

Movies and Methods

An Anthology

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THE LEF ARENA

O. BRIK AND V. SHKLOVSKY

This critical debate on Dziga Vertov's The Eleventh and Eisenstein's October reveals quite clearly the extent to which many Soviet theorists of the arts were concerned with questions of form and what we might now call semiology — film language, syntax, the nature of cinematic metaphor, and so forth. An excellent introduction to the climate of artistic opinion in the U.S.S.R. in the late 1920's is found in Ben Brewster's comments introducing a number of pieces from New Lef in Screen, Vol. 14, no. 4, where this article originally appeared. Peter Wollen's chapter on Eisenstein in Signs and Meaning in the Cinema also offers a whistle-stop tour of various artistic currents present at that time.

A great deal of debate centered around the art of "factography" — of filming events without artifice or deformation, in which New Lef criticized both psychologically realistic acting and assemblies of completely "raw" footage. In another article, "Film Platform" by Aratov, a case is made for the inevitability of a narrative structure and against Vertov's "sectarian" attempt to catch life "red-handed," but even more stress is laid upon the context in which films are shown. For Aratov no social or class distinctions about art are wholly intrinsic to art; they must always take account of context — a view revisited by Solanas and Gettino in their article.

Brik's criticism of Vertov analyzes the errors he commits by failing to give enough attention to the scenario, whereas Brik and Shklovsky represent divergent views of Eisenstein's concept of metaphor, Brik taking a position remarkably similar to the one expressed in Metz's review of Mitry (see the Structuralism-Semiology chapter). Several contemporary critics (among them the Cahiers du Cinéma editors) have argued that we must return to the work of the Russian formalists and this selection may give some idea of why their work has continuing importance.

THE ELEVENTH¹

Dziga Vertov's film *The Eleventh* is an important frontline event in the struggle for the 'unplayed' film: its pluses and minuses are of equal significance and interest.

The film consists of a montage of 'unplayed' film material shot in the Ukraine. Purely in terms of camerawork, Kaufman's filming is brilliant, but on the level of montage the film lacks unity. Why?

Primarily because Vertov has ignored the need for an exact clearly-constructed thematic scenario. Vertov's thoughtless rejection of the necessity for a scenario in the 'unplayed' film is a serious mistake. A scenario is even more important for the 'unplayed' film than for the 'play' film where the term is understood not simply as a narrative-structured exposition of events, but rather

as the motivation of the film material. The need for such motivation is even greater in the 'unplayed' film than in the 'play' film. To imagine that documentary shots joined without any inner thematic link can produce a film is worse than thoughtless.

Vertov tries to make the film titles do the work of a scenario but this attempt to use written language as a means of providing the cinematic image with a semantic structure can lead nowhere. A semantic structure cannot be imposed on the film from outside, it exists within the frame and no written additions can compensate for its absence. The reverse is also true, when a determined semantic structure is contained within the frame, it should not be exchanged for written titles.

Vertov has chosen particular film shots from a complete film sequence and joined them to other frames from a different sequence, linking the material under a general title which he intends will merge the different systems of meaning to produce a new system. What happens in fact is that these two sections are drawn back into their basic film parts and the title hovers over them without uniting them in any sense.

The Eleventh contains a long sequence on work in coal mines which has its own semantic structure, and another sequence showing work in a metallurgical plant which also has its own, distinct, semantic structure.

Vertov has joined a few metres from each sequence, intercutting the title 'Forward to Socialism'. The audience, watching the coal mining shots registers the system of meaning of this complete sequence, sees the metallurgical shots and registers this sequence, and no association with the new theme 'Forward to Socialism' is provoked. For this to be achieved new film material is essential. . . .

This fact needs to be firmly established — the further development of the 'unplayed' film is being impeded at the moment by its workers' indifference to the scenario and the need for a preliminary thematic structuring of the overall plan. This is why the 'unplayed' film at present has a tendency to dissolve into separate film parts inadequately held together by heroic inscriptions.

It is curious that Shub's *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, put together out of old film strips, makes a far more total impression, thanks to careful structuring on the levels of themes and montage.

The absence of a thematic plan must inevitably affect the cameraman. For all the brilliance of Kaufman's filming, his shots never go beyond the visual illustration, they are filmed purely for their visual interest and could almost be included in any film. The reportage/publicism element is completely lacking and what emerges is essentially beautiful 'natural' shots, 'unplayed' images for a 'play' film.

This is because Kaufman did not know what theme he was filming for, from what semantic position those shots were to be taken. He filmed things as they seemed most interesting to him as a cameraman; his taste and skill are undeniable, but his material is filmed from an aesthetic, not a documentary, position.

[O. Brik]

OCTOBER²

Sergei Eisenstein has slipped into a difficult and absurd situation. He has suddenly found himself proclaimed a world-class director, a genius, he has been heaped with political and artistic decorations, all of which has effectively bound his creative initiative hand and foot.

In normal circumstances he could have carried on his artistic experiments and researches into new methods of film-making calmly and without any strain: his films would then have been of great methodological and aesthetic interest. But piece-meal experiments are too trivial a concern for a world-class director: by virtue of his status he is obliged to resolve world-scale problems and produce world-class films. It comes as no surprise therefore that Eisenstein has announced his intention to film Marx's *Capital* — no lesser theme would do.

As a result there have been painful and hopeless efforts to jump higher than his own height of which a graphic example is his latest film, *October*.

It would, of course, be difficult for any young director not to take advantage of all those material and organisational opportunities that flow from the title of genius, and Eisenstein has not withstood the temptations.

He has decided that he is his own genius-head, he has made a decisive break with his comrades in production, moved out of production discipline and begun to work in a way that leans heavily and directly on his world renown.

Eisenstein was asked to make a jubilee film for the tenth anniversary of October, a task which from the Lef point of view could only be fulfilled through a documentary montage of existing film material. This is in fact what Shub has done in her films, *The Great Road*, and *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*. Our position was that the October Revolution was such a major historical fact that any 'play' with this fact was unacceptable. We argued that the slightest deviation from historical truth in the representation of the events of October could not fail to disturb anyone with the slightest cultural sensitivity.

We felt therefore that the task that Eisenstein had been set — to give not the film-truth (*kinopravda*), of the October events, but a film-epic, a film-fantasy — was doomed in advance. But Eisenstein, who in some areas has moved towards the Lef position, did not share the Lef viewpoint in this instance — he believed that it was possible to find a method of representing October, not as documentary montage, but through an artistic 'play' film. Eisenstein of course rejected the idea of straightforward historical reconstruction from the start. The failure of *Moscow in October*³ — a film based purely on the reconstruction of events — showed him to be right in this regard. What he needed was an artistic method for the representation of October events.

From the Lef standpoint such a method does not exist and indeed cannot exist. If Eisenstein had not been loaded down by the weighty title of genius, he could have experimented freely and his experiments might have brilliantly demonstrated the impossibility of the task set him. Now however, alongside pure experiment, he was obliged to create a complete jubilee film, and therefore to combine experiments with form and trite conventions in a way that sits curiously in one and the same work. The result is an unremarkable film.

While rejecting straightforward reconstruction, Eisenstein was obliged one way or another to deal with Lenin, the central figure of the October Revolution, in his jubilee film. To do so he resorted to the most absurd and cheapest of devices: he found a man who resembled Lenin to play the role of Lenin. The result was an absurd falsification which could only carry conviction for someone devoid of any respect or feeling for historical truth.

Eisenstein's film work on the heroic parts of his film is analogous to the operations of our cliché painters, like Brodsky or Pchelin, and these sequences have neither cultural nor artistic interest.

Only in episodes fairly distantly related to the development of the October Revolution is his work as a director apparent and it is to these episodes that any discussion of the film has to be limited.

The Women's Battalion. This theme is given much greater prominence in the film *October* than the women's battalion had in the actual historical events. The explanation for this is that women in military uniform represent rich material for theatrical exploitation.

However, in structuring this theme Eisenstein has committed a crude political mistake. Carried away by his satirical portrayal of the woman soldier, he creates, instead of a satire on the women who defended the Provisional Government, a general satire on women who take up arms for any cause at all.

The theme of women involving themselves in affairs that don't concern them draws further strength in Eisenstein's work from juxtapositions in a metaphorical relation of the women soldier and images like Rodin's *The Kiss* and a mother and child.

The error is committed because Eisenstein exaggerates the satirical treatment of the women without constructing a parallel satire on the power which they were defending and therefore no sense of the political absurdity of this defence is conveyed.

People and things. Eisenstein's search for cinematic metaphors gives rise to a whole series of episodes which intercut the lines of objects and people (Kerensky and the peacock, Kerensky and the statue of Napoleon, the Mensheviks and the high society dinner plate) and in all these constructions, Eisenstein commits the same error.

The objects are not given any preliminary non-metaphorical significance. It is never made apparent that these objects were all to be found in the Winter Palace, that the plate, for instance, was left in the Smolny by the Institute originally housed there. There is therefore no context for their sudden and inexplicable emergence in a metaphorical relation.

While the verbal metaphor allows us to say 'as cowardly as a hare' because the hare in question is not a real hare, but a sum of signs, in film we cannot follow a picture of a cowardly man by a picture of a hare and consider that we have thereby constructed a metaphor, because in a film, the given hare is a real hare and not just a sum of signs. In film therefore a metaphor cannot be constructed on the basis of objects which do not have their own real destiny in terms of the film in which they appear. Such a metaphor would not be cinematic, but

literary. This is clear in the sequence which shows a chandelier shuddering under the impact of October gunfire. Since we have not seen this chandelier before and have no sense of its pre-revolutionary history, we cannot be moved by its trembling and the whole image simply calls up incongruous questions. . . .

The unthought out linkage of objects and people leads Eisenstein to build relations between them which have no metaphorical significance at all but are based purely on the principle of visual paradox; thus we have tiny people alongside huge marble feet, and the overlap from earlier metaphorical structures leads the viewer to look for metaphorical significance where none proves to exist.

The opening of the bridge. As a film director Eisenstein could obviously not resist filming the raising of the bridges in Petrograd, but this in itself was not enough. He extended the episode with piquant details, women's hair slipping over the opening, a horse dangling over the Neva. It goes without saying these *guignol* details have no relation to any of the film's themes — the given sequences are offered in isolation, like some spicy side dish, and are quite out of place.

Falsification of history. Every departure from historical fact is permissible only where it has been developed to the level of grotesque and the extent of its correspondence to any reality is no longer relevant. . . .

When departure from historical fact does not approach the grotesque, but remains somewhere halfway, then the result is the most commonplace historical lie. There are many such instances in *October*.

1. The murder of a bolshevik by women in the July Days: There was a similar incident which involved the murder of a bolshevik selling *Pravda* by junkers. In an attempt to heighten the incident, Eisenstein brings in women and parasols — the result is unconvincing and in the spirit of trite stories about the Paris Commune. The parasols prove to have no symbolic value, they function as a shabby prop and distort the reality of the event.

2. The sailors' smashing of the wine cellars: Everyone knows that one of the darker episodes of October was the battle over the wine cellars immediately after the overthrow and that the sailors not only did not smash the wine cellars, but looted themselves and refused to shoot at those who came after the wine. If Eisenstein had found some symbolic expression for this affair, say, demonstrating some kind of eventual resolution between proletarian consciousness and the incident, the sequence might have had some justification. But when a real sailor energetically smashes real bottles, what results is not a symbol, not a poster, but a lie. Eisenstein's view as it has been expressed in his most recent articles and lectures is that the artist-director should not be the slave of his material, that artistic vision or, to use Eisenstein's terminology, the 'slogan' must be the basis of cinematography. The 'slogan' determines not only the selection of material, but its form. The Lef position is that the basis of cinematic art is the material. To Eisenstein this seems too narrow, too prone to nail the flight of artistic imagination to the realm of the real.

Eisenstein does not see cinema as a means of representing reality, he lays

claim to philosophical cinema-tracts. We would suggest that this is a mistake, that this direction can lead no further than ideographic symbolism. And *October* is the best proof of this.

From our point of view, Eisenstein's main contribution lies in his smashing the canons of the 'play' film, and carrying to the absurd the principle of creative transformation of material. This work was done in literature by the symbolists in their time, by the abstract artists in painting, and is historically necessary.

Our only regret is that Eisenstein, in the capacity of a world-class director, feels obliged to construct 80 per cent of his work on the basis of worn-out conventions which consequently considerably lower the value of the experimental work he is trying to carry on in his films.

[O. Brik]

EISENSTEIN'S *OCTOBER*. REASONS FOR FAILURE.

Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein's talk of the need for a special department in cinema is unnecessary — his film is understandable in a general, not in a special way, and it doesn't call for panic.

Sergei Mikhailovich has raised the question of the reasons for failure, but first we must define what constitutes failure. We all know, many things were received as failures when they first appeared and only later re-assessed as innovations in form.

Sergei Mikhailovich has doubts about his own film in this respect and I too feel there are elements of straightforward failure in the film.

In terms of artistic devices, the film divides into two parts, Lef and academy sections; and while the former is interestingly made, the latter is not.

The academy section of Eisenstein's film is distinguished mainly by its scale and the vast numbers of light units employed. Just by the way, isn't it time an end was put to the filming of wet things? The October Revolution did not take place in a constant downpour and was it worth drenching the Dvortsovaya Square and the Alexandrovsky Column? Thanks to the shower and the thousands of lights, the images look as if they've been smeared with machine oil, but there are some remarkable achievements in these sequences.

One of the branches of cinema is at the moment treading a line somewhere between vulgarity and innovation.

The essential task at the moment is to create the unambiguous cinematic image and reveal the language of film, in other words, to achieve precision in the action of cinematic expression on viewer, to create the language of the film shot and the syntax of montage.

Eisenstein has achieved this in his film. He sets up lines of objects and, for instance, moves from god to god coming in the end to the phallic negroid god and from this through the notion of 'statue' to Napoleon and Kerensky, with a consequent reduction. In this instance the objects resemble each other through only one of their aspects, their divinity, and are distinct from one another through their reverberations on the level of meaning. These reverberations create

the sense of differentia essential to an art product. Through the creation of this transitional series, Eisenstein is able to lead the viewer where he wants him. The sequence is linked to the well-known ascent of the (Winter Palace) staircase by Kerensky. The ascent itself is represented realistically, while at the same time the film titles list Kerensky's ranks and titles.

The overstatement of the staircase and the basic simplicity of the ascent, carried out at the same regular pace, and the very disparity between the notions 'ascent' and 'staircase' together constitute a clearly comprehensible formal device. It represents an important innovation, but one which may contain within it certain flaws, that is, it may be imperfectly understood by the author himself.

A degenerated version of this innovation would take the form of an elementary cinematic metaphor with too close a correspondence between its parts; for instance a flowing stream and a moving stream of people, or the heart of some person as a forgetmenot. It is important in this context to bear in mind that the so-called image functions through its non-coincident components — its aureoles.

In any case, Eisenstein has forged a long way ahead in this direction. But a new formal means when it is created is always received as comic, by virtue of its novelty. That was how the cubists were received, and the impressionists, that's how Tolstoy reacted to the decadentes, Aristophanes to Euripides.

A new form is therefore most suited to material where the comic sense is appropriate. This is how Eisenstein has used his innovation. His new formal device, which will no doubt become general cinematic usage, is only employed by him in the structuring of negative features, to show Kerensky, the Winter Palace, the advance of Kornilov, etc.

To extend the device to the pathetic parts of the film would be a mistake, the new device is not yet appropriate to the treatment of heroism.

The film's failures can be explained by the fact that there is a dislocation between the level of innovation and the material — and therefore the official part of the film is forced rather than creative, instead of being well-constructed it is merely grandiose. The thematic points of the film, its knots of meaning, do not coincide with the most powerful moments of the film.

... but art needs advances rather than victories. Just as the 1905 revolution cannot be evaluated simply as a failure, so we can only talk of Eisenstein's failures from a specific standpoint.

[V. Shklovsky]

Translations by Diana Matias

Notes

1. *The Eleventh* (Odinnadtsati), directed by Dziga Vertov, photography by Mikhail Kaufman, edited by Elizaveta Svilova, 1928. Film celebrating the eleventh year of Soviet Power and the achievements of the first year of the first Five year Plan in the Ukraine.

2. *October* (Oktyabr), directed by Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Alexandrov, photography by Edvard Tisse, 1928.

3. *Moscow in October* (Moskva v Oktyabre), directed by Boris Barnet, 1927. The film tells the story of the Bolshevik seizure of power in Moscow in 1917.

CINEMA/IDEOLOGY/CRITICISM

JEAN-LUC COMOLLI AND JEAN NARBONI

This editorial from Cahiers du Cinéma arose from the broad redefinition of the purpose of film criticism that followed the events of May-June 1968 in France. The editors of Cahiers, along with their colleagues at Positif and Cinéthique, took up positions in relation to Marxism, structural linguistics, and psycho-analysis, and attempted to define themselves from a theoretical, politically active standpoint.

This editorial (originally printed in Cahiers du Cinéma, no. 216, October 1969), defines both the magazine's function – to provide a rigorous analysis of "what governs the production of a film (economic circumstances, ideology, demand and response) and the meanings and forms appearing in it – and its object, the kinds of films it will set out to examine. The editors' typology is politically motivated and places films in relation to how they "show up the cinema's so-called 'depiction of reality,' " a depiction which they see as the opposite of neutral or true or "real." For them, the camera reveals nothing but the realm of ideology, and hence political struggle in the cinema must inevitably involve work at the level of form as well as content. (The editors seem to equate form and content with signifier and signified, but a more rigorous analysis of the differences in these two sets of terms is found in Metz's article, "Methodological Propositions for the Analysis of Film," Screen, Vol. 14, nos. 1/2.) Categories (a) through (d) exhaust the possibilities of ideological endorsement or criticism at the levels of form and content, but perhaps Cahiers' most interesting comments relate to categories (e) and (f), where the films seem wholly determined by the ideology but turn out to have an ambiguous relationship to it. The ideology becomes subordinated and corroded by the film's "cinematic framework," leaving the critic with the task of showing or clarifying this process. Although the editorial is too sketchy to make it clear how this is done, the editors' lengthy analysis of Young Mr. Lincoln is an attempt to deal with just such a film and is therefore an instructive example of both the strengths and weaknesses of Cahiers du Cinéma's program.

It is also worth noting that with the publication of this English translation, Screen magazine itself embarked on an examination of the Russian formalists,

semiology, structural linguistics, and the "depiction of reality" in the cinema that has continued now for several years.

Scientific criticism has an obligation to define its field and methods. This implies awareness of its own historical and social situation, a rigorous analysis of the proposed field of study, the conditions which make the work necessary and those which make it possible, and the special function it intends to fulfil.

It is essential that we at *Cahiers du Cinéma* should now undertake just such a global analysis of our position and aims. Not that we are starting entirely from zero. Fragments of such an analysis have been coming out of material we have published recently (articles, editorials, debates, answers to readers' letters) but in an imprecise form and as if by accident. They are an indication that our readers, just as much as we ourselves, feel the need for a clear theoretical base to which to relate our critical practice and its field, taking the two to be indivisible. 'Programmes' and 'revolutionary' plans and declarations tend to become an end in themselves. This is a trap we intend to avoid. Our objective is not to reflect upon what we 'want' (would like) to do, but upon what we *are* doing and what we *can* do, and this is impossible without an analysis of the present situation.

I. WHERE?

(a) First, our situation. *Cahiers* is a group of people working together; one of the results of our work appearing as a magazine.¹ A magazine, that is to say, a particular product, involving a particular amount of work (on the part of those who write it, those who produce it and, indeed, those who read it). We do not close our eyes to the fact that a product of this nature is situated fairly and squarely inside the economic system of capitalist publishing (modes of production, spheres of circulation, etc). In any case it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise today, unless one is led astray by Utopian ideas of working 'parallel' to the system. The first step in the latter approach is always the paradoxical one of setting up a false front, a 'neo-system' alongside the system from which one is attempting to escape, in the fond belief that it will be able to negate the system. In fact all it can do is reject it (idealist purism) and consequently it is very soon jeopardized by the enemy upon which it modelled itself.² This 'parallelism' works from one direction only. It touches only one side of the wound, whereas we believe that both sides have to be worked upon. And the danger of the parallels meeting all too speedily in infinity seems to us sufficient to argue that we had better stay in the finite and allow them to remain apart.

This assumed, the question is: what is our attitude to our situation? In France the majority of films, like the majority of books and magazines, are produced and distributed by the capitalist economic system and within the dominant ideology. Indeed, strictly speaking all are, whatever expedient they adopt to try and get around it. This being so, the question we have to ask is: which films, books and magazines allow the ideology a free, unhampered passage, transmit it with crystal clarity, serve as its chosen language? And which attempt to make it