

Further Reading on ARSENAL

From *Masters of the Soviet Cinema: Crippled Creative Biographies* by Herbert Marshall (London ; Boston : Routledge & K. Paul, 1983.)

Contemporary critics of *Arsenal* noted how in 1929, the Kiev Studios of Vufku had improved with the production of Dovzhenko's *Zvenigora* and *Arsenal* and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*. But though *Arsenal* as a whole was hailed as a truly revolutionary film, at least one critic could not understand its poetry and imagery. Semyon Getz wrote this of the ending of the film, in which Timosh, the arsenal worker, is shot by Ukrainian nationalists but does not fall, no matter how many bullets they fire at him:⁴¹

The worker Timosh – this generalized type of a bolshevik-arsenal worker – after the train crash said to himself: 'I'll become an engineer!' A wonderful symbol! But as the film developed the engine driver burned with an impatient desire to go forward with Timosh to that moment when he becomes a fully-fledged engineer, truly and unswervingly driving the train to a new life.

But to our great disappointment, Dovzhenko didn't take us to this moment. His Timosh was shot by the Petlurovites. Shot – and full stop. At that the film ends. From whence comes such pessimism? Dovzhenko is not carolling the Paris Commune, but the history of the Kiev Arsenal, which not only lives, but is very healthy and together with us has taken an active part in socialist construction under the leadership of hundreds of thousands of engineer-Timoshes. In our opinion, the director hurried to finish the film, from which it suffered severely.

But that most brilliant and honest of Soviet critics, M. Bleiman, argues:⁴²

Dovzhenko treats his material with complete freedom, concerned

not with its correspondence with actuality, but with its expressiveness and its political clarity. And that is why in *Arsenal* horses reply to man, why shots of winter landscape are suddenly intercut with summer, and why a mother waits for her son at his already-dug grave.

This use of fantasy and folklore imbues the picture with a high emotional intensity, raises every one of its events to the status of a symbol, and finally, gives the film its completely original poetic character. If we can talk of a filmic poem, then we will find it in *Arsenal*.

Simultaneously, Dovzhenko uses the methods of American 'comic' films. In this lies his similarity to other of our revolutionary masters, raising the American 'comics' to the level of social pathos and imbuing every episode with exceptional significance. The old comic trick of bringing a portrait to life works in *Arsenal* with deep political significance. This is where in response to a bureaucrat of the old regime Taras Shevchenko's portrait suddenly comes to life and blows out the ikon-lamp flame the old man has brought to him with his prayer '*Sche ne vmerla Ukraina. . .*'

Passing on to the reconstruction period, the development of the socialist attack still more sharpened the class struggle in the country and in particular on the ideological front. *Arsenal* was a powerful blow to the Petlurovsky-Vinnichenkovsky theoreticians of the non-bourgeoisness of the Ukrainian national.

Dovzhenko himself remarks with some bitterness in his *Autobiography* that a delegation of Ukrainian writers that travelled to Moscow with a protest and a demand to bar the film was not exactly reproached by the leaders of the country.⁴³

He goes on, however:⁴⁴

Making the film was an important step in my life. I became wiser and more mature as a political worker because of it. I was proud of myself and at the same time felt great pain. I realized that things were far from what they should be in our society. Life became hard.