



Russia in Britain, 1880-1940: From Melodrama to Modernism

Rebecca Beasley (ed.), Philip Ross Bullock (ed.)

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CHAPTER

12 The Tempo of Revolution: British Film Culture and Soviet Cinema in the 1920s

Laura Marcus

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Abstract

This chapter explores the impact of Soviet cinema and film theory on British film and literary culture in the 1920s, and the routes through which knowledge of Soviet film and theory entered Britain. It discusses the development of writing about cinema and the establishment of film fora, including film societies. It pays particular attention to the formative impact not only of the film aesthetics of Soviet film, but also the censorship that sought to suppress it. Censorship decisively shaped the development of film culture: cinematic institutions such as *Close Up* (the journal that published the first English translations of articles by Eisenstein), the Film Society (founded in 1925), and the cross-national Workers' Film Societies of the thirties, emerged as more or less direct responses to censorship, attempting to bypass local and governmental controls of film exhibition.

Keywords: Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Ivor Montagu, film societies, cinema, censorship

Subject: Literary Studies (20th Century onwards), Literary Theory and Cultural Studies, Literary Studies (19th Century), Literary Studies (Romanticism)

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In the 1920s the new Soviet cinema had an influence in Britain which somewhat displaced the earlier enthusiasm, amongst those turning to film as a new artistic medium, for German Expressionist cinema. Films such as Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 1919) had, for many viewers, represented the birth and development of 'film as an art' in the early 1920s. Soviet cinema began to make its mark towards the end of the decade. This chapter explores the impact of Soviet cinema and film theory on British film culture, and the routes through which knowledge of Soviet film and theory (in particular that of Sergey Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin) entered Britain. It looks at developments in writing about cinema, the establishment of film fora, including film societies, and the anti-censorship movements of the period, and suggests that negotiations with and around censorship contributed in important ways to the shaping of film aesthetics and film theory in its early years. One of the express

functions of the film journals which were set up in the late 1920s and early 1930s (which included *Close Up*, *Film Art*, and *Experimental Cinema*) was to provide some visual access to films for which it was difficult to gain exhibition or which had been banned by the censors. This was particularly significant for the reception of Soviet cinema in Britain, during a period in which censorship laws did much to prevent the screening and viewing of Soviet film.

The entry of images from the films of Eisenstein or Pudovkin into twentieth-century art and literature, and into the cultural imaginary more broadly, was often mediated through the film still or strip. For the artist Francis Bacon, images from Eisenstein's 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potemkin*), acted as a permanent touchstone—not least those of the sides of rotten, maggot-infested meat which, in the film, lead the sailors to mutiny. As Martin Harrison records, Bacon's 'working documents' included a torn leaf from Roger Manvell's *Film* (1944, revised edition 1946), with stills from *Potemkin*'s 'Odessa Steps' sequence.¹ In 1949, the critic Robert Melville noted the relationship between Bacon's *Head VI* and this sequence, a connection confirmed when Bacon painted his *Study for the Nurse in the Film 'Battleship Potemkin'* (1957). Bacon returned obsessively to the image of the screaming schoolteacher, the figure he interpreted as a nurse, focusing in earlier paintings on the open mouth (which would also recapitulate the image of the gaping mouth of the woman who appears earlier in the sequence, and which David Mellor describes as the 'primordial cinematic scream for Bacon'), and later on the shattered pince-nez. Discussing his series of paintings of screaming Popes, Bacon told David Sylvester: 'I wanted to paint the scream more than the horror'.²

The pince-nez of *Battleship Potemkin* would also play a prominent role in Samuel Beckett's silent *Film* (1965). *Film*, which revolves around scenarios of looking (or staring) and looking away, reveals the influence of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kinoapparatom*, 1929), in particular its image of the 'kino-eye', and was, indeed, filmed by Vertov's brother, Boris Kaufman. The echoes of *Potemkin* emerge in Beckett's replication of Eisenstein's transfer of the eyeglass between figures on the screen, and in its staging of a sequence in which a woman, wearing a pince-nez, opens her mouth in an expression of horror which mirrors or mimics that of Eisenstein's wounded schoolteacher. In a later sequence in *Film*, an elderly woman collapses on the stairs of a house, while, at the film's close, the face of Buster Keaton (the central figure in the film) is shown wearing a single eyepatch which becomes a visual reference to the damaged eye and shattered eyeglass of the figure in *Potemkin*.

Bacon's most direct reworkings of Eisenstein's imagery, like those of Samuel Beckett, were produced two or three decades after the period on which this chapter focuses—the late 1920s, when Eisenstein's films were first shown in Britain, in restricted conditions and after many battles with the censors. Eisenstein's images of revolution, war, and violence were overlaid for Bacon by the imagery of the Second World War, including Nazi imagery, becoming a palimpsest of the violence of the twentieth century. It seems likely, however, that Bacon would first have encountered *Battleship Potemkin* at the Film Society screening in London on Sunday 10 November 1929, where it was shown in a programme which included *Drifters* by the British documentarist, John Grierson. The screaming mouths of the 'Odessa steps' sequence and the tempo of the 'storm', which brings to a close Pudovkin's epic film about Genghis Khan, *Storm over Asia* (as *Potomok Chingiskhana* (*The Heir to Genghis Khan*) was retitled in Britain), became the most emphatic images or markers of Soviet politics and of the power of the cinema to reorder reality and move the spectator. For this reason, they were among the elements of Soviet film most disturbing to the censors.

The censorship of Soviet films, in Britain, continental Europe, and America, played a determining role in the ways in which film culture developed in the 1920s and 1930s. The theatre and film critic Huntly Carter, who travelled widely through Eastern Europe in the 1920s, gathering material on the new Russian theatre and cinema, wrote in *The New Spirit in the Cinema* (1930): 'The Art of the Cinema tendency is to-day a very involved one owing to its close association with the crusade against censorship'. 'The Bolshevik pictures', in Carter's words, 'had the effect of inciting the aesthetes into rebellion against the censorship. The English

director's attitude towards revolutionary pictures lashed them into fury. Then came the "Talkie" to add fuel to the flame.³The cinematic institutions which developed significantly as a response to, or way of skirting, censorship, included the film journal *Close Up*, which ran from 1927 to 1933, and which published the first English translations of articles by Eizenshtein, as well as numerous stills from the new Soviet cinema. Its editors were the young Scottish artist Kenneth Macpherson and the writer Bryher (Winifred Ellerman), who was also the author of one of the earliest studies of this cinema, entitled *Film Problems of Soviet Russia* (1929).

Close Up was edited in Switzerland, where it was possible to see French, German, American, and British films in the same week, as the poet H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), one of the journal's central contributors in its first years, noted. The editors' frequent visits to Berlin provided them with much of their copy, and the city (of speed and spectacle) itself became for them an image of the Kino. While censorship certainly operated in Germany at this time, with *Potemkin* being drastically re-edited at junctures throughout the late 1920s, it was still possible to see a range of Soviet films that had not been cleared for exhibition in Britain. In the words of Huntly Carter: 'Several revolutionary pictures have been established in Berlin which have not been permitted to be shown in this country. Owing to the fairly large number of Bolshevik pictures exhibited in Berlin, that city has of late become the Mecca of the aesthete in search of adventures among revolutionary films, and of evidence by which he may slay the British censor.'⁴

The late 1920s and early 1930s were the 'Berlin years' of W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Christopher Isherwood, for whom the experience of the city was not only highly sexualized ('To Christopher, Berlin meant Boys', Isherwood wrote) but also cinematic: the question of censorship and repression, and the freedom from their constraints represented by Weimar Berlin, prevailed in both arenas.⁵Spender later described the significance of the Russian films he and Isherwood saw at this time, including *Earth (Zemlya)*, *The General Line (Staroe i novoe, literally The Old and the New)*, *Mother (Mat')*, *Potemkin*, *October: Ten Days that Shook the World (Oktyabr': Desyat' dnei, kotorye potryasli mir)*, and *The Way into Life (Putevka v zhizn')*:

These films, which form a curiously isolated episode in the aesthetic history of this century, excited us because they had the modernism, the poetic sensibility, the satire, the visual beauty, all those qualities we found most exciting in other forms of modern art, but they also conveyed a message of hope like an answer to *The Waste Land*. They extolled a heroic attitude which had not yet become officialized; in this they foreshadowed the defiant individualism of the Spanish Republicans. We used to go on long journeys to little cinemas in the outer suburbs of Berlin, and there among the grimy tenements we saw the images of the New Life of the workers building with machine tools and tractors their socially just world under the shadows of baroque statues reflected in ruffled waters of Leningrad, or against waving, shadow-pencilled plains of corn.⁶

Soviet films, Spender suggested, played a central role in their 'restless and awakening mood', projecting images of a different kind of landscape and a different organization of society in, and onto, the decaying facades of Berlin.

In 1929 Eizenshtein and Pudovkin visited Britain and lectured in London, in the months during which *Battleship Potemkin* was screened at the Film Society. The Film Society was another significant institution which emerged as an attempt to bypass local and governmental controls of film exhibition: it was set up by a group of young cineastes in 1925, foremost among them Ivor Montagu. Montagu, the 'youngest son', the title he gave his autobiography, of an aristocratic family (his father was the banker Louis Montagu, Lord Swaythling), became a member of the Communist Party in 1929. He travelled to the Soviet Union for the first time in 1925, soon after leaving Cambridge and visiting Berlin to find about its film culture, though he was unsuccessful in his attempts to arrange, with the Soviet film industry, exhibition through the Film Society: 'I tried hard to explain censorship restrictions on public shows in Britain, the commercial control of cinemas and all the familiar rest, but the idea of a special society that might be outside the operation of the

market, and laws that might exempt it from control or censorship, was quite untranslatable into terms credible to Soviet understanding.'⁷

Montagu returned from this and subsequent trips to the Soviet Union with numerous film stills, which, in the mid-late 1920s, he used to illustrate articles on the cinema to which access was still being denied in Britain. He also became the translator of a number of works by Soviet directors and theorists, most notably Pudovkin in the early 1930s. In 1929, he published a pamphlet on 'The Political Censorship of Films', a topic on which his frequent dealings with the London County Council and the British Board of Film Censors had made him highly expert. The British Board of Film Censors Report for the year ending 31 December 1928 gives an indication of the topics to which 'exceptions' might be taken (I have selected from a much longer list):

Exceptions taken:

Political:

1. References to H.R.H. the Prince of Wales
2. Libellous reflections on Royal Dynasties
3. British Possessions represented as lawless sinks of iniquity
4. Themes likely to wound the just susceptibilities of Friendly Nations
5. White men in state of degradation amidst Far Eastern and Native surroundings
6. Equivocal situations between white girls and men of other races

Social:

3. Girls and women in state of intoxication
23. Son falling in love with his father's mistress
24. Employee selling his wife to employer to cover defalcations

Questions of Sex:

9. Indecorous bathroom scenes.⁸

1929 was also the year in which Montagu became actively involved in the London Workers' Film Society and joined the Executive Council of the newly founded Federation of Workers' Film Societies (along with John Grierson, Henry Dobb, Oswald Blakeston, Ben Davies, and Ralph Bond), although he retained a seat on the Film Society council. The Film Society's original patrons were prominent figures on the social scene and in the arts and politics; it had a strong Bloomsbury presence and was set up, in large part, to show the new European avant-garde and experimental cinema at a time in which the question of whether film was an art was becoming central. It was the arrival of the new Soviet cinema in the mid-1920s that turned the focus towards politics as well as aesthetics. The Film Society's screenings of Soviet films were instrumental in shaping an emergent film criticism: as one writer for *Close Up* noted, 'when Pudovkin's *Mother* was shown by the Film Society it set London agog for a week. The weekly ration of film news in every paper was largely taken up with Russian films and their producers'.⁹

The London Workers' Film Society, and the numerous film societies that grew up in this period in Britain (in Birmingham, Manchester, Salford, Glasgow, Edinburgh), following their establishment in a number of West European countries, were overtly political from the outset. They were founded, as the Dutch film historian Bert Hogenkamp notes (and as James Smith discusses in the next chapter of this volume), 'as a direct response to the censorship's interference with the exhibition of Soviet films. The film society as a legal and

organisational form offered the possibility to get round censorship measures; bourgeois film societies had proved that this could be done in the name of Art.' The Soviet films, Hogenkamp further argues,

acted as the workers' film society movement's indispensable 'capital'. They shaped the image of the societies towards the membership, the press, and last but not least the authorities. The Soviet films were appreciated for a complex of political and artistic reasons which it is not easy to disentangle.¹⁰

p. 230 Hogenkamp, and other film historians, have drawn a sharp divide between the 'bourgeois film societies'—the London-based Film Society foremost among them—and the Workers' Film Societies. It is certainly the case that the Film Society, with its higher subscription rates, was from its inception in 1925 allowed by the London County Council. to show uncensored films to its members, and that it gained permission to screen films—*Potemkin* and *Mother* amongst them—which was frequently denied to the Workers' Film Societies and to groups such as the Masses Stage and Film Guild. Yet Huntly Carter, as a contemporary observer of the scene, if a somewhat eccentric one, noted the 'strangely variegated legion' that had arisen among three organizations in the late 1920s 'for the purpose of making war on censorship...[and] of exhibiting moving pictures with a cinematographic, social or revolutionary interest'.¹¹The three groups Carter referred to were the Film Society and, by association, *Close Up* (which he placed on the political Right), the Masses Stage and Film Guild (Centre), and The Federation of Workers' Film Societies' (Left). Carter's schema here is in fact reproduced from his earlier study, *The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia* (1924), in which he divided the new theatre of the Soviet Union into the same divisions, defining 'the Right Group' as including 'all theatres which are tolerated rather than sanctioned by the Government and Left extremists'.¹²

From the perspectives of the censors and government bodies wary of the ways in which Soviet cinema might impact on British politics, *Close Up*, the Film Society, and the Workers' Film Societies were certainly connected. A memorandum, issued by the Conservative Party Headquarters, 'on revolutionary film propaganda, carried out in England by direction of the Soviet government, 1927–May 1930', linked the activities of *Close Up* and the Film Society (along with Ralph Bond's Atlas Films Ltd and the London Workers' Film Society) to those of 'the Communist Party of Great Britain supported by the Komintern'.¹³A reference to 'this accelerated "tempo" of propaganda', instanced by addresses to the Film Society by Pudovkin and Eizenshtein, suggests that the activity around Soviet cinema (including anti-censorship campaigns) was itself perceived as if it were a Soviet film: a *Potemkin*, perhaps, celebrated for its 'rhythm' and 'tempo', whose banning by the Home Secretary Sir William Joynson-Hicks had outraged writers and intellectuals on the Left. *Battleship Potemkin* had first arrived in Britain during September 1926, a few months after the General Strike in May 1926: the censor chosen to view the film was General J. C. Hanna, who was, as James Richardson has written, 'notoriously unsympathetic to revolutionary tendencies', and the film was rejected after BBC consultation with Joynson-Hicks, 'who was hostile to the cinema in general'.¹⁴

p. 231 It was Montagu's persistence that finally led to the acquisition of a print of the film, procured from the Soviet film delegation, in Berlin, and its screening at the Film Society in November 1929—its last significant exhibition before the Second World War. The programme notes which accompanied the screening on this occasion, written by Montagu, gave an account of the film's vicissitudes at the hands of the censors:

The negative has so often been cut and matched to meet the requirements of various countries that it is now more difficult to draw a perfect positive and the present print is not entirely satisfactory. It is shown by courtesy of the U.S.S.R. Trade Delegation on Berlin and Messrs. Brunel and Montagu Ltd, and, unlike any other copy previously shown outside Russia, is complete; following, in arrangement and colour, the original nearly exactly.

The notes called attention to the divergence between 'the story shown in the film' and 'the historical incident'. While 'the cause and course of the mutiny are exact', Montagu wrote, the film re-ordered events: in the historical incident, the exposure of the slain soldier on the Mole at Odessa 'led to riots in the town culminating at night in the arson of a part of the dockyard. The massacre on the flight of steps, which appears in the film as entirely wanton, was subsequent to the burning of the dockyard.' One can only speculate about Montagu's emphases here, but it would seem that he was striving for an effect of political neutrality: the massacre on the Odessa steps was in fact a fictional dimension of Eizenshtein's film.

Montagu's programme notes continued with an account of the film's techniques: 'In viewing this film it must be recalled that "*Potemkin*" was the first Russian film in which those remarkable methods of expression—the use of non-acting materials and the incitement to hysteria by means of rhythmic cutting—were attempted...It is important to note that the work of Eisenstein and Alexandrov, unlike that of Pudovkin, contains rarely any content effective in itself: its effect depends nearly entirely on the technical visual rhythm.' It is for this reason, Montagu concluded, that the films 'are most effective only when this visual rhythm is emphasized by aural rhythm', and to Edmund Meisel's music, composed specially for the film and to be conducted at the Film Society's performance, 'is attributed much of the success of "*Potemkin*" outside U.S.S.R. Indeed it is recorded that at Stuttgart, though the film itself was permitted, the music was forbidden as *staatsgefährlich!*'¹⁵

Montagu's emphasis on *Potemkin*'s affect is significant, as is his use of the term 'hysteria', which arises time and again in discussions of the cinema of this period, sometimes as 'screen hysteria'. Bryher made the term the target of her attack on censorship laws, and the furor over Soviet cinema, in her introduction to *Film Problems of Soviet Russia*: 'the stock phrase of Fleet Street is "the enjoyment of Russia films is a species of hysteria"'. For the critics, she writes, 'Russian films are not art, they are hysteria partially induced by mass-feeling and hysterical music'. It was impossible, she argues, to have a neutral discussion of Russian film art: 'Either, it appears, you must be prepared to bayonet your aunt because she wont [sic] read Karl Marx, or else you must leave the room because *Potemkin* is mentioned.'¹⁶

p. 232 The term 'hysteria' had been present in some of the earliest discussion of cinema, and in a variety of contexts: the American writer on film and theatre Victor Freeburg, for example, wrote in the early 1920s of the ways in which film's speed, quick close-ups, 'large violent movements on the screen', and stark contrasts between black and white tones 'hurt the eyes', producing 'pictorial hysterics'.¹⁷ In a different context, Huntly Carter, in his *The New Spirit in the Cinema*, quoted an article from the *Daily Express*:

We are still overshadowed by the hysteria and the urge to live recklessly for the moment that were bred in the days of the Great War. Physical life becomes infinitely precious in the face of death; and though we are ten years away from that period of ecstasy and animalism we have not emerged from the mental morass which it engendered. Sex in all its attributes was summoned to the surface by the war; and we still move and think—aided by books, films, and plays—in a welter of sex.¹⁸

While the Soviet director Abram Room's film *Bed and Sofa* (*Tret'ya meshchanskaya*), which centres upon the relationship that develops between a woman and the male friend of her husband who comes to stay in their small flat, came up against the British censors on the grounds of its sexual candour ('Subject: Overcrowding; wife alternates with husband's friend: Exception: Offensive to English moral code'), it was, by and large, Hollywood cinema, not Soviet film, which was represented as a sex-machine. Soviet cinema represented a different, and perhaps more dangerous form of arousal. It too, however, was rendered in strongly physiological and somatic terms (as it was in Eizenshtein's film theories), so that the dangers of sexual and political 'arousal', the 'rhythms' of arousal, were more intertwined than they might at first appear.

Attack and defence at this time moved back and forth between the question of Soviet cinema and politics, and Soviet cinema and film technique, though for Eisenstein the two were not, of course, separable. While support for Soviet film art came to be at the heart of *Close Up*'s project, its editors tended to steer a middle line politically, arguing for Russian films as 'art' and as 'truth'. H. D. wrote, in an article on 'Russian Films', that 'the greatness of the Moscow art productions that it was my unique privilege to see last month in Berlin, puts the question of the Russian film...on a plane transcending politics. These films do not say to the British or the American workman, go and do likewise. They say look, we are your brothers, and this is how we suffered.'¹⁹

p. 233 Bryher's *Film Problems of Soviet Russia* was one of the earliest English-language studies of Soviet film: Huntly Carter's *The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia* (1924) had devoted only one chapter to the cinema. Bryher's study was a striking achievement, in its coverage of a very large number of Russian films, many of which she viewed in Berlin in under a year. The book devoted individual chapters to the directors Lev Kuleshov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Room (from whom, Bryher writes, she gathered 'biographical data' wherever possible), while other chapters explore 'the sociological film', the Ukrainian film organization 'the Wufku' (short for Vseukrains'ke fotokinoupravlinnya, the All-Ukrainian Photography and Cinema Administration), and 'educational films'. The dominant purpose of *Film Problems of Soviet Russia* was to introduce British readers to a film culture to which they were denied access and, in tandem with *Close Up*'s censorship petition, alongside other similar initiatives, to promote a reform of the censorship laws as they related to cinema.

In her introduction Bryher wrote: 'The present attitude to Russian films in England is dangerous on account of the inconceivable stupidity of the authorities. They are investing a work of art with the terror and power which the forest negro credits to a fetish.' She returned repeatedly to the position that no revolution had fomented in Germany and Austria, despite the relative ease of access to the Soviet cinema. She argued, moreover, that the average complacent and insular British audience would, in all likelihood, remain untouched by a *Potemkin* if it were to be freely screened. At points in the text she insisted that Russia was not England, and would never follow the same path; at others she wrote (as in her discussion of Pudovkin's *Mother*) that one should 'forget about Russia and remember that *Mother* fundamentally is the story of many English homes, with disease or stagnation, or the Colonies as a substitute for the ending'. 'One of the great film problems of Russia', she argued, was that the universal situations its films depicted (she instanced the father and son relationship in Yuri Stabavoy's *Two Days*, a film banned in Germany at the time of her writing) were censored purely because they were set 'in the environment of the Revolution'. As she noted towards the close of the book, only twenty or so of the hundred to hundred and fifty films made in the Soviet Union were available abroad, chiefly in Germany: 'It is to be hoped that united protest by English desirous of intellectual liberty will remove the barrier to our cinematographic development and that we shall be able to study the new Russian films as they appear.'²⁰

p. 234 For the most part Bryher's critical approach was descriptive, thematic and sociological (though Huntly Carter accused her of shifting the focus from sociology to aesthetics), focusing on the history of the film industry in the Soviet Union, the specificities of Soviet film technique, in particular 'cutting', and, most particularly, the questions of education (which she differentiated from politics) and of women's social situation. Nonetheless, her detailed, linear accounts of Soviet films (which 'walk' readers through films that they are presumed not to have seen) also sought to convey their power and drama: Eisenstein's *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* is 'all rhythm, all movement...of all the films I know, I feel it to be the greatest...There is not a shot in the picture that has not been created by mind alone.' In her account of Pudovkin's *The End of St Petersburg (Konets Sankt-Peterburga)*, she returned to, and redefined, the terms of 'hysteria', in relation to the film's representations of 'war hysteria', drawing upon the imagery of the close of *Storm over Asia*:

The cumulative effect upon the spectator of the scenes of hysteria upon the outbreak of war, followed by the trenches and Lebedeff sequence cross cutting with each other, cannot be described. Pudovkin is vehement, personal, the Euripides of the screen, where Eisenstein is the Aeschylus. Where injustice has burnt him, he cannot let his anger go. He is at his best with storm, following an emotion, losing his visual sense in a hurricane till everything but the bones of the incident are swept away in the wind.²¹

Storm over Asia was particularly charged for British spectators, and British censors, because of its attacks on colonialism and its perceived anti-British sentiment. ('Subject: Mongol overthrow of foreign adventurers. Exception: Conduct of troops in British uniform'). Leonard and Virginia Woolf saw the film in Berlin in 1929, in the company of Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, Edward Sackville-West, Vita Sackville-West, and Harold Nicolson. In a letter to Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell described the experience, and its stormy, or 'thundery', aftermath:

The film seemed to me extraordinary—there were the most lovely pictures of odd Chinese types, very well done. I enjoyed it immensely & was under the impression that everyone else did too until we got out on into the street when it appeared that feeling was running very high on the question whether it was anti-British propaganda! No doubt it was—at least the feeblest part of it consisted of the flight of soldiers in British uniforms flying from Asiatics. Vita again enraged Leonard by asking him 6 times whether he thought they were meant for Englishmen—she and Harold both thought they weren't but managed to quarrel with each other all the same. The discussion went on & on, all standing in the melting snow, & the general rage & uneasiness was increased by Eddy who was also of the party...Never have I spent quite such a thundery evening.²²

p. 235 The image of the storm as a way of representing the overwhelming impact of the new Soviet cinema emerged repeatedly in the film criticism of the time, with *Close Up* contributors giving their articles titles such as 'Storm over Berlin' and 'Storm over London'. In his *Close Up* review, 'Storm over Asia—and Berlin!', Kenneth Macpherson wrote of the film (with reference to the censors), 'however they quieten it and calm it down it will remain Storm, with lightning and thunder and rain and wind and fury'.²³ Robert Herring's article, 'Storm over London', by contrast, shifted the terms of the debate to Pudovkin's visit to London, and in particular his lecture material on sound imagery and contrapuntal sound (in which sound would be non-coincident with visual imagery): 'Pudovkin would combine the fury of an angry man with the roar of a lion. Think what that means.'²⁴ Herring's discussion thus translated the terms of radical politics into film technique, while at the same time it repeated from Pudovkin's lecture, subsequently published in *The Cinema* on 6 February 1929, an image ('I can join the fury of a man to the roar of a lion') that would inevitably have conjured up one of the most striking montage sequences in Eisenstein's *Potemkin*: that of the 'sleeping' stone lions on the Odessa Steps awakened and become rampant.

Huntly Carter was critical of the Film Society for 'pos[ing] as a harmless school of technique', as a way of evading the censors.²⁵ The Marxist film critic Harry Alan Potamkin, writing in the American film journal *Experimental Cinema*, took Bryher's *Film Problems of Soviet Russia* to task for representing the Russian film as 'entirely harmless...But the Russian idea is dangerous, decidedly dangerous to the prevailing acceptations. The dangerous idea creates the dangerous, or heroic structure—ultimately'.²⁶ It is, in this light, surprising that *Experimental Cinema*, whose politics and whose editor, Seymour Stern, were avowedly Marxist, should have, in their numerous discussions of Soviet film, included so many articles whose approach seemed so purely formalist. The film theorist and historian Lewis Gaskin wrote in the first issue of *Experimental Cinema*, in February 1930:

It was not until the projection of the Soviet film 'Potemkin' that the cinema became aware of its individuality...Eisenstein achieved his results not by any emphasis of actor or acting, plot or

setting, but by an *arithmetical relationship* of the projection of images in *time, movement and image content*: each projection of *image in movement and time* paralleled and reverted and carried the component projections in a rhythmic, and psychological relation to one another, and at the same time unrepeated Eisenstein's 'theme' in cadences strictly cineplastic.... Omitting the few abstract films for the moment, 'Potemkin' was the beginning of aesthetic form in the cinema insofar as it was the first instance of a film which expressed the essential idea (theme) in terms of cinema and came into existence only and entirely through the particular of its medium—the film.

This emphasis on medium-specificity, evidenced in many of the articles in *Experimental Cinema*, might seem like a typically modernist gesture (and one, incidentally, at odds with Eisenstein's insistence in his lectures and essays on the continuities between film and the other arts—literature, painting, theatre, music.) It can also be understood, however, in more strategic terms. Jacobs' discussion included a 'Censorship note', in which he wrote: 'An alteration of any unit in such an ensemble would destroy the existing relations and ruin that particular psychological and cineplastic unity. It is this combination of all forms that constitutes value, aesthetically important in proportion as the synthesis is complete.'²⁷ While arguments for Soviet cinema on formal and aesthetic grounds might have been a way of distracting from the political content, it may also have been the case that arguments made on these terms—the claim that each element of the film is essential to its aesthetic 'unity', that in Soviet montage meaning derives not from individual shots but from the relationships between images—were attempts to defend against the censors' scissors. As Herbert Jehring wrote of the cuts and excisions made to *Battleship Potemkin* in Germany in 1926:

The whole structure, the phenomenal dynamism of the action, the intercutting of portraits and mass meetings, the contrast of the menacingly calm march of the Cossacks with the alarmed population, the rhythm, the inflammable power—all have been lost. The best proof of the merit of the film and of the mediocrity of its re-editing is that with the destruction of its human rationale it also lost its artistic quality. Eisenstein's work was killed for Germany. Precisely because the effect of the film is calculated and arranged with such subtlety, it was possible to make cuts only with great prudence (as was done in the first German re-editing).²⁸

In sum, we might note the strongly, if covertly, political dimensions of the formalist approach, and the profound impact on film aesthetics of both Soviet film and of the censorship which sought to suppress it.

The lectures given in London by Eisenstein and Pudovkin in 1929 played a significant role in the intellectual and political understanding of Soviet cinema and film theory. In February 1929, Pudovkin came to London's New Gallery Cinema at the invitation of Ivor Montagu for the first British screening of *The End of St Petersburg*.²⁹ During this visit Pudovkin also delivered an address to the Film Society on 'Types as Opposed to Actors', which became central to the tenets of the British documentary film movement. The talk was an explication of 'montage principles', and included a description of the Kuleshov-Pudovkin experiments with cutting between static, inexpressive close-ups of an actor's face and various shots—a bowl of soup, a dead woman in a coffin, a little girl playing with a toy bear. Audiences, it was said, found in the actor's blank expression the intense emotions of hunger, grief, and joy respectively. Pudovkin linked this to his preferred use of non-actors in films: he discussed the acting 'honours' of the Mongols in his *Storm over Asia*.³⁰ He ended the talk with a discussion of the use of sound in film (the material to which Robert Herring referred in his 'Storm over London') and the potential for non-synchronous and contrapuntal sound; the most influential account of this had come in the joint statement written by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Aleksandrov, published for the first time in the October 1928 issue of *Close Up*, and taken up in the national and regional press. The questions of sound working contrapuntally to sight, and of 'sound used not realistically but as a kind of expressive commentary on visual action', proved to be powerful concepts.³¹ They would find expression in the literature of the 1930s (in, for example, the work of Virginia Woolf and Graham Greene) and in a number of British documentary films, in which the

conventional 'Voice of God' commentary was supplemented, and at times undermined, by more radical and experimental uses of sound.

p. 237 The concept of 'types' and 'typage' which Pudovkin explored would also become central to the British documentarists' theory and practice. For the documentary film-maker and theorist Paul Rotha, 'if there are human beings they are secondary to the main theme. Their private passions and petulances are of little interest. For the most part they perform their natural behaviour as in normal life...They are types selected from the many, portraying the mind and character of this or that social group.' The tenets of 'typage' would, however, be contested, both in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, and Rotha himself came to feel that audience identification required a focus on the individual story: 'If the masses are interested in seeing individuals and following their emotions on the screen, then documentary must embrace individuals...We must go into the streets and homes and factories to meet them.'³²

The articles containing the substance of Eisenstein's 1929 London lectures were 'The Principles of Film Form', 'The Filmic Fourth Dimension', and 'Methods of Montage', which were later published in the collection *Film Form*, but made their first appearance in the pages of *Close Up*, with 'The Principles of Film Form' also appearing in *Experimental Cinema*. The lectures themselves were later recalled by the literary critic Jack Isaacs and the documentary film-maker Basil Wright, in a BBC radio broadcast. As Isaacs stated, 'here was someone laying down, (and we must remember laying down for the first time), the laws and principles of the youngest of the arts, an art no older than most of us in the audience'. Wright and Isaacs noted Eisenstein's insistence on film as a 'synthetic' art, and his argument that 'film montage was the cinematic aspect of a particular form of expression used by artists in other media—particularly poetry, painting, drama and the novel'. They also recalled his emphasis on the hieroglyph or ideogram—and the 'overtone'—'a term for that unanalysable element—that rare and wonderful aesthetic impact which comes to us only too seldom from the screen'.

In the broadcast, Wright further discussed the significance of Eisenstein's 'instinctive' approach to film-making, 'the making of a film to an idea'. In making his own documentary film *Song of Ceylon*, Wright was, he stated

working, through Eisenstein's conception of montage, to shoot everything to a central idea. By this I mean that all the filmic material—the many, many strips of celluloid depicting different scenes—was related to a central conception—no, less definite than that—a deep *feeling* about this particular island. I couldn't then, any more than I can now, express this feeling in words. It belongs strictly to the flow and movement of film visuals, and could only be expressed in that manner.

He also recalled Eisenstein's insistence on the relationship between different levels of montage, the development of a line from the most basic to the most complex of styles and effects.³³

p. 238 The Film Society programme for Sunday 10 November 1929 included not only *Battleship Potemkin* but, screened before it, John Grierson's *Drifters*, a film on the home fishing industry which Grierson had been commissioned to make in late 1927. Grierson's indebtedness to Eisenstein and other Soviet film-makers, and the milieu of the screening, helped situate *Drifters*, one of the first 'documentary' films, in the context of European avant-garde film culture. It is said of the Film Society screening, however, that Eisenstein perceived Grierson's act of homage to be rather more a theft of his thunder.

The conjunction of the two films is significant. While researching in the United States, Grierson had worked on the English subtitling of *Battleship Potemkin* for American distribution, and on a critical commentary on the film. He returned to Britain in 1927, taking up employment under Stephen Tallents at the recently established Empire Marketing Board (EMB), whose role was to promote trade and economic relations between Britain and the countries of the Empire, with an initial commission to explore international

developments in film-making and to set up screenings of documentary and narrative films, including Soviet cinema. In outlining his plans for the EMB to its Film Committee, he presented Soviet cinema as a model to follow, in its departure 'from the tyranny of individualism'. Describing the Broadway run of *Potemkin*, which lasted for a couple of months, he wrote that

the film inspired more enthusiasm among its admirers than any film has ever done before. The spectator however individualistic in his outlook will dispense temporarily with an emphasis on personal fortunes the moment a picture touches the sources of his pride. A few appreciated 'Potemkin' critically for its cinematic values, but the general audiences which cheered their way through the film did so for the revolutionary cause it espoused and the pride of class to which it appealed.

Grierson made no reference to the censorship battles that had been fought in Britain and Germany the previous year. His concern, and apparently that of the Empire Marketing Board, seemed to be exclusively that of rendering popular those films which would represent to the public 'the progress of industry, the story of invention, the pioneering and developing of new lands and the exploration of lost ones, the widening horizons of commerce, the complexities of manufacture, and the range of communications: indeed in all the steam and smoke, dazzle and speed, of the world at hand, and all the strangeness and sweep, of affairs more distant'.³⁴ (Even Grierson's memos read like voice-over commentaries.)

'One cannot do less when recording a world revolution', Grierson wrote of *Potemkin*, 'than develop a tempo to take it, and that is what Eisenstein did more than anyone before him—from the smashing of the plate that starts and symbolizes the rebellion, through the cumulative flow of the procession in the streets of the city, to the violence and the clash of boots and faces on the stairs of Odessa'.³⁵ Quiet movement succeeding stormy movement, or stormy movement mounting to movement still stormier', he wrote of *Potemkin* in a review announcing its screening at the Film Society along with his own *Drifters*.³⁶ Combining Flaherty's representations of the natural world with the dynamic editing and symphonic structure of *Potemkin*, 'Drifters', Grierson wrote, 'is about the sea and about fishermen, and there is not a Piccadilly actor in the piece':

The life of Natural cinema is in this massing of detail, in this massing of all the rhythmic energies that contribute to the blazing fact of the matter. Men and the energies of men, things and the functions of things, horizons and the poetics of horizons: these are the essential materials. And one must never grow so drunk with the energies and the functions as to forget the poetics.

His discussion of the film, from which this quotation is drawn, was first published in the Left journal *The Clarion* and reprinted in *Close Up*, under the title 'Making a Film of the Actual: A Problem in Film Construction'. Grierson wrote that he had learned what he knew of cinema 'partly from the Russians, partly from the American westerns, and partly from Flaherty... The net effect of this cinematic upbringing was to make me want a storm: a real storm, an intimate storm, and if possible a rather noble storm.' The storm at sea and the physical 'agonies' of the fishermen return at the close of the film, intercut with shots of the marketplace and the 'boxing and barrelling' of the fish and, by extension, of the men's labour: 'the frenzy of a market in which said agonies are sold at ten shillings a thousand, and iced, salted and barrelled for an unwitting world'.³⁷

The author of the lead article in the inaugural issue of *Workers' Cinema* (the 'Official Organ of the Federation of Workers' Film Societies'), which appeared in November 1931, wrote:

In the Soviet Union, the film has been perfected as a social weapon—this time on behalf of the workers there and throughout the world. We have learned to borrow that weapon from out of their hands and to use it in our own struggles. Films which tell us of the world as it really is from the

workers' viewpoint, films which encourage him in his struggle to possess it... *We must make more of our own films—about our own struggles and our own problems.*³⁸

Reports from the regional Workers' Film Societies noted both the successful screening of Soviet cinema and continued struggles over the exhibition of banned films. The censorship battles over Soviet films in Britain continued to be a shaping influence on British film culture into the 1930s and beyond. *Potemkin* remained banned from public cinemas until 1954, when it was finally passed for exhibition by the British Board of Film Censors with an 'X' certificate.

Soviet cinema and theory also fed directly into British film and literature, creating, in Grierson's term, 'a documentary idea'. At times Grierson expressed doubts about 'the fake climax of Revolution' in the films of Pudovkin and Eisenstein, but he nonetheless argued that the position of Soviet cinema remained unassailed.³⁹ As he wrote in an article on the occasion of the re-issue of Pudovkin's *Film Technique* in 1933:

Perhaps the one thing which the Russians have most plainly taught us in the past is that cinema has a life of its own: that objects and events should not be dumbly *reproduced* on the screen, but should be *recreated* by the screen. It is the same essential distinction which divides representational painting from the genuine work of art. On this understanding of cinema, the emphasis falls naturally on the special capacities which the cinema has for shaping movements and moods and vitalities; and the cutting bench, not the studio, becomes the holy of holies of film composition. It is the place where the different aspects of the object, or the movement, or the mass, or the mood, are brought together; where they are given cinematic identity.⁴⁰

Grierson's assertions indicate the complex ways in which concepts of film realism and filmic construction, the given and the made, would develop, as a 'recreation of the world in its own image'.⁴¹ The impact of Soviet film on British documentary film culture was a powerful one, shaping not only its ideas about realism but its discussions and uses of film 'symbolism', film 'rhythm' and 'tempo', the use of sound in relation to the visual image, the relationship between private and public, the question of individuals and individualism, and critiques of the 'story-film' and the film star. More broadly, the extraordinary flourishing of Soviet film and film theory in the 1920s, in the years before the increasing repression of the Stalinist era, and at a time when there was all to play for in the new medium of the cinema, created new syntheses between art and politics, avant-gardism and realism, which would have deep and lasting significance for the cultures of modernity.

Notes

- 1 Martin Harrison, *Francis Bacon: Photography, Film and the Practice of Painting* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 96.
- 2 Quoted in Matthew Gale and Chris Stephens, eds, *Francis Bacon* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 21, 59, 94–5.
- 3 Huntly Carter, *The New Spirit in the Cinema* (London: Harold Shaylor, 1930), 277, 284.
- 4 Carter, *The New Spirit in the Cinema*, 277.
- 5 Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and his Kind* (London: Methuen, 1977), 10.
- 6 Stephen Spender, *World within World: The Autobiography of Stephen Spender* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951), 132–3.
- 7 Ivor Montagu, *The Youngest Son: Autobiographical Characters* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), 301.
- 8 Ivor Montagu Collection, British Film Institute, Item 63.
- 9 Hay Chowl, 'Propaganda', *Close Up*, 4, no. 1 (January 1929), 27.
- 10 Bert Hogenkamp, *Deadly Parallels: Film and the Left in Britain 1929–39* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), 31, 65.
- 11 Carter, *The New Spirit in the Cinema*, 285.
- 12 Huntly Carter, *The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia* (London: Chapman and Dodd, 1924), 256.
- 13 Conservative Party Memorandum, Film Society Collection, British Film Institute, Item 16.

- 14 James C. Robertson, *Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action, 1913–1972* (London: Routledge, 1993), 29–30.
- 15 *The Film Society Programmes, 1925–1939* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 130, 131.
- 16 Bryher, *Film Problems of Soviet Russia* (Territet: POOL, 1929), 12, 11.
- 17 Victor O. Freeburg, *Pictorial Beauty on the Screen* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 36.
- 18 F. G. H. Salusbury, *Daily Express* (11 September 1929), quoted in Carter, *The New Spirit in the Cinema*, 174–5.
- 19 H. D., 'Russian Films', *Close Up*, 3, no. 3 (September 1928), 25.
- 20 Bryher, *Film Problems of Soviet Russia*, 11, 56, 116.
- 21 Bryher, *Film Problems of Soviet Russia*, 37–8, 60.
- 22 Quoted in Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 2 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1972), ii, 142. In a footnote, Bell writes of his mother's letter: 'I do not think that Harold Nicolson doubted that the film was an attack upon British Imperialism in Asia. Vita may have had her doubts. Harold's position was made painful by the fact that he was his country's representative and that at the end of the film there was a small demonstration in the audience which could have been considered anti-British!'
- 23 Kenneth Macpherson, 'Storm over Asia—and Berlin!', *Close Up*, 4, no. 1 (January 1929), 39.
- 24 Robert Herring, 'Storm over London', *Close Up*, 4, no. 3 (March 1929), 38.
- 25 Carter, *The New Spirit in the Cinema*, 290.
- 26 Harry Alan Potamkin, review of Bryher, *Film Problems of Soviet Russia*, in *Experimental Cinema: A Monthly Projecting Important International Film Manifestations*, 1, no. 1 (February 1930), 3.
- 27 Lewis Jacobs, 'The New Cinema: A Preface to Film Form', *Experimental Cinema*, 1 (February 1930), 14.
- 28 Herbert Jehring, *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, July 28, 1926, quoted in Herbert Marshall, ed., *The Battleship Potemkin* (New York: Avon Books, 1978), 144.
- 29 See Amy Sargeant, *Storm over Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 68.
- 30 V. I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique*, trans. Ivor Montagu (London: George Newnes, 1933), 143.
- 31 Charles Davy, *Yorkshire Post* (29 October 1929).
- 32 Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (London: Faber, 1936), 142, 182.
- 33 *Eisenstein's Lectures in London: A Reconstruction by Basil Wright and J. Isaacs* (BBC Third Programme, 17 December 1949, 10.05–10.45 p.m.), transcript in the Film Society Collection, British Film Institute.
- 34 John Grierson, 'Notes for English Producers', John Grierson Archive, University of Stirling, G2A: 2:15, 12.
- 35 John Grierson, 'Eisenstein and Documentary', in Marshall, ed., *The Battleship Potemkin*, 156.
- 36 John Grierson, 'Films and Talkies', *The Clarion*, NS1, no. 11 (November 1929), 11.
- 37 John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (London: Faber, 1979), 20, 19.
- 38 'The Film is a Weapon', *Workers' Cinema*, 1, no. 1 (November 1931), 2.
- 39 John Grierson, 'Films and Talkies: Cinema of State', *The Clarion*, NS2, no. 8 (August 1930), 235.
- 40 John Grierson, 'A First Principle of Criticism', *New Britain*, 2, no. 27 (22 November 1933), 14.
- 41 André Bazin, 'The Myth of Total Cinema', in *What is Cinema?*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray, i (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1971), 21.