

Title: "A Copy of a Copy": Reenactments in *Mess-Mend* and *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*

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Both Marietta Shaginian's *Mess-Mend* and Lev Kuleshov's *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* engage with the same philosophical problems inherent in film, a medium that, in the mid-1920s, was rapidly developing. Along with the fundamental problem of film's apparent portrayal of visual "truth," was the more subtle issue, identified by Walter Benjamin in 1935, of the reproducible photographic image, which "substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence."

Reproductions dominate both *Mess-Mend* and *Mr. West*. *Mess-Mend*, which calls itself a *kinoroman* (cinema novel), is in itself a reenactment, a reproduction of cinematic images and narrative techniques in novelistic form. Likewise, the plot of *Mr. West* is structured around a triple reenactment. Before Mr. West goes to Russia he sees pictures of "Savage Bolsheviks"—in reality photographs of American actors in quasi-Cossack attire. A Russian gang finds the photographs (themselves technical reproductions!) and reproduces those, dressing up to resemble the American actors. In the end a "real" Bolshevik shows up and exposes all the other Bolsheviks the audience has seen up to this point to be crude imitations. Ironically, however, the person who appears in a leather jacket is not a real Bolshevik at all, but an actor playing a *Bolshevik* (and, as Vlada Petric has argued, such a stereotypical type as to be almost a parody).

Both *Mess-Mend* and *Mr. West* question whether apparent, visual, cinematic truth equals authenticity. *Mess-Mend* is overflowing with false identities and misleading appearances. In one scene four characters are made up to look like the same man, Vasilov. The abiding question of the novel is whether these four men, by virtue of being technically perfect reproductions of Vasilov, actually *become* him. They may seem little more than empty copies, but, tantalizingly, the narrator refers to them as "tot zhe chelovek" (the exact same person). In *Mess-Mend*, as in *Mr. West*, it is hard to tell where authenticity lies.