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Vsevolod Pudovkin: Selected Essays
 Translated by Richard Taylor and Evgeni Filippov
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Giuliano Vivaldi

The critical reception of Pudovkin's films and theory has swung from one of adulation to near total dismissal. If Cesare Zavattini (quoted in Sargeant, xxvii) stated that for his generation of neo-realists Pudovkin symbolised cinematography, his fellow countryman Giovanni Buttafava was to lament that Soviet cinema had too many Pudovkins and too few Barnets (Buttafava, 216). Karel Reisz after viewing Pudovkin's penultimate *Zhukovksy* (Pudovkin, 1950) was to say that his reaction to the film was 'rather if, on a visit to the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, while looking at a horsy picture, all smooth and shiny and photographically perfect, one suddenly discovered the name on the corner to be Matisse'. Reisz concludes that 'Pudovkin has discarded all the forms of presentation which are aesthetically valid in the cinema' (Reisz, 476). Herbert Marshall's view of the later Pudovkin was equally negative, for Marshall, Pudovkin was to end his days as a party hack and to merit the role he played as holy simpleton in Eisenstein's *Ivan Groznyi* (*Ivan the Terrible*, 1945 & 1948) (Marshall, 27). These dismissals have all played their part in the fact that Pudovkin has not had the fortune of being rediscovered in recent decades. From the sixties onwards it was Eisenstein and Vertov who were to be discussed and championed by such scholars such as Peter Wollen, Annette Michelson and the review *October*. Dovzhenko was also to be rediscovered as the precursor of the Poetic School of Soviet cinema in the sixties and seventies in the guise of such directors such as Tarkovsky, Paradzhanov, Okeyev et al.

Kuleshov would become famous for the so-called Kuleshov effect (ironically this became known through Pudovkin's writings) but also re-discovered thanks to his Aesopian anti-Stalinist parable *The Great Consoler* (*Veliki Uteshitel'*, Kuleshov, 1936) filmed just as Stalin's Great Terror was getting underway. The lyrical films of Barnet (for the most part lacking in any ideological overdetermination) would, through the good works of Henri Langlois, play a significant role in influencing the French New Wave. Pudovkin, though, in spite of his great silent trio of films (*Mother*, *The End of Saint Petersburg* & *Storm Over Asia* (*Mat*, *Konyets Sankt-Peterburga* & *Potomok Chingis-Khana* 1926, 1927 & 1928, Pudovkin respectively), his early short film *Chess Fever* (*Shakmatnaya Goryiachka*, Pudovkin 1925) and his early experiment in sound counterpoint *The Deserter* (*Dezertir*, Pudovkin 1933) has, arguably, had his reputation tarnished both in the West and in Russia by his subsequent demise from the mid thirties onwards. From this time, in the words of Reisz 'all the life ... ebbed out of his (cinema)... (and it) remained a dry piece of academism' (Reisz, op cit, 476). [1]

This demise in the interest of Pudovkin as filmmaker was to be reflected in the declining interest in Pudovkin's writings. Pudovkin's essays were to be translated into English a decade before those of Eisenstein (this was also to be the case in other European countries such as Italy: Pudovkin was amply translated and promoted by the Italian critic Umberto Barbaro long before the vogue for Eisenstein and Vertov in the sixties). However, Pudovkin's theory was soon to be called into question – whether due to its apparently primitive and rather basic nature [2] or due to the fact that it simply didn't have the erudite and philosophical grounding that Eisenstein's writings had.

Nonetheless, in recent years, Pudovkin has made something of a comeback. For the first time in over a quarter of a century a major monograph on Pudovkin has been published (Amy Sargeant's *Vsevolod Pudovkin: Classic Films of the Soviet Avant-Garde*), a couple of titles in I B Tauris's series of Russian film classics have also been devoted to Pudovkin's films and a number of Pudovkin's films are available on DVD, including his short *Chess Fever* and the great trio of his silent era as well as *The Deserter*. Now Richard Taylor's re-writings and re-translations of Evgeni Filippov's earlier translations from the 1970s are available for the first time in Britain and the US. The opportunity to re-read some of Pudovkin's major theoretical works as well as a number of previously untranslated commentaries on his own films is certainly very welcome. It must be stated that the writings published in this volume are limited to those written in Pudovkin's (as well as Soviet cinema's) 'Golden Age', namely between 1924 & 1934, while all his later writings (including a rather significant one on the Actor & Stanislavsky's 'Method' have been ignored). [3] While there may be some justification in leaving out many of Pudovkin's later writings on the grounds of their growing conformity

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to official doctrine and lack of any individual thought in them, not all texts from 1934 onwards are devoid of interest. One would have welcomed a chance to have an indication of how and to what extent Pudovkin's later views may have coincided or collided with his earlier views. While the final essay in this collection (originally published as a book) 'The Actor in Film' suggests a movement away from Pudovkin's earlier positions there existed essays from the late thirties through to 1952 which would have given a clearer picture of his break with the precepts of montage theory as it was propounded in the 1920s. [4]

The re-translation of Pudovkin's writings allows us to reconceptualise his contribution and to highlight those themes and ideas which he would emphasise again and again in his various articles and primers. The use of the word 'primer' is adept here when talking of his three major texts in this collection (namely, 'The Film Script', 'The Film Director & Film Material' & 'The Actor in Film'). They weren't intended so much as a contribution to film theory as such, but rather as attempts to promote greater film literacy in the Soviet Union. As Sargeant states in her study 'Pudovkin's project ... grounds itself conservatively in the normative acceptance of practical conventions [moreover] he rarely risks a definite comprehensive hypothesis beyond the limits of individual experiments' (Sargeant, 172). His method, if anything, is empirical and Pudovkin doesn't ground himself in philosophical viewpoints – Marxist or otherwise. It was his first translator, Ivor Montagu, who smuggled in a mention of dialectics into the English text which was entirely missing from the Russian original. If Eisenstein's texts were replete with references to Marx, Freud, Joyce and a host of other writers, thinkers and scientists, Pudovkin appears to mention only Tolstoy (and later on, of course, Lenin which was something of an obligation from the thirties onwards). His description of Tolstoy's working method is a pretty accurate description of Pudovkin's own method:

Tolstoy's striving for maximum clarity is remarkable. It is this that makes him the polar opposite of Impressionism. With the utmost persistence he constantly re-works each piece stylistically. Departing from the canons of refined construction, he is not afraid to repeat the same word to take that piece to the limits of persuasiveness. He leaves no room for the reader to see anything other than what he is doing" (Pudovkin, 153)

This emphasis on clarity, the idea of the director leaving no room for ambiguity and 'despotically leading' the audience (in the words of Sargeant [5]), the use of repetition of images – this is as much Pudovkin's self-portrait as it is of Tolstoy. In his great silent trio of films the repetition of images was a stylistic device which had a lot to do with Pudovkin's idea of the rhythmic nature of film. This emphasis on rhythm is, perhaps, the main leitmotiv

in Pudovkin's writings- he insists upon this aspect in nearly every text in this collection from his very first writings. [6]

In these writings we also gain a sense of how the 'theory' of Pudovkin differs from that of fellow montage directors. The inclusion of new and expanded pieces on Eisenstein and the essay 'On Montage Rhythm' devoted to the films of Ruttmann but also containing a critique of Vertov are of especial significance in this context. In a number of his writings, Pudovkin also writes of his experience in the Kuleshov collective and critiques both Kuleshov's sense of rhythm in the film *The Extraordinary Adventures...* (mentioned above) as well as Kuleshov's concept of the actor. Pudovkin's main criticism of Eisenstein's classic *The Battleship Potemkin* (*Brononosets Potemkin*, Eisenstein 1926) is that 'those actors who perform the individual roles ... are all bad, except for the static moments involving non actors'. For Pudovkin this is partly the fault of Eisenstein 'who has not mastered his human material' (Pudovkin, 22). Again, Pudovkin criticises Kuleshov for whom 'acting was all about external form treated as a mechanical sequence of movements, sometimes selected by the actor, sometimes dictated by the director' (Pudovkin, 292). Pudovkin was to move further and further away from the roots of twenties modernism and away from the biomechanical theories of Meyerhold which strongly influenced the Kuleshov collective. The final work in this edition of Pudovkin's writings ('The Actor in Film') indicates some of the paths that Pudovkin's thinking was taking. His critique of the fragmentation of acting in cinema and the 'mechanistic use of the actor as a machine' (Pudovkin, 232) is intimately linked to his distancing himself from the major precepts of montage theory. From the mid-thirties onwards, attention to the requirements of the actor and an adoption of Stanislavsky's 'System' would bring about a break from his more revolutionary practices- the use of fast-cutting, the symbolic role played by objects in his great silent trio, his experiments with time in close-up (or 'zeitlupe') in his film *Prostoj Sluchaj* (*A Simple Case*, Pudovkin 1932) and the revolutionary montage use of sound in his first sound film *The Deserter*. What Pudovkin was to later adopt as his aesthetic principles has been described in an article by Vance Kepley Junior which note the striking similarities between Socialist Realism and the Classical Hollywood Style. The emphasis was to be on clarity, precision and the principle of continuity. Pudovkin's later films are based above all on what Kepley Junior calls an 'aesthetic of redundancy' (Kepley Jr, 3-13). Whereas in his silent films Pudovkin used the device of repeating images in order to create a rhythmic structure to the films, this use in his later films was to become rather tendentious and primarily dictated by ideological considerations and the need to reinforce these messages with repetition as a kind of 'duplicate back-up system to assure that there can be no failure' (Kepley Jr, 2) [7].

Pudovkin's writings also devote much space to his idea of the film script. Here his 'theory' (more a detailed description of technical matters or primer for scriptwriters) is rather empirical and anecdotal. He suggests that scriptwriters should have a knowledge of cinematic devices and be attentive to filmic methods and that the scriptwriter must 'bring his work as close as possible to its final "working" form' (Pudovkin, 47). This demand for a cast-iron script is present both in his early theorising and also later on (from the late thirties it was one of the obligatory conventions of Socialist Realist practice), but interestingly Pudovkin breaks with this in his short-lived enthusiasm for Rzheshesky's 'emotional script' [8] Pudovkin praises Rzheshesky for precisely the opposite of Pudovkin's definition of a good scriptwriter in his earlier 1926 primer. There is no longer a need for the cast-iron script, what is now essential is that (the scriptwriter):

has a feel for the most important aspect of the new cinema: a strict and precise rhythm... A scriptwriter works with words and not with strips of film... Rzheshesky's script constitutes strikingly rhythmic prose, perhaps almost poetry. His 'moment' does not designate a visual form, but it does strike a well-defined beat in the rhythmic course of script speech and that is something that the director needs and can profoundly appreciate" (Pudovkin, 183) [9]

His writings on sound are of a similar significance. In this collection the classical statement of principles of working with sound signed by Pudovkin along with Eisenstein and Alexandrov is included, as are his own writings. He reiterates the need for a contrapuntual use of sound and indeed for Pudovkin practice was to follow theory in his first sound film *The Deserter*. In a survey of eleven sound films made in the Soviet Union between 1930 & 1934 Kristin Thompson states that of these eleven 'two seem to me consistently to use some kind of sound-image disjunction we may call "counterpoint": *Alone* and *Deserter*' (Thompson, 116). However, as Thompson adds, while sound counterpoint existed, it did so only briefly and there is little in Pudovkin's subsequent films to suggest that he made further use of this principle. Nonetheless, *The Deserter* deserves to be acknowledged as Pudovkin's last great montage experiment- the cutting in this film is as fast and as furious as ever.

Other themes that Pudovkin would treat in his writings were the different natures of theatre and cinema and the use of professional and non-professional actors in film. As we mentioned above, his position on the former question changed considerably – but in these translated writings there is a supposition that theatre and cinema are two distinct art forms requiring differing forms of acting. However, after his film *Chess Fever*, Pudovkin was rarely to rely upon Eisenstein's idea of *typage* and was also to become highly critical of Kuleshov's *naturshchik* theory (a kind of specially trained model actor who was to convey meaning

through precise movement and gesture). Pudovkin used stage actors from the beginning of his great silent trio of films and was to prefer them to non-professional actors as he recounts in various anecdotes in these writings. Equally he insists on the collective nature of film-making – for him while early on it was director and scriptwriter who are to be the dominant duo, later on in the mid- thirties he posits the triad of scriptwriter, director and actor as the most important co-creators of the film.

The re-reading of Pudovkin is arguably not as rewarding as the re-viewing of his films. If the statement by Grierson above is clearly exaggerated, it is without doubt true that one can mine much less from these essays than one can from those of Eisenstein. Pudovkin was simply a more reluctant and less accomplished theorist than his great rival. His writings are fuller of examples and anecdotes than they are of ideas of any great originality. Aronson's statement that Pudovkin was a more linear and traditional thinker than either Eisenstein or Vertov is one that requires no real debate. Aronson is also correct in identifying two major themes or leitmotifs running through Pudovkin's texts – those of rhythm and musicality. [10] Perhaps with the publication of these writings and other recent publications dedicated to Pudovkin, a more balanced view of Pudovkin will emerge and maybe more consideration will be given to some of his later films – the long missing *Murderers Take to the Road* was recently shown at a Film Forum in Moscow and a viewing of this film also allows one to rehabilitate Pudovkin politically in the eyes of those critics who saw him as little more than a party hack in his later years (Marshall, 60; Kenez, 227 & Buttafava, 199). Arguably a new and rich line of re-interpretation of Pudovkin has been opened up by Deleuze in his statement that the great theme of Pudovkin is 'the progression of consciousness' (Deleuze, 39) and in his situating of Romm as a kind of successor- a figure hitherto rather unfairly neglected by film scholars. Overall this new edition of Pudovkin's writings is welcome in giving us a slightly expanded collection of his works and a clearer and more readable translation (which is unfortunately marred by many typographical errors). The hope is that some more of Pudovkin's three volumes of writings in Russian will become available in translation in the near future and that some of his lesser known films such as a *A Simple Case* and *Murderers Take To the Road* will eventually be made available on DVD.

Endnotes

[1] Herbert Marshall talks of Pudovkin's 'artistic suicide' after the arrival of sound (Marshall, op cit, 29) and even though he returned slightly to form with a film that was to mark the first sign of the Thaw-

Vozvrashchenia Vassilia Bortnikova (*The Return of Vassily Bortnikov*, Pudovkin 1953), the Italian critic Buttafava asserts that even in this film praise for the merits should go to the scriptwriter Gabrilovich and not Pudovkin. (Buttafava, 199).

[2] The British documentalist was famously to remark that Pudovkin filmed like a poet but theorised like a school-teacher.

[3] This makes the publishers statement on the back of the book that this volume 'of his most important writings from 1926 to 1952 enable us to trace the development of Pudovkin's ideas through his career' both factually inaccurate and misleading.

[4] This criticism could also be levelled at Amy Sargeant's book on Pudovkin with next to no comments on any of Pudovkin's films from *The Deserter* onwards- these films and writings are , certainly, flawed but not entirely without interest – *Minin and Pozharsky* (Pudovkin, 1938) was scripted by the great Formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky and has some striking visual moments; *The Murderers Take to the Road* (*Ubisi vykhodiat na dorogu*, Pudovkin 1942) was banned during the second world war for portraying some sympathetic Germans as victims and while not aesthetically radical is of considerable interest historically and in terms of its plot and characterisation. *The Return Of Vassily Bortnikov* is also of interest in terms of its use of colour and as being unique in portraying a contemporary theme with a psychological conflict at the centre of the film at the time when Soviet cinema was reduced to idealising Stalin's role in the war or in portraying the heroics of pre-revolutionary writers, composers and scientists in the role of 'early Soviet martyrs'.

[5]. As she notes, Pudovkin in an analogy with literature 'takes the liberty which is allowed the author, sometimes narrating actor, sometimes reporting dialogue but in both capacities adopting a thematic point of view' (Sargeant, 24)

[6] The importance of rhythm arguably stems from his experience of working with Kuleshov on the film '*The Extraordinary Adventures of Mister West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*' (*Neobychaniye Priklucheniya Mistera Vesta v Strane Bolshevikov*, Kuleshov 1924). In a number of texts Pudovkin critiques the rhythmic features of the film in which he was to act. At one point in his text on 'Photogeny' Pudovkin states his understanding of rhythm as being a 'simple succession of accented and unaccented moments' and for him 'A precise rhythmic structure is like a special net that will only permit entry to anything that doesn't disturb it' (Pudovkin, 7)

[7] Of course the fact that his writings after 1934 are not available in this collection doesn't allow us to ascertain exactly what the actual path Pudovkin took in breaking with his former montage theory. It must be added, however, that even in his earlier writings Pudovkin was a much more traditional thinker than many of his colleagues. The idea that Pudovkin was a 'Soviet Griffith' reminds us of Eisenstein's criticism that Pudovkin accepted Griffith's aesthetic acritically and wasn't able to make the leap from montage as series to montage as collision and conflict. However, this criticism can't be said to be altogether accurate with regard to his classical trio of silent films.

[8] Rzheshesky is scriptwriter both for Pudovkin's little-known 'A Simple Case' and as well as one of the scriptwriter's for Eisenstein's doomed '*Bezhin Meadow*' (*Bezhin Lug*, Eisenstein 1935-37) which was banned and the negative later destroyed in a German air-raid during World War Two.

[9] This radically new view of the script and his adoption of the use of close-up in time in his transitional film *A Simple Case* (this film was originally planned as a sound film) as well as the plot involving a triangular relationship, makes this a film of considerable interest to Pudovkin scholars and it is a shame that the film itself is not more generally available. While being the subject of heaving criticism ensuring that Pudovkin was to forced to re-edit the film it is arguably a pointer to an alternative path that Pudovkin may have followed in different historical circumstances.

[10] Herbert Marshall was to mention how the film *Mother* was to be created by Pudovkin and scriptwriter Nathan Zarkhi with a sonata form in mind. (Marshall, 21)

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