

HUMOR AS PARODY, ECCENTRISM, AND SATIRE IN SOVIET FILM AFTER WORLD WAR I

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Cover of the journal *Cine-Photo*, no. 3, 1922

Цена 75 руб.

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АРЛИ ЧАПЛИН



ШАРЛО

В. Ф. Степанова.



Lev Kuleshov's Workshop
Boris Barnet, Valentina
Lopatina, Vladimir Fogel,
Aleksandra Khokhlova, and Petr
Galadzhiev (left to right), 1923

Lev Kuleshov
Design for the journal
Cine-Photo, no. 1, 1922

“Engineering of art is based on the spirit of gaiety,” wrote Viktor Shklovsky, an influential critic of emergent Soviet film and a leading figure in the Russian formalist circle.¹ Although explicitly referring to Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, Shklovsky’s insight can be applied to much of avant-garde art in Russia. This essay considers explicit manifestations of this “spirit of gaiety” in the works of Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, and other prominent filmmakers in Bolshevik Russia, such as the founders of the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS), Leonid Trauberg and Grigory Kozintsev, who made their first films during the period covered by the exhibition. Because the exhibition explores the links between Dada and the Russian art of the period, these films serve as the basis for investigating possible crosscurrents that may have reached pioneering Soviet directors in their search for a new film language. After all, many Russian artists and critics visited Berlin in the early 1920s, when the Dada movement was gaining momentum. Shklovsky lived in Berlin from 1922 until 1923 and may have been aware of Dada’s existence through his friend Ivan Puni, whom he knew from Russia and who was close to the Der Sturm circle.² This essay manifestly excludes Dziga Vertov, the creator of the mesmerizing documentary newsreel *Cine-Truth* (*Kinopravda*), now canonized as the first instance of constructivism in film.³ Despite an apparent “spirit of gaiety” pervading Vertov’s production, Shklovsky criticized it at the time for Vertov’s resistance to introducing elements of plot construction in his films, which corresponded to the lack of hints of psychological conflict in his productions.⁴ While creating their own versions of a film language, Eisenstein, Kuleshov, and FEKS retained the seeds of plot construction

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1. Viktor Shklovskii, “Eizenshtein” (1927), in *Za sorok let: stat'i o kino* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1965), 74. I thank Margarita Tupitsyn, Stuart Liebman, and Naum Kleiman for their help and advice on this article.

2. Shklovsky writes about Puni in *Zoo or Letters Not about Love*, trans. and ed. Richard Sheldon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 55–58.

3. *Cine-Truth* was produced by Vertov, Elizaveta Svilova, and Mikhail Kaufman throughout the 1920s. The trio made twenty-three issues of the cinematic journal, the first of which was shown to the public on May 21, 1922. See Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (New York: Collier Books, 1973), 161.

4. Shklovskii, “Vertov,” in *Za sorok let*, 70–73. Vertov’s gaiety came from the gut, expressing uninhibited energy and a joy of life, without the element of self-reflection and parody apparent in films in this essay.

through their pervasive use of such specific forms of humor as parody, eccentricism, and satire, rendering their work more acceptable to Shklovsky as an expression of cinematic art.⁵

On the larger scale of the development of the film industry in Russia, the avant-garde had to compete with the popularity of commercial films made on the foreign market, Hollywood in particular. The Russian Revolution and the concomitant end of World War I marked the beginning of a period of intensive growth for the Soviet film industry. The Bolsheviks understood film's enormous potential for propaganda, entertainment, and, ultimately, control of the masses, and issued foundational decrees in support of the new art form. From October 1917 until Vladimir Lenin's death in January 1924, the Bolshevik government nationalized the film industry, established film schools, and set up a rudimentary production and distribution network for foreign and Soviet films.⁶ This period coincided with the flourishing of constructivism and suprematism in Russia and of the Dada movement in the West. Whereas the influence of the former on Western art has been investigated at length—including, for example, considerations of the great interest Western artists such as George Grosz, John Heartfield, and Hans Richter displayed toward Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich—only recently have scholars attempted to examine the inroads Dada made in Russia.⁷ Results of this investigation appear inconclusive. Russia at the time was an inspiring and emerging force, which intrigued and captivated the imagination of the avant-garde in the West. However, this fascination worked only at a distance. Upon a closer look, the once-revered Russians disappointed the Westerners.⁸ The reaction the other way around was similar: To the Russians, the impressive artistic achievements of the West often looked like a form of subterfuge.⁹

In the sphere of performance, including theater and film, a similar dynamic of mutual attraction and repulsion defied a common ground of relationship according to the degree of “radical criticism, nihilistic denial, and abstraction in aesthetics.”¹⁰ Seemingly similar explorations of “strategies, conditions of formation and usage of literary and artistic languages and meaning on paradigmatic . . . and syntagmatic . . . levels,” frequently compared to a child-like, naive attitude toward the world, ran against fundamental contextual differences in which the artists were operating.¹¹ When Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, and Tristan Tzara sang, played musical instruments, recited poetry, or dressed in wild costumes in Zurich's Cabaret Voltaire shortly after the outbreak of World War I, they opposed the dominant capitalist culture by provoking it, thereby distancing themselves from the violence and philistinism of the world outside.¹² However,

5. Shklovsky, "Kuda shagaet Dziga Vertov?," in *Antologiya russkogo formalizma*, ed. Sergei Ushakov (Moscow-Ekaterinburg: Kabinetnyi uchenyi, 2016), 1:247. On Shklovsky and the development of his theories, see also Il'ia Kalinin, "Viktor Shklovskii kak priem," in *ibid.*, 63–106.

6. All of this was set in motion by a decree Lenin signed on August 27, 1919. For details on the Bolsheviks' nationalization of the Russian film industry, see Vance Kepley Jr., "Soviet Cinema and State Control: Lenin's Nationalization Decree Reconsidered," *Journal of Film and Video* 42, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 3–14.

7. Tomáš Glanc, "Dada izdali," in "Vy gniete, a pozhar nachalsia": *reseptsii dadaizma v Rossii*, ed. Tomáš Glanc (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi muzei im. V. V. Maiakovskogo, 2016), 7–23. See also Margarita Tupitsyn, *Malevich and Film* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 55–69; and Timothy Benson and Aleksandra Shatskikh, "Malevich and Richter: An Indeterminate Encounter," *October* 143 (Winter 2013): 52–68.

8. Glanc, "Dada izdali," 10.

9. *Ibid.* See also Roman Jakobson, "Letters from the West. Dada," on pp. 310–313 of the present catalogue; and Sergei Sharshun, "My Participation in the French Dada Movement" on pp. 314–319 of the present catalogue.

10. Glanc, "Dada izdali," 8.

11. *Ibid.*; and Grigorii Bammel, "Dada Almanach," in "Vy gniete, a pozhar nachalsia," ed. Glanc, 40.

12. Hans Richter, "Cabaret Voltaire: Its Members and Collaborators," in *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965), 19.

13. As several writers noticed, the differing approaches of Dada and Russian artists were determined by their relationship to reality. Speaking on behalf of the Dadaists, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes described their attitude as "refusal to believe in the sameness of things," wreaking havoc on the idea of logical causation. "One and one becomes two only when they want it." Zhorzh Ribmon-Diussen, "Umer li Dada?," in "Vy gniete, a pozhar nachalsia," ed. Glanc, 45. On the Russians' side, Abram Efros emphasized the difference between Velimir Khlebnikov's life-affirming speech creation (*rechetvorchestvo*)—based on live tradition and having as a goal revival of the Russian language—and Tzara's nihilistic "je-m'en-foutisme." Abram Efros, "Dada i Dadaizm," in *ibid.*, 83. Glanc explained the Russians' reluctance to accept Dada as their own by the latter's "refusal of the category of truth," which seemed deficient to the Russians, who, despite their seeming destruction of history and tradition, were always returning to them, whether under the guise of the truth of abstraction, novelty, or beyond-sense reality. Glanc, "Dada izdali," 18.

because they could not extricate themselves from this culture, their humor tended toward its wry variant: irony. The protest by Dada artists was largely ironic because it both ridiculed and elevated the artists as representatives of capitalist culture who rebelled against its aggression. Even though the advent of the New Economic Policy in 1922, which gave a green light to private enterprise, put a stop to the unfettered dominance of Vertov's ideological euphoria, in Soviet Russia artists and filmmakers invented other devices to promote the dominant Soviet proletarian and peasant culture, making fun of only those elements that were extrinsic to it, such as the bourgeois, kulaks, or ignorant foreigners. At that time, Soviet artists were not part of the culture they despised; on the contrary, they were building a culture that could be sustained and admired. Instead of irony, they used parody, eccentricism, and satire to laugh at the common enemy, the philistine bourgeois.¹³

Glumov's Diary (1923) was Eisenstein's first film. He made it as a cinematic insert into his theatrical adaptation of Nikolai Ostrovsky's comedy *Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man*, after having studied the craft of theatrical production with the fabled director Vsevolod Meyerhold. The production was staged at the Proletkult Theater. At the time of Eisenstein's training, Meyerhold elaborated his theory of biomechanics, which his talented student highly admired. In opposition to the classical acting technique, which called for "inward," nearly indiscernible feelings and emotions, biomechanics emphasized theatrical pantomime—physical movements and facial expressions that were controlled and carefully rehearsed by each actor for each character. In Meyerhold's system of biomechanics, the

“psychology” of a character had to be clearly visible in the actor’s physical appearance, so that the aesthetic “excitation” could be conveyed to the viewer: “All psychological states are determined by specific psychological processes. By correctly resolving the nature of his state physically, the actor reaches the point where he experiences the excitation, which communicates itself to the spectator and induces him to share in the actor’s performance. It is this excitation that is the very essence of an actor’s art. From a sequence of physical positions and situations there arise ‘points of excitation,’ which are informed with some particular emotion.”¹⁴ Eisenstein had a chance to become familiar with the technique not only in its theoretical but its practical aspects. In 1922, he witnessed rehearsals of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* in Meyerhold’s theater, and he assisted his teacher in the staging of Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin’s play *The Death of Tarelkin*, with sets designed by Varvara Stepanova.

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After leaving Meyerhold and embarking on his own path, Eisenstein incorporated his teacher’s emphasis on active outward expression and movement into his own performing theory, called “montage of attractions.” In pique to his teacher’s devotion to theater as an art form, Eisenstein’s theory of action took a sharply ideological turn, calling for the overthrow of “the values of the past” and “the abolition of the very institution of the theatre as such, replacing it with a show-place for achievements in the theatre or with an instrument for raising the standard of training of the masses in their day-to-day life.”¹⁵ From the beginning of his independent career, then, Eisenstein’s aesthetics aimed at a practical goal: mobilization of the masses in support of the Bolshevik cause. The “attractions” unfolding on stage would be “any aggressive aspect of the theatre; that is, any element of the theatre that subjects the spectator to a sensual or psychological impact, experimentally regulated and mathematically calculated to produce in him certain emotional shocks which, when placed in their proper sequence within the totality of the production, become the only means that enable the spectator to perceive the ideological side of what is being demonstrated—the ultimate ideological conclusion.”¹⁶

Consequently, the twenty-five attractions that constituted Eisenstein’s production of Ostrovsky’s play ranged from narrational soliloquys to musical-eccentric acts to clownery, farcical scenes, and singing performances. *Glumov’s Diary* was screened near the beginning of the performance; it followed the first attraction where Glumov (played by Grigory Aleksandrov, Eisenstein’s assistant at the time and later a prominent director in his own right) presents the audience with a story of his



Sergei Eisenstein

Glumov's Diary (conceived as part of the adaptation of Aleksandr Ostrovsky's 1868 comedy *Enough Stupidity in Every Wise Man*, which he realized at the Proletcult Theater), 1923

14. Meyerhold's lecture on biomechanics, cited in V. Fedorov, "Akter budushchego," *Ermitazh*, no. 10 (1922).

15. Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage of Attractions for *Enough Stupidity in Every Wiseman*," trans. Daniel Gerould, *Drama Review* 18, no. 1 (March 1974): 77; available online at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1144865> (accessed December 21, 2017).

16. *Ibid.*, 78.



Lev Kuleshov's Workshop
Aleksandra Khokhlova and
Petr Galadzhev, 1923



Aleksandr Rodchenko
Cover of the journal
Cine-Photo, no. 1, 1922

stolen diary. According to Eisenstein, *Glumov's Diary* was a parody of an American detective film. It comprises a series of frames that alternate quickly and appear to lead to a resolution of a mystery. First, we see a car driving by a mansion with an impressive ornamented arch on Vozdvizhenka Street in Moscow—home of Arseny Morozov, scion of a famous merchant family. A man in a top hat jumps out of the car while it is still in motion. He runs up the stairs with his back toward us, turns around suddenly, and stops long enough for us to see he is wearing a black mask over his eyes. From Eisenstein's notation, we know the man is Golutvin, "a man with no particular occupation," who will steal his friend's diary to extort money from him. With a swift gesture, he takes off the hat, waves to us while holding it in his hand, and disappears under the arch. In the following shot, we see Glumov in clown face poking his head out of a roundel in one of the mansion's towers. He screams silently, opening his mouth widely, and disappears from the window. Then the top-hatted Golutvin appears in his place, catches a rope conveniently hanging in front of the roundel, and climbs up the ornaments of the tower to the top balcony surrounded by columns crowned by spiraling cones.

Golutvin hangs his hat on one of the cones and waves his hand. Glumov reappears in the roundel, looks up, sees the hat and then an airplane in the sky. The next shot shows us a crowded street, a moving automobile, and a masked Golutvin landing in the car (supposedly after having jumped down from the airplane). Then there is a close-up of his hands, unraveling a roll of film, and his made-up face, which mimes a smile followed by an expression of fear. A series of heavily made-up clownish characters follow, some wearing dresses and other female-signifying paraphernalia, such as prominent breasts. The clowns gesticulate widely and smile profusely. Glumov approaches each of them, and, trying to adjust to the demands of each character, transforms through a somersault (an acrobatic trick) followed by a fade-in (a montage trick) into something that the character might like: a stack of playing cards for his clown-mother; a *mitrailleuse* for a clown-general; a baby for a clown playing the wife of his relative who likes younger men. The last scene shows Glumov's wedding, in which he amusingly but decisively folds his fingers into an insulting configuration, roughly synonymous with raising a middle finger in the United States. The ending thus metaphorically dots the *i* by conveying the creators' message about American detective stories. In Eisenstein's interpretation of Ostrovsky's play, the hero is the same as the villain, and the only way to combat the evil is through parodic laughter.

The same spirit of gaiety reigned supreme in the productions of FEKS, which Kozintsev and Trauberg formed in 1921 in Petrograd to bring the “eccentrism of the music hall” onto the stage. According to their manifesto, FEKS was created to enliven theater with “hyperbolically crude, overwhelming, nerve-wrecking, overtly utilitarian, mechanically precise, instantaneous, rapid” art, in which the apex of an actor’s production would be a “trick” taken from the circus. The play would then resemble a “pile of tricks,” and the actor would become a combination of an “inventor-fabricator” and a “mechanized movement,” who would not “play” but “give himself airs”; would not “mimic” but “grimace”; would not speak but shout.¹⁷ Shklovsky credited FEKS with influencing Eisenstein’s first independent production and its theory: “In any case, the theory of the montage of attractions (moments filled with meaning) is connected with the theory of eccentricism. Eccentrism is based on a choice of impressive moments and their new connection, which defies automatism. Eccentrism is the struggle with life’s routine nature, refusal of its perception and rendering based on tradition.”¹⁸ In 1924, Kozintsev and Trauberg directed *The Adventures of Oktiabrina*, in which their eccentric method of acting and stage production was introduced on screen. Because the film is lost, we can only imagine its eccentricity in action based on a few remaining frames. In one of them, Oktiabrina appears in an opening of a door on which we see a mysterious inscription: “1,000,000 rubles in gold cur[rency].” She is wearing her signature *budenovka* and determinedly aiming a revolver at two men cowering on the rails of a stairwell. The scene reads like one from an adventure movie, with a clear demarcation between the good Oktiabrina and

17. Grigorii Kozintsev, Georgii Kryzhitskii, Leonid Trauberg, and Sergei Iutkevich, *Eksentrizm* (Eksentropolis-Petrograd, 1922), 3–4.

18. Viktor Shklovskii, “O rozhdenii i zhizni ‘Feksov,’” in *Za sorok let*, 92.

19. Evgeni Gromov, “Lev Kuleshov,” in *Lev Kuleshov, Selected Works: Fifty Years in Film*, trans. Dmitri Agrachev and Nina Belenkaya (Moscow: Raduga, 1997), 7.

the bad counterrevolutionaries who are trying to misappropriate the money of the Bolshevik collective.

Reminiscing about his first film from the position of a recognized director, Eisenstein wrote wryly that *Glumov's Diary* “had nothing to do with cinema,” dismissing his directorial debut as a student exercise. The film was made two years before the release of *Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin*, which took over the world nearly instantaneously, and in which clownery, farce, and gymnastics were replaced by an all-pervasive ideological pathos. Regardless of Eisenstein's dismissive remark, *Glumov's Diary* uses some basic montage techniques, such as fade-ins and juxtaposition of panoramic and close-up shots. He could have learned about them from the films and writings of his colleague Kuleshov, who, although a year younger than Eisenstein, began a career in cinema much earlier.

At the age of seventeen, Kuleshov was hired as a designer by Aleksandr Khanzhonkov, one of the most established prerevolutionary film producers.¹⁹ In 1918, he directed his first film, *Engineer Prite's Project*, at Khanzhonkov's studio. After having left Khanzhonkov and joined the film and photography department of Narkompros, Kuleshov directed newsreels at the military front and taught at the newly founded State School of Cinematography. At that time, he elaborated key concepts of his theory, including that of montage, also known as “the Kuleshov effect,” demonstrating that proper editing and juxtaposition of shots created the films' meaning. He also organized the “Kuleshov Collective,” consisting of his students and collaborators—Boris Barnet, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Aleksandra Khokhlova, Sergei Komarov, and Vladimir Fogel among others. The exhibition features two films from this period in Kuleshov's career: *Taras's Dream* (1919), a short agitational feature directed by Iury Zheliazubzhskii, with Kuleshov in charge of montage, and *Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924), which became a marker of Kuleshov's achievement as an innovative film director.

Taras's Dream, which lasts eleven minutes, is a slapstick rendition of a Red Army soldier named Taras, who gets drunk, falls asleep, and has a dream about his former service in the tsarist army, where his days were spent being humiliated by his superiors, performing hard labor, and enduring harsh punishment. A typical absurdist comedy, it includes an exaggerated facial and gestural pantomime by key characters played by classically trained theater actors—the simpleton Taras (Vladimir Riabtsev), a sadistic sergeant-major (Anatoly Nelidov), and a jealous and vengeful general (Dmitry Gundurov). The film was made on the occasion of the first anniversary of the Red Army and carried a rudimentary message



Varvara Stepanova
Cover of the journal *Cine-Photo*, no. 2, 1922

about the superiority of the Red Army—at least where the well-being of its soldiers was concerned—over its tsarist counterpart. Kuleshov was in charge of montage and was concerned with what he called “American shots,” or a proper use of editing, which made the action suitably filmic, as opposed to theatrical, literary, or pictorial.²⁰ The film includes subtle fade-ins, masterful alteration of medium-range and close-up shots, and an emphasis on smooth frame transitions to convey differences between the “actual” and “dream-induced” realities lived by Taras. In its subject matter and elements of slapstick, the film resembles Charlie Chaplin’s films, in particular *Soldiers Arms*, which was released in 1918, a year before *Taras’s Dream*. Like the Russian film, *Soldiers Arms* tells the story of a soldier, which at the

20. Lev Kuleshov, “The Banner of Cinematography” (1920), in *Lev Kuleshov, Selected Works*, 37–55.

21. Lev Kuleshov, “David Griffith and Charlie Chaplin” (1928), in *Kuleshov on Film: Writings by Lev Kuleshov*, ed. Ronald Levaco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 144–45.

22. “Pis'mo L. V. Kuleshova Charl'zu Chaplinu” (1924), in Lev Kuleshov, *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh, pedagogika* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987), 1:418–20.

23. Lev Kuleshov, “O zadachakh khudozhnika v kinematografe” (1917), in *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, 1:30–31; Lev Kuleshov, “O ssenariiakh” (1917), in *ibid.*, 1:34; Lev Kuleshov, “Znamia kinematografii” (1922), in *ibid.*, 1:38–45; and Lev Kuleshov, “Spravka o naturshchikakh” (1922), in *ibid.*, 1:46–50.

24. Lev Kuleshov, “Prakticheskie raboty nad montazhem i nabliudeniia” (1922), in *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, 1:41–45.

end is revealed to be his dream. Chaplin's film might have been screened in Moscow shortly after its release. Chaplin was widely admired by Western Dadaists and Russian artists and filmmakers. Kuleshov, in particular, expressed his admiration in writing. For him, what made the actor stand out was Chaplin's extraordinary ability to "demonstrate the deportment of a person in various aspects of his life by means of his relationships to things, to objects," rather than by "the elementary portrayal of emotion communicated facially."²¹ In 1924, the Kuleshov Collective even wrote a letter to Chaplin, calling him their "teacher" in the way he managed to "precisely and clearly delineate every movement and positioning of the actor in relation to an exacting and harmonious montage" and explaining to him the principles of the work they had elaborated on the basis of his method.²²

Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks pp. 224–225
was the first film the Kuleshov Collective made following this method. Different from *Taras's Dream* in that it used a more refined satire as opposed to slapstick, it was also the first film directed by Kuleshov with his collective and according to the principles of his theory. The plot of the film is rather simple: Mr. John West, the president of the YMCA, arrives for an extended stay in Moscow. He comes there with a skewed image of the Bolsheviks as unwashed and murderous savages, an image propagated by the American media. Upon his arrival, he is promptly set up by a group of swindlers who extort money from him by playing on his fear of the Bolsheviks. Through a series of hilarious tricks, the group succeeds in fleecing the naive American of large amount of cash. This merciless robbery is stopped only through the intervention of a real Bolshevik, represented by a benevolent Cheka commander. At the end of the film, the transformed Mr. West enthusiastically promotes Bolshevism in a letter to his beloved wife.

Although the goal of the film was properly comic—to ridicule a clueless American for his foreignness—the presentation of the comedy was tailored to the properties of the cinematic medium as formulated by Kuleshov in his writings. From his first texts on film, written in 1917, Kuleshov propagated the uniqueness of cinema as an artistic medium. He argued this point in a series of articles on the roles of designers, writers, photographers, and actors in film.²³ A photographer had to give up his monopoly on reproducing reality in a single picture to a film editor, a specialist on montage—an art of "assembling" separate filmed pieces, including the splitting of individual scenes into separate elements and their skillful juxtaposition, with the editor's effort to adjust the filming to the



viewer's perception and on a harmonious transition of shots.²⁴ Kuleshov completely redefined the role of film actors, asserting that "while the theatre is unthinkable without actors, the cinema does not need actors, . . . but requires models instead."²⁵ Because film works with reality as material by creatively transforming it into a work of art, in cinema, it is "wrong to 'perform' a script; the thing to do is to place the characters in certain situations . . . in such a manner that the character is perceived not as an actor playing a part but as a model, a genuine type fitting the setup, and then the events he lives through can be played."²⁶ Thus, the only way for a film actor to look authentic on the screen is to display genuine individuality. Any theatrical role-acting would look contrived and false.

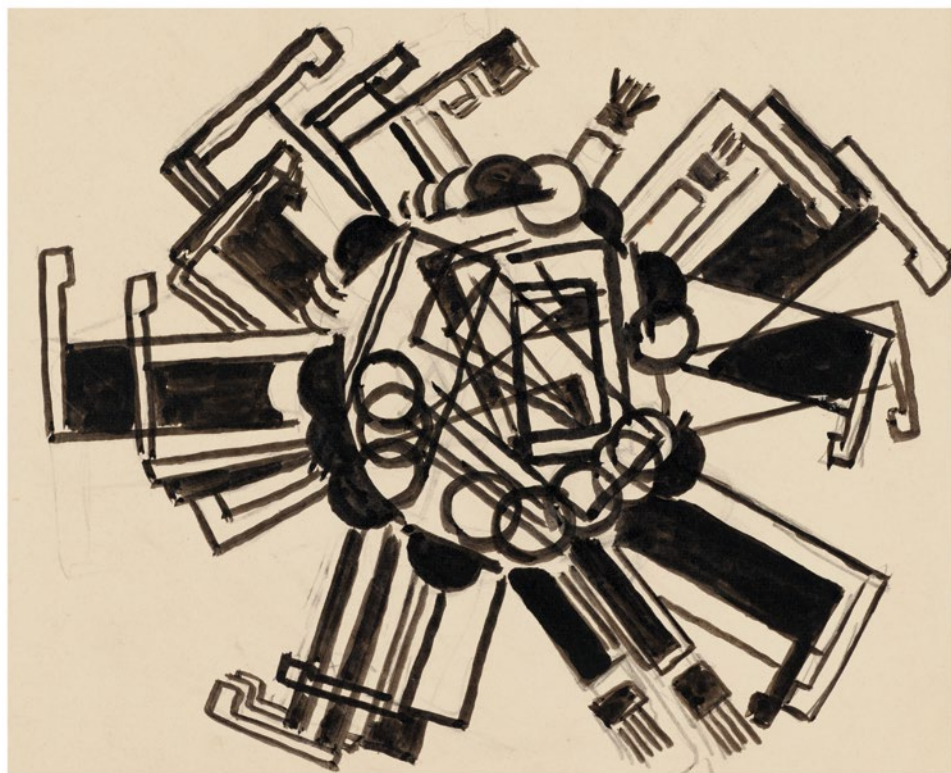
In keeping with the principles stated in the Kuleshov Collective's letter to Chaplin, this display of individuality required rigorous training. For actors, this meant possession of complete control over their facial and gestural expressions at any moment of the shooting and awareness of the camera recording their every move.²⁷ A good sense of the training received by actors in Kuleshov's workshop can be gained from his description of its graduation requirements: "Upon

Lev Kuleshov
Taras's Dream, 1919

25. Kuleshov, "Spravka o naturshchike," 47.

26. *Ibid.*

27. See "Pis'mo L. V. Kuleshova Char'zu Chaplinu" (1924).



Varvara Stepanova
Charles Chaplin Turning Somersault,
1922

graduation, a model must meet the following requirements: 1) to have the capacity to control the body and face muscles consciously and promptly retain the director's plastic assignments; 2) to have the necessary skill to solve, unassisted, any plastic problems arising from the scenario or the directorial assignment; . . . 4) to have a good knowledge of the specific traits of his or her face and body in terms of photogenicity, depending on the particular light and movement."²⁸ In practice, this translated into repeated rehearsals to hone the actor's every move and expression and adjust it to the technical possibilities of camera recording. While watching *Mr. West*, one is captivated by the rapidity of action, the changing scenes, and the mechanical precision with which the actors portray their characters. Khokhlova, in particular, attracts attention with her incomparably rich facial mimicry and her angular figure, which she folds and unfolds effortlessly depending on the required movement and the flow of action.

All of the films considered above are comedies, using parody, eccentricism, and satire to make the audience laugh. At first glance, it might seem remarkable that at the birth of Soviet cinema, comedy appears to have been the only alternative to Vertov's cinematic constructivism. In his writings, Shklovsky wondered about this phenomenon, questioning why it was "eccentricism, filtered through Eisenstein, the FEKS, and partly Meyerhold, that created new devices for the art of the post-October period" and not any other current.²⁹ Elsewhere, he remarked on the significance of parodic laughter for the development of the Soviet aesthetic, because it contributed to conveying "tension in the social field, created by new phenomena."³⁰ He remarked in this respect that "to create his heroic style, Eisenstein had to go through

28. Lev Kuleshov, "Programma kinematograficheskoi eksperimental'noi masterskoi po klassu naturshchikov" (1923), in *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, 1:95.

29. Shklovskii, "O rozhdenii i zhizni 'Feksov,'" 92

30. Viktor Shklovskii, "O Dzhige Vertove", in *Antologiya*, ed. Ushakov, 1:251–52.

31. Shklovskii, "Eizenshtein," 74.

32. Iu. Tynianov, "O FEKSakh," *Sovetskii ekran*, April 2, 1929, 10, translated and reprinted in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896–1939*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (London: Routledge, 1988), 257–58.

33. Richter traveled to Moscow to work on *Metal* (1931–1933), a film about a workers' strike in an iron factory in Hennigsdorf, Germany. See Tupitsyn, *Malevich and Film*, 62–65. According to Marion von Hofacker, Richter was prompted begin work on this film, the only political feature of his career, by the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany. Marion von Hofacker, "Richter's Films and the Role of the Radical Artist," in *Hans Richter: Activism, Modernism, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Stephen C. Foster (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 122–59. Richter met Eisenstein in 1929 in La Sarraz, Switzerland, at the 29th Congress of Independent Cinema. See *ibid.*; and *Travelling: Documents cinémathèque Suisse* 55 (1979), dedicated to this congress.

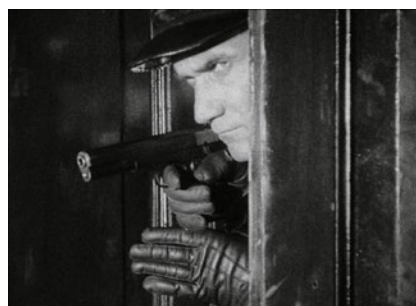
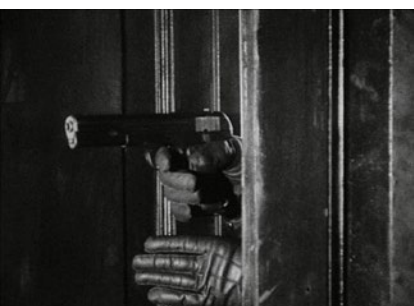
34. Shklovsky begins his article on Eisenstein by stating, "he shuns such words as 'inspiration', 'art' and continues, "if he has anything 'eccentric' about him, it's the eccentricity of a new mechanism." See Shklovskii, "Eizenshtein," 74.

his montage of eccentric attractions.”³¹ Iury Tynianov, a fellow formalist critic, expanded on Shklovsky’s thought when he proposed that “an elementary ‘comedy’ film,” on which the “adventures” of FEKS were reared, still had “traces of cinema as an invention, elements of cinema, which allow one . . . to examine, test, and handle that which the more deferential but less intelligent regard as a taboo—the very essence of the cinema as an art form. Here the FEKS invented what had hitherto been their most valuable feature: freedom from genre, the optional nature of traditions, and the ability to reconcile opposites.”³² Comedy allowed Russian artists in theater and film to bare the device to the maximum, reducing it to its basic building blocks. In this sense, it served the same function in these performance arts as abstraction in painting.

As Dada was a fluid, open-ended international movement, it displayed many choices of aesthetic strategies, highlighting their division according to political lines. Grosz and Heartfield, for example, who were both members of the Communist Party, were close to the Russians in that they used satire to ridicule capitalists as immoral warmongers and money grabbers. The left-leaning Richter became interested in Eisenstein after the Russian director’s *Strike* and *Battleship Potemkin* were released in the West. Richter worked on his own saga about a workers’ strike in Moscow in the 1930s.³³ Shklovsky’s “spirit of gaiety,” then, can be traced not only in the early Soviet film but in the satirical and pathos-oriented works of Dada artists who were inspired by the Soviet directors. The difference in context set the frame for their work: Russian artists and filmmakers were at pains to present themselves and everyone involved in the creation of their films as regular “workers” at a film factory.³⁴ Unless Dada artists consciously affiliated themselves with a certain communist collective or forms of collective production on behalf of a left-leaning political cause, as Grosz, Heartfield, and even Richter did to some extent, their frame of reference remained confined to a culture in which difference and individuality was valued more than similarity and collective action, making irony rather than eccentricism, parody, or satire their artistic device of choice.



Lev Kuleshov
*The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West
in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, 1924



—ПОСМОТРИТЕ-НА НАСТОЯЩЕГО
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