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Direction and script, Serge Eisenstein and Gregory Alexandrov. Production, Sovkino Studio. Photography, Edward Tissé. Cam. oper., Vladimir Nilsen, Vladimir Popov. Asst. dir., Maxim Straukh, Michael Gomorov, A. Antonov, A. Goncharov. Art dir., Basil Kovrigin, Basil Rahals. Architecture, Andrew Burov. Length, 75 min. (orig. length about 90 min.). Distributor, Brandon Films.

Cast: Martha Lapkina (played by herself), her son (M. Ivanin), secretary of diary brigade (Vasia Buzenkov), Mitroshkin the teacher (Nezhnikov), the priest (Father Matthew), the kulak (Chukharev), tractor driver (Kostia Vasiliev), young communist (I. Yudin), sorceress (E. Sikhareva), a peasant (Hurtin).

The most famous film theorist in the world, and one of its most influential film directors, is Serge Eisenstein (Sergei Mihailich Eizenshtein, 1898-1948). In addition to his numerous publications, speeches in many parts of the world, and lectures in the Moscow Film Institute, Eisenstein revolutionized film making in the early years of the Soviet Union with his classic pictures: STRIKE (1925), BATTLESHIP POTESKIN ('25), 10 DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD ('27), OLD AND THE NEW ('29), LONG LIVE MEXICO ('32), BEZHIN MEADOW ('37), ALEXANDER NEVSKY ('38), and IVAN THE TERRIBLE ('44-'45). All of these, except BEZHIN MEADOW, have been shown here by the Film Society or other groups in recent years.

Eisenstein created a film revolution in the 1920's by abandoning the star system (and professional actors in general), whom he replaced by "types" recruited on the streets and collective farms for their physical appearance and mannerisms, to suit those of the characters whom they were supposed to "represent." In this Eisenstein followed the monumental, mass, epic school of dramatic art, which he had learned working with Vsevolod Meierhold and Serge Tretiakov in the Soviet experimental theater of the immediate post-revolutionary period, a theater style "presenting" (not enacting) historical events occurring through the action of masses of people influenced by economic and political factors (strikes, mutinies, etc.). These events were shown happening in outdoor settings in numerous self-contained "episodes," rather than in film studios or theater stages depicting room interiors with the traditional three or five acts. Eisenstein and his modernist predecessors worshipped contemporary high-speed industrial civilization, with its Machine and its Mass Hero.

After gaining a world reputation with POTESKIN, Eisenstein began work on a very different sort of subject, the Soviet village of the late 1920's, to be entitled THE GENERAL LINE. Then work was interrupted for a long time while he took on a rush assignment, TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD. Finishing that monumental picture, Eisenstein and his regular crew (Straukh, Alexandrov, Tisse, etc.) returned to the agricultural film and finished it from spring 1928 to spring 1929, photographing scenes on farms all over the USSR. But then further changes had to be made thanks to some "friendly suggestions" personally communicated to Eisenstein and Alexandrov by Stalin; one of these was that the title should be changed to the less declarative OLD AND THE NEW.

In this film for the first time Eisenstein tried to show an individual "hero," a farm woman named Martha Lapkina who was illiterate but suited the visual conception of the part and very directable. She had become pregnant when filming was resumed in 1928 (as can be seen in some of the episodes), and her baby was born just at the end of the production. She returned to farm work and evidently did not act again.

Many Russian modernists were surprised to hear of Eisenstein tackling a rural subject, which they considered very unphotogenic and "traditional," and it is clear from the finished film that the director had to use all his formal ingenuity to inject modern revolutionary dynamism into problems of cattle breeding and grain harvests. In the years of unimaginative, conventional "socialist realism" (1934-56), critics in the USSR found considerable fault with such inventive, stylized devices as the introduction of the cream separator, the wedding of the bull with its flashes of color (Eisenstein's first use of it) and Freudian overtones, the "sound-montage" of the grasshopper blending into the cutting sickle, the "typage" (modernists disdained the word "cast" or "actors") staring somberly or happily into the camera as Eisenstein off-camera told them what "mood" to show, even the religious procession with bleating lambs used as a metaphor for mumbled prayers -- all these were classified as "formalistic tricks, alien to the Russian people and to socialist realism." But today, if we consider this film as a commercial for a product (communism), we would prefer precisely this technically brilliant formal presentation, just as we do with TV commercials. --SPH