

Earth

OLEKSANDR DOVZHENKO

1930

“It’s important to watch the works of the great masters and to know them well, so as not to attempt to reinvent the bicycle,” Andrei Tarkovsky once said. “There aren’t many of them: Dovzhenko, Buñuel, Antonioni, Dreyer, and one or two others.” That the godfather of Soviet auteurism would place Dovzhenko in such rarified company – indeed, that Tarkovsky would honour any such ideologically committed filmmaker – speaks volumes to the Ukrainian master’s significance in world, let alone Soviet, cinema history.

Several decades after his Western critics first re-evaluated Dovzhenko’s place in the canon, he remains for wider audiences perhaps the most underappreciated and ambiguous of all the Soviet silent maestros. Kuleshov and Eisenstein, pioneers of montage theory, are taught in every film studies 101 course; Vertov is hailed as a founding father of documentary cinema; Pudovkin’s *Mother* is a staple of the silent repertory circuit. Perhaps in keeping with his passion for the marginalised and downtrodden, Dovzhenko remains something of a peripheral figure, even though his more lauded contemporaries themselves recognised his genius at first flush. “As the film goes on it pleases me more and more,” Eisenstein wrote after attending the Moscow premiere of Dovzhenko’s 1928 masterpiece *Zvenigora*. “I’m delighted by the personal manner of its thought, by its astonishing mixture of reality with a profoundly national poetic imagination. Quite modern and mythological at the same time. Humorous and heroic.”

Dovzhenko’s route to cinema was peripatetic; by the time he enrolled in the Odessa Film Studio at the age of 32, he already had stints as a soldier, teacher, diplomatic assistant, cartoonist, graphic designer, and journalist under his belt. Cinema represented for him the surest means of synthesising his multifaceted perspective on Soviet life: “What can an artist show on canvas? Only a small part, an episode of what happens here. But film can capture everything completely, show it during its development, show its rhythm, breathing, and human fate.” The great critic Jonathan Rosenbaum wrote that Dovzhenko’s films flow more like music than like conventional dramas. *Earth* is the most famous example of this synaesthetic worldview.

Dovzhenko’s biography holds the key to another crucial aspect of his artistic sensibility: his profound affinity with the Ukrainian land and the people who worked it. The seventh child of fourteen, only two of whom

survived infancy, his parents were illiterate farmers. The visual poetry in *Earth* is folkloric, almost animistic: fields of grain waving beneath enormous skies; fallen apples glistening in the rain; the stridency of a peasant funeral march. The film is shot through with an appreciation for the rural rhythms of life and death, opening with the passing of an old man (as Dovzhenko once wrote, “a grandfather is a prism of time”), and ending with the promise of new life. But this is not a conservative or even nostalgic vision. Indeed, as with all Dovzhenko’s greatest films, *Earth* presents us with the painful but productive meeting of old and new worlds, of peasant fortitude and technological progress. In this sense, Dovzhenko is a utopian, imagining a world that reconciles Soviet ideals of rational, collective labour with his own love of nature.

Dovzhenko’s relationship to the ideological edicts of the Party was a matter of great controversy in his lifetime, and has remained one ever since. After all, *Earth* is nominally a hymn to the collectivisation of Ukrainian agriculture during the First Five-Year Plan – the dispossession of private landowners or “kulaks” – that contributed to the horrific famines that ravaged Ukraine in the early 1930s. The Party’s own position on the collectivisation drive, let alone Dovzhenko’s, is a question of fiercely contested historical record. In the words of the scholar George Liber, *Earth* was “caught in its own historical contradiction. Conceived in a period of voluntary collectivisation, it appeared during the harshest phases of dekulakisation [violent repression].” Dovzhenko was undeniably a proud son of Ukraine, and Ukraine is proud of him in turn – the national film studio is named after him to this day – but *Earth* stands as a reminder of the complexity of these relationships between artist and nation.

What is not in question, though, is the degree of directorial mastery that Dovzhenko displays across *Earth*’s all-too-brief running time. Working with cameraman Danylo Demutskiy, he displays a radical control of pace and tension without relying on the rapid montage cutting of his contemporaries. His use of intense close-ups without establishing shots is unnerving, but ultimately serves to underline the communion between characters. The extended funeral sequence at the close of the film is one of the most remarkable examples of parallel cutting in silent film. Stephen Horne’s alternately lush and sparse new score underlines and augments the power of Dovzhenko’s images anew.