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Radical Aesthetics and State Sponsorship in Soviet Cinema, 1960–1968

A dissertation presented

by

Vera Koshkina

to

The Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
Russian Literature

Harvard University

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Radical Aesthetics and State Sponsorship in Soviet Cinema, 1960–1968

ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues for an examination of lesser-known, self-consciously experimental film projects that flourished in the 1960s within and adjacent to the Soviet film industry. Revolutionary rhetoric and the imperative to treat experiment in the arts as a tool for broad social transformation shaped the structure of artistic institutions in the Soviet Union. At the same time, creative projects were state sponsored and free from market competition. Paradoxically, this combination of circumstances created opportunities for both ideological films and formally complex experimental works. In broad terms, my project examines the Soviet rhetoric of artistic experiment for the sake of social transformation and the kind of heterogeneous experiments with technology and with film form that it produced. In this dissertation, I focus on the poetics of experiment as it re-emerges in the Soviet film industry in the 1960s. I contend that the experimental nature of the culture of the 1920s, especially in film and visual arts, continues to inform this heterogeneity on the institutional and aesthetic level in the 1960s and beyond.

Combining aesthetic analysis with an examination of institutional frameworks, I proceed through four case studies of institutionally "misfit" film projects: *I Am Cuba* (1964), *Homeland of Electricity* (1967), *Pervorossiiane* (1967), and the visual music films of the Special Construction Bureau (SKB) Prometei group who completed their first film in 1965. Produced within the state run Soviet film industry, these films are both marginal to mainstream cinema as well as on the margins of what could be commonly

claimed as experimental work. The dissertation establishes these “marginal films” as a new topic in the study of Soviet culture. It also places the cinema of the 1960s on a continuum with the visual art of the historical avant-garde. By focusing on these hybrid projects that foreground experimentation, it shows how experiment once again became a medium through which directors articulated different artistic and social positions in this period.

This dissertation contributes to three major areas of investigation: the study of Thaw-era Soviet cinema and culture, the growing literature on experimental film in state socialist Eastern Europe, and most broadly, the study of cinema in the context of visual and other arts. Reading Soviet cinema from its margins revises our understanding of the interaction between official culture, institutional protocol, and the reality of the artistic process, ultimately exposing the mechanisms of transformation of the Soviet film industry.

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Thank you!

INTRODUCTION

Several hours of experiments and we can create a variety of textures and optimal speeds for the movement and disappearance of the images […] Imagination and patience turn ordinary light bulbs glass and water into powerful tools of a visual music artist.

Stills and commentary from the documentary film *Visual Music – It's Very Simple!* 1975[1]

For the honest cinematographer experimentation is more important than bread.

Lev Kuleshov, 1922[2]

Soviet cinema of the immediate post-revolutionary period is virtually synonymous with experiment. Credited with the first articulations of what would later be known as Soviet Montage theory, Lev Kuleshov approached filmmaking as a science.[3]

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[1] *Visual Music – It's Very Simple!* (Kazan Documentary Film Studio, Kazan, 1975) is a made-for-TV documentary about the film work of Special Construction Bureau (SKB) Prometei, directed by Bulat Galeyev.

[2] L. V. Kuleshov, "Kamernaya kinematografiya," *Kino-Fot* 2 (September 8–15, 1922): 3. Reprinted in translation in: Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896–1939* (repr., New York: Routledge, 1994), 74.

[3] See Aleksandr Bogdanov, "Paths of Proletarian Creation, 1920," in *The Russian Avant-Garde and Radical Modernism*, ed. Dennis Ioffe and Frederick H. White (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 277–81, which testifies to the contemporary aspiration to conceive art as an industrial process to be run according to the scientific model. See also

He experimented with alternating sequences of shots and noticed that audiences inferred different meanings from film clips based on differences in sequencing.[4] In 1919 Kuleshov (then only twenty years old) started teaching at the newly founded State School of Cinematography, later known as VGIK (*All-Russian State University of Cinematography named after S. A. Gerasimov*), sharing the experiments that shaped his understanding of how visual narrative is constructed. He influenced the first generation of Soviet film directors, including some who would become well known in their own right, such as Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein. Kuleshov's experiments, as well as their afterlives in his students' works, lie at the core of what is now standard cinematic narration.

For Kuleshov the concept of experiment also extended to promoting a variety of film forms and genres. In a 1922 article on "chamber cinema" Kuleshov wrote:

> Now we must study all the laws of film production so that we know how to make all kinds of product, and consequently, what is required in both ideological and economic terms. The opportunities for chamber filming must be used for experiments. Experiments are now urgently necessary for cinema. This is the most valuable and essential thing. For the honest cinematographer experimentation is more important than bread.[5]

Kuleshov's interest in studying "all the laws of film production" makes it clear that for him experiment was a means to an end, a way to understand how best to make cinema capture its audience to communicate specific messages. Functioning within and

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the discussion of the appropriation of scientific language by the arts in Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 159.

[4] For a description of Kuleshov's experiments see "The Rediscovery of a Kuleshov Experiment: A Dossier," ed. and trans. Yuri Tsivian in *Film History* 8 (1996:3): 357-364. See also Roland Levaco's introduction to the edited volume *Kuleshov on Film: Writings by Lev Kuleshov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974): 1-20.

[5] Kuleshov, "Kamernaya kinematografiya," 74.

simultaneously shaping the newly formed institutions of film education and film production, artistic experiment, for Kuleshov, was a natural part of building the new social, institutional, and artistic order.

Dziga Vertov, Kuleshov's colleague and contemporary, made an equally impassioned, though fundamentally different call for experiment in cinema. In his films and writing, Vertov elevated experiment to an aesthetic position, an end in itself. In his 1923 manifesto, "The Cine-Eyes: A Revolution," Vertov proclaimed that everything that had been done in cinema so far was "100 percent mistaken and the direct opposite of what we should be doing."[6] He also complained that "all prospects of broad based experimental work have been pushed into the background."[7] He concluded with an expanded metaphor:

> Cinema's organism has been poisoned by *habit. We demand that we be given the chance to experiment on this dying organism in order to test the antidote that we have discovered.* We propose to convince the non-believers: we are ready for a preliminary test of our treatment on the "rabbits" of film sketches [Emphasis in the original].[8]

Vertov's demand for experiment suggests that he felt constrained by a standard in visual perception and cinematic storytelling that was already deeply ingrained and habitual. According to Vertov, it was this "habit" that experiment must dislodge. Vertov rejected stultifying habit in his written work with as much inventiveness as he did in his films. He used different-sized fonts, blocked off certain sections of text, or put parts of the text in italics. His cinematic experimentation and unconventional writing (mostly for the avant-

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[6] Dziga Vertov, "The Cine-Eyes: A Revolution," Reprinted in translation in: Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896–1939* (repr., New York: Routledge, 1994): 89.

[7] Dziga Vertov, "The Cine-Eyes: A Revolution," 90-91.

[8] Dziga Vertov, "The Cine-Eyes: A Revolution," 90.

garde journal Left Front of the Arts or *LEF*) bolstered and informed each other, elevating experimental style to a paradigm in filmmaking. Rather than establishing laws of cinematic narration, Vertov's goal in experimenting was to unsettle narration, dislodge vision, and explode genre.

When philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin visited Moscow in 1927, he identified experimentation as the "ruling passion" of the moment.[9] The post-revolutionary cultural climate allowed for both Vertov and Kulesov's fundamentally different conceptions of experiment in cinema.[10] Experiment was understood interchangeably as a method, as an aesthetic and as an artistic conceit that served as a means of personal and artistic transformation. Vertov presented his writings and films as manifestoes. Kuleshov wrote the first Soviet filmmaking textbook, appropriating the scientific method to create new narrative techniques and try out new institutional structures. Experiment was further valorized and aestheticized by artists such as Alexander Rodchenko and writers like Vladimir Mayakovsky, among many others, functioning less as a tool and more as an artistic conceit, expressing most fully the spirit of the pre- and post-revolutionary moment.

All discussion of experiment receded into the background and was eventually suppressed entirely during the Stalin period (1928–1953). After Stalin's death, debates

[9] As quoted by Maria Gough in *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 1. Experimentation in Soviet art and culture has its own narrative. See for example Dennis Ioffe's discussion "Concluding Addendum: The Tradition of Experimentation in Russian Culture and the Russian Avant-Garde," in *Russian Avant-Garde and Radical Modernism: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Dennis Ioffe and Frederick White (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 454–67.

[10] David Curtis compares and conceptualizes the experiments of the two filmmakers in his classic history of experimental cinema. See David Curtis, *Experimental Cinema* (New York: Universe Books, 1971), 30–33.

about experiment in cinema resurfaced with new vitality both on screen and in print. In a 1962 open letter published in the leading Soviet film publication, *Iskusstvo kino* (*The Art of Film*), the director Mikhalil Kalatozov along with film critic S. Vatgsfeld and the poet Evgeny Evtushenko called for a creation of an "experimental movie theater"; they were intentionally speaking the language of the 1920s.[11] As they saw it, this theater for "difficult film" would be part "propaganda of aesthetic knowledge" and part "laboratory for the study of viewer perception." Their goal was nothing short of a "radical restructuring of film distribution."[12] The open call format of the letter was reminiscent of the art manifesto genre widespread in the 1920s. The letter thus evoked all three meanings of experiment as method, an aesthetic and as a means of artistic and personal transformation.

The restructuring of Soviet cinema along aesthetic and institutional lines in the 1960s guides this study. I show that the notion of experiment was central to this restructuring and is also crucial to understanding the films of this period. My analysis of explores the reciprocal, but often confounding, relationship between experiment understood in Kuleshovian terms (as a tool and method for the development of new and expressive techniques, institutional structures, and production methods) and experiment as it was understood by Vertov's "experimental cinema" (as a mode of filmmaking with a specific history and identity in the Soviet context).

I proceed by analyzing film projects that explicitly foreground experiment as a goal either on the institutional or aesthetic level. I focus especially on films that have

[11] Sh. Vatgsfeld, V. Evtushenko, and M. Kalatozov, "Otkrytoe pismo predsedateliu mossoveta tovarishchu N.A. Dyagaiu," *Iskusstvo kino* 9 (1962): 65.

[12] Vatgsfeld et al., "Otkrytoe pismo," 65.

been overlooked by film histories because they do not fall readily into the usual categories of "entertainment," "propaganda," "art film," or "experimental film," and because their directors do not necessarily occupy explicitly dissident positions. I contend that the experimental nature of early Soviet artistic culture resurfaced in the heterogeneous institutional and aesthetic contexts of the 1960s and beyond. In order to understand the aesthetic reorientation in Soviet cinema of the 1960s and its subsequent developments, we must look at films that are both marginal to mainstream cinema as well as on the margins of what could be commonly claimed as experimental work.

Combining aesthetic analysis with an examination of institutional frameworks, I proceed through case studies of institutionally "misfit" film projects: *I Am Cuba* (1964), *Homeland of Electricity* (1967), *Pervorossiiane* (1967), and the visual music films of the Special Construction Bureau (SKB) Prometei group, who completed their first film in 1965. All these projects have generated some recent attention in Russia, but they have never been considered together as experimental works produced within the specific circumstances of the Soviet film/cultural industry. I analyze the aesthetics of these projects as they reflect engagement with film and other arts of the historical avant-garde. I look at archival materials such as filmmakers' letters and diaries, art council discussions, and other documents that inform the internal reception of these projects by the film industry. I also look at published, contemporaneous reviews of the films to understand their reception. Finally, I look at the published writing of the film artists as they make a case for their own unconventional work. In analyzing these "misfit" film projects, I show the Soviet film industry to be much more heterogeneous and the work of film artists as more autonomous and improvisational than previously thought.

I establish these "marginal films" as a new topic in the study of Soviet culture. I also place the cinema of the 1960s on a continuum with the visual art of the historical avant-garde. By focusing on these hybrid projects that foreground experimentation, I show how experiment once again became a medium through which directors articulated different artistic and social positions in this period. Reading the Soviet cinema from its margins revises our understanding of the interaction between official culture, institutional protocol, and the reality of the artistic process, ultimately changing our perception of the history of the Soviet film industry.

I. State sponsorship and experiment

Film and art historians have discussed the unprecedented support for experimental film and art projects, during the early years of the Soviet state.[13] In the Soviet context, art was understood as a political product rather than a commercial one. It did not require commercial success to justify production. In the official rhetoric, art was not supposed to cater to audience tastes, but rather art formed and educated these tastes. As the Soviet Union emerged from Stalin's repressive rule, filmmakers (as well as writers, artists, and members of other creative professions) occasionally used this freedom from audience demands to make experimental work within the mainstream institutions. Even as Soviet art was state run and state sponsored, Richard Taylor and Ian Christie point out that Western historians "continue to overestimate the effectiveness of centralized state control

[13] For example see Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). See also Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919–1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).

and propaganda intent" of the Soviet film industry.[14] Maria Belodubrovskaya goes further, arguing that state control of the Soviet film industry simply failed.[15]

My framework is indebted to Pierre Bourdieu's argument that aesthetics is inseparable from institutional structures.[16] The articulation of Socialist Realism in 1934 as the official aesthetic of the Soviet state put an end to the foregrounding of suspect "formal" explorations by filmmakers, writers, and artists. The perhaps intentionally unclear formulation of this state-sanctioned aesthetic (compounded by the bureaucratic confusion during Stalin's reign of terror) reinforced the bond between Soviet bureaucracy and the arts. The meaning of Socialist Realism was not fully fixed, but was rather continually interpreted by the censorship boards of the various artistic institutions.[17] Experiment re-emerged as a question of aesthetics as well as one of institutional structures after Stalin's death in 1953, during the Khruschev Thaw.[18] This period of

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[14] Taylor and Christie, *Film Factory*, 17.

[15] In her dissertation Belodubrovskaya shows convincingly that the tradition of "artisanal practices" and high cultural standing of film directors on the one hand and the imperative that all filmmaking be subservient to the state on the other led to dysfunction within the industry. These contradictory ideologies led to the failure of Soviet film industry as a mass propaganda enterprise as evidenced by sharp drop in production during moments of tightest control. See Maria Belodubrovskaya, "Politically Incorrect: Filmmaking under Stalin and the Failure of Power" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2011).

[16] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

[17] For a discussion of confusion around interpretations of Socialist Realism, see Regine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

[18] The "Thaw" is a period in Soviet history after Stalin's death in 1953 and is typically associated with the years of Nikita Khruschev's rule, 1953–1964, especially following his "Secret Speech" in 1956 at the 20th Party Congress condemning mass repression and Stalin's personality cult. It is difficult to find consensus on the date that closes the period. Some possibilities include Khruschev's deposition in 1964, the arrest and trial of Andrei Siniavsky and Yuli Daniel for publication of "anti-Soviet" works abroad under the pseudonyms Abram Tertz and Nikolai Arzhak in 1966, or the Soviet invasion of

loosened censorship resulted in a flowering of the arts. Coming on the heels of the so-called film famine of the Stalinist Era, it was especially dramatic for the film industry,[19] where it reached its zenith in the 1960s.

As the Stalinist period in Soviet history was undergoing reconsideration during the Thaw, so were its attendant aesthetic and institutional structures. The bold experimentation and radical heterogeneity of the post-revolutionary 1920s reemerged as both an aesthetic model and a polemical position in the 1960s. In their recovery of experiment, the film artists of the 1960s sought to interrogate the aesthetic norms and institutional structures formed in the Stalinist decades. On the institutional level, film professionals questioned the structure of the film industry, built as it was on the industrial production model. On the aesthetic level, filmmakers were questioning the doctrine of Socialist Realism.

Because the experimentation of the post-revolutionary moment predated Socialist Realism, some film artists argued that it was at least as valid, as true to the spirit of the revolution as subsequent aesthetic developments. To promote and test this position they took the experimental aspects of revolutionary literature and visual art, as much as the

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Czechoslovakia in August 1968. For a discussion of the implications of this period for the Soviet film industry, see Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw*, KINO, the Russian Cinema Series (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

[19] Only nine full-length features were released in 1951, compared to 146 titles released in 1930. Due to the collective nature of film production and the great cost of producing a film, the stringent control of the Soviet arts during the 1930s and 1940s was especially difficult to negotiate for the film industry. Beginning in 1934, the Ministry of Culture issued directives specifying the number of films to be made each year, their topics, and their genres. (The Ministry even specified the number of meters of film to be shot.) Concern for, or rather confusion over, ideology in the post–WWII period nearly ground the Soviet film industry to a halt. For information on the "film famine," see Denise Youngblood, "The Fate of Soviet Popular Cinema during the Stalin Revolution," *Russian Review* 50, no. 2 (April 1991).

revolution itself, as a subject for their films. Other artists were equally if not more urgently concerned with harnessing the discourse of experiment to promote changes in film production, distribution, and reception, prompting reform from within the industry. Finally, the film industry proved so porous in this period that art world outsiders (especially, and perhaps most counter-intuitively, scientists) were able to enter film institutions after the unexpected success of their amateur films. The industry and its aesthetic norms were expanding from within and being encroached upon from without under the banner of experiment.

Film scholarship on Thaw era cinema, both in Russia and in the West, tends to fall into two categories: scholarship on select film directors and scholarship on the historical context of the films. Monographs that focus on the authorship or "auteurship" of select directors still dominate.[20] Work that puts films into the historical context of the 1950s and 1960s is also common, with an emphasis on political and social change as reflected in cinema, mostly on the narrative level.[21] Both of these approaches tend to focus on the work of well-known directors, and on films that have received critical or

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[20] See Zinaida Abdullaeva. *Kira Muratova: Iskusstvo kino* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2008); George O. Liber, *Alexander Dovzhenko: A Life in Soviet Film* (London: British Film Institute, 2002); James Steffen, *The Cinema of Sergei Parajanov* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2013). Scholarship on Andrei Tarkovsky is especially broad. See Maia Turovskaia, *7 1/2, ili, Fil′my Andreia Tarkovskogo* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1991); Vida T. Johnson, *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue* (Indiana University Press, 1994); Robert Bird, *Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema* (Reaktion Books, 2008); Nariman Skakov, *The cinema of Tarkovsky : labyrinths of space and time* (London ; New York : I.B. Tauris, 2012).

[21] See Lev Anninskii, Shestidesyatniki i my: kinematograf, stavshii i ne stavshii istoriei. Soyuz kinematografistov SSSR, 1991; Vitalii Troianovskii, ed., *Kinematograf ottepeli* (Moskva: Materik, 1996); Woll, *Real Images*; Alexander Prokhorov, ed., *Springtime for Soviet Cinema: Re/Viewing the 1960s* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Russian Film Symposium, 2001).

popular acclaim. A related and important trend in Thaw-era film scholarship consists of archival compilations, which publish government rulings, prohibitions, and orders, "letting the documents speak for themselves" about cinema institutions and fates of individual films.[22] The *Polka* ("Shelf") series deals especially with films that were shelved in the post Stalin period (1953–1989). Expanding on the existing scholarship, I aim to de-center the narrative of Soviet cinema of the 1960s by looking at film projects that were neither widely released nor banned.

Ksenia Gurshtein and Sonja Simonyi posit that it was the mixture of "support by, and at times quite intense hostility" from the government that shaped experimental filmmaking in state socialist Eastern Europe.[23] Even as official support for experimentation dwindled in the 1930s in the Soviet Union (and following WWII in the Eastern Bloc nations), experimental work was being made semi-officially in all manner of state run institutions. Alice Lovejoy's recent study of the Czechoslovak Army's film studio as a training ground for avant-garde filmmaking is one striking example of the survival of experimental work within government structures.[24] The Film Form Workshop in Poland (1970–1977) and the Béla Balázs Experimental Film Studio in Hungary (1959–1999) have also received attention more recently as loci of state sponsored experimental

[22] See Vitalii Troianovskii, ed., *Kinematograf ottepeli: Dokumenty i svidetelstva* (Moskva: Materik, 1998); Valeri Fomin, ed., *"Polka": dok., svidel'stva, komment.* Nauch.-issled. in-t kinoiskusstva (Moskva: Materik, 1998). Both are valuable sources of information on the mechanisms of the Soviet film industry, and in my study I draw on the documents made available in these compilations.

[23] See Ksenya Gurshtein and Sonja Simonyi's introduction "Experimental Cinema in State Socialist Eastern Europe," a special issue of *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 7:1 (2016): 2-11. I use their term "state socialist Eastern Europe" to signal the regional specificity of the discussion.

[24] Alice Lovejoy, *Army Film and the Avant Garde: Cinema and Experiment in the Czechoslovak Military* (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2014).

work.[25] In the Soviet context, amateur film clubs that gave their members access to camera equipment have also received attention as sites of experimentation.[26] All these investigations focus on sites of production that offered an alternative to the main studio system. Adding to this scholarship I take a different approach, by looking at aesthetics and production histories of film projects that were made within the main studio system that still foregrounded experimentation.

Expanding on the recent recovery of experimental work in state socialist Eastern Europe, I focus on films that have been left out of film histories because they fall uncomfortably in between mainstream and experimental filmmaking. My filmmakers use mainstream industry in unconventional ways as a means of experimentation with production. Some films for example were made within the mainstream industry with the understanding on the part of the filmmakers that the finished films may never be widely distributed. They bypassed the system of distribution, settling for a smaller audience of film industry insiders. Films like *I Am Cuba* became standard viewing for cinematographers at VGIK, while the students at the VGIK art department pored over the drawings created for *Pervorossiiane*. Simultaneously, the industry was becoming more accepting of outsiders, as individuals who did not have classical film training were

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[25] See Ryszard W. Kluszczynski, "The Mechanical Imagination—Creativity of Machines: Film Form Workshop 1970–1977," in *The Struggle for Form: Perspectives on Polish Avant-Garde Film 1916–1989*, ed. Kamila Kuc and Michael O'Pray (New York: Wallflower Press, 2014), 117–34; László Beke, "Hungarian Experimental Film and the Béla Balázs Studio," in *BBS Budapest: Twenty Years of Hungarian Experimental Film* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1985).

[26] Maria Vinogradova, "Between the state and the kino: Amateur film workshops in the Soviet Union," *Studies in East European Cinema* 8:3 (2012) 211-225. See also Alexei Yurchak, "Suspending the political: late soviet artistic experiments on the margins of the state," *Poetics Today* 29:4 (2008): 713 – 733.

invited to join the ranks of Soviet Cinematographers Union on the strength of their achievements in cinema (such as those who made science films). In this instance I highlight the role of the mainstream industry infrastructure (film archives, libraries, festivals) for the support and functioning of "outsider" filmmakers. The internationalist impulse and attendant cultural liberalization of the Thaw provided a temporary legitimacy for experimentation within the institutional boundaries of the film industry.

II. Stretching Socialist Realism during the Thaw

Socialist Realism was instituted as the official aesthetic of the Soviet state, and artists, writers, filmmakers, and bureaucrats in artistic institutions were promoted or persecuted in its name in the course of roughly forty years, (from the 1930s to the 1970s). The precise definition of this aesthetic is still highly contested today, however. In the visual arts John Bowlt traces the roots of this aesthetic to the nineteenth-century Russian realist painting tradition of *peredvizhniki* (Society of Wandering Exhibitions), whose last exhibition took place in Moscow in 1922.[27] Emphasizing the human figure in a socially and politically charged situation, much of their painting, was too dark (even neo-realist) to resemble the later celebrated examples of Socialist Realist painting. Matthew Bown looks to the idealist art theories of People's Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky, who evoked art not as a "realistic reflection of life," but as an "'enchanted mirror' in which wonderful changes took place."[28] I believe Bowlt gets to the heart of the

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[27] John E. Bowlt, "Realism Victorious," in *Socialist Realisms: Soviet Painting 1920–1970*, by Matthew Brown and Matteo Lanfranconi (Milan: Skira: London, Thames and Hudson 2013): 129.

[28] See foreword to Brown and Lanfranconi, *Socialist Realisms*, 23.

matter by emphasizing the purported aesthetic as a social and political process, claiming that "Socialist Realism is more about collective bargaining than about the prosperity of personal initiative."[29] The aesthetic was a matter of interpretation, and in the continually changing power landscape of the Stalinist period, "collective bargaining" was its most salient feature.[30]

Socialist Realism was formulated in the statutes of the Soviet Writers Union in 1934 as:

> […] demand[ing] of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism.[31]

The 1934 Vasiliev brothers' film, *Chapaev*, a fictionalized biography of a Russian civil war hero, became the prime example of this aesthetic in cinema.[32] As Christie and Taylor note, "*Chapaev* was to the 1930s what *Potemkin* had been to the late 1920s: a model film, an ideal to be emulated. It was, above all, a political film that was intelligible to the millions."[33] The film was "realist" in the sense that it used recognizable settings and events, had a positive hero with the proper social "consciousness," emphasized positive achievements, had a clear ideological message, and was accessible to a wide variety of

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[29] Bowlt, *Realism Victorious*, 129.

[30] Socialist Realism was perhaps most succinctly termed "An Impossible Aesthetic" by Regine Robin for its goal of combining idealism with a clear didactic message. See *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

[31] As quoted in Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society, 1917 – 1953* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992): 157.

[32] Other commonly noted examples of Socialist Realist cinema are the 1935 and 1937 *Maxim* films of Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg and the musical comedies of Grigori Alexandrov.

[33] Taylor and Christie, *Film Factory*, 317.

audiences. All these elements were necessary but not sufficient conditions for party approval. Taylor and Christie suggest that the formulation of Socialist Realism was more a political event than an aesthetic one.[34] Belodubrovskaya elaborates on this position showing that the "campaign against formalism" (with the formulation of Socialist Realism its most prominent expression) was less about form and more about content. She concludes that "the campaign demanded . . . a paradigm shift from a form-centered aesthetic to a theme-based approach in art."[35] Preoccupation with visual style showed a disregard for story and theme. The latter was increasingly valued by the leadership anxious to have the filmmakers' help in mediating ideology and creating "a popular national consciousness."[36] Belodubrovskaya shows that numerous films were banned in this period, not because of their formal innovation but because they did not sufficiently emphasize the political message. In the 1960s film artists increasingly pushed back against this emphasis on content over form.

Part of the impetus for "expanding" Socialist Realism came from the purported internationalism of Khruschev's Thaw-era policies. Khruschev wanted to establish Moscow as the cultural capital of the world, and thus needed the Soviet arts to be relevant and in conversation with the "contemporary style."[37] This internationalism prompted

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[34] Taylor and Christie, *Film Factory*, 2–3.

[35] In her article she shows convincingly that it was narrative concerns rather than stylistic ones that led to the banning of the picture. See Maria Belodubrovskaya, "Abram Room, *A Strict Young Man*, and the 1936 Campaign against Formalism in Soviet Cinema," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 2 (2015): 312.

[36] Taylor and Christie, *Film Factory*, 15.

[37] Susan Reid, "Toward a New (Socialist) Realism: The Re-engagement with Western Modernism in the Khruschev Thaw," in *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts*, ed. Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan E. Reid (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 217.

numerous encounters by Soviet audiences with Western art, from the rehabilitation and return of European modernism (especially Impressionism) displayed in Soviet museums starting in 1954, to the 1956 Picasso retrospective at the Moscow Pushkin Museum. In this way, debates on the interpretation of Socialist Realism in the visual arts came to include what Susan Reid refers to as "figurative modernism."[38] Reid highlights the Sixth World Festival of Youth in 1957 as a particularly important encounter between Soviet and Western artists. During the festival, an "international art studio" was set up where artists from fifty-two countries worked alongside one another. Participants included "representatives of neo-realist, expressionist and abstract tendencies."[39] The international exposure led to a splintering within the Soviet art community. On the one hand, these encounters sparked a variety of underground and unofficial art movements. On the other hand, they increased the efforts of art critics and artists to liberalize the official Soviet art world from within.

Similar developments can be traced in Soviet cinema. The re-institution of the Moscow Film Festival in 1959 brought foreign films and filmmakers into the thawing political climate of the Soviet Union. The recognition of Soviet films by the international community at major film festivals abroad (such as a special prize at Cannes in 1957 for Grigory Chukhrai's *The Forty First*, and the prestigious Palme D'Or for Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes Are Flying* in 1958) created new contexts for Soviet cinema and gave these film artists greater bargaining power in shaping subsequent projects. [40] Moreover, the Communist Party invested significantly in rebuilding the film industry,

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[38] See Reid, "Toward a New (Socialist) Realism, 217–39.

[39] Reid, "Toward a New (Socialist) Realism," 227.

[40] Both films are especially noted for the cinematographic work of Sergei Urusevsky.

planning for seventy-five films to be produced in 1956—as compared to the nine films that were released in 1951, at the tail end of the "film famine."[41]

The massive expansion of cinema during the Thaw forced a re-articulation of the Socialist Realist aesthetic that would appeal to new spectators at home and abroad. Modernism was creeping into Soviet cinema in the form of fragmented narrative and subjective narration (for example, in *Ivan's Childhood, Brief Encounters*, and *Wings*). Neorealist tendencies also surfaced (for example, in *Comissar* and *The Story of Asia Kliachina*) as directors began to focus more on the visual dimension of film. The so-called poetic cinema became the artistic trademark of the moment, with films containing minimal dialog where the visual material was dominant (for example, *Color of Pomegranates*). Finally, in the most daringly modernist move, some directors foregrounded the cinematic apparatus and materiality of film itself in what were otherwise narrative films (for example, *I Am Cuba* and *Pervorossiiane*). Much like the more liberal-minded strain of Soviet visual artists, a vanguard of Soviet directors and film critics worked to liberalize the Soviet film industry from within. Formally, the aesthetic of Socialist Realism was their implicit point of reference. Under the pretext of "searching for new means of expression," the creative teams working on these films pushed the boundaries of Socialist Realism, implicitly putting the coherence of this aesthetic as well as its validity into question. Concepts like *poisk* ("search" or "exploration"), *opyt* ("experiment"), and *vyrazitel'nost* ("expressivity") hinted at the desire to test and stretch

[41] Woll, *Real Images*, 8–11. See also Oksana Bulgakowa "Cine-Weathers: Soviet Thaw Cinema in the International Context," Denis in Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd eds. *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2014), 440 – 451.

the boundaries of this aesthetic position.[42] These concepts also implied an individualistic, and so potentially modernist, approach.

The cautious rehabilitation of Soviet artists and writers of the revolutionary period also expanded the aesthetic boundaries in the 1960s. Written work by artists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko and filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein was republished in this period. An expanded exhibit of the artist Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin (1878–1939), which included his religious works and modernist set designs, produced a sensation in both Moscow and Leningrad in 1965–1966.

While the mainstream expanded, “peripheral zones” of *samizdat* (such as Andrei Sinyavsky’s critique of Socialist Realism in 1959) and semi-official exhibits introduced the cultural elite to the art and literature of the historical avant-garde. The effect on 1960s artists was profound. In his study of the Soviet conceptual artist Ilya Kabakov, who started his professional life during the Thaw, Matthew Jesse Jackson argues that the artist’s exposure to the early Soviet avant-garde art is crucial to understanding his work as well as the work of his contemporaries.[43] Jackson emphasizes the role of private collectors, such as George Costakis, an employee of the Canadian embassy in Moscow, who made his collection of historical avant-garde art available for viewing by the cultural elite.[44] Jackson also highlights the “two- to three-day exhibits held between 1960 and 1968 at Moscow’s State Mayakovsky Museum” hosted by the scholar Nikolai

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[42] See for example L. Dyko, “Tvorcheskie poiski Sergeia Urusevskogo,” *Iskusstvo kino* 7 (1961):102-112. See also V. Ivanova, “Prvao na e’ksperiment,” *Iskusstvo kino* 8 (1964): 71-75.

[43] Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 55–60.

[44] Jackson, *Experimental Group*, 57–58.

Khardzhiev and unofficial poet Genady Aigi.[45] The exhibits reportedly included works by artists such as El Lissitzky, Pavel Filonov, Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Elena Guro, Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, Marc Chagall and Aleksandr Rodchenko. Since most of these artists were still officially considered suspect, the small exhibits of their work at the Mayakovsky Museum were justified by the artists' connections to Mayakovsky. Jackson points out that with the reemergence of this previously suppressed art of the historical avant-garde "came renewed reflections on life's praxis and art's public."[46] As the Stalinist cult was being cast down, the creative elite needed new mechanisms of prestige and a new origin story. The experimental spirit of post-revolutionary art offered new potential genealogies for 1960s artists, writers, and filmmakers, who saw themselves as the inheritors of this creative culture.

The foregrounding of experiment by Soviet film artists of the 1960s reflected the diversity of experiment in the 1910s and 1920s, as well as the ambiguous meaning of Socialist Realism. Experimentation as a discursive position became a buzzword of the 1960s, yet its ramifications remained unclear, especially for those working within official Soviet institutions. Some creative teams involved in experimental film projects explicitly called their work "experimental" (*Pervorossiiane*, the work of SKB Prometei), while others described their work less explicitly, as engaging in a search for "new expressive means" (*I Am Cuba*, *Homeland of Electricity*). For those working within the mainstream Soviet film institutions, experiment meant reimagining their boundaries and an implicit promotion of reform from within. Perhaps because of this contradictory aesthetic and

[45] Jackson, *Experimental Group*, 55.

[46] Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group,* 55.

institutional positioning, this work is difficult to place in discussions of "experimental" or "avant-garde" film.

III. Experiment on Film or "Experimental Film"?

When speaking generally of non-Soviet "experimental film" (alternately and sometimes interchangeably referred to as "avant-garde," "independent," "poetic," or "visionary"), film scholars typically refer to works that combine unconventional aesthetics and unconventional production methods.[47] The terms vary based on the aspects of experimentation being emphasized as much as the historical period/circumstances under discussion. Labeling films as "underground" and "independent" typically emphasizes unconventional institutional structures, away from the industrial mode of cinematic mainstream and occasionally from all artistic institutions as such. "Avant-garde" cinema is most often associated with a radical political as well as aesthetic stance. "Visionary" and "poetic" as terms typically emphasize unconventional aesthetics over modes of commercial production. The film historian Michael O'Pray concludes that a scholar's use of a certain term usually "denotes a nuance, a certain difference of approach and at times acts as a means of excluding (or including) particular films."[48] For O'Pray the choice of term is a question of historiography. Gurshtein and Simonyi provide a contextual characterization of experimental work that is perhaps more useful for my study. They suggest that experimentation is always and primarily a matter of context

[47] For a full discussion of the alternate terms for experimental or avant-garde film, see Micheal O'Pray, *Avant-Garde Film: Forms, Themes, and Passions* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 1–7. See also A. L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (London: British Film Institute, 2011).

[48] O'Pray, *Avant-Garde Film*, 6.

"defined situationally and conditionally *vis-á-vis* more dominant cultural forms in relation to which it produces disruptions."[49]

In terms of "unconventional aesthetics" film historians discussing "experimental" or "avant-garde" cinema note the tendency to use "shock" as a "cultural agent" and catalyst of aesthetic change and social transformation.[50] They also posit innovation as the main goal of this form of filmmaking. All the filmmakers I consider in my study explicitly argue for innovation, for an expansion of film language, even at the expense of easy reception. Both *I Am Cuba* and *Pervorossiiane* were discussed as "difficult" films that could be challenging for the lay audience. Meanwhile, in their open letter of 1962 to the film community, Kalatozov, Vatgsfeld, and Evtushenko argued for a film venue that would enable the reception of "difficult" work through lectures and "consultations" with specialists. These filmmakers and critics saw shock as stimulating for both the audience and the industry, so long as it was properly contained.

Connection to the visual arts is a key aspect of experimental film work. A. L. Rees' history of experimental film includes artists who look to the tradition in the visual arts at least as much as they look to the history of film. Soviet filmmakers of the 1960s were invested in the visual arts of the 1910s and 1920s as a precursor of their own experimental work. The visual music films of Bulat Galeyev's SKB Prometei workshop are situated entirely in the context of the experimental or "artists' films" of Len Lye and Oskar Fischinger.[51] Galeyev's work was also inspired by the paintings of Vasili Kandinsky and the atonal music of Alexander Scriabin. Activating the visual art of the

[49] Gurshtein and Simonyi, "Experimental Cinema," 5.

[50] Rees, *History of Experimental Film*, 2–4.

[51] Rees, *History of Experimental Film*, 37–40.

post-revolutionary moment in a new way, the creative team of *Pervorossiiane* reproduced the suppressed paintings of Kazemir Malevich on screen in striking tableaus. In *I Am Cuba*, the photography of Alexander Rodchenko is quoted throughout. The desire to re-establish Soviet cinema as a visual art is manifest in the connections these film artists establish with the painting and photography of the 1920s.

Experimental work is also most often associated with the use of formal devices that draw attention to themselves, to the materiality of the film medium, and away from the film narrative. The foregrounding of the cinematic apparatus, sometimes by actually showing the camera in the shot (a favorite device of Vertov) is one way of literally drawing attention to the film medium. Any manner of aural or visual disruption, such as blurring of focus, color reversal through the use of filters or special film, distortion achieved with the use of special lenses, or unusual camera angles, is a way in which medium specificity is often highlighted. For this reason, the question of experiment in cinema is necessarily tied to the developments in technology that condition cinematic possibilities. At this juncture the practice of experiment in cinema and "experimental cinema" as a mode of filmmaking nearly converge. It is a matter of debate whether a certain technique is a step in the development of film language, or an expression of the modernist preoccupation with medium specificity and the fetishization of the cinematic apparatus.

My project focuses on this connection between experiment for the sake of developing the Soviet film industry in the changing technological landscape and experimentation as an aesthetic principle. The creative team of *I Am Cuba* showcases all the cutting-edge technology available to the generously funded Soviet filmmakers in the

1960s. The extra light-sensitive infrared film (developed for reconnaissance photography), 9.8mm wide angle lens, dizzyingly mobile camera (and implicitly the complex constructions that move this camera) combined with unusual camera angles celebrated technological possibilities at least as much as they celebrated the Cuban revolution. The development of 1950s television culture created a need to experiment with new technologies that could bring audiences back to the movie theaters, and repackage cinema as spectacle. The development of wide screen technology and the anamorphic distortion process (compressing the image horizontally during filming and re-stretching it during exhibition) becomes a site of experimentation in *Homeland of Electricity*. The introduction of wide gauge technologies with stereoscopic sound and extra wide screen exhibition venues is similarly confronted in *Pervorossiiane*. Finally, the developments in radio-mechanics (and precursors of digital technologies) create entirely new possibilities for kinetic arts in the film experiments of the SKB Prometei group, who were engaging in both artistic and scientific experiment, completing the circuit of industry, art, and science.

Given the connection of the film artists I am discussing with the art of the historical avant-garde, it is notable that for them the concept of experiment overshadows the concept of avant-garde. Both concepts have been critiqued along political and aesthetic lines. O'Pray notes the problems with the concept of the avant-garde (its militant and dogmatic tendency, its connection to specific time periods and national traditions) but prefers it over "experiment." He writes:

> Experiment tends to denote changes in technique, in methodology; it does not herald an avant-gardism but simply provides traditional cinema with more variety of expression. The experimental tag also suggests tentativeness and quasi-scientific rationalist motivation. It fails to capture, and in fact seems to exclude,

> the passions and spontaneity involved in many of the films it purports to cover. Similarly, experiment does not imply radical social or political ideas often associated with the avant-gardes. In fact, experimental techniques are to be found in conservative film tradition used for equally conservative ends.[52]

Yet Soviet directors of the 1960s were drawn to the concept of experiment for precisely the reasons that O'Pray rejects. The quasi-scientific, pseudo rationalist nature of the term lent it materialist, empirical legitimacy in Soviet culture.[53] The fact that experiment does not necessarily imply "radical social or political ideas" was also convenient. The unclear political/social allegiance, the very ambiguity of the experimental conceit left both possibilities open. Instead of engaging politically, the filmmakers working within the Soviet mainstream chose to intervene aesthetically, an intervention that nevertheless held social and ideological potential. Moreover, precisely because experiment could be seen as a tool that "provides traditional cinema with more variety of expression," it could support the development of Soviet arts at the very same time as it potentially loosened ideological holds. In the Soviet context the ambiguity of the concept was its strength.

IV. Plan of the dissertation

The first three chapters are each structured as case studies of a single "misfit" project produced within the Soviet film industry. The fourth chapter offers a case study of an amateur filmmaking collective that was able to enter the Soviet film industry.

In the first chapter I offer an analysis of the Soviet propaganda film *I Am Cuba* (1964), which has recently attained the status of a cult classic for its baroque stylistic

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[52] O'Pray, *Avant-Garde Film*, 5.

[53] For a discussion of the cult of science in Soviet culture see Paul R. Josephson, "Soviet Scientists and the State: Politics, Ideology and Fundamental Research from Stalin to Gorbachev", *Social Research* 59 (1992): 605–606.

sensibility. I contend that while the film was intended as a political propaganda piece, it in fact functions as an aesthetic manifesto that promotes cinema as a primarily visual art. I show that Mikhail Kalatozov and Sergei Urusevsky, the core creative team of the film, appropriate the manifesto format of the historical avant-garde and model their work on the photography and writing of Alexander Rodchenko as well as on the films of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Esenstein, artists newly rehabilitated during the Thaw.

My second chapter treats *Homeland of Electricity* (1967), a Larisa Shepitko adaptation of Andrei Platonov's eponymous short story, produced at the short-lived Experimental Film Studio (1965–1975). In my analysis, I discuss the implications of Shepitko's aesthetic experiment in her use of anamorphic distortion (vertical stretching of the image) to communicate visually the strangeness of Platonov's language. I argue that while the Soviet film industry was closely controlled on the level of the script, its visual "liberation" also comes from literature through cinematic adaptations of formally difficult literary texts. The production history of this film also reveals two levels of experimentation—formal and institutional/economic—in one project. Well-established directors, such as Grigory Chukhrai, were able to promote institutional reform by establishing the Experimental Film Studio, an economic experiment in film production. Younger directors such as Shepitko were more focused on aesthetic experimentation through unconventional use of new technology.

In the third chapter, I offer an aesthetic analysis of *Pervorossiiane* (1967), a feature film commissioned for the fiftieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Produced at Lenfilm, a major Soviet film studio, the film was explicitly conceived and carried out as an experiment in form. I show that the film takes the art of the revolution

(rather than the revolution itself) as its subject matter, particularly in restaging the paintings of Kazimir Malevich and Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin on screen. Two directors, Alexander Ivanov and Evgeny Shiffers, were at the helm of *Pervorossiiane*, and my analysis again uncovers two levels of experiment. Coming into cinema from theater, the much younger Shiffers was most interested in formal experimentation. And Ivanov, a well-established Soviet director with a number of Stalin prizes to his name, was willing to cover the experimental production with his name, even if the film would not be widely distributed, thereby rewriting his own legacy in Soviet cinema.

In my last chapter I examine the experimental films of filmmaker and physicist Bulat Galeyev, who conducted his cinematic experiments under the auspices of the Radiomechanics Laboratory at the Aviation Institute in Kazan. Inspired by the writings of Alexander Scriabin on music, light, and synesthesia, Galeyev founded the Special Construction Bureau (SKB) Prometei in 1962. At Prometei, Galeyev's team engaged in cutting-edge research and experimentation with recorded light and sound, producing films intended officially for Soviet astronauts. The films were later successfully exhibited in European festivals of experimental film and art starting in the 1970s. In 1975 Galeyev was inducted into the Soviet Cinematographer's Union following the success of his experimental science film *Little Triptych*, which secured institutional recognition for his cinematic work. Navigating the networks of art, science, and film in the Soviet Union, Galeyev's collective, SKB Prometei, created a unique niche, an artistic sub-culture within the scientific establishment, merging artistic experiment and scientific work.

Considered together, these film projects point to the multiple axes of experimentation within the Soviet industry – experiments with technology, the film

medium, genre and institutional structures. The examination of lesser-known, self consciously experimental film projects that flourished in the 1960s within and adjacent to the Soviet film industry deepens our understanding of the interaction between official culture, institutional designations, and the reality of the artistic process, ultimately exposing the mechanisms of transformation within the Soviet film industry.

CHAPTER ONE

I Am Cuba—a Film Manifesto for the Soviet Sixties

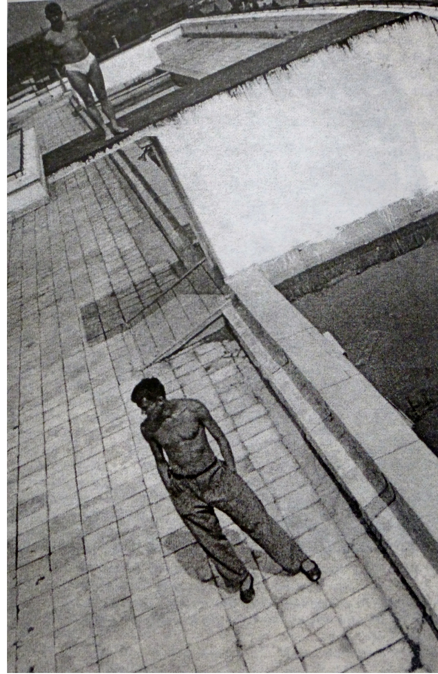

Figure 1.1. Sergei Urusevsky on the roof of Vkhutein dormitory (Photo by Aleksandr Rodchenko, 1932).

When director Mikhail Kalatozov and cinematographer Sergei Urusevsky arrived in Cannes for the 1958 premiere of their new film *The Cranes Are Flying*, the person they wanted to meet most was Pablo Picasso. Georges Sadoul, a prominent film critic and a member of the French Communist Party, arranged the meeting. Remembering the encounter, Urusevsky wrote:

> With the words "your fame precedes you" Picasso threw his arms wide open, hugged me and kissed me on both cheeks. As it turned out, he has heard reports from the festival and read the newspapers. He heard that I was told that I filmed very well, and that I supposedly replied to this that "there is nothing surprising about that, after all, I am a visual artist." The word *khudozhnik* [artist] he said in Russian.[54]

[54] S. Urusevskii', B. Fridman-Urusevskoi', "Stranitsy iz dnevnika" (115) *Iskusstvo kino* 3 (1980): 115-120. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from this publication are my own.

After viewing the film, Picasso allegedly praised every frame of *The Cranes are Flying* as a fully articulated work of art. He also gave Urusevsky a 16 mm camera and asked the cinematographer to film him at work in his studio. Urusevsky returned a week later (fig. 2). In the course of the afternoon, Urusevsky (who did not speak French or Spanish) recalls managing to explain to Picasso—mostly through half-sentences and gestures—that the retrospective of Picasso's work in Moscow a year and a half earlier was mobbed with people, that it sparked heated arguments and nearly caused fights. "This he understood immediately, he laughed a lot, was very happy."[55] The meeting of the two artists (and their mutual enthusiasm) was a testament to the opening of boundaries and the changing mechanism of prestige in the Soviet 1950s.

The Picasso retrospective in Moscow and Leningrad in the fall and winter of 1956 has been described as a pivotal moment for the post-Stalinist artistic culture.[56] This major exhibition of non-Socialist Realist art, coming on the heels of Khruschev's "Secret Speech," contributed to an "atmosphere that was pervaded by uncertainties concerning the limits of reform." The politicians and artists of this time felt that "for better or worse, anything was possible." [57] Two years later, the poor performance of Soviet artworks in the international arena suggested that contemporary Soviet art was in crisis. The 1958 Brussels Expo proved a fiasco for the Soviet Union, as the international selection

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[55] Urusevskii, "Stranitsy iz dnevnika," 119.

[56] For an account of the cultural upheaval unleashed by the Picasso retrospective see Susan Reid "Toward a New (Socialist) Realism: The Re-engagement with Western Modernism in the Khruschev Thaw" in Blakesley, Rosalind P., and Susan E. Reid, eds. *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts*, 222-224 (DeKalb, Ill: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006): 217-239.

[57] Reid, "Toward a New (Socialist) Realism," 222.

committee chose very few Soviet artworks for exhibition. Meanwhile, Western critics had dismissed Socialist Realism as “sentimental” in favor of earlier artists such as Kazimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky.[58]

The success of Kalatozov and Urusevsky’s *The Cranes Are Flying* at Cannes that same year powerfully contradicted the assertion that Soviet contemporary art had become irrelevant. Soviet film, more than any other art, was now leading the charge in the cultural dialog between East and West that Khruschev was so keen to develop. Celebrated by the international community and rewarded at home, Soviet film artists saw this as an opportunity to reposition cinema as a visual art.

Figure 1.2. Stills from the film Sergei Urusevsky shot during his studio visit with Pablo Picasso in May 1958.

In this chapter, I argue that Kalatozov and Urusevsky’s 1964 film *I Am Cuba* (*Ya Kuba*), functioned as their manifesto. The film is perhaps the most ambitious articulation of Kalatozov’s and Urusevsky’s visual agenda, and one that took them nearly a decade to develop.[59] Commissioned as a propaganda film, the Soviet-Cuban co-production depicts the underpinnings of the Cuban revolution of 1958. The film strings together four

[58] Reid, “Toward a New (Socialist) Realism,” 230 – 231.

[59] Kalatozov and Urusevsky had a long history of working together and working out a signature style all their own. *I Am Cuba* was their fourth film together following *First Echelon* (1956), *The Cranes are Flying* (1957) and *Letter Never Sent* (1960).

separate narratives, or “novellas,” that show the rise of collective political consciousness among Cubans as the nation moves toward a revolution. The first and most metaphorical novella focuses on the sexual exploitation of Maria (Betty) by a wealthy American tourist out for a night on the town in Havana. The second shows the fate of Pedro, a sugarcane farmer who loses his land to an American corporation and burns his own crops in despair. The third novella returns to the city to document the political activity of Cuban student revolutionaries, focusing especially on Enrique, who dies in the struggle. His funeral is depicted in a startlingly beautiful single take in the film. The final novella most directly presents the shift from passivity to revolutionary action through the story of Mariano. A pacifist farmer, he joins the rebel fighters after the Batista military forces bomb his home and kill his child. The naratives serve as the basis of the political manifesto, narrated throughout the film by the lyrical voiceover —the voice of Cuba.

Despite the great drama of each of the four “novellas”, the narratives recede into the background, with the film’s visual artistry capturing the viewer’s attention. It is my contention that as a film manifesto, *I Am Cuba* champions film as a primarily visual art—a bold statement on the part of the creative team after the preceding decades of Soviet film industry, which were dominated by the primacy of narrative. The use of cutting-edge filmmaking techniques foregrounds problems of visual perception; for example, infrared film is used to exaggerate the brightness and invert the color, an extra-wide-angle 9.8mm lens stretches and distorts the image, and dynamic camera angles disorient the viewer. Acknowledging this visual emphasis, the film’s creative team referred to it as “an epic poem of the revolution.”[60] Just as poetry attempts to evoke visual and auditory

[60] See Sergei Urusevsky, “On Form”, *Iskusstvo kino* 2 (1966): 27-37.

impressions for the reader, Kalatozov and Urusevsky, by claiming poetic form, claimed license to focus on sensory impressions in their cinematic work.

In combining the two types of manifesto (the political and the artistic) with narrative film I further argue that *I Am Cuba* is most productively read as a kind of hybrid, and an essentially experimental work. I focus my analysis especially on the nine-minute opening of the film, which is not part of the film's four narratives. As the voiceover—the lyrical voice of Cuba—narrates a political manifesto in free verse, we see an aerial view of the island followed by a canoe ride through a jungle village. These images of rural, impoverished Cuba are juxtaposed with those of a decadent rooftop pool party in the heart of Havana. The opening most directly combines the political and the artistic manifesto in one.[61] Cinematic exeperimentation also takes center satge in this sequence. The political manifesto delivered in the voiceover condemns capitalism, while the visual material of the film celebrates the potential of new technology to create powerful sensory impressions. The voiceover commentary on Cuban exploitation sits in uneasy juxtaposition with this dazzling technological display.

With the revolution as its subject, *I Am Cuba* was especially well-poised to become a film manifesto. In his study of the manifesto genre, Martin Puchner traces its history from its inception as "a declaration of the will of the sovereign" to a new genre that is heralding a revolution and is "preposterous in its claims to power and authority."[62]

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[61] Tracing the history of "manifesto art," Martin Puchner points out that, in the Russian context, art manifestos initially "functioned primarily as a frame for collections of poetry." The film's nine-minute opening sequence similarly frames the four poetic pieces that make up the film. See his *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006): 102.

[62] Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006): 12.

The new "revolutionary" manifesto is thus a document written by those who do not actually have the power to enact what they proclaim; instead, it is a call to action. Given Kalatozov's and Urusevsky's high standing in the Soviet film world, it is especially interesting to consider *I Am Cuba* as a manifesto "from above." This use of a genre of the disenfranchised by major players in the old system can be seen as an attempt by well-established film insiders to rebuild legitimacy in the new cultural climate.

In this chapter, I first map out the various historical, cultural and political contexts that contributed to the making of *I Am Cuba* as a film manifesto. I then turn to the history of how the manifesto, an essentially political genre, was appropriated by the Soviet avant-garde, especially in the writings and calls-to-experiment of constructivist artist Aleksandr Rodchenko, who taught and mentored Urusevsky at Vkhutemas (Vysshiye Khudozhestvenno-Tekhnicheskiye Masterskiye, i.e. Higher Art and Technical Studios: fig. 1). I also examine Dziga Vertov's written and filmed manifestos, as they establish the film manifesto and the accompanying text as a mode of cinematic expression. Finally, I use Urusevsky's essay "On Form" to critically analyze *I Am Cuba* as a cinematic manifesto. Through my analysis of the film and the surrounding discourses, I show how the creative team of *I Am Cuba* revived the utopian rhetoric of the Bolshevik Revolution, with its attendant genres and forms, in order to explore the creative potential of radical aesthetics in the newly flexible artistic climate of the Thaw.[63]

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[63] For a discussion of the implication of this period for the Soviet film industry see: Woll, Josephine. *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw*. KINO, the Russian Cinema Series. London: I.B. Tauris, 2000. See also Prokhorov, Alexander, ed. *Springtime for Soviet Cinema: Re/Viewing the 1960s.* Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Russian Film Symposium, 2001. Troianovskii, Vitalii Ed. *Kinematograf Ottepeli*. Moskva: Materik, 1996. *Kinematograf Ottepeli: Dokumenty I Svidetelstva*. Moskva: Materik, 1998.

I. Cuba in Moscow, Moscow in Cuba

Despite its extravagant visuals, the film was poorly received by both Cuban and Soviet contemporary audiences. In Cuba, the film was dubbed a "Soviet hallucination" and "delirium for the camera."[64] A major review of the film ran under the headline "I am NOT Cuba." Although the film was not officially banned in the Soviet Union, it ran very briefly there and did not receive wide distribution. However, in Soviet film circles, *I Am Cuba* was an instant sensation, inspiring vigorous debate among viewers and awe by more artistically-minded critics.[65] While some criticized the film for its baroque tendencies to overwhelm narrative content with visuals, others praised for its artistic mastery and cinematographic innovation.

Although *I Am Cuba* was ostensibly suppressed at home for decades thereafter, it was regularly shown to film students at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (later renamed "All-Russian State University of Cinematography named after S. A. Gerasimov," or VGIK) alongside the work of early avant-garde filmmakers as an example of high cinematic craftsmanship. However, audiences outside of Cuba and the USSR did not encounter the film until 1992, when the Telluride Film Festival hosted a Mikhail Kalatozov retrospective. After Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola subsequently sponsored the film's distribution on DVD, it quickly became a cult classic. The DVD cover advertises the film's award from the American National Society of Film

[64] For more details about the reception of *I Am Cuba* in Cuba see the Vincente Ferraz 2005 documentary about the making of the film *I Am Cuba, The Siberian Mammoth*. For a discussion of the Soviet influence on the Cuban film institutions see Salazkina, Masha. "Moscow-Rome-Havana: A Film-Theory Road Map". *October,* Winter 2012, No. 139, Pages 97-116.

[65] The March 1965 issue of *Iskusstvo kino* published a discussion of the film by the USSR Union of Cinema Workers where a variety of critics, directors and cinematographers voiced their opinions about the film "Ya – Kuba," *Iskusstvo kino* 3 (1965): 24 – 37.

Critics and calls it "one of the greatest achievements in cinema history." Ironically, while it was originally intended for the broadest possible audience as an advertisement for the revolution, *I Am Cuba* is now regarded as a "filmmaker's film."

Because the film inspired such heated debate, the otherwise reticent Urusevsky was persuaded to give a lecture on the team's artistic choices for members of the Soviet Filmmakers Union. His remarks were published in leading Soviet film journal *Iskusstvo kino* in February 1966 under the title "On Form." Two months earlier, in December 1965 the same journal had published Dziga Vertov's 1929 manifesto "Man with a Movie Camera"— its first appearance in print.[66] Both works were part of a larger publishing trend catalyzed by the newly flexible climate of Krushchev's Thaw, which allowed for the cautious rehabilitation and publication of avant-garde filmmakers, writers, and artists (such as Vertov, for example).[67] Monographs on Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and Alexander Rodchenko appeared in 1957, 1962, and 1965 respectively,[68] while contemporary film artists such as Urusevky, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Sergei Parajanov

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[66] Vertov's initial attempt to publish the manifesto in *Pravda* prior to the release of the film failed. Instead, *Pravda* published a much abridged announcement of the release of the film. See: A. Fevralskii, "Dziga Vertov I Pravdisty." *Iskusstvo kino* 12 (1965): 68-74.

[67] On Thaw in Soviet culture see: Kozlov, Denis, and Eleonory Gilburd eds. *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture During the 1950s and 1960s*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2013.

[68] See: Abramov, Nikolai. *Dziga Vertov*. (Moskva: AN SSSR, 1962). Volkov-Lannit, Leonid Filippovich. *Aleksandr Rodchenko risuet, fotografiruet, sporit*. [Moskva, Iskusstvo, 1968].

published their most powerful statements on film and cinematic form in *Iskusstvo kino* in 1966 and 1967.[69]

These concurrent publications facilitated dialog between film artists of the 1920s and 1960s, thereby inspiring, enriching and expanding the discussion and practice of 1960s cinema. It is also important to note that, as both Kalatozov and Urusevsky began their education and work in the arts in the late 1920s, their trajectories in Soviet cinema formed a unique bridge between the two periods. Their work on *I Am Cuba* became the culmination of their partnership—a kind of manifesto of the new possibilities in Soviet Cinema.

Although Fidel Castro seized power in January of 1959, he did not announce his alliance with the Soviet Union until the spring of 1961. The joint production of the film that would become *I Am Cuba* was initiated just a couple of months later at the second Moscow International Film Festival, which was attended by a delegation from the recently formed (1959) Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC). Kalatozov and Urusevsky spearheaded the project, seeing in the collaboration a chance for a unique artistic experiment. At this point, the duo was a team of cultural giants. Both had won international and domestic prizes for their work in film, and Kalatozov had held a number of high administrative posts in the Soviet film industry.[70] Kalatozov hired

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[69] See for example Andrei Tarkovsky, "Zapechatlennoe vremia," *Iskusstvo kino* 4 (1967): 69-79. See also Sergei Paradzhanov, "Vechnoe dvizhenie," *Iskusstvo kino* 1 (1966): 60-66.

[70] In 1936 –1939 Kalatozov served as the director of the Georgian Film Studio in Tbilisi. During WWII, in 1943 –1935 he was an attaché of the Soviet Embassy in the United States as a representative of Soviet cinema. In 1945 – 1948 Kalatozov was in overall charge of the Soviet feature film production. He also made a number of films in this period, including the Cold War propaganda film *The Conspiracy of the Damned* (1950) for which he was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1951. See *The BFI Companion to Eastern*

acclaimed poet Evgeny Evtushenko to compose a poetic script for the film. Although Evtushenko had no screenwriting experience, he had traveled to and written about Cuba as a correspondent for *Pravda* (similar to Vladimir Mayakovsky, the great poet of the Bolshevik revolution who also composed journalistic accounts).[71]

I Am Cuba was an ambitious project in every sense—politically and financially as much as cinematographically. For the Soviet government, the project was a chance to establish tighter relations with the Cuban government via ICAIC, particularly as both nations viewed film as an important consciousness-building and propaganda tool.[72] While the film was officially co-produced, the Soviet Union provided the film stock and the technology,[73] the latter of which remained in Cuba permanently. In this way, the Soviet Union was, in effect, sponsoring Cuba's nascent film industry. This joint production was not just a cinematic propaganda project—it was a political pact.

In October of 1961, Kalatozov, Urusevsky and Evtushenko—the core creative team of the project—set out for Cuba to learn about the local revolution, as well as to secure locations and collaborators. In Cuba, they received an extensive cultural tour from Enrique Pineda Barnet, an important contemporary Cuban poet and writer. Barnet was subsequently hired to coauthor the script.

European and Russian Cinema, ed. Richard Taylor et al. (London: British Film Institute, 2000): 119.

[71] Mayakovsky wrote about Cuba in 1925, when his ship docked for a day in Havana on its way to Mexico.

[72] For a discussion of the Soviet influence on the Cuban film institutions see Masha Salazkina, "Moscow-Rome-Havana: A Film-Theory Road Map," *October* 139 (2012): 97-116.

[73] For a more detailed account of the Cuban film industry see Michael Chanan, *Cuban Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Incidentally, in his book, Chanan refers to "Soy Cuba" as a kind of "delirium for the camera" (166).

Hiring poets to helm a film project was characteristic of 1960s Soviet culture. As Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis explaine in their exploration of the era, "In the sixties, the poets were leaders, and the leader a poet."[74] They also point out that poetry as a genre was deeply connected with the revolution: "The Cuban revolution easily became a metaphor for the October revolution, because the revolutionary upheaval itself followed the logic and dialectics of art. One poet—a poem. Many poets—a revolution."[75] As the most popular and widely read poet of his generation, Evtushenko was an especially appropriate choice for the project. Vail' and Genis point out that: "Khruschev was the top poet of the period. Evtushenko composed its poetic synopsis."[76] Although Evtushenko was a master of sociocultural synopsis, his foremost and deepest talent lay in lyric poetry. In fact, the title, *Ya Kuba*, was selected before the script itself was written because, according to Barnet, it had an especially lyrical tone in Russian.

The team returned to Moscow in January of 1962, and Barnet followed them in February to continue the group's work on the project. During his four-month stay, Barnet made notes of the art and cultural events he attended with the members of the *I Am Cuba* creative team. Subsequently published in *Cine Cubano* in 1962, his reflections reveal the Soviet preoccupation with the Cuban revolution. They also reflect the focus and interests of Kalatozov and Urusevsky as they carefully curated Barnet's cultural program. This curation was also echoed in *I Am Cuba.*

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[74] See Petr Vayl and Genis, Aleksandr, *60-E. Mir Sovetskogo Cheloveka* (Moskva, NLO 2001): 328. Translations are my own.

[75] Vayl and Genis, *60-E,* 56.

[76] Vayl and Genis, *60-E,* 30.

From Barnet's notes, we can see Cuba's significant influence on all facets of the Soviet political and artistic imagination. One of the many Cuba-themed events Barnet attended during this time was prominent Soviet choreographer Igor Moiseyev's production, *Viva Cuba*. Barnet reviewed the show approvingly, writing:

> Taking a break from work, we go to see the Moiseyev (ensemble) which is doing a great show, *Viva Cuba.* It is a non-pretentious show that with simplicity and art succeeds in tactfully capturing "the Cuban spirit." Among the audience is Kim Novak. She claps enthusiastically for the pro-Cuba show. The feverish audience, standing, yells "bis" and chants the slogans of our revolution.[77]

During a trip to Voronezh, Barnet attended the premiere of *Daughter of Cuba*, an opera about the Cuban revolution. While Barnet praised it, he was more critical of other cultural events, including *Theresa's Birthday*, a Moscow stage production about Cuba. The play, "despite its good intentions towards Cuba, ended up being a whole bunch of mistakes about the Cuban reality, full of subjective distortion, picturesque mannerisms and bad taste."[78] (Critics would later level similar complaints against *I Am Cuba*.) He also observed the pervasiveness of Cuban slogans during the 1962 May Day parade in Moscow.

In the creative climate of the Soviet 1960s, Cuba was a natural subject for a manifesto project—the Cuban revolution representing a natural proxy for the Bolshevik revolution. In the Soviet imagination, the Cuban revolution "connected the powerful creative impulse of social upheaval with the exoticism of distant shores."[79] For Soviet artists, reenacting the struggle in Cuba was a way to reimagine the events and struggles of

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[77] Enrique Pineda Barnet, "After Crossing a Herring Pond," *I am Cuba:The Ultimate Edition,* pamphlet (Harrington Park: The Milestone Cinematheque, 1994): 30.

[78] Barnet, "After Crossing a Herring Pond," 33.

[79] Vayl and Genis, *60-E.*, 55.

their own earlier revolution, untainted as yet (in the Cuban context) by subsequent social and political problems. Moreover, because it coincided with the end of the terror associated with Stalin's "cult of personality," "the Cuban revolution was becoming a metaphor not only for the October revolution, but also of its contemporary reincarnation, the Thaw-era liberal revolution of the 1960s."[80]

Given this cultural atmosphere, one would argue that—despite the creative team's considerable time and effort invested in understanding the country's history and culture—*I Am Cuba* was never properly about Cuba. Instead, Cuba represented a convenient stand-in, a space onto which Soviet history—especially the history of its art—could be grafted and enriched using contemporary methods. This irony of subjecting Cuba to the dictates of another regime, even while celebrating its revolution, was lost on the Soviet film industry.

The cultural tour that Kalatozov and Urusevsky arranged for Barnet also reveals much about the two artists' artistic and cultural orientations. One of the first events that Kalatozov arranged for Barnet and Evtushenko was a private screening of various cuts from Eisenstein's unfinished work ¡*Que viva México*! The film was another recent rediscovery in the Soviet Union. Film scholar Jay Leyda had brought the raw footage, which had been shot thirty years earlier, from the US to the Soviet Union in 1957. A three-hour selection was shown to a chosen group of cinema workers, Kalatozov among them. This was to be the conceptual model for the Cuba film.

Eisenstein's footage—which was explicitly commissioned as an artistic work, not a political one—portrayed an exoticized and aestheticized version of post-Revolutionary

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[80] Vayl and Genis, *60-E.*, 59.

Mexico. Each chapter was intended to visually evoke the work of a different Mexican artist. A censor was present during most of Eisenstein's filming to ensure the work engaged Mexican culture and history rather than its politics (in direct contrast to the Cuba film).[81] Still, as the Mexican revolution of 1910 was one of the subjects of the unfinished film, it served as a model for *I Am Cuba.*

Although Cuba was the subject of their project, the creative team clearly sought to contextualize the film in the Russian revolution and its artistic heritage. Barnet cites several other exhibits, performances, and screenings he attended in Moscow as creative inspiration for *I Am Cuba*. In writing about his visit to the Mayakovsky Museum, where he admired the work of a variety of avant-garde artists, he specifically notes "an extraordinary Rodchenko exhibition" that included poster art by Mayakovsky, as well as an exhibit of Malevich paintings. Barnet also visited the Tretyakov Gallery of Russian art, where he was especially impressed by the paintings of icon-painter-turned-modernist-artist Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, and the futurist set designs of Aleksandr *Tyshler.*

In addition to the art of the avant-garde, Barnet comments on contemporary theater and film, with a clear focus on experimentalism and political theater. He speaks especially highly of a meeting with an experimental theater group in Moscow, and of a performance of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children.* To become more familiar with contemporary Soviet cinema, Barnet attended the premiere of Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), as well as Sergei Yutkevich's *The Bath House* (1962) (based on Mayakovsky's 1929 play). Barnet calls the film "a critique of the cult of personality,

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[81] See Masha Salazkina, *In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein's Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009): 1-6.

dogmatism and bureaucracy,"[82] noting its stylistic richness—a mixture of animation and Nazi documentary footage interspersed with images of paintings by Picasso and Soviet avant-garde artists. Another "cine-poetic" discovery for Barnet was Mikhail Kalik's *Sandu Follows the Sun* (1962), a film about a single day seen through the eyes of a child. Barnet immediately recognized the influence French filmmaker Albert Lamorisse's 1956 short *Le Ballon Rouge* (an influence Kalik readily admitted), suggesting the filmmaking efforts of Kalik and his Soviet contemporaries were as oriented toward Western influences as they were toward domestic audiences.

Barnet's impressions of the Soviet cultural scene (shaped as it was by Kalatozov and Urusevsky's selections), describe a vibrant and international-oriented cultural space. Most importantly, the films, exhibits and events Kalatozov and Urusevsky selected for Barnet's viewing illustrates the duo's preoccupation with the historical avant-garde. Art of the historical avant-garde was clearly, though semi-clandestinely "back" and the subject of the revolution could not be treated in a 'contemporary' way without making direct reference to it. In this way, *I Am Cuba* was conceived in conversation with works of the avant-garde, past and present.

Finally, Barnet's visits to the homes of Kalatozov and Urusevsky give a sense of how deeply embedded the two men are in the international art and cinema scene. During work meetings in Kalatozov's home, Barnet observed photos of Kalatozov with a number of prominent creative figures, including Charlie Chaplin (taken during Kalatozov's stay in Hollywood in the early 1940s while serving as a Soviet attaché for the cinema commission), Jean Gabin, and Jean Renoir (key figures of 1930s-1940s French cinema).

[82] Barnet, "After Crossing a Herring Pond," 32.

In Urusevsky's home, Barnet was astonished to find a formidable art collection, which included original prints by Vladimir Favorsky (a major Russian graphic artist and printmaker who taught Urusevsky at Vkhutemas), as well as a mosaic and some vases that were painted by Picasso and given to Urusevsky during his visit to the artist's home in France.

In his notes, Barnet mentions Urusevsky's jokes about his own "formalism." Knowledgeable as Barnet was about Soviet cultural politics (and an outright "war on formalism" in the 1930s), he seems to have understood that accusations of formalism 10 years earlier could have ended Urusevsky's career. By 1962, these "accusations" were reduced to a joke—one that Picasso himself seems to have been in on. Barnet writes:

> While visiting Picasso at his home, the painter offered Urusevsky a cup of tea. Urusevsky asked to have the tea from another cup, "the one with the brushstrokes." Picasso laughed while offering him the other cup and said: "You are a formalist; you are not interested in the content but in the form."[83]

Joking aside, form was indeed of great concern to Urusevsky. In his letters from Cuba written to his wife, Bela Friedman (who would become the film's assistant director), he wrote, "It is astonishing – no one here is thinking about form! Meanwhile it is the essence of any artistic thing."[84] In turn, form became the subject and the preoccupation of *I Am Cuba*, and the island of Cuba a playground where the creative team could experiment with new visual techniques.

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[83] Barnet, "After Crossing a Herring Pond," 29.

[84] A note for Dec. 7th 1962. Reprinted in *Sergei Urusevskii: s kinokameroi i za mol'bertom* (Moskva: Algoritm, 2002): 120.

II. Manifestos of the Avant-Garde

I Am Cuba's belated acclaim and cult status as a complex insider's film are a testament to its liminal position. The film is neither fully mainstream nor entirely experimental but straddles both in the manner reminiscent of the populist aspirations and difficult form of the art of the early post-revolutionary period. I contend that *I Am Cuba* is most productively read not simply as a work of political propaganda but as an experiment in form. Specifically the photography and written calls to experiment of Alexander Rodchenko as well as films and manifestos of Dziga Vertov are emportant context for the understanding of *I Am Cuba.*

As the token genre of the historical avant-garde, the artistic manifesto has been described by Janet Lyon and later by Martin Puchner as a "political genre appropriated for artistic ends." Filippo Marinetti is typically credited with forging the genre, which "continued to function as a political document, but whose primary purpose was now artistic."[85] This combination of the political and artistic makes the avant-garde manifesto an essentially experimental genre because it is trying to bring into existance a reality that hereto only exists in art.[86]

In the Russian context, this competition between the two types of manifesto has an especially rich history. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, artistic conceit in Russia met political reality. The essentially revolutionary genre of the manifesto (as appropriated

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[85] Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*: 3.

[86] Puchner is especially interested in the subsequent competition that developed between political manifestos and avant-garde (artistic) manifestos. As he conceives it, the history of this competition "is thus a history of struggle about the relation between art and politics, a struggle in other words, about the best poetry of the revolution." Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*: 4.

by futurists such as Mayakovsky and Vertov, as well as by constructivists such as Rodchenko) collided with the realities of post-revolutionary social transformation.

In 1922, five years after the revolution, film manifestos and polemics abounded. Major ideological and institutional reorganization was taking place, and much was at stake in terms of shaping the future direction of Soviet politics and art.[87] The manifestos of 1922 (Constructivists, FEKS, Futurists, Kinoks etc.) simultaneously constructed a new reality and competed for the rights to this construction. Although proposing sometimes radically different visions of revolutionary art, all groups agreed that in order to find the proper form, experimentation was necessary. In this respect, the Constructivist and Kinok manifestos become most relevant for *I Am Cuba.*

Now that the country had severed from the capitalist world order, a variety of new cultural approaches were vying for primacy, using the manifesto as their platform. Recognizing these social-experimental processes, Alexei Gan wrote in the Constructivist manifesto published that same year:

> We must bear in mind that our present society is one of transition from capitalism to Communism and that constructivism cannot divorce itself from the basis, i.e., the economic life, of our present society; constructivists consider the practical reality of the Soviet system their only school, in which they carry out endless experiments tirelessly and unflinchingly.[88]

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[87] See Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*. 3rd ed. (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1983): 155—169. For a discussion of institutional shifts in the early 1920s in Soviet cinema see Richard Taylor, "The Disorganisation of Organisation: The Early Twenties," in *The Politics of the Soviet Cinema, 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 64 –86.

[88] Alexei Gan: From *Constructivism* (1922) in *The Tradition Of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990): 40.

Gan highlights a desire to refelect "practical reality" which is in this moment in the process of "transition" or of social experiment. The challenge for the art of the revolution then is to capture this transition both in theme and in form.

The Constructivist preoccupation with experiment is especially relevant for *I Am Cuba.* In her study of the Constructivist aesthetic, Maria Gough asks, "What drives the Moscow Constructivists' unrelenting drive to experiment? In the broadest possible sense, it is their overall desire—equally unrelenting—to find an answer to the following question: What is the role and efficacy of the vanguard artist in the revolution?"[89]
In the name of this search, leading Constructivist artist Rodchenko experimented with easel painting, subsequently moving to three-dimensional constructions, and then to photography and photomontage throughout the 1920s. By the late 1920s, he was working primarily in photography. In his polemical article "Warning!," originally published in the May 1929 issue of *LEF* (*Levy Front Iskusstv*, i.e. *Left Front of the Arts*), Rodchenko wrote: "To put it simply, we must find, we are seeking, and we will find a new (don't be afraid!) aesthetic enthusiasm, and emotional tone for the photographic expression of our new social facts… We must experiment (p. 213)." [90] The ambiguous relationship between reality and experiment is echoed in early Soviet art. This same ambiguity is reflected in *I Am Cuba.*

As a Constructivist photographer, Rodchenko had his own visual agenda: to challenge and supplant the traditional influence of Western perspectival painting on

[89] Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 8.

[90] Rodchenko, Aleksandr Mikhailovich, *Aleksandr Rodchenko: Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings,* ed. Alexander Lavrentiev, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005): 212.

photography. In his article "The Paths of Contemporary Photography," which appeared in *LEF* in August 1929, Rodchenko is especially concerned with the "psychology of painting" as expressed in photography.[91] He notes that all photographs are taken at "eye level" or at "navel level," a precedent set by the Western painting tradition. In reality, he argues, we do not see all objects head-on. Instead, we see objects from many different angles, at various tilts and diagonals. Our cognitive process then "corrects" our vision, synthesizing the visual information into our final perception of the object. It is the job of the modern photographer, Rodchenko argues, to reverse the process of visual habituation, thereby showing the world as it is experienced without cognitive correction. "Behind this threatening template," he says, "is hidden a biased, routine education of human visual perception, and a one-sided distortion of visual thought."[92] He further points out that the "photo camera itself was adapted for a non-distorted perspective, even when perspective is actually distorted."[93] According to Rodchenko, the artist must work against the grain of technology as well as visual habituation, both cognitive and traditional.

Even as Rodchenko engaged in artistic experimentation, he also continued to teach at Vkhutein (formerly Vkhutemas) in Moscow. In 1929, Urusevsky began attending Vkhutein, then still a hotbed of avant-garde experimentation in the visual arts (fig. 1.1). Starting in the fine arts department, he worked on engraving with Favorsky, and eventually moved to photography under the influence and mentorship of Rodchenko, whose approach to vision and photography continued to guide Urusevky's work in

[91] Rodchenko*, Experiments for the Future,* 208 – 209.

[92] Rodchenko*, Experiments for the Future,* 208

[93] Rodchenko*, Experiments for the Future,* 210

cinematography.[94] Rodchenko's sharply angled, spatially disorienting portraits were designed to challenge and disrupt our natural biases.

In *I Am Cuba* Urusevsky quotes Rodchenko's compositions throughout. For example, a photo of Urusevsky taken by Rodchenko while the former was a student at Vkhutemas (fig. 1.3), is quoted almost directly by Urusevsky in the shot of Enrique, a student revolutionary from the third novella of *I Am Cuba* (fig. 1.4). Both portraits are close ups, in three quarter profile. The head of the subject is framed closely, with some of the hair cropped out by the frame. Most importantly, both shots capture the subject from below and at a diagonal. The unusual angle gives the impression to the viewer that the subject is somehow 'falling off' the page or the screen. The vertigo, potentially induced by social uphieval and revolutionary activity experienced by the subject is thereby communicated to the viewer. Critics of the film have pointed out that Urusevky's camera angles in the film are *not* dramatically substantiated (e.g., a character is not shot from above to indicate their low social standing or from below to suggest their position of power). Instead, a certain character is shot from the side, or from below and at a diagonal, to simulate the anxiety of a distressing social situation—for example, social unrest or manic enthusiasm associated with the revolution—by compromising visual stability. This inducement of a state of perpetual visual distress communicates the necessity of the revolution to the viewer, and is therefore not dramatically but sensorially motivated.

[94] Urusevsky wrote an article in *Iskusstvo kino* about his experiences with Rodchenko as a teacher. See Sergei Urusevsky, "Neskol'ko slov o Rodhenko," *Iskusstvo kino* 12 (1967): 101 –105.

Another close quotation of Rodchenko's composition occurs later in the same novella when one of the student revolutionaries is gunned down by the Batista forces and falls to his death. Rodchenko's documentary image captures a street performer with a circle of onlookers surrounding him (fig. 1.5). Shot from above and once again at an angle it was a bold challenge to standard perspective. Urusevsky's re-stages the composition of this famous Rodchenko image as people gather around the body of the student revolutionary (fig. 1.6). Even as Rodchenko's photographic work was slowly rehabilitated, more formally complex or avnat-garde images like this one were not yet widely published or shown. Urusevsky's re-staging of this image is both an ode to a former teacher and a testing of the aesthetic boundaries of Socialist Realism, newly re-negotiated during the Thaw.

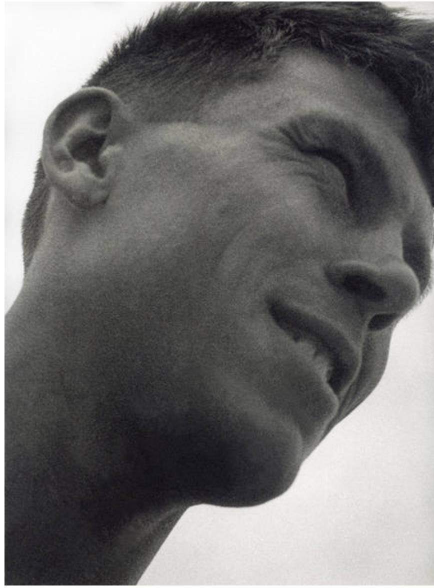

Figure 1.3. Alexander Rodchenko.
Portrait of Urusevsky while a student at Vkhutemas, 1932.

Figure 1.4. Sergei Urusevsky.
A portrait of Diego, the student revolutionary.
I Am Cuba, 1964.

Figure 1.5. Alexander Rodchenko's shot of street performers, 1931.

Figure 1.6. Sergei Urusevky's shot of murdered student revolutionary, 1964.

A parallel visual agenda to that of the Constructivists emerged from the manifestos of the Kinok group headed by the director Dziga Vertov.[95] The Kinoks glorified the ability of the camera to "see" or show the world in a way that is not possible for the eye. Their first manifesto on non-played cinema, "We. A Variant of a Manifesto" appeared in print in August 1922.[96] In it, Vertov calls for cinema to break from other art forms such as music, literature, and theater. Instead, he suggests grounding cinema in science, as it requires a machine—the movie camera—to produce a transformed vision of the world that is only possible with that machine. The camera would allow for the scientific observation of previously unseen movement, in the same way the microscope allowed for the observation of previously unseen diminutive phenomena. In referring to his work, Vertov particularly employed the words *opyt* (experiment) and *experiment* (a Latin word adopted into Russian mostly in artistic contexts) in concert with *razvedka* (reconnaissance)—all concepts suggesting a foray into the unknown, as well as learning through experience. By discussing his art using a mixture of military and scientific language, Vertov was able to rhetorically collapse the distance between aesthetic, political and scientific revolutions.

The 1923 Kinok manifesto was written as a first-person narration in the voice of the camera (or more accurately of the camera eye, or "kino-eye"). The manifesto proclaims proclaims:

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[95] Yuri Tsivian has discussed Vertov's relationship with the Constructivists, and especially with Rodchenko as mutually productive. See "Turning Objects Toppled Pictures: Give and Take Between Vertov's Films and Constructivist Art," *October* 121 (2007): 92—110.

[96] Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896–1939* (repr., New York: Routledge, 1994): 69.

> I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it. Now and forever I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them. I move apace with the muzzle of a galloping horse, I plunge full speed into a crowd, I outstrip running soldiers, I fall on my back, I ascend with an airplane, I plunge and soar together with plunging and soaring bodies… My path leads to a creation of a fresh perception of the world. I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you.[97]

In *I Am Cuba,* Urusevsky's camera is in constant motion. It flies, it crawls under, it plunges and soars. It in fact Urusevsky's camera performs most of the moves described in this manifesto, especially in the opening sequence. The voiceover narration of the opening sequence echoes this Kinok manifesto further by announcing "I Am Cuba" as the tour of the island unfolds, combining and collapsing the political and the aesthetic into one.

By the 1930s, competition between political and aesthetic concerns eventually drove the artistic manifesto out of favor. While two manifesto types initially seemed to share common goals, their paths ultimately diverged, perhaps because of the growing sense that "futurist artwork competed with the revolution."[98] In accordance with this decline, Vertov's 1929 manifesto announcing the completion of *Man with a Movie Camera* did not appear in print. Instead, as Yuri Tsivian points out, the film itself became a celluloid manifesto. Unable to publish the full text of his manifesto, Vertov inserted its

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[97] Vertov, Dziga, and Annette Michelson. "The Council of Three, 1923". *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Translated by Kevin O'Brien. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

[98] Puchner points to Breton, Trotsky and Rivera's 1938 *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art* as the last significant attempt to reposition the aesthetic manifesto as political document (co-written as it was by a professional politician and two prominent artists). Nevertheless, manifestos—both the form in general and artistic manifestos specifically—fell out of favor until their resurgence in the 1960s. See Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution,* 105.

opening lines into the opening titles of the film, thereby disseminating his statement to the public through cinema.[99] The text read:

> The film "Man with a Movie Camera" presents an experiment of cinematic transmission of visible events without the help of titles (a film without titles), without a script (a film without a script), without theater (a film without actors, decorations etc.). This new experimental work of "Kino-eye" is directed at the creation of the truly international language of cinema—TOTAL CINEMATIC WRITING—based on its total separation from the language of theater and literature.

In his note to the editor of *Pravda,* Vertov explained that he feared that audiences would not understand his film without the written manifesto to introduce it. For Vertov, the written manifesto was a crutch for his cinematic manifesto, an interpretive aid for an audience that had not yet developed the visual/compositional "reading skills" to understand his film. Eventually, however, his ambition was to reeducate his audience such that written titles and manifestos would eventually no longer be necessary.

In his edited volume of film manifestoes, Scott MacKenzie criticizes this aspect of "manifesto film" as a concept.[100] While the manifesto film can offer an "experiential level of analysis" in a way that the written manifesto cannot, the impulse to articulate the argument in writing prevails. A manifesto is a very specific speech act, one that *argues*

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[99] Tsivian, Yuri, ed. *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* (Gemona, Udine: Indiana University Press, 2005): 318 – 339.

[100] Scott MacKenzie, "Appendix: What is a Manifesto Film?" in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Scott MacKenzie (Berkeley: Unviersity of California Press, 2014): 625 – 628. MacKenzie further argues that the term "manifesto film" is often used to refer to films that act as turning points, rather than those that argue for a new way of filmmaking or a new kind of cinema. Self-reflexivity, for example, is a necessary condition for a manifesto film, but not sufficient in and of itself. The film must reflect not only on itself (as is arguably the case with Fellini's *8 ½*), but must point beyond itself and propose a new path. The manifesto film is also typically not the first film made by the artist(s), since an aesthetic needs to be worked out in practice before it can be articulated in writing. Finally, the manifesto film is usually didactic; the film's voiceover is sometimes printed separately as a written manifesto in order to affix its argument in writing.

for a new way of filmmaking. Can a film argue in the same way that a written document can? In the case of Vertov's manifesto, the film came first, and the text seems to have been composed as an aid. Indeed, the full text of Vertov's 1929 manifesto did not appear in print until 1965, when it was published in the December issue of *Iskusstvo kino.*[101] Two months later, the same magazine published "On Form," Urusevsky's articulation of the aesthetic principles he and Kalatozov developed over the course of a decade. Because of the much greater scrutiny placed on the word in Soviet culture, making a cinematic manifesto was less perilous than writing one. With the making of *I Am Cuba* and the publication of "On Form" the creative team of the film succeeded in doing both.

III. On Form

Unlike Vertov, Urusevsky did not refer to his essay as a manifesto. However, it is most productively read as such, especially when considered alongside the first nine minutes of *I Am Cuba.* As the case of Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* and its accompanying written manifesto suggests, the literary bias of Russian and Soviet culture (and the decline of the artistic manifesto) gave more room for showing than for telling. In fact, *I Am Cuba* placed so much emphasis on showing (the visual aspect of the film) that it was branded a "cinematographer's film." Subsequently, it was Urusevsky (the cinematographer), not Kalatozov (the director), who was invited to comment on this

[101] In fact, Vertov's rehabilitation began in 1957 with a re-print of his article on Mayakovsky in *Iskusstvo Kino.* See "Iz rabochikh tertradei' Dzigi Vertova," *Iskusstvo kino* 4 (1957): 112—126.

visual emphasis and the aesthetic choices made therein. “On Form” was Urusevsky’s response.

According to Urusevsky, *I Am Cuba* was never intended to be a psychological drama, and so should not be judged by the standards of that genre. Because he and Kalatozov did not know Cuba deeply, they could not create a profound psychological portrait of the place, even with the help of a Cuban screenwriter. Most broadly, the essay argues for the need for “variety” in Soviet cinema, particularly for film that favors visuals over acting or the literary quality of the film narrative. Urusevsky argues that poetic form is the most appropriate for a visual film:

> We envisioned the film as a poem, as a poetic narrative… Naturally, with poetic form, the image must play one of the leading roles. With such form, the everyday details and careful character development are completely unnecessary. However, what seemed crucial to us is the creation of an image (of the Revolution)—to the point of hyperbole.[102]

Urusevsky points to the opening sequence of the film as the most poetic, and goes on to describe it in some detail, though without articulating its implicit arguments. I will attempt to do so in the synopsis that follows.

The first point of his film manifesto is a statement of the expressionistic possibilities of film and photography. In contrast to Urusevsky’s cautious writing, his filming is bold and provocative. Tonal reversal is the first thing that strikes the eye in the opening shot (fig. 1.7) We see the tops of the palm trees, which appear blinding white against the rich black of the sky. The eye struggles to orient itself against this color reversal. This is not a negative, and yet the color is all wrong. The image is clearly

[102] The article initially appeared as: “O Forme: Beseda s Urusevskim” in *Iskusstvo kino* 2 (1966): 27 - 37. I am using the text as it appears in: Urusevskaia, I. S., and Aleksandr Lipkov. S kinokameroi i za mol'bertom. Algoritm, 2002. The translations are my own.

altered, almost a negative—but deeply textured, nothing like a typically flatter negative shot. For a moving pan, the image is also strikingly sharp, with individual palm fronds visible even at a great distance. An aerial view of the island—an otherwise standard establishing shot—is punctuated by exotic drumbeats and lurid colors. The view of this natural setting is unnatural. The camera continues to travel across the island. The eye relaxes only when the credits begin to roll with a filter applied to dim the image, which makes the credits visible against an otherwise overstimulating background.

This is Cuba as it can be seen only with the help of cutting-edge cinematographic technology—in this case, infrared film with heightened light sensitivity, a technology developed by the military for reconnaissance photography. In fact, this opening sequence marks the first use of infrared film for an artistic rather than military purpose. With this color reversal, the opening shot defiantly signals a move away from photographic "realism". The infrared film is used in *I Am Cuba* in all the scenes shot in the countryside, showing nature as somehow "unnatural" (fig. 1.7).

Andre Bazin has famously noted that the invention of photography in the 1830s freed painting from the "obsession with likeness."[103] In his film manifesto, Urusevsky uses the movie camera to enact a similar transition in cinema, freeing it from naturalistic shooting. His camerawork paradoxically subverts 'real' vision in the most realistic of formats (fig. 1.8). In his cinematographic explorations Urusevsky aims to free photography from this realism and move it closer to expressionist paining instead. Early modern art becomes his aesthetic point of reference.

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[103] See Andre Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema Volume 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 12.

Figure 1.7. *I Am Cuba* (1964) Infrared film (developed for reconnaissance photography) was especially sensitive to shooting vegetation.

Figure 1.8. *I Am Cuba* (1964) The background looks like a negative here, while the face of the actor is rendered more naturally.

Figure 1.9. *I Am Cuba* (1964) Low angle of the shot combined with 9.8mm lens exacerbates fish eye effect.

Urusevsky's painterly aspirations in cinema are reinforced in this film manifesto through his use of the 9.8mm lens. Following the aerial shot, the camera "lands" on the water and rises in a slow, sweeping arc (fig. 1.9). As it glides from the black water to the white, wispy tops of the palm trees, the image seems to ripple as if a magnifying glass is being dragged over the picture. As the camera continues to move, the trunks of the palm trees widen and spread toward the edges of the screen—retaining their natural shape toward the center of the frame, then distorting again as they move off the edge. This stretching and distorting effect—yet another step away from perceptual realism and toward expressionism—was achieved with the newest technology, the use of an extra-wide-angle 9.8mm lens.

The camera pauses on a large cross stretching into the sky, parallel with the trunks of the palm trees. The low angle of the shot accentuates the exaggerated perspective of the fisheye lens. The tops of the trees and the cross seem to shoot up, extending deeper into the screen than seems natural. Again, the eye is disoriented in the landscape – a stretching and rippling effect compromising the naturalism of the setting. It is notable that Urusevsky could have avoided much of the distortion if he stayed away from verticals and sharp andgle shots. Instead he emphasizes these, clearly looking to draw attention to this potential of the photographic image.

In various moments throughout the film, the 9.8mm lens is also used to distort faces, creating a funhouse mirror effect. This move was perceived as both politically as ethically suspect. Director and cinematographer Nikolai Prozorovsky expressed this concern in a 1965 issues of *Iskusstvo kino*:

> In this film, he (Urusevsky) chose to use the 9.8mm lens because the possibilities of this lens are enormous. It offers unprecedented depth of field, the ability to

> quickly transition from an extreme close up to a long shot. But this lens has its drawbacks – it deforms people. It is one thing when such distortion acts as an expressive technique, it is another thing when it accidentally distorts faces or nature. When he shoots the interior of the bar, the distortion is valid, substantiated as artistic expression. But when the same technique is used to film people whom we are supposed to love, it is scary to look at them. One cannot forgive this.[104]

Urusevsky addresses this accusation in "On Form" by placing his artistic choices into a broader art historical context: "I see no distortion here. This is visual intensity, not distortion. What about the drawings of Matisse, Picasso—they are all in 9.8mm. And the classics, such as El Greco—he also created in 9.8mm."[105]

Urusevsky's choice of visual artists rather than filmmakers as examples here—particularly Matisse, whose artwork was returned to display in Soviet museums during the Thaw, and Picasso, who had a major exhibit in the Soviet Union nearly a decade prior—is especially significant. These artists were long held suspect and their recent rehabilitation gave Urusevsky the reference point to leverage similar changes in cinema. In his subsequent discussion, Urusevsky also refers to Renaissance painter El Greco and the avant-garde poet Mayakovsky as master "distortionists" and claims that distortion is expressive—that which makes art, art. Art does not show reality, but rather reality as it is experienced and distorted by someone else. Urusevsky claims his own distortion of the photographic image as part of this larger context.

As a manifesto, *I Am Cuba* is also a call to challenge the standard perspective, reminiscent of Rodchenko's Constructivist preoccupations. In the next sequence, the camera lurks behind and below a standing oarsman as he uses a long pole to push a canoe downstream (fig. 1.10). The low angle of the camera tilted up at the oarsman's

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[104] Prozorovsky, "Ya – Kuba," 28.

[105] Urusevsky, "O Forme," 32.

backside and the legs of the oarsman reinforce the unnatural stretching of the image. The man's legs at the bottom of the screen look sturdy and powerful, larger than natural; his top is disproportionately smaller. His body shoots up at the same angle as the palm trees in the preceding shot—a dehumanizing bodily distortion. The low angle of the camera makes the exotic setting of a Cuban village—naked children playing in the water, women hanging laundry just as the camera eye approaches—even more exotic and strange. The foreign setting and the extravagant visuals are not complementary; rather, they seem to compete for the viewer's attention.

The boat continues on—ducking under clotheslines, through a dark and dangerously low tunnel, yet emerging unscathed on the other end. The position of the camera and the curvature of the lens together reinforce the illusion of greater depth. It is as if the image is drawing the camera eye deeper into itself, into the interior of the island and the village. Another bridge—a wide wooden plank thrown at a diagonal across the river (from bottom left to top right)—approaches, and the canoe glides under it.

The camera remains on the bridge at the bottom left of the screen, filming upward from a low as a woman crosses with a basket on her head and a naked child in tow. As she traverses the field of vision, moving toward the left, the plank of the bridge extends unnaturally far to the right. The shot packs in maximum dynamism as our gaze is simultaneously drawn in opposing directions. This boat journey, with its sharply low angles (a clear ode to Rodchenko) enhanced by new technology (a nod to Vertov) challenge standard cinematic visuals and promote the mobility of the camera.

Figure 1.10. *I Am Cuba* (1964), Cuban village distorted.

Figure 1.11. *I Am Cuba* (1964), Havana rooftop party.

A call to the freedom of the camera is another central argument of this cinematic manifesto. The dizzying possibilities of camera motion suggested by Vertov are emphasized most fully in the opening sequence whenre the camera is never still. Aggressive jazz music interrupts the village scene. The camera jerks down dramatically in a single motion—from slightly above the heads of the three performers to slightly below—mimicking the head-bang of a jazz musician. The image pans right to left, from the face of one musician to the next, then begins to spin around the group. The musicians themselves spin clockwise, slightly lagging behind the camera so that their faces are always caught in profile, never quite head-on. The camera sinks to a low angle view as the musicians begin to jump upward, their feet now flying above the eye of the camera (fig. 1.11). The camera's elaborate dance with the musicians—first mirroring their motion, then mimicking it just out of step, and finally moving rhythmically away from their upward leap—dynamically draws the viewer into the shot.

In "On Form," Urusevsky expresses his intention of making the viewer one with the camera. "We are always trying to make sure that the viewer was not a passive observer of the events taking place on screen, but lived the events, and was an active participant in the action."[106] He especially emphasizes his use of the handheld camera for the majority of *I Am Cuba* (noting that he does not promote this method for all occasions). Previously, the camera could fly, drive, and gallop (per Vertov). The handheld camera is the next step in technological development in that it allows for the cinematic replication of *human* motion. Urusevsky describes the use of the handheld camera in *The Cranes are Flying,* where actress Tatiana Samoilova held the camera

[106] Urusevsky, "O Forme," 30.

pointing up at her face during a running scene in order to capture the jerky rhythm of running. While none of the actors in *I Am Cuba* hold the camera, the handheld device interacts with their motion more intimately, at close range, showcasing the new abilities of the cinematic apparatus.

In a self-conscious move, our attention is drawn to the act of recording as much as to the performance itself when we are shown a camera crew (lights, cinematographer, and an announcer) positioned behind the performers, recording not only their performance, but the camera that is recording the scene as it unfolds for the viewer (fig. 1.12). Here, the presence of the cameraman on screen and the variety of recording technologies echo Vertov's self-reflexive preoccupation. An ultramodern skyline frames the performers, extending behind and below them. They seem to stand precariously above the city, provoking a sense of vertigo in the viewer. As the camera drops down and tilts up, the figures are now framed only by sky, increasing the sense of spatial disturbance and dislocation.

This dislocation marks the next phase of the camera's long journey. The musicians now leave the platform with the camera following behind, moving amid a group of contestants in a swimsuit competition. The models twirl, pause before the eye of the camera, and then move off-screen as the camera imitates their spinning motion. The camera pauses on one woman and follows her as she moves away. Behind her, we again glimpse the camera crew. One of the crew members, microphone in hand, gestures at the women, the skyline behind, the pool on the rooftop below; the camera follows his gestures with its gaze. Focusing on the pool, the camera begins to descend, sliding slowly

through the air and panning around its own axis, providing the viewer with the full panorama of the city.

The uninterrupted motion of the camera is carefully punctuated by changes in subject. The camera pauses on another level of the multi-tiered rooftop, revealing an applauding audience. The descent continues to the poolside tier, where the camera refocuses on a waiter as he makes his way through the pool party. A man takes a drink from the waiter's tray, and the camera now focuses on him as the waiter recedes into the crowd.

As the eye of the camera follows its new subject through the crowd, another cameraman appears in the foreground. With his 16mm handheld home camera, he slowly moves around two women as they play cards, carefully composing a shot for his home movie (fig. 1.13). The camera's long, uninterrupted motion from the concert on the top tier down to the lower levels—its tilting and panoramic pans, its zigzagging motion through the crowds—is possible only with a handheld device, yet this appearance of a consumer handheld camera suggests even more new potential applications of this technology.

The eye of the camera watches him move around the women as the camera itself moves around the whole group, another unmistakably self-reflexive gesture (fig. 1.14). Perhaps to address potential accusations of modernist self-reflexivity, in his essay Urusevsky later draws parallels with the self-conscious narration techniques of Mayakovsky and Pushkin in his essay.[107] The self-reflexivity in exposing the device, he argues, is not a modernist invention but a common feature of all artistic practice.

[107] Urusevsky, "O Forme," 35.

Figure 1.12. *I Am Cuba* (1964)

Figure 1.13. *I Am Cuba* (1964)

Figure 1.14. *I Am Cuba* (1964)

Moving on from the card players and panning right, the camera observes the man hand his drink to a woman who stands on the roof ledge, protected only by a thin railing. This makes for another vertiginous shot as we teeter on the ledge with her, the skyline again behind and below. The woman moves off toward the pool and the camera follows, picking out another woman and following her from her sun chair to the edge of the pool and into the water. A special waterproof case was constructed for the camera to capture this shot. In the pool, the camera bobs up and down, as if coming up for air and then diving back down, to observe the bodies of the swimmers gliding past in slow motion. In "On Form," Urusevsky mentions that this last shot was seen as especially "unnecessary"—its entire purpose was to show that the camera can now swim as well as fly.

The rooftop shot proceeds for nearly four minutes of uninterrupted motion—a statement of pure visual zeal. The dynamism of the shot is remarkable considering the fact that it is captured in a single take, with no cuts and no traditional montage. Instead of splicing different shots together, the camera is able to effect its own "montage" by rapidly moving from one subject to another—facilitated not only by the handheld camera's lighter, more mobile profile, but by the 9.8mm lens that allows for quick focal shifts. These technological improvements are further aided by the complex system of cranes that enable the camera to move two stories in the course of the shot. In contrast to Vertov, who argued that montage was the essence of film, Urusevsky's manifesto sequence illustrates the dynamic possibilities of uninterrupted filming.

Conclusion: A Manifesto for the Future

Contemporary critics challenged Urusevsky's call to expressivity. In a review of the film, Mikhail Bleyman wrote: "Consumed by the realization of their goal of visual expressiveness, the authors seem to have forgotten that the word 'expression' in itself suggests *something* that requires expression."[108] While Urusevsky's essay obliquely identifies "form" as the object requiring expression, Bleyman's criticism does capture the film's genre confusion. With the manifesto sequence framing the four poetic novellas, the film sits uncomfortably as a whole, vacillating awkwardly between the political manifesto, the artistic manifesto, and a narrative film.

In addition to these competing genres, *I Am Cuba* combined the potentially conflicting agendas of the creative team itself. While Urusevsky's work reveals the influences of Rodchenko and Vertov, Kalatozov was clearly more drawn to Eisenstein as a model in taking on a film project celebrating a foreign revolution in the manner of *¡Que viva México*! However, with its uncomfortably heterogeneous generic position, *I Am Cuba* is perhaps most similar to Eisenstein's *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (1927), which was commissioned for the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution. In the scathing article "October," published in *Novy Lef* in 1927, Osip Brik wrote:

> If Eisenstein had not been loaded down by the weighty title of genius, he could have experimented freely and his experiments might have brilliantly demonstrated the impossibility of the task set him. Now however, alongside pure experiment, he was obliged to create a complete jubilee film, and therefore to combine experiments with form and trite conventions in a way that sits curiously in one and the same work. The result is an unremarkable film.[109]

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[108] Mikhail Bleiman, "Povod dlia ser'eznykh razdumii," *Sovetskaia Kul'tura Kino* 29 (1965).

[109] Reprinted in *Movies and Methods: Vol. I: An Anthology* ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985): 15 – 21.

Eisenstein was also unhappy with the film, recognizing its genre confusion. He wanted to experiment *and* he wanted to make a revolutionary epic. However, productive experimentation requires the freedom to make mistakes – a freedom he did not have.

In contrast, Viktor Shklovsky's more nuanced review, "Eisenstein's *October*: Reasons for Failure"[110] (the title referred to the doubts Eisenstein himself expressed about the film), offered praise in the guise of a critique. Much like Brik, Shklovsky found moments of irony in the film to be problematic, but for different reasons. Yes, Shklovsky argued, Eisenstein's visual metaphors were novel, but "new formal means when created are always received as comic, by virtue of its novelty. The Cubists were received in this way, as were the Impressionists, and this is also the way Tolstoy reacted to the Decadents, and Aristophanes to Euripides." Because Eisenstein's technique was so new, it could not be applied to the more serious moments in the film: "To extend the device to the pathetic parts of the film would be a mistake. The new device is not yet appropriate for the treatment of heroism."[111]

In other words, because so much of *October's* key moments were heroic/epic, Eisenstein's new devices, though of great future value, were *not yet* a good fit for the subject matter. For Shklovsky, *October'*s weakness was expressed chiefly in the fact that the film's innovations did not occur during its strongest narrative and ideological moments.

> The film's failures can be explained by the fact that there is a dislocation between the level of innovation and the material—and therefore the official part of the film is forced rather than creative; instead of being well-constructed it is merely

[110] Reprinted in translation in: Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896–1939* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 20.

[111] Shklovsky, "Eisenstein's *October,*" 21.

> grandiose. The thematic points of the film, its knots of meaning, do not coincide with the most powerful moments of the film.

Shklovsky's conclusion is most powerful. Using the stages of the revolution as a metaphor, he wrote, "…but art needs advances rather than victories. Just as the 1905 revolution cannot be evaluated simply as a failure, so we can talk of Eisenstein's failures only from a specific standpoint". For Shklovsky, *October* was not a failure, but an advance toward a later success, one of the many experiments on the road to a breakthrough. Similarly, the visual flourish of *I Am Cuba* was too experimental to successfully bear its dramatic and political political weight. As with *October,* the most visually stunning scenes do not correspond to the moments of greatest dramatic content.

Grigori Chukhrai, another prominent Soviet director, with whom Urusevsky collaborated on the critically acclaimed *The Forty First* (1957), was also troubled by Urusevsky's excessive emphasis on vision. In his biography, he writes:

> The only point of contention between us was the argument about "fine art cinema." He believed that film is a visual art and wanted to prove it in practice. I held to a different opinion and wanted to protect him from making mistakes but I could not. His film *I Am Cuba*, a cinematographic masterpiece, was forgotten soon after its release.[112]

Much like *October,* it is perhaps most productive to view *I Am Cuba* as an advance rather than as a victory. The rediscovery of the film precisely when the political propaganda of the project had become irrelevant is telling. Released from its political baggage and the institutional constraints of Soviet film industry, the film can now be seen simply as a part of a larger experiment, and a call to vision.

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[112] Grigorii Chukhrai. *Moe kino: O vremeni, o sebe* (Moskva: Algoritm, 2002): 111.

CHAPTER TWO

The Literary Model: Adapting Platonov's *Homeland of Electricity* at The Experimental Film Studio

Figure 2.1. *Homeland of Electricity* (1967)

"What was the new cinema made of? It was made of texture," observed the writer and director Andrei Konchalovsky reflecting on his start in Soviet cinema in the 1960s. "The look of the film was what made it a work of art. All else (the language, philosophical content, emotional drama) was just an addendum."[113] Konchalovsky was well poised to make such a categorical statement. His first film, the 1961 *Mal'chik i golub* (*The Boy With a Dove*) was built of lyrical visual sequences and contained no dialogue at all. His first major film script, co-written with Andrei Tarkovsky, is the 1966 film *Andrei Rublev,* which narrates the life of an icon painter who feels compelled to take on a period of extended silence, twenty years of "purification from language," before he is able to paint his masterworks. Konchalovsky's self-described preoccupation with the visual material

[113] Andrei Konchalovsky, "Moi Shestidesiatye. O rabote kolleg i sobstvennom debiute," *Iskusstvo kino* 5 (2004): 107.

of film and his exploration of the relationship between word and image on screen were typical of the creative climate of the 1960s and for directors such as Marlen Khutsiev, Andrei Tarkovsky and Larisa Shepitko among others.[114] At the heart of this logophobic creative impulse lay both the verbose tendency of the Soviet cinema as well as the institutionalized control of the film industry at the level of the script.

The use of the script as the primary site of censorship for a proposed film project began to change shape in the late 1950s. Konchalovsky recalled, "We were given a budget to film one script, and we filmed something quite different, and no one was paying much attention to this."[115] It is in this space between the script and the finished film that Konchalovsky and his contemporaries seemed to find creative room. He describes discovering and "colonizing" this space as a great joy – this space was the space of experiment. True, many films that were approved on the level of the script were ultimately shelved upon completion (including his own 1966 film *The Story of Asya Klyachina*), but as he points out, they were still made. Their 'shelved' films did not get the wide distribution of released films, and yet Konchalovsky notes that they were seen by the immediate film community, making their small but potent artistic mark. For Konchalovsky's generation of filmmakers, art was not just a product – it was valued as a process. The process itself was seen as having distinct aesthetic value.

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[114] For a contemporaneous discussion of common themes and tendencies in the Soviet cinema of the 1960s see Maia Turovskaya, *Da i net: o kino i teatre poslednego desiatiletiia.* Iskusstvo, 1966. See also Vail', Petr. "60-e: sovetskoe kino i stil' epokhi. Razmyshleniia i kommentarii." *Close-Up: Istoriko-teoreticheskii seminar vo VGIKe: Lektsii 1996-1998 gody*, ed. Aleksandr Troshin (Moskva: VGIK, 1999). Evgenii Margolit, *Zhivye i Mertvoe: Zametki k Istorii Sovetskogo Kino 1920-1960-kh Godov* (Sankt-Peterburg: Masterskaia "Seans," 2012).

[115] Konchalovsky, "Moi Shestidesiatye," 110.

This chapter considers cinematic experimentation at the boundary between film and linguistic media in the cinema of the 1960s. Specifically, it argues that literature was both the site of control and the inspiration behind formal experiment. As a case study I will focus on Larisa Shepitko's short 1967 film *Homeland of Electricity* (*Rodina elektrichestva*), an adaptation of Andrei Platonov's 1939 eponymous short story. Specifically I focus my analysis on Shepitko's use of anamorphic distortion of the image – a vertical stretching of the picture (fig. 1) – to communicate the linguistic experimentation and distortion characteristic of Platonov's texts. The fact that the film was the first project of the newly formed Experimental Film Studio (Eksperimental'naia Tvorcheskaia Kinostudiia: ETK) is important. Although the studio was formed as an economic experiment in film production it became an unwitting harbinger of formal experiment as well. My analysis of the aesthetics as well as institutional aspects of film production of *Homeland of Electricity* allows me to examine the revalorization of the concept of 'experiment' and the resulting aesthetic and institutional transformations in the newly liberated cultural arena of the Thaw.

Larisa Shepitko's film was part of a larger literary project at the Experimental Film Studio proposed by the artistic director of the studio Vladimir Ognev. Initially, the proposed 'film almanac' *Beginning of an Unknowable Century* (*Nachalo nevedomogo veka*) was to consist of four so called 'film novellas' (short films) all based on the literary works of major writers writing during and about the revolution.[116] The project was one of many commissioned for the fiftieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution and Ognev

[116] For more information on the project see Valerii Fomin, "Nachalo nevedomogo veka" in *"Polka" Dokumenty. Svidetel'stva. Kommentarii,* ed. Valerii Fomin (Materik, 2006), 33-54. Translations from this text are my own.

wanted the "literature of Revolution" to be used as source material for the films. In addition to Larisa Shepitko's adaptation of Andrei Platonov, Alexander Smirnov adapted Yuri Olesha's short story *Angel* for the almanac, while Elem Klimov was to adapt Isaac Babel's *Betrayal.* The title of the almanac comes from a fourth novella, Genrikh Gabai's adaptation of Konstantin Paustovsky's *Beginning of an Unknowable Century*. Unfortunately, *The Beginning of an Unknowable Century* film almanac cannot be analyzed as a coherent whole. Klimov's film was never made. Shepitko's and Smirnov's films were both shelved until 1987. Gabai's film was the only one of the projected almanac that was released as scheduled in 1967.

The writers to be adapted (especially Platonov, Babel and Olesha) were all experiencing renewed popularity in the Thaw period. The formalism of their work, their experimentation with forms of narrative as well as with language itself, was previously seen as ideologically suspect and had largely prevented their wider publication during the Stalin period.[117] By contrast, in the new relaxed climate of the Thaw the recognition of the "high literary quality" of these works was giving the film project greater legitimacy.[118]

To note the literary bias and, by extension, the logocentrism of the Soviet film industry is commonplace in film scholarship dealing with Russian and Soviet cinema.[119]

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[117] Adaptation of texts of writers who were newly republished and previously suppressed was part of the trend in adaptations of the 1960s. Stephen Hutchins and Anat Vernitsky give a more thorough overview of the theoretical approaches to *ekranizatsiia* in Russian culture in their introduction to the edited volume *Russian and Soviet Film Adaptations of Literature 1900 – 2001: Screening the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 8-12.

[118] Fomin, "Nachalo nevedomogo veka," 35.

[119] For more recent discussion of this see for example Masha Salazkina's discussion of logocentrism in the introduction to *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema*, ed. Kaganovsky, Lilya, and Masha Salazkina (Bloomington; Indianapolis:

Starting in the 1930s, film was seen as a primarily narrative art with great propaganda potential. And literature, rather than visual art, was set as the best model for cinematic narrative construction. Thus, professional writers were invited to write for the cinema, and adaptations of existing 'ideologically appropriate' literary works were especially common. What happened when the literary texts proposed for adaptation were difficult or experimental texts? In analyzing Shepitko's treatment of *Homeland of Electricity*, I contend that the impetus to de-emphasize the word in Soviet cinema came from literature itself.[120] Platonov's difficult text maps out the limits of language encouraging cinematographic treatment that extends beyond the literariness of the script and the text. The prevalence of adaptations of more complex literary forms (difficult prose or poetry) in this period marks a key aesthetic transformation of Soviet cinema.

This chapter starts by tracing the discussions on the pages of the official Cinematographers' Union journal, *Iskusstvo kino*, about the need for institutional support for experimentation in cinema as well as experimentation with film institutions. Looking to the avant-garde period as well as to contemporaneous models in other Eastern Block nations, the authors call for alternative institutional structures for the creation, distribution, and reception of cinema. I show the Experimental Film Studio to be one manifestation of this larger conversation. I then turn to the discussion of the interaction of literature and film, looking at the way film institutions came to be centered on the script

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Indiana University Press, 2014): 8-10. My own discussion of literary bias and logocentrism is less an argument about the *quantity* of adaptations in Soviet cinema than about specific manifestations of the literary bias across the cinema institutions and about the impact of this bias on film aesthetics.

[120] See, for example, the 1962 Sergei Yutkevich film *Bania* (*The Bath House*). Based on a Mayakovsky play, it takes the complexity of the original play as a pretext for experimenting with mixing animation and documentary film footage.

as the literary basis of the film. I further outline the way the literary bias came to manifest itself in the cinema and became a source of institutional and artistic contention. I argue that adaptation of a difficult literary text serves as the site of artistically and institutionally productive experimentation in the case of Shepitko's adaptation of Platonov's *Homeland of Electricity*. Olga Meerson's analysis of linguistic automatization and re-familiarization in Platonov's language is a point of departure for my analysis.[121] Meerson's use of images (painting) to demonstrate the way Platonov's language functions establishes a feedback loop between language and image and is especially helpful in conceptualizing Shepitko's visual treatment of Platonov's text. This case study shows how artistic communities reinterpret and reshape politically conditioned institutional structures through creative projects.

I. Experimental Structures (production, exhibition, genre)

The *Beginning of Unknowable Century* was the first project of the Experimental Film Studio, and its failure to come together as a unified feature was especially worrisome for the future of the new studio venture. The Deputy Chairman of the Cinematographic Committee V. Baskakov reportedly protested, "Who over there allowed you to turn an economic experiment into an ideological experiment!?"[122] The studio had been founded by Grigori Chukhrai (1921-2001) as an economic experiment in film production. By the time of the film almanac's inception, Chukhrai was an award-winning director who became interested in the economics of film as part of a larger interest in the economy of

[121] See Olga Meerson, *"Svobodnaia veshch": Poetika neostraneniia u Andreia Platonova* (Berkeley: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1997).

[122] Fomin, *Polka,* 44. Translations from this text are my own.

production.[123] Although Chukhrai himself came from the 'creative class' of cinema workers, in his framing of the studio's mission, he expressed no explicit interest in formal or aesthetic experiment as such. In the triumvatite of art, propaganda, and entertainment his greatest priority was the latter, or rather the 'fruitful' interaction between cinema and its audiences. Along with other prominent industry workers, he despaired at the unnecessarily slow and wasteful process of film production in the Soviet Union.[124] Chukhrai attributed this wastefulness to the separation of production from audience tastes, as well as to a lack of sufficient incentive for the production team, especially for directors, to make films that would be of interest to audiences.

Chukhrai explains in his biography that the production teams were paid a salary that was set by the industry, so their pay was in not connected to the success of the individual film and depended instead on seniority. This environment, more economically stable for the filmmakers than in any other film industry in the world, allowed cinema workers to create works of propaganda that were not dependent on audience tastes. At the same time, it meant that workers had no incentive to speed up the process of production. As long as the members of the creative team were engaged in a project, they were receiving their standard pay. Chukhrai argued that this was a pervasive problem for all Soviet industries and he advocated a system of bonuses and incentives to increase productivity.[125] With the help of Vladimir Pozner, who had been educated in the West

[123] For Chukhrai's recollections of the studio see his *Moe kino* (Moskva: Algoritm, 2002), 165-188. Also see B. Landa, "Eksperiment vedet v budushchee. Interv'iu s V. Pozner, G. Chukhrai," *Sovetskii ekran* 3 (1966).

[124] For an example of the call for fundamental changes in Soviet film industry see V. Surin, "Nuzhny bol'shie peremeny," *Iskusstvo kino* 7 (1965): 13-22.

[125] For an outline of the structure of the film industry see Irina Cherneva, "Rynok protiv plana? Eksperimenty v organizatsii i oplate truda v sovetskom kino (1961-1976). Chast'

and took on the position of head producer of the new studio, Chukhrai drew up a new economic model and presented it to the Cinematographic Committee.[126] Their greatest worry was that the new model (similar as it was to the NEP model) would be condemned as profit-based and therefore ideologically suspect. However, Baskakov's statement about 'ideological experiment' suggests the Party was less concerned about the political underpinnings of the new economic model than the ideological implications of narrative and form in the completed films. The hyperrealism of Smirnov's *Comissar* (an adaptation of Yuri Olesha short story *Angel*) and the strange formalism of Shepitko's work worried the Cinematographic Committee.

The creation of the Experimental Film Studio did indeed have larger social implications. Behind the call for economic experiment lay the question of cinema's social position.[127] The cultural reorientation of the 1960s led once again to the question of whether cinema was to be understood by the state primarily as propaganda, money-making entertainment, or as art. Although the explicit interest of Chukhrai in this case was economic (or audience-centered), the creation of the studio was part of a larger discussion among film professionals about the need for institutional support for a variety of films. Some, like Chukhrai were more interested in drawing audiences and creating genuinely popular films, others were making arguments for institutional support for

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pervaya," *Soviet History Discussion Papers - DHI Moskau*. Accessed January 30, 2017. http://www.perspectivia.net/publikationen/shdp/cherneva_rynok.

[126] Chukhrai, *Moe kino,* 171.

[127] See the second part of Irina Cherneva's article "Rynok protiv plana? Eksperimenty v organizatsii i oplate truda v sovetskom kino (1961-1976). Chast' vtoraia," *Soviet History Discussion Papers - DHI Moskau* (2016):19, Accessed January 30, 2017, http://www.perspectivia.net/publikationen/shdp/cherneva_rynok_ii.

less ‘main stream’ and more experimental work. As Susan Reid convincingly shows in her study of audience responses to contemporary art in the 1960s, audience taste was no longer presumed to be unified, and was in fact widely varied and dynamic.[128] The notion of diversity of audience tastes gained legitimacy during the Thaw. Conversations about the need for a variety of institutional structures for the production, distribution and critical reflection on film, including those that would support experimental work in cinema, became more frequent.

The very name of the Experimental Film Studio echoed the recently formed Béla Balázs Experimental Studio in Budapest, Hungary. The Hungarian studio, formed in 1959, was designed more explicitly to encourage formal investigations and experiment with film language and form. A somewhat belated 1966 article in *Iskusstvo kino* discussed the Béla Balázs Experimental Studio for Short Experimental Film as a kind of laboratory.[129] The article reports that not all the films made at the studio were released for wider audiences, and some were retained for ‘internal use’ only. It introduced the notion that some behind the scenes work in the cinema may be necessary to prompt internal development of film language, even if the film does not reach a broad audience. The very idea of experimentation in cinema without the plan to make and release an actual film is similar, in spirit, to Lev Kuleshov’s theories about filmmaking as described in his 1941 primer *Basics of Filmmaking* and taught in his workshop throughout his teaching career at VGIK. Although Kuleshov is not explcitly mentioned in the article, the article’s discussion of a laboratory for the development of film language echoes the

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[128] Susan Reid, “In the Name of the People: The Manege Affair Revisited.” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History,* 4 (2005): 673 – 716.

[129] Curiously the article was part of a section written anonymously. See Anon, “Budapesht. Kinostudiya imeni bely balasha,” *Iskusstvo Kino* 3 (1966): 99-100.

experimentation of the 1920s – dictated, in part, by the necessity of shortages of film stock and equipment at the time.

A more detailed and polemical article written ostensibly for the tenth anniversary of the Béla Balázs studio appeared in *Iskusstvo kino* in 1969.[130] The writer argues that institutional support for experiment is more crucial in cinema than in other arts. Film is an art form based in technology, and relatively fast technological advances create the need for experiment with technology and form. On the other hand, cinematic devices are incorporated and become dated relatively quickly, sending workers of the cinema into perpetual search for fresh means of expression. Because film needs substantial institutional support for production (much more so than other arts) experimental laboratories in the manner of the Béla Balázs studio are essential to the kind of experimentation that continues to propel cinema forward. The author of the article also argues that short films are an especially appropriate genre for experiment, since they are much faster and cheaper to make. The Béla Balázs studio foregrounds short film as its signature format and genre, fostering an experimental community where young directors can build skills and experience before undertaking feature-length projects. The article does not advocate the creation of a single institutional entity like the Béla Balázs studio in the Soviet Union. Instead, the article names the VGIK studio, which specialized in production of student films, the Gorki studio, which specialized in children's films, and "other creative units within Mosfilm and other major studios" as possible harbingers of the short experimental genre, with the Experimental Studio as one such "creative unit."

[130] A. Karaganov, "Bol'shoe iskusstvo malogo e'krana" *Iskusstvo Kino* 5 (1969): 59-62.

Production was only one aspect of the institutional support for experimental work that directors called for. Distribution and reception were no less important, and they received the most vocal support from Mikhail Kalatozov. In September 1962, just two months after the launching of the Experimental Studio, the film director Mikhail Kalatozov along with the popular poet Evgeny Evtushenko published an open letter in *Iskusstvo kino* calling for the creation of a "movie theater for experimental film." The letter proposed that such a theater would play more 'difficult,' less easily accessible work, and that it would also be a venue for lectures and conversations with filmmakers. "This would be, so to speak, a theater for 'difficult film,' a kind of laboratory for the new experiment in exhibition and propoganda of film art." The short run and alleged 'incomprehensibility' of the many significant works of Soviet cinema (from Eisenstein's *Potemkin* to Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood*) are cited as examples of the need for a more specialized exhibition venue where such works could find the requisite exhibition support in the form of accompnying lectures and workshops. The writers also evoke domestic and foreign precedents as models for the new venue. They highlight a theater with a similar profile that was successfully functioning in Warsaw, Poland, as well as a theater that screened more experimental work in Moscow in the 1920s.

Most interestingly, and in a curious reversal, the open letter harnesses the cultural/political capital of the concept of 'propaganda' to make an argument for the arts. The writers describe the new theater as a kind of cine-club, "[O]n the one hand, a place of propaganda of aesthetic knowledge, on the other, a laboratory that studies audience perception." As they explain: "This is a question of propaganda for films that are unusual in form but important in their content and in their artistic significance, a question of the

aesthetic education of film audiences." The concept of "propaganda" is carefully peppered throughout the letter, but in most cases it is propaganda of *film as art* rather than the use of art in the service of socio-political messaging that is invoked. The letter calls for a site of exhibition that would both support the artists and foreground the education of the audience through cinema. Implicitly, it emphasizes the artistic possibility of cinema over its potential as political propaganda.[131] The open letter and its polemic reversal of values is a striking example of the possibilities of discussion around social position of cinema in the Soviet Union in the early 1960s.

It is also notable that this discussion of experiment was taking place on the pages of *Iskusstvo kino* the main journal of the cinematographer's union rather than in a more marginal venue, and was written by one of the most prominent Soviet directors of the time. By championing institutional and aesthetic 'experiment' in the mainstream industry, Kalatozov was clearly modeling his promotion of experiment on those of Kuleshov, Vertov and Eisenstein before him. The letter stands as both an appeal to the history of experiment in Soviet cinema, and as an important gesture of self-fashioning for a director like Kalatozov, who was thereby vocally aligning himself with the avant-garde. Given the high cultural status he enjoyed as a Soviet poet, Evgeny Evtushenko's support bolstered Kalatozov's aesthetic statement.

[131] A 1963 article in *Iskusstvo kino* announced that an experimental theater, "a laboratory of the new experiment in the exhibition and propoganda of film art," will be created in the renovated space of the theater currently called "Ekran" (Screen). See B. Rodinov, "Eksperimental'nyj kinoteatr budet!" *Iskusstvo kino* 2 (1963): 7. It is unclear that the theater ever operated in a way that was intended by the authors of the letter.

II. Cinema without Cinema

Vladimir Ognev's choice of *Homeland of Electricity* for cinematic adaptation was no doubt strategic. Platonov's story (dated 1926) was originally published in 1939 in the journal "Industry of Socialism" and re-published in a collected volume in 1962. Because of its publication history, the story was a relatively safe choice for adaptation. The story is loosely based on Platonov's own experience working as an electrical engineer on irrigation and land-reclamation projects. The protagonist and narrator, an engineering student, is sent to a distant village to help run the electrical station – thus bringing light and enlightenment to the masses. He arrives to the village to find the small electrical station run unreliably by the power of a war-trophy German motorcycle. While the villagers claim that they need electricity to have light for reading, what they need even more urgently, as assessed by the narrator, is electricity to irrigate communal land threatened by the ongoing drought. Rather than help the villagers feed their mind, the narrator-protagonist becomes concerned with helping them feed their bodies. In the course of his stay in the village, he orchestrates the construction of the irrigation system (with the help of the same motorcycle), and when he returns to the city he is secure in the knowledge that he performed a small part of his duty. On the level of the plot, "Homeland of Electricity" is a typical Socialist Realist production narrative – a politically appropriate work for a jubilee project.

Although Shepitko's reworking of *Homeland of Electricity* into a literary scenario was approved for production, on ideological grounds the finished film was shelved upon

completion.[132] This situation was common in the Soviet industry, much more so than in the "commercially run" Western film industries, where this kind of financial waste would have been more carefully monitored. In her article on the Soviet screenwriting tradition, Maria Belodubrovskaya explains that part of the problem was the Soviet convention of the two-script system – the writing of a 'literary script,' followed by the writing of a 'director's script,' typically by the director.[133] The literary script was the premiere site of censorship, and was censored by the Central Committee. This literary script was structured more like a work of literature and it was often difficult to tell what the finished film would look like based on its literary version. The director used the literary script to develop a director's version, a rewriting that was considered part of the creative process of the director. To save time, the director's script was censored on the studio level. This second script, as well as the filmic work itself, often departed in significant ways form the version censored by the Central Committee. Belodubrovskaya argues that, contrary to the common belief that the Soviet film industry was closely controlled, there were significant lapses in censorship. In fact, the industry never developed a successful censorship model.[134]

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[132] Of the four texts proposed for adaptation, only three films were completed (Shepitko's, Smirnov's and Gabai's) and only one, Gabai's adaptation of Paustovsky's *Beginning of an Unknowable Century*, was released in 1967. Upon completion, this latter film was assessed as being of 'low artistic quality'. It is currently lost. See Fomin, *Polka*, 47-48.

[133] Belodubrovskaya explains that the literary scenario formed as a kind of compromise between the 'iron scenario' and the 'emotional scenario' see her "The Literary Scenario and the Soviet Screenwriting Tradition," in *A Companion to Russian Cinema,* ed. Bridgit Beumers (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 252-257).

[134] Belodubrovskaia, *The Literary Scenario,* 252-257.

If the literary script was not a step by step director's plan, and thus not an effective tool of censorship, what was the logic behind its development? The 'literary script' was a unique format of the Soviet film industry, a product of the heated polemics about the relationship between film and literature of the late 1920s. By far the loudest statement against literature and the word in cinema came in the mid and late 1920s from the Kinoki group headed by Dziga Vertov. In their manifestoes, publicized throughout the 1920s in print as well as on screen, the group called for cinema to disengage from older narrative forms such as literature and theater. This is why the opening titles for Vertov's 1929 *The Man with a Movie Camera* famously proclaimed that the film was made with no scenario (script) and did not use titles at all. The Kinoki decried the script, as well as cinematic titles, as unnecessary crutches, thereby aligning themselves with the modernist preoccupation with medium specificity and with the larger anti-narrative movement of the avant-garde.

It is then no surprise that the early attacks on this tradition of "montage cinema" (later called "formalism in cinema") advocated for the unification of literature and film at the level of the script. In 1928, the film critic Adrian Piotrovskii demanded the unification of film and literature on a mass scale:

> Life should gush out into the cinema along the canals of literature, refreshing, renewing, enriching the formal fabric of our cinema. Mass literary conferences under the slogan 'To the aid of the cinema', [and] prolonged campaigns should bring about the mass involvement of writers in the work of the cinema.[135]

The ecstatic image of literature irrigating cinema alluded to the so-called 'script famine' that was commonly believed to have plagued Russian cinema since the 1910s. By the

[135] Adrian Piotrovskii, "Kino i pisateli," *Zhizn iskusstva* 6 (1928).

1920s it referred specifically to the dearth of ideologically sound scripts. Writers were invited into the world of cinema in order to help meet the demand. In the 1920s the above statement was part of a debate about how best to accomplish the political function of cinema. Both Vertov and his opponents agreed that cinema was an ideological tool and that it should *not* be dependent on audience tastes for funding. They also agreed that cinema, as an ideological tool, should be fully funded by the government. The chief disagreement was regarding the degree of control that the government should exercise over *form,* which was understood as part of the ideological content of film. The intelligibility of film to the wider masses was another point of contention. Film artists like Vertov and Eisenstein wanted to 'educate' audience tastes by exposing them continuously to the constantly evolving vocabulary of film language, while the Soviet governing bodies wanted a more immediate impact for their propaganda message.

However, the proponents of 'the literary' in cinema were victorious on an institutional level. By 1929, after a massive restructuring of the film industry, cinema was finally brought under effective control of the Party, with a high premium placed on ideological control at the level of the script.[136] After a full articulation of the doctrine of Socialist Realism at the Writers' Union meeting in 1934, literature was tasked with guiding the way of realism in all the arts, cinema included. The move surprised no one.[137]

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[136] As quoted in Richard Taylor, *The Politics of Soviet Cinema.* For a detailed discussion of the restructuring of the film industry in the early post revolutionary years see his *The Politics of the Soviet Cinema 1917 – 1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[137] For a description of the debates in cinema in the 1930s see Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society, 1917-1953* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) especially 127-142 on censorship and 187-192 on film famine.

One critic wrote about bringing Socialist Realism to the cinema through the script in 1937:

> Artistically, this means first of all, a total denunciation of montage cinema and of the establishment of the rule of dramaturgy; this follows from the necessity for a truly realistic understanding of our life and the creation of truthful characters. Secondly this means a creation of a clear demarcation of responsibilities during production and of conferring the authorship of the dramaturgy of the film to the screenwriter and the authorship of the production to the director.[138]

In 1934 montage cinema and the primacy of the director in this mode of filmmaking were explicitly named as the central problem. In her discussion of the literary script in the Soviet screenwriting tradition, Belodubrovskaya argues convincingly that the only way to demote the directors, who traditionally saw themselves as ‘authors’ of their films, was to elevate the importance of the writer in the creation of the film.[139] Drama became the model for this elevation of the writer, since theater plays were traditionally read as literature. Indeed, the references to “dramaturgy” in the critic’s comments above were specifically calculated to achieve this shift. If the film script was understood as a work of dramaturgy with literary/artistic merit of its own (like the works of Shakespeare of Chekhov), the position of the filmmaker would be at least equal to if not subservient to that of the script writer, as was the case in theaters.

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[138] Nikolai Otten, “Snova ob emotsionalnom stsenarii,” *Iskusstvo Kino* 5 (1937): 30-35.

[139] According to Peter Kenez, by the late 1930s Stalin (much like Goebbels in his position as Minister of Propaganda of Nazi Germany) micromanaged the film industry. He suggested topics for future films made edits to submitted scripts, and often changed film titles. His simplistic understanding of the process of film production led him to believe that the script writer is the ‘author’ of the film, while the director merely follows the script writer’s direction. Belodubrovskaya on the other hand argues against the idea that this separation between the functions of the director and the writer in the making of the film may have come directly from Stalin, and provides a more complex cultural analysis of the film industry. See Belodubrovskaia, *The Literary Scenario,* 252-254.

In 1938, another restructuring of the film industry led to just such separation between the screenwriter and the director.[140] The film industry was now run much like any other part of the planned economy, with a pre-assigned quota for the number, type and subject matter of films. Most importantly, the film director was now treated as any other film worker, rather than as a creative worker, and received a salary for his work. Only the writers retained authorial rights to the film scripts, receiving commission for their work and retaining the status of artist in the film industry. As a result, Soviet screenwriters were generally better compensated than the directors, an unusual situation in world cinema.[141] The writers' greater responsibility for the film also lead to the subsequent repression of many scriptwriters during Stalin's purges, while relatively few directors suffered the same fate.[142]

The formation of the dual script system described above was only one expression of the literary bias. The literary focus of the Soviet film industry in fact had many other manifestations. Literary scripts were expected to read as fully fleshed out pieces of writing, becoming a kind of literary genre all their own. Much like dramatic works written for the stage, these scripts were routinely published in a variety of film, literary and entertainment journals and read as literature. An entire literary journal, *Kinostsenarii* (Film Scripts) dedicated exclusively to publication of scripts has existed in Soviet Union since 1973. Directors wrote and published scripts to give life to the films they could not make. Scripts penned by famous authors, screenwriters or directors were often published

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[140] Cherneva, "Rynok protiv plana," 1.

[141] Cherneva, "Rynok protiv plana," 4.

[142] For a discussion of workers of the cinema repressed in the 1930s and 40s see also A. Latyshev, "Hotelos' by vsekh poimenno nazvat…," *Sovetskii ekran* 1 (1989): 20-23.

later as compilations – a kind of proxy for the films that were never made. Paradoxically, while the 'script crisis' was a commonplace of official discourse about the arts, literary film scripts were being published in the Soviet Union at an astonishing rate. Soviet cinema was becoming a cinema without cinema.

By the time Shepitko was re-working Platonov's text for the screen, the literary bias of the Soviet film industry was deeply entrenched on the level of production, distribution, and criticism. Meanwhile, the unspoken distance (and difference) between the script and the finished film widened, with directors like Shepitko exploiting this aporia for their creative ends. Critics also refrained form discussing this difference for fear of being accused of formalism. As a result, this distance usually became visible only when the finished works were shelved, as it happened with Shepitko's film. *Homeland of Electricity* premiered in theaters twenty years after the film's completion, in the winter of 1988. In June of the same year, a highly polemical article by Mikhail Iampolski, called "Cinema without Cinema," appeared in *Iskusstvo kino*, deriding the logocentrism and literary bias of the Soviet film industry. Iampolski wrote:

> Since the 1920s, the film crisis in the Soviet Union has been interpreted as a script crisis…. The responsibility for the trouble in our film is being put upon *words* as opposed to *images.* I have not heard a single complaint about insufficiency of film language. Soviet film mentality is essentially *logocentric*.[143]

Iampolski further argued that "Soviet film criticism compared to film criticism abroad is hardly interested in cinematic qualities, and is as logocentric as the films themselves." Writing in a style of an op-ed, he was clearly trying to stir discussion at what seemed like

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[143] Mikhail Iampolski, "Kino bez kino," *Iskusstvo kino* x (1989): 88-94. Reprinted in English in *Russian Critics on the Cinema of Glasnost* ed. Michael Brashinsky and Andrew Horton, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 12.

a ripe moment. Back during the 1960s, the distance between the script and the finished film could be explored only as long as it was not named in print, another testament to the greater pressure that Soviet culture put upon words. The replacement of the entire editorial board of *Iskusstvo kino* in 1971 signaled that even the cautious and opaque discussions that did take place in the 1960s went too far.[144] Criticism of the distance between word and image, and between the script and the screen, became possible only in the late 1980s, in the newly liberalized cultural climate of glasnost.

Iampolski returned to the topic of literary bias a year later in a more detailed article for *Iskusstvo kino*, titled "How to be an Artist."[145] Here he surveyed the complex relationship between literature and film, ironically using the example of the latent literary bias of the most 'visual' of Soviet directors, Andrei Tarkovsky. Iampolski argued convincingly that the writer has been the model artist in Russian culture beginning in the eighteenth century, citing Yuri Lotman's work on Nikolay Karamzin as an example. Tarkovsky's vocal irritation with Eisenstein's quasi-verbal logic of montage, challenged by his own focus on the irreducible quality of durational visual experience, is then seen by Iampolski as a kind of rejection of this logocentric tendency. And yet, he points to Tarkovsky's use of poetry and rhetoric as grounding elements of his films. With the writer held up as the model of the artist, Iampolski shows how Tarkovsky grappled with the high status of words, literature, and writing in his visually mesmerizing films. The height of this exploration comes in the 1960s. Tarkovsky and his generation of

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[144] In 1971 the entre editorial board of *Iskusstvo kino* was replaced. See Vladimir Semerchuk, "'Smena vseh' na ishode ottepeli" in *Kinematograf ottepeli II*, ed. Vitalii Troianovskii (Moskva: Materik, 1996): 120 - 159.

[145] Mikhail Iampolski, "Kak byt' khudozhnikom?" *Iskusstvo Kino* 3 (1990): 25-36. Translations from this article are my own.

filmmakers (Shepitko and Konchalovsky among them) both harnessed and destabilized the high standing of the word in Russian culture. In his cinematic work and in theoretical polemics, Tarkovsky explored the dynamic relationship between the word and image as it developed in Soviet cinema from the 1920s to the 1950s. A more sustained critical analysis of this issue, as seen in Iampolski's articles from the late 1980s, was prompted by the recovery of the many shelved films of the 1960s during the 1980s. Larisa Shepitko's *Homeland of Electricity* is one of the films that were shelved and then recovered decades later. In the following pages I will focus on the way Shepitko's film navigates the space between the text and its visual rendering.

III. Visual syntax: A Case Study

In part to speed up the production process, Shepitko herself reworked the text of *Homeland of Electricity* for the screen, changing the ending of the Platonov original. Shepitko's script emphasizes and makes obvious the paradoxes of Platonov's labyrinthine syntax and narration. In the text of *Homeland of Electricity* Platonov distracts the reader with the narrators' positive statements about the success of the motorcycle-powered irrigation project. And yet, if we follow carefully the logic of the events – the explosion of the distillery, the only source of fuel for the engine running the motorcycle – the project manifestly failed. Even as the narrator concludes, "One of my tasks in life had been completed,"[146] if we pay attention to the logic of the events rather than to the narrator's pronouncements, we notice that his labor ultimately brings no fruit.

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[146] Platonov, *Soul and Other Stories*, 279.

In Shepitko's screen version it is not the distillery, but the motorcycle itself – the symbol of the triumph of technology and ultimately of communism – that explodes.
As the villagers gather to watch the motorcycle engulfed in flames, it begins to rain (fig. 2.2 and fig. 2.3). In the film nature itself intervenes on behalf of the communist project. The rain extinguishes the fire resulting from the explosion and feeds the parched earth. Drought and the subsequent famine are, presumably, averted, though not through human labor or the power of industrialization, but due to the forces of nature. The voiceover narration in the film notes that the villagers, in their fear and anguish about the impending drought, forgot to hope for rain. The closing lines of the film script, delivered through the narrator's voiceover, are taken directly from Platonov's text – though from the middle rather than from the end of the story. "It was this same hope for the future communist world," the voiceover muses, "hope that was necessary for their daily labor, hope that was the only thing making them human." Hope, a humanist trope of the Thaw era, rather than labor, is held up as a tool of communism. The narrator's reflections on the nature of hope, humanity and communism provided a more elliptical, though still seemingly acceptable to the censor, ending in the film script.

Figure 2.2. *Homeland of Electricity* (1967)

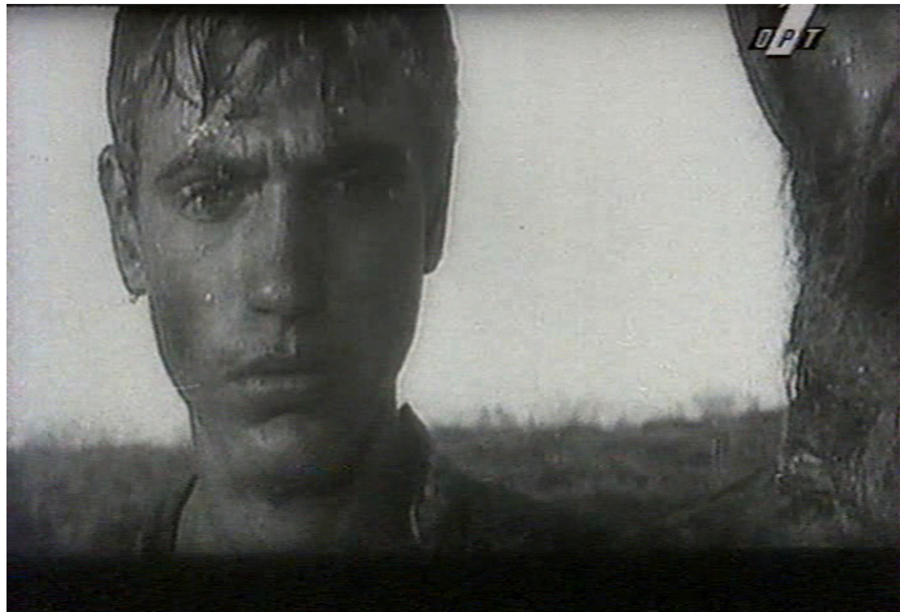

Figure 2.3. *Homeland of Electricity* (1967)

Shepitko's narrative changes were easily accepted by the script board, but it was the look of the film that eventually caused problems. The first screening of the three short films comprising *The Beginning of Unknowable Century* was met with immediate

criticism at the Artistic Council, while one reviewer noted that the film *Homeland of Electricity* "demands the most serious attention." According to these critics, while Platonov's story exposes the real difficulties of rural life, it nevertheless depicts "ordinary, living people, who actively seek a better life." The reviewer writes:

> On screen however, as it seems to me, we see such terrifying, such hopelessly scorched earth, that it is impossible to even imagine its revival. Upon this fundamentally dead earth walk creatures that resemble the living dead more than they resemble live men and women. They are incorporeal phantoms who have already renounced all that is living, rather than village folk in need of an electricity generating machine in order to read, live, and so on.[147]

The reviewer further complained about the shift of "certain conceptual emphasis" in the course of filming, and the resulting departure from the literary sources in the "intonation and meaning" of the film. The "conceptual emphasis" was to be found in its visual realm. Although the reviewer's language is vague, it suggests that it is largely the visual departure from the literary material, the *look* of Shepitko's picture that made the film ideologically faulty.

A complex exploration of the relationship between word and image is signaled already in the opening shot of Shepitko's film. In the establishing shot, the text of the central Soviet newspaper *Pravda* (Truth) fills the screen. The camera pans across the printed page, where headlines announcing drought and famine, and images of the cracked earth dominate. As printed words fill the screen the narrator's voiceover is taken directly from Platonov's text, with no hint of departure from the authoritative literary original. The opening lines of the film and the story are the same: "It was the hot dry summer of

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[147] Fomin, *Polka,* 46.

1921, my youth was passing."[148] The wordplay between *shlo* (was ongoing) and *prohodila* (was passing) take us from the specific temporal and spatial setting to the existential question of life's passing. This sentence sets the tone for both the story and the film. Both works are explicitly preoccupied with the juxtaposition of the physical and the metaphysical (rather than with the psychological). The narrator's messianic journey to the famished village of Verchevka to bring light to the masses further reinforces this theme.

The change in the film's "conceptual emphasis," noted by the reviewer above, occurs not on the level of the text as it is shown or narrated. It occurs through the plastic quality of the image, the slight stretching of the picture that becomes progressively more pronounced as the film goes on. The stretching effect is less noticeable early in the film in the more intimate shots of the narrator (fig. 2.4) and becomes more pronounced when we see the figures in full length (fig. 2.5). In the scenes of the narrator's arrival to the village, as he observes a religious procession – the villager's prayers for rain in the midst of a drought – the picture appears especially elongated, stretched and somewhat unsettling to the eye. The figures look unnaturally long and slim, making them appear as "incorporeal phantoms". Because of the stretching, the entire space of the screen seems somehow otherworldly, marking it as part of another reality. The subtle stretching results in the lingering feeling of discomfort and displacement during the viewing, even though many viewers would not be able to identify the distortion as the source of their discomfort right away. Although the review does not name the distortion explicitly, it is

[148] In the original "Шло жаркое сухое лето 1921 года, проходила моя юность." Unless otherwise noted I use the Chandler and Meerson translation of Platonov. Andrei Platonov, *Soul: And Other Stories*, trans. Robert Chandler and Olga Meerson (New York: NYRB Classics, 2007): 269-271.

this aspect of the picture that pushes it over the edge and makes the figures appear "otherworldly," metaphysical, rendering the film ideologically suspect.

Figure 2.4. *Homeland of Electricity* (1967)

Figure 2.5. *Homeland of Electricity* (1967)

To achieve the stretching effect, a special anamorphic lens attachment was used during filming, extending the image vertically and making all characters appear longer, stretched or, as some have noted, "iconic." Anamorphic technology (anamorphic – from the Greek "form again") was developed for the newly popular wide screen format.[149] Anamorphic lens attachments squeezed the image horizontally during the filming. The image was then normalized and widened horizontally to fit the wide screen during the printing/projection process. The experimental move on the part of the creative team was to bypass the normalizing process, and thus retain the visual distortion. The novelty of the use was in showing the technique mid-process. Rather than taking part in the emergence of the popular technology directly, Shepitko plays with it, exploring and exposing the ways in which it manipulates and distorts photographic image. The viewer's tendency to treat photographic representations as unmediated, true, or real, is subtly foregrounded and confronted in the process.

Shepitko used the distortion to elaborate on the messianic theme of Platonov's story in what I will call 'inverse Pieta' sequence (fig. 2.6). The protagonist arrives to the village as a kind of Messiah. The villagers had been praying for rain and are presented with an engineer instead. The Messiah image is activated and reversed when the narrator, a young man, resolves to carry back to the village an old woman who can no longer walk. Instead of the sacrificial body of a young man in the arms of an old woman, as in the traditional "Pieta" genre of Christian painting, we are presented with an inverse image, an old woman cradled in the arms of a young man. A number of cues in the text suggest to

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[149] Wide screen technology was developed (in 50s and 60s) to create a more spectacular theater viewing experience, to bring audiences back to the theater after the popularization of television. Dmitri Korzhikhin, the cinematographer on the picture, initially suggested the use of the cinematographic technique.

the reader that the old woman is in fact the sacrificed body. At one point in the conversation she says "worries and work took the flesh off me long ago" and pulls off her head covering, exposing her balding head.[150] The young man's subsequent decision to "dedicate his whole life to her"[151] further reinforces the activation of the messianic discourse and its reversal.

Shepitko's film forces us to dwell on this image in a relatively long and striking sequence. In the three shots that comprise this sequence the figures are shown against three different terrains, moving across the screen, then moving toward the camera. The stretching of the image feels especially pronounced here, the body of the young man exaggeratedly elongated and the figure of the old woman appearing compressed, almost folded. With this sequence the viewers automatically perform two 'corrections,' one on the level of the image quality (re-stretching the image) and one on the level of the 'genre' of Christian painting.

[150] Platonov, *Soul and Other Stories*, 266.

[151] Platonov, *Soul and Other Stories*, 267.

Figure 2.6. *Homeland of Electricity* (1967)

Shepitko's interest in experimenting with visual distortion was inspired by Platonov's use of language. As Thomas Seifrid points out, Platonov's prose expertly brings out the avant-garde aspect of Socialist Realism, namely its stated aspiration to "become a form of praxis."[152] Platonov's characters are predominantly builders, struggling to shape Soviet slogans into existence. Both reality and language seem to escape their grasp and their creations are misshapen distortions. In his works from the mid 1920s on, Platonov begins to "dislocate words from their ordinary contexts in ways that engender new, often grotesque meanings."[153]

To highlight the ties to Platonov's language most of the dialogue as well as the voiceover narration in Shepitko's film are taken directly from Platonov's text. Following the images of *Pravda* that introduce the drought, the narrator reads out a letter summoning him to the village of Verchevka. The narrator reads the letter almost in its entirety enough to give the viewer the sense of its odd language. Somewhat absurdly for an official document, the letter is both metered and rhymed.

> Comrades and citizens, don't waste a tear, amidst a world so poor and dear. Our power of science now raises like a tower; our thoughtful power will soon wipe out this Babylon of lizards and of drought. […] Our hearts are warlike, vast, so do not cry, you who are poor of belly, this deathly thing will pass by and we shall eat pie with jelly. We can hear the beat of the machine, the light of electricity can now be seen, but we need help to make things even better in the village of Verchovka, because our machine used to belong to the Whites, it came into the world as a foreign interventionist and its nature makes it reluctant to aid us.[154]

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[152] Thomas Seifrid, "Platonov, Socialist Realism, and the Avant-Garde" in *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment, ed.* John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996): 236.

[153] Seifrid, "Platonov, Socialist Realism, and the Avant-Garde," 239.

[154] Platonov, *Soul and Other Stories*, 262-263.

[Tovarishchi i grazhdane, ne trat'te vashi zvuki sredi takoi vsemirnoi bednoi skuki. Stoit kak bashnia nasha vlast' nauki, a prochii vavilon iz iashcherits, zasukhi razrushen budet umnoiu rukoi. […] Gromadno nashe serdtse boevoe, ne plach'te vy, v zheludkakh bedniaki, minuet eto nechto grobovoe, my budem est' pirozhnogo kuski. U nas mashina uzhe gremit, svet elektrichestva ot nei gorit, no nado nam pomoch', chtob eshche luchshe bylo u nas v derevne na Verchovke, a to mashina ved' byla u belykh ran'she, ona chuzhoiu interventkoi rodilas', ei psikh meshaet pol'zu nam davat'.]

Just as Soviet slogans were fed to the general populace though poetry and song, this deputy chairman actually composes his letters in rhyme, elevating mundane correspondence through artistic form. The logic of transforming everyday life into art with the intrinsic ability (or at least aspiration) of Socialist Realist art to turn art into reality is evoked in the rhyming gesture. The resulting long list of promises of impending plentitude (triumph of science that will result in widespread economic prosperity) reads as a blatant distortion - an unusually frank satire of Soviet propaganda on Platonov's part.

The direct quotations introduce the strangeness of Platonov's literary language to the viewer. His linguistic "stretching" and narrative twisting then serve as a kind of pretext for Shepitko's visual elaborations on his semantic distortions. In her analysis of Platonov's "poetics of non-defamiliarization" Olga Meerson notes that Platonov's texts are full of "slightly strange distortions of the expected – be that idioms, word order, or word combination."[155] As she puts it Platonov both relies on clichés and meaningfully distorts them "in order to overcome the prescriptive linguistic autopilot of Socialist Realism from within." The reader is forced to automatically correct and normalize Platonov's distortions in order to make her way through his texts without getting lost.[156]

[155] Olga Meerson, *Poetika neostraneniia u Andreia Platonova* (Oakland, California: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1997): 44.

[156] Meerson, *Poetika neostraneniia,* 43.

The impact of Platonov's texts is achieved with the help of the reader, who re-familiarizes the idiom made newly unfamiliar through the 'misspeaking' that is typical of Platonov's characters. For example the mechanic tells the narrator, "Just because there's nothing to eat, you think the people don't need to read?"[157] This is an inversion of the more commonsensical "How can we read when there is nothing to eat?" The reader is enlisted in automatically correcting the 'errors' in slogans, idioms, mixed metaphors, and so on. Conversely, as Meerson shows, Platonov also makes the reader complicit in normalizing statements that are unethical, unbearable or logically faulty.

Joseph Brodsky famously wrote that Platonov took language into semantic dead ends, making it difficult to talk about. And so, in her discussion of Platonov's language, Meerson's key examples are visual. As a kind of visual analogy of the "automatic correction" of Platonov's language, Meerson offers the sixteenth century paintings of Giuseppe *Arcimboldo,* whose merging of the genres of still life and portraiture verges on the grotesque. Platonov, much like Archimboldo, is an artist who reverses genres and mixes conventional ways of depicting and apprehending reality. Like Archimboldo's late Renaissance contemporaries, Soviet citizens had internalized the Soviet slogans and Marxist rhetoric and developed a complex relationship with social, linguistic and artistic conventions. Relying on this internalized sloganeering, Platonov's characters routinely "misspeak," confusing slogans with reality in uncanny linguistic concoctions. Readers of Platonov's texts are forced to automatically correct these 'mistakes,' thereby becoming complicit in the Soviet sloganeering and the artistic project of Socialist Realism.

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[157] Platonov, *Soul and Other Stories*, 269.

Similarly, the audience of Shepitko's film automatically corrects the slight distortion, normalizing the elongated, slightly uncanny image. Platonov's readers skip over his linguistic distortions; Shepitko's viewers are compelled to "normalize" the distorted image. Because the distortion is slight, the viewers perform it automatically. The viewers perform this automatic correction subconsciously, completing the function that would be typically performed by anamorphic transfer technology. The stretched images come to resemble icons, which in their traditional stylization deliberately signal the depiction of a metaphysical plane. The stretched figures of the villagers thus appear as martyrs of the revolution rather than the "ordinary men and women" in the critical review of the film. In stretching the image Shepitko signals this otherness to the viewer, and in normalizing the image the viewer becomes complicit in reducing the experience of these men and women to something ordinary, even as they are sure to fall victim to the impending famine. Through this stylization of the image Shepitko is also implicitly posing a challenge to the cinematic aesthetic of Socialist Realism.

The narrator's response to the rhymed letter that summons him the village is a further commentary on art. He remarks "Secretary Zharyonov was evidently a poet, but Chunyaev and I were practical, working men. And through the poetry, through the enthusiasm of the secretary we were able to see the truth and reality of the far away and unknown to us Verchevka."[158] In separating himself from the deputy chairman, the artist, the narrator suggests that in this case the artistic form of the letter is a kind of disguise, a screen behind which, or with the help of which, one can uncover something else. Just as Seifrid suggests, "Platonov ironically shows art to be most "real" when it portrays failure

[158] Platonov, *Soul and Other Stories,* 263.

to act on the world."[159] This suggestive commentary on art prompted by Platonov and elaborated on by Shepitko is left as a kind of ellipsis at the end of the film. The long and complicated history of the discussion of "the real" in art is hinted at and left for the viewer to ponder. The relatively tame formal experimentation in Shepitko's film and its eventual shelving marked one of the boundaries of the possible in the Soviet film industry of the 1960s.

IV. Conclusion

The year 1962 was a turning point for Soviet arts. With the official establishment of the Experimental Film Studio in July of 1962, and the open call for a theater for experimental film appearing on the pages of *Iskusstvo kino* in September of the same year, it seemed that the state was ready to loosen its control on the arts. However, in December 1962, Khrushchev's famous intervention in the Manezh exhibit of contemporary and mostly "difficult" art introduced new uncertainty into the creative climate and into the discussions around experiment in the arts.[160] The Manezh affair marked "the collapse of the officialization of dissent," as Matthew Jesse Jackson argues in his study *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes*.

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[159] Seifrid, "Platonov, Socialist Realism, and the Avant-Garde," 244.

[160] For a discussion of the "Manege Affair" see N.M. Moleva, *Manezh: God 1962* (Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel', 1989); L.P. Talochkin and I. G. Apatova, eds. , *Drugoe iskusstvo: Moskva, 1956—76. K khronike khudozhestvennoi zhizni,* vol, 1 (Moskva: Moskovskaia kollektsiia, 1991), 99-120; Alexander Glezer, "The Struggle to Exhibit," in *Soviet Art in Exile,* ed. Igor Golomshtok and Alexander Glezer (New York: Random House: 1977), 107-8.

Jackson discusses the subsequent confusion regarding what was allowed in the artistic and cultural arena.[161] He writes:

> The limits of "censorship" could never be staked out definitively – and that was *the* central problem of cultural production in the late Soviet world, particularly following Khrushchev's removal from office in October 1964… For Kabakov and his friends, it was not dissident struggle against state censorship that defined their lives, so much as a perpetual labor to interpret officialness correctly, to determine which limits were flexible, which more stringent.

The artists whose works were on display were all members of MOSKh (Moscow Artists Union) and, much like the cinema workers, they were officially employed by the state. As members of the union, these artists had job security, stable incomes, access to art materials, as well as a variety of cultural privileges. The state bureaucracy occasionally persecuted them, "while at other moments it would provide them with an indispensable 'umbilical cord of gold,' but neither gesture would be performed without its opposing term."[162] Jackson argues that understanding the unofficial artists as state employees is key to their poetics: many were employed as children's books illustrators or held similar positions while making 'unofficial' art in their spare time.

The same argument extends well to the poetics of Soviet film workers. Creative conditions were similar, yet more institutionally constricted for filmmakers, because of their total dependence on government-run studios for access to expensive filmmaking equipment. As the article about the Béla Balázs Experimental Studio argued, advances in technology necessitated constant experiment. However, just as experiment was important for the development of film language, it was equally important for helping film artists to

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[161] Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago; London: University Of Chicago Press, 2010): 77.

[162] Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group*, 79.

understand the limits of censorship, so as to know what was allowed and what was possible. By making works that pushed formal or stylistic boundaries, young directors like Shepitko were engaged in testing both the expressive means of film and the limits of censorship. They often found the license or inspiration for testing these limits in works of literature.

Short films were a key for testing the limits of censorship, as suggested by the Béla Balázs studio model. It is economic considerations no doubt that prompted the Experimental Studio to propose a compilation of short films rather than a single full length feature as the studio's first project. Writing about the Béla Balázs studio in 1988 the American film scholar Andrew Horton suggested that cultural and political realities make an American clone of the studio impossible. In the Eastern Bloc, where most experimental projects were state-sponsored, the possibility of a state-sponsored experimental studio was real, though precarious and ultimately short-lived.

The *Homeland of Electricity* was perhaps the most formally "experimental" project of the Experimental Film Studio, which operated for a mere ten years, between 1965 and1975. The Studio's subsequent projects were much more formally cautious and calculated to attract popular audiences. Parodoxically, according to Chernova, the studio was shut down precisely because of its success as a 'laboratory' and as a small scale experiment in economics of production. Chukhrai mostly corroborates this version in his memoirs. The economic lessons learned by the Studio were then introduced into larger studio models (longer pre-production time, bonuses for filmmakers etc.), making the existence of the separate entity of the Experimental Film Studio obsolete. Its first project, *Beginning of Unknowable Century*, was also a laboratory rather than a popular audience

project through which the studio was also establishing its identity, trying to define and delimit its own brand of experiment.

CHAPTER THREE

Revolution in the Archives: The Scale of State Sponsored Experiment in *Pervorossiiane*

Figure 3.1. Scenes from *Pervorossiiane*, directed by Aleksandr Ivanov and Evgeni Shiffers (Leningrad, Lenfilm, 1967).

The recent spike in interest among film scholars in archival film and the gradual restoration and reclamation of lost film in Russia are changing the understanding of the history of the Soviet film industry. One film, recently restored after more than forty years of obscurity, illustrates particularly well the creative strategies Soviet directors used to produce formally and aesthetically complex work within the state-run film industry. The 1967 film *Pervorossiiane* [*Firstrussians*] directed by Evgeni Shiffers and Aleksandr Ivanov is truly remarkable for its experimental ambition, but remains mostly unknown.[163] This chapter

[163] The film was first shown in 1993 in St. Petersburg at a Lenfilm festival as part of a "Lost Lenfilm" series. In 2008 a digitally restored version of the film premiered at the archival film festival at Belie Stolby. In 2009 the film was shown at the Moscow

builds on recently published archival materials in connection with the film and engages in visual analysis to forge a new direction for conceptualizing experimental work in Soviet cinema, a continuation of the polemics and aesthetics of experiment that originated in the 1920s.

Completed in 1967, *Pervorossiiane* was one of the many films commissioned for the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution and was shot at Lenfilm, one of the largest Soviet film studios.[164] An anniversary feature, *Pervorossiiane* is drama of the hope and failure of one of the early Soviet agricultural communes. The story follows a group of workers from Petrograd as they travel to the remote region of Altai to set up a Socialist commune. The commune members encounter growing resistance from the local population – communities of Old Believers and Cossacks. The resistance erupts into violence. The surviving commune members are forced to disperse even as they preserve their conviction and commitment to the Revolution. Members of the local communities are also altered by the encounter, as they observe the commitment of the Petrograd commune. The film narrative was appropriate for an anniversary feature.

Stylistically *Pervorossiiane* is highly demanding of the viewer. Set in four dominant colors – red, black, white and gold – color is used in the film to create dramatic effect through carefully orchestrated and evocative color blocking (fig. 3.1). The resulting film has a minimal plot, with much of the dramatic action translated into manipulations of color and composition. The film is structured into eight chapters, with each chapter dominated by a set color scheme. The fifth chapter has no live action, and consists

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International Film Festival as part of the archival film program, and following this, a 2009 issue of *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* dedicated a major section of one volume to the film. *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 92/93 (2009): 182–318.

[164] The film was also shot on location at Teberda in the Caucasus.

entirely of written statutes of the commune that the viewers read in silence. The spare composition and static quality of the shots in *Pervorossiiane* rejects "reality" and foregrounds materiality and construction, clearly recalling the Soviet modernist visual culture of the 1920s.

The film baffled its original viewers. The film critic Lev Anninsky wrote: "One gets the impression that one is watching some sort of 'anticinema': a rejection of motion, a rejection of montage, a rejection of any illusion of reality. *Pervorossiiane* is a collection of static compositions and portraits for some reason shown through the projector."[165] The point of comparison for Anninsky is Sergei Parajanov's 1964 *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, which *Pervorossiiane* resembles in its bold use of color.[166] Anninsky praises Parajanov's innovative use of color and successful integration of the so-called poetic form. However, in *Pervorossiiane*, he sees a work in which the form (including the evocative use of color) overwhelms or in fact *becomes* the content. As he sees it, the film is "pure experiment" and is therefore "stillborn" in its failure to express "human content."

On the other hand, the film's bold experimentation was discussed as its great strength during the Art Council meeting that followed the first private screening of *Pervorossiiane* in April 1967.[167] The various members of the committee praised the creative team headed by the film director Aleksandr Ivanov for their courage in undertaking such an

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[165] Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own. For the full article, see L. Anninskij, "Tri Zvena," *Iskusstvo kino* 9 (1971): 134—152.

[166] Another Parajanov film, *Sayat Nova* (*Color of Pomegranates*), which is closer to *Perveorossiiane* in its static compositions, was made two years later, in 1969, and came out in theaters in 1971.

[167] For full Artistic Council discussion see Piotr Bogrov ed. "*Pervorossiiska net Kommuna zreet*: Obedinennoe zasedanie Hudozhestvennogo soveta studii i Vtorogo tvorcheskogo obedinenija. Prsmotr i obsuzhdenie fil'ma *Pervorossiiane,*" *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 92/93 (2009): 290-318.

experimental feat, for “following the path of greatest resistance.”[168] Many in the committee saw the film in the context of the visual culture of the revolution—modernist designs of ROSTA windows (propaganda posters created by the state news agency ROSTA, the Russian Telegraph Agency), paintings of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, and a variety of revolution-era public events and spectacles—as well as the films of the 1920s and 1930s that daringly sought a new film language for the post-revolutionary world. Virtually all the members of the board especially welcomed the “search for a new language” that the film heralds through its strong visual and formal statements.[169] The need for experimentation in itself is made to sound as sufficient reason for the creation of this work.

As we glean from the remarks of the head editor of the Lenfilm studio, Dmitri Moldavsky, the film’s experimentation was hardly an accident or an oversight. Moldavsky opens his comments at the Art Council meeting by declaring: “It must be said, that this film is experimental. This is how it was conceived, and this is how it was carried out. We can only speak of the degree to which this experiment was a success.”[170] Moldavsky’s claim of industry support for an “experimental” project recalls the polemics of experimentation in Soviet cinema of the early post-revolutionary period.[171]

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[168] Dobin, *Pervorossiiska net Kommuna zreet*, 290.

[169] Dobin, *Pervorossiiska net Kommuna zreet*, 291.

[170] Moldavsky saw the film through from inception to completion. Moldavsky, *Pervorossiiska net Kommuna zreet*, 309.

[171] The art historian Maria Gough and the film historian Malte Hagener discuss at length the unprecedented state support for experimental film and art in the Soviet Union in the first decade after the revolution. Gough speaks especially about the way the artists were often opportunistic in their approach (not simply politically in perfect sync with the authorities) and shaped their projects to fit the rhetoric of the day. Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of

Despite the nearly unanimous defense of experiment by the members of the Art Council, the film did not receive wide distribution. Perhaps because of its "correct" ideological content, the film was never formally banned; it was, however, actively suppressed. After a brief run in select theaters, the film was shelved (moved to an archive with no plan for further distribution). Neither Alexander Ivanov nor Evgeni Shiffers, the film's two directors, were allowed to head another project again.

One of the major difficulties around the film's rehabilitation is its 70mm wide gauge format. Typically a 35mm print of all 70mm productions was made, but this did not happen for *Pervorossiiane*, making the film prisoner to its format for nearly forty years (until its digital transfer in 2008).[172] An even more pressing difficulty with watching *Pervorossiiane* today is the problem of its intelligibility, of locating an appropriate interpretive framework. Is it a dramatic feature, an art-house film, or an experiment intended for a limited audience? The film has elements of all three and yet

California Press, 2005), especially 23-25 and 58-59. Also for a full discussion of the popularization of Soviet films in Europe and their contentious reception at home, see Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919-1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 162-165.

[172] The 70mm format went out of vogue by the 1980s, and the technology to exhibit the films in the original format became scarce. Iakov Butovsky, the technical director of the Lenfilm studio in the 1960s explains: "Wide gauge films (the width of the negative and the positive print 70mm) were screened in a limited number of theaters which were equipped with wide gauge film projectors, a 6 channel system of stereoscopic sound and an extra large, bow shaped screen. The majority of the theaters at the time were equipped to show only wide screen films (the width of the negative and the positive print 35mm). Because of this transfers were typically made from the 70mm negative onto a 35mm positive print. In the process, the height of the shot was reduced (the aspect ratio 1:2.2 for wide gauge and 1:2.35 for wide screen). So as to allow the cinematographer to take the future transfer into consideration during the filming of the 70mm film, the camera window was marked with two dashes that indicated the height of the wide screen." See Iakov Butovsky, "*Pervorossiiane* (1966–2009)," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 92/93 (2009): 192.

does not fit comfortably into any of the above categories. Confusion over the right frame of reference has complicated and continues to complicate the reception of this film.

In this chapter I trace the way *Pervorossiiane* engages with both the polemics and aesthetics of "experiment" in the culture of the early post-revolutionary period, adapting these for the contemporary moment in the 1960s. While experimental work is typically thought of in the Western context as auteurist and as standing in opposition to the industry, this film is connected to the long tradition of Soviet state support of explicitly experimental projects. The aesthetics and production history of *Pervorossiiane* also suggests the multiple layers of experimentation combined in this film. I contend that a variety of conflicting experimental agendas (institutional, aesthetic and technical) led to the difficult reception history and the ultimate shelving of the feature.

This chapter also argues for the need to place Soviet experimental cinema in the context of visual arts. *Pervorossiiane* is an anniversary film that self-consciously takes the visual art and film of the revolution (rather than the revolution itself) as its primary subject matter. In its explicit search for a "new language in cinema," it looks for inspiration in modernist painting. It especially engages with the work of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin and Kazimir Malevich, boldly restaging versions of their paintings onscreen. A preoccupation with film as a new technology that could quickly reach and teach millions—characteristic of the 1920s—is also mirrored in *Pervorossiiane* through the use of the 70mm format, newly popular for immersive blockbuster productions in the 1950s and 1960s. Although very much a film of its time in terms of its decelerated editing style (typical of contemporaneous art cinema), *Pervorossiiane* draws on the narration techniques of avant-garde films of the immediate post-revolutionary period. The scale of

the picture and the pace of the editing transform this rhetorical and didactic mode of narration from an agitprop piece into a dirge. Commissioned to (positively) evaluate the social experiment of the revolution fifty years later, the film's creative team advances an argument for the urgent need for experiment in the arts instead.

I. Experiment as a goal

Pervorossiiane was hardly an auteur project, as one might expect of an experimental film; it had a large and disjointed creative team. The first author of the film was Olga Berggholz (1910–1975), a major Soviet poet of the period. The jubilee film was to be based on her award-winning epic poem "Pervorossijsk" (which won the Stalin Prize in literature in 1951). "Pervorossijsk" tells the story of the hope and failure of one of the early Soviet agricultural communes. Encouraged by Lenin himself, a group of workers from Petrograd set out in 1917 to establish a socialist community in the remote region of Altai. Once there, the workers encounter untamed nature and an even more inhospitable community of Old Believers who are immediately suspicious of the activities of the newcomers.[173] Berggholz's epic poem follows the "tribute to heroic failure" plotline,

[173] The Old Believers separated from the official Russian Orthodox Church in 1666 as a result of disagreements over liturgical reforms. After the split, the persecuted communities of Old Believers often moved to more remote regions of the country in search of religious freedom. Interestingly, the religious motifs in the film were introduced by Berggholz and developed further (perhaps beyond her intentions) by the creative team. As noted by the second director of the film, Evgeni Shiffers, "This is not a conflict of personalities, of individuals. This is a conflict of two religions—the old believers and the communists. This is an occasion for a tragedy." Y. Panich, "Gorestnoe Posleslovie," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 92/93 (2009): 201–8, quote from 207.

typical of the Socialist Realist novel.[174] The commune's failed social experiment is cast by Berggholz as an essential act of martyrdom on the road to communism.

Pervorossiiane was launched into production on the ideological strength of the proposed script, but the poem's narrative provides only the most basic backbone for the project. A well-established "old guard" director, Aleksandr Ivanov (1898–1984), was at the head of the picture.[175] Ivanov had great ambitions for the jubilee film and envisioned the project as a revolutionary blockbuster to be made in the newly fashionable 70mm (wide gauge) format. With a large budget and full studio support, Ivanov also wanted to "say a new word" in cinema. To help with the artistic conception of *Pervorossiiane*, he brought in a second director, Evgeni Shiffers. Although Shiffers had no cinema experience, he was recommended to Ivanov as an interesting new voice in theater, having made six sensational (and borderline scandalous) productions at various Leningrad theaters up to that point.[176] The young theater director agreed to work on the film on the condition that his artistic decisions would not be challenged and that he would be able to work with his small theater team, most notably the theater artist Mikhail Sheglov.[177] Together, Shiffers and Sheglov drew up a visual storyboard for the script (a drawing for

[174] Perhaps the most famous cinematic "tribute to heroic failure" is Vsevolod Pudovkin's 1926 film *Mother*. The film was based on Maxim Gorky's 1906 eponymous novel, which famously became a model for the development of the Socialist Realist novel. See Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

[175] Ivanov, a major Soviet director and film administrator, began his work in film in the mid 1920s. Recipient of a number of Stalin prizes, he was especially famous for his war films. For more information see: L. Muratov, *Aleksandr Ivanov* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1968).

[176] For more on Shiffers' work in theater, see the section on Shiffers in *Teatr* 11/12 (June 2013): 86–105.

[177] See Larisa Longina, "Po sledu avangardnogo filma *Pervorossiiane*," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 92/93 (2009): 226.

every shot), throwing out the majority of the dialog and proposing a fixed color palette for the film. Most importantly, Ivanov, Shiffers, and Sheglov agreed that in order to recapture audience interest in the familiar story of the revolution, the film had to experiment with form.

In addition to directing, Ivanov held a post as the head of the Second Creative Union at Lenfilm, and his division was known for carefully toeing the line between "unusual" and Party-line films.[178] In fact, in his closing remarks at the Art Council meeting, Ivanov sounded more like an experienced administrator than an artist defending his work. He spoke openly about the experimental nature of the film, but explained the experiment as a necessary step *toward*, rather than away from, the audience. In his statement, Ivanov especially complained that domestic attendance of Soviet films was dropping, while the foreign purchasing commissions bought only seven of the thirty films they were offered in the previous year. The audiences were losing interest in the output of Soviet studios, and the studios in turn were losing money on their productions. While the Soviet system was not market-driven, Ivanov was noting the flip side of the freedom of cinema from market competition. In not being dependent on the audience, the industry neglected the audience altogether, making films that conformed to Party standards rather than audience needs. For Ivanov, experiment in cinema was a problem of economics (as a reflection of audience interest) as well as of art and ideology.

During the Art Council meeting, Ivanov argued, with the requisite decorum, that experiment was necessary to revitalize Soviet cinema, to raise interest in domestic

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[178] Some of the more "unusual" films include Yuliy Fayt's 1966 *Malchik I devochka* and Spalikov's 1967 *Dolgaya schastlivaya zhizn*, among others. See Iakov Butovsky, "*Pervorossiiane* (1966–2009)," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 92/93 (2009): 184.

productions. In the extensive notes he made during the filming of *Pervorossiiane*, he expresses himself more frankly:

> I cannot look without disgust at the grey, stilted, putrid, standard form which kills all interest in the audience. It kills all the dramatic, philosophical and political content of the piece. The essence of the piece is lost entirely—it is discredited because the audience has no interest in this putrid greyness.[179]

Ivanov also complained that contemporary directors did not know how to "see in a new way," while a "new vision" was especially important in an industry that was stuck rehashing the same plots.[180] Berggholz's Socialist Realist plot, written at the height of Stalinism, seemed appropriate in 1950. But after the de-Stalinization of the mid-1950s and seen through the prism of new information about the Second World War and the Stalinist purges, the plot of "Pervorossijsk" seemed hopelessly outdated. Even as the script for *Pervorossiiane* was re-worked several times, there was not much wiggle room in terms of narrative. Ivanov (and many other directors of the period) saw the greatest possibilities of innovation in the visual realm. In his diaries he noted: "I want to make this otherwise banal story in such a way that the audience would want to see it."[181] And yet, seemingly contradicting himself, he wrote about the importance of making the film even if it were not released. Midway through production he noted: "I may be getting ahead of myself when I say that the film will be accepted and released. But that a highly unusual film, both for me and for the viewer, will be made—that is certain."[182]

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[179] See "Aleksandr Ivanov: Dnevnik [A Diary]," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 92/93 (2009): 252–86, quote from 259.

[180] Ivanov, "A Diary," 259.

[181] Ivanov, "A Diary," 259.

[182] Ivanov, "A Diary," 275.

This willingness to make a film that might be seen only by industry insiders is in itself significant. With no experimental or independent film culture running in parallel with the mainstream from which to draw new language and techniques, the Soviet system had stagnated.[183] If experiment could not come from outside the system, Ivanov was ready to prompt it from within. Exasperated by the review process, he wrote: "To hell with them all. I have not been afraid of anyone or anything for some time now. If the film works—very well. If not, I will resign."[184] From his notes it is clear that he chose quite consciously to shield an experimental work with his name, even if this work was his last.

Although he saw the film as marking progress in his own artistic trajectory, in his letters to his wife Ivanov speaks at length about the leading role that Shiffers had in the aesthetic conception of the film.[185] Ivanov saw his role in the making of the film primarily as that of the studio patron. However, when the film was not "accepted," Ivanov did step in with a direct creative contribution in an effort to save the production. Also in an attempt to save the film, he re-edited the ending, by including the shot of the

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[183] Malte Hagener speaks of experimental cinema as running alongside the mainstream and serving as a wellspring from which the mainstream draws its inspiration. See "The Dialectics of Self-Coneption – Film Avant-Garde and Industry Around 1930," in *Moving Forward Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture 1919 – 1939,* 41-76.

[184] Ivanov, "Diary," 275.

[185] Ivanov discusses in detail the setup necessary for various scenes and then concludes: "And please do not think that I will be organizing it all. No, this is the work of a director, I let Shiffers take care of it all. He is an active young man, he likes it, so let him scream. I can not pull this off any longer. But this is fine by me, I have no other ambitions than to sit back with the smart look of the chief and give advice here and there. I am not the only one working like this either. Vashinskij, the head of the central committee of the cinematographers union came here the other day. He said that Romm, Kalatozov, Gerasimov—they all work like this. They ride the young ones, while they work to earn the right for an independent production." Ivanov, "Diary," 279.

statue of Lenin and by adding the shots of the statues of the Czars at the opening of the film, a stylistically questionable reference to the early films of Eisenstein.[186]

With his name, Ivanov created the opportunity for a project of this magnitude. Shiffers in turn provided the artistic concept. Evgeni Shiffers (1934–1997) graduated from the Russian State Institute of Performing Arts in 1964 with a degree in theater directing. He staged his first plays "with real actors" in a "real theater" well before his graduation—a practice unheard of at the time, recalls Kama Ginkas, a fellow graduate of the institute.[187] This move in itself was "avant-garde."[188] To dare to go around the established theater hierarchy and stage a play semi-independently was a brave act. Shiffers' first such play was Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, a staging that was innovative "in terms of movement and in its use of space."[189] Ginkas remembers that the staging was especially interesting in its philosophical and social positioning:

> The position of Antigone was the main position of the honest intelligentsia of that period. The essence of this position was *non-participation.* Fighting "against" was not possible. Such people almost did not exist. In any case, we did not know any such people and could not become such people. But we considered it our duty to *not participate*.… This is what Zhenya's [Evgeni Shiffers] play was about. But Zhenya himself – he wanted to participate![190]

Ginkas describes Shiffers as an earnest believer in the communist *ideal*, if not in the existing communist system. His greatest desire was to somehow enter the system

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[186] Some thought this was an outdated stylistic move that ruined the unity of the film. See Longina, "Po sledu," 225.

[187] Interview with Kama Ginkas, "Ego glavnym talantom byl talent liderstva," *Teatr* 11/12 (2013): 86–97. All translations from this publication are my own.

[188] Ginkas, "Ego glavnym talantom," 90.

[189] Ginkas, "Ego glavnym talantom," 90.

[190] Ginkas, "Ego glavnym talantom," 90.

"honestly." At times it was as if he tried to "break through the wall" and at other times to "adjust to it," observes Ginkas.

For his diploma staging, Shiffers chose William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* (1959), also an unusual work and by all accounts brilliantly staged. His 1964 staging of *Romeo and Juliet* at Lencom, where the actors wore modern clothing and behaved like contemporary gangs (fighting with pocket knives as in the 1961 American musical *West Side Story*), caused a scandal and was shut down after two performances. The 1965 staging of Alexander Kron's *The Party Candidate* (1950) was another baffling event in the world of Leningrad theater. In this case, Shiffers seemingly tried to appease the authorities by staging a manifestly Party-line play. Here he tried to turn a work that was concerned with the everyday aspects of life into an existential piece. Most strikingly, in keeping with the growing contemporary curiosity about abstract art, he encouraged the theater artist Edik Kochergin to create abstract sets for the play.[191] Ginkas describes his confusion with the stage design:

> White rectangles in reverse perspective. Here is one such rectangle, then another bigger than the first and then yet another bigger than the previous two. What did they mean? Nothing! Just pure abstraction. It was difficult for Kron's communists to live in such abstraction.

The Liteyny theater actors, an otherwise classically trained troupe, also did not know how to respond to Shiffers' nonstandard demands of flat delivery and unnatural motion.

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[191] The first exhibits that widely showed non-realist art in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death were part of the Youth Festival in 1957. The year before, an exhibition of Picasso's works at the Moscow Pushkin Museum was also a sensation. The 1962 exhibit of non-realist art in Moscow's "Manezh" exhibit hall was famously criticized by Nikita Khruschev and subsequently shut down. For a thorough overview of all the venues for viewing abstract art in the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s, see Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2010), 55–60.

Shiffers tried to take a standard script and dress it in radically new devices, and he failed. The production flopped. "He was always most interested in questions of existential being. And in form," Ginkas concludes. In terms of its staging and visual devices, this work was a direct precursor to *Pervorossiiane.*

Unlike Ivanov, Shiffers never spoke of the audience, nor did he explicitly mention experiment. When asked about the essence of theater, Shiffers responded that he would like theater to be "an experience of a kind of group meditation."[192] In his estimation, the first part of *Pervorossiane* approached this more closely than any of his stage works, achieved in part with the help of immersive 70mm technology. In interviews with Yulian Panich, who was one of the actors on *Pervorossiane*, Shiffers talked about wanting to do more than simply depict the drama of the revolutionary moment. Instead Shiffers talked explicitly about wanting to "absorb the spirit of the revolutionary period, its aesthetics, its rhythms; we must feel the pulse of the artists of that period, to solve the mystery of the way the arts of that moment took off."[193] Shiffers does not speak of "experiment" because what was seen as experiment by someone like Ivanov was in fact Shiffers' default. Likening him to the artists of the early Russian avant-garde, another actor, Ivan Krasko remarked: "For Shiffers, his whole life was an experiment."[194]

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[192] "The performance could go on for several days and nights and catharsis would be experienced by actors as well as by viewers." Shiffers, "O problemah teatra," *Teatr* 11/12 (2013): 103.

[193] Because the production of this film was seen as an event in itself, one of the actors in the film, Yulian Panich, was granted permission to make a television film about the ambitious jubilee production. He and his wife gathered interviews with the production team. See Panich, "Gorestnoe Posleslovie," 208.

[194] Ivan Krasko, "Dlya shiffersa vsya zhizn' byla eksperimentom," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 92/93 (2009): 209–16, quote from 216.

To help the visual aspect of the film make maximum impact, Shiffers chose to work with his longtime collaborator, the theater artist Mikhail Sheglov. For Sheglov, the experimental challenge was to push the essentially photographic cinematic medium toward the iconic and the painterly. In his interview with Panich, Sheglov explained his conception:

> We are painting with pure color. Here we have not photographs but icons, like those of Andrei Rublev—golden mountains and black forests, golden wheat, reverse perspective … the black horses of the executioners and the black earth of the graves. For each chapter there is a unique color scheme. This is work with the subconscious of the viewer. Not faces, but holy images—just as in icons.[195]

Sheglov is especially interested in the color symbolism of the icon, as well as its traditional vibrant yet flattened use of color. He is also drawing on the explicit rejection of the illusion of reality traditional in icon painting. In the tradition of icon painting, the icon should not attempt a photographic likeness of the saint because the icon is considered a theological entity. Instead, the artist's objective is to represent the saint's essential qualities most distinctly.[196] In using the icon as a referent, Sheglov and Shiffers were in fact creating "anticinema": in pushing the essentially "realistic" photographic medium of cinema toward de-personified representations of individuals and symbolic rather than natural use of color.[197]

"Experiment," then, had different meanings for all involved. For the cinematic community, one of the concerns with experiment, just as in the discourse of the 1920s, was its intelligibility to a wider audience. During the Art Council meeting, the director

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[195] Panich, "Gorestnoe Posleslovie," 208.

[196] In an icon, a saint is to be marked with certain identifying attributes—a unique article of clothing, a specific color, or a significant object associated with the saint.

[197] This type of aesthetic works better in Genadi Poloka's 1968 *Interventsia*, on which Mikhail Sheglov worked as an artist. The film was classified as an "eccentric tragi-comedy." The aesthetic works better as a farcical pastiche than as a tragedy.

Vladimir Vengerov spoke explicitly about his own lack of experience in watching "experimental" work. "Our habituation to feature film, my own habit as well as that of the majority of the viewers (we are used to watching and making feature films) makes analyzing a film of such a unique form difficult."[198] In defense of this new form, he draws an analogy between film and literature, especially the poetry of Alexander Blok and Vladimir Mayakovsky, and expresses a desire to see all the possibilities of cinema exploited: it is "an art as stylistically variable as literature."[199] Vengerov claims that through its "poetic" form, *Pervorossiiane* is able to reach those parts of the brain accessible only by poetry but otherwise unreachable by traditional narrative structures. Another member of the board, the poet Sergei Orlov, cautions that "some may say that the film is only for a prepared audience," but he disputes this concern by claiming that every Soviet citizen is familiar with the stories of the revolution and therefore can handle greater narrative and stylistic leaps.[200] Because the Soviet audience knows the story of the revolution, because they can read the poetry of Blok and Mayakovsky, they can watch a film like *Pervorossiiane.* Poetry of the avant-garde was the pretext for cinematic experimentation with form.

II. Technological Frontiers

Commencing work on *Pervorossiiane*, Shiffers looked to early post-revolutionary avant-garde cinema for inspiration. The film relies heavily on the films of the Soviet

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[198] Vengerov, *Pervorossiiska net Kommuna zreet*, 291.

[199] Vengerov, *Pervorossiiska net Kommuna zreet*, 291.

[200] Orlov, *Pervorossiiska net Kommuna zreet*, 293.

historical avant-garde for its narrative legibility. Films like Vsevolod Pudovkin's *The End of St. Petersburg* (1927), and Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (1928), both commissioned for the tenth anniversary of the October revolution, or Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), commissioned for the twentieth anniversary of the first Russian revolution of 1905, sounded like appropriate ideological models, even if most Soviet citizens in the 1960s had not seen these works due to their "formalism." Although long out of wide circulation, these films were well known to industry insiders and were readily available to Shiffers and the creative team of *Pervorossiiane*. In the interview with Panich, Shiffers asserts, "We must get into the skin of the makers of *October*, of *Earth*, of *Battleship Potemkin* or of the creators of the ROSTA windows. We cannot speak about the revolution in a whisper."[201] In engaging with these works, Shiffers saw an opportunity for formal flourish and complexity of the sort that had thrived in the 1920s.

By the mid-1930s, however, Soviet cinema had become dominated by a "seamless" narration style (also typical of Hollywood) that was sanctioned by Socialist Realism. The art film of the 1950s and 1960s introduced a more "subjective" camera, a labyrinthine and idiosyncratic narration that signaled the presence of a subjective consciousness. In *Pervorossiiane*, the narration techniques do not fit either the "seamless" or the "subjective" model. The narration is hardly seamless, and is in fact self-consciously overt; and yet it cannot be called "subjective" as none of the characters emerge as well-developed consciousnesses. Rather than disguising its tricks, the narration tries to draw attention to itself through unusual camera angles, extreme close-ups,

[201] Panich also recalls seeing Shiffers and Sheglov headed for the screening room at Lenfilm with boxes filled with films of Eisenstein, Dovzhenko, and other directors working in the 1920s. See Panich, "Gorestnoe Posleslovie," 206.

abnormally slow motion, unnatural stasis of figures, dissonance between sound and image, frontal staging, direct address of the audience by the actors, etc. In its rejection of seamless editing and in bringing the narration self-consciously forward, the film is engaging with the narrative techniques of the propaganda films of the 1920s—what David Bordwell terms "historical-materialist narration."[202]

An important difference between the construction of *Pervorossiane* and the films of the immediate post-revolutionary period is their divergent approaches to montage. The rapid montage typical of the films of the 1920s is radically slowed down here. In fact *Pervorossiiane* is very much a film of its time, with a preponderance of extended shots held uncomfortably long for the viewer. In interviews, Shiffers discuses pace as a feature of generic construction. He especially comments on the extra-slow pace and long duration of tragedy, as opposed to comedy, where time is often artificially sped up. In *Pervorossiiane* he seems to be especially interested in slowing down the pace of the shots. By slowing the pace of the familiar revolutionary narrative and by making the scenes static, Shiffers sought to change the register of the film from dramatic to tragic. Taking the aesthetic of the art of the revolution as a starting point, Shiffers suggests a tragic staging, thereby compromising the often romantic message associated with the revolution.

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[202] Films intended as explicit propaganda pieces followed a predictable narrative arc, with narration always at the service of rhetoric. As David Bordwell describes it, "The narration comes forward as a didactic guide to proper construction of the fabula." David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 237.

Shiffers also speaks with interest about the possibilities of the wide gauge format.[203] Interviews with Shiffers reveal his caution in working with the “entertainment” format, as well as his fascination with its “enormous potential.” More than one hundred films were made in 70mm in the Soviet Union in the period between 1959 and 1985. The United States and the Soviet Union produced by far the largest number of films in this format, a kind of technological race of scale between the United States and the Soviet Union (American “gigantism” versus Soviet “monumentalism”). Notable American productions included *Lawrence of Arabia* (1961), *Cleopatra* (1963), and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The first Soviet film made in 70mm was *Poema o More* [*Poem of the Sea*] (Alexanr Dovzhenko/Yulia Solntseva, 1958), while the most famous was the appropriately epic *Voina i mir* [*War and Peace*] (Sergei Bondarchuk, 1967).[204] Making a 70mm film presented its own set of challenges, not the least of which was the pure entertainment reputation of the new technology. Was a more serious work of art possible in such format? To this end, Shiffers was committed to pushing all the distinctive features

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[203] Because of their enormous scale, superior color, and image resolution as well as stereophonic sound, 70mm films were a spectacle unlike anything else and were a compelling investment for the film industry fighting the newly emerging television culture. Still, this was an expensive format, used most successfully for epic films and costume dramas. Although the first films in 70mm were virtually contemporaneous with the appearance of cinemas—permanent movie houses (as filmmakers have dreamt of putting the viewer ‘inside’ the film from the very beginning)—the heyday of this format was the 1950s and 1960s. See Robert E. Carr and R. M. Hayes, *Wide Screen Movies: A History and Filmography of Wide Gauge Filmmaking* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1988).

[204] In addition to the epic period pieces, the Soviet productions also included a number of ballet films such as *Ballerina* (1968), while the US productions exploited the immersive sound quality of the format for staging musicals such as *The Sound of Music* (1965). For more on the history of the format in the Soviet Union, see D. Masurenkov, “Shirokij format,” *Tehnika kino i televidenija* 2 (2008): 38–45. For more on 70mm productions, see Gabriele Jatho and Gert Koshofer, *70 mm: Bigger than Life*, edited by Deutsche Kinematheck (Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, 2009).

of the format—stereoscopic sound, superior color/resolution, enormous scale—to their limit.

According to the response of the contemporaries, *Pervorossiiane* was carefully constructed especially for the 70mm format. In his account of viewing *Pervorossiiane* when it was released and then again more than forty years later in 2009, Iakov Butovski (a technical director of Lenfilm studio at the time of the making of the film) writes:

> In 1967 I saw the film twice (during the art council meeting and during the technical commission meeting at Lenfilm), both times in wide gauge. The projection was done by the still new and well-calibrated wide screen projectors, from the original 70mm film copy supervised by Shapiro (the cinematographer). After the art council meeting I wrote down: "On the whole, I really like the film." After seeing the film on the TV screen I would have never written this, because the fact that the color restoration was true to the original does not save the film. In this "narrow format" the 1967 film *Pervorossiiane* does not exist, we are watching something else entirely.[205]

Butovsky compares his viewing experience of *Pervorossiiane* in 2009 on a television screen to seeing a reproduction of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling in an art album. The editor may have done a fine job with the quality of the reproduced image, the colors may be well done and true to the origin to the greatest extent possible, but it is a stretch to claim that the two experiences are equivalent.

Butovsky identifies three main issues with viewing the film in the "narrow format." When we look at a television screen, we grasp the image all at once. When viewing a wide format film in a theater equipped with a curved screen, a shot cannot be seen all at once. The image fills the entire peripheral vision of the viewer, and the audience has to move their body and their head to see a character move from the left of

[205] Iakov Butovsky, "*Pervorossiiane* (1966–2009)," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 92/93 (2009): 184–93.

the screen to the right. The experience is not simply immersive but requires actual movement and so produces a different physiological response in the viewer. He writes:

> And now imagine yourself before an enormous screen. The edges of the screen are in your peripheral vision and are blurred for you, so if you want to get a clearer view of certain patches of the background, you need to move your eyes or maybe even your head. However, you cannot tear your eyes away from this face – the face of a fanatic. Especially striking is the fact that the overall tone of the face, in some ways deathly, is illuminated by the *blue* eyes and the delicate *pink* of the eyes and the lips. On a television screen these effects can be discerned only if you put your face directly against the screen.[206]

The reduced size of the picture interfered with its compositional balance, especially the color balance, since details that would look sufficiently large on an extra-large screen get lost entirely. Finally, in watching the film on a television set, the sound comes from only one direction; whereas the six-channel sound systems of the specially-equipped theaters enveloped the viewer in the soundscape of the film. This allowed Shiffers to experiment with sound in ways that Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov could only have dreamed of when they wrote their 1928 essay "The Future of Sound Film." Shiffers deliberately worked with the defining features of the format to exploit them to their greatest potential. His self-conscious embrace of the new technology was another echo of the modernist ethos.

While Shiffers was highly conscious of the medium and the format, he was new to working in film and was "not yet in full control," claims Ginkas.[207] In fact, throughout the film the experimentation with motion, sound, and composition is uneven. The explicit experimentation betrays both a learning of the medium and the format by the director,

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[206] Butovsky, "*Pervorossiiane* (1966–2009)," 191.

[207] Ginkas, "Ego glavnym talantom," 94.

and at other times the artful deployment of newly learned techniques. At its best, such as in the scenes toward the end of the film when the sound of swinging scythes is layered over the images of dozens of running peasants, the unexpected pairing of sound and image provides a powerful jolt. In other scenes the static compositions and their sound pairings are less evocative, and sometimes unintentionally strange to the point of caricature. Ginkas asserts that, had Shiffers had the chance to make another film, he would have certainly mastered the medium.[208] However, in the Soviet context, there was no room for small-scale experiment. For Shiffers, exploration of form and format had to come all at once or not at all.

III Painting Reality

In considering the film in the context of the contemporary cinematic process, the film historian Evgeni Margolit proposes that the rejection of reality in *Pervorossiiane* is a natural response to the "hyper-realism," a fascination or preoccupation with texture (*faktura*), in Soviet cinema of the early 1960s.[209] He cites the director Andrei Konchalovsky, who in his neorealist 1967 *The Story of Asya Klyachina* [Istoria Asi Kliachinoi kotorai liubila, da ne vyshla zamuzh] (which premiered in theaters only in 1988) famously shows in great detail the mud puddles, dirty boots, and dirt under the fingernails of the workers of the communal farm (not to mention the missing digits of former soldiers and their grammatically garbled, broken speech). *Pervorossiiane* stands at the opposite end of the representational spectrum with its total emphasis on construction.

[208] Ginkas, "Ego glavnym talantom," 94.

[209] Evgeni Margolit, "Take kino," *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 92/93 (2009): 238–48.

Margolit makes a compelling case, and yet the visual vocabulary of the latter film is not simply reactionary. It is built on a complex set of visual references, some of which were named explicitly during the Art Council discussions (the films of Eisenstein and the ROSTA windows and paintings of Petrov-Vodkin). Other apparent visual points of departure, such as the icon and the work of Kazimir Malevich, are present implicitly.

The limited reemergence of the icon, as well as of all manner of modernist painting in the 1960s, are just as important for contextualizing *Pervorossiiane* as are contemporary trends in Soviet and Western cinema. The year 1960 was commemorated as the 600th anniversary of Andrei Rublev's birth, with state-sponsored exhibits and conferences held to celebrate the artist's achievements. The icon now became the visual symbol of the Russian nation (as a nationalist rather than religious sign), somewhat sidestepping its theological implications. Perhaps unexpected for an officially "atheist" state, the icon was again in visual vogue. Sheglov was thus free to evoke Rublev and the tradition of icon painting in discussing the conception of *Pervorossiiane.*

Another important artistic event of the moment was the 1966 retrospective of the work of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin (1878–1939) at the Russian Museum in Leningrad. The exhibit was part of a larger trend of reemergence of early Russian/Soviet modernism during the Thaw, and drew large crowds. Petrov-Vodkin's work was an especially interesting visual and generic hybrid. Trained initially as an icon painter, he later contributed to the Symbolist exhibitions of the *Mir Iskusstva* group and eventually developed a style of his own, a unique mixture of Symbolism and avant-garde visual devices (such as his use of simplified figures, reduced depth, and a combination of

multiple points of view in one image).[210] The primitivism of the icon served as a model and inspiration for modernist treatments of the theme (fig. 3.2 and fig. 3.3).

Figure 3.2. *Theotokos of Vladimir*, painted about 1130 in Constantinople.
Tempera on panel, 104 x 69 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Figure 3.3. Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, *Our Lady—Tenderness of Cruel Hearts*, 1914–1915.
Oil on canvas, 990 x 1090 mm. State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg.

[210] The 1966 exhibit was his first major retrospective since 1938 and included twice as many works (270 to the earlier 135), containing many of the earlier pieces from the 1910s that were previously not shown due to their religious subject matter or their "formalist" leanings. Of special interest in the exhibit were Petrov-Vodkin's stage and costume designs, also previously unseen by the general public. See the catalog of the exhibit for more information: Nina Alekseevna Barabanova, Kuz□ma Sergeevich Petrov-Vodkin, and E. N Selizarova, *Kuz'ma Sergeevich Petrov-Vodkin, 1878–1939: katalog vystavki* (Moskva: Sovetskiĭ khudozhnik, 1966).

In his later work, Petrov-Vodkin came to treat explicitly revolutionary themes while maintaining a strong tie to iconography: such are his famous paintings “The Year 1918 in Petrograd” (1920), also known as “The Petrograd Madonna” (fig. 3.4). Because of the active suppression of both religious art and any manner of “formalism” in the 1930s to the 1950s, the artistic trajectory of Petrov-Vodkin, which combined both of these, was especially interesting to the Thaw generation. Sheglov and Shiffers both speak with great interest about Petrov-Vodkin in interviews and draw on his aesthetic approach for inspiration.

Figure 3.4. Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, *The Year 1918 in Petrograd* (*Petrograd Madonna*), 1920. Oil on canvas, 73x92 cm Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

With these various trends in mind, one sees the opening portraits of *Pervorossiiane* presented in a succession of cuts as a curious hybrid between the icon and modernist paintings. These are the faces of the revolutionaries attending the funeral procession of the “martyrs” of the February revolution—an epochal event that took place on March 23, 1917 (fig. 3.5 and 3.6). The faces are centrally framed and are in extreme close-up, with the top and bottom of the face meeting the edges of the screen. The

shallow focus of the shot gives us only a vague idea of the urban setting, with soft outlines of church domes in the background. The faces look out directly at the audience, engaging us in a silent dialog, as is characteristic of the icon. The cuts from one face to another, with no conversation to motivate the cuts, are reminiscent of an iconostasis (rows of icons positioned side by side).

The succession of more lifelike portraits, in which the face is "naturalistically" lit and some setting is suggested in the background, is interspersed with more abstracted portraits of a female face. In these images, the background is completely empty, a blank canvas with the lighting arranged so as to give the background an incandescent glow. The nose and brow line are emphasized through lighting, creating a sharper line, another stylistic marker of an icon. The clearly religious portraiture of Petrov-Vodkin compellingly combined the visual tradition of the icon with modernist techniques, providing a point of reference for the opening portraits of *Pervorossiiane* (compare figs. 3.5 and 3.6 with figs. 3.2 and 3.3)

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Figure 3.5. *Pervorossiiane.* (1967)

Figure 3.6. *Pervorossiiane.* (1967)

The empty background of the more abstract portraits in *Pervorossiiane* gives the image a kind of flatness, suggesting a space apart from the material world. The modernist preoccupation with form (emphasizing the two-dimensionality of a two-dimensional screen) is apparent here and is especially effective as it breaks with the strategies of narrative cinema, where stereoscopy is typically taken for granted. The use of color also contributes to the abstracted feel of the shot. Both the face and the background are the same incandescent blue-green, with the dark purple of the woman's headscarf creating a sharp borderline. The deliberately "unnatural" color of the face signals yet again the alternate reality of the screen space. The evocative, rather than naturalistic, use of color of the human face—which had become the norm in painting since the Impressionists—looks startling and fresh one hundred years later on a cinema screen.

Of course, the extreme close-up and the central framing of the face was also typical of 1920s film overall. Most notably, Carl Theodor Dryer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) is largely made up of such static portraits, as are the films of Alexander Dovzhenko. Shiffers names both directors as important influences for his work and uses

their examples as explicit points of departure. However, in these earlier films, close-ups of the face were most often used to emphasize the emotional state of the character, as communicated through the facial expressions of the actors. The magnification of the face also magnified the impact of the emotion on the character's face—be it laughter of the village women in Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930), or the tears of sorrow and resignation of Joan of Arc in Dryer's film (see fig. 3.7 and 3.8). To place further emphasis on the facial expressions of the actors (and their emotional states), exaggerated makeup was often used to highlight certain facial features.

Figure 3.7. *Earth* (Alexander Dovzhenko, 1930)

Figure 3.8. *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Theodor Dryer, 1928)

The expressions on the faces of the revolutionaries in *Pervorossiiane* are much less emotional, more self-contained. Here the emotional impact of the image is achieved not through the actor's facial expression but through the use of color. The face-paint used to tint the woman's face, making it a cool greenish blue, gives the image a feeling of calm resolve. Close-up shots of faces painted a single color—white, red, greenish-blue—are inserted throughout, highlighting the emotional tone of the sequences. Rather than exaggerating and highlighting certain facial features through the use of makeup, the monochrome face paint both flattens the facial expression and creates an emotional impact of its own. While makeup emphasizes certain features, paint draws attention to itself as material. The use of the actor as a prop is also a modernist move, often exploited by filmmakers of the early post-revolutionary period. What is typically achieved through the work of the actor is accomplished here through the use of color. In revolutionary film of the 1920s, actors were famously conceived of as "types"—a worker, a bourgeoisie, a peasant. Here, through the expressive use of color, the creative team goes even further: making an actor into not just a social type but into an abstract concept such as sorrow, fear, or tragedy (fig. 3.9).

Figure 3.9. *Pervorossiiane* (1967)

Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935) is another artist of the revolutionary period whose presence is strongly felt in the film. Malevich's Soviet rehabilitation came much later than that of Petrov-Vodkin, with the first small Soviet retrospective of Malevich held in 1978.[211] Throughout the 1960s, a small selection of his work appeared alongside other artists of the avant-garde, most notably an exhibit at the Mayakovsky Museum in Moscow in 1965.[212] Reporting on the state of contemporary art in the Soviet Union in 1970, A. C. Wright wrote that the work of Malevich and other subsequently suppressed

[211] In 1978 Shiffers wrote an article about the Malevich exhibit and he helped curate an exhibit of E. Shteinberg and V. Yankilevsky (two members of the Moscow unofficial art scene). Following the exhibit, Shiffers took part in a panel discussion with other members of the Moscow Conceptualist circle (with Boris Groys among the participants).

[212] Nikolai Khardzhiev, the director of the Mayakovsky Museum (and a major collector of the art of the Soviet historical avant-garde), organized a number of exhibits dedicated to the works of artists "who had illustrated Mayakovsky's books" with Malevich among them. See: N. Khardzhiev, E. A. Petrova, John E. Bowlt, Mark Clarence Konecny, and E. N. Petrova, *A Legacy Regained: Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2002).

avant-garde artists was mostly available to Soviet artists and art historians through foreign and pre-revolutionary publications that circulated unofficially in arts circles.[213] In the course of the 1960s, Soviet art historians mentioned Malevich in major art publications such as *Iskusstvo* [*Art*]. Even though the discussions are always framed in terms of Malevich's eventual errors in his move to conceptualism and abstraction, the discussion of his work points to their general familiarity with his work and artistic trajectory.

The visual composition of the film strongly suggests that the creative team of *Pervorossiiane* was in one way or another familiar with the work of Malevich and was quoting it self-consciously throughout the film. The strongest and most unmistakable engagement with Malevich is the recreation of his famous painting *The Black Square*, which comes toward the end of the film (fig. 10).[214] The square is first brought to the screen during the scenes of the funeral of the participants of the February revolution. Historically, these first Soviet "martyrs" were interred in a mass grave in the middle of the Field of Mars (a large park in the center of St. Petersburg, then Petrograd). The park, designed in the early classical period, maintained its heavily geometric layout; the large rectangle of the park is bisected vertically and horizontally to form four rectangles of perfectly manicured shrubbery and green lawn. Each of the small "green" rectangles is further cut at a diagonal by footpaths that converge in the middle of the larger rectangle. The footpaths meet in a square, which became the site of the mass grave.

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[213] For more on the Soviet art scene in the 1960s, see A. C. Wright, "Soviet Art: The Contemporary Scene," *Art Journal* 29 (1970:3): 309–17.

[214] Malevich first painted and exhibited *The Black Square* in 1915. He created several later versions of the square in the 1920s and 1930s.

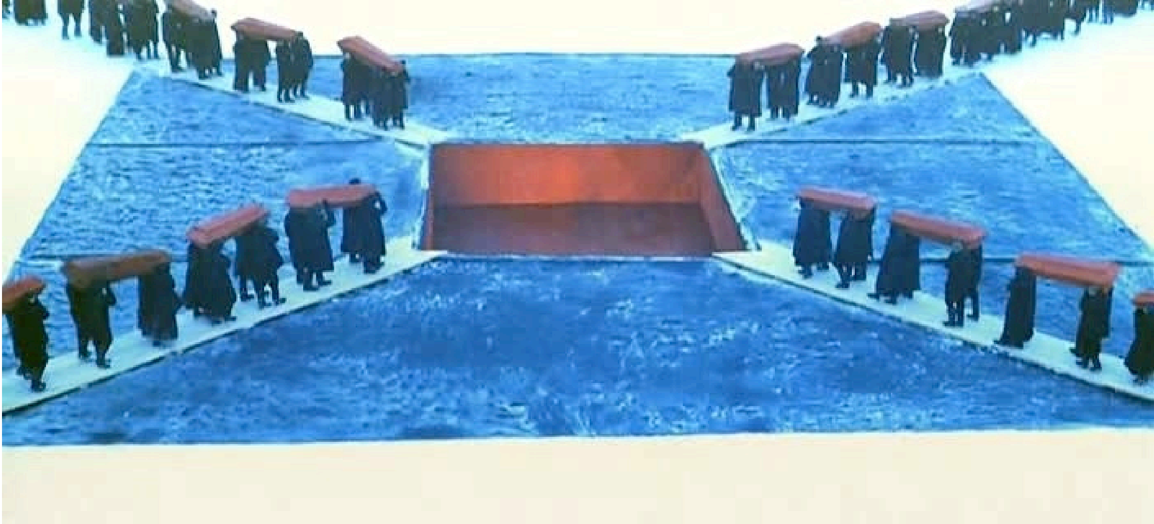

Figure 3.10. *Pervorossiiane*. (1967). Funeral procession of the victims of the February revolution on March 23, 1917.

In the scene—not filmed in the actual Field of Mars—the classicist geometry of the park layout is turned into a modernist, or rather Suprematist, composition (see fig. 1). The rectangle of the park is drastically simplified and is converted into a large square painted a flat blue, with a smaller square painted red nested in its center. The camera is positioned at one end of the larger square, above and tilted down, to give the viewer the idea of the overall shape. Here the creative team chose against a direct aerial shot, electing to show the square tilted and stretched instead. The camera is also positioned in such a way as to cut out the horizon line, flattening the image and thereby disorienting the viewer. Because of the obvious use of paint to create the white, red, and blue of the background, and the absence of the orienting horizon line, the space of the shot appears artificially constructed rather than located in the world as we know it. The resulting

stretched, nested squares are reminiscent of Suprematist compositions that Malevich produced in the course of the 1910s (fig. 3.11).

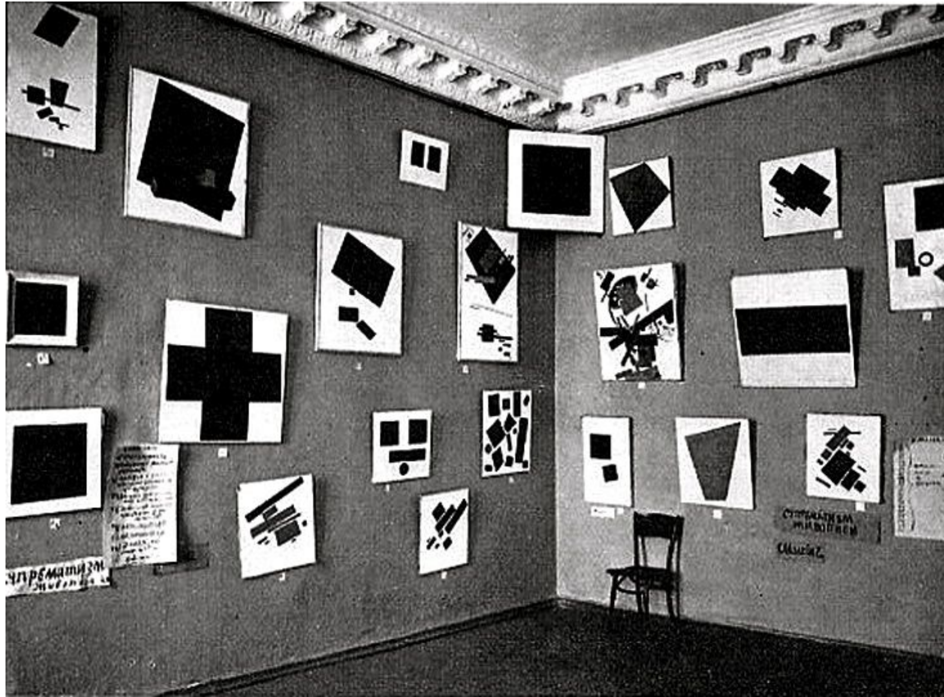

Figure 3.11. 0.10 Exhibition, 1915, Petrograd. For the exhibit Malevich suggestively placed his "Black Square" in the corner and tilted down, the traditional placement of an icon.

This abstract composition is further complicated by the appearance of human figures. The diagonal footpaths that converge in the nested red square are filled with pallbearers carrying coffins. However, the small human figures are dwarfed by the large scale, the stark color, and the right angles of the geometric arrangement on screen. The whole shot strikes one as an abstract (Constructivist) composition with human figures added onto the image in a way reminiscent of early Soviet poster art. To dispel any doubt of the visual reference to Malevich's *Black Square*, the tilted square field appears once again later in the film. This time, the square is a representation of the field of burnt crops, which had been planted and harvested by the members of the worker commune only to be subsequently destroyed by the local peasants. In this later shot (clearly intended as a

visual rhyme to the opening funeral scenes, as signaled by the identical positioning of the camera), the larger square is painted black, framed by a white border—a direct reproduction of Malevich's *Black Square* on screen (fig. 3.12).

Figure 3.12. *Pervorossiiane* (1967). Burning of the crops by the Cossacks.

While Malevich's *Black Square* is one of the most referenced and reproduced artworks of the twentieth century (with the artist himself making several reproductions and possibly sanctioning its reproduction by his students), it is also perhaps one of the most mysterious. In 1927, Alexei Gan complained that no one wrote about the square in the Soviet Union because they could not decide if it represented "the decay of the bourgeoisie or the ascent of the young class, the proletariat." Much later, the British art historian T. J. Clark expressed a similar, though less politically preoccupied, sentiment, claiming that the square was difficult to discuss because it had too many "undecidables." He wrote: "Is it figure? Is it ground? Is it matter? Is it spirit? Is it fullness? Is it

emptiness? Is it end? Is it beginning? Is it nothing? Is it everything? Is it manic assertion or absolute letting go? Is it the question of whether it laughs itself to scorn?"[215]

In *Pervorossiiane* the square retains every bit of its gravity and its mystery. Trying to decode and formulate its "meaning" as it appears in the film narrative would, I believe, be a dead end. Instead, I am interested in the fact that the creative team of the film, especially Shiffers and Sheglov, were drawn to the image as an emblem of its time (the crucial pre-revolutionary years) and an image of the revolution, with all its "undecidables" intact. The use of the square and other geometric (nearly abstract) compositions throughout the film also seems to be "a comment on the notion of the Soviet 'geometric industry' that developed as Suprematists and other non-objective artists engaged in decorating public spaces with geometric forms." This analysis, offered by Margarita Tupitsin with regard to the Komar and Melamid's "Circle, Square, Triangle" (1975), could easily be describing the use of geometric forms in *Pervorossiiane.*[216] To my knowledge, *Pervorossiane* stages the only direct reproduction of *Black Square* in a would-be feature film. The creative team of *Pervorossiiane* daringly brings an otherwise suppressed work of art to the Soviet screen and stages a performance around it—a striking conceptual move.

References to Malevich are also evident in the use of human figures in *Pervorossiiane*. Throughout the film, the members of the commune are often shown in static, "fresco-like" compositions, positioned side by side in full length, their hands

[215] T. J. Clark and Timothy J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 254.
[216] Tupitsin's study explores the variety of artistic endeavors in the Soviet Union and in the West in the decades following the first introduction of *The Black Square* in 1915, with Komar and Melamid's piece as one of such works. See Margarita Tupitsyn, *Malevich and Film*, 1st ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

hanging by their side or folded over their chest, facing the viewer head on. Both the camera and the figures are still, presenting the viewer with a tableau rather than an action scene (as would be typical for a feature film). In one such scene, the workers-turned-peasants stand facing the viewer, entirely silent (fig. 3.13). In others, they speak their lines in unison, their words directed at the viewer in a declarative rather than conversational manner (fig. 3.14). The absence of action, movement, and dialog (replaced by stillness, stasis, and silence or declarative speech) all draw attention to themselves and away from the film's narrative—making the narrative strange. The positioning of the figures bears an especially strong resemblance to Malevich's late work, in its composition as well as in its estranging qualities (fig. 3.15).

Figure 3.13. *Pervorossiiane* (1967). The commune faces the Cossacks.

Figure 3.14. *Pervorossiiane* (1967). The commune faces Lenin.

Figure 3.15. Kazemir Malevich, *Two Peasants* (*In White and Red*), 1928-1932.
Oil on canvas, 99 x 79.5 mm. State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg.

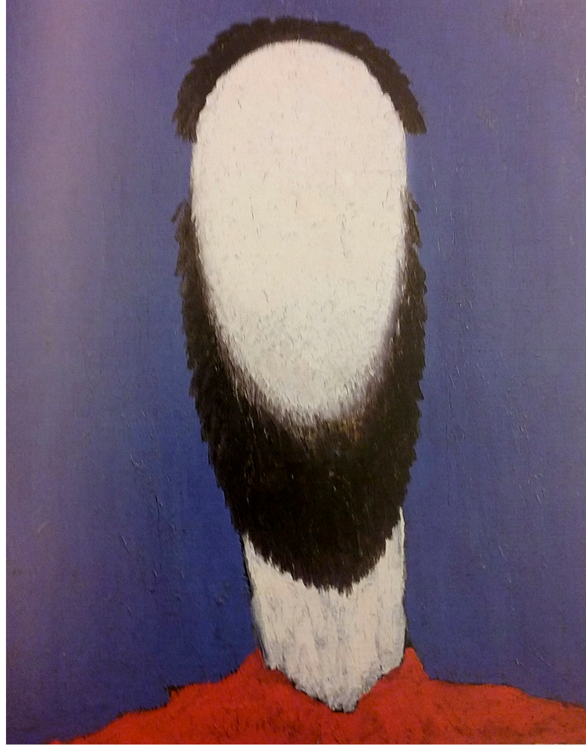

Figure 3.16. Kazemir Malevich, *Head of a Peasant*, 1928–1932.
Oil on canvas, ?? x ?? mm.
State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg.

Some of Malevich's most striking canvases from this period are the so-called faceless peasants—frontally staged figures of peasants with their faces left blank, producing an eerie, uncomfortable sensation in the viewer (fig. 3.15).[217] Some of these later portraits show the peasants full length, filling the entire canvas, often holding tools of labor but not performing any work (and in some of the paintings, the peasants simply

[217] Malevich virtually stopped painting in the 1920s, proclaiming that painting as a medium had reached its logical end; however, he returned not only to painting but also to figuration in the late 1920s. The critical discussion of this period in Malevich's work has focused on the escalating political pressures to produce realistic and topical pieces, and Malevich's submission to this pressure.[217] In a more recent and convincing treatment of the late work of Malevich, Anna Katsnelson argues that Malevich's return to figuration was not simply political/artistic capitulation, but is rather a complex formal and polemical move. For a discussion of Malevich's late work, especially his return to figuration, see Anna Wexler Katsnelson, "My Leader, Myself? Pictorial Estrangement and Aesopian Language in the Late Work of Kazimir Malevich," *Poetics Today* 27:1 (2006): 67–96.

have their hands hanging by their sides). Other portraits are at closer range, three-quarter-length or close-ups, showing only the head and the shoulders of the figure (fig. 3.16). Anna Katsnelson's study of the late works of Malevich argues that in these purportedly figurative works, Malevich is much more concerned with balance and composition than he is with the subject of the painting, in effect using the human figure "as an excuse for an exercise in form and color."[218] She also points to the prevalence of peasant scenes and the rise of portraiture in the early post-revolutionary years, claiming that Malevich's late work contains a pointed critique of these through estrangement. "It is as though a pictograph—the peasant—harvested from the vernacular of Soviet paintings, posters and advertisements of the time is planted into an alien pictorial soil governed by alien modes of operation, rendering the canvases pervasively strange."[219]

Making the peasant "strange" through rendering her faceless and immobile is a visual move that Shiffers and Sheglov exploit to great effect in *Pervorossiiane*. The use of portraiture in the film, in addition to engaging with the icon as discussed above, is also reminiscent of Malevich's late portraiture. In some of the cine-portraits, the faces of the actors are painted a single color (such as red or white) as if to flatten and obscure their features. The direct application of paint (rather than makeup, which is typically used to highlight certain facial features) to the face of the actor also draws attention to itself as a device. Referencing naturally the application of paint to canvas, here paint is applied to human faces, plants, buildings, and earth, emphasizing the "made" quality of the resulting image (fig. 3.17). *Pervorossiiane* tries to "say a new word" in cinema by rejecting all its

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[218] Katsnelson, "My Leader, Myself?" 78.

[219] Katsnelson, "My Leader, Myself?" 79.

conventions and turning to the painting tradition and to abstract art for inspiration. This connection between abstract art, painting, and early experimental film resurfaces in *Pervorossiiane.*[220]

Figure 3.16. *Pervorossiiane* (1967)

Figure 3.17. *Pervorossiiane* (1967). The commune members leave the burnt village.

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[220] For a discussion of the connection between abstract art and experimental film, see A. L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, 2nd ed. (London: British Film Institute, 2011) especially the discussion of abstract film 27 – 29 and absolute film 37 – 40.

IV. Conclusion: A New Context for Old Experiment

Of the primary members of the creative team, Olga Berggholz was the one least interested in “experiment” per se. Alexander Ivanov’s diaries provide detailed and frank accounts of their many fights and disagreements. Naturally, she was particularly taken aback by the fact that of all the many lengthy dialogues in “Pervorossijsk,” only a tiny fraction made it into *Pervorossiiane.* She was also not convinced that her expansive work with words could be rendered visually. And yet, at the final Art Council meeting, she unequivocally defended the final picture. In defending the film, however, she echoed the comments of Moldavsky (above), asking that the experiment be evaluated.

> The word “search” was being used a lot here. I must say that I do not like this word. For example, a writer writes a forty-page novella, and later it is said the writer “tried to” write something. But didn’t he actually write something? He searched, he explored, but in the end did he carry out the experiment!? There is a sense of something “stillborn” in words like “search,” “experiment,” and “the author tried.” But here, the process did not end with some sort of ideological hiccups—it ended with a major, powerful film.[221]

In many ways, Berggholz’s position was representative of the industry approach in general. It was not enough to make a film and call it “experimental.” The experiment had to be appraised.

The statement of Grigori Kozintsev (1905–1973) at the Art Council meeting posits the opposing view: that evaluation of experiment misses the point of experiment in the arts. Kozintsev, formerly a FEKS (Factory of Eccentric Actors) member and a living link between the contemporary film culture and the experimental spirit of the immediate post-revolutionary period, commented on the important role of experiment in art by gesturing toward the revolution. He remarked: “Until very recently, one could think that

[221] Berggholz, *Pervorossiiska net Kommuna zreet*, 311.

our art has only one stylistic line—if a work turned out well, it must belong to this stylistic line. However in our art, in its best periods there existed a creative debate."[222] He commented that some of the intelligibility issues that *Pervorossiiane* faced came from the film following directly on the tradition of revolutionary art, which was political and anti-psychological. In Kozintsev's view, the film was a long exposition on the art of the revolution. He does critique certain aspects of the film, but rather than evaluate the film as a whole, he chooses to evaluate it as a gesture. "This is my opinion, but I cannot approach this work from the standpoint of my individual tastes. I can only say that I respect the work of the creative team and believe that the revival of the traditions of revolutionary art has every right to exist."[223] This film demands space for experiment, and finds a way to carve it out within the studio system, even though the studio may no longer be the best place for experiment.

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[222] Kozintsev, *Pervorossiiska net Kommuna zreet*, 296.

[223] Kozintsev, *Pervorossiiska net Kommuna zreet*, 297.

CHAPTER FOUR

From the Space Program to Soviet Video Art: the Film Experiments of Bulat Galeyev

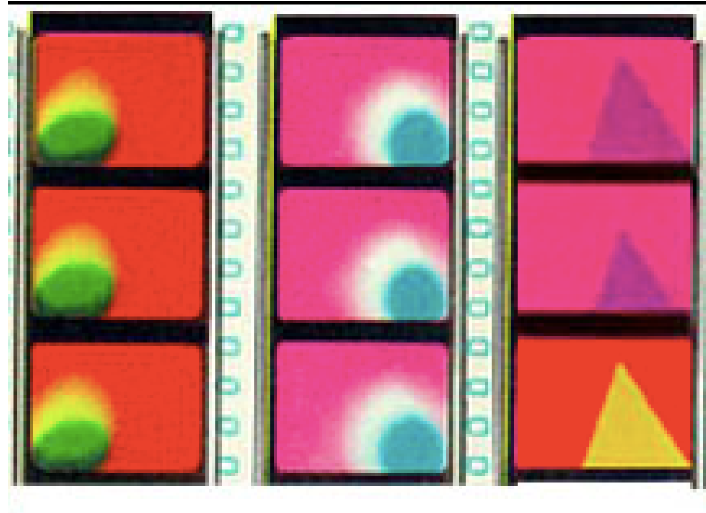

Figure 4.1. Stills from the light-music film "Prometheus" 1965.

In July 1975, Soviet physicist and filmmaker Bulat Galeyev delivered a provocatively titled talk, The Role of the Military-Industrial Complex in the Development of Avant-garde Art Forms in the USSR.[224] The occasion for the talk was the third all-union conference Kinetic Art: Light and Music ('Kineticheskoe isskustvo: svet i muzyka') hosted by the Kazan Aviation Institute, one of the top Soviet institutions for aeronautics research. In fact, Galeyev's presentation was an improvised joke delivered at a post-conference gathering.[225] However, actual presentations at this highly unusual conference included papers on topics as varied as color music and abstract painting, the theory and

[224] Unless specified otherwise, all translations are my own.

[225] Galeyev writes about the high-tech experimental arts in the Soviet Union in his book on the Soviet inventor Lev Termen. For more information see the chapter "Imperiya zla, polyubish i kozla, ili oda VPK" in *Sovetskij Faust: Lev Termen, pioner èlektronnogo iskusstva* (Panorama, 1995).

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practice of kineticism, audio-visual synesthesia in the poetry of Blok, and audio-visual music in advertising. The topics of the presentations indicated an astonishing awareness on the part of conference participants of early Soviet avant-garde and pre-Soviet modernist culture, which had both been largely suppressed in the Soviet Union starting in the 1930s. They also indicated awareness of concurrent developments in the arts and popular culture in the West, unexpected for a conference in a "closed" state. An overview of the proceedings from this Soviet conference were published in the Summer 1976 issue of *Leonardo*, a leading American journal on art, science and technology published out of MIT, signaling an exchange between Soviet and Western art-science communities.[226] The conference content was too artistic for a Soviet scientific institution and would have been deemed too "formalist" for any artistic institution. Galeyev's talk title flaunts and indulges in this fact.

Remembering the events of the 1975 conference twenty years later, Galeyev remarks that the conference participants gathered to hear his improvised talk had smirked and exchanged knowing glances. In the Soviet Union, anyone who worked on so-called "kinetic art" – anything from electronic music, video art, Laserium installations, computer graphics, light architecture, hologram installations, etc. – in one way or another drew on the military-industrial complex for their funding, technology, and facilities. In his reminiscences, Galeyev notes the unlikely yet robust institutional support for high-tech experimental arts in the Soviet Union:

[226] For more on the conference proceedings see Bulat Galeyev, "Kinetic Art: Third Conference on Light and Music, Kazan, U.S.S.R., 27 June – 4 July, 1975," *Leonardo* 9 (1975: 3): 238-239.

> The first official light music laboratory, led by the engineer Konstantin Leontiev, was created in the late 1950s in the "closed" Institute of Automation and Telemechanics, which was part of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. The pioneer of cybernetic music Rudolph Zaripov […] also worked for the military-industrial complex […] The first artistic holograms were created at the Vavilov State Optical Institute in Leningrad – just try to get into that institution without special clearance! Within this same institute, despite all official plans, the first experiments with laser animation were carried out. The creators of light-music instruments were also closely connected with the military-industrial complex. Finally, the first Soviet computer film by the Novosibirsk "Albatros" studio which received a prize at the "Ars Electronica" festival (Linz, Austria) was hardly produced in "underground" conditions. The film was in fact created by a massive computer used to service flight simulators. Long live the "physicists" at VPK [military-industrial complex]![227]

Galeyev puts physicists (fiziki) in scare quotes in order to suggest that the scientists working on these experimental projects (he among them) saw themselves as artists as much as scientists, despite the fact that the official missions of these various institutes were anything but artistic.[228] As further indication of this artistic self-identification, many of these scientists later participated in experimental film and art festivals, bringing their "scientific innovations" to the artistic community. Just as the title of Galeyev's mock-talk suggests, Soviet scientific institutions were in fact fostering artistic communities.

The unique cultural and institutional configuration of arts and sciences in the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s led to the development of "high-tech" artistic communities within scientific institutions. Here as in other socialist contexts, art had a way of surviving in unexpected establishments, often the least intuitive ones, such as the

[227] Galeyev, *Sovetskij Faust: Lev Termen.*

[228] This was also an unmistakable reference to the *fiziki/ liriki* (scientists/artists) debate initiated during the Thaw. As the scientists turned to the arts, there was a complimentary scientific turn in the humanities, as expressed for example in the development of structuralism. See Yuri Lotman's 1967 article "Literaturovedenie dolzhno stat' naukoi," *Voprosy literatury* 1 (1967): 100. See also Peter Seyffret, *Soviet literary structuralism : background, debate, issues* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1985).

sciences or the military.[229] In this chapter I focus on the work of the physicist Bulat Galeyev and the cinematic experiments he conducted under the auspices of the radio-mechanics laboratory at the Aviation Institute in Kazan. A prolific writer, Galeyev was also an active member and promoter of the art-science community.[230] Inspired by the writings of Alexander Skryabin on music, light and synesthesia, Galeyev founded the Special Construction Bureau (SKB) *Prometei* in 1962.[231] Starting in 1965, the group held regular conferences, festivals and visual music performances in Kazan, bringing together colleagues from other Soviet scientific institutions conducting similar transdisciplinary work. The group also completed their first amateur film "Prometheus" in 1965 (fig. 4.1).

Using his position as a highly regarded scientist, Galeyev gained access to otherwise banned literature on the abstract art of Kazemir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky as well as theories of the combination of image and sound developed by

[229] For example, Alice Lovejoy's recent book *Army Film and the Avant Garde: Cinema and Experiment in the Czechoslovak Military* is a groundbreaking study of the fostering of an experimental artistic community within the Czechoslovak military film studio. Lovejoy argues that it was the studio's institutional position, outside the reach of traditional artistic institutions that allowed it to engage in aesthetic experiment, and to become a hotbed of artistic innovation. Lovejoy also traces the way the experimentation at the military film studio contributed to the development of the aesthetics and politics of the Czech New Wave, nuancing our understanding of the interaction between official culture, institutional designations and the reality of artistic process.

[230] Irina Vanečkina, in her introduction to the memorial volume of the conference dedicated to the 50th anniversary of SKB "*Prometej*" in 2012, cites Galeyev's 16 books, his editorial participation in 17 edited volumes and over 700 articles in a variety of publications. For a selected bibliography of Galeyev's publications see: Vanečkina, I.L. & Galeyev, B.M. eds., 2012.

[231] In 1993, SKB "*Prometej*" was restructured into Nauchno Issledovatelski Institut (NII) *Prometej*. In 1994, NII *Prometei*became the Institute of Experimental Aesthetics *Prometej*.

Sergei Eisenstein and Alexander Scriabin.[232] He amassed a library on avant-garde and experimental art at SKB *Prometej*, and published widely on light-music experiments and synesthesia.[233] At *Prometei*, Galeyev's team (self-described artists, musicians and engineers) used cutting-edge technology to experiment with combinations of recorded light and sound, producing visual music films that were later commissioned for so-called "relaxation rooms" for Soviet astronauts. Starting in the 1970s, the films were successfully exhibited at European festivals of experimental film and art. In 1975 Galeyev was invited to join the Soviet Cinematographers' Union following the success of his experimental film *Little Triptych*, which secured institutional recognition for his cinematic work. The various institutions of the Soviet Film industry were instrumental to the work of SKB *Prometei* (access to the film archive at Belie Stolby, use of film libraries and film publications and finally the ability to make films at the Documentary Film Studio in Kazan). In the case of SKB *Prometei* film experimentation was substantiated by scientific work even as it was inspired by the art of the avant-garde.

In looking at the social and institutional position of SKB *Prometei* I am especially indebted to Alexei Yurchak's concept of being 'vnye', literally *outside,* a notion he introduces to speak about a variety of groups and phenomena in the Soviet society that

[232] Galeyev's bibliographies for *Leonardo* articles include French, and English language publications such as F. Popper's *Naissance de l'art cinetique* (1967), Gidoni's *The Art of Light and Color* (1933). The bibliography to Galeyev's first book, co-authored with his wife art historian Irina Vanechkina in 1981 contains an expanded foreign language bibliography that includes German language publications of Kandinsky's work.

[233] Galeyev published in a wide variety of industry journals of literature, technology, musicology, etc. See for example: Galeyev B. "Srkyabin i Eizenshtejn (kino i vidimia muzyka)," *Volga* 7 (1967): 150-162; Galeyev B.M. "Svetomuzyka na kinoekrane," *Texnika kino i televideniia* 11 (1973): 35-39; Galeyev B.M. "Kraski muzyki," *Sovetskii èkran* 19 (1976): 17; Galeyev B., Sajfullin R., Galiullin I. 'Prostranstvennaia muzyka i ee tehnicheskaia realizaciia'. *Scenicheskaia tehnika i tehnologiia* 3 (1976): 30-32; Chto zhe eto takoe, svetomuzyka? *Muzykal'naia zhizn'* 4 (1988): 18-20.

“do not quite fit the pro/anti dichotomy in relation to authoritative discourse and can not be quite articulated within the parameters of that discourse”.[234] Typically these groups function within socially accepted norms and institutions, but rather than promote these or engage in their critique they chose to sidestep the conversation entirely. Instead they use the social structures in form only, injecting new meaning into existing institutional settings. Yurchak explicitly discusses the circle of theoretical physicists as well as a variety of the late Soviet experimental art groups such as the Leningrad based Mitki and Necrorealists as being ‘vnye’, noting the great range of social expressions of this discursive position.[235] Because Galeyev’s group functioned within a state institution, drawing funding from the military-industrial complex, it is difficult to group it with underground art (which often though not always had an oppositional bent). Nor would it be accurate to class the activities of SKB *Prometei* with the politically engaged and later explicitly critical scientists.[236] There is no indication in his writings that Galeyev had an explicit political agenda in promoting visual music. While working explicitly within the system, the Soviet art-science community was ‘vnye’ in so far as it replaced the “Soviet political and social concerns with a quite different set of concerns that allowed one to lead a creative and imaginative life.”[237] Galeyev also worked within film institutions, but not exactly according to the film institution plans. The film industry of the period was

[234] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever,* 132.

[235] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever,* 139-142. For a discussion of art communities such as Mitki or Necrorealisty that occupied the ‘vnye’ position with respect to the Soviet Society see also: Alexei Yurchak, “Suspending the political: late soviet artistic experiments on the margins of the state,” *Poetics Today*, 29(2008: 4): 713 – 733.

[236] For a discussion of the privileged position of Soviet scientists and their oppositional and occasionally dissident activities see Medvedev, Z.A., 1978.

[237] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever,* 132.

evidently porous enough to make room for external actors such as the SKB *Prometei* group.

The study of an artistic community in the sciences is also necessarily a nod to the avant-garde. Scientism was a trope of the historical avant-garde across Europe, and nowhere more so than in Russia. Commenting on this tendency, Michael Holquist remarks that in much of the avant-garde, "the marriage between the two discourses [of science and art] is merely a matter of rhetorical convenience, with science invoked as no more than a pool of misappropriated terms, hasty metaphors, and spurious significance."[238] I argue that this "marriage of the two discourses" obtains concrete form in the later Soviet period with the emergence of the art-science subculture within the Soviet science mainstream. I start by tracing the early modernist and avant-garde heritage of visual music as conceptualized by musicians such as Scriabin and visual artists such as Kandinsky. I then turn to the associations between visual music and science in Soviet culture, tracing the way institutions of science rather than art became the hub for visual music's development. Finally, I turn to the earliest film experiments of Bulat Galeyev, as well as his early writing about film and visual music. His exploration of the film medium in practice as well as in theory (in conversation with Eisenstein) provided fresh avenues for the development of this new art. I close by looking at networks of film, art and science in the Soviet Union, and explore the ways in which Galeyev's group and the larger art-science community constitutes a renegotiation of the boundary between science and art – a conversation initiated by the avant-garde.

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[238] Michael Holquist, 'Tsiolkovsky as a Moment in the Prehistory of the Avant-Garde' in Bowlt, J.E. & Matich, O. eds., *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde & Cultural Experiment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press,1999): 101.

I. Visual Music as the Art of the Avant-garde

Bulat Galeyev's group SKB *Prometei*took its name and inspiration from *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*, a "musical poem" composed by Alexander Scriabin (1872 – 1915) in 1910. A symbolist composer, Scriabin was famous for the development of atonal music and for his interest in synesthesia. Influenced greatly by theosophy, as well as by Wagner's idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, for some years before his sudden death Scriabin had been planning a multi-media work called *Mysterium*. This was to be a weeklong performance held in the Himalayan mountains, a synthesis of all arts that would bring about a kind of exulted Armageddon.[239] This final work was never actualized; however, Scriabin's *Poem of Ecstasy* (1908) and *Prometheus* (1910) were precursors of the project. Most notably, *Prometheus* included a color score called "Luce," which was composed for a special music/color organ. The "organ" consisted of a simple wooden panel with light bulbs of different colors that would light up as they were triggered mechanically by corresponding musical tones. This idea of an entirely new art form combining music and color/light inspired the experiments of Galeyev's workshop.

At first the group created light music machines (elaborations on the original color organ) and experimented with combining music and color/light based partially on the notes left by Scriabin. The first collective action of SKB *Prometei*at their inception in 1962 was a performance of Scriabin's *Poem of Fire* in collaboration with the Kazan conservatory and with color light accompaniment. The introduction of the piece, announced over loudspeakers to the assembled audience, claimed that this was the first

[239] For more on Scriabin's *Mysterium* see Sabaneev, L.L., 1925.

performance of *Prometheus* with color/light accompaniment in the Soviet Union and perhaps in the world.[240]

In fact, the first public performance of *Prometheus* with color-light accompaniment had taken place in 1915 at New York's Carnegie Hall, shortly before Scriabin's death (fig. 4.2). The composer did not oversee the staging of the performance, and the reviews of the event were mixed. Some critics found the color accompaniment technically weak and therefore a distraction from the music. Others believed that while the idea of combining music and light had a future, the present manifestation of the idea was underdeveloped and would have benefited from further work and the involvement of the composer in the staging of the piece. Most, however, dismissed the idea of bringing color and light into musical performance as a cheap attraction. The Soviet premiere of *Prometheus* took place at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow in 1918, part of a performance commemorating the first anniversary of the October Revolution. The performance had a visual component, but was accompanied by dynamic modernist set designs created by Aristarkh Lentulov rather than by color-light arrangements, as Scriabin had conceived it (fig. 4.3). Still, the multi-media component of the performance in its totalizing conception had a symbolic significance. The mystical ideas of cosmic union and synthesis of the arts espoused by Scriabin found a conceptual home in the October Revolution. Galeyev learned about the performance history much later and wrote about it in a book on

[240] The performance was part of a Kazan 'Festival' studenčeskoj xudožestvennoj samodejatel'nosti', a youth festival dedicated to amateur art. This and similar youth festivals were a common feature of the cultural climate of the Thaw. See Vanechkina, I.L. 2012: 24.

Scriabin's *Prometheus* that he co-authored with his wife, the art historian Irina Vanechkina, in 1981.[241]

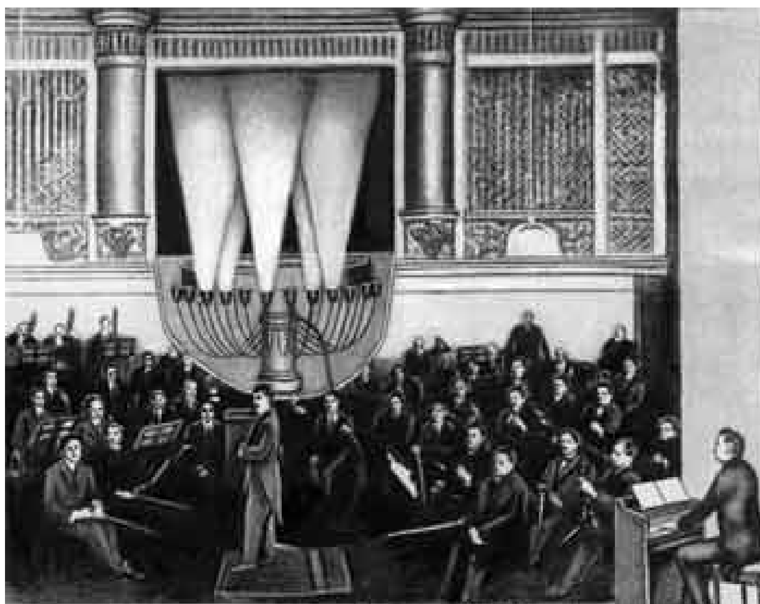

Figure 4.2. First performance of "Prometheus" with light accompaniment.
New York, Carnegie Hall, 1915.

[241] Irina Vanechkina and Bulat Galeyev, *Poèma ognja": koncepcija svetomuzykal'nogo sinteza A. N. Skrjabina*, (Kazan: Izd-vo Kazanskogo un-ta, 1981).

Figure 4.3. First Performance of "Prometheus" in USSR (stage design Aristarkh Lentulov). Moscow, Bolshoi Theater, 1918.

Although Galeyev foregrounds Scriabin in his research, he credits Vasilii Kandinsky with the origins of his interest in the synthesis of color and music. As a child, he recalls, he had seen images of Kandinsky's paintings in an encyclopedia printed before the revolution that had sparked his imagination.[242] In fact, among Scriabin's contemporaries, Kandinsky was especially interested in the synthesis of the arts, and in Scriabin's forays into visual music. Similarly influenced by theosophy, in 1911 Kandinsky published his famous essay 'On the Spiritual in Art', where he discussed the correspondence between the senses and between various art forms. Kandinsky's paintings of the early teens reflected this interest. Many of his works from this period were

[242] Irina Vanechkina and Bulat Galeyev eds., *Galeyevskie chteniia: materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchno-prakticheskoi konferencii ("Prometej"-2012), Kazan, 6-8 aprelja 2010 g.* (Kazan: Izd-vo Kazanskogo gos. texnicheskogo un-ta., 2012): 23.

attempts at visual representations of sound, and bear musical titles such as *Fugue* (1914) (fig. 4.5), or the *Compositions* cycle, a concept he began to develop starting in 1909 and continued to work on throughout his career (fig. 4.4). In 1914 Kandinsky published his notes for a multi-media piece, *Yellow Sound*, which included precise directions for color orchestration and shifts in musical tonalities.

Figure 4.4. Wassily Kandinsky, Composition VI, 1913

Figure 4.5. Wassily Kandinsky*, Fugue,* 1914.

Whereas Scriabin died suddenly in 1915, before he had a chance to refine his ideas on visual music, Kandinsky's ideas continued to develop from their more mystical origins in theosophy into a quest for the concrete scientific study of human perception. Taking advantage of the rapid restructuring of artistic institutions after the revolution, in 1920 Kandinsky became the first director of the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK). At INKhUK, Kandinsky drafted the program for the theoretical section of the institute, whose mission was to conduct scientific analysis of the basic elements of various art forms and art as a whole. Kandinsky was also the founder of the Section for Monumental Art at INKhUK, conceived as the department concerned with the synthesis of the arts.[243] At INKhUK (which was later restructured into GINKhUK, 1925 – 1930), artists came to consider themselves scientists of material, appropriating the scientific method for artistic endeavor.[244]

After his departure from INKhUK in 1921, Kandinsky and his supporters were able to form a different kind of scientifically-minded artistic community at the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences (RAKhN).[245] Unlike INKhUK, RAKhN was a fully academic institution, not an art school. Its goal was to "elaborate a theory of art history, to provide this theory with a scientific grounding, and to inquire into a potential

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[243] In his practice and research Kandinsky was most interested in bringing painting and visual art closer to the "kinetic arts" of music and dance. However, as the institute evolved, the Constructivists, headed by Rodchenko, saw Kandinsky's ideas as too subjective. Their work was more grounded in material, seeking to orient painting toward sculpture and ultimately toward architecture and industrial design. See Misler, N., 1997.

[244] See for example Maria Gough's discussion of the careful "scientific documentation" of the Constructivists. Gough, M., 2005.

[245] For more information on Kandinsky's work at RAKhN see Nicoletta, M., 2002.

relationship between art and the positive sciences."[246] At RAKhN especially, Kandinsky encouraged scientists to participate in the theoretical debates on art in science, for example asking the physicist Petr Lazarev to give lectures on 'Colors and Their Physical and Chemical Investigation' and 'Sight and Color', and the X-ray specialist Nikolai Uspensky to lecture on 'The Role of the Positive Sciences in the Study of the General Paths of Artistic Creativity'. Other scientists who helped shape the program of study at RAKhN were another X-ray specialist, Georgii Wulf, biologists such as Evgenii Gabrichevsky, psychologists such as Petr Kapterev and mathematicians such as Pavel Florensky. Kandinsky's continued interest in Scriabin also led him to invite Scriabin's biographer, the musicologist Leonid Sabaneev, to give lectures at RAKhN.[247] RAKhN maintained strong ties with the positive sciences for the duration of its operation until its closure in 1930. Many of the avant-garde movements appropriated (or misappropriated) scientific terminology. And many of the newly formed Soviet artistic institutions claimed to train not artists, but "scientists of art."[248] It was only at RAKhN that art and science truly intermingled, setting an institutional precedent for the continued merging of these two areas of knowledge.

II. Art in Soviet Science

Although Galeyev did not write about Kandinsky until much later, he read about both Kandinsky's artistic work as well as his institutional efforts starting in the 1960s,

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[246] Nicoletta Misler, "A citadel of Idealism: RAKhN as a Soviet Anomaly," *Experiment* 3 (1997:1) 14–30.

[247] Misler, "A citadel of Idealism," 21-22.

[248] Misler, "A citadel of Idealism," 17.

knowledge that would hardly be common for a Soviet citizen of the period.[249] In an interview with film scholar Milena Musina, Galeyev explained that the group was in fact able to assemble a major library on abstract art and visual music at the institute because of the privileged position scientists held in the Soviet Union, especially scientists connected with the space program.[250] He clarified:

> Kandinsky and abstract art in general was very well represented in library depositories, but it was not widely released. And so I began to request microfilm copies of those books from the Lenin Library [in Moscow]. Initially they responded negatively. "The Aviation Institute? Why would you need Kandinsky? Rejection!" And so I wrote them a long letter, explaining that we are working on aeronautics research for the space program, that I am forbidden from disclosing any details about our project, but that we need the books for further research. After this letter they released the literature.

Paradoxically, it was Galeyev's standing at a scientific institution that gave him access to otherwise inaccessible literature on art. This access created an opportunity for an alternative art education for Galeyev and his group, one that could not be obtained at the standard artistic institutions at the time.

Scientists were in fact perhaps the most privileged class in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, a condition created by the escalating Cold War and the space race adjacent to it. This was the case both in the eyes of the state and in the popular imagination. In his book on the Soviet intelligentsia Vladislav Zubok gives special attention to the freedoms and privileges of Soviet scientists. Zubok specifically mentions that scientists in this period

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[249] Galeyev's knowledge of literature on Kandinsky mostly included works published before Kandinsky's departure from Russia or those published abroad such as: Kandinsky V. *Stupeni*. Moscow, 1918. Kandinsky V. O sceničeskoj kompozicii. *Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo*, 1919, N1, s.39-49. Kandinsky V. O "Velikoj Utopii". *Xudožestvennaja žizn'*, 1920, N3, s.2-4. Kandinsky V. 'O duxovnom v iskusstve (Živopis')'. N'ju-Jork,1967. See Vanečkina I., Galeyev B. 1998. 'Kandinsky i Skrjabin: mify i real'nost' *Mnogogrannyj mir Kandinskogo*: (Sb. statej). Nauka. s.131-144.

[250] Musina, "Andergraund."

acquired access not only to a wide array of foreign professional publications but also increasingly to popular literature and periodicals. Another significant development was the creation of "Soviet Pugwash Committee" which legalized regular communication between Soviet and Western scientists.[251] In their social analysis of the 1960s, Peter Vail and Alexander Genis point to the new heroic and messianic image ascribed to scientists: "Science was seen as the long-awaited lever that will overturn Soviet society and turn it into a utopia, built on the basis of exact sciences."[252] Vail and Genis also note that scientists needed relative freedom to carry out creative work—and they were granted it. Soviet physicists began receiving Nobel prizes in 1958, 1962, 1964, showing positive results emerging from their newfound autonomy. The launching of Sputnik in 1957 also fed the popular imagination. Galeyev's founding of *Prometei*as an amateur workshop at the Kazan Aviation Institute, and its development into an independent Institute of Experimental Aesthetics over the course of Galeyev's tenure as a lecturer and later professor of physics and aesthetics at the Kazan Institute, is testament to the freedom and high standing of science in Soviet society.

When asked by Musina about the conceptual connection between visual music and science in the 1960s, Galeyev points to science fiction.[253] Fed by the general excitement around science, science fiction became the best loved and most widely read

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[251] Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's children: the last Russian intelligentsia*, (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011): 132.

[252] Piotr Vail and Aleksandr Genis, *60-e mir sovetskogo čeloveka* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2001): 100.

[253] Musina, "Anderground."

genre of the period.[254] Varieties of multimedia performances involving music, color and light appeared in science fiction works as projections of the art of the future. In Yan Larri's 1931 utopian science fiction novel *The Land of the Happy,* (re-published in the 1960s) a light symphony is performed in the sky over Magnitogorsk. Another Soviet scientist and science fiction writer, Ivan Efremov, described visual music performances in his 1957 novel *Andromeda Nebula.*[255] Galeyev explained that Efremov's novel was enormously popular during the Thaw and was read by everyone including the lead Soviet rocket engineer and head of the Soviet space program Sergei Korolev. Korolev was inspired by Efremov's projections and conceived a number of projects for the use of audio-visual equipment in space travel. The commissions of Korolev's team provided work for *Prometej*. Galeyev remembered:

> What didn't we experiment with…A number of audio-visual indicators for evaluating the condition of the space ship and of its operators. Equipment for color-filling the monitor of the spaceship control panel during periods when the spaceship was outside the sphere of radio-accessibility… It turned out beautifully. Moreover, having reached the theoretical conclusion that all music is mediated by gravity, we proposed designing special audio-visual programs for adaptation to zero gravity.[256]

Because of Korolev's sudden death in 1966, many of these projects were never fully carried out. Nevertheless, the possibilities and projections of the space program served as rich inspiration for technical and artistic experimentation. The research on the positive

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[254] For a discussion of the popularity of science fiction in the 1960s, and especially of Efremov's novel see Matthias Schwartz 'A dream come true: Close encounters with outer space in Soviet Scientific Journals of the 1950s and 1960s' in Maurer, E., 2011. *Soviet space culture: cosmic enthusiasm in socialist societies*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 231-251.

[255] In fact, Schwartz refers to the novel as "one of the most popular science fiction works until the end of the Soviet Union, with more than 20 million copies sold". *Ibid.,* p. 242.

[256] Galeyev, *Sovetskij Faust.*

psychological effects of visual music drew a separate set of contracts for Galeyev's films, such as a commission to design videos for the decompression rooms for Soviet astronauts. Other "practical applications" of the work of SKB *Prometei*were visual installations for monotonous industrial environments, which helped workers maintain focus, as well as "visual gymnastics" films for people operating heavy machinery.[257] Work with cutting-edge audio-visual equipment transformed organically from artistic experimentation into state-commissioned projects, and vice-versa.

III. Visual Music on Film

According to Galeyev, who described the group's first forays into film in an interview with Musina, the group started working with film as a matter of practicality. Their first performances generated interest; however, the equipment they used was heavy and thus difficult to move to and from different locations. In the course of his research, Galeyev also discovered that Scriabin had envisioned the color performance on a flat surface, a screen of sorts, rather than on a stage. The use of film and film projection would also expand the range of possible performance venues. Their film experiments began through trial and error. Initially they recorded the music along with simple color alterations, as suggested by Scriabin's "Luce," on a screen. The simplicity of the color alterations was not a good match for the intricacy of the musical score, and the group decided to add colored forms to bring greater complexity to the image. Because color film was not readily available, the group made their first visual music films on black and white film

[257] See Bulat Galeyev, "Music-Kinetic Art Medium: On the Work of the Group "Prometei" (SKB), Kazan, U.S.S.R," *Leonardo*, 9 (1976: 3): 180.

and established a technique of chemically dying the negatives in the course of the development process.

The group completed their first experimental film, another rendition of a color performance of Scriabin's *Prometheus*, in 1965 (fig. 4.1). The film used primary colors and simple geometric shapes. Although for *Prometei* these were explicitly artistic experiments, they carefully documented their activity using the conventions of scientific process. A point of special interest for the group was an "intuitive" versus "automatic" correlation between color and sound. Much as Kandinsky had asserted in his later writing, the group believed that there was no simple, objective correspondence between musical tones and colors. Thus much of the experimentation was dedicated to manually rather than mechanically altering color and shape combinations to achieve the greatest possible artistic unity.[258] Their next film, the 1969 *Eternal Motion,* used much more elaborate forms and a more diversified color palate, similar to the early abstract works of Kandinsky (fig. 4.6). Galeyev himself connected the formal development of this work to Kandinsky, an otherwise still largely censored artist in the Soviet Union.

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[258] This approach to visual music went very much against the grain of the Soviet cybernetics boom, and the increased interest in electronic sound. A laboratory of Color Music was set up in the academy of sciences in Moscow in the early 1960s, headed by K. Leontiev. In contrast to Galeyev, Leontiev maintained that computers could generate the most "reliable" color accompaniments for any musical piece. See Galeyev, B. "The Fire of Prometheus: Music-Kinetic Art Experiments in the USSR". *Leonardo* 21 (1988:4): 388.

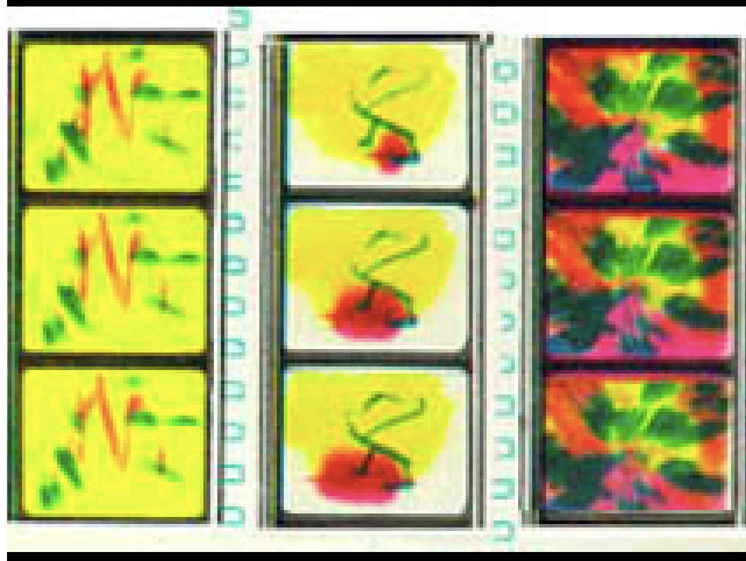

Figure 4.6. Stills from the light-music film *Eternal Motion*, 1969.

Galeyev's first theoretical article, 'Scriabin and Eisenstein: Film and Visual Music,' was published in 1967 in the Saratov Writers Union journal *Volga*.[259] Harnessing both the theory and the technology of film, Galeyev was looking to speed up the development of visual music—at this time gaining popularity mostly as psychedelic curiosity—into a legitimate art form. Cinema's start as a fairground attraction and its relatively fast development into high art (Galeyev points out that only 30 years separate the introduction of the new technology by the Lumière brothers and the creation of *Battleship Potemkin*) were additional points of inspiration for Galeyev. Riding the wave of the Thaw, a six-volume set of Eisenstein's writings was published in the Soviet Union in 1964; in his article Galeyev quotes abundantly from Eisenstein's essays from different years. In Eisenstein he found an eloquent theorist and practitioner of an art still new—cinema—and ideas that can be used to advance the cause of visual music.

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[259] The journal was reputably more liberal with its content because being published out of Saratov it was scrutinized less carefully by censorship bodies than less central publications. See Galeyev B.M. 1967.

Of special interest for Galeyev are Eisenstein's essay 'Non-indifferent nature' (1945), in which he discusses the synthesis of the arts and synesthesia, and his last essay, 'Colored Film' (1945), in which he draws crucial distinctions between the natural color of objects in the world and the use of color as an artistic device in cinema. Perhaps of greatest importance for Galeyev are Eisenstein's ideas on the counterpoint of image and sound, an idea that Scriabin had only hinted at before his untimely death in 1915. In his 1928 essay 'The Future of Sound Film,' (co-authored with Pudovkin and Alexandrov) Eisenstein writes that only counterpointal use of sound with respect to the visual montage piece offers new possibilities for development and perfection. Eisenstein would continue to develop his ideas on counterpoint during the filming of *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and elaborate on them in his 1940 essay 'Vertical Montage.' Here, especially, he speaks about—and dismisses—the mechanical correlations between sound and image:

> For this purpose we also dealt with the question of correspondence between music and color, and here we came to the conclusion that the presence of 'absolute' equivalents between sound and color – if they exist in nature – do not play a decisive role in a work of art, although they can sometimes be useful in an 'auxiliary' capacity. Here, the decisive role is played by the *graphic structure* of the work, which does not so much *make use* of existent or non-existent correspondences as *establish* graphically those correspondences which *the idea and the theme of the given work* prescribe for its graphic structure (Eisenstein 2010: 371). [260]

Eisenstein is not simply uninterested in the mechanical correlations; he goes on to develop and orchestrate a full theory of audio-visual counterpoint. In 'Vertical Montage,' he includes a breakdown of the audio-visual correlations and counterpoint in *Alexander Nevsky*, an articulation that Galeyev would exploit in his later work.

[260] Here italics are added by Eisenstein. See Sergei Eisenstein, *Towards a Theory of Montage: Sergei Eisenstein Selected Works, Volume 2* Reissue edition. R. Taylor, ed., (London; New York, 2010): 371.

In addition to engaging with the theories of Eisenstein, Galeyev's article provides a discussion of early abstract film of the 1920s and 1930s. Extensions of various avant-garde movements, these films were not known in the Soviet Union even within the cinematic community. Galeyev learned of their existence from the writing of two western film scholars, Georges Sadoul and Béla Balázs. Sadoul's six-volume history of cinema was translated into Russian in 1958, and was especially informative about the early years of motion pictures, including the various avant-garde movements.[261] The writings of Béla Balázs were another crucial connection between the European avant-garde movements of the 20s and 30s and the period of the Thaw. His work on cinema as an art form came out in Moscow in 1945 while he was living in the Soviet Union.[262] The re-publication and translation of these texts became major sources of information for film scholars during the Thaw, and prompted further research from Galeyev.

Using the commentary of Sadoul and Balázs on early experimental cinema, Galeyev is clearly working to carve out a space for visual music, which bears a close resemblance to abstract cinema. Galeyev is especially keen to make a sharp distinction between abstract art, abstract cinema and visual music, which, because it is "plotless," is open to the accusations of formalism. Galeyev begins by discussing the work of Viking Eggeling, a Swedish avant-garde (Dadaist) artist whose silent film *Symphonie Diagonale*

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[261] A vocal French communist, Georges Sadoul held strong Soviet sympathies and was regularly published in Soviet film journals. Although Galeyev himself notes that Sadoul's writings were "cautious," his history of film did contain a brief discussion of abstract filmmakers. See Sadul', Ž., 1958. Vseobščaja istorija kino. V šesti tomax. Tom 1, Iskusstvo.

[262] In the 1920s Balázs lived in Berlin, where he joined the local communist party, eventually moving to the Soviet Union in 1930 to live in Moscow until 1945. See Bela Balaš, *Iskusstvo kino*. (Moskva: Goskinoizdat, 1945). His work theorizing the essence of cinema was published was in German in 1961 and later translated into Russian in 1968. See Balaš, B., 1968. *Kino. Stanovlenie i suschnost' novogo iskusstva,* Progress.

(1924) was “an experiment to discover the basic principles of the organization of time intervals in the film medium” as proclaimed by the opening slide of the film. The film is silent, and shows a variety of geometric shapes and lines moving and transforming into one another. Eggeling theorized that the movement of shapes would elicit an acoustic sensation in the viewer – a kind of visual music – prompted by the changing forms and the rhythm of their movement. For Galeyev, the work of Eggeling is more connected to abstract painting than to visual music, and he dismisses it as “pure formalism”. Galeyev also discusses Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940). For him, Disney’s forays into visual music are too closely tied with “tricks and entertainment” to be a work of art.[263] It is the films of Oskar Fischinger, such as the *Optical Poem* (1938) based on Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsody*, which Galeyev considers a truly successful attempt at creating visual music (fig. 4.7). Here, he quotes Balázs, who seems to agree that visual music “has a future” in Fischinger’s films. Unlike Eggling’s work, Fischinger’s films were made in color and set to music, with the musical themes serving as their content. Galeyev argues that the work of artists like Fischinger needs to be discussed not as “abstract cinema” (a subcategory of cinema and of abstract art), but as a powerful statement of a new art – visual music.

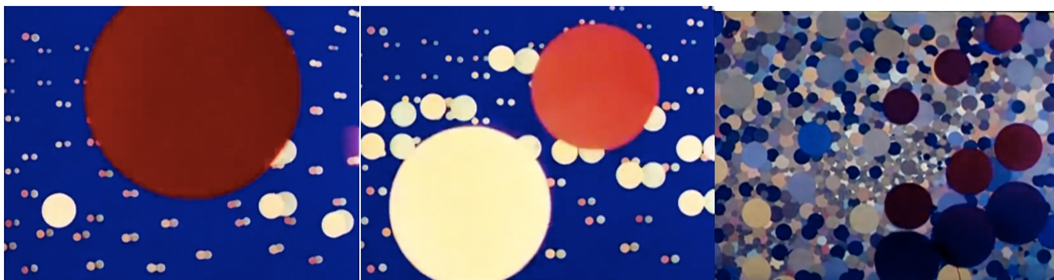

Figure 4.7. Oskar Fischinger. Stills from “An Optical Poem” (1938).
Set to the music of Franz Liszt “Second Hungarian Rhapsody.”

[263] Galeyev does not mention the fact that Disney collaborated with an abstract artist and filmmaker Len Lye (1901 – 1980) on *Fantasia*. The project was in fact pushing off the avant-garde form of visual music to appeal to mass audiences of Disney’s films.

IV. Networks of Science - Networks of Art

Having access to texts was a matter of privilege; having access to films was a matter of official clearance. A true breakthrough for Galeyev's theory and practice came during a trip to the main Soviet film archive, Gosfilmfond, at Belye Stolby (probably sometime in 1966). Reading the newly translated film histories of Sadoul and Balázs, Galeyev learned of the work of abstract filmmakers of the 1920s and 30s. He also discovered that many of these films were kept at the Belye Stolby archive. Although Galeyev and his team did not have the requisite permission to work at the archive, they arrived armed with Galeyev's manuscript on Eisenstein and Scriabin. Naum Kleiman, an Eisenstein expert, was at the time the head of the archive collections. Impressed by the article, he managed to obtain clearance for Galeyev's group and substantiate the visit of the scientists as a one-day conference/festival on abstract film and visual music.[264] Galeyev recalls: "And for an entire day we watched abstraction. We even watched films of Dali and Bunuel under this guise."[265] The archivists at Gosfilmfond admitted to Galeyev's group that this was the first time they had been allowed to view the previously banned "formalist" works.

During this impromptu "conference," Galeyev and his team also shared their own films with the film scholars at Gosfilmfond. Galeyev admits that their films looked amateurish next to some of the works of the abstract film artists, and the archivists were amused. After all, Galeyev's team made their films in "homegrown" conditions without the materials available at a real film studio. Nevertheless, the trip was of great educational value for Galeyev. The relatively detailed discussion of the films in

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[264] Naum Kleiman confirmed Galeyev's account of the meeting during an interview with the author that took place on May 6th, 2014.

[265] Musina, "Andergraund."

Galeyev's article suggests that the section discussing abstract film was added *after* the visit to Belye Stolby. Curiously, the section on abstract film is only tenuously connected to Eisenstein and Scriabin. In the article, Eisenstein and his Thaw era rehabilitation and re-publication becomes a pretext for talking about abstract cinema. The visit also helped Galeyev hone his film practice, and there is a notable difference in his work before and after the trip to Belye Stolby. Despite Galeyev's criticism of Eggeling, for example, his own subsequent films strive for greater visual agency, looking for the visual composition to suggest sonic arrangements (rather than the other way around). They also move away from classical music toward more contemporary sound arrangements.

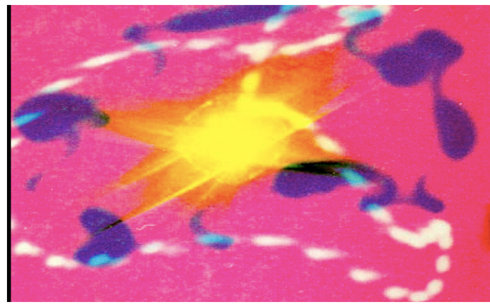

Figure 4.8. Still from the light-music film
"Little Triptych" 1975. Set to the music by V. Sviridov.

The group's first professional film, completed entirely at the Kazan Documentary Film Studio in 1975, was *Little Triptych*, set to the music of the contemporary composer Georgii Sviridov (fig. 4.8). *Little Triptych* received an award at the International Techfilm Festival in Prague, Czech Republic, and Galeyev's group was commissioned (by a non-Soviet distributor) to make one thousand copies for foreign distribution.[266] The commission was a pivotal moment for the group. Making one copy of the film was technically complicated, but possible; making multiples presented an entirely different

[266] Musina, "Andergraund."

challenge. Because the film did not fit well into any of the established film categories, it was neither a documentary film, nor a feature film, nor a newsreel, nor an educational film; Galeyev could not find a studio that would agree to give its resources to the uncategorizable project. In humanistic institutions, the film was recognized for what it was – a work of abstract art – and its wide distribution was still deemed "undesirable". However, the press generated by the award in the Soviet Union was significant, and Galeyev was invited to join the Soviet Cinematographers Union on the strength of the project.[267] The affiliation with the Union brought Galeyev into yet another institutional context, that of Soviet cinema, which in turn gave him access to a cinematic network of festivals, archives, publications and production studios.

Although the international distribution of the film was thwarted because the group could not make the commissioned copies, Galeyev's new cinematic credentials opened up another avenue for the development of visual music as a film genre and for its legitimacy as an art form. In 1975 the group collaborated on a made-for-TV documentary about the work of SKB *Prometei*with the upbeat title *Visual Music – It's Very Simple!* The documentary was constructed very much in the style of the so-called industrial film, showcasing the cutting-edge technology used to make this "art of the future." The industrial film as ecstatic celebration of new technology and Soviet industry became a trope in the 1920s and 30s, and was deployed quite earnestly in this instance. In addition to highlighting technology, *Visual Music – It's Very Simple!* carefully documents the creative process, emphasizing that the resulting films have "musical themes" as their subject and are therefore not безпредметные or "subjectless" (i.e., formalist). The film

[267] Musina, "Andergraund."

also gives the audience a glimpse of a shooting script for one of the visual music films as it charts the parallel development of visual material, the musical score, and the technical operations necessary to achieve the desired visual effects (fig. 4.9). The documentation of the parallel development of these three lines of action as they appear in the script is clearly modeled on Eisenstein's analysis of *Alexander Nevsky*, which is presented in 'Vertical Montage' and reprinted in the 1964 edition of Eisenstein's writings. On the whole, the film highlights scientific process in the creation of visual music trying to de-mystify the creation process. It also emphasizes the technology used in the production, showing explicitly how certain visual effects are achieved. Most significantly, the documentary shows fragments of finished visual music films, bringing these otherwise inaccessible visual music pieces to a broader Soviet audience (figs. 4.10 and 4.11).

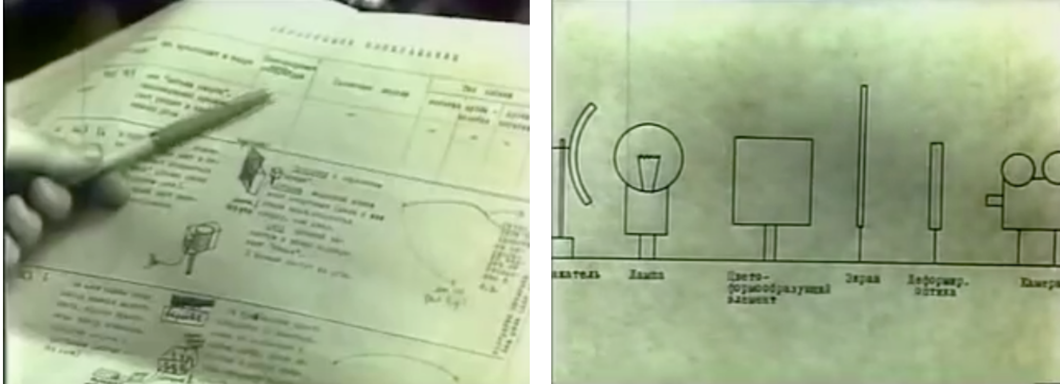

Figure 4.9. *Visual Music – It's Very Simple!* (1975). The equivalent of storyboard for a visual music film.

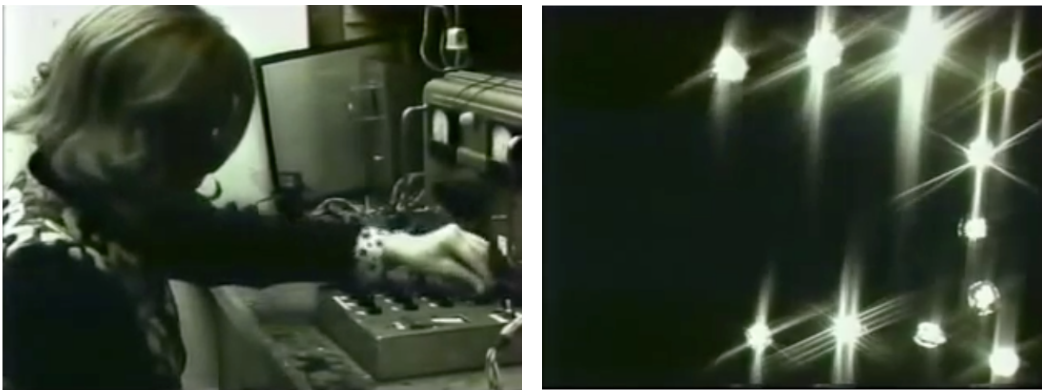

Figure 4.10. *Visual Music – It's Very Simple!* (1975) The scientist flips switches on a control board (left), light effects are created (right).

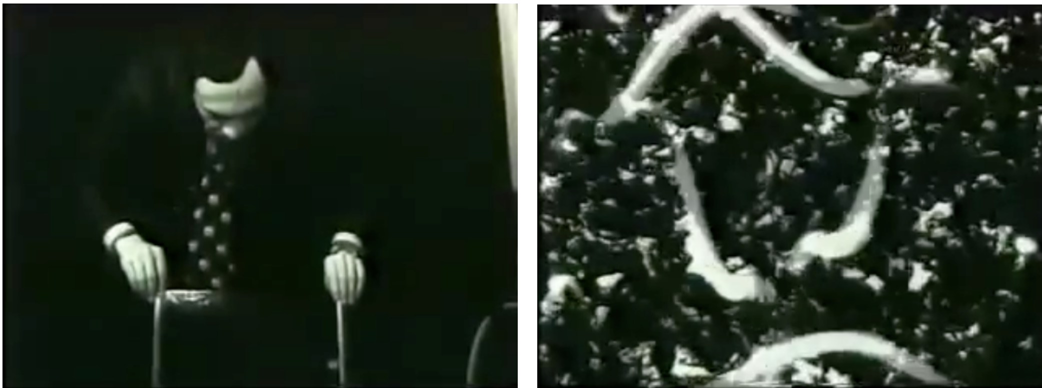

Figure 4.11. *Visual Music – It's Very Simple!* (1975). The scientist moves a screen over a light source (left) visual effects are produced (right). The films were then colored by hand to achieve the color results such as in the 1981 "Space Sonata" below.

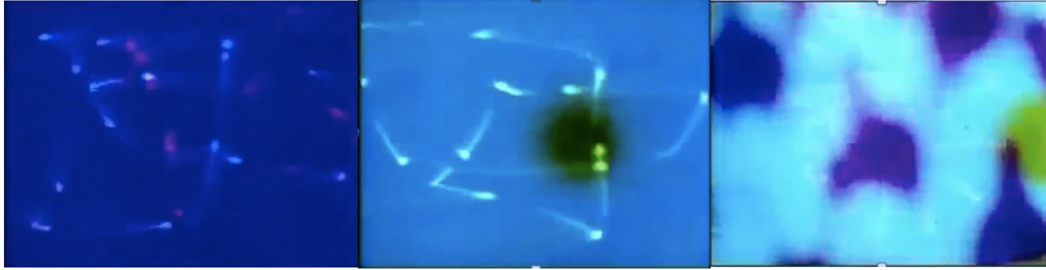

Figure 4.12. Stills from the light-music film *Space Sonata* (1981)
Music arranged in response to the visual compositions.

Along a different institutional line, it was the positioning of SKB *Prometei*within science that allowed the group to interact with the western art-science community. As a scientist, Galeyev maintained contact with *Leonardo,* a leading journal on art, science and technology. Articles by Galeyev and other members of SKB *Prometei* began appearing in *Leonardo* in the mid-1970s, alerting western colleagues to their experimental work. Conversely, journals like *Leonardo,* which were classified as scientific literature, became a great source of information for Soviet scientists about art-science experimentation taking place in the West. In 1987 Galeyev joined the editorial board of *Leonardo*, and in 1990 he helped to conceive a special issue devoted to art and science in the Soviet Union. By the time the issue came out in 1994, the Soviet Union had collapsed.[268] In the introduction to the issue, Galeyev notes that during the Soviet years, state control of artists and lack of technology, among other reasons, meant that "in the triad of art-science-technology, the emphasis was mainly on science."[269] After the breakup of the Soviet state, on the one hand, the funding situation for both art and science changed for the worse. On the other hand, the art-science community no longer needed to disguise their artistic work as something other than what it was – art. In his introduction,

[268] Bulat Galeyev and Yuri Mikheyev, "Introduction: Prometheus: Art, Science and Technology in the Former Soviet Union," *Leonardo* 27 (1994: 5): 367.

[269] Galeyev and Mikheyev, "Introduction," 369.

Galeyev is especially eager to emphasize the tradition of experimental art in Russia, the tradition that he sees his team carrying forward.

> The history of abstract painting, music-kinetic art (light music), kinetic art, luminodynamics, and electronic and spatial music, includes the names of many of our compatriots, who were pioneers on a world scale. They include Wassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich, Alexander Scriabin, Mikhail Matuishin, Lev Termen, Naum Gabo, Antoine Pevsner, Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, among many others. We had a great past, and – excuse me for the grammatical nonsense – we had a great future. But the wheel of history turned suddenly on the slippery ice crusts of the thawing Cold War. And now we are in the somewhat embarrassing position of asking: Who are we? Where are we? Where did we come from?[270]

And yet Galeyev's conclusion is optimistic. Tracing the lineage of SKB *Prometei*to the avant-garde allows him to argue that certain strands of the artistic avant-garde survived in the unlikely space of science in the Soviet period. He expresses confidence that in the post-Soviet shifting landscape they will again find a way.

Conclusion: The Privilege to Experiment

In their trans-disciplinary work, SKB *Prometei* created a unique niche, a kind of artistic subculture within the scientific establishment. The group also crossed institutional borders into cinema, drawing on cinematic tradition of visual music films to create their hybrid works. A remarkable aspect of Galeyev's work was his ability to mediate between a variety of social and institutional contexts, expanding and renegotiating their boundaries. While working at the "closed" Aviation Institute, Galeyev published widely in industry journals of engineering and musicology, film and literature, as well as in international art-science publications, adjusting his language and presentation as

[270] Galeyev and Mikheyev, "Introduction," 369.

necessary. A deep interest in visual art also led him to establish connections with non-official artists, and he seemed to relish playing social musical chairs.

> I remember my Moscow trips of those years. In the morning yet another meeting with the "mailboxes,"[271] in the evening – the library, at night – the basements of my formalist/abstract artist friends. My head was spinning! In a single day, polite lieutenants standing by grand entrances, books in heavy bindings, brilliant disheveled artists…[272]

The growing roster of institutional affiliations gave Galeyev greater room for movement in a culture famous for its administrative dead ends. From within a variety of social contexts, Galeyev modeled himself and his work on that of Skryabin and the artists of the avant-garde in their drive to erase disciplinary boundaries and, ultimately, the boundaries between art and life.

In his interview with Musina, Galeyev is careful to point out that the operations of SKB *Prometiej* were not exactly underground.

> Although we made our films with no money, in amateurish conditions, no one harassed us. We even showed our films at the State Palace in the Kremlin. We also sent our films to the astronauts, and let them keep them as a present. Of course, we were not officially sponsored [for making artistic work], but neither were we persecuted. And so our 'underground' was a kind of semi-underground.[273]

While working within the Soviet system, Galeyev's group was working "наперекор институтским планам" (against the institutional plans) but doing so in ways that were not clearly politically oppositional or illegal. Instead this group and others like it carved out a pocket of creative freedom within official structures and acted as a "'hero' of

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[271] In Soviet vernacular "mailbox" referred to any high clearance institution that required special access. All mail sent to such institutions was addressed to a mailbox number (an equivalent of a P.O. Box) rather than having the name and the address of the institution on the correspondence.

[272] Galeyev, *Sovetskij Faust: Lev Termen.*

[273] Musina, "Andergraund."

authoritative discourse who followed its script on the level of form" but on the other hand, "acting as 'the author' of this discourse who invested that script with new meanings."[274] Using the infrastructures and resources provided by the Soviet system Galeyev's group was persistently 'vnye'.

Galeyev's theory regarding the survival of his group is simple. For *Prometej,* music, rather than abstract art, was their initial point of departure. Because *Prometei*was under the umbrella of the Aviation Institute, there were no cultural censors attached to their institution. In artistic institutions the atmosphere was much more restrictive. For example, the authorities shut down Evgeni Murzin's experiments with visual music at the Scriabin Museum in Moscow.[275] These were seen as clearly formalist and went against the official museum plans. Working at the Aviation Institute, Galeyev's team had much more freedom because their work was seen as primarily technological and scientific. In this context, visual music was considered the cutting edge of technology, not of art. In the later Soviet context, experiment was a privilege, and only scientists had the cultural clout and the privilege to experiment – be it in science or in art.

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[274] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever,* 134.

[275] Galeyev, *Sovetskij Faust: Lev Termen*.

CONCLUSION

Experiment Victorious

> Despite apparently stringent control at all levels of the production and distribution process, Soviet cinema has continued to produce a considerable number of 'deviant' films throughout almost every decade of its existence – all but a very few of which have been exhibited publicly in due course.
>
> Ian Christie[276]

The above comment appeared in 1986 in a footnote to Ian Christie's introduction to *The Film Factory.* This footnote seems an ironic yet appropriate place to find mention of "deviant" films. Confined mostly to side comments and footnotes, these institutional "misfits" (films that bend genre, form or institutional protocol) fit together if only because they fit nowhere else. Some of these films are most productively read as experimental works.

My concerted grouping and analysis of "misfit" projects uncovers the parallel life on the margins of the Soviet film industry. It also shows that this parallel life was essential in enabling the industry to define itself, chart out its own boundaries, and, when necessary, change course. Just as Christie suggests, complete control of the industry was a fantasy whose reality was much more complex. The aesthetic analysis and study of production history of individual projects enables my mapping of this complexity.

Soviet cinematic production of the 1960s has been naturally placed in conversation with contemporaneous Western and world cinema. Through analysis of

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[276] Ian Christie, introduction to *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939,* ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (London: Routledge, 1986): 416n167.

individual projects, it is clear that the poetics of historical avant-garde experimentalism mattered as much as the expanding dialog with the West in charting the course of Soviet cinema in the 1960s. In the name of experiment, Soviet film artists reclaimed plastic, literary and musical arts of the revolutionary avant-garde as well as its various utopian discourses. Somewhat paradoxically, this move back (to the Revolution) was also a move forward in allowing the artistic community to re-write its own history, tied to the Revolution but divorced from the period of Stalinist repression. Moreover, this change apparently came as much from above, from well-established and powerful figures in the cinematic community (Kalatozov, Chukhrai, Ivanov among others), as from below, from younger directors and newcomers. With the changing mechanisms of prestige during the Thaw, the Palme D'or became more meaningful than the Stalin prize in the domestic community. The well-established figures were more effective in experimenting with institutional boundaries, as younger film artists were active in experimenting with film form. In sponsoring institutional change and promoting formal experimentation, well-established figures were also eager to re-write their own personal histories in Soviet arts.

Experimentation in the sciences and technology of the 1920s was an important part of broad experimentation in the arts. Early Soviet fascination with technology reemerged as a preoccupation within the film community of the 1960s and became a site of formal exploration. This interest was so strong that at certain junctures, filmmaking and scientific/technological experimentation converged, such as in the case of the SKB "Prometei". This convergence highlights another finding that emerges from my study of "misfit" film projects. The film community was prompted to change from within as much as it was encouraged to change and incorporate new cinematic phenomena from the

outside, in this case from the sciences. Just as was suggested by Vertov's interchangeable use of words *opyt* (experiment) and *eksperiment* (a borrowing of a Latin word into Russian most often used in artistic contexts) interchangeably with *razvedka* (reconnaissance), the distance between aesthetic, political and scientific revolutions was narrowing significantly in the 1960s.

In proceeding through case studies, my project is hardly exhaustive and there are many other films I could have chosen to deepen my analysis. One particularly interesting example is the 1962 film *The Bath House* (*Banya*) directed by Sergei Yutkevich (with Anatoli Karanovich). Made at Soyuzmultfilm, the main Soviet animation studio, the film is a generic hybrid –a compilation of original animation, live action cinematography, and images of paintings by Picasso, Matisse, and artists of the historical avant-garde spliced in with Nazi documentary footage. The 1929 play *Banya* by Vladimir Mayakovsky is the basis for the film. Here, just as in the case of Shepitko's *Homeland of Electricity,* adaptation of a difficult literary text served as the pretext for visual experimentation. Much like Kalatozov, Ivanov and Chukhrai, Yutkevich was a major establishment figure in Soviet cinema, and held administrative posts, heading the children's film studio "Gorky Film Studio" in 1938-1944 in addition to making creative work. He was also an internationally recognized film artist receiving the 1955 Best Director prize at Cannes for his cinematic rendition of *Othello*. Finally, Yutkevich was a 'living link' to the avant-garde period of early Soviet art, having studied at Vkhutemas with Vsevolod Meyerhold. *The Bath* is then another example of a very well-funded experimental work made by a

powerful Soviet director. The analysis of this film would open avenues for discussion of experimentation in animation and children's films in the Soviet Union.[277]

Unfinished films can also be mined as a rich site of "misfit" projects. A notable example is Sergei Parajanov's 1965 film *Kiev Frescoes.* Parajanov created the film script after his success with the 1964 *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors,* and was to make the film at the Dovzhenko Film Studio in Kiev. The film never went beyond the "actor auditions" stage. Currently, it exists as a twenty-minute collage of audition footage that resembles a surrealist-inspired video installation more than a feature film or casting footage. The preoccupation with material culture as well as the static camera and repetitive, almost mechanical movement of the actors that Parajanov perfected in his 1969 *Sayat Nova* (*Color of Pomegranates*) is first introduced in this picture. While the footage was intended as a record of the casting calls, it also served as an opportunity for experimentation with motion and stasis of the actors as well as the camera. The production history and visual analysis of this project would be a starting point for study of "chamber cinema" experimentation in the manner of Kuleshov.

Student film projects, (and the student film studio created at VGIK in the 1960s) are another potent site for investigation of experimental work. Rustam Hamdamov and Inessa Kiseleva's 1967 student film *I Left My Heart in the Mountains* (*V gorakh moe serdtse*) is a self-consciously experimental effort that takes the silent cinema period as its subject. The film is black and white, entirely silent, and uses titles and piano accompaniment, an unmistakable ode to the silent period. As was expected of student productions, the film is a thirty-minute short. The film was never publically exhibited but

[277] Many writers of the avant-garde also worked in children's literature, while artists of the avant-garde found work in children's book illustration.

like Parajanov's film, became an insider work and a cult classic within the film community. Analysis of select student projects such as those of Hamdamov and Kalik among many others would offer insight into their subsequent feature film work as well as insight into the student studio at VGIK as a locus of experimentation.

Foregrounding experimentation in children's films, unfinished works and student productions is yet another avenue for expanding this study. Films made by artists and conversely, the artwork made by filmmakers in other media (such as painting, photography, collage) would be another. The growing interest in the artwork of major filmmakers, such as the collages of Sergei Parajanov, photographs of Andrei Tarkovsky, drawings of Otar Iosseliani and Rustam Hamdamov, and paintings by Sergei Urusevsky have generated exhibits and album publications. The study of Soviet cinema would benefit from incorporating the discussion of these works of filmmakers in other media. Incorporating analysis of inter-media practices into the study of Soviet cinema helps to put it into conversation with the contemporary discussions of intermediality that seem so pressing today.

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The Filmography lists all films mentioned in the dissertation, providing their titles in English (when available), the name of the studio, the name of the director and the year production was completed.

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2001: A Space Odyssey, Stanley Kubrick*,* Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968.
Aleksandr Nevskii, Sergei Eisenstein, Mosfilm, 1938.
Andrei Rublev, Andrei Tarkovsky, Mosfilm, 1966.
Ballerina, Aploinarii Dudko and Konstantin Sergeev, Lenfilm, 1968.
Battleship Potemkin, Sergei Eisenstein, Mosfilm, 1925.
Beginning of an Unknowable Century, Genrikh Gabai 1967.
Brief Encounters, Kira Muratova, Odessa Film Studio, 1967.
Chapaev, Georgi Vasil'ev and Sergei Vasil'ev, Lenfilm, 1934.
Cleopatra, Joseph Mankiewicz, 20th Century Fox, 1963.
Color of Pomegranates, Sergei Parajanov, Armenfilm, 1969.
Comissar, Aleksandr Askoldov, Gorky Film Studio, 1967.
Dolgaya schastlivaya zhizn, Spalikov, 1967
Eternal Motion, Bulat Galeyev, SKB Prometei, 1969.
Fantasia, Walt Disney, Walt Disney Productions, 1940.
First Echelon, Mikhail Kalatozov, Mosfilm, 1956.
Homeland of Electricity, Larisa Shepitko, Experimental Film Studio, 1967.
I Am Cuba, Mikhail Kalatozov, Mosfilm/IKAIK, 1964.
I Am Cuba, The Siberian Mammoth, Vincente Ferraz, 2005.
I Left My Heart in the Mountains, Rustam Hamdamov, VGIK studio, 1967.
Ivan's Childhood, Andrei Tarkovsky, Mosfilm, 1962.
Lawrence of Arabia, David Lean, Columbia Pictures, 1961.
Letter Never Sent, Mikhail Kalatozov, Mosfilm, 1960.
Little Triptych, Bulat Galeyev, SKB Prometei, 1975.
Malchik i devochka, Yulii Fayt,1966
Optical Poem, Oskar Fischinger, MGM, 1938.
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The Bath House, Sergei Yutkevich, Soyuzdetfilm, 1962.
The Boy and the Dove, Andrei Konchalovsky and Evgeni Ostashenko, VGIK studio, 1961.
The Conspiracy of the Damned, Mikhail Kalatozov, 1950
The Cranes Are Flying, Mikhail Kalatozov, Mosfilm, 1957.
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The Man With the Movie Camera, Dziga Vertov, VUFKU, 1929.
The Red Balloon, Albert Lamorisse, Films Montsouris, 1956.
The Sound of Music, Robert Wise, 20th Century Fox, 1965.

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War and Peace, Sergei Bondarchuk, Mosfilm, 1967.
Wings, Larisa Shepitko, Mosfilm, 1966.
Youth of Maksim, Grigorii Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, Lenfilm, 1934.