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# Serge Eisenstein

BORIS INGSTER

BORIS INGSTER, a screenwriter and motion picture director, worked with Eisenstein in Russia and later came with him to Hollywood, where Mr. Ingster chose to remain. This article is prepared from a lecture Mr. Ingster gave at the University of California at Los Angeles in connection with the showing of Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*.

I MET Eisenstein for the first time, I believe, in 1922. I was studying to be an actor at that time and at my school I heard exciting tales about a young director who was doing some very interesting things at the "Proletcult" Theater.

Through some of my fellow students who were acting in the mob scenes, I managed to sneak in to the dress rehearsal of Eisenstein's latest production. I knew the play. It was an old comedy by the father of the Russian realistic school, Ostrovsky. The action, I remembered, took place at the home of a well-to-do Moscow merchant around 1860. Imagine my amazement when the curtain rose and disclosed a stage which was dressed as a Picasso-like version of a circus ring. The actors were doing somersaults all over the place; there was a trapeze hanging from the ceiling, and the leading lady was swinging back and forth on it; the leading man was walking a tight rope, balancing himself with a long pole, and, at the same time, speaking the famous lines of the big love scene. Incidentally, the part of the hero was played by G. Alexandroff, who later became Eisenstein's closest collaborator and is now one of Russia's leading directors.

I was amazed by what I saw, but by no means shocked. No Russian of my generation could be shocked by anything in the Moscow of 1922. The show was noisy, gay, and colorful, but, for the love of me, I couldn't discover any connection between it and the old play I knew so well.

After the performance, I boldly approached the young genius. If he had seen the trappings of a circus as the most suitable setting for the play, which he declared he had, why had he selected a

Western European circus—for example, the clown in loud checkered pants, which was the type known as the classical English clown. “After all, this is a Russian play,” I said. “Why don’t you go to the Russian jesters—to the old circus fairs we have in this country?” In answer, Eisenstein plunged into a long discussion of things which were brand new to me. He told me about *The Beggar’s Opera*, and about the tradition of the clowns, and in what way the Russian theater owed its comedy to Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and so on. And this was quite symbolic of Eisenstein. He was, in his cultural origins, a Westerner; a man who grew out of the Western European culture rather than in the national Russian school.

Then I asked him the important question: what was he trying to say with the amazing spectacle I had just witnessed? Eisenstein very willingly plunged into a long and eloquent statement of his artistic credo. The theater, he declared, was dying. It had been enslaved for too long by the playwright. It could be reborn only in a revolt against the tyranny of literary content, a revolt of the people who constituted the living theater—the actor, the stage designer, and the director. A written play belongs to literature, and those who are interested only in its content should read it in the privacy of their rooms. The stage belongs to the performers, for whom the play is merely an excuse, or, at most, a stenciled material on which their art is embroidered. And behind them stands the director, who coördinates their separate efforts into the harmonious whole. Only, Eisenstein sighed, he wished he could dispense with actors altogether and use puppets instead—the result would be much more gratifying.

This will perhaps explain the enormous impact the discovery of the motion picture had on Eisenstein. Of course, the possibilities of the motion picture as an art form had been discovered long ago in the West. But in Russia all through the years of war and revolution, we were completely cut off from any contact with the West. And when we first saw D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*,

the effect was simply overwhelming. Eisenstein immediately decided that the stage was a puny little dark closet in comparison to the unlimited scope offered by the motion picture camera.

He joined a group of early Russian movie makers consisting of Lev Kuleshov and Dziga Vertov, both former newsreel cameramen. During the day he set about eagerly learning the mechanics of motion picture photography, and the nights were spent behind the screen of the Dimitrovka Theater, which was the only house in Moscow showing American films. We joined him behind the screen, because none of us could afford to pay our way into the theater night after night, and fortunately the friendly manager permitted the young film enthusiasts to watch the show from the vantage point of Eisenstein—a vantage point that gave one a rather distorted view of the proceedings.

The Soviet government was equally impressed by the great potentialities of the film as an instrument of propaganda, and encouraged the growth of native movies. Eisenstein soon was teaching his own brand of cinema and heading his own production group. For a textbook he used a worn-out print of *Tol'able David*, which was so torn and scratched that it no longer could be shown in the theaters. The number of frames in each shot was eagerly counted; the sequence of shots analyzed; and great significance read into the film of which, I am sure, Henry King, who made it, was entirely unaware. A whole philosophy of cutting or montage was evolved, going considerably beyond the original discovery by the great D. W. Griffith that, in the motion picture, action can play simultaneously in several places; the simplest example is the classic chase in which the heroine is pursued by the villain, and the hero is racing to the rescue.

Eisenstein went farther. He demonstrated that you can join scenes separated not only in place but also in time and content, and by so doing, you can create a new content derived from the effect of one image upon the other. For example, if you cut from a close-up of a young girl to a snow-covered landscape, you suggest

the idea of innocence, whereas if you substitute the face of an old woman for the young girl's, and then cut to the same landscape, you suggest the idea of great age.

In other words, Eisenstein discovered that the motion picture has a language of its own, and the ultimate effect it has on the audience depends entirely upon the sequence in which the image-ideas are assembled. This method of cutting later became known as "Russian montage." Curiously enough, in Moscow it was first called the "American cut."

Film fascinated Eisenstein. Not only because of its unlimited scope, but because it was liberating him from his pet hates—the author and the actor. In his very first film, *The Strike*, he determined that he wouldn't use a conventional story or any professional actors. All he needed was a general theme, and he maintained that he could find among the people on the street all the characteristics, all the expressions, that he would possibly require. He evolved a theory of the "frozen emotion." He maintained that life froze into people's face some dominant characteristic or emotion, and that no actor could possibly reproduce that which took years to crystalize.

Although *The Strike* remained a rather halting first step, it already had in embryo all the virtues and all the weaknesses of Eisenstein's art. It contained some magnificently expressive close-ups, and the camera work was distinguished by the careful composition of individuals shots—anyone who saw the picture will remember the final shot of the mounted Cossacks who had ridden their horses right up the stairs in the tenement and out onto balconies and fire escapes at all levels of the five-story building. And yet the film lacked movement. As in all Eisenstein's efforts, the picture moved only in the sense of a succession of shots, with almost no movement within the individual scenes themselves. However, with all its faults, *The Strike* was a distinct achievement and profoundly influenced other Russian movie makers.

Then came *Potemkin*. It is rather curious that this great film

was an almost incidental afterthought. Eisenstein was commissioned to produce a film commemorating the first abortive Russian revolution of 1905. Long sequences were shot in St. Petersburg and in Moscow. There were tremendous mob scenes, a great deal of footage devoted to reconstruction of the most important highlights of those turbulent days. But somehow, in assemblage, the material didn't jell. It was partly due to the inferior film raw stock used, and partly to the photographic conditions in northern Russia. Eisenstein was in the depths of gloom. No matter what magic he tried with his scissors, the film refused to come to life. And the summer was at its end; outdoor shooting was no longer possible. Since nothing could be achieved inside the primitive studios then available, the situation looked hopeless.

Then Edward Tisse, the cameraman later identified with all of Eisenstein's work, returned from Odessa with tales of sunshine at the Black Sea coast and the unbelievable beauty of some of the features of the city. He told Eisenstein about the great marble stairs leading to the port, the magnificent, curving sea wall. This was good news indeed, for there was one episode of the 1905 revolution that had occurred in Odessa—the mutiny aboard the cruiser *Potemkin*. In spite of the fact that inquiries made at the navy were rather discouraging, because most of the Russian Black Sea fleet had been sunk by the sailors in 1918 to prevent its capture by the Germans, Eisenstein was certain that he could find some relic of a battlewagon, and he went to Odessa.

Another lucky break came his way. He managed to finagle from the government permission to buy a little film stock abroad. Then he went to work. Again there were no actors employed, with the exception of Eisenstein himself playing the priest from behind a huge black "muff," and of G. Alexandroff playing a martinet of a lieutenant. The film was completed in twenty-three days and Eisenstein returned to Moscow with a triumphant gleam in his eye. He knew that he finally had something that would be a pleasure to cut.

The success of *Potemkin*—originally intended as a mere sequence to round out the film called *1905*—was instantaneous, overwhelming, and universal. If anything, it won even greater critical acclaim abroad than in Russia itself. Overnight Eisenstein became an international celebrity, which caused some measure of annoyance among his confrères in Moscow. This led to some amusing incidents. N. Pudovkin, who is well remembered for his *St. Petersburg*, *The Mother*, and *Storm over Asia*, found somewhere a huge, shaggy hound, and called him Eisenstein. When people gathered at his house to argue motion pictures, he would turn to the dog and ask it for its opinion. The shaggy creature would give a couple of barks and withdraw to its corner.

Not to be outdone, we presented Eisenstein with a little dog, part Dachshund and part Pomeranian, and taught it to answer to the name of Pudovkin and sit up at Eisenstein's command. When the dog was sufficiently trained, Pudovkin was invited for dinner and shown how he was to behave in front of the master.

*Ten Days That Shook the World* followed *Potemkin*. This film was to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Communist Revolution of 1917. One rather amusing incident stands out in memory in connection with this film. A certain scene called for the raising of one of the principal bridges across the Neva. A horse-drawn cab was supposed to drive across the bridge and be caught in the crossfire between the Whites and the Reds. The horse was to be killed and when the bridge was raised, the horse was to hang limply over the edge.

Now it so happened that this bridge is the main traffic artery connecting the industrial and residential sections of Leningrad. The authorities asked Eisenstein how long the scene would last. Eisenstein truthfully answered that it would be less than a minute. But he forgot to mention that sometimes it took several hours to get the shortest little scene on film, which is exactly what happened. As a consequence the life of the great city was almost paralyzed. Whereupon the local authorities had Eisenstein and the

entire crew thrown into jail, charged with counterrevolutionary sabotage. And it took the most authoritative intervention from Moscow to rescue the overenthusiastic movie makers. Whatever the cost, this particular shot became one of the most memorable scenes ever recorded on motion picture film.

There were some other great moments, but on the whole *Ten Days* lacked the unity and the dramatic impact of *Potemkin*. It met with a great deal of official acclaim, but was much less successful with the audiences. Several friends pointed out to Eisenstein that he was making a mistake in avoiding a tighter story structure and disdaining to use professional actors. Eisenstein refused to concede. Instead he did a great deal of writing in defense of his position.

His next film was *The General Line*, released here as *The Old and the New*. This was a film about farm collectivization, which was then sweeping the country. Again the film was a critical and official success, but there was no mistaking that the audiences were not interested. This time Eisenstein was a little disturbed and began to reëxamine some of his pet theories. Just then the news reached Moscow that movies had begun to talk, and Eisenstein decided to go abroad and see what it was all about.

Nothing came of his sojourn in Hollywood, and we have only incomplete fragments of a film he began in Mexico. However, the influence of his short stay in Mexico on its movie makers was profound and lasting and, until this day, one can discern in the work of such men as Figueroa some unmistakably Eisensteinian frames.

Upon his return to Moscow, Eisenstein found that the political climate in the studios had changed considerably, and that he was no longer recognized as the supreme master of the Soviet cinema. He was accused of "formalism," of "esthetic self-indulgence," and decried as a bourgeois individualist.

The next few years he spent in obscurity and semi-exile in central Asia, teaching cutting in a local movie school. He was brought back by another political shift. The times now called for reasser-



tion of national spirit, and he was commissioned to produce *Alexander Nevsky*.

This film was the first talkie made by Eisenstein. It represented a kind of compromise between his old style and the demands of the day. His concept was gigantic, almost Wagnerian in scope, and for the first time he used a great actor in the central role. But despite the advent of sound, Eisenstein had approached *Alexander Nevsky* as he would a silent picture; he saw it as a story to be told in images, appealing primarily to the eye. In consequence, the film rose to its full heights only in the purely silent moments like the opening scene or the charge of the German knights across the frozen lake. The individual playing scenes were pathetically wooden, and I could almost hear Eisenstein sighing again for puppets.

*Alexander Nevsky* was in general disappointing, despite the distinguished score written for it by Serge Prokofieff. However, despite all its shortcomings, the film brought Eisenstein again to the forefront among Russian movie makers, and he was once more *persona grata* with the government.

His next picture was *Ivan the Terrible*. It was again magnificent in its pictorial concepts and hopelessly static in dramatic content. This film is particularly interesting because in it Eisenstein, whose compositions had always gone straight back to the great masters of the Italian Renaissance, turned for the first time to Russo-Byzantine sources. Every frame of *Ivan the Terrible* seeks its inspiration in ancient Russian religious art, in the ikons of the ninth century or the Byzantine mosaics of St. Sophia cathedral in Kiev.

This motion picture, while generally approved by the press in Moscow, led to renewed suspicion that Eisenstein was again up to his old tricks of "art for art's sake," "formalism," "disregard of popular appeal," and so on. He was permitted, however, to proceed with the filming of the second part of *Ivan the Terrible*. By then, the first part had been reëvaluated and found wanting, from

the official point of view. The second part of the film was never released, and, from some things I know, I believe that it broke Eisenstein's heart. Actually, there was no official disgrace, but he was not given anything else to do. Soon thereafter, he died.

Eisenstein was probably one of the very few pure artists that ever lived. And yet he lived in an age in which he was forced to deny it, in order to be permitted to function. Everything that is being done in Russia is based on science. Everything has to have a scientific explanation. If an artist cannot prove, dialectically, that to use red, not orange, in this spot is what is proper, he is not a good artist. So statements of Eisenstein's such as "making motion pictures is like plumbing" are not really as dogmatic as they sound. It was necessary for the man to appear to be dogmatic in order to beat down a constant attack for the mortal sin of what is known in Russia as "formalism," of being an artist and not a propagandist, of being an artist and not a teacher. He had to justify scientifically everything that he had done—done because his instinct, his feelings, and his understanding as an artist had so dictated to him.

If I were asked which were the great influences in Eisenstein's life as an artist, I would say the French painter Daumier, the drawings of Leonardo, which he always used as an illustration of the "frozen emotion," and Dickens, whom he considered the greatest scenario writer who ever lived. And actually, the greatest dream of Eisenstein's life was that someone would give him enough money, enough time to make a great picture out of a great Dickens novel.