

## II.IX. V Z R Y V

by Devin Fore

As the film's title suggests, Sergei Eisenstein's *The Old and the New* points in two directions. This 1929 film about the industrialization of the Soviet countryside stages a dramatic collision between distinct and seemingly irreconcilable phases of sociocultural development: on the one hand, a deep past inhabited by the peasantry and associated with the cyclical time of agricultural production, and on the other, a future society taking shape in accordance with the laws of linear historical progress through the activities of its anointed agent, the industrial proletariat. Certainly one of the most curious aspects of *The Old and the New*, ideologically speaking, is that instead of displacing the benighted peasantry with industrial workers—as standard Marxist narratives of progress would have it—the film holds the two together in a protracted embrace. Eisenstein envisioned the Bolshevik policy of a *smychka* (“coupling”) between the peasantry and proletariat not as a displacement but as a chiasitic exchange of properties between the two. To wit: by the final scene, the film's protagonists—the *traktorist* from the city and the woman from the collective farm—have switched places, the former proletarian lounging lazily in his peasant tunic upon a horse-drawn

cart while the erstwhile farm girl drives past on a shiny tractor wearing the streamlined livery of an airplane pilot.

Such reversals between the old and the new can be seen throughout the film, although nowhere as strikingly as in the notorious sequence featuring a machine for separating cream from milk. In this scene, which Eisenstein identified as the film's peripeteia (on par, he claimed, with the moment in his landmark film when *Potemkin* bursts through the ranks of other battleships), a group of peasants huddle around the new piece of equipment. Like everything else in *The Old and the New*, this object points simultaneously ahead, to the future of material abundance made possible by Russia's industrialization, and also backward, to a prehistorical past of transcultural archetypes and myth. Symptomatically, in his writing on the film, Eisenstein compared this separator to King Arthur's grail. As the scene accelerates toward its orgasmic crescendo, the chorus of peasants—each “emotionally immobile, like a mask in antique theater”—bears witness to a series of miraculous transformations: the centrifugal interior mechanism of the separator is inexplicably transformed by Eisenstein into a spinning roulette wheel; cream issuing from a spout



splashes into a bucket, but then begins suddenly to pour over the hood of a tractor as well; propelled by a strapping peasant who pumps away furiously at the handle, the explosion of white liquid gushing from the spout is mirrored in the vertical jets of a fountain, and then echoed again in the sweeping current of a hydroelectric dam. Through tumbling resemblances like these, which are often edited so seamlessly that the spectator barely registers the difference between these objects, Eisenstein multiplies their semantic valences, causing each to dehisce into associative chains of increasing complexity.

Yuri Lotman's late studies on the mechanisms of cultural invention helped shed light not just on the curious temporality of Eisenstein's film, but also on the interpretive perplexities that emerge in the wake of this encounter between old and new. Specifically, Lotman observed that this redoubled temporality was the very condition for the emergence of unprecedented cultural forms. Building on the work of the Russian-born Belgian chemist Ilya Prigogine, Lotman explained that the moment of maximal complexity in a given cultural system "is situated between the past and the future and is as if ripped out of time." An incubator of the new, this interval of maximal complexity cannot be parsed according to categories of chronological time such as past, present, or future.

Because this revolutionary interval entails both dissolution and convergence, Lotman designated this interval with the Russian word *vzryv*, which can mean both "explosion" and "implosion": "The moment of the *vzryv* is not just the point of formation of new possibilities, but the moment of the creation of another reality, a leap and a re-comprehension of memory." At this moment of maximal cultural informativity, the past and the future become symmetrical, Lotman observed. From a vantage within this zone of historical suspension, all variations of history appear "equiprobable," and the old and the new intermingle and recombine. The moment of *vzryv* is a moment of pure virtuality, in which all courses and all outcomes are still possible. "The events that were realized and those that were not realized at a moment of *vzryv* are variants, and could easily be substituted for one another."

Importantly for our understanding of Eisenstein's film, Lotman also associates the moment of *vzryv* with a condition of heightened hermeneutic indeterminacy. "The state of *vzryv* is characterized by the moment of equalization of all oppositions," he writes. "That which is different appears to be the same. This renders possible unexpected leaps into completely different, unpredictable organizational structures." The convergence of the classical and the futurist in *The Old and the New* spawns a whole

series of interpretive paradoxes that cannot be easily resolved in favor of either term. As a result, the moment of *vzryv* is experienced as a kind of compression or symbolic overdetermination: the revolutionary "explosion" is perforce a space of hermeneutic "coalescence" and an interval of "semiotic uncertainty," Lotman writes. The historical condition of *vzryv* thus gives rise to a culture of profound irony, for the symbols of a culture at the moment of explosion always display two incompatible meanings at once. One phenomenon divides into two: separator and grail, labor and copulation, hydroelectric dam and cascade of cream, industrial production and pastoral idyll, spindle mechanism and roulette wheel. What we have, according to Lotman, is a kind of "double reading of one and the same cultural fact," a simultaneity of antitheses rather than their sublation. At this moment, the deep past becomes indistinguishable from the society to come.

## Devin Fore, "Vzryv"

- 198 *Symptomatically, in his writing on the film: Sergei Eisenstein, "Separator i chasha Graalia,"* in *Neravnodushnaia priroda* (Moscow: Eizenshtein-tsentr, 2006), 2:47–72.
- 198 *emotionally immobile: Viktor Shklovskii, Eizenshtein* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1973), 146.
- 200 *is situated between the past: Yuri M. Lotman, Nepredskazuemye mekhanizmy kul'tury* (Tallinn, Estonia: TLU Press, 2010), 46.
- 200 *The moment of the vzryv is not just: Ibid.*, 50.
- 200 *The events that were realized: Ibid.*, 163.
- 200 *The state of vzryv is characterized: Yuri M. Lotman, Culture and Explosion*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Wilma Clark (New York: De Gruyter, 2009), 158.
- 201 *the revolutionary "explosion" is perforce: Ibid.*, 145–46.
- 201 *double reading of one: Iurii M. Lotman and Boris A. Uspenskii, "Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture,"* trans. Robert Sorenson, in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, ed. Alexander Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 37.