

Remarkable collection of early Soviet films on DVD: *The New Man—Awakening and Everyday Life in Revolutionary Russia*

By Bernd Reinhardt
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A notable collection of early Soviet films, *The New Man—Awakening and Everyday Life in Revolutionary Russia* (*Der neue Mensch—Aufbruch und Alltag im revolutionären Russland*), has been released on DVD in Germany to coincide with the centenary of the October Revolution.

The DVD was compiled by Rainer Rother, artistic director of the Berlin Cinematheque, and film historian Alexander Schwarz. In 2012, the WSWs commented on the important Berlin Film Festival retrospective, “*The Red Dream Factory*”, which brought before the public a number of lesser known early Soviet films, as well as classics by directors such as Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Alexander Dovzhenko.

The new DVD includes eight documentary, animated and feature films from the years 1924 to 1932, which again confirm the vitality and originality of Soviet film prior to the ascent of crushing Stalinist censorship. The films are in Russian with German subtitles. One hopes they will also be made available in an English version.

The principal theme of the film series is indicated by its overall title: the ideal of the “New Man”. The victory of the October Revolution in 1917 made an initial step toward a “transitional man”, which raised the question: Where does such a transition lead? The brochure accompanying the DVD (authored by Schwarz) cites an article by Leon Trotsky referring to the early Soviet ideal of the “autonomous and free person, with all-round education and development”. For Trotsky, the youthful medium of cinema was ideally suited to raise the educational and cultural level of the population in pursuit of this new human being.

By the mid-1930s, as the brochure correctly notes, this conception of the New Man no longer bore any resemblance to Trotsky’s “enlightened-libertarian vision”. The “cultural revolution” initiated by the Stalinist bureaucracy at the end of the 1920s meant the end of bold experimental film and reduced artists largely to propagandists of the official party line. The resulting “reversion to traditional role models” is clearly reflected in the film series.

The cinematic starting point of the series is the newsreel *Kino-Pravda No. 18* (1924) by the renowned filmmaker Dziga Vertov. His camera soars to the top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, and following a long pan, eventually lands in Soviet reality: a shoeshine boy, a newspaper boy, a beggar, farmers, a house for workers and then ... with up-tempo an auto race.

The theme of Vertov’s documentary is the rise of industry, which requires an ever closer alliance between peasants and workers. For a short time the machines rest for a brief “October Baptism”, a secular alternative to Christian baptism. Will Vladimir, the small boy featured in the film, be one of the “new people”?

Bed and Sofa

In 1926 or so, a popular genre emerged in Soviet cinema that was

critical of everyday life. It revealed the germs of a newly developing social order coexisting side by side with stubbornly held old ways of living and thinking—for example, in the everyday life of women. The revolution had given women the rights to vote and to legal, free abortion. She was no longer her husband’s property. Alongside marriage, other forms of cohabitation were recognised. Nevertheless, the trio in the feature film *Bed and Sofa* (Abram Room, 1927) are by no means happy.

The two “proletarian” men, Kolia and Volodia, are a stonemason and a printer, respectively. At home, they are intolerable tyrants who expect to be waited on by “their” woman. Liuda is no longer prepared to accept her assigned role and displays a new self-confidence. She ends up selecting her bedfellow each night and consigns the other man to the couch. And when Liuda becomes pregnant and both men insist, rooted in their petty jealousy, she should have an abortion, she quits “the street of the petty bourgeois” to go to work and lead her own life.

The film is not unsympathetic to the men. Above all, *Bed and Sofa* criticises the terrible housing situation which encourages ad hoc living arrangements and—as the film suggests—corruption. Who is to receive a “housing permit” when two leading workers and former Red Army soldiers are declared ineligible?

Another Soviet work, *The Man Who Lost His Memory* (also known as *Fragment of an Empire*, Friedrich Ermler, 1929), is dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. It impressively illustrates the quantum leap that has occurred with the founding of the first workers state. Ermler is considered by certain film historians to have been an important director.

Ivan, a rail worker, loses his memory due to trauma in the First World War. He regains it 10 years later in the Leningrad of 1928. Ivan has lost a whole number of years of his life and fails to recognise anything. “Where is Petersburg?” he cries out in despair as he struggles to come to grips with the reality of modern skyscrapers, cars and machines.

Ermler’s film offers a sensitive portrayal of Ivan, an older worker who fully absorbed in tsarist society the role of the downtrodden citizen. He tries to orient himself in this new Soviet world by desperately seeking out his old job and former boss. He begins working in the same shop that employed him before the war, and behaves as he did then. Angry with the “unreasonable” criticisms of a colleague who complains about bad working conditions, Ivan regards the new Soviet Occupational Health and Safety Commission as an arm of the former tsarist secret police, the infamous Okhrana. Instinctively, he hides a copy of *Pravda*, the Bolshevik newspaper in the period before the revolution, which is lying in plain sight.

This brief scene in *The Man Who Lost His Memory* is a telling reference to a time when factory workers were politically influenced by the Bolsheviks. Ivan was certainly not one of the more politically conscious

workers, but neither was he an informer. As a soldier in the First World War, he fraternises with a German counterpart, and as he begins in 1928 to grasp the significance of the 1917 upheaval, enthusiastically welcomes the new order.

Ermiler's film criticises a definite phenomenon of the period, the Soviet Communist Party careerist. A slick official lectures workers on culture and morals, while treating his wife (she is in fact Ivan's former spouse) as a servant. While she does the cooking, the bureaucrat peruses his newspaper and berates her for being a culturally and politically backward petty bourgeois. In the behavior of the bureaucrat, Ivan identifies the contempt shown by Russia's former rulers for its "subordinates". In one striking scene, images of the bureaucrat are blended together with images of tsarist officers in World War I and White reactionaries in the Russian Civil War.

Nightmares in the form of Ivan's war memories have been effectively integrated into *The Man Who Lost His Memory*. Its striking portrayal of Jesus wearing a gas mask was criticised at the time as "formalistic". Another virtuoso montage, illustrating the new forms of collective ownership, reflects the influence of the artistic avant garde. A working organism, a kind of all-round worker unites all forms of social work into a single force. Is this high-performance machine the embodiment of the Soviet ideal of the New Man?

The first Soviet sound film, *Road to Life* (Nikolai Ekk, 1931), won a prize at the 1932 Venice film festival and later found a following in the USSR and East Germany. The film is set in 1923. After the horrors of seven years of war and counterrevolution, countless orphans populate the streets, begging and stealing. To counter the problem, a progressive solution is tested out. Instead of imprisoning the urchins and subjecting them to coercion, reliance is placed on trust and patience. Residence in the self-governing work commune is voluntary. The social experiment in the film is based on actual social role models.

The vitality and energy of the protagonists on screen continues to impress. The street children, devious and at the same time naive, are prone to anarchic riots, as in a famous scene involving kitchen utensils. Nikolai Batalov, who appeared in *Bed and Sofa*, plays the role of the commune leader with a large dose of down-to-earth sensibility. He exhibits great patience and humour toward the children, who continually undermine attempts to educate them to correspond to the ideal of the New Man.

There are questionable elements here. The commentary and heavy-handed glorification of collective work in *Road to Life* appear to have more in common with the increasingly patriotic pathos introduced under Stalin in the 1930s. The success of the commune becomes a parable for the construction of "socialism in one country."

The accompanying brochure notes that the cheeky "Fomka the rascal", the arch-enemy of the commune, who thoroughly resists all "insight into necessity" and later commits murder, became a popular figure for Soviet youth. His defiant attitude, which combines psychological desperation with strong yearning, apparently hit a nerve with adolescents who experienced Stalinist "socialist" education only in the form of compulsion or even forced labor.

David Marjan's feature film *Das Leben in der Hand* (*Taking One's Life in One's Hands*—editor's translation), which also premiered in 1931, is essentially a Stalinist propaganda film. In contrast to the early efforts after the revolution, its role is not to enlighten, but rather to enforce the "general line" of the party.

Some of the scenes, in fact, recall Eisenstein's film *The General Line* (1929). Nevertheless, the two films are quite different. Eisenstein (who began work on his film in 1926) utilises poetic form, humour and an understanding of the backwardness of the impoverished peasants that lead them to oppose the industrialisation of agriculture. His film also criticises bureaucracy. *Das Leben in der Hand*, however, propagates the spirit of

compulsory collectivisation: The time for patience is over. Slogans proposed to accompany showings of the film included: "Pace is crucial. We have to catch up a century within ten years."

A "Shock Workers Commune", housed in a modern workers' apartment block, produces the machines urgently needed by the new agricultural communes. A banner with the inscription "Machines are death to the kulak [rich peasant]" points to the official main enemy of "socialism" at the time, big farmers who are supposedly sabotaging industrialisation. First and foremost, the film points to the problem of wide-scale alcohol abuse. An alcoholic represents a brake on production. He refuses any help from doctors and is expelled from the commune.

The film lacks the playful, sensitive treatment of social issues in the earlier works. The social backgrounds of the various protagonists remain obscure. The struggle for an elevated general level of culture is reduced in *Das Leben in der Hand* to a subjective struggle against "wrong behaviour". Guilt lies with the unstable worker whose egoism threatens not only his own wife and child but society as a whole.

The rise of Stalinism fundamentally altered the notion of the socialist New Man. The earlier *Kino Pravda*, along with the carefully crafted animation films of the period, clearly belongs to the tradition of cinema designed to enlighten. Room's chamber piece *Bed and Sofa* has lost none of its refreshing realism. Stalin, whose image appears several times in the film, crops up only in the shadow of the Civil War Red general Semyon Budyonny. As the brochure notes, Stalin commenced a fake campaign against "bureaucracy" in 1928, the same year of *The Man Who Lost his Memory*. Through its historical flashbacks, the film points to the enormous social force of the working masses. Those who dared to openly attack the achievements of the revolution faced powerful opposition.

The films from the period 1931-32 reveal a gradual change. The ideal of the New Man increasingly assumes the form of an unquestioning and efficient machine, while the "collective ego", solidarity and social cohesion mutate into nationalism. As *Das Leben in der Hand* demonstrates, the individualist must start being "educated" in kindergarten. Otherwise, the chubby rebellious child, who refuses to eat at the right speed, can transmute into someone who disrupts the work process and becomes a tool of the enemy class, and, finally, a "people's parasite". The hollow propaganda of Marjan's film not only testifies to the return of "traditional role models", in the form of the methods used by the old Russian aristocracy to govern the masses, it is also an indication of enormous social tensions.

The brochure for *The New Man—Awakening and Everyday Life in Revolutionary Russia* is informative, although Schwarz tends to favor formulations suggesting a seamless transition in the USSR from revolutionary enthusiasm to the later "reign of terror of the elites". The films themselves, however, convey a very different message. The struggle for the new human being was also a struggle over the fate of what Trotsky later described as the "Revolution Betrayed". This struggle was still undecided in 1932.

The film package is available from absolut Medien.

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