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October 2 - November 18, 1975

OCTOBER, or TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD

SOVIET SILENT CINEMA

Part 2: 1926-1927

By special arrangement with Gosfilmofond, the Soviet State Film Archive, and the Pacific Film Archive of the University Art Museum at Berkeley, the Department of Film will present the second of a three-part retrospective of Soviet cinema in its silent period. This program is the most comprehensive ever mounted outside the U.S.S.R. of the classic and revolutionary films of the Soviet Union.

Part I, comprising 29 titles, covered the years from 1918 through 1925, and was presented in 1974 from March 7th through April 15th. Part 2 limits itself to the two peak years, 1926 and 1927, and will include forty titles to be exhibited from October 2nd through November 18th. Part 3, completing the silent years of Soviet filmmaking, will be announced in the future.

The works in the retrospective were selected from a list of surviving Soviet silents in the Gosfilmofond Archive by Professor Jay Leyda in consultation with Victor Privato, Director of Gosfilmofond, and Tom Luddy, Program Director of the Pacific Film Archive. Professor Leyda is the author of the definitive text in English on the history of Russian and Soviet cinema, Kino.

The majority of the prints in Part 2 will contain only the original Russian intertitles. Some of the films which will complement the program will be from the Museum's own collection, and many of these will have English intertitles. Almost all the films will be in 35mm.

Synopses and detailed information will be distributed at each screening. The documentation for the notes has been supplied through the generosity of Gosfilmofond, Jay Leyda, the Pacific Film Archive, Jacques Ledoux of the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique (Brussels), Vlada Petric and Andy McKay. Additional information is also drawn from the Museum's own Study Center files. The Department of Film owes a special thanks to Sonia Volochova who is not only translating from original Russian sources but who is assisting in the compiling of these notes as well.

Monday, November 10 (5:30)

OCTOBER, or TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD (OKTYABR, or DESYAT DNEI, KOTORIYE POTRYASLI MIR). 1927. Released November 7, 1927 (preview at the Bolshoi Theater) and March 14, 1928. U.S. release:November 2, 1928. Historico-revolutionary epic. 7 reels. Sovkino (Moscow and Leningrad). English intertitles. ca. 130 minutes.

Scenario and direction:Sergei Eisenstein, Grigori Alexandrov. Assistant directors: Maxim Strauch, Mikhail Gomarov, Ilya Trauberg. Photography:Eduard Tisse. Assistant photographers: Vladimir Nilsen, Vladimir Popov. Design:Vasili Kovrigin. Music (for performance abroad): Edmund Meisel.

Cast: worker Nikandrov (Lenin); N. Popov (Kerensky); B. Livanov (Minister Tereshchenko); Eduard Tisse (German officer),

In 1926 Eisenstein began working, with his collaborator Grigori Alexandrov and his photographer Edward Tisse, on THE GENERAL LINE, his first film since POTEMKIN. At the end of that year he and Tisse were taken off THE GENERAL LINE and assigned to what was to become the most ambitious of the many jubilee film projects made in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the October

revolution. The two hoped that Alexandrov would be able to complete the shooting of THE GENERAL LINE, but the enormous task of doing research and writing the scenario make this impossible. (The interrupted film was completely re-written and re-shot in 1928 as OLD AND NEW.) Three full months were devoted to preparing the production. Considerable assistance was provided on the research by Esther Shub, who had discovered and compiled great quantities of documentary footage from the period of the revolution, all of which she showed to the Eisenstein team. Shooting of OCTOBER began in April, 1927 and was beset with difficulties until its completion. There were times when two crews were used, with Eisenstein and Alexandrov each supervising one and Tisse running back and forth between the two. The film was scheduled to be shown publicly in the beginning of November, but the extreme lack of time did not diminish the ambitious scope of the project. The original plan was for a film in two parts with a combined running time that was much longer than the version finally completed. To give some indication of the problems involved, it is necessary to point out the fact that the final version contains over 3,000 separate shots, far more than in the modern film. In addition, many of the scenes required precise lighting conditions and contained large groups of people. The film was not ready in time for the jubilee showing and Eisenstein was severely criticised. Unfortunately, this was very nearly the height of the open split between Stalin and Trotsky. Eisenstein, who had recounted the events between February and October with a view to what had happened then rather than to what had taken place in the internal political structure since, became the victim of rumors that he sided with the opponents of the government. Although they were not generally believed, they did not help his position. When the film was finally completed, he was accused of giving an unclear and impressionistic view of the revolution. An attack on artistic formalism was going on at the time and he was to become its chief target in the Russian cinema. OCTOBER was released in the U.S. in 1928 as TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD with its anti-religious and some of the Kerensky scenes cut. (a number of the Trotsky*scenes had already been cut in the Soviet Union.)**

-Bleecker Street Cinema program note circa. 1969

*Jay Leyda asserts Trotsky can still be seen in two episodes (Kino, p. 239)
**Tonight's print in 16 mm and with English intertitles is from a "long" negative at the British Film Institute.

* * *

To Eisenstein, a film was more than just scenes which were linked to match action and to tell a story. What was process (the mechanical joining of shot to shot) became subject to Eisenstein. By careful manipulation of shots, he transcended the film's usual prosaic and direct statements in such a way as to achieve a richer means of expression, akin in its clashes of ideas and suggestive overtones to some kinds of poetry. He increased the vocabulary of the cinema by making ingenious use of rhythm, space, and time. Juxtaposition was raised from an occasional trick to an essential aspect of the art, and editing, which had been mere device, a means, became matter itself.

The process, by which disparate shots are edited into a whole is called "montage", literally "to mount" pieces together. Eisenstein's procedure was governed by his knowledge of the Chinese Ideogram, which is a combination of individual concrete symbols. "To weep", for instance, is conveyed by the joining of the symbol of eye with the symbol for water. He took the process, by which two relatively meaningless things are united to form an idea, and

propounded the famous theory: A + B=C. That is, from the mating of two shots (A & B) which mean little in themselves, he was able to present a new concept (C). In film, this new idea (C)--which was the result of a juxtaposition of images--conveyed both meaning (frequently metaphorical) and emotion (gained from Time, the one quality the Chinese characters did not have). This manipulation of the content and length of shots extended the language of cinema.

This rather mathematical-sounding formula of A + B=C is actually nothing new to film. When a mother-in-law is chattering endlessly, a director may cut to some chickens clucking busily in the yard. Eisenstein himself uses the formula in a conventional way when he cuts from Kerensky to a stableman to a close-up of the derriere of a horse. The audience puts these images together and gets the "idea" (C)...

Eisenstein did not relegate this method to a few subsidiary comical moments. He made it the substance of the film. His main concern was not the plot but rather the ironic, satiric, and philosophical asides. The narrative became a mere framework. The film was no longer a dramatic vehicle but rather a dynamic interplay between objective reality and the director's personality...

Eisenstein's editing differs from that of his cinematic confreres in another important aspect. The tendencey of most directors is not to call attention to the medium itself. Shots are spliced together as smoothly and unobtrusively as possible. In order to reduce the number of cuts, the camera is set "amoving" and roams around the set in shots that last for many minutes. These methods, however, are diametrically opposed to those of Eisenstein. He did not wish to hide the "joins" but to point them out. He wanted each shot to COLLIDE, not to blend. He attempted to preserve the "integrity" of the individual shot, to call attention to its lone sacredness. He did not want his audience to ignore the film form, nor did he want his viewers to sit lethargically and absorb like a roomful of blotters. He wanted them to react violently to the action on the screen for, to Eisenstein, film was the clash of ideas...his personal predilection (was for) "epic" themes which transcend the problems of people (he found their crises either irrelevant to the historical scheme or too domestically vulgar); he perhaps did not concentrate on individuals because this center of interest would limit him to "continuity editing", that is, he would be forced to link the shots of the central character in the usual manner. Thus we never see Kerensky as a person in October, but merely as a figure that goes through different actions so that Eisenstein can reveal his own ideas. It is not personal intimacy but IDEA that is communicated. This central character is used more as a cipher, as a portion of an ideogram, than as a real "human" person...,

Eisenstein's camera does not, however, concentrate wholly on abstruse speculation. When the bridges are opened, in the most famous scene in the film, we go from objective to subjective time. Where a lesser director whould have used two or three shots, Eisenstein increases the tension of the bridge-raising, reforces its symbolic meaning, and recreates a scene of monumental force by intercutting over forty highly selected shots which are carefully calculated to "focus" the audience's emotions...

Eisenstein's interest in pure form and rhythmic cutting can be seen in the Cossack Dance sequence. He has captured the swift action, the jumps, the smiles, the quick turns--the very spirit of the dance. Having at his disposal the film of a number of cameras, he is able to present the dancer from a variety of angles. As the pace of the dance increases, the editing becomes more rapid. Each shot is trimmed to its shortest expressive length. Some, only five or six frames in length, appear again and again. As the dance approaches its climax, the cutting

becomes more agitated: four frames,three frames, two frames, one frame!...

There is another memorable scene in which Eisenstein attempts to create a cinematic metaphor. When the machine gun shoots at the crowd, he tries to capture in FORM the action depicted. The poet can shape his words: "The rifle's rapid tattle." Eisenstein achieves a similar effect by cross-cutting a series of shots two frames long of the gun muzzle and the gunner himself. The subsequent clatter is a brilliant reproduction of the actual event.

Eisenstein uncompromisingly omitted any "personality" interest in October. His hero is the crowd--the people--not merely a familiar face. Some will condemn the "cult" of IMpersonality." At times the audience will be hard pressed to differentiate between the opposing forces because of Eisenstein's too vigorous suppression of identifiable individuals. But it must be said that he did not choose any facile or conventional means to express his subject. He maintained the integrity of the film against all odds. October is one of the milestones of cinematic experiment. Complex, multi-layered, courageous in its austerity, profound in its concepts, unwavering in its aims.

--Arthur Lennig, in Film Notes of Wisconsin Film Society, 1960

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