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SOVIET CINEMA: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Friday, October 28 - 8pm

(OCTOBER)

CAST: Essentially nonprofessionals, but included a few actors such as Nikandrov playing Lenin, and N. Popov playing Kerensky

CREDITS: Director and Screenplay: Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Alexandrov; Assistants Maxim Strauch, Mikhail Gomarov, Ilya Trauberg; Photography: Eduard Tisse; Art Director: Vasili Kovrigin

Released on March 14, 1928

Running Time: 130 minutes

Eisenstein was commissioned to make a film to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the 1917 Revolution. *October* was screened on Nov. 7, 1927 as part of the celebrations, and in a revised version was given general release March 14, 1928.

Georges Sadoul's Dictionary of Films (U.S. edition, 1972) has the following to say about this film:

"Almost unlimited resources were placed at Eisenstein's disposal for his production of *OCTOBER* and he was even put in control of the Winter Palace in Leningrad for several months. As usual, he used no professional actors, relying on "types", -- found by his assistant, Strauch, in the streets, factories, and offices--to play roles in the film. Many of these had themselves been involved in the October Revolution. Eisenstein also drew much from the "mass pantomime" of the attack on the Winter Palace that the people of Leningrad had staged each year since 1920.

"*OCTOBER* is the film in which Eisenstein most rigorously followed his own theories of "intellectual montage." The most famous sequences (such as the 'bridge raising' or the depiction of Kerensky's lust for power) not only incorporate images of objects as metaphorical elements but also integrate the titles into a total dynamic and plastic unity. Those sequences seem to have baffled the general public at the time.

"*OCTOBER* was not well received in the Soviet Union. Not only did its montage sequences lead to the first attacks on Eisenstein for his "formalism," but its production coincided with the power struggle in Trotsky. Eisenstein had made no distinction between the roles played by members of the then present government and those of the then present opposition. After a few showings, Eisenstein was obliged to re-edit the film to eliminate opposition figures. The original film was to be 13,000 feet long; the released version was 9,000 feet. In 1967, for the Fiftieth Anniversary celebrations, Alexandrov reconstructed the original version based on Eisenstein's notes, and with new music by Shostakovich. In 1928, a version shorter than the Soviet general release version was shown in the United States and England under the title *TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD*."

Arthur Lennig in his book The Silent Voice (1966) comments:

"In order to understand Eisenstein's procedures in *OCTOBER*, it will be necessary to recall some of his artistic theories. Basic to his method was the individual shot which has three qualities: the literal subject, the length, and the feeling one gets. By careful manipulation of shots, he transcended the film's usual prosaic and directed statements in such a way as to achieve a richer means of expression, akin in its

clashes of ideas and suggestive overtones to 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 a mere device, a means, became matter itself. This manipulation of the content and length of shots extended the language of cinema. But to control this language properly, it was necessary for the director to do his own editing, for the placement of the individual shots now became the most creative aspect of the film. 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.

It is no wonder that Eisenstein is not too popular with critics who see cinema more as "human document" than as an art form. He was ruthless in his suppression of human interest and frequently removed people entirely from the screen to work with concepts; he did not sugar-coat his message nor did he let people wallow on the screen because they were "people."

"Perhaps the most classic example of Intellectual Cinema, is the scene in which Eisenstein explains the "God" for whom the counter-revolutionaries are fighting. The idea of God, represented by a beautiful baroque statue of Christ, is reduced by cross-cutting other statues and idols until the scene is concluded with a dull egg-shaped mask of Uzume, Goddess of Mirth.

"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 would have used two or three shots, Eisenstein increases the tension of the bridge-raising, reinforces 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. He sustains the superb drama of this scene by a careful manipulation of rhythm. Each shot increases meaning and tension. Thus, from a more strictly formal view (that is, by the manipulation of shots and the careful calculation of shot to shot) the bridge sequence is better than the Odessa Steps sequence in *POTEMKIN*. The concept of authoritarianism, represented by the regular marching of the soldiers in the one, has been rendered more tellingly in the slow, ponderous raising of the bridges, whose inhumanity and mechanism become a gigantic metaphor as majestic and heroic as the Revolution itself. This epic scene concludes with an impressive Egyptian statue agelessly brooding over the corpse-strewn bridges. This concluding scene may lack some of the more melodramatic touches of the Odessa Steps, but is far more profound. The statue achieves a kind of deja vu, a fission. The instant has suddenly pulled back from the passage of time and is seen as another event in the long history of man. If Eisenstein intended this to show monumental importance, the less committed viewer might perhaps think of the pomposity of man. But in any case, when the bridges are open, the men and the horse and the pamphlets swirl in the seething waters before the impassive statue of some now unworshipped god, the viewer has witnessed one of the glories of the silent screen, perhaps the most epic episode ever filmed."

A vast amount has been written on this key film. Jay Leyda in his book *Kino* (1960) describes in detail how the film was researched and prepared, often using historical films and photographs. Yon Barna in his book *Eisenstein* (English edition, 1973) tells of the production as well as the attacks by critics which completely changed Eisenstein's life and work. "OCTOBER remains, indisputably, an experimental film of immense proportions. Through both the film itself and Eisenstein's subsequent theoretical analysis based on it, the concept of the "intellectual film" was launched throughout the world."

Program notes by Donald Deschner

Program presented in association with the Los Angeles Film Exposition and the American Film Institute