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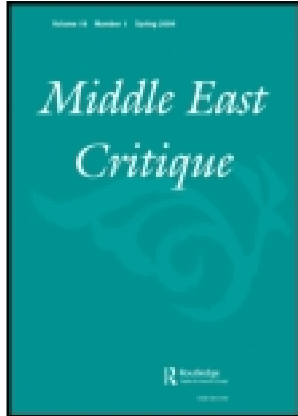

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The Oriental 'Other' in Soviet Cinema, 1929-34

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The Oriental 'Other' in Soviet Cinema, 1929–34

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Inspired by the exciting book by Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, which argues that the socialist 'East' and the capitalist 'West' were 'two closely related versions of modernity,' it is my hope in this article to examine the relationship between the socialist East and its own 'Oriental' periphery, namely the peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus, as it is revealed in documentary films from the early Soviet era.[1] These films, I believe, depict an asymmetrical relationship that in numerous ways resembled the connections between the West and its colonies. This 'mirroring' of yet another feature of the capitalist world contributed to one of the least acknowledged failures of the utopian promises of the October Revolution: the inability of the Soviet state, dominated by European Slavs, to perceive Asian 'Orientals' as fully equal. I will develop this argument by analyzing images from a number of highly celebrated Soviet documentaries, all filmed either in Central Asia or the Caucasus, to explore the discursive/textual traces of a colonial historiography, as it expressed itself in cinematic modes. Three films in particular will be emphasized here: Victor Turin's *Turksib* (1929), Mikhail Kalatozov's *Salt for Svanetia* (1929), and Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs for Lenin* (1934). Furthermore, I will situate these films in the context of the First Five Year Economic Plan (1928-32), which marked the final consolidation of the Soviet 'phantasmagoria of production.'[2]

The theoretical perspective and, to some extent, the thematic concerns, for this article are drawn largely from the works of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's ideas also provide the foundation for the work of Buck-Morss and therefore will inform this article in a twofold dialogic mode. While through his body of work (and particularly in the posthumously

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[1] Susan Buck-Morss (2000) *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), p. x.

[2] Buck-Morss suggests that by the 1930s, the dream of a 'socialist culture of consumption' was superseded by the 'phantasmagoria of limitless production' that in many ways was similar to the capitalist 'phantasmagoria of limitless consumption'; see Susan Buck-Morss (1995) 'The city as dreamworld and catastrophe,' *October*, 73 (Summer), p. 19; and idem, *Dreamworld*, pp. 150, 208.

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published *Arcades Project*), Benjamin uncovers the illusory and phantasmagoric nature of modern capitalism, Buck-Morss points to the Soviet 'phantasmagoria of production' that generated its own 'dream-sleep.'[3] She further explores and deciphers the materialization of this dreamworld in relation to different notions of temporality and progress. But the eventual triumph of a progressive historiography particularly affected the marginalized 'Orientals' of the Soviet Union. By undertaking a retrospective examination of exemplary instances of cinematic representations, it is my hope that 'snapshots' of the history of those who were offered the bitter fruits of progress will emerge. These images from the past promised a utopian future of 'advancement,' even though the actual consequence of that advancement was a ruinous history for the impacted peoples. By focusing on portrayals of peoples in Central Asia and the Caucasus in this account of the Soviet cinema, it is my intention to remain faithful to Benjamin's counsel to reclaim the past on behalf of its victims. Today, this task is as pressing as it was in the early twentieth century: As the last remnants of the Soviet era are withering away, the International Monetary Fund and Western oil companies have been moving into Central Asia and the Caucasus to offer their formulas for advancement.

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Cinema in Service of the Modernizing State

The early Soviet state stood firmly by a teleological and evolutionary narrative of history. As Buck-Morss has noted, it was committed to a 'historical cosmology' grounded on a linear trajectory of revolutionary time.[4] Subsequently, as the 1920s evolved, the Communist Party increased its demand for cultural products that served 'progress' by representing it visually. The development of cinema, not unlike other modes of mass communication, can be understood as an important instrument and product of the modern drive to construct mass society. In the case of the Soviet Union, cinema's vital role in creating a mass audience for the Revolution's message was recognized very early. In 1927, Benjamin described the peasantry as the Soviet cinema's 'most important audience' as well as one of its 'most interesting subjects.'[5] In the early 1920s, traveling cinemas known as 'agit-trains' were organized to visit the workers and peasants in their distant towns and villages. Newsreels reflecting the 'everyday life' of the 'common' citizenry allowed the ordinary Soviet masses, many of whom reportedly had never before seen moving pictures, to see and recognize their collective selves in the images represented to them. According to Buck-Morss, this process of 'mirroring' was instrumental in altering 'the accidental crowd (the mass-in-itself) into the self-conscious, purposeful crowd (the mass-for-itself), with at least the potential of acting out its own destiny.'[6] For instance, the early films

[3] See Walter Benjamin (1999) *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin (Trans.), Rolf Tiedemann (Ed.) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press); idem (1969) *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn (Trans.), Hannah Arendt (Ed.) (New York: Schocken Books); and idem (1986) *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Edmund Jephcott (Trans.), Peter Demetz (Ed.) (New York: Schocken Books).

[4] Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld*, p. 49.

[5] Benjamin adds that films provided the rural population with 'historical, political, and even hygienic information'; see Walter Benjamin (1999) 'On the present situation of Russian film,' in: Rodney Livingston et al. (Ed.), Micheal W. Jennings, Howard Eiland & Gary Smith (Trans.) *Selected Writings, vol. 2 1927–1934* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 13.

[6] Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld*, p. 140. Buck-Morss' argument here seems to be inspired by Benjamin's theory of alterity, although she does not mention it explicitly.

of Sergei Eisenstein celebrated the revolutionary mass as a leading protagonist in the narrative of history. The staged mass rallies in Eisenstein's films—*Strike* (1924), *Potemkin* (1925), *October* (1927)—not only offered an affirmative representation of the mass as a force with radical historical agency but also 'gave an *experience* of the mass that became the reference point for future meaning.'[7] These powerful images offered their audiences an emotional as well as prosthetic experience of events, which, of course, took place in the past. For Benjamin, the mass in Eisenstein's cinema was characterized best as 'architectonic.' He insisted that 'No other medium could transmit this turbulent collective.'[8]

The collective of the film world also is always a simulated entity—and the Soviet Union of the screen was no exception. Cinema was instrumental in strengthening the idea of the Soviet Union as a unified nation, fashioning an imagined and indivisible community from an entity that was exceptionally heterogeneous in the social formations it contained. Different modes of economic, ethnic, linguistic, and religious relationships existed within the borders of the territory inherited from the Russian Empire. The Soviet Union became another instance of what Benedict Anderson calls 'imagined communities'; thus, it was to be reproduced discursively. Accordingly, the Soviet 'film machine,' not unlike cinemas of other modern nation-states, offered a simulacrum of a multitude, a diverse and yet unified populace.

Gradually, the image of the Soviet mass, united by a revolution that was a rupture in the continuum of history, was superseded by the image of a unified collective, one that, above all, implied a national identity. Dziga Vertov's *A Sixth of the World* (1926), produced by Gorstog (Government Trade Agency) and widely distributed inside the country, provides an example of how the Soviet national image was constructed. As Buck-Morss notes, Vertov's film, which juxtaposed old newsreels and new footage, 'gave a simulated immanence to the idea of "socialism in one country" by introducing a pleased public to the myriad of ethnic types as the new Soviet "we."'[9] Benjamin considered *A Sixth of the World* to be part of a 'new spirit' of filmmaking in the Soviet Union. He saw Vertov's 'self-imposed challenge' in this film as striving to show:

> ... through characteristic images how the vast Russian nation is being transformed by the new social order. ... The new Russian film is set by preference in the far eastern sections of Russia. This as much as to say, 'For us there is no "exoticism."' 'Exoticism' is thought of as a component of the counterrevolutionary ideology of a colonial nation. Russia has no use for the Romantic concept of the 'Far East.' Russia is close to the East and economically tied to it.[10]

What is even more illuminating here is to note that Benjamin (in a passing remark) refers to Vertov's 'epic film of new Russia' as a 'filmic colonization of Russia.'[11]

[7] Ibid., p. 147, author's emphasis.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld*, p. 148.
[10] Benjamin, 'On the present situation of Russian film,' p. 13.
[11] Ibid.

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(Re)Orientalizing the Soviet East and South

The Soviet commitment to the ideal of 'proletarian internationalism' promised a new and more just relationship between the Russian center and its peripheries to the east and south, regions that had been conquered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and subjected to generations of harsh rule and economic exploitation.[12] At least in rhetoric, the more repressive colonial practices of the tsarist past, including the policy of 'Russification,' were repudiated loudly. As a result, education, artistic production, newspapers, and literature in indigenous languages were encouraged. The establishment of 'sovereign' Soviet Republics (e.g., Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) and 'autonomous regions' (e.g. Chechnya and Daghistan) were also meant to institute (often unsuccessfully) congruence between the regions' 'ethnic composition' and their political and administrative formation. For the Orientals of the empire, however, the October Revolution did not translate into a genuine rupture with the past, and this other potential of the Revolution remained largely unrealized, a victim to the culture of the progressive left, to which Soviet Marxists belonged. One very important political implication of the linear narrative of Marxist historicism was a devotion to a hierarchy of cultural formations.[13] According to Buck-Morss:

> The Russian nation was once again privileged and since other 'minorities' and indeed all Soviet 'nations' were historically 'backward' in comparison with the Russians, the latter group set the standards of cultural development for all. This policy was laid down in 1921 at the Tenth Party Congress, where Stalin asserted that 'the essence of the nationality question in the USSR consists in the need to eliminate the backwardness (economic, political, and cultural) that nationalities have inherited from the past, to allow the backward peoples to catch up with Central Russia.[14]

This 'war on time' gave rise to contradictory and ambiguous strategies: on the one hand, the 'rooting' of peoples was encouraged through the celebration of 'folk' traditions; on the other hand, certain aspects of local cultures were deemed as reactionary and therefore dangerous. Thus, the sponsoring of operas in the Azeri and Uzbek languages accompanied the frequent persecution of Sufi orders and the demolition of mosques. On one occasion, in 1926, a large mosque in Uzbekistan was converted into a film studio.[15]

This discourse of modernization, consequently, deemed large segments of the society, namely the peasantry and non-Russians—particularly those from Central Asia and

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[12] For a detailed history of Russia's conquest of Central Asia and the Caucasus, see Tair Tairov (1992) 'Communism and national self-determination in Central Asia,' in: Kumar Rupesinghe et al. (Eds) *Ethnicity and Conflict in a Post-communist World: The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China* (New York: St. Martin's Press), pp. 171–182; Austin Jersild (2002) *Orientalism and Empire*: *North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier, 1845–1917* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press); and Michael Rywkin (Ed.) (1988) *Russian Colonial Expansion to 1917* (London: Mansell).

[13] In the afterword to his book *Orientalism and Empire*, Jersild writes that 'Soviet scholars explained that the hierarchy of cultural development progressed from "tribe" to "nardost" [people] to "nation" (*natsional'nost*)' (p. 157).

[14] Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld*, p. 22, note 24.

[15] Gönul Dönmez-Colin (2001) 'Central Asian cinema,' in: Oliver Leaman (Ed.) *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film* (London and New York: Routledge), p. 17.

the Caucasus—as 'people from the past.' In practice and conception, the Soviet approaches to the peripheries of the new state came to resemble those of the late imperial era. It should be noted here that at least as early as the mid-nineteenth century, deeply influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment, the Russian political and cultural elite had justified the empire's expansionist enterprise on the Asian frontiers as a philanthropic civilizing mission motivated by a desire to push back the frontiers of poverty, disease, tyranny, and, of course, lawlessness. Likewise, in the Soviet progressive historical teleology, non-European peoples still lived in an earlier phase of the evolutionary march of human history—a liability that had to be remedied at all costs. By the late 1920s, there were also incongruities with some features of the late imperial culture. Increasingly there was less tolerance of any form of the romantic primitivism that had been so popular among the Russian intelligentsia—particularly among ethnographers and avant-garde artists—in the late imperial era and in the immediate years following the October Revolution.[16] According to Buck-Morss:

> The national question, too, was transposed into a discourse of time, as backward cultures and ethnic groups came under attack as vestiges of an earlier era. In the 1920s, it was still possible to argue that the indigenous peoples of the north and of Central Asia had elements of classlessness and 'primitive communism' that might make their transition to socialism easier. But by the 1930s, their whole culture was seen as hostile to revolution and historical progress.[17]

As noted above, in 1927 Benjamin also recorded the Russians' rejection of 'exoticism' and the 'Romantic concept of the "Far East."' However, he also noted a rather zealous interest in the 'far eastern sections' of the country as a most important characteristic of the 'new Russian Film.' Looking at a number of the films shot in the eastern and southern margins of the Soviet Union in the course of the Five Year Plan allows us to explore their themes further. By way of textual analysis, we can see how the progressive discourses of (historic) time and industrial modernization, as well as an ideology of a Soviet mass, were visualized and articulated verbally in these exemplary films.

Time, the East, and Soviet Cinema

Victor Turin's *Turksib* opens with intertitles that establish the setting of the film as 'Turkestan in Central Asia—a land of burning heat.' What follows is a series of shots and intertitles that emphasize the importance of cotton and 'Turkestan's wealth' for 'Russia's industry.' Images of groups of men laboring under a burning sun in cotton fields are intercut with footage of textile factories and stockrooms (presumably) in Russia. Very early in the film, the two problems of a lack of water and the 'underdevelopment' of the means of transportation are introduced as the main burden of Central Asia—maladies to be cured with the help of technology. The region is portrayed as a dour land of 'parched

[16] For a nuanced account of Russian ethnographic primitivism in relation to the inhabitants of far eastern Sakhalin Island, see Bruce Grant (1997) 'Empire and savagery: the politics of primitivism in late Imperial Russia,' in: Daniel Brower & Edward Lazzerini (Eds) *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 292–310.

[17] Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld*, p. 38.

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fields.' The accompanying imagery of dry soil and dead animals, thirsty and naked infants, and empty clay vases stress that the main worry, as summarized in the intertitles, is 'waiting for water.' The sporadic rainfall in the region's mountains brings a momentary relief for grain cultivation—a crop that, however, is not urgently in demand in Russia. And so it is the 'enduring thirst' of cotton fields that *Turksib* presents as a most pressing concern 'for Turkestan, for all Russia.' The film's portrayal of Central Asia as a malnourished land, in need of (European) technology in order to reach an ideal level of productivity evokes other, often older, Western colonial narratives. To buttress the idea of Central Asia as a wasted and 'dour land,' repeated images of dead bodies, sandstorms, and, of course, silhouette shots of camels wandering on a desert landscape are presented. These images fit the motif of 'the virgin land' that Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have described as a recurrent trope in colonial imagination:

> The revivification of a wasted soil evoked a quasi-divine process of endowing life and meaning *ex nihilo*, a Promethean production of order from chaos, plenitude from lack. Indeed, the West's 'Prospero complex' is promised as a Caliban's isle, the site of superimposed lacks calling for Western/Northern transformation of primeval matter, in a phallocentric engendering of life from Adam's rib.[18]

One sequence in *Turksib* calls for a closer look: It is a sequence that particularly exemplifies a cinematic instance of 'vanguard time,' implying a vision of history that rendered peoples of Central Asia as 'vestiges of the past.' Furthermore, it is as if the utopian trope of 'interplanetary travel' in early Russian science fiction has been appropriated and transposed onto a Central Asian setting where a group of nomads (supposedly from Kazakhstan) encounter their future: the modern man. First, there appears a map of this vast region, on which the words 'WITHOUT RAIL LINES' appear in a superimposition. 'And across [this] unconquered land,' as an intertitle asserts, we see a 'native' man on the back of a camel staring watchfully at the sky. Suddenly the words, 'the first patrol,' and immediately an airplane appears, swirling gracefully above the clouds, followed by a rather ominous sentence: 'The attack begins!' Back on the ground, looking through binoculars is a white man in military attire whose point of view shot shows a desolate ruined building in the middle of a desert. But, as it turns out, he is awaiting 'the advance guard of the new civilization': a group of men wearing long, white coats, caps, round glasses, and on their backs, tripods and tools of cartography. This futuristic team of (apparently) engineers and scientists is in this region to 'survey' and draw maps of this supposedly static and obscure land.[19] Soon this 'vanguard of the new civilization'—who indeed look like characters out of a science-fiction movie—descend upon a nomadic

[18] Ella Shohat & Robert Stam (1994) *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge), p. 141.

[19] Shohat and Stam insightfully examine the role of 'discoverers,' voyager-scientists, as well as the symbolism of geography and cartography in the colonial narratives of Western literature and cinema. They also argue that 'the aura of scientificity inscribed by images of maps and globes' contributed to legitimizing these accounts (see ibid., pp. 145–148). Maps and diagrams abound in the films discussed here, especially in *Turksib* and *Salt for Svanetia*. Benjamin recorded that 'the map is almost as close to becoming the center of the new Russian iconic cult as Lenin's portrait' and described a map of Europe hanging in a Red Army Club and showing all the cities Lenin had been to: 'On it Lenin's life resemble[d] a campaign of colonial conquest'; see Benjamin, 'Moscow,' in *Reflections*, p. 118.

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Figure 1. *Turksib* by Victor Turin (1929)

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community in which 'life is asleep.' 'And the tombs of the East stand sentry' over this sleeping lot, who seem to have taken leave from the course of history. The following images are of numerous half-ruined mosques—emblems (or perhaps causes) of the lack of progress. But this community's stagnation is soon to end, as an intertitle reading 'ALARM' so dramatically announces—the stylized and medium-sized letters suddenly expand and take over the screen. Accordingly, the natives and the surrounding nature respond to the wake-up call: On arrival of the 'strangers' and their vehicle, the livestock herds run in panic, the dogs start barking, and the locals, guardedly, start to leave their huts.

The bewilderment of these men, women, and children increases at the sight of the group of aliens—whose eyes are hidden behind thick, dark, industrial-type glasses. Their initial suspicion, however, turns into amused curiosity as one member of the visiting group (whose physical appearance suggests a shared ethnic background) leaves the truck, removes his glasses, and speaks to the nervous crowed in their own language: 'AMAN-BA' translated as 'Greetings, comrades.' Laughter and talk follow while a young woman emerges from a hut and brings water to the crew. But the natives' lack of knowledge of the objects and the ways of the 'new civilization' brings about a momentary disturbance to this joyful 'first contact' between the 'non-technological' nomad and the voyager-scientist: A child blows the horn of the car, causing the adults of the nomadic community to panic and their children to run away in fear.[20] But the cheerful atmosphere soon is restored as the scientists bid farewell, climb into their vehicle, put on their glasses, and depart. Watching them leave, an elder among the locals refers to the truck as 'Shaitan-arba!' or 'A devil's chariot.' This sequence ends with a montage of images of an airplane and its point of view of vast mountains and their snow-covered peaks.

Time and again, congruent with the ideology of modernization, Soviet films represent Central Asia and the Caucasus as territories that reside outside history in a state of timelessness and stagnation—that is until the October Revolution. In this scheme, the intertitles are far less ambiguous. In Kalatozov's *Salt for Svanetia*, for instance, the opening captions tell of how 'Even now there are far reaches of the Soviet Union

[20] Here I am borrowing the phrase 'First Contact' from Micheal Taussig since this scene in *Turksib* brings to mind some images of 'that auratic moment of "first contact" between the "primitive" and Europeans' that he explores in his book *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 72–81.

where the patriarchal way of life persists along with remnants of the clan system.' Almost immediately (that is, after the appearance of two maps), the region (in the Northern Caucasus) is described as a harsh natural and social environment 'cut off from civilization by mountains and glaciers.' The subjects of the film, members of the Ushkul tribe, are also 'cut off from the outer world,' capable of satisfying only their 'most basic needs.' Most of the film is about visualizing and/or describing the hardships and 'peculiarities' of subsistence under these 'pre-technological' conditions. Images of daily routines are accompanied with almost ethnographic, and frequently somewhat sarcastic, written commentary: for example, intertitles reading 'Further down rumble the factories. Here people weave with the help of machines . . .' are preceded by shots of a barefoot woman working on a wooden device. Also, the viewer is introduced to the locals' archaic ways of harvesting, tailoring, hat making, and even 'haircuts according to their own fashion.' More importantly, another caption maintains that in this part of the world 'the way of life never changes.' And yet, above all, 'Cut off from civilization, Ushkul needs salt,' a shortage so severe that it forces the animals to slurp human sweat and urine. The problem of the Ushkul people's 'starvation for salt' (like Turkestan's want for water in *Turksib*) can be solved adequately only through the development of the means of transportation. If in *Turksib* the construction of the Siberia-Turkestan railway (and the import of grain) is to free the land (and water) for the important industrial crop of cotton, in *Salt for Svanetia* it is the building of roads that is going to connect this presumably isolated region to the outside world.[21]

The presumed extreme religiosity of Central Asia and the Caucasus in these films serves as a marker of the inhabitants' attachment to the pre-modern past. Manifestations of anti-religious and anti-clerical views can be found in many Soviet films (of which the grotesque Orthodox priest in *Potemkin* exemplifies a rather repeated *type*). But the Marxist critique of Russian Orthodoxy, focusing on the Church and its special affiliation to the tsarist state, at least implicitly, understood the phenomenon to be a modern one. At the same time, the religious beliefs and rites of the peripheral peoples were seen in more fixed terms as further proof and/or the ultimate source of their 'ageless backwardness.' *Salt for Svanetia*, therefore, asserts 'In the stone walls of this savage land, religion still rules.' Progress here, in a discourse dependent on a clear-cut distinction between East and West, becomes identified with breaking away from the shackles of religious fanaticism that is thought to be the essence of the Orient.

Although in *Salt for Svanetia* it is Christianity (as it is practiced in the North Caucasus) that becomes an explicit signifier of the past, in the Soviet discourse of modernization it was Islam, and especially the figure of the Muslim woman, that played a major symbolic role. As staunch proponents of the European Enlightenment ideals of progress, freedom, and equality, Soviet Marxists championed the cause of the 'liberation of Muslim women.' The education of women, particularly Muslim women, was seen as a requirement for the well-being of the nation and for reaching the desired level of civilization. This linking of modernization to women, it should be remembered, was not unique to the Soviet Union of the 1920s; at the same time, 'modern reformers' in the neighboring countries of Turkey

[21] This part of Georgia was the scene of numerous revolts, particularly those in 1921–22 (when the Svans called on Western powers for assistance) and 1929–30 (during which women played a major role); see further Charles van der Leeuw (1998) *Storm over the Caucasus: In the Wake of Independence* (New York: St. Martin's Press), p. 141.

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Figure 2. *Three Songs for Lenin* by Dziga Vertov (1934)

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and Iran were promoting and enforcing similar ideas and policies. Other than devotion to a linear conception of history, the underpinning assumption, among others, that the nationalist modernizers of Turkey and Iran and the Soviets shared was the Orientalist divide between East/West and primitive/civilized. It was in this discursive terrain—its genealogy dating back to the nineteenth century—that Muslim women's clothing, particularly the veil, appeared as the most visible and outward indicator of the Orient's allegiance to the past.[22]

It was 'the songs of the Soviet East,' according to the opening captions of *Three Songs for Lenin*, that 'served as the basis' for Vertov's celebrated film:

> ... songs of a wom[a]n who
> has cast off her veil,
> of electricity that brings light
> to the villages,
> of water that makes the desert recede,
> of the illiterate
> who have become literate,
> and of all this
> and LENIN being one.[23]

The first episode of the film revolves around the theme of Muslim women and is exemplary of the Soviet attitude to the issue. Identified as 'THE FIRST SONG; MY FACE WAS IN A DARK PRISON,' it opens with a series of shots, each displaying a veiled woman (from Central Asia) whose body and head is covered by her clothes. Reminiscent of the decaying 'tombs of the East' in *Turksib*, there are also shots of a half-ruined mosque. The words 'I led a blind life' are juxtaposed to a shot of a bare-foot and visibly ill woman, trembling as she walks. With the Islamic call to prayer on the soundtrack, a group of turbaned men bow down in prostration, and then a cut to: 'In ignorance and darkness, I was a slave without chains.' After these words, we

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[22] For an insightful analysis of the cultural and gender politics of Western and nationalist obsessions with 'the veiled women of the Orient,' see Meyda Yeğenoğlu (1998) *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

[23] *Three Songs for Lenin* can be read as an example of Lenin's iconography in Soviet imagery; see the discussion of this process in Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld*, pp. 70–79.

Figure 3. *Three Songs for Lenin* by Dziga Vertov (1934)

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see more glimpses of the 'backwardness of the East': a woman carrying a heavy load on her head, a shot of a ('folk') religious talisman, more praying, and more veiled women. There is another diseased body too, a blind vagabond dervish with a cane. These images of the past, symbolic and/or literal (that is if they consist of found footage shot in earlier periods), are contrasted with those of the present. The 'arrival of modernity' is dramatic and triumphant as the sound of a trumpet reveals: 'A ray of truth began to shine—the dawn of Lenin's truth.' In place of oppression and ignorance there is going to be liberation and enlightenment. Images of the 'new Soviet woman'—we see a medium shot of a young woman studying next to a window and wearing only a scarf—are intercut with those of the 'new youth': a rather large group of (most likely *komsomol*) adolescents marching forward next to a riverbank. Almost everything about these 'new youths' is differentiated symmetrically from the representation of the past and its remnants: in place of diseased bodies, there are healthy-looking young bodies; uniforms replace the ragtag Oriental costumes—that 'overdress' the Oriental body; instead of prostration there is an orderly march behind flags; and last but not least, their proud forward movement is recorded by a traveling camera that moves horizontally and parallel to the marchers, implying a sense of freedom and empowerment. (This disciplined 'mass' can also be compared to the disorderly and rather spontaneous 'crowds' of earlier Soviet films, such as *Potemkin* and *October*.) Meanwhile, the young woman, as though in response to the marchers' call, leaves her house and starts to walk through the back-alleys and streets of a city that is waking up. To the upbeat rhythm of percussion and flute, images of her journeying outside her home are intercut with frontal shots of veiled women casting off their veils. We learn her destination when a sign (in Russian) on a building she enters identifies the site as 'THE TURKIC WOMEN'S CLUB.' Interior shots of her ascending the stairs are juxtaposed with what seems to be glances at the activities that take place at the Women's Club. The pedagogical services offered there apparently include the provision of reading materials (in rooms adorned with Lenin's portraits), literacy classes, music lessons, and health care. We observe a half-naked little girl whose height is being measured by a member of the staff.

The hope of overcoming the disabilities and pains that illness can inflict on the human body, gave these simulated healthy bodies of the Soviet dream-world (in which cinema played a significant role) a utopian impetus. Defeat of disease, among the other brutal effects of nature on the corporeal body (such as hunger, cold and death), was yet another promise of modernity with its drive for scientific and technological advancement. But this utopian impulse, too, became incorporated into the Soviet 'phantasmagoria of production'; in other words, by discursively linking disease to the body that resides in 'pre-modernity'—the body of

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the peasant and the Oriental—this utopian potential became a legitimizing force to control and regulate. As a result, in its articulation of the East, the dominant discourse in post-revolutionary Russia came increasingly to resemble that of the late Imperial era.[24] Those who lived on the Oriental periphery of the new Soviet state, whose cultures and ways of life were deemed as 'vestiges of the past,' came under immense pressure to 'speed up' in order to become contemporaneous with their age. Therefore, the unhealthy bodies and veiled women of 'the East' came to represent (signify) the very antithesis of modernity, first in the cosmological narrative of Soviet historiography, and later in the simulated world of the Soviet cinema, particularly since the late 1920s.[25] In a truly modernist fashion, in line with other fictionalized dichotomies of the time—Nature/Culture, East/West, Primitive/Civilized, etc.—the diseased (and/or veiled female) body also had to have its defining opposite. The youthful marching band, in *Three Songs for Lenin*, was perhaps just a precursor to this 'new mass.'

The discursive opposite of the 'pre-modern' body was above all the ideal healthy body of athletes and dancers, whose valorization reached a new height with the emergence of the genre of the Soviet musical in the 1930s (e.g., Grigorii Alexandrov's *The Circus*, 1936). In these monumental and carefully choreographed films, the music, as Buck-Morss points out, was used 'to provide the organizing rhythms, [to which] the masses danced onto the screen surface as an animated, formal design.' Always composed of ideal, athletic figures, the mass-body evoked the pleasures of the collectivity. What's more, in retrospect, one can decipher not just the athletic bodies of Vertov's playful documentary *A Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) but also those in Alexander Rodchenko's photography, if not as the *ur*-form, at least as earlier utopian instances of this ideal of the healthy body.[26]

The Utopics of Technological Advancement

It is in the imagery of technology that the most fervent utopian thrust in Soviet cinema (and other visual media such as photography) and its appropriation in the 'phantasmagoria of production' can be found. Perceived and enunciated as the treatment of a lack, machine culture was embraced passionately by the radical avant-garde (e.g., Italian and Russian Futurists) and revolutionaries of various kinds, with Soviet Marxists being a leading force among them. As mentioned above, in the symbolism of this utopics of technology, machines were given redeeming attributes of magical proportions. Machines that make traveling through space possible, that is, locomotives and airplanes, particularly were invested with liberating and transformative significance. Images of trains, railways, and airplanes are numerous in Soviet films. For instance, it can indeed be said that *Turksib* is, above all, a story of connecting Turkestan and Siberia via rail lines. *Salt for Svanetia*'s main theme, too, is about ending a remote region's isolation by building roads, a scheme

[24] Of course, there were many fundamental differences between the Soviet and Imperial Russian Empires, as well as with the Western European colonial states; most importantly, the Soviets never attempted to explain the presumed backwardness of the East in racial terms.

[25] For a detailed study of the Soviet claim that Muslim women constituted the most repressed social element of their society—and therefore had the maximum potential to become allies of the new system, see Gregory J. Massell (1974) *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

[26] Buck-Morss offers a fascinating comparative analysis of 'mass as ornament' in the Soviet and Hollywood musicals of the 1930s in *Dreamworld*, pp. 152–156.

Figure 4. *Three Songs for Lenin* by Dziga Vertov (1934)

that is underlined constantly by the intertitles and finally epitomized in the film's closing montage sequence. As noted above, the sequence in *Turksib* that depicts the 'first encounter' between the old and the new starts and ends with images of an airplane's graceful bird-like flight. Machines that allowed humanity to overcome the limitations of its natural body, by facilitating journeying through space, also inspired the imagining of a better world. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin reminded his readers of this utopian promise of the originary images of airplanes:

> Bomber Planes make us remember what Leonardo da Vinci expected of the flight of man; he was to have raised himself into the air 'in order to look for snow on the mountain summits, and then return to scatter it over city streets shimmering with the heat of summer.'[27]

If by remembering the link between the imagery of trains and airplanes in Soviet films and the *ur*-images of these journeying machines we can recall their utopian register, we can also allow the betrayal of that potential to come into view by deciphering their significance to the progressive historiography of Soviet Marxism. The linear narrative of history, solidified by the time that the First Five Year Plan was launched, turned technology in general and the much coveted machineries of travel, especially trains and airplanes, into the absolute emblems of modernity itself. As the symbols of progress, their presence, simulated or real, indicated a higher stage of civilization; as we saw in *Turksib*, the image of an airplane is described (by the intertitles) as the harbinger of 'the vanguard civilization.' Thus, situating the films made in the Orient of the Soviet Union, in the context of the Marxist discourse of modernization, reveals the correspondence between the films as discursive sites of historiography and the Soviet teleological perception of history. Furthermore, by foregrounding this link we realize that these machineries of journeying through space, namely trains and airplanes, were also meant to stand for instruments capable of shortening the alleged temporal distance between the 'backward' and the 'advanced' peoples. Soviet historiography, grounded in the presupposition of the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous Western and 'Oriental' societies, developed

[27] Benjamin, quoting Pierre-Maxime Schuhl (in 1938), and cited in Susan Buck-Morss (1989) *The Dialectics of Seeing: Water Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), p. 245.

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its own version of what Johannes Fabian termed the 'denial of coevalness.'[28] In this regard, the words of S. M. Dimanshtein (in 1930), the influential official of the Commissariat of Nationalities, are exceptionally telling:

> The advanced peoples are tearing along in the fast locomotive of history ... At the same time, the backward people have to 'race like the wind' ... in order to catch up.[29]

It is not a mere coincidence that Dimanshtein used the metaphor of a 'fast locomotive' to characterize the history of 'advanced peoples'—meaning Europeans. Marx himself once likened revolutions to the 'locomotives of world history.'[30] The image of a fast train as a visual metaphor for the Soviets' drive to speed up the course of history is understood better when we recall that this 'race against time'—or 'WAR ON THE PRIMITIVE' as the intertitles in *Turksib* read—dominated Soviet public debate from the mid-1920s onward. The discourse of this debate was at its most totalizing when it concerned the non-European communities. The historical backwardness of the 'East' (as well as the indigenous 'peoples of the north') was regarded as an empirical fact. In the triumphant teleological master-narrative of the ideology of modernization (of which the Bolsheviks certainly did not have a monopoly), 'to catch up' with the advanced nations was the primary, indeed urgent, task for those who were 'left behind' by history. In the words of Anatoli Skachko (1930), the head of the Minorities Section of the Commissariat of Nationalities:

> The whole of the USSR, in the words of Comrade Stalin, needs ten years to run the course of development that took Western Europe fifty to a hundred years, then the small peoples of the north, in order to catch up with the advanced nations of the USSR, must, during the same ten years, cover the road of development that took the Russian people one thousand years to cover.[31]

The need 'to catch up' is articulated visually and explicitly in at least two of *Turksib*'s most celebrated montage scenes, both of which use imagery of a fast-moving locomotive to make their point. The first of these skilfully shot and edited montage sequences precedes a series of shots of a group of wandering nomads packing their tents and heading on a journey across the wilderness. Relative to the rest of the film, particularly in comparison to what follows, this segment has a slow pace. These 'wandering nomads,' the intertitles reveal, are going 'to see—THE FIRST,' a steam engine on tracks. At the same time as the iris shot of a locomotive opens, we see the nomads approach this magnificent machine. After a brief moment of tense anticipation, represented by images of the static components of the locomotive, the engine starts up and a race between the train and the nomadic riders begins. As the pursuit speeds up, the tempo of the montage becomes increasingly faster,

[28] See further Johannes Fabian (1983) *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press).

[29] Cited in Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld*, p. 38.

[30] In fact, the genealogy of trains and railroads as markers of progress in the leftist idiom can be traced back to the Saint-Simonians, the 'idealist socialists' of the nineteenth century, to whom Engels and Marx were indebted intellectually; see discussion in Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 90.

[31] Cited in Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld*, p. 39.

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Figure 5. *Turksib* by Victor Turin (1929)

the length of each shot, shorter and shorter. Clearly, despite their fervour, the nomads, riding on their horses, oxen, and camels, are no match for modern technology and eventually fall behind. For the people of Turkestan, their future emancipation in history has to come by embracing modern technology. The race ends with the image of a camel 'bowing' at the rail tracks as the locomotive pushes forward.

Following the aforementioned scene, *Turksib* returns to the depiction of the harshness of nature in Turkestan (as well as Siberia) and its transformation into a productive environment with the arrival of modern technology and culture. More importantly, we learn that the Turkestan-Siberia rail line must be completed by the year 1930. The introduction of this concern, and its linkage to the need to 'quicken the pulse of the [textile] mills,' further centers the problem of the 'race against time' in the film. The last montage sequence in *Turksibt* juxtaposes fleeting shots of different parts of a moving train with those of tracks, textile machinery, and assembly lines. Also, there are inserts of intertitles that simply read '30', numbers that flash repeatedly and ever more rapidly. Even compared with the other montage sequences of the film (or other Soviet films of the time), the editing of this final segment can be distinguished as fast paced. This montage sequence, as well as the film itself, ends suddenly and simply: '1930.'

Salt for Svanetia's last shot is of a road. If the last sequence in *Turksib* celebrates the near completion of a railway, the concluding montage sequence of Kalatozov's film rejoices in the construction of a road that is going to end Svanetia's isolation. The final montage sequence of *Salt for Svanetia* includes intertitles that proclaim the desired success of the Soviets in their war on time: 'Of the 107 kilometers that Svanetia needs ... By the third year of the five-year plan ... 50 kilometers have been completed.' This montage arrangement, not unlike *Turksib*'s finale, to a large extent consists of imagery of machines (mainly those useful in road construction) juxtaposed with filmed explosions. But there are also half-naked muscular bodies, in fact masses of them—hitting their picks onto the earth, cutting big trees, marching joyously. Moreover, these toiling humans perform their acts repeatedly, particularly their strikes onto the soil, in step with the explosions that rip open the mountains. Often filmed from an oblique low angle, they simply seem to be invincible. As the intertitles put it, 'For communists—for the Svans—there are no obstacles.' Seeing this rather sensual representation of the corporeality of manual labor and remembering the time when the film was made, the viewer is bound to recall the 'shock workers.' During the First Five Year Plan, the idealized form of collective labor known as 'shock work' (*udarnyi trud*) was meant to compensate for the deficit of mechanization from which

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Figure 6. *Salt for Svanetia* by Mikhail Kalatazov (1929)

Soviet industry suffered. In Buck-Morss' observation, this norm-breaking, fundamentally non-Taylorist, method of organizing work was also linked to the project of the 'race on time':

> 'Shock' (*udar*) is the Russian word meaning a blow or strike with impacting force in the military sense (of an air attack), in the natural sense (of a thunder clap or musical percussion), and also in the medical sense (of stroke or seizure). *The collective thrust of the shock workers gave a shock as the agents of historical change, 'bringing the time of socialism closer.rsquo;* [Emphasis added.] Their image was superhuman, rather than machinelike and nonhuman. They produced the shock of modernity rather than parrying its effects. At the same time, they bore the brunt of the attack on their own bodies, as shock work entailed physical sacrifice and exhaustion for the sake of the collective goal.[32]

Celluloid duplicates of these overexerted bodies also can be found in *Turksib* and *Three Songs for Lenin*. Perhaps these 'earthmoving,' collective bodies exemplify a different facet of the Soviet cinema-masses, one whose appearance coincides with the First Economic Plan, occupying a temporal and discursive space between the passing of the revolutionary mass (in *October*, for instance) and before the full emergence of the 'mass as ornament' (of the 1930s musicals). What is more certain is that these shock workers, in reality and on the screen, epitomized the drive to 'hasten the course of history.' Their appearance in the films made in the Oriental periphery of the Soviet Union only added to this aspect of their signifying surplus. Along with those of industrial machinery, their imagery was to be a sign of the possibility of 'deliverance from backwardness.' Second only to machines, they were the harbingers of modernity, capable of producing 'the shock of modernity' onto the seemingly sleeping body of the Orient(als). (Interestingly, the most productive among them often were nicknamed 'airplanes' and 'lightning sheets.') By arousing hopes of a better world, the image of the mass as an agent of historical change (even though in a progressive sense) is impregnated with a utopian impulse. Furthermore, the aesthetic qualities of these films, with their virtuoso rhythmic editing and handsome cinematography, for instance, also provide a pleasurable sensual experience. They offer a

[32] Ibid., p. 111.

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cognitive experience that, even now, more than 70 years after their making, encourages anticipating historical change by evoking the joys of collective agency as well as personal political becoming.

Different Memories, Different Futures

Looking back, from the 'privileged' position of a contemporary viewer from the East, I find these images as ultimately contradictory. A question that keeps coming back: What of the other consequences of the 'arrival' of machines for the peoples of the Soviet periphery? Of that, we see close to nothing. Concealed behind the unity of the cinema masses of Soviet films are the inequities, if not atrocities, to which those who were deemed 'vestiges of the past' were subjected. In 1921, it should be remembered, before the Soviet filmic airplanes came into being (and long before nearby Afghanistan would be subjected to successive waves of shock modernization), the city of Bukhara experienced aerial bombardments. The discrepancies between the real and the dreamworld of the simulated universe of the Soviet documentary filmmaking point to the phantasmagoric traits of this cinema. During and since the Five Year Plan, the social project to recreate the real, with all its heterogeneity, in the shape of the virtual reality of collective fantasies rendered a phantasmagoric quality to these dream images. The Soviet phantasmagoria of production, increasingly resembling its Western consumerist counterpart, built a multitude of things—massive dams, factories, theatres and mass bodies. The 'smaller' peoples of the East, denied contemporaneity by the progressive Soviet historiography, were to 'race like the wind' in order to be admitted into the dreamworld of this modernity. From the mid-1920s, the Soviet cinema, as a medium of producing meaning, increasingly reproduced this model of linear historiography. If 'we' are to recall the utopian potential of these images, as proposed by Buck-Morss, we need do so in the hope of telling those narratives of the past and future that have room for radical difference.

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