

Outskirts

BORIS BARNET

1933

The first few years of the 1930s represent one of the great turning points in Soviet film history, alongside the Thaw that followed Stalin's death, and the tumultuous years of perestroika and communist collapse. By sheer historical chance, the arrival of sound to Soviet cinema at this time coincided almost exactly with the decline of the silent-era avant-garde and the rise of Stalinism in film. Filmmakers attempting to work in the first half of the decade were thus forced to navigate enormous technical and ideological shifts at once. But this was also a window of opportunity; for a brief period before the edicts of Socialist Realism were properly established, directors could imagine a different kind of Soviet cinema, neither avant-garde nor stolidly state-sanctioned. Alongside Kozintsev and Trauberg's *Alone* (also 1933), Boris Barnet's *Outskirts* is perhaps the most finely preserved time capsule from this strange, suspended moment in film history.

Barnet is often cited as the "path not taken" of early Soviet cinema. He had worked superlatively in the silent era, acting in Kuleshov's hugely influential *Extraordinary Adventures of Mr West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924) and directing sparkling comedies of everyday life like *The Girl with the Hatbox* (1927, also available on Klassiki) and *The House on Trubnaya* (1928). His was a lyrical voice, sympathetic to the anxieties of ordinary people faced with revolutionary upheaval. In *Outskirts* and the remarkable romance *By the Bluest of Seas* (1936), Barnet's lyricism came into its own.

In order to appreciate the quiet radicalism of *Outskirts*, it is important to appreciate the extent to which the montage theories of the likes of Eisenstein and Pudovkin had dominated discourse in the 1920s, as well as the reasons for their decline in the new decade. The iconoclasm and dynamism of those silent greats sat uneasily with a state in pursuit of stability and consolidation. The protagonist of Eisenstein's silent classics was the crowd, the mass; he cast according to type, rather than creating "real" characters. By the early '30s, this was seen, crudely put, as too intellectual. One critic famously called for a "cinema of socialist feelings" rather than one of "abstractions". Another wanted to see "the Communist individual" on screen: "living person, with blood and nerves, feelings and intellect".

This is precisely what Barnet provides in *Outskirts*. The film is set during the First World War, and ends as the Revolution breaks out in 1917. The setting is a provincial town where Pyotr Ivanovich and his two sons, Nikolai and Semen, are employed in a shoe-making workshop. Their community is torn apart by the war before unifying again around the revolutionary cause. But if this is a war film, it is of a very particular kind, with a particular model of heroism. Barnet uses the marginality of the setting to show this war of imperial powers is an alienating phenomenon for working people, who are forced to fight for a cause that is not theirs. Throughout *Outskirts*, the war is shown in terms of its impacts on real people, not its abstract meanings. Indeed, the film emphasises war's absolute lack of meaning for the ordinary men on both sides who are forced to fight — before, in a clear presaging of later Socialist Realist dogma, suggesting that meaning ultimately derives from collective labour and struggle.

Barnet's attention is thus to the lived experience of ordinariness, rejecting the grand narratives of History. It both predicts the concerns of full-blown Stalinist film, while also suggesting another path that Soviet cinema could have taken. According to critic Mikhail Bleiman, the film offered "a formalism of the living human being". Barnet achieves this through a careful modulation through the techniques of silent-era physical comedy; a tentative but hugely innovative application of sound (much of the film revolves around slippages in translation between German and Russian speech in a way that draws attention to the technological advances being tested before our eyes and ears); and a melodramatic romance narrative between a German prisoner and a young Russian woman that demonstrates a remarkable tenderness and empathy. Barnet's message of international workers' solidarity would soon be out of place in the increasingly militaristic 1930s, and a sympathetic German character would be hard to find on Soviet screens within a few years. But here, in 1933, there is still room for a simple labourer like Pyotr Ivanovich to stand up to the vengeful villagers eager to lynch the foreigner in their midst and ask: "What does it matter that he's a German? He's a shoemaker like you."