Reviews

• Ian Christie

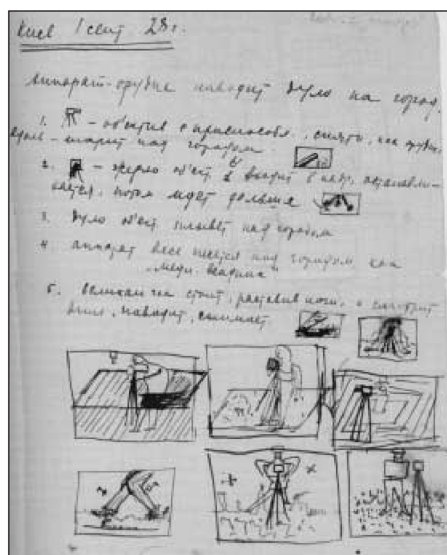
Clare Kitson, *Yuri Norstein and* Tale of Tales*: An Animator's Journey*, John Libbey, 2005. ISBN: 0 86196 646 5

Thomas Tode, Barbara Wurm *et al*, eds, *Dziga Vertov: The Vertov Collection at the Austrian Film Museum*, SYNEMA/Ostterreichisches Filmmuseum, 2006. ISBN: 3-901644-19-9

The recent appearance of two apparently very different books about major Russian filmmakers provides an opportunity to take the temperature of current scholarship about the Soviet period in the year that has seen various events marking the twentieth anniversary of Gorbachev's *perestroika*. Clearly the reformers of 1986 could not have anticipated that relaxing censorship and the central control of artistic organisations would unleash a rising tide of dissent that would ultimately lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union. And it may be that the high-profile reforms of the cinema and press, which allowed previously banned films to circulate and be openly discussed, were not decisive in the larger political arena. Yet the almost visceral impact of such contemporary films as *Is It Easy to be Young?* (Yuris Podnieks, 1986) and *Little Vera* (Vasily Pichul, 1988), together with the 'unshelving' of Askoldov's long-banned *The Commissar* (1967/1987) and the revelation of the hitherto suppressed careers of Kira Muratova, Alexei Gherman and Alexander Sokurov, certainly contributed to a cultural awakening that would prove irresistible.

However, an important dynamic within this awakening was less the desire to expose the brutality of Stalinism, than to celebrate aspects of the Soviet experience that had long been censored, especially the closeness and solidarity of daily life during the 1930s and 40s, even within the infamous communal apartments. German's *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (1983–5) puzzled many outside Russia by its apparent nostalgia for this era, but few admirers of Yuri Norstein's widely celebrated animation *The Tale of Tales* (1979) would have recognised that it too sprang in part from the same desire to celebrate ordinary life in Stalin's time. This impulse emerges clearly in Clare Kitson's wonderfully intimate and illuminating account of the genesis and complex trajectory of Norstein's masterpiece. In his first outline for the film, developed jointly with the writer Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, herself already a controversial chronicler of the sorrows and joys of everyday Soviet life, Norstein frankly expressed this desire to evoke his childhood in the Moscow suburb of Maryina Roshcha:

> If only we could go back to that poor childhood, sustained by ration cards, to that long corridor [of the Norsteins' communal apartment], to the sunny Sunday yard. . . where the children all gather [. . .] If only we could look now, with different eyes, at the homeland of our childhood, at that cramped yard, where the earth was so trampled that the grass only



• Preparatory drawings by Vertov for *Man with a Movie Camera*

pierced a way through round the edges (Treatment for an animated film, 1976).

Despite this emotional starting point, the treatment already made clear that the film would be anything but straightforwardly nostalgic, or even easily understandable. When Norstein came to assemble his patchwork of 'micro-histories' of everyday life for what would become *The Tale of Tales*, he and Petrushevskaya declared that the film would 'not feature scenes with an instant interpretation' so that the reader/viewer would feel 'yes, I've got what they mean by that'. Instead, developing the techniques he had used in earlier animated films such as *The Heron and the Crane* (1974) and especially *The Hedgehog in the Fog* (1975), with its diffuse, almost phantasmagoric space – justified by the foggy setting – Norstein envisioned a film in which fragments of personal memory would mingle with images from the collective memory of his generation, growing up after the war. The central figure would be a poet, intermittently seen in an Arcadian setting, and other characters and scenes would be summoned through his imagination. In the course of production, however, one of these creatures, the Little Wolf, effectively became the main character, and it is from his marginal perspective that we see scenes of modern family life, of myth and legend, and of war and nightmare.

The fact that an animal character became central may have misled some into thinking Norstein's film was merely whimsical, in the tradition of Aesopian (or Krylovian) animal fables. But the Soyuzmultfilm studio was alarmed to discover they had unknowingly produced a film of alarming suggestiveness – Kitson's chapter on the labyrinthine negotiations needed to get the film released is entitled 'What's it about then, Yuri?' During this war of nerves, which was entirely typical of the era that saw Askoldov's film buried and his career abruptly ended, a change of title was demanded, and so *The Little Grey Wolf Will Come* became the more resonant *Tale of Tales*, while a series of bungled attempts at censorship allowed the film to acquire an international reputation that led to it being voted

• Yuri Nostein with Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, his scriptwriter for *The Tales of Tales*

the best animated film of all time in a poll organised for the Los Angeles Olympiad of 1984. Kitson has been closely involved with raising the profile of animation in the UK, and worked closely with Norstein while heading animation at Channel Four television. Her study of the film's genesis and tortuous route to production and acclaim is unabashedly personal, interspersed with anecdotes from her own travels in the former USSR, but the result is often more perceptive than any conventionally academic study could be of this extraordinary work – whose only peer is surely Tarkovsky's equally personal *The Mirror* (1975).

The current revival of interest in one of Soviet cinema's original dissidents, the prickly Dziga Vertov, continues with a valuable and superbly illustrated bilingual compendium from the Austrian Film Museum.[1] After Vertov was pushed aside in the 1930s by the development of a determinedly 'socialist realist' Soviet cinema, he spent much of the remainder of life reflecting on what he had achieved in the whirlwind years between 1918 and 1934. One result, published here for the first time, was a major stock-taking he prepared in 1947, entitled 'Artistic Calling Card' [*Tvorcheskaya kartochka*], which lists his achievements in 137 entries, written in a third-person style which evokes both the Constructivist idea of 'factography' and Viktor Shklovsky's experiments in oblique autobiography.[2] It is inevitably the autobiography of an artist torn

• Drawing for the drunken father in *The Tales of Tales*

between pride in his pioneering achievements – 'the first. . .' recurs constantly – and bitter disappointment at not being able to pursue his radical projects. Increasingly he takes refuge in the conviction that his influence lives on elsewhere and that his work will 'only be understood fifty years from now'.

That it is being better understood and appreciated is due in no small measure to the unique relationship formed between the Austrian Film Museum and Vertov's widow, and editor, Elizaveta Svilova. Svilova visited Vienna in 1974 and arranged to deposit documents and films, in an echo of the arrangements made by Kasimir Malevich in the 1930s to place his work abroad, anticipating its possible destruction under Stalin's dictatorship. Not only has the Film Museum preserved this extraordinary cache of rare film and autograph documents, making possible exhibitions such as the one held in Sacile in 2004, but the determination of its co-founder Peter Kubelka to validate Vertov's place in the history of experimental film led to a 'corrective' restoration of *Enthusiasm* in 1972, involving resynchronisation of parts of the film.[3] Whatever the merits of this, it has the undeniable value of focusing attention back on actual texts of Vertov, filmic as well as graphic. Thanks to the rich iconography of this catalogue, it is at last possible to grasp how closely Vertov's work paralleled that of his rival Eisenstein. Poems, diagrams, lists – even projects from the 1940s – all show Vertov's range and consistency as a 'media artist'.

Vertov was lucky to maintain his niche in Soviet cinema for as long as he did; and lucky to have the skilful and loyal support of Svilova, helping keep his memory alive after collaborating on all his major films. Norstein equally owes much of his achievement to the collaboration of Francesca Yarbusova, his talented designer and wife. Ultimately, both of these books follow a similar path in illuminating the privileged contexts that allowed such maverick artists to emerge – the early post-revolutionary era and the Khrushchev 'Thaw' of the late 1950s – and the close, often self-sacrificing, support of family and co-workers that enabled them to create works of such unique integrity and vision. At last, we are beginning to see behind the veils of secrecy, censorship and concealment that have lingered after the Soviet era, and the Little Wolf and the Hedgehog of Soviet cinema emerge as fully-rounded and deeply fascinating figures.

Notes

1 An anthology, *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, edited by Yuri Tsivian and translated by Julian Graffy, was published to accompany the 2004 Pordenone/Sacile Vertov retrospective by Le Giornate del Cinema Muto (ISBN 88-86155-15-8).

2 This is not the Diary, parts of which were first published in Sergei Drobashenko's collection of Vertov's writings in the USSR in 1966, and which has appeared in a more substantial form in Thomas Tode and Anexandra Gramatke, eds, *Dziga Vertov: Tagebücher/Arbeitshefte*, UVK Medien, 2000.

3 This corrected version is now available in a special edition of the film, including the original and a documentary about its making, published as a DVD set by the Austrian Film Museum.

• Sarah Leahy

Alison Smith, *French Cinema in the 1970s: The echoes of May*, Manchester University Press, 2005. ISBN: 0719068282.

In 2002, the *Studies in French Cinema* conference devoted to the 1970s identified this decade as a neglected one in terms of scholarship, sandwiched as it is in between the decades of the New Wave and the *cinéma du look*. Alison Smith's contribution to that conference addressed the performance of the rural in the history films of René Allio. In this book she explores a wider cinematic landscape, while retaining the same interest in the political and, specifically, the influence of May 1968 on French cinema in the decade immediately following the events. Smith's book aims to examine how cinema responded to May in a 'serious' way. In doing so, this work builds on previous publications on French cinema and the impact of May 1968, in particular, Sylvia Harvey's *May '68 and Film Culture* (BFI, 1978), Jill Forbes' *The Cinema in France after the New Wave* (BFI/Macmillan, 1992) and Margaret Atack's *May '68 in French Fiction and Film* (Oxford University Press, 1999). As a result, in order to distinguish her work from these studies, and to build on the body of scholarship dealing with the 1970s, Smith chooses not to dwell on popular narrative cinema and what she terms its incorporation and degradation of the revolutionary spirit of 1968, for example, with the emergence of new stereotypes such as the left-wing student. Rather, her interest lies in films that engage on a more productive political level with the events of May, and yet which were easily available to the general public during this time. Her analysis focuses on how such films define the political, and how successful they are in putting across their political messages. Her methods are principally those of textual analysis, though an investigation of contemporary critical responses and theoretical debates are also of key importance here.

The emphasis is firmly on films that have not generally been the subject of much previous study. Thus, filmmakers who one might expect to feature strongly (Pialat, Eustache, Blier, Malle, Ferreri) are barely mentioned in order to concentrate on less well-known aspects of French cinema of the time. The result is a fascinating analysis which includes the work of Costa-Gavras, Boisset, Allio, Farraldo, Cassenti and Comolli, as well as the Swiss Tanner and the American Klein.

The only popular (in terms of box office) films discussed are those of the Série Z, which are situated within the popular genre cinema of the 1970s as well as in relation to their own political subjects and the revolutionary spirit of May '68. Smith argues that even though mainstream cinema inevitably entails a dilution of the political message, Costa-Gavras et al were nonetheless responsible for a shift in the mainstream away from pure escapism and towards films that engaged with social realities. Such an interest is equally reflected – though on a different scale and in a very different style – in the '*nouveau naturel*', a term coined by *Télérama* critics to define a group of films made by young directors and featuring mainly working-class protagonists, and which Smith links clearly to the *jeune cinéma français* of the 1990s, where once again new young directors demonstrated concerns with depicting the social reality of young people. Other chapters explore further the question of realism through the representation of history, Utopias, and revolutionary form.

The main concern of Smith's book is to analyse the political intentions of the directors discussed in the book, and to consider whether their films succeed in putting across the intended message, or whether they ultimately contradict the intentions of their makers. Smith takes into consideration writings of the directors and their contemporaries, as well as the theoretical debates of the time, in particular, regarding approaches to realism. As a result, the book offers a fascinating discussion of the key theoretical concerns of these directors and of the time. However, there are some inherent contradictions in such an approach. It firstly implies a basically auteurist view of cinema, supposing that it is possible to know the true

intentions of the film-maker and that film *can be* a translation of these intentions. And yet, it also recognises the disparity between production and reception of any film, undermining the *auteur* through a questioning of form and of the critical reception of the films. It would seem that the answer can always be that the film-maker has failed, since there is so much potential for slippage from production to reception. Perhaps it might have been more fruitful to frame the question not in terms of success or failure (which seems to uphold the auteurist project), but rather in terms of ideological shifts related to context. However, this is a minor point in what is otherwise a clear and nuanced account of the major ideological debates surrounding cinema in the 1970s.

Smith offers an excellent overview of the theoretical developments of French cinema of the 1970s, providing an illuminating context within which to situate the film she discusses. It would also have been interesting to have been given a clearer picture of the relationship between these films and the majority of more mainstream French films, most of which continued in the vein of the pre-New Wave tradition of quality. Equally, although Smith's subject is French cinema, this cannot be divorced from international developments. The choice to focus in such detail on the French film she discusses means that consideration of the global context is limited to brief passages, for example, on the political cinema of Francesco Rosi, seen in relation to the Série Z, and on *La Hora de los Hornos* (Solanas, 1968), which influenced Marin Karmitz' *Camarades*. In *The French New Wave: An Artistic School* (Blackwell, 2003), Michel Marie highlights the importance of seeing the New Wave within the international context of revolutionary cinematic movements in Europe and beyond. While it is clearly not within the scope of this study to offer any sustained exploration of developments in global cinema, the overall perspective could have benefitted from more attention to cinematic developments elsewhere, most notably in Latin America and Germany. In addition, a good deal of prior knowledge is taken for granted, including of events such as the kidnap and assassination of Ben Barka, or the Larzac issue. While Smith makes it clear that she does not intend to reiterate the events of May which have already been covered thoroughly elsewhere, the clarity of argument would benefit on occasion from a little further exposition of the context, and, on occasion, from clearer plot summaries of the films, many of which may not be immediately available to readers.

French Cinema in the 1970s claims to take a new look at the 1970s. Alison Smith has achieved this, while also uncovering potential areas of further study, such as the impact of 1968 on women film-makers (interestingly, Chantal Akerman does not feature among the Francophone directors discussed), the increasing visibility of minority groups in French cinema post-68, and the role of key figures such as Coluche. It is to be hoped that this work does indeed inspire its readers to pursue such areas of further investigation and to continue to shed light on this neglected decade.

• Andrew Martin

Andrew Klevan, *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation*, London: Wallflower Press, 2005. ISBN: 1 904764 24 X

It is a pleasure to read and re-read this book about acting in cinema. Published in Wallflower's admirable 'Short Cuts' series, *Film Performance* lives up to the aims of the list: it provides a clear, economical introduction to an aspect of cinema which, in this case, is everywhere evident (and, indeed, celebrated), but so rarely discussed in rigorous, analytical terms. But Andrew Klevan, a gifted writer, does still more than this: although fairly quiet on the polemical front, his book offers itself as an example of a new kind of criticism, descriptively rich and poetically suggestive.

It is essential to understand the two 'poles' in the book's title: achievement and appreciation. Achievement is what a great or even simply good film (and Klevan lines up a shining parade of 'classic Hollywood' examples) manages to do all

by itself, by dint of its art and craft. But appreciation is what the spectator must rise to, and what she or he can create only in an interplay of description, evocation and analysis.

Time and again in this book, Klevan enacts for us what it can mean to poetically 'free associate' from the posture of a body to a detail of décor or the suggestion of a theme – as when a chair is compared to a character: "it has slim parts, a straight back, and is firm (a touch hard, perhaps?)" (p. 65). This is not *belles lettres* 'impressionism' of the kind once excommunicated from serious film writing; it penetrates to the heart of a film's dramatic and poetic logic.

I unreservedly recommend this book to both beginning and advanced students of cinema. My comments from this point on should be construed less as criticisms than suggestions of areas that it would be interesting to see Klevan reflect upon in future, for the general elucidation of us all.

The pithy introduction ('Interpreting Performance') arrays a select number of masters, or mentors, in the annals of writing about film acting – including David Thomson, V.F. Perkins, Charles Affron, and especially Stanley Cavell (whose philosophical terminology filters pervasively, and at moments cryptically, into Klevan's language). One reference sticks out oddly: the Australian anthology *Falling For You: Essays on Cinema and Performance* (1999) edited by Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros. Odd, because where that book goes, Klevan fears to tread, or he at least seems happy to leave it between the pages of his previous book, *Disclosure of the Everyday* (2000): cinematic modernism, which has, for at least four decades, proposed a very unclassical, split-level relation between actor, character, 'body too much' and (increasingly in our digital age) the performer as mere graphic 'element' or special effect. This is not a matter of theoretical fashion: one can hardly appreciate the achievement of *Vivre sa vie* (Godard, 1962), *Arizona Dream* (Kusturica, 1993), *Dogville* (von Trier, 2003), or about a thousand other innovative movies, without the sense of these levels.

Klevan, however, gives us classicism with a vengeance: it is startling, at times, how he returns the act of 'reading a film' to what most filmgoers spontaneously do, i.e., speculate on what fictional characters are 'really' thinking, feeling or remembering at any given moment of their screen story.

It was once suggested to me that the quality – or, at least, the nature – of any book can be adduced from the structure of its notes. This part of Klevan's book is brief and to-the-point, but is nonetheless telling on the level of what it leaves out. In a book about acting, there is not a single reference to any anecdotal material about the actors considered in his text – material of the sort that can be abundantly found in biographies, memoirs, journalistic profiles or television documentaries. I am not referring to private-life gossip, or speculations on larger-than-life personae, which Klevan does well to skip. But why does he feign such lack of interest in what his preferred actors (or those who worked with them) might have had to say about how they approached their *craft*? If Barbara Stanwyck has only once said on the public record – even indirectly, or seemingly in jest – that she somehow pitched her acting in relation to the décor she found herself surrounded by, Klevan's argument about her work in *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956) would be immeasurably strengthened by citing it. But we read nothing, here, of actors' processes, Method or otherwise – and, likewise, not a single classic text on acting for theatre or film (by Stanislavsky or Michael Chekhov or Michael Kirby) is referenced.

Ultimately, in fact, this is not a book about how actors act. It is about how they *figure* within the stylistic ensemble of any given film. That in itself is a big deal to grasp, and no previous book has offered us such a generous handle on it. Klevan's approach – it has a pedagogical air, in the best sense – is to attend to nothing except what is on the screen before one. What we infer (following Klevan) about the quality and nature of performance can be generated only from this frontal, wilfully reductive vantage point – other inputs, like the social discourse around actors, are mere

distractions. But consequently, in order to *empower* actors as creative *agents* within the filmic frame, Klevan virtually ends up attributing to them almost everything that is normally attributed to the *mise en scène*, or the director.

It is a provocative move, involving a risk richly worth taking: it's not every day that we read accounts of *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) or *The Cobweb* (1955) that mention the respective holy auteur-names of George Cukor and Vincente Minnelli only once, within parentheses. And there is no doubt that Klevan awakens us to details and aspects of these movies – such as the *bodily language* of acting – that we have probably never noticed, or appreciated, so well before.

But the stratagem – this critical fiction in which actors seemingly respond, unmediated, to the felt needs of 'the film' or (in a curious affectation filched from Cavell and William Rothman) 'the camera' – leads to some strange, questionable moments. An example comes when Stanwyck is praised for 'playing off' the resonances of a previous scene in *There's Always Tomorrow* that (in all likelihood) she would not have attended the shooting of (since she does not figure in it), nor watched its rushes. Only one person was in the position to seize, develop, and take advantage of these resonances, and his name (whisper it between parentheses) is Douglas Sirk.

Indeed, much of what counts as acting or performance in this book – particularly in the discussion of Marlene Dietrich's role in *The Scarlet Empress* (1934) – is quite simply what any director of even middling skill routinely instructs the actor to do: where to stand and move within the frame in relation to props, lights and other actors. And that is, after all, a decent, working definition of *mise en scène*! This is why Klevan's argument is strongest when he is in fact detailing the work of a director who directed himself on screen: Charlie Chaplin. Only here does an implicit auteurism of film style slip back in through the side door.

Which brings us, finally, to an intriguing ambiguity in the book's main title. I remember a moment, twenty years ago, when the reasonably avant-garde term 'film performance' referred to how a *film itself* could be said to perform, not merely the actors inside it – and indeed, it was a kind of knight's move, taking the movies back from their 'stars' to empower other players and generate other responses. Klevan, intentionally or not, cleverly reverses this trend for a new historical moment: in his account, what the actors do becomes, with a touch of grandiosity, the heart and soul of every old-fashioned narrative film, the very vehicle of its deepest artistry – a passionately nostalgic position in this digital age. And it is probably what the 'ordinary moviegoer' foolishly believed to begin with. But even the most naïve spectator stands to learn a lot from the inspired, in-depth, beautifully composed responses of Andrew Klevan.

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