

## Cinema's "Miracles": Film Tricks and the Production of Soviet Wonder

**ABSTRACT:** This article investigates the treatment of cinematic special effects or *kinotriuki* (film tricks) in Soviet cinema of the 1930s, focusing on the film *The New Gulliver* (1935), an adaptation of *Gulliver's Travels* by director Alexander Ptushko that used cutting-edge techniques to combine live action and stop-motion animation. It argues that film tricks in both fantastic and dramatic genres of Soviet cinema served to generate a form of wonder akin to that inspired by the religious miracle, but transferred to the miraculous feats of the party-state, with implications for the comparative study of special effects and cinematic experience.

**KEYWORDS:** special effects, trucage, stop-motion animation, Soviet cinema, *The New Gulliver* (1935), cinema and religion

The first film to win what came to be known as the Academy Award for Achievement in Special Effects was Paramount's *Spawn of the North* (1938), an Alaskan sea adventure starring Henry Fonda and featuring a Russian pirate antagonist played by Akim Tamiroff, as well as a trained seal named Slicker.<sup>1</sup> In the Soviet Union, however, the term *special effect* (*spetseffekt*) did not make its way into regular usage until well after the death of Stalin, presumably under the influence of Hollywood.<sup>2</sup> Before this, as elsewhere in Europe, Soviet cinema's special effects instead were more commonly called "film tricks" (*kinotriuki*) and "trick film shots" (*trikovye kinos'emki*). While American film technicians had distanced themselves from the term *trick photography* by the late 1920s, seeking to emphasize their technical mastery rather than their facilitation of sleight of hand in a bid to raise their status in the studio system, their Soviet counterparts did not have the same economic motivation to package their skills.<sup>3</sup> Resonant with the avant-garde call for demystification, the term *kinotriuk* does not pretend to be more than it is, exposing the technological manipulation of the film image. Socialist awakening of the sort depicted in Dziga Vertov's *Chelovek s*

*kino-apparatom* (Man with a Movie Camera, 1929) allows Soviet spectators to be in on the trick. The moviegoers who smile appreciatively in the mise-en-abyme closing shots of Vertov's masterpiece share both in the wonder of their new Soviet city displayed onscreen and of the technological miracles wrought by the kino-eye, of which they themselves are a constitutive part.

Though the Stalinist cultural revolution in the Soviet Union marked a turn away from the avant-garde and self-aware filmmaking of the 1920s, the interest in revealing the devices of filmmaking and celebrating its craft did not disappear. Only now that display took place outside of the work of art while the celebration of craft took the form of the industry's bravado about production quotas and ongoing ideological and technological competition with the West.<sup>4</sup> The filmmaker Alexander Ptushko insisted on a polemical explanation for the cultural difference between special effects in the Soviet Union and Hollywood in a 1949 pamphlet entitled "*Chudesa*" *Kino* (Cinema's "Miracles"). The pamphlet, transcribed from a recent public lecture series about his craft in Moscow, reported on Soviet achievements in cinema technology, focusing on methods of trick and combination shooting, the most technologically advanced special effects of his day. In it Ptushko also delivered a familiar attack on Hollywood cinema: "For American cinematography, where sadism and murder, inhuman crimes, and the hatred of humankind appear to be the basic themes of all films, *the trick has become an end in itself* [emphasis added]. In Soviet cinematography, the most advanced, most ideologically correct cinematography in the world, trick and combination shooting are not ends in themselves, but a means of raising the ideological and artistic quality of the film work."<sup>5</sup> While the attack on the trick as an "end in itself" recalls the attacks on art for art's sake that heralded the end of the avant-garde in Soviet cinema in the late 1920s, from the perspective of 1949, the more immediate rival was Hollywood, with its international reach. Lest one assume this competition was one-sided, it is worth noting that *Spawn of the North* in fact used its award-winning special effects to promote an anti-Soviet message. Thanks to the heroic combined efforts of two old buddies, the thieving Russian pirate, predictably nicknamed Red, is ultimately crushed in his ship by a massive glacier, which is rendered by matte paintings, scale models, and combination shooting.<sup>6</sup> In the absence of a clear moral directive for cinema in capitalist society, asserted Ptushko, the film trick ostensibly served to appeal to the lowest forms of sensationalism and voyeuristic pleasure. In the Soviet cinema, however, according to the author, ideology and artistry went hand in hand. Ignoring or discounting the invisible effects used for the sake of narrative that Hollywood had so perfected, Ptushko insisted that the American special effect sought to amaze for the sake of amazement, while the Soviet film trick simply served to provide technological support to the idealistic aims of Soviet art.

This article investigates Ptushko's claim about the role of the film trick in Soviet cinema of the 1930s, in films of both fantastic and dramatic genres. It queries the theoretical and practical treatment of cinematic special effects in Soviet filmmaking and examines how the film trick was supposed to work on the Soviet viewer of this time period. What were its ideological aims? How did its affectual power signify in the wake of the avant-garde experiments in cinematic wonder in the Soviet 1920s? Central to this investigation are also the stakes for the production of wonder in a rapidly changing socialist, atheistic state in which cultural production was subject to strict political oversight. While the quotation marks around the word *miracles* in the pamphlet's title acknowledged the irony of invoking religious superstition in the ideologically atheistic Soviet state, films by Ptushko and other Soviet directors of the 1930s, I argue, strove to mobilize both the logic and the affect of the miraculous for Soviet aims in ways that call on the experience of religious wonder. After a general theoretical discussion of the relationship between cinematic special effects and the religious miracle, I offer a brief historical overview of the ways in which cinema came to be seen as a replacement for religion in the Soviet Union. Then I analyze Ptushko's first feature-length fantastic film, *The New Gulliver* (1935), a child's fantasy of waking in the world of Lilliput and helping to liberate its workers with his communist values, rendered in stop-motion animation with cutting-edge combination shots. Though ostensibly a film for children, it forged a new approach to the fantastic in Soviet culture, training the Soviet spectator in both childish naïveté and knowing superiority. It also served as a prestige project for the USSR, already in technological competition with the US. I subsequently offer a brief overview of the use of film tricks in Soviet films in other genres to show how filmmakers negotiated the depiction of the miraculous and the fantastic within the parameters of socialist realism. I aim to show how the ideological demands on Soviet cinema shaped its special effects and their affects.

### **SPECIAL EFFECTS BETWEEN TRICK AND MIRACLE**

Christian Metz, for one, highlights the act of duplicity inherent in the film trick. In his essay "*Trucage* and the Film," originally published in 1972, he argues that the spectator's ongoing negotiation of what is filmic reality and what is the product of the trick is fundamental to the perception of cinema and its power. *Trucage*, which encompasses all forms of the manipulation of the cinematic image, either in front of the camera or on the filmstrip itself, relies both on deception and the spectator's desire to be deceived, conditioned by the entire *dispositif* of cinema, including cinema's public promotion of its ability to astound. According to Metz, "there is always something hidden inside it (since it remains *trucage* only to the extent to which the perception of the spectator

is taken by surprise), and at the same time, something which flaunts itself, since it is important that the powers of cinema be credited for this astonishing of the senses.”<sup>7</sup> While the cinema industry promotes its ability to astound, in certain cases it may be in its interests to hide its acts of manipulation, as in the case of the use of stunt doubles or other effects meant to be invisible. In these cases, “the cinematographic establishment prefers to *ensure* its power rather than *display* it. The machination is at a maximum; confession at a minimum” (emphasis in original).<sup>8</sup> I focus here on cases in which filmic manipulation is meant to astound, rather than those in which it is intended to be invisible; however, the tension between astonishment and disbelief relies on the possibility that the trick might go undetected. A contemporary reviewer of *Spawn of the North* capitalizes on this tension, drily proclaiming that in the climactic final scene the antagonist’s boat was “crunched beneath icebergs like a toy boat in a studio tank.”<sup>9</sup> The author’s droll humor equates the mechanics of the trick with its intended effects, indicating that he is aware of both.

While Metz takes for granted the commercial interests of Western cinema in publicizing or hiding the powers of *trucage*, the same patterns can be found in the case of Soviet cinema, which, despite the influence of a command economy and strict censorship control from the very top, still relied on box-office return and its ability to bring in audiences.<sup>10</sup> However, in the Soviet case, while “it is important that the powers of cinema be credited for this astonishing of the senses,” it is just as important that this astonishment be directed toward the miraculous achievements of the party-state. As early as 1931, Ptushko had unflatteringly described the use of animation in advertising films of the West as “externally spectacular (*effektnyi*), but devoid of any content” and “in pursuit of sensations for the amusement of bald old folks, even descending at times to the level of open pornography,” whereas Soviet animation was put to “social-political” and “cultural-everyday” uses, “serving in the first instance as a weapon of propaganda.”<sup>11</sup>

The philosopher of religion Hent de Vries argues that the astonishment generated by certain kinds of cinematic special effects in fact depends on the religious notion of the miracle. He insists that the special effect cannot be “thought or experienced—without some reference to (or conjuring up) of the miracle and everything for which it stands.” He argues also that “conversely, ... thinking the miracle was never possible without introducing a certain *technicity* and, quite literally, a *manipulation* of sorts” (emphasis in original).<sup>12</sup> For the cinema spectator, the special effect is miraculous not only because of the nature of the event narrated onscreen but because of the miracle of technological cinema magic that it entails. De Vries understands the miracle as recalling the original act of divine intervention, that is, the creation of the world. Thus, the miracle

can be seen as “the paradigmatic case of an event that stands out by its absolute character, its being uncaused or caused by an act of free Will, whose force forms the model for the acts of all finite beings, all of which are portrayed as being created out of nothing. This original scene supposedly determined all the creative acts—indeed, all special effects—that followed in its wake.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the special effect relies on prior knowledge of a concept that allows the cinema spectator to experience the same feeling of wonder as the miracle inspires. De Vries argues that all “effects” must refer back to the ultimate “*effectus*”—divine creation and God as *causa sui*. Yet rather than asking the spectator to believe that the effect is uncaused, or miraculous, cinematic special effects rely on the spectator’s acknowledgment of the technical mediation or manipulation behind the effect, as Metz notes, and that knowledge is just as formative of the experience of wonder itself.

Thus understood in de Vries’s terms, the absence of the term *special effects* in the Stalinist cinema lexicon might be seen as reflecting the Soviet rejection of an understanding of the world as dependent on the divine.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the quotation marks around the word *miracles* in the title of the 1949 Soviet pamphlet acknowledged the irony of invoking religious superstition in the ideologically atheistic Soviet state at all. The title *Cinema’s “Miracles”* deflates both religion and the trick. But it also acknowledges the possibility that religious understanding influences the cinema spectator’s experience of the film trick in the first place. If the film tricks of cinema are the miracles of the modern, secular world, they are at the same time dependent on the memory of the religious experience of the magical and miraculous.<sup>15</sup> In the Soviet case, the transfer of miraculous authority to the party-state made this dependence palpable in ways that have implications for the understanding of cinematic special effects across national borders.

## SOVIET CINEMA VERSUS RELIGION

In 1919, the Soviet cultural commissar Anatoly Lunacharsky asserted that cinema ought to replace the “life-giving idea” (*zhivotvoriashchaia ideia*) that belief in God once gave to Russian culture with communism. Then in turn, a cinema inspired by communism would take on, as one of its key tasks, exposing the corruption of the church.<sup>16</sup> Leon Trotsky, in 1923, on the other hand, rejected the idea that Russians had ever really believed in God but suggested that their bad habits of vodka consumption, church attendance, and brothel patronage might be combatted by another habitual practice, that of going to the movies. Cinema would of course have to be properly regulated, and thus Trotsky called on the party-state to “make up for the separation of the Church from the socialist State by the fusion of the socialist State and the cinema.”<sup>17</sup> This substitution

of communism for God, and of cinema for church can be seen as one of the major themes of Soviet cinema in the silent era. Dziga Vertov's 1924 *Kino-Glaz* (Kino-Eye) contrasts the drunken dancing of peasant women on a church holiday with the orderly march of the young pioneers and, in the same film, uses reverse-motion to resurrect a slaughtered bull and unmake loaves of bread into rye in the fields. These modern-day miracles used the wonder generated by the early effects of cinema to instill belief in the Soviet communist project.<sup>18</sup> Though Vertov announces his trick, laying bare the effect's technological mediation ("The Kino-Eye moves time backward," proclaims an intertitle), as both de Vries and Metz suggest, wonder inheres both in the miracle of production and in its technological mediation via the camera and film processing.

Sergei Eisenstein more directly transposed religious ritual into communist practice and juxtaposed religious states with the revolutionary transformation of individual communist consciousness. The quasi-religious vigil over the body of the martyred Vakulinchuk in *Bronenosets Potemkin* (Battleship Potemkin, 1925) leads to the revolutionary outrage of the citizens of Odessa. In *General'naia Linia* (The General Line, a.k.a., The Old and the New, 1929), a procession of priests with icons leads the faithful peasants down a dusty road, futilely beseeching the heavens for rain. Their blind and retrograde faith is contrasted to their skepticism that the commissar's cream separator will thicken their milk. Of course, the separator works, with an orgasmic ecstasy that substitutes sensual gratification for other, spiritual rewards, via what Eisenstein called "overtone montage," or editing according to a calculation of emotional and physiological stimuli.<sup>19</sup> The thickening of the milk prefigures the multiplication of the disciples of the collective farm.

In an unpublished essay of 1926, Vertov attacked Eisenstein for establishing a "Film-Church." Vertov called for film facts to oppose "art-religion," advocating for his own "film-newsreel" style to combat Eisenstein's "art-drama."<sup>20</sup> Mimicking the affects of religious ritual, even for communist ends, was a misuse of film's formidable powers. Vertov instead unmasked the media of religion and its tactics in *Entuziazm: Simfoniia Donbassa* (Enthusiasm: A Donbas Symphony, 1930), which depicts the rise of Soviet radio, the casting down of church bells, and the conversion of churches into cultural centers. In it, Vertov again equates churchgoers with drunkards, mocking their worshipful response to tolling church bells with jerky camera movement and multiple exposures of crosses and domes.<sup>21</sup> Though here Vertov's trick shots satirically stand in for superstitious belief and impaired perception, elsewhere in the film, Vertov used nonsynchronized sound, stop-motion animation, and combination shots to depict the wondrous functions of Soviet sound film technology and its ability to generate productive connections throughout the vast empire. As Trotsky had

suggested, Vertov advocated for technological media to replace and overcome religious practices and hoped to lay the groundwork for the politically conscious consumption and transmission of cultural content by and for the masses.

However, both Vertov's commitment to the transformative powers of the kino-eye and Eisenstein's dialectical montage would give way to the monumentalizing aesthetic principles of socialist realism, codified at the First Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934. Leaving behind the aesthetics of disenchantment, socialist realism demanded that art exceed mimesis and that artists produce the reality that the party-state proclaimed was coming into being. Art was to represent life "not simply as 'objective reality,' but to depict reality in its revolutionary development."<sup>22</sup> These new Soviet forms of enchantment appealed to sensibilities of the miraculous and the divine despite the party-state's antireligious agenda.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, after religious education and so-called religious propaganda were outlawed in 1929, cinema no longer had to compete for market share, as it were. Sweeping closures of churches and purges of the clergy in 1937–38 enforced the atheism of state and society, at the same time that purges of the culture industry led to widespread uncertainty.<sup>24</sup> State rituals and the cult of personality explicitly filled the void left by the outlawing of religion, like the institution of a tradition of decorating a New Year's tree. Fantasy and fairy tales, considered somewhat regressive forms of entertainment in the 1920s, became appropriate genres for depicting the utopian present.<sup>25</sup> Cinema's task was to generate the appropriate sense of wonder at the Soviet utopia coming into being. In a note of greeting to the 1935 All-Union Creative Conference of Workers in Soviet Cinema published in *Pravda*, Stalin wrote of cinema's "exclusive opportunity for the spiritual influence of the masses."<sup>26</sup> The victories of socialism and the five-year plans had ostensibly given cinema direct access to the hearts and souls of its audiences.

## SOVIET MIRACLES ON THE SCREEN

As much as cinema was asked to generate appropriate Soviet wonder to replace religious sentiment, it was necessary for cinematic effects to be as realistic as possible, at least within the framework of the world created by the film as a whole, visually or narratively, and as technically polished as the best products of Hollywood. In his 1853 essay on "The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality," the nineteenth-century radical journalist and patron saint of Soviet aesthetics, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, made the most crude utilitarian claims for aesthetics when he assigned to art the function of poor substitute for reality, analogous to giving a person who lives inland the chance to see a representation of the sea.<sup>27</sup> Harkening back to such claims, Ptushko credited the miraculous achievements of cinema film tricks with allowing Soviet spectators the chance to experience

all of the miraculous achievements of Soviet conquest and science from the comfort of the movie theater. He said: “Thanks to the achievements of contemporary cinema technology, the spectator, without leaving the hall, can set off on a journey to ‘unknown and distant countries,’ descend into the depths of the sea, ascend to the stratosphere, spend time at the front of the Great Patriotic War, acquaint themselves with the life of microorganisms, trace the unfolding of flowers or the formation of crystals.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, as Ptushko demonstrated in his films and asserted in his lecture, the magical present could not be captured via documentary means alone. “Life is so complicated and multifaceted,” he explained in his introductory remarks, “that to represent it on the screen is possible only by complete fluency in all of the representational means of contemporary cinema. One of these means is trick and combination shooting.”<sup>29</sup> The Soviet pamphlet goes on to expose and explain the techniques that went into the making of the Soviet Union’s most cinematographically accomplished films of the 1930s and 1940s. In order of the pamphlet’s table of contents, these included: reverse motion, fast and slow motion, animation, the use of miniature models, the “wandering mask” method, rear projection, matte painting, perspective effects, and other combination shots.

However, the list of global and scientific wonders to be enjoyed by the Soviet spectator that were enumerated in the pamphlet somewhat strangely downplayed the cinematic productions of the author himself. Ptushko, a “laureate of the Stalin Prize,” as the pamphlet proudly announced, was known as the director of inventive fairy-tale films that combined live action and stop-motion (“volumetric” [*ob’yomnaia*]) animation. While he does not omit mention of his own fantasy films, in *Cinema’s “Miracles”* Ptushko places them in the same category as films that made use of special effects to dramatize battles, ships, and other phenomena extraordinary to the spectator’s everyday life, and those that were difficult or impossible to shoot on location. His pamphlet insists that special effects are integral to the technological process of filmmaking and not just child’s play or artistic flourish. Ptushko’s emphasis on the need for film tricks for the purposes of greater realism, rather than for the creation of wondrous fantasy worlds, echoes the emphasis on technical mastery found in the American case, but it may also reflect the lingering effects of the “campaign against formalism and naturalism in the arts,” signaled by Stalin’s criticism of Dmitry Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in 1936 and purges at the highest levels of the film industry in 1937 and 1938.<sup>30</sup> Though the antiformalist campaign was enforced in unpredictable ways for political ends, giving potential critics the opportunity to make an accusation of a commitment to film art for art’s sake alone was ill-advised in this era of cultural persecution.<sup>31</sup>



Further, despite what Western scholars might expect from the lasting influence of Vladimir Propp's famous 1928 study "The Morphology of the Folktale," fantastic stories suffered attack as "bourgeois nonsense" in the Soviet 1920s from no less a personage than Lenin's widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, who coordinated a broader campaign to cleanse children's libraries of "harmful" literature.<sup>32</sup> It was not until the rise of socialist realism that the fairy tale, appropriately repurposed for communist aims, returned as a politically correct form of storytelling. The fairy tale offered a suitable form to illustrate propaganda campaigns that proclaimed, "life is better, comrades, life is happier!" and "Thank you, Comrade Stalin, for our happy childhood!"<sup>33</sup> With party approval, and with the Soviet mastery of synchronized sound and animation techniques, and heavily influenced by industry professionals' visits to Disney studios in Hollywood, the foundations for the Soviet children's film industry had been laid.<sup>34</sup> Ptushko, who had primarily made political cartoons and advertising shorts with volumetric animation up until this point, shifted to the artistic form.<sup>35</sup> His fantastic films of the Stalinist era, *The New Gulliver* (1935), *Skazka o Rybake i Rybke* (The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish, 1937), *Zolotoi kliuchik* (The Golden Key, 1939), and *Kamennyi tsvetok* (The Stone Flower, 1946), taught the dangers of greed,



**Fig. 1:** The appropriate expressions of wonder for ideological fantasy. (*The New Gulliver*, 1935)

sloth, and vanity, and promised peace and happiness to the virtuous, using the most advanced cinematic special effects available to Soviet filmmakers at the time to astonish and enchant viewers young and old.

### SOVIET FILM TRICKS IN *THE NEW GULLIVER*

The first of Ptushko's feature-length fantasy films of the 1930s, *The New Gulliver*, used the device of the dream to introduce his fancifully imaginative world of puppets and miniature props. Although the film was billed as a children's feature, it provided experimental ground for Ptushko to engage with the advances in film technology exemplified by the American film *King Kong* (1933) and it was seen by party leadership as a prestige film on par with the much-celebrated epic film of the Russian civil war, *Chapaev* (1934).<sup>36</sup> An advance excerpt of the film was even brought to the Venice International Film Festival in 1934, and the film received a fair amount of foreign press, including an extensive feature by the director in the summer 1935 issue of *Sight and Sound*.<sup>37</sup> The frame tale of the film, shot in live action, depicts the boat trip of a troop of young pioneers on the sparkling Black Sea. Petya Konstantinov has just been awarded a prize book: Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Having arrived at their picnic destination, the troop leader offers to read the book aloud. The expressions of bliss on the youths' faces as he reads signal to the viewer the appropriate emotive response to the film (fig. 1). They relax into the wonder and adventure of the story while eating shiny black grapes and apples. The leader loosens the knot of his pioneer scarf as he reads, and the gazes of the children intensify into close-ups. His words begin to be drowned out by the rising musical score, which is accompanied by shots of the sparkling waves and rocky landscape. A particularly beautiful backlit shot of a dark-haired girl verges on the erotic, transposing the glamour of the Hollywood close-up with the Soviet sublime (fig. 2).<sup>38</sup>

This is the healthy, youthful response to well-told ideological fiction, which directly indicates how the film's audience should react. A contemporary reviewer credits the introduction's "simplicity," achieved by "artistically primitive, almost newsreel-like methods," for the film's accomplishment of "great form and emotional fullness."<sup>39</sup> Although the newsreels to which the reviewer suggests a similarity were far from "artistically primitive"—the close-up shots of the pioneers recall those of Vertov's *Kino-Eye* as well as Aleksandr Rodchenko's photography—the author, an industry insider, was likely well aware of this fact, and with this language gestured to the tradition and rhetoric of Vertov's "life caught unawares," updated for the 1930s.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to the children watching the Chinese magician in the third reel of *Kino-Eye*, the children playing the pioneers in *The New Gulliver* are acting their parts and have been posed and enhanced by lighting and symphonic sound. These children exemplify the



**Fig. 2:** The close-up as Soviet sublime. (*The New Gulliver*, 1935)

cinematic supplement to reality that socialist realism asked of its practitioners. Their staged expressions of wonder and desire indicate the unbounded promise of their adulthood in a utopian future, which will be played out in miniature, literally speaking, by Gulliver's travels.

Petya drowns, and a series of dissolves transforms him from pioneer Petya Konstantinov to sea adventurer Petya Gulliver in his mind's eye. His dreaming state is evoked by this change in costume and haircut, as well as by a time-lapse shot of the clouds forming and dispersing over the cliffs and a slow-motion shot of the waves on the shore. The film tricks signal to the viewer the transition into a new genre and a new attitude toward reality. The action of Petya's dream uses the slightly faster frame rate of slapstick fight sequences to depict his righteous defense of young prisoners against the caricatured pirates. Then a model miniature is used to depict the ship's explosive end on the rocks off the shore of Lilliput. This almost encyclopedic display of film-trick vocabulary serves both to show off Ptushko's virtuosity and to prepare the viewer to see the stop-motion sequences to come, never before seen in a feature length film in the Soviet Union, as the next stage in the evolution of cinematic technological advancement. Although the contemporary reviewer insisted that the "realism"

of the frame tale “strengthens the feeling of credibility of all of the following adventures,” repeating a socialist-realist homily about the emergence of heroes from “concrete, historical, real everyday life,”<sup>41</sup> we might instead recognize the fantastic idealization of Soviet childhood in the frame tale from the flight of animated fantasy within.

Swift’s story presented Ptushko with a formal challenge that allowed him to engage metacinematically with the tensions between spectacle and reality, as Petya becomes an onscreen guide for the spectator’s reactions to Lilliput. Combining him with the stop-motion miniatures demanded a careful negotiation of the relationship between scales and layers of the film, both technologically and ideologically. Recent critical work on special-effects practices in other national film industries of this period has drawn attention to the ways in which the prevalent use of visual and aural compositing techniques structures cinematic space in signifying layers. Though rear projection and travelling mattes, among other techniques, rely on the viewer’s assumptions of coherent narrative space to position the narrative film’s subjects in realistic space, they also demand the active negotiation of those divergent spaces, allowing for what Ariel Rogers calls “a sensory experience of the spatiotemporal reorganizations associated with the larger mediascape.”<sup>42</sup> Rogers argues that the composite shots of *King Kong*, for example, recapitulate the ideology of colonialization by bringing the West into contact with its other. Yet at the same time, in separating out the damsel in distress from the giant ape on different planes of the composite image, the film also plays into racist fears of miscegenation.<sup>43</sup> Both filmmaker and spectator, in turn, negotiate and make sense of the relationship between layers of the composite image both visually and ideologically.

Ptushko was in fact well aware of the inevitable comparison of his film to *King Kong*, which had set a new international standard for cinematic fantasy. The cinematographer Vladimir Nil’sen, soon to become famous for his work on Soviet versions of Busby Berkeley-style musical comedies directed by former Eisenstein collaborator Grigory Aleksandrov, reported on the technical achievement of the film in an article for the journal *Soviet Cinema*. His article, titled “‘King-Kong’: A Miracle on Celluloid,” claims that though the film’s narrative can only be of negligible interest for an enlightened socialist, the sensation of the film inheres in the fact that “the viewer completely loses the boundary between the conventions of the ‘film trick’ and the reality of the action on screen.” Nil’sen confesses that “the combination shots were filmed with such mastery that even the specialist can run up a dead end in an attempt to explain how these shots were realized.”<sup>44</sup> Yet Nil’sen rises to the challenge, correctly establishing that the RKO Radio Pictures publicity materials deliberately misled viewers as to the kinds of process shots used to combine the giant ape with the Empire State

Building, in yet another example of Hollywood's investment in duping its audiences. In his conclusion to the article, Nil'sen delivered the charge to be taken up by Ptushko: "It's time to undertake for real the technical reconstruction of our film production, and if this problem is resolved, films like *King Kong* will cease to be a 'celluloid miracle' for us."<sup>45</sup>

The Soviet cinema industry was thus invested in overcoming its insecure feeling that the special effects of Western fantastic cinema were somehow "uncaused" or miraculous, and in proving that Soviet filmmakers could both learn its tricks and generate an even more miraculous miracle in the service of socialism. The ends to which that miracle were directed can just as well be discerned from the layers of Ptushko's film as in Rogers's reading of *King Kong*. The choice of stop-motion animation allowed the live actor to interact directly with the expressive puppets painstakingly sculpted by Olga Tayozhnaya and Sara Mokil' but required the live Petya to perform for the most part on a separate plane of the composite image to allow for the characters to be animated. Ptushko's crew mastered transparency techniques including rear projection and matte shots in order to achieve "the combination of animated objects with 'live nature.'"<sup>46</sup> Sound composition too took into consideration the need to both reconcile and distinguish the film's narrative layers. In a short article on the film's sound, the sound crew noted that the "'collision of scale' of the visual components of the film obliged us to seek out special techniques for creating a difference in the scale of sound." Though the sound crew experimented with giving the Lilliputians "children's voices, the voices of puppet theater actors, and finally the voices of live Lilliputians [*sic*]," they decided that mechanically manipulated sound would best achieve the "organic melding with the image of our puppet characters."<sup>47</sup>

This insistent and overdetermined search for ways to connect the created world of the film with organic life draws attention to the ideological tensions played out in the film's narrative. Rather than dwarfing his human actors with an animated puppet as in *King Kong*, Ptushko made his Soviet hero into a relative giant. And rather than one animated puppet interacting with dozens of live actors, Ptushko's film features one live actor interacting with hundreds of miniature puppets, each laboriously animated by hand. The scenes that combine the giant Petya and the Lilliputians are masterfully coordinated, sometimes via composite shots and sometimes by the use of scale models of Petya or his limbs. However, the film seems to place less emphasis on the reality effect gained by the combination of the puppets with the live actor, and much more emphasis on the spectacle of excess created by the intense labor of the simultaneous stop-motion animation of literally hundreds of puppets. The scenes in the king's throne room, the courtyard parades, the carnival and the performance of the



Fig. 3: The Lilliputian throne room. (*The New Gulliver*, 1935)

corps de ballet during the conveyor belt feast, and the labor of the workers in the underground weapons plant each highlight the filmmaker's technical mastery and fanciful design. A rough count of figures in the king's throne room comes to 132 individual puppets, and Ptushko claims that in certain scenes there were up to 1,500 figures in a single shot, of which 60 to 70 percent of the figures were made to move (fig. 3).<sup>48</sup> This was stop-motion animation on a mass scale, for the age of Stakhanovism.

Unlike in *King Kong*, in which the beast is wrenched from his jungle home and put on display in New York City, however, the hero of *The New Gulliver* scarcely intervenes in the political struggles of the world that is technically separated from him by the differing planes of composite images. As Nina Sputnitskaya observes, Petya mostly remains a spectator to the Lilliputian world until he finally comes into contact with their proletarian workers.<sup>49</sup> Sputnitskaya reads the film as a coming-of-age story, likening it to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. However, she notes, Petya does not change his size to interact with the alien world, but rather remains outside it with little intervention into their proletarian revolution until seizing the fleet at the end.<sup>50</sup> The underground workers' discovery of his notebook, with the lesson "Long live the mighty union

of workers of all lands,” allows them to recognize that he will take their side. Both enchanted by his tiny hosts and reproachful of their feudal ways, Petya guides the spectator’s wonder at the technical feat of animation and gives voice to the appropriate skepticism of their love of feast and frivolity while their masses are enslaved.

Interestingly, the 1939 Fleischer Studios Technicolor production of *Gulliver’s Travels* similarly portrays Gulliver as a bemused outsider to the petty conflict between the kingdoms of Lilliput and Blefuscu, holding him aside in a different volumetric plane from the Lilliputians via rotoscoping, whereas most of the tiny inhabitants are rendered in traditionally drawn 2-D animation. Yet Gulliver literally takes a hand in resolving their conflict, a petty Hollywood squabble over which kingdom’s song should be sung at the wedding of the prince and princess. In what was certainly a historically ill-timed bid for the pacifist resolution of national conflict, Gulliver orchestrates a counterpoint duet that disarms the militarized kingdoms on the brink of war, neatly sealing up the plot and sending Gulliver sailing back on his way home into the sunset. The film, Fleischer’s unsuccessful bid to compete with Disney, strictly follows classical Hollywood narrative principles, offering the rotoscoped hero as the spectator’s idealized point of identification.

*The New Gulliver*, on the other hand, replicates and calls attention to the very instabilities that inhere in a state-controlled cinema industry “for the millions.”<sup>51</sup> The boy-hero’s curtailed agency, as if not to disrupt the delicate act of manipulation required by stop-motion animation, replicates the experience of the necessarily passive spectator taking in this marvel of movie magic. What ends should cinematic mastery serve in a socialist state? What forms of wonder should the new sound cinema, enhanced by the most cutting edge cinematic “miracles,” transmit? Each of the animated episodes in the film remarkably



**Fig. 4 and Fig. 5:** Workers at the steel mill in Alexander Ptushko’s *The New Gulliver* (1935) (left) and Dziga Vertov’s *Enthusiasm* (1930) (right)

seems to answer these questions with a self-reflexive and historical look back at the themes and genres of Soviet silent cinema of the 1920s, from the slapstick satirical violence in the throne room with its familiar caricatures of fat bourgeois ministers, priests, and policemen, to documentary films of military parades, to the vaudeville scenes of dance and song at the feast, to the coordinated labor of the workers in the steel mill. The craven ministers hiding in the palace during the workers' revolt bear a resemblance to Eisenstein's depiction of the Winter Palace in *October* (1928).<sup>52</sup> The scene in the steel mill bears a striking resemblance to the steel-mill sequence in Vertov's *Enthusiasm* (figs. 4 and 5). At the victory parade to celebrate the presumed slaying of Gulliver, a man with a movie camera dressed distinctly like the eponymous hero of Vertov's film can be spotted cranking his camera in the bottom left corner (figs. 6 and 7). Ptushko himself had made a short advertising film in 1929 for a showing of the film *Vsesoiuznaia spartakiada* (All-Soviet Spartakiade, 1928) that combined stop-motion animation and live action and let the little puppet, anxious not to miss a moment of the Spartakiade games, know that twelve cameramen from Sovkino had recorded it all for him to see.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the cameraman given a cameo in *The New Gulliver* may also have referred to the filmmaker's own short, as much as it might have been a nod to his colleague's epoch-defining film.

*The New Gulliver* indulged in other moments of self-reflexivity, including the dance master's ballet of "microputs" at a scale of miniaturization equivalent of that of Gulliver to the Lilliputians ("You have dwarves? How amusing!" exclaims Gulliver), and the mise-en-abyme shot of the microput on the palm of the dance master who stands on the palm of Gulliver (fig. 8). The dance master's mistreatment of the dwarves awakens Petya's socialist outrage, causing the spectator to perhaps wonder if Ptushko's animated puppets were afforded the



**Fig. 6 and Fig. 7:** The men with the movie camera in Alexander Ptushko, *The New Gulliver*, 1935 (left) and Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929 (right)



appropriate Soviet workers' rights. The minister's ventriloquizing of the king with a record player hidden under his cape seems like a double-edged satire in the era of bombastic speeches transmitted over radio but also a metacritical joke about the difficulties of synchronized speech and stop-motion puppet animation. Finally, the intentional plasticity of the Lilliputian's bodies—their expressively stretchy arms, ears, and necks in various scenes—also draws attention to the meticulous manual pushing and prodding performed by the team of animators. These metacinematic winks to the craft of filmmaking frame the wonder of this fantastic film as explicitly created by technologically mediated human labor. While Metz argues that *trucage* flaunts the film trick so cinema can take credit for its power to astonish, here credit must be shared with the ultimate cause of all miracles in the Soviet Union, the party-state of the people. Indeed, the narrative logic of the film also makes its story the product of Petya's meritorious service to the pioneers. The book was his reward, and the dream is his understandable fantasy of becoming a Soviet giant and performing Soviet feats of liberation. The cause of this cinematic miracle is socialist labor.



**Fig. 8:** Mise-en-abyme of micropout on the hand of the Lilliputian dance master on the hand of Gulliver. (*The New Gulliver*, 1935)

Petya may feel himself to be a giant in his dream, able to tear the church bell out of its belfry with his fingers after the triumph of Lilliput's proletariat, just like the revolutionaries of Vertov's *Enthusiasm*, but he awakens from his dream to childhood, and to the gentle but diminishing laughter of his peers. "Guys, you're so big!" ("Rebiata, kakie vy bol'shye!") he tells them, casting his eyes down modestly. "And how large is life!" ("Kakaia zhin' bol'shaia!"). Robert Bird convincingly gives the film a carnivalesque interpretation, proposing that "if *The New Gulliver* performs the task of initiating Soviet viewers into the grand scale of their civilization, it does so in part by dwarfing them before the infinite horizon of genuine justice."<sup>54</sup> Thus, the spectators may recognize that they are asked to identify with the fresh-faced Petya, but they also may be aware that they are Lilliputian in the face of the grandeur of the party-state. Despite the ways in which its special effects enact what de Vries calls the "conjuring up of the miracle and everything for which it stands," producing a form of wonder that legitimates the transcendent power of the party-state, *The New Gulliver* resists mystification by self-referential commentary on its technological production and also defers the true miracles to the world outside the movie theater. The film ends with a shot of the sparkling sun on the waves and the sense that the superimposed word *Konets* (The End) is a permeable layer between the theater audience and the more beautiful image beyond. The spectator is to understand both that the real Soviet miracles take place all around them and that those miracles are screened from their reach. In an introduction to *The New Gulliver* for the film archive of the website Rossiia-K, the film critic Sergei Lavrent'ev says that the cinema of the 1930s was "a magical substance, as if life was connected by the movies." The film experience, he says, was "life *plus*" (emphasis in original).<sup>55</sup>

### SOVIET SPECIAL EFFECTS BEYOND CHILDREN'S FANTASY

While the children's fantasy film may have particular investment in the aspect of *truçage* that makes cinema's technological manipulations visible, the self-reflexivity I have shown also invites the potential destabilization of the reality effect of socialist realist cinema. If the *kinotriuk* is necessarily recognizable as a trick, then might this not undermine the spectator's belief in the ostensible industrial miracles of Soviet accomplishment? Although the special difficulties of combining stop-motion animation with live action in *The New Gulliver* brought the relationship between the real and the special effect to the fore, films in all genres in Soviet cinema of the late 1930s in fact often used special effects, sometimes incongruously, to grapple with the conflicting agendas of materialism and utopianism inherent to socialist realism. The film *Krest'iane* (Peasants, 1934) renders the heroine's dream of Stalin as benevolent godfather of her unborn child in

a dissolve to graphic animation in the style of 1920s poster design. Peter Bagrov writes that “it is impossible to establish any theoretical-philosophical basis” for this image but aptly proposes that it represents the heroine’s mind’s-eye view of Stalin as an icon, just as it simultaneously manifested the notion of Stalin as the spark of paternity for all (virgin) birth in the Soviet Union.<sup>56</sup> The film thus casts doubt on even the most obviously natural miracle of pregnancy, granting the agency for fatherhood to Stalin as the cause of all causes. The heroine will in fact be murdered by the real father of her child, a kulak bent on destroying the collective farm. She becomes a martyr, and Stalin the father demands that the spectator take vengeance.

The drama film *Sluchainaia vstrecha* (A Chance Encounter, 1936) similarly uses animation to explain the enormity of the miracle of Soviet labor. When the heroine, Irina, the best toymaker in the Soviet Union, but also an outstanding competitive runner, is invited to run in the all-union Spartakiade, the factory director refuses to give her the three-month leave necessary for her to train and compete in the race. The children of the Soviet Union need her, he objects, so Irina’s friends try to prove to the director that they can make up her production capacity in quantity and quality. The film illustrates the curious nature of Soviet exchange value and Stakhanovite magical math—her friends’ toys must be wondrous enough to make up for three months of production by the USSR’s best toymaker, and be worth the chances of her winning the race (an improvement of 1.5 seconds) as well as their wonderment over the quality of her running (“like a bird!” says one of her friends). This calculation of Communist wonder leads to an extraordinary sequence in which the friends present their prototype toys to the director. The scene combines trick wires to propel a wireless zeppelin, stop-motion animation to give a toy tank the illusion of spontaneous movement, and a drawn animation combination shot that allows a model horse to transform into a giraffe and back to a horse (fig. 9).<sup>57</sup> Needless to say, it works—“*okh, vy molodtsy!* [oh, aren’t you all clever!],” exclaims the director.

The film’s narrative requires this cinematic excess—the toys must indeed be miraculous to fulfill their exchange value.<sup>58</sup> However they must be as real as possible in order to convince the viewer that they are miracles that can happen in Soviet reality, and that are, in fact, coming soon to a toy store around the corner. After all, it is a real runner whom we see running “like a bird” in sequences of physical culture that remind us of the leisure sequence of Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*. The animation, both drawn and stop motion, is particularly smooth in this film, and calls little attention to the cinematic process of production. The boundary between animated impossibility and photographed reality thus all but disappears. The toys play no further part in the film, which centers rather on Irina’s decision to keep her child despite her fiancé’s insistence on



**Fig. 9:** The animated giraffe toy. (*A Chance Encounter*, 1936)

an abortion, his abandonment of her, and her decision to postpone her racing career. The miraculous wonder of the toys, remembered but not returned to through the end of the film, stand in for the future of her child and of the Soviet Union.

In contrast to the animation of the toys in Savchenko's film, the miniature model of Moscow that forms the focal point of Alexander Medvedkin's *Novaia Moskva* (The New Moscow, 1938), rendered by stop-motion animation, is strangely jerky. In the first sequence in which the model appears, the people looking on swat away mosquitos, as if to explain away the hiccups in their motion (fig. 10). When some fellow passengers on the train come to admire the model and a young woman foolishly calls it a "wonder," the elderly grandmother accompanying the engineers tells her in no uncertain terms, "miracles, my dear citizeness, do not exist! This is electrotechnology!" The skeptical old peasant women looking down at the cream separator in *The Old and the New* has become a confident purveyor of Soviet technological accomplishments. At the end of the film, a melodramatic hitch causes the model, now expanded to fill a movie theater, to run backward, transforming modern Moscow into a muddy medieval wooden city. But the hero and heroine get to the controls and crank time forward



Fig. 10: The electrotechnical city model. (*The New Moscow*, 1938)

again, passing by the present into the future as the Palace of the Soviets, a skyscraper topped with the statue of Lenin, planned in the 1930s but never carried out, rises up over the city. This scene within a scene was realized as a drawn matte with animated airplanes, strongly recalling the scene of King Kong on the top of the Empire State Building (fig. 11).<sup>59</sup> Yet Soviet culture would not allow for the penetration of the primeval jungle in its portrayal of the modern city. In *The New Moscow*, special effects are used to represent modernity and the experience of modernization. However, characters' reactions are strangely ambivalent and comic, and real Soviet wonder is deferred until the end, once the model is working and melodrama comes to a close. *The New Moscow* encapsulates the danger of exposing Soviet miracles, and showing them to be just a technical trick, rather than risking having them construed as bourgeois, capitalist special effects. This film stepped over the fine line between the caused and uncaused miracle. It was banned before its release.<sup>60</sup>

I have argued that the Soviet reworking of the logic of the miraculous shapes the special effects of Soviet cinema and their signification. Whether thematically and narratively central to the film, as in the electrotechnical city model of *The New Moscow* and the Lilliputians of *The New Gulliver*, or incidental to its plot, as in the toys of *A Chance Encounter* and the dream of *Peasants*, these



**Fig. 11:** The future Moscow. (*The New Moscow*, 1938)

special effects give cinematic form to the wonders of Soviet materiality, allowing the spectator to imagine, to handle, and to experience them. Even the dream of Stalin gives embodied form to an ideological fantasy. No matter how fantastic, these effects are made contiguous to Soviet reality, a metonymic representation of the whole.<sup>61</sup> Soviet cinema of the Stalinist period asked cinema audiences to believe that cinematic wonders can stand in for, or predict, the communist utopia on the verge of becoming. Cinema itself, as the medium of this utopia, called into being the effect of “the miracle and everything for which it stands,” to recall de Vries’s words, a miracle that demands faith, grand inquisitor-style, in the power of the movies and the Soviet state.

### Notes

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for *Film History*, as well as the members of the Johns Hopkins University Medinar, and fellow panelists and interlocutors at the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies and the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conferences for their helpful and generous feedback on versions of this article.

1. The film was given a Special Award for “Outstanding Achievement in Creating Special Photographic and Sound Effects” in 1938, and in the next year the award was renamed “Achievement in Special

Effects." It is now known as the Academy Award for Best Visual Effects. See the Official Academy Awards Database, updated through February 6, 2020, <http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org>. On the history of the award, see Richard Rickitt, *Special Effects: The History and Technique* (London: Aurum Press, 2006), 46–47.

2. I have consulted the Google Books Ngram Viewer's corpus of texts in Russian (<https://books.google.com/ngrams/>) to confirm this claim, as well as the East View Information Services database of major Russian film periodicals (Iskusstvo Kino Digital Archive, Izvestiia Digital Archive, Pravda Digital Archive, and Ogonek Digital Archive in East View On Demand, <https://dlib.eastview.com>). Nikolai Izvolov notes the imprecise and shifting meanings of the terms "triuok, priem, vpechatlenie, effekt, illiuziia, attraktsion [trick, device, impression, effect, illusion, attraction]" (28), preferring the word *triuok* to refer to the actual manipulation of film to produce images that do not correspond to the viewer's expectation of reality, and the word *effekt* to refer to the "immediate impressions of the viewer, caused by the manipulation." Nikolai Izvolov, *Fenomen kino: Istoriia i teoria* (Moscow: Materik, 2005), 29.
3. Ariel Rogers, "Classical Hollywood, 1928–1946: Special/Visual Effects," in *Editing and Special/Visual Effects*, ed. Charlie Keil (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 68–77, 68. On the economic motivations of this linguistic shift, see Julie Turnock, "Patient Research on the Slapstick Lots: From Trick Men to Special Effects Artists in Silent Hollywood," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 13, no. 4 (2015): 152–73, <http://doi.org/10.1080/17460654.2015.1025531>.
4. Maria Belodubrovskaya, *Not According to Plan: Filmmaking under Stalin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).
5. Aleksandr Ptushko, "Chudesa" Kino: Nashi dostizheniia v oblasti triukovykh i kombinirovannykh kinos'emok (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Pravda," 1949), 5.
6. Contrary to Ptushko's claims, the film was acclaimed for its "authentic record" of Alaskan scenery rather than its sensationalism. Basil Wright, *The Cinema*, *Spectator*, September 23, 1938, 479. See also "Spawn of the North," *Variety Movie Reviews*, January 1, 1938, 53. On the anti-Soviet political message of *Spawn of the North*, see John J. Gladchuk, *Hollywood and Anticommunism: HUAC and the Evolution of the Red Menace, 1935–1950* (London: Routledge, 2007).
7. Christian Metz, "Trucage and the Film," trans. Françoise Meltzer, *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1977): 657–75.
8. Metz, "Trucage," 669.
9. The New Pictures, *Time*, September 5, 1938, 36.
10. For an overview of the economic conditions of the industry, see Denise J. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 13–34.
11. Alexander Ptushko, *Mul'tiplikatsiia fil'my* (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1931), 21–22.
12. Hent de Vries, "Of Miracles and Special Effects," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 50 (2001): 48. This article was republished in *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 3–42.
13. De Vries, "Of Miracles and Special Effects," 47.
14. Soviet filmmakers were well aware of the use of the term in the American industry. The cinematographer Vladimir Nil'sen reported in 1934, "In American cinema, almost all of the major film studios have created departments of 'special effects.'" Nil'sen, "'King-Kong': Chudo v tselluloide," *Sovetskoe kino* 6 (June 1934): 57.

15. As a philosopher of religion, de Vries's intent is just as much to attribute a notion of technological mediation to the religious notion of the miraculous as it is to insist on a religious understanding of the special effect, but the former does not fall within the scope of this essay.
16. Anatoli Lunacharsky, "The Tasks of the State Cinema in the RSFSR," in *Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896–1939*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (London: Routledge, 1994), 49. Published originally in "Zadachi gosudarstvennogo kinodela v RSFSR," *Kinematograf* (Moscow, 1919), 5–7, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/o-kino/zadachi-gosudarstvennogo-kinodela-v-rsfsr/>.
17. Leon Trotsky, "Vodka, the Church and the Cinema," in Taylor and Christie, *Film Factory*, 94–97, first published in *Pravda*, July 12, 1923; and L. Trotsky, *Problems of Life*, trans. Z. Vengerova (London: Methuen, 1924), 34–43.
18. John MacKay aptly identifies the round dance in *Kino-Eye* as an element of a pattern contrasting circular, nonproductive motion with rectilinear progress in Vertov's films in general. John MacKay, "Allegory and Accommodation: Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934) as a Stalinist Film," *Film History* 18, no. 4 (2006): 380.
19. Both the vigil and the cream separator are given as examples of this form of montage built around "emotional resonance" in Sergei Eisenstein, "The Fourth Dimension in Cinema," in *Selected Works*, vol. 1, trans. Richard Taylor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 188–91.
20. The essay was dated March 1926. Dziga Vertov, "Front kino-glaza," in *Iz Nasledii*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Eizenshtein-tsentr, 2004–2008), 107. On the complexity of translating Vertov's sense of *khronika* (here translated as "newsreel"), see John MacKay, *Dziga Vertov: Life and Work*, vol. 1 (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), 199.
21. In the words of the film scenario: "The chimes, mingled with the motifs from the service, cannot maintain solemnity for long. A note of irony appears. The solemnity is continually undercut. The religious motifs seem to dance about." *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Kevin O'Brien, ed. Annette Michaelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 290. Richard Hernandez puts this scene in the context of the history of the Bolshevik repurposing of church bells during the 1930s in "Sacred Sound and Sacred Substance: Church Bells and the Auditory Culture of Russian Villages during the Bolshevik Velikii Perelom," *American Historical Review* 109, no. 5 (December 2004): 1496–97.
22. This was the official definition of socialist realism given by Zhdanov at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers. "Rech' A. A. Zhdanova," in *Pervyi vsesoyuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei 1934: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo 'Khudozhestvennaia literatura', 1934; repr., Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990), 4.
23. On the debts of Soviet culture to religious mythology, see Irene Masing-Delic, *Abolishing Death: A Salvation Myth of Russian Twentieth-Century Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); and Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
24. Smolkin, *A Sacred Space*, 46–48. On the effects of the purges in cinema, see Jaime Miller, "The Purges of Soviet Cinema, 1929–38," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 1, no. 1 (2007): 5–26; Belodubrovskaya, *Not According to Plan*, 190; and Benjamin Raikin, "Soviet Cinema in the Wake of the Terror: The Artistic Council at Mosfilm, 1939–41," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 3, no. 3 (2009): 267–88.
25. In her introduction to the "Fairy Tales of Socialist Realism" section of *Politicizing Magic: An Anthology of Russian and Soviet Fairy Tales*, Marina Balina observes that "in Soviet fairy tales the world of magic is easily interchanged with the world of real-life events. Fantastic characters mingle with Soviet citizens and learn true moral values from them. The fluidity of this interplay makes magic or



- miracle a natural and expected part of Soviet life. The traditional magical transformation of a single fairy-tale protagonist is replaced, in the Soviet context, by the magical transformation of the whole country." In *Politicizing Magic*, ed. M. N. Lipovetskii, Marina Balina, and Helena Gosciolo (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 118.
26. Iosif Stalin, "To the Headquarters of Soviet Cinematography, Comrade Shumiatsky," *Pravda*, no. 11 (6257) (January 11, 1935): 1.
  27. Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel *What Is to Be Done?* gave Vladimir Lenin the title for his 1902 treatise of the same name. N. G. Chernyshevskii, "Esteticheskie otnosheniia iskusstva k deistvitel'nosti," completed in 1853, published in the journal *The Contemporary* in 1855. Translated in Nikolay Chernyshevsky, "The Aesthetic Relation of Art to Reality (A Dissertation)," in *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953; repr., Westport, CT: Hyperion, 1981), 281–381.
  28. Ptushko, "Chudesa" kino, 3.
  29. Ptushko, 5.
  30. On the effects of the purges in cinema, see Jaime Miller, "The Purges of Soviet Cinema, 1929–38," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 1, no. 1 (2007): 5–26; and Belodubrovskaya, *Not According to Plan*, 190.
  31. Maria Belodubrovskaya has convincingly argued that the antiformalist campaign had more of a political than an aesthetic aim and impact. See Belodubrovskaya, "Plotlessness: Soviet Cinema, Socialist Realism, and Neoclassical Storytelling," *Film History* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 169–92, and also "Abram Room, A Strict Young Man, and the 1936 Campaign against Formalism in Soviet Cinema," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 2 (2015): 311–33.
  32. Balina, "Introduction: Fairy Tales of Socialist Realism," 105–8; Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*, trans. Jesse M. Savage (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 190–93.
  33. See Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
  34. For an overview of the children's film industry in the USSR, see Jeremy Hicks, "Soiuzdetfilm: The Birth of Soviet Children's Film and the Child Actor," in *A Companion to Russian Cinema*, ed. Birgit Beumers (Malden, MA: Wiley & Sons, 2016), 117–36.
  35. Ptushko's 1931 pamphlet *Mul'tiplikatsiia fil'my*, mentioned above, reviews the various uses and techniques of animation for the advertising and scientific industry. Its cover features a Rodchenko-style, unattributed, strikingly colored photomontage of two of Ptushko's volumetric figures and the hand that animates them.
  36. Nina Iu. Sputnitskaya, *Ptushko. Rou: Master-klass rossiiskogo kinofentezi; Monografiia* (Moscow: Direct Media, 2018), 11–22.
  37. A. Ptushko, "The Coming of a New Gulliver," *Sight and Sound* 4, no.14 (Summer 1935): 60–62. Boris Shumiatsky, head of Soiuzkino, assured the heads of the commission on cultural ties abroad that the delegation to the Venice Film Festival would "serve the goals of propaganda of our films in other countries." G. L. Bondarev, ed., *Kremlyovskii kinoteatr, 1928–1953: Dokumenty* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2005), 237–38.
  38. On the multiple significations of the close-up, including the relationship of the face to the divine, its meanings for the Russian avant-garde, and in the transition to sound cinema, see Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4–5, 39–52, 67–72.
  39. Kh. Khersonskii, "Novyi Gulliver," *Sovetskoe kino*, no. 5 (May 1953): 62–68.

40. Khersonskii had in fact signed a letter in support of Vertov and his documentary methods in 1927 after the latter had been forced out of his job from Sovkino, though the letter was never published. A. Febral'skii, "Dziga Vertov i pravdisty," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 12 (1965): 70.
41. Khersonskii, "Novyi Gulliver," 64.
42. Ariel Rogers, *On the Screen: Displaying the Moving Image, 1926–1942* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 69. On the signification of the layering of the cinematic image in Japanese film, see Laura Lee, *Japanese Cinema between Frames* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017); and on German film, see Katharina Loew, *Special Effects and German Silent Film: Techno-Romantic Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, forthcoming).
43. Rogers, *On the Screen*, 19–24, 40.
44. Nil'sen, "King-Kong," 57.
45. Nil'sen, 64. In his report on making *The New Gulliver*, Ptushko in fact credits Nil'sen for pioneering the composite techniques in his work on *Vesyolye rebiata* (Jolly Fellows, 1934). Aleksandr Ptushko, "Kak sozdavalsia 'Novyi Gulliver,'" *Sovetskoe kino*, no. 3 (March 1935): 51.
46. Ptushko, "Kak sozdavalsia 'Novyi gulliver,'" 57.
47. "O zvuchanii fil'ma 'Novyi gulliver,'" *Sovetskoe kino*, no. 3 (March 1935): 59.
48. Ptushko, "Kak sozdavalsia 'Novyi gulliver,'" 56. Ptushko reported that a full three thousand puppets were made for the film in total. A. Ptushko, "The Coming of a New Gulliver," 60–62.
49. Sputnitskaya, *Ptushko*, 19.
50. Sputnitskaya, 21.
51. This was the title of a programmatic statement by the Soviet cinema industry chief Boris Shumyatsky in 1935. See Boris Shumyatsky, "A Cinema for the Millions (Extracts)," in Taylor and Christie, *Film Factory*, 358–69. Originally published as B. Shumyatskii, *Kinematografiia millionov* (Moscow: Kino-fotoizdat, 1935).
52. The scene of the king hanging from the clock hand might also reference the famous 1923 Harold Lloyd film, *Safety Last*, as well as Georges Méliès's short film *Cinderella* of 1899. Harold Lloyd was extremely popular in the Soviet 1920s and was featured in an animated cameo in the opening credits of *Jolly Fellows*.
53. Sputnitskaya, *Ptushko*, 9–10.
54. Robert Bird, "Schematics and Models of Genre: Bakhtin and Soviet Satire," in *Persistent Forms: Explorations in Historical Poetics*, ed. Ilya Kliger and Boris Maslov (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 449.
55. Sergei Lavrent'ev, "Illuzion v stile buff," introduction to *The New Gulliver*, aired on Rossiia-K, [https://tvkultura.ru/brand/show/brand\\_id/26649/](https://tvkultura.ru/brand/show/brand_id/26649/).
56. Peter Bagrov, "Ermler, Stalin, and Animation: On the Film *The Peasants* (1934)," *KinoKultura*, no. 6 (2007), <http://www.kinokultura.com/2007/15-bagrov.shtml>.
57. See Emma Widdis, "Child's Play: Pleasure and the Soviet Hero in Savchenko's *A Chance Encounter*," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 6, no. 3 (December 2012): 319–31, in particular, for an explanation of the one toy that does not work, a misfiring cannon.
58. I draw here on Emma Widdis's reading of the film's childish excess in *Socialist Senses: Film, Feeling, and the Soviet Subject, 1917–1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 318–20.

59. Susan Buck-Morss cannily relates the architectural plan for this tower to the film *King Kong* in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Boston: MIT Press, 2000), 174–80. Not uncoincidentally to the conflation of Soviet miracles with the religious miracle, the site where the Palace of the Soviets was planned formerly held the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. The cathedral was razed for this project in 1931 and then rebuilt in the late 1990s. The rebuilt church became the site of the 2012 Pussy Riot protest against Russian President Vladimir Putin.
60. On the history of the film, see Emma Widdis, *Alexander Medvedkin* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2005), 92–110.
61. I am indebted here to Robert Bird's conception of socialist realism as "an experimental laboratory for producing material models of a reconstituted world," in "Stalin's Well-Kept Garden: Horticulture, Aesthetics, and Soviet Statecraft," *Russian Review* 79 (July 2020): 446.

**Anne Eakin Moss** is an assistant professor in the Department of Comparative Thought and Literature at Johns Hopkins University, and a steering committee member of the JHU Center for Advanced Media Studies. Recently a fellow at the Internationales Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie at Bauhaus University, she is working on a book tentatively titled "The Special Effects of Soviet Wonder" about the immersive stylistics and permeable screens of Soviet sound cinema in the Stalinist era. Essays from the project have been published in *Screen*, *Die Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung*, and a number of edited volumes. She is also the author of *Only Among Women: Philosophies of Community in the Russian Imagination, 1860–1940* (Northwestern University Press, 2020), which examines ideas of idealized relations among women in Russian and Soviet literature and cinema.

Copyright of Film History is the property of Indiana University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.