Kino/Film: Soviet Posters of the Silent Screen

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‘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 re-formed 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.

The lack of adequate materials 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. The brothers Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg created a contraption that allowed the projection of film stills onto the poster layout to ease this process. Changing the angle of the projection produced distortions and alterations of perspective, underpinning their bold design style.

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.

Alexandra Chiţiuac
Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg
*The Three Million Case*, 1926
101 × 72
USSR, 1926, Director: Iakov Protazanov

A screwball comedy about three thieves and a femme fatale, this film was an attempt to create a Soviet production to rival Hollywood imports. Disconcertingly for the new government, light-hearted foreign films proved very popular with the proletariat seeking escapism from the difficulties of every day life. Unlike some of the other films in this exhibition, *The Three Million Case* is not a cinematic masterpiece and it fell into obscurity after its original box-office success.

Yet the poster is both dramatic, with the enormous face of the female lead hypnotically highlighted by vivid green eyes and vampy red lips, as well as innovative in its design, with the disorienting vignettes of the thief scaling a building appearing beneath the floating head. The enduring appeal of this work is a great testament to the talent of its creators, the brothers Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, who had the ability to turn even average material into great design.

A contemporary critic ridiculed the Stenbergs for their use of over-sized disembodied heads, an innovation based on the film close-up, claiming that their posters frightened passers-by and even horses. Undaunted, the artists went to his office and thanked him for the publicity, saying: ‘Everyone who reads the article goes out on the street to see where those big heads are that the horses shy away from. Write more articles like that.’

Nikolai Prusakov
*The Second Exhibition of Film Posters*, 1926
108.5 × 71.5

The first exhibition showcasing the new poster designs was organised in 1925 by the Stenberg brothers at the Kamerny Theatre. The second one, held in 1926 at the same location, was organised and selected by Nikolai Prusakov who produced a very stylish typographic poster for the event. Its abstract design sets it apart from the other works exhibited here. The tetrahedron shape was in fact Prusakov’s own trademark which he used to sign his posters designs - he enlarged it here to create an almost Suprematist design.

The 1926 exhibition included all the artists present here at GRAD, bar one. After seeing the show, Anatoli Lunacharskii, the Commissar for Education, described the new Soviet film posters enthusiastically as ‘Living Posters’, free of pre-revolutionary symbolism and sentimentality, functional as well as of expressive beauty.
Man with a Movie Camera, USSR, 1929, Director: Dziga Vertov

The phenomenon of film itself was the underlying subject of the feature length montage film by Dziga Vertov, Man with a Movie Camera of 1929, which presented a cross-section view of city life in Kiev, Odessa and Kharkov. Instead of following a story line the film has a thematic structure, the cinema audience, the working day, industry, street life, birth, death, recreation. The camera lens represents the director’s ever present eye at work, as Vertov declared in his 1923 manifesto: ‘I am an eye; a mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you the world the way only I can see it.’

Having honed his skill with agit-films and news reels in the years since the Revolution, Vertov demonstrated his many innovative cinematic techniques in Man with Movie a Camera. Asymmetric viewpoints, repetition, dramatic camera angles, extreme close-ups and an accomplished use of montage are just some of the methods he and his fellow film directors employed. These in turn inspired the poster artists, who created their own visual vocabulary to capture the essence of the films in dynamic and dramatic graphic compositions.

Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg
A Real Gentleman, 1928

A Perfect Gentleman, USA, 1928, Director: Clyde Bruckman

The 1917 Revolution and the ensuing civil war crippled the economy of the newly formed Soviet state, affecting also the film industry which almost came to a standstill. With support from Lenin, who saw the political potential of cinema, the industry began to rebuild itself, but due to the low output of the Soviet studios only a few of the films shown were of recent Russian production.

Besides re-runs of older films, approximately 80 per cent of the repertoire was imported from abroad, mostly from Germany and the USA. Favourites were German mystery films and society dramas, while Hollywood provided swash-buckling adventures and comedies starring Buster Keaton or Monty Banks, who can be seen in this poster. Viewed with disapproval by government officials, American films were tolerated as their public appeal brought the box office profits desperately needed to subsidise Soviet film production.

It soon transpired that the proletariat preferred Hollywood’s simple brand of escapism to the experimental daring of home-grown talent such as Sergei Eisenstein or Dziga Vertov. Battleship Potemkin only attracted Soviet audiences after being shown abroad to favourable reviews. By contrast, the Douglas Fairbanks vehicle The Thief of Baghdad was probably the blockbuster of the decade, seen by 1.7 million Soviet citizens in its first six months and continuing to run for years in cinemas across the country.
**Chess Fever**, USSR, 1925, Director: Vsevolod Pudovkin

This short comedy was the first film by director Vsevolod Pudovkin to be released. In November 1925 Moscow was in a flurry of excitement over the International Chess Tournament being held in the city. The film combines footage from the actual tournament with scenes played by actors. It depicts, to great comic effect, the hero’s infatuation with chess at the expense of his exasperated wife-to-be. She decides to poison herself in despair, but her attempts go awry when the chemist is also in thrall to the game.

Pudovkin was assistant director to Lev Kuleshov, a pioneer of montage theory who experimented with juxtaposing images in order to change their meaning. Pudovkin used this in light-hearted fashion in Chess Fever, where the reigning chess world champion José Raúl Capablanca plays a role most probably without his knowledge. Shots taken during the tournament, supposedly for a newsreel, were juxtaposed with shots of objects and other actors’ body parts, integrating Capablanca into the film’s action.

**Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg**

**Turksib**, 1929

109 × 71.5

USSR, 1929, Director: Viktor Turin

Advertising a documentary about the building of the Turkestan-Siberian railroad, this poster illustrates two important themes in propaganda of the period.

Firstly, the industrial prowess of the Soviet Union is emphasised, this project being a prominent part Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan. In the film the workers are depicted toiling furiously against the clock, in order to lay the last tracks within the ambitious timelines of the project. The Stenberg brothers selected for their poster the emblematic image of two labourers urging their comrades to complete this feat before the imminent arrival of the first train. The dynamic design makes the steam engine look like it is hurtling towards us, an image reminiscent of the early days of cinema. Industrial themes are also prevalent in the two posters to the left. One depicts the workers of a cement factory, while the other shows a stylised burst of petrol fueling planes, trains and automobiles.

To return to Turksib, the second important theme is the presence of the Central Asian nations within the Soviet Union. Propaganda was frequently used to show the positive influence that communist ideology would bring to these regions, banishing superstitions and replacing them with technological advances such as the new railroad. Another film entitled The Uprising, whose poster you can see on the far left, depicted an anti-Soviet revolt in Central Asia quashed by the Red army forces to the benefit of the local people. It was based on the eponymous novel by Dmitrii Furmanov, formerly a Bolshevik commissar.
One of the best known Soviet film of this era, Battleship Potemkin was by no means an unqualified success at the time it was made. The poet Vladimir Mayakovsky complained to the authorities that following its premiere it was relegated to second-rate theatres, while Anatolii Lunacharskii, the Commissar of Education, recalled walking into a half-empty theatre during the film's first run. The film's popularity only came after audiences abroad received it with enthusiasm and, according to Lunacharskii, 'its greatest publicity came from the wish to see a film that brought us our first victory in the foreign film market'. This 1925 poster by the Stenberg Brothers complements the cinematic innovation of Eisenstein's and his camera operator Eduard Tisse. The famous scene on the Odessa steps involved a camera-trolley that could move across the lengths of the steps, as well as an acrobatic crew member with a camera strapped to his body. This sense of dynamic motion and disorienting perspective underpins the poster design, where the opposing diagonals of the guns have been juxtaposed with the drama of the falling figure for maximum visual impact.

The Stenbergs' monumental poster for Eisenstein's October was made of eight segments pasted together into the final composition. We only have one segment in the exhibition and very few complete versions are in existence today, one belonging to the Russian State Library. The print runs for these adverts were often as high as 20,000 copies, so they could be plastered side-by-side for maximum effect, in cities across the Soviet Union. Yet very few are still in existence today. The posters were seen as disposable and were often reused, so that a new film was advertised on the back of an old one. In addition, conditions for the general population were so harsh that countless homeless children survived by peeling the posters of the walls at night to wrap themselves for warmth.

The Stenbergs collaborated in creating this poster, one of the largest of the period, with Iakov Ruklevskii, the head of the department that supervised film poster production across the Soviet Union. As its first director, he established a successful production process and engaged a team of talented young artists and designers, many of whom are present in this exhibition. By 1925 the department set up in-house lithographic printing which allowed the designers to produce a large amount of posters while still controlling the quality. You can see Ruklevskii's own design for October on the wall to your right, with the towering figure of Lenin unfurling a red flag. Although Ruklevskii himself was an advocate of realism in art, he supported his team in producing a body of work both revolutionary and appealing.
Izrail Bograd  
*The End of St Petersburg*, 1927  
125.5 × 95  
USSR, 1927, Director: Vsevolod Pudovkin

The poster for this film, designed by Izrail Bograd, does not refer directly to the content of the film. It uses symbolism to monumental effect; the equestrian statue of Tsar Aleksandr III, once popularly known as the 'Scarecrow', stands massively against a blood red background. The Imperial monument symbolises the weight of oppression inflicted on the Russian people by the old regime and implies its imminent demolition.

Both this film and October were commissioned for the 10 year anniversary of the 1917 Revolution. Filming against a deadline and in close competition the two directors, Pudovkin and Eisenstein, found themselves vying for the same locations. It is frequently said that the dramatisation of the storming of the Winter Palace caused more damage than the actual event itself ten years earlier. Pudovkin later remembered: 'One night I knocked away part of the balustrading of the roof, and I was scared I might get into trouble. But, luckily enough, that same night Sergei Mikhailovich broke 200 windows in private bedrooms.'