

in Amo Bek-Nazarov's *Khaz-Push* (1928), vivid images of poverty in Persia elicit the revolutionary energy of the east, a sensorial form of indignation also evoked by close-up images of fur in Pudovkin's *Storm over Asia* (1928).

But what about all those close-ups of faces so prominent in silent cinema? Although material and human touch take pride of place, Widdis is wise not to ignore the human countenance. As the utopian spirit of early Soviet cinema diminished with the rise of Socialist Realism, emotion evoked through the face began to overshadow sensation, and thus Evgenii Cherviakov's recently rediscovered *My Son* (1928) reveals a discernable shift from sensation to feeling (*chuvstvo*) of a sentimental sort. In the transitional phase into high Socialist Realism, Kozintsev and Trauberg's *Alone* (1930), Barnet's *Outskirts* (1933) and Room's collaborative effort with Yuri Olesha on *A Severe Youth* (1936) all convey new modes of experience that reflected an increasingly prescriptive vision of Soviet consciousness. As Socialist Realism took shape, it was primarily the child's perspective that remained as a means of fostering sensation in film. Toys, Widdis shows, thus became the material of choice in this new Stalinist landscape, whereby sensual pleasure was restricted to the very material of child's play.

Although Widdis concludes her study by exploring the sanitized jazz of Aleksandr Andrievskii's aptly named *The Death of Sensation: The Robot of Jim Rippl'* (1935), she seems at somewhat of a loss when it comes to the introduction of sound into film and its effect on Soviet spectators' sensorial experience. Widdis is clearly drawn to those 1930s films that featured minimal sound (and she avoids the issue altogether when touching upon early sound films such as Nikolai Ekk's 1931 *Path to Life*). Nevertheless, Widdis's assured voice comes through loud and clear in *Socialist Senses*, as this impressive study proves both comprehensive and compelling. The author's often dazzling analysis opens readers' eyes—and senses—to the vivid textures and material of the period, so much so that some might find it difficult to look at and experience early Soviet cinema in the same way again.

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***The Voice of Technology: Soviet Cinema's Transition to Sound 1928–1935.*** By Lilya Kaganovsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. xxii, 272 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. \$36.00, paper. doi: 10.1017/slr.2019.111

Nowhere was there more debate and experiment over synchronized sound on film than in Soviet Russia, where the transition proved relatively protracted (although it started later and took longer in Japan, India, and China). The complexity resulted from a technological revolution provoking aesthetic and political controversy, amid what amounted to a revolution within the revolution of 1917, the “Great Turn” announced by Stalin in November 1929.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere else

1. Kaganovsky cites Stalin's *Pravda* article, “A Year of Great Change: On the Occasion of the Twelfth Anniversary of the October Revolution,” *Pravda*, No. 259, November 7, 1929, 5.

was the introduction of sound cinema treated as a matter of state policy, with the added complication of Stalin simultaneously asserting his control over the entire state apparatus, including its culture.

This is the background to Lilya Kaganovsky's informative, if perhaps unavoidably selective study, in which she is kind enough to cite my 1982 article on early Soviet sound as "seminal." Given this, however, and the considerable literature on experimental work by Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Aleksandr Dovzhenko, Dziga Vertov and Esfir Shub, it hardly seems plausible to invoke a "usual narrative of Soviet belatedness" (4) in sound film. On the contrary, thanks to the wide availability of *The Deserter* and Vertov's two sound features, *Enthusiasm* and *Three Songs of Lenin*, this extended transitional period has arguably become the prime arena for discussion of alternatives to naturalistic synchronization, as proposed in the 1928 "Statement on sound" published by Sergei Eisenstein, Grigori Alexandrov, and Pudovkin (13–15).

Kaganovsky suggests that the "Statement" has often been read as opposition to recorded sound, although this is also hard to credit, considering its opening welcome: "our cherished dreams of a sound cinema are being realized." What the three signatories did register as their concern that sound cinema would disrupt the "montage culture," they and fellow avant-garde filmmakers had successfully defended. The anxiety proved well-founded, but not only for the aesthetic reasons expressed. What would soon engulf and transform Soviet cinema was a new demand for mass intelligibility, which the directors of *October*, *The New Babylon*, *Arsenal*, and *The Man with a Movie Camera* were not obviously best suited to satisfy. This would be enforced through a new organization, Soiuzkino, headed by the bullish bureaucrat, Boris Shumyatsky.

One aspect of the period 1929–31 can be seen as a rearguard resistance campaign by the leading montage filmmakers, aiming to demonstrate that their finely-honed aesthetics could continue to educate viewers, while demonstrating "intelligibility." The test case would be Eisenstein and Alexandrov's *The Old and the New*, a project revived and re-oriented after their controversial *October* (1928), which its directors promised would not "trumpet fanfares of formal discoveries [or] flabbergast people with puzzling stunts," [but would] "be clear, simple and intelligible" and "however contradictory it may sound, be an experiment intelligible to the millions!"<sup>2</sup> The repetition in this February 1929 article of key words of the moment—"collective," "intelligible," "millions," while still insisting that it would be "inescapably an experiment" was clearly an attempt to challenge, or at least nuance, the new imperative. When Eisenstein left the USSR in August for his extended journey abroad, he took a copy of the film before its official premiere, hoping that he could organize the making of a sound version while in western Europe.<sup>3</sup>

2. "Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Alexandrov: A Experiment Intelligible to the Millions," in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896–1939*, 257.

3. In a letter to Leon Moussinac dated June 4, 1929, he wrote: "it is my obsession to add sound to *Old and New*. Have to do that abroad." See Jay Leyda and Zina Voynow, *Eisenstein*

If he had succeeded, there would have been an even more radical experiment in “asynchronous” sound montage than Pudovkin’s *The Deserter*. The detailed notes that Eisenstein made for a proposed soundtrack were not published until 1982, and they envisaged an extraordinary range of generic sounds (sawing, gunfire, bells, tractors), “Slavonic” and other musical motifs as well as a leitmotiv for the heroine, Marfa, and some ambitious transitional effects, such as a “deformation of the saw sound into sobbing,” and “distortions of the fanfare” that would accompany the garlanded cow, turning into the sounds of a baby crying and a cat mewing.<sup>4</sup>

In neither Germany nor Britain did Eisenstein find sufficient commercial interest in added sound to justify the expense of his proposed dubbing. Yet the rediscovered notes for this can also be seen as foreshadowing what Pudovkin would attempt in the most experimental passages of *The Deserter* (the traffic jam and the shipyard “industrial symphony”), and indeed some of the more avant-garde moments in Aleksandrov’s *Jolly Fellows*, too often cast as a “betrayal” of his partnership with Eisenstein. Kaganovsky does not discuss this project, treating Eisenstein as essentially “absent” during the crucial period of early Soviet sound film, but she offers detailed and original close readings of a number of key transitional works.

Probably the least familiar of these is Igor Savchenko’s *The Accordion* (1934), which became chronologically the first Soviet venture in the new genre of “musicals,” preceding Aleksandrov’s *Jolly Fellows* by some months. Based on a poem by a popular youth poet of the period, written to defend “the old village ways” against changes likely to follow from collectivization, this truly lyrical film effectively demonstrates through dance and music that the traditional instrument has a role in the new order, as the hero “discovers he is more useful to the collective as an accordion player than as secretary of the village Soviet” (114). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Stalin hated its conclusion, and was recorded by Shumyatsky as continuing to complain “Are you still making crap like *The Accordion*? (*A driani podobno ‘Garmo’ bol’ she ne stavite?*, 112). Kaganovsky’s detailed analysis of this neglected film is welcome, although her efforts to deepen the analysis, by identifying it as an example of Louis Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatus, and later trying to “organize” it around “Freud’s three psychic agencies: the ego, the superego and the id,” both seem somewhat forced.

A happier use of theoretical ideas from beyond the Soviet context occurs in the book’s longest chapter, on Dziga Vertov’s *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934). Starting with the apparently simple question, “what difference does sound make” to the film, Kaganovsky first reveals the considerable textual complexity of its different versions and revisions, which include Vertov’s own silent 1938 edit, resulting from the 1930s need to make all films available for screening where sound technology was not yet available. The core of her argument is that *Three Songs* stands virtually alone as “truly contrapuntal” in its

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at Work (New York, 1982), 38. See also my discussion of this abortive plan in the introduction to Ian Christie and Richard Taylor, *Eisenstein Rediscovered* (London, 1993), 11.

4. Leyda and Voynov, *Eisenstein at Work*, 39–40.

treatment of sound and image as “equal elements of montage . . . combined in absolutely new ways, independent of their origins” (183).

Nowhere is this more dramatic than in the use of Lenin’s voice, carefully retrieved from an old phonograph recording, which addresses us from the grave. Kaganovsky quotes Paul de Man on the figure of *apostrophe*: “when the dead speak, the living fall silent” (203); and her discussion of the wider implications of this “moment extracted from the continuity of historical time” (Laura Mulvey, in *Death 24 x per second*) affirms the lasting relevance of what would be the last film over which Vertov and his collaborators—notably his editor and wife Elizaveta Svilova—would have full control.

The book includes valuable discussions, combining new archival sources with attempted re-theorization of Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg’s transitional *Odna* (Alone, 1931), and of “multilingualism and heteroglossia” in Alexander Dovzhenko’s *Ivan* (1932) and *Aerograd* (1935), drawing attention not only to the sheer variety of linguistic phenomena in these, but also to the movement from the voices of individuals to that of the state across these years. But it ends with a conclusion that represents a mystery, if not a missed opportunity, for this reader. The “official” first Soviet all-talkie was *Putevka v zhizn* (The Road to Life, 1931), directed by Nikolai Ekk, described here as “a complete unknown” and lacking even his own index entry. Not only was the film a technological achievement, but its story of caring for orphans of the Civil War (*besprizorniki*) also proved popular in the USSR, playing for a year at one cinema in Moscow, and was well-received abroad. Yet the more Kaganovsky lists the film’s achievements (“ideology, plus profitability, plus sound,” according to Maya Turovskaya), the less we feel her analytic interest in it.

Ekk has long been the forgotten, if not the unknown man of Soviet cinema, despite having directed both its first talkie and first full-color film, *Grunya kor-nakova* (Little Nightingale, 1936), both rewarding yet little-studied works. Ekk’s critical misfortune seems to have been his ability to meet the new demands of the Shumyatsky era without protest or censure, thus apparently making him an unsuitable subject for serious research. This, in turn, suggests a wider problem for scholarship on early Soviet cinema. The field is still powerfully structured along auteurist lines, attributing all power and achievement to a pantheon of canonized directors. To be outside this pantheon, already defined as the “big five” in the silent era (originally Lev Kuleshov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov and Abram Room, later revised to include Dovzhenko and Fridrikh Ermler) seems to have condemned other directors, along with all the many other creative personnel of Soviet cinema, to a lasting lack of serious attention.<sup>5</sup> Lilya Kaganovsky’s sensitive case studies are a welcome addition to the literature on early sound cinema, and its peculiarly Soviet inflections, but we still lack a properly “industrial” and cultural account, paying due attention to the full range of production, and the responses of more than its leading directors and their masters.

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5. A rare exception is Phil Cavendish’s study of Soviet cinematography, *The Men with the Movie Camera: the Poetics of Visual Style in Soviet Avant-Garde Cinema of the 1920s* (Oxford: Berghan, 2013)