KINO/FILM:
Soviet Posters of the Silent Screen

'*You must well remember that, of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important.*'
Vladimir Lenin, January 1922

Admired today as a revolutionary art form, Soviet cinema rose from difficult beginnings. Following the 1917 Revolution, Russia was engulfed by a civil war that drained away its resources and by 1921 domestic film production was at an all-time low. It was Lenin who saw the potential of this relatively new art form as the perfect propaganda tool, able to reach the largely illiterate masses across the vast expanse of the Soviet Union. The film industry was nationalised in 1919 and the first state-owned film company, Goskino, was founded in 1922, and reformed as Sovkino in 1924.

Advertising was key for attracting cinema-goers, so a special department entitled Reklam Film was created to control the production of film posters across the Soviet Union. At its helm was the designer Iakov Ruklevskii, who engaged a number of talented young artists. They created a whole new visual vocabulary for film posters, both foreign and domestic, incorporating the practices they saw on-screen. As the films were black and white, the designers employed their artistic licence to great effect, using vivid colour blocking and dynamic typographical experiments to capture the essence of each production, sometimes without having even seen it.

By bringing together both films and posters from this period, the exhibition highlights the symbiotic relationship between the pioneering vision of the film directors and the output of the poster artists engaged to promote them. Techniques such as cinematic montage, repetition, asymmetric viewpoints and dramatic camera angles were used in the creation of both the films and the posters, leading to the appearance of a distinctive body of works, highly influential to the present day.

Stenberg Brothers, *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925
Courtesy Antikbar

Battleship Potemkin, Sergei Eisenstein, 1925

Kinofication: Film in the Soviet Union

The new Soviet leaders aimed to 'cinefy' the USSR, using film as a means of mass education and propaganda. Before the Revolution cinemas were a significantly urban phenomenon with an educated, upper class demographic. Although peasants constituted over 80% of the Russian population at this time they made up only a tiny percentage of film audiences – just 10%. The need to reach the far flung corners of the USSR, where the majority of peasant workers and villagers lived, was therefore crucial if the masses were to be educated and mobilised. A programme of 'kinofication' followed, which aimed to divert the profits raised from screenings of popular foreign films back into the building of new cinemas and the fledgling Soviet film industry.

Young directors in the new Soviet Union honed their skills with agit-films during the late 1910s and by the mid-1920s feature-length films began to appear incorporating increasingly innovative techniques. The theory of montage was crafted during this period through the experiments of directors Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov.

The difficulties they encountered, such as the lack of basic materials, spurred them on to greater creativity: light effects, for instance, were obtained using reflective materials as electrical lighting was scarce. Yet the experimental masterpieces that emerged gained more acclaim abroad than at home, the downtrodden Soviet masses preferring escapist Hollywood productions. These, and a range of other foreign films, were distributed by Sovkino in order to raise funds for domestic productions and revitalise the home-grown industry.


Sergei Eisenstein

Spotlight on: Dziga Vertov

'*A little man, armed with a movie camera, leaves the little fake world of the film-factory and heads for life. Life tosses him to and fro like a straw. He's like a frail canoe on a stormy sea. He's continually swamped by the furious city traffic. The rushing hurrying human crowd surges round him at every turn.*' – Dziga Vertov on his film *Man With the Movie Camera*

Dziga Vertov (the pseudonym of Denis Arkadievich Kaufman) was born in Belostok. Internationally renowned as one of the founders of documentary film, his kino-glaz [film-eye] theory – that the camera is an instrument, much like the human eye, best used for exploring real life – had a great impact on the development of cinema realism during the 1920s and beyond.

Vertov experimented double exposure, fast motion, slow motion, freeze frames, jump cuts, split screens, Dutch angles, extreme close-ups, tracking shots and footage played backwards. He attached the camera to locomotives, motorcycles and other moving objects. He also held shots on screen for varying lengths of time, a technique that contributes to the rhythmic flow of his films. Many of these techniques can be seen in *Man With a Move Camera*, Vertov's most famous work. In an attempt to break away from the conventions of the film business the documentary presents everyday life in the modern world, dispensing with script, characters and set. Vertov's work received significant interest and support from the European avant-garde but at home he attracted unfavourable attention from party officials. Despite being a vocal supporter of communist ideals, the Soviet authorities viewed Vertov's artistic experiments as suspicious and branded him an eccentric, refusing to support *Man with a Movie Camera*. Today the film is considered a defining moment in cinematic history and in 2013 was voted into the top 10 greatest films of all time by the BFI.

Discussion point: Watch a short clip of *Man With the Movie Camera*. How many different film techniques can you identify? In what ways might the camera be better than the human eye in exploring everyday experiences?
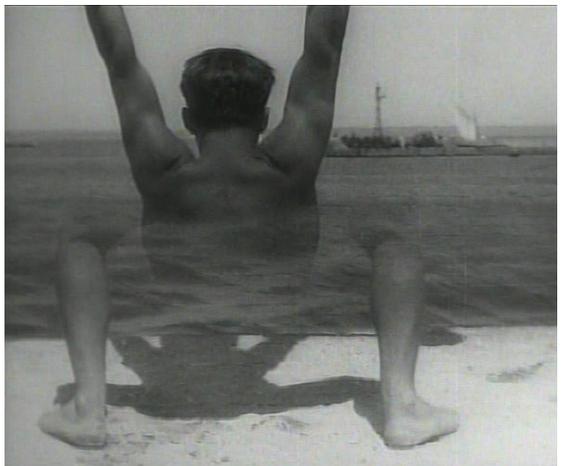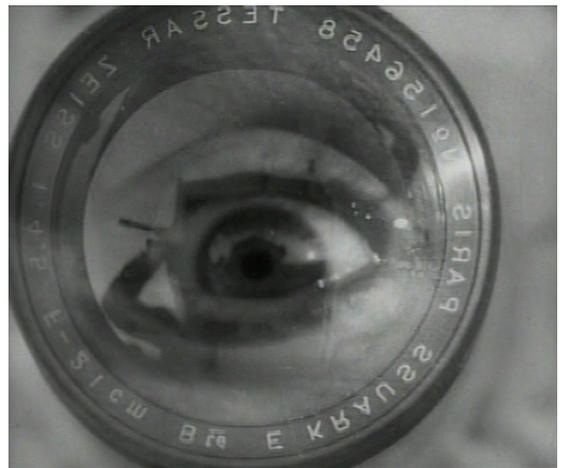
Stills from *Man With a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov, 1929

Poster design in Russia and the Soviet Union

Poster design was a vital tool for spreading propaganda in the newly established Soviet Union. After the Revolution of 1917, which culminated with Lenin's Bolshevik troops storming the Winter Palace and seizing power in St Petersburg, Russia was plunged into a state of civil war. Fighting raged between the Bolshevik Red Army and the White Army, comprised of loosely allied anti-Bolshevik forces. After three years of conflict the Reds were eventually victorious; the Soviet Union was officially established in 1922.

As a form of simple and effective mass-communication, posters were used to agitate for the total break with old political attitudes and promote the new communist vision during these turbulent times. The streets of Moscow and St Petersburg became an open public forum with posters adorning shop windows and pamphlets and newspapers thrust into the hands of passers-by.

This moment in Russian history gifted young artists the opportunity to engage with a responsive audience and lend their creative skills to the establishment of what they believed would be a new society and ultimately a new world.

In 1918 the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky declared: '*the streets shall be our brushes – the squares our palettes*'; art had suddenly taken on the power to transform everyday life.

Moscow in particular became a pioneering centre for the development of the visual arts, theatre, architecture and cinema, spawning movements such as Cubo-Futurism, Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism and Constructivism, practised by artists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova. The revolutionary new visual dialogues and principles practised by these artists – such as oblique angles, abstract shapes and the elimination of painterly conventions – strongly influenced both poster design and film production.

Parade commemorating the first anniversary of the 1917 Revolution

El Lissitzky *Beat the Whites With the Red Wedge* 1919–20

In context: El Lissitzky, Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge

Lissitzky's seminal poster from 1919 is a perfect example of the employment of a new visual language to effectively communicate Bolshevik propaganda. The message refers to the civil war between the Red and White armies that raged across Russia in the years after the Revolution.

Lissitzky was a close friend of fellow artist Kazimir Malevich who in 1915 founded the Suprematist movement. *Beat the Whites...* displays many of the features of Suprematism: geometric forms that appear to be floating, bold primary colours and a total lack of figurative elements or references to the 'outside world'. As with many of his peers in Russia, Lissitzky used art as a means of educating the masses and serving the aims of the Soviet state.

Discussion point: How does Lissitzky succeed in communicating the themes of victory and conflict?

See more Russian revolutionary posters at the Tate Modern, Level 2: Room 5

Author unknown, *Dare We Stay Quiet*, 1928. Courtesy Antikbar

Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, *Knight's Move*, 1927. Courtesy Antikbar

Author Unknown, *Heroes of the Blast Furnace*, 1929. Courtesy Antikbar

Film Posters of the Russian Avant-garde

The lack of adequate materials suffered by film directors was also felt by the poster designers, resulting in further feats of ingenuity. As the printing techniques available in the Soviet Union were too primitive to allow the large-scale reproduction of photographic images, film stills could not be directly included in the posters and had to be painstakingly drawn by hand.

Competing with propaganda posters, political proclamations and banners for public attention, film poster designers needed to find a distinct style of visual immediacy and presence that would capture the imagination of the Soviet public. Whilst propaganda images were usually printed in two colours (typically black and red), film posters asserted their difference by often incorporating three vibrant hues. The use of typography stretched beyond simple communication to ornamentation as artists explored the inherent abstract geometric qualities of the Cyrillic alphabet.

As a group, the Russian poster artists saw themselves in a state of constant experimentation. By inventing their own techniques and visual metaphors they developed highly effective methods of communicating the specific atmospheres and characteristics of individual films. Their designs were constantly in dialogue with the latest developments of cinematography as they sought to capture the drama and pathos of the silent screen.

Yet despite the indisputable artistic quality in the design work the posters themselves were seen as disposable merchandise. Many were simply thrown away when they became outdated whilst others were reused with new designs printed on the reverse. In one startling anecdote it was reported that orphans had been known to use discarded posters as blankets to keep warmth. Unsurprisingly, very few of these posters, once printed in editions numbering tens of thousands, survive today.

Discussion point: Do you think posters should be considered on the same level as other forms of fine Art? How have the values of posters as art objects changed?

Spotlight on: Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg

'*We produce a poster that is noticeable, that, one might say, is designed to shock, to hold attention, which is what is primarily expected of a poster. To reach this aim we treat the source material with total freedom, which is also spurred on by the size of the poster. We do not preserve proportionality between several objects and are turning figures upside down. – In short, we employ everything that could stop even a hurrying passer-by in his tracks.*' The Stenberg brothers

The Stenberg Brothers produced a large body of work in a multiplicity of media. They worked as Constructivist sculptors, theatrical designers, architects, and draftsmen and completed design commissions that ranged from railway cars to women's shoes. Their most significant accomplishment, however, was in the field of graphic design, specifically the advertising posters

they created for the newly burgeoning cinema in Soviet Russia. The brothers designed their first film poster in 1923 and went on to design around 300 film posters in total, many of which rank among the best in the genre.

Their intimate knowledge of contemporary film theory, Suprematist painting, Constructivism, and avant-garde theatre, as well as their skill in the graphic arts, was essential to the genesis of these works. The Stenbergs had a remarkable working relationship; their shared instinct for design resulted in works of true collaboration. Their innovative compositions combined vibrant colours, geometrical lines, distorted proportions and perspective, and stark typography. They introduced and successfully exploited the medium of photomontage in order to translate the dynamism of the moving image onto a two-dimensional plane. They also developed an optical device that could divide a film frame into squares and project enlargements onto their studio wall.

Discussion point: How do the Stenberg Brothers' posters compare to film posters today? Which do you think is more successful – in terms of attracting audiences, advertising and communicating the mood and genre of the film?

Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, *The Three Million Case*, 1926. Courtesy Antikbar

Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, *Death Loop*, 1929. Courtesy Antikbar
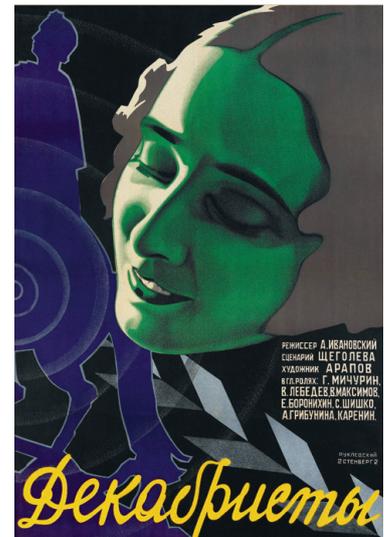
Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, *Decembrists*, 1927. Courtesy Antikbar

Technique: lithography

By the early 20th century lithography was not a new art form. Invented in 1798 by Austrian Alois Senefelder, the technique was perfected as a commercial art form by the mid-19th century when it became possible to print sheets at a rate of 10,000 an hour. The effects of lithography, which allowed artists to 'paint' and 'draw' onto a flat stone, could often rival an original painting in terms of detail and colour and as a result became a popular way of producing book illustrations, pamphlets and posters.

The essential principal behind lithography is the repulsion of oil and water and the attraction of oil to oil. In its most basic form the technique follows these simple steps:

The artist draws/paints the composition on the stone with an oily substance. Materials specifically designed for this use include litho crayons, paints and pencil which all have a soft waxy/greasy consistency. The stone picks up this greasy substance and holds it.

The stone is moistened with water. The parts of the stone not protected by the greasy paint soak up the water.

Oil-based ink is rolled onto the stone. The wet parts of the stone do not pick up the ink because oil and water repel one another. Instead the ink attaches itself to the greasy parts of the stone, where artist has painted the image.

A piece of paper is then pressed onto the stone. The ink transfers from the stone to the paper.

Suggested activities

- Identify 3 film techniques and incorporate them into the design of a poster.

- Create a film poster in the style of the Stenberg Brothers to advertise your favourite film. Use distorted perspectives, dramatic viewpoints and a limited palette of 3 vivid colours.

- Draw a storyboard for a new documentary about London. Using Dziga Vertov as inspiration, try to incorporate as many creative shots as you can.

- The Stenberg Brothers often used photomontage in their posters. Print a screen shot from a movie of your choice, cut out the actor or object and integrate it into a poster design.

- As part of the exhibition GRAD is showing Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Chess Fever*. The main character in the film has a number of possessions that are inspired by the game of chess. Think of a hobby you enjoy and design a range of merchandise inspired by it.

- Pretend you are one of the Stenberg brothers. Write a letter to the Soviet authorities explaining why posters are an important art form in the new Soviet Union.

Georgii Stenberg and Iosif Gerasimovich in the studio, 1920

Glossary

Constructivism
The term was first coined by artists in Russia in early 1921 and achieved wide international use by the 1920s. The movement emerged from the Utopian climate following the October Revolution of 1917, which led artists to seek to create a new visual environment, embodying the social needs and values of the new Communist order. Russian Constructivism refers specifically to a group of artists, including Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Vladimir Tatlin and Liubov Popova, who sought to demolish the concept of art as a detached from everyday life and instead actively employ it into the service of society. They achieved this through extending the formal language of abstract art into practical design work.

Suprematism
The term Suprematism was first used by the artist Kazimir Malevich in 1915. The term itself implied the supremacy of this new form of art in relation to the past. Malevich saw it as purely aesthetic and concerned only with form, free from any political or social meaning. He stressed the purity of shape and in particular that of the square. His most famous painting, Black Square, came to be seen as the embodiment of his ideas and the official symbol of the Suprematist movement.

Abstract
Abstraction indicates a departure from reality in the depiction of imagery in art. This departure from accurate representation can be slight, partial, or complete. Differing ideas and manifestations of abstraction appeared in artists' works in the successive modern movements of the 20th century.

Cubo-Futurism
The term refers to a group of Russian avant-garde artists whose work was seen to relate to French Cubism and Italian Futurism; it was subsequently adopted by painters and is now used by art historians to refer to Russian art works of the period 1912–15 that combine aspects of both styles.

Photomontage
Technique by which a composite photographic image is formed by cutting and joining images from separate photographic sources resulting in an illusion of an unreal subject. The term was coined by Berlin Dadaists c. 1918 and was employed by artists such as George Grosz, John Heartfield, Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch for images often composed from mass-produced sources such as newspapers and magazines.

If you want to know more
Visit www.grad-london.com for more information on the individual posters on display and to listen to the Kino/Film exhibition guide on the GRAD website.