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New Babylon: Second Empire decadence depicted with gusto

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When Communism Was in Flower

By J. Hoberman

NEW BABYLON. Written and directed by Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg. Music composed by Dmitri Shostakovich. Produced by Sovkino. Released by Corinth Films. At Radio City Music Hall, October 3.

Once upon a time, Nelson Rockefeller commissioned Diego Rivera to paint a mural for the brand-new R.C.A. tower on the theme "Men at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future." Rivera's vision encompassed surging waves of red and a small cameo of Lenin. The boss got the message, fired the artist, and had the brazen image chipped off his wall.

That was 50 years ago. This Monday, red modernism returns to Rockefeller Center when *New Babylon*—a delirious, 1929 near-masterpiece of avant-punk Soviet agitprop—gets its American premiere at Radio City complete with symphony orchestra booming out the young Dmitri Shostakovich's original score.

Created by Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg and their Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS), *New Babylon* celebrates the 1871 Paris Commune with a mixture of elliptical melodrama, contrapuntal eloquence, and canny, jolting spectacle. The film is a dynamic pageant, visualizing history in a series of swift, playfully lurid strokes. *New Babylon* eschews the intellectual montage of Eisenstein's *October* (1928) and the manic invention of Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). But more than either, this once-in-a-lifetime synthesis of Eisenstein and Sennett, Lenin and Zola, Jacques Offenbach and Jelly Roll Morton, epitomizes the astonishing ferment of the Russian roaring '20s.

Kozintsev and Trauberg organized FEKS in revolutionary Petrograd while still in their teens. They considered themselves "engineers of the spectacle" and the October revolution fueled their natural sense of dada. According to Sergei

Gerasimov (a commund in *New Babylon* and one of several Soviet directors to emerge from the Factory), the FEKS game plan was to reject, overthrow, and negate—"in every way possible"—all preexisting forms of theatrical art. In practice, however, FEKS idols included modernists Picasso and Chaplin, as well as Meyerhold and Mayakovsky, and American slapstick proved a key text.

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"The actor was required not to 'feel,'" Gerasimov recalled. "The very word 'feeling' was pronounced with derisive grimaces accompanied by scornful laughter from the whole troupe."

Sergei Eisenstein teamed with the FEKS kids in 1922, their second season at Proletkult Hall, to effect the "electrification of Gogol, Vaudeville, Americanism, and Grand Guignol." The FEKSniks called him "the Old Man" (he was all of 24) and it was Eisenstein's *Strike*, two years later, that inspired them to move into cinema. FEKS's first efforts were low-budget trick films and children's comedies (including one in which an intrepid 10 year old foils Calvin Coolidge's attempted robbery of the Soviet state bank), an expressionistic gangster flick, a conspiracy drama, and a hypermodern romantic comedy about Petrograd auto traffic.

New Babylon was the FEKS super-production, the integration of their revolutionary style with a revolutionary theme. The story of the Commune is an almost religious episode in socialist history. When the Second Empire collapsed during the Franco-Prussian war, organized workers and Proudhonite intellectuals revolted and assumed control of the capital, making new laws, and administering the city. Panicked by the specter of 1793, the defeated French

bourgeoisie surrendered to the Prussians, then enlisted the foreign army to help them attack Paris.

For Marx, the Commune was a foretaste of the millenium. For Engels, it represented the realization of "dictatorship of the proletariat." For Lenin, it was the model worker insurrection of modern times and its climactic atrocity—the torching of Paris with upwards of 20,000

communards slaughtered in the streets by army death squads—was a lesson he would never forget. (Lenin considered it a great victory when his own revolution survived one day longer than the 10-week Commune.)

For FEKS, the Commune provided the occasion to create a monument to adolescent energy. The film opens in a Second Empire department store where the frenzy of consumption is exceeded only by the frenzy of the FEKS mise-en-scène, proceeds to a cabaret whose perpetual can-can is matched by the rat-a-tat-tat of "eccentric" montage, and saves its most tumultuous rhythms for the mid-film triumph of the Parisian working class—"radiant," as Marx put it, "in the enthusiasm of their historic initiative." Even the Commune's bloody collapse is rendered with a furious verve that, abetted by Shostakovich, is ultimately upbeat.

New Babylon's sense of the Second Empire comes from Zola—whose novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* satirizes Parisian department stores as cathedrals of commodity fetishism—and Marx. "Industry and commerce expanded to colossal dimensions; financial swindling celebrated cosmopolitan orgies; the misery of the masses was set off by a shameless display of gorgeous, meretricious, and debased luxury," the great comrade explained to the International Work-

ingman's Association in his powerful defense of the Commune. The film's tempo, however, is anything but 19th century.

Even younger than the directors, Dmitri Shostakovich—who, as a teenager, earned money playing piano in Petrograd movie houses—composed an elegantly agitated collage of marches, can-cans, and carnival music. A work of witty dissonance, lilting sarcasm, and brassy ebullience, the Shostakovich score was designed to counterpoint, rather than illustrate, the film's sensational imagery. The combination left early audiences dazed. "The day of the premiere, in all the cinemas, the complaint books carried the same protests," Kozintsev recalled proudly many years later. "The conductor of the orchestra was quite drunk tonight!"

The score was shelved after the first few performances, but *New Babylon* was controversial even apart from Shostakovich's incendiary musical assemblage. One of the few Soviet films to ever treat a non-Russian revolution, *New Babylon* was criticized for its frivolity and aestheticism, and perhaps regarded with suspicion for the inspired enthusiasm with which it portrayed anarchy, decadence, and heroic martyrdom. Kozintsev and Trauberg went on to make talkies under the prescribed "realism" of the new Five Year Plan, proving more adaptable to the general line than did the Old Man. While Eisenstein fell into disfavor, the pair's *Maxim* trilogy were among the most celebrated films of the Stalin era. Narrowly eluding the postwar purges, Kozintsev and Trauberg enjoyed separate careers that continued into the '60s and '70s. (Trauberg, in fact, is still alive and teaching at the Moscow Film Academy.)

It's a good year for political—not to mention commie-themed—films at the NYFF. *Seeing Red* is a landmark in the problematic revisionist history of the American Communist Party. *Red Love* deranges a story by feminist-bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai—another veteran of the red roaring '20s—to make the venerable connection between political and sexual repression. *Boat People* is an appropriately right-wing coarsening of the Eisenstein—or should I say Griffith—aesthetic. *The Wind*, *Forbidden Relations*, and the upcoming *Lost Illusions* are all political films of intelligence and subtlety. But the film *New Babylon* most dialectically engages is Wajda's *Danton*—another brilliant exercise in using French history as a way of telescoping the aftermath of the October revolution. For, despite *New Babylon's* historical setting, it's difficult not to see the film as the imaginative recasting of its perpetrators' youthful lives and times. The FEKS gang came of age during a period of atrocious violence, foreign invasion, and communal glory. Even the Second Empire decadence they depict with such gusto—a gusto which has a distinct echo in the stylizations of the Russian emigré punk *Liquid Sky*—is basically their vision of modern times.

Mid-'20s Leningrad has been compared to George Grosz's Berlin and Duke Ellington's Harlem. Nightclubs thrived, the streets were filled with flappers and flaming youth. People danced to the "aero-foxtrot" and the "hypnosis tango" (and Shostakovich arranged "Tea for Two" for symphony orchestra). Jugbands cum noise orchestras serenaded the populace with uplifting work songs. Prohibition was suspended and you could buy hashish in the central market. The rumors of wild orgies among the high-spirited members of the Communist youth organization, Komsomol, may have been exaggerated, but the period's sexual experimentation is amply documented by Kollontoi and others.

The Wajda film is ultimately the tragedy of revolutionary leaders—one of the few occasions this century has left for tragedy. *New Babylon* is the triumphant orchestration of a revolutionary generation. Rimbaud ran away from home to join the Commune at 17. The teenage Kozintsev, Trauberg, and Shostakovich would have had to run far, far from home in order to miss it. ■