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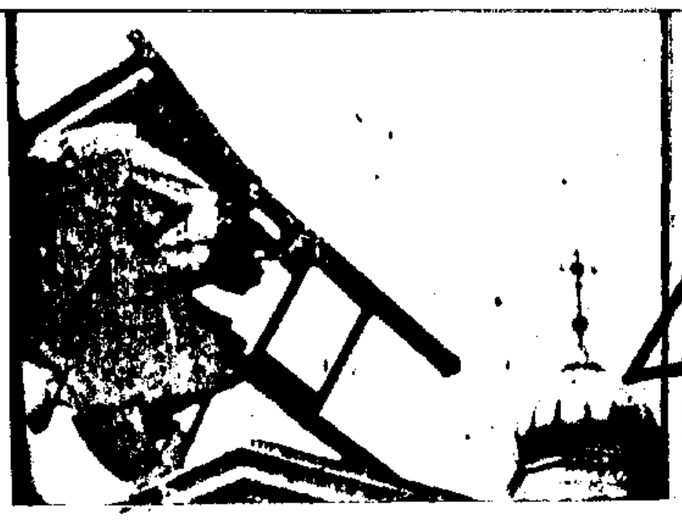

wisconsin film society

OCTOBER (TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD)
(U.S. Title) 1927-28)
Directed by S. Eisenstein & G. Alexandrov
Photographed by Eduard Tisse
Starring N. Popov as Kerensky

B A C K G R O U N D

Sergei Mikailovich Eisenstein, born in 1898, became the foremost director of the Soviet Cinema. He completely revolutionized film making with Strike (1924) and Potemkin (1925). In 1927, he was asked to make a film commemorating the 1917 revolution. That film was OCTOBER. Because of its complexity, it was not as appreciated as Potemkin, but it does show further artistic development.

The American prints of October, called by the more dynamic title, Ten Days That Shook the World, were unfortunately severely cut by about one-third. Since 1928, this mutilated version, from which many of the central parts were removed, has been the only print available in the United States. In the Fall of 1959, the mebers of the Wisconsin Film Society contributed enough money to purchase a complete print which was donated to the Museum of Modern Art Film Library in New York, where it can now be obtained. Tonight's screening, to the best of our knowledge, is the first showing of the original in the United States.

A N A L Y S I S

In order to understand Eisenstein's procedures in October, it will be necessary to examine some of his artistic theories. Basic to his method was the individual shot which has these three important qualities:

Narrative--the subject of the shot; the factual or literal content
Formal--the length of the shot; the placement in the edited whole
Emotional--the "feeling" one gets from looking at the shot, based not only on subject matter but also on lighting, texture, angle, etc.

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 for eye with the symbol for water. He took this 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. 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.

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). When a director does this, he is of course embuing the camera with a personality; it is no longer seemingly objective, a mechanical recorder of images, but a commentator on mother-in-law's verbosity and Kerensky's political skill. Occasionally such asides appear in films, but they are usually only humorous interludes.

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. When the means of communication shifted from logic (cause and effect) to allusion (association of ideas), the process of the creator's mind became vitally important. This raised problems of audience understanding which prevented the Intellectual Cinema (as Eisenstein termed it) from developing further.

In the first part of October, for instance, Kerensky walks up a staircase in the palace, sits down, muses on the crown, and lies on his couch. This is the "pure" story, yet Eisenstein takes 263 shots to relate these few incidents. These additional shots are not "narrative" but rather comment. We see Kerensky, then we see a bust of Napoleon. Such an association of ideas is not bound by real time and real place. Thus it is not only possible but indeed perfectly consistent (within the premises of the film) that a tank rising into the frame miles away can break a plater-of-Paris image of Napoleon in the palace. Here--without punning--is an actual collision of ideas.

Eisenstein's editing differs from that of his cinematic confreres in another important aspect. The tendency of most directors is not to call attention to the medium itself. Shots are spliced together as smoothly and unobstrusively 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.

The perplexity which many audiences feel with Eisenstein's method is not wholly his fault. The success of allusive explication depends upon the audience's knowledge and intelligence. We in the U.S.A. must remember that the film was made primarily for domestic consumption only ten years after the Revolution; thus the director assumed familiarity with the events depicted. Also, he was forced by the Russian rewriters of

history to recut the film--after it was completed--in order to remove the emphasis on Trotsky who had fallen out of favor. These factors have not been kept in mind by the superficial critics who condemn before attempting to understand what Intellectual Cinema really is. Certainly it is no fault of Eisenstein's method that we are not Russians of 1928.

Still, Eisenstein does not make it easy for his audience. He distained the usual "story" film which almost anyone with any talent can do. His great contribution to film aesthetics lay in his WAY OF SEEING; it is his style which is important. Its crispness, calrity, and virility are appropriate to the dynamic subject matter. Besides his personal predilection 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. But this is only partially true. Kerensky in October, as well as Marfa in The Old and New (1929), are still handled in the collision and conflict method, even when we are following their actions. The rigors of this method allow the character to be seen only through the virile eyes of the director. (Note the camera's introduction" to Kerensky in the Czar's palace when he signs the order reviving the death penalty: Long long shot, L.S., M.S., C.U., E.C.U.) Eisenstein stands just outside the line of the camera and prevents the audience from becoming too intimate with the screen character; the actor is refracted through the personality of the director which is revealed by the camera placement, the lighting, the movement, and the editing. 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.

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 supression of human interest and frequently removed people entirely from the screen and worked with ideas; he did not sugar-coat his message nor did he let people wallow on the screen because they were "people." (An analogy can be made to travel films. Some "directors" cannot show a waterfall without having someone stand near it to make nature more human.)

Perhaps the most classic example of Intellectual Cinema (omitted in the Ten Days prints), 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 perfectly contained and 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, 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 (the girl; the horse; the dead revolutionary in the water). He sustains the superb drama of this scene by a careful manipulation of rhythm. Each shot increases meaning and tension.

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! (Silent speed is, of course, approximately sixteen frames per second). Here he tried to reflect the rhythm of the dance. His attempt, however hard on the eyes, is certainly a daring one and perhaps the cinema's most daring interpretation of dancing.

There is another memorable scene in which Eisenstein attempts to create a cinematic metaphor. When the mac 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 rattle." 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 this "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 indentifiable 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, it deserves the same careful attention given to serious works in other fields of expression.

--Arthur Lennig--