

The October Revolution in Soviet Cinema of the 1930s: Narrative Structure and the Stalin Cult*

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*Περίληψη_ Παναγιώτα Μήνη | Η Οκτωβριανή Επανάσταση στον σοβιετικό
κινηματογράφο της δεκαετίας του 1930: Αφηγηματική δομή
και η λατρεία της προσωπικότητας του Στάλιν**

Το άρθρο εστιάζει σε δυο σοβιετικές ταινίες που γυρίστηκαν την περίοδο 1937–1938 για την εικοστή επέτειο της Οκτωβριανής Επανάστασης του 1917: *Ο Λένιν τον Οκτώβρη* (*Lenin v Oktyabre*, 1937) σε σκηνοθεσία του Μιχαήλ Ρομ —η οποία εξετάζεται στο άρθρο στην πρωτότυπη, πλήρη μορφή της— και *Η μεγάλη λάμψη* του Μιχαήλ Τσιαουρέλι (*Velikoe zareno*, 1938). Αντίθετα από τις παγκοσμίως γνωστές, επικές ταινίες του σοβιετικού μοντάζ της δεκαετίας του 1920, που γυρίστηκαν για την δέκατη επέτειο του 1917 [*Το τέλος της Αγίας Πετρούπολης* (*Konets Sankt-Peterburga*, 1927) του Βσέβολοντ Πουντόβκιν και *Οκτώβρης* (*Oktyabr'*, 1928) του Σεργκέι Μ. Αϊζενστάιν], οι ταινίες *Ο Λένιν τον Οκτώβρη* και *Η μεγάλη λάμψη* αναπαράστησαν το παρελθόν με τον εύληπτο τρόπο του σοσιαλιστικού ρεαλισμού και εξύμνησαν τη συμβολή των ηγετών, πρωτίστως του Στάλιν, στην επιτυχία της Οκτωβριανής Επανάστασης. Το άρθρο εξετάζει τον τρόπο με τον οποίο η αφήγηση στο *Λένιν τον Οκτώβρη* και τη *Μεγάλη λάμψη* δομήθηκε έτσι ούτως ώστε να υπηρετηθεί η λεγόμενη «λατρεία της προσωπικότητας» του Στάλιν. Υποστηρίζεται ότι οι συγκεκριμένες ταινίες δανείστηκαν και αναθεώρησαν τις «δύο γραμμές πλοκής» του κλασικού κινηματογράφου και έθεσαν τον Στάλιν στο κέντρο και των δυο γραμμών, ως πρωταρχικό αιτιακό παράγοντα. Η μορφή του Στάλιν συνενώνει τις δυο γραμμές πλοκής και οδηγεί στην επιτυχή έκβασή τους, ως σωτήρας του Λένιν, σχεδιαστής της επανάστασης, προφανής διάδοχος στην εξουσία του κόμματος και πατρική φιγούρα που συμβολικά εμπνέει και επικυρώνει τον ρομαντικό έρωτα ενός νεαρού ζευγαριού μπολσεβίκων.

WHEN we think of depictions of the October Revolution in Russian cinema, we tend to imagine the famous epic films of the montage movement of the 1920s: *October* (*Oktyabr'*, 1928) by Sergei M. Eisenstein (1898–1948) and *The End of St Petersburg* (*Konets Sankt-Peterburga*, 1927) by Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893–1953). Both films were made to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the revolution, and since their creation they have come to be considered milestones in world cinema. What we probably don't picture are the films made in 1937–1938 for the twentieth anniversary of 1917. These films, including Mikhail Romm's

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(1901–1971) *Lenin in October* (*Lenin v Oktyabre*, 1937) and Mikheil Chiaureli's (1894–1974) *The Great Glow* (*Velikoe zarevo*, 1938, also known as *The Great Dawn* or *They Wanted Peace*), remember 1917 differently from the montage epics of the 1920s. Their primary goal was to celebrate the contribution of great leaders to the October Revolution, mainly Stalin. The films were projects of the Stalin cult.¹

For many decades, most Soviet films of the 1930s remained unknown to film lovers because they could hardly compete with the popularity of montage cinema. The aesthetic genre to which they belonged, socialist realism, was dismissed as a second-rate, insipid trend. Still, as film scholars have shown, the Soviet socialist realist films deserve our attention for many reasons, including their thematic and stylistic particularities and their political implications.² The anniversary films of the October Revolution that were made during the 1930s are of special significance. These films were extremely popular in the Soviet Union.³ In addition, they produced a memory of October that prevailed in the Soviet Union for almost twenty-five years, from the late 1930s to 1953, as they “were kept in the repertoire and shown on the anniversary of the revolution until Stalin’s death.”⁴ Finally, they most clearly reveal how October became a constructed story, a part of Stalinist ideology.

At this point, we should bear in mind that until recently film scholars did not have easy access to the original versions of the anniversary films of the October Revolution (or of socialist realist films in general). The most readily available forms of these films were those reworked during the Soviet Thaw (1953–1964);⁵ virtually all references to Stalin had been removed. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union was sustained research on the original versions possible.⁶ In the West, the first such analyses appeared after 2000. In “Recreating ‘History’ on Film: Stalin and the Russian Revolution in Feature Film, 1937–39,” Judith Devlin used archival material and described the stages that the scripts of the anniversary films underwent before they could offer a politically acceptable depiction of Stalin.⁷ In addition, in one chapter of *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History: Museum of the Revolution*, Evgeny Dobrenko paid attention to the way in which these films distorted the events of 1917 to depict Stalin as Lenin’s chief collaborator.⁸

This essay contributes to this discussion by investigating how the narratives of *Lenin in October* and *The Great Glow*, which dramatize the 1917 events, were struc-

¹ Devlin 2007, 149–150. Other anniversary films that also contributed to the Stalin cult focused on the immediate post-1917 period: *Lenin in 1918* (*Lenin v 1918 godu*, 1939) by Romm and *The Vyborg Side* (*Vyborgskaya storona*, 1939) by Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg.

² See Taylor 1999; Taylor 2007; Taylor 2011; Bordwell 2001; Belodubrovskaya 2017b.

³ Devlin 2007, 161; Dobrenko 2008, 227.

⁴ Devlin 2007, 162.

⁵ If they were not altogether banned under the Thaw (e.g. *The Great Glow*, see p. 123 of this article).

⁶ The original versions of the films are now rather easy to find. They are being broadcasted on Russian TV channels and some are available for purchase in digital format.

⁷ Devlin 2007.

⁸ Dobrenko 2008, 191–255.

tured to serve Stalin's cult. This analysis may help us to comprehend the storytelling methods of socialist realist cinema and the way in which the memory of October was shaped through works intended to perpetuate public admiration for Stalin. I have worked in a similar direction in relation to another popular Soviet film of the late 1930s, which does not concern the revolution, Ivan Pyrëv's kolkhoz musical *Tractor Drivers* (*Traktoristy*, 1939). The original version of *Tractor Drivers* places Stalin at the heart of the film's narrative motivation (although Stalin as a flesh-and-blood person never appears).⁹ Before expanding on this idea in my examination of *Lenin in October* and *The Great Glow*, I will discuss how October was commemorated in the famous 1920s films, so we can understand better the changes that *Lenin in October* and *The Great Glow* brought to the memory of 1917.¹⁰

The 1920s

In 1927, the tenth anniversary of the revolution was celebrated in the Soviet Union, especially in Leningrad and Moscow. Visitors from all over the world came for the spectacle. As Frederic C. Corney has suggested, the tenth jubilee presented the revolution as an event in which the Russian people had unanimously and enthusiastically participated.¹¹ Cinema contributed to this legend: in addition to *The End of St Petersburg* and *October*, the anniversary output included Boris Barnet's *Moscow in October* (*Moskva v oktyabre*, 1927), part of which survives; A. Naydich's animated *October and the Bourgeois World* (*Oktyabr' i burzhuaznyy mir*, 1927), a Belgoskino production which has been lost; and two documentaries by Esfir Shub: *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (*Padeniye dinastii Romanovykh*, 1927), concerning the February Revolution of 1917, and *The Great Road* (*Velikiy put'*, 1927) about the October Revolution.¹²

The best-known among these films, *October* and *The End of St Petersburg*, showcase the role of the masses in 1917 and use filming methods that were innovative at the time. *The End of St Petersburg* tells the story of a young peasant man (Ivan Chuvelev), a Bolshevik worker (Alexander Chistyakov), and his wife (Vera Baranovskaya) in 1914–1917. The revolution is presented as a historical moment in which the class-conscious Bolshevik proletariat (the worker), the less-conscious segments of the working class (the wife), and the backward peasantry (the young man) come together to build socialism.¹³ The film also indirectly contributes to the cult of Lenin that the Party had been cultivating since the mid-1920s;¹⁴ the Bolshevik worker is often shown holding his hand straight and slightly upwards, as if giving directions for the nation's course, a pose associated with Lenin.¹⁵ At

⁹ Mini 2016, 162, 169–172.

¹⁰ Here I elaborate on ideas presented in Mini 2017.

¹¹ Corney 2004, 176.

¹² For these films, see Leyda 1973, 223; Corney 2004, 184.

¹³ For details, see Mini 2002, ch. 5.

¹⁴ For the cult of Lenin, see Tumarkin 1983.

¹⁵ Mini 2002, 269–271.

the same time, *The End of St Petersburg* conforms to the Bolshevik explanation of Soviet history as a transition from monarchy (statues of the tsars) to bourgeois democracy (Kerensky's Provisional Government), capitalism (Lebedev's factories), and imperialism (First World War) and from there to socialist revolution.¹⁶

Stylistically, Pudovkin combined traditional and radical techniques. As in his previous film, *Mother* (*Mat'*, 1926), he revised classical film devices to create harmonious environments and used unconventional methods to accentuate ideological tension and bring key political points to the fore.¹⁷

Eisenstein's *October* focused on a shorter period, from February 1917 to the storming of the Winter Palace. Instead of limiting his story to a few characters caught up in the sweep of history, he highlighted the rising of the masses, the discussions and debates among socialists before the revolution, and the storming of the Winter Palace. Eisenstein presented Russia's trajectory towards October by splitting the world into two camps: counterrevolutionaries and revolutionaries. In the first camp, we see—in the order of the film's unfolding—priests and upper-class citizens; the Prime Minister Alexander Kerensky; the ambitious General Kornilov; dubious Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries (SRs); and the Women's Death Battalion at the Winter Palace. In the second camp, we will find poverty stricken people; tired soldiers, who see adversaries as friends; Lenin (Vasili Nikandrov) arriving at the Finland Station in April 1917 amidst cheers and applause; the masses demanding the transfer of power to the Soviets; the revolutionaries gathering artillery at the Smolny Institute and storming the Winter Palace; and finally the victorious people welcoming Lenin to power.

Eisenstein's radical methods inscribe the October Revolution into the dialectical process of history.¹⁸ This director prompts the viewers to associate disparate bits of information to comprehend broad historical developments, and to experience time as a fluid quality, since, through montage, some actions are repeated, some are sped up, and others are unnaturally prolonged. Next to these, Eisenstein's allegories and intellectual associations, produced by diegetic and non-diegetic material—what Eisenstein described as “intellectual cinema”—¹⁹ lead the viewer's mind beyond the 1917 reality and into the depths of human thought and language structures.

Although both films caused a sensation at home and abroad for their scope and techniques, they did not find commercial success in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, they were criticized for historical inaccuracies (*October*)²⁰ and misuse of

¹⁶ Mini 2002, 274–310.

¹⁷ On Pudovkin's style in *The End of St Petersburg*, see Kepley 1995; Mini 2002, 315–335; Kepley 2003.

¹⁸ Ropars-Wuilleumier 1976.

¹⁹ For Eisenstein's “intellectual cinema,” see Eisenstein 1988, 179–180, 193–194; Bordwell 1993, 123–127.

²⁰ Brik 1988, 230.

money on the production level (*The End of St Petersburg*).²¹ A common criticism centered on these films' experimental styles. For example, *The End of St Petersburg* was described as "unfinished, a sketch for a film,"²² "overloaded with lyrical and psychological parts" that tired the attention.²³ *October* was characterized as "difficult to understand," lacking both "a sense of measure"²⁴ and "coordination between three or four essentially different stylistic devices."²⁵ In fact, in March 1928, the same month in which Eisenstein's *October* was belatedly released, the First All-Union Party Conference on Cinema resolved that Soviet films needed to be intelligible to the masses.²⁶ This petition gradually resulted in the establishment of socialist realism as the official aesthetic dogma of the Soviet Union. As a result, after 1934 films adhered to socialist realism and propagated socialist reality in its revolutionary development through easily comprehensible stories centered on positive heroes. Other changes concerned the organization of Soviet cinema. The studios were purged,²⁷ and a highly bureaucratized censorship apparatus delayed or halted film production.²⁸

The 1930s

The changes in Soviet cinema during the late 1920s and the 1930s were accompanied by broader transformations in Soviet society and culture. In the realm of politics, Stalin's power was consolidated,²⁹ as he either exiled or eliminated those whom he considered party enemies. The Stalin personality cult dominated the cultural arena. Soviet cinema produced new films about October that would contribute to the Stalin cult and represent the past in the comprehensible way of socialist realism.

Oddly enough, the model for accessible Soviet films was found in American cinema. The head of the Soviet film industry, Boris Shumyatsky (1886–1938), envisioned a Soviet Hollywood on the Black Sea (which never materialized) and a "cinema for the millions."³⁰ One of the narrative features of Hollywood cinema that Soviet socialist realism borrowed and revised seems to be the double causal structure, the use of two plot lines. As David Bordwell has explained regarding Hollywood cinema, "Usually the classical *syuzhet* presents a double causal struc-

²¹ See Leyda 1973, 236.

²² Khersonskii 1981.

²³ V. 1927.

²⁴ Rokotov 1988, 220.

²⁵ Piotrovsky 1988, 216. For more information on critics' published complaints about *October* as well as on audiences' responses to Eisenstein's film, as were reported in contemporaneous surveys, see Bohlinger 2011.

²⁶ See the Party Cinema Conference Resolution in Taylor and Christie 1988, 208–212.

²⁷ Youngblood 1991, 189–191.

²⁸ See Kopley 1996, 47–48; Miller 2010; Belodubrovskaya 2017a, ch. 5.

²⁹ Gill 1988.

³⁰ See Taylor 1983, 451–453; Belodubrovskaya 2014.

ture, two plot lines: (...) Each line will possess a goal, obstacles, and a climax.”³¹ Although distinct, the two plot lines are “interdependent,” causally interconnected. The anniversary films of the 1930s, *Lenin in October* and *The Great Glow*, use a double plot structure, at the heart of which Stalin stands as the prime causal factor.³² These two films are different in terms of design: *Lenin in October* is tightly structured, while *The Great Glow* often appears loose.³³ Still, Stalin’s figure brings the two lines together and leads to a successful resolution. Thus, as the primary goal in both films is carrying out the Bolshevik Revolution, Stalin emerges as the driver of Russia’s change, in contrast to the broad, impersonal historical processes that led to popular uprisings in the montage films of the 1920s.

Lenin in October

Lenin in October begins shortly before the October Revolution. Lenin (Boris Shchukin) travels by train from Finland to Petersburg, accompanied by the Bolshevik worker Vasily (Nikolai Okhlopov). Meanwhile, in Petrograd, Kerensky’s (Alexander Kovalevsky) Provisional Government is hunting Lenin, considering him German spy. The film then focuses on Lenin’s secret meetings with members of his party and on the attempt of the Provisional Government and foreign officials to kill him, an assassination that is prevented just before the victorious uprising.

The goal of the film is the October Revolution. For the revolution to happen in *Lenin in October* two things need to be done. First, Lenin needs to outwit the Provisional Government and its foreign allies. Second, those Bolsheviks who are against the immediate, armed revolution (Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinoviev) need to be marginalized. Both plots run throughout the film.³⁴

The plot line concerning Lenin’s life starts early. When Lenin arrives in Lenin-grad’s train station he needs to evade the police, so he stays either with Vasily or with Anna Mikhailovna (Yelena Shatrova). As in classical American films, a critical moment comes halfway through.³⁵ Between minutes 50 and 53 of *Lenin in October*, there is a scene in which the Provisional Government and Western officials hire someone to kill Lenin. The assassin reappears at minute 70, aided by another

³¹ Bordwell 1990, 157–158.

³² For the double plot in Soviet socialist realist cinema, see also Mini 2016, 170; Belodubrovskaya 2017b.

³³ *The Great Glow* seems to be an example of that group of socialist realist films of the late 1930s that Belodubrovskaya calls “plotless” to suggest their “incomplete or unstructured plotting” (Belodubrovskaya 2017b, 170). For the loose causality in one of the plot lines of *The Great Glow*, see the analysis below. I have noted a similar looseness in one plot line of *Tractor Drivers* in Mini 2016, 170–171.

³⁴ In terms of the themes in its two plot lines, *Lenin in October* resembles a minority (an estimated five percent) of classical American films, in which none line of action involves romantic love. (In approximately ninety-five percent of classical Hollywood films, one of the plots is a love story. See Bordwell 1991, 16.)

³⁵ For the midway turning point in classical American cinema, see Thompson 1999, 31–32.

man. He locates the apartment where Lenin is hiding and knocks on the door. Lenin does not open it and is thus saved. The assassin then prepares the next steps of the plan, leaving his assistant behind. Vasily joins Lenin and Anna Mikhailovna, and although Lenin insists on going out, Vasily will not let him do so. On his way back to the apartment, the assassin is shot by a Bolshevik, but before he dies, he reveals the apartment number to an officer. Back at the apartment, Vasily and Anna Mikhailovna help Lenin disguise himself, and Vasily disarms the assassin's assistant. Vasily also outwits some officers, so Lenin can go safely to the Smolny Institute.

At first glance, Lenin's protector is Vasily, and indeed this is the impression of the altered, later version of the film. In the original version, however, there is another man behind Vasily: Stalin (Semyon Goldshtab).³⁶ Vasily does not act on his own initiative. As he says to Lenin before the uprising, the Central Committee is holding him responsible for Lenin's safety. Earlier, the Central Committee's order in the film is voiced by Stalin, who has a

short conversation with Vasily, explaining to him that without permission from the Central Committee Lenin must not go out. Here Stalin shows his personal interest in Lenin's welfare: he wants to make sure that Vasily will provide Lenin with warmth and food <fig. 1>.³⁷ Stalin's interest is understood by Sverdlov,³⁸ who listens to this conversation, as a Central Committee "special decree." Thus, Sverdlov encourages Lenin to wear someone else's coat, an act that keeps Lenin from being recognized by his enemies.



Fig. 1

In *Lenin in October*, the Central Committee is synonymous with Stalin. In this sense, by following the orders of the Central Committee, Vasily (and less often Sverdlov) is a surrogate for Stalin, who protects Lenin in the early scenes of the film. After the first meeting between Stalin and Lenin in Petrograd, Stalin exits the building first to make sure the place is safe. When Lenin is gone, Stalin again inspects the surroundings. In the remainder of the film, whenever Stalin and Lenin are apart, Vasily takes the place of Stalin.

The second plot line concerns the betrayal of the revolution by three Party men: Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinoviev.³⁹ The threat that they pose is suggested early on.

³⁶ *Lenin in October* is the first Soviet fiction film that featured Stalin. See Devlin 2007, 149.

³⁷ All images in this article are screenshots by the author, published under fair use.

³⁸ As Devlin explains, in Stalin's version of Soviet history, except of him "only relatively minor and long dead figures, such as Sverdlov and Dzerzhinsky, were to be allowed to appear in any kind of positive role" (Devlin 2007, 152).

³⁹ For details about the "conspiratorial imagination" concerning Stalin's opponents (Trotsky,

At minute 9, at the Central Committee Assembly Lenin rails against Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinoviev, who supposedly believe that the Bolsheviks should not yet proceed with the revolution. Lenin is furious, considering them to be traitors. “These pessimists keep asking us: ‘What if ...?’ ‘What if?’ (...) We must demand decisively the immediate armed insurrection. And hold that all power go to the soviets!”

More dangerous for the fate of the revolution is an article by Kamenev in *Novaya Zhizn* (*New Life*). The article is first mentioned at minute 49 in the same scene in which Lenin’s assassin is hired; thus the obstacles of the two plot lines appear together in about the middle of the film. Kamenev’s article is later discussed by the Provisional Government who feel grateful to him because he thus revealed the plan for the revolution and let them prepare. At Anna Mikhailovna’s, Lenin finds out about the article and shouts, “These bastards [Kamenev and Zinoviev] have betrayed us! They betrayed the Party, gave away the plan of the Central Committee. Those bandits!” Lenin sends Vasily to Stalin and Sverdlov.

In *Lenin in October*, Stalin is the only person whom Lenin trusts and with whom he privately discusses the preparations for the revolution.⁴⁰ The second line that Lenin utters in the film, while traveling to Petrograd, is his wish to meet Stalin, to whom he sends a letter for *Pravda* (Stalin was a chief editor of *Pravda* in 1917, but so was Kamenev, a fact that the film leaves out). As soon as Lenin and Vasily arrive at Anna Mikhailovna’s, Lenin makes sure that Vasily remembers that his first meeting should be with Stalin. The next day, Lenin meets Stalin, and their conversation (which we never hear) lasts, as an intertitle states, for four hours. After this meeting, the two men say goodbye, with Lenin hugging Stalin <fig. 2>. Obviously, Lenin has found in Stalin a real supporter of the armed revolution. Later, at the Central Committee Assembly where Lenin castigates Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinoviev, who want to delay the revolution, he refers to the correct idea of Stalin “that we cannot wait.” The film thus suggests that the plan for the *immediate* armed revolution, which would change Russia’s future, belongs to Stalin. Soon,



Fig. 2

Lenin will have another private conversation with Stalin, which we watch through a glass pane door <fig. 3>. Although we do not hear what the two men say, we see Lenin listening attentively to Stalin, who is shown presenting his opinions with conviction and confidence, as if Stalin is the mastermind of the revolution.

Zinoviev, and Kamenev among others), as it appears in this and other films of the era, see Dobrenko 2008, 191–255.

⁴⁰ See also Devlin 2007, 155.

On the day of the revolution, the two men again meet privately at Smolny and the obstacles of the two plot lines are now resolved. An intertitle announces, “And Lenin’s plan of the armed insurrection started to be implemented,” implying Stalin’s central role in designing the uprising. From that moment, the film enters its climactic last part: the revolution. In this last part, Lenin is most often absent from the scenes. As head of the Military-Revolutionary Committee, bending over charts and maps, Stalin coordinates the shot from the cruiser *Aurora*, the phases of the people’s revolt, and the storming of the Winter Palace <fig. 4>. All stages, the intertitles announce, are implemented by order of the Military-Revolutionary Committee. In this sense, *Lenin in October* predates the laconic description of the preparation of the revolution in the 1938 *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)*, known as *The Short Course*, the textbook that Stalin commissioned in 1935 and was to become “the chief prototext of Stalinism”:⁴¹



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

On October 16 an enlarged meeting of the Central Committee of the Party was held. This meeting elected a *Party Centre*, headed by Comrade Stalin, to direct the uprising. This Party Centre was the leading core of the Revolutionary Military Committee of the Petrograd Soviet and had practical direction of the whole uprising.⁴²

In *Lenin in October* the revolution seems to have been shaped by Stalin’s personality. Unlike the epic films of the 1920s, in this film the revolution unfolds with extraordinary discipline, order, and secrecy, as if it has absorbed Stalin’s character traits. The armed masses march from the Smolny Institute to the Winter Palace in well-shaped lines, at a steady, coordinated pace <fig. 5>. After attacking the Winter Palace, the revolutionaries are instructed to preserve its precious art collection. They maintain their decorum while the members of Provisional Government surrender. At the end of the film, Lenin makes his first public appearance in Smolny,

⁴¹ Dobrenko 2008, 194.

⁴² A Commission... 1939, 206. For the importance of *The Short Course* in Soviet ideology, including the ideology of the anniversary films, see Dobrenko 2008, *passim*; Devlin 2007, 159.

followed by Stalin. Lenin proclaims Soviet power while Stalin stands to his right, as if he were the legitimate heir of the father of the revolution <fig. 6>. The last shot shows Lenin being approached by Stalin, so the film ends with both men on screen.⁴³



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

In the final analysis, in *Lenin in October* Stalin is the worthy architect of the revolution. The film implies that Lenin is the visionary, while the implementation of the revolution depends on Stalin's strategic mind.⁴⁴ Spontaneous, talkative, sometimes angry and other times happy, and often careless about his safety, Lenin seems to have the passion and vision for the revolution but not the military ability needed for its realization. Romm's presentation of Lenin prompts the viewers to feel protective of him. The figure of Stalin, instead, is designed to arouse the viewers' respect and admiration. He is the loyal, disciplined comrade who is necessary for the success of the revolution. As such, although his actual filmic presence is brief, Stalin stands at the center of the film's narrative motivation.

The Great Glow

Stalin holds a longer role in *The Great Glow*, a production of Georgia (Stalin's birthplace), directed by Mikheil Chiaureli, who "among film directors (...) would become the major architect of the Stalin cult."⁴⁵ The film was made under the patronage of the leader of the Georgian Communist Party Lavrenti Beria, the future chief of Stalin's Secret Police.⁴⁶ Like that of *Lenin in October*, the script of *The Great Glow* underwent many changes before reaching an appropriate depiction of Stalin. In addition, as was most often the case, Stalin previewed the film with members of the Politburo. At the end, he gave his approval, saying, "I didn't know I was so charming. Good!"⁴⁷

⁴³ See, also, Goodwin 1993, 161.

⁴⁴ See, also, Petrone 2000, 163–164.

⁴⁵ Kenez 2001, 208.

⁴⁶ Devlin 2007, 159.

⁴⁷ See Devlin 2007, 160.

The Great Glow covers the period from the summer of 1917 until the night of October 25, when the blank shot from the *Aurora* signaled the start of the attack on the Winter Palace and the beginning of the revolution. Like *Lenin in October*, *The Great Glow* is characterized by the simplicity of the socialist realist aesthetic, and includes a double plot structure. The major plot line concerns the political and revolutionary activities leading to the uprising. The second plot line is a love story between two young people who meet at the front, the Georgian soldier Georgi (Spartak Bagashvili) and the Bolshevik girl Svetlana (Tamara Makarova), who as a Red Cross nurse secretly distributes the Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda* to the soldiers.

In the primary plot line, Stalin (Mikheil Gelovani) is again the man behind the revolution. He shields Lenin (Konstantin Müfke), both his life and his legacy. Stalin also has an equal say in the revolution. He first appears in the middle of this 80-minute film, in a scene that lasts from minute 36 through minute 41. We see him in the *Pravda* headquarters, which Svetlana, Georgi, and other soldiers visit. All important aspects of Stalin's crucial role are condensed into this scene. He is the guardian of Lenin's ideas, the bulwark of the armed revolution, and the correct ideologist who inspires the people. Specifically, when he enters the scene, an article by Lenin is about to be published in *Pravda*. Stalin immediately senses that a few words of the article have been cut off. He compares the forthcoming piece with Lenin's manuscript and is proven right: some of Lenin's words have been deleted. Stalin makes it clear to everyone that it is not their business to correct Lenin. "Until the Party gives me a different role in *Pravda*," he states, "I will not allow anyone to twist Lenin."

Stalin's protection of Lenin also concerns the Soviet leader's life. In this film, Lenin's life is at risk not because of the Provisional Government but because of some Bolsheviks. The film refers to an incident in 1917 when there was a disagreement in the Bolshevik Party over Lenin standing trial after the Provisional Government accused him of being a German agent. In the film, two party members want Lenin to stand trial, although this would endanger his life. Stalin intervenes, makes clear that Lenin's life cannot be put at risk, and cleverly leads the two party members in a direction different from the one that he and Lenin are about to take. The film dramatizes what the *Short Course* writes:

Kamenev, Rykov, Trotsky and others had held (...) that Lenin ought to appear before the counter-revolutionary court. Comrade Stalin was vigorously opposed to Lenin's appearing for trial. This was also the stand of the Sixth Congress, for it considered that it would be a lynching, not a trial. The congress had no doubt that the bourgeoisie wanted only one thing — the physical destruction of Lenin as the most dangerous enemy of the bourgeoisie.⁴⁸

Regarding his role as an ideologist in *The Great Glow*, in *Pravda's* headquarters, Stalin, like an accomplished, calm teacher addressing eager pupils, comprehen-

⁴⁸ A Commission... 1939, 198.

sively narrates Russia's fate after February 1917 and the need for the revolution <fig. 7>.⁴⁹ Stalin assumes a similar role toward the end of *The Great Glow*, when he gives a lengthy speech at the Party Congress <fig. 8>. In simple words and proverbs, he explains how Russia should proceed with an armed uprising without the help of Europe and give the power to the working proletariat and the poor peasantry. As he states, there is a “dogmatic Marxism” and a “creative, revolutionary Marxism,” the one that Bolsheviks now follow. To those who believe that violence incites violence, he replies, “The one who is afraid of the wolves, he better not go to the woods.” His speech, which takes about six minutes of filmic time, is constantly interrupted by applause; in addition to explaining Russia's way to the revolution, it offers a justification of the state violence which was taking place at the time of the film's creation.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

As far as the armed revolution is concerned, in *The Great Glow* Lenin and Stalin have an equal say. When Lenin first appears in the film at minute 44, the two men sit next to one another. Lenin boldly voices his opinion, and the two men communicate through their glances. As if Lenin's equal, Stalin denounces their ideological opponents <fig. 9>.⁵⁰ While hiding at Lake Raslin, Lenin expresses his distrust of Kamenev and his group, and is confident that “under Stalin's passionate guidance, the Party Congress will meet its objective,” which it does. When the time for the revolution arrives, Stalin and Lenin complement one another, as they both give orders. The last spoken lines of the film belong to Stalin <fig. 10>. As soon as the shot from the *Aurora* brightens the dark sky, he predicts, “This is a great glow which is going to brighten the whole world.”

Although Stalin's supreme role on a political level is clear, in the film's second plot line concerning Georgi and Svetlana his role is indirectly suggested. At

⁴⁹ According to Pisch, a major archetype contributing to the Stalin cult was that of “the Teacher,” with Soviet propaganda referring to him as “teacher,” “great teacher” or “dear teacher” and emphasizing “his wisdom and ability to inspire and guide” (Pisch 2016, 46 and 246).

⁵⁰ After the mid-1930s, Soviet posters usually also portrayed Stalin as “Lenin's equal.” At times, Stalin “even appeared to be giving advice to Lenin” (Pisch 2016, 46).



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

first glance, it seems that Lenin alone helps the love affair reach a happy ending. Svetlana's mother does not want Georgi, a Georgian man, to become her son-in-law, so Lenin, followed by Stalin, visits the mother and changes her mind. On a deeper, symbolic level, though, the love between the two young people flourishes under Stalin's blessing. As mentioned earlier, Georgi and Svetlana meet at the front, where Svetlana distributes *Pravda*, whose chief editor is Stalin. At the front, Georgi, who is not yet a Bolshevik, hides a copy of *Pravda* underneath his uniform <fig. 11> and right away feels attracted to Svetlana. When she leaves, Georgi starts singing "Svetlana," another oblique reference to Stalin because Svetlana was the name of Stalin's first daughter.⁵¹ Soon, the two meet again unexpectedly. As Svetlana departs the front, two counterrevolutionaries attack her. Georgi, who happens to be there, saves her, inspiring her romantic interest in him. Once again Georgi is seen holding *Pravda* <fig. 12>, as if the newspaper brings him to the side of the Bolsheviks and into Svetlana's heart.



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

Later, it is vaguely explained why Svetlana has joined Georgi and the other soldiers on their way to Petrograd. An intertitle states that the "people's heart was

⁵¹ Georgi's nationality also pays tribute to Stalin, a Georgian. In addition, the name "Svetlana" alludes to the bright future since it derives from the Slavic word "svet," meaning "light."

inclined towards the truth, and the truth was in Petrograd. So, the military union sent delegates there.” Among the delegates, we see Svetlana, who is familiar with Petrograd, and Georgi. The real cause that brings Svetlana and Georgi together is ideological:⁵² Svetlana and Georgi must meet Stalin together so they can be instructed by his words and Georgi can become a true Bolshevik and be ready to relate to Svetlana.

Later, Svetlana will reappear with Stalin and Lenin, with no clear explanation apart from the fact that she has become a substitute daughter. Still later, when Stalin gives his lengthy speech to the Party Congress, the couple appears in the audience <fig. 13>, as the narration wants them to be inspired once more by Stalin and applaud him. Georgi and Svetlana seem to symbolize true Bolshevik love and partnership under Stalin. Near the end of the film, Georgi and Svetlana are among those to whom Stalin gives orders for the implementation of the revolution, something that brings the couple even closer. Thus, after Stalin’s god-like prophesy that *Aurora’s* glow will brighten the world, they join the revolution marching and singing <fig. 14>.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Conclusion

If *The Great Glow* and *Lenin in October* were shown on every anniversary of the Revolution until 1953, under destalinization new film narratives of October were needed. As Mira Liehm and Antonin Liehm explain, Soviet cinema was expected to present Lenin “as the sole leader” and to purge “the image of the Revolution from Stalin’s cult.”⁵³ Sergei Vasiliev (1900–1959), Romm’s assistant in *Lenin in October*, directed *V dni oktyabrya* [*In the Days of October*] (1958), the plot of which covers a period similar to *Lenin in October* and attempts to restore the truth about 1917 which Romm’s film had distorted. In Vasiliev’s film, Stalin is a loyal member of the Party, but one among others. Above all is Lenin, who presents and develops

⁵² For a similar function of loose compositional causality in the service of the Stalin cult in *Tractor Drivers*, see Mini 2016, 170–171.

⁵³ Liehm and Liehm 1977, 204.

the need and plan for the revolution. The film conforms to Soviet ideology under Khrushchev, which considered Lenin an unparalleled genius and which was to be fully elaborated in the 22nd Congress and the new Program of the Communist Party of 1962.⁵⁴

During the Thaw, the effort to correct the filmic narrative about 1917 from its mistakes under Stalin was most evident in the fate of the anniversary works of the 1930s. *The Great Glow*, which so heavily depends on Stalin's presence, was one of the few such Soviet films to be banned under Khrushchev.⁵⁵ *Lenin in October*, like other films in which Stalin plays a smaller part, was purged of references to him. Thus, *Lenin in October* appeared in a new version, in which only one verbal reference to Stalin remained. All other mentions of him were removed through the deletion of scenes in which he was present or by the superimposition of figures and objects over him when he was a silent character on screen.

In the reworked version of *Lenin in October*, produced during the Thaw, Lenin never meets privately with Stalin. Stalin does not protect Lenin and the revolution, nor does he stand to Lenin's right after Lenin receives power <fig. 15>. The whole ideological message of *Lenin in October* has thus been altered, affecting the viewers' perception of the film's major causal factor and political points. As this essay has shown, in the 1930s, in the original *Lenin in October*, a tightly structured film, and *The Great Glow*, with its occasional loose narrative motivation, the goals in both plot lines are achieved thanks to one man: Stalin. Soviet socialist realist cinema borrowed and revised the classical double plot structure and placed Stalin at the intersection of both plots as Lenin's savior, the planner of the revolution, the heir apparent to the Bolshevik throne, and a father figure inspiring and sanctioning Bolshevik love.



Fig. 15

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⁵⁴ Mini 2017, 184.

⁵⁵ Bulgakowa 2013, 451.

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