Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era

While other nations developed avant-garde film movements right after World War I, Russia did not develop its own movement until the 1920s.

Post-Revolutionary Soviet Cinema can be divided into three distinct periods:

1. War Communism
2. New Economic Policy
3. Increased State Control

War Communism
Dates: 1918-1920
Russia had two revolutions:
1. February Revolution 1917 – Eliminated czarist, aristocratic rule – reformist provisional party set up
2. October Revolution 1917 – Bolshevik revolution led by Vladimir Lenin – establishment of the U.S.S.R.

The film industry was uncertain after the Bolshevik revolution –
- The state took control of all companies
- Some film companies closed
- Some filmmakers fled the Soviet Union
- Bolsheviks could not nationalize the film industry
  - Not enough money

People's Commissariat of Education (Narkompros)
- Oversaw national cinema
- 1918 – struggle to gain control over film production, distribution and exhibition
- A few Soviets set up production companies to make propaganda films
- Cohabitation (1918) – A well-to-do professor loses his home to a poor janitor under the Soviet government but both learn to live together peacefully
- Two important directors from this period:
  - Dziga Vertov – took charge of Narkompros’ first newsreel
  - Lev Kuleshov – used Hollywood continuity style in directing

Two serious blows to Soviet Cinema in 1918:
1. Soviets entrusted 1 million USD to a man to buy film equipment for Soviet cinema. The man bought worthless junk and stole the money.
2. 1918 decree that all raw film stock had to be registered to the government – film production companies hit what little raw film they had and a severe shortage developed.

- Only 6 films made by the state in 1918
- Short propaganda-style newsreels
- Civil war in Russia – Bolsheviks defeat the Whites (pro-US/UK supporters)
- Agit-vehicles – trains, trucks and steamboats bringing films, theater and propaganda to people
- Discovery of old Russian and international footage

1919

- Lenin nationalizes film
- State Film School is established to train directors and actors
- Lev Kuleshov becomes a faculty member of the school

Kuleshov

- Worked with actors training them to put on film-like theatrical productions that showed cinematic framing
- Early development of Montage style – took existing footage and merged it with other footage
- Mozhukhin Experiment – Actor Ivan Mozhukhin shown with a neutral expression. Same shot repeatedly shown together with shots of other subject matter – a bowl of soup, a dead body, a baby, etc. People praised Mozhukhin’s varied performance not knowing it was the same expression each time – Audience involvement in interpretation (Kuleshov Experiment)
- Another experiment – actors in a Moscow look and point off screen – cut to an image of the U.S. Capitol which they seem to see

New Economic Policy (NEP)
Dates: 1921-1924

1921 – New economic policy to end famine allows for temporary private ownership of businesses

- Hoarded raw film reappears
- Private and government production firms increase

1922

Lenin makes two statements that impact Soviet filmmaking:

1. Lenin proportion: films should balance entertainment and education
2. “Of all the arts, cinema is the most important.” – most powerful tool for education and propaganda

Goskino – A central film distribution monopoly that all production firms had to released films through

Slow but steady growth during the NEP
1924
• Increase in production
• Yuri Zhelyabuzhsky
  o *Cigarette-Girl of Mosselprom* – contemporary comedy about a cigarette girl who accidentally becomes an actress
• State Film School produces comedy
  o *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the land of the Bolsheviks*

**Increased State Control**
**Dates: 1925-1930**

New Soviet distribution company Sovkino replaces Goskino
• Produced the most famous film of the Montage era – *Battleship Potemkin*
• Opened urban theaters
• Sent portable theaters to the countryside
• Made some money importing films and distributing in the USSR
• Domestic production more important
• Export of Soviet films
• Making films that embody new Soviet ideals

**Constructivism**
• Art movement closely linked to Montage
• Influenced by French Cubism
• Italian Futurism
• Aim – to make abstract art functional
• Artwork is machine-like – put together with parts
• Assemblage – montage
• Art as propaganda

**Montage**
• Sergei Eisenstein
  o 1920 began acting in Soviet theater in Moscow
  o 1921 directed theatrical productions
  o Produced a short film *Glumov’s Diary*
  o 1924 moved to film
  o 1926 *Battleship Potemkin*
  o First overseas triumph
• Filmmakers’ theories about montage
  o Kuleshov – Montage is a technique of editing for clarity and emotional effects
  o Vertov – Montage is the entire production process, choosing a subject, shooting footage, and assembling the film
  o Eisenstein – In montage – clips are not simply linked but may also be in sharp contrast – may collide
    - The shot is not an example of montage
    - A shot is a montage cell
Montage is the collision or conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other
- Intellectual cinema

Montage Form and Style
- Genre
  - Bolshevist doctrine
  - Physical conflict
  - Revolutionary history
  - Social-based dramas and comedies
- Narrative
  - French Impressionism – personal actions/psychology
  - German Expressionism – supernatural/legendary elements to motivate distorted style
  - Soviet Montage – Social forces are the source for cause and effect, characters represent social classes rather than individuality
- Editing
  - Dynamism through editing
  - More shots than other types of filmmaking
  - Overlapping editing – repeats all or some of a previous action
  - Elliptical cutting – a portion of an event is left out so the event takes less time than it normally would
  - Non-Diagetic Insert – one or more shots depicting space and time unrelated to those of the story events in the film
  - Graphic contrasts from shot to shot
- Camerawork
  - Low-angle framings
  - De-centered framings
  - Low horizon line
- Special Effects
  - Split-screen framing
  - Superimpositions
- Mise-en-Scene
  - Realistic
  - Contrast
  - No fill-lighting
  - Realistic and stylized acting
  - Casting by typage – the look of the actor

1930 Soviet film moves to Socialist Realism