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HIPPODROME
silent film festival
celebrating film with live music

SAT 25 MARCH | 19:00

IN SPRING

Dir. Mikhail Kaufman | Ukraine | 1929 | N/C U | 1h

Short: *Concert, Edinburgh* | Dir. Dr M. Latyszewski | UK | 1960 | 2m 50s

Screening material courtesy of the Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Centre
(Feature) and the National Library of Scotland Moving Image Archive (Short)

Performing Live: Roksana Smirnova & Misha Kalinin (Feature)

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, there were three Kaufman brothers born in the town of Bialystok. The youngest one, Boris, is rather known as a French avant-gardist and American Oscar-awarded cameraman of (among many others) Sydney Lumet's *12 Angry Men* (1957). The elder brother David aka Dziga Vertov (from Ukrainian "dzyga" - a spinning top) became a leading Soviet theorist and filmmaker, author of the best documentary (according to *Sight & Sound* Poll) of all time - *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Despite the fact that the third Kaufman brother Mikhail was an actual man with a movie camera, a cinematographer of Vertov's film(s), his cinematic legacy is unfairly overshadowed by Boris and David.

In 1929 Mikhail made his directorial debut with *In Spring* in a clear creative dialog with *Man with a Movie Camera*. As a result of the already troubled relationship between the brothers, their paths parted for decades. Despite all the drama, both films are the products of the same, very elaborate politico-aesthetic paradigm. In 1922, Mikhail together with his brother organized a group of avant-garde filmmakers called *Kinoki* ("kino" (film) + "oko" (an eye in Ukrainian)).

Like many other avant-garde artists of that time, Kaufmans expressed their frustration and ambitions in a manifesto, called *WE* (1922): "WE proclaim the old films, based on the romance,

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theatrical films, and the like to be leprous... -Keep away from them! -Keep your eyes off them! -They're mortally dangerous! -Contagious!"

Kinoki aggressively opposed themselves to prerevolutionary, bourgeois "cinematography", willing to replace "staged life events" with real life, captured by the movie camera. They intended to create an absolute and truly international cinematic language, entirely emancipated from theatrical and verbal domination. They wanted their films to address the audience directly, without the mediation of actors, without a script, without intertitles.

During the second half of the 1920s, an anti-formalist campaign, initiated by Moscow, made many avant-garde and experimental projects a target of the public and harsh criticism of Soviet officials. The Kinoks were constantly accused of formalism. As a result, Vertov was fired from Moscow Sovkino in 1927.

In the summer of the same year, VUFKU (The All-Ukrainian Photo Cinema Administration) invited Vertov and Mikhail to come back to Ukraine where during the next four years Kaufman's brothers got the opportunity to carry out their most daring cinematic experiments. Thus, Vertov is going to make three (*The Eleventh Year* (1927), *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), and the first sound Soviet film *Enthusiasm: The Symphony of the Donbas* (1930)) and Mikhail's two films (*In Spring* (1929) and *Unprecedented Campaign* (1931)). In five of these six films, Mikhail acted as a cameraman.

VUFKU was established in 1922, under the jurisdiction of the Commissar of Education of the USSR, and became one of the most productive Soviet film organizations of the silent era. It controlled film production, distribution, and exhibition. VUFKU also successfully and independently operated on the international market, selling its films to France, Germany, the UK, the USA, etc. What is more important, VUFKU enjoyed its cultural autonomy and has established itself as an inclusive and open-to-experiments organization. If it weren't for VUFKU, the Kaufman brothers might never have filmed their avant-garde masterpieces.

Kaufman's *In Spring* was filmed exclusively in Kyiv, which turns this film into the first, and probably the most lyrical, declaration of love to the Ukrainian capital and its inhabitants. Unlike Vertov, Mikhail's urban symphony is rather interested in humans than machines. He closely observes faces, emotions, an everyday life routine, which is mesmerizing in its spontaneity and

transformation. The film's title symbolism is transparent – the spring of the nature echoed in a “spring” of a young socialist society. After all, for Kaufman, the film camera is the most perfect form of representation not only of the new post-revolutionary subject (masses) but also of the time durations, like life and revolution. That's why Kaufman in *In Spring*, uses a lot of optical effects, such as a hidden camera, a telephoto lens, freeze-frame, and animation.

In Spring became one of the best VUFKU films in 1929, and quickly set off to amaze foreign audiences, Japanese among others. The observation made by French cinema critic Georges Sadoul is one of the most well-known and widely published reviews during the Soviet times of *In Spring*. A surrealist, a member of the French Communist Party, a USSR sympathizer, and a cinema historian, he was greatly impressed by Mikhail's film:

“*In Spring* has opened for us a completely new form of documentary cinema – a poem, in which lyrical images of thaw and swollen flower buds reflect the pathos of the UkrSSR's advancement on the way of constructing socialism, while not concealing the remnants of the past that still exist”.

Unsurpassed remains the commentary of VUFKU chairman Mykhailo Makotynskyi, who in succinct form managed to articulate the uniqueness and grandeur of Mikhail's film: “If I were a poet, I would have written a poem for this movie. If I were presiding over a suicide club, I would have closed the shop and had no clients left”.

STANISLAV MENZELEVSKYI

Stanislav Menzelevskyi is a film scholar and archivist. He has degrees in Cultural Studies from the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. He has headed the Research and Programming department at Oleksandr Dovzhenko for the last ten years. He was a Carnegie visiting scholar at Columbia University and a Fulbright visiting scholar at UC Berkeley. Stanislav is currently working on a Ph.D. in the Media School at IU.