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Revolutionary Theory/ Prerevolutionary Melodrama

Jane Gaines

The following discussion assumes a triangular relationship that may not be immediately familiar to scholars. At one point is the great silent film director of the prerevolutionary period in Russian cinema, Evgenii Bauer (1886–1917), at another, the American David Wark Griffith (1875–1948), and at the third, Russian theorist/filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948). I think of the points of this imaginary triangle as equidistant and each of the three directors as mediating between the other two.

It is only recently that Bauer has come to occupy this place in film history, and what I want to suggest by this triangle is that such a major addition has changed the theoretical relationships that we have been navigating by in film theory for over fifty years. It is not just that the masterpieces of the 1908 to 1919 period in Russia were suddenly available in international retrospectives.[1] These retrospectives have unveiled for scholars the very cinema that epitomizes bourgeois cinema in the silent period. Here, at last, is the cinema that embodied the decadent sensibility that the new Soviet avant-gardists were rebelling against in the 1920s, the bourgeois cinema against which Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and Lev Kuleshov defined themselves. Because of the international significance of the Soviet experiments, this body of prerevolutionary Russian work has an originary significance for avant-garde film movements around the world. We can now view that corrupt and barren aesthetic that was deemed incapable of carrying the revolutionary message to the Soviet masses, the aesthetic that had to be transformed beyond recognition.

This rediscovery then has relevance for contemporary film theory especially in relation to its most persistent paradigm: bourgeois cinema versus independent cinema (the dominant monolith and its "fighting" avant-garde), now occupied by classical American cinema and its antitheses: women's film and video, Third Cinema, and gay and lesbian media. Here we observe an interesting historical reversal. The legacy of the Soviet opposition has come to the West through a number of routes. In film theory, the legacy of Marxist aesthetics comes through post-1968 French film criticism and an experimental cinema that took Russian revolutionaries Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein as models. Interestingly, this passing of revolutionary film culture from the Russians to the French is reversed in the earlier movement of revolutionary theatre from post-1789 France to post-1917 Russia where French popular melodrama provided a model of how to swiftly concretize the political situation.[2]

Prerevolutionary Bourgeois Aesthetics

I stress the way revolutionary forms have traveled between countries and over centuries in order to set up the question of political rereading. Such passages and shifts depoliticize or reinvigorate and, it could be said, observing the historical adventures of political art, that one epoch's revolutionary form may become another epoch's bourgeois aesthetics. Yet the more interesting question would be: What is the process by which one epoch's bourgeois form becomes revolutionary in some sense in a later time?

While many film scholars have confirmed the historical importance of these prerevolutionary films, their political positioning still raises issues. Heide Schlupmann reports that scholars at the 1989 Pordenone Film Festival in Italy where the Russian prerevolutionary films were first retrospectively screened, finally concluded that they preferred the work of Eisenstein and Vertov. The work of Bauer, in particular, was said to be tedious, long, and exceptionally morbid (5). Serious reconsiderations of the work of Bauer by Western feminists, including Schlupmann, however, suggest that there is much in these melodramas that is relevant for feminist film theory.

At this historical juncture, long after the Russian revolution — in the period when Western feminists have undertaken the project of rereading world culture — the Russian prerevolutionary parlor dramas emerge as radically new. This rereading of Bauer returns us to the paradox of melodrama, the genre's capacity to accommodate conservative as well as radically progressive ends. Melodrama throughout

history has advanced the interests of social upheaval as well as protected the interests of entrenched power. While as Leftist feminists we like to remind ourselves of the historical origins of theatrical melodrama in the French Revolution around 1791, this paternity is no guarantee that melodrama as structure will deliver a progressive position (Gerould, "Revolution" 185). What is particularly significant about the prerevolutionary film dramas is the way that they depict the aristocratic decadence that had become intolerable by 1917. Watching them, contemporary audiences are placed in the position of revolutionaries — not placed by the films themselves, of course, but by the historical circumstances of retrospective consideration. We know what the filmmakers didn't know. We know what came after. Close upon its heels and after the demise of prerevolutionary cinema there appeared both a revolutionary theatrical melodrama as well as a cinematic modernism — two strategic responses, as it were, to the excesses of the tsarist regime. Two truly revolutionary movements.[3] And yet contemporary feminists want to find something resistive in these last gasps of a dying and depraved era.

The films produced in the 1907 to 1917 period by the two leading companies headed by Aleksandor Drankov and A. A. Khanzhonkov, constitute a bourgeois cinema by, of, and for the middle class, a cinema virtually unseen by the Russian masses.[4] The Russian prerevolutionary cinema is bourgeois cinema but not in the same way that the American cinema of the same period is bourgeois. The cinema of the tsarist period is not only a cinema complicit in a representation of a world that would flatter the middle class point of view. This is not just an exclusive cinema, it is a propertied cinema, in its height representing a richly padded aesthetic that offers the "feel" of the lives of the aristocracy. A cinema so much concerned with the sumptuous display of property, we assume, must be concerned as well with its protection. In the films of Bauer this prerevolutionary cinema aspires to the condition of the interiors of Versailles or perhaps the Winter Palace. It seems quite right that Lev Kuleshov (who worked as Bauer's set designer) would look back on prerevolutionary cinema, dense with French Regency furniture, candelabra, and gilded mirrors, and describe its effect as a "lacquering" of reality (Levaco 191). Brittle and glossy, this is *haut bourgeois* cinema of the silent era that in its *mise en scène* is redolent of the theatrical aspirations of Film d'Art.[5] Beside this opulence, D. W. Griffith's Biograph films of roughly the same period look like they were shot in a barn using the same rough-hewn wooden desk and chair for props in every picture.

Although the revolutionary critics of this cinema would later say that it was the very theatricality (as well as its "psychopathological" tendencies) that was most intolerable to them, it remains for us to try

to understood what they meant by "theatricality" (Levaco 128). In contrasting the "theatricality" of prerevolutionary cinema with what he calls "film-ness," Kuleshov might be taken to mean that there is nothing about these works that necessarily distinguishes them *as film* (Levaco 129). And certainly they evidence little interest in the art of "cutting," interest that defined cinema for the Soviet avant-gardists. In retrospect, however, (when there is at last an erosion of the old complex about "film as art"), we can see these films as spectacular cinema and spectacular *as cinema,* not as filmed theatre.

Bauer raises again the question of an old dichotomy in film theory between Eisenstein's cinema of montage and the "cinema of transparency," long associated with the theoretical work of André Bazin.[6] In Bauer we see what has become known as a Bazinian aesthetic, sometimes referred to as "composition-in-depth." We see this depth composition, especially in Bauer's use of long corridors of action in which the actors wind their way through the maze of furniture; in the way the cinematic playing field is laid out around shifts between foreground, midground, and background. Three planes of action, in continuous movement, are orchestrated over the duration of the shot by some calculating but ghostly force.

I evoke Bazin here not to raise the tired issue of realist aesthetics but to redirect the question of "composition-in-depth" back to the question of the relation between deep space and cutting as well as the historical development of a style. Reviewing a similar phenomenon in French films from 1900 to 1914, Ben Brewster suggests that we may have been addressing the wrong question in our emphasis on deep focus in relation to cinematic space, particularly in this early period when standard lenses were more capable of rendering depth than one might have thought. It is, he says, really "deep staging" that we should be talking about when we study the arrangement of action in depth as opposed to a lateral staging perpendicular to the axis of the lens as Griffith liked to block scenes.[7]

Perhaps it is Bauer's perfect realization of the Bazinian ideal of spatial unity that gives the lie to the ideal. First, we are reminded that "deep staging" that took advantage of the deep focus capabilities of the lens did not spring full blown from the cinema of Jean Renoir, William Wyler, and Orson Welles in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The later use was a return to a style that had disappeared at the end of the silent era.[8] Long before Renoir pushed the possibilities of deep space we are seeing an ingenious use of multiple planes, of rooms within rooms and spaces discovered through distant doors and windows. But Bauer's space is not Bazin's ambiguous space within which the viewer is ostensibly "free" to perceptually roam around. More accurately, Bauer's space is a treacherous, unpredictable *mise en scène,* a compartmentalized architecture. If nothing

else, it is the way that Bauer finds to produce emphasis without cutting (through set construction, by turning corners) that challenges the transparency/montage dichotomy. The two styles of cinematic discourse implicate one another historically and need not mutually exclude one another.

The Moral Teleology of Russian Melodrama

Prerevolutionary Russian cinema is a cinema of prolonged melos in addition to a cinema of texture and plane. As such, it poses questions for melodrama theory as well as for film aesthetics. In *Poetics of Melodrama,* the premiere critical work published on the genre after the revolution, Sergei Balukhatyi (1892–1945) describes how melodrama is organized in terms of an "emotional teleology" as well as a "moral teleology." Under the latter heading the author observes that melodrama *always* betrays its feelings toward characters; it is "happy" for the good characters and "unhappy" for the bad ones. It has its scheme of rewards and punishments and its genius is in the way the spectator takes its judgments to be "natural" (Gerould, "Russian Formalist Theories" 122–23).

If, by definition, melodrama always reveals its moral attitude, what do we do with a style of melodrama that does not exactly state its moral position? At least three feminist film critics from Europe and the US have made similar observations about Bauer's cinema, each discussing his aesthetics in terms of moral stance (particularly as it is worked out through the question of narrative closure). Heide Schlupmann notes the ambiguity of the sexual politics in these films, in particular she sees the way they stand back from women's struggles with "indifference" as though unwilling to judge or take a moral position: "There is no hint of moral judgment in these films; they are not concerned with who is right and what is right" (4). Likewise, Mary Ann Doane observes about the endings of these films that they evidence "no textual balancing act associated with narrative justice" (79). Concurring, Miriam Hansen analyzes the way these films are resigned to tragic consequences, evidencing no attempt to "strain" for the happy ending. The heroines of these melodramas, she goes on, might even be seen as illustrating a more "realistic representation" of "woman's fate under patriarchy" (11). Confirming what has been called the fatality of "Russian endings" in a theatrical tradition that predates these films as well as in the films themselves, these feminists ask about the ideological significance, the stake *for women* in the denouement that refuses to make a judgment.[9] And in their analyses they open up the possibility that these films (once thought to be so counterrevolutionary) could be read as progressive.

Hansen proposes an intriguing formula: without the obligation to produce the "happy end," beginning from within a tradition that "accepts" the tragic denouement, melodrama has the potential to represent a more complete picture of the historical conditions of women's domestic lives (11). Neither propelled by any moral imperative nor particularly invested in the outcomes of the narratives, this cinema would theoretically be "free" to let events follow their inevitable consequences. Following this hypothesis, such dramatic structuring would be progressive to the degree that narrative endings followed the path of outcomes paralleling the circumstances within which women in patriarchal societies the world over have historically found themselves. Victimized women are not rescued; they die by the hands of male tormentors. Estranged family members are lost to one another forever. Mothers and daughters are competitors who can never be reconciled. Such scenarios over all conform more closely to what we might call the "real historical conditions" that exist between men and women and within families. From this point of view, the refusal of a "false" happiness in favor of the representation of a historical reality is a feminist advance.

Opening up these films in this way boils down to seeing them as exemplifying a kind of moral ambiguity, an argument that is compelling for a number of reasons to which I will turn momentarily. But however compelling the argument may be to me, the argument for seeing a transcendence of moralism in these films is not convincing to my Russian feminist colleague, Maya Turovskaya. And here I want to defer to Turovskaya who has summarized Russian melodrama as "sin, reckoning, suffering."[10] While I still think that a case can be made for seeing these films as less invested in moral outcomes, this lesser investment thesis is predicated on a familiarity with a cinema that is more invested in a moralistic world view. Doane notes that these films are "not burdened with the weighted expectations of U.S." films (76). Thus, I do think that a case for the *relative* moral neutrality can be made, a case which of course depends upon a close comparison between Bauer and the supra moralism of D. W. Griffith.

Here I want to look at *An Unseen Enemy* (1912), important as an early example of Griffith's use of crosscutting or parallel editing, a film that is structurally similar to so many other Biograph shorts in the 1909–1912 period. In contrast, Bauer's *A Life for a Life* (1916), four years later, is a much more lavish production and a feature-length adaptation of the French novel *Serge Panine* by George Ohnet, but also one of the last big opulent productions to be mounted before the war shut down the studios. In relation to the narrative, the two films are quite unlike — the Russian film, originally titled *The Rival Sisters*, centers on two sisters' love for the same

A Life for a Life. Evgenii Bauer, dir. 1916. BFI Stills Archive.

man — the aristocratic Prince Bartinskii. The prince marries Musya Khromova, daughter of a millionairess, to save himself from financial ruin, although he truly loves Natya, Musya's adopted sister. As part of the transaction, the prince arranges for Natya to marry his friend the merchant Zhurov.

Although the narratives take significantly different routes, thematically, the two films present us with the problem of family inheritance. In the Griffith film, the brother's legacy is threatened by dark thieves, coded ethnically "other"; in the Bauer film, the daughter's inheritance is squandered by the man she marries — the scoundrel Prince. Both families are missing the father, but whereas in the American family the brother functions as the rescuing patriarch, in the Russian family it is the mother who stands in for the capitalist patriarch and who protects both her daughter and her own fortune by shooting Prince Bartinskii.

Both films feature the plight of daughters, although in Griffith's first use of the Gish sisters — Dorothy and Lillian — the two are featured as a kind of doubled innocence, even referred to as "children" in the titles. What is crucial about the story of Natya and Musya is the absence of blood relation between the two. The film cannot forget this and observes Musya favored over Natya because Natya is adopted. Blood ties guarantee money and money is linked to happiness and peace of mind, directly in Griffith and obliquely in Bauer. But whereas in the Griffith short, the return of

the money reunites the family (and brings the younger sister a kiss from her college-bound beau), in Bauer's triangle, loss of the daughter's fortune is not centrally at stake and the characters aren't equally invested in its preservation. Musya tells her mother that she doesn't care if her husband is squandering her money.

In the final scenes, the mother faces the prince in the drawing room as the police surround the house and the sisters, in another room, confront each other for the first time. In a third room, Natya's husband calls the police to tell them to drop the charges. The mother urges the prince to commit suicide ("Be a man for once in your life"). When he doesn't, she shoots him herself, places the gun in his hand and calls out, "The prince has shot himself." The final tableau restates the mother's preference for her biological daughter over her adopted one and realigns the true wife with her husband's body; the adulteress sister is shunted behind one of Bauer's neoclassical columns.

What is striking about this ending in the relative sense is the disinterest in temporal imperatives. The police surround the house, but this produces no urgency. Their presence isn't made to press upon the confrontation between the mother and the prince. The three simultaneous actions are organized in a kind of weak parallelism, neither building an anticipation of a bloody outcome nor recoiling from it. The mother who wanted to produce happiness for her daughter and produces misery instead is not judged by the film as, in contrast, Mildred Pierce is judged over the course of the 1945 film narrative for having loved her daughter too much. Neither does the film punish this mother for having chosen one daughter over the other.

But how do we know that the mother is not judged? For one thing, the shooting that ends the narrative is followed by a tableau in medium long shot. A tableau is always a stepping back and a settling. Rather than judge her, the narrative resorts to freezing. For another, the cutting pattern neither anticipates nor emphasizes. The film's clock continues to tick at the same rate; the cutting produces neither a speeded up nor a particularly elongated sense of the moment. In other words, time is not manipulated in such a way as to direct the viewer to anticipate one outcome or another. But whereas the viewer experiences parallelism as a time imperative, we need to consider it as what it really is: a cutting pattern.

Contrast the throbbing crosscutting style with which we are familiar from the work of D. W. Griffith in this period. At the end of *An Unseen Enemy*, the viewer is thrust into the temporal imperative when the two sisters are trapped in a room, held at gunpoint by robbers who work at the lock on the safe in the adjoining room. The film cuts back and forth, paralleling the brother on the telephone

and the sisters locked in the room, the brother driving to the rescue and the sisters pinned behind a dresser, following a rhythm that builds to a frenetic pace. Contrasting closeups tell us that the slatternly maid and her accomplice are "ruthless" and "depraved"; the sisters are "innocent" and "pure." The loaded gun poses the enigma: Will the disgusting maid shoot it into the sisters' room? D. W. Griffith's work is nothing if not a compendium of "moralizing devices": contrast editing, rhythmic commentary, emotional closeups, grandiloquent speeches, editorializing intertitles, narrative withholding, wrongs righted, and rewards distributed.

The virtual absence of such devices characterizes the dramatization of domestic strife in prerevolutionary film. In contrast, the ending of *A Life for a Life* appears relatively languid; the film is almost passive in its acceptance of the action it unfolds. The temporal imperative represented by the presence of a loaded gun does not play a part at all in posing a narrative enigma. Is it because of the relative absence of cutting (so essential to Griffith's moral commentary) that the film seems so resigned and nonjudgmental? Cutting, as the new historians of early cinema argue, is always a discursive foregrounding (see esp. Gunning, ch. 1). It is an intervening voice, a comment, a judgment.

But there is another way of explaining the apparent absence of the intervening voice of discursive judgment in *A Life for a Life*. Following Turovskaya's formula, "sin, reckoning, suffering," we might notice the kinds of decisions the film makes to insure its own survival as a narrative. Faced with narrative choices, it opts for the route that leads to increased suffering for the characters. The two sisters love the same man. Musya is not dissuaded in her love for the prince because he has robbed her. Natya refuses to give up the prince when he marries her sister. The operative principle here appears to be the construction of a narrative that offers suffering layered on top of suffering, suggested in the alternative title: "A Drop of Blood for Every Tear." In this spiral of suffering the denouement can only offer a resolution that guarantees more misery. Killing her daughter's husband to alleviate her daughter's suffering, the mother causes her daughter to suffer. How can we say that a character who is the agent of so much misery for herself and others is not judged in some way by the film?

This example provides as well a lesson in the difference between melodrama and tragedy especially where *A Life for a Life* aspires to the condition of the higher form and in doing so appears to leave one of the basic principles of melodrama behind. As Robert Heilman distinguishes between the two, melodrama, the more local form, works from the outside in rather than from the inside out. Working as it does *within* the character, tragedy is often unable

to tell us much about the social origins of this internal struggle. In working from the social, from the outside in, melodrama is able to lay out a kind of historically specific map of the moral scheme of things in a particular culture. Yes, the Russian melodramas appear like tragedy in their use of the "apparently insoluble situation" (247). However, Heilman cautions against seeing the happy end and the disastrous-ending theatrical drama as distinct forms; they are for him just opposing ends of the spectrum of melodrama (255). This leaves us with the question of the social specificity of the gender relations dramatized in these melodramas of Russian domestic turmoil. What kind of patriarchal grip produces what Yuri Tsivian calls the "aesthetics of immobility" in these films (15)?

In Bauer's *For Luck (to Happiness)* (1917), the mother decides to sacrifice her lover to her terminally ill daughter who has fallen in love with the older man. The film ends with a closeup of the daughter, little Li Koreneva, who is immediately struck blind by the older man's revelation to her that "the other he loves is her mother." Like *A Life for a Life*, this is a portrait of a doomed family; love is strangled by love. Victims are sucked into a vortex of familial devotion. The hero of *Day Dreams* (1915), for example, unable to forget his first wife after her death, is driven to strangling his mistress when she taunts him about his unnatural fixation. In *Child of the Big City* (1914), Manka rises from the gutter to heights of power and a life of dissipation. As she rises, her former suitor, Viktor, suffers from her rejection, finally dropping dead on the steps outside the restaurant where she dances on into the night. Exiting with her entourage, she steps decorously over his head. Western feminists, accustomed as we are to reading the exertions and excesses of male power, will find a reversal in these scenarios. In the urban melodramas, ineffectual men are sometimes dominated by powerful women, both dead and alive.

Laura Engelstein, in her recent analysis of Russian popular culture just after the turn of the century, reads sexual attitudes in relation to the enormous success of the female-authored best seller, *The Keys to Happiness* (1910–1913). Confirming the fact that Victorian sexual scenarios never quite succeeded in the Russian theatre, she goes on to describe some of the social conditions in the early part of the century. She argues that Russian men of the professional class were displaced patriarchs because of the way in which they were excluded from political power. This exclusion, she goes on, made it possible for them to make a comparison between the political plight of women and their own powerlessness (4). This is not to hypothesize the absence of the patriarchal but rather to pose the question of a different kind of patriarchy, perhaps a weakened patriarchy. Schlupmann's explanation for the moral indifference

she finds in Bauer has something to do with the conflictedness of the patriarchal position. In an extremely telling observation, she concludes that the filmmakers faced a difficulty: "neither could they identify in a reactionary way, with the patriarchal order, nor could they identify with the woman's struggle" (4).

Eisenstein and American "Energy"

One of the more curious developments in motion picture history for beginning film students is the Soviet filmmakers' enthusiasm for and subsequent adaptation of American silent melodrama for their revolutionary project. This is an anomaly to them, particularly if they learn this chapter after they have already had the unit on bourgeois form, the ideological saturation of Hollywood cinema, and the American development of classical continuity, a chapter that usually begins with D. W. Griffith. With the restoration of Russian prerevolutionary cinema to its place in cinema history, Eisenstein's fascination with Griffith begins to make more sense. Bauer's melodramas, like missing puzzle pieces, start to explain something about how it was that the Soviet avant-gardists saw something intriguing in the American imports that played theatrically both before as well as after 1917.

Lev Kuleshov gives us the first insights, in essays published several decades before Eisenstein wrote his famous tribute to D. W. Griffith. Thinking of the ponderousness of some of the prerevolutionary melodramas, one understands that Kuleshov must be making a contrast when he describes the physical response of the audiences in the cheaper seats to American action and detective films exhibited between 1914 and 1922:

> The public especially "feels" American films. When there is a clever maneuver by the hero, a desperate pursuit, a bold struggle, there is such excited whistling, howling, whooping, and intensity that interested figures leap from their seats, so as to see the gripping action better. (Qtd. in Levaco 127)

And this same formula was not limited to action films but worked within melodrama, as the Soviet film scholars noted. Soviet Formalist Adrian Piotrovsky (1898–1938) observed that the "catastrophe-chase-rescue" structure had been transferred from the adventure film into a "new" genre, the American melodrama (qtd. in Gerould, "Russian Formalist Theories" 132). Whether or not this is the way the intensely crosscut American melodrama evolved, it is interesting to note that the Soviet experimenters did see the form as transferrable between genres as well as completely separable from subject matter.

The many elaborate justifications (as well as later renunciations) aside, more than anything, the Soviets identified an "energy" in the aesthetics of the American cinema of the silent era (Levaco 191). Elaborating on this theme of "energy," Eisenstein would theorize revolutionary form as a new class ideology, based not on preexisting forms but manufactured anew through social and technical experiments. Working through his energy analogy he says: "It is not by 'revolutionizing' the forms of the stage-coach that the locomotive is created but through a proper technical calculation of the practical emergence of a *new and previously non-existent kind of energy* — steam" (qtd. in Taylor 60). Not an overhaul or rehabilitation of older cinemas (the stage-coach), the new film machine had to run on a completely new energy source that could produce such dynamism (the locomotive). So the new revolutionary cinema was able to use the energy source of the montage style in Griffith's melodramas, which Eisenstein would later describe as having caused the young Soviets to lose interest in prerevolutionary films (Eisenstein 202). It was after seeing these "amazing (and amazingly useless!) works from an unknown country" that they began to consider, as he said, the "possibilities of a profound, intelligent, class-directed use of this wonderful tool" (204).

Recent reconsiderations of Eisenstein's work have shifted attention to his earliest interest in "agitational spectacle," including the history of low forms of entertainment and early theatre that played to the visceral response. His discussion of cinema as a "montage of attractions," considers the way emotional "shocks" can be precisely calculated (Taylor 34, 49). Certainly the roller coaster ride of melodramatic shot alternation and fast, rhythmic cutting could be seen as harnessable energy; parallelism as dynamic force. However, if the discussion was of emotional excitation, the point was really the body. Like a disease, "Americanitis," as they called it, inhabited the body, making it do the kinds of things that the Soviets needed to get the people to do in the revolutionary struggle (Levaco 127). What was needed was a cinema of "provocation" (Taylor 41) rather than what Vertov called the bourgeois cinema of "consolation" (Levaco 191).

Eisenstein and Kuleshov may have thought that they could borrow the energy in popular American film form, leaving aside the sentimentality and bourgeois concerns. In principle, aesthetic forms can always be reinflected to new political ends. Sometimes there is a residue of former use left in refurbished forms; sometimes not. It is always an interesting exercise to look at the chase in Griffith's "Modern Story" at the end of *Intolerance* (1916) along with the associational montage comparing the mass shooting with the slaughterhouse at the end of Eisenstein's *Strike* (1924). No art

historical exercise in "influence," this is an object lesson in reverse cooptation — a case of political appropriation. The same rhythms and discontinuities make the heart beat for such antithetical causes.[11] Elsewhere I have argued that, consciously or not, in taking over the rhetorical forms of American domestic melodrama the Soviets also soaked up some of the moralism. Contrast editing, emotional closeups, and rhythmic buildup, all appear, however much these moralizing devices were adapted to contradictory political ends ("Melos").

And this brings us back to the question of the relative moral ambiguity of prerevolutionary melodrama. It is an easy argument to make that the dualisms, the high tone, the sharp contrasts, the ideological lessons that critics do not find in prerevolutionary Russian cinema *do* appear in the ideological morality tales of the revolutionary 1920s. For one thing, a revolutionary Marxist cinema cannot afford to be ambiguous about anything, least of all about the evils of capitalism and the errors of the former tsarist rulers.

There is connection in the disconnection between the Soviet avant-gardists and their cinematic forerunners. I am left with the question of the coherence between Eisenstein and Bauer, between revolutionary and prerevolutionary cinema. Having wedged Griffith between the two, they now appear to be connected through him, and he is there only because of a fluke of history, a revolution. It may soon become popular to search through this disrupted continuity demarcated by the pre and the postrevolutionary for "morbidity" in the Russian sensibility or some such trait. One could find this morbidity in the lock of the hero's dead wife's hair ("his precious flea-breeding tuft") in Bauer's *Day Dreams* (1915), a taste for the ghastly that carries on through to the maggoty meat in Eisenstein's *Potemkin* (1921). However, I find in these films something somewhat more strange, although here I mean strange in the sense of an irony, rather than an oddity.

Irreconcilability

We find in Eisenstein's theory as well as his film practice a strong aversion to dramatic reconciliation as a function of the denouement. Most emphatically stated in his essay, "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today," what was wrong with Griffith's parallelism was that it delivered a rich versus poor "dualism" and tricked the eye into seeing a reconciliation of the social classes that was a theoretical impossibility. Writing this essay in 1944, Eisenstein was of course constructing a retrospective theory that would bolster the theory of montage and conflict that he continued to refine. Where

Griffith's sentimental montage only made comparisons between the "haves" and the "have-nots," Eisenstein's montage was designed to show up the contradictory conditions of class society at the level of the image. "Conflict," as he put it, had to be achieved with the "[threading] . . . through the whole system of planes." In contrast, the parallel structure of Griffith's melodramas with their "hypothetical reconciliation," represented an impossibility given the internal divisions of class society (234–35).

Do we find in the prerevolutionary melodramas this same aversion to reconciliation? In his comments about the "Russian ending," sometimes called the "inevitable ending," contrasted so often with the American "happy ending," Yuri Tsivian warns against any attempt to generalize from the preponderance of tragic endings to the existence of a "gloomy Russian soul" (6–7). But it is not the endings of the prerevolutionary melodramas that I want to connect with Eisenstein. It is the contemporary Western feminist readings of those endings.

Closure in the Hollywood film, it is often argued, is achieved at the expense of logical consistency. Illogic and contradiction are silenced, frayed ends are bound in the narrative resolution, and it is in acknowledgment of the difficulty of effecting a satisfactory end that Hollywood melodrama is said to only achieve an "uneasy happy ending."[12] Laura Mulvey has gone somewhat further to suggest that in domestic melodrama, stories of exploitation and repression stir up considerable trouble, which, like "a cloud of overdetermined irreconcilables," elude closure and "put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes" (76). This formulation, which has accommodated the possibility of women as resisting viewers as well as allowed feminists to theorize the danger in the text, acknowledges the paradox of melodrama: the conservative function is so close to the progressive that they could be said to cancel each other out. And in a companion formulation, the same feminist film movement has moved beyond the total irreconcilability of Eisenstein's modernist style.[13]

The first Western feminist responses to Bauer's work can be located within a phase of feminist film theory that has for the last decade been concerned with the position of the woman as spectator. This is a tradition that is unwilling to relinquish too much power to the popular film text, that is committed to finding a space for struggle against it. Looking for this space, what Hansen notices is that the Russian melodramas, leaving the contradictions unresolved at the end as they do, are less ideologically complicit. They might even be seen as straightforwardly spelling out the tragic inevitabilities of the contradictions of patriarchy. Instead of happy endings they give us naked conflict.

It should be made clear that Bauer's melodramas as a whole, although they do offer moments within which the female characters could be said to "act out" against patriarchal constraints, do not offer even imagined power or equal status. They do not offer hope, everlasting love, or even a return to a golden age in the way the sentimental melodrama often does. But they do refuse to compromise their conclusions. So at this historical juncture — long after the Russian revolution — in the period of feminist rereadings of world culture — the Russian prerevolutionary parlor dramas emerge as radically new and possibly even more politically progressive than the political avant-garde of the 1920s. And all because they refuse to reconcile the irreconcilable.

Notes

[1]Of the 1,716 Russian films produced between 1907 and 1917, 286 are now on 35mm safety film (Cherchi-Usai, et al. 14). Fewer still are readily available. A small but excellent selection, produced by the British Film Institute, can be purchased or rented on tape by Kino, International. It is from a selection of a selection of the work of Evgenii Slavinskii, Petr Chardynin, Vasili Goncharov, Ikov Protazanov, and Evgenii Bauer that other Westerners will invariably attempt to make critical evaluations of this period in the near future. Because the work of Evgenii Bauer represents the pinnacle of this period and is both typical and atypical, my tentative remarks about this rediscovered period will be limited to a discussion of his available work.

[2]For a historical overview see Gerould, "Revolution" 185–91.

[3]Jay Leyda describes how the major film producers as well as many actors fled between the February and October revolutions. Although the film industry was dismantled, the Moscow Art Theatre remained as the foundation of a revolutionary theatre (111).

[4]Leyda's chapters one through four provide the most complete history in English of the Russian prerevolutionary film industry. As such, they function as a companion history to the ten-tape set of videotapes released by Kino, International. See also the introductory essay in Cherchi-Usai, et al.

[5]Film d'Art, which presented stage actors in famous roles, was imported from France by Khanzhonkov in 1908 (Leyda 33).

[6]It should be noted that although Bazin is still associated with the "cinema as transparency" concept, important recent scholarship demonstrates that his own critical position cannot be reduced to this concept. See Belton, Rosen.

[7]It is also important to note that the alternative to "deep staging" was thought to be "faster cutting." If, as Brewster argues, two options were seen

to be available in this period for varying action, a faster speed of scene change and a complication of the staging, it would seem that prerevolutionary parlor dramas were opting for the latter (Brewster 45–49). What we may be seeing in these films is a level of saturation achieved at which point the frame could be stuffed no further and even a stage at which the possibilities for creating dramatic emphasis without "cutting into" the integral space before the camera had been exhausted.

[8]For a summary of way film theory has posed the Bazin/Eisenstein dichotomy see Aumont, et al. 50–61.

[9]The story is often told of the way Yakov Protazanov remade D. W. Griffith's *The Lonely Villa* (1909) as *Drama by Telephone* (1918), changing the ending for the Russian audience by returning the husband too late to save his wife whom he finds murdered by the robbers who threatened her (Tsivian 7).

[10]I am grateful to the comments made by Turovskaya on an earlier version of this paper delivered at the "Views from the Post-Future" Conference held at Duke University in January, 1993. The quotation is from an unpublished abstract, "The Melodrama and Its Audience."

[11]For a fascinating and important account of how the Soviets added material to *Intolerance* to make it more ideologically satisfactory to them, see Kepley. I also want to thank Vance Kepley for his helpful suggestions about the timing of Eisenstein's essay on D. W. Griffith and montage.

[12]Various accounts of the difficulties posed by the happy ending can be found in Altman, Bordwell, Elsaesser, and Nowell-Smith.

[13]I refer here to the feminist theorization of counter-cinema as a political avant-garde, beginning in the 1970s and under revision by the mid 1980s.

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