RUSS 380: Putin's Russia and Protest Culture
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with
University regulations. — Elise Lieberman

A World Neither Marvelous Nor New: Aleksei Balabanov's Of Freaks and Men as an
Anti-Avant-Garde Film
by Elise Lieberman '22

Soviet avant-garde cinema rendered the camera a weapon for creating a marvelous new

world. Sergei Eisentstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) chronicles the dawn of this new world

and the violent destruction of the old order. Eisenstein's portrayal of class rage and hope was so

potent that *Battleship Potemkin* was banned in many countries for fear it would start a

revolution.[1] Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) portrays Eisenstein's nascent

world in full, incandescent bloom. Both Vertov and Eisensteins' portrayal of this new egalitarian

society on screen renders the camera itself an instrument of revolution. *Man with a Movie*

Camera adds a self-referential layer to its portrayal of revolutionary modernity by constantly

filming cameras and trains: the modern technologies used to create the film and the modern

world it portrays. Aleksei Balabanov's *Of Freaks and Men* (1998) is similarly obsessed with

early cameras and trains. This paper argues, however, that Balabanov's *Of Freaks and Men* is an

anti-avant-garde film. It will provide a close reading of the scene of Liza and Johann's first

meeting to argue that Balabanov uses the Soviet avant-garde's fetishized objects of modernity -

the camera and the train - to show that technology does not bring about a marvelous new world,

but rather accelerates and multiplies the worst tendencies of the present, bringing about a

terrifying world that is neither marvelous nor new.

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[1] Bilterevst, Daniel 'Will we ever see Potemkin?': The historical reception and censorship of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* in Belgium (1926–32), Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema, 2:1, 5-19, DOI: 10.1386/srsc.2.1.5_1 (2008)

Both *Battleship Potemkin* and *Man with a Movie Camera* use formal devices to show how modern technologies - such as the films themselves - are shepherding humanity to a brilliant and novel future. Eisenstein's pioneering use of montage "threw disparate images against each other to elicit an emotional response or to stimulate an intellectual association."[2] Together, these independent shots create a feeling of agitation and synergy - a force greater than any one individual. Eisenstein's innovative use of the hand-drawn red flag similarly enraptures and inspires the viewer, linking the Soviet Union with technological progress and wonder. Vertov's use of double exposures, montage, and sped-up takes give the viewer a similar sense of magic and wonder upon beholding a new, futuristic utopia. Vertov uses these effects to intersperse footage of various individual technologies, thereby metonymically linking the already-magical train and camera. The result is a physical and psychic collage of modernity in which all moving parts melt into one. These dizzying shots of amalgamated modern technology are, in turn, constantly interspersed with scenes of rebirth and growth from daily life: the opening of a camera shutter mirrors the opening of an eye, a baby is born and then a train races by. Such explicitly links the film's portrayal of technology with that of "progress" for humanity. Key in this progress is the notion of scale; technology allows this progress to move not only faster, but also to positively affect more people. That both films constantly show masses of men and women, united and equal, emphasizes this notion of technology's wide reach and equalizing nature. Both films also feature a stark black and white (and in *Battleship Potemkin*'s case, red) color palette evocative of Soviet avant-garde artists such as Mayakovsky and Lissitzky, further linking the films to revolutionary art. Both films also feature an upbeat score that triumphantly rings in the dawn of the new world.

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[2] "Battleship Potemkin." *San Francisco Silent Film Festival,* https://silentfilm.org/battleship-potemkin/

The scene of Johann's meeting with Liza shows how Balabanov uses distinctly non-avant-garde formal devices to portray the avant-garde's fetishized subjects, thus subverting the avant-garde notion of the positive power of technology. The scene opens with Liza looking out of her window at a train. Balabanov's use of sepia tone creates a warm, subtle color palette antithetical to the bold black/white/red contrast of the Soviet avant-garde. If the avant-garde's color palette denotes the future, Balabanov's brown tones evoke the past. As Liza stares out the window, it clear that Balabanov's film has none of Eisenstein and Vertov's dizzying speed and magical effects. Instead, the scene's pace is languid: the train idles at the station for maintenance, and then slowly pulls away. Slow, mournful music fills the viewer with foreboding and dread; the train pulling out of the station evokes a funeral procession, not the hopeful birth of a new world.

Just like Vertov, Balabanov uses form to metonymically link trains and cameras, but argues that the resulting technological amalgam merely accelerates the worst of human tendencies: exploitation, greed, and violence against women and children. When adolescent Liza first meets Johann, the man who will steal her inheritance and force her to become a pornographic actress for his own financial gain, a train's "choo choo" is heard from outside the window. This "choo choo" is heard after each step which brings Liza deeper into Johann's clutches throughout the film. This "choo choo" is also heard when Johann learns that his colleague, Viktor, is hiding two young Siamese twins - thus leading Johann to force the twins into his business as well. These "choo choos" are successive death knells, puncuating Liza and the twins' fall deeper and deeper into the pornography business: a world in which their exploitation is mediated by the new technology of the camera. Moreover, in this scene, Liza speaks to Johann alone. Throughout the entire film, Liza and the twins almost never interface

with society. Unlike in *Battleship Potemkin* and *Man with a Movie Camera,* there is no mass, no montage of faces in the crowd, no dizzying shots of collective power. Technology has rendered the weakest members of society - women and children - yet more profoundly exploited and alone.

Balabanov also uses content to further link the camera and the train and explore their synergistic potential for exploitation. Johann himself, a Western European by name, has just arrived in Russia, ostensibly by train and from Western Europe. It is thus the Russian Empire's new railroad system - the Saint-Petersburg Warsaw line was completed in 1962, linking the Russian capital to Western Europe - that brings pornography to Russia. Moreover, that the Siamese twins are Asian shows the role of trains in the expansion of the Russian Empire. From 1891-1916 (precisely the time period of *Of Freaks and Men),* the Trans-Siberian railroad was being constructed in order to link European Russia to Central Asia and the Russian Far East, thus incorporating people who looked like the twins into the Russian Empire.[3] Later, Eisenstein and Vertov would celebrate the ability of these trains to incorporate more people into the egalitarian Soviet project. Balabanov, however, shows that trains allow exploitation, and not progress, to reach greater numbers of people: the twin's incorporation into the Russian Empire by rail has led to their exploitation via camera as pornographic subjects. That empire-building is a tremendously violent process independent of pornography is surely not lost on Balabanov. Balabanov's portrayal of early twentieth-century trains also nods to the looming specter of WWII, in which trains would carry troops to the front and civilians to the death camps. Technology, Balabanov hints, is about to enable a quantum leap in the scale of possible human death and destruction.

Moreover, the shot of the train outside Liza's window before her meeting with Johann offers a different and darker origin story for cinema itself, thus rewriting the cinematic history on

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[3] Ames, Edward. *A Century of Russian Railroad Construction: 1837-1936.* https://www.jstor.org/stable/2491700.

which Soviet avant-garde films stand. The shot outside Liza's window bears a striking resemblance to *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat,* a fifty-second clip of a train pulling into a station first shown by the Lumiere brothers in January of 1896, less than a month after they conducted the first-ever public film screening in December 1895. The film soon became a "key part in the founding myth of cinema's birth" through widespread but apocryphal stories that the film terrified the audience who believed they would be run over.[4] *Man with a Movie Camera's* enchantingly meta final scene is surely an allusion to *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat:* joyful moviegoers watch a train on screen which seems to run them over. *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* and *Man with a Movie Camera* show how early modernity was endlessly enamored with itself and wanted to film other marvelous and novel objects. Balabanov's allusion to *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, however, subverts this origin story of early cinema and the magical modernity it represents. In its place, *Of Freaks and Men* offers a much darker history. The first thing humans will film, Balabanov shows, is not the Lumiere Brothers' and later the Soviet avant-garde's marvelous objects of modernity, but rather pornography.

Soviet avant-garde films such as Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* and Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* show that modern technology is zooming humanity forward towards an expansive, inclusive, and egalitarian new world. In *Of Freaks and Men,* Balabanov portrays the subjects of avant-garde modernity with distinctly non-avant-garde formal devices in order to subvert this avant-garde vision of positive technological progress. Balabanov also uses both formal (much like Vertov) and informal devices to metonymically link trains and cameras. Unlike Vertov, however, Balabanov concludes that the resulting technological amalgam does not bring about the future, but instead accelerates the worst tendencies of the present: abuse of

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[4] Loiperdinger, Martin, and Bernd Elzer. "Lumiere's Arrival of the Train: Cinema's Founding Myth." *The Moving Image*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2004, pp. 89–118., https://doi.org/10.1353/mov.2004.0014.

power, greed, and violence against women and children. Balabanov also offers a new, perverse origin story of early cinema itself, thus subverting the positive historical narratives of modernity which undergird Soviet avant-garde films. In so doing, Balabanov shows that the hopes of the avant-garde era were fundamentally incorrect from the outset.

But why make an anti-avant-garde film in 1998? Perhaps Balabanov is really critiquing Russia's accelerated return to global capitalism in the 1990s - a return mediated by the technologies of global and financial trade such as wire transfers. These new technologies, Balabanov argues, are no different than cameras and trains: they merely magnify the possibilities for exploitation, greed, and violence. Anyone who believes otherwise - such as Vertov and Eisenstein did - is a fool. Moreover, Balabanov's portrayal of early pornography surely has in mind the explosion of internet pornography in the 1990s. By showing how first image, and then video, magnified the scale of sexual exploitation in turn-of-the-century Russia, Balabanov seems to wink at the audience, saying "Just wait and see how far - and low - pornography will go." In *Of Freaks and Men,* Balabanov is really saying that modern technology has brought 1990s Russia to a terrifying world that, much like turn-of-the-century Petersburg, is neither marvelous nor new.

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