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The General Line

The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

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THE SOVIET FILM

(September 25 - November 11, 1969)

Tuesday, October 21, 1969 (2:00 ONLY)

OLD AND NEW (STAROYE I NOVOYE) ** 1929. Produced by Sovkino (Moscow). Directed by Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Alexandrov. Written by Eisenstein and Alexandrov. Photography by Eduard Tisse, assisted by V. Popov. Design by A. Burov, Vasilii Kovrigin, Vasilii Rakhals.

CAST:	The Woman	Marfa Lapkina
	Young Comsomol	Vasya Buzenkov
	Tractor Driver	Kostya Vasiliev
	The Kulak	Tchukhmarev

ENGLISH TITLES.

ca. 75 minutes.

** Silent film, no piano accompaniment.

OLD AND NEW (THE GENERAL LINE) is distributed theatrically in the U.S.A. by Artkino Pictures, Inc.

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OLD AND NEW (THE GENERAL LINE)

Before the last silent film by the Eisenstein group was released on October 7, 1929, under the title of OLD AND NEW, that great experimental film had undergone many vicissitudes, the most serious being the year's interval spent away from it on the production of OCTOBER. Though I have often been told that THE GENERAL LINE, on being resumed after OCTOBER, had a completely different plan, I find it hard to conclude that there was any total alteration in its general character or treatment or emphasis. There were stills reproduced in 1926 attached to the personal story that is the backbone of the final film, and most of the basic casting was done also at the first stage of production. Putting together the available evidence, I should say that when the crew returned to THE GENERAL LINE in spring 1928, there was no more than further shooting on the long-before determined story. At this point, and in the cutting-room, there was, of course, the always painful whittling process that reduced twice too much material to a normal running length of film. Here, as in both POTEMKIN and OCTOBER, Eisenstein had to throw away almost as many ideas as the best ones that the finished films retained. If the treatment, published in Germany (as DER KAMPF UM DIE ERDE) at the time of the world release of OLD AND NEW, was written by Eisenstein and Alexandrov before the shooting script was done in 1926, the differences between this original plan and the post-October realization are so minute as to seem revisions of the least radical sort. (There was, however, a considerable change made after the montage of THE GENERAL LINE was complete.)

There are two articles by Tisse, written more than two years apart, describing approaches to the photographic style of THE GENERAL LINE that are fundamentally the same. The first, written before the crew moved to OCTOBER, declares an aim of strict simplicity:

In this film we resolved to get away from all trick camera-work, and to use simple methods of direct filming, with the most severe attention to the composition of each shot. Only exception to this rule: when we sometimes employed artificial lighting in exterior scenes -- and this was to gain more control over final compositional unity. This gave us the means to determine all degrees of light, from day to night, without resorting to a chemical process at the laboratory, to achieve such gradations....Our aim in this film: to gain artistic and technical effects by entirely new methods of filming reality with simplicity.

Tisse also mentions that for economy of time and maximum use of each filming day, some scenes were filmed with five cameras: 'With such filming for editing, there must be maximum accuracy in each camera's composition, so that each will supplement all other cameras that are recording the same scene.' He also voices a feeling that many cameramen have suppressed when he says that 'animals are more difficult to work with, but they are more patient than human beings'.....

Till now, both here and in the West, the opinion has been cultivated that rural material is not "photogenic". As THE GENERAL LINE is constructed exclusively from the materials of the countryside, it will be at some disadvantage if this should happen to be true, but I believe that it will demonstrate the contrary: that rural material gives very rich "photogenic" possibilities.

On completing our location shooting, last autumn, we began our studio work. It was at this time that experiments began in the West with a new type of lighting apparatus, using lamps of half the power used formerly. We learned from these experiments and continued them in some of our studio work for THE GENERAL LINE.

The faces in OLD AND NEW had always given me the impression of having been found "on the spot" -- in the places being photographed -- so I was quite unprepared to learn that they were the result of an immense casting operation that swept through cities and countryside to bring possible faces to Eisenstein for final choice. Most of the people in the famous religious procession ('prayer for rain') were found in and brought to the country from Leningrad's flop-houses. It was only when I became a part of this great casting apparatus on a later film, and saw the unstinting expenditure of time and effort, that I realized how this search for the precisely "right" face was as important to an Eisenstein plan as a montage-list or a shot-composition. The discovery of the most important face for THE GENERAL LINE, that of the film's heroine, was so long in being made that everyone became worried:

The filming went on, but the heroine had not been found. For two months the directors of THE GENERAL LINE combed railway stations, night-lodgings, factories. They rode through the country. They summoned women for inspection by ringing church bells. They looked at thousands of faces and tested some of them.

No heroine.

In this extremity Eisenstein even decided on a step directly contrary to all his principles originally formulated on beginning this film -- he decided to test actresses for the role. Interviews of actresses began. Nothing came of this. Actresses looked insulted when they were asked whether they could milk a cow, or plow, or drive a tractor. They would proudly answer, "No!" -- and that would end

the interview. The directors resumed their search wherever they went. At last, perhaps in exhaustion, they began filming anyway. Yet nothing seemed quite right. They noticed that they tended to film people from behind.

And then, one fine day, they found her....

Marfa Lapkina came to the filming that one day only because everyone did. She had been a farm-laborer since the age of nine; after the revolution she worked on the state farm of Konstantinovka. She was illiterate, but once her remarkable face was discovered by Eisenstein, he and the crew found in her an intelligence and alertness that more than made up for her inability to read. At first she refused to leave her work to travel with strangers, but finally agreed on the condition that she could take along her year-old baby boy. The baby was always kept near her, and between takes Marfa would sometimes run to change his nappy. When the crew left to work on OCTOBER, Marfa returned to her husband at Konstantinovka, and was again pregnant when THE GENERAL LINE was resumed, so that most of her last scenes were shot to conceal her state; the new baby was born just as the film was finished. Four years before the film was begun Marfa had tended a healthy calf at the Konstantinovka farm, and when the crew arrived at the Pyazan farm for the scenes with Fomka the bull, Marfa discovered that he was the calf she had taken care of....

It is perhaps for the last stage of THE GENERAL LINE's creation that it will hold its place in all histories of film art. Several film-making generations from now the montage of Eisenstein's fourth film will be just as unique in its range of 'sensual montage' as OCTOBER is unique for its vocabulary of 'intellectual montage'. Eisenstein himself realized the nature of THE GENERAL LINE's montage only at a late stage of the film's completion, apparently at the time of its last revision:

It was on the cutting table that I detected the sharply defined scope of the particular montage of OLD AND NEW. This was when the film had to be condensed and shortened. The "creative ecstasy" attending the assembly and montage -- the "creative ecstasy" of "hearing and feeling" the shots -- all this was already in the past....

And there, examining the sequence of the religious procession on the table, I could not fit the combination of its pieces into any one of the orthodox categories, within which one can apply one's pure experience. On the table, deprived of motion, the reasons for their choice seem completely incomprehensible. The criteria for their assembly appear to be outside formally normal cinematographic criteria.

Defining 'orthodox montage' as editing for the dominant or surface elements of the filmed material, Eisenstein discovered that many sequences of the film had been edited for less visible associations, for their 'collateral vibrations', for their overtones.

The montage of OLD AND NEW is constructed with this method. This montage is built, not on particular dominants, but takes as its guide the total stimulation through all stimuli, that is, the original montage complete within the shot, arising from the collision and combination of the individual stimuli inherent in it.... The whole intricate, rhythmic, and sensual nuance scheme of the combined pieces (of certain sequences) is conducted almost exclusively according to a line of work on the "psycho-physiological" vibrations of each piece.....

It was during the cutting of THE GENERAL LINE that Eisenstein made a serious beginning on a second career that in time would rank beside his film-making career -- his work as teacher and theoretician. Even before his first film he had balanced -- and in public print -- the compelling intuitions of an artist with the inquiring mind of a logician; his teaching, too, had begun in the Proletkult days, when he had given a class in theatre direction (chiefly to show a method distinct from that of Meyerhold). And now his work on the montage of THE GENERAL LINE, with all the technical maturity that it represented, required words and print to explain his new steps to others -- and to himself....

There were many outer stimulants, too, at this time -- some of them can be identified in his essays. One of the most impressive of these was the visit to Moscow from Tokyo of the Kabuki Theatre in August 1928, just as THE GENERAL LINE crew returned to Moscow for studio work. Eisenstein, who had studied Japanese culture at a distance, was already sharpened for every stimulating subtlety in this fresh theatre experience, and found in it, as he was to find in so many cultures and arts, justifications and precedents for the new forms he wished films to take. Soviet theatre activity, with Meyerhold in the vanguard, was competing with the cinema as the most vehement Soviet art. The new poetry of Mayakovsky and Pasternak was at its peak of popularity, and there was a new wave of study of the literary techniques of past generations. In painting and sculpture there was still room for more than the naturalistic norm that had always dominated these arts in Russia. And all the arts were clamouring for more responsible roles in the propaganda and instructional jobs needed by the new industrial intensity of the Five Year Plan. This is a constant theme in Eisenstein's writing, especially in the quantity of forceful journalism that appeared alongside his theoretical essays....

In the spring of 1929, the montage of THE GENERAL LINE was finished, the various inspection screenings had begun, and the Eisenstein group were planning a trip abroad to learn about sound-film, when a conversation took place that occasioned further alteration and delay in the film's release. Ten years later Alexandrov published his account of this event:

One day when Eisenstein and I were lecturing to the students of GTK, the guard ran into the lecture-hall and told us that Cde Stalin was on the telephone, asking for us. We reached the phone in an instant.

"Forgive me for interrupting your work", said Josef Vissarionovich, "I have wanted to talk with you, comrades. When would you have some free time? Would two o'clock tomorrow be convenient?"

The idea that we, young Soviet film-makers, were to see the great leader of the people, to talk with him personally, filled us with excitement and joy.

Next day promptly at two p.m. we were admitted to Cde Stalin's office, where we also found Comrades Molotov and Vorshilov. We were greeted warmly and kindly. An unconstrained discussion started.

With great sensitivity Josef Vissarionovich gave us his critical comments on THE GENERAL LINE. Then he went on to the general question of film art.

"The significance of Soviet film art is very great -- and not only for us. Abroad there are very few books with communist content. And our books are seldom known there, for they don't read Russian. But they all look at Soviet films with attention and they all understand them. You film-makers can't imagine what responsible work is in your hands. Take serious note of every act, every word of your heroes. Remember that your work will be judged by millions of people. You should not invent images and events while sitting in your office. You must take them from life. Let life teach you!"

After a brief pause Josef Vissarionovich continued:

"In order to estimate this properly, you see, Marxism must be known. It seems to me that our artists still show insufficient understanding of the great strength of Marxism." Cde Stalin spoke heatedly about the slight acquaintance that masters of Soviet film art had with the works of Marx....

Cde Stalin showed interest in questions of film technique. Knowing about our planned trip to America, Josef Vissarionovich told us: "Study the sound film in detail. This is very important for us. When our heroes discover speech, the influential power of films will increase enormously."

Towards the end Josef Vissarionovich again spoke about THE GENERAL LINE, advising us to change the finale.

"Life must prompt you to find the correct end for the film. Before going to America, you should travel through the Soviet Union, observe everything, comprehend it and draw your own conclusions about everything you see.

And he gave orders to the cinema administration, to organize a trip for us through the new construction projects....We were sincerely sorry that the talk with Cde Stalin had not taken place before we made our film. It would have been a very different film....

Amidst these platitudes and worshipping attitudes some things of interest reveal themselves -- most importantly, that Stalin respected the medium of cinema more than he did the artists who worked in it. The effect of Stalin's 'orders to the cinema administration' was to delay the completion and release of THE GENERAL LINE. The crew travelled, filming, through the Soviet Union for two more months, achieving only an ordinary peasant-and-worker-bond epilogue that could have been attached to any other film. The original conclusion, in homage to A WOMAN OF PARIS, still showed the chance meeting of Marfa (now a tractor-driver) and the tractor-driver (now a farmer.) Even as altered, the authorities were cool to THE GENERAL LINE, and to prevent its identification with any Party policy, scaled down its release title to the less specific OLD AND NEW....

-- Jay Leyda, Kino, A History of the Russian and Soviet Film.