Storm over Asia

(Potomok Chingiskhana, SU 1928; D.: Vsevolod Pudovkin)

(Picture 2) Genghis Khan inspires big cinema. In the fifties there was the infamous Howard Hughes production that combined John Wayne in dubious make-up and CinemaScope to little success. “The Conqueror”, as the film was known, famously flopped and is now better known for the cancer controversy which surrounds it – filming having taken place downwind from a nuclear test site. But that never prevented it from being truly epic. Ten years later, Omar Sharif was portraying the Mongol emperor for the more obviously titled “Genghis Khan”. Backed up by an all-star cast that encompassed everyone from Telly Savalas to Eli Wallach and filmed entirely in Yugoslavia, this version once more did full justice to the phrase epic. Much more recently we’ve also seen Sergei Bodrov’s “Mongol”, at the time of its production the most expensive Russian film ever made. That claim has since been snatched away by Nikita Mikhalkov’s “Burnt By the Sun 2”, but again the epic-ness of it all is not to be denied. When it comes to Genghis, cinema goes large.

(Picture 3) Much the same would appear to be true for his descendants, at least if “The Heir to Genghis Khan” (*Potomok Chengiz-Khana*) is anything to go by. Better known in the West under the title of “Storm over Asia”, this is Vsevolod Pudovkin’s classic piece of Soviet silent cinema that deftly combines action, propaganda, ethnographic documentary and stunning visual technique. Vsevolod Pudovkin’s “Storm over Asia” is an ironic fable that offers the kind of satisfaction that comes only from fables. It’s also a film of amazing visual hardness, lushness, and vigor, one of the great works of the Soviet avant-garde. And Pudovkin’s location shooting in Siberia and Mongolia makes it an important document of Central Asian culture.

(Picture 4) Filmed in the Buriat-Mongolian Republic, Vsevolod Pudovkin's “Heir of Ghengis Khan” opens in 1918 at the deathbed of an old Mongolian. Bair, a Mongol fur trader, is advised by the dying elder to travel to the market and sell a pelt of exquisite quality: “Food for many months”, as the inter-title notes. After demanding a fair price for this pelt from a British capitalist who “buys cheap and sells dear”, Bair ignites a marketplace riot and is forced to flee to the mountains. The narrative then jumps to 1920. Bair has been living in the tundra for two years and there is fighting on the Eastern front between the partisans and the White Russians, supported by American and British battalions. Bair is captured by the British

at the partisan camp and an amulet is discovered on his person, suggesting that he is a direct ancestor of twelfth-century warrior Ghengis Khan. Upon this discovery, British officers plot to install him as a puppet leader on the Mongolian throne in their attempt to strengthening their power over the territory. Of course, he resists all of them which also positions him as the perfect metaphor. Here is the revolutionary Asian versus the decadent, capitalist West.

(Picture 5) In terms of historical accuracy, it has been pointed out that the English never had been in Mongolia and that what the cunning Englishmen were doing in the film, the cunning Russians were doing quite often in real life. Unlike other Soviet films of the 1920s like “The Battleship Potemkin”, which are about revolutions in European Russia, “Storm over Asia” concerns itself with the British occupation of Southeastern Siberia and Northern Tibet. During the First World War, the British and the French had supported the Russian army on a massive scale with war materials. After the surrender of the Russian Empire in autumn 1917, it looked like much of that material would fall into the hands of the Germans. Under this pretext began an Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War with the United Kingdom and France sending troops into Russian ports. There were violent confrontations with troops loyal to the Bolsheviks.

(Picture 6) Unlike many of his earlier films, like “Mother” (*Mat’*) and “The End of St. Petersburg”, (*Konec St. Peterburga*) Pudovkin's goal in “Heir of Ghengis Khan” was narrative clarity, stylistic uniformity, and popular appeal. He had recently been criticized for shifting between competing styles of montage in “The End of St. Petersburg”, and so “Heir of Ghengis Khan” underwent tests with focus groups of schoolchildren to ensure that its ideological messages were easily appreciated. The results of these trials were overwhelmingly positive and the messages of the inter-titles were praised for their intelligence: “Listen to Moscow / that is where Lenin lives”, reads one title. In a 1929 article, a year after the film's release, Pudovkin made clear his desire to incorporate new sound technology into his films: he noted where he would have used sound in “Heir of Ghengis Khan” to establish conflict between shots and to complement the montage of the film. Sound, Pudovkin declared, “must be included in the raw material of cinema art”.

(Picture 7) So as not to upset British sensibilities, “The Heir to Genghis Khan” had its inter-titles altered for overseas audiences. The villains were no longer cartoonish Brits but instead white Russians, a situation which was also far closer to the truth. Dubious politics aside, Pudovkin’s feature nonetheless makes for remarkable cinema. The propagandist elements are

swamped by the technique to the point where their simplicity and lack of authenticity barely even registers. Our attention is constantly swerved towards the more striking elements, whether it might be the hyperkinetic editing rhythms, the location shooting or the non-fiction aspects which occasionally intrude. It is here where “The Heir to Genghis Khan” makes its mark as great cinema.

In terms of style alone the results are often breathtaking. Pudovkin’s montage almost predicts the fidgety nature of today’s post-MTV action movies such as a rapid fire approach. He would remove frames from a particular sequence to give it a more staccato feel; the method nowadays resembles stop motion but the intention at the time was to find the same visual sting as a close-up, something with which to make the audience pay that little bit more attention. In combination with the snatches of classical music which make up the score (interwoven with newly composed passages and examples of authentic Mongolian folk music) it undoubtedly succeeds.

(Picture 8) Many of the actors are nonprofessionals – though not the lead, Valery Inkizhinov, who had been a member of Lev Kuleshov’s work group. Inkizhinov had a curious career. Later, he emigrated to Germany and then France, where he frequently played the part of Asian villains. His most active period was in the thirties, when he appeared as a Bolshevik commissar in the Nazi propaganda movie “Friesennot” in 1935, dealing with the fate of the Volga Germans in communist Russia. During the 50s, Inkizhinov played for Fritz Lang in “The Tiger of Eschnapur” und “The Indian Tomb”. His role was the Indian high priest Yama, making him popular among a broader Western audience. However, he was ending his career in low-grade spy movies and died at his home in France in 1973.

(Picture 9) The location photography is just as important as the actors. “The Heir to Genghis Khan” was captured on the harsh plains and hillsides of the Soviet’s outskirts. Filming in such a landscape - and among actual Mongolians – led Pudovkin to pursue an added documentary-like dimension. Amidst the action and the propaganda we also find more straightforward ethnographic scenes of Mongolian culture, its rituals and its traditions. Non-professional actors were employed as too where their habitats. Moreover, they were accorded the utmost respect making their scenes stand out against the more caricatured portrayal of the various evil, corrupt, spoilt, despicable Brits. Such context may be a little obvious, but the documentary elements shine through and it’s fascinating to see such images more than 85 years later.

(Picture 10) The version of “Heir of Ghenghis Khan” screened today includes documentary footage of the feast of Tsai, an important Buddhist rite. Pudovkin and his crew were given permission to film the Bogdo Lama, the religious ruler elevated in 1911 to be the head of Mongolian territory as a monarch with unlimited power. The highly choreographed dance scenes included in the film were only performed once and in order to capture the action of the ritual, cameraman Anatolii Golovnia, had to strap the camera to his chest and operate it manually, turning the handle through 5,000 meters of film. In consequence, Pudovkin neither ridicules nor demonizes Buddhism. We know that he had reason to be grateful to the local lamas, who moved up the date of the religious festival so that he could film it. In themselves, the extraordinary shots of the ceremonial dance convey no disapproval. And look at the heavily ironic build-up to the appearance of the all-wise grand lama, who turns out to be a child of about two rubbing his feet together and looking around with a vague expression of concern. Even with the child lama, Pudovkin doesn’t go for easy laughs: the main satire is directed against the pompous British commander (uniformed, walrus-moustached, and medaled) and his tiara’d wife.

(Picture 11) Pudovkin is a master of expressive composition. In a remarkable shot, a dying partisan leader’s body lying on a slope in the foreground is echoed by the rise of a mountain in the background. Pudovkin gives the scene a leaping, plunging momentum through cutting. Although the “Heir of Ghengis Khan” takes place in present-day Mongolia, the narrative of the film is centered on Moscow as the ideological center: “Lenin ... / Moscow ... / go to the Russians, they are good and strong” reads one inter-title. This Moscow-centrism presents the supposed “ethnic inclusivity” of the Soviet Union – Mongolians and Russians fight side by side in the partisan camp – but at the same time depicts the Mongols only with orientalized rhetoric and imagery.

(Picture 12) While the British capitalists are plump and adorned with metals, the Mongolians are exotic, mystical, and linked to nature. Golovnia's static camera often shoots the Mongolian actors from above. Their bodies are dwarfed by, and assimilated into, the vast, anemic landscapes of the tundra. Their action is combined with animals fighting, rock formations, stampedes, and wind blowing over dunes. Although the extent versions of the film include numerous scenes of Mongolian “exoticism”, the original 1928 version incorporated even more ethnographic footage: Mongolians buying and selling goods in the market, market performers dancing and juggling in the street, and peasants frantically pushing one another out of the way to hear a record player.

(Picture 13) One of the reasons "Storm over Asia" resonates so profoundly in the silent film canon is its thematic, if not contextual, connection to the Soviet heritage and worldview. Although the film does not address Soviet woes, routines, or spaces directly, it grapples with a powerful and pervasive question present in the Russian psyche: To what extent should Russia be construed as "West" or "East"? Pudovkin alludes to the historical debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers through cinematic language, rather than blatant, polemical statements. Few Russians appear in the film, with the exception of the partisans. But the Russians' naturalistic style creates a visual parallel with the seemingly ancient Mongols — suggesting deeper connections to the Mongolians than to continental Europeans.

(Picture 14) "Storm" suggests an underlying ambivalence in terms of Russian identification with either the West or East, though the film tends to empathize with the Mongolians. The sentiment is conveyed through landscapes that manifest an Asian aesthetic in their graphic simplicity and still depiction, the intimacy and sensitivity with which the nuclear Mongol family and its prized ornaments are filmed prior to the son's departure, and the implicit connection between Anglo characters and unnatural processes, including surgical repair of the body, the hygienic and materialistic "rituals" before the visitation to the Buddhist Temple, and the infiltration of technology into the primeval environs of the Steppes.

(Picture 15) Throughout the film, the agrarian and uncultivated landscapes range from chillingly vacant, to tranquil, serene and sublime. Ultimately, though, the Steppes pulse with a voracious life force: a mysterious and aggressive wind decimates the British colonial presence. Pudovkin elevates and restores the dignity of the indigenous Mongols through this ostensibly natural (though seemingly supernatural) force. But the shots by Golovnia overlooking the sand dunes, mountains and conifers of the Steppes, are also entirely unique. Prior to "Storm", no one had ventured into the rural, nomadic domestic spaces of the Buriat-Mongolian Republic with a movie camera. The director complemented his Soviet montage technique with an awareness of Asian art, establishing graphically simple, yet emotionally stirring landscapes, with just the slightest degree of movement, like shuddering leaves, shifting ice, or the slow, almost viscous flow of a river.

(Picture 16) "Storm" constitutes an exquisite portrait of Mongolian life, integrating graphic landscapes (in which the individual is frequently subverted to the grandeur and scale of the natural environment) with humanizing close-ups of the native people and the indexical signs present in their lives, such as the amulet that had belonged to the lama, and the prized skin of

the silver fox. The Mongolian hunter's family appears aged, crouched, tanned, and wrinkled, yet their faces embody a spirit and spontaneity that is totally absent from the visages of the British Army Commander and his bejeweled and powdered wife. The lighting in the interior of the Mongolian yurt is fascinating and quite beautiful. The crisscrossing of cast shadows simultaneously gives the impression of individuals *trapped* within a colonial economic framework, and *integrated* with the natural space. The continuity between anatomy and environment suggests a higher level of authenticity. These individuals, bound by the complex of shadows, are close to the earth and to each other, in-tune with the seasons, the wildlife, and the hours. In contrast, the British delegate and his wife shroud themselves in unnatural pieces of finery: a long satin sheath wrapped around an obese male torso, the whale-bone corsette cinched unnaturally at the waist, and layers of lotion and powder set on the skin.

(Picture 17) The naturalistic quality of the Mongolians makes the surgery performed on Inkizhinov's character all the more loathsome. The victim, after being bound and brutally shot, is essentially reawakened from the dead and brought out of the natural space of the sand dunes into the civilized British interior. Sanctioned violence is followed by sanctioned medical penetration to revive the human form. The body, bound like a mummy, and restricted in its movements, constitutes a mannequin or dummy. It is the physical manifestation of the Mongolian's diplomatic function as a pawn of the British Empire's. The surgical repair is unnatural in that it is totally divested from any spiritual healing, that is the sort of healing presented in the earliest moments when the lama prays for the father's recovery.

The Mongolian is wholly castrated, unable to quench his thirst or articulate his thoughts. The moment when he attempts to drink from the fish tank, an action wholly outside the purview of civilized European decorum, is quite poetic: his head on the slick floor, surrounded by the thrashing fish, constitutes a visual metaphor for all the trauma and exploitation he has endured, and his inability to thrive within this world. Yet, like all of the images infused with pathos, it is neither sentimental nor contrived.

(Picture 18) The closing scene is perhaps the most unambiguous example of Soviet montage. Pudovkin employs the fastest tempo, the wildest mise-en-scéne, and rapid inter-cutting between a savage, fully restored Mongolian hunter and the inter-titles, producing negatives of the image that seem monstrous and supernatural. Yet, it is highly telling that the British defeat is staged without bloodshed: the wrath of the wilderness is the only outpouring of violence. The men fall back, rolling and somersaulting like weightless dolls blown down. It is as though

this culminating struggle occurs outside the bounds of mortal life: it is no mere territorial dispute, but a recovery of the dignity and humanity that was lost.

Also the final frames of “Heir of Ghengis Khan” reinforce thee competing forces in the film - subsuming Mongolia as a territory under Moscow and marking the Mongolians as ethnically other (of different blood than the “white man”, as the inter-titles tell us). Bair, in an explosion of anger after the murder of another Mongol with “Khan blood”, gallops across the steppe with his band of Mongolian followers. The hooves of their horses stir up the sand below, inciting a storm that rips up trees, tears guns from hands, and overpowers the Western army with the sheer force of nature. On the surface, this uprising appears to be a rebellion of Mongolians peasants - friends of Moscow - against capitalism. The final inter-title of the film, however, reinforces the view that bloodlines and ethnicity are of equal importance to class affiliation: “O, my people / rise ... / in your ancient strength /and free yourselves!”

The movie releases the power of Pudovkin’s tribute to the spirit of the Central Asian people – enabling us to see this not as a pro-Soviet film but as a pro-Asia film. That quality was undoubtedly apparent to its first viewers, and it must have made them uneasy at a time when a trend toward conservatism in Soviet art was obvious. The critic Victor Shklovskii – himself a target of the decriers of “formalism” - complained that Pudovkin had perverted Osip Brik’s scenario, eliminating Brik’s “irony at the expense of the exotic” and replacing it with “dubious allegories and metaphors.” But what if behind the seeming exoticism Pudovkin had grasped something essential about the destiny of a people whom the Soviets would annex but never assimilate?

Under the title “The Heir to Genghis Khan”, the film was first released in the Soviet Union in 1928 in a print thought to have lasted two and a half hours. When it was exported as “Storm over Asia”, scenes and inter-titles that identified the occupying forces as British were cut, so that the bad guys could be passed off with relatively minor offense as White Russians. In the Soviet Union, the film lost many details of local market economy and culture. Today we will watch a newly assembled 125-minute version, probably the most complete seen since the initial release.