
Avant-garde Culture

act consisted of cutting up, isolating elements, destroying an old context and creating a new one when re-combining the pre-existing elements in a different form. Re-montage could also be related to the Dadaesque technique of destroying an ordered bourgeois universe and creating non-sense (or anti-sense); the title THE GILDED ROT could have easily been thought up for a Zürich Dada soirée or for a meeting of the Parisian surrealists. Moreover, an element of abstraction can be found in this strategy as the narrative – which in traditional and formalist accounts of films takes centre-stage – recedes into the background and new meaning is created from existing material in a new assembly. It is on these three levels – collage technique, destroying order, and abstraction from a narrative universe – that the Soviet cinema aligned itself with avant-garde preoccupations in a more general way. In fact, the practice of reverse engineering (i.e. taking something apart in order to understand its functioning) is typical of a constructivist ethos: isolating element, examining how energy is generated through the sequence, contrast and alternation of these pieces, and putting the elements together again. The modular approach, constructing from a limited number of existing entities, proved to be crucial to the Soviet avant-garde.

This technique was widespread. Practically all foreign films were re-edited and, as Yuri Tsivian reports, these specialists and cinephiles avant la lettre developed an extraordinary pride and confidence in their work:

They were connoisseurs: no one in the film industry (or outside it) knew Western cinema better than the re-editors; they were experts: few filmmakers compared to them in mastering the technique of editing [...]; they were arrogant: they believed they could improve Griffith! And despite being badgered by film critics, they were proud of their profession!«

Yet, not only did this practice train aspiring filmmakers, it also directly fed into the education of a future generation of film practitioners. Georgii and Sergei Vasiliev, later famous film-makers in their own right, put together from existing material an educational film, AZBUKA KINOMONTAZHA (SU 1926, »The ABC of Film Editing«), that illustrated the practice of re-editing. Sergei Vasiliev also published a book under this title in 1929 and the film was used in class at the Film Institute in Moscow, the first film school anywhere in the world. It is the co-presence of talking and writing about film, of exhibition and distribution practice, of teaching and publishing that is a crucial element of the avant-garde. The avant-garde cannot be characterised solely by a specific aesthetic programme or an innovative formal gadget, but only by its overall approach to film-making which aimed at overcoming the barriers separating life and art. Thus, teaching, theorising, screening films, editing journals are not secondary or ancillary activities, but are as crucial to the overall conception of the avant-garde as filmmaking.

The reversal of hierarchies – related to the theory of re-montage – was another factor important for the emergence of the Soviet cinema. Many different
instances come to mind: one can think here of the inversion of the traditional evaluation of the arts, most famously encapsulated in Lenin's legendary claim for film as »the most important of the arts«, one is reminded of eccentricity and the carnivalesque in FEKS (factory of the eccentric actor)\(^{31}\), one can point out the significance of the circus, highly valued by Eisenstein, and of the music hall which featured importantly for the futurists\(^{32}\) or one can indicate the notion of »ostranie« (making strange) developed by the Russian formalists. The reversal of hierarchy, the inversion of centre and periphery adheres to an avant-garde practice of breaking down traditional barriers and evaluations, of toppling traditional value judgements, of overcoming stale and fixed rankings. Undermining and turning around the narrative as in the remontage adheres to this reversal of established hierarchies as well when the images are being made to say something very different from what they were first intended to mean.

Moreover, in a generational logic the celebrated innovators of the 1920s did come of age artistically at the time of the revolution or after it: Barnet (*1902), Dovshenko (*1894), Eisenstein (*1898), Fridrikh Ermler (*1898), Kozintsev (*1905), Kuleshov (*1899), Pudovkin (*1893), Ilja Trauberg (*1905), Leonid Trauberg (*1902), Vertov (*1896) were all born around 1900. They were in their adolescence at the time of the revolution and reached their 20s in the 1920s when they started working in film. Symbolically they represented the younger generation revolt in oedipal fashion against the fathers, they were the young turks eager to topple the existing system as it was, but they were also old enough to know how things had been before and to preserve a living memory of the Revolution. Even geographically, a similar pattern of periphery over centre is discernible as most of the protagonists of the first generation rather came from the fringes of the Soviet empire than from the big cultural centres Moscow or Leningrad/Petersburg. Eisenstein and Ermler came from the Baltic countries, Dovzenko and the FEKS activists originated in the Ukraine, Aleksandrov and Pirev were from the Ural and Siberia and Vertov grew up close to the Polish border.\(^{33}\) The radical turn-around, the toppling of existing hierarchies relates the communist experience to avant-garde ideals; a similar transformation according to avant-garde concepts can be seen in the organisation of work.

The organisation of labour followed a typical communist model: the collective or the reliance on a small and stable group. One can think here of the FEKS collective, of Eisenstein and his assistants (they called themselves »the iron five«), of Kuleshov's workshop, of Dziga Vertov's Cinema-Eye group, of the Proletkult collective and many more.\(^{34}\) While on the one hand this was meant to limit the level of alienation from work diagnosed in orthodox Marxism for workers in Fordist factories, these small groups of highly skilled specialists are also reminiscent of engineering teams in research departments. The Soviets were fascinated by modern industrial production in which labour is organised according to abstract models of flow and efficiency. In the desire for renewal and
restructuring, these examples are not only novel models for organising labour processes, but also early teaching activities. Thus, the collective was not only a work collective compatible with communist society, but it moreover led to a dissemination of knowledge and abilities that were in traditional film cultures heavily policed by specialists’ associations. The pedagogical impetus of the avant-garde has traditionally been neglected, yet I believe that education is a crucial element in any attempt at restructuring the power relations in the cinema.

5.3 Exploding categories, toppling hierarchies

Within film histories guided by questions of technical and narrative innovations, within historical accounts that revolve around style and poetics, the Soviet filmmakers are normally credited with the »invention« (or »innovation«) of montage cinema. The contribution of Soviet film culture of the 1920s in this view follows German expressionism and French impressionism to become the final and crowning achievement in a series of three important European movements with clearly demarcated national borders and sharply differentiated stylistic features. German filmmakers gave stylised sets and expressive acting style to film culture, French directors contributed subjective style and the expressive close-up while Soviet filmmakers provided intellectual montage and the typage (type casting) of actors. What is absent from this descriptive model is the interrelationship on an international level and, more importantly, how stylistic innovations are part and parcel of cinema as dispositif and institution (rather than a bundle of representational techniques). In formalist histories, every filmmaker becomes a formalist and therefore the Soviet directors of the 1920s have very often been treated as formal innovators with political blinders. Formal innovation happens within a specific political and economic culture and cannot be considered apart from its context. In a similar vein, Janet Sorensen has criticised the division between formalist and political/historical criticism:

This sort of division, however, can have pernicious consequences. At worst, it allows critics to see these two realms – the political/historical and the formal – as mutually exclusive. Under this logic, the whole of the Soviet experiment in form and politics and their combination is suspect. The message here [...] is that the two fields [...] are incompatible, and that to attempt to relate them to each other is ultimately absurd.37

This separation is only possible in retrospect as for contemporaries formal and political issues were inextricably bound together. In a perspective shaped by
historical materialism, the use of formal devices flowed logical from the perceived political and social situation while this situation in turn could be worked upon by formal technique – both sides of the coin were inextricably linked. In fact, any attempt to try to consider them apart from each other was absurd to contemporaries.

In another popular version of Soviet film history that has been especially popular in the 1970s, Vertov became the true revolutionary while Pudovkin and Kuleshov were treated as conservative sediments of an earlier filmmaking style concentrated on psychological realism, individual agency and character identification. In this perspective, Eisenstein occupied a middle ground (even a »mainstream« position which then can be used as the explanation for his retrospective fame and popularity) between the radical and the traditional, yet clearly distinguished from Vertov by the heavily policed demarcation line of documentary vs. fiction. As Bill Nichols has convincingly argued, this dogmatic distinction between fact and fiction has been created within certain traditions of film studies »that insists on a difference between documentary and fiction in the first place and then push Eisenstein over to one side of the line and Vertov to the other.«

Among other things, it is exactly this line between fiction and non-fiction that the Soviet film-makers radically questioned in the first years of their activity. This radical attack has to be seen as a central element of the Soviet avant-garde experiment.

The films that were being made initially in the period of war, civil unrest and the immediate aftermath of the Revolution were rather non-fiction films, yet they quickly became a curious mixture of fiction and non-fiction. This distinction only played a subordinate role in these years: a society that believed to be in the process of realising the future would rather distinguish between accomplished goals and future aims rather than fact and fiction. After an initial phase of experimentation, the focus shifted to more concrete goals of persuasion, yet also entertainment. Discussions centred on questions such as the acted or non-acted film, a distinction similar to the line between fiction and non-fiction, yet with a somewhat different focus. As Denise Youngblood argues, even within avant-garde circles this tension persisted:

[F]rom the beginning, the artistic left in cinema was more diverse than it has been portrayed. It was divided into those who supported fiction films with weakly developed narratives and those – the most radical – who rejected the fiction film altogether, advocating the nonfiction film in its place. While the importance of the former faction would persist, the influence of the latter had all but ended by 1924 as revolutionary romanticism was eschewed by young film activists more intent on rebuilding a shattered industry than indulging in sloganeering and the writing of aesthetic platforms.

Applying these distinctions to some of the Soviet classics, it is indeed very hard to classify them: BRONENOSEZ »POTEMKIN« (1925, Sergej Eisenstein, »Battleship
Potemkin uses many elements from documentary film and it was meant to re-enact an incident from the pre-revolutionary days. The expensive films—one is tempted to say: blockbusters—commissioned for the tenth anniversary of the Revolution in October 1927, OKTIABR’ (Sergei Eisenstein, >Ten Days That Shook the World< / >October<), KONEC SANKT-PETERSBURGA (Vsevolod Pudovkin, >The End of St. Petersburg<), ODINNADCATYI. HRONIKA (Dziga Vertov, >The Eleventh Year<), VELIKIJ PUT’ (Esfir Shub, >The Great Way<), and MOSKVA V OKTIABRE (Boris Barnet, >Moscow in October<), make use of real locations and actors, of newsreel footage and re-enactment, of historical documents and recreation. These films could be fitted into many different film histories. They are commissioned films when one concentrates on the question of what the government wanted to achieve and whom they chose for the task. They are examples of film propaganda when emphasising the formal structure that aimed at the persuasion of the spectator. They belong to the history of documentary in the way these films have been used later as reservoirs of footage depicting the revolution—the staged scenes of the storming of the Winter Palace in Eisenstein’s and Pudovkin’s films are now to be found as non-fiction material in contemporary TV documentary on the history of the Russian revolution. They are arguably heritage films in the way that a not too distant past was idealised and an »imaginary community« was constructed around the represented events. These films are also docu-dramas in the way some of them mix historical footage and re-enactment while also, last but not least, being early examples of cinema events. Yet, it is important to see that these distinctions did not seem to exist at the time for the filmmakers, but that they were only later introduced as rigid demarcations between different genres of film.

Especially Dziga Vertov’s films are hardly classifiable: ODINNADCATYI. HRONIKA (SU 1927, >The Eleventh Year<) CELOVEK S KINOAPPARATOM (SU 1929, >The Man with the Movie Camera<), ENTUZIAZM: SIMPHONYA DONBASSA (SU 1930, >Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbas<) and TRI PESNI O LENINYE (SU 1934, >Three Songs of Lenin<) mix non-fiction footage with re-enactment, audio-experiments with city symphonies, self-reflexive gestures with secretly filmed street scenes. If we classify these films retrospectively as »documentaries« we take away their explosive capacity to break open categories and to overcome traditional distinctions and boundaries. Classical histories have routinely worked on a biographical basis; thus, Vertov is claimed for the documentary and therefore his films are classified as such while Eisenstein is normally seen as a fiction director and his films are filed into another chapter of film history. The Soviet cinema of the 1920s abounds with examples of films balancing on the invisible, yet highly significant line between fact and fiction such as Victor Turin’s account of the construction of the train connection between Siberia and Turkmenistan TURKSIB (SU 1929). The film employs elements from documentary, fiction and educational film not unlike Mikhail Kalatozonov’s SOL’ SVANETII (SU 1930, >Salt for Svanetia<) about a remote and underdeveloped region in the Caucasus which, in
turn, is reminiscent of Luis Buñuel’s later LAS HURDAS / TIERRA SIN PAN (ES 1932, ›Land without Bread‹).

Esfir Shub might be besides Vertov the key example of bursting traditional categories; her trilogy of Russian history 1896–1928 — comprising PADENIE DINASTII ROMANOVYH (SU 1927, ›The Fall of the Romanoff Dynasty‹) on the years 1912–17, VELIKIJ PUT’ (SU 1927, ›The Great Way‹) on the post-revolutionary decade 1917–27, ROSSIIA NIKOLAJA II I LEV TOLSTOI (SU 1928, ›Czar Nikolaus II. and Leo Tolstoi‹) on two key figures of the epoch 1897–1912 — can be understood as an extended historical essay. Rewriting recent history in ideological terms became an important facet of Soviet filmmaking, but also of the avant-garde in the West. Historiography, albeit in a changed form, could be said to be a key element for the early avant-gardists, together with their didactic impact. Indeed, this might fruitfully direct us away from a purely formalist understanding of the avant-garde. To make historical films while also changing the idea of history amounted to nothing less than to a whole reinterpretation of the texture of the world. Vertov was in this respect probably in the mid-1920s more important than Eisenstein who only moved centre-stage after the success of his films abroad:

Vertov’s influence went beyond documentary. Many observers felt that he influenced fiction films for the 1920s, in that his work and polemics helped to turn them away from earlier artificialities. Thus he may have strengthened the Soviet fiction film, though he scarcely intended to do so. There may also be a Vertov influence in the use of climactic actuality sequences in a number of fiction films — as in Kuleshov’s celebrated satire THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF MR. WEST IN THE LAND OF THE BOLSHEVIKS (NEOBYCHAINIYE PRIKLUCHENIYA MISTERA VESTA V STRANYE BOLSHEVIKOV, 1924) and in Ermler’s FRAGMENT OF AN EMPIRE (OBLOMOK IMPERII, 1929). Both end with tours of restored and rebuilt Moscow [...] The work of Dziga Vertov and of those he influenced had unquestionable propaganda values for the Soviet government in the early and middle 1920s. Yet Vertov thought of himself not as a propagandist, but as a reporter: his mission was to get out the news. Conflict — or potential conflict — between the obligations of a journalist and the demands of doctrine was not yet sensed as a problem in the early Vertov days. This happy moment passed quickly.

Yet, before the documentary had coagulated into a form of filmmaking with its own rules, conventions, methods and standards, for a short moment many forms of filmmaking could freely mix and mingle. To claim Vertov (or Shub, Turin, Kalatozonov, for that matter) for the documentary is retrospective reasoning which disregards the specific historical situation in which these films were produced.

Just consider the variety of projects that Dziga Vertov was involved in before 1925: he oversaw the KINONEDELLA-newsreel (SU 1918/19, 43 installments), a rather traditional collection of informational reports, and the KINOPRAVDA-newsreels (1922-25, 23 instalments), a far more experimental approach to the cinematic news format, he made compilation films and the
canonised avant-garde classic KINOGLAZ (SU 1920), he worked on »cinema advertisements«, an early kind of commercial in the service of state institutions, he developed plans for the »Cinema Eye« project and a »Radioprawda« while also collaborating on animation films. While directing his avant-gardistic energy into many projects, these were all directly or indirectly linked to emerging Soviet state agencies. Thus, from another perspective Vertov could also be seen less as an auteur of documentaries (his usual film-historical status), but as a maker of commissioned films. Annette Michelson has pointed out this other side of Vertov, the filmmaker in the service of others:

The entire production of the group of kinoki, organized and administered by Vertov as chairman of their executive Council of Three between 1924 and 1934 [...], was commissioned by specific agencies for specific ends. Thus, FORWARD, SOVIET! (1925) had been commissioned by the Moscow Soviet as a demonstration of the progress made during the immediately post-Revolutionary construction of the new administrative capital of the socialist state; ONE-SIXTH OF THE WORLD (1926) was commissioned by Gostorg, the Bureau of Foreign Trade; THE ELEVENTH YEAR (1928) was a tenth-anniversary celebration of the advances in hydroelectric power; and ENTHUSIASM (1930) [...] celebrated the Stakhanovite acceleration of mining and agriculture in the Don Basin. THE MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA (1929) stands alone as Vertov’s wholly autonomous metacinematic celebration of filmmaking as a mode of production [...]. THREE SONGS OF LENIN [was] commissioned for the tenth anniversary of Lenin’s death (and it was, of course, one of several such commissions)...

One should add though that CELOVEK S KINOAPPARATOM was produced by VUFKU, the Ukrainian state trust for film, and thus Michelson’s label of »autonomous« appears problematic even for this avant-garde classic. The phenomenon of the avant-garde making commissioned or industrial films is not limited to the Soviet Union as I have elaborated above: Indeed, when thinking about many of the stars of the interwar avant-garde, none of them has more than one or two independently produced and made films to their credit, neither Eisenstein nor Richter, neither Ivens nor Ruttman nor Buñuel. A continuous dilemma of the avant-garde, in practical filmmaking as well as in theoretical discussion, is the dependency on others for filmmaking purposes. Since no network of independent outlets (film societies, cinémas d’art et d’essai, art houses, worker’s clubs) tight enough for the sustained support of independent filmmakers existed, the question persisted where to look for support: with the industry, with the state, with wealthy patrons.

The Soviet filmmakers largely worked with the support of the state as the Soviet Union appeared to be a radical new attempt free of the conservatism of the established bourgeois nations. Therefore, no matter how much these films might defy categorisation, they still share one important element: they were all directly or (slightly) indirectly made in the service of the state. As Peter Kenez has argued:
Between 1925 and 1929, the studios made 413 films. [...] With only a few exceptions, the films were made in order to serve the interests of the state. Some were made to popularize sports or the state lottery, or to help the fight against venereal disease, but the great majority were political. Even in these relatively liberal days, the Soviet regime rarely and barely tolerated a film that was made either to entertain or to give nothing but aesthetic pleasure.52

Reminiscent of Ruttmann’s call for the state as a sponsor of a new film form53, the Soviet Union put this specific form of support into practice. Yet, the filmmakers had a price to pay for this dependency on the state: an existing institution (the Soviet state) had no interest in abolishing itself which was ultimately the goal of the avant-garde. The avant-garde wanted to render art superfluous because life has changed to such a degree that the distinction between life and art was meaningless. In a systemic logic, an existing system (like the totality of state institutions concerned with the cinema) always works towards stabilisation and not towards destroying itself. For a while, during the 1920s the development of avant-garde films made sense within the existing institutions (because radical changes had to be instituted), but in the long run this period could not last and film style soon coagulated into Socialist Realism. Therefore, after the revolutionary drive for novelty weakened in the course of the 1920s the Soviet authorities in the 1930s could neither tolerate an autonomous sphere for art nor a privately funded film sector – the avant-garde working on the project of abolishing art ultimately had to clash with the new leaders of the state who were also the new leaders of the art.

5.4 Time and History: The temporal framework of the avant-garde

The avant-garde was characterised by an unconditional sense of utopianism which was directed solely into the future. Nevertheless, the avant-garde was caught up in a special kind of temporal relation which is deeply paradoxical at heart. By taking a closer look at Esfir Shub’s trilogy of Soviet history I want to approach this sense of limitless future that nevertheless could not exist without the past, but that did away with the present. The energy of the avant-garde’s utopianism was derived to no small measure from an overwhelming sense of being steeped in the past. While the avant-garde constantly claimed that it was winning the future, it needed the past as a dead horse for flogging.
When Esfir Shub began work on the film that would become the first part in the trilogy of Soviet history, "PADENIE DINASTII ROMANOYIH (SU 1927), she realised that hardly any film documentation of the revolution existed in the Soviet Union. In their desperate lack of valuta, old film had been either reused or sold to the West. This explains why, for example, the negative to Eisenstein’s POTEMKIN ended up in Germany: partly to obtain badly needed foreign currency, partly because the »Soviet Union did not have the technological capability to duplicate it«. Shub started tracking down and collecting film stock in different places in the Soviet Union, but also pushed Sovkino to acquire material abroad. Even in the United States the Russian trade organisation Amtorg was asked to acquire film stock for Shub which had been sent there as part of the workers' international relief. According to legend Shub viewed about one million metres of film for the whole trilogy – only 6,000 metres were used, less than one percent. In her autobiography she reports from research trips in words that echo the archivist’s labour of unearthing forgotten treasures. In Leningrad she found that

all the valuable negatives and positives of war-time and pre-revolutionary newsreels were kept in a damp cellar [...] The cans were coated with rust. In many places the dampness had caused the emulsion to come away from the celluloid base. Many shots that appeared on the lists had disappeared altogether. Not one metre of negative or positive on the February Revolution had been preserved, and I was even shown a document that declared that no film of that event could be found in Leningrad.

In fact, Shub took on the task of the archivist cum found-footage filmmaker: tracking down material, following the most obscure traces, preserving and identifying the findings, and finally arranging everything in a new order, be it an archival catalogue or a film. Similar to makers of cross-section films, Walter Ruttman and Albert Victor Blum, Germaine Dulac and Edgar Beyfuss, the objective of the search was for the right shot. Not unlike today’s found-footage filmmakers who scan archives or flea-markets, attics or cellars, Shub went to extraordinary length to secure the material she needed for her project.

VELIKU PUT’ (THE GREAT WAY), the second part of Shub’s trilogy dealing with the post-revolutionary decade, was one of several state commissions on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. In between Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov and Barnett it was Shub that went furthest in her move away from shooting new material while Eisenstein and Pudovkin directly competed in elaborate re-stagings of the historical events culminating in the storming of the winter palace. They were effectively creating Spielbergian versions of history in which the construction of a certain version of the (hi)story overrides all other concerns. Today’s documentaries about the Russian revolution are unthinkable without these staged images of the event which have long ago turned into real documentary footage of the event. Vertov and Shub in contrast concentrated on the technical and economic achievements of the Soviet Union in their typical montage.
Vanishing Point Soviet Union

structures – Vertov full of optical tricks and fast cutting, Shub slower in pace and giving the image and the single shot more scope.

In contrast to Eisenstein and Pudovkin, Shub maintained that any kind of real, historical material was preferable to a recreation of that same event, no matter how much »better« or more »realistic« the recreated material might be. Shub’s argument in favour of her method was that the »non-acted« film (the term used in the Soviet Union at the time) was superior to the acted film because in retrospect we observe the films differently. While »acted films« get weaker with age, her work could only increase in value as it utilised real film material:

We think that in our epoch we can film only newsreel and thus preserve our epoch for a future generation. Only that. This means that we want to film the here and now, contemporary people, contemporary events. It does not worry us in the least whether Rykov or Lenin act well in front of the camera or whether this is a played moment. What is important to us is that the camera has filmed both Lenin and Dybenko even if they do not know how to show themselves off in front of the camera because it is this moment that characterises them most of all. Why does Dybenko not approach you in an abstract fashion? Because it is him and not someone portraying Dybenko. It does not worry us that here is a played moment. Let us talk about non-played cinema. Let it have its played moments. But what is the difference if you look, for example, at a remarkable played film made three years ago? You will not be able to watch it because it has become quite simply indigestible. When you look at a non-played film this does not happen: it survives, it is interesting because it is a small fragment of the life that has really passed.59

Shub’s text is mainly directed against Eisenstein’s and Pudovkin’s films who restaged the revolution and chose the same actor to personify Lenin, mainly because of a striking facial and physical resemblance, even though his acting was rather clumsy. Whereas staging and the use of actors offer the opportunity of retrospectively altering what has happened and thus gives almost boundless opportunities how to make it appear, using archive material means limiting oneself to existing shots. Yet again, the films Shub created are in no way neutral depictions of a time past, but they are very partial and present a strong version of history.

In fact, Shub’s work should be seen in the context of debates led in contemporary intellectual film magazines. The key discussion concerning the work of Esfir Shub took place in the magazine Lef, succeeded by Novij Lef, dominated by left-wing activists like Sergei Tretiakov, Viktor Shklovski and Osip Brik (also Shub’s husband). In the pages of Lef the concept of a »factory of facts« was developed. Directed not only against the dream factory of Hollywood or Babelsberg, but also against Kozinzev’s and Trauberg’s factory of the eccentric actor FEKS as well as Eisenstein’s factory of attractions, the factory of facts (or in poststructuralist fashion »fact-ory«) was meant to accompany the re-structuring measures put into practice in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Yet, the factory of facts was not meant to simply show empirical evidence of the changes in the
economic or social sector, but it was meant to »organise life«, as it was called. »To organise life« meant that art played a crucial role in the building of the new society as the revolution had broken down the boundaries between art and life – the aim of all avant-garde activity. Art was now part of the new Soviet reality and was thus participating actively in the transformation of the country, not just representing the change.\(^6\) It was in this sense that many avant-garde activists felt that the Soviet Union had reached a stage that Western arts were not able to climb – art and life had a much stronger connection in the Soviet Union than in Western Europe. Vertov, in an article published in Pravda in July 1926, argued against big fiction film studios and asked for a centralised film factory of facts: »Every non-played film in one place with a film laboratory. With an archive of non-played films.«\(^61\)

Yet, some time later Vertov fell from grace with the theoreticians of the avant-garde for his alleged lack of »radicalism«.

In 1927 a discussion began in the pages of Lef that played off Shub not against Eisenstein or Pudovkin (for the intellectual radicals of Lef that would have meant flogging already dead horses), but against the other Soviet innovator of the non-acted film: Dziga Vertov. The writers in Lef went even further than Vertov because they valued the idea of the fact higher than the creative montage. They took issue with the concept of authorship implicitly inherent in the virtuosity of editing. They attempted to eradicate authorship and the showmanship of brilliant editing by resorting to non-authored images or at least images not produced for the specific purpose for which they are used because at bottom the debate circled around the question of how to write history.

If one makes a distinction between creating new images on the one hand and storing, sorting and manipulating them on the other, one notices that even Dziga Vertov in his CELOVEK S KINOPAPPARATOM (1929) thought it necessary to shoot his own material. Shub was even more radical, as she reused old material. Shub criticised Vertov for manufacturing facts, for staging and shooting his non-fiction material. Her avant-gardism went so far to override the concerns of authorship and intentionality appreciated in the avant-garde movement of the cine-eyes:

> The studio must [...] remove its Futuristic sign and become simply a factory for non-played cinema where people could work on editing newsreels, films of the history of the Revolution made from newsreel footage, where scientific production films and general cultural films could be made as a counterweight to played entertainment films.\(^62\)

The »kinoki«-group around Vertov was an important source of innovation for non-fiction film-making after the revolution, but in the second half of the 1920s this group was becoming a focus of criticism. The larger shift from an emphasis on rapid montage and the manipulative power of images to a valorisation of the long shot and a rather encyclopaedic editing is visible in the opposition of Shub vs.
Vertov. It was not only the bravado editing that was being criticised, but also Vertov’s manner of film-making. As Victor Shklovsky wrote:

I think that newsreel material is in Vertov’s treatment deprived of its soul – its documentary quality. A newsreel needs titles and date. [...] Dziga Vertov cuts up newsreels. In this sense his work is not artistically progressive. In essence he is behaving like all our directors whose graves will be decorated with monuments, who cut up newsreels in order to use bits in their own films. These directors are turning our film libraries into piles of broken film.

Not only does Shlovsky accuse Vertov of staging films and distorting reality, he moreover scolds him for destroying film, for endangering the heritage of Soviet history. To Shklovsky the preservation of the archive was more important than Vertov’s films. Ultimately, as the debates within film circles were becoming fiercer in the second half of the 1920s, the charge amounted to a wilful destruction of the heritage of the revolution, to a distortion of history as seen by Marxist materialist history.

Mikhail Iampolski has pointed out the conception of history inherent in the compilation films of Esfir Shub. It was Shub’s employment of long takes that was pitted against Vertov’s fast and virtuoso montage which distorted and manipulated. The film archive not only became a place for the preservation of film, but as the stored material provided an unauthored view of the past, the archive became the bearer of history. Ideally, a film should consist of many shots from all different kinds of sources: making a film would mean a combination of these unconnected shots, actually not unlike what today’s found-footage filmmakers Harun Farocki, Peter Forgacs, Matthias Müller or Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi are doing. Osip Brik went so far to even propose to close the studios for acted films and just send out cameramen to gather material that would then be edited together into films. The document, the single shot was the basic building block in this conception of filmmaking: »The document not only became alienated from the director, it became a document from the past.« The idea was to store the present day reality – the building of the new communist world – for the future in a temporal paradox typical of the avant-garde as a whole. The recorded material, the shot as document and monument became a view of the past for a future which was certain and imminent according to the laws of materialist history, but not yet fully achieved. The Lef-activists evaluated the raw material higher than any rhetorical structure – the document was eternal, the film was fleeting and the archive was the place from which films were born and to which they returned: »In so far as the material was understood as raw material for permanent re-combination, the film archive became an endless and inexhaustible source for the future filmmaker.« As a consequence, montage became practically indistinguishable from cataloguing. Shub’s films do in fact contain long sequence where one gets the impression that every scene of »soldiers leaving for the front« or »workers in a factory« that she
found, was included in the film. They sometimes appear as catalogues of what was available at the time of making. This should not only present a direct view of reality, but it should also guard against the dangers of authored and virtuoso combination. The underlying idea was to solve the paradox of the avant-garde that wanted to do away with artistic subjectivity (the romantic notion of the genius) theoretically, yet it only replaced it with another kind of genius as exhibited in the breathtaking montage sequences. Furthermore, an archaeological gaze is manifest in the films of Shub which was first and foremost treating single elements as monuments that keep their strangeness and distance as they are not inserted into a master pattern. The shot is able to maintain some of its autonomy even though a different pattern may overlay the single element to a certain extent.

The final sequences of THE GREAT WAY testify to this paradoxical temporal construction. Children of different ethnic background are shown, underscoring the idea that the Soviet Union covering »one sixth of the earth« included all kinds of different people – communism as a universal hope for mankind. These children vow to finish the work begun by their fathers. The final title declares »On this great way we will, following Iljitsch’s legacy, build our new world«. The past is being evoked for a future to be won and achieved. Vladimir Iljitsch Lenin, metonymically standing in for the preceding generation that carried out the Revolution, has begun the revolutionary work and the children will fulfil this task. The past is modelled to promise a bright future, the present is already a past as it is just one step on the way to the future. This temporality was typical of the phase of the New Economic Policy that characterised the 1920s. Most industrial sectors had broken down during the revolution and the ensuing civil war. The communist government responded by re-introducing a market economy into a socialist society in the making. Culture became a crucial sector in this phase because the achievements of communism were most visible here, both inside and outside the country. While the economy went back to a model of capitalism, culture had the task of showing what had been achieved and, more importantly, what the purpose of the fundamental transformations were. The promises were huge, the present situation was gloomy and cinema had the function of redeeming this advance on the future that had been given out.

This, I would maintain, is also the core dilemma of the avant-garde, not only in the Soviet Union, but anywhere where artists occupy such a position. Already in its name the avant-garde announces that it is ahead of the rest, striding forward and leading the mainstream. The avant-garde carries within itself the promise of a future better than the past or the present. Yet again, most of the iconoclastic energy of the avant-garde is directed against traditional bourgeois art, against its conventions of individual creation and individual reception and against its places of worships like museums or theatres. The avant-garde, while wanting to achieve the future, has its eyes firmly fixed on the past. This precarious and even tragic situation is perfectly summed up in Benjamin’s angel of history who is
eternally transfixed on wounds and catastrophes that the past has inflicted which it wants to heal, yet it is relentlessly pushed forward into the future.⁶⁷

5.5 Berlin as the Gateway to the West

*Die Spitzenleistungen der russischen Filmindustrie bekommt man in Berlin bequemer zu sehen als in Moskau.*

_Walter Benjamin (1927)⁶⁸_

The first wave of Russian films in the first half of the 1920s did not reach the European centres from Moscow but rather from the émigré colonies which had after adventurous travels through the Crimea and Istanbul set up shop in Paris and Berlin.⁶⁹ A real craze for Russian subjects swept Europe in the early years after World War One which partly paved the way for the later revolutionary films. Oksana Bulgakowa has identified several waves in the reception of Soviet films in Germany which followed each other, but always adhered to specific clichés, therefore she has termed the interrelationship between the two countries a »war of stereotypes«.⁷⁰ The stereotype of 19th Century Russian literature (Tolstoi, Gogol, etc.) was replaced by the stereotype of the revolutionary nation in the mid-1920s with the advent of POTEMKIN. Some of the émigré films, like LE BRASIER ARDENT (FR 1923, Ivan Mosjoukin and Aleksandr Volkov) and KEAN (FR 1923, Aleksandr Volkov), were at the time considered to be at the aesthetic forefront of filmmaking. While the émigré group in Paris had earlier mainly produced lavish spectacles in an international European style, these two films formed at least stylistically part of the French avant-garde. Characteristic of both films is a fast and relatively free editing which was influenced by earlier experiments like Abel Gance’s _La Roue_ (1920-22).

Following these two films, the French avant-garde and the Russian émigrés moved closer together: Mosjoukin starred in Jean Epstein’s _LE LION DES MOGOLS_ (FR 1924) and in Marcel L’Herbier’s _FEU MATTHIAS PASCAL_ (FR 1924) while Albatros, the main production company of the Russian exile community, had a hand in the production of films such as _NAPOLÉON_ (FR 1924–27, Abel Gance), _UN CHAPEAU DE PAILLE D’ITALIE_ (FR 1927, René Clair), _LES NOUVEAUX MESSIEURS_ (FR 1928, Jacques Feyder), _LA PASSION DE JEANNE D’ARC_ (FR 1928, Carl-Theodor Dreyer) and others. Many of the French productions of the second half of the 1920s foreshadow an international pan-European art cinema that we now associate with the period after 1980. The personnel is as international as the topics, stylistic influences cross borders easily and the films are made with a European market in mind. These films walk the line between art cinema and avant-garde: on the one hand, they were inclined to experiments and open to new filmmaking techniques, they often employed state-of-the-art technology, while on the other hand they had their origin within a blatantly commercial film industry. The
producing companies were not interested in a different use of film, they experimented mainly for commercial reasons: new techniques were employed for reasons of product differentiation and as an additional selling point of their products.

Central to my definition of avant-garde is an attempt to reconcile life and art on a higher level, to break down the barriers separating the two spheres. It remains doubtful if the majority of the Russian émigré’s productions can be fitted into such a definition of the avant-garde. Despite the stylistic innovations visible in some of these films, despite formal experimentation, the whole approach to filmmaking was indeed that of a commercial company. In fact, these production strategies were difficult to transfer to sound film and in some respects the avant-garde was better equipped to deal with the coming of sound as narrative was less central to their filmmaking approach. Yet, these films also paved the way for later films as Russian films were accepted as experimental – and often the distinction between émigré Russian and Soviet films were not clearly made by contemporary observers in the West.

POTEMKIN did not arrive out of nowhere as the number of Soviet films on German and French screens had considerably increased over the two years previous to POTEMKIN’s release. Before POTEMKIN inaugurated the wave of »Russenfilme«, it was Soviet culture and art that spurred Western imagination. Through the International Workers’ Relief (Internationale Arbeiterhilfe - IAH) and other organisations, cultural artefacts from the Soviet Union found their way to the West in order to rally ideological and financial support. One of the first big cultural events that brought artistic products from the revolutionary state to the West was the first Russian art exhibition in autumn 1922 in Berlin at the Galerie Van Diemen. Slowly, the trickle became a river that, in the mid-1920s, was the most important trend internationally in the cinema.

In the course of the 1920s the one-way-street of Western films coming to the Soviet Union developed into a policy of exchange. The conduit through which the vast majority of the Soviet films would reach Western screens was certainly Berlin; in fact, Germany was the first country to officially recognise the Soviet Union after the Revolution. Germany and the Soviet Union had signed a trade agreement already in April 1918 in the wake of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, a contract followed by many close collaborations. One of the first Soviet films seen outside the new state was documenting the famine of 1921, GOLOD... GOLOD... GOLOD (SU 1921, Vladimir Gardin / Vsevolod Pudovkin); it was shown on 26 March 1922 in Berlin and the same year also at Louis Delluc’s ciné-club in Paris. Starting from this success, the IAH, closely linked to the communist party and to the Communist International (ComIntern), toured with programmes of mostly non-fiction films through worker’s clubs and union societies in Germany. These films were shown for humanitarian and political purposes – to rally support for the Soviet Union – and money was collected for hunger relief and to support the struggling worker’s
and peasant’s state. The response to these films demonstrated the interest of Western audiences to what was going on inside the Soviet Union, but they did not yet exhibit a radical new approach to filmmaking. The films were documents of the Soviet crisis and their aim was direct and immediate – to raise money for the starving workers and peasants. At this early stage of interchange, films were meant to evoke workers’ solidarity in Germany and other countries for their Soviet comrades. The medium of film was largely chosen because it was easier to reach workers in the cinema than with publications or lectures. Nevertheless, film was not the only means for targeting workers’ solidarity. Another important element of this relief effort was a media offensive that also included the magazine *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* (since 1921, title in the beginning *Sowjetrussland im Bild*). The *IAH* arguably conceived and executed a veritable media campaign which in style was akin to the avant-garde idea of a united media front.75

In September 1922, POLIKUSHKA (SU 1919/20, Alexander Sanin) was the first Soviet fiction film to be distributed commercially abroad: a German distribution company had bought it.76 This film, based on a story by Leo Tolstoi, fitted into preconceived ideas of the Russian cinema with its story of oppression in rural, Tsarist Russia. The ensuing pattern of distribution shows a peak of interest and popularity around 1930. From 1922 to 1925 each year 2 or 3 Soviet films came to German screens. 1926 brought the breakthrough with 7 films, it was 13 in 1927, 12 in 1928 and 1929, 13 in 1930, 8 in 1931, and 13 in 1932.77 It was a combination of factors that made Berlin important as the interface and channel through which many interchanges between the Soviet Union and the West took place. Germany had a geographical advantage as the most immediate access point. Furthermore, Germany had early on recognised the Soviet Union and trade was most intense between the two countries. Culturally, both countries had a long history of exchange and co-operation. On a more personal note, when estimating Eisenstein’s enormous popularity in Germany it should not be underestimated that his fluent command of German and his charismatic personality played a role in attracting public attention. In economic terms, this exchange was a crucial factor for the regeneration of the Soviet industry. Kristin Thompson has argued: »[I]f we take 1924 as the year when the Soviet cinema’s recovery finally took hold, it becomes apparent that German-Soviet dealings played an extensive rôle in it.«78 In the winter of 1925/26 *Prometheus* was founded as a daughter company of the *IAH*, a new distribution company specialised in Soviet films, which would later also venture into production.79

It is important to remember that the *IAH* was not a German organisation, but rather an international organisation (in its operations rather comparable to today’s international NGOs) that happened to have its headquarter in Germany. The idea for the *IAH* followed from the change of policy in 1921 of the ComIntern which reverted to a united front and support of the struggling Soviet Union – instead of trying to achieve an immediate revolution in other countries. In fact, as
the German communist party followed for some years in the mid-1920s an anti-Comintern strategy, membership for the IAH lagged far behind other countries – in 1926, there were 1.25 million members in England, 600,000 in Japan, but only 25,000 in Germany. The leadership of the IAH, Willi Münzenberg, was able to build up a veritable media empire, possibly the most important alternative attempt at challenging the media industry in Europe. The various affiliations, Weltfilm and Prometheus, VFV and IAH, Aufbau and Mezhrabpom’, all worked together not towards creating revenue (the profit was channelled either into enlarging the companies or into workers’ relief in the Soviet Union and elsewhere), but towards achieving change. While the set-up and internal organisation of the IAH mirrored that of the existing industry, its aim did not: the commercial film industry strove towards a maximisation of profits while Münzenberg’s aim was a communist revolution, to overthrow the existing economic and social system. In this way, Münzenberg shared avant-garde ideas as he tried to topple the existing order of the film industry (and of society at large). It was the German-Soviet joint-venture Mezhrabpom-Rus’ (Mezhrabpom’ is the Russian acronym for »International Workers’ Relief«) that succeeded in building up a vertical integrated structure while also keeping up its trans-national network between the Soviet Union and Germany. Yet, it was more than a copy of commercial film companies:

Mezhrabpom-Rus’ plowed some of its profits back into activities which contributed to the agitational and educational roles the government had mandated for Soviet cinema. It funded an »agit-steamer« which carried cinema and other cultural activities into the countryside as part of the government’s effort to reach remote areas of the USSR. It also used profits from its popular entertainment films to produce several agitational works.

Mezhrabpom-Rus’ (after the old Rus’ management had been bought out in 1926 renamed Mezhrabpomfilm) had a decisive advantage over other Soviet companies in the mixed economy of the NEP years: it was sufficiently capitalised because its capital basis came in hard currency from the West. All other film enterprises (Sovkino, Sevzapkino etc.) did not have sufficient funds for stepping up production as a large part of technical equipment had to be imported from abroad as well as film stock. Yet, this joint venture was not just making many interesting films since the financial situation was considerably better here, it was also co-producing films and setting up a pattern of exchange with the West.

Mezhrabpom’ was producing a mixture of revolutionary works and genre films. It had its first successes with the science fiction drama AELITA (SU 1924, Iakov Protazanov), the family melodrama MEDWESJA SWADBA (SU 1925, Konstantin Eggert, »The Bear’s Wedding«) and the adventure serial MISS MEND. PRIKLJUCENJA TREH REPORTEROV (SU 1926, Fedor Ozep / Boris Barnet), but it also produced some of those films that are now considered classics of the Soviet cinema, like KONEZ SANT-PETERSBURGA (SU 1927, Vsevolod Pudovkin) and TRI
Vanishing Point Soviet Union

PESNI O LENINE (SU 1933, Dziga Vertov). Another important contribution to the alternative cinema culture of the interwar period were the international co-productions such as FALSCHMÜNZER / SALAMANDRA (DE/SU 1929, Grigori Roschal) and DER LEBENDE LEICHNAM / SHIWOI TRUP (DE/SU 1929, Fedor Ozep). This inauguration of co-productions between Germany and Soviet Russia was revived after the introduction of sound with Pudovkin’s DEZERTIR, yet cut short in January 1933 when Hitler came to power. Further projects of this production line include failed films such as the unfinished METALL (DE/SU 1930-32, Hans Richter) and VOSSTANIE RYBAKOV / DER AUFSTAND DER FISCHER (SU/DE, 1931-1934, Erwin Piscator). Despite all changes and the growing resistance to the internationalist ambitions of the organisation, the importance of this model is hard to overestimate:

Although the Mezhrabpom was reorganized and its German ties became less significant, all through the 1920s it remained a useful link between Russia and Western Europe. Mezhrabpom-Rus made a great contribution to making the work of Soviet directors known first in Germany, and later in the rest of Europe. The studios of Mezhrabpom-Rus also turned out some of the most interesting films produced in the Soviet Union.

It might serve as little more than an in-joke of film history, but it arguably has its allegorical significance that the film that is most often singled out as a precursor to »the golden age« of Soviet cinematography had as its topic the relationship between the West and the Soviet Union. NEOBYCHAINIY PRIKLUCHENIYA MISTERA VESTA V STRANYE BOLSHEVIKOV (1924, Lev Kuleshov) participates in an imaginary dialogue via the cinema. In Kuleshov’s film the Western, crime film, and chase sequences take turns with the éducation idéologique of an American capitalist who is on a business trip to Moscow. The textbook capitalist is turned into a textbook communist through his adventures and experiences. In fact, many of the Soviet avant-gardists were fervent admirers of all things American as America stood for progress and new developments. And even though the US and the Soviet Union had diametrically opposed ideologies in many respects they were both young countries characterised by an extraordinary dynamic development in the 1920s centred on industrialisation and automation and they provided the main models to which other countries turned. Despite all differences, there was also a good measure of attraction between the Soviet Union and the United States. Not coincidentally many filmmakers in the Soviet Union rather looked to Hollywood than to Berlin or Paris for inspiration. Indeed, Kuleshov is often singled out as the most »Hollywoodised« of the Soviet auteurs. Kuleshov in fact acknowledged his debt to the US cinema, yet that was an influence completely inflected by his avant-garde position:
If he [Kuleshov, MH] looked to the conventions of Hollywood commercial cinema, he did so out of self-consciously modernist motives. If he raided capitalist cinema for models, he was also selecting out properties that he could apply to Soviet definitions of modernity in the arts. Whatever his debt to the Americans, his ideas also conformed to the program of the Russian avant-garde, specifically to [...] the Constructivist ethos.88

As Kepley suggests, Kuleshov’s modernism was in the spirit of the constructivist avant-garde treating the artist as a precision engineer who fabricated functional and streamlined objects far removed from a romantic ideal of individuality, genius and authorship. What attracted Kuleshov to the Hollywood cinema was its efficiency of narrative form, the energies it was able to generate, its streamlined narrative process which proved to be highly popular in the Soviet Union as well as in all other countries that Hollywood films reached. Choosing the US cinema as its (formal) model was also a polemical choice to reject the laborious and slow Russian dramas which had been produced in the pre-revolutionary time and continued to be made in the first half of the 1920s with little changes. More often than not, modernism as a cultural and artistic movement and the modernisation of work and private life, of production methods and leisure time proved to be natural allies.

Another film that participated in the imaginary dialogue via the cinema was POTSELUI MERI PIKFORD (SU 1927, Sergei Komarov, ’The Kiss of Mary Pickford’) which mildly pokes fun at those people adoring the stars of the Hollywood cinema.89 Indeed, Pickford and Fairbanks appear in this film as themselves and their positive comment on POTEMKIN made after seeing the film in May 1926 in Berlin90 was used in the Soviet Union to promote the film which had a hard time drawing a large domestic audience beyond the urban intelligentsia. Pickford and Fairbanks were shot for newsreel purposes when visiting a Soviet studio. The manner in which Fairbanks and Pickford were later inserted into POTSELUI MERI PIKFORD demonstrates Kuleshov’s influence as the documentary material was later used in a fictional context.91 The popularity of Hollywood stars was a matter of hot contestation in the Soviet magazines, for political as well as for economic reasons.92

If one has to single out one specific event as a point of crystallisation, there is hardly a doubt which moment to choose. POTEMKIN had its premiere in Berlin only three days after its first official screening in Moscow. On 18 January 1926 it opened at two cinemas in central Moscow and on 21 January it was shown in Berlin at the Große Schauspielhaus at a closed memorial meeting for Lenin who had died on 21 January two years earlier.93 The reception in the Soviet Union was mixed: while some observers hailed the film as a new achievement, others, especially fellow filmmakers, found fault with Eisenstein’s film. The fate of POTEMKIN shows a pattern that does not seem altogether untypical of innovative films that only get real recognition after achieving success abroad. Famous
examples in the same period from the fringes of the avant-garde are DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI (DE 1919/20, Robert Wiene) which returned triumphantly from Paris after having broken the French ban against German films and SOUS LES TOITS DE PARIS (DE 1929/30, René Clair) which was hailed by German critics and was only then embraced in Paris. It is as if the recognition abroad adds an extra value to the film that is then transported back to the country of origin where at first the novelty had met criticism. These »prodigal son«-films which were accepted only into the »imagined community« of nationhood after having gained recognition from an equally »imagined other« abroad would make for an interesting case study.

After the German premiere which was an internal screening on invitation only with a special status, the German board of film censors prohibited public screenings of Eisenstein's film. *Prometheus*, Münzenberg's distribution and production company which owned the foreign rights to the film, called on theatre director Erwin Piscator and theatre critic Alfred Kerr as witnesses with a voice that the liberal intellectual establishment would listen to. On 10 April the German supreme board of film censorship (Filmoberprüfstelle) passed the film with some cuts and regular screenings started despite strong protests from the political right on 29 April 1926 at the Apollo theatre at the Friedrichstraße where it enjoyed a long and triumphant run. A variety of reasons contributed to the success of the film: a heavily politicised public sphere followed with intense interest the developments inside the Soviet Union, the fights over censorship and cuts of the film created the hype necessary for a media event, and Edmund Meisel's score heightened the dramatic appeal of the film. Meisel’s music combined the routine of cinema accompaniment with some of Eisenstein’s ideas and a tamed modernism in music and noise. Finally, all through the summer bans in specific territories (the provincial states of Württemberg, Bavaria, Hesse and Thuringia) and temporarily on a nation-wide level kept the film in hot discussion and contributed in no little measure to the enormous success of the film. Even though from the first premiere version (1,740 m) more than 400 metres were cut in the following years (1,353 m – the version still in circulation when the Nazis came to power in January 1933), the film had made its impact and soon moved on to other countries: »[T]he explosive combination of POTEMKIN and Berlin in the 1920s had put both Eisenstein and Soviet film on the world cultural map.« POTEMKIN was subsequently sold to 36 countries and it continued to be the only solidly canonised classics of the Soviet cinema of the 1920s.

The British reception replayed the German one in terms of censor reaction, yet the public enthusiasm was nowhere near the Berlin frenzy. In fact, it took 3 years until the first closed screening of POTEMKIN could take place at the Tivoli Palace in London's Strand organised and attended by the London Film Society on 10 November 1929. The reaction was somewhat cool, but Britain had received its share of Soviet revolutionary cinema by this date, thus the film did not come as a complete novelty. POTEMKIN had made its imaginary impact in Britain because the
banning and public debate was widely discussed in the public while the cinematographic void had been filled with other Soviet films. Moreover, British censorship was very severe, so Soviet films with a revolutionary content were – if at all – only screened in closed circles of film societies. Most of the films considered classics in retrospect did not make it to regular cinema screenings. POTEMKIN remained banned in Britain until after World War Two, just as in France. Yet, in France it was seen by many people in ciné-clubs and the French premiere was considerably earlier than the English: it was shown in Paris on 18 November 1926 at the Ciné-Club de France. In France, the line ran between the ciné-clubs which were often able to screen those films and the ordinary cinemas which only played the Soviet genre production. Nearly all of the classic revolutionary films did not pass the censors for public exhibition and only Moussinac’s Amis de Spartacus, Canudo’s Club des amis de septième art, and the Ciné Club de France, besides some organisations of the communist party and occasionally Studio 28 were able to show Soviet films with revolutionary content. The impact of the Soviet cinema was thus largely »imaginary« because most people only heard and read about the allegedly sensational films as they could not see them in the cinema.

POTEMKIN was dividing public opinion all over Western Europe: the film was screened in Vienna, Geneva, and Stockholm, but it remained banned in Italy, Spain, Belgium, Denmark, Norway and the Baltic Republics. The impact of Soviet films can hardly be overestimated and their influence can be seen in many classics of the transitional period: René Clair’s SOUS LES TOITS DE PARIS (FR 1930) was influenced by Abram Room’s TRET’JA MESCANSKAJA (SU 1927, »Bed and Sofa« / »Third Meshchanskaia Street«), Josef von Sternberg’s SHANGHAI EXPRESS (US 1932) by Leonid Trauberg’s GOLUBOJ EKSPRESS (SU 1929, »The Blue Express«) and Bunuel’s LAS HURDAS / TIERRA SIN PAN (ES 1932) is indebted to SOL’ SVANETTI (SU 1930, Michail Kalatozov). Moreover, without POTEMKIN and the impact of Soviet montage the whole school of British documentary is unthinkable. When Grierson’s DRIFTERS premiered at the Film Society in London, it did so alongside Eisenstein’s POTEMKIN; Grierson himself worked on adapting that classic for an English audience (translating titles, preparing it for censorship). Grierson was also instrumental in starting the Workers’ Film Society which had as the main attraction on its first day of screening Victor Turin’s TURKSIB. Just like Eisenstein’s film, the English version was put together by Grierson.

Yet, the proliferation of Soviet films in the West was no one-way-street and neither the influence ran just in one direction. Whereas the early 1920s had seen mainly entertainment films from Germany and the US on Soviet screens, in the latter half of the decade it was also art and avant-garde films that found an interested audience in the big urban centres of the Soviet Union. According to contemporary Léon Moussinac who travelled frequently to the Soviet Union, the Soviet public (at least in the big cities) had by 1928 been able to see films by Louis
Vanishing Point Soviet Union

Delluc, Jean Epstein, René Clair, Abel Gance, Marcel L’Herbier, Germaine Dulac, Alberto Cavalcanti, Walter Ruttmann and Hans Richter. Jay Leyda reported that the filmmakers in the Soviet Union were familiar with the work of Abel Gance, D.W. Griffith, James Cruze, Fritz Lang, G.W. Pabst, F.W. Murnau, Ernst Lubitsch, and Richard Oswald. In 1927 Ilja Ehrenburg brought several avant-garde films from Paris for a screening to the Soviet Union. And the stylistic development also ran on parallel tracks as when Vertov after a screening of René Clair’s PARIS QUI DORT (FR 1923/24) confided to his diary his envy that he had wanted to make a very similar film in technical terms. The Soviet Union participated in the international network of alternative screenings, yet as the situation was different (and even though NEP did create a sort of market situation it was still considerably different from a capitalist economy), these events did also much rather take place in political or social organisation in close proximity to the state.

As Berlin was the main conduit for the transition of Soviet cinema to the West, it was here that many decisions were made that had lasting influence. It was the Berlin distributors (often Prometheus) that sometimes changed titles and it is usually these new titles that the films are remembered and that they still circulate under: TRETYA MESHCHANSKAYA (SU 1927, Abram Room) became BED AND SOFA (literally >Third Petit Bourgeois Street<), OKTABR’ (SU 1927, Sergei Eisenstein) became TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD (literally >October<), POTOMOK CHINGIS-KHAN (SU 1928, Vsevolod Pudovkin) became STORM OVER ASIA (literally >The Heir to Jenghis-Khan<), NOVYJ VAVILON (SU 1929, Grigorij Kozincev & Leonid Trauberg) became KAMPF UM PARIS (literally >New Babylon<), and ZEMLJA V PLENY (SU 1927, Fedor Ozep) became THE YELLOW PASS (literally >Earth in Chains<). The work of translation, both literally and metaphorically, was most frequently done by Prometheus, the non-profit organisation Weltfilm or Mezhrabpom’, the key companies in this whole set-up of relations and exchange.

5.6 Publication and Travelling: Translations and the Grand Tour

Along with the Constructivists, Eisenstein developed a kinetic art, not as an aesthetic experiment or exciting spectacle of interest in itself, but from a >passionate desire to incite the spectator to action<.

Standish Lawder (1975)

Not soon after the first films of the montage school made their way to the West, the makers followed suit. Again, Berlin was the gateway and network node for cultural, economic and geographical reasons. The itinerary was almost invariably the same: from Moscow they went to Berlin and from there trips to other German cities (Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Hamburg) and from their to the other European centres of the avant-garde, to Paris, London, and Amsterdam / Rotterdam. The celebrated innovators visited mainly those metropolitan centres where production and
exhibition in the alternative sector took place on a broader basis. Thus, Spain and Portugal were not part of the itineraries and neither were Scandinavia or the Balkans, only the central European space demarcated in the Northwest by London, in the Southwest by Paris, with Berlin as the imaginary and real turnstile. Only Eisenstein and his close collaborators Alexandrov and Tissé spent some time exploring rural France and subsequently also made the trip across the Atlantic to the United States (and to Mexico). These trips have been researched and discussed quite thoroughly, yet always from an auteuristic and biographical angle and never in a synthesising fashion where the different countries and different filmmakers are put in a comparative perspective.

Vsevolod Pudovkin paid several visits to Western Europe in the decisive years between 1927 and 1932. In January 1927 Pudovkin travelled to Berlin for 2 weeks in order to attend the international premiere of MATJ. He returned to Berlin for the premiere of KONEC SANKT-PETERSBURGA on 5 November 1928, this time he stayed longer for film work: in the winter 1928/29 Pudovkin played the leading role in DER LEBENDE LEICHNAM / SHIWOI TRUP (DE/SU 1928/29, Fedor Ozep), a German-Russian co-production between Mezhrabpom’ and Prometheus. The shooting took place in Berlin and Pudovkin took advantages of his extended stay in Germany travelling to Holland for 2 days to visit the Filmliga for a screening of MATJ on 10 January. On this occasion Pudovkin invited Ivens to the Soviet Union to make a film there. Pudovkin also travelled to London for three days on invitation of Ivor Montagu for another screening of MATJ and a talk to the Film Society of London on 3 February 1929. In the same period the German edition Filmregie und Filmmanuskript was published (late 1928). Despite his shooting schedule and his travels outside Germany he found time to lecture on film: On 13 January, Pudovkin was present at a matinee with Soviet films at the Tauentzien-Palast organised by the Volksfilmverband where KONEC SANKT-PETERSBURGA was screened. This opportunity for marketing was not lost on contemporaries: The Lichtbild-Bühne, a trade paper which ran its own publishing house which published Pudovkin’s book, reported at length about the lectures and activities of the Soviet director and presented big advertisements alongside the articles. On 29 February 1929, after nearly four months abroad, he returned to Moscow. In late May 1931 Pudovkin travelled to Germany for the third time, again to make a film, only this time not as actor, but as director: DEZERTIR is planned as the story of a strike of dock workers in Hamburg. Pudovkin stayed for research in Germany until 26 June 1931. On his return to the Soviet Union, he continued work on the script until Hitler's ascent to power made shooting in Hamburg impossible and as a result the film was entirely made in the Soviet Union.

The decisive year for the European avant-garde and the moment of highest convergence of different developments was surely 1929: Dziga Vertov’s first trip to Western Europe as a filmmaker of reputation was an extended voyage from early May to early August 1929, planned and organised with the support of El
Lissitzky and his German wife Sophie Küppers who probably also had a hand in the translation of Vertov's Russian texts for the various lectures he gave. He attended the screenings at the Werkbund-exhibition *Film und Foto* in Stuttgart and was invited to La Sarraz as the Soviet delegate, yet he had to return to the Ukraine before the meeting. During this journey, Vertov was doing a grand tour of Germany presenting *CELOVEK S KINOAPPARATOM* (SU 1929). It is worth recounting this trip in more detail because it illustrates typical stations and institutions: On 3 and 4 June he was at the Planetarium in Hanover, on 9 June he presented at the Phoebus-Palast in Berlin, the following day at the Bauhaus in Dessau, and on 11 June at the Museum Folkwang in Essen. He visited the *Film und Foto* exhibition in Stuttgart where he gave a lecture on 16 June, on 23 June Vertov was at the association »Das Neue Frankfurt« in Frankfurt/Main, on 29 and 30 June at the Bayerische Landesfilmbühne in Munich, and finally on 2 July the tour ended at the Marmorhaus in Berlin. Conspicuously, only in Berlin he presented twice at (nominally) commercial venues, all the other occasions seemed to be rather within the context of the film society and avant-garde movement (*Bauhaus, FiFo-exhibition, Das neue Frankfurt*). Vertov moved on to France where he was featured on 23 July 1929 at the Parisian Studio 28. In Paris he stayed with his younger brother Boris Kaufman who was just about to start his celebrated co-operation with Jean Vigo on *APROPOS DE NICE* (FR 1929/30), *ZERO DE CONDUITE* (FR 1933), and *L'ATALANTE* (FR 1933/34). Yet, not only did he present films and give lectures, there were also production plans: Vertov was invited to make films on the creation of new cities (in Frankfurt), on travel from Europe to the United States (in Hanover), and on medicine (in Zurich; the offer came from Lazare Wechsler and the film was later shot by Eisenstein, Alexandrov and Tissé as *FRAUENNOT – FRAUENGLÜCK* in the second half of 1929). Vertov was also invited to La Sarraz and intended to go, but was then assigned by the Soviet authorities to make a sound film about the industrial region of the Donbass (in Ukraine): a mixture typical of this time with elements from documentary, propaganda, and staged scenes.

He toured with *ENTUZIAZM: SINFONIJA DONBASSA* (SU 1930) in 1931 for seven months, from June to December. The tour started in Berlin, as most of those trips, went on to several German cities (Hannover, Hamburg), to Switzerland, London, Paris, and finally the Netherlands from where he returned via Berlin to Moscow. Even on such a long trip Vertov did not leave the well-trodden and pre-ordained paths. During his second extended European journey, Vertov also visited London for the first time from 10 until 23 November where he presented *ENTUZIAZM*. Vertov was present at the screenings of his own films at the London Film Society, as Thorold Dickinson reports:

> When Vertov attended the presentation of his first sound film, *ENTHUSIASM*, to the Film Society of London on November 15, 1931, he insisted on controlling the sound
projection. During the rehearsal he kept it at a normal level, but at the performance flanked on either side by the sound manager of the Tivoli Theatre and an officer of the Society, he raised the volume at the climaxes to earsplitting level. Begged to desist, he refused and finished the performance, fighting for possession of the instrument of control, while the building seemed to tremble with the flood of noise coming from behind the screen.¹²¹

It was also in London that Charlie Chaplin watched ENTUZIAZM at the private screening rooms of United Artists in Wardour Street on 17 November 1931 and wrote Vertov a note afterwards: »Never had I known that these mechanical sounds could be arranged to sound so beautiful. I regard it as one of the most exhilarating symphonies I have heard. Mr. Dziga Vertov is a musician. The professors should learn from him, not quarrel with him. Congratulations.«¹²² It was also on this trip that Vertov paid his only visit to the Dutch Filmliga, on 9 and 10 December he was lecturing in Rotterdam and Amsterdam.¹²³

Having recounted Pudovkin’s and Vertov’s journeys, Sergei Eisenstein’s trajectory will complement these trips. Eisenstein first arrived in Berlin on 26 March 1926 (accompanied by his cameraman Eduard Tisse).¹²⁴ Initially the purpose of the trip was to learn about technology and the German industry and to try out equipment – a research trip. During his stay in Berlin Eisenstein witnessed the debate about the censorship of POTEMKIN after the German Board of Film Censors (Filmpriifstelle) had prohibited the public exhibition of the film. He visited the major studios and saw Lang working on METROPOLIS (Eisenstein’s characterisation of Lang is that of Kuleshov »well fed over a period of time«) and Murnau making FAUST. Eisenstein and Tisse attempted to stick around for the premiere of their film, extending their trip over the planned length, but on the order of Sovkino they finally had to return to the Soviet Union on 26 April 1926, three days before the international premiere of POTEMKIN.¹²⁵ This relatively unknown journey was followed three years later by an extended voyage which lasted for three years and took Eisenstein and his collaborators all through Western Europe, to the United States and to Mexico. In the meantime Eisenstein had become an international celebrity partly through screenings of his films in the West, partly because of many visitors to Moscow: Western intellectuals invariably sought out Eisenstein because of his command of languages, his classic education and his wit and irony: In 1927/28 Eisenstein met Léon Moussinac, Edmund Meisel, Käthe Kollwitz, Diego Riviera, Sinclair Lewis, Le Corbusier, Valeska Gert, Stefan Zweig, Joseph Schenck, John Dos Passos and many more who all visited the Soviet Union.¹²⁶

The most famous trip was also the longest and possibly the biggest failure in terms of projects that fell through: the grand tour of Eisenstein with Tisse and Alexandrov in the key year of 1929. Their order was »to learn from the West and to teach the West«. Jay Leyda has summed up the manifold reasons for this trip:
In August 1929, three months before the release of OLD AND NEW, the Eisenstein group left the Soviet Union for a stay abroad of undetermined length. By now there was an accumulation of reasons for the trip: a study of sound-film techniques in European studios was possibly the primary reason, and the one usually advanced, but there was also the hope of working for the world’s best-equipped film industry, Hollywood; Eisenstein had received many invitations to go there, the latest being from Joseph Schenck who visited Moscow in the summer of 1928; a trip to America was looked upon as a deserved vacation for a group that had worked so continuously without leave. A more pressing reason was connected with Eisenstein’s project to film Capital: he felt that he could not honestly undertake such a task without seeing the capitalist world at its zenith [...].

In the late Summer of 1929, on 19 August, Eisenstein, Tisse, and Alexandrov boarded a train to Berlin where they attended the German premiere of STAROE I NOVOE / GENERAL’NAJA LINIJA (SU 1926-29, >The Old and the New / The General Line<) before moving on to Switzerland for the La Sarraz meeting in early September 1929, the moment when many biographies, activities, discourses and trajectory overlapped before all taking on their own directions. Eisenstein was the undisputed star of the La Sarraz meeting, especially after the Swiss police had heightened the suspense by first refusing the assumed revolutionaries entry as they feared that the three communist troublemakers could incite a revolutionary fervour. Ivor Montagu describes their arrival at the homely and somewhat complacent atmosphere of the chateau as an unnatural act:

At first all had gone fairly steadily and staidly, as had been planned. We showed one another films. We praised one another and admired one another. All was plain living and far from plain speaking, indeed an elevated and enervating atmosphere of high polite discussion. The invasion of the three men in blue quickly put a stop to that. [...] Were they not our heroes? [...] Were they not the supreme experimenters, not artist alone but scientists, and had they not stormed the citadel by their success? It is doubtful whether any other Soviet film-makers touring Europe would have been such natural invitees for La Sarraz. But their arrival was at once its highlight and its justification.

The next months in Europe were complicated and characterised by a zig-zagging route. Soon after the conference, on September 19 Eisenstein was back in Berlin for meetings, talks, plans and lectures, but nothing concrete materialised yet. Tisse and Alexandrov stayed behind in Zürich for some time to shoot FRAUENNOT – FRAUENGLÜCK, a film about women’s right to family planning produced by the Polish émigré Lazare Wechsler. In November 1929 the trio went from Berlin to London on the invitation of the London Film Society where POTEMKIN was shown on 10 November 1929, alongside Grierson’s DRIFTERS. The Soviet group went to Paris on 29 November, but was already back in London on December 3 where Eisenstein participated in Hans Richter’s course on filmmaking – the material was later edited together by Richter into the film EVERYDAY in which Eisenstein can be
seen as an English policeman. Many of the later protagonists of the British documentary film movement and feature film participated in the workshop: Grierson, Basil Wright, Thorold Dickinson, Anthony Asquith, Ian Dalrymple, Herbert Marshall. Eisenstein stayed on a couple of weeks leaving London (after visits to Windsor and Oxford) in late December 1929. For Christmas and New Year he was back in Paris and went for a visit to the Netherlands as a guest of honour of the *Filmliga* from January 14 to 20\(^{131}\) until he arrived in Paris in February 1930.\(^{132}\)

In Paris, the next job was to get some money shooting *Romance Sentimentale* (FR 1930), financed by the millionaire Leonard Rosenthal to indulge his mistress Mara Gris. Many more offers reached Eisenstein, among them such curiosities as making a long advertising film for Nestlé’s condensed milk (on the strength of the milk sequence in *The Old and the New*) or shooting an anniversary film on Simon Bolivar commissioned by the Venezuelan government.\(^{133}\) Interestingly, it was not the European film industry which was interested in hiring the young Soviet director, but assignments came either from private patrons, from companies outside the film business, state institutions or organisations involved with reformist social change. Besides a multitude of anecdotes (visiting a brothel with Montagu, taking Eluard to a Cocteau play where the surrealist caused a scandal), Eisenstein became the centre of a dispute when a screening at the Sorbonne got cancelled (he gave an inflammatory speech instead)\(^{134}\) and his visa was not prolonged. He still was able to meet with influential artists and intellectuals like Abel Gance, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, André Malraux, Joris Ivens, Germaine Krull, Eli Lotar, André Kertesz, and others. Eisenstein was even approached to make *Don Quixote* with Fyodor Chaliapin, a project that Walter Ruttmann was also associated with at another time and that was finally directed by G.W. Pabst. Eisenstein left France on 6 May 1930 on a ship appropriately named *Europa*. Two years later, in May 1932, he was back in the Soviet Union after several unsuccessful projects at Paramount and the disastrous Mexican adventure *Que Viva Mexico!* financed by Upton Sinclair.\(^{135}\) He returned via New York, on the same ship *Europa* to Cherbourg, then on to Hamburg where he hoped in vain to receive his Mexican material. On the train to Moscow, Eisenstein met Bertolt Brecht and Slatan Dudow, on their way to the Soviet premiere of *Kuhle Wampe*.

The final missing name in the traditional pantheon of great Soviet directors is Alexander Dovzhenko who spent some time in Warsaw and Berlin at the Ukrainian embassies (possibly as a spy and rabble rouser) in the early 1920s. His only trip as a filmmaker to the West in the period under consideration took place in the second half of 1930. Dovzhenko left the Soviet Union on 19 June 1930 and visited major European film production centres in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany, France and Great Britain: »During his trip he met the French director Abel Gance, H.G. Wells, Albert Einstein and other celebrated artists and
Vanishing Point Soviet Union

intellectuals. [...] He undertook the trip with the primary purpose of investigating new trends in film-making, especially the rise of sound film.«

Director Boris Barnet also spent two and a half months in Germany and France in 1933. His film OKRAIN A (1933, OUTSKIRTS) was presented in a closed screening in Paris attended by Victor Trivas, Jacques Feyder, Joris Ivens, Ilja Ehrenburg, Isaac Babel and others.

Having recounted the main itineraries of Pudovkin, Vertov, Eisenstein, Dovshenko and Barnet at least five reason for these trips can be found: First of all, the poverty of the Soviet industry meant that filmmakers had to look abroad for innovation of technology, but also of technique. Not coincidentally, Eisenstein visited the sets of METROPOLIS and FAUST on his first Berlin trip, the two most advanced special effects spectacles of the German art cinema of the 1920s while doing research in Hollywood on his second trip. The film industry of the Soviet Union was characterised by a lack of film stock, by insufficient lighting gear, by a general dearth of modern equipment. Thus secondly, the chance to make films abroad was seductive in terms of the means available even to an independent production. Pudovkin certainly took advantage of the possibility of shooting abroad, but so did Eisenstein and his entourage, even though their extended trip of 1929–1931 marks the climax as well as the end of this period. Thirdly, this proved to be also interesting for the Soviet authorities because they might obtain badly needed foreign currency this way. The fourth reason – and visible in the case of Eisenstein’s stay in Mexico – was the beginning Stalinization at home, both aesthetically and organisationally. After the restructuring had set in around 1928, it became increasingly difficult for independent minds to execute their projects. The criticism levelled against OKTJABR’ is a case in point here; the climate in the Soviet Union was slowly changing, so journeys also became a welcome opportunity to get away from a difficult situation at home which to some observers might have appeared at the time as a passing interlude. The changes in aesthetic policy and organisational structure made it more difficult for the innovators of the mid-1920s to realise their projects who were used to working in relative freedom from constraints. Paradoxically, the craze for Soviet films in Western Europe was peaking at the moment that the climate in the Soviet Union was radically changing. While troubles were intensifying at home, hopes were high in Western Europe – a further temporal paradox. The final reason is possibly less personal for the filmmakers and shows that also the Soviet Union had an interest in those travels. These luminaries also toured the big cities of Western Europe as ambassadors of goodwill and as orators and activists for the Soviet cause. In the long run, the Soviet Union had an interest in either spreading its cause or at least establishing political, economic and cultural ties and relationships. Germany was an important trade partner while also – as many believed in the late 1920s – the next country that would see a communist revolution. Thus, the trips were also meant as propaganda for the revolutionary cause.
As influential as the tours of Soviet filmmakers in the West were, they were possibly equalled or even surpassed in effect by the many translations of Russian texts published in journals and magazines or even in book form in Western languages. For the avant-garde the distinction between theory and practice did not exist at all, it was only logical for Pudovkin, Eisenstein, Vertov and others not only to make films but also to publish accompanying articles. In the West they were eagerly taken up as testimonies and manuals to aid in the understanding of the Soviet cinema. Pudovkin's volumes on »The Film Scenario« and on the »Film Director and Film Material«, written during the production of »MATJ« and published in 1926, were already enormously successful in the Soviet Union. They were quickly translated into German and only a little later into English. Ivor Montagu, himself a translator of Pudovkin, has pointed out the importance of these texts for generations of students of the cinema:

[T]he most influential of all the things in all cinema, English and American, even the commercial cinema, I dare say, was the Pudovkin book that I translated. [...] That Pudovkin book was so simple, no Eisenstein book could have had the same influence. What is in it was pinched either from Kuleshov who taught it directly to him or from Eisenstein, but he translated it as the simple, idealist and poetic-minded person that he was, into simple language that everybody could understand, and anybody even the simplest amateur can get ideas from Pudovkin.

Starting in 1928 with the travel activities, there is a marked increase of articles translated from the Russian to be found in Western magazines and newspapers. These texts, often coinciding with lecture series, were published in widely diverse organs, from Communist-party newspapers (L'Humanité) to established trade papers (Filmmurier, Lichtbildbühne), from left-wing intellectual magazines (Die Weltbühne) to specialised avant-garde film journals (Filmliga, Film und Volk, La revue du cinéma). It is apparent from this variety of publications publishing specialised texts how widespread the interest in the cinema was and how central the Soviet cinema was after 1926 at least for some dramatic years until 1930.

In fact, the translation did not only go one way, but it became a two-way traffic, a dialogue of sort that was contributing to the sense that something was developing in film culture that might truly transform cinema as such. One crucial network node was Léon Moussinac who was active in film societies and publishing, in distribution and exchange with the Soviet Union in general:

As the decade [the 1920s, MH] progressed, Moussinac's theories began to resemble more the ideas of the Soviet film-maker theorists, especially those of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. Eisenstein and Moussinac would become friends later in the decade, the work of each influencing the other; Naissance du cinéma was published in Russian translation in 1926.
Publishing even took off before film production developed in more experimental directions. In some respects, magazines paved the way for the later creative burst in filmmaking. The energy devoted to theorising some of the crucial issues connected to cinema was necessary to open up the path that would be taken from the mid-1920s onwards. With the exception of France, no country could boast a more lively publication and magazine scene than the Soviet Union. Besides the famous Lef and Novi Lef (1927-28) there was Kino-fot (Cinema-photo) published from August 1922 until early 1923 under the directorship of Aleksei Gan. Their champion was Dziga Vertov and they campaigned in a militaristic fashion for the most radical avant-garde positions. Besides, there were magazines such as Kino-zhurnal ARK (Cinema Journal ARK, from 1925 onwards, published by the Association of Workers in Revolutionary Cinema; from 1926 to early 1928 superseded by Kino-front / Cinema Front), focused on a high-brow discussion of cinema. The popular stars-and-genre magazine Kino-gazeta (Cinema Gazette, 1923-1925; from 1925 onwards as Kino / Cinema), Kino-nedelia (Cinema Week, organ of the Leningrad-based studio Sevzapkino, absorbed in March 1925 by Kino), Soviet Cinema (from April 1925 onwards published by the Artistic Council on Cinema Affairs, a government agency; liquidated in 1928), and the most popular stylistically, Sovetskii ekran (Soviet Screen), all more or less revolutionary, but also in fierce competition. In fact, as the social and economic situation stabilised with the first Five-Year-Plan and after the end of NEP, these poly-vocal debates were shut down in the course of the cultural revolution by the authorities.

Publishing can be seen as avant-gardistic in the sense that it could lead the way for film-making or for trying out ideas and positions since the avant-garde is always as much about possibility as about reality. This avant-gardistic function was due to accessibility (the young Turks could more easily place an article or even start a magazine than make a film) and to lack of funds for making films because very few films were actually made in the Soviet Union. Just like Kuleshov’s »films without film« and the dream architecture discussed above, little magazines opened up a space of possibility as well as a space for unexpected encounters and juxtapositions – just like their Western equivalents iL0, transitions, de stijl, Die Form, G or documents. It also reflected the situation in the decade after the Revolution when a public discussion about the means and methods of the Soviet cinema was still possible. This discursive formation in which an active discussion around cinema was part of an intellectual film culture was not limited to the centres as Jay Leyda reports from one of the republics:

In the Ukraine film-literature advanced more boldly than film-production. In December 1925, the Kharkov studio of VUFKU began a monthly magazine, Kino, that in any country at that time would certainly have been labelled avant-garde, aesthetically and politically. Not only were foreign films reported, but film-experiments, too, in Germany and France; and the experimenters themselves were sometimes its foreign correspondents; Eugene Deslaw reported regularly from Paris.
The autobiography of George Grosz ran serially, and German-trained portraits by a young Ukrainian, Dovzhenko, were reproduced in colour. When Léon Moussinac visited Kharkov, he had difficulty asking questions, for most of the time was taken by the questions asked him, chiefly about the films of Clair, Cavalcanti, Epstein, Dulac, Man Ray, and Léger.  

It was in this turbulent period of the cinema that publication did not follow filmmaking, but written consideration of film and its problems often led the way. In the decade between 1922 and 1932, 173 books on films were published; even though most of these titles were biographies of foreign stars or accompanied popular releases, still many were serious attempts at theorising cinema. In the Soviet Union twisted temporalities were not unusual: films that had not been made were reviewed and discussed, filmmakers celebrated abroad were under fire at home, and film reviewing preceded filmmaking – just as Soviet cineastes wrote about sound film before they had even seen, let alone made, a sound film.

5.7 Allegories of the heavy industry: The battle with sound

Our cherished dreams of a sound cinema are being realised.

Sergei Eisenstein, Grigori Alexandrov, Vsevolod Pudovkin (1928)

Discussions around film form and style as well as problems of financing and organisation in the Soviet cinema began to re-surface after a brief period of exaltation in the mid-1920s that followed the relative stabilisation of the cinema sector. The industrial restructuring began seriously in March 1928 with the Party conference on cinema which resulted in the first five-year-plan (which lasted until 1933) on cinema. Slowly the (limited) free-market situation of NEP was reversed to one of state control. Big institutions were liquidated or purged such as Sovkino in June 1930 which was restructured and reborn as Soizkino with Boris Shumyatsky as chairman. The government organisation culminated in 1935 when the All-Union Creative Conference on Cinematographic Affairs derided Eisenstein, when a film festival was held in Moscow and when Shumyatsky went on a long research trip to Europe and the US with some of his most dedicated and politically reliable co-workers. On his return he decided to build a Soviet Hollywood on the Krim which was scheduled to produce up to 700 films a year. At the same time entertainment was pushed back to make room for more open propaganda, in this respect distinguishing the Soviet Union from Nazi Germany which was on the surface an entertainment cinema with relatively few open propaganda film. Yet, the megalomaniac plans for the Soviet Hollywood did not materialise as Shumyatsky fell from grace with Stalin (and was eventually killed in the purges in 1938). One of the final steps away from the heyday of the 1920s was the liquidation of the Mezrabpom’ in early 1936 which had been an important conduit between the Soviet industry and cinema culture abroad with its co-
productions and policy of producing export films. This period from 1928 to the mid-1930s was also the period of the introduction of sound which lasted nearly a decade in the Soviet Union. Contrary to received wisdom in the West about the introduction of sound, the historiography of this media transition in the Soviet context requires a relatively long period for investigation. Moreover, the coincidence of sound film with the shift from the limited free market situation of NEP to a »command economy« and the transition from a limited pluralistic public sphere to a cultural revolution complicates the retrospective understanding of sound cinema in the Soviet Union.

Probably one of the first statements on the sound film by filmmakers anywhere in the world (not just in the Soviet Union) came from Eisenstein, Alexandrov, and Pudovkin. They published their »Manifesto on Sound Film« (»Zayavka«) first in German as »Achtung! Goldgrube! Gedanken über die Zukunft des Hörfilms« on 28 July 1928 in the trade paper Lichtbild-Bühne. It was subsequently published on 5 August 1928 in the magazine Zizn’ iskusstva (»The Life of Art«) and in December 1928 in English, long before any of them had actually seen sound film in practice. Quite significantly, they greeted the new technology with cautious enthusiasm and referred to it as »our cherished dreams«. They continued with a number of qualifications about the proper use of sound and pointed out the danger that a purely illustrative use of sound might have in »dramas of high culture«. More importantly, the three filmmakers saw sound technology as »an organic escape for cinema’s cultural avant-garde from a whole series of blind alleys which have appeared inescapable«. The blind alleys are identified as the intertitle (and its integration into the image) and explanatory sequences. These issues were particularly pertinent in the other two centres of the European avant-garde: in Germany where the title-less film DER LETZTE MANN (DE 1924, F.W. Murnau, THE LAST LAUGH) and other experiments in a similar vein had caused a considerable stir and in France where impressionist film-making had refined the art of the insert and close-up and subjective sequences illustrating mental states. Even though the text is not absolutely clear on these matters it seems that overt complexity and raffinesse is seen as the main problem of the avant-garde by Soviet filmmakers. They also address the question of internationality and claim that a contrapuntal use of sound will not imprison »the sound film [...] within national markets [...]«, but will provide an even greater opportunity than before of speeding the idea contained in a film throughout the whole globe, preserving its world-wide viability. «Rejected outright was the use of dialogue for advancing the plot of the film. Some of these proposals to keep the guidelines of montage cinema were still used at a time when the use of sound had already been long codified in classical fashion in Hollywood, Berlin, London or Paris. DEZERTIR (SU 1933, Vsevolod Pudovkin) for example still employs written inter-titles to explain details about the on-going strike while sound is used contrapuntally, for example in the confrontations between the striking dock
workers and the police, whereas in comparable films from the same period, sound is employed in Brechtian fashion to illustrate the divergent positions of the social-democrats and the communists like in *KUHLE WAMPE ODER WEM GEHÖRT DIE WELT*? (DE 1932, Slatan Dudow).

As already mentioned, sound film in the Soviet Union was introduced within the context of the first Five-Year-Plan (1928–32) which stressed the development of the heavy industry. In its accompanying move towards centralisation and huge production centres, the plan »gave a new propaganda job to the comparatively light film industry, and geared film-making to the basic industrial programme.«¹⁵³ Filmmaking became one sector of the heavy industry, a similar development to the West where huge electrical companies (General Electric, Western Electric, AEG, Siemens & Halske, Philips) gave the capital push necessary for the film industry to revert swiftly to sound. In the Soviet Union as well as in the West it was the industry at large that carried along the film sector towards achieving sound in a short time. Adequately, one of the first applications of the Soviet sound system, *PLAN VELIKIKH RABOT* (SU 1929/30, Abram Room, »Plan for Great Works«) which was completely post-synchronised with sound effects, music and voice-over agit-prop statements, dealt with the achievements of the Five-Year-Plan. The film presents an allegory or mise-en-abyme of the introduction of sound film as its technological novelty value (sound) is made possible through which that is the subject of the film itself. Similarly Dziga Vertov’s first sound film *ENTUZIAZM: SINFONIJA DONBASSA* (SU 1930) deals with the breadth of industries concerned with the Five-Year-Plan, while Aleksandr Dovshenko’s first sound film *IVAN* (SU 1932) focuses on the construction of the great Dnjepr dam, also stressing on the industrialisation of the agrarian country. Many early sound films were directly or indirectly concerned with issues pertinent to the forced industrialisation of the Five-Year-Plan: *ZEMLJA ZAZDET* (SU 1930, Juri Raizman, »The Earth Thirsts«) and *ODNA* (SU 1931, Grigori Kozintsev / Leonid Trauberg, »Alone«) deal with regional developments while Esfir Shub’s KSE – KOMSOMOL, SEF ELEKTRIFIKACII (SU 1932, »Komsomol, Patron of Electrification«) is concerned with one of the key measures in the industrialisation, the electrification of the gigantic country.¹⁵⁴ The first sound films in the Soviet Union can therefore be seen as allegories of their own production process and the industrial development in general.

In Western countries the introduction of sound marked a shift of the film industry into a phase characterised by monopolistic (or oligopolistic) tendencies: the capital push necessary for the introduction of sound brought most studios under the direct or indirect influence of big electrical companies (or big banks which were in turn connected to those companies). The sound film in the Soviet Union also meant in organisational terms a shift from a rather artisanal model to an increased centralisation and industrialisation. This movement had begun earlier, at least in 1928, but sound with its complicated technology, its intricate problems of
post-production and most of all its necessity to wire cinemas for sound played into a tendency of increasing block building and centralisation. Yet again and not unlike developments in the West, sound was less a cause than a catalyst that intensified and accelerated tendencies already underway. In this way, the manifesto of Eisenstein, Alexandrov and Pudovkin is not an enthusiastic welcome, but rather a cautious and far-sighted position paper in a debate that was in 1928 on very few peoples radar and that would become increasingly dominant in the 1930s: the question of film style and ideology.

The introduction of sound not only coincided with the efforts of building up the heavy industry within the framework of the first Five-Year-Plan, it also arrived roughly at the same time as the introduction of the Stalinist dogma of Socialist Realism. Thus, sound and realism happened to grow stronger simultaneously, yet nothing in fact necessitates this connection between sound film and a realist agenda. In fact, early sound films such as ENTUZIAZM and DEZERTIR have a very experimental approach to using sound which is consciously refraining from realist sound effects. The reason for the shift to realism has to be located elsewhere and cannot be detected in some inherent character of sound film. In fact, Socialist Realism is very different from the critical realism of bourgeois art in the second half of the 19th Century and it is much closer to the revolutionary films of the 1920s than commonly assumed. The collective heroes of the »Russenfilme« were not replaced by individualised and internally rounded characters that would adhere to ideals of psychological verisimilitude, but these larger-than-life heroes were individualised versions of the collective protagonists of 1920s cinema. A film like Sergei Eisenstein's ALEXANDER NEVSKI (SU 1937) makes this dialectic between the individual and the collective clear in the way that individuals are juxtaposed with or framed by masses. The title character Nevski remains a weakly developed Socialist idea while the dramatic conflicts are to be found in supporting characters. In fact, individuals in films of this period are often just stand-ins for the collective agent of history. Similar observations could be made for CHAPAEOV (SU 1934, Georgii & Sergei Vasilev) and the Maxim-trilogy of Leonid Trauberg and Grigorij Kozintsev (IUNOST' MAKSIMA, SU 1934/35, ›The Youth of Maxim‹; VOZVRASTHENIE MAKSIMA, SU 1937, ›The Return of Maxim‹; VYBORGSKAIA STORONA, SU 1939 ›The Vyborg Side‹).155

Two arguments in favour of traditional narratives with recognisable heroes as identification figures were advanced in the Soviet Union at that time: One was polemically directed against experimentation (formalism) and the lack of popularity of montage cinema with audiences, the other was more intricate and aimed at promoting the Soviet planned economy. While the former was inherently populist and remained a staple of polemic attack throughout the 1930s, the latter is more interesting as it points towards a larger agenda behind Socialist Realism. This argument for a more realistic film style in general was to present the Soviet achievements to the spectators. Foreign films which exhibited bourgeois life style
in alluring images remained popular with Soviet audiences despite progress in Soviet production. Many of the home-made montage films were hailed as great artistic achievements, yet did not elicit enthusiastic responses from the people, while the more traditional Soviet films by directors such as Iakov Protazanov were popular, but did not meet the demands of the political functionaries. Thus, to counter the popularity of the lush foreign pictures, realism was promoted as an advertising possibility for the Soviet way of life. In a wider perspective, this is a logical shift in avant-garde positions in the arts: At a time when the communist economy and society had been firmly established, at a time when a certain stability had been achieved (at least in the sector of basic necessities), culture no longer had to fulfil the function of presenting a future ideal to be achieved. The arts should give an image of Soviet life, so the spectators would recognise the achievements made through the socialist course. The deferral into a far-away future typical of the 1920s gave way to a very different kind of cultural policy which promoted the Soviet chic.

5.8 Vanishing Point:
From Imaginary Projections to Literal Purges

The trips of Soviet film-makers to the West inaugurated a period of intensive travel activities. Only briefly after this exchange set it, trips in the opposite direction – from East to West – began. Many journalists had travelled the Soviet Union in the years following the revolution reporting on the state of the huge experiment. Film-making contacts – in the sense of working abroad or presenting films and lecturing – began seriously only in the late 1920s. Naturally, Moscow was for Western filmmakers what Berlin meant for the Soviets: touching pad, gateway and network node. One of the first directors to come to the Soviet Union with his films was Joris Ivens who departed for Moscow on 13 January 1930 where he stayed in Sergei Eisenstein’s apartment and was shown around by Eisenstein’s (professional and private) partner Pera Atasheva. After two weeks in the capital he travelled around the country presenting his films (and some of his Filmliga colleagues’ films) in different Russian cities, but also in Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia. On this trip he received two commissions for non-fiction films: one from the builder’s union on the construction of a dam, the other from Sovkino on a topic to be decided later. Ivens returned on 6 April to Amsterdam with the firm decision to go back to the Soviet Union as soon as possible. For both Ivens and the Soviet Union the trip proved to be successful: Ivens sold copies of his films to Sovkino’s distribution arm and he was commissioned to return to the young country not as a
Vanishing Point Soviet Union

visitor, but as a »film worker«. Much to the advantage of the Soviet Union, Ivens had turned from a sympathetic observer to an ardent propagandist of the communist cause. Back in Holland, he toured worker’s clubs, gave interviews and did everything he could to support the Soviet Union. Some of his friends poked fun by calling him »Boris Ivens« after his conversion. The prospect of films by Joris Ivens (and other established Western directors) must have thrilled the functionaries in the Soviet film industry as these film-makers had an established following and often also distribution contacts which meant that those productions could be commercially viable while also ideologically pleasing – the marrying of these two elements had been the focus of discussions all through the 1920s.

Ivens’ second trip began on 9 October 1931 and he stayed for more than a year making KOMSOMOL (SU 1932-33, ›Song of Heroes‹) in Magnitogorsk where Ernst May from Frankfurt and Mart Stam and Johan Niegeman from the Netherlands worked as architects at the same time. Ivens contracted Hanns Eisler for the music and Sergei Tretiakov for the lyrics of the film. Ivens’ trip belongs to a series of invitations issued by Mezhrabpom™ and other institutions not limited to film directors – besides Ivens, also avant-garde film-makers Hans Richter and Walter Ruttmann, writers Belá Baláš, Friedrich Wolf and Egon Erwin Kisch, composer Hanns Eisler and theatre director Erwin Piscator were asked to work in the Soviet Union. Carl Junghans, left-wing filmmaker active for Münzenberg’s Prometheus in Germany, went to the Soviet Union in 1931 and stayed there for a year. No film project materialised, supposedly two projects fell through, yet he was one of the many activists travelling to the Soviet Union at that time. Erwin Piscator had a reputation as an innovator in theatre who was one of the first theatre directors to employ film consequently in his stage productions. He was invited by Mezhrabpom™ in September 1930 when Piscator was in a difficult position as both his theatres had filed for bankruptcy and a new start seemed difficult due to the generally strained economic situation. Piscator left Germany on 10 April 1931 with his close collaborator Otto Katz who stayed behind in Moscow to work as a production manager for Mezhrabpom™. The production of VOSSTANIE RYBAKOV / DER AUFSTAND DER FISCHER (SU/DE, 1931-1934), based on Anna Seghers novel, turned into a labyrinthine nightmare full of accident, misunderstanding, personal over-sensitivity, and political cabal. Planned originally in two language versions (Russian and German), the shooting had to be interrupted several times until the film finally premiered on 5 October 1934 in Moscow, more than three years after the first material was shot. The German version had been abandoned in the meantime and Mezhrabpom™ was attacked in the increasingly tense atmosphere for inviting film-workers such as Junghans and Richter who never finished their Soviet projects.

Ivens made a third trip to the Soviet Union staying from April 1934 to January 1936; he worked on a film about the Saar vote, prepared a new version of MISÈRE AU BORINAGE (BE 1933/34, Joris Ivens/Henri Storck) and collaborated with Gustav von Wangenheim on BORZY (SU 1935/36, ›Fighter‹), yet he did not
manage to finish a new film not unlike some other invitees. Richter’s unfinished film METALL (SU 1931-33) was conceived as a complimentary piece to Pudovkin’s DEZERTIR – while the former was planned to deal with a strike and subsequent visit to the Soviet Union of Hamburg dock workers, Richter’s film, scripted by Friedrich Wolf, should have done the same with metal workers from the Berlin borough of Henningsdorf. In May 1931 Wolf travelled to the Soviet Union, in June Richter followed – the crew for METALL spent a beautiful, yet unproductive summer in Odessa. Evidence points to frictions between Mezhrabpom’ (Francesco Misano, the head of production, and Otto Katz, Piscator’s long-time collaborator and production manager) and Russian circles. Another artist commissioned with a project was the Hungarian-German writer Belá Baláš who arrived in 1931 in Moscow where made TISZA GARIT (SU 1933/34) about the short-lived Hungarian communist episode. Yet, the film was suppressed by the authorities and is nowadays considered to be lost.

Many more artists were invited: Jacques Feyder who had made himself a reputation in avant-garde circles with VISAGES DES ENFANTS (FR 1923-25) and LES NOUVEAUX MESSIEURS (FR 1928) had already been invited in 1928 to make a film in the Soviet Union – instead Feyder chose to go to Hollywood on the invitation of M-G-M from where he returned disillusioned in 1931, just like other avant-garde artists. An invitation was also offered to Luis Buñuel in the winter of 1931/32 and renewed by Louis Aragon in December 1932. The project in the making for Buñuel was based on a script to be written by André Gide after his novel Les caves du Vatican (1914), building on Gide’s reputation. Even though Gide politely declined, Buñuel in February 1935 still contemplated the possibility of making a film in the Soviet Union.

A last wave of co-operation can be discerned around 1935/36 when the worst purges where just setting in. At least 19 of the film émigrés from Germany were shot or died in the Gulag, at least 7 were put in prison. The most important event of the German emigration to the Soviet Union was certainly the production of BORZY (SU 1935/36, Gustav von Wangenheim, FIGHTER), based on the Nazi court case against Georgi Dimitrov following the fire in the Berlin Reichstag in 1933. From January to March 1936 Max Ophüls visited the Soviet Union for two months, sounding out film projects while also helping to promote BORZY. Also in the spring of 1936 Ernst Lubitsch came from Hollywood for a visit just as William Dieterle one year later. One reason for these visits of exiles might have been working possibilities as Sumjacki was planning a »Hollywood on the Krimean« after his US trip. More importantly was the ComIntern policy of the popular front: around 1936, with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War the official communist policy reverted to a collaboration with left-wing liberals who were not self-proclaimed communists.

If this is to be anything more than an enumeration of biographical data, we have to consider the facts on a structural level. What made these symmetrically
mirrored journeys from East to West and from West to East possible and desirable for both parties involved? Perhaps more importantly, why did they either produce works that never made it inside the canon of avant-garde classics (KOMSOMOL, DEZERTIR, BORZY) or abandoned projects after considerable time and energy had been devoted to them? It seems that several paradoxes inherent in the avant-garde of the 1920s resurface here. For once, politics returned with a vengeance as the Western film-makers were inexperienced in dealing with the Soviet public sphere which was considerably different from its Western counterpart. Ideological debates were fierce and as the decade progressed the danger of intellectual isolation or worklessness turned into a life-threatening situation when one appeared unreliable to the authorities. While Peter Wollen’s theory of »two avant-gardes«\(^{172}\) (one oriented towards formal abstraction, the other inclined towards political activism) might be overstated for the 1920s (on which side do we put Eisenstein or Ivens before the coming of sound?), the 1930s certainly saw a differentiation of the avant-garde into various directions. It is interesting to note that no French or British activists were invited; one reason could be that these two countries still offered considerable room for left-wing activities, thus making the uncertain trip to Moscow not desirable. Another reason might be that the French filmmakers were rather leaning towards a commercial art cinema while the German or Dutch activists had considerable experience with an industrial environment and commissioned film work. The artists and technicians came from Germany, the Netherlands, Hungary and other countries. Another reason could be found in the official policy of the Comintern which proclaimed a united front against the fascists, yet when dealing with the Soviet authorities things were more complicated. The gap between official rhetoric and the gritty day-to-day dealings proved to be often unbridgeable. And, last but not least, these Western filmmakers came at a time when the working conditions deteriorated for everybody in the Soviet Union as Stalinist restructuring was in full swing. Thus, one has to remember that Mezhrabpom’ was viewed by many as a remnant from the NEP period and was itself under fire. Part of that pressure was passed on to the visitors who often neither had sufficient knowledge of the general development of the Soviet film industry nor an adequate grasp of the Russian language and cultural politics to be able to understand (their own role in) the events.

5.9 Conclusion

_Im russischen Film ist der Begriff der Kunst, wie er in Europa gilt, überwunden._

_Hans Richter (1930)\(^{173}\)

Traditional views of the Soviet cinema that developed in parallel fashion to the encounter with Soviet films in the 1920s and 1930s resorted to two models which
dominated the 1920s and 1930s respectively and which have currency until today: revolutionary, formally innovative and modernist cinema – the »good« object – was followed by reactionary, formally conservative and classicist film – the »bad« object. That the transition between the two phases can be short-circuited with the introduction of sound only intensified the attraction of this model. Ian Christie has described and problematised the over-simplified historiography of these two phases:

Soviet cinema [...] was first constructed as an »idealised other« in relation to its western counterpart. And when that opposition was made redundant by the sweeping changes in western cinema after the introduction of sound, the still struggling »industrialised« Soviet cinema of the mid-1930s was rejected as inferior to both Hollywood and the emerging documentary movements of Britain and America. Thus a new interpretive model emerged: that of a state propaganda machine, ruthlessly subordinating artistry and non-conformity to its philistine needs. Essentially this remains the dominant western model, continuing to colour the perception of contemporary Soviet cinema. 

I hope to have also contributed to the breaking up of this binary dichotomy which does neither decade justice. By employing a different frame of references, this period gives a somewhat different image from the traditional film historical account.

As I have argued, much of the avant-garde spirit of the wave of the »Russenfilme« derived from the specific circumstances under which they were produced and received: As the official government doctrine at the time of their making proclaimed that the socialist society was still in the making and as the economic system reverted to a market-economy in the mid-1920s, the arts were obliged to fulfil the function of presenting an ideal. Culture was endowed with the task of depicting a state to be achieved because the present could not yet live up to the high expectations. Even though many of the films dealt with revolutionary events in the past, the manner in which individuals or groups were presented was firmly anchored in the future: What was presented in the classics of revolutionary cinema, was future socialist people. The canon of the 1920s presented the ideal that the Soviet Union was trying to achieve, yet saw it realised in the past. They showed the revolution (a historical event) as it was to be seen by coming generations, anticipating the future. Resulting from a scientific logic of historical-materialist progression, this was a denial of historicity: The Soviet Union believed to be moving rapidly towards a socialist society that would mark the end of history. The films manifested this in the past (the time of change) and in the future (the end result of this change, thus the end of history) at the same time. As a side effect, this double movement left out the messiness of the present and it is not coincidental that the films that were most fiercely attacked were films that dealt with contemporary problems of Soviet life. In a paradoxical movement, the
Vanishing Point Soviet Union

revolutionary past was depicted in a way that evoked a future to be achieved. This double movement away from the present is typical of the avant-garde: the temporal slippage into the past and future is probably a unifying element for all the avant-garde activities on a higher level of abstraction. The paradoxes of the avant-garde are simultaneously central elements of their constitution, yet also the reason for their (cyclic) demise. Especially during the NEP period the projection of the imaginary future into an imaginary past played an immense role because the economy had so obviously not yet arrived at the state where it was supposed to be. This utopian ideal was the legacy of the montage cinema that had solidified into a motionless monument that the following epoch had to deal with.

In the 1930s, the situation was reversed in many respects when compared to the preceding decade: the social development was declared to be over, the state of socialism was announced to be reached. If historical progress is over because history has run its logical course through revolution, construction of socialism and ossification (this was the official doctrine of the Stalinist 1930s), then art can only deal with the present because historical time has coagulated into a perpetual now. This is especially true for the hero who now cannot make any development, but acts and talks from an elevated position of finality and achievement as in CHAPAEV (SU 1934, Georgii & Sergei Vasilev), in the MAXIM-trilogy of Leonid Trauberg and Grigorij Kozintsev (SU 1934-39) or in Sergei Eisenstein’s return to filmmaking ALEKSANDR NEVSKY (SU 1938). The idea of avant-garde becomes meaningless once historical development is declared to be over: art cannot be in the forefront of a development if a final and static situation has been reached and development is foreclosed by definition. A further complication was the increasing reliance on nationalist topics in films – not even Soviet revolutionary films or a reinterpretation of the prehistory in the light of dialectical materialism, but rather Russian nationalist myths that had already been used by the Romanovs and other groups.

The developments in the Soviet Union are so interesting because the trajectory is much better visible here than in the West: while the constructivists were on the one hand constructing a new world, a new consciousness in their art, on the other hand they were very destructive in their wish to burn down museums, to shatter traditional art completely, not just to see it differently but to get rid of it altogether. As a result of this the Stalinist era brought forth the Stachanov-movement and the heroes of Socialist Realism like Capaev who could change the world by a pure act of will because – according to Marx –consciousness determines being. Boris Groys has pointed out the importance of the figure of the parasite:

Die für die Mythologie der Stalinzeit so wichtige Figur des ›Schädlings‹ ist im Grunde auf keine Weise ›realistisch‹ motiviert, genausowenig wie die übermenschliche schöpferische Potenz des ›positiven Helden‹. [...] Der positive und der negative Held der Stalinzeit sind die zwei Gesichter der ihr vorangegangenen demiurgischen Praxis der Avantgarde, beide übersteigen die von ihnen geschaffene und zerstörte
The flipside of this constructivist ethos of change are the Stalinist purges. If a pure act of will could change things for the better, then a negative thought could also mean a change for worse. In this logic which developed out of the avant-garde idea of overcoming the distinction between life and art, any act of criticism, even within the confines of art, was logically to be seen as sabotage because it was influencing reality to the negative. If everything becomes art then the category itself becomes meaningless because it does no longer hold any discriminatory energy. The purges were not directed against the avant-garde movement in the first place, but in their own cynical and murderous consequence they were rather a consistent acting out of the avant-garde proclaimed in the 1920s. Thus, one could see the 1930s as a logical continuation of the avant-garde idea(1)s of the 1920s brought to their conclusion and the Soviet Union were once more the place where the avant-garde experiment was carried out to its most radical extreme.

5 For a discussion of the distinction of the acted vs. the non-acted film as a basic category of Soviet film culture see »Sergei Eisenstein vs. Dziga Vertov«. In: Skrien, no. 33, Maart/April 1973: 3-9.
6 See chapter two on the theoretical ramifications of the avant-garde for more details.
10 On the development of the Soviet industry from the Revolution until the end of the NEP see Vance Kepley, Jr.: »The origins of Soviet cinema: a study in industry development«. In: Richard Taylor, Ian
Vanishing Point Soviet Union

18 See Boris Groys: Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin. Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion. München, Wien: Carl Hanser 1988. See also his »The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde«. In: John E. Bowlt, Olga Matich (eds.): Laboratory of Dreams. The Russian Avant-garde and Cultural Experiment. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1996: 193-218. Groys has provided me with a subtext for this chapter, albeit I have altered and refined his argument somewhat as he soley deals with visual arts and literature while a study of film has to factor in economic developments which are much stronger given the shortage of material and money.
19 See chapter two on the aporias of the avant-garde for a detailed discussion.
21 Victor Sklovski: »Po powodu kartiny Esfir Schub«. In: Lef, no. 8-9, 1927: 32-54, here 53. [reprinted in and quoted after Janina Urussowa: Das neue Moskau. Die Stadt der Sowjets im Film 1917-1941. Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau 2004: 26.] »In those days socialism was realised as an advance. The air of liberty and not necessity, a paradox premonition of the future substituted at that time the fat, the wooden logs. This was the general atmosphere. [...] We flew on a iron ball from the past into the future – and gravitation no longer existed, just like the ball of Jules Verne.«, my trans.]
23 See chapter 4 on the discourses of the avant-garde.
25 Gance's two films just mentioned are certainly not installations in its contemporary usage, but I am proposing a different way to look at them in order to gain a different perspective.
27 A good account of the re-editing practice for home distribution, but also for export is Yuri Tsivian: »The Wise and Wicked Game: Re-editing and Soviet Film Culture of the 1920s«. In: Film History, vol. 8, no. 3, 1996: 327-343.
Avant-garde Culture


30 See chapter two on the »aporias of the avant-garde« for a discussion of this movement.


32 For the significance of the music hall for Italian and Russian futurists as well as some relations between classical avant-garde and popular entertainment media see Wanda Strauven: »The Meaning of the Music-Hall: From the Italian Futurism to the Soviet Avant-garde«. In: Cinéma & Cie., no. 4, Spring 2004: 119–134.


35 Boris Groys: Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin. Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion. München, Wien: Carl Hanser 1988: 8. [ »The re-organisation of the world according to aesthetic principles has been proposed several times in the West and even attempted, however it truly succeeded for the first time in Russia.«, my trans.]

36 Possibly the clearest expression of this view can be found in the work of Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell. See Bordwell, Thompson: Film History. An Introduction. New York et al.: McGraw-Hill 1994: chapter 4-6 (83-155); for remarks on Film Europe and the International Style see 185-189; see also Kristin Thompson: »Early Alternatives to the Hollywood Mode of Production. Implications for Europe’s Avantgardes«. In: Film History vol 5, 1993: 386–404.


39 In one of these discussions in the intellectual magazine Novij Lef Vertov’s films were stigmatised as »acted« and compared unfavourably to Esfir Shub’s compilation films. See the documents in Ian Christie, Richard Taylor (eds.): The Film Factory. Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1988. See also my discussion of Shub below.


41 An account of the making of these films can be found in the chapter »Anniversary Year« in Jay Leyda: Kino. A History of the Russian and Soviet Film. London: George Allen & Unwin 1960: 222–244. See also more specifically on Eisenstein’s contribution Richard Taylor: October. London: British Film Institute 2002.

42 One could see a large part of the cinema policy of the Soviet government up to the early 1930s as an attempt at »nation building« in the sense that Benedict Anderson has used it. See B.A. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London: Verso 1983.

43 Of course it is possible to group the films of the 1920s into genres as has been done for example by Denise J. Youngblood: Movies for the Masses. Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992: 33, yet even she has to include »revolutionary« as a
genre (she sees it as a substitute for the action-adventure of the Western cinema) to accommodate those films that do not fit other categories. According to Youngblood the »revolutionary« genre accounts for 17-20% of the Soviet production 1924-29, and 11-14% in the period 1930-33.


47 See my chapter on the documentary for the codification of this genre.


50 See chapter two on the aporias of the avant-garde for a discussion of the question around in/dependence.

51 See chapter three on the distribution and exhibition network for a more detailed account.


63 Viktor Shklovsky: »Kuda shagaet Dziga Vertov?« (»Where is Dziga Vertov Striding?«). In: Taylor, Christie, *Film Factory*, op.cit.: 151f.

64 This idea was taken up by some left-wing cooperatives outside the Soviet Union which equipped amateurs with cameras in order to document their life and struggle, often potentially confrontational situations such as demonstrations or strikes.


For a discussion of the image in relation to the avant-garde see part 1.6.


See also the special number of Griffithiana, no. 35/36, October 1989 with contributions by Vittorio Martinelli on Russian émigrés in Italy, by Lenny Borger on the situation in France and by Kristin Thompson on the Ernoloff group.


See also Fritz Mierau (ed.): Russen in Berlin. Literatur – Malerei – Theater – Film, 1918–1933. Leipzig: Reclam 1993. See also the special number of Griffithiana, no. 35/36, October 1989 with contributions by Vittorio Martinelli on Russian émigrés in Italy, by Lenny Borger on the situation in France and by Kristin Thompson on the Ernoloff group.


For an overview of the Prometheus from an East German perspective see Gerd Meier: »Materialien zur Geschichte der Prometheus Film-Verleih und Vertriebs GmbH. 1926–1932« (8 parts). In:
Vanishing Point Soviet Union

Deutsche Filmkunst, vol. 10, no. 1-8, 1962: 12-16; 57-60; 97-99; 137-140; 177-180; 221-224; 275-277; 310-312.

81 The IAH had its distribution, Weltfilm and Prometheus, its production arm, Prometheus and Mezhrabpom, and did even control its own film theatre, Filmstern, Berlin (Große Frankfurter Straße 28).
87 A reply to the challenge inherent in this film could be seen in Ernst Lubitsch's Ninotchka (1939) in which a textbook communist is turned into a capitalist by consumerism and romantic love in Paris.
96 On Meisel in general and the POTEMKIN-music in particular see Werner Sudendorf (ed.): Der Stummfilmimusiker Edmund Meisel. Frankfurt/Main: Deutsches Filmmuseum 1984.

256


112 See for example *Lichtbild-Bühne*, vol. 22, no. 7, 9.1.1929 and *Lichtbild-Bühne*, vol. 22, no. 8, 10.1.1929; see also for a sympathetic portrait Hans Wollenberg: »Pudowkin, der Mensch«. In: *Lichtbild-Bühne*, vol. 22, no. 5, 7.1.1929.


116 See h.s.: »Noch einmal –Film und Foto«. In: *Lichtbild-Bühne*, vol. 22, no. 156, 2.7.1929.

117 For Vertov’s German tour see Thomas Tode: »Ein Russe projiziert in die Planetariumskuppel. Dsiga Wertows Reise nach Deutschland«. In: Oksana Bulgakowa (ed.): *Die ungewöhnlichen


120 See Tode, Vertov, 230ff.


128 For a critical portrait of Eisenstein as a talented artist subjugated by a political system on the occasion of this premiere see »Begegnung mit Eisenstein« in the (right-wing) journal Kinematograph, vol. 23, no. 202, 30.8.1929.


134 See Samuel Brody: »Paris Hears Eisenstein«. In: Close Up, vol. 6, no. 4, April 1930 for a contemporary account of that event.


138 Similar reasons, advantageous both to the artist and to the home country, can be found in the travels of Iranian directors such as Abbas Kiarostami or Jafar Panahi.


Avant-garde Culture


152 This stance is echoed by Hanns Eisler, [Theodor W. Adorno]: Komposition für den Film. Berlin: Henschel 1948. They consider dialogue as a »unfilmic« continuation of the intertitle which needs film music to soothe the overall disconcerting aspects of filmic representation of movement.


158 See TTO [= Thomas Tode]: entry »Erwin Piscator – Regisseur«. In: Hans-Michael Bock (ed.): CineGraph – Lexikon zum deutschsprachigen Film. München: edition text + kritik 1984ff.: inst. 33,


On the strained relationship between Piscator and Mezhrabpom see Peter Diezel: »Im ständigen Dissens .. Erwin Piscator und die Meshrabpom-Film-Gesellschaft«. In: Filmexil, no. 20, 2004: 39-56.


See Film-Kurier, vol. 10, no. 283, 28.11.1928.


Hans Richter: Der moderne Film«. Lecture given on 16 February 1930 to the Filmliga Amsterdam. Reprinted in and quoted after: Filmliga, vol. 3, no. 6, March 1930: 75. [»In Russian film the notion of art, as it exists in Europe, is overcome,«, my trans.]


For a more detailed discussion of this »rhetoric of possibility« see Boris Groys: Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin. Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion. München, Wien: Carl Hanser 1988: 66ff, quote 68 and 69. [»The figure of the >parasite< so important for the mythology of the Stalin era is on the bottom line not realistically motivated, just as the superhuman and creative potential of the >positive hero<. [...] The positive and negative hero of the Stalin era are two faces of the previous demiurgic practice of the avant-garde. Both exceed the reality created and destroyed by themselves, and also the struggle between them does not take place in reality, but rather beyond its limitations: reality is only the stake in this game.«, my trans.]