

TURKSIB

VIKTOR TURIN, USSR, 1929

Screening: Saturday 21 April, 7 pm



Image courtesy of bfi Stills, Posters and
Designs

The Film

Turksib was made to illustrate the importance of the 1445km Turkistan-Siberia railway to the people of those areas and the rest of the Soviet Union. The building of the railway was one of the great achievements of the first Soviet Five Year Plan, and the film was released in the USSR while the railway was still in construction to speed the drive for its completion.

The film's epic depiction of the building of the railway achieved successful merging of political ideology with film style. It has been described as 'anti-pretty' by Jay Leyda; however its direct style includes some boldly beautiful images. Turin organised his material carefully, particularly wanting to avoid what he felt was the greatest defect in documentary or 'culture-films' of the time: the tendency towards 'a tiresome hodge-podge of shots spliced together with merely mechanical links.' He wrote in his proposal 'From the very outset it is necessary to approach the work of filming *Turksib* not as one would approach a culture-film, even in the broadest interpretation that can be given this term, but as a film without actors, de-

manding no less attention than the making of any story film. If we do it this way we may be sure that our film on the building of the Turkistan-Siberia railway will be not only useful and cultural, but entertaining and emotional as well.'

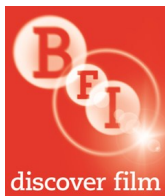
The footage in *Turksib* covers a wide range of geographical areas and subjects and could have become a conventional travelogue in less skilful hands. Instead, as K.J. Coldicutt has written, 'Turin's scenario and editing have given the material a classical form and a rhythm that make it analogous to a symphony. After the introduction, *Turksib* is divided into five parts or movements. Each part deals with a separate and clearly defined aspect of the subject, but throughout the film there are recurring themes which help to intensify the total effect, at the same time providing strong continuity links ... The last part is a sustained whole, and is largely recapitulation, leading up to rhetorical conclusion.'

Turin collaborated on the English version with John Grierson, who, as he did with *Battleship Potemkin*, recut the film for its distribution in the UK. Unlike *Potemkin*, *Turksib* was granted a British censor's certificate – doubtless due partly to its less overtly revolutionary subject matter – and opened in the UK in 1930 to immediate acclaim. The English version retains the dramatic impact of the struggle between man and nature which appealed to audiences and was less controversial than the 'oppression and hate' one contemporary reviewer perceived in other Russian films of the time. The *Bioscope* reviewer claimed that '*Turksib* is greater than *Potemkin* and [*The End of*] *St. Petersburg* because the director chose a more exalted theme. He showed us men and women; a

GALA SCREENING

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The 15th British Silent Film Festival



nation throwing themselves with the fullness of the old revolutionary spirit into a constructive revolt against the uncultivated. It is a picture of the civilisation of man versus the savagery of stark nature and it is done without a wasted foot of celluloid.'

The Bioscope reviewer went on to declare 'It is real screen history taken on the spot as that history was made. To Turin goes the credit of assembling, in a cogent strip, a kaleidoscope of rare beauty and charm; one of the most thrilling chapters of screen history ever written in the language of the eye.' Indeed, it is the combination of social purpose and cinematic style which gives the film its power. As Paul Rotha wrote: 'Turksib marked the beginning of a new documentary method and has probably had more influence on later developments than any other picture.'

Ros Cranston, Curator, BFI National Archive.

The Music

Bronnt Industries Kapital (Get Physical Music, Static Caravan) will be performing its live soundtrack to the classic Soviet silent film **Turksib** (Dir. Viktor Turin, 1929) throughout 2012. The film (with new soundtrack composed by BIK's Guy Bartell) was released by the British Film Institute this year as the centrepiece of **The Soviet Influence: From Turksib to Nightmail**, a collection looking at the influence of Soviet propaganda on British filmmaking.

One of the most breathtaking documentaries ever shot, **Turksib** is an epic spectacle that lyrically and intensely depicts Stalinist Russia's improbable efforts to build a

railway through one of the most inhospitable deserts in the world. This captivating time-piece allows us to witness the technological world we've built on nature's shoulders: it is also a priceless artefact of cinema history, giving us unparalleled insight into the daunting technical and artistic creativity undertaken in the name of Soviet Communism. A masterpiece of scenario and editing techniques, director Viktor Turin gave the film a classical form and a rhythm that make it analogous to a symphony, fully exploited by BIK's score, which taps into the weird and wonderful emotions and intellectual political dilemmas thrown up by this incredible film. Pastoral solo psaltery melodies, Central Asian-style drones, graceful ensemble pieces, and propulsive drum rhythms combine to trace Turksib's dizzying transit. The moving images take on a hypnotic resonance.

Bronnt Industries Kapital's previous work includes a contemporary soundtrack to Benjamin Christensen's 1922 silent film about witchcraft, **Häxan**, released by Tartan Films, and the albums **Virtute et Industria** (Static Caravan) and **Hard for Justice** (Get Physical).

"Turksib is greater than Battleship Potemkin and [The End of] St. Petersburg because the director chose a more exalted theme. He showed us men and women; a nation throwing themselves with the fullness of the old revolutionary spirit into a constructive revolt against the uncultivated." Bioscope reviewer, 1929

"A lyrical, humane, superbly edited masterpiece"
The Guardian, 2011

"Bartell is one of electronica's staunchest and most singular footsoldiers" The Wire

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*Live music from
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The original reviews may be abridged.

Programme Notes written by Alex Rock, Programme Design and Layout by Molly Cotterill and Emma Jezard



The 15th British Silent Film Festival



THE BIOSCOPE

March 12, 1930, page 27

When Victor Turin, the famous Russian film producer, spoke at the New Scala Theatre just before the members of the Workers Film Society saw his Soviet film "*Turksib*," he proved himself to be a man of culture and charm. Modestly couching his speech in the third person, he put into language as simple as he could find, the views of Soviet film directors on what can be described briefly as the new technique of screen imagery evolved by Russia in the few years since that country's great upheaval.

Victor Turin brought greetings from the people of Soviet Russia to all the people of Great Britain who might be interested to see the films from his vast and re-created country. He was applauded; chiefly, one felt, through political fervour, for this Sunday night audience made no attempt – even in the dress circle – to disguise the fact that it came principally of the proletariat and not of the bourgeoisie.

Photographically "*Turksib*" is superb; its theme is concerned with the great constructive idea of linking Turkestan with Siberia by railway, and of thus bridling the primitive in one of the most backward, yet most fascinating, corners of the earth.

In telling his story, Turin has borrowed an idea from Pudovkin, who in "*The End of St. Petersburg*" and other films strained every nerve to show us how much spirit the revolutionaries put into their revolution. But he has given the idea greatness and grandeur by washing it of its blood; cleansing it of oppression and hate. "*Turksib*" is greater than "*Potemkin*" and "*St. Petersburg*" because the director chose a more exalting theme. He showed us men and women; a nation throwing themselves with the fullness of the old revolutionary spirit into a constructive revolt against the uncultivated. It is a picture of the civilisation of man versus the savagery of stark nature, and it is done without a waste foot of celluloid. Turin's crowds are terrific; his types, supplied by nature, are fascinating, but he takes no credit for these. It is real screen history taken on the spot as that history was made. To Turin goes the credit of assembling, in a cogent strip, a kaleidoscope of rare beauty and charm; one of the most thrilling chapters of screen history ever written in the language of the eye.