Special theme section: Eisenstein, Bogdanov, and the organization of culture

Eisenstein's 'Cinema of the Masses'

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Introduction by Oksana Bulgakowa and John Biggart

In 1925, Sergei Eisenstein delivered to the Russian journalist and poet, Aleksandr Belenson, a text containing a theoretical exposition of his ideas on expressive movement, the Proletkult, the reflexology of Pavlov and Bekhterev, on film and on montage. However, in his book, *Kino segodnya* (*Film Today*), published in the same year, Belenson presented a slightly edited version of Eisenstein's text, under his own name, which purported to be the record of a conversation he had had with the director.¹ Eisenstein wrote an open letter to the newspaper *Kino* protesting against this abuse.²

After the première of *Battleship Potëmkin* in December 1925, Eisenstein's attitude towards journalists changed and in the course of several months he gave around 25 interviews for the Soviet and foreign press. In 1927, around the time of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, more and more foreign visitors to Moscow came to see him. These included Stefan Zweig, Sinclair Lewis, Theodor Dreiser, John Dos Passos, James Abbe (photographer of the stars), Le Corbusier, Diego Rivera, and the Harvard Professor, Henry Dana. Eisenstein also gave a long interview to Joseph Freeman, an American correspondent for the left-wing paper, *New Masses*, who was working on his book *Voices of October*. Freeman incorporated this interview into his chapter on film.³

According to Marie Seton, Eisenstein in 1927 also "collaborated with Louis Fischer, then the Moscow correspondent of America's leading liberal weekly, *The Nation*, on the first comprehensive article explaining his current attitude towards cinematography."⁴ Conceivably, Eisenstein's experience with Belenson explains the fact that "Mass Movies", when it was published in *The Nation* on 9 November 1927 was presented not as an interview but as an article by Eisenstein himself: there was no mention of Fischer, either as interviewer or translator.⁵

1 A. E. Belenson, *Kino segodnya. Ocherki Sovetskogo kino-iskusstva [Kuleshov-Vertov-Eizenshtein]*. Moscow: Author's Edition, 1925. Aleksandr Belenson (Beilenson, 1890–1949), was also the editor of the Futurist review, *Strelets*. After the revolution of 1917 he wrote lyrics for popular and patriotic songs.

2 Eisenstein, "Po lichnomu voprosu", in: *Iz tvorcheskogo naslediya S.M. Eizenshteyna. Materialy i soobshcheniya*, eds. Leonid Kozlov, Naum Kleyman, Moscow: VNIILK 1986, 30–36.

3 Joseph Freeman, Joshua Kunitz, Louis Lozowick. *Voices of October. Art and Literature in Soviet Russia*, New York: Vanguard Press, 1930.

4 Marie Seton. *Sergei M. Eisenstein. A Biography*. London: The Bodley Head 1952, 119. In fact, Eisenstein had already published "The montage of attractions" in *LEF* (1923), No.3.

5 Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein, "Mass Movies", *The Nation*, Vol. CXXV, No. 3253, 9 November 1927. This was a special issue devoted to "Soviet Russia 1917–1927".

"Mass Movies" is a comprehensive and popular explanation of what Eisenstein understood to be his original contribution to the art of film and is free of complicated references to psychology, physiology, and Marxism. Possibly it was Eisenstein's response to the German critic, Oskar A. H. Schmitz, who had denied that *The Battleship Potëmkin* had any artistic merit, given that the individual was, in this 'mass movie', completely absent. Schmitz's review had been published in *Literarische Welt* of 11 March 1927 and had provoked a reply by Walter Benjamin who offered a very surprising and very accurate comparison of the film with, not the *Bildungsroman*, but American slapstick. Like *Potëmkin*, that genre of grotesque cinema had invented a new formula that represented progress in art and had moved in step with the technological revolution.⁶

Later that year, in its issue No.49 dated 6 December, the German journal *Die Weltbühne: Wochenschrift für Politik, Kunst, Wirtschaft*, published, as one of a number of items devoted to Soviet Russia, an article by Eisenstein under the title "Massenkino" that purported to be an 'authorized translation' by the Austrian literary journalist and poet, Otto Basil.⁷ This was, clearly, much the same material that had been published in *The Nation*. However, it was not stated in *Die Weltbühne* whether Basil's translation was of the text that had been published in *The Nation*, or of a Russian text that he or the editors of *Die Weltbühne* had obtained, directly or indirectly, from Eisenstein.

No original Russian texts of the articles that appeared in *The Nation* and *Die Weltbühne* are extant. Neither Fischer nor Basil was entirely conversant with the terminology of film production and there are passages in both the English and German texts that are obscure. However, given Basil's claim that his translation was 'authorized', the German text was taken as the starting point for this new English translation by Richard Abraham. This new version takes into account what we now know of Eisenstein's cinematic theory, film technique and vocabulary.

Cinema Of The Masses

S. M. Eisenstein 1927

Translation by Richard Abraham

I am a civil engineer and a mathematician by profession. I approach the creation of a film in the same way that I would the design of a poultry farm or the installation of water pipes. My attitude is thoroughly utilitarian, rational and materialist.

When the small collective that I lead undertakes some project we don't get together in an office and design plans. Nor do I set out on my own and wait under an oak tree for poetic inspiration. Our slogan is "Down with intuitive creation!" Instead of dreaming, we take to the road of life. The subject of our latest production *The General Line* is the village; so we are currently burying ourselves in the archives of the Commissariat of Agriculture; we are assessing thousands of peasant complaints. We attend meetings of the rural Soviets and immerse ourselves in village gossip. The film, which will be ready on 1 January, demonstrates the power of the earth over people and will give the town people an affection for, and an understanding of our peasants. We recruit our actors from the flop houses; we pick them up on the streets. The 'heroine' must plough the land and milk a cow.

Our films never deal with an individual or a love triangle. We want to depict the masses not the actor. This is a manifestation of the collective spirit that prevails throughout the country. Nor do we

6 The texts of Schmitz and Benjamin are reprinted in: Fritz Mierau. *Russen in Berlin. Literatur, Malerei, Theater, Film 1918–1933*. Leipzig: Reclam 1990, 515–24.

7 "Massenkino" von S.M. Eisenstein, *Die Weltbühne: Wochenschrift für Politik, Kunst, Wirtschaft*, No.49, 6 December 1927, 858–860. Basil's text was later republished, without comment, in *Filmwissenschaftliche Mitteilungen* (Berlin/GDR), 1967 No. 3. On Otto Basil (1901–1983), see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto_Basil

ever try to arouse sympathy for the lives of the protagonists in the drama. That would be a concession to sentiment. The achievement of the cinema will be much greater and it will make a much stronger impact if it depicts things and bodies and not feelings. We photograph an echo and the 'rat-a-tat' of a machine gun. The effect is physiological. Our psychological method is based, on the one hand, on the work of the distinguished Russian scientist, Pavlov, on the operation of the reflexes; and, on the other, on the teachings of Freud.

Let us take, for example the scene in *Potëmkin*, in which the Cossacks slowly, deliberately, descend the Odessa harbour steps, firing into the masses. Through a deliberate composition of the elements of limbs, steps, blood, people, we create an impression, but of what kind? The spectator is not immediately transported to the Odessa wharves of 1905; but as the soldiers' boots march relentlessly down the steps the spectator recoils involuntarily, so as to escape from the field of fire. And when the pram of the panic-stricken mother goes tumbling down the steps, the spectator grips his cinema seat convulsively, so as to avoid falling into the sea.

Our method of montage⁸ is an additional tool for achieving such effects. In some countries where the film industry is highly developed, montage is rarely, if ever, practiced. For example, a sledge will be shown hurtling down a snow-covered toboggan slope, until it reaches the bottom. But we photograph the bumping of the sledge, and the spectator feels and even hears this, in the same way that the throbbing of the engines of the Battleship *Potëmkin*⁹ as it steamed into battle had been felt and heard. This means that the movement of things and of machines is not a secondary or insignificant aspect of our films, but a process of fundamental importance. Technical detail, the alternation of object and close-up, side-view, superimposition, constitutes the most important part of our work. Such methods cannot be employed in the theatre. I arrived at the theatre by way of the Proletkult, but soon went over to film. I believe that the theatre is a dying industry. It is (for me) a field for the insignificant artisan. Film is a heavy, highly-organized industry.

We always give great thought to both the visual impact and the conceptual impact. We never begin a film without a clear idea of our purpose. *Potëmkin* was an episode from the heroic struggle of the revolution, filmed with the intention of electrifying the masses. *The General Line* aims to strengthen the link between town and countryside, one of the political objectives of Bolshevism. *October*, a film that will soon be seen everywhere, portrays the ten days in autumn 1917 that shook the world. It depicts an episode in world history, made by the man in the street, by the worker in the factory, by the lice-infected soldiers from the trenches. It identifies the masses with world history.

Of course, certain conditions make our work a bit easier. In *October*, we worked night after night with four or five thousand Leningrad workers who had volunteered to take part in the storming of the Winter Palace. The government provided weapons and uniforms, as did the army. To supplement the workers and the soldiers we needed a crowd. The word soon got around and a couple of hours later the militia had their hands full controlling a throng of ten thousand.

For *Potëmkin*, the Black Sea Fleet was placed at our disposal. On 7 November 1917, the *Avrora*, flagship of the Baltic Fleet,¹⁰ went over to the Communists and steamed up-river on the Neva to bombard the Winter Palace. The state lent us the ship for the filming of this scene in *October*.

Just as we take our materials from life, so we take our scenery from real life. We never construct streets, towns or villages. Those that already exist are more authentic. Permission to film is readily

8 The term used by Eisenstein was *sborka*.

9 In the German text – '*Panzerkreuzer*'. Eisenstein's *Bronenosets Potëmkin* was distributed in Germany under the title *Panzerkreuzer Potëmkin* and for the English-speaking world as *The Battleship Potëmkin*. The original ship, the *Knyaz' Potëmkin Tavricheskiy*, was a battleship of the pre-dreadnought class.

10 The cruiser *Avrora* had formed part of a 'second squadron' that operated in the Baltic Sea during the First World War, but it does not appear to have been a flagship, in the sense of having served as the headquarters of the squadron commander. At the end of 1916 the *Avrora* was in dock in St. Petersburg for repairs. Its crew played an active part in the revolutions of February and October in 1917. See <http://www.aurora.org.ru/eng/index.php?theme=info>.

granted. No private property-owner can protest against the use of his land or demand payment for its use. Naturally, these things considerably reduce production costs.

Potëmkin was a staging post. *The General Line* and *October* are a step forward. They are closer to life. We are constantly learning. We know that our method is the only correct one and that its potential is limitless.

[The version of Eisenstein's article that was published in *The Nation* concluded with the following paragraph, which does not appear in the German version.]

"Our method and America's highly developed movie technique ought to be a powerful combination. For this reason we are interested in an invitation to work in the United States during the next year. If our activities here permit, and we are granted freedom of action in the United States, we may soon be there."¹¹

11 In the intervening years Eisenstein travelled widely in Europe but it was May 1930 before he arrived in the United States.

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