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CINEMA AND THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE:  
AESTHETICS AND POLITICS

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This paper is the preview of a more extensive study which intends to explore the development of Soviet cinema within the artistic avant-garde.

The first section begins with a definition of the avant-garde and its political implications. While the idea of an artistic avant-garde originally appeared in the writings of the French utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon, its full manifestation is a phenomenon of the 20th century. This paper focuses on the years 1910-1930. Those two decades witnessed the emergence of the historical avant-garde, followed by the birth and development of Soviet cinema.

The second section discusses the Russian avant-garde, particularly cinema, in the context of the October Revolution. The Soviet government recognized the tremendous potential of cinema as a means of communication with the mostly illiterate masses and as an invaluable propaganda tool. Therefore, cinema enjoyed a great deal of support. Filmmakers on their part supported the revolutionary ideals, but were mostly concerned with cinema as an art form. Experimentation and the search for new forms of expression occurred in all of the arts. Consequently, a great deal of cross-fertilization took place between cinema, literature, painting, music, and theater.

The third section considers how Soviet filmmakers engaged in the search for cinema's unique expressive medium--the language of cinema--and analyzes both the theories and cinematic techniques of Soviet filmmakers. It analyzes Sergei Eisenstein's idea of "montage as collision," Dziga Vertov's notion of "poetic documentary," and Vsevolod Pudovkin's use of "plastic objects." The contribution of the Russian Formalists to cinema studies is also discussed. The Formalists' work in this field is of fundamental importance because it is the basis for the most recent theories of the semiotics of cinema.

The fourth section explores the relationship between art and political ideology from a structural point of view. Given the conflicting nature and functions of art and ideology, this section discusses the consequences evident in the Soviet case, which include the demise of the avant-garde and a general loss of creativity in filmmaking for a period of approximately thirty years.

### The Avant-Garde

For a discussion of the avant-garde and its impact on the Soviet cinema of the 1920s it is necessary to follow two lines. One has to do with the nature of the movement, its inner dynamics, and the principles inherent in its ontology, the other concerns its historical development and the circumstantial causes that brought it into being. Therefore, I will start with a brief overview of Futurism, as the movement that marks the inception of the historical avant-garde and which epitomizes its features, and will proceed with an exploration of the avant-garde's origins.

Vladimir Mayakovsky synthesized the task of Futurism in the following way: "In the name of the art of the future, the Futurist art, we have started the grand destruction of all areas of beauty."<sup>1</sup> In this declaration, Mayakovsky pointed to the "revolutionary" role of the avant-garde and revealed one of the basic dichotomies inherent in its nature. He characterized Futurism as a renovating force with two inseparable functions: the positive function of creating the art of the future; and the destructive function of annihilating existing aesthetics. Renato Poggioli in his seminal work *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, identified these two functions as two moments--the "nihilistic" and the "futuristic"--in the life span of an avant-garde

movement.<sup>2</sup> Poggioli observed that those who called themselves Futurists had only crystallized in their name a feature that is common to all avant-gardes. Poggioli also pointed out that while the nihilistic moment is generally realized, the futuristic moment remains unfulfilled. According to Poggioli, "in the psychology and ideology of avant-garde art, historically considered ... the futurist manifestation represents, so to speak, a prophetic and utopian phase, the arena of agitation and preparation for the announced revolution, if not the revolution itself."<sup>3</sup>

Such was the messianic role of the many of avant-garde groups that emerged in Europe starting with the second decade of this century. Futurism, born almost simultaneously in Italy and Russia, was the first avant-garde movement in the modern sense of the word. The appearance of Futurism in the literary and artistic arena started an era of radicalism in the relationship between artists and society and brought to the fore with unprecedented virulence the essential traits of avant-gardism. With Futurism, the avant-garde's indirect challenge to the public's aesthetic sensibility became a direct and violent attack on society as a whole. The Futurists aimed at establishing a radically new relationship between art and society, a relationship that was intended to change the role of art in its social function. Therefore, their action exceeded the boundaries of aesthetics as they became politically involved. Furthermore, their strategy had much in common with political agitation. The Futurists displayed a militant stance and an aggressive attitude, relied on organized collective action, and engaged in skillful publicity campaigns making use of the most sensational techniques, from the publication of vociferous manifestoes in major newspapers to the orchestration of provocative public demonstrations.

It is impossible, and unnecessary, here to provide a comprehensive picture of Futurism in its two main national modes.<sup>4</sup> While there are technical differences between Italian and Russian Futurism in matters of aesthetics and politics, their life patterns followed a similar course. In the years immediately preceding World War I and the October Revolution, Futurism enthusiastically lived its nihilistic moment and carried out its "barbaric" mission of destruction. In Italy the Futurists "burned museums and academies," at least metaphorically, and in Russia they threw "Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, et al., overboard from the Ship of Modernity."<sup>5</sup> The "public taste" got "slapped in the face," and the values and customs of the bourgeoisie were shaken.<sup>6</sup> All that was not in step with the Futurist march was given the label of "passéist," and was disdainfully relegated to the attic of obsolete ages and civilizations. At the same time, through a great deal of ingenuity and experimentation in all art fields, the Futurists pointed the way toward the art of the future--an art inspired by the technological world in its themes and formal structures, and by new scientific theories in its world view.

The futuristic moment, however, remained unfulfilled as the avant-garde followed its natural course. The movements that followed relied in many ways on the Futurist legacy, as Futurism itself had in turn relied on the previous experience of Symbolism and Cubism but not in the classical sense of a master/disciple relationship. In the spirit of the avant-garde, new groups denied the achievements of their predecessors, went through their own nihilistic moment, and envisioned an art of the future that they considered to be a radical breakthrough in the history of civilization. The golden years of Futurism were rather short, and by the end of the 1910s we can no longer talk



of Futurism in a strict sense. In the Soviet Union, the movement failed to adjust to the requirements of the new government. In Italy, Futurism was coopted by the fascist government and turned from avant-garde into academy.

The circumstantial reasons for the death of Futurism, therefore, differ according to the national political situation. Nevertheless, there is a deeper cause these two modes share, which lies at the very basis of their being. An avant-garde movement, because of its dynamic nature, can exist only in a precarious condition, in a state of transition and perpetual change. In other words, the revolutionary spirit and the sense of mission implied in the two basic movements of "nihilism" and "futurism" are compounded by a spirit of self-sacrifice in the name of the cause.

This is the third main component of the avant-garde psychology, which Poggioli called "agonism," relating the term to its two possible etymological meanings of "struggle" and "agony." The Futurists were well aware of the self-destructive implications of their movement, and they emphasized both struggle and agony in direct statements and creative compositions depicting the artist as a willing sacrificial victim, although their "tragic" sense of life was never devoid of self-irony and ostentatious clownishness. However, what distinguished them from the previous avant-gardes was the attitude they displayed vis-à-vis their destiny. While the Decadents and Symbolists concentrated on the "agony," the Futurists focused on the "struggle" and infused their movement with a sense of vitalism and optimism. The positive energy that they released could not be contained within the art field alone and had to find another outlet. Social and political involvement provided that outlet. The Futurists were the first avant-garde that not only undertook independent political action (the Italians at one time founded the short-lived

Futurist Party), but associated themselves with established political parties. The Futurists aligned themselves with the fascist party in Italy, and with the communist party in the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup>

As a representative of extreme avant-gardism, Futurism illustrates the psychological and physical makeup of the avant-garde in a broader sense. Nihilism, futurism, and agonism were already present, if latent, throughout the 19th century in movements with an anti-traditional stance and with exponents who regarded themselves as innovators and opponents of established values. It will suffice to look at the French *poètes maudits*, or their counterparts among the Impressionist painters, to recognize the avant-garde syndrome in their artistic practice and their attitude toward society. Those social outcasts waged private wars in the isolation of their studies, but they were moved by the same impulse to destroy the old, create the new, and perish in the process that brought the Futurists to the open battlefield. And if we push our inquiry a little further back in time, we will get at the very roots of avant-gardism, firmly implanted in that great revolution of the human spirit known as Romanticism. The Romantic conception of history as a dynamic process, the belief in the potential of the future rather than the certainty of the present or the legacy of the past, the idea of permanent spiritual renewal, the rejection of classical finality both as a philosophical concept and an aesthetic manifestation, the iconoclastic spirit, and the actual involvement in political action and armed uprisings--all this constitutes the seeds of avant-gardism that matured over a century and finally blossomed in the heated arena of Futurism.

With this portrait of the avant-garde in our hands, we are now able to see its physiognomy--what it looks like, what it is made of, and what it does.

Let us now turn to the question of its identity--what it is. The answer to this question is to be found first of all in its name.

The term "avant-garde" originally belonged to the military vocabulary, and denoted a small detachment invested with the tasks of reconnaissance and guerrilla warfare. Using sabotage tactics and intelligence gathering, scouts were supposed to undermine the enemy's positions and prepare the ground for the oncoming army. Their mission was to be rapid, radical, and suicidal, both in a literal and figurative sense. Upon completion, the mission implied the dissolution of the detachment, or what remained of it. Thus the avant-garde was literally the leading edge of the army.

The concept of an avant-garde leadership eventually shifted from the military field to the ideological sphere when it was applied to a political party. It is likely that this shift occurred during the turmoil of the French Revolution. The radical leftists might have been the first political party to call themselves the leading ideological avant-garde. Parenthetically, this explains why the spelling of the term is most widely accepted in French. Thus the avant-garde shed its military uniform and donned the Frisian beret. Under this new guise, however, the old spirit remained unchanged and it was just a small step to include the artistic sphere under the avant-garde ideological umbrella.

As Donald Egbert points out, Henri de Saint-Simon, himself a former soldier, was the first to formally assign a leading role to artists in the ideal society of the future.<sup>8</sup> In Saint-Simon's *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles*, an artist defines his role in the following way:

It is we, artists, who will serve you as *avant-garde*: the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to

spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas; ... and in that way above all we exert an electric and victorious influence. We address ourselves to the imagination and to the sentiments of mankind, we should therefore always exercise the liveliest and most decisive action; and if today our role appears nil or at least very secondary, what is lacking in the arts is that which is essential to their energy and to their success, namely, a common drive and a general idea.<sup>9</sup> [Emphasis added]

Saint-Simon's socialist philosophy served as the point of departure for placing the artistic avant-garde within the political spectrum. The initial relationship between avant-garde artists and socialist ideology, although not apparent in earlier movements that resorted to a sort of mystical anarchism and disdainful disengagement, proved to be one of the most durable phenomena in the development of modern art. At the same time, it has also been the main source of confusion, controversy, and conflict among artistic and political progressive forces.

With the appearance of Marxism, Saint-Simon's romantic idea of the artists' leading role in society gradually became less viable, and a split between art and politics emerged. The political elite took the upper hand and relegated the artist to a subservient role. While recognizing the importance of art in the building of the new society, Marxist theoreticians demanded that the artist produce socially relevant and educational works in strict conformity with the needs and goals of the political leadership. As Marxism was about to become the ideology of a totalitarian regime in the Soviet Union, the political elite--the future communist party--was officially christened by Lenin as the "avant-garde of the revolutionary forces in our time."<sup>10</sup> This "avant-garde," however, did not include artists. In fact, artists did not even figure into the later propaganda slogans that presented the leading elite as a composite of "workers, soldiers, and peasants." The role the artistic avant-garde was allowed to play within the framework of Soviet society, at

least for a few years, was that of "fellow travellers."<sup>11</sup>

This role lies at the core of the dilemma that has troubled the international avant-garde since the time of the October Revolution. Despite a "biological" attachment to their socialist origins, the artistic avant-garde could not reconcile themselves to the change in their role that resulted from the development of romantic socialist theories into Marxist-Leninist ideology. A schizoid syndrome first became apparent in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and subsequently spread to the rest of the world. Over the past 60 years we have witnessed a strange phenomenon. Avant-garde artists as a rule have displayed leftist leanings, when not overt allegiance to the communist party. On the other hand, they have produced works that in the Soviet Union have been proscribed as decadent and bourgeois.

This situation had different repercussions in the USSR and the West, but one common result. It led to the demise of the avant-garde by the middle of the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> Where the Soviet Union is concerned, there is an obvious explanation--namely, that nonconformist art movements are forcefully suppressed within the framework of a totalitarian regime. This, however, does not apply to the Western avant-garde that was allowed to thrive in democratic pluralist societies. We should look for a deeper reason other than politics that is intrinsic to the function of the avant-garde and lies in the relationship between the artist and society.

The Russian avant-garde lost its revolutionary function when the concept of "revolution" became one of the many clichés of Soviet propaganda and politically progressive forces turned into a rigid, conservative, and bureaucratic machine. In such an environment, the avant-garde mission of destruction and renewal lost all meaning. The nihilistic moment was over and

new values were established. The political leadership did not need a futuristic phase leading to a new revolution, but the construction and perfection of new values that would be considered absolute truths. In the realm of art, this meant a return to some form of classicism that was incompatible with the avant-garde spirit. The Russian avant-garde, therefore, found itself out of step with the reality of the day, unneeded and unfit. What was left of it after its brutal decimation by the government died like an obsolete species.

The dilemma that aggravated Western avant-garde artists, on the other hand, existed mainly on the theoretical level. They, too, found themselves out of step with their ideal political leadership, but this did not prevent them from carrying on their revolutionary function. While Western avant-garde artists dissented with Marxist critics on matters of aesthetics and in some cases forfeited their party cards and dissociated themselves from communist policies, they maintained their original socialist leanings and continued to wage war against the bourgeois society in which they operated. However, even in the West, the avant-garde lost its impact. In spirit, the later avant-gardes retained their revolutionary character, but in practice their "subversive" action was accommodated by the multi-faceted complexity of modern democratic societies and was turned into a commodity for bourgeois consumption.

If the birth of the historical avant-garde can be identified with the appearance of Futurism, Surrealism in Europe and the Oberiu group in the Soviet Union can be considered its swan song. What followed was mainly a manifestation of epigonism that at times produced vital sparks, as in the case of the French, Italian, and German cinema of the 1960s and early 1970s, but

most often suffered from a lack of direction and coherence. In conclusion, the historical avant-garde died of an identity crisis. Its traditional enemy was "vanquished" in the Soviet Union and became a patron in the West, its ideological foundation sank in the marshes of the "gulag archipelago," and its artists were rejected by their political confreres.

### Cinema in the Avant-Garde

When the Futurists launched their first attack on "public taste," Russian cinema hardly existed. The main bulk of the films then in distribution were imported, and nationally produced films consisted mainly of sentimental melodramas patterned on foreign models.<sup>13</sup> The Futurist outpouring of avant-garde zeal in all art fields did not leave cinema undisturbed. In 1913, the Futurists produced the first avant-garde movie, *A Drama in Futurist Cabaret No. 3*, with the participation of poets and painters (noticeably there were no filmmakers among them).<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, this film has not survived and one can only guess what it looked like from the scanty recollections of some participants and contemporary observers. The movie was a rather unique episode of an experimental nature and had no commercial repercussions. Cinema continued to be a form of entertainment geared to the tastes of the middle class until the October Revolution.<sup>15</sup>

This does not mean that Russian cinema does not have a prerevolutionary history. It certainly does, complete with producers and stars, but in its early phase Russian cinema did not exist as an art form in its own right. Instead, cinema was perceived as an extension of the theater. Most films were shot as though on stage. The *mise en scène* employed theatrical props; the

actors performed according to the dramatic techniques proper to their training, with exaggerated facial mimicry and gestures to make up for the absence of sound; and camera work consisted of shooting from a fixed angle--usually the center of the "proscenium"--at eye level. The action relied heavily on the plot and the psychological tribulations of the characters, and the filmmakers made extensive use of explanatory intertitles.

Critics considered cinema to be a step child of the theater, a new form of popular entertainment like the circus, the cabaret, and fair attractions. On the popular level, cinema enjoyed a great deal of success. So much so, that in theater circles there was widespread alarm that this "barbaric" form of performance might supplant the theater entirely.<sup>16</sup> However, during the years immediately following the revolution, as cinema found its own identity, the alarm proved unwarranted. In fact, cinema developed along a line that diverged from the traditional theater. It established its peculiar aesthetics based on principles common to the avant-garde perception of art in literature and painting, and dependent on the technology of its medium. By the beginning of the 1920s, a new generation of filmmakers--Kuleshov, Vertov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko, Kozintsev and Trauberg--intuitively realized that the basic feature of cinema was its unprecedented potential for the treatment of artistic space and time, i.e., the spatial composition of shots and their arrangement in a temporal sequence. In other words, montage.

The theater actually developed avant-garde techniques that brought it closer to cinema, rather than cinema copying theater. Action was fragmented into short scenes. A revolving platform was devised to allow rapid displacement in space, or the stage was divided into spatial segments symbolizing different places. Light effects were no longer used as an



accompaniment to the action--a thunderstorm or moonlight--but were used in a structural way. For example, to focus the attention of the viewer on a particular space and/or time, half the stage would be lit and half would be left in the dark. Naturalistic set design gave way to abstract mobile structures and industrial decor. Action became predominant over speech, dialogue was reduced to a minimum, and actors turned into acrobats and mimes. Instead of a smooth development of the plot, theater relied on a montage of intensely charged moments.

Eisenstein called this technique a "montage of attractions." In his words, the attraction is "an independent and primary element in the construction of a theatrical production ... a molecular (i.e., compound) unity of the *efficiency* of the theatre and of *theatre in general*," which must be selected and assembled "all from the stand of establishing certain final thematic effects--this is montage of attractions."<sup>17</sup>

At that time, Eisenstein was working in the theater as a pupil of Meyerhold, and engaged in the production of Ostrovsky's play *Enough Simplicity in Every Wise Man*. This notion of the "montage of attractions" points to a direction that was later fully realized in his films and confirms the process of "cinematization" of the theater. Eisenstein maintained that "schooling for the *montageur* can be found in the cinema, and chiefly in the music hall and circus."<sup>18</sup> As an attraction, he inserted a short detective movie that he had made into the play he was producing. Two other stage directors who later turned into filmmakers did the same thing. In 1922, Grigory Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg used a segment of a Charlie Chaplin film in their production of Gogol's play *The Wedding*. Long before that time, however, the Futurists had introduced into their theatrical performances the radical changes that

eventually developed into the "biomechanical" productions of Meyerhold and the Constructivist theater.<sup>19</sup>

Cross-fertilization occurred not only between the theater and cinema, but was a common phenomenon within the avant-garde. Inspired by French Cubism and Italian Futurism, the Russian Futurists applied the principles of their new aesthetics to both literature and painting. In literature they set out to "destroy syntax" and to create a language based on analogical juxtapositions. They rejected conventional language based on logical semantic and grammatical connections and devised a poetic medium structured mainly on phonetic analogies. The most extreme manifestations of this new poetry were the "transrational" works of Alexei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov. In one of his manifestoes, Kruchenykh declared that "the artist is free to express himself not only in a common language (concepts), but also in a private one (the creator is an individual), as well as in a language that does not have a definite meaning (not frozen), that is transrational."<sup>20</sup> In their poetry, Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov isolated expressive sounds devoid of conventional semantic value and reassembled them through careful orchestration. The idea was that sounds will bear on each other and yield a new and unexpected meaning, i.e., they will acquire a semantic value not through a rational process, but through a purely intuitive one. Mayakovsky's poetry reflected a similar principle, although he never practiced "transreason." He used conventional words, but deformed their meaning by foregrounding their component sounds in structuring the verse line, and by making odd semantic juxtapositions. Once again, by "shifting" the meaning-making process from the rational to the intuitive level.

Painters, such as Mikhail Larionov, Natalya Goncharova, Kazimir Malevich,

and Vladimir Tatlin pursued an aesthetic search along similar lines. Many of their experiments were aimed at isolating objects from their conventional environment and reassembling them in unusual spatial relationships, or mixing elements that belonged to different semantic categories such as common everyday objects, numerals, letters, and graphic shapes. Fragmentation and recomposition of pictorial space eventually led to a greater degree of abstraction. Not only objects were taken out of their contexts, but parts and cross-sections of objects as well. Ultimately objects dissolved into essential geometrical shapes, as Malevich nihilistically stated with his famous canvas entitled "Black Square" (1915). What is more interesting is not this abstractionist stage, but the stage in which disparate elements on canvas can be seen as parallel to sound orchestration in poetry. The collision of shapes and lines created a dynamic field and generated new meanings. In cinema's terminology, this was montage.

The avant-garde spirit spread to all art fields. But while in the prerevolutionary years it inspired the most daring experiments in an iconoclastic and bellicose mood, after the revolution it found another outlet. The avant-garde tried to consolidate its prerevolutionary experience by turning it from an art of opposition into an art for the people--the new proletarian art. Futurists from the old guard were joined by new recruits and regrouped around the magazine *Lef*, founded by Mayakovsky. The Lefists were joined by radical members of another newly born movement, the Constructivists, and by artists from all fields who considered themselves part of the avant-garde. Collaborators of *Lef* included the graphic artist and photographer Alexander Rodchenko, the philologists Osip Brik and Viktor Shklovsky, the poets Kruchenykh and Boris Pasternak, the stage director

Meyerhold, the filmmakers Eisenstein and Vertov, and many others. The Lefists continued their traditional mission of destroying old art forms in the name of a new Soviet society and of producing a new art that was both aesthetically revolutionary and socially useful. The first programmatic declaration reads:

Working at strengthening the conquest of the October Revolution by strengthening leftist art, *Lef will agitate art with the ideas of the commune* and open to art the way toward tomorrow.

*Lef will agitate the masses with our art*, acquiring among them an organized force.

*Lef will confirm our theories through an effective art*, raising it to the highest degree of professional qualification.

*Lef will fight for the aesthetic construction of life*. We do not pretend to monopolize the spirit of the Revolution in art. We will bring it out by competition. We believe that by the correctness of our agitation, by force of the things that we are producing we will demonstrate the following: *we are on the true way toward the incoming future.*<sup>21</sup>

The Lefists plunged into the live magma of social life and turned into "art workers." They shunned the concept of pure art and applied their skills to poster-making, fashion and furniture design, interior and street decoration, and *agitki* (short propaganda skits) in theater and film. Consequently, for a short time the avant-garde enjoyed the support of the Soviet government, even though the support was balanced by caution and many reservations. Many leading members of *Lef* were assigned to top positions in the Department of Fine Arts (IZO), a section of the People's Committee for Education (Narkompros). On the other hand, they came under fire from members of Proletkult, an organization that claimed to be the only representative of proletarian culture and paradoxically held a rather conservative view of art. Proletkult accused the Lefists of perpetuating a prerevolutionary elitist stance and of producing works unintelligible to the masses. Attacks by Proletkult eventually weakened the position of the avant-garde and contributed

to its final demise.

Among the arts, cinema occupied a rather privileged position. In 1919, Lenin declared, "Of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important," and proceeded to sign a decree nationalizing the cinema industry.<sup>22</sup> This was a mixed blessing. Although the decree gave cinema an official status and provided it with funds and institutions, it also placed cinema under government supervision. In that same year, the commissar for education, Anatoly Lunacharsky, identified the role of Soviet cinema in his article "Tasks of the State Cinema Industry in the RSFSR."<sup>23</sup> Lunacharsky stated that cinema was expected to be spectacle in a new spirit. No longer a tool in the hands of a ruling class that obfuscated the consciousness of the people, rather an institution in the service of the proletariat. Thus, wrote Lunacharsky, cinema should be mobilized to solve the problems of educating the masses, and should not only serve as a means to reform their aesthetic taste, but also as a tool of propaganda and agitation. No effort was spared to provide filmmakers with the necessary means to carry out their task. The All-Russian Photographic and Cinematographic Section of Narkompros (VFKO) was established, and the State Film School (Gosudarstvennaia kinoshkola) was founded to train cinema workers in all aspects of production.

One of the most interesting government sponsored ventures was the creation of "agit-trains," designed to enlighten the population in the most remote parts of the Soviet Union with political lectures, demonstrations, pamphlets, and movie shows. Besides a Political Department, an Information Department run by the Soviet news agency ROSTA, a petition section, and a book shop, most agit-trains also carried a Film Department. The task of the filmmakers was to bring images of the central power based in Moscow to the

provinces, and to return to Moscow with documentary footage shot on location. Lev Kuleshov produced his first film, *On the Red Front* (1920), while working on an agit-train, Dziga Vertov also spent some time on a train collecting materials for his newsreel series, and Eduard Tissé, who later became Eisenstein's cameraman, received his training on agit-trains. The first train, which departed from Moscow in August of 1918, was called "The Lenin Mobile Military Front Train," and was specifically geared to agitational work among the troops. Trains that followed sported more colorful names--"October Revolution," "Red Cossack," and "Red East"--somewhat connected with their geographical routes. There was also an agit-steamer by the name of "Red Star" which operated along the Volga river, and whose Film Department was headed by none other than Nadezhda Krupskaja, Lenin's wife.

Agit-trains, significantly for our topic, looked very much like fair attractions. They were decorated with banners, posters, and oil frescoes produced by avant-garde artists. Kalinin, the commissar in charge of "October Revolution" reported to the Party's All-Russian Central Executive Committee and described the positive effect of this provocative display on the simple folk:

Everywhere we stopped it produced a tremendous impression and attracted an enormous number of people. People walked around it, picked out a picture, argued amongst themselves (whether they were literate or not) as to what a particular drawing depicted. We heard constant arguments round this or that carriage. In a word these trains immediately brought the local population closer to us.<sup>24</sup>

The conservative wing, however, voiced a totally different view:

The early paintings were extraordinarily unsuccessful. The carriage sides were covered with Futurist and Symbolist paintings depicting enormous monsters denouncing the Revolution. The majority of these illustrations were unintelligible and often bewildered the local population. The organizers had no experience in this field and the artists were given almost complete freedom of action. Now the sides of the trains (and steamers) are decorated with pictures

having a *realistic content*, and Futurism has been completely routed.<sup>25</sup>

The last sentence was more a manifestation of wishful thinking than a true assessment of the situation. Although realism in the arts was making more and more claims, these were still the years of the short honeymoon between the political and the artistic avant-garde. The artists marched under the red banner of communism and their march produced an unprecedented number of highly creative works.

This period yielded Vertov's films *Kino-Eye* (1924), *The Sixth Part of the World* (1926), *Stride Soviet!* (1926), *Eleventh Year* (1927), *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), and *Enthusiasm* (1930); Eisenstein's films *Strike* (1924), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1927), and *The General Line* (1929); Kuleshov's films *On the Red Front* (1920), *Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924), *Death Ray* (1925), and *By the Law* (1926); and Pudovkin's films *Chess Fever* (1925), *Mother* (1926), *The End of St. Petersburg* (1927), and *Storm Over Asia* (1928). Noteworthy films by less renowned directors include Abram Room's *Bed and Sofa* (1927) from a script by Viktor Shklovsky, and Kozintsev and Trauberg's *The Adventures of Octobrina* (1924) and *The Overcoat* (1926). The latter was made from a script by Iury Tynianov, based on Gogol's short story. During the first stages of Soviet cinema, there was no doubt in the artists' minds as to their social role and political allegiance. In intellectual circles, however, the debate focused on the specifics of the new art, namely the cinema aesthetics.

### Cinema Theory and Practice

Moved by a desire to develop the "most important" proletarian art form,

filmmakers concentrated on the search for a new expressive medium--the language of cinema. Because a theory of cinema did not exist, the filmmakers turned into theoreticians.<sup>26</sup> By the end of the 1920s, a body of writings had been produced that are still studied and discussed today. Filmmakers were joined in this endeavor by numerous exponents of the other arts--mainly writers, poets, painters, and philologists. Mayakovsky addressed the question of the new art in a number of articles and tried his hand at filmmaking.<sup>27</sup> He wrote several scripts and produced films in which he played the main role. His contribution to filmmaking, however, was marginal. Only one of the films he produced showed a great deal of originality in its conceptual structure, but unfortunately the film did not survive.<sup>28</sup>

A more substantial contribution to the development of film theory came from the Formalists. In particular, Boris Eikhenbaum, Iury Tynianov, Victor Shklovsky, and Roman Jakobson. Although the Formalists were primarily involved in the study of poetic language in verse and prose, and in problems of the structure of the poetic text, they brought their experience to bear on cinema.<sup>29</sup> Their contributions varied according to their specific areas of inquiry. Eikhenbaum's was the transformation of materials proper to a given art into expressive signs in correlation with each other; Tynianov's was the narrative structure and the semantics of rhythm; Shklovsky's was the technique of *ostranenie* ("making it strange") and the concept of "art as device;" and Jakobson's was the metaphoric and metonymic functions of language. In sum, the Formalists indicated the intrinsic structural similarity between the literary and the cinematic text. They pointed out "syntactical" features in the construction of a sequence (a film phrase), stylistic devices (cinematic metaphors), the narrative point of view (camera work), the rhythm of the



cinematic phrase (duration of shots), and the orchestration of expressive signs into a poetic system of signification. These were the first, but seminal, steps toward an understanding of the poetics of cinema that, through the intermediary stage of the Prague School of Structuralism (notable are the contributions of Jan Mukarovsky and, again, Roman Jakobson), blossomed in recent years within the field of semiotics.

In the Soviet Union, Formalist studies ended together with the liquidation of the avant-garde as a whole. It was not until the early 1970s in the warmer atmosphere of the "thaw" that Formalism made an unobtrusive comeback within the framework of the semiotics of culture centered around Iuri Lotman in Tartu and V. V. Ivanov in Moscow.<sup>30</sup> In *The Semiotics of Cinema*, Lotman perfects early Formalist ideas and adds notions from the new science of information theory. The Formalists had already approached cinema as language, but Lotman brought the concept one step further by viewing the cinematic text as a communication system logically governed by inner laws and designed to convey a message. This communication system, according to Lotman, is a model for the interpretation of the world. The message is the specific interpretation the author works into the model and the viewer extrapolates from it. In Lotman's words:

An act of communication is the basis of every narration. It presupposes: 1. A sender of information (addresser); 2. A receiver of information (addressee); 3. A channel of communication between them which may be any structure which facilitates communication--from a telephone wire to a natural language, a system of customs, art norms or the sum of cultural monuments; 4. A message (text). The classical scheme for the communicative act was provided by Roman Jakobson.<sup>31</sup>

Lotman further explains that information can be conveyed through both a codified system (a logically structured conventional language) and through "pictures" (complex units of signification, analogically structured and

without a predetermined semantic value). This observation raises the question of the way the addressee receives the message. While the message through conventional language is received and decoded rationally, "pictures" trigger an emotional response. Needless to say, the latter is proper to the realm of art.

The idea of the work of art as an interaction between the sender and the receiver was central to Eisenstein's earlier theory. Eisenstein based his observations on the studies of the contemporary psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who analyzed the human processes connected with speech. Vygotsky distinguished between "external speech," a system based on conventional signs, and "inner speech," a process of apprehending in total images. Eisenstein based his theory of cinema as a communication system on this distinction. He recognized the ability of cinema to trigger processes of "thematic-logical" thinking as well as "image-sensual" thinking, i.e., to communicate the rational through a conventional sign system and the irrational through the aesthetic arrangement of images.<sup>32</sup>

In his definition of cinema, Lotman also argues that the cinematic text by its very nature is dynamic. The text shows two opposite tendencies conflicting with each other and creating a magnetic field. One tendency is to create a recognizable image of the world--a tendency towards verisimilitude. The other tendency is to assert itself as an artifact by laying bare the devices proper to the medium. Lotman argues that these two tendencies are not peculiar to cinema, but coexist in all art objects, although one tendency or the other might predominate in a given work or a given period. However, cinema is more likely than the other arts to succumb to the trend toward verisimilitude because it is, after all, a photograph and, as such, a

photography should replace painting because it represented a "more precise and objective means for the fixation of the fact."<sup>34</sup> The natural outcome of this idea was to regard cinema as the ideal artistic medium because it added movement to the verisimilitude of still photography.

Among filmmakers, Dziga Vertov adhered most strictly to the views of the Lefists. It was no coincidence that one of his more articulate manifestoes appeared in *Lef*.<sup>35</sup> Vertov organized the group of the "Kinoki," or Cine-eyes, and set out to revolutionize the art of cinema with the documentary.<sup>36</sup> To Vertov the documentary was the only legitimate form of film in a proletarian culture because it used fragments of life "caught unaware." Eventually this concept developed into the various forms of "cinema verite" and candid camera works. Vertov produced three series of newsreels: *Kino-Nedelia* (Cine-Week), *Kino-Pravda* (Cine-Truth), *Goskinokalendar'* (State-Cinecalendar), and a number of full-length feature films.

Vertov's method was to shoot unstaged scenes from real life situations, using natural sets and ordinary people. He then combined these fragments of reality into a coherent whole by means of montage. This is precisely what made him vulnerable to criticism from the conservative wing. In fact, in his finished products, whether newsreels or feature films, the original segments of reality lost their objectivity. The aesthetic intentions of the artist and his individual interpretation of the world, heavily affected the picture. Through montage--a careful selection of shots and their arrangement in a specific sequence--Vertov created analogical connections. He also affected the perception of an event by endowing the sequence with a certain rhythm. Finally, although the shots depicted real people and places, they were "deformed" by the artist's choice of lighting, camera angle, and framing. In

supposedly literal projection of the world. Viewers tend to believe that what they are watching is reality itself rather than a model of reality. Therefore, according to Lotman, the film artist has to apply a double effort to destroy the illusion of reality and remind the viewer that the text is not a mirror of the world but a primary artifact.

The interpretation of cinema as an accurate picture of the world played a major role in the discussion of the art in the 1920s. Proletarian culture, as it was understood in those years, demanded a form of spectacle true to the reality of the day. Cinema was the ideal medium because it was able to record facts and project them onto the screen with the utmost degree of verisimilitude. It could also convey the collective spirit of proletarian society through mass scenes and epic action. Furthermore, cinema seemed to embody the nature of the proletariat as a class technologically oriented and in tune with the dynamic rhythms of industrial production.

The orientation toward art as "fact," however, did not start with cinema. The staunchest supporters of this view were the Constructivists and the Lefists. Both groups regarded art as a phenomenon strictly connected with revolutionary developments in society. In the journal *Lef*, the theory of the "literature of fact" was developed.<sup>33</sup> This view of art called for the rejection of fiction typical of a bourgeois society bent on mystification, and the creation of an objective art based on material from real life that would express the collective consciousness of the new ruling class--the proletariat. The subjective and "distorting" view of the creative individual had to be replaced by an objective representation of the world. The Lefists did not limit their inquiry to literature, and demanded that the figurative arts also adhere to this new revolutionary concept of art. They concluded that

sum, Vertov's documentaries were ultimately systems of signifying signs in which the shots themselves carried a meaning that exceeded their literal representation, and their structuring responded to the requirements of inner aesthetic laws. Thus, Vertov's documentaries were not a photograph of reality but an abstract model. This dichotomy in the concept of the film of fact was implicitly recognized by Vertov. Although he defended his objective method, he called his movies "poetic documentaries" and drew parallels between them and the poetry of the Futurists.<sup>37</sup>

The aesthetic potential of cinema, rooted in the internal montage of the shot and in the montage between shots, at times materializes regardless of the author's intentions. An example is offered by the films of another documentarist, Esther Shub. Her work differed from Vertov's inasmuch as she was primarily a film editor rather than a filmmaker, and she did not pretend to create a new theory of film. However, in her practical work Shub made the same discovery. In 1926, she was commissioned to make a documentary for the 10th anniversary of the February Revolution entitled *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*.<sup>38</sup> Without shooting a single foot of new film, partly because of a chronic shortage of film stock, Shub produced a full-length movie by splicing together pieces of existing material. She retrieved old footage of Russian and foreign prerevolutionary newsreels<sup>39</sup> and discovered a wealth of still unseen pictures in the personal archive of Nicholas II. Shub then selected the segments that she needed to compose her film. Although the material on hand was "objective," she unwittingly followed the laws of montage in the editing process. For example, to convey the idea of two different types of relationship to the land, Shub juxtaposed shots of a peasant bent over his plow with a landlord tapping the ground with his walking stick. These two

shots did not originally have any "real" relationship, having been made at different times in different places. However, in the aesthetic system of Shub's film, the contrasting shots became abstract signifiers of an idea.

The inner law of filmmaking was eventually raised by Eisenstein to a more sophisticated level of complexity. But the first filmmaker to give it a theoretical foundation was Lev Kuleshov, who pointed out how cinematic montage creates a spatial, temporal, and emotional reality independent of the concrete world.<sup>40</sup> Kuleshov demonstrated this point by conducting three experiments that became famous examples in the history of film theory. In the first experiment, a man and a woman meet on a Moscow street and, in the course of their stroll, they pass ... the White House. The last shot was taken from American film footage and allowed Kuleshov to deform real spatial contiguity in order to create an imaginary space. After this sequence was completed, Kuleshov realized that he needed an additional shot of a handshake between the two characters upon meeting. The actors involved in the experiment were no longer available, and the director resorted to a cinematic "trick." Kuleshov shot a close-up of a handshake using different actors and inserted the shot into the sequence. By doing this, Kuleshov created an example of fictitious temporal continuity. The second experiment involved the montage of a human body made of parts taken from different persons. The entire figure was not shown, but the juxtaposition of head, legs, and arms in a sequence of shots created the illusion of a whole person. The third experiment demonstrated how an emotional state is expressed by creating the appropriate context. An actor impersonating a prisoner was asked to express a joyful state of mind. This image was juxtaposed with the shot of a steaming bowl of soup. Then, that same image of the prisoner was juxtaposed with an exterior shot of trees,

birds, and the sun (the prisoner is supposedly thinking of taking a walk). Obviously, the prisoner's joyful feeling is not supposed to be the same in these two scenes, and the viewer perceives the different implications of his joy. And yet, the actor's expression did not change.

The influence of this last experiment is particularly noticeable in the theory and practice of Vsevolod Pudovkin, a former pupil of Kuleshov.<sup>41</sup> Essential to Pudovkin's theory of film is the use of "plastic objects" as expressive elements that in a given context function as abstract images of emotion. Two examples from Pudovkin's most celebrated film, *Mother* (1926), illustrate this point. The first part of the film presents the heroine as an abused and submissive housewife who is the victim of a boorish alcoholic husband. In one scene, the drunken husband stands on a stool and tries to take down a clock hanging on the wall in order to trade it for booze. Judging from the bareness of the room, the clock is all that is left of the family possessions. Eventually, the husband loses his footing and crashes to the floor together with the clock. The wife observes the action from a low angle, as she washes the floor on her hands and knees. The clock's shattered pieces roll across the frame and come to a stop in front of her. She remains almost motionless and her facial expression hardly betrays her emotions. The camera lingers on the broken clock and the woman gazing at it. The psychological focus is on the "plastic object," which becomes the carrier of the implied emotional message--a broken family, and the heroine's state of hopelessness and dejection. Similarly, after the husband's death the heroine sits motionless and expressionless beside his bier. The camera pans from her stony face along the bare walls to the sink and to a close up on drops of water monotonously dribbling from the tap. Once more, the heroine's state of

mind--dullness of feelings--is transferred to a contiguous object that becomes emotionally charged.

In addition to his concern with problems of montage within the shot, Pudovkin also turned his attention to montage as editing. Following in Kuleshov's steps, he reaffirmed the potential of cinema to create illusions. Pudovkin called his editing method "montage as linkage," having in mind a process parallel to the syntactical linkage of building blocks in a literary narrative form. To this day, Pudovkin's method is considered to be the foundation of classical narrative cinema. Its function was to create spatial and temporal continuity and causal relationships. In other words, Pudovkin's method was primarily designed to advance the plot rather than generate a superstructural meaning. The latter was the domain of Eisenstein, who opposed Pudovkin's idea of "montage as linkage" with his much more avant-garde notion of "montage as collision."<sup>42</sup>

Eventually all the theories, experiments, and discussions that shaped the first specimens of Soviet cinema came to full fruition in the work of Eisenstein. Eisenstein made his first theoretical statement in 1923 with his declaration on the "Montage of Attractions," and until the mid-1940s he never stopped renewing and perfecting his concept and definition of cinema. Trying to sum up his writings is like trying to condense an encyclopedia into a notebook. However, a few basic notions and examples can be given.<sup>43</sup>

Eisenstein deconstructed the natural world into signs that he called "montage cells." He used this term to refer to the shot as a composite organism made up of two elements: "pro-filmic" elements, including objects and people in relation to each other; and "filmic" elements, including direction of motion, quality of lighting, graphic compositional patterns, and sound



tracks. The composition of montage cells was based on their differentiation in modality--vertical versus horizontal motion, soft versus sharp light, and straight versus curved lines--in order to bring about the collision of their distinctive features. Eisenstein conceived the internal montage of the cells as an integral part of the overall montage among the cells. The film as a whole was designed to generate associations by collision on different structural levels--the levels of people and objects, action, and modalities. Eisenstein later called the method of achieving this multilevel structure "vertical montage." A higher degree of complexity was reached with the addition of sound in *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and color in *Ivan the Terrible, Part II* (1944-46).<sup>44</sup> The final result of this net of collisions was a comprehensive synthesis, in other words the message.

Eisenstein's dynamic view of a work of art is parallel to the Marxist dialectical philosophical system. In his essay entitled "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form," Eisenstein makes it explicit:

'According to Marx and Engels the dialectic system is only the conscious reproduction of the dialectic course (substance) of the external events of the world' (Razumovsky, *Theory of Historical Materialism*). Thus, the projection of the dialectic system of things into the brain, *into creating abstractly, into the process of thinking* yields: dialectic methods of thinking; dialectic materialism--PHILOSOPHY. And also: the projection of the same system of things, *while creating concretely, while giving form*, yields: ART. The foundation for this philosophy is a dynamic concept of things: Being, as a constant evolution from the interaction of two contradictory opposites. Synthesis, arising from the opposition between thesis and antithesis .... In the realm of art this dialectic principle of dynamics is embodied in CONFLICT as the fundamental principle for the existence of every art work and art form .... Here we shall consider the general problem of art in the specific example of its highest form--film. Shot and montage are the basic elements of cinema. Montage has been established by the Soviet film as the nerve of cinema .... Montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots--shots even opposite to one another: the 'dramatic principle.'<sup>45</sup>

Thus Eisenstein found an ideological justification for his avant-garde art.

A practical example of "montage as collision" can be found in Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin*. We will analyze a differentiation of modalities in the use of graphic patterns, namely opposition of curved and straight lines.<sup>46</sup> Throughout the film, curved shapes are associated with people, specifically sailors and citizens of Odessa. Straight lines are associated with the military apparatus, and by extension with the autocratic political structure. In the mass scenes, the graphic pattern of curved lines created by the spontaneous association of people suggests an organic and dynamic structure in contrast to the rigid military ranks connoting a stiff and artificial structure. Therefore, there is a dialectic opposition of dynamism and stasis. This opposition occurs both within a shot and between shots.

In the opening scene, the sailors sleep in their hammocks and the frame is filled with the chaotic crisscrossing of the hammocks' curved lines. This pattern is suddenly broken by the appearance of a petty officer, whose stiff figure contrasts with the graceful curves of the hammocks. The contrast is accentuated by color. The officer's uniform is black while the sailors are either barechested or wearing white T-shirts. In the sequence preceding the mutiny, the crew gathers on the quarterdeck where the straight lines constitute the dominant pattern. The camera looks down from the gun turret, so that the frame in the foreground is occupied by the straight lines of the cannons pointing away from the camera and toward the prow of the ship. In the background and on a lower plane, the rigid ranks of the sailors and officers on each side of the deck reiterate the straight parallel lines of the cannons. In the next sequence, this pattern of linear stiffness is first contrasted with a circular cluster of sailors waiting under a tarpaulin to be executed,

and finally destroyed by the chaotic swirling motion of the mutiny.

The people of Odessa, like the sailors, are introduced by the curved line motif. The people cross curved bridges and pass under curved archways on their way to the pier. They finally gather on a long curved pier that extends into the sea like an arm eager to embrace the mutinous ship. The camera emphasizes the shape of the pier by panning with a circular movement from the lower left to the upper right corner of the frame. Another set of curved lines and undulating movements connected with the people of Odessa appears when the sailboats head for the *Potemkin* with food and water supplies.

The climax of the film--the Odessa steps scene--presents a dramatic example of Eisenstein's conflict of lines. Recurring shots show three orders of straight lines that are interwoven in a net pattern. The soldiers' figures (at times just their boots) provide vertical lines, while the rifles and steps provide horizontal and, when shot from a side angle, diagonal lines. The pattern's rigidity is emphasized by the rhythmic and mechanical pace of the cossacks' ranks. By contrast, the chaotic running of the panicking crowd breaks both the stiffness of the straight lines and the rhythm of the march. This process culminates in the image of a stroller rolling down the steps. Eisenstein indicated that he used the stroller image to underline the transition from one rhythmic pattern to another. "The stepping descent passes into a rolling descent," he said.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, but on the graphic plane, the wheel of the stroller bouncing down the steps emphasizes the conflict of straight and curved lines.

The two modalities under discussion belong to two opposite paradigms--curved lines/spontaneity/dynamism/people versus straight lines/rigidity/oppression/authority. When these paradigms are juxtaposed as in the example

above, they become sharply distinct by opposition and clash with each other. However, the dialectic collision will eventually generate a synthesis--the merging of curved and straight lines, and by extension, of people and authority. The merger is accomplished in the last sequence of the film when the *Potemkin* is about to engage in battle with an oncoming squadron. The sailors of the *Potemkin* are now in control of the ship and the cannons, but they feel ill at ease in that position and go through a night of anxiety and meditation. Is it possible that in order to achieve social justice the people have to resort to the same weapons that were previously used as instruments of oppression? The disturbing paradox of this realization is reinforced by the fact that the approaching enemy--the sailors of the squadron--are also "people," and consequently, victims of the system. Only a synthesis of the two conflicting elements can provide a solution to this paradox.

Graphically, Eisenstein generates the synthesis by showing the side shot of a cannon in close up, with the straight line of its barrel cutting the frame horizontally. Subsequently, the turret slowly rotates and the cannon turns to face the camera. A front shot of the cannon then fills the frame, the straight line of the barrel transformed into the circle of its muzzle. The conclusion of this dialectical process on the narrative plane is realized when the squadron welcomes the *Potemkin* into its ranks and the confrontation is peacefully resolved. The synthesis occurs through a psychological quantum leap on the part of the viewer into a higher system of values. The film suggests a transition from a political system based on the *opposition* between people and authority to a new system predicated on the *identity* of people with authority. Once in control of the guns, the sailors no longer need to use them because the principle of love and brotherhood has replaced the principle

of violence. The film ends with an apotheosis of peace and friendship, with the decks and turrets of the ships submerged in a sea of happy sailors cheering each other.

From a political point of view, Eisenstein's conclusion might seem rather simplistic to today's viewers. Nevertheless, the affective quality of Eisenstein's filmmaking still strikes an emotional chord. Who does not feel like jumping into the frame and embracing the first sailor on hand? This emotional response is not accidental, but has been calculated and meticulously planned by the filmmaker. Eisenstein worked out an aesthetic system capable of communicating through an "image-sensual" apprehending process. He also demonstrated that the affective element resides in the medium rather than the story or, to turn this concept upside down, that the story is only a pretext for the aesthetic communication of the message.<sup>48</sup>

#### Art and Politics

Although Russian avant-garde filmmakers fulfilled their self-imposed task of representing the values of the October Revolution, they ultimately did not succeed in blending their actions with government policies. The reason for their failure is to be found not so much in the discrepancies of their goals as in an inner discrepancy between art and politics.

Taking a semiotic approach, let us consider the art object--in this case the cinematic text--as a model for the interpretation of the world. The artist creates a system of signification by carefully structuring a complex of signs and endowing it with a message. He then offers his model to the viewer and engages him in a dynamic exchange. It is up to the artist to encode his

message into the aesthetic fabric of the text so that it would be received by the viewer. It is up to the viewer to decode the text and to extrapolate from it the essence of the message. This exchange cannot occur without the willing and active participation of the viewer. With his participation the sensitive viewer cannot fail to receive and retain the message.

Therefore, the crucial element in this process is the nature of the message itself. A message encoded in a poetic text is a composite signifier with a high degree of complexity. The text is not structured according to a logical linking of concepts that leads to a rational conclusion, but according to an orchestration of "images" bearing analogical correspondences.<sup>49</sup> The poetic message is therefore ambiguous, and is not imposed on the viewer as a clear-cut and categorical statement. The message tends to mix logical categories and generate disturbing paradoxes. The viewer is able to decode it mainly on the emotional-intuitive level or, to use Eisenstein's terminology, to apprehend it through an "image-sensual" thinking process. Through this process, the message strikes an emotional chord and impresses itself on the human psyche. The result is the awareness of a newly-born perception--an undefined feeling that, regardless of the thematic content of the message, broadens the viewer's consciousness and elevates it to a higher sphere of values. The viewer might or might not agree with the specifics of a given theme. Nevertheless, the viewer will be enriched by the affective power of the message. Parenthetically, this result supports the avant-garde argument that there are no "moral" or "immoral" themes because any theme is viable art material, and that, by extension, art by its very nature cannot be immoral; it is the distortion and exploitation of art that is immoral.

In light of structural studies in the general field of human sciences,

not only art but political ideology as well can be approached as a model for the interpretation of the world.<sup>50</sup> Like art, political ideology is a system of representation intended to convey information. It presupposes an addresser, a channel of communication, a message, and an addressee. However, the difference lies in the praxis which affects the nature of the message. Here the praxis involves not an individual artist but a collegial institution--the political party. This fact removes the element of spontaneity inherent in individual creation and replaces it with a predetermined program. Furthermore, communication occurs mainly through the mass media and the message is received by the addressee on a different level of consciousness. The mass media are designed to convey a message with the utmost clarity, i.e., to avoid ambiguity. Therefore, the text is structured according to the distinction of logical categories and to principles of causality. The result is not an elusive net of analogies among complex signs without a predetermined semantic value, but a sequence of rational connections among conventional signs. It follows that such a text, unlike the poetic text, is secondary to the message. In other words, while in art the message has its genesis within the poetic text, and therefore the text is the primary entity, in a rational form of communication the message already exists as a concept and is conveyed by a codified system. The message is received by the addressee on the rational rather than the emotional level, and decoded through a logical thinking process. This form of communication does not engage addresser and addressee in a dynamic interaction. Because the addressee apprehends the message by means of a conventional code, he is deprived of his own individual creative act. Reception becomes automatized and rests on the more superficial levels of consciousness. Furthermore, what is received is

the content of the message, i.e., a concept that exists in an abstract dimension and does not have any physical connections with the addressee. This is a fundamental point for understanding the different kinds of relationships between message and addressee in these two systems of communication.

It is common knowledge by now that the poetic text possesses its own ontology and is perceived "as such."<sup>51</sup> To take this notion a step further, the poetic text exists in a physical dimension and its impact on the addressee is first of all physical. Given the identity of poetic text and poetic message, it follows that the poetic message has a concrete, physical relationship with the addressee. The addressee makes contact with the art object first through physical sensations--visual, aural, tactile--and only at a subsequent stage internalizes and processes them psychologically. In his writings on filmmaking, Eisenstein emphasized the importance of the physical element in the process of aesthetic communication. He analyzed how patterns of light or movement operate on various centers of the brain, and considered the reactions of the nervous system when constructing his films.<sup>52</sup> Thus, by dint of its primary nature, the poetic text is able to enter into a physical bond with the addressee. The message is thereby incorporated into the individual's consciousness.

More poetically, one can say that art "gets to you at gut level." Conversely the gut level reaction does not occur in the absence of art, i.e., when the text is secondary to the message. In this situation the message lies outside the physical field of interaction, and even when rationally accepted it is not physically integrated. It follows that the addressee plays an active role when confronted with a poetic text and a passive role when confronted with a non-poetic text. In the latter case, the addressee tends to



accept the message uncritically with an automatic response. The message therefore acquires the characteristics of an absolute truth.

In light of the discrepancy between the systems of communication used in art and in politics, we will return to the Russian avant-garde and its uneasy relationship with the Soviet authorities. It was the policy of the Soviet government to indoctrinate the masses with Marxist-Leninist ideology in the quickest and most expeditious manner. The message had to be rationally comprehensible and unambiguous so that it would be received as a categorical statement. The political ideology had to be presented not as a model for interpretation, but as a model for literal implementation. To this end, in the spirit of totalitarianism the government sought to employ both the mass media and the arts. However, while the mass media were fit for the task, the arts were not. The poetic message, even when thematically inspired by political ideology, remained ambiguous, i.e., connotative rather than denotative. This intrinsically positive feature was seen by the government as a flaw. Ambiguity was construed as an indulgence in art for art's sake, as social disengagement, and finally as a failure to serve the people's cause. Witness to this were later charges of "formalism" that resulted in the liquidation of the avant-garde through ostracism, imprisonment, or execution.

Eventually, art conformed to the demands of the Soviet government, but in the process, it lost its integrity. Soviet art shifted from a poetic to a rational form of communication. That form was no longer art. What was camouflaged as Socialist Realist "art" was in fact a communication system that presented the public with a logically structured text and an inescapable conclusion, and revealed the "truth" in the form of a categorical statement. In order to make this statement palatable, Socialist Realist "artists" had to

embellish it and present it to the public in the form of a myth. Because the dismal reality of the day or the already controversial revolutionary events of the past did not provide viable material, they placed the myth in the future. The communist utopia became an all-pervasive theme. However, without artistic inspiration, the myth never attained the classic grandeur to which it aspired.

The focus of this discussion is not the creation of the myth, per se, which is an intrinsic function of art (true art), but the representation of myth as reality. In Lotman's analysis of the nature of cinema, as we have seen, he points out that every art object shows two opposite and conflicting tendencies. One tendency is toward verisimilitude or the representation of a recognizable image of the world. The other tendency is toward self-reflexivity or the revelation of the artifact. Ideally, Lotman argues, sensitive viewers must be aware of the artificiality of the text, and at the same time must be able to experience real emotions as if they were involved in real-life situations. Alexander Pushkin, speaking about literature, put this experience into a few masterfully chosen words when he said: "I shed tears over an imaginary event."<sup>53</sup> It follows that when the text lacks self-reflexivity and the tendency toward verisimilitude becomes the only dimension, the function of art is defeated. The result is a camouflaged text and a deceitful message.

The falsification of art, while hindering human growth and being counterproductive to the healthy development of a nation in the long run, might efficiently serve immediate political goals.<sup>54</sup> The poetic text, because of its affective power, is able to generate a new awareness and give meaning to the message. Conversely, the tautological repetition of axioms, even in the form of a myth, soon ceases to carry information and becomes meaningless.

The message turns into a dogma, accepted or rejected once and for all. In the interests of building communism, the Soviet government required the unconditional acceptance of dogma by the population. By and large, through persuasion and coercion the government succeeded in its task and the masses were indoctrinated.<sup>55</sup> The few "heretics" who rejected the dogma were eliminated.<sup>56</sup>

But were they? Under the banner of Socialist Realism, for roughly three decades Soviet "art" fulfilled its propaganda task. On the surface the dogma reigned undisturbed. However, toward the end of the 1950s that grayish layer of incrustation was suddenly, although not completely, shattered by a surge of creativity in all the arts. Such a phenomenon did not happen in a vacuum. While it is true that it was brought about by the fresh energies of a new generation and a change in the political leadership, it would not have been possible without the foundation of a cultural heritage. Creativity blossomed from the seeds of "heresy"--those everlasting values that art had earlier implanted in the consciousness of the nation.

In the past 20 years, the Soviet government has granted in practice a relatively higher degree of autonomy to the arts without changing its basic policy. A few "heretics" are now tolerated within the official cultural establishment, provided that their message does not deviate substantially from official dogma and that activities are kept under control.<sup>57</sup> This pragmatic approach is mainly a response to popular demand. In general, the Soviet public now shuns the overcooked concoctions of Socialist Realism and demands more originality, inventiveness, and honesty. The arts have obviously benefited from this trend, as illustrated by the overall improvement in the quality of filmmaking and the recent production of a few first class films.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, the Soviet people will undoubtedly benefit from an increased exposure to art, and in the long run so will the nation.

In conclusion, without taking Saint-Simon's words to the letter we can in principle agree with his idea that it is the artists who can best serve society "as avant-garde" because they address themselves "to the imagination and to the sentiments of mankind" and in that way they "exert an electric and victorious influence."

## Notes

1. V. Mayakovsky, "Teatr, kinematograf, futurizm," *Kine-zhurnal*, July 23, 1913.
2. R. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).
3. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 69.
4. See Anna Lawton, "Russian and Italian Futurist Manifestoes," *Slavic and East European Journal* 20, no. 4 (1976), pp. 405-420. For a comprehensive picture of Russian Futurism, see Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).
5. In this and the following sentence, the quotations are loosely drawn from various manifestoes. Italian manifestoes are to be found in R. W. Flint (ed.), *Marinetti, Selected Writings* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972). Russian manifestoes are from V. Markov (ed.), *Manifesty i programmy zusskikh futuristov* (Munich: Fink Verlag, 1967).
6. Taken from the first manifesto of the Cubo-Futurists, signed by D. Burliuk, A. Kruchenykh, V. Mayakovsky, and V. Khlebnikov, "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste," 1912.
7. The contradiction in the color of the political allegiance in Italy is only apparent. The Futurists came into contact with Mussolini in the early 1910s, when he was an admirer of Karl Marx and the editor of the official socialist newspaper *Avanti!* During and immediately after World War I, the Futurists shared with the newly-born fascist party revolutionary aspirations and a fascination for militant action.
8. Egbert, "The Idea of the Avant-Garde in Art and Politics," *The American Historical Review* 73 (December 1967), pp. 339-366.
9. Saint-Simon, *Opinions litteraires, philosophiques et industrielles*, cited in Egbert, "The Idea of the Avant-Garde," p. 343.
10. V. I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, 1902.
11. The term "fellow travellers" was first used by Trotsky with reference to a group of writers, the Seapion Brothers. It soon extended to all artists who, while supporting the Revolution, were engaged in formal experimentation.
12. This does not include the American avant-garde, that started taking shape exactly at that time. However its development from the mid-1930s on followed a similar path.
13. Actually, there were Russian film enterprises in the prerevolutionary years which blossomed with the beginning of World War I, when foreign competition was eliminated. Today's historians consider early Russian cinema

as a preparatory phase for the emergence of Soviet film. See Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of Russian and Soviet Film* (Collier Books, 1973).

14. The film was created by N. Goncharova and M. Larionov, who also played the main roles. Other participants were V. Mayakovsky, the Burluik brothers, V. Shershenevich, and B. Lavrenev.

15. However, another experiment worthy of note was Meyerhold's film *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1915. This film also has been lost.

16. On the debates surrounding the emergence of cinema, see Tamara Selezneva, *Kinomysl' 1920-kh godov* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1972).

17. Originally published in *Lef*, 1923, no. 3, trans. in Jay Leyda (ed.), *Film Sense* (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1975), pp. 231-32.

18. *Lef*, 1923, no. 3, trans. in Leyda, *Film Sense*, pp. 231-232.

19. Meyerhold's long-lasting association with the Futurists started in 1913, when he directed the tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovsky*, whose protagonist was both the author and the main actor.

20. "Declaration of the Word as Such," 1913, trans. in Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 130-131.

21. *Lef*, 1923, no. 1, pp. 6-7.

22. Quoted in G. M. Boltiansky (ed.), *Lenin i kino* (Moscow, 1925), pp. 16-17.

23. *Kinematograf* (Moscow: Gosizdatel'stvo, 1919).

24. V. Karpinsky (ed.), *Agitparpoezda V.C.I.K. Ikh istoria, apparat, metody i formy raboty. Sbornik statei* (Moscow, 1920), p. 61. Quoted in Richard Taylor, "Agitation, Propaganda, and the Cinema: The Search for New Solutions, 1917-21," in Nils Ake Nilsson (ed.), *Art, Society, Revolution* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1979), p. 251.

25. Quoted in Taylor, "Agitation, Propaganda and the Cinema," p. 251.

26. Some ideas and techniques from the West, however, were well known in Russia. For example, Louis Delluc's notion of "photogeny," Griffith's methods of montage, and principles of expressionistic *mise en scene* applied to the film by K. Mayer and T. Janovitz, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

27. In these early articles Mayakovsky discusses cinema in relation to theater. See V. Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii 1* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1955), pp. 275-285.

28. *Zakovannaia fil'moi*, 1918, starring Lili Brik in the main role. The central motif was the same cinematic trick used by Woody Allen in *The Purple*

Rose of Cairo. On Mayakovsky and film see A. Ripellino, *Maiakovskii e il teatro russo d'avanguardia* (Turin, Einaudi, 1959); and Maks Polianovskii, *Kino-zvezda Volodia Maiakovskii* (Holyoke: New England, 1983).

29. Many Formalist articles on cinema have been reprinted in individual or collective volumes. The first collection was B. Eikhenbaum (ed.), *Poetika kino* (Moscow, Leningrad: Kinopechat, 1927), trans. in Herbert Eagle, *Russian Formalist Film Theory*, (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Materials, 1981). One should also mention that V. Shklovsky and Iu. Tynianov contributed to the cinema as screenwriters.

30. See in particular, Iu. Lotman, *Semiotika kino i voprosy kinoestetiki* (Tallin, 1973); translated by N. Suino, *Semiotics of Cinema* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1976); V. V. Ivanov, *Ocherki po istorii semiotiki v SSSR* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976); and V. V. Ivanov, "The Categories and Functions of Film Language," trans. by Roberta Reeder in *Film Criticism* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1983), pp. 3-19. In the West similar work has been done by Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour, Peter Wollen and others.

31. Lotman, *The Semiotics of Cinema*, p. 36. The reference to Roman Jakobson is to his "Linguistics and Poetics," in T. Sebeck (ed.), *Style in Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 353.

32. See Eagle, *Russian Formalist Film Theory*, p. 30.

33. A number of articles were collected in N. F. Chuzhak (ed.), *Literatura fakta* (Moscow: Federatsiia, 1929).

34. *Novyi Lef*, no. 11-12 (1927), p. 1.

35. "Kinoki. Perevorot," *Lef*, 1923, no. 3.

36. The composite word *kinoki* is derived from *kino* (cine) and *oko* (archaic form for eye). Vertov called his method *kino-glaz*, which also means cine-eye (*glaz* being the modern word for eye).

37. See Anna Lawton, "Dziga Vertov: A Futurist with a Movie Camera," *Film Studies Annual* (Pleasantville: Redgrave, 1977), pp. 65-73; "Rhythmic Montage in the Films of Dziga Vertov: A Poetic Use of the Language of Cinema," *Pacific Coast Philology* 13 (October 1978), pp. 44-50; Annette Michelson, "The Man With a Movie Camera: From Magician to Epistemologist," *Artforum* 10, no. 7 (1972), pp. 60-72; and Vlada Petric, *Constructivism in Film*, to be released by Cambridge University Press.

38. Esther Shub then made a second film for the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution entitled *The Great Way*.

39. Foreign newsreels were produced by French firms such as Pathé and Eclair, as well as American firms.

40. Kuleshov summarized his early articles and practical experiments in *Iskusstvo kino* [The art of cinema], 1929. Part of this book is translated in

Ronald Levaco (ed.), *Kuleshov on Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

41. Pudovkin enrolled in Kuleshov's workshop at the State Film School in 1919.

42. This was the core of a theoretical dispute that divided the two directors for many years. However, toward the end of the 1920s Pudovkin, while clinging to his own theory, recognized the merit of Eisenstein's view and even applied some of the principles of "montage as collision" in his film *Storm Over Asia*, 1928.

43. The concept of collision was already implicit in the idea of the "montage of attractions," but its original foundation can be found in theories of structural linguistics. As those theories developed, the semioticians of culture patterned their idea of art as a communication systems on the basic Saussurian notion of binary sets of distinctive phonemic features in a given language. Lotman argues that as phonemes possess paradigms of distinctive features (voiced/voiceless, plosive/non-plosive, front/back, and so forth) so do the basic units of signification in film. Therefore, meaning arises from opposition, or a collision of features pertaining to two opposite paradigms.

44. See S. Eisenstein, "Vertikalnyi montazh," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 9 (1940). Eisenstein's notes on the use of sound in *Alexander Nevsky* as well as his views on color are to be found in Leyda (ed.), *Film Sense*.

45. Jay Leyda (ed.), *Film Form* (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949), pp. 45-49.

46. A similar graphic opposition has been noted by Eisenstein and recently by Herbert Eagle. See Eisenstein, *Film Form*, pp. 115-120; and Eagle, "Visual Patterning and Meaning in Eisenstein's Early Films," in K. Brostrom (ed.), *Russian Literature and American Critics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), pp. 331-45. Here I carry the analysis of a graphic conflict to its ultimate result, the synthesis of two opposite elements.

47. "Methods of Montage," *Film Form*, p. 74.

48. The Formalists were the first to make this distinction clear by using the terms *fabula* for the story line and *siuzhet* for the interaction of the structural devices that turn the story into a system of signification.

49. I am not referring to rhetorical images, but to mental images. C. S. Pierce calls these images "representations," or "triadic signs."

50. Without mentioning specific works, I am loosely referring to the studies of Claude Levi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, and others. These studies applied the structural method to various spheres of human activity including linguistics, anthropology, economics, psychology, and history.

51. The Futurists were the first to use this expression and to call the



poetic word "the word as such."

52. See Herbert Eagle, "Visual Patterning and Meaning in Eisenstein's Early Films," in K. Brostrom (ed.), *Russian Literature and American Critics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), pp. 331-346.

53. Iu. Lotman, *Semiotics of Cinema*, p. 17.

54. While we are limiting the discussion to the falsification of art for political purposes typical of a totalitarian regime, similar exploitations of art for commercial reasons occurring in the West should not be overlooked.

55. This statement should be qualified by the fact that the picture is much more complex, especially where peasants and manual labor workers are involved.

56. Evgeni Zamyatin created an artful picture of the role of the "heretic" in a conformist society both in his essay "On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters," and his novels *The Islanders* and *We*. Also see Abram Tertz, *On Socialist Realism*; and Dostoevsky's views on both political and religious dogmatism, particularly in "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," and *Notes From the Underground*.

57. Those who get out of control, however, are still disposed of expeditiously. For example, the film director A. Tarkovsky and the stage director Iu. Lyubimov were both stripped of their Soviet citizenship less than two years ago.

58. First among the examples of first class films are *Oblomov*, directed by N. Mikhalkov in 1979, and *Stalker*, directed by A. Tarkovsky in 1980. The latter, a work of stunning beauty, is particularly relevant because it focuses on the visionary/artist as spiritual leader. More recently, see *Scarecrow*, directed by R. Bykov in 1983 and *Come and See*, directed by E. Klimov in 1985. Also noteworthy are two films made some 20 years ago and recently released, *Road Test* and *My Friend Ivan Lapzhin*, both directed by A. German.