

New Babylon

USSR, 1929, 93 min. B&W

Silent with Russian, English and Czech intertitles

Directors: Leonid Trauberg & Grigorij Kozincev,

Restored, reconstructed and digitalized copy: arte

Original music by Dmitri Shostakovich

This story unfolds on the background of the dark days of Paris Commune and follows the encounter and tragic fate of two lovers separated by the barricades. Heart of Louise, a shop assistant in the New Babylon, a luxury department store in Paris, beats for the Commune. Jean, a soldier, is forced to act against the Commune and ends up ushering Louise to the scaffold. The original work was substantially shortened on the intervention of Soviet censors and its premiere took part without Shostakovich's music. The work has been restored only recently.



The New Babylon

(**НОВЫЙ ВАВИЛОН / Штурм неба / The Assault on Heaven**)

Directed by Leonid Trauberg and Grigorij Kozincev, USSR, 1929, 93 min

Music by Dmitri Shostakovich

Silent with Russian intertitles, Czech and English subtitles

Digitized and reconstructed copy

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Set against the dark backdrop of the Paris Commune, *The New Babylon* is the story of unfulfilled love between Louise and Jean. Louise, a shop-assistant in a luxury department store – symbolically named "The New Babylon" – enthusiastically joins the Communards. Jean, a politically unaware peasant serving in the ranks of the French army, is forced to take part in an attack against the Communards, ultimately to lead his lover to her place of execution.

Drawing inspiration from Emile Zola's novels *Au bonheur des dames* (The Ladies' Delight) and *La débâcle*, this film is not only an attempt to provide an ideological manifesto (young communists' endorsement of the ideals of the Communards) but is also, primarily, a fascinating example of the work of young, mostly Jewish, filmmakers who had a major influence on Soviet cinematography and theatre and who, if still allowed by the regime, enthusiastically acknowledged the legacy of the French Impressionists, the principles of Dada and the films of D. W. Griffith, in addition to French literary naturalism. This group was somewhat overshadowed in the history of film and theatre by the renown of Eisenstein and Meyerhold and by the popularity of the artists at the Moscow State Jewish Theatre (GOSSET). Its leading figures were Leonid Zakharovich Trauberg (1902-1990), Grigori Mikhaylovich Kozintsev (1905-1973), Sergei Iosifovich Yutkevich (1904-1985), the authors of the *Eccentricity Manifesto* (1922) and the founders of the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS), which was established a year earlier in Petrograd, renamed by the young artists to Eccentropolis.

The music for the film *The New Babylon* was composed by the then 23-year-old Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975), who had made a living early on in his career as a pianist in

Moscow cinemas and who composed film scores throughout his creative life. *The New Babylon* was substantially cut by the censors three days before its premiere (20% of the original footage was removed), which inevitably had an impact on the musical component. Although Shostakovich tried to put together a shorter version at the last moment, there was not enough time for this work and its new orchestration, which is why the premiere performance ended as a debacle. The film has existed only in fragmented form since then and has only recently been restored.

Dmitri Shostakovich on music for ‘Babylon’

Shostakovich, D. “The Music for New Babylon” in: *Sovietskii ekran*, no. 11, March 12, 1929, p. 5

[...] The majority of musicians working in the capacity of cinematic illustration view this job much as they might a swamp that threatens to submerge anyone coming into contact with it, annihilating their talent, making of them an ‘inspired’ automaton, retained to improvise for films, hired for several hours a night and which would brand with its indelible mark any gifts they might have as a composer.

[...]

The only correct route is the composition of special music, as has been, if I am not mistaken, one of the first cases with ‘New Babylon’. In composing music for ‘Babylon’, I was led least of all by the principle of obligatory illustration of each shot. Essentially I started from the principal shot in each sequence. For example at the end of the second reel: the principal movement is the attack on Paris by the German cavalry and a deserted restaurant closes this section. A deep silence. But the music, despite the absence of the German cavalry on the screen, comes all the same from the cavalry, reminding the spectator of the terrible force that has been unleashed.

It is the same with the music for the seventh act, when the soldier stumbles into a restaurant full of bourgeois in the throes of hilarity, after the Commune has been crushed. The music, despite the gaiety, which reigns over the restaurant, takes on the somber sentiments of the soldier who is searching for his sweetheart, condemned to death.

I also constructed a great deal on the principle of contrasts. For example, the soldier who meets his love on the barricades is filled with despair. The music becomes more and more cheerful and is finally resolved in a giddy and ‘obscene’ waltz reflecting the Versailles army victory over the Communards. An interesting process is used in the opening of the fourth reel. While rehearsals for an operetta are being shown, the music performs variations on a well-known ‘galop’, which takes on different nuances in relation to the action. Sometimes a gay mood, sometimes bored, sometimes terrifying.

I used a large number of dance tunes of the period (waltz, cancan) as well as a few melodies taken from the operettas of Offenbach. I have made references among others, to popular and revolutionary French songs (*Ca ira* and *La carmagnole*). The Marseillaise is the theme of Versailles and appears sometimes in the most unexpected contexts (cancan, waltz, gallop, etc.).

Given the importance of the musical material, the music keeps up an unremitting symphonic tone. Its fundamental aim is to keep to the rhythm and variations of the film, to augment the force of its impact. [...]

This project was produced by the BERG Orchestra and Jewish Museum in Prague. The premiere took place in October 2011 at the Spanish Synagogue in Prague.