

# 'Kinesthesia' and Cinematic Montage: An Historical Examination of the Film Theories and Avant-Garde Mediation of Slavko Vorkapich in Hollywood

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## Abstract

Early film theorist Slavko Vorkapich, a talented European émigré who became one of the first avant-garde filmmakers in the United States, articulated his conception of cinema as a unique, distinctive artistic endeavor. I will historically examine extensive original primary archival materials from the Slavko Vorkapich Collection to historically contextualize his film theories, montage techniques, and investigate how he envisioned his cinematic philosophy and visual aesthetic in his theoretical writings on motion pictures regarding "Film As A Visual Language," "The Motion Picture as an Art" and "Motion and the Art of Cinematography" in 1926 which he went on to stylistically employ in his independent avant-garde films, such as *The Life and Death of 9413 – A Hollywood Extra* (Slavko Vorkapich and Robert Florey [with Gregg Toland]; US, 1928), and in montage sequences for an extensive number of Hollywood studio films, including *What Price Hollywood?* (George Cukor, RKO Pathé; US, 1932). Vorkapich's diverse array of work embodies the dynamic representation of his aesthetic philosophy encompassed in both his studio and independent productions. Notable is that he manages to successfully bridge the conceptual economic and artistic abyss between the dominant commercial industry and the avant-garde. Moreover, an analysis of montage sequences in the commercial film *What Price Hollywood?* reveals how his avant-garde stylistic mediation functions to transform the overall narrative film text by appropriating his innovative experimental aesthetic techniques expounded on in his film theories within the mainstream commercial production environment of the classical Hollywood studio system.

Early film theorist and filmmaker Slavko Vorkapich, a talented European émigré who became one of the first avant-garde filmmakers in the United States, articulated his conception of cinema as a unique, distinctive artistic endeavor. I will historically examine original archival papers from the Slavko Vorkapich Collection to historically contextualize his film theories, montage techniques, and investigate how he envisioned his cinematic philosophy and visual aesthetic in his theoretical writings on motion pictures, then analyze how he applied his film theories to his work as a filmmaker which was influential in the motion picture industry, specifically in his innovative experimental montages in *What Price Hollywood?* (George Cukor, RKO Pathé; US, 1932), which reveal how his avant-garde stylistic mediation functions to transform the overall narrative film text by appropriating his innovative experimental aesthetic techniques expounded on in his film theories within the mainstream commercial production environment of the classical Hollywood studio system.

Primary archival materials in the Slavko Vorkapich Collection at the University of Southern California Cinematic Arts Library Special Collections

reveal how he envisioned his cinematic philosophy: "If film is an art it has to have its own language of expression."<sup>1</sup> This tenet comprises the essence of the 'visual dynamic' aesthetic which Vorkapich expounded upon in his theoretical writings on motion pictures regarding "Film As A Visual Language," "The Motion Picture as an Art" and "Motion and the Art of Cinematography" in 1926

<sup>1</sup> Slavko Vorkapich quoted in Bozidar Zevevic, *Slavko Vorkapich and Early American Film Theory* (Belgrade: Institut za film, 1981), 268; see also, Slavko Vorkapich, 'The Motion Picture as an Art,' *Film Mercury* (29 October-12 November 1926): 4-16; Slavko Vorkapich, 'Motion in Motion Pictures,' *Film Mercury* (3-17 September 1926): 1-12; Slavko Vorkapich, 'Motion and the Art of Cinematography,' *American Cinematographer*, volume ii, no. 8-9 (November-December 1926): 16-17, 19; Slavko Vorkapich, 'Film As A Visual Language' and 'The Visual Nature of the Film Medium' in the Slavko Vorkapich Collection, Special Collections, University of Southern California Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California (hereafter SVC, USC). I will investigate primary archival materials from the SVC, USC which shed light to contextualize secondary sources on film theory. These original materials provide valuable insight into Slavko Vorkapich's film theories, lectures, publications and creative work as a filmmaker and creative avant-garde montage artist both inside and beyond the commercial Hollywood motion picture studio system, as well as independently and across the Atlantic in Europe.

which he went on to stylistically employ in independent avant-garde films, such as *The Life and Death of 9413 – A Hollywood Extra* (Slavko Vorkapich and Robert Florey<sup>2</sup>; US, 1928), and in montage sequences for an extensive number of Hollywood studio films, including *What Price Hollywood?* and a wide range of productions: *Manhattan Cocktail* (Dorothy Arzner, Paramount Famous Lasky; US, 1928; now 'lost'), *Christopher Strong* (Dorothy Arzner, RKO; US, 1933), *Dancing Lady* (Robert Z. Leonard, MGM; US, 1933), *Crime Without Passion* (Ben Hecht, Paramount; US, 1934), *Manhattan Melodrama* (W. S. Van Dyke, MGM; US, 1934), *Viva Villa* (Jack Conway, MGM; US, 1934), *David Copperfield* (George Cukor, MGM; US, 1935), *San Francisco* (W. S. Van Dyke, MGM; US, 1936), *Romeo and Juliet* (George Cukor, MGM; US, 1936), *The Good Earth* (Sidney Franklin, MGM; US, 1937), *The Firefly* (Robert Z. Leonard, MGM; US, 1937), *Maytime* (Robert Z. Leonard, MGM; US, 1937), *Boys Town* (Norman Taurog, MGM; US, 1938), *Test Pilot* (Victor Fleming, MGM; US, 1938), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, Columbia; US, 1939), *Meet John Doe* (Frank Capra, Warner Bros.; US, 1941), and *Lady in the Dark* (Robert Z. Leonard, MGM; US, 1944).

Vorkapich's diverse array of work embodies the dynamic representation of his aesthetic philosophy encompassed in his studio and independent productions. As a filmmaker and special effects montage artist, Vorkapich navigated between the commercial Hollywood industry and the avant-garde. Vorkapich's film theories and work as an avant-garde filmmaker and cinema montage artist outside and within the American motion picture industry reveals independent avant-garde artists (such as Vorkapich, Oskar Fischinger, and others) who theorized on the nature of cinema as an art form, made experimental films, and also engaged in involvement as creative individuals within the Hollywood studio system, and established a clear relationship and sphere of influence between these two divergent realms. In the case of Vorkapich, his significant contributions within and outside of the commercial film industry transcends beyond this binary distinction—as evident in his successful studio montage work, film theories and lectures, and influential position as one of the first avant-garde filmmakers in the United States.

The successful implementation of Vorkapich's cinematic theories in independent and studio productions deviates from this 'Hollywood versus the

avant-garde' artistic divide.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, an analysis of montage sequences in the commercial film *What Price Hollywood?* reveals how his avant-garde stylistic mediation functions to transform the overall narrative film text by appropriating his innovative experimental aesthetic techniques expounded on in his film theories within the mainstream commercial production environment of the classical Hollywood studio system. Vorkapich is a fascinating early film theorist and avant-garde filmmaker who effectively functioned in and outside Hollywood's commercial motion picture industry. Further, he is also a remarkable transnational artistic figure who exported his creative montage theories across the Atlantic from Europe to America and back, moving between national filmmaking production and cultural contexts.

### Slavko Vorkapich as Film Theorist and Filmmaker

Originally from Dobrinici, Yugoslavia, Vorkapich was born in 1894, educated at fine arts schools in Belgrade and Budapest, then studied painting at *Ecole des Beaux Arts* and *Academie Ranson* in Paris. In his essay, "Archeology of Film Theory: Slavko Vorkapich, The First of the Independents," Bozidar Zecevic also notes that Vorkapich "belonged to the Parisian strand of Yugoslav expressionists."<sup>4</sup> In 1920, he emigrated to the United States working as a commercial artist and portrait painter in New York before coming to Hollywood in 1921.<sup>5</sup> In 1926, prior to making any films, Vorkapich published his cinematic theories in *Film Mercury* and *American Cinematographer* and lectured to the American Society of Cinematographers. In 1928 he worked with Robert Florey and Gregg Toland to design, direct and edit the experimental film *The Life and Death of 9413 – A Hollywood Extra* which Vorkapich shot with his DeVry camera for 97 dollars using cardboard and cigarette boxes as sets in his kitchen and living

<sup>2</sup> Collaborating with Gregg Toland.

<sup>3</sup> Contradicting the notion, as P. Adams Sitney suggests, that: "The precise relationship of the avant-garde cinema to American commercial film is one of radical otherness. They operate in different realms with next to no significant influence on each other." P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Bozidar Zecevic, 'Archeology of Film Theory: Slavko Vorkapich, The First of the Independents,' *Framework*, no. 21, (Summer 1983): 10 in SVC, USC.

<sup>5</sup> Slavko Vorkapich, 'Reminiscences of Slavko Vorkapich,' Interview by Ronald L. Davis, Transcript of Oral History Project, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX, 11 August 1975, 3 in SVC, USC.

room.<sup>6</sup> Recognized as one of the first avant-garde films in the U.S., Charlie Chaplin screened *The Life and Death of 9413 – A Hollywood Extra* for a gathering of prominent Hollywood studio executives who arranged for the film's distribution and exhibition in 700 theaters throughout the U.S. and Europe.<sup>7</sup> Vorkapich was hired by Paramount one week later as director, designer, photographer and editor of montage sequences within narrative films—and subsequently worked for RKO, MGM and Columbia studios. From 1928 to 1949, he was responsible for an impressive array of studio montage work, including a significant number of outstanding montage sequences for MGM (one of the largest, most prestigious of the 'Big Five' major studios) between 1934 and World War II.<sup>8</sup>

In 1930, Vorkapich wrote "Cinematics," published in *Cinematographic Annual*, which revealed his "interest in optics" and "insight into the psychological effects of camera technique on the spectator," then lectured on montage theory through the Museum of Modern Art at Columbia University in 1938.<sup>9</sup> He completed two independent films, *Moods of the Sea* (Slavko Vorkapich and John Hoffman; US, 1942) and *Forest Murmurs* (Slavko Vorkapich; US, 1947), which were never released commercially, then went on to teach as Head of the Department of Cinema at the University of Southern California from 1949 to 1951. During 1952–1956, Vorkapich traveled and lectured extensively throughout Europe, returned to Yugoslavia as an artistic advisor for Belgrade's Avela Film Studios, directed and edited the feature *Hanka* (1955; filmed in Yugoslavia, and presented at the Cannes Film Festival in 1956), and taught at the Belgrade Academy of Theatre and Cinema. He returned to Hollywood in 1956 to edit John Gunther's *High Road* travel series for ABC Television through 1960. In 1959, Vorkapich published his influential "Toward True Cinema" theories in *Film Culture*, before moving to New York in 1961 to develop his lectures on "The Visual Nature of the Film Medium" which he presented at the Museum of Modern Art in 1965, then taught at Princeton, USC, and UCLA. Vorkapich's

film theories were published by *American Cinematographer* in the 1920s and his lectures later reprinted in the 1970s.

### Slavko Vorkapich's Early Film Theories

In his cinematic theories, Vorkapich championed film as a distinct art form. He criticized the appropriation of aesthetic conventions from other media (such as novels or the theatrical stage) into filmmaking technique because in his view this practice severely restricted the creative exploration of developing film's unique inherent potential. He argued,

It is surprising that motion picture people are so slow to realize the real form and purpose of their art. The cinema has been borrowing so much from the other arts, especially drama and literature, and it has become so entangled in those uncinematic elements, that it will be very hard for it to get rid of the bad habit and to come into its own.<sup>10</sup>

Vorkapich expounded upon the notion of "kinesthesia"— what he described as the greatest power of film which resides in using movement as a means of aesthetic expression. In his 1926 article, "The Motion Picture As An Art" in *Film Mercury*, he states:

We live in a dynamic world and an equally dynamic world lives in us. The external world is a world of incessant movement. From the terrific gyrations of the minute electrons to the immense sweeping revolutions of the Universe there is an indefinite scale and variety of motions that make up the world in which we live... science discovered that the world is nothing but energy... provided us with a medium to express this new outlook on the... motion pictures.<sup>11</sup>

Vorkapich felt that visual subject matter in films should be treated cinematically through the rhythmical organization of motion and image. "Motion pictures should be... *an art of motions...* told in a cinematic manner... *moving patterns of light and darkness on the screen.*"<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Doris Denbo, 'Extra No. 9413 is Snubbed: Maker of 100 Dollar Film Awaiting Big Opportunity,' *Hollywood Citizen*, 4 May 1929 in SVC, USC.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Allen, 'The Life and Death of 9413 - A Hollywood Extra,' *Framework*, no. 21, (Summer 1983): 12 in SVC, USC.

<sup>8</sup> Slavko Vorkapich, 'Curriculum Vitae: Slavko Vorkapich,' (undated) in SVC, USC.

<sup>9</sup> Vorkapich, 'Curriculum Vitae,' (undated); see also Slavko Vorkapich, 'Cinematics: Some Principles Underlying Effective Cinematography,' *Cinematographic Annual* (1930) in SVC, USC.

<sup>10</sup> Slavko Vorkapich, 'The Motion Picture As An Art,' *Film Mercury*, (5 November 1926): 4 (Part II of the article) in SVC, USC.

<sup>11</sup> Slavko Vorkapich, 'The Motion Picture As An Art,' *Film Mercury*, (29 October 1926): 11 (Part I of the article) in SVC, USC.

<sup>12</sup> Slavko Vorkapich, 'The Motion Picture As An Art,' *Film Mercury*, (12 November 1926): 16 (Part III of the article) in SVC, USC.

He defined 'motion' to mean an expressive "optical change" and expressed terms evocative of experimental Russian documentary filmmaker Dziga Vertov's film theories about the possibility of the camera as a "kino-eye." As Vorkapich explained, "First of all, you... have to give more freedom of action to this magical eye: the camera... to allow... more agility."<sup>13</sup> Vorkapich envisioned film's realization as an art form through liberating the camera to enable greater movement and creative rhythm rather than static theatrical derivations. He asserted that "All art, ultimately, is expression of thoughts or feelings in a rhythmic manner," and argued that "an accurate reproduction... is far from being artistic creation." Rather, "Art does not copy, it expresses feelings."<sup>14</sup> In acknowledging film's sensory and aesthetic potential as a medium and art form, Vorkapich points out that in order for motion pictures to be fully realized artistically, rhythmic visual composition and editing is necessary to create simple and complex rhythms of moving images which, when organized into aesthetic and rhythmic relationships, achieves a formal expression of 'perceptual' content independent of subject matter.

In developing this 'formalist' conceptualization, Vorkapich emphasizes that film must be considered in terms of its medium specificity (similar to other formalists such as avant-garde theorist Clement Greenberg). Vorkapich's film theories refer to cinema as emphasizing its inherently filmic nature that is distinctive from other expressive mediums or art forms. For instance, he states that lines are expressed through drawing, colors convey the "world of light" which is realized through the art of painting, "living forms" are "crystallized" in sculpture, sounds are expressed through music, but "the world of motions, physical and mental, is still waiting for those who will be able to grasp it and recreate it in a dynamic flowing form."<sup>15</sup> He then expounds upon his notion of medium specificity: "Each of these... arts... expresses... [a] vision... different from the others... according to the laws inherent in its medium... Why should not the movies express certain human feelings, thoughts, visions, dreams, etc., in their own particular way."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Vorkapich, 'The Motion Picture As An Art,' (12 November 1926): 16 in SVC, USC.

<sup>14</sup> Vorkapich, 'The Motion Picture As An Art,' (12 November 1926): 16 in SVC, USC.

<sup>15</sup> Vorkapich, 'The Motion Picture As An Art,' (29 October 1926): 11 in SVC, USC.

<sup>16</sup> Slavko Vorkapich, 'Motion in Motion Pictures,' *Film Mercury*, (3 September 1926): 12 (Part I of the article) in SVC, USC.

Vorkapich's formalist tendency is self-reflexively revealed in 1928 in *The Life and Death of 9413 – A Hollywood Extra* by exposing and "laying bare the devices" of the film medium (similar to the notion posited by Greenberg) using shots of the camera during the filming process which are evocative of Dziga Vertov's *Man With A Movie Camera* (VUFKU; USSR, 1928). Vorkapich's expressionistic influence is evident as well in the dark subjective tone and distorted high-contrast images of dream sequences and psychological montages reminiscent of German Expressionist films of the 1920s.

He critiques the tendency of early filmmakers to not properly utilize the uniquely intrinsic motion or rhythmic capabilities of the film medium to realize the great "kinesthetic power" and aesthetic experience of the cinema.<sup>17</sup> As an early film theorist and avant-garde filmmaker who explored and experimented with the artistic promise and possibilities of motion pictures as innovative art cinema, Vorkapich summarizes his criticism of what he regarded as the 1920s commercial industry's neglect of film's full creative potential. "The cinema is like a marvelously gifted child," he argues, "whose parents exploit its genius for commercial purposes. Obviously this is a great handicap to the development of its real talents."<sup>18</sup> He denounces the formal homogeneity of the mainstream commercial motion picture industry's profit machine in favor of true 'cinematography' in his 1926 article "Motion and the Art of Cinematography" for *American Cinematographer*: "I will ask you... to forget... the business side of film, the box office and the appeal to audiences... even among the public there is an evident demand for 'something different.'" In fact, he hopefully suggests that "perhaps the idea" of cinematography "here expressed, if properly realized, might some day prove... financially viable."<sup>19</sup>

Vorkapich conceives of this fully realized 'cinematography' as "the fundamental principle of cinema-art: Its language must be, first of all, a language of motions." He adds that "figuratively speaking, the camera should be able to look within" one's 'soul' and achieve 'mastery' of cinematic 'tools' to 'express' "dreams and visions" in an "eloquent,

<sup>17</sup> Vorkapich, 'Reminiscences,' 24 in SVC, USC.

<sup>18</sup> Vorkapich, 'The Motion Picture As An Art,' (29 October 1926): 11 in SVC, USC.

<sup>19</sup> Slavko Vorkapich, 'Motion and the Art of Cinematography,' *American Cinematographer*, volume ii, no. 8 (November 1926): 19 (Part I of the article) in SVC, USC.

cinematic manner."<sup>20</sup> He cites F. W. Murnau's extraordinary achievement in *The Last Laugh* (F. W. Murnau, UFA; Germany, 1925) as a rare, groundbreaking example of true 'cinematography' whereby a film expressively utilizes its unique, medium specific capabilities by placing the camera on a descending elevator to photograph amid multiple layers of movement in and around a hotel lobby colored by "actions... composed into a real symphony of motions... not confusion" but rather "five or six distinct motions excellently orchestrated... optically... intriguing to the eye... mentally convincing... throbbing with life."<sup>21</sup> It is also interesting to note the potential expressionistic influence of this stylistic appropriation of narrative technique since Murnau was one of the leading directors in the German Expressionism film movement during the Weimar cinema era of the 1920s.

In this expressionistic tradition, in his film theories, experimental films and montages, Vorkapich is also significantly influenced by dreams, the unconscious, and what he called the "Mind's Eye" and its relationship to the film experience. In addition to observing external motions, he calls for integrating the imaginative process to "visualize a blank screen" in "your mind's eye... let your subconscious mind... play absolutely freely" and "run riot, no matter how absurd its whims may appear; do not try to impose... conventional continuity." Instead, imagine "original and amazing things... learn that your subconscious mind is a greater artist. Dreams... mental pictures *move perpetually*... appear suddenly... grow... gradually... transform, metamorphose... dissolve... into something else... fade... reappear... with variations." He added, "the wealth of moving pictures" in "conscious dreams is immense."<sup>22</sup>

In his 1930 article, "Cinematics: Some Principles Underlying Effective Cinematography," published in *Cinematographic Annual*, Vorkapich discusses optics and the psychological effects of camera technique on the spectator. "Modern psychology teaches that our primitive emotions can be sublimated and our reflexes conditioned... we may create pleasure and entertainment by suggested motions. By merely

seeing motion on the screen our minds, conscious or unconscious, may be made to react in a similar manner as in active participation."<sup>23</sup>

He argues that there is intense power in the movements of film, independent of content or meaning, and contends: "Motion is energy visualized, therefore motion is a symbol of life itself."<sup>24</sup> In his essay, "A Fresh Look at the Dynamics of Filmmaking" (extracts from his lectures on "The Visual Nature of the Film Medium" published in *American Cinematographer*), Vorkapich further develops this relationship between motion and perception within the context of the viewing process in what he terms "kinesthetic responses" which he defines as "implicit motor impulses" or physical sensations, tensions, and movements in response to a spectator's visual participation and to "seen movements." To achieve an ideal, fully articulated aesthetic realization of film, Vorkapich argues that the viewing experience should engage the spectator both on a formal-physiological level as a vivid kinesthetic experience, and on a content level as a poetic experience. However, he points out, "poetic values can be achieved only if the referential aspects and literal content of shots are transcended so that they acquire multilevel meanings which cannot be verbally described." He goes on to further emphasize that "moods, tensions, and conflicts" should be "expressed in visual-dynamic imagery" rather than in "histrionics."<sup>25</sup>

Vorkapich considers visual perception and applies fundamentals of cognition, optics and motion to the cinematic experience. His innovative insights and early film theories on montage, editing and the cinematic process in the 1920s and 1930s also coincided with the writings of Lev Kuleshov (known for his famous 'Kuleshov Experiment'), as well as formalists Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, and the artistic experimentation of the European avant-garde cinema. Drawing on his notion of the 'Mind's Eye' and psychological cognition, Vorkapich relates perception and kinetic movement to his innovative editing technique in creating montage sequences, and incorporates his influential appropriation of

<sup>20</sup> Slavko Vorkapich, 'Motion and the Art of Cinematography,' *American Cinematographer*, volume ii, no. 9 (December 1926): 16-17 (Part II of the article) in SVC, USC.

<sup>21</sup> Vorkapich, 'The Motion Picture As An Art,' (5 November 1926): 4 in SVC, USC.

<sup>22</sup> Vorkapich, 'Motion and the Art of Cinematography,' (November 1926): 15 in SVC, USC.

<sup>23</sup> Slavko Vorkapich, 'Cinematics: Some Principles Underlying Effective Cinematography,' *Cinematographic Annual* (1930) in SVC, USC; reprinted in Richard Koszarski, *Hollywood Directors: 1914-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 254.

<sup>24</sup> Vorkapich, 'Cinematics,' 255 in SVC, USC.

<sup>25</sup> Slavko Vorkapich, 'A Fresh Look at the Dynamics of Filmmaking,' (extracts from his lectures on 'The Visual Nature of the Film Medium') in SVC, USC; reprinted in *American Cinematographer*, volume 53, no. 2 (February 1972): 223.

Gestalt psychology into his visual montage formulae in his later 1959 *Film Culture* essay, "Toward True Cinema." As he explains: "The human perceptive mechanism... may interpret as motion certain phenomena where no actual motion occurs... Investigated by Gestalt psychologists... phi-phenomenon or apparent movement" is the "sensation of displacement" or "visual leap" between "sufficiently different shots" or "transformation of one shape to another" by "intercutting" to create a "new purely filmic force" producing a "visual impact that occurs at each cut."<sup>26</sup>

Vorkapich elaborates on his montage theory in a lecture for the Museum of Modern Art at Columbia University in 1938. In this transcript, he points out that each cinematic "possibility" has a "different psychological value." For example, he cites how slow motion is evocative of a dream and resembles a state of floating. Again, note Vorkapich's expressionistic influence and insight into the psychological process in his film aesthetic, which he articulated in his early film theories in the 1920s and 1930s (and later reiterated in the 1950s). He defines "montage" as "assembling" images or sounds. As he explains:

Montage can be purely visual or intellectual, but... primarily visual... meaning should be expressed filmically... not rely only on the contents of the image. Montage is putting two images together or on top of one another to express an idea or a mood, atmosphere or lapse of time.<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting to note that Vorkapich's montage film theory—although bearing some similar formalist language—does not posit the ideological or intellectual collision dialectic put forth by Sergei Eisenstein in his Soviet montage theories.

In applying his montage theory to sequences not only in independent avant-garde films, but in an extensive number of studio narrative films, Vorkapich was an avant-garde filmmaker and film theorist who conceived of very visionary and expressive ideas regarding the medium which moved significantly beyond what the commercial industry in Hollywood was doing at the time. Yet, as an innovative thinker, Vorkapich was nonetheless very

successfully placed into—and his ideas were appropriated by—the Hollywood studio system. Furthermore, he achieved wide recognition for his work on montage sequences—in commercial narrative films produced by the industry—with the most prominent, influential producers and directors (including David O. Selznick, Irving Thalberg, Frank Capra, George Cukor, Victor Fleming, Hunt Stromberg, Ben Hecht, Walter Wanger, et. al.) at major studios (MGM, Paramount, RKO, as well as individual films for Columbia, Warner Bros., et. al.) as a means of financially supporting himself during the peak period of the classical Hollywood studio system era (from 1928 into the 1940s). As a result of this stylistic exposure within and outside of the industry, Vorkapich subsequently influenced Hollywood narrative technique. In fact, in realising his film theories in filmmaking practice, Vorkapich's experimental montage style was so distinctive and immediately recognisable that studio executives referred to his special effects sequences not as a montage, but as a "Vorkapich."

### Slavko Vorkapich's Avant-Garde Montage in Hollywood: *What Price Hollywood?*

George Cukor's *What Price Hollywood?* is a prototypical example of the successful implementation of Vorkapich's cinematic theories in a studio production. An analysis of this film's montage sequences reveals how Vorkapich's avant-garde stylistic mediation functions to transform the overall narrative text by appropriating his innovative philosophic and aesthetic influence within the production environment of the dominant studio system. Although he did not receive screen credit, Vorkapich refers to this film as one for which he not only created montage sequences, but also co-directed with George Cukor for RKO Pathé in 1932.<sup>28</sup> (He is officially credited with "special effects.") This self-reflexive film on the industry incorporates the formalist notion of laying bare the devices of the medium in "glimpses of behind-the-scenes filmmaking" which "remain among the best ever committed to celluloid" and initiated "one of the most durable plots in Hollywood history."<sup>29</sup> It culminates in a series of montage sequences which comprise the film's climax and form a microcosm of

<sup>26</sup> Slavko Vorkapich, 'Toward True Cinema,' *Film Culture*, no. 19 (1959): 16 in SVC, USC; reprinted in *American Cinematographer*, volume 54, no. 7 (July 1973): 884-890.

<sup>27</sup> Slavko Vorkapich, Transcript From Lecture on Montage Theory, Museum of Modern Art Film Library's 'History of the Motion Picture,' Columbia University, New York, 20 December 1938, 14 in SVC, USC.

<sup>28</sup> Vorkapich, cited in both Vorkapich, 'Curriculum Vitae,' (undated) and in Vorkapich, 'Reminiscences of Slavko Vorkapich,' Oral History Transcript, in SVC, USC.

<sup>29</sup> Richard B. Jewell and Vernon Harbin, *The RKO Story* (London: Arlington Press, 1982), 49.

the entire narrative plot—that is, the *A Star is Born* vehicle tracing a well known Hollywood figure's self-destructive descent amid the success of a rising star, in this case, an alcoholic ex-film director and the young actress he discovers.

*What Price Hollywood?* also appropriates an expressionistic influence into its dark, psychologically subjective style in Vorkapich's stunning montage sequence which is evocative not only of Vorkapich's earlier avant-garde work in his 1928 silent avant-garde film *The Life and Death of 9413 – A Hollywood Extra*, but also seems to anticipate the famous film noir stylistic aesthetic that would become so prevalent in later Hollywood films—including Cukor's remake of *What Price Hollywood?* into the noir musical, *A Star is Born* (George Cukor, Warner Bros.; US, 1954) with Judy Garland and James Mason.<sup>30</sup> In this proto-noir sequence of *What Price Hollywood?*, the iconography, visual style, and subjective psychological tone is distinctive: a dark, disheveled figure crosses a chiaroscuro room splintered by diagonally criss-crossing patterns of shadow from windows which place expressionistic bars of entrapment across the character and the walls of his subjective environment. Shot glass and cigarette in hand, he staggers across a gun, a mirror, and a framed photo portrait of his youth while searching in the dark for a match. Disgustedly throwing his photograph aside, he looks in the mirror as Vorkapich's climactic montage begins.

The sequence comprises multiple montages which last only two minutes in all. Inclusive is an intense, three second montage-within-a-montage which uses rapid single-frame imagery to powerfully convey the character's suicide, followed by a brief visual pause and a final montage of highly saturated images communicating multiple codes of meaning in relation to the culminating effect of this pivotal action. Vorkapich utilizes overlapping visual layers of high-contrast imagery along with a dark, subjective psychological tone in this sequence that silently commences with a close up of the director's haggard face in the mirror superimposed first with his youthful image beside a camera—the image blurs and wavers, then dissolves into his successful image superimposed gaily drinking a martini in tuxedo and top hat, wavering and dissolving into his disheveled mirrored face which he covers with his hand in disgust as his image dissolves into a superimposition

of diagonally panning prison bars, then a rippling pool of water over close-ups of his feet walking, dissolving to his hand opening a drawer, reaching for the gun and pointing it to his heart.

At this point, Vorkapich integrates an emotionally and perceptually riveting three-second, high-contrast psychological sub montage using single frame shots to subjectively simulate the character's mind and point-of-view as images of his life flash before us on the screen in a dream-like, stream-of-consciousness fashion. The firing of a gun pierces the silence as a rapid visual succession follows: a flash frame of white, his youthful shot at the camera, his grinning toast in tuxedo, dark swish-pans of both he and the actress he discovered, another flash of white, his dark haggard profile, an extreme overexposed shot of his image in the mirror, fading to white, then in to a rueful two shot with the actress, an abrupt cut to a dark shot of him behind bars looking down in shame over the black shoulder of a prison guard which moves laterally to completely cover him in the frame, cut to another flash of white, then to a dark, barred shadowed, extreme low angle shot of him holding the gun and falling in slow motion.

A brief visual pause posits a connotative comma following Vorkapich's intense montage-within-a-montage: a silent reaction shot of the actress in an adjacent room, cut to a completely blackened room—a light goes on beyond the opened door, and she rushes in and stops abruptly to see him laying in shadow on the floor. As she hesitantly moves toward his shadowed body in the foreground, Vorkapich resumes his montage by superimposing the rapid, siren-blaring procession of black police cars with bright lights turning toward the spectator and racing diagonally across the frame.

This shot dissolves into a bustling reverse-zoom of a newsroom, close ups of printing headlines such as "Director Dies of Wounds in Star's Home" superimposed with the dynamic movement of the printing press, an extreme low-angle shot of newspapers falling from the sky in all directions dissolving over a vulnerable close up of the actress, which is superimposed with a third low-angle reverse-zoom of a doll-like gowned starlet with a star lens radiating light above her head as the white figure becomes more diminutive and the falling papers fade into the foreground over both the figure and her face. As the papers fall, an out-of-focus extreme low-angle shot of dirt falling toward the camera blends in and out of the superimposition, which dissolves into headlines reading "Star

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<sup>30</sup> Producer David O. Selznick also adapted a version of *What Price Hollywood?* as *A Star is Born* (William Wellman, Selznick International; US, 1937).

Collapses On Stand At Inquest," "Police Quiz Star In Death of Director," "Film Star Faints at Grave of Former Director-Friend," "Star Denies Romantic Life With Director," "Women's Clubs Ban Pictures Of Star From Theatres" amid the falling dirt and papers which simulates the point-of-view looking up from within a grave; the montage ends with a pile of dirt being thrown atop the paper headlines—which functions as a double metaphor of both the media 'digging up the dirt' on the star, and of her being 'buried alive' by stylistically simulating a nightmare to establish a parallel vulnerability with the star's psychological referent sharing the deceased director's point of view from the grave.

While the overall body of the narrative text in *What Price Hollywood?*—like other commercial Hollywood films of the classical studio system era—remains essentially a dialogue-driven vehicle visually reliant on relatively static two-shot compositions derivative of the stage, Vorkapich transcends this framing, cutting and blocking germane to the proscenium arch by appropriating his avant-garde stylistic mediation into montage sequences within the text. In successfully implementing his cinematic theories in a studio production, he transforms the overall narrative text from a few static cuts of static figures alternating between wide, medium/close-up shots, into a visually dynamic interplay of movement in the frame and between shots to create richly layered visual textures through techniques such as superimpositions, high-contrast single-frame shots, and slow motion.

## Conclusion

Interestingly, Vorkapich succeeded in integrating his theories and ideas of film as an artistic medium into an industry whose commercial aims were often the antithesis of that aesthetic objective to actually improve the quality of the product that was coming out of the Hollywood studio system. Vorkapich's contribution significantly improved the quality of these studio films. As a film theorist, in lecturing and in his theoretical writings he was also developing an awareness in other filmmakers (in and outside the industry) that ultimately resulted in its appropriation into Hollywood filmmaking. Although Vorkapich's influential montage work was a lucrative means of supporting himself, he did experience a certain degree of personal compromise. For example, in later interviews, he expresses disappointment in repeated, unsuccessful efforts to generate studio

interest and secure financial support towards completing full-length independent film projects; additionally, he was unable to release two independent experimental films which he did complete, *Moods of the Sea* and *Forest Murmurs*—similar to the disappointing studio experience of avant-garde animator, Oskar Fischinger.<sup>31</sup>

Ironically, Vorkapich was nonetheless incredibly successful within the Hollywood film industry: in his self-contained montage sequences, he was able to 'call the shots,' make artistic decisions, and retain complete creative freedom and control—without compromising his vision. Vorkapich was recognized for his stylish montage work as in the extraordinary earthquake sequence with Clark Gable in MGM's *San Francisco*. In later interviews, Vorkapich admits he would have preferred greater artistic license using sound to fully realize his notion of 'sound montage' by creatively layering aural textures of distortion and natural sounds. For example, he once edited sound from a storm sequence in *The Good Earth*, then combined an aural montage of wind and thunder with the battle sequence from the Jeanette MacDonald film, *The Firefly*. Although studio executives agreed that it was "the most terrifying battle sequence" they had ever experienced, producers considered the more light hearted film genre and decided: "This is a musical; we have to use music" to accompany the sequence. He regretted having to change it.<sup>32</sup>

Regarding Vorkapich's mode of production as a filmmaker, montage artist and special effects wizard, the studios hired Vorkapich on these projects because he could produce these sequences quickly and inexpensively; he was especially talented in being able to conceive of and visually realize ideas in an extremely economical way (as seen in his modestly produced *The Life and Death of 9413 – A Hollywood Extra*). For instance, if a studio film was over budget and the studio needed to inexpensively convey a considerable amount of filmic information within a minimum amount of time for minimal financial cost, Vorkapich could expediently realize the idea in his montages at relatively insignificant

<sup>31</sup> Vorkapich, 'Reminiscences,' 27-30 in SVC, USC. Oskar Fischinger was another talented avant-garde filmmaker whose independent films, 'absolute animation' and 'visual music' inspired Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (released through RKO; US, 1940), but was not successful in Hollywood.

<sup>32</sup> Vorkapich, 'Reminiscences,' 15 in SVC, USC.



expense. As a result, he saved the studios a great deal of money; so, predictably, Vorkapich's involvement in commercial narrative productions often functioned primarily from an economic—rather than purely aesthetic—motivation on the part of the industry.

Vorkapich's work on specific films and mobility between various studios evolved from his relationship with certain prominent independent producers, such as David O. Selznick, and directors, such as Frank Capra and George Cukor. For example, because Selznick preferred to hire Vorkapich for montage effects on his films (often with Cukor directing), he brought Vorkapich onto projects which moved among different studios depending on the production. Additionally, Frank Capra, impressed with his 'special effects' reputation, hired Vorkapich to create the impressive montage sequences in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *Meet John Doe*—notably these productions are for different studios, Columbia and Warner Bros.

As a result of these collaborations, Vorkapich had established quite a reputation in the industry for creating montage sequences. In fact, when he began Hollywood montage work in 1928, he succeeded in breaking considerable ground as one of very few creative individuals in the industry having the capability to produce these sequences during this early period. Montage became more prevalent in subsequent years when studios realized that not only could they produce films which were more visually dynamic, but there was significant financial savings as well; the vertically-integrated 'Big Five' major studios discovered that saving significant time in film length would generate greater revenues because it enabled them to exhibit more films in their studio-owned theater houses. Thus, ultimately, Vorkapich's creative involvement and aesthetic innovation within the Hollywood studio system remained inextricably tied to the industry's bottom line—an answer to the question ironically posed by the film's title: *What Price Hollywood?*

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### **Biographical note**

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