

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

October: Ten Days that Shook the World 1928

Sergei Eisenstein 1898-1948

STORY

One looks ahead into a challenge! Is there a story here? Are there characters? Or are there simply tumultuous sequences of faces, eyes, teeth, crushing mobs, broken flagstaves, smoke pouring steamers, creaking drawbridges, sacked boudoirs, and delirious flashes of light which morph into thunderbolts of sound? Are there then no characters?

Coherence. The immediate aftereffect of watching this film today is shock, power, perhaps in the end tedium--enough already--and yet we can easily imagine the power the film packed for its initial audience. There is a well structured text underlying the work of the film, the popular (1918) work of John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, and the fateful sequence of events, which Reed traces, is distinctly visible in Eisenstein's film. How palpable those events had to have seemed, not only to the impacted Russian populace, but to worldwide observers of the globally changing events taking place in Petrograd in 1917!

Overthrow. Eisenstein plunges the audience directly into the now well known drama of immense cultural overthrow; and does so as part of the 1927 celebration of the ten year anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. It should be added, to any account of the power of Eisenstein's patriotic promotion, that in this film he initiates the full force of a cinematographic technique, *montage*, which was rarely used before his time. Initially a Soviet addition to the director's armoire; the effect, one of doubling down on images, editing and collocating their interrelations, allowed for hitherto unexplored visual intensities.

Sequence. After the excitement of establishing a temporary provisional government, Vladimir Lenin, who will mastermind the intended new government, returns from exile in April 1917. In July, anti-monarchy demonstrators are fired upon by the Tsarist army, and the drawbridges of Petrograd are raised, to cut the ruling city center off from the workers' quarters, where protests are growing violent. (Plenty of visual enrichment guarantees that this 'sequence,' which in historical retrospect can of course seem pre-cut, is as if just invented. Case in point: the President of the Provisional Government, Alexander Kerensky, is seen strutting a la Napoleon. In the near distance a peacock flutters its feathers stuffily.) On Oct 17 the Bolsheviks approve Lenin's proposal to rebel formally. On October 24 Lenin returns to the Smolny, the institutional center of Petrograd, and on the following day he declares the dissolution of the Provincial Government. (Intertitles, by the way, grease the narrative pictorial path, wakening in the film audience old mnemonic routes of patriotic ritual.)

October 25-6. On these two days, during which the Provincial Government is formally deposed, and the Soviets take formal control of the state, the cruiser Aurora sails up the river into Petrograd, and the sailors take charge of the bridges. The Cossacks, and the Women's Death Battalion, which have been counted on as reserves for the Provisional Government, are undercut by the vote, taken that evening, that dissolves the Provisional Government altogether. Eisenstein, always ready with the knife, delights in showing us the final formal behaviors of the Provisional Government, who seat themselves at a great oak table, ready to hand over power like gentlemen—only to find themselves tramped insensible by a horde of workers, who shoutingly over fill the chamber. The film was essentially over, having completed its work as propaganda for the people, but in addition, for this was the luck long following the workers, picking up laborers off the street, who excelled at the acting parts unfolding before them.

Innovative. Two chief factors dominated the innovative thinking of Eisenstein, as he created his way through the present film. One factor was the ready to hand choice of actors from 'real life,' individuals passing in the streets; a practice palpably suited to the aesthetic dominating *October*. The other striking innovative element, to which we referred earlier, was Eisenstein's use of 'intellectual montage,' a

juxtaposition of images which had at best a loose and metaphorical reciprocity to one another. A developed example of this technique is on display in the instance of an image of Jesus, which is (without explicit explanation) juxtaposed to a series of images—Aztec gods, Hindu images, the Buddha, and a prehistoric sacred idol—in a sustained effort to argue for the religious impulse equally distributed across the globe. It is worth noting, in regard to this second innovation, that it was widely criticized for being unintelligible to the masses.

THEMES

Revolution. Revolution, the overturning of an established state, is the inevitable theme. The Bolsheviks, a revolutionary socialist party founded in Russia in the late 19th century, had been set on establishing a worker's party as the driving power of the government of Russia. The October Revolution of 1917, with which this film is concerned, is all about the process by which the Bolsheviks overthrew first a Provisional government set up after the first Revolution (1905), and then a last stage Tsarist regime. By 1917 the Soviets were in charge of the government of Russia.

Violence. Violence played a role in the Russian October Revolution: arson was rampant, statues were toppled, buildings were overturned, and casualties (seven to twelve million) give an idea of the vast human destruction, which was heralded in by the vicious overthrow of the Tsarists.

Scorn. The revolutionaries who storm and take the Winter Palace in Petrograd have ample opportunity to eyeball the luxurious living appointments in which the Tsars lived. Eisenstein lingers over an iconic scene: a revolutionary invader, after wandering through the Palace's luxurious appointments, lingers over the gold plated commode off the Tsarina's bedroom: his face is twisted in a rictus of laughter.

Hatred. The people in the streets have long been boiling with anger, against the self-indulgent and totally closed off life style of the Tsars. The dismantling of the statue of Tsar Alexander III (1845-1894) is a powerful symbol of this hatred coming to the surface. TV watchers, in our time, will have been magnetized to a similar dismantling, when the statue of Saddam Hussein was torn down in Bagdad in 2003.

CHARACTERS

Kerensky, the short term President of the Russian Provisional Government, is caricatured, strutting up and down in the government buildings, and making as if he were Napoleon. The film script explicitly likens Kerensky to a 'mechanical' peacock, and so he seems to the spectator, though only 'from outside.'

'**Lenin,**' arguably the single most influential historical figure in the film, is—like many of the historically recognizable figures who demand our attention, acted by a man 'off the street.' A certain cement factory worker, who bore a sharp resemblance to Lenin, was chosen for the part, decked out in a Lenin type suit and hat, scraped bare on top for the trademark bald spot, and proven very suitable, given the demands of the film, which were almost entirely for action, not speech.

Main character. The present film has no main character; is in fact a paean to the cult of the masses, not of individuals. Lenin is the most invoked historical player, but even he is hardly more than a spokesfigure for 'the people.' (The new government, under formulation through the Revolution itself, is all about government by the people, not by individuals.) Shall we say that 'the people' are the main character? Or would it be more precise to say, 'the people as their actions?'

Parallels. Film is a perfect medium for deploying the actions of a political revolution, and one thinks of a few, among the many, large scale revolution-portraying works of the camera, as it deals with revolutionary movements in modern times: *Battleship Potemkin*(1925); *Battle of Algiers*(1966); *Zapata* (1952); *Danton*(1983); *Che*(2008). Worth noting: certain of these great mass films highlight the inspiration of a single leader; others, like *October*, are all about mass movement.

Illustrative moments

White Horse. One iconic moment, frozen in the midst of the storming of the Tsarist redoubts, is the ikon of a white horse, which is held hanging over the water by the drawbridge machinery, and which only later, as the mechanism moves, is released to fall, like a moving statue, into the waters of the river.

Toppling statue The statue of Alexander III is slowly toppled from below, and in its falling seems to take with it a hated (by the crowds) image.

Drawbridge raising. As the revolutionary pressure of the workers grows, across the river from the Winter Palace, The Tsarist forces order the drawbridge to be raised, isolating the protestors. The raising of the drawbridge is one more iconic visual event.

Storming crowds. The crowds advancing up the steep steps toward the Winter Palace cover the ground with thickness, in their furious black garb. Eisenstein continually sees like a painter.

Discussion questions. The poet Mayakovsky complains of the present film, that it has no thought argument in it—just motion, sound, and fury. The English novelist Graham Greene found the film ‘restless, exciting, and crackling,’ but went no further in praise. What do you think of the film as entertainment? What do you think of the montage effect? Does it strengthen the visual power of the film?