

AN ACCELERATION OF IMAGE AND TIME: THE TRAJECTORY OF PAINTING AND FILMMAKING IN THE USSR

IN

AZERBAIJAN

ROBERT MEAD

We live in a time that is destabilised by human impacts; our technological advances are embedded in the layer of the earth in the form of radioactive particles and we observe our planet's climate crisis via our satellites orbiting in space. Aspects of the technological developments that have contributed to our current climate can be found in the cultural acceleration that took place under the Soviet Union. A period bound in utopian desires for new powers over nature and space; artists and filmmakers were carried by this momentum and energised to create their own contributions alongside it. However, these influential moments in visual culture are entwined with both a destructive and creative history.

The revolution of 1917 which ended the Tsarist rule generated a radical response in the arts which thrived alongside the people's movement, as artists questioned how their work could respond to this? The revolution would contribute to the formation of the Soviet Union in 1922 which would last until 1991. The utopian vision of soviet cultural and social movements that came with this inspired many painters and filmmakers who worked in a period of revolutionary social momentum and technological advancement where idealism and creativity intermingled.

The positive idealism of the Russian individual and their utopian prospects was elegantly captured by Aleksandr Deyneka. A Soviet artist and a founder of Socialist Realism movement which embodied this response to the revolution. His works helped shape the image of Moscow in the 1930s-1950s, under the rule of Joseph Stalin and during a period of rapid industrialization and strict collectivism. Deyneka worked across different mediums including painting, illustration and public murals decorating metro stations. Young Bolsheviks were full of enthusiasm in the idea of building a new country, and so was Deyneka and this positivity can be seen in picturesque, idealised paintings such as *The Farmer on a Bicycle*. Deyneka had a rough uncomplicated demeanour which allowed him bond with workers who were happy to pose for him, seeing him as an equal. As a result of this he was able to move freely between the contrasting environments of industry and the arts.



Collective Farm Girl on a Bicycle (1935)

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This comradeship with his subjects is present in Deyneka's paintings, where the workers are championed and his depictions embody the positive energy and acceleration of the Soviet project. For example, in his paintings of the station workers in the Donbass region of Ukraine, a subject he returned to multiple times, he shows two strong female figures in the foreground shovelling coal while a sleek steam engine sits behind them, ready for action. There is a pronounced sense of primed energy and modernity waiting to be released here, in the process of being fuelled. The trio of figures moving across the gangway above the train are shown pushing trolleys of materials and give the sense of relentless movement and labour going on in the background of the scene and across the USSR as a whole. Deyneka's style is more idealistic than realistic and any negatives of the Soviet Union such as famine, instability, and the severe repressions that took place under Stalin, are hidden from view. The image-making itself is caught up in the ideal of Socialist Realism and what was referred to as the 'radiant future' of Communist ideology, an irony considering the radiated glow of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster which would eventually help contribute to the collapse of the Soviet project.

Deyneka managed to avoid the persecution that formalism and more radical abstracted painting movements suffered under Stalin's rule. However, he was fired from the Moscow Art Institute, where he had taught for nearly a decade. He was able to continue painting though, producing darker and more sombre works reflecting on the second world war. The heroism of Soviet soldiers and workers remained at the forefront of his depictions of conflicts and the harsh conditions and working into the post-war environment and during the cold war period, his attention was turned upwards towards the stars, and the space race.



Donbass (1947)

Deyneka began to reflect the advances of technology and the Sputnik Program, a series of five space missions launched by the Soviet Union in the late 1950s. Sputnik 1, was the first artificial satellite to be launched into orbit and as it continued to develop, the Soviet space programme became a subject of Deyneka's paintings, such as Conquerors of Space. The utopian ambitions of the Soviet dream are clearly visible in this painting and the imagination of sci-fi illustration seeps into the painting as reality and science fiction began to blur with the advances being made into space. The development of space travel during this period contributed to major transformation in tools of visualisation. Fears of nuclear attacks and control over territories both on earth and in orbit became more growing and satellite imagery began to be key in responding to this. The ambitions of the Soviet Union in this cause helped

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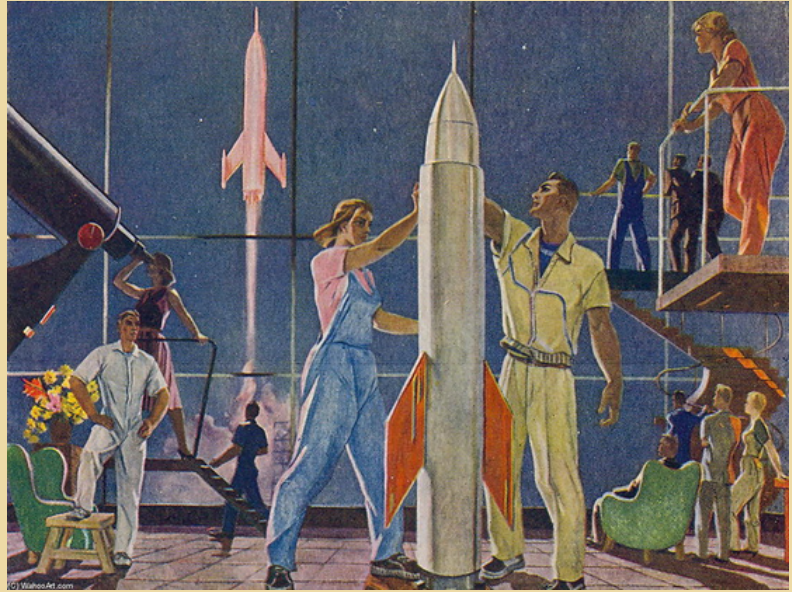
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contribute technology which would set a precedent in planning the extraction of energy sources such as oil and uranium and which was integral in the beginning a systematic mapping of the planet for its resources: food, water, minerals, energy. The trajectory leading to the contemporary is set in motion, as this mapping has now become vital in finding ways of visualising the global impact of humans on the planet, and revealing the subtle visual changes from these impacts that surround us, the slow pollution of humans, animals, plants and the soil.

Another outcome of this period was the development of computer systems designed to operate in the aftermath of a nuclear attack during the cold war, which would in turn help contribute to the development of the internet. During the 1960s Polish-American engineer Paul Baran developed a communication system that could keep running even if part of it was knocked out by a nuclear blast. The ARPANET network would be a direct stepping stone in the development of the internet, beginning as an attempt to build an information network capable of withstanding humanity's destruction.



Conquerors of Space (1961)

It was this trajectory of advancements which Deyneka witnessed from the dawn of the revolution in 1917 to sci-fi possibilities of the 1960s. His paintings can help draw the path to our current environment. Alongside painters such as Deyneka, soviet filmmakers were also developing new ways of working which would become highly influential for cinema. One clear soviet pioneer of this time was Sergei Eisenstein and his montage theory. In montage filmmaking, the sequences are made up of series of independent moments, or what Eisenstein described as 'A succession of elements arranged in series, in order to expose an idea'. Montage's multiple shots offer insights into life – for example through the close-up and slowing time and making visible 'hidden details of familiar objects'. Eisenstein's fast cutting montage was aimed at shocking any distracted viewer, making them receptive to the images they were receiving.

For Eisenstein, engaging the viewer in this way was vital, the montage is reliant on the spectator making the connections between these images and in doing so becoming a final contributor to the action of the film. 'Eisenstein states that the system of film operates like the methodology of language. He emphasizes the material concreteness of the individual shot. Both in language and in montage, each piece (sign or shot) only has meaning in conjunction and comparison with others, and in such a combination's ability to evoke associations.' The viewer must make these associations between separate individual shots, connecting them to make the greater whole.

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The violence of 20th century warfare is present in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) where the montage is seen in the conflicting consecutive of shocking images and juxtapositions. A shot of a vulnerable baby in a pram follows the image of bodies from a shocking massacre, stirring a response from the viewer and aiming to bring two distinct events together to suggest a new meaning for both images through their synthesis. Within the acceleration of the soviet project and its technological advances Eisenstein can be seen to make this radical leap in cinema, moving beyond traditional linear storytelling to the fast-action-packed jump cuts of montage and pointing towards the continuation towards abstraction and fragmentation that would follow the second world war.

Comparatively, in reflecting the end destination of the acceleration of the soviet period is the work of Andrei Tarkovsky. While Eisenstein's montage generated concepts and associations from contrasting images, Tarkovsky's used contemplative rhythmic shots of images and symbols – creating films that were reflective, focusing on the passage of time and processes of nature. Resistant to the protocols of soviet filmmaking at the time, Tarkovsky followed his own vision - where time flows through the slow paced and symbolic scenes of his films. This is in comparison to Eisenstein's montage which jumps sharply between movement, emotional or psychological associations and leaps between images. Tarkovsky argued that 'time lived within his films, within each separate frame.' This sense of passing time gives an eerie emptiness to Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker*, which has become associated strongly with strange zones of environmental disaster and of post-human imaginations.



Stalker (1979)

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Stalker can be seen as a prophetic depiction of the evacuation zones put in place after environmental disasters, in particular the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl in 1986. Shot on location in Estonia, Stalker takes place in a world full of fears of invisible spectres resulting from a mysterious environmental crisis. This can be seen as a parallel with the unseen deadly radiation that was released from Reactor 4 at Chernobyl. Set in a landscape that is simply referred to as the 'Zone', human presences have been seemingly ejected, leaving behind what the main protagonist describes as 'the quietest place in the world' Stalker forms an excellent meeting point in terms of cinema and the visual destination of the soviet dream, where technological advancement and utopian idealism and image ultimately collapse under the weight of the strain of keeping this ideal image in place. Curiously, those who trespass and scavenge today in the evacuation zone around Chernobyl are also referred to as 'Stalkers' and offer illicit tours of Pripyat, the closest city to the reactor. The protagonist of Tarkovsky's film is referred to only as Stalker, with a similar job which is to guide his clients around the invisible dangers of the 'Zone'. Tarkovsky's 'Zone' as with the Chernobyl evacuation zone is a manifestation of uncanny fears set in the soviet landscape, and echoes the anxiety around the cold war, nuclear disaster and fallout. The haste with which technologies had been developed and overriding desire to keep hidden all fallibilities within the USSR contributed to nuclear disaster, but also the technology that would reveal it. When the radiation spread across Europe from Chernobyl, the same satellites first sent into space as part of the soviet space program and international space race now helped track and reveal the radiation – undermining attempts to conceal the incident by the soviet government.

Tarkovsky's death in 1986, only months after the Chernobyl disaster, has taken on a mythical status in relation to these connotations and contributes to the strange resonance between the film and reality. Medical evidence and personal claims have suggested his cancer could not have developed from natural causes while his wife Larisa Tarkovskaya and lead Stalker actor Anatoli Solonitsyn also died from the very same type of cancer. Vladimir Sharon, sound designer in Stalker, has suggested they were poisoned by working near a chemical plant and in contaminated rivers where they were shooting the film. This mythology adds to the significance of the site of Tarkovsky's 'Zone' which becomes the nexus of cinema and radiation, a dual site where film and time are distorted along with the atmosphere and environment; where the rules of gravity and physics are destabilised. In the mythology around Tarkovsky's death the 'Zone's' contamination spreads beyond the screen into the real world.

The visual forms of both painting and filmmaking that came out of the Soviet Union can reveal how a utopian vision helped drive vast technical developments and pushed artists and filmmakers to make radical new works that have become highly influential. However, through the trajectory of this acceleration a condition of denial was encouraged, and by pushing an image of impossible idealism contributed to highly destructive environmental impacts. The technologies that developed from this time, nuclear, satellite and networks are now key to how humanity operates globally, monitoring and observing changing landscapes and climates from space. Artists continue to respond to technology and the impacts humans have left, where the trajectory takes us now is unclear but the post-human landscape of Tarkovsky can be glimpsed in the distance.

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Written and researched by Robert Mead

Robert Mead is an artist and PhD researcher at the Slade School of Fine Art. The aim of his research is to make artworks that form emotive connections between the viewer and our environment and reveal the traces of human ecological impacts. Beginning with a material connection to a visible change to our landscape or wildlife his research acts as an inquiry, investigating the subject and making paintings and animations which reveal layers of history and time, allowing many interconnecting strands to be made visible to the viewer.

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