S. M. Eisenstein

REVALUATION

October

(U.S.S.R., 1928)

Derick Grigs and Guy Coté

A Soviet critic, V. Smirnov, wrote of Eisenstein's first film, Strike: "*It was a philosophic reply to those who held that the individual played an exceptional role in history. In this film the individual roles were subordinated. The living mass, acting in the tempo and scenes characteristic of Eisenstein, let the audience perceive its own power. . . . A new road had been found, new possibilities and new horizons loomed up—but a new individual hero, reflecting the new values, was still to be created. The mass hero expressed the new values. But that was not enough. It was abstract . . .*".

In his two films that followed, Potemkin *and* October, *Eisenstein elaborated this presentation of the mass hero. It was not until* The General Line—*begun before* October, *but interrupted and restarted a year later—that he attempted to focus on an individual, to humanise his material in the person of a peasant woman. But neither this film nor its predecessor,* October, *was generally popular in the Soviet Union; both were considered too complex, too calculated, and the word "formalism" began to rear its ugly head. It was not until almost ten years later—after an inconclusive experiment in Mexico, and other projects never fully realised—that Eisenstein once more found unqualified public favour with* Alexander Nevski.

"October". Above, Lenin at the Finland Station; below, an episode in the storming of the Winter Palace

The paradox of October *is that of a film with ostensible popular sympathies, surveying an episode of history in the mass, unconcerned with individual characterisation, yet conceived in terms of intellectual exposition and allusive style that makes it remote, if not incomprehensible, to the audience for whom it was intended and whose sympathies it specifically aimed to engage. This style is based on montage, the effect of which many critics have compared to music. In* Soviet Cinema (*Falcon Press*), *Thorold Dickinson describes its development and the impression made on Eisenstein by a Japanese 'Kabuki' Theatre performance in Moscow: "As he had seen 'Kabuki' mount their performances gesture by gesture, so he was now able to mount his films, shot by shot, in such a way that one plus one might be said certainly to make two, and at the same time to make something greater and quite different from its component parts. He studied the content of the shot, its actual length compared with its apparent length, as dictated by the speed with which the human eye can assimilate a simple or complex composition in shape and movement . . .". In an article written for* Experiment in the Film (*Grey Walls Press*), *the Soviet director, Grigori Roshal—in a survey omitting any mention of* October, *now politically unsatisfactory in its native country—comments on Eisenstein: "Montage made it possible to reveal the profound meaning of events with impressive clarity, and to convey the musical feeling of the theme in a silent film. . . . He only finds scope in the broad movement of great populous scenes. They are the best in all his films".*

Eisenstein was the dialectician of the Russian cinema, unlike Pudovkin, its humanist, and Dovzhenko, its poet. Perhaps this explains his sporadic difficulties in coming to terms with his regime and his audience: he projected ideas before people, and people change less quickly. October *has been unavailable for some years*

in this country, and the National Film Library made it available again only a few months ago. Its two critics, Derick Grigs and Guy Cote, are connected both with the Oxford University Film Society, and the Oxford Experimental Film Group: they describe the fresh impact it makes to-day.

WHEN ONE CONSIDERS how much has been written by Sergei Eisenstein, his critics and his historians, about the principles of montage that were developed for *October*, it is all the more remarkable that, at the age of twenty-nine, he planned and completed the film in a mere three months.

Eisenstein had been working on *The General Line* when the Government commissioned him, in 1927, to make a film for the tenth anniversary of the Revolution. With the concentrated, communicative enthusiasm which is evident in both his films and his writing, he set to work with Alexandrov and Tisse, slave-driving his assistants into impossible day and night schedules: the three frequently had to dope themselves in order to stay awake. The result, adapted from a book by an American, John Reed, who had lived in Leningrad during the Revolution, was a two-hour representation of the events that followed the establishment of the Provisional Government between February and October, 1917: the flight of Kerensky, the attack on the Winter Palace, and the triumph of Lenin.

The film was photographed almost entirely on location. Pudovkin, who was also making a Festival film, *The End of St. Petersburg*, recalls: "I bombarded the Winter Palace from the *Aurora* while Eisenstein bombarded it from the fortress of St. Peter and Paul. One night I knocked away part of the balustrading of the roof, and was scared I might get into trouble, but luckily enough the same night Sergei broke 200 windows in private bedrooms". The part of Lenin was given to a Moscow factory worker who resembled him; Trotsky was completely eliminated from the reconstruction; Kerensky became an object of crude ridicule: historical accuracy was subordinated to the Party line. At the premiere, *October* was shown with an orchestral score by Edmund Meisel, who also wrote the music for *Potemkin* and *Berlin*.

October caused quite a stir outside Russia. Called *Ten Days That Shook The World* by the German distributors who wanted to give it a more "popular" name, it suffered from censorship in almost every country. The copies were mutilated on religious or political grounds: most American versions, for instance, omit the sequence of the "Gods" described below. *October* was first shown in England at the London Film Society and subsequently denied public exhibition; later it was shown by other film societies. The film is now banned in the Soviet Union.

October is the most brilliant and intellectual of Eisenstein's films. It is not as moving as *Potemkin*, as human as *The General Line;* it lacks the grandeur of *Alexander Nevsky;* but it is cleverer and more inventive than any of them. Here we see the author of endless abstruse essays on film form and montage improvising laboratory experiments, putting his theories into vivid effect on the screen.

When Eisenstein wanted to explain montage to his pupils at the Higher State Institute of Cinema in Moscow, his favourite illustration was from Chinese hieroglyphs: in his words, "Door plus ear=eavesdrop . . . that is montage in a nutshell". It is difficult to distinguish the term from "editing", with which it overlaps. But the difference is that in routine editing each shot arises naturally out of its predecessor, whereas montage establishes a connection between unrelated images, the "collision" of shots seen one after another, producing from them a new idea.

Many of the refinements of montage theory which Eisenstein elaborated in his books are illustrated in *October*. Even in the titles he uses timing, placing and shock capitals for dramatic ends. Among the realistic effects may be included both the brilliant impression of a machine gun firing (created by rapidly inter-cutting light and dark shots taken from different angles) and the series of close-ups in which the gross and spiteful faces of the bourgeoisie jeer at the "traitors" of the machine gun corps. Here the director, as is his custom, sets his scene through the selection of a handful of significant details.

Eisenstein's innovation in *October* was "intellectual" montage: a method which he sometimes reiterates to the point of boredom. Here he uses symbols to express abstract ideas. The sequence in which the disintegration of the imperial statue represents the fall of Czardom is later run backwards so that the statue reassembles itself during the reaction. The royalists' claim to be fighting for "God and Country" is ridiculed by successive shots of military decorations, of elaborate churches and rituals, and finally of gods and idols in a descending scale of barbarism—the implication being that religion itself is an object of mockery. At times, the director's devotion to his new method over-reaches itself, as in the clumsy parallel drawn between the chant of compromise from Lenin's opponents and the sight of women strumming harps. Sometimes an artificial event is created by cross-cutting geographically unrelated images: when war breaks out the scene of a soldier cowering in a trench is intercut with scenes in a munitions factory, so that he seems to shrink away from a massive gun which is being lowered by a winch. The implied comment is as vivid as a political cartoon.

It has been argued that Eisenstein's montage technique did not survive into the sound film because the latter, concerned with telling a story rather than conducting an argument, could convey intellectual concepts better with words than with pictures. For the modern film-maker, this is the obvious way out: but there should still be plenty of scope for the kind of harmony of word and symbol found, as Mr. Karel Reisz recently pointed out, in certain films of Basil Wright and Humphrey Jennings, and also used by feature directors, as in the opening sequence of *The Third Man*. One may also regret the neglect of another favourite device of Eisenstein's, much used in *October:* overlapping movement. The editor here creates a sense of relentless power by the slowness with which the drawbridge is raised, through his overlapping shots taken from contrasted angles. The impression is reinforced by glimpses of detail, such as the woman's hair lifted as the gap widens, or the horse suspended by its harness over the edge.

These methods, ingenious though they are, suffer in *October* from some over-emphasis. Eisenstein cannot leave well alone. After several alternations of the figure of Kerensky and the statue of Napoleon, followed by the title "Two Bonapartes", one feels that the satirist has more than made his point. The narrative passages suffer in the same way: the audience sits up at the first almost audible blast from the whistle of a train advancing with its load of ferocious Cossacks, but sinks back limply at its countless repetitions. So that the spectator may be impressed with the might of Bolshevik activity, he has to watch the unloading of endless bundles and leaflets; he sees officials trooping in and out of an incessantly swinging door; sometimes he is shuttled abruptly from one scene to another with only the taciturn guidance of a few titles. Some of the confusion probably arises from a certain haste in assembly,

and the tangle of conferences, speeches and resolutions is certainly likely to muddle a modern audience unacquainted with the events. But Eisenstein's story as a whole does not lack clarity and the big events—Lenin's appearance at the Finland Station, the storming of the Winter Palace, the flight of Kerensky (in a car flying the American flag)—are handled with superb assurance.

Eisenstein's sometimes heavy-handed and laboured humour, more successfully used in *The General Line*, has its effective moments in *October*. The scared Mensheviks goggle at the machine guns which file past their doors; the silly little idols blankly stare at each other; Kerensky ascends with military formality and metronomic precision the interminable stairs of the Palace in a sequence which has something of the satirical edge of a René Clair.

The visual grandeur and dramatic power of *October* are undeniable. In such passages as the attack on the Winter Palace Tisse's dark and angular compositions, with the figures scurrying past the looming facades, the smoke, searchlights and watching faces, convey the movement, the tension, and even the clamour, of the scene. Eisenstein's own chief interests were composition and montage, and his camera for the most part remains rooted to the ground; when it does go for a brief ride in Kerensky's car, the bonnet of the engine in the foreground is the immobile main element of the shot's composition. Yet within the frame there is much telling and skilfully composed action, notably of course in the crowd scenes.

October is an epic of revolt combined with a polemic against ambition (Kerensky) and compromise (the moderates who opposed Lenin's party). Except, no doubt, in the eyes of the converted, the latter element gives rise to most of the film's weaknesses: an excess of visual puns and heavy-handed satire. Yet the special pleading of its message and the naïveté of much of its symbolism, defects though they are, cannot detract from the stature of the film: it remains one of the greatest and most original ever made, and is a theorist's masterpiece.

CREDITS

Production: Sovkino, Moscow. *Direction and Scenario:* Sergei Eisenstein, Gregori Alexandrov. *Photography:* Edward Tisse. *Design:* Kovrigin. *Music:* Edmund Meisel. *With:* Nikandrov (*Lenin*), N. Popov (*Kerensky*), Boris Livanov (*A Cabinet Minister*).

(GRIFFITH, *continued from page* 86)

frustrated. Six indifferent films followed and then his first talkie *Abraham Lincoln* which gratifyingly earned him the vote as Hollywood's best director of 1930. But his next film was never shown, no one would take any notice of him and he languished in unhappy retirement for seventeen years and died in 1948. The debt to him of the silent film is incalculable.

The influence of his two great films brought him a tribute which he rejected. All the early Soviet film directors acknowledge the influence of *Intolerance*, the only film of his available to them in the early years of the Bolshevik Revolution. When *The Birth of a Nation* reached the Soviet Union in 1923, Lenin sent him a personal invitation to undertake the supervision of the nationalised Russian film industry. It is interesting to speculate on his possibilities had he accepted that extraordinary offer.

NEW BOOKS

CHAPLIN

CHARLIE CHAPLIN, by Theodore Huff. (Henry Schuman, New York, $4.50 (36s.) 344 pp. 148 illustrations).

THE LITTLE FELLOW, by Peter Cotes and Thelma Niklaus. (Paul Elek, London, 15/-. 160 pp. 38 illustrations).

THE PUBLICATION OF Mr. Theodore Huff's monumental work on Chaplin has been eagerly awaited. No one interested in the subject can have failed to be struck by the extraordinary amount of misleading information and admitted ignorance which characterise all critical references to Chaplin's early films, prior to the publication by the British Film Institute of Mr. Huff's "Index to the Films of Charles Chaplin" in 1945.

On this stable foundation of facts Mr. Huff has erected an impressive edifice. Every stage of Chaplin's career is traced in some detail, no major film is left undescribed, and a great number of them are illustrated with stills. There are also a large number of miscellaneous illustrations. The original "Index" is repeated in an enlarged form, and 81 short biographies of "people professionally associated with Chaplin" added.

About such a work it may well be said, "What more could one want?" Nothing, certainly; but would one, perhaps, have been more grateful for something less? Might not the "private life" part of the story have been handled either more briefly or less breezily?

No one, presumably, wants biography to return to the pre-Strachey epoch of flattery and moralisation. No one any longer wishes to hear that X succeeded because he got up so early, Y because he never drank anything stronger than lemonade, and Z because he kept hundreds of neat little notebooks. We are naturally more at home with X's, Y's and Z's who succeed in spite of mixing breakfast with lunch, lime with gin, and scientific notes with ribald nonsense. But are we not in danger of overlooking the fact that soot is thicker than whitewash in obscuring the finer details of outline? The present writer, who some years ago was the recipient of a signal piece of kindness from Chaplin, finds in neither of these books a sufficient tribute to his quite remarkable bursts of generosity to humbly placed admirers.

More broadly, is not the Muse of Biography at the present time in danger of taking the wrong turning, and following her erring sister down the primrose path of Journalism?

It is easy to see that there is something of a dilemma involved. It may be said that you cannot explain *Monsieur Verdoux* without making reference to the fact that it is the work of an embittered man; and that this leads to the attacks made on Chaplin from various quarters, and that, in all fairness to the attackers, it becomes necessary to state their case. But such a line of argument assumes that the public has a "right to know" everything, and that, where curiosity and good manners confront one another, it is natural to expect that good manners should be ruthlessly pushed aside.

An alternative assumption would perhaps be that such cases involve a conflict between scientific enquiry and good manners. If this were indeed the case, the choice would be a hard one. But the fact that both the volumes under review are clearly intended for the general reader somewhat weakens this argument. If we must have analyses of the characters of great men, let us at least examine them in the sort of moral vacuum which modern psychology creates. Freud's monograph on Leonardo da Vinci might be taken as a prototype of such work.

But perhaps these are somewhat Utopian generalisations. Let us in the meanwhile be grateful to those film historians who give us facts, and it must again be stated emphatically that Mr. Huff's book brings us a vast accession of new and reliable material.

It is therefore in no carping spirit that I plead with him to alter "cocaine" to "cockayne" (Page 13) and "Dan Leo" to "Dan Leno" (Page 17) in future editions, and to reconsider carefully his interpretation of an episode in the telephone-instrument scene in *Easy Street*, when Chaplin, caught by the Big Man in the act of telephoning to the police, holds the instrument first to his eye and then to his mouth. Mr. Huff says, "To deceive him Charlie 'plays' the receiver like a musical instrument, and 'looks through' it like an