

# VIKTOR SHKLOVSKY IN THE FILM FACTORY



Initially a participant in the Russian Futurist circle in St Petersburg which included David Burliuk, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikov, Viktor Shklovsky became an important critic and theorist of art and literature in the 1910s and 1920s in Russia. In 1916 he founded OPOYAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language) with Yuri Tynianov, Osip Brik and Boris Eichenbaum. Up to its dissolution in the 1930s the group developed the innovative theories of literature characterised as Russian Formalism.

Shklovsky's theory of *ostrannenie* (estrangement) was widely influential on the Soviet avant-garde, brought to even greater significance through its development by Bertolt Brecht as *Verfremdungseffekt* – alienation or estrangement effect (probably mediated via his contact with Sergei Tretyakov or Sergei Eisenstein both figures who were close to Shklovsky).

Shklovsky participated in the Russian Revolution of February 1917 however immediately after the revolution of October 1917 he sided with the Socialist Revolutionaries against the Bolsheviks and was forced to hide in Ukraine, returning to participate in the Civil War, fleeing again in 1922 to Berlin where he stayed until 1923.

In Berlin he published *Knight's Move*, a collection of short essays and reviews written in a period spanning the first few years of the revolution, and *Sentimental Journey*, his memoir of the years of revolution and exile 1917-1922. Also, Shklovsky (then living in Berlin) published in 1923 a collection of his own essays and articles on film (*Literature and Cinematography*, first English edition 2008) as well as editing, with several of the Russian Formalist group, a collection on the work of Charlie Chaplin.

Shklovsky's novel, *Zoo: Letters Not About Love*, includes a letter appealing to the Soviet authorities to allow him to return. This, and the intercession of his literary peers, Maxim Gorky and Vladimir Mayakovsky, secured his return to Russia. However, in the context of Soviet Marxism's suspicion of Shklovsky's anti-Bolshevik past and the popularity of Formalism Shklovsky found fewer and fewer opportunities to publish in the 1920s, he instead sought employment in the State cinema of Goskino as a screenwriter, where he worked with the directors Lev Kuleshev, Abram Room, Boris Barnet and others. Shklovsky's novel *Third Factory*, published in 1926 as a peculiar mixture of apologia and defense, represents an attempt to address his critics but also protest his censors and deflect criticisms.

First of all, I have a job at the third factory of Goskino [A documentary film unit/studios].

Second of all, the name isn't hard to explain. The first factory was my family and school. The second was Opoyaz.

And the third – is processing me at this very moment. Do we really know how a man ought to be processed?

[...]

It is impossible to exclude certain material; necessity creates works of literature. I need the freedom to work from my own plans; freedom is needed if the material is to be bared. I don't want to be told that I have to make bentwood chairs out of rocks. At this moment, I need time and a reader. I want to write about unfreedom, about the royalties paid by Smirdin, about the third factory – life. We (Opoyaz) are not cowards and we do not bend before wind pressure. We love the wind of the revolution. Air moving a hundred kilometers an hour exerts pressure. When a car slows down to seventy-five kph, the pressure drops. That is unbearable. Nature abhors a vacuum. Full speed ahead.<sup>1</sup>

Speed, trains, cars, revolution and the passage of time will be recurrent themes in this short essay, they appear frequently as motifs in Shklovsky's writing across 7 decades and will appear with different emphases in the various clips of films discussed.

In his early writing on cinema Shklovsky sought to discover and define what was unique in it as an art form, and to do so he had to work to develop and distinguish what its relationship was with the other arts. What distinguished the Cinema from the other arts first and foremost was its status as an industry:

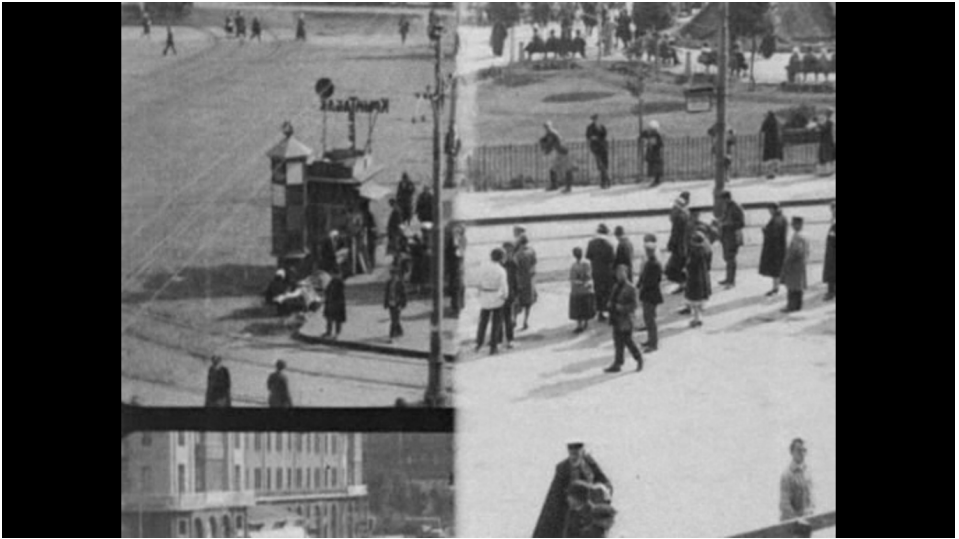
To my horror, I have discovered abroad that in America the film industry is the third largest industry, exceeded only by metallurgy and textiles. Quantitatively speaking, it is mainly cinematography that represents spectacle in the world.

Our literature, theatres, paintings are nothing but a tiny niche, a small island, in comparison to the sea of cinematography.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 Viktor Shklovsky, *Third Factory*, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003, pp.8-9.

2 Viktor Shklovsky, *Literature and Cinematography*, Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 2008, p.25



Still from Abram Room (Dir.), *Bed and Sofa*, 1927

For Shklovsky, film was an industry and an industrial process – in a text from 1927 he named it ‘The Film Factory’. His concern was what constituted the material specificity of this new art and since literature was his main area of expertise his initial concern was focussed on the relationship between Cinema and Literature:

The poetics of the motion picture is a poetics of pure plot. [...] Thus film, with all its limited means, is capable of competing with literature.<sup>3</sup>

Film took plot from literature, but in the process, the literary plot underwent profound change.<sup>4</sup>

One of the key features shared by film and literature to Shklovsky’s mind was the elaboration of parallels or ‘parallelism’ another is plot transposition: ‘Plot transposition is the phenomenon whereby a work’s events are rendered not in sequence, but in some other order.’<sup>5</sup> Parallelism describes the way plot lines

---

3 Ibid., pp.32-33.

4 Ibid., p.40.

5 Ibid., p.52.

diverge and develop in parallel, usually connected by common characters, and resolve by the end of the film in a moment of dramatic illumination. Parallelism is common both to both the beginnings of *Bed and Sofa* and *The House on Trubnaya Square* in each we see the city waking up and the camera surveys details of everyday life in Moscow gradually settling on two different sets of characters whose lives will dramatically collide.

At the beginning of *Bed and Sofa* we see multiplication of action, waking, each in turn washing, man, wife, cat, then a car outside. (cat fed from the table). The unified activity, carefully choreographed rituals articulate this odd series of co-habiting creatures, synchronising their actions as one unit. This strengthens the sense of collective life unfolding in the early post-revolutionary Moscow, and gives us the sense that a city waking involves perhaps the multiplication of similar (but singular) small units in the metropolis invisible yet imagined off-camera. The unit is three, this we begin with they are perhaps harbingers of currently improvised new form of life? By the end of this opening sequence unfolds there will be a new guest, and through his introduction social relations, sexual and power relations in the house will substantially change. There is a constantly revised and adapted scene of domesticity, play with screens, curtains, different household items. The cat is play object, a comrade-thing, a medium of intimacy between the couple. There is a fragility to the interior barriers, but clear separation between the concentrated action taking place in the interior (apartment) and the bright openness and complex articulation of multiple actions in the city outdoors.

After 3 days the cat begins to stand in for the new guest. The cat has become literally part of the furniture, it dissolves into sight on the sofa as if it has been there forever, offering no interruption to the couple's life. The building superintendent nods towards the sofa, saying 'I've signed him in, but without the right to living space.' 'Where does he work?' Liuda replies nodding at the cat, 'He's a Printer he lives on the sofa'. The same truth applies to two realities – two guests – that of the cat and the invisible guest (symbolised here by the cat). The cat steps off the sofa. What's made strange is that the guest becomes the cat and the cat appears to be subject to human rules (about lodging, property relations). A mixture of substitution and parallelism. Both cat and guest are sexualised and gendered, but at this point only ambiguously and provisionally as if social roles are a moveable component of this new domestic space.



Still from Abram Room (Dir.), *Bed and Sofa*, 1927

The cat at this stage of the film is the symbol of happy domesticity. Disappearing as an affair begins between wife and guest. Reappearing when ‘all three are reunited’ in a fragile menage a trois. But despite initially resuming domestic life discord breaks out when competition reappears, division over reproductive labour, sexual competition and games of draughts. Between macho comradeship, loves’ pushes and pulls, Liuda states to her two husbands, ‘I’m fed up with both of you and your stupid games.’ Preparing to leave, in probably the most uncanny scene of the whole film, Liuda stops between packing and sheds tears at her desk, and her tears fall on a statue of a cats head. In another act of film staged animal mimicry the cat’s head isolated in close-up appears to shed her tears, they trickle down its face from the corner of its eye, and down its nose.

Here a double estrangement ensues whereby a cat appears to cry human tears, yet this cat is in fact a plaster statue – a representation of the filmed cat which up to now has featured as a kind of domestic idol. A representation of a representation which emotes in sympathy with Liuda’s difficult fate and impending departure. Liuda’s emotion becomes external, is transposed from cat to thing, doubly reified, as stone and as film and she packs this external object in her bag and leaves. Her grief has become the past almost immediately through the migration of tears to cat and transubstantiation of cat into a stony substance.<sup>6</sup>

---

6 [The question on the externalisation and emotion is discussed in Shklovsky’s ‘On Poetry and Trans-Sense Language’] ‘Yuri Ozarovskiy remarks in his book

Formerly a ‘messenger and promise’ to use John Berger’s terms, the cat, has become a portable idol, a thing, the petrified residue of a potent living presence. Here, in a typically perverse reversal of Shklovsky’s famous sentence whereby art makes the stone stony, that which previously stood in for, or was sympathetic and complimentary, to human feeling, now becomes strange, as a stony lifeless thing which appears ironically as a bearer of feelings.



Still from Abram Room (Dir.), *Bed and Sofa*, 1927

This reversal serves the plot as a kind of pivot or turning point, conforming exactly to the *peripeteia* defined by Aristotle in *Poetics* as:

a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity. – Aristotle, *Poetics*

The final sequences of the film mirror and reverse those of the film’s opening, the two men lie ensconced in happy domesticity in the flat, while Liuda rides a train out of Moscow optimistically (leaving the flat for only the second time in the whole film) propelled towards a new independent life as a worker and a mother. Everything is familiar (the train, the flat, the city view), but their

---

The Music of the Living Word that the timbre of the voice is dependent on mimicry,<sup>64</sup> and if one goes further than he did and relates to his remark James's thesis that each emotion is the result of some bodily state (a sinking heart is the cause of fear, and tears are the cause of sorrow)'. p.19.

dynamics, ownership, sexual organisation, fundamental meanings have been radically changed and rendered open to the unpredictable and unknown.



Still from Abram Room (Dir.), *Bed and Sofa*, 1927

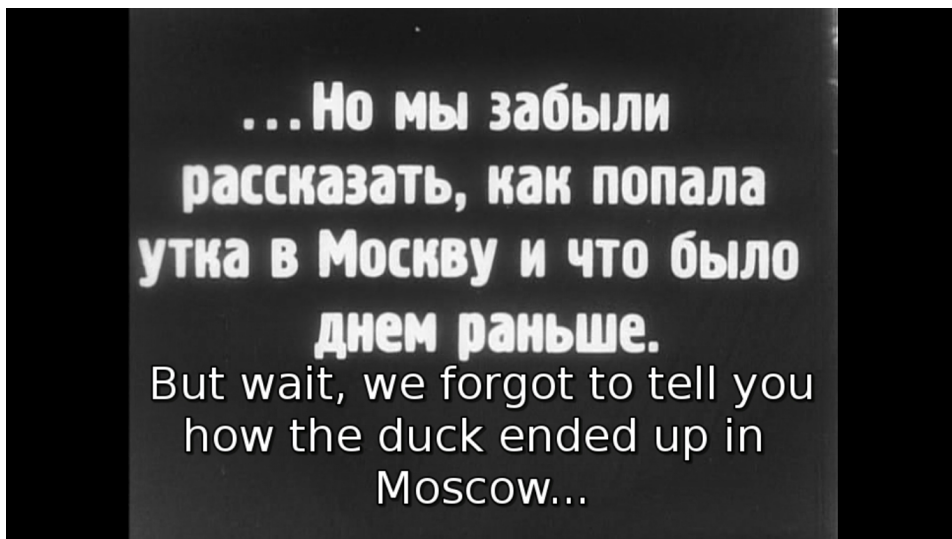
In *The House on Trubnaya Square* (1928) action is interrupted by an extremely unusual effect: the film is stopped in the middle of action, an intertitle addresses the viewer directly on a question of plot construction ‘but wait...’ and the film sequence is played in reverse (see cover image) to indicate we will be going back in time to begin the story again from a different point of view to provide the viewer with information omitted the first time around.<sup>7</sup> The false start, new

---

7 Towards the climax of the film Paranya, the protagonist we saw chasing her duck and nearly being hit by a tram, intervenes in a theatre performance, unwittingly beating her own abusive employer – playing a General – in order to save her friend Semyon – playing a revolutionary – she becomes the hero of the theatre crowd and is swept to acclaim eventually resulting in her apparent election as a Moscow City Councillor. Only apparent, because the illusion of Paranya’s election is actually down to mistaken identity sufficient to produce a fold in time /or ‘parallel intrigue’ as described by Shklovsky whereby the residents, and her former employers, transform their attitude to Paranya and the building they live in working together to repair, clean it up and throw a huge party. Even when the news is broken that Paranya is not in fact an elected Councillor, the vigilance of her neighbours and friends Semyon (the driver) and Fenia (the activist) defend Paranya from the abuse of her employer, get her a new job and leads to the prosecution of the abusive landlord/employer. The diverging plots, the surprise and tensions they generate allude to the plasticity in social relations, reversals of hierarchy in Russian society at this time but ultimately resolve into a moralism of fairness and hard work.



digression, recursion to an earlier point in time and ‘baring of the device’ achieved by making the viewer conscious of the telling of the story they are following are all literary devices theorised by Shklovsky and the formalists in literature.



Still from Boris Barnet (Dir.), *The House on Trubnaya Square*, 1928

This is just a brief summary of what cinema had borrowed from literature, but what also distinguished it from almost any other art form, and what was ‘bared’ in the clip discussed above, for Shklovsky and others, was its particular relation to movement.

As everyone knows, a movie reel consists of a series of momentary shots succeeding one another with such speed that the human eye merges them; a series of immobile elements creates the illusion of motion.

[...]

A film does not move; it only appears to move. Pure motion, as such, will never be reproduced in cinematography. Cinematography can only deal with

---

Workers remain workers, but protected by union and law. Class violence from below, the subversion of power and the supersession of art can be briefly played out in the theatre as a moment of carnivalesque exception, but ultimately normality soon resumes.

the motion-sign, the semantic notion. It is not just any motion, but motion-action that constitutes the sphere of a motion picture.

The semantic motion-sign triggers our recognition; we complete it; it does not demand our perception.

Hence – the conventional mimicry, the raised eyebrows, the large tear, movements, gestures.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Shklovsky (heavily influenced by the philosopher Henri Bergson) propounds, in 1923, the first semiotic theory of cinema. A theory of motion-action and the process of cognition it triggers in the film viewer. By focussing on Charlie Chaplin, whom Shklovsky calls, ‘The first movie actor’, we learn what is distinct from theatre acting and specific to film.

Chaplin doesn’t speak – he moves. He works with the cinematic material instead of translating himself from theatrical into screen language. I cannot define right now what makes Chaplin’s movement comical – perhaps the fact that it is mechanized.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, from its earliest moments cinema embodies the advancing industrial processes which underpinned its technical specificities, broke from theatre and literature, emphasised and explored the machinic, dehumanising qualities of industrialisation. For Chaplin, human gesture, stunts and play against social morality are the material of film.

One of the key motifs in Shklovsky's writing is the car an icon and commodity exemplary of modernity. The car or automobile was both the site of work for Shklovsky, he worked as a driver and mechanic in the army and later wrote a technical manual for a car, and a key metaphor for modernity’s annihilation of old values:

The machine gunner and the contrabassist are extensions of their instruments.

---

8 *Literature and Cinematography*, pp.31-32

9 Viktor Shklovsky, *Literature and Cinematography*, p.65.

Subways, cranes and automobiles are the artificial limbs of mankind. [...]

Drivers change in proportion to the amount of power in the engines which propel them.

An engine of more than forty horsepower annihilates the old morality.

Speed puts distance between a driver and mankind.

Start the engine, press on the gas – and you have forthwith left space behind, while time seems measured only by the speedometer.<sup>10</sup>

For Shklovsky, things are sensory extensions of man, but things also transform his sensation and use him (as their own extensions of their purpose). Thus, rather than a simple curtailment of autonomy, both man and thing are autonomous, make their own rules and impress themselves upon their 'objects'. There is nothing 'unnatural' about the shaping of life by things, but rather there are degrees, the machine being the most extreme and apparently of another order than nature's (man's inorganic being?) shaping of man.

Things make of a man whatever he makes from them.

Speed requires a goal.

Things are multiplying around us – there are ten or even a hundred times more of them now than there were two hundred years ago.

Mankind has them under control, but the individual man does not.

The individual needs to master the mystery of machines; a new romanticism is needed or machines will throw people out of life on the curves.

At the moment, I am bewildered, because this tire-polished asphalt, these neon signs and well-dressed women – all this is changing me.

Here I am not as I used to be; here it seems, I fall short.<sup>11</sup>

Shklovsky reveals a fear of both mechanisation and feminisation through 'things' particularly 'machines'. Through 'speed' machines and the humans embedded in them annihilate space and time. Speed requires a goal. This changes the shape of human sense-perception, but also the structure of time even

---

10 *Zoo Letters Not About Love*, Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 2001, p.115-116.

11 *Ibid.*, pp.119-120.

the destiny/destination of life.

Automobiles are a cipher for the overtaking of the slow, old order and a sign of the revolution going out of control, by superempowerment of isolated 'individuals' via the apparatus of the machines.

You brought the revolution sloshing into the city like foam, O automobiles!  
The revolution shifted gears and drove off.<sup>12</sup>

Here, we might read this contradictory and multi-valent reference as a subtle critique of mechanisation under the NEP in Russia. Shklovsky used the analogy between the construction of a steam engine and the construction of the Russian word for it: Train = parovoz (par = steam, Voz = carriage, Cart = povozka po (on) + voz (carriage)+o) to explain how language is constructed of smaller, historical elements.<sup>13</sup> In the linguistic analogy what is emphasised is the very elasticity and historicity of language, whereas what is emphasised in the mechanical history (and he lived in destructive times) is power and destruction (we could say 'subsumption' in the sense that Marx used the term, to describe the incorporation of historical forms and their subordination to capitalist ends).

Animals abound in Viktor Shklovsky's literary, critical and cinematic work. Whilst animals are used to allegorical and humorous effect in Shklovsky's prose and criticism, in the films highlighted here, they are often deployed as elements of plot delivery alongside other devices. Animals take on a dynamic and organising function, leading the action rather than diverting it, they assist in making things strange, but are not necessarily enigmatic. If animals direct things in a linear yet chaotic direction, other devices (such as intertitles) interrupt, reverse and generally redirect the story. Fundamentally, all these deployments of animals and their interactions with humans focus a dialectic of life/liveliness and death/rigidity which have high political and aesthetic stakes in these early post-revolutionary years.

***Po Zakonu*** (1926) directed by Lev Kuleshev and influenced by constructivist theories of art betrays a rather odd conjunction of American and Russian themes, based on a story by Jack London and heavily influenced by Chaplin's *Gold Rush* (1924). Shklovsky's interest in object relations appear to have influenced the

---

12 Zoo..., op. cit., p.117.

13 Viktor Shklovsky, *The Energy of Delusion: a Book on Plot*, Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 2011, p.15.

construction of one of the more bizarre fight sequences in the history of film and one which subsequently became a trope in ultra-violent Spaghetti Westerns. Playing on the visceral articulation of greed, gold, labour and violence, the film was one of the cheapest films made in Russia ever and one of the most successful. Restaging the struggle for the frontier in Alaska in locations just outside Moscow, the film counterposes nature's indifferent violence and humankind's madness and greed as anarchic forces which can only be tempered by social values, justice and law however remote from society.



Still from Lev Kuleshev (Dir.), *Po Zakonu*, 1926

Despite Shklovsky's interest and enthusiasm for the new medium of film, there was a mournfulness in his early statements directed towards what film erases in its rush to develop down the path that has been set out for it. Ultimately, for Shklovsky, this is the wrong path, that of recognition rather than active perception, discontinuity rather than continuity.

In the world of art, the world of continuity, the world of the continuous word, a line of verse cannot be broken into stresses; it has no stress points; it has a place where the lines of force fracture.

The traditional theory of verse emphasizes the violation of continuity by

discontinuity. The continuous world is a world of vision. The discontinuous world is a world of recognition.

Cinema is a child of the discontinuous world. Human thought has created for itself a new non-intuitive world in its own image and likeness.<sup>14</sup>



Still from Lev Kuleshev (Dir.), *Po Zakonu*, 1926

The contradictions of this movement of modernity, an expansion of its discontinuous world in tandem with the expansion of cinema's universalising vision is pitted against geographical limits in both *Turksib* (1929) and *Salt for Svanetia* (1930), two films which coincidentally lay the foundations for the subsequent tradition of ethnographic film by following the intensive development projects of the New Economic Plan era out to the far reaches of the Soviet empire. In *Salt for Svanetia* the arduous and primitive work comprising the cycle of nature and agricultural life is contrasted with the linear progress carved out by the establishment of the railway.<sup>15</sup>

14 *Literature and Cinematography*, p.30.

15 Although *Salt for Svanetia* is the only film mentioned in this discussion which Shklovsky had no formal role in the production of at all, an interesting anecdote suggests he did play a critical role bringing the film into existence: '[...] I've got some strange stories about the cinema. One time, Mikhail Kalatozov, shot a film from a script written by Tretyakov. It was called *Salt for Svanetia*. The film didn't pass the censors, they told the director not to come

When Shklovsky began work at Goskino in the early 1920s Soviet cinema was in a dreadful state. This generally reflected the crisis of regime, held in check by the Civil War, rose up in 1920 and 1921 with peasant, worker and army revolts, deindustrialisation, starvation and evacuation of the cities. After an initial nationalisation in 1919 the whole cinema industry was undergoing re-organisation by 1924 in line with the New Economic Plan and an anarchic combination of private and state enterprises attempted to develop under the twin pressures of producing both expanding internal and international markets for Soviet film and rigorously observing the political propaganda role encouraged by the Bolshevik state.<sup>16</sup> This was to be a period of both pluralism, complex

---

back. He asked me for help. I went to the office that handled those things and proposed reediting the film. They replied that there were no more funds available. "Twenty-five rubles. would that be possible at least?" I asked. They acceded. I watched the film and re-edited it. You know what the re-editing consisted of? I simply took out five hundred meters of film, and with the director's consent, added another five hundred meters that were completely neutral. That is, I added some extra frames so that the viewer wouldn't have trouble following the pace. When they saw it again, the film passed. and it was shown to great success. But I hadn't changed anything. I'd just taken out five hundred meters of film.'

– Viktor Shklovsky in interview with Serena Vitale December, 1978.

Serena Vitale, *Viktor Shklovsky: Witness to an Era*, [Trans. Jamie Richards], Champaign, London, Dublin: Dalkey Archive Books, 2012, pp.165-166.

Five hundred metres = 1640 feet, a little less than 20 minutes according to a guide at <http://www.intervalometers.com/resource/index.php> Shklovsky explains exactly how to measure film in Viktor Shklovsky, 'The Script Laboratory', originally published as V. B. Shklovskii, 'Laboratoriya stsenariya' *Kino i zhizn'*, 1930, no. 17 (mid-June), pp. 6–7 english translation available in Ian Christie & Richard Taylor, *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, London: Routledge, 2003.

- 16 Lenin's 'Directive on Cinema Affairs', published 17 January, 1922, indicates these two priorities, Vladimir Lenin, 'Directive on Cinema Affairs' in Ian Christie, 'Introduction' in Ian Christie & Richard Taylor, *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, London: Routledge, 2003. Typical of this time was the following advertisement from 1923 by the film company Russfilm requesting the public send in scripts, since the private company had none, on the following themes

THE THEMES MAY BE:

- 1 The Russian folk epic.
- 2 Historical and epic tales with a heroic flavour.
- 3 The everyday life of the workers and peasants past and present.
- 4 Contemporary everyday life (not workers' and peasants').
- 5 Modernised daily life.
- 6 The everyday life of Nepmen.
- 7 Adventure films and films of everyday life 'on a USSR-wide scale'.

debate and eventually increasingly strict state control. In the 1910s and 1920s European cinema was financially challenged by the dominance of the American film industry. Whilst in America the birth of narrative cinema had been initiated in 1915 with D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and throughout the 1920s technical leaps were made with the introduction of sound film, Russia was still catching up with the technology, and the introduction of sound and even narrative were contested and experimented with in equal measure through the 1920s and the 1930s.

As the 1920s drew on Shklovsky attempted to contribute to development of Soviet film industry with texts on aesthetic issues, technical matters, script writing and general organisation of the 'The Film Factory' (1927):

The Soviet film factory is better than other film factories. But it suffers from many ailments and more than anything else it suffers from a lack of skill. Technically it is still weak. It is disorganised in its professional attitude.

The fault in cinema's disposition and in its poor labour protection lies first and foremost with film-makers.

The film-maker is often a dilettante. The film factory is full of philistines.

If you want to come to cinema's aid do not rush to the screen.

Pause to think a hundred times, a thousand times, on the doorstep of the film factory.

Best of all: stay in the audience. A conscious, exacting audience.

Cinema needs that more than anything: *an audience that does not succumb to cinema psychosis.*<sup>17</sup>

As discussed, cinema's development was tied up with the overall tendency for

---

8 Wholesome revolutionary detective films.

9 Utopian films, such as a look into a happier future.

Russfilm Script Competition, Advertisement in *Zrelishcha*, no. 54, September 1923, p. 13. Reproduced in *The Film Factory*, Ibid. A useful timeline of the history of Russian cinema from prior to the revolution up to end of the cold war can be accessed here, 'The History of Cinema 1896-2000', <http://www.filmbirth.com/russia.html>

17 Viktor Shklovsky, 'The Film Factory', (1927) in Ian Christie, 'Introduction' in Ian Christie & Richard Taylor, *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, London: Routledge, 2003.



the Bolshevik government to subordinate all other social questions to the necessity of industrialisation. Nonetheless, Shklovsky's criticisms are organisational, labour-related and finally aesthetic – a question of the cultivation of a perceptually alert cinema audience.

Interestingly, the Soviet cinema of the 1920s found a very engaged audience with specific political commitments and this has a specific historical relation to Berlin and the strength of the workers' movement in Germany.

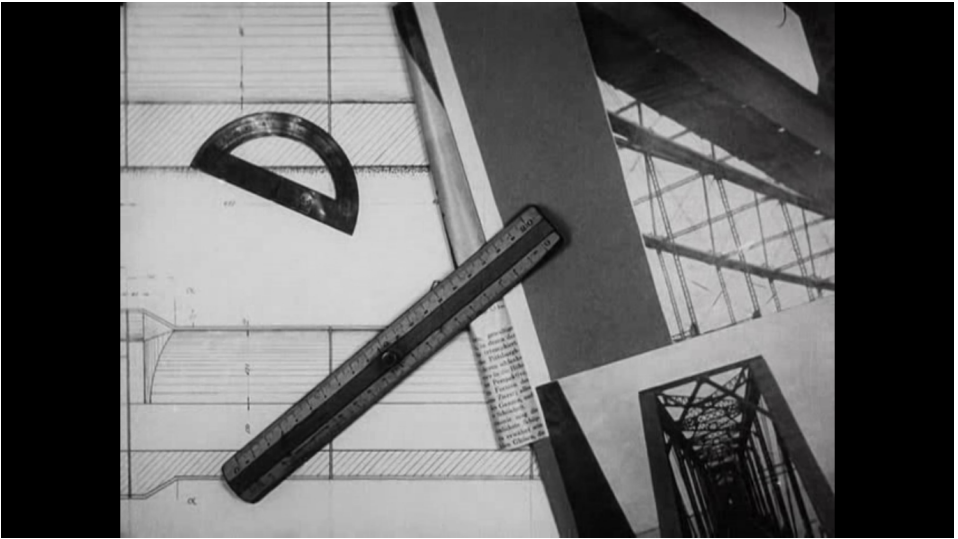
Although the triumphant Berlin run of *Potemkin* in July 1926 is usually cited as its starting point, the screening of films from and about Soviet Russia actually began in 1921 through the Berlin-based *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe*, or Workers' International Relief – which was also responsible for the vast public success of *Potemkin* in Germany that undoubtedly helped to create its subsequent reputation. WIR was started by Willi Münzenberg to raise money abroad for the relief of famine in Russia after the Civil War and to help build the Soviet economy when all foreign aid was being denied. From the beginning, film played a leading part in the work of fundraising and it has been estimated that the organisation helped to produce and distribute some twenty documentaries and newsreels between 1922 and 1924, which they claimed were seen by 25 million viewers throughout Europe, the Americas and the Far East.<sup>18</sup>

The documentary film, *Turksib* (1929) charts the building of the Turkestan-Siberian railway. The film had a widespread influence, particularly in the UK where it was presented in an English version prepared in 1930 by John Grierson (a famous British documentary director, who used the strength of Soviet documentary work to argue for a state supported 'cinema of public life' in the United Kingdom).

As well as the plot effects drawn from literature, the constructivist take on pure action explored in *Po Zakonu*, Shklovsky, not surprisingly as a writer, insisted on the innovative potentials of intertitles. Moreover, there's evidence to suggest that his view also stretched to an extraordinarily prescient view of multi-genre and multi-media approach to film by which combinations of real and animated film might be realised.

---

18 Ian Christie, 'Introduction' in Ian Christie & Richard Taylor, *Ibid.*



Still from Mikhail Kalatozov, *Turksib*, 1929

The success of Chaplin-type films is undeniable. In all likelihood, classical cinematography will grow out of them. There is yet one other line along which cinema may evolve. It is the animated film [...] I am convinced that they have possibilities that are, as yet, untapped. [...] Maybe cartoons can be combined with regular films? In any case, what is meant to happen will happen.<sup>19</sup>

As well as the renowned success of the documentary *Turksib*, the closest Shklovsky seems to have come to realising this ambition is in an extraordinary sequence in the film, *Prostitutka aka Prostitute* (1927). Towards the end of the film a lecture is staged in a small workshop on the topic of Prostitution and disease – two sequences are intercut to provide an extremely condensed and information rich presentation of facts and political arguments for solutions to the problems presented by prostitution. The sequence presents an informational punctum in the centre of a fiction film. The new opportunities of presenting data and movable type on screen are realised to the fullest in a way that appears close to our own information based multimedia on-screen environments in use today. However, in this sequence, the real-life lecture and abstract tableau of information are combined in their separation via harsh cut's back and forth.

---

19 *Literature and Cinematography*, pp.69-70.

Individual elements, music, text, typography, maps, photographs, drawings, animated objects, are not merged seamlessly but combined in their difference to produce surprise, engagement and dramatisation of the issues.



Still from Oleg Frelikh (Dir.), *Prostitutka*, 1926

As increasingly savage attacks by Marxists aligned with the party and State were brought to bear upon the influence of Formalism on the study of literature and the arts generally (the so-called Marxism – Formalism debate) throughout the 1920s Shklovsky made his final public pronouncement on formalism in a contradictory and satirical self-critical text entitled 'A Monument to Scientific Error' in 1930. With Mayakovsky's suicide in April 1930 and the Stalinist purges which followed throughout the 1930s, after 1931 Shklovsky retreated, publishing less theoretical or experimental writings, his output in the 1930s included ghostwriting other writers' texts, writing a car manual and two children's stories the authorities' rehabilitation of Mayakovsky after 1935 culminated in 1940 when Shklovsky was permitted to publish *Mayakovsky and His Circle*. Shklovsky continued to work (occasionally) on scripts for the cinema (with notable credits as a writer for films in 1932, 1939, 1956 and 1961) but with much less frequency.

After one hundred years of cinema it seems that what was meant to happen did happen. In a century film has come full cycle back to it's beginnings confronting the truth of it's constraints and confirming to the stress Shklovsky placed on cinema's non-verbal nature, it's reliance on pure action, 'stunts' threaded

together by increasingly baroque forms of plot transposition and parallel intrigues. Contemporary action forms rely very little on dialogue, they take as standard the combination of real and animated sequences (CGI special effects). In a sense the directions film is presently taking are as much under a pressure to cater to international multi-lingual audiences and markets as the worn out perceptions of viewers succumbing to cinema (or screen) psychosis and fatigue. However, these forms remain in the realm of spectacle (in the words of Guy Debord) ‘a *separate pseudo-world* that can only be looked at’.

In 1923 Shklovsky’s melancholy over the ascendancy of cinema was tempered with political utopianism. It seems towards the end of the 1920s he revised his position in relation to cinema, working hard with the new medium as a practitioner and theorist. Such political utopianism became impossible to express publicly, but my impression is that his ‘hunt for optimism’ did not end.

It grieves me to observe the development of cinematography. I want to believe that its triumph is temporary. A century will go by, and there will be no more dollars, marks, visas, states – but these are all trifles, details.

No, a century will go by, and human thought will overflow the limit erected in front of it by the theory of limits; humankind will learn to think in processes, and we will again behold the world as continuity. Then there will be no motion pictures.<sup>20</sup>

If, in 1923, Shklovsky’s Bergsonian melancholy over the ascendancy of cinema, understanding cinema as ‘a child of the discontinuous world’ – the path of recognition rather than active perception, discontinuity rather than continuity, It seems towards the end of the 1920s he revised his position in relation to cinema, working hard with the new medium as a practitioner and theorist.

Individual elements, music, text, typography, maps, photographs, drawings, animals animated objects, are not merged seamlessly but combined in their difference to produce surprise, engagement and dramatisation of the issues. The peripetetic movement discussed in the films above, a signature of Shklovsky’s prose, is not only crucial to development, but also brings in a complex and unpredictable play of forces through which art develops through a series of determinations and swerves.

---

20 *Literature and Cinematography*, op.cit., pp.31-32.

Important to this change of view for Shklovsky, was his closeness to Sergei Eisenstein,

Eisenstein saw the world as a fly or bee sees it, i.e. with its thousand eyes.<sup>21</sup>

Through *Battleship Potemkin*, Shklovsky understood the new possibilities brought about by montage, he understood this as a poetics of cinema, a possible combination of prose (narration) and poetry (technical and formal). In *Potemkin...* Seagulls are related to the necessity for invention in art, as if the work of art is difficulty itself, to show how difficult it is to show accurately a given scene. By producing and overcoming difficulty art combines with the truth of the contingency of the real and true event. For Shklovsky 'stepped' (the Odessa steps are given as a prime example) or delayed action intensifies a viewer's perception and creates tension (suspense). This can be related to Shklovsky's views on the Circus, which was for him an art consisting of only animal and human gesture as material and sheer effort – 'making it difficult – that is the circus device'.

Rather than 'pure heterogeneity,' an indivisible unity 'melted together like the notes of a melody'<sup>22</sup>, Shklovsky's art, in practice and in theory, passes through endless obstacles, media-objects, diversions and reversals. Life, as with Bergson, can only find its alterity in differentiation from the animated-without-life - the mechanical, reified or rigid - that which doesn't feel. Likewise, art – artifice – requires the animal, the lively,

Art needs the local, the vital, the differentiated.<sup>23</sup>

For Shklovsky, within the Film Factory as in other art forms, truth finds its ground in necessity. Freedom can only realise itself through effort, difficulty produces difference, the new, that which carries potentiality forth, is not the product of a pure originality, but forking, reversals, swerves.

As the 1920s drew on Shklovsky attempted to contribute to development of Soviet film industry writing texts on aesthetic issues, technical matters, script

---

21 From, Viktor Shklovsky, *On Eisenstein*, 1964. Translation by Benjamin Sher, available, <http://www.websher.net/srl/shk-eis-14point.html>

22 Quotations from Henri Bergson, *Laughter*.

23 *Zoo*, op.cit., p.87

writing and general organisation of the rapidly developing new industry. Cinema's development was tied up with the overall tendency for the Bolshevik government to subordinate all other social questions to the necessities of industrialisation. Nonetheless, Shklovsky's criticisms were organisational, labour-related and finally aesthetic – a question of the cultivation of a perceptually alert cinema audience.

Despite its apparent complicity with the 'society of labour'<sup>24</sup>, Shklovsky's practice carries a secret cargo, that of 'laziness as the truth of mankind' as Malevich put it. As life becomes technologised, the mechanistic constructed aspects of art and literature come to the fore, yet while the abundance made possible by the technological promises to make labouring human obsolete, in art the opposite becomes true, the senses must labour as never before. While Bergson's vitalism celebrated animality as an epic transhistorical condition to be affirmed as an almost transcendental good in itself, Shklovsky's menagerie and his inhabitation of the 'Bergsonian paradigm', as James Curtis puts it, is mediated by the world historical, the particular and the general:

Somewhere in the Crimea there is a staircase that goes down from the Alupkinsky Palace to the sea. On it sit several pairs of marble lions that betray a conscientious, though rather mechanical, manner of execution. The lions assume different poses: some are thoroughly tame, others look agitated, while still others are getting up with a roar. Though made of marble, Eisenstein arranged these lions in such a way that they seem to be leaping up and growling in indignation. That's how he released the tension that had been building up during the scene. The massacre on the Odessa steps did in fact take place. However, in Eisenstein's hands this scene represents something more than a single, isolated crime by the Tsar.<sup>25</sup>

---

24 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

25 *On Eisenstein*, 1964, op.cit.



10 frames



14 frames



17 frames

Three frames from the Odessa steps sequence, Sergei Eisenstein, *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925.



Still from Lev Kuleshev (Dir.), *Po Zakonu*, 1926

**A playlist of some of the films discussed in this pamphlet can be accessed at:**  
**[http://www.youtube.com/playlist?](http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpt2NTR68_TAuEeQh0NSICUceGWStztX9)**  
**[list=PLpt2NTR68\\_TAuEeQh0NSICUceGWStztX9](http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpt2NTR68_TAuEeQh0NSICUceGWStztX9)**

**A more substantial collection of films Viktor Shklovsky worked on, with English subtitles, can be accessed at the membership site**  
**<https://karagarga.net/>**

**This pamphlet can be downloaded as a PDF from the website**  
**<http://saladofpearls.wordpress.com/>**