

X [battle for the communist decoding of the world, as an attempt to show the truth on the screen—Film-truth.
1924

On *Kinopravda*

Kinopravda is, on the one hand, linked to the old type of newsreel. On the other hand, it is the present-day organ of the kinoks. I shall have to examine both these aspects in my report.

After the October Revolution, the Pathé and Gaumont newsreels and the newsreels of the Skobelev Committee were replaced by *Kinonedelia*, issued by the All-Russian Photo-Cinema Department.

Kinonedelia differed from the newsreels which preceded it perhaps only in that its subtitles were "Soviet." The subject matter remained the same, the same old parades and funerals. These were precisely the years when, still unfamiliar with the techniques of cinema, I began to work in cinema. By that time, despite its youth, cinema had already established unshakeable clichés, outside of which you were not allowed to work. My first experiments in assembling chance film clippings into more or less "harmonious" montage groups belong to this period.

It seemed to me then that one such experiment was a complete success, and for the first time I began to doubt the necessity of a literary connection between individual visual elements spliced together. I had to halt the experiment temporarily to work on a picture for the anniversary of the October Revolution.

This work served as the point of departure for *Kinopravda*. It was precisely during this period of experiment that several of us who had lost faith in the possibilities of "artistic" cinema and had faith in our own strength, sketched the first draft of the manifesto that later caused such commotion and brought our cinema-apostles so many unpleasant moments.

Skobelev Committee. Originally founded as an agency to assist veterans of the Russo-Japanese War, the Skobelev Committee established a Military Film Section in 1914. The Committee survived the Revolution and fell under the control of the Ministry of Education under the provisional government, producing short documentary films and becoming an agent of propaganda for the regime. It was later controlled by the Moscow City Soviet and produced short agitation films—ed.



History of the Civil War

After a long break (at the front) I again wound up in the Photo-Cinema Department and was soon thrown into newsreel. Having learned from bitter experience, I was terribly cautious in the first issues of *Kinopravda*. But as I became convinced that I had the sympathy of, if not all, then at least some viewers, I increased pressure on the material.

Alongside the support received from Alexei Gan, the constructivist, then publishing the journal *Kinofot*, I confronted ever-increasing internal and external opposition.

By the tenth issue of *Kinopravda*, feelings were running high.

The thirteenth issue of *Kinopravda* elicited the unexpected support of the press. The almost unanimous diagnosis—"insane"—after the release of the fourteenth issue, completely puzzled me. That was the most critical point in *Kinopravda's* existence.

The fourteenth *Kinopravda* not only differed significantly from most newsreels of its time, but bore no resemblance even to the preceding issues of *Kinopravda*. Friends didn't understand and shook their heads. Enemies raged. Cameramen announced that they wouldn't film for *Kinopravda*, and the censors wouldn't pass *Kinopravda* at all (or rather they passed it, but cut exactly half, which was equivalent to destroying it). I myself was perplexed, I must admit. The film's structure seemed simple and clear to me. It took me a while to learn that my critics, brought up on literature, under the force of habit, could not do without a literary connection between the different items.

Later on it proved possible to eliminate the conflict. Young people and workers' clubs gave the film a good reception. There was no need to concern ourselves with the Nepman audience—the sumptuous *Indian Tomb* received them in its embrace.

The crisis passed. But the battle continued.

Kinopravda made heroic attempts to shield the proletariat from the corrupting influence of artistic film-drama. To many, these attempts seemed ridiculous. The paltry number of prints of *Kinopravda* could serve, at most, some thousands of people, not millions. But though *Kinopravda's* role in the creation of an extensive workers' repertoire was small, its propagandistic action in the battle with the commercial movie theater repertoire proved significant.

The charge was soon repudiated. The more farsighted amongst our deprecators clutched their heads and quickly began to imitate us—some of them quite early on. But many remained hostile to our work. A small group of conservative hacks, very obtuse people, tirelessly showered praise on filmed canned goods (mostly imported from abroad). These same people support the fabrication of similar film-surrogates (of far inferior quality, it is true). Thanks to their clumsy efforts every slightly successful revolutionary undertaking is being nipped in the bud.

Shaking off these self-appointed nursemaids is not advisable. In revenge, they'll set about proving it was *their* umbrellas that saved the public from the rain, that is, from the kinoks. And when the rain stops and the artistic drama's sun is shining, they fan the public obligingly. Thanks to these critics, the resplendent image of the

Indian Tomb. *Das Indische Grabmal* (1923), a film directed by Joe May with scenario by Fritz Lang—ed.

American millionaire-hero glows within the stern heart of the Russian proletariat.

Almost all those who work in artistic cinema are either openly or covertly hostile to *Kinopravda* and the kinoks. That is completely logical since, if our viewpoint prevails, they'll either have to learn to work all over again or leave cinema completely.

Neither group represents an immediate danger to the purity of the kinoks' position. Far more dangerous are the newly formed intermediate and, as it were, conciliatory, opportunistic groups. Adopting our methods, they transfer them to the artistic drama, thereby strengthening its position.

In attacking *Kinopravda*, our detractors gloatingly point out that it's made from previously shot, and therefore "random" footage. To us this means that the newsreel is organized from bits of life into a theme, and not the reverse. This also means that *Kinopravda* doesn't order life to proceed according to a writer's scenario, but observes and records life *as it is*, and only then draws conclusions from these observations. It turns out that this is our advantage, not our shortcoming. *Kinopravda* is made with footage just as a house is made with bricks. With bricks one can make an oven, a Kremlin wall, and many other things. One can build various film-objects from footage. Just as good bricks are needed for a house, good film footage is needed to organize a film-object.

Hence the serious approach to newsreel—to that factory of film footage in which life, passing through the camera lens, does not vanish forever, leaving no trace, but does, on the contrary, leave a trace, precise and inimitable.

The moment and the manner in which we admit life into the lens and the way in which we fix the trace that remains determine the technical quality; they also determine the social and historical value of the footage and subsequently the quality of the whole object.

The thirteenth *Kinopravda*, released for Lenin's birthday, is constructed from footage demonstrating the relationship between two worlds: the capitalist world and the USSR. The footage is insufficient, but attempts generalization.

It's interesting to note that now, a year after the release of the fourteenth *Kinopravda*, orders are again coming in. As you can see, that newsreel has not grown obsolete and isn't soon likely to do so. And yet it was, in its day, the most berated issue of *Kinopravda*.

Kinopravda fifteen and sixteen concentrate footage shot over

several months—one in winter, the other in spring—and both are experimental in character.

The seventeenth *Kinopravda* was released for the opening day of the All-Russian Agricultural Exhibition. It shows not so much the exhibition itself, but rather a "circulation of the blood" effected by the idea of the agricultural exhibition. A big stride from country fields to city. One foot is in rye, among villages; the other is set down in the exhibition area.

The eighteenth *Kinopravda* is the movie camera's marathon run from the Eiffel Tower in Paris via Moscow to the far-off Nadezhdinsk factory. This run through the thick of the revolutionary way of life had a tremendous effect on sincere viewers. Don't think that I'm bragging, comrades, but several people felt compelled to tell me that they regard the day they saw the eighteenth *Kinopravda* as the turning point in their understanding of Soviet reality.

The nineteenth *Kinopravda* you shall see today. The others can't be shown; they're already worn beyond recognition.

I won't attempt to describe in words the content of the latest *Kinopravda*—it's constructed visually. Using many visual threads it connects city with country, south with north, winter with summer, peasant women with urban working women and converges at the end, upon a single family, the amazing family of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. There we see Lenin alive, and here—dead. Mastering their grief, impelled by their sense of duty, his wife and sister continue working with redoubled energy. The peasant works, and so does the urban woman, and so too, the woman film editor selecting the negative for *Kinopravda* . . .

Simultaneously with the releases of *Kinopravda*, the kinoks took over another area, which would not appear to have any immediate relationship to our goals—that of the cartoon and film-advertisement. Certain reasons impelled us to learn to handle this weapon.

In time it will come in handy.

The next kinok production is an experimental film, which we're making without a scenario, without the preliminary equivalent of a scenario. This effort is a reconnaissance operation of a very difficult and dangerous sort—which should not even be attempted when one's economically and technically unarmed. But we haven't the right to refuse the *impossible possibility* confronting us. We're trying to seize hold of reality with our bare hands.

Comrades, in the near future, perhaps even before the appear-

ance of our next work, you will be seeing on Soviet screens a series of substitutes, motion pictures made in imitation of the kinoks. In some, actors will portray real life in an appropriate setting; in others real people will act out roles according to highly refined scenarios.

These are the work of compromisers—"film Mensheviks." Their work will resemble ours as a counterfeit banknote resembles a real one, or a big mechanical doll resembles a small child.

The international conflagration of "art" is at hand. Sensing destruction, workers in theater, artists, writers, choreographers, and canaries like them are fleeing in panic. Looking for shelter, they're running to cinema. The film studio is the last stronghold of art.

Sooner or later long-haired quacks of all sorts will come running. Artistic cinema will receive a tremendous reinforcement, but it won't escape . . .

We will explode art's tower of Babel.

1924

Artistic Drama and Kino-Eye

Comrades, I am speaking on behalf of the kinok group. As most of you know, our group doesn't connect either its existence or its work with what is called "art."

We engage directly in the study of the phenomena of life that surround us. We hold the ability to show and elucidate life as it is, considerably higher than the occasionally diverting doll games that people call theater, cinema, etc.

The actual theme of today's debate, "Art and Everyday Life," interests us less than the topic, say, of "Everyday Life and the Organization of Everyday Life," since, I repeat, it's precisely in this latter area that we work and consider it proper to do so.

To see and hear life, to note its turns and turning points, to catch the crunch of the old bones of everyday existence beneath the press of the Revolution, to follow the growth of the young Soviet organism, to record and organize the individual characteristics of life's phenomena into a whole, an essence, a conclusion—this is our immediate objective.

It is an objective with tremendous and far from merely experimen-



KINO-**●**-EYE

THE WRITINGS OF DZIGA VERTOV

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