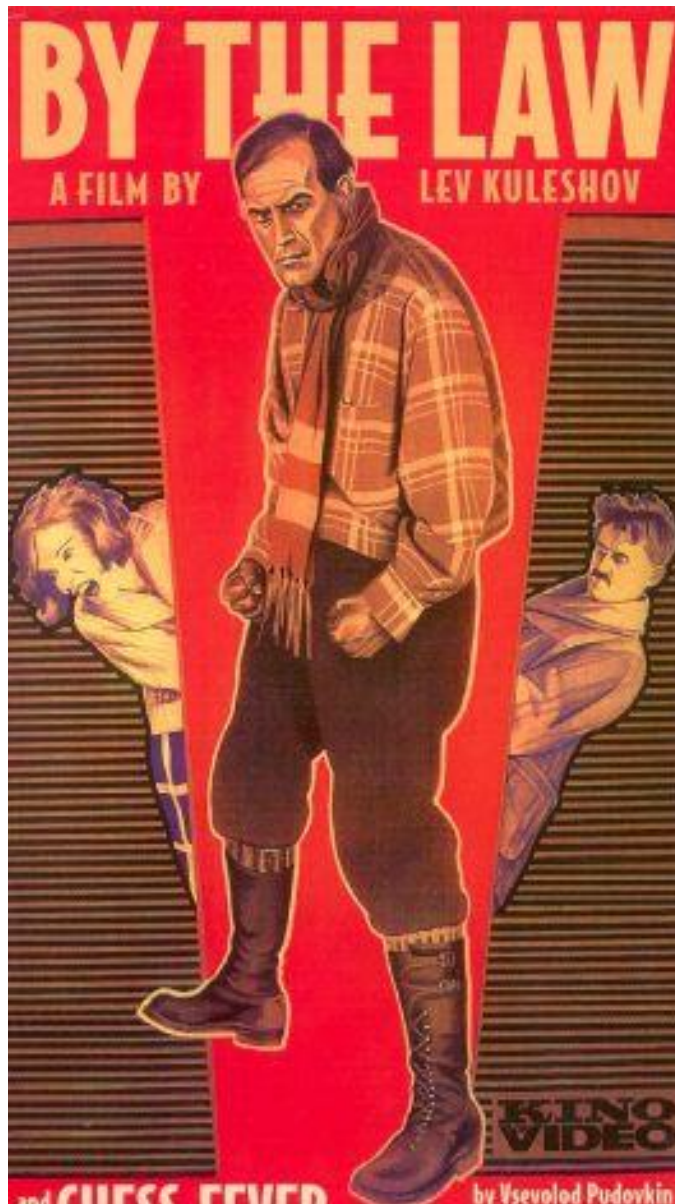


Dina Iordanova. Lev Kuleshov's *Dura Lex/Po zakonu*, 1926.
Essay for the catalogue of **Hippodrome Silent Film Festival** in
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DURA LEX, Lev KULESHOV, 1926

Dina Iordanova



Lev Kuleshov's *DURA LEX (PO ZAKONU, 1926)* is one of my favourite films of the Soviet silent era. And it tops my list when it comes to sleek minimalist aesthetics and pace of editing.

There is a lot to be said about this film, but in these notes I will only focus on three aspects: its aesthetics, its standing as a work of socialist realism, and its lead actress, Alexandra Khokhlova.

DURA LEX is remarkable for its acting, for the dramatically paced editing juxtapositions that are a major narrative device and account for the famous 'Kuleshov effect' or montage, for the use of silhouettes, and for its extremely simplified and streamlined aesthetics.

Nature has a major role to play in this film. Yukon is presented quite differently from other films set in similar contexts – for example, Klondike in Charlie Chaplin's *GOLD RUSH* (1925), a film that was made and released at around the same time. The filming was actually done around Moscow river, not far from the centre of city, and it is decisions of mise-en-scene and special effects that leave the unsettling impression of overwhelming hostile natural forces in the decisive scenes. Here, human passions evolve alongside the ardours of nature. In that, *DURA LEX* is a first in what would later become a long line of Soviet films where nature plays a major role – Alexandr Dovzhenko's *AEROGRAD* (1935), Mikhail Kalatozov *LETTER NEVER SENT* (1960), or Andrei Konchalovsky's *SIBERIADE* (1979), to name just a few.

DURA LEX is not set in the context of revolutionary struggle on St Petersburg's streets (as in OCTOBER, 1928) nor amidst a workers' strike at a factory (as in Eisenstein's STRIKE, 1925). Nonetheless, it conforms to the requirements of socialist realism. Namely, its protagonists are impoverished proletarians who struggle to keep themselves in the world, there are strong characters that have to transcend the ideological limitation of their class standing and rise to extreme moral dilemmas, and there is a difficult but nonetheless uplifting ending, which supplies the optimistic historical view that is one of the main requirements of socialist realist art.

The film is based on a short story by Jack London, who was one of the few Americans recognized by the Soviets as an author who spoke for the working classes and thus adhered to an acceptable world view. The script, however, was by Victor Shklovsky, the father of Russian Formalism – so no wonder that the production underwent difficulties in getting approval. The result is probably one of the most 'formalist' early Soviet films, which confirms my long standing view that in spite all censorship attempts, filmmakers in the Soviet Union did manage, at large, to uphold aesthetic standards of avant-garde creativity.

Alexandra Khokhlova, seen here in the role of Edith Nelson, is one of the most amazingly expressive faces of silent cinema, an energy powerhouse, and an enormously interesting figure in her own right. Coming from a high profile wealthy family, a descendent of the founders of Moscow's famous Tretyakov Gallery, Khokhlova is one of the key female figures of the early Soviet avant-garde intelligentsia. She was friend to other important

female figures of the time, such as Isadora Duncan, Lilya Brik, and director Esfir Shub. But she was also close to poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and sculptor Aleksandr Rodchenko.

Khokhlova debuted in theatre at the age of 19, and, at 26, married her second husband, director Lev Kuleshov, becoming his lifetime fellow-traveller and muse. She played in Kuleshov's EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF MR WEST IN THE LAND OF BOLSHEVIKS (1924), which also starred Boris Barnet and Vesvolod Pudovkin and THE DEATH RAY (1925), as well as in some later films. Later in life, during World War II, she co-directed films with Kuleshov, and after the war she worked as professor at VGIK (the leading Soviet film school in Moscow), and authored books on Soviet film history before passing away at 87. Recognised as one of the most important female figures in early cinema, her extraordinary life is discussed at length in Ana Olenina's excellent piece in Women Film Pioneers Project (<https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/pioneer/aleksandra-khokhlova-2/>)