

Cine-intellectuals or cine-proletariat? Ideological allegiances and professional identities in early Soviet cinema

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IN STUDIES ABOUT early Soviet cinema, horizontal professional interactions remain to this day largely overlooked, thus confining *the* scope of research to the ideological or socio-economic realms, which are often perceived in isolation.¹ By analyzing the activities and rhetoric of the first professional cinematographic organization, the Association of Revolutionary Cinematography, I would like to introduce one of the 'missing players' into the polyphonic discussion about early Soviet culture. The association, remembered for its heated debates about films and cinematographic policies, offers abundant material for grasping the formation of professional and ideological standards within the cinematographic field.²

The Association of Revolutionary Cinematography (hereafter ARRK³) was established in 1924, a year marked by economic stabilization, flourishing cultural debates, on-going artistic experiments and a certain degree of tolerance towards intellectual diversity. The Soviet film industry gradually regained its confidence in the self-sustainability of film production; the example of the first Soviet blockbuster, *The Little Red Devils* (*Krasnye d'javoljata*, directed by Ivan Perestiani, 1923) nurtured belief in the possibility of popular local filmmaking. The revival of cinematography, by and large nationalized, was enhanced by the partial return of some private and semi-private enterprises under the policies of NEP, albeit subject

¹ Among important exceptions are: Denise Youngblood, 1991, *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era, 1918-1935*, Austin, Tex.; Eric Schmulevitch, 1996, *Réalisme socialiste et cinéma: le cinéma stalinien, 1928-1941*, Paris; Richard Taylor & Ian Christie (eds), 1994, *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema*, London.

² For an elaboration on the concept of 'cultural field' see the works of Pierre Bourdieu, 1993, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Cambridge, and idem, 1996, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford, Calif.

³ The first abbreviation of the association was ARK, but from 1924 it was renamed as the Association of the Workers of Revolutionary Cinematography and thus was abbreviated as ARRK. The abbreviation ARRK is used throughout the text to avoid confusion.

to the centralized system with its monopolized distribution. At the same time, the Head Repertoire Committee (Glavrepertkom) — the state film censorship established in February 1923 — continued developing a complex web of censorship regulations.⁴

Although the cultural space experienced radical transformations, public debates still accommodated the positions of avant-gardists (LEF) and emerging organizations of proletarian writers such as *On Guard (Napostu)*, as well as a diverse and less ideologically outspoken group of so-called 'fellow-travelers', publishing in *Red Virgin Soil (Krasnaja nov')* and other, sometimes short-lived, periodicals.⁵ A variety of journals and magazines put forward a wide range of views on Soviet culture, emphasizing the differences rather than professing a shared 'socialist' platform. Film periodicals underwent a similarly radical transformation: the journals capitalizing on pre-revolutionary films and film stars gave way to those which featured Soviet cinema as a new beginning (Kino-Fot, Proletarskoe kino, Kino-Front, etc).⁶ Although quite a few cinematographic careers started before the revolution and continued after it, public debates on Soviet cinematography steered away from diachronic comparisons with the 'old world', turning to the foreign film markets in order to discuss the qualities of the new films.

The founding of a professional cinematographic organization was the initiative of the editorial board of *Kinogazeta*. The proposition was signed by thirty-four prominent cultural and political figures, including film critics, film directors, cameramen, and scriptwriters.⁷ Although it was originally envisioned as a strictly professional association, the new organization made use of the official rhetoric of the 13th Party Congress, which reiterated Stalin's view of cinema as 'the greatest means of mass agitation'. The organization, which formulated its goals in accordance with the latest party resolutions, was thus given a green light.

⁴ Manuscript collection of the Film Museum in Moscow (Музей Кино, hereafter: МК), фонд] 26, оп[is'] 1, д[elo] 64.

⁵ Edward J. Brown, 1953, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature, 1928-1932*, New York; Robert A. Maguire, 1968, *Red Virgin Soil: Soviet Literature in the 1920's*. Princeton, N.J. For rich and comprehensive information on early Soviet periodicals see <http://www.ruthenia.ru/sovlit/> (last accessed 6 April 2003).

⁶ Denise Youngblood, *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era*.

⁷ МК, ф. 26, оп. 1, д. 12, ф[olio] 250.

ARRK positioned itself as a vanguard of professionals. Until its dissolution in 1934, it remained the central professional association, uniting people from all walks of cinematographic life. Not surprisingly, the number of its members grew quickly, despite the expected volunteer work and required payment of a monthly subscription. The membership was restricted to those professionally active in the field of film production, promotion, and evaluation, **ARRK** comprised the 'core' of early Soviet filmmakers, including, among others, Grigorij Alexandrov, Boris Barnet, Sergej Eisenstein, Nikolaj Ekk, Vladimir Erofeev, Michail Kaufman, Aleksandr Litvinov, Ol'ga Preobraženskaja, Vladimir Pudovkin, Ivan Pyr'ev, Jurij Rajzman, Abram Room, Viktor Šklovskij, Esfir' Šub, Eduard Tisse, Viktor Turin, Sergej Vasil'ev, Dziga Vertov, and many others.⁸ Created outside the state bureaucratic structures, the association was originally independent of direct political intervention as well as of the pressure of film studios. In the first years, ARRK membership increased from 34 to 100 members⁹ and by May 1926 it already included 324 professionals.¹⁰ Since the original selection criteria emphasized professional stature rather than political activism, the number of party members was originally quite low, in the first years of its existence remaining below one-third.¹¹

The charter of ARRK presents an interesting example of rhetorical 'negotiation' between the original concept and the external demands of the time. Aspiring from its very inception to build an exclusively professional organization, the initial group intended to devote its attention to professional activities, socializing its members through public debates and specialized group work.¹² The officially accepted version altered the mission of the organization, advancing the agenda of 'attracting the attention of the wide Soviet public to the issues of cinematography and shaping public opinion' as well as of 'influencing and correcting the ideological and artistic

⁸ For a partial list of members and the films debated in 1924 see Русский государственный архив литературы и искусства (Russian State Archive of Art and Literature, Moscow, *hereafter*: RGALI), f. 2494, op. 1, d. 2, fos. 10-24; for the ARRK membership see: RGALI, f. 2494, op. 1, d. 384 fos. 1-7.

⁹ MK, f. 26, op. i, d. 12, fo. 163.

¹⁰ RGALI, f. 2494, op. 1, d. 384, fo. 1.

¹¹ While the number of the ARRK members was steadily increasing, the later report on the activities of ARRK states that the percentage of the party members remains below one-third: in October 1925 29.5 % of the members belonged to РКр(b), in February 1926—27%, in May 1926—29% (RGALI f. 2494, op. 1, d. 384, fo. 8).

¹² RGALI, f. 2494, op. i, d. 3, fo. 1.

dimensions of cinematographic production'.¹³ Furthermore, the emphasis on cooperation with mass organizations—such as, for example, The Society of Friends of Soviet Cinema (ODSK), headed by the notoriously friendly Feliks Dzeržinskij — bore witness to the ambiguities of ARRK'S status. Uniting 'elitist' and 'mass' activities in the charter sowed the seeds of future contention.

The prestige of ARRK was unparalleled by any alternative cine-association, its verdict affected the reception of individual films in the professional milieu, as well as the reputation of its director. At the same time, the association brought together people with differing aesthetic opinions (those that were 'allowed' within the shrinking space of tolerated diversity). Importantly, the association was not only lenient about the aesthetic disagreements among its members, it even claimed to promote this very diversity. Even in 1927, with the initiation of campaigns of criticism, the strengthening of aesthetic norms and with the 'cultural revolution' blooming, the general meeting of the members welcomed competition between different artistic groups:

Admitting that the questions of form in feature cinematography have not been resolved yet, ARRK approves the existence of different artistic groups even within its own organization...¹⁴

ARRK was structured as a loose network of 'sections'—script-writing, directing, acting, peasant cinema, Kulturfilm, children's cinema, etc—the borders between which remained indistinct until 1931. Along with professional specialization, the association offered its members the chance to view and discuss both new Soviet and imported films before they were shown to the general public. Although the verdicts of ARRK did not have any legal authority, the opinion of the professional audience set the main lines of the reviews and debates in the press. The number of screenings increased with each year, raising professional competence and elaborating the evaluation criteria, as well as forming corporate solidarity and shaping professional and personal relations for the first generation of Soviet filmmakers.¹⁵ The gradual transformation of the

¹³ RGALI.f. 2494, op. i, d. 3, fo. 2.

¹⁴ «Признавая, что вопросы формы художественной кинематографии еще не получили своего окончательного разрешения, АРРК допускает возможность существования художественных группировок даже внутри своей организации...» (RGALI, f. 2494, op i, d. 74, fo. 31).

¹⁵ In 1925-6 ARRK organized 25 screenings, in 1927 there were 47, including seven public ones for a broad audience (RGALI, f. 2494, op. 1, d. 74, fos. 47-48).

status and shared values of the professional group outlined here is pertinent to the itinerary of Soviet culture in the 1920s.¹⁶ Relying on the minutes of the film debates, I present in the following sections three case-studies which exemplify the formation of the system of references, the structures of arguments, the polarization of aesthetic positions, and the evolving rhetorical figures in the debates on cinema.

PRYING OUT THE RULES

By the Law (Po zakonu, Lev Kulešov, 1926)

The minimalist low-budget film, *By the Law (Po zakonu, 1926)*, was an important event for the contemporary professional audience. After his extensive experiments with montage techniques — ironically coinciding with the ideological reediting of imported films—Kulešov had become one of the central figures in the new Soviet cinematography. His previous films, particularly *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mister West in the Land of the Bolsheviks (Neobyčajnye priključenija mistera Vesta v strane bol'shevikov, 1924)*, presented a promising amalgam of experimental, commercial, and ideological dimensions. This popular film used innovative editing to tell an adventure story about a misled American, trapped by petty criminals and saved by the vigilant and efficient Soviet militia.

By the Law is based on Viktor Sklovskij's adaptation of a novel by Jack London made by a group of the director's long-time students and partners —including his wife Aleksandra Chochlova, Leonid Fogel, and the future director Sergej Komarov. It is a 'gold-rush' story in which the servant, having killed one of the group members, remains in a tiny remote shack with the two other gold-hunters, all of them trapped by the heavy polar winter. Kulešov turned the story into a spectacular psychological study of anarchy

¹⁶ In 1925 the organization experienced its first restructuring as a result of which the leadership was replaced by politically loyal and professionally incompetent activists of the Association of Proletarian Literature (RAPP), headed by Konstantin Jukov. The new leadership was instrumental in trying to break with the alleged 'elitism*' of the organization. The renaming of the association from ARK to ARRK (Association of the Workers of Revolutionary Cinematography) inadvertently emphasized the curbing of its original mission by turning visionary 'revolutionaries' into 'employees'. In Russian, the second 'R' in the abbreviation stood for *rabotnik* and not *rabočij*, which, contrary to the conventional translation, should be understood not as 'worker', but as 'employee'.

and law, custom and authority. The prestige of the director as well as the innovative aspects notwithstanding, the discussion about this film exemplified the instability of the reputation of even the most appraised filmmakers in the context of shifting cultural and political priorities. Kulešov became one of the first targets of instrumentalized 'peer reviewing'.

It turned out, however, that it was not that easy to channel the professional debate in the desired direction. Despite the straightforwardly negative stance towards the film on the part of the administrative leadership of **ARRK**, it was screened and discussed twice, which was in itself quite exceptional. After the second screening, the presidium once again made a proposal to the audience to vote for the prefabricated resolution. The opening sentences of the text paid tribute to the professional qualities of the film, while at the same time separating them from the ultimate 'public value' of the final product. The ensuing statements, however, showed that the optimistic beginning was no more than formal lip service paid not so much to the author as to the audience:

The meeting notes, however, that the theme of the film *By the Law*, both as regards the script as well as in its essence, is alien to our spectators, far from our Soviet reality, and, taking into account the elements of pathology, hysteria and mysticism, is a detrimental incident in our cinematography, harmfully affecting our Soviet screen.¹⁷

This quote contains in a nutshell the rhetorical devices of the Soviet *apparàtks*, mobilized to crush undesired 'detrimental incidents' — be they films, books, or people. The consistent usage of an amorphous 'ours'—four times in one sentence!—was expected at once to add credibility to the claims through speaking on behalf of mythical consolidated masses as well as to avoid personal responsibility for the judgment presented. Contrasting Kulešov to the apparently innumerable 'us', Konstantin Jukov, the head of **ARRK** and the author of the resolution, spoke at once on behalf of the spectators and 'Soviet reality' at large, as well as the whole Soviet cinematography. While the film was castigated for its uselessness and— worse! — for misusing state resources, all these claims needed to gain

¹⁷ «собрание, однако, отмечает, что тема картины «По закону» как по сценарию, так и по своему существу чужда нашему зрителю, не близка нашей советской действительности, а имея в виду моменты патологии, истерики и мистики является болезненным явлением в нашей кинематографии, вредно отражающимся на нашем советском экране.» (RGALI, f. 2494, op. i, d. 32, fo. 7)

the support of the competent audience, which by and large welcomed the film and respected its author as a highly qualified professional. The suggested 'sanctions' also tell of the attempted negotiations with the artists, where the two sides were testing the limits of their respective freedom. The resolution seemed to offer a compromise:

The meeting concludes that the film requires serious analysis and in-depth study and thus appoints the methodology department to study the montage techniques, composition, etc., publishing the results of this research ...[*Aesthetic questions*] should be worked over by the film crew and the results of this study should be published as well.¹⁸

The statement euphemistically conveyed the intention of the administrative establishment to exclude the film from public distribution, limiting its audience to the professional press and a restricted circle of specialists. Furthermore, the results of a so-called 'detailed analysis' could potentially open the way to compromising the work and its creators, particularly in a situation when the film was not available to the public. Yet the emphasis on public discussion suggests the acceptance of its merits as well as the existence of some tacit rules of professional interaction, whereby public debates (even if restricted to professional circles) still possessed an unquestioned value.

Even this seemingly 'friendly' compromise was rejected outright by the members of **ARRK**, who openly criticized the leadership for, in Sklovskij's metaphorical language, 'sticking pencils into the artists' wheels'.¹⁹ Sklovskij further attacked the multi-layered censorship and protested against victimizing this inexpensive experiment, contrasting it with such costly commercial undertakings as *Bear's Wedding*, based on the script by the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatolij Lunačarskij. The other **ARRK** members backed his position, refused to sign the resolution, and proposed a new one, specifying the achievements of Lev Kulešov in cinema.²⁰ The first

¹⁸ «Собрание считает, что картина требует анализа и изучения в порядке кабинетной работы, а поэтому поручает методологическому кабинету проработать моменты монтажа, композиции, и т.д., объявив эти материалы в печати. ... Вопросы художественного оформления картины «По закону» поручить проработать постановочной группе, также опубликовав проработанные материалы.» (RGALI, f. 2494, op. i, d. 32, fos. 6-у)

¹⁹ RGALI, f. 2494, op. i, d. 32, fo. 7.

²⁰ RGALI, f. 2494, op. i, d. 32, fo. 8.

attempts to impose a prefabricated opinion on the professional audience faced the considerable integrity of the organization as well as the members' mastery of public rhetoric.

SPLIT LOYALTIES: LOOK WHO IS TALKING

The Land of Čuvašija (Strana Čuvaškaja, Vladislav Korolevič, 1927)

Further attempts to compromise and subvert the status of **ARRK** followed. One of the strongest arguments used against the organization was directly concerned with its main organizational principle, namely, professionalism. The leadership of the association itself accused its own organization of 'elitism'. The Society of Friends of Soviet Cinema (**ODSK**) became a tool for the authorities to 'liberate' **ARRK** from its professional 'limitations'.²¹ The divergence between the two organizations in view of their interests, aesthetic positions, assumed missions, and modes of existence made the proposed option of 'peaceful coexistence' wishful thinking. Two parallel discussions of the same film exemplify the divergent criteria for evaluation employed by the mass and the professional organizations respectively.

The Land of Cuvassija (Strana Cuvasskaja, 1927) was commissioned by a regional studio, Čuvaškino, created in the Autonomous Republic of Čuvašija.²² The film was envisioned as part of the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Revolution. Typically for the commissioned works of the time, it was made in a hurry (total 32 days!), under the slogan 'Quickly!'²³ Although it was finished on time, the state distribution company rejected the film on the grounds of its low professional quality. The director, Vladislav Korolevič, appealed to the public to lobby for distribution rights for the film, **ODSK** was to be the official 'mouthpiece' of the mass audience, while **ARRK** stood for professional expertise, adding weight to the *voxpopuli*.²⁴

²¹ RGALI, f. 2494, op. i, d. 74, fo. 34.

²² *The Land of Čuvašija* was already the third film produced by Čuvaškino. On the activities of the studio, see RGALI, f. 2494, op. 1, d. 102, fo. 12.

²³ RGALI, f. 2494, op. i, d. 102, fo. 5.

The two screenings took place with a two-month time difference—at **ODSK** on 29 October 1927 and in **ARRK** on 8 December 1927.

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A comparison of the two discussions brings to light the diver-gent hierarchies of 'acceptability' co-existing in the early years of Soviet cinema. The debate at ODSK gathered a mixed audience of journalists and ordinary viewers and focused mostly on the political message and the representations of different groups and local practices. The overall attitude was sympathetic to the film and to its author's problems with distribution; the audience praised the studio *for* its attempts to initiate local production, emphasizing the importance of 'ethnographic' filming and representation of everyday life. The 'technical' problems with the film *per se* were considered to be less important than its thematic scope and ideological implications: ,

The *Land of Čuvašija* is an interesting film document reflecting the everyday life of the Soviet Republic of Čuvašija and deserves to be mentioned among Soviet productions of 1927. It suitably fulfills the practical objective of presenting a cinematographic report for the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution and is a convincing agitation weapon, useful for introducing the wide masses of worker and peasant spectators to the Soviet construction. As for the technical and professional side of the film, it suffers from schematism, which should be corrected through adjusting the inter-titles and the editing.²⁵

While the director and its team anticipated reintegration into the professional field with the help of public and professional pressure, the discussion at ARRK took a very different turn. The audience of 135 people—unusually large for a non-fiction film from a small provincial studio—debated the nature and principles of *Kulturfilms*, a concept used at the time to refer to works with educational aims largely based on non-fiction material.²⁶ The members of ARRK criticized the film for breaking the 'rules of the genre' by including

²⁵ «„Страна Чувашская" — любопытный кино-документ, отражающий быт и жизнь Чувашской советской республики, заслуживает быть отмеченной в числе советской кино-продукции 1927 года. Выполняет практическую задачу иллюстративного отчета к ю-летию Октябрьской революции удовлетворительно и является убедительным агитационным оружием, пригодным для ознакомления широких масс рабоче-крестьянских зрителей с социалистическим строительством. В технике и мастерстве страдает схематизмом, [что] надлежит исправить надписями и монтажем.» (RGALI, f. 2494, op. i, d. 102, fo. 30)

²⁶ For more on non-fiction and the concept of *Kulturfilm*, see Daan Hertogs and Nico de Klerk (eds), 1997, *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Nonfiction Film*, Amsterdam; Hans-Joachim Schlegel, 2002, Немецкие импульсы для советских культурфильмов 1920X годов, *Киноведческие записки* 58, 368-79; Oksana Sarkisova, 2003, Life as it should be? Early nonfiction cinema in Russia, *Medien und Zeit* 1,41-61.

staged elements into the otherwise non-fiction texture of the *Луг* and thus undermining the viewer's trust in the authenticity of the material. The 'contamination' of documentary material was seen as the foremost problem, more serious than the unprofessional camera work or the unsatisfactory editing. The final resolution summarized the harshest points without any trace of sympathy:

We shall conclude that *The Land of Cnvašija* mixes the methods of fiction and non-fiction filmmaking. As a result, it fails to achieve an emotional impact on the viewer and at the same time undermines the significance of the documentary material, evoking mistrust in the organization of material in the film. We should thus draw the attention of public cultural-educational and producing organizations to the inadmissibility for Soviet cinematography, in 1927, to produce and distribute such helpless and illiterate films as *The Land of Cnvašija*.²⁷

The unanimous decision by the cinematographic community to discard the film is thus an example of the 'victory of professionalism'. The film was not granted wide distribution and remained a forgotten historical accident, bearing witness to the symbolic authority of ARRK; ironically this coincided with the position of the distribution company, which tried to avoid financial losses on a film that was far from a cinematographic triumph. In retrospect the film can be appreciated for the growing ethnographic and historical value of material that was originally perceived as mediocre. While ARRK'S word alone was not enough to shape film policy, rather adding symbolic weight to the on-going campaign, its authority was sufficient to determine the reputation of the cinematographic work. Furthermore, the debate demonstrated a strong group cohesion under the aegis of professional standards. In order to turn ARRK into a more manageable institution, and to force it to subordinate professional interests to ideological ones, further 'work' was required.

²⁷ «Констатировать в фильме „Страна Чувашская“ смешение методов работы художественной и документальной фильмы. В результате чего, не достигая задачи эмоционального воздействия на зрителя, он в то же время подрывает значение документального материала фильма, вызывая недоверие к организации материала в нем. ... Считать, что необходимо обратить внимание ответственных культурно-просветительных и производственных организаций на недопустимость производства и выпуска советской кинематографией в 1927 году беспомощных, безграмотных фильм, подобных „Страна Чувашская“.» (RGALI, f. 2494,0p. i,d. 102,fo, 31)

TRANSIENT OR PERMANENT – AMBIGUITIES OF FILMMAKING

Today (Segodnja, Esfir' Šub, 1930)

The changing agenda of professional organizations exemplified the on-going process of politicization. A wave of purges was initiated by the Communist Party in the mid-1920s and grew exponentially to incorporate a variety of cultural institutions. In ARRK, as in other organizations, the purges followed an externally imposed scenario. The wave of purges reached ARRK around 1930 and was used for breaking up existing professional and personal loyalties, and for settling accounts with those who previously were defended by strong group solidarity.²⁸ Film debates continued, while their atmosphere changed unmistakably. The intertwined political and aesthetic reasoning blurred the distinction between the artistic the product as such, its political implications, and the accountability of the director. 'Mistakes' in filmmaking acquired political overtones. The discussion of Esfir' Šub's film *Today (Segodnja, 1930)* accentuates the internal transformation of the professional debates.

The film was finished in early 1930, to be released in time for the 16th Party Congress. It was nevertheless not released until five months later, deferred through referral to numerous censorship organizations. These were not convinced even by the established reputation of the film director, previously hailed for the pioneering genre of 'ideologically adjusted' chronicle materials—*Fall of the Romanov Dynasty (Padenie dinastii Romanovych)*, *The Great Road (Velikijput')*, both from 1927. Sub's new film—a montage of American and Soviet newsreels—aimed at contrasting the decline of capitalism with the progress of Soviet industry. Like Sub's previous works, this film sought to ascribe meaning to the visual material through editing and inter-titles. In the changing political atmosphere, however, even a straightforward and Manichean division into 'good' and 'bad' required further adjustments.

Characteristically, an important announcement preceded the discussion of Sub's film. The head of ARRK opened the meeting with a speech on the 'Industrial Party' trial. He did not simply reiterate the news from the morning press, but linked it directly to the activ-

²⁸ Cf., for example, the 'purification' of the head of the Mežrabpomfil'm studio, Arustamov, headed by the ARRK leader, in which insinuations and accusations were collected against Lev Kulešov (RGALI, f. 2494, op. 1, d. 295).

ities of ARRK. A resolution on the trial was passed unanimously emphasizing the personal responsibility of the members for adhering to ideological orthodoxy.

I think that we, as cinematographic specialists, cannot help but express our indignation against this whole counter-revolutionary gang which conducted its subversive activities in the Soviet Union.... By way of response to these criminal deeds, the members of ARRK should direct all their efforts to continue accelerating the tempo of their work, to increase the quality of their production, and to strike at bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology which infiltrates the entire front of our socialist construction.²⁹

Turning to discuss the film, the audience debated first of all the question of responsibility for possible ideological mistakes in *Today*. On the day of its release, the film evoked anonymous criticism in the Leningrad press, criticism which tacitly signalled the beginning of an orchestrated campaign against the film. Depending on the position of the speaker, the unspecified 'blame' was put either on the censorship authorities for having sanctioned the screenings, the director for not having foreseen the new party line, or alternatively the **ARRK** leadership for not having provided the necessary guidance for its member. The film was no longer seen as an autonomous product, but as an organic part of the social reality it claimed to represent. The situation bordered on absurdity when Sub was accused of political shortsightedness for including in the film scenes from a Novorossiisk factory, which later (!) failed to fulfill the norm of production.³⁰

However irrelevant the accusations might seem to us now, the stakes were high at the time. The atmosphere of growing aggression and fear further polarized the positions of the filmmakers and the administrative members. The latter defended "themselves against political accusations by pleading their 'liberalism', which was considered a lesser 'sin' than political 'deviation'. Thus, a representative

²⁹ «Я думаю, что мы, специалисты-кинематографисты, не можем не выразить своего возмущения против всей этой контрреволюционной банды, которая вела свою подрывную работу в Советском Союзе.... АРРКовцам в ответ на эту преступную работу нужно напрячь все свои силы для того, чтобы продолжать развивать темпы своей работы, для того, чтобы повышать качество своей продукции, бить ту буржуазную и мелкобуржуазную идеологию, которая просачивается по всему фронту нашего социалистического строительства.» (RGALI, f. 2494, op. i, d. 338, fo. 1)

³⁰ RGALI, f. 2494, op. i, d. 338, fo. 40.

of the the distribution company attempted to pay lip service in tongue-tied language both to the authorities and to the filmmakers in the following way:

I disagreed with GRK [*the State Censorship Committee*, o. s.], which ascribed the first category to this film, since I thought and still think that this film, if you approach it from the point of the committee's categories (which I personally do not like too much) should not have received the first category.... I think that the worst evil in our Soviet cinematography was the situation when our administrators very often said: 'Accept it and do accordingly!'... But I... know that you cannot deal with people in that way.... I therefore assure you that in the future films will appear on the screen which come through my hands, even though I disagree with them.³¹

The filmmakers, voicing support for the challenged member of their 'guild', used the different strategy of passing the responsibility to the censoring organizations. Presenting cinematographic production as a collective enterprise under the supervision of numerous organizations, they protested against blaming a single filmmaker for possible political misconceptions. Similar personal experiences motivated many to fight for collective 'security'. Relegating the responsibility to the controlling authorities, Aleksandr Dovženko, for example, openly referred to a deliberate attempt to turn the film into compromising material:

Why did the indignation of the Leningrad proletariat start exactly on the first day of the screening in Moscow while the film was ready five months ago ? This is a very juicy story... Surely it was possible to organize everything in such a way that the proletariat became indignant three months earlier, and in that time comrade Sub could have taken notice of all the best in this indignation and introduced changes in her film so that her work would not have become a...scandal Let us talk about the film. You protest against the title...*Today*. And we ask you: why did you call the film *Today*? Comrades from Sovkino,... is it not all in your hands ? ... let us demand

³¹ «Я не был согласен с ГРК, который дал ей [*картине*, o. s.] первую категорию, ибо я считал и считаю, что картина,... если подходить к ней с точки зрения реперткомовских категорий, которых я не очень большой поклонник, то она первую категорию получить не должна была.... Я считаю, что наихудшим злом в советской кинематографии было то обстоятельство, что кинематографическое руководство очень часто поступало так: прими к сведению и к беспрекословному исполнению. ... Я же ... знаю, что так обращаться с людьми нельзя. Поэтому я заверяю вас, что в дальнейшем буду поступать так, что на экранах будут появляться картины, проходящие через мои руки, но тем не менее, картины, с которыми я не буду согласен.» (RGALI, f. 2494, op. i, d. 338, fos. 4, 29-30)

from you not to be mere bureaucrats, sitting at four-legged tables but teachers, guiding your filmmakers; for your current method of dealing with things will lead to us doing even worse.³²

Sub herself, unwilling to accept the self-victimizing role, took an active part in the debate. She pointed to the external obstacles she had had to overcome while making the film—from scarcity of material to the controversial suggestions of the censoring committee. Furthermore, she argued for the right to approach film as a historical document. The debates over the concept of the documentary further radicalized the positions of the filmmakers. The concept of 'life as it is' was opposed to the normative position—'life as it should be'—then gaining momentum in Soviet documentary filmmaking. Thus, the qualities of the film itself remained secondary in a debate which centered on the notorious question of 'who is guilty?' Most participants in the debate only referred to the film by way of a suitable scapegoat.

In the heat of the debate, the audience did not come up with a unanimous opinion. The resolution on the film was assigned to a committee, which included administrators and filmmakers as well as the director herself. The implication of this and many similar film debates, however, was clear: any cinematographic work was seen as a political statement the approval of which no longer depended on the declared ideological loyalty of the filmmaker. The political and the aesthetic were becoming tightly interwoven, and the visual language of documentaries was increasingly converging with that of fiction films. Furthermore, the ascription of a cathartic function to political processes implicitly presented the latter as blueprints for the artists to follow. Speaking of the relationship between artistic and documentary, one of the participants in the discussion sponta-

³² «Почему возмущение ленинградского пролетариата началось именно в первый день выпуска картины на экран в Москве, в то время, как картина была сделана 5 месяцев тому назад? Получается очень пикантная история ... Неужели нельзя было поставить дело так, чтобы пролетариат возмутился месяца три раньше, и за это бы время товарищ Шуб, принявшая к сведению все лучшее в этом возмущении, сделала бы исправления и картина не была бы оскандалена. ... Давайте говорить о картине. Вы протестуете против названия „Сегодня“. А мы спрашиваем, зачем вы назвали картину „Сегодня“ ? Товарищи Совкино,... ведь в ваших руках это находится?.. позвольте требовать от вас, чтобы вы не были чиновниками, сидящими за столами на четырех ножках, но педагогами, ведущими своих режиссеров, ибо такой метод хозяйствования приведет к тому, что мы будем делать еще хуже. » (RGALI, f. 2494,0p. i,d. 338, fos. 19-20.)

neously and emotionally formulated the idea of the 'aestheticization of politics', later developed by Walter Benjamin with reference to different material:

We have spoken today about one document—about the condemnation of the saboteurs...In the last two years, I have seen many...films and works of art, but I have never experienced such a strong emotional excitement, as in reading this sentence. And there could hardly exist an artistic product that could lead to stronger conclusions than the collection of these documents, artfully edited, correctly organized from a specific class-conscious political viewpoint.³³

Aesthetic competence and the right to set the canon of interpretation was thus gradually transferred to the external, non-professional institutions of authority, reducing the artistic community to the seemingly safer role of an executive body, whose professional expertise was used to justify political decisions. Trying to ensure a space for professional freedom, the filmmakers agreed willy-nilly to reduce their position to that of craftsmen. Aspiring to create an undisturbed milieu of 'cine-intellectuals', they eventually assumed the role of 'cine-proletarians', forced to sell their labor to the only possible employer and thus having to adjust to the changing demands of the power center.

The need to bring together mass and elitistic, utilitarian and idealistic, everyday and outstanding registers contributed to the formation of Soviet culture as a blend of 'high' and 'popular' layers. Professional identities became intertwined with political standings, and inevitably they condition one another. The Association of Revolutionary Cinematography attempted to preserve the identity of an elite professional organization in times of shifting cultural landmarks, experimenting with alternative directions in search of a winning strategy. From a defence of the 'purity of the ranks' of the guild, a justification of the right to experiment (Lev Kulešov's *By*

³³ «Мы сегодня говорили об одном документе — об обвинительном акте по делу вредителей. ... За последние два года я видел множество кинокартин и произведений искусства, но никогда не испытывал такого сильного эмоционального возбуждения, [как] когда читал это обвинение. И вряд ли найдется такое художественное произведение, которое могло бы привести к более сильным выводам, чем собрание этих документов, искусно смонтированных, правильно организованных с определенной классовой политической точки зрения. » (RGALI, f. 2494, op. i, d. 338, fo. 27)

the Law) and the rejection of 'unprofessional' works (Vladislav Korolevič's *The Land of Cuvašija*), ARRK, given that neither professional competence nor ideological commitment could guarantee a positive reception of the film (Esfir' Sub's *Today*), moved to protect its members by shifting responsibility for films away from their directors. Looking at the everyday choices made in the professional milieu, at the small 'victories' and 'compromises', at the internal splits and alliances, one discovers a rich social fabric and a transient subjectivity of experiences, which escapes the theories of de-monized totalitarianism or heroic resistance.

