

Olga Romanova: WATCHING SOVIET CINEMA TODAY: “The Woman” (1932) by Yefim Dzigan and Boris Shreyber

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For many years, I taught courses on Soviet culture and cinema to Belarusian students at the European College of Liberal Arts in Belarus (ECLAB) in Minsk. Unfortunately, due to political repressions, the college had to close down in 2020. Throughout the years of Belarusian independence, remnants from the Soviet Union have permeated the everyday lives of its citizens as well as the country’s colloquial and political rhetoric, often thoroughly detached from their original cultural contexts, discourses, and imaginaries. But what can we learn from watching Soviet movies today?

The movies in question bear complex meaning pertaining to different Soviet eras and transition periods. Through an informed viewing, we not only perceive the official agenda—be it political, ideological, or cultural—but also traces of social and political tensions, metaphors, and “clues” on historical reality. Historicizing these movies and understanding their initial cultural and social context as part of a sociocultural analysis of film allows to uncover implicit, often unintentional meanings inherent to this cinematic heritage.

I.

My analysis here will focus on the social drama *The Woman* (*Женщина*), a late masterpiece of Soviet avant-garde cinema directed by Yefim Dzigan and Boris Shreyber. Artistically and stylistically, this widely forgotten silent movie provides one of the most vivid and interesting pre-War filmic representations of collectivization and village life on Belarusian territory. Produced by Belgoskino, the first Belarusian state-run film studio, and released throughout the Soviet Union in the summer of 1932 through an all-Union distribution, *The Woman* portrays the difficulties of establishing life on a collective farm.

The film’s narrative is told through the prism of women’s experiences. Its main protagonist Mashka dreams of becoming a tractor driver. All the female characters habitually suffer and submit to masculine oppression, humiliation, or jovial condescension. The master of the Machine and Tractor Station (MTS) refuses to train Mashka because he believes that a *baba* (pejorative for “country woman, broad”) is unable to comprehend the necessary technical and mechanical knowledge. Likewise, Mashka’s husband throws her mechanic’s handbook into the furnace, shouting at her: “A woman’s business is farming and childbirth!” With respect to the conflict between patriarchal attitudes and feminist ideas, the movie seems relevant even in the context of contemporary discourses. At the same time, however, it refers to ideas of early Soviet feminism—a feminism that was to come to an end four years later with the onset of the era of Stalinist traditionalism and the subsequent establishment of a

specific form of Soviet patriarchy, resulting in both mandatory participation of women in “socialist building” and reproductive labor (for example, through the ban on abortion in 1936). While Mashka is expected to fulfil a secondary role due to her gender, male tractor drivers and mechanics defend their exclusive right to a privileged status that yields higher incomes than work on collective farms, greater mobility, and the possibility of actively partaking in building up communism. From a feminist perspective, this discriminatory attitude can be seen as a topical metaphor for the phenomenon of the invisible “glass ceiling” that women are still continuously up against.

Stylistically, *The Woman* references two famous montage films on the collectivization of the countryside in the late 1920s: Sergei Eisenstein’s *Old and New / General Line* (Старое и новое / Генеральная линия, 1929, Sovkino) and Alexander Dovzhenko’s *The Earth* (Земля, 1930, Kiev Film Factory VUFKU). Dovzhenko’s film was heavily attacked in the wake of the First Five-Year Plan 1928–1932, as avant-garde aesthetics came under growing pressure as part of an increasingly unified public cultural discourse. Central Moscow newspapers accused Dovzhenko of “myth-making,” “kulak philosophy,” and denounced the “biologism” (meaning the naturalism) present in certain scenes. *The Woman* was criticized for similar “ideological errors,” its excessive “naturalism,” and its promotion of a “cult of femininity and fertility.” However, since aesthetic norms and the cultural policy in this period were still relatively inconsistent, and due to the international reputation of Soviet avant-garde film, both movies were licensed to be distributed internationally. Back in 1930, *The Earth* had been a success with European moviegoers. *The Woman* was broadly distributed throughout the West. In the US, however, the Hays Code only allowed for a censored version to be shown that omitted all so-called “naturalistic shots.”

II.

Of course, a silent black and white movie made over 90 years ago challenges today’s viewers and their viewing habits. And yet, it is a worthwhile experience. Firstly, as a film that engages with everyday life, *The Woman* vividly depicts attitudes and peasant survival strategies during the early years of Stalin’s collectivization and the modernization of the village. Secondly, it demonstrates the strategies of ideology, the methods by which it reconstructs reality, and how, to a certain degree, these may be considered as universal. And, thirdly, the film can also be seen as a topical parable for female emancipation, revealing how patriarchal attitudes dominate everyday life on all levels and generally determine men’s behavior towards women, regardless of ideology or political rhetoric.

The strongly emotional scenes, in particular, still captivate today’s viewers through their representation of women’s pain, despair, and silent screams. A sequence depicting a “double ordeal” powerfully combines two events by editing them in a rhythmic parallel montage. One scene shows the chairwoman of the collective farm suffering from the demanding physical labor while the parallel scene shows Mashka undergoing a test at the MTS during which the male workers decide to play a joke on her by making her carry a red-hot bolt in her hand.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/tCZbNdi7fRM>

By intercutting a long shot of Mashka's tense arm with shots of the hard-working woman (an example of Soviet montage technique), the directors convey a state of extreme pain. It is interesting to note how today's young people perceive such a sequence. Among my students, two reactions dominated. Some of them associated the images shown with their personal movie experiences. For example, one of the students said the sequence reminded her of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, specifically the scene when Alex, in a close-up, is forced to watch acts of violence while his eyes are forcibly pried open. Others reacted more emotionally, often ignoring all the ideological messaging. The receptive gap between perceptions of the audience of the early 1930s to whom the message is addressed and the young viewers of today is the starting point for my research questions and film analysis. First, we need to reconstruct the political, ideological, and social contexts and understand the film's meanings and emotional messages. Regarding the "double ordeal" sequence described above, we need to ask: Why does Mashka endure the pain, and why is it presented as just as inevitable as childbirth? What is the ideological message that the directors attempt to convey here?

In the early 1930s, when the Soviet state commissioned a studio and selected a director to make a film about collective farm life, it had to offer solutions to certain ideological challenges. For instance, such a film had to legitimize the ideology and methods of collectivization while also providing an ideological response to the waves of peasant protests against forced collectivization sweeping the USSR in 1929/30. By the time *The Woman* was released, these protests were still ongoing in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Furthermore, films had to support new campaigns of mechanization and women's emancipation that was propagated under the slogan "Woman to the tractor!"

Not only does a sociocultural analysis reconstruct the cultural-political contexts of these filmic resolutions of real-life contradictions, but it also allows to uncover deeper layers of meaning. Even though *The Woman* is a silent movie, there is a lot of crying and screaming. The most furious, masterfully shot and edited altercation takes place at a well. At the well, peasant women habitually gather to collect water and share news. It is here that the wife of a *kulak* provokes a scandal. Instructed by her husband, she pits the peasant Ulyana, a poverty-stricken mother of many children, against Mashka. The women fight and yell, hysteria spreads among the other women who pour buckets of water over each other as they scream: “Beat her! She’s destroying women’s life!”

Fig. 1–4: Frames from “The Woman” (23.20–25.57, the scene at the well)

This outrage must be interpreted more broadly as a reflection of the conflict’s intensity in the villages which peaked at the beginning of Stalin’s collectivization. With the abolition of tsarist serfdom in the Russian Empire in 1861 in mind, many peasants saw collective farms as a second serfdom. They had to give their land back to the state and were generally suspicious of any modernization. However, the film attempts to conceal this reality that secret service workers of the OGPU (All-Union State Political Administration) spelled out in secret reports on the mood of the peasants. Furthermore, the scene had to channel hostility towards the ideologically correct object—the *kulaks*. This becomes obvious in the agitating, propagandistic finale of the movie in which an embittered kulak tries to annihilate the collective farm’s plentiful harvest.



The Woman not only manages to convey this official political message, it also inadvertently captures the tense atmosphere in an early 1930s Soviet village. Its visual language unwittingly translates gender and social conflicts that escalated following Stalin’s attempt to uncompromisingly reorganize traditional peasant life. The directors conceived the “double ordeal” sequence as a metaphor for the suffering and hardship that Soviet peasant women had to endure for the sake of the good new life on the collective farm. However, the associative montage generates additional meanings that the directors most likely did not intend to convey. The pain associated with breaking the traditional pattern is juxtaposed with the pain of childbirth and captured in images of trial and humiliation. Shots of the rich harvest and the satisfaction of the MTS director with the

accomplished work reflect the position of the state. It is not the peasants, but the state that controls and enjoys the results of modernized peasant labor. It is therefore symptomatic that the result of the work is “accepted” by the MTS director which endows the film’s climax with patriarchal connotations on women’s emancipation. In addition to this poignant depiction and criticism of patriarchal society, which remains relevant to this day, the visual poetics of the film help uncover an aspect that is mostly silenced or even completely omitted in the contemporary appropriation and recoding of the Soviet past, including the mass violence during the forced collectivization: the trauma of collectivization.



III.

Furthermore, since this film engages with the first wave of Soviet feminism, it can also be seen as a parable on the nature of overt and covert resistance to women’s emancipation—a parable that, unfortunately, has not lost any of its relevance. This is especially true for contemporary authoritarian regimes that grew out of the former Soviet empire, where the elites increasingly implement patriarchal rhetoric to defend the interests of the “traditional family.” In 2020, for instance, the Belarusian president Lukashenko claimed that a woman cannot be president, because it is an impossible job for her. These regimes follow the model of Stalinist traditionalism which relied on paternalistic patterns while seeing people as a mere means for mobilization and as a reproductive resource.

The montage techniques that Dzigan and Shreyber used in *The Woman* reveal traces of a traumatic reality as well as the ideological construction behind the making of the film. *The Woman* can therefore be read as a testament to the trauma of collectivization, and the layers of restored meanings speak to the complexity of the cultural fabric that Soviet cinema both displayed and constructed—and that we now approach as a form of cultural heritage. It is of utmost importance to engage with such works both in research and in education, especially

since the Soviet past is actively mythologized in official mass media, increasingly becoming a means of political manipulation—up to the rehabilitation of Stalin and “Stalin’s merits” in contemporary Russian and Belarusian propaganda.

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