



# Ordinary Fascism

MIKHAIL ROMM

1965

Mikhail Romm's voiceover implores the viewer to assess how socialist the National Socialist Party were in reality. This peculiar stress leads to an implicit comparison between the USSR and Germany. Romm's documentary is a suggestive masterpiece, one that simultaneously reveals and hides itself in the implicit. His ability to invoke the power of suggestion is in no doubt due to his choice of genre: compilation film. Compilation film was, in the Soviet context, a technique pioneered by Eshfir Shub in the revolutionary era. Her film, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) used a similar technique to draw a picture of life around the days of the revolution. Using archival footage, especially from that of the Tsar's resident cameraman, she was able to compile the film around a specific thesis: the excess of the Romanovs and the veracity of socialism's project. Romm's work, released around forty years later, used the same technique. Utilising a combination of newsreel footage, which had been confiscated from the Reich Film Archive and taken to Moscow in 1945; as well as photographs, including portraits by Hitler's private photographer, Heinrich Hoffman, and contemporary hidden camera footage of quotidian life in the USSR.

Whilst compiled and edited in a similar manner to Shub's film, *Ordinary Fascism* uses a series of techniques that subvert the genre. Where Shub's depiction of the revolution has a clear message, Romm informs the viewer of the documentary's limitations. In writing, before the film begins, he states that the documentary does not intend to cover all the complexities of fascism. Instead, he wishes 'together with the audience to ponder over this phenomenon.' Instantly, the stage is set for assessment. Romm speaks directly to the viewer in commanding voice over, as we watch carefully chosen images. These are images of children's pictures, which change into scenes of typical life in Moscow and Warsaw. Romm says, 'For every child, his mother is best and most unique.' A woman in Moscow bends down to pick up her child and he uses a freeze-frame to crystallise that moment of love. Abruptly the music stops, and a static image appears. A photograph of a Nazi soldier pointing a gun at a woman holding her child. The music in the background stops and a shot is heard. As the shot rings out the camera zooms in on the photo, now with the soldier removed from the frame and the desperate mother

filling the screen. This juxtaposition is deliberately abrupt and shocking after the philosophical rumination into perspective and individualism. 'Playing' with that one static photograph he is able to impress the magnitude of pain the image alone may not have conveyed. At the film's start, when Romm discusses the limitations of documentary, he establishes the challenge that fascism's tendency to censor itself and to not leave behind visual records of wrongdoings, offers to the filmmaker. He uses compilation to give more power to the limited images he does have at his disposal.

Even when faced with limitations of resource on his topic, he is able to portray his message through emphasis and juxtaposition. His voiceover is instructive at times, like a teacher he guides us through the compiled work and speaks in imperatives. At one point he tells us, 'Let us listen to it' when showing viewers a rally in Germany before turning silent. In contrast, he talks over footage of Mussolini, pointing out the blackened space to the dictator's right. The negatives were marked, in order to eradicate someone that Mussolini did not like from the image. In all likelihood, it was probably Victor Immanuel. Whilst Mussolini speaks to the crowd, next to the black space, Romm continues to talk, telling us it is not important for us to hear his speech and we should simply watch the expressions on his face. Romm's work claims to merely reflect. However, there is no doubt that the central aim is to build the comparison between Nazism and Stalinism, by showing the mechanisms of fascism. Using compilation and a wide array of footage he shows us the sheer terror of mob mentality and hero worship. When interspersed with footage from the Soviet Union, his point is subtle but palpable. Romm's guiding voiceover often tells us categorically what to think, whilst maintaining his film is a speculative journey. When talking over footage of men from the Red Army, he tells us they are not heroes, but merely men. This reiteration of people's ordinariness starts from the film's inception. In a disturbing sequence Romm shows us amateur photographs kept by Nazi soldiers. We see intimate family pictures mixed with images of torture that are being kept as souvenirs, establishing Hannah Arendt's phrase 'the banality of evil', as a presence in the film and its capacity to exist in our own societies.