

# Soviet Cinema of the 1920s



# The Context

- Until 1917, emperors, known as **Tsars**, had long ruled Russia.
- However, because he had involved Russia in the unpopular First World War, the Russian people increasingly hated **Tsar Nicholas II**.
- The war was causing a lot of hardship and starvation in Russia.



# February 1917

Rioting and strikes in the Russian capital led to the overthrow of the Tsarist monarchy.

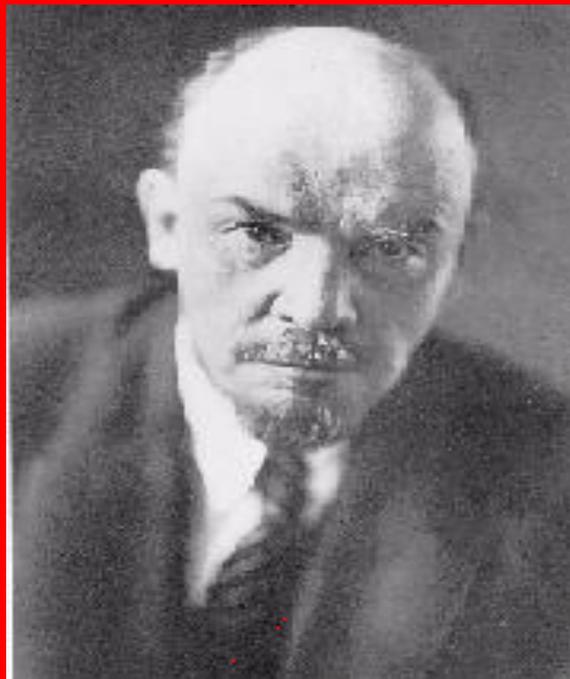
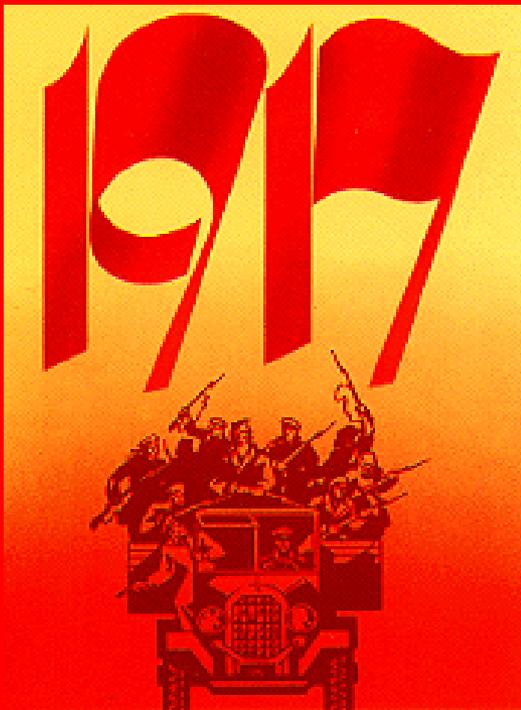


# February-October 1917

A provisional government, headed by Alexander Kerensky was set up. However, Kerensky's government continued to fight in the unpopular First World War.

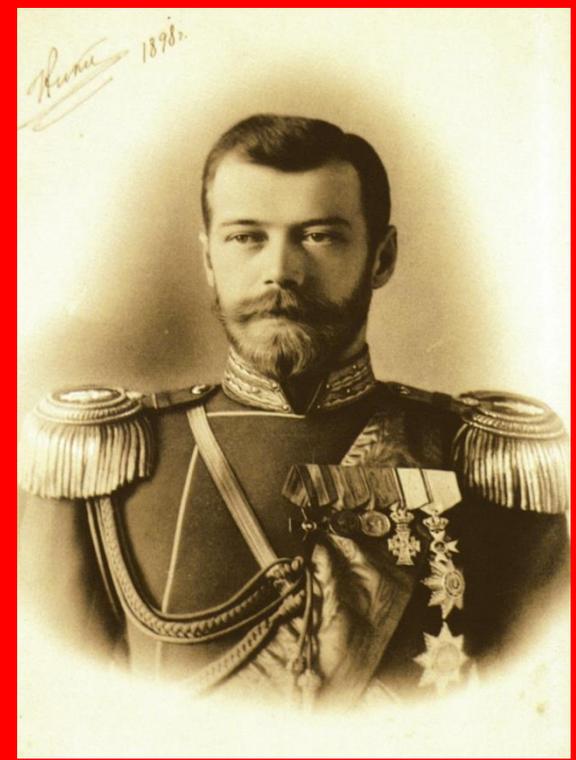


The **October Revolution**, also known as the **Bolshevik Revolution** was led by Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks. It is the first communist revolution of the twentieth century.



Cinema is “an empty, totally useless and even harmful form of entertainment.”

Nicholas II



You must remember that, of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important” - Lenin

The revolution overthrew the provisional government, which led to the Russian Civil War from 1918–1920, followed by the creation of the Soviet Union in 1922.



The Communists knew the power of the strong image as a propaganda tool

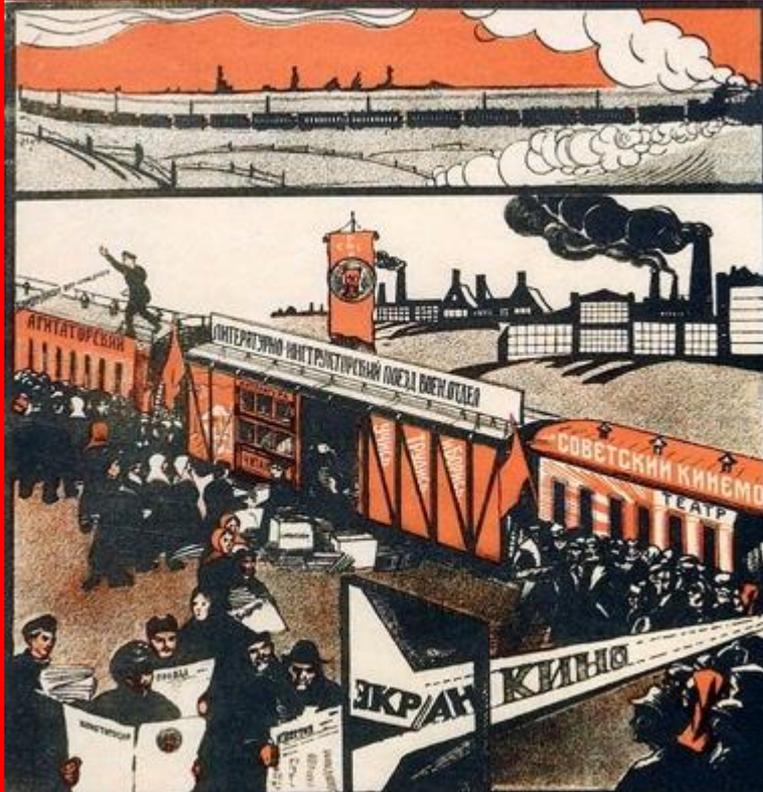
# Post revolution cinema in Russia

1918

Cinema is overseen and regulated by the People's Commissariat of Education (Narkompros)

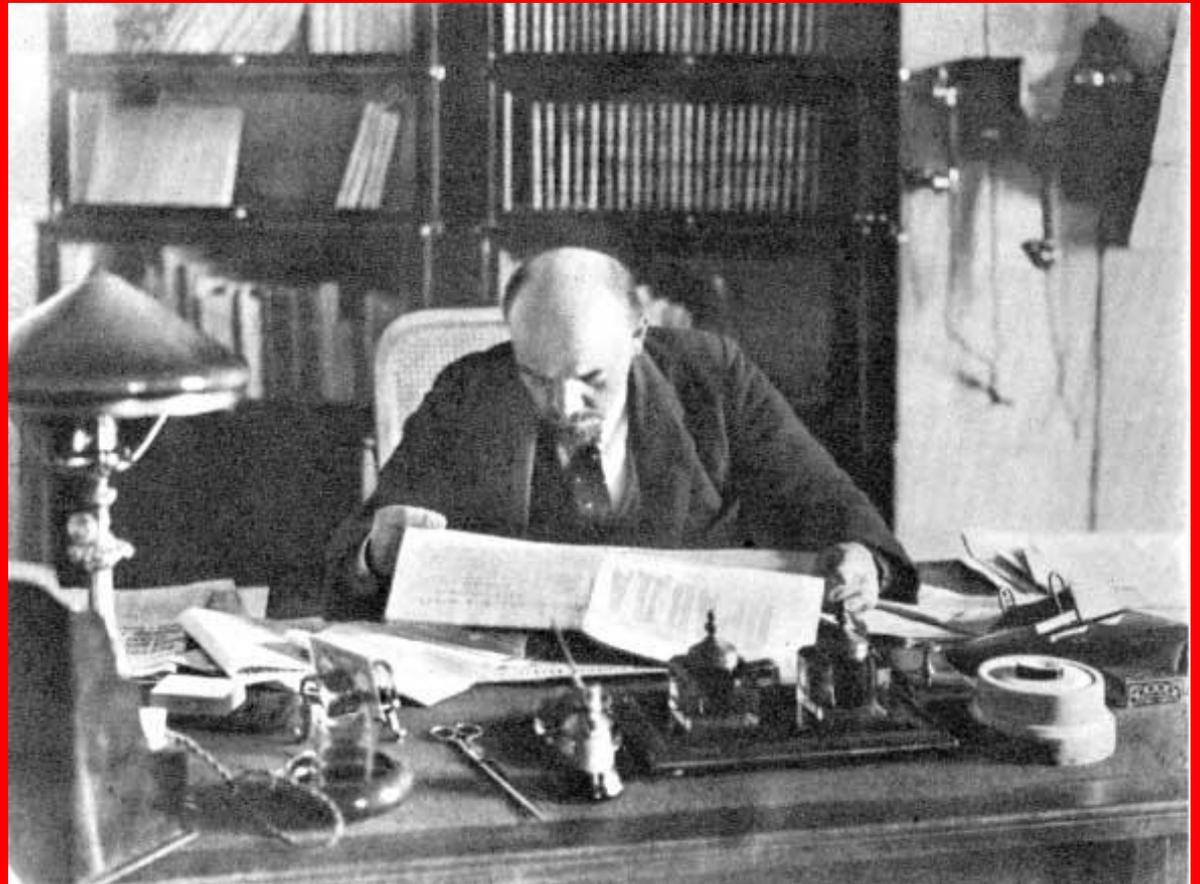
Private film companies close and actors, directors, technicians etc. flee, taking stars, experience production equipment and film stock

# 1919-1920 Nationalisation of cinema - film as propaganda



Agit-trains

In the early 1920s, Lenin decided to permit increased freedom in the arts, and the Soviet cinema opened up and began to explore new possibilities.



# What did this mean for the cinema industry?

- Anything that seemed to be bourgeois was seen as bad. This included the arts and cinema.
- Almost all filmmakers from pre-revolutionary times were labelled as bourgeois. The pioneers of the 1920s cinema were all new to the arts and were all in their mid-twenties
- The film industry was nationalised, and the films produced had to be pro-communist.

# Formalism

- Not only was **content** to be communist but a new, soviet style art was demanded.
- The key filmmakers from the 1920s set out to **structure** films in a way that was distinct from Hollywood.



- In 1924, Lenin died. After a short period of shared rule, Joseph Stalin took over the leadership of the Soviet Union, becoming a dictator.



- He had spies everywhere and the people had to work incredibly hard to make Russia a great country.

**He followed a programme of mass industrialisation.** Many people died of overwork and starvation.



1930s

Boris Shumyatsky  
becomes head of  
Shoyuzkino – answered  
directly to Stalin.

No more formalist  
experiments

‘Soviet Hollywood’



# Key points to remember:

- The Soviet Union was a brand new entity and at first, the world's only communist state.
- Lenin's early death and the civil war meant that the country's future was uncertain. It was vital to demonstrate a show of strength and unity.
- The country was a one-party state, so opposing political views were not legal.

# Key words and phrases in Soviet Cinema

- **Bolsheviks** – The Communists (Very good!)
- **Bourgeois** - The old middle class overthrown in the revolution (Very bad!)
- **Proletariat** – The working class, made equal comrades by the revolution (Very, very good!)
- **Tsarist** – Anyone supporting the rule of the deposed Tsar (Exceptionally bad!)

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# So that's bad, isn't it?

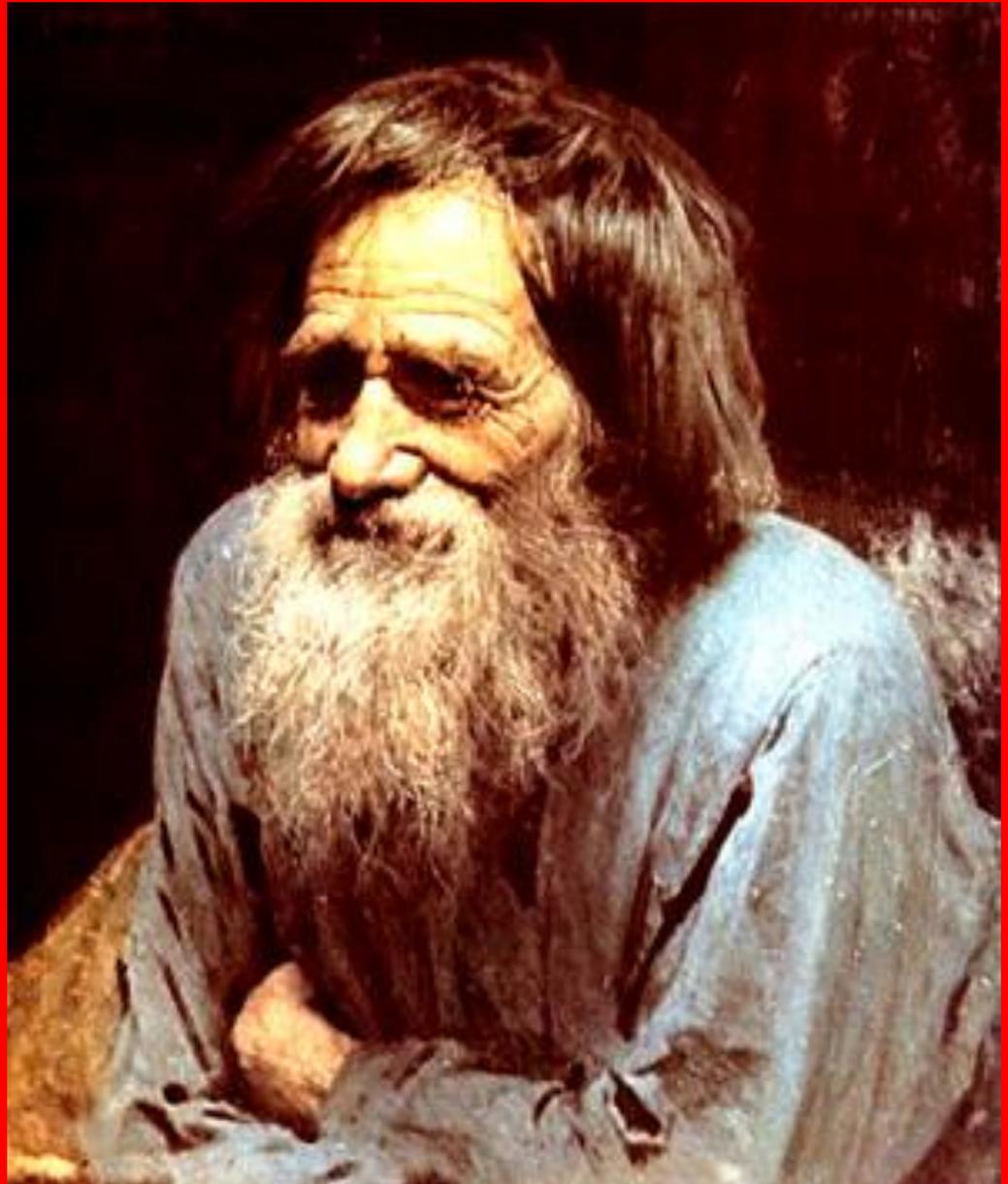
- A bunch of amateurs making propaganda films?

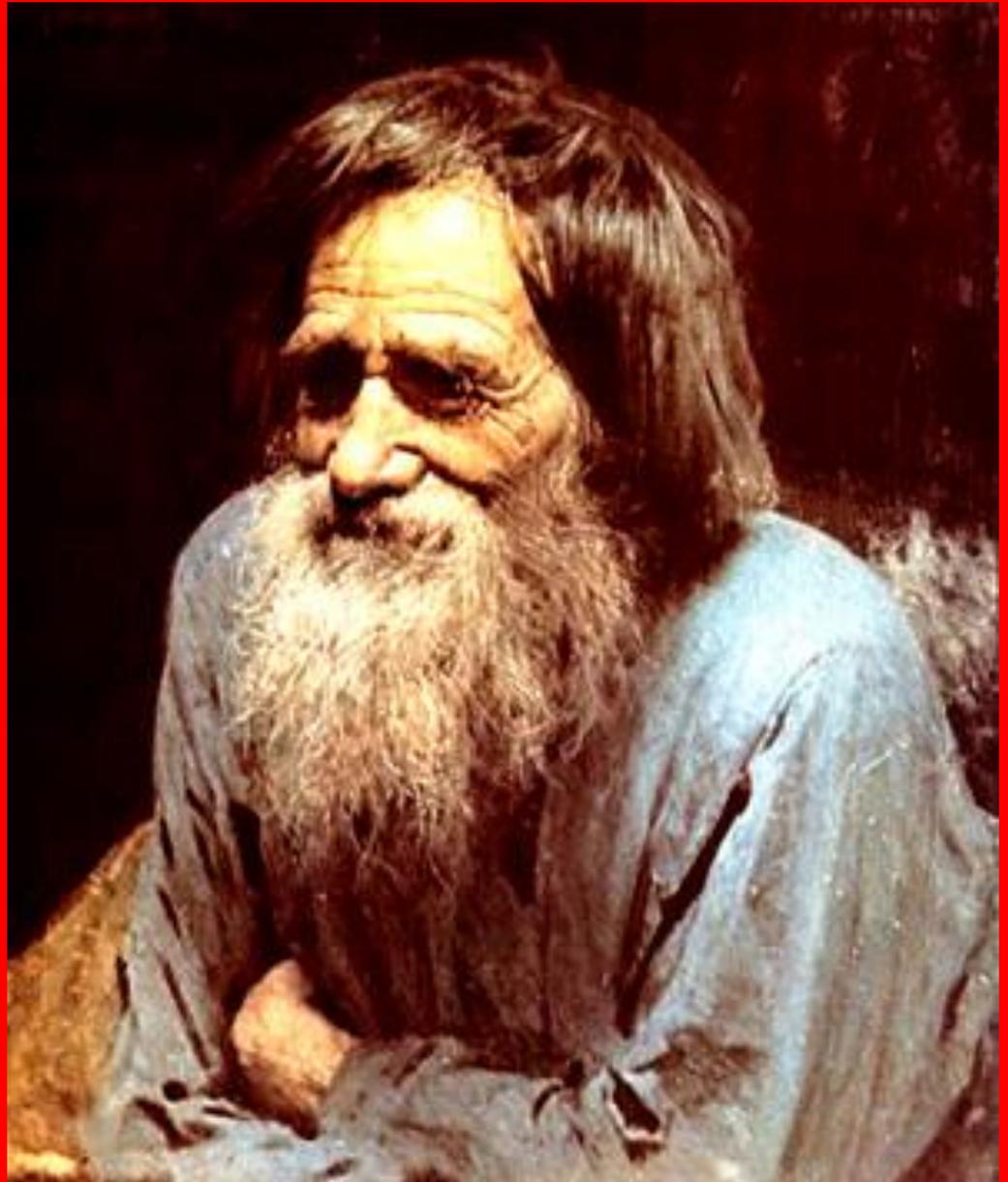
It gets worse: in the civil war days, film stock was hard to get hold of – being manufactured overseas – leaving the filmmakers having to use relatively small strips of odd film to work with, so (in the early days) no long takes.

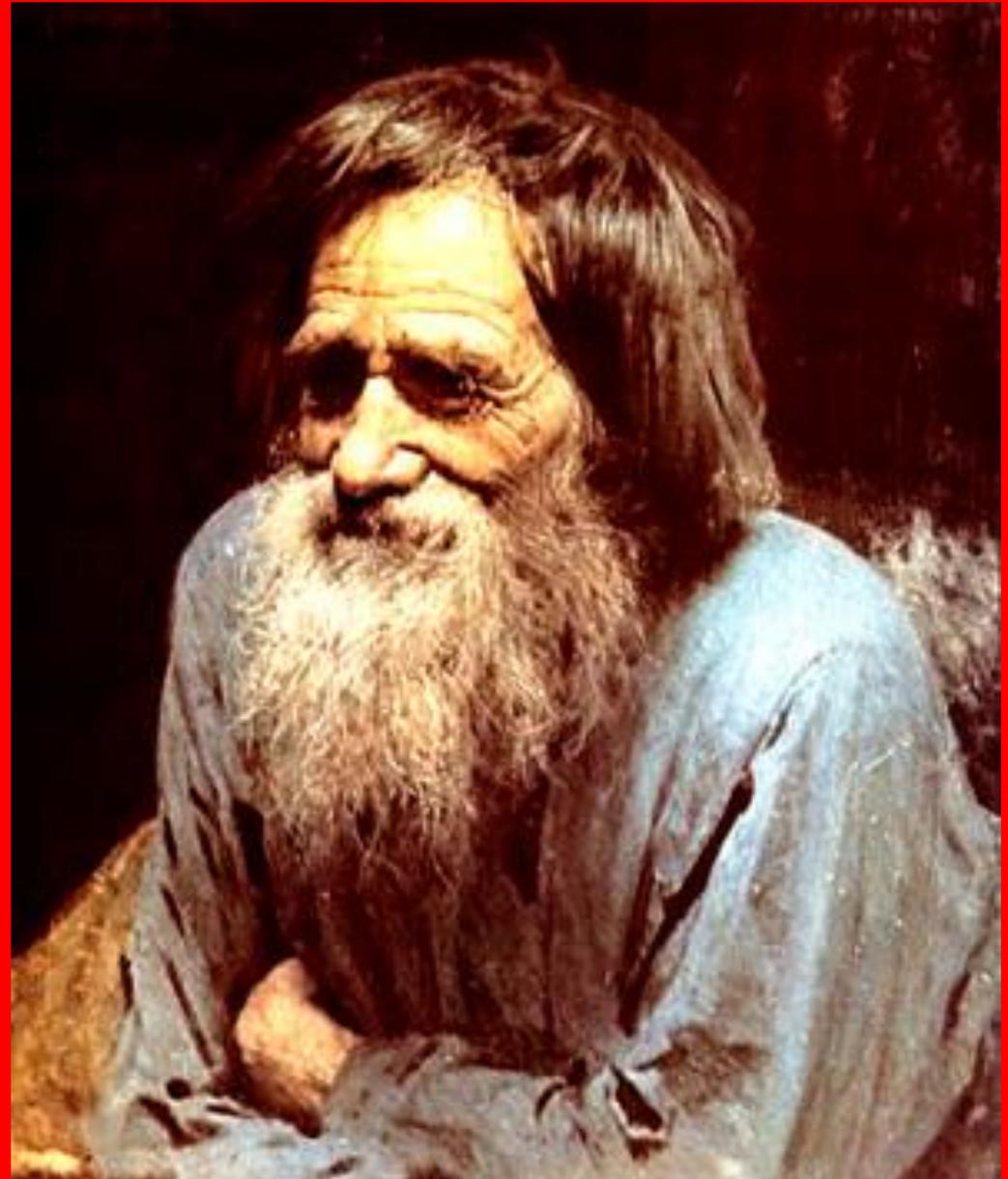
So, it's amateur propaganda films made on little scraps then? It sounds rubbish!

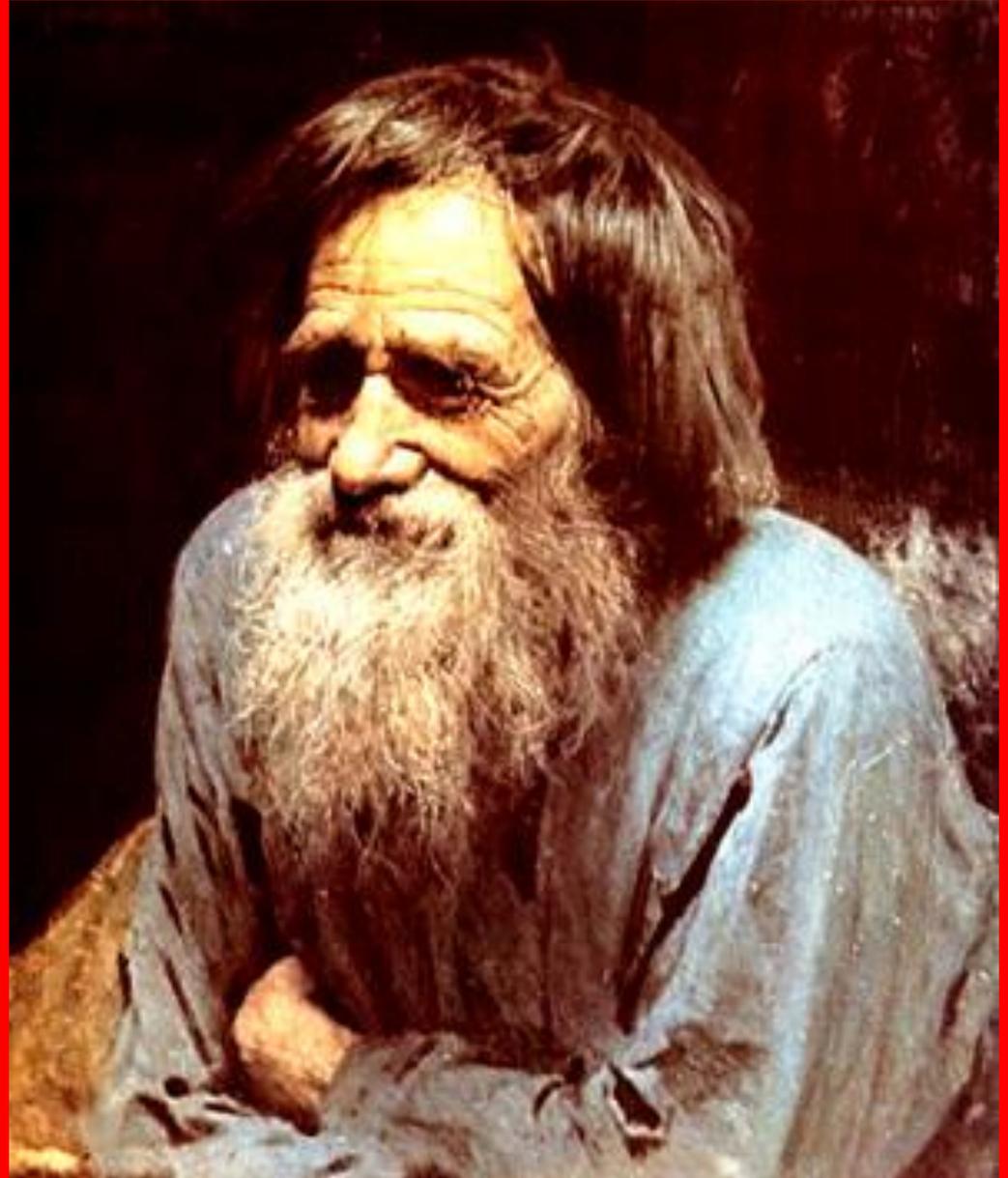
What is the old man thinking?







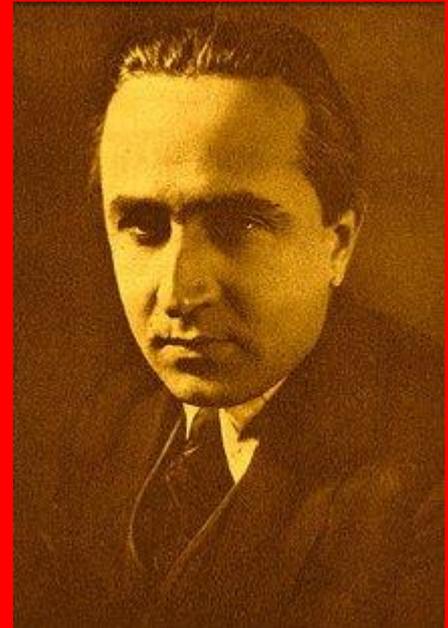




# Necessity is the mother of invention.

Lev Kuleshov was an important contributor to cinema as a filmmaker, a theorist, and as the teacher of Eisenstein and Pudovkin, two of the major filmmakers of the period.

He came up with **The Kuleshov Effect**



# The Kuleshov effect

The effect of leaving out a scene's establishing shot and leading the spectator to infer spatial or temporal continuity from the shots of separate elements



# Also...

‘Creative geography’

Multiple segments are shot at various locations and/or times and edited together to appear as a continuous place at a continuous time.

# Also...

- Pre-conceiving the shot via tableaux.

Thus performance is deliberately constrained and expressiveness comes from the editing.



+



= sadness



+



= hunger



+



= lust

Kuleshov's own  
films were still  
influenced by  
Hollywood

