

Cold War Film Story

By Erik Barnouw (1992)

In 1971-72 I visited film archives and studios in twenty countries in preparation for a history of the documentary film. My wife Dotty went with me; together we screened over 700 films. As we approached Moscow I felt nervous. Letters I had sent to its archive, documentary studio, and filmmakers association had all gone unanswered for months. What did this mean? Would our Moscow research plans go down the drain? Then in Belgrade -- last stop before Moscow -- a letter from the USSR awaited us. My letters had apparently covered at some point of authority where a decision could be made. I was given a Moscow phone number to call on arrival.

The number reached one Bella Epstein, a dynamic lady, a zealous film devotee. At Domkino, the House of Film, she explained in rapid Russian-accented English: "This is the headquarters of the Association of Film Makers of the USSR. A screening room is reserved for you each morning during your visit. My task is to get you the films you want to see, and arrange appointments. I did not know if you knew Russian; I assumed you did not, so I have arranged for a high school English teacher, Sonya Berkovskaya, to be released from her teaching duties while you are here, to be with you each day."

Astonishingly, this routine began promptly the following morning, with films from a wish-list I had sent with my letters. Heading the list were films of Dziga Vertov (Denis Kaufman) and his brother Mikhail Kaufman, Vertov's main cameraman and the central character in their famous film *The Man With The Movie Camera* -- which I showed annually in my course at Columbia University. Many of their other films had not been available in New York, including some episodes of their *Kino Pravda*

I discussed with Bella my special interest in the Kaufman brothers. The eldest, Denis -- who had renamed himself Vertov during the 1917 revolution (the name suggested a whirling motion, perhaps symbolizing a spinning film reel -- or revolution) was known in Russia as "father of the documentary" -- as Robert Flaherty was known among us as "father of the documentary." Their careers had striking parallels. Each had taken up film during the 1910's. After a brief period of prominence in the early 1920s, each had worked the rest of his life on the fringes of his nation's film industry, which preferred dream films. Both continued their missionary struggle for a new kind of film, not built on studio artifice. Both hated large production groups. Each worked closely with a wife and a brother, adding others as needed. Both died in the early 1950s. The genre they had created lived on and grew in importance.

I had become well acquainted with Frances Flaherty, Robert's widow, and with his brother David, and had learned much about early documentary history from

them. I hoped in Moscow to learn about Vertov's career and impact. If Mikhail Kaufman and Elizaveta Svilova, Vertov's widow, were alive, I hoped to interview them. And there was something else. In 1954 one Boris Kaufman, a World War II refugee from France, had scored an impressive success in the United States as cameraman for *On the Waterfront* and later for other films including *Baby Doll* and *Twelve Angry Men*. He too was said to be a brother of Vertov. Was this true? Some seemed to doubt it. In 1971 the University of California Press had published a book about Jean Vigo, a director with whom Boris had collaborated for several years in France, in which the writer P.E. Salles Gomes described Boris Kaufman as "a cameraman of Russian origin" and speculated:

Boris is often confused with Mikhail Kaufman, Dziga Vertov's brother and cameraman on the most important of the Kino Pravda films. Boris is perhaps the third Kaufman brother, the youngest, but it is also possible that Vigo and Boris deliberately created a myth.

I told Bella I hoped to sort all this out. She said she could tell me nothing about Boris, and did not know Svilova's whereabouts. But she knew that Mikhail Kaufman was alive. For years he, like Vertov, had lived under a cloud of official disfavor. But a rehabilitation seemed in process. Bella was clearly an admirer of Mikhail and anxious to arrange an interview.

Each morning at the screening room the young Sonya Berkovskaya, our attractive red-headed schoolteacher, sat between Dotty and me and did simultaneous translation. She astonished us with her easy, idiomatic English. At some time during each morning Bella was likely to pop into the screening room with an excited announcement such as, "We're lunching with the director Grigori Chukrai!" or "We will meet with Roman Karmen!" On the third morning she was more excited than usual. Mikhail Kaufman would come for an interview that afternoon.

This began a strange, memorable sequence. We conversed in a quiet Domkino lounge, drinking tea. On this occasion Bella herself did the translating. I had my tape recorder running. She treated Mikhail Kaufman with great respect, as some patriarchal leader. He had a courtly manner. In his mid-seventies, he seemed in good health but spoke slowly, with a quiet, resonant voice. Short questions often elicited long answers, which Bella obviously hesitated to interrupt, so our exchanges took time. After pleasantries and tea-pouring, we finally seemed ready for the interview. But Kaufman surprised me with an urgent question of his own. The following discussion, stretched out via Bella's translations, unwound slowly.

"Mr. Kaufman says he is worried about Boris. Do you know if Boris is all right?" He has not heard from Boris for several months."

"I don't know Boris. You mean they write to each other!"

"Mr. Kaufman says he writes to Boris often, and Boris writes to him."

"You mean regularly?"

"He says they write regularly."

"Do letters go through without difficulty?"

After Bella relayed this question, he considered before replying. Then Bella reported: "Mr. Kaufman thinks they are often read by others. There are delays. Usually the letters arrive."

"When did he and Boris last see each other?"

"1917."

"All this time letters have gone back and forth?"

"Yes."

"What could they write about?"

Hearing this question translated, Mikhail Kaufman smiled reminiscently. "I taught him cinematography by mail."

A saga gradually emerged. The Kaufman family originally came from Bialystok in the Polish part of the Czarist empire. Both parents were librarians. When World War -- the first -- erupted in 1914, they decided to take their sons eastward to what seemed the comparative safety of Moscow. Denis studied in St. Petersburg. But in 1917 he and Mikhail were caught up in the excitement of the revolution. Denis volunteered to the cinema committee and became Dziga Vertov. During the years of foreign intervention and civil war -- 1917-20 -- he helped to make "agitprop" films to further the Soviet cause. The parents meanwhile decided to take the much younger Boris back to Poland, away from the turmoil. As peace came to Europe, they sent him on to France for his education. In the young Soviet Union Vertov had become a writer of zealous manifestos, calling on film artists to play a formative role in shaping the new order -- not with dream films but with films of "Soviet actuality."

The idea won support from a high source -- Lenin. In 1922 Vertov, now joined by Mikhail, was able to launch a new kind of newsreel, Kino Pravda ("film truth"), with Mikhail as chief cameraman and Svilova as film editor. Major documentaries, such as *One Sixth of the World* (1926) were made as by-products of the newsreel. (Kino Pravda eventually became the inspiration for *cinéma vérité*.)

They worked ceaselessly. Vertov would outline larger strategies, then send Mikhail and other cameramen out to record events of the hour, glimpses of order emerging from chaos. Kino Pravda cameramen abhorred staged action: they caught moments in market-places, factories, schools, taverns, streets. Mikhail, with my tape recorder running, recalled those early days nostalgically. Not so the later period under Stalin, when rigid controls began to dominate the industry.

After the death of the Kaufman parents, Mikhail felt a special responsibility for the faraway Boris. He wrote to him regularly, telling him about the film work. Boris saw some of his brother's films in Paris and was drawn into similar work in France, winning attention with a 1930 Vigo-Kaufman collaboration, *A Propos de Nice*, a mordant portrayal of the upper-class playground, and with several subsequent successes. But when Hitler's armies began to overrun Europe, engulfing most of France in the early 1940s, Boris became a war refugee once more and embarked for Canada, where he found work as a cameraman with the National Film Board of Canada, which John Grierson was organizing. Later Boris entered the United States, became a U.S. citizen, and began a U.S. film career. The correspondence continued.

It seemed extraordinary to me that the mail link had persisted through a half-century of war and cold war. Had Mikhail and Boris ever talked by phone? No, Mikhail told us. I promised to inquire about Boris, and secretly resolved that I would some day seek out Boris, interview him, and let him hear once more his brother's voice.

Mikhail wanted us to see some of his own films made after the conclusion of the Kino Pravda series, especially *Moscow*, one of the earliest of the international wave of "city films" -- made with Ilya Kopalin in 1927 -- and the much admired *In Spring*. Bella screened both of them for us.

I sent an overnight cable to my colleague Stefan Sharff at Columbia, inquiring about Boris. I thought that Sharff, being Polish and a film maker, might know Boris or know where to find him. An answer came promptly. At the next meeting with Mikhail, over a long lunch, I was able to tell him that Boris was fine, but worried because he had not heard from Mikhail for several months. Mikhail was reassured by the news I brought him.

Mikhail gave me photos from his family album, including one I found especially haunting. It was from the Bialystok days, and showed the three brothers together. The two older boys were in school uniforms. Boris looked almost childlike beside them. I eventually used it in *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*.

Later at Columbia, I learned that Boris Kaufman lived on 9th Street in New York. His wife answered my phone call. I said I was anxious to interview Boris and mentioned that I had been in Moscow and seen Mikhail, and wanted to tell Boris

about it. Could she suggest a time for an interview? She seemed on guard, as though wondering if I might be a KGB agent, planning something ominous -- or perhaps an FBI investigator. She promised to call back but did not. I tried again later and again found her edgy and evasive. On my third try Boris answered the phone. He too seemed wary but finally set a time for a visit. It took place in his living room as Mrs. Kaufman watched from an adjoining room. I set up my recorder. Boris was brief in reply to my questions, but we managed to clarify several points in his career. In the United States his main achievements had been as cinematographer for feature films shot on location, such as *On the Waterfront*. In a sense these represented a continuation of his documentary beginnings. During the interview Boris made one comment that especially fascinated me. It concerned his brother Mikhail. Boris said, "Mikhail taught me cinematography by mail."

After the interview I brought out the cassette of my interview with Mikhail, asking Boris if he would like to hear his brother's voice. Without waiting for a reply I started the record. Boris continued to look uneasy, but soon a change came over him and he listened with growing intensity. As Mikhail talked about his work and the mysteries of the film medium, Boris kept exclaiming: "Our ideas are so similar! So similar!" It was clearly an emotional experience. Later I sent Boris a copy of the photo from Mikhail's album. He wrote back: "Thank you so much for the photo of the three of us. I didn't have it but somehow remember it. It isn't easy to face oneself through time, telescoping into the past. It brings back images, sounds, even odors." I had mentioned that I found the photo "haunting." He agreed that it evoked a feeling of expectation -- of a potential "never fully realized."

To me the unfolding of the Kaufman saga had been a wondrous story. I mentioned it to friends at the Museum of Modern Art, who at once conceived the idea of a MOMA exhibition of *FILMS OF THE KAUFMAN BROTHERS*, to include Vertov/Mikhail films (*Kino Pravda*, *The Man With a Movie Camera*, *One Sixth of the World*, etc.), Mikhail's films (*In Spring, Moscow*, etc.), and work done by Boris in France, Canada, and the United States (*A Propos de Nice*, *On the Waterfront*, etc.). It seemed a splendid idea for a major retrospective series. Weeks later I inquired how the plan was progressing, and learned that it had been quickly abandoned. Boris had said, "No! Absolutely not!" He was very distressed about it. "I have nothing to do with all that!" It seemed to me, sadly, that the Cold War and its blacklists had resumed their hold over him. It was a sad ending to a bittersweet tale.