

Shedding the Political Skin: A Step Towards Accurate Authorship for Male-Female Collaborations

Christopher Penfold
University of Southampton

Introduction

Between 1918 and 1944 Soviet filmmakers, Elizaveta Svilova (1900-75) and Dziga Vertov (1896-1954) formed a formidable husband and wife collaboration. Beginning as Vertov's editor and then working up through the ranks of assistant director and co-director, Svilova was for Vertov a constant and equal companion in their documentary projects; she complemented him in terms of both creativity and work ethic. Indeed, in a 2002 interview published in Russian film journal, *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, Semiramis Pumpyansky (a friend and colleague of the couple) describes not only the closeness of Vertov and Svilova's personal relationship, but also the mutual respect they had for each other's cinematic acumen.¹

In her written application to join the Council of Three (the policy-making group and film company led by Vertov and assisted by his brother, Mikhail Kaufman) in 1923 Svilova claims to have been working in the industry since 1910, editing dramas for reputable directors such as Vladimir Gardin.² I am not aware, however, of any specific films that she edited until 1918 when she joined the state production agency, Goskino. By 1925, Svilova had been promoted to the positions of assistant director and co-director, before becoming an accomplished director in her own right by the mid-1930s. Although her co-directorial assignments with Vertov are still regularly discussed in contemporary film studies, references to Svilova tend to allude to her as Vertov's accessory rather than as his collaborator; in fact, Robert Sklar goes as far as to confine her role to that of 'co-editor'.³

After accusations of formalism from the Soviet Politburo and constant disagreements with his colleagues led to Vertov's alienation and quiet disappearance from the Soviet documentary scene, Svilova continued to work alone as a successful documentary filmmaker.⁴ Therefore, although her contribution to Vertov's filmography was unique and powerful, her institutional history goes far beyond her collaboration with her husband. From the time of their professional separation in 1944 to her semi-retirement twelve years later, Svilova is credited with no less than a 103 directorial assignments. Such a healthy and prolific independent career is not symptomatic of a collaborator who, only a few years earlier, would have been content to provide merely an auxiliary role. As well as being an active component in Vertov's

career, Svilova was also responsible for the growth and cementing of his posthumous legacy – willingly dedicating her retirement years to the evangelisation of Vertov’s ‘kino-eye’ dogma, while simultaneously securing the archiving of his independent body of work and the films they had collaborated on together.⁵

My analysis of Svilova’s authorship comes as part of a general effort in film studies to rewrite history by empowering the female subject, texts and readings. As a modernist artist, Svilova defends her position in history and stakes claims for creative freedom by making an artistic contribution that aggressively asserts her autonomy. At this particular historical juncture, and as long as filmmakers such as Svilova remain obscure, such a cultural and political project is vital.

In addition to the questions of gender this paper poses, the complexities of ‘co-directorship’ will also be partially unravelled. Co-directorship is an interesting yet problematic approach to film authorship as it falls into both the categories of ‘single authorship’, in that the directors are held more accountable than the other collaborators, and ‘multiple authorship’, in that more than one director must in theory be held accountable. As a prefix, ‘co’ inculcates a sense of egalitarianism – a relationship that is even-balanced in its distribution of power. The relevance, and indeed importance, of this exception to authorship studies will be articulated in due course.

Vertov and Svilova’s films are archived mostly in Russia and also in a number of other archives across Europe and the United States. During my research into Svilova’s body of work, I have discovered a reoccurring phenomenon in the archiving of the films she co-directed with Vertov: more often than not, Svilova’s name is omitted from the archives’ catalogues and databases. To tirelessly list the specific titles that are inaccurately archived is not wholly necessary, nor would it be professional to name the archives in question. What is important to know, however, is that this problem does exist and extends far beyond this particular collaboration. Indeed, in the case of Soviet male-female collaborations alone there are at least three other women who have suffered the same marginalisation as Svilova. For example, Yulia Solntseva, wife and collaborator of Alexandr Dovzhenko; Aleksandra Khoklova, wife and collaborator of Lev Kuleshov; and Olga Preobrazhenskaya, who collaborated with Vladimir Gardin and Ivan Pravov, are all omitted from certain archival records for one film or another. The fallacious nature of this archiving is not only inconsistent but also follows no kind of pattern or reasoning in its changeability.

In short, then, this paper aims to explicate as to why Svilova’s name is omitted from these records by, firstly, reviewing the system of crediting in the Soviet Union at the time of

Svilova's career and, secondly, by questioning the methods by which film studies has tended to credit women since the time of Svilova and the impact these methods have had on the archiving of male-female collaborations.

Crediting Women in Pre-1960s Soviet Cinema

Mary Kelley, commenting on early women artists, argues:

Unlike a male, a female was to be shielded from public scrutiny. Neither her ego nor her intellect was cultivated for future public vocation. After all, her proper sphere was the home. Even her exercise of moral, social, or personal influence was to be indirect and subtle. In essence, her voice was to remain an invisible presence.⁶

An “invisible presence” is a provocative yet accurate way of describing Svilova. Indeed, she was granted the freedom to work in the film industry, but there is a discernible tension between this emancipation and the subsequent marginalisation she suffered or has suffered – both then, when the films were made, and now, in the twenty-first century. Although recognition for women artists was rare in this period on a universal scale, arguably this marginalisation was intensified in the Soviet Union where, as Lynne Attwood describes it, “the post-revolutionary transformation in sexual relations” encouraged a status quo of gender disillusionment.⁷ The acknowledgement of Svilova's competence as a filmmaker led to her success, while her gender served to keep her relatively anonymous. In a section of her interview with film journal, *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, Semiramis Pumpyansky recalls the responsibility Svilova felt to sustain Vertov's legacy after his death:

Elizaveta did everything to keep the archives of Vertov alive. In the sixties, interest in his work increased again, and the name ‘Vertov’ was heard around the world. Directors of the French New Wave announced him as their predecessor. Elizaveta was invited to various countries for retrospectives and exhibitions. She did this on her own, without help. She spent all of her retirement years at these exhibitions.⁸

Svilova, who we can now deem solely accountable for the original stage of the archiving of her collaborative films with Vertov, appears to have negated her own contribution to these particular films. It is worth entertaining the thought that Svilova's motivation for her actions originated from a shrewd understanding of female authorship. Having spent forty years working in the industry by the time she came to archive Vertov's body of work – including the films they had collaborated on together – it could be argued that Svilova, already fully conscious of the fact that films created with male authorship had a longer shelf life, selflessly renounced her own involvement for the protection of the films, which not only offers a very

personal insight into Svilova's outlook, but also serves to teach us something new about her character.

It can be deduced, then, that Svilova felt very ambivalent about her place in a male-dominated industry, which, according to Judith Mayne, typified the mentality of the Soviet female population as a whole in the 1920s and 1930s.⁹ While the Bolshevik government was committed on paper to equality for women, the pressure of practical concerns took its toll. The steps deemed necessary to build socialism – the protection of the family as an economic unit, particularly in rural areas, and the free market established by the New Economic Policy – conflicted with measures that immediately would have improved the status of women. The marriage laws of 1917, for example, which allowed women to instigate divorce, were revised in 1925 with the aim of providing more protection for women. While it is true that this change did come with good intentions, it was precisely women's legal status as 'victim' that, in retrospect, highlights the extreme ambivalence that Soviet culture had towards female equality.

Female Authorship since the 1960s

The exact circumstances surrounding the omission of Svilova's name from certain archive credits is not the most pertinent question in discussion here. In my opinion, a more important line of enquiry is why, since becoming aware of the contribution Svilova made to Vertov's legacy, we have not made the necessary amendments to the archive records. This point leads us onto the nature of film authorship and how it works sometimes in favour of – but mostly against – women filmmakers. Although the introduction of authorship into film studies has helped us assign film texts to a source, films made by women still tend to be omitted by the paradigms that are used to theorise and decode authorship. Furthermore, contemporary paradigms that attempt to include women filmmakers still succumb to the Hollywood methods that excluded them in the first place as, according to Jacqueline Levitin, the theory that informs the field is still largely only concerned with male filmmakers.¹⁰ This unevenness has been intensified in the last forty years by the fostering of the auteur theory. Deeply grounded in the rules that govern the discipline, it has augmented the role of the all-powerful male director to overstated proportions; consequently, film history has tended to pay more homage to this group of directors, particularly the ones that have boldly embellished their own authority.

Thus, with so many preoccupations, opportunities to put right any injustices in the field of film authorship have been few and far between. Admittedly, the direction in which the field of authorship has unfolded has made it difficult to question the filmographies of some of

cinema's most-loved auteurs. For example, the role that Joan Harrison played in the writing stages of Alfred Hitchcock's productions has only relatively recently become widely acknowledged.¹¹ It seems almost unethical – or at the very least, disrespectful – to revisit the works of the grand auteurs and to try and bring a fresh insight into their potentially collaborative methodologies.

However, the use of Hitchcock as an example here has allowed us, for the first time, to take into consideration a non-Soviet male-female collaboration relevant to the study. Although Hitchcock and Harrison were just writing partners and, thus, are not an ideal comparison to Vertov and Svilova, a brief look into a second American collaboration reminds us that it is not rationally possible to lay all of the inaccuracies evident in the archiving of the Vertov-Svilova collaboration solely at the door of universal gender inequality. Maya Deren, an American avant-garde filmmaker from the 1940s, collaborated with her husband, Alexander Hammit, on what has become *her* most famous work, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). The majority of the archives that hold a copy of this film give Deren sole authorship. This example serves to teach us that, in some respects, film archiving is a way of challenging certain theoretical practices and presents opportunities to display the changing course of historical interpretation. Alongside cases such as Joan Harrison, Maya Deren's prevailing authorship over her husband exemplifies America's own changing course of film authorship as it finally begins to recognise the resounding impact that women filmmakers have had in the construction and progress of its film industry. Therefore, the problems surrounding the Vertov-Svilova collaboration may well find its origins in 'Sovietness', or in other words, the rules that have defined the place of women throughout the changing course of Soviet history in the last century.

Having said all of this, I am reluctant to settle on 'Sovietness' as the sole – and most convenient – factor in explaining Svilova's omission, and to simply end my analysis on that supposition. As I have previously stated, the complex nature of co-directorship, and the inherent auteurist contradiction upon which it functions, may also have a part to play. It is, therefore, also an aim of this paper to briefly call attention to this relatively neglected exception to film authorship and to form a basis for further discussion.

Sanctioning Co-Directorship

Film authorship is, at times, oddly mysterious and made even more elusive by the notion of co-directorship. For many films, when the circumstances of composition are investigated in detail, the identifiable authorship turns out to be a plurality of authors – the 'myth of the solitary genius' is debunked, so to speak. Consequently, it is commonplace that most films are

highly collaborative in ways that affect their artistic properties. The multiple authorship theory states that there can be more than one author, plausibly occupying some or all of the main production roles, who may or may not be in harmony on the purposes of the production. Although this view, at least held unambiguously and explicitly, is less common than the claims of single authorship, nevertheless, it offers us a more careful and precise classification and articulation of the options available when crediting multiple authors, and a nuanced exploration of the correctness of these more precisely defined positions.

As I have already commented on, the auteur theory has, to an extent, contributed to the fallaciousness evident in the archiving of Vertov-Svilova films. Our preoccupation with the male director has left us with only limited time and energy to fully explore the contributions made to early cinema by women filmmakers. Moreover, the auteur theory has also narrowed down this preoccupation to a single director; to try and encompass a second director, who may have also provided an artistic vision in the engineering of the product, would in many ways contradict the status and development of the theory. Thus, when it comes to film authorship, to try to comprehend the existence of multiple authors is a problem that most would consider best – and easily – avoided. Although there appears to be little pressure in the field to accommodate for multiple authors in film authorship analysis, I would argue that there is, nevertheless, an inherent responsibility attached to the act of crediting films. Such welcome fidelity on the archivist's (or researcher's) part will, ultimately, afford film archiving its *raison d'être*: a method of preservation that not only serves to protect films, but also serves to provide us with a way of collating our knowledge on the source of certain films, for future generations to build on.

'Multiple authorship' asks that we consider all of the possible artistic contributors in our consumption of the product. Thus, now we are aware of Svilova's omission, alongside the omission of her contemporaries, to not re-include them in the archive credits would not only deny film authorship its central purpose, but it may also instigate aberrant decoding on the part of the researcher and spectator. Let us not forget that authorship is a fundamental part of interpreting artwork; our scope of understanding a film is considerably larger if we know where it came from – what the author(s) did in the process of creating it. For example, it is imperative that *Lullaby* (1937), a Vertov-Svilova collaboration centred on the blissfulness of Soviet motherhood (and one that Svilova's authorship is habitually omitted from), is understood to have both a male and a female author. To omit the female author's voice from a film carrying such a strong feminist subject matter merely works to subvert the essentiality of film authorship. A knowledge of *Lullaby*'s authorship greatly widens our appreciation of the film's integrity. Indeed, the film's subject matter was, at the time of its conception, very personal to both Svilova and Vertov: Svilova had suffered a miscarriage sometime between

1924 and 1926, after which references to childbirth and children steadily increase in her films, while Vertov, reacting to the powerless role forced upon him by the Soviet cinema authorities, adopted what Jeremy Hicks describes as “feminine sensibility ... A less aggressive form of self-realisation.”¹² Thus, the responsibility on the shoulders of the archivists and researchers to ensure that authorial data is not omitted or disregarded goes beyond simply providing credit where it is due. As we can detect with *Lullaby*, hidden within every film catalogue entry is a potential story about the author(s), which can effectively voice social problems, express the basic values of life, accumulate the spiritual energy of the time, and of the epoch.

Although Maya Deren’s dominance over her husband in their collaboration perhaps reassures us that the case of Vertov and Svilova is not inherently ‘genderist’ but may instead be symptomatic of a reluctance by the archives I have researched to embrace the possibility of seeking authorship beyond the all-powerful omniscient and singular director; nevertheless, even within the relatively safe and theoretically sound domain of multiple authorship gender remains, at the very least, as one of the most defining and significant factors in the crediting of archival texts. In order to fully credit male-female collaborations we must accept that, despite the gender preference that surrounded early film production, a female director is as important as her male counterpart and, secondly, that film is a collaborative process and all directors must be acknowledged regardless of their respective gender, superciliousness or humility, and also irrespective of the occasionally misleading pragmatism that single authorship provides. Multiple authors are unquestionably, given the theological model, more difficult to apotheosise or deify as an ideal for validity in interpretation or textual purity but, as Jack Stillinger rightly argues, the more useful theories in film authorship may turn out to be the ones that cover not only more facts but more authors.¹³

Conclusion: The Filmography as a Research Strategy

To conclude, I would like to discuss a possible solution to this problem of archiving male-female collaborations. How do we ensure that, firstly, the male is not favoured in any way over the female and, secondly, that co-director films are archived as a co-direction and not reduced to a single author for the sake of expediency or convenience? These questions are not necessarily new to the field of authorship but they exert a new insistence as we aim to recover the woman’s role in the early industry.

Filmographies are a crucial underpinning in that they influence the research and theory emerging from the field. The future of archiving co-director films may well begin at the creation of a form of filmography that, as a matter of course, provides an explanation for any discrepancies in the current archiving of a certain film or perhaps even within the on-screen

credits, which can be notoriously inaccurate in early cinema. Most importantly, it must be a filmography that can handle the information required to account for multiple authorship. Without this, we risk devaluating the contributions we are making to the future of film archiving because, as Radha Vatsal rightly states, “A historiographic text that glosses over the history of its decision-making process quickly loses credibility when its claims are researched in any detail.”¹⁴ As I have demonstrated in the case of Svilova, the archiving of her co-director films with Vertov, as a whole, is not a dependable source of biographical data. Details of the decisions that have guided the archiving since the time of Svilova’s career to now are not known and possibly never will be. However, a filmography that serves to work alongside the archive resource and account for all future decision-making would be a welcome – and perhaps even vital – development.

Such a filmography, whether or not it makes this explicit, could also include both the history of a film, as material and textual object, and the preoccupations of the researcher. As we know from the many catalogues, compilations, and databases in which early women filmmakers are barely mentioned, filmographies do not tell us as much about films and filmmakers as they do about the status of our knowledge on the subject. As Vatsal observes, “A filmography that foregrounds its research procedures, thereby highlighting the contingency and limits of its knowledge, encourages further investigations and welcomes multiple conclusions.”¹⁵ And so, creating a filmography to assist the necessary untangling and reallocation, in Svilova’s case at least, becomes a process of analysis and close reading and also an opportunity to rethink film archiving and the modes through which historiographic and filmographic knowledge are transmitted.

Sacrificing the orderliness that single authorship provides is a small price to pay for referencing sources in which seemingly simple, but in fact problematic, decisions (such as the attribution of multiple directorship for film texts) are presented to the reader with all of their ambiguities made public. Such a filmography would function not as a repository of fact, but rather as a text that prompts the reader to reach his or her own conclusions. Instead of being part of a prescriptive, entrenched mechanism underwriting truthful claims of authorship, the filmography would then ironically destabilise that tradition. Such a development would not encourage erroneousness or imprecision but would, instead, highlight those instances when a loss of accuracy was or is unavoidable.

Final Note

On a final note, the human condition is such that the more people and the more ideas that are considered and included, the better society is. Naturally, film has benefited from male

creativity and enterprise – that is indisputable. However, perhaps now is the time in the life of twenty-first century film archiving to look back at the early female director, whether she worked alone or in a collaboration, and fully explore the contribution she made. The excitement generated by such an act of recovery will hopefully lead to a fundamental questioning of the established concerns of history and its dominant methods.

¹ Quoted in Evgeny Tsymbal, 'I Dreamed of Working at the Studio', <http://www.kinozapiski.ru/article/147>, consulted 5 August 2009.

² Quoted in Yuri Tsivian, ed. *Lines Of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* (Pordenone: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004), p. 87.

³ Robert Sklar, *A World History of Film* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 145.

⁴ See Yuri Tsivian, ed. *Lines Of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* (Pordenone: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004), pp. 252-262.

⁵ Vertov's official archive, housed at the National Film Museum in Vienna, was established in the early 1970s through a close relationship with Svilova. See National Film Museum, 'Collections', Dziga Vertov Collection, <http://www.filmmuseum.at>, consulted November 13 2008.

⁶ Quoted in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, eds Jennifer Bean and Diane Negra (Buckinghamshire: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 40.

⁷ Lynne Attwood, ed. *Red Women on the Silver Screen* (London: Pandora Press, 1993), p. 30.

⁸ Quoted in Evgeny Tsymbal, 'I Dreamed of Working at the Studio', <http://www.kinozapiski.ru/article/147>, consulted 5 August 2009.

⁹ Judith Mayne, *Kino and the Woman Question: Feminism and Soviet Silent Film* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), pp. 29-29.

¹⁰ Jacqueline Levitin, *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 29.

¹¹ See Christina Lane, 'Stepping Out from Behind the Grand Silhouette: Joan Harrison's Films of the 1940s' in *Authorship and Film*, eds David Gerstner and Janet Staiger (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 97-119.

¹² Jeremy Hicks, *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2007), p. 108.

¹³ Jack Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of the Solitary Genius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 24.

¹⁴ Radha Vatsal, 'Re-evaluating Footnotes: Women Directors of the Silent Era' in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. Jennifer Bean and Diane Negra (Buckinghamshire: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 122.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 127.