Silents, Sound, and Modernism in Dmitry Shostakovich’s Score to the New Babylon (1928–1929)

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Abstract:

Although widely regarded by scholars and general audiences as one of the greatest of the last “silent” films, Novyi Vavilon (New Babylon, dir. Kozintsev and Trauberg, 1929) was initially a surprising failure. Even with its original score by the celebrated composer Dmitry Shostakovich, the film failed to fully satisfy audiences and critics at the time of its premiere. Since then, the musical score has been blamed for this initial failure, even though it was intended to be a significant contribution to a work that was designed to be innovative, properly socialist, and entertaining. This narrative, still spun in recent writings about the score, rarely acknowledges that this failure involved intertwining cultural and political issues related to the restructuring of the Soviet film industry and the establishment of a new relationship between sound and image. The score to New Babylon was created to explore this new relationship, which signaled the reevaluation of the musician’s role in music for cinema. Since New Babylon was the first Soviet film to have a full original score written by a professional Russian composer, Shostakovich’s compositional process was closely observed and necessarily required a collaborative effort between the composer and the directors Grigory Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg. The composer’s process was therefore a central issue during the film’s production. Examining this collaborative process, through the directors’ and composer’s writings about the music for New Babylon and the film’s reception, reveals much about perceptions of modernism and socialism in the whole work.

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Although widely regarded by scholars and general audiences as one of the greatest of the last “silent” films, Novyi Vavilon (New Babylon, dir. Kozintsev and Trauberg, 1929) was initially a surprising failure. Even with its original score by the celebrated composer Dmitry Shostakovich, the film failed to fully satisfy audiences and critics at the time of its premiere. Since then, the musical score has been blamed for this initial failure, even though it was intended to be a significant contribution to a work that was designed to be innovative, properly socialist, and entertaining. This narrative, still spun in recent writings about the score, rarely acknowledges that this failure involved intertwining cultural and political issues related to the restructuring of the Soviet film industry and the establishment of a new relationship between sound and image.¹ The score to New Babylon was created to explore this new relationship, which signaled the reevaluation of the musician’s role in music for cinema. Since New Babylon was the first Soviet film to have a full original score written by a professional Russian composer, Shostakovich’s compositional process was closely observed and necessarily required a collaborative effort between the composer and the directors Grigory Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg. The composer’s process was therefore a central issue during the film’s production.² Examining this collaborative process, through the directors’ and composer’s writings about the music for New Babylon and the film’s reception, reveals much about perceptions of modernism and socialism in the whole work.

Changes in Soviet film policy in 1928 and the modernist inclination of the directors both played significant roles in the creation of New Babylon and its score. The Party Conference on Cinema of March 1928 limited the scope of film politics and required cinema to be profitable, entertaining, and socialist while also being “intelligible to the millions.”³ This conference and other official declarations also addressed the integral role of music for moving pictures, requiring it to be created by “highly qualified musicians.”⁴ In August 1928, the well-known

“Statement on Sound” followed, in which directors Sergey Eisenstein, Grigori Alexandrov, and Vsevolod Pudovkin argued for the integration of sound and image; it also revealed their fear of sound’s potential to rob the images of their privileged ability to create meaning. New Babylon was released on the heels of this statement, in March 1929. It marked Shostakovich’s first experience in writing a film score and the last silent film by the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS), a group formed by Kozintsev and Trauberg that engaged modernist trends in the visual arts. The film was representative of its time. The directors used some of the same modernist techniques of their past films while also attempting to develop a story deemed applicable to current Soviet art politics.

Shostakovich and the directors desired a musical counterpart—that is, an “integral” score—that would support the techniques and narrative of the visual component of the film. They each theorized how the music should be integral in their writings and revealed how they collaboratively dealt with musical form and film editing, the creation of recurring motifs, and the usage of musical styles to represent characters. Broadly speaking, this collaboration and Shostakovich’s innovative score helped to shape the role of the composer in early Soviet film scoring.

The pre- and post-premiere reception adds another layer of complexity to the production politics of the film. Articles in the press and unpublished discussions from Lenfilm studio meetings and screenings revealed multiple perspectives on New Babylon’s success and how it related to current concerns for socialist themes in cinema. This reception was also dependent on the quality and level of cooperation of the cinema conductors and performers, some of whom were hesitant to accept a newly composed score. Such documents illuminate how the film’s codification as a formalist failure was dependent upon its perceived immediate success and failure, as determined by the studio, cinema houses, and the press.

The creative process of the film and its score, together with the issues of its reception, were therefore deeply affected by contemporaneous art politics. My discussion in this chapter addresses how New Babylon musically and cinematically represents FEKS’s last “eccentric” film while also pointing to future socialist realist trends in both filmmaking and film music. A focused analysis of notable moments in the score to the film, guided by the writings of Kozintsev, Trauberg, and Shostakovich, and informed by studio documents and press reception, forms the core of the discussion. This reading of the eccentric socialism of New Babylon ultimately reveals that things modernist and socialist were closely connected throughout this period—instead of opposed to one another—illustrating the complexity of the politics of Soviet music written specifically for film.

Inspired by the work of Émile Zola, Friedrich Engels, and Karl Marx, Kozintsev and Trauberg designed a story using the Paris Commune of 1871 as a metaphor for the proletarian struggle of the late 1920s. The story of the commune
was well known at the time and has been referred to as the “official mythology.” Their primary aim was to provide a positive portrayal of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” by comparing it with a corrupt French bourgeoisie. The result was a historical drama and proletariat lesson that attempted to educate and entertain its viewers—a tall order in a time when few Soviet-made educational films existed, the majority of which lacked the entertainment value of a Charlie Chaplin or Harry Piel film. The comparison of the bourgeoisie and the Communards was achieved through character typage and Soviet montage, techniques common to such films of the time, including Bronenosets Potemkin (Battleship Potemkin, dir. Eisenstein, 1925). Since historical films had “predictable fabula [story] with unpredictable narration,” the innovation of New Babylon would be found in its presentation. This presentation includes typing and montage, which help to define the two central characters (Louise and Jean) and classes (workers and bourgeoisie) of this eight-reel film. Louise is a saleswoman at the New Babylon department store who later becomes a passionate Communard; the soldier Jean is an average peasant-farmer who finds himself enlisted in the National Army to fight in the Franco-Prussian War and, eventually, the bourgeoisie’s battle against the Communards. Initially apolitical and romantically interested in each other, both characters eventually become involved in opposite sides of the class war and act as its typed representatives. In the last scene, Jean does nothing but watch Louise’s judgment and execution by firing squad while digging her grave. Although finally executed at the Père Lachaise Cemetery, the Paris Commune is celebrated in this film as a symbol of the struggle of the working class.

New demands in film policy required “intelligibility” both in film and in scoring. As a response to the 1928 Party Conference demands that highly qualified musicians be used for film scoring, the Lenfil’m studio branch of Sovkino specifically set out to hire Shostakovich for New Babylon because he was a young professional composer of international repute, and one of the “most talented and interesting young Soviet composers” of his time. At this point, Shostakovich had already experienced worldwide success with his Symphony No. 1 (1924–25), and had finished his Symphony No. 2, Dedication to October (1927). Regardless, the members of the studio administration were unsure of his skills as a film composer and hired a consultant, film-theater director and compiler Mikhail Vladimirovich Vladimirov, to ensure a “competent showing” of the score. Kozintsev related an alternate perspective on Shostakovich’s hiring, in which he focused on how he and Shostakovich musically fit together. After reportedly having seen a rehearsal of the The Nose, an opera that revealed the composer’s ability to musicalize the grotesquerie of Nikolai Gogol’s story, Kozintsev decided that Shostakovich would be the perfect composer for New Babylon.

In their writings, Kozintsev and Trauberg highlighted the collaborative process between themselves and the composer:
Our thoughts were the same: not to illustrate the frames, but give them a new quality and range. The music should be composed to go against the action of the film, revealing the inner meaning of the occurrences. That was not the only thing we thought up! The *Marseillaise* should shift into *La belle Hélène*, great tragic themes contrast with bawdy cancans and galops.\(^{20}\)

In an interview from 1984, Trauberg confirmed that there was an agreement between the composer and himself regarding the alignment of musical and cinematic ideas:

> He [Shostakovich] knew where the cancan and the funeral march should be. . . .
> I thought of mixing the cancan with the *Marseillaise* and Shostakovich just wrote it down like that. . . . [A]ll he needed was a list with the length of the scenes.\(^{21}\)

The three appeared to agree that music should specifically complement the film, as echoed in the “Statement on Sound.” This statement, written in August 1928 by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov, sought to theorize a role for sound in film that would allow the integrity of the Soviet montage style to be preserved and offered suggestions on how to synthesize image and sound. Such ideas led to new concepts such as the film composer and montage score, as a contemporaneous musicologist noted.\(^{22}\) Kozintsev, Trauberg, and Shostakovich were clearly aware of these arguments and sought to craft an original score that played an integral role in the creation of meaning, even if it was for a silent film.\(^{23}\) Having a specially composed original score for a Russian film written by a professional composer was therefore relatively exceptional at the time. As far as the directors, the composer, and the administration of the Lenfilm studio were concerned, *New Babylon* was intended to represent the new future of cinema and music.\(^{24}\)

Kozintsev’s writings evince a desire for a meaningful original score that avoided the contemporaneous practices of individual improvisation or orchestral compilations, and attempted to portray what he designated as the “inner meaning” of a film.\(^{25}\) A parallel is found in Shostakovich’s own words and music. In an article published just before the premiere of the film, Shostakovich protested against musical hackwork in the cinema, where pieces of music were cobbled together to illustrate the film.\(^{26}\) He declared, “Lack of space does not allow me to write further about so-called film music manuals (musical bits for tears, uprising, corrupt bourgeoisie, love, and so forth). I will say one thing: that this is such hackwork [khaltura], if not worse.”\(^{27}\) Instead of *khaltura*, he suggested that music should reflect and be guided by the individual film, and should strive to portray its “inner meaning”:

> The only correct path was to write special music, as it has been done, if I am not mistaken, in one of the first instances with *New Babylon*. When composing music to *Babylon*, I was guided least of all by the principle of mandatory illustration of every
shot. Mainly, I began from the principal shot in each sequence of shots. [Take,] for example, the end of the second part. The primary moment is the attack of the German cavalry on Paris. The part ends with a deserted restaurant. Total silence. But the music, despite the fact that the German cavalry is not shown on the screen, comes from the cavalry all the same, reminding the viewer of the impending menacing force.

Shostakovich proposed two principles in this article, which was the first of his writings to elaborate his theory of composing for film. The first, the principle of the shot or scene, involves music that symbolizes the general meaning of an entire scene; the second, his principle of contrasts, requires music that closely follows the rhythms of the shots, which may contradict the overall tone of the scene. Shostakovich demonstrated each principle with examples of original and borrowed music related to image and narrative.

Shostakovich’s examples for the first principle show various approaches to music as a dominant narrative force within a scene. The first example concerns the attack of the German cavalry on Paris, as related earlier. The music associated with the German cavalry guides the scene, first appearing with images of the cavalry at the beginning and reappearing at the end without these images. Having this music for the German cavalry reappear without its initial referent was intended to conjure the image of the cavalry and to represent war, thus making music the primary agent of meaning that drives the scene. The second example concerns the musical depiction of “the somber sentiments of the soldier” in part 7, wherein Jean attempts to find Louise but instead encounters the partying bourgeoisie. The music for this scene is anempathetic: it contrasts significantly with the musical characterization of the bourgeoisie, but it aptly evokes Jean’s mental state after he fails to find his beloved. By concentrating on Jean’s emotional state or generalizing the concept of war, Shostakovich actively employed the principle of the shot or scene, avoiding the objective and disconnected associations that were typically found in the technique of musical “illustration.”

The elements of contrast and contradiction found in Shostakovich’s first principle similarly permeate Kozintsev’s essays. Kozintsev often emphasized how contradiction and “visual ‘alliteration’” underscore the themes of this film:

The frames not only engage semantic synthesis, but many elements of the plastic arts (distinctive visual “alliteration”): lace on the counter and soap suds in the washtub of the laundresses; the dancing galop and the rotation of the day in the store; the fog of the garden and the steam of the laundry. Similarity of some elements are presented to contradict with contrasts of others: the abundance of “sales” and of emptiness, and the poverty of the [worker’s] shops.

The alliterative images that Kozintsev listed are entirely visual, with the exception of the galop. He realized the visual counterparts of the “dancing galop” and the “day in the store” through crosscutting between the cabaret and the New Kaganovsky, L., & Salazkina, M. (Eds.). (2014). Sound, speech, music in soviet and post-soviet cinema. Indiana University Press. Created from uncg on 2022-01-07 19:34:01.
Babylon store. Shostakovich found a direct musical realization of Kozintsev’s visual crosscutting, emulating its structure using musical blocks, each of which represented the chaotic New Babylon store, the train station attendees, or the cabaret and contained the same busied galops every time these images appear throughout part 1. These musical blocks correspond to characters or events in separate locales, including Louise and the busy store, the manager deciding on Louise as his “dessert,” and Louise receiving an invitation from the manager. The events as they correspond to musical sections appear in figure 2.1.

This part of the film is symmetrical and self-contained, corresponding to a block form, which can be expressed as ABCBDBA. Both A (“Train Station”) and B (“New Babylon Store”) recur, acting as structural signposts throughout the part. Although they contain different sections of music that seamlessly segue into each other, both “Train Station” and “New Babylon Store” have the features of a galop, that is, 2/4 meter with offbeat rhythms. The “Train Station” section is also a galop simply by association—this galop has the same melody and key, offbeat rhythms, and meter of a musical number titled “Galop” from Shostakovich’s contemporaneous satirical theater work, Klop (The Bedbug, 1929). Shostakovich therefore added another layer to Kozintsev’s alliteration by applying the principle of the shot or scene and using music that he stylistically signified as a galop.

The second half of Kozintsev’s statement concerns contradiction and contrast, another parallel to Shostakovich’s second principle of contrast. In his writings, Shostakovich discussed two specific scenes that exemplify this principle, the first of which is a waltz. There are only four waltzes in the score, three of which are musically different from one another; the fourth is a repetition. Of these three waltzes, two are quotations from preexisting works. One waltz and its restatement in parts 2 and 4, in connection with the bourgeoisie’s operetta performance, are built from quotations from Jacques Offenbach’s La belle Hélène. The third waltz, from part 6, in which the bourgeoisie are located in Versailles, is an identical quotation from Shostakovich’s The Bedbug. Since the waltzes from La belle Hélène and The Bedbug were written to be satirical, they can be read intertextually within the film as a socialist critique of bourgeois decadence and wealth.
A different form of satire operates in the final appearance of the waltz, which Shostakovich described as “frantic” and “obscene.”\textsuperscript{39} In this instance, a collision of multiple meanings to create the “satirically grotesque” results from the depiction of two events: Jean’s internal crisis at the end of the battle and the celebrating bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{40} In tandem with the film’s crosscuts between the battle in Paris (where Jean is situated) and the bourgeoisie in Versailles (who watch the battle like it is an operetta to be enjoyed) the music incrementally builds into a crescendo, hitting a climax as Jean turns to the distant bourgeoisie “filled with despair.”\textsuperscript{41} Until that point, the music had been characterized by asymmetrical phrase groupings and rhythms, internal cadences, and all the signifiers of waltz that had been presented earlier in the film. These textures and meanings build and finally coincide with the image of Jean turning to face the applauding bourgeoisie, who are too far away to see his internal crisis.\textsuperscript{42} The editing and music, however, encourage the viewer to empathize with Jean, resulting in an effect of the satirical grotesque that represents the composer’s and directors’ objective of moving beyond the usual illustration of standard compilation scores.
The second example of the principle of contrast mentioned by Shostakovich is considerably more ambiguous but has another parallel to contemporaneous filmmaking:

An interesting method is used in the Fourth Part. There is a rehearsal of the operetta. The music plays a rather well-known exercise by Hanon, which takes on different nuances in relation to the action. Sometimes it has a gay mood, sometimes boring, sometimes terrifying. 43

This variation approach that Shostakovich used operates both on a large scale—that is, through the entire fourth part—and in some cases, on a small scale, such as a brief ten-measure vignette (measures 44–54) that corresponds to the dancers at the rehearsal and an officer in the countryside. 44 As Shostakovich described, he varied the “well-known exercise by Hanon” (measures 44–54), which was likely borrowed from one of the piano exercises from The Virtuoso Pianist, by French composer and pedagogue Charles Louis Hanon (1819–1900). 45 It may have also been borrowed from a recurring motif in act 1, no. 3, of Offenbach’s La belle
Hélène, known as “Song of Oreste,” to reflect the mood and actions of the images. This small section represents the whole; it is a correlate to the multiple styles and themes used as recurring motifs within part 4 and throughout the entire score to represent specific characters or moods. The section begins with the cue “People dance at a rehearsal,” with rhythms, intervals, and melodic contour most similar to Hanon’s exercises 2 and 3 from The Virtuoso Pianist, and somewhat similar to “Song of Oreste.” The tonal center shifts from C to E-flat (measure 50) at the midway point of the section, where the designation “Officer smiles” appears. This cue corresponds to a visual cut to images of the countryside, where the officer smiles at his soldiers while they prepare the cannon. This specific moment and part 4 as a whole have a parallel in contemporaneous filmmaking: what Shostakovich described closely resembles a musical version of Soviet montage technique of the 1920s. Shostakovich insisted that his music
had contrasts, meaning that his score follows the nuances of the action, as revealed in the film editing that corresponds to measures 44–54, rather than following the overall tone or action of a scene. His discussion directly referred to the juxtaposed images of the soldiers in the countryside (who eventually meet the Communards) and the operetta rehearsals; a montage between two different groups of people in two different locales, who are eventually brought together in Versailles. This montage is reminiscent of both D. W. Griffith’s crosscutting and the “Kuleshov effect,” techniques that influenced the editing processes of many filmmakers of the 1920s. It is also reminiscent of the crosscutting that Kozintsev used to create the “alliterative” comparisons between the shop and the workers, described earlier. Shostakovich’s music and its “different moods”—that is, its various musical styles—correspond to the cinematic montage. Shostakovich’s discussion of part 4 can therefore be read as a brief moment (measures 44–54) in which the nuances of the music indicate that he emulated the editing of the scene; and it can be read more broadly as describing the multiple juxtapositions of place represented musically by juxtaposed leitmotifs or allusions to musical styles throughout the entire fourth part. This approach to musical juxtaposition resonates with Shostakovich’s principle of contrasts and implies that he followed the rhythm of the film (i.e., its editing style) instead of the scene’s tone or mood. Read either on a micro or macro level, this is the first written document by Shostakovich that suggests a direct influence of the cinematic montage techniques of the period on his music.

Shostakovich’s two main principles were similar to the ideas about music’s role in sound film that would permeate most film theory in the decades to follow, such as Siegfried Kracauer’s oft-cited notions of parallelism and counterpoint. Shostakovich’s principle of the shot or scene involved music that embodied the meaning of the shot or scene, whereas his principle of contrasts created music to follow the rhythm or editing of the scene and/or to contradict the primary mood a central character, as with Jean and the applauding bourgeoisie. The theorizing of these principles set Shostakovich apart from the musical-illustration improvisers and compilers, demonstrating that a composed score was indeed integral to the narrative of a film.

Following the discussion of his principles, Shostakovich reiterated his desire to avoid empty musical illustration and discussed how he chose leitmotifs to maintain what he called a “continuous symphonic tone.” He saw the primary goal of his music “to be in the rhythms and tempi of the film and to augment its impact”; borrowed music played a part in that continuity. This conception had a parallel to Kozintsev’s concept of the symphony:

The episodes were formed in a bundle of feelings and thoughts as parts of a visual symphony. Each of these, first and foremost, has distinguished emotional [and] rhythmic character. The sinister scherzo [for] the collapse of the Second Empire;
slow and sorrowful andante (siege of Paris); the gleeful theme of liberation (of the Commune); the stormy melody of the struggle; the requiem of the end. Thus, the real contour of the conception gradually appears.\textsuperscript{53}

Although Kozintsev’s musical conceptualization of the film-as-symphony refers to the dramatic tone of the work, it has resonance with Shostakovich’s notion of his score-as-symphony. Shostakovich strove to maintain the “continuous symphonic tone” that he associated with the symphony as a genre.\textsuperscript{54} What results is either continuous music or a fragmented, montagist approach to the music’s form that directly mirrors the action, the pacing and editing, the character development, and the emotional content in every reel of the film.\textsuperscript{55} To maintain this continuity, Shostakovich stated that he used the “leitmotif,” implying a nineteenth-century and specifically Wagnerian practice, quarrying from “dances of the epoch (waltz, cancan), a few of which use melodies from Offenbach’s operettas,” among other tunes.\textsuperscript{56} These statements are verified in the score; he utilized specific tunes and excerpts from Offenbach’s operettas.\textsuperscript{57} The waltz, for example, was a “dance of the epoch” that he evoked several times to represent the partying bourgeoisie, whereas other melodies were borrowed from Offenbach’s \textit{La belle Hélène} and his \textit{The Bedbug}.

Shostakovich also used “French folk and revolutionary (‘Ça ira’ and ‘La carmagnole’) songs” throughout the score to maintain a link to both the French revolutionary past and to common 1920s Soviet theater practice.\textsuperscript{58} He asserted that “La Marseillaise” represents Versailles (the bourgeoisie), while “La carmagnole” and “Ça ira” appear in strong connection with the Communards.\textsuperscript{59} Of the three French songs, the “Marseillaise” is prominent throughout and, as Shostakovich wrote, “sometimes appears in the most unexpected interpretations (cancan, waltz, galop, and so forth).”\textsuperscript{60} The “Marseillaise” appears in partial statements in parts 3 and 4 to symbolize the defeat of the Communard Army and in a full statement in part 5 to foreshadow the battle.\textsuperscript{61}

This statement of the “Marseillaise” is a clear example of Shostakovich’s principle of the shot or scene, whereby the music aligns itself with the scene, “anchoring” the meaning—that is, using \textit{ancrage}, to borrow Roland Barthes’s terminology.\textsuperscript{62} In the scene set in Versailles just before the battle, an actress-singer at the bourgeoisie’s operetta climbs upon a table, rifle in hand, to lead the bar full of the National Army and the bourgeoisie in a rendition of the “Marseillaise,” as indicated by italicized intertitles that quote the lyrics of the song. Yet after a full orchestral statement is made to accompany the actress-singer, the horns begin a second statement of the tune in C major layered over a string statement of Offenbach’s “Cancan in B-flat Major” from \textit{Orphée aux enfers}, thereby colliding associations of war (horns, the “Marseillaise”) with associations of decadence and the bourgeoisie (cancan) that had already built up separately throughout the score.
These two quotations merge into a variation based on both musical ideas. Shostakovich used instrumentation (brass versus strings) and key (bitonality) to differentiate between the tunes, calling attention to their differences and their meanings, while creating a musical transition from the full statement of the “Marseillaise.” The music of the cancan and the “Marseillaise” was likely composed to coincide with the images and intertitles of “Paris the gay” and “Paris the carefree” intertwined with images of the legs of cancan dancers cut from earlier reels of the film and shots of the singer at the bar. The musical equivalent of this example...

Example 2.4. Continuation of Marseillaise quotation from part 5. At this point, the Marseillaise, in the horn, is layered over a statement of Offenbach’s cancan in the strings (flute, oboe, and lower strings are tacet or doubling in this section, and are omitted). From Yakubov, “Novyi Vavilon,” 349 (measures 286–89).
crosscutting, or montage of images of different locales, is reflected in Shostakovich’s sensitive reworking and layering of the “Marseillaise” and the cancan. The superimposition of these tunes acts as an aural complement to the visual segue from the specific space of the bar scene to the general idea of the bourgeoisie. The simultaneity of, yet stark difference between, both tunes emulates the editing and the juxtaposition of the images while also representing the main idea of the scene, thus illustrating Shostakovich’s principle of the shot or scene and principle of contrast. The resulting effect is the mirroring of the horizontal montage on the screen with vertically layered musical ideas. At the same time, the music abides by Kozintsev’s notion of contrast and irony; he wrote, “Great tragic themes contrast with bawdy cancans and galops.” The “Marseillaise” and the cancan are both firmly associated with the defeat of the Paris Commune and the corruption of the bourgeoisie by this point in the film, but the contrast between the two themes themselves—a patriotic idea and a tune associated with the evocative dancing of Parisian music halls—could be read as a commentary on the insincerity of the bourgeoisie. The layering of these two themes therefore serves several functions: it cyclically refers to the party scenes from the earlier reels of the film while also representing the images of the current scene, thus anchoring the images on the screen while simultaneously foreshadowing the eventual victory of the bourgeoisie, whose sense of patriotism is insincere and misdirected. Layered music, which references specific musical codes associated with the themes of the film and comments on the actions of characters, ably reflects Shostakovich’s intentions of an actively engaged musical score.

As the writings by Shostakovich and the directors have shown, the score was intended to be “integral” instead of merely illustrative. Although, similar to compilers, Shostakovich borrowed music from the past, his desire was to attend to the image with greater specificity—to integrate image and music—as opposed to producing spontaneous and generalized responses to the images. These efforts, however, did not guarantee an overwhelmingly positive reception for the music or the film. Recent and contemporaneous writings alike have claimed that Shostakovich’s music was the source of the film’s failure, whether it was copying errors, lack of rehearsal and eventual alignment with the film, or the musical complexity of the score. These factors, however, were not the only reasons for the film’s presumed failure. Contemporaneous arguments about the appropriate “Soviet” quality or the intelligibility of cinema were applied to New Babylon; as a result, its reception was complex and varied. As Kozintsev retrospectively related in his book Glubokii ekran (The Deep Screen), there were multiple points of view on the usefulness, intelligibility, and success of the film. The variety of opinions about the content and the style of the film revealed that critics, film workers, and the public at large were still unclear as to whom the cinema served and what was “intelligible” and permissible in Soviet cinema.
The issue of intelligibility was no doubt clouded by the terrible performances of Shostakovich’s score in the premiere of the film in certain theaters. As Yuly Vainkop related:

An overly enthusiastic cinema entrepreneur was too hasty in sounding the alarm about Dmitry Shostakovich’s music to the film New Babylon, by ascribing the film’s failure to the young composer’s supposedly unsuccessful music. This classic maneuver of shifting the blame onto someone else’s shoulders should have met with the appropriate rebuff, particularly since this accusation is supported by many cinema conductors deprived of “royalties” for their musical-illustrational compilations due to the presence of a ready score . . .

This music is played horribly everywhere, although to be fair we should say that M[ikhail] V[ladimirovich] Vladimirov (conductor at the Picadilly cinema) treated it with more care than the rest, achieving the most piquancy and expressiveness and the fewest mistakes and [least] tempo confusion.66

Others also related that the performances at theaters in Leningrad and Moscow were unsuccessful. Lev Arnshtam related how badly Shostakovich’s music was performed, claiming that the composer ran from theater to theater only to find that orchestras were nearly destroying his score.67 As Vainkop suggested, however, Shostakovich’s music was not necessarily to blame. Since the music was given to theater orchestras, like those of the Picadilly and Gigant cinemas, only days before the premiere, conductors were generally unable to rehearse the orchestras well.68 Orchestras such as these were unaccustomed to performing specially tailored scores of this level of difficulty, which left much work to be done on the part of the conductor. The music itself was otherwise deemed to be intelligible and of high quality. The administration of Sovkino screened the film almost a month before its premiere and recommended evaluating Shostakovich’s music through a performance of it with the screenings of the film. As Sovkino related:

His music is distinguished by its considerable closeness to the style and rhythm of the film, by great emotional strength and expressivity. The effect of the picture is greatly heightened. Furthermore, despite the originality and freshness of the form, the music is sufficiently simple and can be appreciated by the mass viewer.69

After the film’s premieres in Moscow and Leningrad, most critics found the score to be successful, especially in fulfilling the party’s directives for the new Soviet film. As reviewer M. Gartsman claimed, “Dmitry Shostakovich carried out the instructions of the Party assembly: his music is an integral part of the film. And we will add, one of the best parts.”70 This reviewer and others also praised Shostakovich for his ability to fuse image and sound. They also positively noted his ability to evoke the ideology of the film specific to the historical era through revolutionary songs, such as the “Marseillaise.” The idea of the music being “one of the best parts” is further supported by surveys taken by Sovkino at workers’
clubs, which are currently housed in the Gosfil’m archive. Most of the audience at these clubs enjoyed the film and its music, ranking the music alongside their usual favorite elements: cinematography and the performances of the actors. Shostakovich’s music was therefore received well and considered intelligible by the studio and by audiences at some venues before and after the film’s premiere screenings.

Yet, critic Kliment Korchmaryov found fault with the score, claiming:

Shostakovich, a very talented person, came to this work without enough care; he obviously wrote the music hurriedly, [and] as a result of that, it emerged uneven in quality and style; among the simple, even primitive presentation of the borrowed material (the “Marseillaise,” the “Carmagnole,” fragments from the operettas of Offenbach), there was much muddled atonal music, which was difficult to perceive. The most successful music [belonged] to the first part, where the composer emphasizes the dynamics of the film language well.72

Korchmarev’s mixed review focused mostly on the “uneven quality” of the work, its “primitive borrowing” of musical material that led to “atonal muddle” and the “extraordinary technical complexity.” He did credit Shostakovich with emphasizing the dynamics of the film language well—that is, the film’s editing. Korchmarev mainly concentrated on the first part, which is likely the most easily understood reel of the film, since the blocky quality of the music mirrored the crosscutting of the reel and reflected the symmetry of the film’s language, thereby resulting in montagist-sounding music. But a negative tenor dominates this review. This negative language continued into the 1930s, when film music critic Ieremia Ioffe discussed the score to New Babylon in connection with the “formalism” and “constructivism” of the late 1920s.73 This criticism is also similar to that directed at the film, for multiple critics representing the Communist Youth International and from Komsomol’skaia Pravda described the film as “formalist,” “aestheticist,” “art for art’s sake,” and “expressionistic,” all pejoratively referring to earlier modernist art practices that they felt were represented in the film’s lighting, mise-en-scène, and editing.74 Despite the generally positive reception and the attempts by the studio, directors, and composer to create an intelligible and socialist work, the aspects of cinematic and musical style initially resulted from a mixed reception that eventually became wholly negative.

Although New Babylon was intended to be “intelligible,” its perceived stylistic modernism generated varied reactions. Reviewers complained that the film was too “formalist” or “aesthetic,” using language that foreshadowed the criticism of the following decades. This often meant that the film editing was too quick and fragmented, and the shooting and lighting too dark and impressionistic for reviewers who were looking toward a new era of intelligibility and, inevitably, socialist realism. The music followed the film quite closely, as reviewers
and Sovkino noted, emulating the tone, mood, tempo, and rhythm of the film editing. This approach to the composed score was relatively new for this time, since the intent of both the composer and the directors was to depict the “inner meaning” of the film, instead of merely providing simplistic musical illustration. The music was therefore as sophisticated and innovative as the music of future sound films.

Although the requirements for creating music that was integral to the film had been met, Shostakovich’s score, like the film, was nonetheless received as difficult and formalist. This reception might be explained by his principle of contrast, or more specifically, his grotesque manipulation and development of borrowed material, including Offenbach’s waltzes and French revolutionary songs. Shostakovich’s main goal was to “intensify [the film’s] impression” with his score; therefore, he also paid special attention to the interaction of aspects of film form and musical material. Shostakovich managed to create a score “in the [same] tempo and the rhythm of the film,” which was reflected in the montagist approach to musical form and the layering of motifs throughout the film. The superimposition of the “Marseillaise” and the cancan is one example of how he created a multivalent musical equivalent to the montagist editing, realizing an approach that he theorized in both of his principles.

Some of the socialist aspects of this film are found in its content, in particular its treatment of the well-known topic of the Paris Commune. Although FEKS had made earlier films that broached socialist topics, this film was the first to use the concept of a commune and to fulfill the new requirements for film discussed in 1928. As David Bordwell has argued, New Babylon was one of the “historical-materialist films [that] paved the way for socialist realism in [its] use of referentiality [and] exemplary heroes.” Yet the “negative” topic of the Paris Commune and the manner of reinforcing a socialist agenda in New Babylon was not the way in which socialist realist films would develop in terms of plot. Instead, the positive hero, as seen in the Maxim Trilogy (1934–38), was to become the stereotype for socialist realist film. The mixed reception of the film and its music shows that critics, filmmakers, and the public at large disagreed as to what “Soviet” film should become.

Though New Babylon was one of the last modernist films of the 1920s, it had characteristics that subtly pointed to socialist realist trends that would appear several years in the future. The unsettled reception of the film and its music show that ideas about how Soviet film should be defined were quickly changing toward a new aesthetic that consciously deviated from modernism. It is no surprise that New Babylon was deemed one of FEKS’s last modernist film experiments. Yet it was Shostakovich’s first opportunity to negotiate moving image and sound and, importantly, the politics of the film industry and its developing relationship to
the film composer. His next score, for the film Odna (Alone, dir. Kozintsev and Trauberg, 1931), was a stylistic departure from New Babylon and allowed him to continue to negotiate his role and to develop as a film composer, gradually adopting aspects of socialist and realist aesthetics as part of his approach to film scoring.

Notes

All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. My sincere thanks to Alexander Burry, Arndt Niesbisch, Peter Schmelz, and Gillian Anderson for their assistance and suggestions.


2. For a discussion of earlier attempts at original scoring in Russia and Shostakovich’s role in that history, see Joan Titus, Hearing Shostakovich: Music for Early Soviet Cinema (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).


4. Ibid., 212.


7. According to Trauberg, the directors likely intended New Babylon to be “intelligible,” even though they may have misunderstood what that meant. Their film style was dependent on montage technique, which was considered modernist by 1928. Leonid Trauberg, “An Experiment Intelligible to the Millions,” in Taylor and Christie, Film Factory, 250–51.

8. The reception and performance history of New Babylon has been complex and controversial, and has led to multiple versions, all of which are considered here. For a detailed performance history and detailed analysis of the overall film score, see Titus, Hearing Shostakovich.


10. The development of the scenario was complex and inconsistently discussed. See Grigorii Kozintsev, Glubokii ekran (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), 105; Leonid Trauberg, “Comment est


12. Ibid., 235.


16. See Fay, Shostakovich, 32.


18. Kozintsev, Glubokii ekran, 120. For details on the process of the hiring of Shostakovich, see Titus, “Modernism, Socialist Realism, and Identity,” chap. 3.

19. Kozintsev, Glubokii ekran, 120. For his impression of the rehearsal of The Nose, see also Grigorii Kozintsev, “Deriuga i dudochka” (Sackcloth and a Fife), in D. Shostakovich, Stat’i i materialy (D. Shostakovich, Articles and Materials), ed. G. M. Shneerson (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1976), 122. See also Wilson, Shostakovich, 86–87.

20. Kozintsev, Glubokii ekran, 120. See also Wilson, Shostakovich, 87–88, for her translation and interpretation of this passage.


25. Kozintsev, Glubokii ekran, 120.


28. I translate this as “part,” but it can also be translated as “reel.”


30. Ibid.

31. Anenpathetic describes how music contradicts or plays against the meaning of the image, thus creating irony. This term was coined by Michel Chion and has been used by Claudia


33. This form breakdown includes the “Invitation to the Ball” as part of “Saleswoman,” that is, part of “D.”


35. For these waltzes, see Yakubov, “Muzyka D. D. Shostakovicha,” 83, 222, 388, 455. For a more detailed discussion of each of these waltzes and their origins, see Titus, *Hearing Shostakovich*.

36. See act 2, entr’acte of Jacques Offenbach, *La belle Hélène*, Chatelet Theatre Musicale de Paris/Marc Minkowski (EMI Records/Virgin Classics, 7243-5-45477-2-0, 2001), approximately forty seconds into track 1. This recording is based on the critical edition by Robert Didion, which contains sections, as in act 2, that do not appear in other editions.

37. The voicing (instrumentation) and form are different between the two works, but the key is the same (D minor and G major). Compare Yakubov, “Muzyka D. D. Shostakovicha,” 387–90 (measures 109–40) and “waltz” (track 9) on Shostakovich, *Theatre Music*, which corresponds to the piano reduction of the waltz made by the composer, and “Waltz,” in Dmitry Shostakovich, *Muzyka k dramaticheskim spektakliam* (*Music to Plays—For Piano*), ed. Lev Solomon (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1977), 16. Bernatchez also mentions that this waltz is like a galop from *The Bedbug*, but she fails to specify any further details. See Bernatchez, *Schostakowitsch*, 145–46.


42. For greater detail on the musical nuances of this scene, see Titus, *Hearing Shostakovich*, chap. 4.

43. Shostakovich, “O muzyke,” 5. This particular section has been often mistranslated with the word galop instead of “exercise by Hanon.” See Pytel, *New Babylon*, 26; Bernatchez, *Schostakowitsch*, 123, 252.

44. Yakubov, “Muzyka D. D. Shostakovicha,” 225. In Yakubov’s edition of the score, this music corresponds with directions from Shostakovich’s manuscript, which are “People dance at a rehearsal” and “Officer smiles.” See ibid.


46. The designation “act 1, no. 3” refers to the edition of *La belle Hélène* as it appears in Offenbach, *La belle Hélène* (Chatelet Theatre Musicales de Paris/Marc Minkowski). This melody from “Song of Oreste” reappears twice, for “March and Couplets for the Kings” and in the finale of act 1. See also Bernatchez, *Schostakowitsch*, 123–24.

52. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. See Titus, *Hearing Shostakovich*.
64. Fay, *Shostakovich*, 50; Egorova, *Soviet Film Music*, 10; Wilson, *Shostakovich*, 86. See also “V pravlenie Sovkino” (To the administration of Sovkino), April 8, 1929, in TSGALI SPB, f. 257, op. 5, d. 31, p. 79; David Robinson, “When Filmmaking Was All about Circus and Scandal,” *London Times*, January 20, 1983, 8.
70. M. Gartsman, “Ne plokho, no i ne sovsem eshche khorosho,” *Sovetskii ekran* 15, April 9, 1929.
71. Sovkino report from “Novyi Vavilon,” Gosfil’mofond: sektzia 1, f. 2, op. 1, ed. khr. 597, ll. 50–54. Although the report does not directly state that Shostakovich’s music was used for the showings of the film, Shostakovich was asked to write alternate versions for piano and small ensembles for smaller venues. See “Letter to Sovkino,” December 7, 1928, in TSGALI SPB, f. 257, op. 5, d. 31, p. 12; and “Pis’mo zam. direktora leningradskoi kinofabriki ‘Sovkino’ tov. Bykova v pravlenie ‘Sovkino’” (Letter from the Deputy Director of the Leningrad Film Studio Sovkino Comrade Bykov to the Management of Sovkino), in Gornitskaia, *Iz istorii Lenfil’ma*, 254–55.
76. Ibid.
77. Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 269.