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The Camera Shot and the Gun Sight

Anne Eakin Moss

IN 1984, PAUL VIRILIO contentiously claimed that »War is cinema, and cinema is war« (26). The invention of the machine gun led to the invention of cinema, thus linking, at their very birth, the movie camera shot with the gun shot. Aerial warfare and aerial reconnaissance techniques during the first World War equated the cinematic covering shot with the bomb's eye view. Virilio argued that World War I witnessed the »air arm's violent cinematic disruption of the space continuum« and that these military advances »literally exploded the old homogeneity of vision and replaced it with the heterogeneity of perceptual fields.«¹ Rather than the shared tangible and mutually vulnerable space of the shoot out on the town square, now the scope of the sniper or the targeting screen of the bomber places the combatants on two different planes, mediated by an optically enhanced interface. Already in the 1989 second edition of his book *War and Cinema*, that is, before the widespread use of drone warfare, Virilio observed that because of the development of precision and remote weapons, »what is perceived is already lost« (4). The view from above gives the power of life and death.²

Well into an age of life-like ›first person shooter‹ games and the convergence of blockbuster movies with their video game spin-offs, the notion of the screen as a violent interface may seem natural, if not inevitable. However, during the formative first decade of sound cinema, filmmakers both exploited this linkage and called it into question. Virilio's causal claims aside, the shot/reverse shot sequence of continuity montage offered a natural grammar for transmitting the logic of precision weapons' optical technology.³ Montage allows the spectator to take in

1 Paul Virilio: *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, 2nd Ed., London/New York 1989, p. 20.

2 Consider the shocking statement of US drone pilot Brian Velicovich about his Life as a ›Drone Warrior‹, in: Weekend Edition Saturday, NPR (8 July 2017): »With drones, it's changed the way we see people. We see them from different angles. We now can make a conscious decision. Yes, this person deserves to be captured, or he deserves to be killed.« Under: <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/08/536125111/life-as-a-drone-warrior> (25 June 2019).

3 The film and media historian Paula Amad complicates the history of aerial photography, reclaiming the history of its imaginative and utopian, as well as humanist and atheistic uses for rethinking urban planning and the place of the human on the face of the earth.

both the emotion of the shooter and the reaction of the victim.⁴ The bullet flies in the cut between shots. On whichever side of the shot our sympathies lie, the formal rules of cinematic narrative demand impact of some sort, sooner or later, just as Chekhov insisted of the gun on the wall on stage.

Given this dramatic inevitability, finding oneself at either end of the weapon through the language of cinema has powerful effects. Central to psychoanalytic film theory and the notion of montage as suture is the feeling of *jouissance* generated by the establishing shot, which offers the viewer »imaginary plenitude, unbounded by any gaze, and unmarked by difference.« This feeling of power and control over the image encourages the spectator's identification with the protagonist of the film. Yet conventional rules of continuity provide for a reverse shot that assigns the transcendent view to a character in the narrative, abruptly taking it away from the spectator. This is the »castrating coherence« of continuity cinema, which makes »the viewing subject [...] aware of the limitations on what it sees.«⁵ The cinematic gunshot conventionally employs a parallel logic, generally giving the person with the gun the power over both gun and gaze. The reverse shot, rather than assigning the point of view, affirms the agency and power of the gun-wielding subject over the victim. Although there may be infinite permutations of this sequence, the affective pleasures of certain film genres largely rely on the fulfillment of this expectation.⁶ The shock effects of finding oneself on the other end of the gun, as in the final shot of *THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY* (USA 1903, Edwin Porter), which takes direct aim at the audience, affirms the spectator's complicity and the cinema's self-awareness of this problematic from the very beginning.

The Soviet montage auteurs of the 1920s affirmed the linkage of cinema and war. Dziga Vertov sent his »cine-eye« operators out into the field with their cam-

Paula Amad: From God's-eye to Camera-eye: Aerial Photography's Post-humanist and Neo-humanist Visions of the World, in: *History of Photography* 36/1 (February 2012): pp. 66–86.

⁴ In her recent book, *A Grammar of Murder: Violent Scenes and Film Form*, Karla Oeler elegantly argues that montage is linked to murder both in film theory and film form. The cut from one shot to another murderously cuts short the subjectivity of the victim, and at the same time, draws attention to the irreducible otherness that has been curtailed. Karla Oeler: *A Grammar of Murder: Violent Scenes and Film Form*, Chicago 2009.

⁵ Kaja Silverman: *The Subject of Semiotics*, New York/London 1983, p. 203.

⁶ Hermann Kappelhoff puts this well in his *Front Lines of Community: Hollywood between War and Democracy*: »As the illusion of a gaze that overcomes the spatio-temporal complexity of any explosion, it is one fundamental trait of aesthetic pleasure and the agent of action cinema.« (Hermann Kappelhoff: *Front Lines of Community: Hollywood between War and Democracy*, Berlin/Boston 2018, p. 179.)

eras like troops, and likened his cinematic techniques to military attack.⁷ Sergei Eisenstein called for a cine-fist to break through the spectator's skull.⁸ I have argued elsewhere that the visual logic and grammar of suture in Soviet cinema of the 1930s assigns a different form of agency to the spectator as psychological, political and communal subject than does Hollywood cinema of the same period. Soviet cinema of this period diverges from the traditional Hollywood style of continuity editing, careful avoidance of the fourth wall, and strict division of genres, striving instead to immerse the viewer in a fantasy world using an eclectic array of techniques including camera movement, gesture, special effects, direct address, and sound. Whereas Hollywood cinema polices the aspirational fantasies of its spectator, reminding her that »there's no place like home,« Soviet cinema assures its viewers that there are no limits on their dreams, and no limits to the sacrifices they might make.⁹ I hypothesize here that, similarly, Hollywood and Western cinema are willing to cast into doubt the agency of the gun and frustrate the spectator's desire to hit the target, whereas Soviet cinema insists that Soviet guns usually hit their mark. And moreover, that for Soviet spectators, to see is implicitly to act and to possess, not to sit passively in the dark. Soviet cinema denies Stanley Cavell's assertion that »the screen is a barrier,« and instead takes the screen to be an interface connecting the spectator and the cinematic world.¹⁰

Consider, for example, the aerial photo that sets into motion the plot of Jean Renoir's classic anti-war film *LA GRAND ILLUSION* (FR 1937). An unreadable smudge on the photo sends the French aviators back up in the air for a second look, but they are shot down and taken into German captivity. The film viewer never gets to see that aerial photo, and the flight and dog fight are elided from the movie entirely: the heroes walk out of their French barracks directly into the captivity of the German barracks, in a visual match-cut that equates them and estranges the viewer. By denying the aerial view to the spectator, the film insists that it serves only the inhumanity of war. Our last view of the heroes is given from the superior position of a German border patrol. Though one member of the patrol takes a shot, he misses. He tells the other to hold his fire, as the men have crossed the invisible boundary into Switzerland, and thus can no longer be considered a target. The long shot of the men's vulnerable backs, trekking through the snow, insists that the spectator too must relinquish the gun's eye view.

⁷ See for example Dziga Vertov: Kinoks' Field Manual, in: *Kino-eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. by Annette Michelson, trans. by O'Brian, Berkeley 1984, pp. 162–3.

⁸ Cited in Oeler: *A Grammar of Murder* (as note 4), p. 27.

⁹ Anne Eakin Moss: *The Permeable Screen: Soviet Cinema and the Fantasy of No Limits*, in: *Screen* 59/4 (Winter 2018): 420–443.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

Renoir's is certainly an exceptional film, and the power of its withholding the gun shot and the aerial shot depends on the viewer knowing what to expect. But its message, narrative and visual, would be inconceivable in 1930s Soviet cinema. Classic Soviet war cinema mostly *does* associate the camera eye with the gun sight in just the way Virilio expects. In her important study of the depiction of empire in Soviet cinema, Emma Widdis notes that the aerial shot, introduced in the 1930s, had a similarly enabling effect of *osvoenie*, »the mastery of space«: »the aerial perspective was granted to the extraordinary individual, who looked down on those who admired him and whose controlling gaze was implicitly aligned with the totalizing, heroic vision of *osvoenie*.«¹¹ Beyond the aerial shot, each gun fired by a loyal communist gives the spectator the satisfaction of registering its effect. Soviet cinema affirms the spectator's feeling that the screen is an operable interface over which they have control, and implicates them in the action as well.

In Stalin's favorite film, *CHAPAEV* (Georgii Vasiliev and Sergei Vasiliev, USSR 1934), named for a peasant hero of the Red Army in the Soviet Civil War, we get a direct, formal linkage of almost every shot and reverse shot to the shot of the rifle or the stroke of the sword. The climactic battle puts the eponymous hero behind a machine gun firing out of an attic window. The flickering light on Chapaev's face equates his machine gun with a movie projector, and the reverse shot, from the point of view of the machine gun, so to speak, gives the spectator the satisfaction of the Whites mowed down. When Chapaev meets his tragic end, trying to swim for safety, the water indexes the machine gun fire in the water around him. The splashes in the water trace the bullets' progression closer and closer to the hero, giving the spectator the chance to hear, see, and practically feel them. In the final scenes, in which the reinforcements arrive and rout the Whites, every Red canon shot and sword stroke leads to an equivalent shot of revenge taken. Stalin screened the film again and again, sometimes more than once on the same evening. Kaganovich called it »an astonishingly powerful film,« and declared »You find yourself under its spell.« Zhdanov reportedly said »despite the anxieties you experienced [during the film], you emerged cheerful and relaxed.«¹² These Stalinist luminaries were remarkably self-aware about the psychological effects of the film and acknowledged (and valued) the sense of power and agency it bestowed upon them.

In the remainder of this article I present a comparative case study from my larger project to ask if the link posited by Virilio and others between the camera shot

¹¹ Emma Widdis: *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War*, New Haven, CT 2003, pp. 7, 135.

¹² Richard Taylor: *On Stalin's Watch: the Late-night Kremlin Screenings, October 1934 to January 1937*, Documents, in: *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, 8/2 (2014), pp. 138–163, 140.

and gun shot operates differently in the context of Soviet vs. Western fantasies of agency, community and technology. Luckily, the historical record gives us the opportunity to pose this question about a pair of films, one American and one Soviet, both set on the same adventure plot, and both thematically engaged with the problem of sight and warfare. A number of scholars have pointed to the link between *THE LOST PATROL* (USA 1934, John Ford) and *TRINADTSAT' (THIRTEEN)*, USSR 1936, Mikhail Romm) as evidence of the influence of Hollywood cinema on the Soviet industry.¹³ Yet as I hope to show here, the ideological and stylistic differences in the films demonstrate the very different modes of existence mediated by optical technologies in each cultural and political system.

In 1936, the young director Mikhail Romm and the scenarist Iosif Prut were called to the office of Boris Shumyatsky, the head of the Soviet cinema industry. According to Romm's memoir, they were told that »a certain comrade—who exactly is not important—had seen an American film.« The comrade, by some accounts the military Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, by others Stalin himself, wanted a Soviet version made of John Ford's 1934 ›Eastern‹ film *THE LOST PATROL*.¹⁴ Shumyatsky reportedly told Romm and Prut, »The action takes place in the desert. An American patrol perishes in a battle with the natives, but they fulfill their duty. The film is imperialistic, hysterical, but the opinion was expressed that something like this should be done about our frontier guards.« Romm and Prut were not to be given the opportunity to see the film, but Shumyatsky insisted that was no big deal. »What's important,« he said, »is that there be the desert (we have excellent deserts), that there be frontier guards, Basmachi, and that everyone dies. Almost everyone.«¹⁵ Ostensibly from these bare instructions of plot and setting alone,

¹³ Maria Belodubrovskaya: *Not According to Plan: Filmmaking Under Stalin*, Ithaca 2017, p. 219; Maya Turovskaya: *The 1930s and 40s: Cinema in Context*, in: Richard Taylor and D. W. Spring (eds.): *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, New York 1993, pp. 34–53; Kristian Feigelson and Annabelle Creissel: *Ford, fordisme et stalinisme (1935)*, in: Kristian Feigelson (ed.): *Caméra politique: cinéma et stalinisme*, Paris 2005, pp. 73–84. Whereas the debt to the American film was noted explicitly in reviews of the 1930s, it is elided or minimized in Soviet overviews of the cinema industry during the Cold War. See for example, D. S. Pisarevskii and S. I. Freilikh: *Sovremennaia zhizn' sovetskogo obshchestva v fil'makh vtoroi poloviny 30-kh godov [Contemporary Soviet Social Life in Films in the Second Half of the 1930s]*, in: Iu. S. Kalashnikov, et. al. (eds.): *Ocherki istorii sovetskogo kino: tom vtoroi [Essays on Soviet Film History: Second Vol.]*, 1935–1945, Moscow 1959, pp. 36–198: 69.

¹⁴ Claiming it was Voroshilov, according to oral accounts: Sergei Lavrent'ev: *Krasnyi Vestern [Red Western]*, Moscow 2009. Claiming it was Stalin: Maia Turovskaya: *Mosfil'm-1937*, in: *Kinovedcheskie zapiski [Notes on cinema]* 50 (2001), under: <http://www.kinozapiski.ru/ru/article/sendvalues/715/> (12 July 2019).

¹⁵ Mikhail Romm: *O sebe, o liudiakh, o fil'makh [About myself, about people, about films]*, in: *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v 3-kh tomakh [Selected Works in 3. Vol.]*, Moscow 1981,

Romm constructed the film *THIRTEEN*, a minimalistic adventure about a stand-off at an abandoned well in the middle of a Central Asian desert.

If Romm's memoir is to be trusted, the many visual and thematic similarities between the films were produced solely by the identity of their structural task rather than direct adaptation. It should be noted that Ford's film was also an adaptation, in his case of the popular 1927 adventure novel *Patrol* by Philip MacDonal. Thus just like Romm, Ford's formal challenge was the cinematic adaptation of a pre-existing scenario. Both directors faced the cinematographic problem of depicting a circular outpost besieged in the middle of a desert. Both films figured a demonized and nearly faceless Oriental mass enemy against a collective of mostly positive heroes who must rally together to survive. In both films, directors, actors, and equipment alike were subjected to the punishing conditions of the desert (in one case, Kara-Kum, Turkmenistan, and in the other, outside Yuma, Arizona), yet both films used the dunes as a cinematographic chalkboard to register the movements of heroes and enemies.¹⁶

Romm was later a prominent figure in the Soviet film industry. He was considered one of the great ›intellectuals‹ of Soviet cinema for the masses, according to the noted film historian Maya Turovskaya, Romm's collaborator on the documentary *OBYKNOVENNYI FASHIZM* (*ORDINARY FASCISM*, USSR 1965). Yet he was relatively unknown at the time of the meeting with Shumyatsky.¹⁷ Romm's memoirs imply that he considered the assignment a punishment or a test for not having followed Shumyatsky's orders to abandon the current script he was working on. Romm had made only one prior film on his own—*PYSHKA* (*CRUMPET*, USSR 1934), a silent adaptation of Guy de Maupassant's story *Boule de Suif*. Yet in that film, the problem of the bourgeois community that comes together randomly in a carriage and that is willing to sell out the prostitute *Pyshka* will resonate strangely with Ford's later masterpiece, *STAGECOACH* (USA 1939). Indeed, as Romm himself pointed out, the formal problem of *THIRTEEN* was similar to his first film in that both depict a motley community that must find a way out of its predicament together.¹⁸ Thus perhaps the affinities between the two filmmakers could already be felt.¹⁹

pp. 145–6. A shortened version of the same anecdote was also printed in Mikhail Romm: *Besedy o kino* [Conversations on Cinema], Moscow 1964, p. 15.

¹⁶ On the conditions of filming *THIRTEEN*, see Mikhail Romm: *O sebe*, (as note 15), pp. 142–155. On the conditions of filming *THE LOST PATROL*, see Scott Eyman: *Print the Legend: The Life and Times of John Ford*, New York 2015, pp. 142–3.

¹⁷ Turovskaia: *Mosfil'm-1937* (as note 14).

¹⁸ Romm: *O sebe* (as note 15), p. 147.

¹⁹ This was not the first John Ford film to have an influence on Soviet cinema. See Ingrid

Romm's film pits the eponymous thirteen Soviets—a group of ten demobilized Red Army soldiers on their way home from Central Asia, plus the commander of the frontier guard, his wife, and a somewhat elderly geologist—against an initially invisible horde of Turkestanian bandits known as the Basmachi. Their water running out, and the closest well run dry, the decommissioned soldiers and civilians take on military order to make it through the desert alive. After a harrowing ride through desert sandstorms, they come upon a ruin that hides a nearly-dry well and a stash of machine guns. It is an outpost of the Basmachi leader, Shurmat-Khan, and he will certainly be back.

The soldiers in John Ford's *THE LOST PATROL* similarly come upon their oasis out of dire circumstance. Their captain is killed by an unseen assailant before he has a chance to communicate the patrol's mission to the sergeant, his next-in-command. The sergeant tells the corporal, »I don't have a ghost of an idea where we're at, why we're here, or where we're going.« Their lack of mission sits in sharp contrast to the implicit and unquestioned goal of Romm's heroes: to return to their homes and help to build Socialism. The British soldiers grumble against the sergeant, fixate on their own interests, quarrel, and agree to take on the rescue mission only by drawing lots.

The desert, for Ford's soldiers, is a mysterious, illegible wasteland. The opening title of the movie tells us »The endless desert wore the blank look of death.« Sighting the enemy proves impossible. »You'd think you can see everything in the desert, but you can't,« says the sergeant. When one of the soldiers climbs to the top of a palm tree to look for the enemy, he is shot in the head by an unseen gunman. The other men can only run to get out of the way of his falling body. The inability to see is an ongoing theme of the film: the heat plays tricks on the eyes of the soldier Abelson, luring him out into the desert to his death. The subjective camera shot of the warping sands forces the spectator to see with his unreliable eyes. An airplane flies over the oasis about three quarters of the way into the film, and the goggled eyes of the pilot seem to offer salvation. A matched aerial shot of the oasis affirms his power. However, the pilot lands and is immediately shot a few steps from the plane. A religious fanatic character, played by Boris Karloff, abandons the oasis and climbs to the top of a dune with a self-fashioned cross. He and the soldier who rushes out to stop him are both shot down. Neither the technological nor the metaphysical view from above can save the men. Ultimately the signs of smoke and fire from the burning plane make contact with the rest of the regiment.

Kleespies: Riding the Soviet Iron Horse: A Reading of Viktor Turin's *TURKSIB* through the Lens of John Ford, in: *Slavic Review* 77/2 (Summer 2018), pp. 358–389.



Fig. 1a&b: The sergeant finally has his enemies in sight as he kneels in his grave. *THE LOST PATROL*, USA 1934, John Ford.

The enemy finally appears in the film's last five minutes, after the lost patrol is reduced to one. The sergeant lays down in the grave he has dug for himself, clutching the pilot's light machine gun, when he finally sees the enemy. Five men in headscarves march calmly to the top of a dune and the sergeant mows them down mercilessly. Finally closing the distance between hero and enemy, Ford puts sergeant, machine gun, and enemy in the same frame to register their deaths and the sergeant's satisfaction in the same shot. (Fig. 1a) Multiple subsequent camera shots confirm their deaths, connecting the laughter of the sergeant and their staggering falls. On the verge of insanity, he tells the graves of his comrades that he has finally killed for them. A sixth attacker gets in a shot, and the sergeant falls into his sandy grave. But he staggers to his feet and shoots the last enemy. This final, decisive rifle shot also places weapon, shooter, and victim all in the same frame, as if to confirm the transmission of the bullet by eliding the mediation of the cinematic cut. (Fig. 1b)

The cinematographer Vladimir Nil'sen, who presumably saw Ford's film while travelling abroad with a Soviet delegation in 1935, fairly assesses the film as »100% the expression of imperialist ideology.«²⁰ Nil'sen found *THIRTEEN* to be »much higher in its ideological and artistic essence« than *THE LOST PATROL*, as well as »genuinely Soviet, deeply moving, artistic, truthful, and persuasive.«²¹ At the same time, he misremembers the American film's ending as having been much more exciting than it really is. In place of the five men on the hilltop, he describes »an

²⁰ On the Soviet delegation to investigate the possibility of creating a »Red Hollywood« see Maria Belodubrovskaya: Soviet Hollywood: the Culture Industry that Wasn't, in: *Cinema Journal* 53/3 (Spring 2014), pp. 100–122.

²¹ Vladimir Nil'sen: O fil'me *Trinadtsat'* [About the Film *Thirteen*], in: *Iskusstvo kino* [Art of Cinema] 4 (April 1937), pp. 10–15, 13.



Fig. 2: The sergeant addresses his dead comrades through the screen. *THE LOST PATROL*, USA 1934, John Ford.

endless band of galloping horsemen in white burnouses.« In Nil'sen's memory, »The sergeant grabs a rifle and, using it like a club, kills his last opponents. Bloody and half-mad, he stands alone at the smoking machine gun. He leaps up to the crest of the hill and howls.« Unless there is another cut of the film of which I am not aware, all of these details are a product of the film's impression rather than its actual text. Though the sergeant is indeed half-mad, there is no blood, no club, no galloping. At the very end of the film, a British regiment comes to the rescue at an easy canter. Perhaps the cinematic impact of sound, framing and editing generated the excess affect in Nil'sen's memory. As much as the film thematizes the men's inability to see, it confirms the power of seeing at the end. The invisible enemy has the upper hand until they enter the same frame as the hero, at which point they are as good as dead. When crying out to his dead comrades, the sergeant gazes madly out at the spectator, as if we represent that world of the dead. (Fig. 2)

The ending of *THIRTEEN* allows for no such existential questioning. As the bandits crawl over the dunes on their bellies, Akchurin, the last Bolshevik alive at the outpost, drags his machine gun to the opening of the ruin at the center of the out-



Fig. 3a–d: Akchurin takes his last stand from an opening in the ruin. THIRTEEN, USSR 1936, Mikhail Romm.

post, which looks more like the birth canal than the grave. »Nu?» he asks. (Fig. 3a) The reverse shot of his view from the ruin shows first the tracks of the bandits on the hillside, as if the very sands confirm that they will come. (Fig. 3b) And yet in the subsequent shot of the same hillside, the sands are blank. As Akchurin calls them out, dozens of turbaned enemies charge down the hills, their feet making fresh tracks on the sand. (Fig. 3c) These frames are matched by the reverse shot of Akchurin shooting the machine gun. (Fig. 3d) The a-chronological sequencing of these shots confirms the certainty of Akchurin's vision. He sees prophetically the advance of the Basmachi. However, we see none of the enemies falling in the next shot, and the Basmachi continue to advance, swords brandished. His machine gun out of ammunition, Akchurin rushes out of the ruin and throws a grenade, which is matched on action in the next shot by an explosion and falling men. The reaction shot confirms that Akchurin has seen the effects of his grenade, but then the sound of nearby gunfire catches his attention. The next shot shows the source of the sound, a Red Army soldier firing a machine gun from a ridge in the dune: the reinforcements have arrived. The cavalry rides in and the Basmachi turn tail and retreat. »*Davai!*« shouts Akchurin. »Give it to them!« His shouts are matched by

explosions. One shout, one explosion; a second shout, two explosions. Each subsequent explosion is met with a shot of falling enemies. This is not the continuity montage of shot/reverse shot, but the Soviet montage of ideological equivalents.²² The powerful shout of a Bolshevik is the same as a well-thrown bomb.

In a 1959 overview of the history of Soviet cinema, the authors liken this ending to that of *CHAPAEV*, in which the Red Army reinforcements give the satisfaction of revenge against those who killed the film's heroes. The authors of this essay describe the endings as »a moral duel of the Soviet people with representatives of the enemy camp.« It is precisely the collective—enduring, cohesive, united—that is the hero of the film.²³ They further assert that the film awakens in the viewer those important feelings that »rally them into a collective, that transform it into an unconquerable power.« The rhythm of Akchurin's shouts together with the rhythm of the explosions and visual montage rally the viewer to affective participation in this collective.

Unlike in *THE LOST PATROL*, we can see the attacking bandits in *THIRTEEN*. The Bolsheviks' machine gun fire is met with a reverse shot of the bandits being driven away. Yet when the bandits manage to kill the Bolsheviks one by one, we see only the heroic victim dying and embraced by comrades, never the death of the enemy shooter. Only one scene in *THIRTEEN* employs the striking composition of shooter, gun, and victim in the same frame as at the end of *THE LOST PATROL*. The soldier Petrov, finally driven mad by hopelessness and thirst, upsets the last bucket of water and runs out to the dunes shouting to tell Shirmat Khan that the well is dry. As Petrov's footsteps in the sand trace his trajectory, Akchurin is forced to gun him down to protect their ruse. (Fig. 4) The frame ensures that the spectator understand the shot was taken in full cognizance and responsibility for the death of one of their own. The camera is positioned in such a way that makes it seem as if the spectator, like Timoshkin, one of the last soldiers left, is standing behind Akchurin's shoulder as he guns down Petrov. Thus the spectator is forced to stand behind the ne-



Fig. 4: Akchurin is forced to gun down Petrov. *THIRTEEN*, USSR 1936, Mikhail Romm.

²² Emma Widdis similarly notes that the film is »stylistically poised between the avant-garde and Socialist Realism, between silent and sound film.« (Emma Widdis: *Socialist Senses: Film, Feeling, and the Soviet Subject, 1917–1940*, Indiana 2017, p. 280.)

²³ Pisarevskii and Freilikh: *Sovremennaia zhizn'* (as note 13), p. 65–6.

cessity of the murder as well. Timoshkin's wide-eyed reaction, and Akchurin's brooding regret for the need to kill as he clutches the machine gun handle, confirm that this is a death that hits home. It is the kind of death that shapes the collective in many examples of Soviet cinema of around the time of the Great Purges.

In his review of the film, Nil'sen made special mention of this shot, drawing attention to its difficulty and intentionality. »The remarkable pictorial effect that is obtained from the combined sharpness of foreground and background is used to excellent effect in the frame in which the Red Army soldier Petrov runs to the Basmachi. In the expressiveness of its compositional solution, the shooting of Petrov is one of the best frames of the film.«²⁴ Nil'sen's review is devoted in large part to an appreciation of the special cinematographic problems of lighting posed by filming in the bright desert. Romm's cinematographer, Boris Volchek, used polarizing filters, matte reflectors, and a host of other techniques to delineate the horizon, to perfect the effects of shadows on sand, to capture sandstorms, and to establish the correct contrast of skin tone and sky. The many shots of tracks and ripples on desert sands are artistically composed and narratively significant, both much more so than in Ford's film in which the desert is »blank.« The multinational Soviet subjects are attuned to the desert and can read its traces even if they cannot see their enemies. By giving narrative function to the legible marks on sand, the film seems to tell the spectator that they too are part of the Soviet collective that has conquered one sixth of the material world. That material world, further, is a legible medium that communicates to each member of the collective—commander, soldier, geologist, spectator—transparently. Similarly, the ruined hut, though ambiguous in its origins and purposes, shelters the Soviets, giving them of its water, weapons, and cover.²⁵ They are the chosen inheritors of whatever history it represents. The filmic portrayal of the political agency of the Soviet subject over their material world and geological history echoes that of Dziga Vertov's *THE ELEVENTH YEAR* (USSR 1928) which, according to Devin Fore, »prospects downward into the earth like a cinematic stratigraph, uncovering the metabiotic interactions that connect the present civilization to a deep, prehistorical time.«²⁶

The bumbling tag-along geologist in *THIRTEEN* is played for laughs and never gets a chance to show off his expertise. Though he is gently mocked for his book learning, he is a Soviet to the end and dies honorably in his turn. The conflicted

²⁴ Nil'sen, *O fil'me Trinadtsat'* (as note 21), p. 12.

²⁵ Widdis calls the hut »blank,« arguing that it has »decontextualized status.« (Widdis: *Socialist Senses* (as note 22), pp. 280–2.)

²⁶ Devin Fore: *The Metabiotic State: Vertov's The Eleventh Year*, in: *October* 145 (Summer 2013): pp. 3–37, p. 23. For further investigation of this theme and Vertov's film, see Michael Kunichika: »Our Native Antiquity«: *Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Culture of Russian Modernism*, Brighton, MA 2015.

role of the ›bourgeois specialist‹ was a stock one in Soviet cinema, but a contemporary reviewer complained that three different Mosfil'm adventure movies planned for the year 1936 had a geologist character, threatening the transformation of »the adventure genre into a geological expedition.«²⁷ He recommended better coordination of screenwriters with the industry's central plan. One would think that the geologist might find a way to tap the well or build a tunnel in the rock, but the film values intuitive knowledge over intellectualism. Instead, it is he who must learn military discipline and how to shoot a gun. One of the last men alive, the geologist comes out of the ruin to take up a gun, but he needs a lesson from one of the soldiers. Their extended dialogue about the mechanics of the gun sight gives the spectator a thorough practical lesson as well as an ethical one, in the wake of their need to shoot one of their own.

The soldier repeats, after the failure of his first explanation: »The sight line must go from the eye through the sighting notch, and the front sight to the target point. Do you get it, comrade scientist?« The geologist protests, »but when I look at the front sight, I lose the target, and when I look at the target, I lose the front sight. I think it's a natural property of the eyes, isn't it?« The soldier answers, »No, it has nothing to do with the eyes. Just try not to ›love thine target,‹ and you'll hit it. But of course the front sight should be aligned with the sighting notch.« The educated geologist must be taught to see through the sight of a gun like a Soviet. (Fig. 5) The soldier's inversion



Fig. 5: The geologist learns to shoot a gun like a Bolshevik. *Thirteen*, USSR 1936, Mikhail Romm.

of Jesus's admonition to »love thine enemy« negates the notion of the inviolable human soul. The atheist Soviet subject should see the enemy as nothing other than target, and thus the front sight will be transparent to it; it will become not a prosthetic, but a natural extension of the eye. Though Boris Karloff in *THE LOST PATROL* plays his religious fanatic as a crazed anti-hero who jeopardizes the men's survival, his insistence on burying the dead with a cross can be seen as the American film's conscience. In Romm's *THIRTEEN*, Christian humanism is all that stands in the way of the complete unity of Soviet eye and the optical technologies

²⁷ No author: *Dnevnik »Iskusstva kino«* (»Art of Cinema's« Diaries), in: *Iskusstvo kino* [Art of Cinema] 1 (January 1936), pp. 5–6.

of war. The film both illustrates and demonstrates these principles to implicate the spectator as a component part of that media network.

Although the scene with the geologist is played somewhat for comic relief, a contemporary reviewer of THIRTEEN took it completely seriously. The reviewer contrasted the film to the American ›happy ending‹ asserting that its special Soviet optimism stems, »not from the philosophy of reconciliation with death; [...] not the moldy theory of catharsis, the purification of the human ›soul in suffering and affliction; not the nasal Kantian homily on sacrifice in the name of an abstract and hazy ›categorical imperative.« Instead the film offers »red blooded, truthful, and optimistic art.«²⁸ It is, he concluded, an »ideological armament of the country that is building socialism.« For, »if a metaphorical image is to be found for the leading works of Soviet cinema, would it not be more correct to call them weapons, an ideological weapon with tremendous force of influence?« He admits that this »cinematic weapon« would be »inferior in accuracy to the machine guns of the Red Army.«²⁹ However, perhaps he would agree that its impact would be as transparent as that of the bullets on the actors in THIRTEEN. As the reviewer notes, »it is as if the bodies of the fallen soldiers disappear from the field of battle, and the viewer does not see them again.«³⁰ Though he sees this as a »completely justified convention« of the director's rejection of naturalism, we might see it as the natural course for bodies that exist only in a continuum with weapon and world, on this side of the screen and that.

²⁸ A. Novogrudskii: Poema o muzhestve [Poem on Courage], in: *Iskusstvo kino* [Art of Cinema] 4 (April 1937), pp. 3–9, p. 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.