Document Citation

Title	**Film's institutional mode of representation and the Soviet response**
Author(s)	Noël Burch
Source	*October*
Date	1979 Winter
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	77-96
No. of Pages	11
Subjects	Silent films Motion pictures -- Soviet Union Motion picture audiences
Film Subjects	Oktiabr (October), Eisenstein, Sergei, 1927

Representation and the Soviet Response

October
11 : Winter 1979

NOËL BURCH

It is tempting to regard the system of representation at work in the vast majority of films produced during cinema's earliest period (which we may situate between 1892 and 1906) as an authentically working-class system, in opposition to not only the bourgeois novel, theater, and painting of the nineteenth century, but also an institutional mode of representation as it was to develop after 1906. In the countries where the film industry first developed, not only was the audience of this cinema largely proletarian, but in many respects the system of representation which we may identify as specifically of this period derives little from the characteristically bourgeois art forms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and almost everything from popular art forms descendent from the Middle Ages and before.

However, much of the *otherness* of the films of this era is patently overdetermined, often due to the contradiction between the aspirations—conscious and unconscious—of middle-class inventors and entrepreneurs on the one hand and the influence of such plebeian or otherwise "alien" art forms as the circus, the carnival sideshow, the picture postcard, or the lantern show on the other.[1] In any case, one must regard as highly problematic any direct intervention of the working classes, whose taste could have directly affected only the substance of the films they saw (in France and England, especially); while the deepest aspirations of the working class were sometimes catered to symbolically, these films certainly never reflected revolutionary ideology. In France this privileged relationship between an essentially populist cinema and the working classes lasted practically until the introduction of sound. In the United States, however, where even in the era of a wholly proletarian audience the substance of the films mostly reflected the lives and ideals of their petit-bourgeois makers, the industry quickly came to see that the condition for its commercial development was the creation of a mass audience, that is, one which also included the various strata of the bourgeoisie, less fragile

1. More recent research has shown that other contradictions, economic and psychological, played a major role in this process of overdetermination.

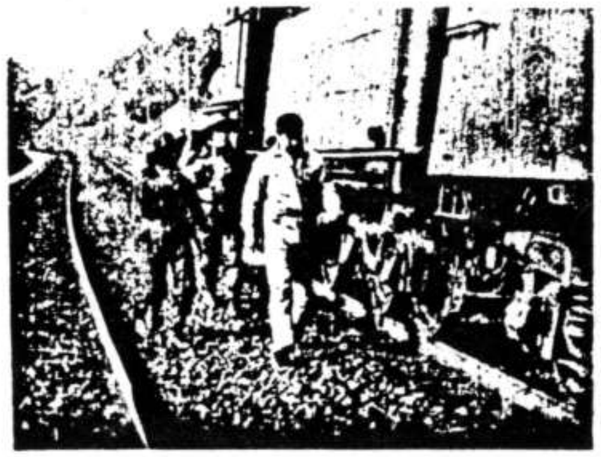
economically and possessing more leisure time than the immigrant working classes.

It is important to realize that the extraordinary expansion of the American cinema and its rise to world dominance after World War I was a direct consequence of the creation of that audience during the period 1905–15. In France, on the other hand, the industry remained content to exploit the early mode of representation for nearly three decades, catering to a small domestic audience which was almost exclusively working class, and counting on the skills of its cameramen and actors to continue to captivate indefinitely the huge international market which it had conquered early in the century. The corollary of this situation was that the French bourgeoisie was not to come to the cinema in any appreciable numbers until the screen finally acquired a *voice*, that crucial element of presence which would at last place it on a par with the legitimate—which is to say, bourgeois—stage.

Early cinema was marked, in the eyes of the international bourgeoisie, by the absence of the persona, of nearly all the signs of character individualization capable of satisfying expectations created by naturalistic theater and novels, and steeped in the primacy of the individual, in the centrality of the Subject. The voice was indeed the biggest lack, hence the constant but only very relatively successful efforts to invent a sync-sound system, from Edison's Kinetophonograph to the Gaumont Chronophone. However, the persona was lacking on the visual plane as well.

One of the founding visual models for the early period as a whole was the long shot as exemplified in *La Sortie des Usines Lumière* and also in films such as *L'Assassinat de Marat*, which Hatot directed for the Lumière Company during the early months of its production. Films like the latter—and there were many of them—illustrate in spectacular fashion the gap between early cinema and the bourgeois theater: the coextension of proscenium arch and film frame produces an effect of distance through smallness and low definition which is very different from the effect of presence indissociable from the bourgeois stage and produced by the "sync" voice, by "natural" color, three-dimensionality, and the eye's faculty of focusing in space, often with the aid of opera glasses. As the various socio-ideological pressures to make the cinema "more respectable" became stronger, this long shot came to be perceived as an obstacle.

We may take as both metaphor and illustration of this a film produced in 1903, Edwin S. Porter's *Great Train Robbery*. As in so many films of the period, it would be impossible even to distinguish between, for example, the outlaws and the posse were it not for the bandannas worn by the former, so wide are all the shots of the action proper. For this film, however, Porter—who seems to have experienced with unusual acuity the contradictions of that transitional era—supplied exhibitors with a small, separate roll of film consisting of a single shot, which they were free to splice onto the head or tail of the film, whichever they chose. This mobility itself stresses the otherness of an era in which films were not



Edwin S. Porter. The Great Train Robbery. *1903.*

yet closed objects. As is well known, this shot showed a close, head-on view of one of the outlaws shooting into the camera, an image which gives clear, almost brutal expression to the need then being felt to *reduce distance* . . . at all costs. This "close-up," which seems to hover on the fringe of a diegesis which cannot assimilate it, is indeed the sign of something already sensed as lacking at that time. But sensed by whom? All that we can say with any certainty is that the lack was felt by commentators, producers, exhibitors, directors, cameramen; what the mass of film viewers may have felt is an altogether different matter, which for the moment can only be left to conjecture.

Despite legend, it certainly was not Griffith who singlehandedly solved the problem of the interpolated close-up, of facial legibility, that sine qua non for the institution of the persona. In fact, while Griffith, during his richly innovative career at Biograph, gradually moved the camera closer to all of his tableaux, true close-ups picture objects far more often than they do people. Moreover, Griffith was one of the last directors to relent on the matter of actors' anonymity, which for a variety of reasons had been a universally respected rule during the early period. This belated adhesion to the star system—the counterpart of the close-up in the constitution of the filmic persona—is undoubtedly both cause and effect of the paucity of true facial close-ups in the Biograph films, which were in other respects so forward-looking.

Another aspect of early cinema which did not fulfill expectations created by modes of representation dominant at the turn of the century resulted from the great difficulty experienced by early filmmakers in reproducing, under certain circumstances (especially for indoor scenes), the depth cues long essential in

Georges Méliès. L'Homme à la tête de caoutchouc. *1901.*

Western imagery, whether in easel painting or on the proscenium stage. A great many films made during this era are characterized by the *relative perceptual flatness* of their (interior) imagery. *L'Assassinat de Marat* and the other "theatrical" films produced by the Lumière brothers at the start of their undertaking are examples of this. More significant still, perhaps, are the many remarkable instances found in what I call the mature early era.

Consider *The Life of Charles Peace*, the narrative of a celebrated Victorian murderer filmed by a remarkable artisan of working-class origins, William Haggar.[2] Most of the film consists of a series of single-shot, richly orchestrated tableaux, but it culminates in a multishot chase sequence filmed on location. All of the stylized interior scenes are shot against two-dimensional backdrops from which all illusion of haptic space seems to have been cunningly excluded, and in front of which actors play according to a strictly lateral blocking scheme. This trait is common to nearly all scenes shot in the studio until at least 1910[3] and was brilliantly illustrated by the great Méliès, for whom the "essence" of cinema was precisely its capacity for rendering three-dimensional space and movement in two dimensions (see in particular the trick effect in *L'Homme à la tête de caoutchouc*).[4]

This tendency continued to make itself felt in the films of Griffith and of most of his contemporaries. This was due to the persistence of two factors that had determined its presence from the start. One was filming in daylight, in studios with glass roofs or in the open air, which gave an even, "flat" lighting that tended to place everything on the same plane. The other was the stationing of the camera, still resolutely frontal, with the lens axis rigorously parallel to the floor and always at the height of a standing man. Consequently, until about 1915 or even later a character would occupy full screen height only if he or she were standing in the foreground. When the actor was seated in a chair, crouching on the ground, or standing in the background, his head only reached the middle of the screen, which produced a flattening effect, familiar to graphic artists, in which the background—set or landscape—seems to be looming overhead, ready to topple into the foreground, as it were.

At the same time, however, other factors had already been working in the opposite direction. The generalization of electric lighting made it possible to obtain more subtle modeling and chiaroscuro effects. Color had long been used by the French, including Méliès himself, to counteract the flatness of certain images (with the introduction, in particular, of artificial effects of aerial perspective). Around 1914 several directors and technicians began to avoid placing their cameras at a ninety-degree angle to the rear wall, as had been customary. Finally, there was the introduction—possibly by DeMille in *The Cheat* (1915)—of a systematic, slightly downward tilt of the camera, which meant that characters would occupy the whole height of the screen even when they were at the back of a moderately deep set, and which furthermore accentuated the obliqueness of horizontal lines. Together, all of these procedures were gradually to bring about the creation of a full-blown haptic pictorial space "in" which the diegetic effect would be able to reach full development.

However, the chief problem for the major pioneers, from Porter and the early British filmmakers (Smith, Williamson, Hepworth . . .) to Barker and Feuillade, was, on the one hand, what I call the linearization of the iconographic signifier and, on the other, the construction of a linearized diegetic continuum. Let us now briefly examine these two closely linked issues.

The *panoramic tableau* of the most characteristic early films offers two basic traits which may also be seen as *complementary*—for we must not lose sight of the fact that all of these "inadequacies," as well as the strategies which ultimately led to their reduction, interpenetrate in complex fashion. First there is the relative

2. This film is a fine example of the populist tradition in the early British cinema, as referred to above. Peace is treated as a kind of folk hero.
3. I should exclude the very precocious Danish cinema from this statement, however.

4. In this film a magician-scientist pumps his head up to huge proportions with a bellows. As is shown in Franju's film *Le Grand Méliès*, the effect was obtained by pulling Méliès up an inclined plane on an invisible trolley towards the camera. For Méliès, close-ups were always "giant faces": the screen, he felt, was the only plane a film could contain.

rareness of any of the indexes of individualization-differentiation alluded to above; then there is a tendency to confront the spectator's gaze with an entire surface *to scan*, at times along a relatively controlled trajectory (but which generally took in most of the screen's surface). At other times the gaze is undirected, considering the absence of most of the ordering procedures—strategies of isolation or signalization—which would gradually make it possible to normalize the behavior of the spectator's eye. One very striking example of the typically "chaotic" tableau is the opening shot of a Biograph film of 1905, *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*, known to us today through Ken Jacobs's enlightening rehandling of it. The shot shows a crowded marketplace distractedly dominated by a woman tightrope walker in white. But she has no role in the narrative (in fact, she is the only character never to be seen again). On the other hand, what is meant to be the central action—the preliminaries leading up to the theft of the pig, the theft itself, and the start of the chase as the thief escapes—is nearly invisible for the modern spectator at first viewing. For he is accustomed to having each shot in a film carefully organized around a single signifying center and to the linearization of all the iconographic signifiers through composition, lighting, and/or editing.[5] And as we know, the first step in overcoming this "handicap" was the dissection of the tableau into successive fragments (closer shots), each governed by a single signifier, so that each frame would be immediately decipherable (at least in accordance with certain norms of legibility) *at first viewing*.

However, in order that these successive images not bring about the dislocation of the "original" profilmic space—the space of the single tableau, the space, if one prefers, of the proscenium—a long evolution was necessary. Starting from the first premises of the alternating shots in the work of Porter and the British, and the earliest contiguity matches (matches of direction and eyeline), this evolution, through the increasing ubiquity of the camera, was ultimately to succeed in establishing the conviction that all the successive separate shots on the screen referred to the same diegetic continuum. In other words, the time spans represented were linked together by relations of immediate succession, simultaneity, or a more distant anteriority or posteriority; the spaces pictured communicated directly or at one or more removes; and above all the whole constituted a milieu into which the spectator might penetrate as an invisible, immaterial observer, yet one who not only saw but also "experienced" all that transpired there. The camera's ubiquity and the strategies which led to the spectator's identification with the camera's viewpoint, together with the system of orientational matches by

5. It should be noted that as often as not a contemporary presentation of this or any other film would have been accompanied by a "lecture," the task of which was to center these acentric images. Independently of the *alien* nature of this typically primitive splitting of the narrative signifier, it is my contention that an audience which had been watching such films for as many as ten years may well have been sufficiently "on its toes," even without the help of a lecturer, to conduct spontaneously a slightly more topological reading than we are normally capable of today.

which the right/left relationships of the spectator's own body organized his apprehension of all contiguous spatial relationships on the screen from shot to shot, reinforced the sense of spatial integrity. These two acquisitions were ultimately to converge in the figure known as the reverse-angle set-up,[6] destined to become the keystone of the entire edifice at the level of visual signification.

While the full head-on reverse-angle did not become generalized until the mid-twenties, and while of course the sync voice was not heard until the end of the decade, the system thus constituted as a visual entity had become fully operational in the United States before the end of World War I and in Western Europe by the early 1920s. Fritz Lang's *Mabuse* diptych (1922) is an early example of the system mastered to a perfection that has perhaps never been surpassed. And it is not without interest that Eisenstein had the opportunity of studying closely such a supreme example of the system whose emergence I have briefly sketched here, having been involved—in what capacity has not, I believe, been clearly established as yet—with the editing of the Soviet version of *Mabuse*.

Several years before the first projections at the Grand Café, Edison was already dreaming of filming and recording operas, and in this his enterprise is antithetical to that of Louis Lumière. Not only did the team working under Edison's auspices (W. K. L. Dickson and his associates) invent the first "sound movies" with their Kinetophonograph, whose eyepiece and earphones prefigure, at the scale of the individual spectator, the dark, womblike isolation of the modern movie palace, but they also shot some of the earliest close-ups. And all of this was done in the Black Maria, that precursor of the modern sound stage. If the company was soon forced by the competition from Lumière to give up the attempt at sound and to copy the more typical early European models, these early experiments attest to the existence of a need, ideologically determined in part, but only in part, that would ultimately give rise to an institutional mode of representation.

We also find, as early as the first Lumière films, and throughout the early period of French cinema up to the masterpieces of Jasset, Perret, Feuillade, and the émigré Fasnier, first in scenes shot on location, later in increasingly elaborate studio sets, a very thorough exploitation of the possibilities of deep-focus mise-en-scène. In fact, we are dealing here with an increasingly sharper prefiguration of that pseudomontage within a single take (except in the work of Feuillade, intrasequential editing was still rare in France before World War I) which would ultimately be capable of reproducing the structures of classical montage. This approach, which among French directors continued to serve as a vehicle for strictly primitive elements, such as the insistent glancing at the camera which one still finds in Feuillade as late as 1916, would reappear twenty years later in the canned theater of the early sound years, when it was simultaneously theorized by

6. Also called shot-reverse-shot or shot-countershot in tribute to the French *champ-contre-champ*.

none other than Eisenstein (the paradox is only apparent) in his classes at the Moscow Institute.[7]

The dominance of the Western mode of filmic representation was determined neither by ideological factors alone nor by sheer economic opportunism. Rather, it corresponds broadly to the mode of constitution of the Subject in our culture, and it developed into an ideological vehicle of unprecedented power. However massive its political and social consequences, it was the result of an overdetermined convergence and not simply a class strategy.

•

At the time when the civil war was receding within the young Soviet Union and the great period of artistic experimentation was beginning, the system of representation developing in the film industries of the capitalist world was not yet fully consolidated. We have already noted that sync sound constituted a serious lack which, it is clear today, the intertitle never completely filled. To the very end of the silent era, it retained (and indeed still retains) a "distancing" potential which directors like Gance and L'Herbier had sought to exploit to aesthetic ends. A film industry as culturally important as that of France remained very strongly dominated by early practice, with frontality still dominant as late as 1925, with the rules of orientation still very poorly assimilated. And in all countries the various "punctuating" opticals made possible by recent technology were as yet scarcely encoded and were often used—and not only in avant-garde films—to contribute to a freely decorative style. This "unfinished" state in which the system found itself, especially in Europe, played a decisive role in the orientations of the most important Soviet directors who, with only one exception, were otherwise quite prepared to accept the system's claim to a privileged status.

It is no doubt this twofold circumstance which determined the earliest options of Lev Kuleshov and his troupe. It was this which led them to the first theorization of the system of orientation matching. Their most famous experiment consisted of a series of montage fragments linked by actors' entrances and exits, so that various parts of Petrograd were seen as contiguous, whereas anyone familiar with the city knew that they were miles apart. This experiment was in fact nothing more than the rational formulation of the contiguity match long since mastered at the practical level by D. W. Griffith. In *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), for example, a whole "imaginary" neighborhood is similarly constructed by laying end-to-end fragments of settings which are brought together only by the successive frame exits and entrances of the actors.

Following these laboratory experiments, the films that came out of the

7. See Vladimir Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein*, trans. and ed. Jay Leyda and Ivor Montagu, New York, Hill and Wang, 1962.

Kuleshov workshop attest to another concern, not unrelated to the first: studying and *appropriating* the codes governing the major genres of the capitalist film industry—the spy serial, as in *The Death Ray* (1925); the comedy, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924); the "Far North" adventure drama, *By the Law* (1926). The guiding principle behind all these productions was that the institutional mode of representation, the genres and other coded systems founded upon it, offered ideal vehicles in the ideological struggle because of the privileged relationships which they already enjoyed with mass audiences.

After the Kuleshov group disbanded in 1925, its ambitions were no doubt best achieved in *Miss Mend* (1926), directed by an ex-disciple of Kuleshov, Boris Barnett (in collaboration with Fyodor Otsep). In this film the principle of political didacticism through pastiche is maintained, but with one fundamental difference: this monumental "serial" (three parts, over four hours long) frequently shifts abruptly from one popular genre to another. Spy thriller, sentimental melodrama, romantic comedy, slapstick farce follow each other in quick succession. The intention is clearly to undercut the escapist and alienating absorption of the popular genres.

I have no wish to establish, in the context of this inventory, any hierarchical order whatsoever. The wide range of Soviet attitudes and options, which runs from Kuleshov's pastiche to Dziga Vertov's "deconstruction," corresponded to a pluralism indispensable to the socialist ethic. It also reflected the very concrete and highly diversified needs of Soviet society, coming into existence under notoriously complex and difficult conditions. Kuleshov's undertaking thus appears doubly justified. The urban masses were already quite familiar with the current mode of representation and forms of expression, and it was obvious that one important way of reaching them consisted in acquiring the theoretical mastery of that mode and in appropriating its forms of expression. Furthermore, although the bulk of the peasantry did not come to know the cinema until after the revolution, it takes the optimism of a Vertov to become convinced that linear expectations with regard to the cinema would only be produced by previous film-going experience, and that these peasant masses were consequently "unspoiled."

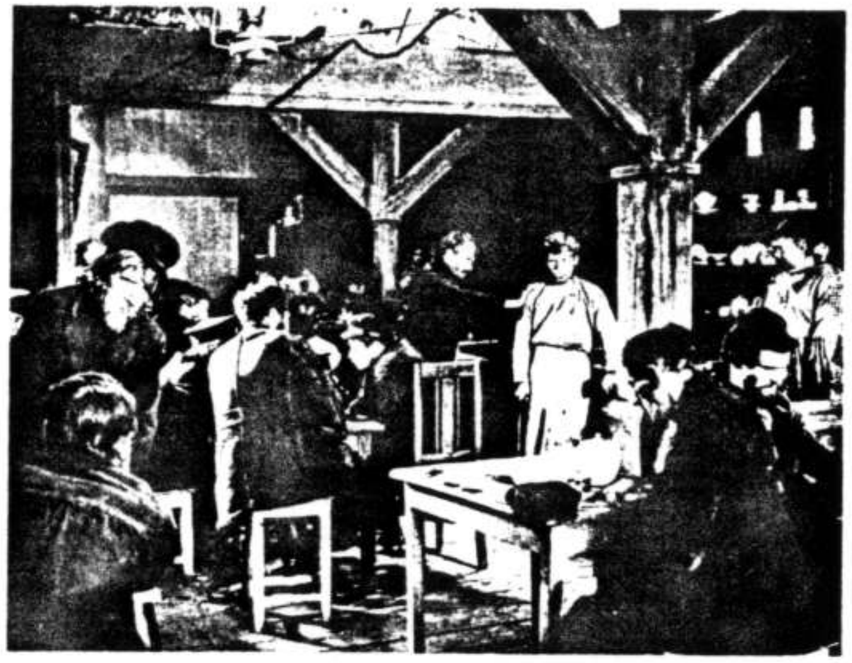
V. I. Pudovkin also came out of the Kuleshov workshop. His approach was not fundamentally different from that of his mentor, although his methodology—and, of course, his stylistics, which are not the subject of this essay—is quite different and his ambition, in a sense, far greater. Pudovkin was striving principally to extend the possibilities of the existing system, while maintaining its essential principles. This undertaking has undeniably enriched our cultural heritage, with such remarkable films as *The End of Saint Petersburg* (1927) or *The Deserter* (1933), but it was certainly not devoid of contradictions. Significantly enough, these actually repeated, at a higher level of elaboration, the contradictions experienced by the pioneers of the early and formative periods.

Some years ago, in a programmatic essay which has not surprisingly fallen

into neglect, two British critics, Michael Orrom and Raymond Williams, voiced a number of criticisms concerning the Pudovkin method in connection with a sequence from *Storm Over Asia* (1928).[8] They argued that the director disrupted too radically the cohesion of the spatiotemporal continuum, that essential guarantee of verisimilitude, in other words, of the full-blown diegetic effect. And they went on to compare this outmoded, disjunctive style, too analytic for their taste, with the techniques of modern cinema, illustrated by a sequence from George Stevens's *Shane*. Here, they demonstrate, continuity is ensured by the juxtaposition in long shots of all the signifiers present to the scene, their ordering being assured by picture composition instead of their being linked together only by eyeline and screen-direction matching, as was so often the case in Pudovkin's films. Despite the ingenuous character of their demonstration, these writers pointed to a fundamental contradiction, one which is of considerable interest to basic research in this field.

Pudovkin's writings and his polemic with Eisenstein clearly bear out the evidence of his films: his chief concern was to draw the ultimate consequences from that historical process of linearization of the iconographic signifiers to which I have already referred. Let us consider the sequence at the beginning of *The Mother* in which the father, trying to take the household clock down from the wall to exchange it for vodka, is confronted by his son and wife. He accidentally breaks the clock and leaves the house carrying off the laundry iron which served as the clock's counterweight. This scene is a perfect illustration of Pudovkin's method. The scene is broken down into a series of key fragments, big close-ups whose meaning is wholly unequivocal and which, while respecting and rendering quite satisfactorily the continuity of the action, primarily serve *to spell out* that action in a series of elementary, carefully differentiated signs, in a simple, causal chain. A face grows tense, an arm is raised, a wheel of the clockwork rolls across the floor. There is no room for the gaze to roam unguided (or even guided) about the image for so much as an instant. The director's constant concern is, on the contrary, to regulate the "flow of signs" as closely as possible. Moreover, in a sequence such as this one—and it is here that Pudovkin adds a new dimension to an approach which is otherwise fundamentally Griffithian—acceleration of tempo and strong rhythmic patterns in certain editing fragments generate the *pathos* of the close-up, to use an Eisensteinian term which seems perfectly apt in this context. The fragmentary scansion of the signifiers no longer has as its sole aim to confer order on denotative signs. It also serves to control the underlying production of meaning, the connotative dimension of the filmic discourse—what has often been called the "emotion" of the scene—by means of the dynamics of the succession of the montage fragments. Moreover, the connotative production is also used by Pudovkin in a reiterative manner, in particular to suggest sound effects. One

[illegible] and Michael Orrom, *Preface to Film*, London, Film Drama, 1954.



Vsevolod Pudovkin. The Mother. *1926.*

thinks of the bar scene in *The Mother*, which immediately follows the one described above. The lively atmosphere, the throb of the music are suggested by the very dynamics of the succession of details, no longer subject to causal order but rather swirling about in an impressionist description, a vertical equivalent of the horizontal transparency of Griffithian linearization.

It is a fact, however, that in many passages, especially those involving confrontations between more than two characters—here I have in mind a scene involving the mother, the son, and the tsarist soldiers, or another in which "The Heir to Genghis Khan" confronts the English fur traders—Pudovkin's analytical penchant, his concern to make each picture into a "brick" as elementary as possible in a chain of signification which he can control as closely as possible, does indeed lead him *to weaken the verisimilitude of the diegetic spatial continuum.* And yet this verisimilitude was a founding historical condition of the system which subtends his whole endeavor. Wishing to carry to its extreme consequences the logic of linearization through editing, Pudovkin comes up against the same obstacle encountered by the pioneers when they were casting about for methods capable of overcoming the unfortunate "dissociative" effect which the first interpolated close-ups had upon the unity of films that still depended almost exclusively on the layout of the primitive tableau. In both cases, this disintegration, as it were, was the price that had to be paid for an increase in "expressive-

ness," in other words, a greater control over the production of meaning. Striving to remain within the bounds of fundamental linearity and to strengthen that linearity, Pudovkin fails to see that the enunciation characteristic of the system is not simply a succession of signs, as decomposed as possible, but that it is founded on a dialectic between such "stripped-down" images and a more complex spatiality offering complementary guarantees.

The close-up, as integrated into filmic discourse by Griffith, Barker, the Ince brothers, etc., drew an important share of its signification from the wider shots that proceeded and followed it and from which it was in a sense *excerpted.* It was through this alternation of long-shot and close-up that the strongly diegetic cinema was to attain maximum effect (and in this sense a film like *Shane* is certainly an example). Intoxicated, as it were, by the possibilities revealed in the new-found mastery of orientational matching procedures (and in particular the eyeline match), Pudovkin sought to reconstitute a given profilmic space in its entirety solely through the successive presentation of its details. He attempted to render the full presence of characters, objects, and indeed the diegesis itself solely through this "nearsighted" approach. Yet in so doing he set his work at odds with a whole dimension of the system he was seeking to improve, since in many sequences of his silent films diegetic space is reduced to such an abstraction that important effects such as the illusion of the presence of characters *to each other* are considerably weakened.

Paradoxically, one of the finest moments in *The Mother* is that in which the method described above is abandoned completely and Pudovkin returns, for reasons of stylistic and dramatic contrast, to a space which is much closer to that of the films of Louis Lumière. The first part of the admirable scene showing the confrontation between revolutionary workers and strikebreakers in the factory yard is filmed in fixed, wide-angle shots which remind us how aptly suited is the primitive tableau to scenes of mass struggle. This demonstration will be confirmed again and again throughout the Soviet cinema's silent period and well beyond it.

It was Dreyer, in *The Passion of Joan of Arc,* who went on to derive from what we might call the Pudovkin contradiction a coherent dialectic based precisely upon that diegetic dissolution, *assumed as such,* of profilmic topography. However, it was the Ukrainian master Alexander Dovzhenko, in the opening sequence of his greatest film, *Earth* (1930), who went furthest in putting that contradiction to work, designating it as such, showing how it was possible to construct, with classical spatiality, an ambiguous diegetic space, in the sense that it is essentially and disturbingly *uncertain.*

This celebrated sequence deals with an old man dying and a dialogue between him and friends and relatives standing or sitting around him. But is it so certain that they are actually around him? Some shots, especially those of the baby playing, seem to involve a relationship which has nothing to do with ordinary contiguity; they seem more like elements of "attraction" in the manner of

Eisenstein. The characters are never seen together in the same shot; they are linked only by their eyeline exchanges. A close reading of this sequence shows a whole series of discrepancies which actually render impossible a reading of diegetic space in keeping with the traditional system of orientation: "in the place where" the orientation of a glance from the old man had enabled us to situate this or that character, we now encounter another; in the course of another series of apparent reverse-angle shots, we encounter still another character "in the same place," and yet, as far as we are able to judge, the hieratic stillness of the scene has been preserved throughout. At other moments a shot of a field of wheat seems to be located in an "impossible" space with respect to the eyeline directions of those who see it. And this opening scene offers only one of various strategies employed by Dovzhenko: often an articulation between sequences will leave fundamental doubts about the precise moment when the spatial or temporal hiatus actually occurred. Along another axis certain shots, though more closely related to an "emblematic" space/time than to the diegetic space/time proper, nevertheless continue to entertain subsidiary links with the latter (witness the series of shots indicating the passing of the seasons, the quasisymbolic sequence of "the lovers' night," or the shots of a young woman standing by a sunflower). Conversely, other moments which are firmly anchored in the primary diegesis (such as Vassili's famous dance-and-death or his father's night of mourning) seem to partake in turn of those emblematic shots, tending to suspend the movement of the diegesis. It is through such ambiguities as these, such derogations from the seamlessness of

the representational fabric, such attacks on the metonymic integrity of the diegesis by the introduction of fragments of a metaphoric discourse, that Dovzhenko comes closest to an important aspect of Eisenstein's great adventure. But in fact this type of construction in one way or another was a major concern of nearly all the important Soviet directors. Yet while it has often been identified with them exclusively, it should be pointed out that these techniques grew out of an objective encounter between crosscutting of the type perfected by Griffith in *Intolerance* (1916) and the metaphoric cutaway of Gance, procedures which in turn are merely extrapolations of the earliest inserts and crosscutting.

The final sequence of Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), consisting of an alternation between shots of butchers at work in a slaughterhouse (shots which absolutely do not belong to the principal diegetic space/time) and images of the persecution of the striking workers by mounted Cossacks, provides the earliest example of this type of figure in narrative Soviet cinema. Here the relationship between diegetic and metaphoric space/time (which in this instance involves its own strongly diegetic effect) still derives from a linear concept which is perfectly compatible with the Griffith approach. In fact, one might cite several mainstream films of the sound era which have incorporated this technique of parallel and extended metaphor (Walter Graumann's *Lady in a Cage* comes to mind . . . but do not the shots of buildings and city streets in *Muriel* function in a similar way?). On the other hand, Eisenstein's developments of this strategy in *The General Line* (1929) and above all in *October* (1928) may be said to be fundamentally at odds with this linearity.

The mechanical peacock in *October*, which appears fragmentarily within the montage piece associated with the opening of the door as Kerensky enters the great room which is to shelter his precarious power, is of course a symbol of Kerensky's fatuous character. But it is so tightly meshed into the movement of the door itself that it resists any reduction to a single signifying function. A naive reading, predicated on the inviolability of diegetic space/time, might conclude that this is an automaton set in motion by machinery which connects it with the door. This is but one (perfectly "legitimate") aspect of a complex production of meaning irreducible to any linear model.

I cannot draw here a complete picture of Eisenstein's contribution to the far-reaching investigation of the established representational mode, undertaken in fact by all the most advanced members of the Soviet school. One would have to discuss typage, that important reconsideration of the cinematic persona, and the complex relations which it entertained with the stereotyped casting of the capitalist cinema. One would have to discuss as well the concept of the mass-as-hero and the revaluing of the long-shot associated with it, as well as the mixtures of style and genre in *Strike*, *October*, and *The General Line*, and of course such ambitious attempts to extend the director's range as "tonal montage" or "intellectual montage."

However, it seems to me that Eisenstein presents his most stimulating

challenge when, first in his films, later in his teaching, he strives to found a dialectics of orientational matching which, though he saw it as a complement to the system that had risen over the previous twenty years, also tends to undermine the very foundations of that system.

I have already suggested that it was precisely because of the unfinished status of the representational system that Eisenstein and his fellow filmmakers found themselves in a relatively privileged situation for a rethinking of film practice. At that time in Europe, eyeline and direction matching, for want of any universally accepted codification, for want of a "continuity girl," was no more than a working hypothesis, one which seems to have enjoyed favor, it is true, but which remained only one possible option among others (witness all the mismatched eyelines in French and German films of every category as late as the mid-twenties).[9]

In this connection *Strike* contains an extremely significant sequence. The spying foreman is knocked off his feet by a clout from a huge steel wheel swinging on a crane driven by a group of mischievous revolutionary workers. In this sequence, perhaps for the first time in film history, we see illustrated the proposition that "correct" direction matching, the logic of which corresponds to that of the right/left orientations of a real or imaginary "establishing shot," could very well coexist with other systems, and that although the latter might contradict the logic of the former, together they could constitute a single *composite space/time* characterized by its unnaturalness (i.e., its rejection of left/right body logic). For indeed, in the successive shots showing the foreman being knocked over, the swinging wheel changes screen direction at each shot change, and yet all the diegetic evidence (and our own common sense) tells us that in reality the direction of the wheel remains constant.

Of course the intention here and, at one level, the effect produced consist in an exteriorization, through this "violation" of representation, of the latent class violence behind this relatively harmless incident. In his account of Eisenstein's teachings, Vladimir Nizhny tells how the master theorized his doctrine of the "montage unit," which advocates dividing up a given sequence into sub-sequences defined by successive crossings of the 180° line. These "bad" position/direction matches are of course meant to emphasize privileged moments of tension in the narrative flow. Indeed, whenever Eisenstein provided a rationale for his innovations—invariably after the fact—he invoked criteria derived from the ideology of representation. And the dramaturgy at work in the sequences that are most representative of his dialectics of matching provides confirmation of this "expressionist" outlook and of the correlation between such experiments as these and Eisenstein's quest for the effect which he called pathos. However, it seems to me no less true that there is a precious parallel statement in this strategy, for it also

9. In Lang's *Metropolis*, L'Herbier's *L'Argent*, Raymond Bernard's *Le Miracle des* are clearly not talking about the mistakes of amateurs

involves a jeopardizing of the system's greatest "secret": the fact that a film is made up of fragments of montage, that it is not by nature but by artifice that the classical *découpage* produces an effect of continuity.

We find one particularly vivid illustration of this in the Odessa steps sequence in *Potemkin* (1925). Here the extreme discontinuity of the editing goes far beyond mere impressionistic subjectivism, and the principle of montage units intervenes spectacularly to organize the climax of the episode. In this instance the expressive intention is accompanied by a programmatic statement of no small importance: that a secondary organization of the signifiers, endowed with relative autonomy, can give filmic discourse an entirely new dimension, irreducible to linear expressiveness. The sequence is constructed around two broad montage units, of which the second intervenes only when the nurse first appears with her baby carriage and is then associated with the carriage as it rolls alone down the steps. However, the images of this dramatic trajectory are intercut with shots of the continuing massacre, and these are filmed from angles which belong to the first montage unit. Finally, the carriage seems, toward the end of its run, to "fall back" into the first unit (in other words, into the initial right/left relationship), and after this "dissonant" period consisting of cuts back and forth between the two units, the sequence ends entirely in the first. It is through such constructions as these—we might also cite the second section of *Potemkin*, "Drama on the Quarterdeck," the cream-separator sequence in *The General Line*, or the raising of the bridge in *October*—that Eisenstein became the first to succeed in relativizing certain fundamental norms of the institutional mode of representation. This mode would, of course, reintegrate them into a subsystem derived from it, but which at the same time contained the premises of a more fundamental contestation. We may, I believe, sum up both the progressive and the contradictory nature of this work with the following well-known observation taken from *Notes of a Film Director*:

> The strength of montage lies in the fact that the emotions and minds of the spectators are included in the creative process. The spectator not only sees those elements of the work which are capable of being seen but also experiences the dynamic process of the emergence and formation of the image just as it was experienced by the author. This probably is the highest possible degree of approximation to visually conveying the author's sensations and conception in the greatest possible completeness, to conveying them with "that almost physical tangibility" with which they arose before the author during the creative process, at the moments of his creative vision.[10]

Under close scrutiny, this text may be seen to reveal with great precision

10. S. M. Eisenstein, *Notes of a Film Director*, New York, Dover Press, 1970, pp. 77–8.

Eisenstein's complex attitude. On the one hand, he rejects everything in the representational system which causes the spectator to see only "those elements capable of being seen," in other words, he rejects transparency. This is the credo, as it were, that underlies his "dialecticization" of the matching system and all the other "illusionist" strategies; his goal is to make the work of the signifier visible. Yet at the same time this work is reintegrated into a spectacle of the classical type, one which is certainly on a "higher plane" than the other, but one which nevertheless must in the last analysis submit to the same linear, we might even say totalitarian, model: what the spectator is supposed to grasp at the end of the process, whatever work he or she may have been called upon to perform, is assumed to be what the author put into it. We find ourselves face to face with the old illusion that holds the work of art to be a mediator, a means of communication between two sensibilities. This will perhaps also help us to understand why Eisenstein never sought (not even in *Strike*, despite all claims to the contrary) to oppose the system by then established with any notion of a tabula rasa. In spite of their differences, in spite of their disputes, he shared with Pudovkin and Kuleshov the deep conviction that the "language" with which the name of Griffith was then so closely associated was tantamount to a basic language whose fundamental components were intangible. Even a filmmaker who proclaimed his attachment to dialectical and historical materialism and who felt his task was to enrich that system through critical reappraisal was bound to remain within the conceptual framework which it defined. This is the nerve center of his polemic with Vertov. Needless to say, it would in my estimation be foolish to reproach him for this.

Among the Soviet masters, Dziga Vertov alone advocated an uncompromising tabula rasa. In the USSR of the 1920s, such a position also involved contradictions which are far from negligible. The fact remains, however, that Vertov was the first filmmaker and theoretician to have produced—in ways that were at times crude, at others deceptively polemical—a critical definition of the nature of cinematic representation, and to have undertaken, in his masterwork *The Man with a Movie Camera*, a practical critique of it.

Reading certain Vertov texts overly literally, commentators have often made of him the irrepressible champion of documentary against the fiction film. However, what this reading of his career fails to reveal is that the reason Vertov seemed to be combating fiction per se was that he perceived in the fiction film of that era the hegemony of a deeply alienating system of representation. This was in part because of the ideological substance which in capitalist countries it almost invariably purveyed—explicitly or implicitly—and in part because of the passive attitude that it required of the spectator. And if he attacked Eisenstein, seeming to confuse him with the masters of Hollywood, it was because he felt that in the revolutionary context a tabula rasa strategy was indispensable to clean the eyes of the masses, as he might have put it. Reading his texts, seeing his films, it is hard to believe that he did not realize that *The Man with a Movie Camera* (or *Kino-Glaz*, for that matter) was as much, or as little, a fiction as *Potemkin* or *The Mother*.

We know that Vertov's project did not merely concern the perception and reading of images. Vertov had a deep political commitment, and he even had the presentiment that exercises in the decoding of images could provide training for the decoding of reality. This project still holds promise today, and we have had, in the films of socialist Cuba, a glimmer of its fulfillment. In the Soviet Union of the 1920s, however, such amalgamations could easily lead to serious political illusions. It is also true that in Vertov's case, it produced masterpieces. Through recent literature we are beginning to have a better appreciation of the true breadth of this film, long regarded as a simple display of cinematic fireworks.[11] This classical response, so common among viewers even today, is a symptom of the almost total illegibility of this film for several decades, the veritable crisis which it causes within filmic representation as a whole . . . and all the light which, at a second level, it sheds upon it. I can only sketch the broad outlines of the work accomplished in this immense film, and I must start with the observation that its chief target is the fundamental linearity of filmic representation, a linearity contested in all its aspects, and no longer simply in that of syntax, as was chiefly the case with Eisenstein.

This film is not made to be viewed only once. It is impossible for anyone to assimilate its work in a single viewing. Far more than any film by Eisenstein, *The Man with a Movie Camera* demands that the spectator take an active role as *decipherer* of its images. To refuse that role is to leave the theater or escape into revery. For the relationships proposed between these images are seldom self-evident; often the logic of successive significations moves backwards, denying our usual sense of chronology, and even more often it will take us along an axis which is no longer syntagmatic, but paradigmatic of the film's very production (frozen frames, photograms, editing scenes, shooting scenes, screening of the film before an audience). Here again, however, the trajectory followed is not determined by any simple chronology of production but is the result of the multiple interaction of other structures—the cycle of the working day, the cycle of life and death, a reflection on the new society, on the changing situations of women within it, on the vestiges of bourgeois life, on poverty under socialism, and so on. Further associated with all this is a reflection on filmic representation itself, on the constitution of haptic space, the illusion of movement, and so on. One may safely say that there is not a single shot in this entire film whose place in the editing scheme is not overdetermined by a whole set of intertwined chains of signification, and that it is impossible to decipher fully the film's discourse until one has a completely topological grasp of the film as a whole, in other words, after several viewings.[12] Resolutely reflexive, this film was the most radical gesture that the silent cinema had known—in the Soviet Union or elsewhere.

11. See for example Annette Michelson, "'The Man with the Movie Camera': From Magician to Epistemologist," *Artforum*, vol. 10, no. 7 (March 1972) 60–72.
12. In my work the concept of the univocality of the institutional mode of representation refers of course to a relationship between the films and the spectators—most spectators—who have been written into the institution by society. The others—a few scholars, critics, filmmakers—will often perceive the very real polysemic dimension of just about any film text. However, this reading is not only conducted from outside the institution (whose vocation, as Christian Metz reminds us, is "to fill theaters, not to empty them"); it is ultimately irrelevant to our understanding of the institution as a single text.

Dziga Vertov. The Man with a Movie Camera. *1929.*

Vertov was, however, a communist; as long as he was permitted to do so, he strove to involve his work in the concrete construction of socialism. At the same time, his analyses—written and filmic—were some thirty or forty years ahead of their time. Not until the 1950s did the young Stan Brakhage produce a critique as penetrating, albeit written from the opposite ideological position; not until the mid-1960s did European Marxist critics reintegrate Vertov into Left aesthetics. Small wonder, then, that Vertov should have fallen prey to the pedagogical illusion, that he should have imagined that films which have probably only become legible in the past ten years or so (and even then only through much hard work), could spontaneously "educate the senses" of the illiterate peasant masses or, for that matter, of the urban masses, however highly developed their political consciousness. For their expectations had long since been programmed by their experience of dominant film practice.

Nothing will ever excuse or justify the persecutions to which this great master was subjected during the latter part of his life, when he was given

No. 11

practically no opportunity to work. Nevertheless, we must make no mistake about it: if the work of Vertov still contains an immense theoretical potential, if it helps us to understand the system which still governs 99% of the world's film and television production, if it helps us to reflect on the possibilities of eventually developing—within a political and social context comparable, *at the very least*, to Vertov's—methods of audio-visual education and propaganda which might depart significantly from the basic norms of cinematic representation, he invented no magic recipes. In particular, it is clearly a delusion to imagine that reflexiveness has automatic pedagogical value. The key to educating the senses of the masses, an education that would enable them to read the filmic system—to read themselves inside it rather than simply being written into it again and again—lies in changes a good deal more far-reaching. Even at the strictly audio-visual level, the education of the senses must pass through the schools of Kuleshov and Eisenstein before that of Vertov, must move, in other words, in an ascending order of contradiction.