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Author(s)	Ed Hoff
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FAMOUS FOREIGN FILMS

Two films constructed from footage shot in Mexico in 1931-32 by Sergei Eisenstein, Grigori Alexandrov and Eduard Tisse, for Eisenstein's unfinished film, Que Viva Mexico!:

THUNDER OVER MEXICO (edited by Sol Lesser, 1933)
TIME IN THE SUN (edited by Marie Seton, 1939)

"Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein was born in Riga, Russia, in 1898, to a well-to-do bourgeois family; showed as a child a great aptitude for drawing and studied at the Petrograd Institute of Civil Engineering. He took a particular interest in the life and work of Leonardo da Vinci, and from reading Freud's study of that artist began to take interest in psychology. In 1918 he volunteered for the Red Army in a fortification corps and two years later organized his fellow-soldiers into an amateur theater company. On demobilization in 1920 he went to Moscow and soon joined the Proletkult worker's theater as designer and director..."(1) One of the first productions for which he was designer was an adaptation of Jack London's The Mexican. This project not only commened his career, but also his consuming interest in Mexico, the subject which was to culminate in probably the most trying experience of his life.

In 1924, his interest in drama outgrowing the limitations of the theater, Eisenstein directed the film STRIKE, scripted by himself and other members of the Proletkult group. The film was acclaimed and awarded a prize at the Paris Exhibition of 1925. Soon followed Eisenstein's universally praised masterpiece, POTEMKIN, (1925), then OCTOBER (popularly known as TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD, 1927-28) and THE GENERAL LINE (popularly, OLD AND NEW, released in 1929). In these startling productions Eisenstein's advanced theories of film construction were displayed.

As he had studied the Japanese Kabuki players mount their performances by gesture, "...so he was now...to mount his films, shot by shot, in such a way that one plus one might be said certainly to make two and at the same time something greater and quite different from its component parts..."(2) "Instead of linking shots in smooth sequence, Eisenstein held that a proper film continuity should proceed by a series of shocks; and that each cut should give rise to a conflict between the two shots being spliced and thereby create a fresh impression in the spectator's mind. (He)...believed that the director's function was to evolve a series of shot conflicts of this sort and to express his ideas through the new meanings which arose from them..."(3)

Touring Moscow in July 1926 Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford made it a special point to visit Eisenstein, for whom they were filled with admiration because of POTEMKIN. They invited him to come to Hollywood and make a film for United Artists. Further negotiations faltered, however, and it was not until 1930 that Jesse Lasky of Paramount offered Eisenstein \$900 a week to come to America with his assistant Grigori Alexandrov and cameraman Eduard Tisse. After much Red tape, the Soviet government ex-

tended permission for the trio to depart their homeland, and so it was that on June 3 Eisenstein, halfway across the U.S. on his journey to Hollywood, arrived in Chicago. Marie Seton, in her book Eisenstein describes his visit: "...the Three Musketeers were met by a young woman, Agnes Jacques, the executive secretary of the Society for Cultural Relations between the U.S.S.R. and America...Sergei Mikhailovich flummoxed Miss Jacques at the outset by ordering with a great gesture, 'No museums!' and 'Take me to see Chicago!' (She and her friends)...took him to the ornate Palmer House. He barely sat down before he wanted to be off.

"...First they took him to see Chicago's Gold Coast of North Michigan Avenue, but elapsing his head he cried out: 'Take me away from these Babylonian things!' In an effort to show him the city, they took him to the top of the Chicago Tribune Tower. But he only stared uncomprehendingly at the sprawling industrial city... 'There's nothing to see!'

"His companions saw what he meant - an immense view of buildings, but no humanity, and he was seeking the details of American life.

"They descended from the tower and took him to the small streets, the poor hideous streets - West Madison teeming with bums, Maxwell Street with its open markets, Halsted Street filled with Mexicans with striking faces, and the Black Ghetto, where the beauty and physical rhythm of the Negroes fascinated Sergei Mikhailovich. People enchanted him; forms intrigued his eye; a splash of light and shadow caused him to pause and speculate. He was thirsty for details, though he appeared to take little note of the social implications of what he saw, and he never talked politics.

"...Interested in psychology and the behavior of criminals, he made contact with a University of Chicago criminologist, John Landesco, who took him to the lowest dives of the Al Capone gang in the Chicago suburb of Cicero. He also...delivered a lecture at the University of Chicago in Mandel Hall on the 6th of June (he spoke English quite well)...Nineteen years later, those who heard Eisenstein recalled with vivid clarity his extraordinary ability to explain his then almost unknown theories of montage, and his remarkable blending of humor and erudition." (4)

When Eisenstein at last arrived in Hollywood, he was given a "big Build-up" publicity campaign, perhaps to offset the anti-semitic and anti-Bolshevist propaganda circulars against him which were being circulated by various pressure groups.

Eisenstein submitted two scripts for Paramount's approval. The first was Sutter's Gold, a story of the California Gold Rush of 1849. But Paramount didn't like the moral imbedded in the story's treatment - that gold is a source of destruction to man and nature. (The script presented John Sutter, once a rich and prosperous farmer, reduced to ruin when gold is discovered near his sawmill.) Then Paramount dusted off a book they had kept on their shelves for years, Dreiser's An American Tragedy, and handed it to Eisenstein with an unspoken ultimatum. With Dreiser's consent, Eisenstein made certain changes and clarifications while seeking to retain Dreiser's total social setting, which implied Clyde's tragedy was the symbolic tragedy of American society. This was not the murder film that Paramount expected and Eisenstein was summarily released from his contract.

The Russian then busied himself in plans for an independent film laid in Mexico, the country which had interested him from the days of his first

theatrical work. But the question was, to whom could he go for money? Charles Chaplin, one of his few Hollywood acquaintances, suggested the socialist Upton Sinclair.

Surprisingly, Sinclair responded to Eisenstein's plea. He arranged for financing and a contract was signed in November, 1930. So eager was Eisenstein to obtain the means to realise his dream that he neglected to consider the finer points of the contract. "He did not realize that he had not reserved the right to edit his film... He went on the assumption that the words 'directing the making of' a film meant that the film would be edited by him according to his theories of montage. He overlooked the words that '(the owner) may market the material in any manner ...and shall be the sole owner of all the world rights'"(5)

Eagerly, Eisenstein, Tisse and Alexandrow departed for Mexico. According to his contract, he was to devote himself for "three or four months" to the making of a film. But at the end of that time he had not exposed a single foot of negative. Instead, he had been traveling over much of Mexico, stopping momentarily in Yucatan. Gradually, as he absorbed the spirit and tradition of the Mexicans, his tentative idea of a film expanded into an "all-embracing film based on Mexico's living history". He envisioned it as four episodes or 'novels'...framed by prologue and epilogue, unified in conception and spirit; each 'different' in character, different in people, different in animals, trees and flowers. And still held together by the weave - a rhythmical and musical construction and an unrolling of the Mexican spirit and character". Thus the monumental conception of QUE VIVA MEXICO! was formed, a "dialectical epic of Mexican history from Mayan times to the glorious future, starting with and exemplifying all through the basic theme, 'Life must follow Death'"(6)

Eisenstein developed a full length scenario and sent a copy to Sinclair and his wife, who approved of it. The Mexican government, whose cooperation was needed, cautiously approved also. (Later, Eisenstein said he had not written down certain sequences he had planned, for fear of arousing the Mexican government's ire.) The script contained no cutting directions and no indications of camera set-ups. As was customary, Eisenstein preferred to rely on the inspiration of the moment while actually shooting and editing.

Sinclair, apparently still enthusiastic, told Eisenstein to commence work on his grandiose conception. Eisenstein's enthusiasm was boundless. He consumed more than two years and over 160,000 feet of film attempting to bring his epic to completion. Production at last ground to a halt when Sinclair announced in exasperation that his financial resources were exhausted. "He and Eisenstein could not agree on the termination of the expedition. Sinclair...held all the exposed film, which had had to be sent to the US for processing. In the end, Eisenstein had to give up, and made his way, subjected to petty restrictions and annoyances, back to Russia...relying on Sinclair's promise to send the uncut film to Moscow for editing."(7)

Claiming Eisenstein had violated certain agreements, Sinclair did not send the negative, but instead made an arrangement with a commercial Hollywood producer, Sol Lesser, to edit the film for quick commercial release. Thus "the most tumultuous and bitter controversy in the history of the cinema" was touched off. Eisenstein's friends in the U.S. organized pressure groups, raised money and tried by legal measures to return the negative to Eisenstein for editing. They were unsuccessful, and at the end of 1933, Lesser's

version of the material, THUNDER OVER MEXICO, appeared. This was but one sequence of the original film, expanded into a full length feature. It was alternately praised and damned. As John Grierson commented: THUNDER OVER MEXICO might have been a good film with Eisenstein(as the editor) or it might not...The significance that Eisenstein might have added to the tale is not there; and types, acting and glycerined clouds cannot turn a simple tale of village rape into the passion of the people. There were other things up Eisenstein's sleeve, or he is not the dialectician I have always taken him for."(8)

Marie Seton, whose friendship with Eisenstein was initiated in later years, says: "In 1939, I tried to get the footage of QUE VIVA MEXICO! into Sergei Mikhailovich's hands. Failing, I took the memory of what he had told me (of his original intentions regarding the film) and attempted to reconstruct his dream in order that it might not be entirely lost. That film is TIME IN THE SUN."(9)

Sinclair later released a further compilation from Eisenstein's footage, DEATH DAY. He then disposed of the remainder of the negative to various travelogue film distributors. (A persistent rumor still circulates today that much of the Eisenstein footage rests buried in the film vaults of the Bell and Howell Co.)

When Eisenstein returned to Russia, the film industry there was well into the sound era. Younger men had taken over. A tighter government grip had been fastened upon film-makers, and in subsequent years Eisenstein suffered much difficulty under the pressure. He planned and began shooting many productions, but only two sound films were ever released, ALEXANDER NEVSKY (1936) and ~~IVAN THE TERRIBLE~~ (1944, Part I).

Throughout all the ensuing years, Eisenstein never forgot his Mexican epic. But it was only in 1946, a few months before his death, that he saw after years of trying to get prints, the films that had been assembled by other hands from his treasure. By then he was too ill to work on them himself.

What he would have made of these fragments we view tonight, we can only wonder.

Notes by Ed Hoff

Projection by Stan Bower, Dan
Gojkovich, Dan Silverman

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- (1,2) Dickenson & De La Roche: Soviet Cinema. Falcon Press, England, 1948
(3) Karel Reisz: Technique of Film Editing, Farrar, Straus, N.Y. 1953.
(4,5,9,) Marie Seton: Eisenstein, A.A. Wyn, N. Y. n.d.
(6,7,) Sidney Film Society 10th Birthday Programme, 1945-55.
(8) John Grierson: Grierson on Documentary, Harcourt and Brace, NY 1947