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October

(Oktyabr)



Dir: Sergei Eisenstein. Assoc. dir: Grigory Alexandrov. Scr: Sergei Eisenstein, Grigory Alexandrov. Phot. (black and white): Edouard Tissé. Asst. ph: Vladimir Popov, Vladimir Nilsen. Art dir: Vasily Kovrigin. Mus: Edmund Meisel (restored and conducted by Alan Fearon, performed by The Northern Sinfonia, leader Paul Barritt). Ass. dir: Maksim Straukh, Mikhail Gomorov, Ilya Trauberg. Prod. co: Sovkino (Moscow and Leningrad). Source: Contemporary Films, 24 Southwood Lawn Road, Highgate, London N6 5SF. R. t: 116 mins.

Cast: Vasily Nikandrov (*V. I. Lenin*), Boris Livanov (*Minister Tereshchenko*), N. Popov (*Kerenski*), Edouard Tissé (*The German*).

☆ This presentation with the original score made possible by support from the Tyne and Wear Development Corporation.

Background

October has become so much the official 'newsreel' of the October Revolution, with its images of storming the Winter Palace and Lenin at the tribune used in countless documentary compilations, that it's difficult now to recover the sense of experiment and outrage that accompanied the film's belated appearance in 1928. Eisenstein's group, fresh from the international triumph of *The Battleship Potemkin*, was already at work on their film about agriculture and the villages, *The General Line*, when the summons arrived: a film to commemorate the tenth anniversary of 1917 (indeed, this was one of the three commissioned for that momentous anniversary, the others being Pudovkin's *End of St. Petersburg* and Barnet's *Moscow in October*).

From the start it was a race against time. The group were already shooting in Leningrad while the treatment for this daunting subject was still being devised, with vast human and material forces at their disposal to recreate the events of 1917 on a suitably imposing scale. Indeed, many sequences were shot without Eisenstein being present,

so great was the pressure of time and the close understanding of his associate Alexandrov and cameraman Tissé. The original plan was for a massive two-part film that would cover both the period from February to October 1917 and the early years of Soviet power. But only the first was actually filmed and during the hectic editing phase the film's scope was further limited, partly to speed up the work – it had already missed the official anniversary in November 1927 – and partly, no doubt, to skirt some tricky political issues about who did what in the first desperate months of Lenin's rule.

Stalin's control over party and state was in fact confirmed during the making of *October*, and there must have been considerable re-editing of history as a result. But of almost equal importance in fathoming this strangely jagged, uneven torso of a film is the ferment of ideas that preoccupied Eisenstein during its editing. For it now seems clear that this was when he conceived the audacious idea of a film-essay based on Marx's *Capital*. Many of the most experimental passages in *October* – the 'God and Country' montage sequence,

the playful *Ballet mécanique* tricks with clocks and watches – must surely be seen as rehearsals for this daring project. Others, as the Soviet scholar Yuri Tsivian recently demonstrated, are the byproduct of Eisenstein's need to condense – which led him to devise some shockingly scatological implications in the Tsarina's bedroom sequence!

And, hovering over the whole enterprise, there was the promise – and threat – of synchronised sound. Eisenstein knew full well that the Talkies had already triumphed in the West even while he was making what would be a final monument to the 'culture' of montage cinema. His solution to this dilemma, apparently, was to bring the composer who had done so much to ensure the success of *Potemkin* in Germany, Edmund Meisel, to Moscow to work on a meticulously-planned accompaniment for *October*. We know from some hints in the memoirs that Eisenstein plotted some ingenious image-sound effects during this intensive collaboration. But until this extensive restoration of Meisel's score undertaken by Alan Fearon, the success of their joint work has remained a matter of speculation.

Potemkin with Meisel's powerful music proved a revelation at last year's LFF. *October* will surely also be a landmark in the exploration of Eisenstein's legacy that is taking place during this 90th anniversary of his birth.

– Ian Christie

Sergey Mickhaylovich EISENSTEIN was born in Riga, Latvia, on 22 January 1898, the son of a German-Jewish father and Russian mother. After studies at Institute of Civil Engineers, Petrograd (modern Leningrad), he volunteered for the Red Army in 1918, working on defences around the city and also serving on the Northern Front and Western Front. After being transferred to be a designer for a Red Army theatre unit, he was released from service in 1920 to complete his education; but he dropped the career of engineer and eventually ended up as a designer with Moscow's Central Proletkult Arena, a new worker's theatre. His first film was a five minute short interlude (shot in one day) for his 1923 production of Aleksandr Ostrovsky's play *Enough Simplicity in Every*

Wise Man. That same year saw the first of his articles on film theory and in 1924 he co-supervised a collective which led to his first feature, *Strike*. The rest is history. During the 1930s he became more and more under criticism and retreated for a while into writing and lecturing at GIK (later VGIK) film school. He made a comeback with *Alexander Nevsky* but died in Moscow, on 11 February 1948, without seeing the release of part two of *Ivan the Terrible*, his final work.

Films: 1923: *Pokhishcheniye dnevnika Glumova* (*Glumov's Film-Diary*) (short). 1925: *Stachka* (*Strike*); *Bronenosets "Potyomkin"* (*Battleship Potemkin*). 1928: *Oktyabr* (*October/Ten Days That Shook the World*). 1929: *Staroye i novoye* (*Old and*

New). 1932: *Que viva Mexico!* (unfinished; sections edited by Sol Lesser released in US as *Thunder over Mexico*, 1933, and *Death Day*, 1934; footage also used in Marie Seton and Paul Burnford's *Time in the Sun*, 1939, and the educational shorts series *Mexican Symphony*, 1941-42). 1937: *Byezhin lug* (*Bezhin Meadow*) (unfinished). 1938: *Aleksandr Nyevesky* (*Alexander Nevsky*). 1944: *Ivan grozni* (*Ivan the Terrible*). 1958: *Ivan grozni, II* (*Ivan the Terrible, Part Two*) (prod. 1946).

Eisenstein: His Life and Work, an exhibition organised by the Oxford Museum of Modern Art, the British Film Institute and the USSR Union of Cinematographers, is currently at the Hayward Gallery.

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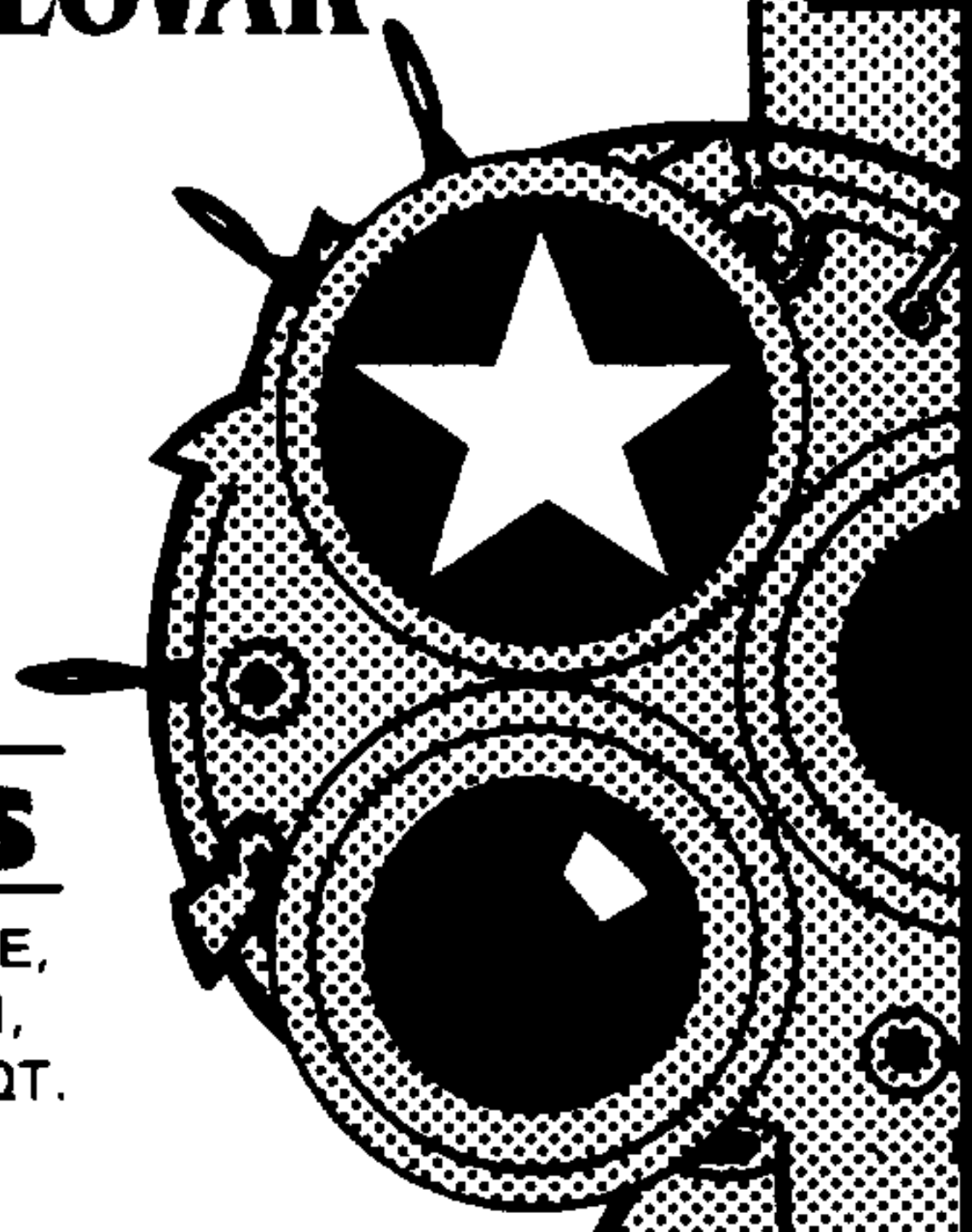
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