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The Kuleshov Effect and the Death of the *Auteur*

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The 'Kuleshov Effect' has long been regarded as being both of seminal importance in the development of cinema in the 1920s and yet also as being so ambiguous and difficult to interpret that it has almost become all things to all people. Dana Polan has actually suggested that,

> [t]o a large degree, the very discrepancies in the available historical reports of Kuleshov's experiments may be part of the appeal of a reference to Kuleshov in writing on film. The 'Kuleshov Effect' becomes the film theorist's equivalent of a palimpsest, an ink-blot test out of which one can read almost any aesthetic position. (Polan 98)

In this spirit, I shall use the Kuleshov Effect as my own palimpsest to try to trace connections between Soviet montage cinema, the *politique des auteurs* of the French *Nouvelle Vague* and Barthes' essay on 'The Death of the Author'. This may seem somewhat anachronistic, given that Kuleshov carried out his experiment in about 1918, the French *Nouvelle Vague* arrived in the late 1950s and Barthes' essay first appeared in 1968. Nevertheless, many subsequent developments in 20th century film theory are foreshadowed within Kuleshov's famous experiment, and it is only in retrospect that this can be understood clearly. Kuleshov's early montage experiments, as well as their role in establishing montage cinema on a theoretical basis, had profound implications for the concepts of originality and authorship in the making of films, the same concepts which were later foregrounded by the *Nouvelle Vague* critics and by Roland Barthes.

First of all, what is the 'Kuleshov Effect'? The most obvious answer is that it is the name given to a film montage experiment carried out by Lev Kuleshov around 1918. It is actually unclear when or under precisely what conditions he carried out the experiment. Kuleshov himself simply stated:

> During this time I created a montage experiment which became
> known abroad as the 'Kuleshov Effect'. I alternated the same shot
> of Mozzhukhin [a Tsarist matinee idol] with various other shots (a
> plate of soup, a girl, a child's coffin), and these shots acquired a
> different meaning. The discovery stunned me - so convinced was I
> of the enormous power of montage. (Kuleshov "Kuleshov on
> Film" 200)

The canonical description of the experiment has it that the film was shown to an audience who believed that the expression on Mozzhukhin's face was different each time he appeared, depending on whether he was 'looking at' the plate of soup, the girl, or the child's coffin, showing an expression of hunger, desire or grief respectively, when in the actual footage, the image of Mozzhukhin was identical each time it appeared. Pudovkin (who later claimed to have been the co-creator of the experiment) described how,

> [the audience] raved about the acting of the artist. They pointed out the heavy
> pensiveness of his mood over the forgotten soup, were touched and moved by the deep
> sorrow with which he looked on the dead woman, and admired the light, happy smile
> with which he surveyed the girl at play. But we knew that in all three cases the face was
> exactly the same. (Pudovkin 184)

This response by the audience to certain types of film montage became known as the 'Kuleshov Effect'.

The experiment itself was created by simply assembling fragments of pre-existing film left over from the Tsarist film industry. When Kuleshov created his experiment, then, he was not shooting any new material, but assembling ready-made fragments; it was a true 'montage' experiment. Mozzhukhin himself had been the leading romantic 'star' of Tsarist cinema. The audience were therefore familiar with the sight of his face on the cinema screen, and Kuleshov deliberately chose footage in which his face was particularly bland and expressionless. The material itself therefore had little emotional affect for the audience; it consisted only of everyday objects like a bowl of soup or a coffin or a matinee idol's blank face. It was by combining and juxtaposing this bland material that Kuleshov could evoke an emotional response in the audience, a response which could not be triggered by the material itself but only by its organisation and juxtaposition, in other words by film montage. Through this experiment, and others like it, Kuleshov became convinced of:

> the necessity to consider montage as the basic means of cinema art,
>
> the specific and fundamental quality of the medium.... The cinema
>
> consists of fragments and the assembly of those fragments, of the
>
> assembly of elements which in reality are distinct. (Kuleshov, "The
>
> Origins of Montage" 71)

It is therefore not the content of those images which is important, but their combination with each other. The raw materials of such an art work are not original, but are pre-fabricated elements which can be deconstructed and re-assembled by the artist into new juxtapositions. As Kuleshov put it,

> with montage it becomes possible both to break down and to
>
> reconstruct, and ultimately to remake the material.
>
> (Kuleshov, "Kuleshov on Film" 52)

Kuleshov was clear that montage was to be, in fact *had* to be, the basis of cinema as an independent art form, as he asserted in 1918: "Montage is to cinema what colour composition is to painting or a harmonic sequence of sounds is to music." (Kuleshov "The Tasks of the Artist in Cinema" 46) To relate Kuleshov's experiments with a *politique* or theory of the film *auteur* is not entirely anachronistic. In Kuleshov's own time, in the 1910s and 20s, there were at least two such *auteur* movements: the French *Film d'Art* and the German *Autorenfilm*. Both were significantly motivated by commercial considerations; the *Film d'Art* movement wanted to attract middle-class audiences to the cinema theatres by 'elevating' film into a respectable bourgeois art form, and the *Autorenfilm* movement involved screenwriters trying to stake their claim to authorship of the film itself rather than just the script. Kuleshov was not part of either movement, and indeed would have been hostile towards them on both political and aesthetic grounds. Both the *Film d'Art* and *Autorenfilm* movements were based on a romantic bourgeois subjectivism and valorised the creative individual 'genius', while Kuleshov championed an objective and scientific (or at least pseudo-scientific) approach which involved a collective, industrial method of filmmaking. Just like the Constructivists of his time, Kuleshov had a firm belief that scientific calculation could guide artistic creativity, and his intention in conducting his montage experiments was to establish the scientific principles that underlie filmmaking. His aim was to discover nothing less than the 'formula' for constructing films, proceeding according to the scientific method of experimentation, inductive reasoning and statistical analysis. While it is true that, as Amy Sargeant states, "[his] experiments are unsatisfactory by any scientific criteria" (Sargeant 8), Kuleshov's *aim*, so far as it was possible for him, was always to achieve scientific precision and repeatability in his montage experiments. It was a systematic attempt to eliminate the subjective, mystical idea of the 'inspired' artist creating original works of art out of whole cloth. Rather, the work of art would be assembled out of pre-fabricated parts like a car on an

assembly-line. Indeed, the very concept of 'montage' is derived from modern industry, and refers to the assembly of ready-made elements.

In contrast, the earliest *auteur* movements were thoroughly elitist and made a sharp distinction between high and low art. Kuleshov wanted to exploit the popular appeal and kinetic vitality of popular Hollywood movies of the day. He had even carried out quasi-anthropological field experiments in Russian cinemas just before the Revolution to determine which kind of films had the greatest effect on working class audiences, and deliberately set out to mimic that strong effect by using the same techniques: for example, rapid cutting, slapstick comedy, car chases, energetic movement and acrobatics, and so on. The use DW Griffith made of parallel montage in the chase scenes of his movies to build excitement and suspense in the audience was also of great importance. Kuleshov's feature films of the 1920s, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mister West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* and *The Death Ray*, are concrete examples of this 'Americanitis'. Kuleshov was completely hostile to the psychologism and interiority of the Tsarist cinema. It is interesting to note that, just like the French *Nouvelle Vague*, Soviet montage cinema actually originated as a rejection of the 'elite' Tsarist cinema of its time, and was an attempt to harness the tremendous effectiveness of popular American movies, films which were previously regarded only as inartistic mass entertainment. It is this populism, the erasure of the boundary between high and low art, and the obsession with popular Hollywood movies which links Kuleshov much more with the *politique des auteurs* of the French *Nouvelle Vague* than with the *auteur* movements of his own time. Indeed, the French *Nouvelle Vague* were in no sense descendants of the *Film d'Art* movement, and consistently ignored it in their writings.

Since space restrictions prohibit me from examining the internal contradictions in the *Nouvelle Vague* in any detail here, it could be objected that I am merely setting up the *Nouvelle Vague* as a straw man by ignoring the internal debates and heterogenous nature of the movement. I will later devote some space to André Bazin's ideas about the role of the spectator; but I will state here that, in its time, the *politique des auteurs* was an extremely important and useful approach which reinvigorated French cinema. However, it involved a romantic and essentially conservative valorisation of the creative 'Author' of a film. The role of the spectator, insofar as it was considered at all, was assumed to be passive and of no relevance to the film's production of meaning. In other words, the *politique des auteurs* lacked a reception theory of film. As Susan Hayward puts it, "Still absent from the debate, however, was the spectator - the question of pleasure and ideology." (Hayward 25) Yet Kuleshov's montage theory was nothing if not a reception theory of film. For the Kuleshov Effect to work, the juxtaposition of film fragments must evoke a certain response in the audience; indeed, this effect on the spectator is precisely what is meant by the 'Kuleshov Effect'; it exists in the mind of the spectator rather than on the celluloid itself.

This concentration on the effect of film on the spectator probably originated in Kuleshov's political commitment to the Communist cause. As Marx famously put it, "The philosophers have only described the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." (Marx 173) Likewise, as a filmmaker, Kuleshov wanted not just to describe the world or to express himself as an individual, but to change the world using cinema. To this end, the *effect* on an audience of a given filmic technique first had to be understood, since this would determine the usefulness and function of that technique in raising an audience's level of social and political

consciousness and thereby, hopefully, having an effect on the real world. Kuleshov was therefore less interested in how the individual 'Author' of a film could express himself, than in how to assemble film stock in such a way that it would provoke the desired emotional and political reaction in the audience. Indeed, Kuleshov was so far from valorising the *auteur* that he even organised his filmmaking as a collective 'Workshop', much like an industrial workshop of craftsmen, rather than working as a lone creative *auteur*.

The 'Kuleshov Effect' experiment demonstrated clearly for the first time the fact that in cinema the audience is an active participant in the creation of the meaning of a film. The actor Mozzhukhin's face displays no emotion to the audience, yet it acquires an emotional affect by its juxtaposition with images of food or a girl or a coffin. In other words, contrary to the theatrical tradition in which the actor must project emotion towards the audience, in the cinema, as Kuleshov discovered, it is the audience which projects emotion onto the actors, and this process is triggered by montage. The blankness of Mozzhukhin's face is particularly significant in this respect; the actor is simply one object among others, of no more affective significance than a bowl of soup. As Amy Sargeant puts it,

> Kuleshov... recognise[d] that, with the advent of cinema,
>
> expression is no longer signified by the actor alone, the emotion
>
> can be conveyed and stirred by montage of a number of elements
>
> between and within shots as much as by an actor's performance.
>
> (Sargeant 17)

This demonstrated that the actor is no more the 'author' of a film, or even of his own performance within it, than is the director. In a very real sense, the actor's performance is created by the spectator, through the process of film montage. Mainstream Hollywood cinema,

and the French *politique des auteur* critics who valorised it, seem to believe, on the contrary, that a film is a self-contained work of art whose meaning or emotional affect the audience passively consumes. In Susan Hayward's words,

> cinema, in terms of meaning production, positions the spectator as a subject-effect who takes as real the images emanating from the screen. Thus, meaning is received, but not constructed, by the subject. (Hayward 26)

It could be objected here that, on the contrary, André Bazin argued for precisely such a relatively open film text which would grant existential free choice of perception and interpretation to the spectator. Leaving aside the fact that Bazin was not actually a member of the *Nouvelle Vague* movement himself but is usually credited merely as its 'inspiration' and in fact argued against the cult of artistic personality, I shall now try to address such objections by briefly examining Bazin's position as exemplified in his essay "William Wyler, or the Jansenist of Directing".

Bazin's essay summarises his position very clearly: the filmmaker should use *mise en scène* in such a way that in a film, as in everyday life itself,

> [t]he event exists continuously in its entirety, every part of it demands our undivided attention; we are the ones who decide to choose this or that aspect, to select this instead of that according to the bidding of our feelings or our thinking. Someone else, however, would perhaps make a different choice. In any case, we are *free* to create our own *mise en scène*: another "creation" or cutting is always possible that can radically modify the subjective

> aspect of reality. Now the director who does the cutting for us also
>
> does the selecting that we would do in real life. (Bazin 7-8)

It is this commitment to the existential freedom of the individual spectator to create their own *mise en scène* which lies behind Bazin's valorisation of depth of field over flat composition and the long take over montage. To Bazin, montage (and even the Hollywood technique of analytical cutting)

> tends to destroy in particular the ambiguity inherent in reality. It
>
> "subjectivizes" the event to an extreme, since each shot is the
>
> product of the director's bias. (Bazin 8)

However, the process by which the spectator does the "selecting that we… do in real life" is not 'free' in any real sense at all. It is itself determined by our conscious or unconscious assumptions and prejudices, which are themselves determined by our environment and our social conditioning; that is, by our class identity. As Engels pointed out, "freedom is the recognition of necessity"; that is, we only become free by attaining a higher state of consciousness, by becoming aware of the social and historical forces which determine our being. Bazin's position, it seems to me, does not advocate more consciousness but less, and therefore does not lead to real freedom but merely to a passive contemplation of "the ambiguity inherent in reality". Kuleshov's aim was entirely different. To place the onus of interpretation and production of meaning of the film text onto the spectator does not necessarily mean subscribing to an essentially bourgeois liberal conception of the spectator as a metaphysically or existentially 'free' individual. Rather, in the case of Kuleshov at least, it means using the formal properties of cinema through montage to allow the spectator to achieve a greater consciousness of the hidden structures of society which determine our being. It is only through this 'recognition of necessity', as Engels insisted, that true freedom can be attained.

Bazin's position, on the contrary, requires the mystification of the spectator by creating an illusionistic film world which can be mistaken by the spectator for reality. And Bazin several times implicitly admits the deception involved in William Wyler's 'art that hides art', his "styleless style":

> For Wyler, depth of field is subject to the dramatic demands of the *mise en scène*, and in particular to the clarity of the narrative. The two interpolated shots amount to a sort of attention-getter: a rerouting of the viewer's eye. (Bazin 16)

And:

> his one and only concern is to make the viewer understand the action as precisely and fully as possible. (Bazin 17)

And also:

> Wyler commands our mental vision according to the rigorous laws of an invisible dramatic optics. (Bazin 22)

In other words, the illusion of reality which Wyler strove for could only be attained by careful manipulation of the spectator's attention, which is a long way from allowing the spectator the existential 'freedom of choice' valorised by Bazin. Surely Kuleshov's position, and that of the montage directors in general, is more honest: not to conceal their tendentious, unambiguous intentions but to 'lay bare the device' from the outset, as the Formalists advocated? The spectator would then not be induced to mistake the film world for reality and be lulled into a mystified lack of consciousness, but would be induced instead to spontaneously make connections between apparently disparate fragments in order to achieve an insight into the hidden structures of society. It was by this means that Kuleshov and the other Soviet montage directors believed that a Marxist worldview could be unambiguously communicated to the

audience without doing violence to their freedom of independent thought. Montage techniques could be used to stimulate the spectator's thought, to make the spectator rather than the film *auteur* the creator of the film's propagandistic 'message'. This, rather than a passive contemplation of the unresolved "ambiguity inherent in reality", is the only freedom of the spectator which has real meaning.

The position adopted by Kuleshov with respect to the cinematic *auteur* in 1918 was presciently very close to the position taken by Barthes in the 1960s concerning the literary *auteur* in his essay 'The Death of the Author'. Barthes made what he meant by the 'death of the Author' very clear when he wrote:

> a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and
>
> entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but
>
> there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place
>
> is the reader, not, as it was hitherto said, the author. The reader is
>
> the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are
>
> inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in
>
> its origin but in its destination. (Barthes 148)

And he proclaimed that,

> writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject
>
> slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the
>
> very identity of the body writing. (Barthes 142)

Film, as understood by Kuleshov, is quite literally that 'negative' in which there is no single, uninterrupted 'voice' which tells the audience the meaning of what they are seeing. Rather, it is

a 'composite space' in which ready-made fragments are juxtaposed, whose meaning is not inherent in the images themselves, but in their conflict and blending. As Barthes explained,

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single
>
> 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a
>
> multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of
>
> them original, blend and clash. (Barthes 146)

The point I wish to make is that it is precisely this which is an important yet neglected aspect of the significance for cinema of the 'Kuleshov Effect' experiment. Kuleshov's experiment actually has a wider significance than it is usually given, as the origin of Soviet montage cinema. It can also be understood as an avant-garde challenge to the whole concept of the film *auteur*, both in the embryonic form in which it existed in Kuleshov's own time, and in the form of the *politique des auteurs* of the French *Nouvelle Vague* forty years later. Kuleshov showed that, as Barthes said of the literary text, a film's "unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 148); that is, it is in the mind of the spectator rather than the *auteur* that the film's fragments are unified and given meaning. What Barthes wrote about Valéry applies equally well to Kuleshov:

> throughout his prose works he militated in favour of the essentially
>
> verbal condition of literature, in the face of which all recourse to
>
> the writer's interiority seemed to him pure superstition. (Barthes
>
> 144)

Likewise, Kuleshov's hostility to the psychologism and sentimental interiority of Tsarist cinema and his concern instead with the material basis of the cinematic medium - what Kuleshov called the "filmness of film", corresponding to Barthes' "essentially verbal condition of literature" - led him towards an approach to filmmaking which emphasised craftsmanship rather than artistry,

collective construction rather than solitary creation, and a belief that the function of film is to have an effect on the audience rather than to be a medium for the self-expression of an individual *auteur*.

Even the proponents of the *auteur* concept of filmmaking, under the influence of structuralism and post-structuralism in the 1960s and 70s, began to adopt similar positions, while still attempting to valorise the film *auteur*. Peter Wollen, in his 1972 book *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, stated that

> [w]hat the *auteur* theory argues is that any film, certainly a
>
> Hollywood film, is a network of different statements, crossing and
>
> contradicting each other, elaborated into a final 'coherent' version.
>
> (Wollen 532)

The important difference, of course, is the idea that the final 'coherent' version is constructed by the *auteur* rather than by the spectator, as it is in the Kuleshov Effect. And while Wollen concedes that, "The *auteur* theory, as I conceive it, insists that the spectator has to work at reading the text" (Wollen 533), this is still far from replacing the *auteur* with the spectator as the generator of meaning; here, the spectator merely has to 'read' a pre-existing meaning placed into the film by the *auteur*. However, one of the important effects of structuralism on film theory has been to move attention away from the *auteur* as the 'origin' of a film's meanings. In Susan Hayward's words, "Thus the *auteur* was displaced from the centre of the work and was now one structure among several others making up the film text." (Hayward 25) Peter Wollen describes the effect this had on '*auteur* theory' in particular:

> Auteur analysis does not consist of retracing a film to its origins, to
>
> its creative source. It consists of tracing a structure (not a message)

within the work, which can then *post factum* be assigned to an

individual, the director, on empirical grounds. (Wollen 532)

Wollen is referring here to the particular structure shared by all the films of an *auteur* director, which serves as the cinematic 'fingerprint' of the *auteur*. In my view, this begs the question of the usefulness of valorising that structure above all the other structures in the film. Furthermore, if the *auteur* is no longer the origin or 'creative source' of the film, then what is the usefulness of assigning a film to that *auteur*? Surely what Barthes wrote about the literary Author applies also to the film *auteur*?: "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin." (Barthes 142) And if Barthes could celebrate the 'death of the Author' as a necessary and liberating event, surely we should do the same in the case of cinema? As Barthes put it, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author." (Barthes 148) By the same token, the birth of the spectator must surely be at the cost of the death of the *auteur*.

The fact that it has taken so long for cinema to follow where literary theory has led, despite Kuleshov's pioneering experiments which pointed in this direction as early as 1918, is surely due to historical accident as much as anything else. Soviet montage cinema, which derived largely from the montage experiments of Kuleshov, was suppressed by Stalin in the 1930s for political reasons, before it could complete its artistic and theoretical development. While Kuleshov was always careful to keep his films clear and 'intelligible to the masses', the later development of montage cinema in the work of Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov led to films which were considered by the Soviet authorities to be unusable as propaganda, being too abstruse and difficult for peasants and workers to understand. And since, as Kuleshov showed, the spectator has to actively construct the meaning of a montage film, this perceived lack of intelligibility was especially dangerous for Soviet montage cinema in a system which required

that films function efficiently as political propaganda for a semi-educated mass audience. This suppression of montage cinema in the Soviet Union meant that the full implications of Kuleshov's experiments were never properly assimilated into world cinema or film theory, and Kuleshov himself became an almost forgotten figure until a revival of interest in his work in the 1960s.

His demonstration of the Kuleshov Effect showed that the raw material of film does not have to be original or meaningful in itself; rather, the power of cinema as a unique artistic medium lies precisely in the deconstruction and re-assembly of ready-made elements. Cinema is an artistic medium which originated with modern industrial society and is based on quasi-industrial techniques of montage, the cutting and editing of the raw material of film being basic and unavoidable technical requirements when a film is put together. The uniqueness of the material itself, its 'inspired originality', is unimportant. In fact, as Kuleshov showed, the more ordinary and familiar the raw material is, the greater can be the effect on the spectator of deconstructing and rearranging it. Montage itself seems to be the natural method by which to achieve the liberating 'death of the Author', and by extension the death of the *auteur*; as Barthes said of the 'Author', "His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them." (Barthes 146) This is reminiscent of the dream of Walter Benjamin (who, like Kuleshov, was a proponent of montage) of one day writing the 'perfect essay' consisting only of quotations from other writers' texts. Kuleshov assembled his montage experiment from pre-existing footage shot by other directors, mixing these fragmentary film texts and 'countering one with the other', thereby demonstrating with the Kuleshov Effect that, due to its essential reliance on cutting and editing as the fundamental method of artistic creation, the cinematic medium lends itself to the application of montage, the decomposition and

re-assembly of ready-made materials, better than any other artistic medium. It is therefore

potentially the most radically avant-garde of all the arts instead of, as it is usually regarded, the

most conservative.

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