

THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

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WEDNESDAY 16 MARCH – SUNDAY 20 MARCH 2016

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Wednesday 16 March | 19:30

Earth

Dir. Alexander Dovzhenko | USSR | 1930 | 1h 24m
Accompanied by composer Jane Gardner (piano) and
Hazel Morrison (percussion)

Presented in partnership with Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Centre
and the State Film Agency of Ukraine

Alexander Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930), made at the very end of the silent era, is the third film in a trilogy dealing with the transformation of the Ukraine under communism. This movie looks at the agrarian reforms brought by soviet collectivism, and the fierce resistance of the wealthier farmers, known as kulaks. But the film transcends this seemingly dry subject with the force of its ecstatic imagery, and the power of its editing.

The film begins with an old farmer dying amid heaps of pears, encapsulating its theme from the start: the death of the old way, but the continuity of life and community. Dovzhenko's lush, succulent shots of ripe fruit and rippling fields of wheat impart a passionate intensity to the world: from here on, everything will have the sharp, impossible beauty of nature seen by someone approaching final fade-out. As Dennis Potter said when he was dying, "The nowness of everything is absolutely wondrous."

Later, a character will walk home at night, and the slow build-up of beautiful images, including a slight slow-motion effect on his tread, creates suspense and suspicion – we again somehow feel that death is near, and we're right. No obvious attempt at suspense is created, no lurking figures or sinister point-of-view shots, just an intensity of interest in beauty which seems to carry an evil portent.

Earth is at times surprisingly earthy. Casting aside religion, the farmers embrace each other, or themselves. Bosoms are clutched. The body is

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celebrated. All surprising imagery for a film of this period, served up with a frankness quite different from the exotic forms of eroticism promulgated in France or Hollywood.

As with Eisenstein and others, Dovzhenko's commitment to communism makes him disinclined to explore characters over-much, which means the story is more about the community than individuals, and in fact more of a portrait of a society in flux than a story at all. At times, it's more documentary than fiction, as with the thrilling harvest sequence when the first tractor to work these fields ploughs then reaps, through a montage so rapid-fire that sheer momentum carries us through to the baking of the bread made from the crop.

Dovzhenko's editing can slow things down as well as accelerate, as he dances from angle to angle amid the farmers' weather-beaten faces, or amid the gleaming fruit in the orchard. And his compositions are frequently staggering too, setting tiny figures walking across the very bottom of frame, dominated by luring clouds that hang over them, big as battleships, and looking just as heavy.

The first approach of the fabled tractor is heralded with many reactions by peasants, but all we see initially is a spindly row of telegraph poles diminishing into nothing. The tractor is an indecipherable dot. It slowly grows, shot by shot. Close-ups show farmers running alongside. Finally the tractor is presented via the furrow it ploughs, like the wake of a ship carved in soil.

Soviet cinema often seems more interested in machines than people; five year plans rather than plotlines. From the whirring observer of *Man with a Movie Camera*, to the inexorable rising bridge in Eisenstein's *October*, our technological triumphs take pride of place. Society itself is the ultimate machine, so these filmmakers orchestrate spectacular crowd scenes in which the workers move as one. Here, the dignity of the funeral, in which the countryside comes together *en masse*, is contrasted with a single crazed outsider, showing in cinematic terms the overwhelming power of the collective.

By David Cairns.

David is a filmmaker, writer, academic and critic who blogs at Shadowplay.
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