

# ***A Study in Reds***

By Patricia R. Zimmermann

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Amateur films map the private sphere from the point of view of the participants, collapsing the borders between subject and object. These films trace the melodrama of personal life and the idealized projections of family. They graph the contradictions between the realities of family life bounded by class, race, and gender expectations and the fantasies of the nuclear family, and they also reveal the nation's unfinished production of obedient subjects and histories.

A major shift occurred in the definition of amateur film in 1923. Bell and Howell and Eastman Kodak colluded to standardize the amateur film gauge at 16mm, ensuring an oligopoly over cinema technologies for the consumer. With the standardization of 16mm, amateur film transformed from an entrepreneurial battleground for competing patents into a consumer commodity aimed at families and copying Hollywood narrative forms.

The Amateur Cinema League, the largest organization for amateur film aficionados in the United States, sought to reinvigorate cinema as an art form rather than as a corporate enterprise ensconced in Hollywood. Although the league championed antirealist formal approaches, it advocated a rededication to the art of cinema as the "seventh art" more than as anti-narrative visual experimentation. The league ran yearly contests, circulated amateur films, and held exhibitions, functioning as an Americanized, hobbyist version of the more avant-garde and politically oriented cine clubs.

The amateur films of Miriam Bennet, daughter of a well-known Wisconsin photographer, which are housed in the Wisconsin State Historical Society, exemplify amateur filmmaking that moved away from the nuclear family into the realm of narrative. Bennet's "A Study in Reds" (1927) creates an imaginary narrative where Wisconsin middle-class women are suddenly catapulted into Soviet society, a culture without men, without leisure, without capitalism. Produced before the stock market crash of 1929 and ten years after the Bolshevik revolution, the film is suspended between a series of global re-orderings. It also evokes the long tradition of social activity in the Midwest. The film suggests cinema as a collective, leisure-time, club enterprise. It also refutes the idea



*A scene from the Soviet fantasy portion of the film. Courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society.*

that all amateur film be collapsed in the universalizing rubric of the family-centered home movies.

This film invokes a performative narrative: the women in the film play at communism as they drop their children off at daycare, work in the fields, saw down trees, labor in the factories, participate in a firing squad. The film operates more as a record of fantasy than as a record of history. It presents history, instead, as an inflection of fantasy to restructure women's lives.

This performativity displays identity as that which can be remade differently on celluloid than in life, a malleable rather than an inert state. In "A Study in Reds," the snowy, barren landscapes of Wisconsin are refigured as the stark landscapes of the Soviets, a reimagining of space and place suspended between the ideological and the fantastic. What was Wisconsin is now Russia, what was middle class is now the worker, what was family life is now daycare.

Although the film could easily be read as an anti-

communist diatribe, showing the horrors of the life of a woman who is controlled by the party and forced to labor outside the home, the visual structure of the film circumvents its overt political ideology. Scenes inside a middle-class drawing room, with finely dressed ladies gathered in a circle for club meeting, bookend the narrative. Some embroider, some apply makeup, others are bored. The middle of the film, where the ladies are transformed into Bolsheviks, occupies the most screen space.

The film assigns more screen space to the Soviet fantasy section than to the more realist narrative inside the home. While the middle-class Wisconsin women sit on chairs inside the home, in the Soviet fantasy sequences they do physical labor outside, work on the farms, and operate heavy machinery. The film spatializes women's bodies differently within capitalism and communism. Although it mocks communist death squads as a reaction to insufficient egg production by hens, the film presents women as active producers.

"A Study in Reds" demonstrates how classical realist narrative and avant-garde tropes blur together in amateur film. The film employs realist cinematic forms, with long takes and minimal editing. It focuses on group activities, a visual trope in many amateur films that frequently recorded church, school, and country club performances. The camera is distanced from the subjects. "A Study in Reds" is shot mostly in medium and medium long shot, with very few close-ups and shots of individuals, a nascent cinema of collective identity. The Soviet section of the film evidences more plot development than the bracketing story: the day progresses, deviations are noted, a woman is slated for execution.

The film borrows visual tropes from surrealism, with a framing sequence spurring dreams. The first transi-

tion into the Soviet section is marked by blurred imagery, suggesting transformation. The second transition back to the middle-class parlor entails a close-up of clapping hands abstracted from space. Further, resonating with René Clair's 1924 surrealist film "Entr'acte," the film works with actors who perform as a group, ostensibly engaging in absurd activities like running machines and working the fields. Babushkas, groups of women, snow, aprons, fur hats, and stars sewn into coats signify communism.

"A Study in Reds" highlights the conceptual difficulties in reading amateur films as only histories from below. As the narrative mixes in fantasy, the question as to what history these images are actually documenting arises. This film transfigures historical facts and representations. The immobilization of the women in the bracketing story evokes enervation of middle-class women. Conversely, the fantasy story entails action through imaging different economic and social structures. "A Study in Reds" shows daycare, women's work, collective activity, images virtually absent from commercial films. While it can be read as an anticommunist warning about the horrors of communism for women, it can equally be read as the making-legible of fantasies beyond men and family.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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