

2. THE BOLSHEVIKS, PROPAGANDA AND THE CINEMA

Of all the arts for us the cinema is the most important.

Lenin, 1922.¹

When the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917 they took control only of the 'commanding heights' of a disintegrating administrative machine, a machine whose malfunctioning had largely contributed to the collapse of the previous system of political control. While the machine itself, and those who staffed it, were not necessarily anti-Bolshevik, neither were they inherently anti-tsarist. Their position may be appropriately compared with the ineffectual inertia of the now fallen Provisional Government, and for this reason the Bolsheviks could not rely on the existing machinery of government for the transmission and execution of their orders, let alone use it actively as an instrument for social and political change.² The situation was further complicated by the reaction of the non-Bolshevik forces to the October Revolution. The ravages of famine, disease and armed insurrection in the provinces that characterised the first three years of Soviet power effectively prevented the 'party of the masses' from establishing, let alone maintaining, contact with the masses in whose name it claimed to be acting, and thus exposed the fundamental weakness of the Bolsheviks' political position. Ruptured communications between the centre and the periphery brought difficulties in both the practical and theoretical fields; it was an emergency situation that demanded emergency measures.

The new government aimed to mobilise the masses into active involvement with the Bolshevik cause and to train them into appropriately new patterns of political, economic and social thought. In this way their future support could be relied on as an automatic reaction to predetermined stimuli transmitted from the nerve-centres of Bolshevik organisation. On the morrow of the Revolution, at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, Lenin stated:

In our view the state draws its strength from the consciousness of the masses. It is strong when the masses know everything, can make judgements on everything and approach everything consciously.³

Four years later he clarified his meaning:

While we have in our country a phenomenon such as illiteracy it is difficult for us to speak of political education. . . An illiterate person stands outside politics; he has first to be taught the alphabet. Without this there is only rumour, scandal, gossip and prejudice, but no politics.⁴

If then the masses were to be mobilised they must first of all be given the rudiments of literacy and education, for only then could they be fully integrated into the political and economic activity of the new Soviet state.

But in the immediate years after the Revolution the new Soviet state was in no position to integrate the masses into its activities. It did not have the necessary administrative machinery or competence, it did not have the conventional political power, and it did not have the military strength to reorganise the social and economic structure of the country. Apart from anything else, and despite subsequent assertions, the October Revolution was a revolution from above. Unable to rely upon administrative fiat and incapable of using force, the revolutionaries were compelled initially to shield themselves, but later were also able to strengthen their position, through the use of agitation and propaganda.

In the English language the concept of 'propaganda' covers many eventualities, but in Russian the distinction between 'agitation' and 'propaganda' is a commonplace of socialist parlance. The distinction was first developed by Plekhanov in 1892: 'A propagandist presents *many* ideas to one or a few persons; an agitator presents *only one or a few* ideas, but he presents them to a *whole* mass of people.'⁵ This distinction was developed by Lenin in *Chto delat'?* (What is to be done?):

the propagandist, dealing with, say, the question of unemployment, must explain the capitalistic nature of crises, the cause of their inevitability in modern society, the necessity for the transformation of this society into a socialist society, etc. In a word, he must present 'many ideas', so many, indeed, that they will be widely understood as an integral whole only by a (comparatively) few persons. The agitator, however, speaking on the same subject, will take as an illustration a fact that is most glaring and widely known to his audience, say, the death of an unemployed worker's family from starvation, the growth of impoverishment, etc., and, utilising this fact, known to all, will direct his efforts to presenting a *single idea* to the 'masses', e.g., the senselessness of the contradiction between the increase of wealth and the increase of poverty; he will strive to *rouse* discontent and indignation among the masses against this crying injustice, leaving a more complete explanation of this contradiction to the propagandist.⁶

In the period when Lenin was writing this, in 1901–2, when the Party's activities were confined to the secret and the underground,

‘the propagandist operates chiefly by means of the *printed* word; the agitator by means of the *spoken* word.’⁷ Propaganda, then, is more of a long-term activity, a preparation of the background. Agitation, on the other hand, is more immediate, and more specifically directed. It was clearly agitation rather than propaganda, to use their own terminology, that the Bolsheviks required in the aftermath of the October Revolution and, indeed, for some years afterwards. However agitation and propaganda are obviously activities of a kind, even if they differ in detail; the *agitki* of the Civil War period⁸ were clearly agitational, rather than propagandist but, as the twenties wore on and the Soviet cinema began to be organised on a more permanent basis, the distinction becomes more difficult to maintain. The elements of agitation and propaganda in a film such as Eisenstein’s *Bronenosets Potëmkin* (Battle-ship Potemkin)⁹ are inextricably intertwined. In a discussion of the Soviet cinema in the 1920s the distinction made between agitation and propaganda is not then on the whole a useful one. I am confirmed in this view by the manner in which Plekhanov attempted to define ‘agitation’ and ‘propaganda’ in terms of one another:

In general it is not easy to draw the line between agitation and what is usually called propaganda. Agitation is also propaganda but propaganda taking place in particular circumstances, that is, in circumstances which compel even those people who would not normally have paid any attention to them to listen to the words of the propagandist. Propaganda is agitation conducted in the normal everyday course of the life of a particular country. Agitation is propaganda, occasioned by events which are not entirely ordinary and evoking a certain upsurge in the general mood. . . Propaganda, in the proper sense of the word, would lose all historical meaning if it were not accompanied by agitation.¹⁰

Save for the observation that there was a general tendency to move from agitation to propaganda as the cinema became more firmly established, I shall therefore use the English term ‘propaganda’ throughout this book to cover both Russian terms, ‘agitation’ and ‘propaganda’.

The rôle of propaganda in the revolutionary struggle was also a commonplace of Russian socialist thought. The working class had had to be aroused to revolutionary consciousness: as the mast-head of the Social Democratic newspaper *Iskra* (The Spark) had proclaimed, ‘From this spark shall arise a flame.’¹¹ So too after the Revolution the masses would be aroused and actively involved in the struggle to create a new society. What *Iskra* had been to the underground Party, the cinema would be to the socialist

society: a rallying-point, a unifying force.¹² This, at any rate, was the hope expressed by Lenin in the remark that I have quoted at the beginning of this chapter. But when Lenin said that, 'of all the arts for us the cinema is the most important', he was passing not an artistic, but rather a functional judgement. In an article written shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, Lenin had already noted the use of the cinema in capitalist society to improve productivity and therefore also profits in accordance with the so-called 'Taylor system' for the reduction of labour to its basic mechanical component movements:

The cinema is systematically employed for studying the work of the best operatives and increasing its intensity, i.e., 'speeding up' the workers. . . A newly engaged worker is taken to the factory cinema where he is shown a 'model' performance of his job; the worker is made to 'catch up' with that performance. A week later he is taken to the cinema again and shown pictures of his own performance, which is then compared with the 'model'.

All these vast improvements are introduced to *the detriment* of the workers, for they lead to their still greater oppression and exploitation.¹³

As Lenin had already observed in another article written slightly earlier: 'The capitalist cuts his expenditure by *half* or more; his profits grow. The bourgeoisie is delighted and cannot praise the Taylors enough!'¹⁴ The cinema could thus have a practical economic function in that it could directly influence methods of work and lead to a more efficient use of resources. That Lenin felt that socialism could in this instance learn from capitalism is shown by his attitude towards the film *Gidrotorf*, an instructional film demonstrating a hydraulic method of lifting peat, which was made and shown to him in 1920.¹⁵ The cinema was, quite clearly, the most appropriate medium for this type of propaganda, but why was it considered more generally to be 'of all the arts. . . the most important'?

To understand the importance of the cinema in its proper perspective we should first of all look at the other propaganda media that were available to the Bolsheviks at the time of the Revolution. Their pre-Revolutionary propaganda had been almost entirely confined to the spoken and the written word, the political meeting, the newspaper and the pamphlet. Written propaganda, especially in the form of a newspaper such as *Iskra* or, later, *Pravda*, had its place in preaching to the converted, who tended to be either members of the disaffected intelligentsia or literate members of the industrial proletariat. Spoken propaganda (or agitation, in Bolshevik terminology) was more appropriate to a

specific situation, a case of alleged exploitation which could be developed into a strike or a demonstration of the kind that swept Russia in 1905. Although both these types of propaganda had their place after 1917, neither was entirely adequate for the task that confronted the new régime. The Bolsheviks had to find propaganda media that would appeal to the broad masses of the still largely illiterate population. This meant that written and printed propaganda had only limited value, at least in the early years, and their value was further limited by the confines of language in a multilingual country. Initially attempts were made to involve the population directly in the celebration of May Day and the anniversary of the Revolution.¹⁶ But these attempts were limited in their scope and, therefore, also in their effect. The same could be said of attempts to utilise the theatre for revolutionary propaganda, but the theatre had its own limitations as well:

The very nature of the theatre makes overnight changes impossible; a play cannot simply be mounted at a moment's notice. Even given the existence of a suitable play, there is bound to be a timelag for the rehearsals, training of actors, designing of sets.¹⁷

There was also the problem that the theatre was not entirely reliable; on the one hand a touring group might wander from the straight and narrow in the provinces, and the central authorities, even if they found out, would be powerless to act, while on the other hand the theatre was bound by conventions unfamiliar to the broad masses, conventions which might make the message of a play difficult to comprehend. Nevertheless efforts were made to break down these conventions and involve the masses in the actual performance. Events from revolutionary history such as the rebellion of Spartacus or the storming of the Bastille were re-enacted,¹⁸ but perhaps the most extravagant gesture of this kind was the re-staging of the storming of the Winter Palace (*Vzyatie Zimnego dvortsa* – The Taking of the Winter Palace) *in situ* on 7 November 1920, with a cast including 2,500 performers, 500 musicians and some 35,000 spectators.¹⁹ But the possibilities of such spectacles were clearly also limited, in both space and time, and such ephemera were scarcely worth the immense organisational effort involved.

The Bolsheviks needed a propaganda medium that was primarily and fundamentally visual in its appeal, one that would thus overcome differences of language and cultural development. In many ways the poster suited their purposes and they came to rely heavily upon it, both during the Civil War and afterwards.²⁰ The

poster was, after all, visual, simple and universal in its appeal. It was used for educational²¹ as well as agitational²² purposes. The most important innovation in the poster field was the development of the ROSTA window, which provided a semi-satirical commentary on current events that could be displayed in the street or pasted on a factory wall.²³ There were some posters which became indelibly imprinted on the popular mind, such as Moor's *Ty zapisalsya dobrovol'tsem?* (Have you Volunteered?)²⁴ which owed more than a passing resemblance to the British 'Your Country Needs You',²⁵ and his appeal poster for the victims of the Volga famine *Pomogi!* (Help!),²⁶ but the poster was ultimately confined in its utility by its static imagery. The Revolution required a more dynamic, more modern medium of propaganda, and that medium was the cinema.

The cinema provided a medium that was not merely visual and dynamic but also mechanical. The cinema's essence, as the argument went, lay in movement: 'The soul of the cinema is in the movement of life.'²⁷ Its association with the machine underlined its novelty, especially in the outlying areas of the Soviet countryside, and its symbolic rôle as an agent of progress. The cinema was universal in its appeal: the 'great silent', as it was called,²⁸ could be viewed simultaneously in Petrograd and Vladivostok, in Murmansk and in Baku, and its message would be understood in all these places, unimpeded by language barriers.²⁹ This universality also meant that the cinema could be controlled more easily than, say, the theatre by the authorities at the centre. But to understand fully the attractions and limitations of the cinema as a propaganda medium we must examine the disputes that surrounded it throughout the period under discussion.

The disputes and polemics that took place in the 1920s between the various schools of film theoreticians, film makers and film critics must be seen against the background of a general preoccupation with three themes: the very legitimacy of the cinema as an art form, especially vis-à-vis the theatre; the rôle of the cinema as the art form of the machine age and therefore of the twentieth century; and, by extension, the rôle of the cinema as the art form of the Revolution itself.

The controversy that raged over the legitimacy of the cinema as an art form was very much a continuation of the debate that had been carried out in the period prior to the First World War.³⁰ Then theatrical interests had attacked the cinema largely because they were afraid that its rise would lead to the demise of the

‘legitimate’ theatre; but in the 1920s this possibility was acclaimed with glee. The essence of the argument lies in the words of the critic Pavel Poluyanov:

The theatre’s day is over and there is only one thing left for it to do – die. . . The theatre is for *a few epicures*, it is not for the people. The cinema belongs to everyone. The cinema does not talk, leaving us the chance to *complete* the spectacle, at the same time *training* our self-creativity. The theatre gives us long, boring, alien words which are 99 per cent banal and empty. Which of them do we need now? Of course there can be only one answer. . . The cinema and the theatre are enemies and every one of us knows where he stands; every one of us should say his yea or nay.³¹

In a pamphlet that he published himself in 1925 Poluyanov expanded his arguments. The title of the pamphlet was itself symptomatic of the style of the argument: *Gibel’ teatra i torzhestvo kino* (The ruin of the theatre and the triumph of the cinema).³² He thought that the demise of the theatre was inevitable because the cinema was better matched to the pace of contemporary change.³³ The amount of time spent theorising on the theatre and its rôle indicated its unhealthy state: ‘The very fact of this controversy surrounding the theatre indicates that something is rotten in the state of Denmark.’³⁴ In addition Poluyanov quoted Eichenwald’s argument that the theatre was not itself an art form but a combination of painting, architecture and literature; once a theatrical performance was completed, there was nothing left except the ‘real arts’ like the sets and the printed word.³⁵ The theatre was therefore dependent on ‘real’ art forms: ‘If there were no literature, there would be no theatre, while, if there were no theatre, the play would nevertheless still exist.’³⁶

Finally, he argued that it was the theatre, rather than the cinema, that was the vulgarising force: ‘The theatre demeans man, making him into a mere. . . actor.’³⁷ The theatre had historically been in the hands of the ruling classes and had therefore always been a medium of entertainment rather than education.³⁸ The cinema, on the other hand, was a mass force:

The curse of the theatre – *The Unrepeatability of the Spectacle* – does not frighten the cinema, which reproduces its spectacles for the whole world. . . Hence the colossal profitability of the cinema, which gives it the chance for the most powerful development and a tremendous advantage over the theatre – *Economy of Artistic Resources with an Infinite Auditorium*. In order to give millions of people the chance to enjoy a beautiful spectacle involving world artists the cinema has only to play once. . . And the great Asta Nielsen or Jackie Coogan excites and shakes simultaneously both Berlin and Singapore.³⁹

The cinema could conquer time and space:

To tear dying life from the hands of all-destroying time and make it immortal, to preserve history for future generations – what a crushing victory over time and space!⁴⁰

This ability made the cinema a new teacher, particularly appropriate to the rush of modern life.

A similar point was made by the critic Voznesensky.⁴¹ He recognised that the cinema had suffered from its origins in the market-place⁴² and compared the attitude of many intellectuals towards the cinema with that of the Hottentots towards the first musical instrument.⁴³ Nevertheless he saw the cinema as a weapon for progress:

If the purpose of the world, of life, of every living thing, is to give birth to the new man, to ensure in such a way that tomorrow's man is today's with something else greater than today, then the art of the screen must be recognised as one of the most powerful methods on the road to this universal goal. . . Because in none of the old art forms is there that living flicker of the birth of new ideas, a new will, a new personality which those who know the screen sense to be amongst its future possibilities.⁴⁴

Like Poluyanov, Voznesensky felt the cinema to be more 'real' than the theatre: the theatre for him was symbolised by the mask, whereas the cinema was concerned with the exposition of truth.⁴⁵ The cinema was also the 'art form of tomorrow' because of its connection with technology and the universality of time and space; here too Voznesensky was in accord with Poluyanov:

In truth all the rules of the past are broken here: Pickford or Chaplin act in America, but we see them in Nezhin or Mtsensk. The actor Polonsky or the actress Kholodnaya have died, but their living smiles, every wrinkle and every breath, can be seen with your own eyes and now the mystical secret of immortality has already become the concrete achievement of the screen.⁴⁶

Other writers argued that the essence of the cinema's future lay in its connection with technology⁴⁷ but the majority emphasised the essentially visual nature of the film:

Literature seems to me to be the art which is most opposed to cinematograph art in as far as we bear in mind the very essence of these two arts. The means of expression of literature is the word. The cinema is the great silent. The word damages the cinema as such. . . The picture should speak for itself. . . And of course the ideal would be the picture that could be shown without subtitles.⁴⁸

The absence of the word from the film meant that the audience was required to use its imagination and thus participate in the artistic process.⁴⁹ Literary adaptations were regarded as anathema: Eisenstein himself wrote:

On the question of what the cinema needs from literature, one thing can be said in every case with certainty:

Comrade littérateurs! Don't write screenplays!

Production organisations, make people buy your goods with novels.

Sell your rights to the novel.

And film directors must be made to find the *cinematographic* equivalent of these products.⁵⁰

Osip Brik took a similar view: the screenplay should be written, not before, but after the film had been shot:

The screenplay should be written, not before shooting, but afterwards. The screenplay is not an order to shoot, but a method of organising what has already been shot. And we should therefore ask, not how a screenplay should be, but what should be photographed. The re-working of material in the screenplay is the last stage of the work.⁵¹

Unfortunately this extreme attitude contributed to the chronic shortage of screenplays that affected the Soviet cinema in the later twenties.

The cinema was also distinguished from the theatre by the scope of materials that it could encompass on the screen: 'the cinema is the organisation in time of the spatial elements of reality, taken on film. . . The theatre is the organisation of real people in the midst of reality.'⁵² Or, as another critic put it, 'The theatre is a game. The cinema is life.'⁵³ Yet another argued that the only thing that the cinema and the theatre had in common was the auditorium.⁵⁴ For him the cinema's greatest advantage was the power of real movement.⁵⁵ He compared the film to a painting: 'The immobile chiaroscuro and line, as if frozen on to the painting, become mobile on the screen, as if alive. Their expressiveness is heightened.'⁵⁶ The painter could only produce 'the fiction of movement', but the film maker could produce real movement, using the painting as mere background.⁵⁷ The cinema's distinctive movement was produced by the manner in which the film was cut – by montage:

The film as a product of the art of the cinema originates from the time when words were replaced by images, when the unity of time and place was destroyed, when different concepts of the *combination of the order of separate scenes* appeared, when people began to introduce various plans for one and the same scene.⁵⁸

In the theatre too the audience saw real people, whereas in the cinema it saw only illusions created by montage; the cinema, for this writer, was less realistic but more powerful.⁵⁹ He saw montage as having three purposes: it organised and directed the viewer's attention; it concentrated the imagination on essentials;

it retained the viewer's attention through the rhythm and dynamism of optical bombardment.⁶⁰ In all these, montage further distinguished the cinema from the theatre. This view was supported by Eichenbaum. For him the cinema deformed nature by giving the illusion of continuity: there was a contrast between the content of each individual frame and the impression left by a series of images – each frame attained its full significance only in the context of the surrounding frames.⁶¹ Given the essentially visual nature of the cinema, fears were expressed that the introduction of sound would destroy the cinema; the director, Vsevolod Pudovkin, wrote in 1929:

At that time [i.e. the cinema's beginnings] people did not consider the cinema to be an art but a poor surrogate for the theatre – and they were right. Now the appearance of sound is once again driving us along the line of least resistance towards being a surrogate for the theatre.⁶²

On the other hand, because of its dependence on visual imagery rather than words, the cinema was still attacked as illiterate:

Historically the cinema emerged as a substitute for the theatre. . .It's funny when people talk about 'the art of the screen'. . .Of course there is no 'art of the screen'. . .The cinema is untheatrical by its very nature. . .And it is not by chance that a fatal illiteracy weighs upon this dirty 'art'. Its terminology is not given to any language. . .Finally our Russian cinema. It beats the record for illiteracy.⁶³

But, although this view had held sway before the First World War, it was now very much a minority opinion. The majority of critics agreed with Voznesensky:

The 'great silent' has literally become the hero of the day both abroad and here. In its triumphant progress it has left both the theatre and even literature some way behind it. It is increasingly gaining the audience of the broad masses, it is penetrating ever more deeply into such corners as would not in the near future be penetrated by other forms of art. It is therefore not surprising that the cinema, which even recently was slighted by every aesthete as a vulgar surrogate, has now become a subject for discussion amongst recognised art specialists.⁶⁴

The cinema then, was a visual art form, the theatre a verbal one. In addition one of the cinema's principal distinctions from the theatre lay in its technological basis; in the Soviet Union in the 1920s technology was synonymous with progress, and hence the art form of the machine age would also be the art form of the Revolution.

As early as 1913 the cinema's connection with the pace of modern life had been noted by Shapotnikov: 'The tempo of

dramatic action must correspond to the rapid tempo of contemporary life. The cinematographic pace of impressions.’⁶⁵ This central idea was taken up and developed in the 1920s, especially in the columns of the journal *Kino-Fot*. In the first issue of the journal, published in 1922, Lev Kuleshov proclaimed that any interest in the past was a sign of abnormality, that the cinema was *the* contemporary art form, and therefore the only one that was worthy of serious consideration.⁶⁶ Only the cinema could, through the techniques of montage, *organise* its material and its audience in such a way as to re-establish a connection whose loss had led contemporary art into what Kuleshov called ‘a hopeless blind alley’.⁶⁷ In the very next article Ippolit Sokolov made even more extravagant claims for the cinema:

The cinema is the new philosophy.

The slow–analytical and rapid–synthetic language of the *cinema* is the new international visual Esperanto of the future.⁶⁸

And further:

The style of our era is the style of straight lines and sharp corners.

Our contemporary psychology is constructed on sharp corners. . .

But the style of our contemporaneity is the style of the cinema.

Only the *cinema* is constructed exclusively on the straight line and the sharp corner. . .

The *cinema* is a universe constructed on straight lines and sharp corners.

The cinema is a new outlook on life.

The *cinema* is the triumph of the machine, electricity and industry.

The *cinema* alone can compel us to live with the wonders of technology at an ever more feverish pace. The latest cars, Canadian locomotives and ocean-going liners can rush furiously across the screen, and mills, machines, pistons and levers can work at a fantastic pace.

*The Cinema is the Power of the Machine.*⁶⁹

Similar sentiments were expressed by Boltvansky in an article published in *Kino*, also in 1922, entitled ‘The art of the future’ (*‘Iskusstvo budushchego’*).⁷⁰ Boltvansky maintained that there had been a ‘psychic revolution’ in contemporary man induced by the introduction of the machine and the consequent broadening of human horizons; this had, of course, met with opposition from vested interests and, in the case of the cinema, those vested interests were to be found in the theatre:

But the young muse is armed, as a symbol of the New Man, with an adjunct in the shape of the machine, and it is already setting out on its independent path through the stormy waves of art.

But the sun cannot be stopped and the wheels of history cannot be turned back.

For every great historical epoch, regardless even of the parallel develop-

ment of other forms of art, one art form has been the most characteristic, the most important and the most central. For the ancient Greek epoch it was sculpture, for the feudal period poetry and architecture; the bourgeois epoch also had its turn – painting, music and the theatre.

There can be no doubt that the cinema, this new art form, is the rightful heir for our time, for its melodiousness, its rhythm, refinement and its machine culture, and it therefore represents the central art form of the current epoch.

It is not yet the art of the present. The present is a transitional epoch in which the decrepit art of the theatre is writhing in terrible convulsions and fighting for its very existence, while the art of the cinema is growing triumphantly and becoming conscious of itself. The art of the cinema is all in the future.

All the more reason why we should approach it, recognise it and study it.⁷¹

Boltyansky's ideas were subsequently developed by Pavel Poluyanov in the two works already cited.⁷² He expressed them most forcefully in his book:

The machine... That is the conqueror of our times! It drives its fellow machines and is controlled by more complex and surprising machines: in the air there is the sound of aeroplanes; with lightning speed radios bring the sound of world events from beyond the oceans. The machine... The tentacles of great cities compel us to transform the antiquated psychology of the feudal epoch into insolent, daring, tempestuous psychology of refutation, into the dynamic, into our *New Aesthetic of Struggle*, of heroic deed, of great adventure, of enterprise. We have been seized with a desire to tear ourselves away from our putrid way of life, always slow or static, into space, in pursuit of events, of the glittering happiness of a fundamentally new life.⁷³

In Poluyanov's opinion, the only art form that was consonant with the machine age was the cinema: 'the real theatre of the people, the revolutionary, agitational, or simply *contemporary* theatre which really corresponds to the epoch and its tempo is the *cinema* alone'.⁷⁴ Boltyansky returned to this theme in a book published in 1927 and entitled *The culture of the cameraman (Kul'tura kino-operatora)*.⁷⁵ The views expressed in this book by Boltyansky were very similar to those of the German school led by Walter Benjamin.⁷⁶ While emphasising the essentially visual nature of the cinema as an art form,⁷⁷ Boltyansky discerned a distinction between the cinema and other art forms that depended upon its capacity for mechanical reproduction:

The mechanical possibility of unending reproduction and distribution of the works of the cinema make it, as distinct from the other arts, the sole and exclusive *expression of the era of the new culture*.⁷⁸

There were, of course, dissenting voices but they were few and

far between. A typical counter-reaction to the enthusiasm expressed for the cinema appeared in the journal *Novyi zritel'* in August 1924:

Life continues under the slogans of mechanisation and the automation of life. In art the actor is replaced by a biomechanical doll, the worker by a machine, the beast of burden by electricity or petrol traction. Many do not want a living theatre – but a mechanical apparatus.

People have grown tired of words, speeches and books, their ears and their brains are sick, they are already bored with thinking and hearing, they want to look, and at the same time the 'great silent' comes to their rescue.⁷⁹

But this particular author was merely expressing reservations, for he also referred to the cinema as 'the legitimate child of urban culture and of the twentieth century'.⁸⁰ Nonetheless he did point out what many saw to be the cinema's greatest weakness – its absence of words. What for some writers represented the very essence of the cinema, and of its strength, was for him its principal limitation: without words, he argued, the cinema could only be utilised to transmit extremely simple ideas.⁸¹

But, whatever the strengths of this view, it was atypical. The second issue of *Kino-Fot* carried an article by B. Arvatov which reiterated the mainstream view that the cinema was the appropriate art form for the machine age. The bourgeoisie, in his opinion, were obsessed with passive concepts of beauty; the proletariat, on the other hand, did not recognise the validity of the distinction between high and low art, but preferred to distinguish between progressive and reactionary art.⁸² He held the American cinema up as an example whose techniques could well be copied: 'The American film is not merely constructive; it is, in addition, of maximum agitational value in its very forms.'⁸³ But Arvatov did not share the almost slavish worship of American films practised by some of his contemporaries:

Agitation is not dreaming; agitation is practical action. And that is why the agitational cinema is the cinema not of adventures but of real people and objects.

The realism of the material and the excitement of action are what we need.

A fleeting train, a moving skyscraper, a strike on aeroplanes or an uprising of objects are fit themes not merely because of their entertainment value but also because of the possibilities that they present us with: *taking the very real and making of it what one will*.

America has opted for pure entertainment.

The R.S.F.S.R. must give entertainment its special, social purpose.⁸⁴

But the attitude of Soviet film theorists and film-makers of the 1920s towards the American film is a matter to which we shall return later.⁸⁵

There was thus a general feeling that the cinema was the most appropriate art form for the machine age. Further, since the machine had become the symbol of progress, the art form of the machine age was also deemed to be the art form of the Revolution. We can see here a direct parallel with the writings of Italian Futurism and, in particular, of Marinetti.⁸⁶ And in both countries it would be fair to say that the theory outstripped the practice.⁸⁷ The cinema's revolutionary rôle in Soviet Russia was primarily identified by complaints about its signal failure to fulfil expectations. In November 1923, in a review of the film *Krasnye d'yavolyata* (The Little Red Devils),⁸⁸ the journal *Kino-Gazeta* complained:

For six years the Russian cinema has been in the hands of the workers' government.

For six years we have waited for it to produce revolutionary films.

And for all those six years instead of bread we have been given stones – German mysticism and, on rare occasions, a Soviet potboiler. . .

And only now do we have the first, great and fine revolutionary film!

A film of the Revolution!⁸⁹

In a poem published in *Kino-Fot* in October 1922 Mayakovsky expressed similar sentiments:

For you a cinema spectacle.

For me almost a *Weltanschauung*.

The cinema – purveyor of movement.

The cinema – renewer of literature.

The cinema – destroyer of aesthetics.

The cinema – fearlessness.

The cinema – a sportsman.

The cinema – a sower of ideas.

But the cinema is sick. Capitalism has covered its eyes with gold. Deft entrepreneurs lead it through the street by the hand. They gather money by stirring the heart with whining little subjects.

We must put an end to this.

Communism must rescue the cinema from its speculating guides.

Futurism must steam the dead water – slowness and morality.

Without this we shall have either the imported tap-dance of America or the continuous 'tear-jerking' of the Mosjoukines.

We are tired of the first.

Even more tired of the second.⁹⁰

In the same issue the Constructivist Alexei Gan stated more simply that, 'The cinema should depict our way of life!'⁹¹ This was to become a common, and perhaps also a rather plaintive, cry.

These ideas were developed by Viktor Shklovsky in a book published in Berlin in the following year.⁹² In it he argued that

man was in danger of becoming insensitive to the world around him; he needed to renew his contact with it:

Just as those who live by the sea do not hear the sound of the waves, so we do not even hear the words that we speak. We speak in the pitiful language of unspoken words. We look one another in the face but we do not see one another.⁹³

This could be remedied by a periodic renewal of artistic consciousness through a concentration on new material, but, 'New material requires new forms.'⁹⁴ Shklovsky further observed that, 'Attempts to use literature for the cinema have come to nothing.'⁹⁵ Literature had been the art form of the bourgeois epoch, but it was no longer appropriate in the post-Revolutionary context:

Art forms 'grow tired', burn themselves out, like flames. The change in forms is usually revolutionary.

The cinema is the natural heir to the theatre and, possibly, literature. It may embrace the theatre, though probably not.⁹⁶

For Shklovsky too, then, the cinema was the art form of the Revolution.

On 1 April 1924 the People's Commissar for Enlightenment, Lunacharsky, in an article in *Pravda*, lamented the cinema's failure to fulfil its function as the purveyor of the revolutionary message:

The Soviet cinema cannot allow in its films either a political social-bourgeois tendency or the glorification of bourgeois virtues, nor elements of depravity or crime, presented in tempting form.⁹⁷

In 1926 the journal *Kino-Front* printed an article by V. Kirshon which underlined the special responsibility of the Soviet Union for the production of revolutionary films:

Is bourgeois ideology being propagated here in the cinema?

Yes, it is.

Every day in all our cinemas in the town and in the country, in the commercial cinema and in the club, bourgeois morality, bourgeois prejudices, the bourgeois gospel of faith in the 'Lord God' are presented from the screen with all possible Priscillas and Barbaras to the Soviet audience. . . The U.S.S.R. is the only country where revolutionary films can be made. . . The pursuit of philistine tastes, the preparation of films for the cinemas on the main streets, are a crime which should be brought to trial.⁹⁸

Against this background there was some argument as to the exact revolutionary potential of fictional, as opposed to documentary, films; this is an argument to which I shall return in greater detail later,⁹⁹ but the origins of the dispute lay in this general discussion. Lunacharsky, in his *Pravda* article, had laid stress on the

need for more *agitki*, or 'living posters' (*zhivye plakaty*) as he called them, because he felt that they were the most effective means of propagating Bolshevik ideology.¹⁰⁰ He was echoing Lenin's directive to Litkens of January 1922, which had also stressed the importance of documentary and newsreel films as a vehicle for propaganda.¹⁰¹ By 1927 this had become the line that the Party had determined to push, for it emphasised the direct practical utility of the cinema; an editorial in *Sovetskoe kino* observed:

We are not opposed to the fiction film, which should occupy a small place in the field of the cinema. *But we are opposed to the evaluation of the cinema in terms of art.*

The cinema is the condenser of human practice, of fact and insistence, not the literary teacher of life.

The cinema is the ideological weapon of production of our time: its experience, its example, will forge new men, new achievements.

And we need not argue about the priority of the theatre or the cinema. To argue on such a level is like comparing the significance of electricity with ... the Tretyakov Gallery.

The fiction film is a good thing in a given period, necessary and profitable.

The constant broadening of the horizons and the experience of the human race – that is the task of the cinema.

*The way forward for the cinema is the cultural film.*¹⁰²

There was then in certain quarters a strong feeling that it was not merely the cinema as such that was the appropriate art form of the Revolution, but more specifically the documentary cinema. But this is a debate that I shall return to later.¹⁰³

Whatever individual attitudes might have been towards the specific qualities of the cinema, the attitude of the Party and government was made quite clear. At an early stage the significance of the cinema was underlined by the publication under official auspices of a collection of essays on the cinema and its social and political rôle.¹⁰⁴ In his introduction, Lunacharsky wrote: 'We must do what no-one else can do or wants to do. We must remember that the socialist state must imbue even cinema spectacles with a socialist spirit.'¹⁰⁵ But the exact nature of the task facing the cinema in a socialist society was spelled out in the contribution from V. Kerzhentsev entitled 'The social struggle and the screen':

What then is the task of the state cinema in a socialist republic?

To all appearances the answer is clear. The cinema must above all be utilised for the communist education of the broad masses. At the same time as cinema enterprises are nationalised and municipalised bit by bit and as they come under the general control and leadership of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment and its local Departments, the transformation of

the cinema from a tool of amusement and entertainment into a means of education is achieved. But the task for our Commissariat for Enlightenment is not merely the communication to the population of a specific sphere of knowledge but the direction of education in a fully defined communist spirit.¹⁰⁶

Kerzhentsev's remarks take us back to Lenin's statements on the eradication of illiteracy. The new government needed to educate the population, not merely in a general sense of cultural or intellectual enlightenment, but for the specific political purpose of winning their hearts and minds. Although military victory over the Whites was the first priority in the Civil War period, in the longer term the Soviet state could not survive without the support, however tacit and however passive, of the broad masses of the population. It was in this propaganda battle that it was envisaged that the cinema would play a major rôle.