

Article

# Dimitri Kirsanoff: The Elusive Estonian



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## ABSTRACT

**This article investigates the contradictory information about the Estonian identity of the filmmaker Dimitri Kirsanoff (1899–1957) and examines the archival material that provides final confirmation of his birth and childhood in Tartu. In addition, Kirsanoff's substantial contribution to silent cinema and his significance in the context of French avant-garde impressionism are discussed. Kirsanoff's most acclaimed film *Ménilmontant* (France, 1926) was released 90 years ago. It is still frequently screened all over the world, due to its experimental montage techniques, the early use of handheld cameras, its innovative use of actual locations and the actors' performances that still resonate with contemporary audiences. *Ménilmontant* is also influential because of its elliptical narrative style. However, with the advent of sound film, Kirsanoff's career declined because the reorganisation of the film industry limited the creative freedom he enjoyed in the 1920s. This article attempts to contribute to a wider acknowledgement of Dimitri Kirsanoff's Estonian origins, his films and his important place in the world cinema.**

In 1929 the journalist Marcel Lapierre interviews Dimitri Kirsanoff, a young filmmaker. Lapierre had just attended release of Kirsanoff's third film *Autumn Mists* (*Brumes d'automne*, France, 1929) and was deeply affected by the fact that, despite the brilliance of his films, Kirsanoff had languished in relative obscurity in the film world. For Lapierre 'the films of Dimitri Kirsanoff have to be counted among the most powerful and sincere works in cinema' (Lapierre 1929).

When the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) premiered Kirsanoff's second film *Ménilmontant* in New York, eleven years after its first screening in Paris, the press release underscored the fact that the European critics have ranked the film 'among

the few masterpieces of the screen' (Newmoyer 1937). In Kirsanoff's obituary, Walter S. Michel maintains that 'Dimitri Kirsanov was a poet who chose the cinema as his medium of expression and gave us *Ménilmontant*, *Brumes d'automne* and *Rapt*, three of the most beautiful and intelligent films in the history of the cinema' (Michel 1957: 37). After his death in 1957 Kirsanoff and his oeuvre fell into relative obscurity until Richard Abel (1984) highlighted Kirsanoff's role in avant-garde cinema and Dudley Andrew commended *Ménilmontant* as a 'personal triumph of art over industry' (Andrew 1995: 42). Oliver Fahle praises the film as 'one of the most beautiful city portrayals in film history' (Fahle 2000: 19), Santiago Rubín

de Celis describes it as 'one of the masterpieces of avant-garde filmmaking' (Rubín de Celis 2010) and Jürg Stenzl proclaims that 'there are few artworks that have such poignancy' (Stenzl 2013: 19).

Despite an increasing interest in Kirsanoff's work and life, only two monographs on the subject have been published thus far: Christophe Trebuil's *L'Oeuvre singulière de Dimitri Kirsanoff* (2003) and Jürg Stenzl's *Dimitri Kirsanov. Ein verschollener Filmregisseur* (2013).

### DISSIMULATION AND ITS EFFECT ON KIRSANOFF'S BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

The biographical history of Kirsanoff is very vague and full of erroneous information. Parker Tyler (1970: 170) describes him as 'Russian', Alan Williams (1992: 149) as a 'White Russian', P. Adams Sitney (Pendergast, Pendergast 2000: 769) as a 'Russian émigré cellist', Dudley Andrew (1995: 42) maintains that Kirsanoff 'came from the Russian aristocracy'.

What contributed to that contradictory biographical information is that Dimitri Kirsanoff changed his name when he moved to Paris. His admiration for Ivan Turgenev is documented, and thus he might have seen the family name as a reference to one of the characters in *Fathers and Sons* (*Отцы и дети*, 1862).

More recent articles on Kirsanoff correctly state that Kirsanoff's real name was Markus David Kaplan (although variations in spelling exist). As Rubín de Celis states, 'Dimitri Kirsanoff was born Marc David Kaplan on 6 March 1899, in Tartu, Estonia, although some other sources indicate his birth place as Riga, Latvia' (Rubín de Celis 2010).

The two main sources related to his identity are his death certificate and the information provided by Kirsanoff's only living relative, his niece Francine Kaplan-Ryan. Whereas Trebuil bases the biographical information on the death certificate, Stenzl cites Kaplan-Ryan as his main source. Trebuil contests earlier statements that Kirsanoff was born in Estonia:

According to the death certificate, issued by the town hall of the 8th arrondissement in Paris, Markus David Kaplan, known as Dimitri Kirsanoff, was born in Riga (Russia, now Latvia), on 21 February 1899, of Zousman Kaplan and Rachel Sohn. Of this information only the year of birth, 1899, corresponds to what has appeared in the main publications on the filmmaker. In general these indicate a birth on 6 March 1899 in Dorpat (Estonia). (Trebuil 2003: 19)

In his biographical account, Stenzl refers to Francine Kaplan-Ryan and confirms the year of birth but states that Markus David Kaplan was born in Tartu. Trebuil remarks that 'the absence of archival documents makes a precise statement on the identity of people who were born a century ago difficult' (Trebuil 2013: 19).

However the relevant archival information is available in Estonia. The National Archives of Estonia contain a birth certificate issued by the Tartu Jewish congregation which confirms that Markus David Kaplan was born on 21 February 1899 (according to the Julian calendar) in Tartu.<sup>1</sup> There are also documents in the archives that indicate that between 1907 and 1917 Kaplan/Kirsanoff attended the 'Tartu Tsar Alexander I Secondary School' (Tartu keiser Aleksander I gümnaasium) and that show that the Kaplan family lived at 32 Alexander Street.<sup>2</sup>

Due to conversion problems related to the Julian and the Georgian calendars, literally all the sources give the wrong date of birth for Dimitri Kirsanoff (henceforth the adopted name will be used). Trebuil and Stenzl both claim 6 March 1899 (according to the Georgian calendar) is correct, whereas a proper conversion of

1 The National Archives of Estonia, Tartu Juudiusu koguduse meetrikaraamat, EAA.5413.1.138, p. 22.

2 The National Archives of Estonia, Tartu keiser Aleksander I gümnaasium; Каплан, Давид-Маркус, EAA.405.1.3002.

the date of birth from the Julian calendar would be 5 March 1899.

As to the background of the Kaplan family, the archival documents refute the fact that he was 'Slavic' (Rubín de Celis 2010), that his parents 'were from Riga' (Stenzl 2013: 10) or that he had 'Russian roots' (Trebuil 2003: 21). The records confirm that his father Susman and his mother Rohel were Lithuanian Jews who came to Tartu in the 1870s.

Despite the fact that the documents in the National Archives of Estonia clarify some issues related to Dimitri Kirsanoff's early years many questions remain. It is clear that Kirsanoff graduated from secondary school in 1917, and Tartu court documents prove that his father died on 14 January 1919.<sup>3</sup> Susman Kaplan was taken hostage and murdered by the Bolsheviks. Stenzl claims that Rohel Kaplan, Kirsanoff's mother, had already died in 1901 after the birth of her fifth child. In any case Dimitri Kirsanoff and his siblings were orphaned in 1919. In the aftermath of the tragedy Kirsanoff and his older brother Nikolai left Tartu. Photos indicate that they spent some time in Berlin in 1920 and a letter written by Kirsanoff from Paris in October of 1921 can be found in the National Archives.<sup>4</sup>

It is unclear whether the family tragedy led him to change his name, but in the early 1920s Markus David Kaplan became Dimitri Kirsanoff, and throughout his life he gave no indications about his childhood and youth in Tartu. As Trebuil remarks Kirsanoff liked to create a smokescreen around his identity and 'break with his origins' (Trebuil 2003: 21). Rémy Python states that 'Kirsanoff's life is very hard to reconstruct, since not only did he use pseudonyms ... but he also strove to blur the tracks of his early life' (Python 2004: 136).

Kirsanoff gave very few interviews and wrote only three articles, but he does makes

one reference to his birthplace (without mentioning the name of Tartu):

I clearly remember the impressions I have from my first cinema visits. This was really long time ago. The cinema was in its early days. I went often to the 'Kinematograff' in my provincial town where slowness is the guiding principle, so I felt that I was watching most of the films in a sort of deceleration... (Kirsanoff 1926: 9)

During his youth in Tartu, Kirsanoff not only frequented the cinema, but he also developed his interests in music and painting. The combination of the visual and musical aspects would later mark his work as a filmmaker. When Kirsanoff arrived in Paris he pursued his musical interest and studied cello at the École Normale de Musique. While he was studying, he also frequented the ciné-clubs of the city and played in an orchestra at a movie-house.

It was in these cinematic circles that he met Germaine Lebas who would become not only his partner in life, but also in film. It is interesting to note that Lebas also adopted a Russian pseudonym: Nadia Sibirskaiä. Years later, in 1946, his second wife Berthe would also change her name to Monique. Thus, the dissimulation of Kirsanoff and his companions is by no means accidental but a systematic attempt to change their identities. One can merely speculate on the reasons for this camouflage, because Kirsanoff obviously did not want anyone to reveal their real identities. So it is impossible to say whether this identity game was played as a result of the early trauma he suffered as an orphan, or just a playful attitude toward birth names. Or it might have been a wishful projection of a different life, the illusion of cinema translated into the illusion of being the master of one's own identity. What cannot be disputed is that the strategy worked, not only in the case of Kirsanoff, but also in the case of Nadia Sibirskaiä. Sibirskaiä's performances

3 The National Archives of Estonia, Tartu linna vaeslastekohus; Kaplan, Jussmann, EAA.3501.3.643.

4 The National Archives of Estonia, Tartu linna vaeslastekohus, EAA.402.1.11486, EAA.402.1.11497.

in Kirsanoff's films received praise, for example, from Tyler who compared Kirsanoff and his 'beautiful Russian' to Roger Vadim and Brigitte Bardot, Monica Vitti and Michelangelo Antonioni, and to Jean-Luc Godard and Anna Karina (Tyler 1970: 167).

The collaboration between Kirsanoff and Sibirskaïa developed quickly. They began filming *The Irony of Fate* (*L'Ironie du destin*, France, 1923) already in 1921. It took three years because Kirsanoff financed the project himself, thereby becoming one of the pioneers of independent filmmaking. No copy of *The Irony of Fate* exists but it is known that it was a 67-minute melodrama and the first French feature film without intertitles. The film also marked the beginning of Kirsanoff's collaboration with Sibirskaïa, which would last for 18 years and result in ten films directed by Kirsanoff that she starred in. Their last collaboration was *Quartier sans soleil* (France, filmed in 1939 and released in 1945) and shortly after her separation from Kirsanoff, Sibirskaïa gave up her acting career.

Kirsanoff would direct films until his death in 1957, but for a second time in his life, the geopolitical situation left a deep imprint on his personal biography. The German occupation of France in 1940 forced him and his brother Nikolai into hiding due to their Jewish background. During his five years in southern France, Kirsanoff worked in the fields and had no way of pursuing his career as a filmmaker. After World War II Kirsanoff continued to direct films, but was often constrained by a lack of financing, so that his films never reached the innovative heights of his early work in the 1920s.

### KIRSANOFF IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FRENCH AVANT-GARDE

When Kirsanoff started to film his second film *Ménilmontant* in 1924, the French film industry was in a state of disorganisation in the aftermath of World War I and because of the growing dominance of American cinema. Small production companies were filling the gap and often produced films that were more artistically daring and experimental. These films found their audience in

the ciné-clubs that catered to the taste of a growing number of *cinéphiles*. The artistic aspect of the *septième art* was debated in film journals and the first theories about film emerged. In this context Louis Delluc played a significant role by developing concepts such as *photogénie* and *cinéaste*. The idea of *photogénie* implied that cinema has an intrinsic quality that exists only in this medium. As Jean Epstein explained, through 'the notion of *photogénie*, cinema as an art form is born' (Epstein [1926] 2012: 300). In their work, Epstein and filmmakers such as Marcel L'Herbier or Abel Gance attempted to capture this *photogénie* and gave birth to avant-garde impressionism. The avant-garde impressionism, or 'narrative avant-garde' as Abel (1984) labelled it, aimed to find filmic expressions that allowed the depiction of the fleeting moments of character subjectivity and experimentation with filmic techniques that challenged the Hollywood approach to storytelling.

While the avant-garde impressionists experimented with a form of narrative cinema, other avant-garde movements, such as surrealism or Dadaism, challenged the cause-and-effect scheme of narratives altogether. Directors with backgrounds in painting (Fernand Léger, Salvador Dalí), photography (Man Ray) and conceptual art (Marcel Duchamp) broke down the barriers between the disciplines and made films that pushed the arsenal of filmic expression to new limits.

Kirsanoff, as he already demonstrated in his first film *The Irony of Fate*, aimed to use technical experimentations, and his work can be framed in the context of avant-garde impressionism. In an article, he also reflected on the 'problem of *photogénie*' that was so central to the avant-garde impressionists. Kirsanoff writes that 'the cinema opens to us dimensions which we don't know, which are strange and mysterious to us, because these dimensions are so different from our dimensions' (Kirsanoff 1926: 10). The other dimension of cinema, the different appearance of life on the screen, the mysterious and elusive dimension of

cinema is what Kirsanoff aimed to explore.

P. Adams Sitney also describes avant-garde impressionism as 'subjective film' and underscores the possibilities of reframing melodrama and transforming it into a 'mythopoetic film' (Sitney 1970: 25). A fleeting impression in the context of a melodrama can open up new possibilities of cinematic expression when emotions are not shown as clichéd, the way they are in mainstream American productions, but as dramatically framed expressions – as mysterious irrational forces within the character. Thus, the visual dimension within the narrative does not refer to established cause-and-effect schemes, but rather establishes an elusive flow of images. Kirsanoff and other avant-garde impressionists aimed to strip the cinema of theatricality and led it into a more visual realm.

Although Kirsanoff had been reflecting on *photogénie* and his work of the 1920s was very similar to that of the avant-garde impressionists, such as Epstein, Gance, Dulac and L'Herbier, his production methods were fundamentally different. Kirsanoff produced his films independently, outside the French studio system and due to the financial limitations had to find different solutions from a technical and artistic point of view. As Michel underscores, Kirsanoff 'stated definitely that he had not been in contact with either the French avant-garde or the Russian émigrés, both of which he often associated with' (Michel 1957: 38).

### MÉNILMONTANT

Kirsanoff started shooting *Ménilmontant* in 1924, initially with Léonce Crouan as the cinematographer and then taking over the cinematography himself. He was also the director, producer, scriptwriter and editor and it was obvious that he would never be able to achieve the sophisticated studio aesthetics of such influential avant-garde impressionist films such as *The Wheel* (*La Roue*, France, 1923) by Abel Gance or *The Inhuman Woman* (*L'Inhumaine*, France, 1924) by Marcel L'Herbier. As the information about *The Irony of Fate* suggests, Kirsanoff was more interested in location

shooting, so using the streets of Paris as a set was probably not only motivated by financial constraints but by aesthetic considerations.

From a narrative point of view, *Ménilmontant* uses the generic formula of a melodrama. It starts with a murder scene. The parents of two girls are killed in an undefined rural setting. Years after the terrible incident, when the sisters have grown up, they move to Paris and start working in a flower shop. They share an apartment and enjoy the bustling life of the big city. When the younger sister (Nadia Sibirskaja) falls in love with a playboy (Maurice Ronsard), the older sister (Yolande Beaulieu) feels isolated and jealous. After the man has seduced the younger sister he loses interest and starts an affair with the older sister. The younger sister suffers a double blow – not only does she discover the betrayal, but she also finds out that she is pregnant after spending a night with the playboy. Alone, homeless, and without any financial means, she contemplates drowning the baby. She is wandering the streets looking for food when she accidentally runs into her older sister again. The older sister is working as a prostitute and is also destitute. The two sisters reunite to take care of the baby. An unknown woman, who was also betrayed by the playboy, kills him with a rock.

The ending of *Ménilmontant* varies depending on the version of the film. According to Trebil (2003) the original was 58 minutes long, but it is thought to be lost. Kirsanoff himself donated a 35-minute version to MoMA in 1937; the DVD version in the Avant-Garde series is 37 minutes long; and a copy from the Cinémathèque Française that was screened in Tallinn in 2014 is 43 minutes long. In the 37-minute DVD version the film ends with a close-up of a woman's hand working on flowers and the title card '*Fin*'. In the longer Cinémathèque Française version, the film ends with the sisters together with the baby in an apartment. It seems that the length of the DVD version corresponds more to the MoMA version, and is therefore closer to the director's original vision (despite Trebil's comments



on the original length). From a narrative point of view the open-ended version reflects the idea that the two sisters must somehow continue to survive in a city that is indifferent to their destinies. In addition, the fact that 'Fin' – the end – is the only title card in a film without intertitles adds a sense of irony.

Since *The Irony of Fate* has been lost, *Ménilmontant* is the first French film without any intertitles, which underscores Kirsanoff's intention to move away from the verbal to the visual. The only words that are clearly visible in the film are the inscriptions at the grave of the father 'À notre père' ('To our father'); the grave of the mother 'À notre mère' ('To our mother'); and the word 'Maternité' (meaning 'Maternity ward', but also maternity in a more general sense), which we see when the younger sister is sitting in front of a hospital with her newborn baby. All three uses of text (the first two at the beginning of the film, the third toward the end) are related to the idea of family, whereas the first two are linked to death and the last to birth. Thus the idea of family, in a non-traditional sense, appears to be the connection between the events. In the end, the two sisters and the baby create a new 'family', but one that is based on the experience of loss: the loss of their parents, the loss of the baby's father (and their common lover), and the loss of their playfulness and innocence. This playfulness is shown at the beginning of the film when the two sisters are happily fooling around in the forest, but this is brutally interrupted by the murder of the parents. After their arrival in Paris, they become playful again. In their shared room they cheerfully jump on the bed and dance, but their common link is severed by their romantic involvement with the playboy. This theme is being established and varied throughout *Ménilmontant*.

The film is structured using reoccurring visuals that are often used in a non-metaphorical way (cats, trees, water, movements of cars, clocks), but float through the film and constitute the mysterious atmospheric undercurrent of the narrative. In this sense, Kirsanoff's approach can be framed

as impressionist, based on Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell's definition:

Impressionist narratives depend to a considerable extent on psychological motivation. As in classical narratives, cause-and-effect operates but causes arise largely from character's conflicting traits and obsessions. (Thompson, Bordwell 2002: 91)

Kirsanoff uses a melodramatic narrative frame to show the actual incoherence of the subjective experience. His storytelling is elliptical and underlines this incoherence and the absence of a clear cause-and-effect scheme. When the younger sister is standing by the Seine contemplating whether to throw her newborn baby into the river, the flow of images that Kirsanoff intercuts and the superimpositions that are floating through her head do not provide any reasons for or against killing the baby, but merely display confusion. When she decides to keep the baby, the audience does not understand why she made this decision, and in Kirsanoff's universe, reason matters less than the poetic portrayal of emotions. This also explains the absence of intertitles – Kirsanoff's story works perfectly well without words because his character's inner world has no logical structure.

The idea of making films without intertitles was not new in 1926. As already mentioned, Kirsanoff did so in *The Irony of Fate*, which he started shooting in 1921. In the same year, the first feature films without intertitles were released: Joseph De Grasse's *The Old Swimmin' Hole* (USA) and Lupu Pick's *Shattered* (*Scherben*, Germany). In the French cinema, Kirsanoff pioneered that approach and was also heavily criticised for doing so. At the time that *Ménilmontant* was released, Jean Epstein wrote the following:

watching a film absolutely free of intertitles is, for psychological reasons, depressing; the subtitle is above all a place for the eye to

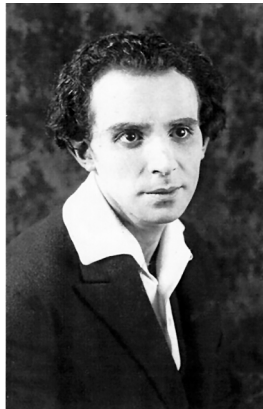


FIGURE 1. Kirsanoff and Sibirskaiia promote *Ménilmontant* in front of the Cinéma des Arts (1926).

FIGURE 2. Kirsanoff during his the early days in Paris (1924).

FIGURE 3. Kirsanoff in the 1930s.



rest, a punctuation point for the mind. A title often avoids a long visual explanation, one that is necessary, but also annoying or trite. (Epstein [1926] 2012: 303)

Kirsanoff contested this point of view – ‘the intertitles are a *bête noire*’ which ‘contribute to the fact that some consider cinema to be inferior to other arts’ (Lapierre 1929). *Ménilmontant* works without the ‘punctuation point for the mind’ because, through his elliptical storytelling, Kirsanoff forgoes long visual explanations and creates a visual flow that makes any punctuation superfluous. Fahle describes the narrative in *Ménilmontant* as ‘observant’, ‘vague’ and ‘ambivalent’ (Fahle 2000: 83). This vagueness and ambivalence is enhanced by the fact that Kirsanoff supplements the elliptical narrative with ambiguous flashbacks (after the night with the playboy, the younger sister has a flashback that shows her childhood innocence, which could also be a dream) and undefined visions (when the younger sister is sitting on a park bench she dreams of a chimney, a restaurant table and a washbasin). Rubín de Celis explains that ‘Kirsanoff likes to emphasize the subjective-tale condition of the film by frequently breaking its chronological order with memories and evocations of the past that also work towards creating its rather melancholic tone’ (Rubín de Celis 2010).

The montage contributes to these ruptures and disorientations. Kirsanoff uses many superimpositions, fast cuts, jump cuts and dissolves while masterfully creating a multifaceted visual universe with a rhythm that still resonates with contemporary audiences. Richard Prouty maintained that *Ménilmontant*’s ‘bravura editing techniques’ anticipate ‘the montage aesthetics of the Soviet cinema’ (Prouty 1996: 3) which does not take into account the actual historic facts. But considering the fact that Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Людина з кіноапаратом*, Ukraine, 1929) was only released three years after *Ménilmontant*, Kirsanoff’s approach to editing deserves greater recognition than

it currently receives. What fundamentally distinguishes Kirsanoff’s approach to montage from Soviet montage cinema is an interest in character subjectivity. Soviet montage cinema used editing as a manipulative device in narratives focused on the masses; Kirsanoff used it to uncover the subjective impressions of an individual character.

Due to the location shooting in Paris, *Ménilmontant* has also been interpreted as a city portrayal/city symphony. As Rubín de Celis notes:

The depiction of the Paris streets ... is not dissimilar to what is seen in films such as Mikhail Kaufman’s *Moskwa* (1926), Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (*Berlin, Symphonie einer Grossstadt*, 1927) and Dziga Vertov’s *The Man with the Movie Camera* (*Cheloviek s Kinoaparatom*, 1929). In all of them, documentary and avant-garde techniques, such as out-of-focus effects, accelerated movement, superimpositions, double exposures, etc., are masterfully combined to present a dynamic vision of the city. (Rubín de Celis 2010)

The classification is appropriate for some of the scenes in *Ménilmontant*, but ignores the fact that there are many passages (e.g., when the younger sister is waiting for her lover to contact her) that are shot in a slow pace in the very austere side streets of Paris and merely use the city as a backdrop for the emotional solitude of the younger sister. Abel more appropriately describes the film as ‘a mixture of styles or modes, a pastiche of techniques’ (Abel 1984: 396).

In addition to the very advanced montage techniques and the innovative use of Paris as a location, Kirsanoff also used a handheld camera very effectively. Whether portraying the two sisters playing as children in the countryside with a cat, depicting an inexplicable murder in detail at staccato

speed, or rendering the insecurity of a young mother, Kirsanoff's handheld camera mixes dynamism with poetry and moves way ahead of its time through the landscapes, cityscapes and character-scapes in *Ménilmontant*.

The most important character-scape of the film is the younger sister, masterfully portrayed by Nadia Sibirskaja. In her many close-ups she gives a very restrained, but emotionally multifaceted performance that mixes innocence with pain, playful enthusiasm with shyness, and eroticism with shame. In a subsequent interview Sibirskaja explained 'that we always had to use the first take because we could not waste any film stock' (Philippe 1961: 76). As MoMA mentioned in a press release for the American premiere, 'the acting of Nadia Sibirskaia in the chief role, remain[s] extraordinarily fresh and brilliant' to this day (Newmoyer 1937).

Considering the sheer force of the film, it seems incomprehensible from a contemporary point of view why Kirsanoff had difficulties finding a distributor and it took a year until the film was finally premiered. The premiere took place on 22 January 1926 at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in Paris, which was run by the *cinéophile* Jean Tedesco. Trebil (2003: 33) tells us that the brutal opening scene of the film was censored. The press reviews were positive but the film did not succeed at the box office (partly because it was only shown on the ciné-club circuits).

### SILENCED FOR SOUND REASONS

Kirsanoff immediately started working on his next films. The studio-based *Destiny* (*Destin*, France, 1928) was more traditional in its form and *Sables* (France, 1928) shot in North Africa is thought to be lost. The most notable film from that period is *Autumn Mists*, a *poème cinématographique* carried by Nadia Sibirskaja's performance, and a return to the avant-garde explorations of the film form. Again the reviews were positive but the box office revenues modest. After *Autumn Mists*, Kirsanoff faced some

serious obstacles in his career; a silent film project called *Le Croisé* and his first sound film project for Paramount Pictures called *Les Nuits de Port-Said* were aborted. In addition the introduction of sound films profoundly changed the industry.

At the beginning of the sound era, Kirsanoff did not believe in the absolute transformation that sound would bring. In an interview Kirsanoff insisted that it 'is a new art' that will 'not eliminate the silent film' (Lapierre 1929). He believed in the peaceful co-existence of sound and silent cinema, which he felt was comparable to sculpture and painting. Only a year later his assessment had been fundamentally altered. Kirsanoff writes that, in regard to 'the silent film, it appears that the world of cinema has completely turned its back on it. It is considered to be an early art form. Do we have to conclude that the silent film is dead?' (Icart 1988: 151) He concludes his article with the defiant statement that 'we will always find that the basis is the silent film, the substance of the *septième art*' (Icart 1988: 151).

For Kirsanoff the introduction of sound film and the increasingly tight grip of the large film companies on the market meant a decline in his career. Although many critics consider his Swiss-produced (sound) film *Rapt* (France/Switzerland, 1934) to be a masterwork, the film could no longer compete on a market increasingly dominated by large American production companies. For many of the avant-garde filmmakers the introduction of sound film meant commercialisation (e.g., René Clair, Abel Gance) or decline (e.g., Germaine Dulac). Trebil points out the following:

the cinema can be perceived through two different attitudes – 'art in the service of an industry' and 'art for art's sake'. The introduction of sound film puts a definite end to this confrontation. The first attitude wins. From that moment, the career of Dimitri Kirsanoff turns into disenchantment. (Trebil 2003: 49)

In a letter to a friend in 1937 Kirsanoff writes that 'I am doing nothing... my only preoccupation is making money – this is not bad, but there are better things in the world' (Fondane 2007: 139). So, Kirsanoff continued to shoot films, despite the forced absence from filmmaking during the German occupation, and the lack of creative freedom, financial means or box office success. As Trebuil remarks, Kirsanoff had to get used to the fact that 'practically all of his films were failing with the big audience' (Trebuil 2003: 43). Despite that impediment, Kirsanoff directed 23 films that ranged from feature films, short films and documentaries to *poèmes cinématographiques* and *cinéphonies*.

In a subsequent interview, Kirsanoff is critical of the role played by the audience, which he considers to be 'too indifferent, too apathetic. Most people go to the cinema to see (and listen to) a story and they don't understand that the plot is not the main thing' (Fabre 1950).

But although he had to face many setbacks in his life and career, Kirsanoff ended the interview on an optimistic note, expressing the hope that 'I can encourage young filmmakers, by showing them that it is possible to achieve something with a little money, courage and confidence' (Fabre 1950). This could be considered the essence of Dimitri Kirsanoff's elusive life and career.

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