

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Eisenstein's *October*

by Murray Sperber

from *Jump Cut*, no. 14, 1977, pp. 15-22

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1977, 2004

INTRODUCTION

Sergei Eisenstein, in the first decade of the Soviet Union and his own first decade in the cinema, was deeply committed to Marxism. This fact, so obvious in Eisenstein's films of the 1920s, is denied or distorted by most critics of his work.

Politicos often attack or apologize for him in "vulgar Marxist" or "vulgar Free World" terms: e.g., the Stalinist and American Legion charges against him during his lifetime (OCTOBER was considered particularly "deviationist" and "subversive"), and the Soviet Union's veneration of him in safe death. The majority of writers, including many of the luminaries of film criticism, evaluate Eisenstein mainly for his technical achievements and failures, and his place in film history. That he happened to make movies about political revolution appears in their eyes inconsequential compared to his innovations in film direction and editing.

This aesthete position gained momentum in the West during the Cold War when the safest way to discuss film—or any art—was in formalist terms. And when film came to the academy, film teachers and historians, codifying and clubifying their language and discipline also felt most comfortable discussing the director out of political context and in terms of a mystified film history: e.g., partially influenced by Griffith but little impact upon Hitchcock, etc..

The study of actual history is difficult and the more distant and foreign the period—e.g., the Soviet 1920s—the greater the problems. Also, an idealist approach to film (film as an art object) is generally easier than a materialist one (what actually occurred and why). Thus aesthetic criticism of Eisenstein continues. But denying an artist's political content is a highly political albeit conservative act. If Eisenstein's films are art objects, then we can ignore his political—i.e. Marxist—messages. Although in the last half century a number of critics, mainly French,

have inquired into the connections between politics and art in his work, their impact upon film criticism, especially British and U.S., has been negligible. (For the best of the French writing, see the special double issue of *Cahiers du Cinema*, Jan.-Feb., 1971.) The purpose of this essay, therefore, is not to add to the existing criticism on Eisenstein but to shift the discussion, to consider him in terms of his Marxism. Here I will try to understand his use of dialectical materialism and to evaluate whether and how he translated it into cinema. Only in this way do Eisenstein's triumphs, as well as his failures, become intelligible.

THE CRITICISM OF *OCTOBER*

Part of the problem for Western critics and viewers is that the subject of Eisenstein's *OCTOBER*—the 1917 Russian Revolution—is unfamiliar. Furthermore, the print of the film they see is butchered and far from the director's intention. In foreign distribution, especially in the United States, the film was cut and even censored in various ways. The usual Western version is both distorted and at least 1,200 meters shorter than the original Moscow print. Even the usual title, *TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD*, is incorrect: Eisenstein always called his work *OCTOBER*. The German distributor renamed it *TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD* after John Reed's famous eyewitness account of the Revolution, which was one of Eisenstein's many sources.

In discussing the film, it is important to use the best print available in the West. This is the French S.N.A. version, the closest to the original Moscow print. And to help the reader understand the action better, to retrieve the past, in a sense, it is useful to provide ongoing identifications of the historical persons and events. Although cumbersome at times, this positivist approach supplies the facts of the film, facts upon which any understanding and comment should be—but have not been—based.

OCTOBER has always been a problem film, for Eisenstein, his viewers, and especially critics. From its premiere, the film has served more as a Rorschach for critics' projections than as a work seen and understood in its own terms. Mordaunt Hall, the reviewer for the *New York Times*, found it

“clever, but a bore. It is kaleidoscopic... His masters, the Soviet, get their due.”

Then, in complete disregard of the images of the screen, he states:

“Mr. Eisenstein revels in showing the pillaging of Bolshevik troops as they found their hobnailed boots for the first time on the waxed floors of a palace” (Nov. 3, 1928, p. 24).

Even critics predisposed in favor of the Soviet Union and its cinema

complain of the film's "rococo discursiveness and its lack of organized dramatic development" (Alexander Bakshy, *The Nation*, Dec. 28, 1928, p. 721). Another maintains,

"OCTOBER has no central slant. It is built up out of a collection of what might be called imaginary news reels. It darts about Russia, rushes through time, skips whole pages of history to fasten its frenzied eye in turn on ... etc" (Robert Littell, *The New Republic*, Nov. 21, 1928, p. 17).

The standard critical line on OCTOBER was soon established:

"The film as a whole is difficult and incoherent" (William Hunter, *Scrutiny of Cinema*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1932, p. 31).

Critics, especially in the United States, did have the problem of seeing butchered versions of the film. Nevertheless, one suspects that even if they *had* viewed the original Moscow print, they probably would not have understood the film any better.

The problem for most critics is that they have been unwilling or unable to see the film in dialectical terms. Eisenstein described OCTOBER as "the first embryonic step towards a totally new form of film expression." He called this form the "intellectual film," and he based its methodology on his interpretation of Marxism (*Film Form*, New York, 1949, p. 63).

To analyze Eisenstein's OCTOBER, we must first understand his theoretical premises and then examine whether he was able to render them cinematically. If we apply Western film values and sit passively in the dark, regarding OCTOBER as simply another sequence of moving celluloid, we watch the movie through a distorted lens. If we gain entrance to the world of OCTOBER, its political and cinematic meanings, we begin to see Eisenstein's work, walk around its filmscape, participate in it, and achieve a new and richer understanding.

EISENSTEIN'S FILM THEORY AND HIS PLANS FOR *OCTOBER*

Eisenstein not only made movies but he wrote about the cinema in a detailed and original manner. In one of his most important essays, "A Dialectical Approach to Film Form," written one year after completing OCTOBER, he tried to explain his sense of dialectical materialism and its application to film (his main example was OCTOBER). Eisenstein began by stating:

"The foundation of this philosophy is a dynamic concept of things:
Being—as a constant evolution from the interaction of two

contradictory opposites.

Synthesis—arising from the opposition between thesis and antithesis.” (*Film Form*, 45).

Eisenstein believed that “*art is always conflict* (his italics) and that montage captures conflict on the screen. By montage, he does not mean only the editing and arranging of film, but a much deeper dynamic:

“By collision. By the conflict of two pieces of film in opposition to each other from the collision of two given factors *arises* a concept” (Ibid., 37).

He rejects the linear editing and narratives of his colleagues, Pudovkin (“linkage”) and Kuleshov (“brick-by-brick composition”), because their

“approach overrules dialectical development, and dooms one to mere evolutionary ‘perfecting,’ in so far as it gives no bite into the dialectical substance of events” (Ibid., 37).

Dialectical montage cannot be confined to editing single shots. It must connect to the “organicness” of the whole work. In his later essay, “The Structure of the Film,” he argues that

“organicness can be defined by the fact that the work as a whole is governed by a certain law of structure and that all its parts are subordinated to this canon” (Ibid., 161).

In the essay, he shows how in *POTEMKIN* he worked dialectically, seeking the dynamic quality within the whole work, then carefully connecting sections to sequences and sequences to individual shots.

In the same way, his conception for *OCTOBER* was dialectical. He constructed his shooting script in five act form (he had done the same in *POTEMKIN*. He began each act with a thesis, set up its antithesis, and at the end of the act, resolved the conflict with a synthesis which became, at the opening of the next act, the new thesis. Dialectical conflict characterizes each part of the act and frequently each sequence and even each shot. (See S.M. Eisenstein, *Octobre: découpage intégral*, Editions de l'Avant-Scène, Paris, 1971.)

The script, like the film, opens with the symbols of the old order, the supposedly timeless power of Tsarist Russia. Immediately, the oppressed Russian masses challenge the Tsarist thesis. The first six shots of the script are of gold and jewels, the Tsar's crown, scepter and imperial globe. The next seven shots are of starving crowds of women, machine-like workers, and bent peasants. And the next two shots read: “And the crown begins to tarnish and fade. Then the blinding brilliance disappears” (*Octobre*, p. 12). Within this opening sequence of the script (which Eisenstein did not film), we can see a thesis-antithesis and the

suggestion of its synthesis.

The next sequence, a more powerful opening, is the famous scene of the Tsar's statue: shots of the statue, appearing omnipotent and permanent; shots of the angry masses of people who surround and rope the statue; then the stone Tsar begins to wobble and tilt; back and forth between the statue and the people the struggle goes on, until, with shot 31, the Tsar falls and breaks into pieces, into the synthesis, "FOR ALL, FOR ALL."

Immediately, a new thesis is established: "LONG LIVE THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT." Once again, the people must struggle with it until, at the end of Act I, it is resolved into the Menshevik synthesis: "LONG LIVE THE SOCIALIST REVOLUTION."

Act II opens with this synthesis immediately turned into Lenin's thesis: "SOCIALIST AND NOT BOURGEOIS/DOWN WITH THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT."

The second act, probably the most exciting and dynamic in the script and later in the film, has the Petrograd workers in mortal struggle with their enemies. Back and forth the fight continues. And out of this collision comes powerful drama—until in the final scene of the act, the Bolshevik agitators convince Kornilov's "Wild Division" to come over to their side.

The third act opens with the title: "THE COUNTER-REVOLUTION WAS PUT DOWN BUT THE PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION DID NOT GIVE UP THEIR ARMS." Then we read Lenin's famous dictum: "IT IS NECESSARY TO SEIZE POWER." (In the shooting script, Eisenstein uses these quotations and titles much more extensively than he does in the film. In fact, one of his triumphs in OCTOBER is the translation of abstract and verbal political argument into visual terms.)

In the third act, the Bolsheviks contend directly with the Provisional Government and those whom they lump together with Kerensky: the Social Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks. The act ends with the Bolshevik Revolutionary Military Council drawing up plans for the insurrection and tracing them out on a map of Petrograd.

This synthesis, the Bolshevik plan for a *coup d'etat*, becomes the thesis for Act IV: Move the red troops into position. This is also the point where the script loses much of its dynamic quality. Eisenstein presents the Bolsheviks as inexorable:

"shot #249, One after the other, the [red] detachments come into the city; shot #250, One after the other, the orders fly from the small office [the Revolutionary Military Committee's headquarters] along the telephone lines; shot

#251, One after the other, the regiments occupy the strategic positions of the city; shot #252, One after the other, the detachments occupy: shot #253, the railroad stations, shot #254. the electricity stations, shot #256, the water stations ...
“ (*Octobre*, p. 12).

Instead of contending and struggling with the antithesis, the thesis simply overwhelms it.

Acts IV and V become a paean to the Bolshevik seizure of power. What should be the most dramatic moments of OCTOBER become flat and inevitable. Eisenstein violates his own principles of dialectical montage. There is no *collision* merely a walkover. There are ideas for excellent scenes and sequences, but the drama of the seizure of power is not present. Instead, the director plans a pageant.

In the script for Act V, he scheduled only sixteen shots of the storming of the Winter Palace (16 out of a total of 479 indicates their brevity). Eisenstein, however, made movies on location as well as in the conference room. When he came to shoot these scenes, he took fuller advantage of the magnificent Winter Palace. He added whole new sequences, such as the fighting in the crypts and the lumpenproletariat raiding the wine cellars. Thus, he turned the unpromising last act of the script into an acceptable conclusion to the film.

As his script predicts and his film shows, Eisenstein's triumphs in OCTOBER come from his method of dialectical montage, and his failures spring from the same source. Because he prepares his viewer for a dialectical and dramatic struggle—and part of his dialectic is to move the viewer into this struggle—when he undercuts the tension in the final two acts, he loses his audience. He also fails to gain the full impact from his final synthesis, Lenin's statement “THE WORKERS' AND PEASANTS' REVOLUTION HAS SUCCEEDED/LONG LIVE THE WORLD SOCIALIST REVOLUTION.”

The viewer responds: It was too easy—where was the struggle?

ANALYSIS OF OCTOBER

(The following attempts to show how Eisenstein's dialectic works—or fails to work—in the film. Because of limitations of space and readers' patience. I have concentrated on the important scenes and shots.)

ACT I

The Statue of Alexander III—the despotic Tsar's huge image dominates the screen. Thesis: the old order. The scene is at twilight, the end of an era. The symbols of the old order—throne, crowned head, scepter, and imperial globe—dominate the picture. The director shoots from a low

angle to make them appear even larger and more powerful. Behind the statue is the steeple of the Church of Christ the Savior—the tie between church and state.

Crowds of people run up public steps. Eisenstein, always translating political ideas into visual images, announces one of his dominant metaphors: Those ascending steps are moving to power, those descending are losing power (he had used the same metaphor in *STRIKE* and *POTEMKIN*). The people, the antithesis, have come to oppose the Tsar's power.

For his contemporary Soviet audience, Eisenstein has immediately stated a crucial premise. He is creating his own version of revolutionary history. He is shunning strict verisimilitude for an impressionistic view of events. The statue of Alexander III was in Moscow—not St. Petersburg, where the February riots occurred. And the statue was not pulled down until 1921, four years after the revolution. As he says in his essay on dialectical montage, one of his aims was the

“Liberation of the whole action from the definition of time and space. My first attempts at this were in *OCTOBER*” (*Film Form*, 58).

The people surround the statue and a peasant woman climbs onto its base to harangue the crowd. At first the woman seems tiny against the Tsar's image, she barely comes up to his ankle. A rope is thrown up to her, then three workers climb onto the crown and tie ropes about the head and neck. They are a tiny group of people against the massiveness of Tsarist Russia. Eisenstein's political message, and one of his main themes, is that although the people are ready for revolution, they need the leadership of the energetic and audacious few: the Bolsheviks.

Eisenstein cuts first to a crowd of soldiers who raise their rifle butts to the sky, then to a crowd of peasants holding sickles against the sky. All acts in history connect. The army and the peasant masses are ready to join the revolution. The first title announces “February.”

The ropes for the Tsar's statue are in place. Their great number underlines the countless ties between the old order and the new—out of imperial Russia has come its revolutionary proletariat. The dismembering of the statue begins—in the same way, imperial Russia was dismembered by the war. The head shakes, the arms come off and the Romanoffs rock upon their throne. It is decayed and dismembered but still it does not topple (Russia from 1914 to February, 1917). Shots of the army and the peasants, then, finally, with a tremendous heave, the statue falls forward.

“For all, for all, for all” (Eisenstein plays with the title's connotation: this was the way announcements and telegrams began). A close-up shot

shows two men, grossly bourgeois according to the best Eisensteinian “typage,” congratulating each other. The director said,

“In concept from beginning to end, OCTOBER is pure
‘typage’”
(*Film Form*).

A shot of a church incense burner. “FOR ALL.” The temporary synthesis of the February upheaval: the bourgeois take-over.

The opulence of the Church and the absurdity of the Metropolitan of Novgorod is juxtaposed to a poor peasant woman, praying: the people must learn that religion is fake and a tool of the state.

Tsarist Army officers burst into laughter; politicians sing “Huzzah” (through the rhythmic montage we seem to hear them). But the soldiers want peace. Bayonets stuck in the snow, fraternization of Russian and German troops (honest, open faces including the long, thin one of Eisenstein’s cameraman, Edward Tisse, as a German soldier). “BROTHERS.” One particularly intense soldier gives a political speech (probably he is a Bolshevik). The cut from his face to the crowd shows the dialectic between them. Soon all soldiers, Russian and German, applaud.

An allied embassy: a flunkey in full morning coat and tails walks onto an ornate, mosaic floor—its center, a Medusa head—and extends a sheet of paper. The diplomatic document appears to sprout snakes. The war must continue, the Provisional Government is the lackey of the Allies (the Bolsheviks called for immediate peace). Shots of the imperial eagle, church crosses, bayonets in the snow.

An explosion: the friendly soldiers panic and flee to their trenches. Montage of soldiers running—explosions—men falling—debris falling—montage of a huge machine pressing down, the meat grinder of The Great War. All men are brothers and only kill each other when trapped by machines, literal and institutional ones.

Out of the unstable synthesis of the Provisional Government’s war comes greater oppression of the workers and the army, and starvation. A tableau of a breadline at winter twilight. The scene, a change of pace and an effective counterpoint to the frantic battle sequence, conveys the static, endless waiting for bread that is not there (a situation Eisenstein must have remembered from his life in Petrograd in 1917).

“Everything is the same as before. Famine and war. But at the Finland Station, on the 3rd of April.” Night: lights play on the crowd, honest faces of workmen, soldiers and sailors. In the crowd a glimpse of Lenin’s face (played by his look-alike, Nikandrov). He climbs up to a platform by stepping on a wheel. Close-up shot of his foot on the wheel (the

Bolshevik wheel of history is about to roll). Lenin speaks: “Down with the Provisional Government.” Eisenstein shoots up at Lenin to confirm his domination of the scene and the historical moment. Then he shoots down so that Lenin seems to fuse with his audience. Lenin’s synthesis, which becomes the thesis for the next act, is “ALL power to the Soviets. Long Live the Socialist Revolution. Socialist and not Bourgeois.”

As the first act shows, Eisenstein sought a dramatic view of revolutionary history. His controlling idea came from his understanding of Hegel and Marx: history as dialectical conflict. Although generally following the flow of events in early 1917, he moves beyond specific events and searches for dialectical tension and drama. When showing the Army’s desire for peace, he does not distinguish between regiments (a few were still Tsarist in sympathy, most supported the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, and a handful were Bolshevik) or even fronts (some were more antiwar than others). Instead, he tries to focus on the deeper feelings of the muzhik soldiers and the fact that although victims of the military machine, they were not quite ready for revolt. Eisenstein’s premise is that the overview contains the dialectical truths of history.

In Act I, he telescopes five confused days of street fighting in Petrograd in February, 1917, into one sharp sequence—the statue toppling—which he does not specifically locate in Petrograd. He recreates Lenin’s arrival at the Finland Station but sees no reason to mention either the squabbles within the Bolshevik leadership or the ambiguous nature of Lenin’s return (the Germans transported him from Switzerland in a sealed train). For Eisenstein, history is dialectical and its essence, rather than its surface, is crucial.

ACT II

The second act focuses on the July Days: a series of strikes and street fighting incidents led by the Anarchists and the far left-wing Bolsheviks (against the will and strategy of the Bolshevik Central Committee). Why was Eisenstein fascinated by the July Days? Some critics suggest purely technical reasons: he was filming in high summer and these were the main summer events of the revolutionary year. A less superficial reason—and the film reveals it—is that for Eisenstein the July Days provided the greatest drama of 1917. The workers and soldiers struggle against a strong opponent and are temporarily set back. This is the drama of STRIKE and POTESKIN. Here again Eisenstein probably gravitated to a favorite theme.

The July Days sequence opens with crowds of people mounting the steps of public buildings (resonances of the opening of Act I). The seemingly spontaneous uprising demands that, the Provisional Government resign. The people rise up, the bourgeois government must come down. Streetcars pass between a speaker and the camera (the moving engines

of history).

Trotsky addresses a group of sailors. He is wearing a Red Army uniform, gold rimmed glasses and a goatee; the sailors are identified as “Kronstadt Marines—Trotsky’s special followers. “The uprising is premature.” The sailors discuss this among themselves and decide to sheathe their bayonets. The people start down the public steps. But the Provisional Government provokes an incident and fires on the crowd. Montage of machine gun barrels—the dispersing crowd—the firing guns—the fleeing crowd—banners fall. Revolutionary banners are a key motif in this sequence. When raised high, they signify the people moving toward power; when fallen, the bourgeois counter-attacking.

The camera is perched above the intersection of Sadovaia and Nevsky Prospects and there are sharp newsreel-like shots of masses of people fleeing across public spaces. Then comes the famous montage of the machine gunner intercut with his firing gun. In the montage fusion, the soldier becomes his machine, he is reified into a brutal, dehumanized object. The dialectic within this shot connects to the movement within the sequence—the machine gunner versus the fleeing crowd; within the Act—the Provisional Government versus the people; and finally, within the film—oppression versus revolution.

The director relentlessly shoots down into the fleeing crowd to produce the sense of the distant and brutal bourgeois government always aloof from the masses below. The people must obtain guns to bring Kerensky and Co. off their high perch.

A young worker, with a revolutionary banner under his arm, runs along the river quay (this area, near the Nevsky Prospect, was one of the wealthier sections of Petrograd). A fancy parasol fills the screen—through it we see a luxuriously dressed woman and her officer lover in a boat. They spot the worker with the flag. “A Bolshevik.” The officer attacks the worker, the lady calls out to well dressed passers-by and they join in beating the worker. The coquette sits in the boat, twirling her parasol and coyly holding her chin up to watch this spectator sport. It’s the utter decadence of the Russian bourgeoisie, like the Romans watching the mauling of Christians. By piling up his arresting images of the bourgeoisie, Eisenstein moves the viewer to his perception of middle class life. In this act particularly, the Provisional Government and Kerensky seem the occasion for his much wider and deeper attack on everything bourgeois.

Some women attempt to destroy the Bolshevik flag. One tries to tear it with her teeth, another lifts her skirt to try to stomp its pole. The bourgeoisie are so reified, so turned into their objects of wealth, their possessions—visually, the women become their fancy hats—that they live in a world of fetishes and false symbols. Thus, they think that by destroying the flag, they can obliterate the Bolsheviks. But the

bourgeoisie is impotent. The women are unable to destroy the flag; they cannot destroy even the symbol of Bolshevik power, never mind the real thing. (Eisenstein's consistent satire and vengeance upon the bourgeoisie—he is the Daumier of the cinema with his brilliant eye for épater—probably derives from his own middle class origins. A proletarian director would not care enough to sustain such anger.)

A well-dressed old gentleman cheers on the women by clapping effately with one gloved hand. A bourgeois woman's cruel laughter dissolves into a montage of machine guns and wounded bodies. Then Konavalov, the Minister of Trade and Industry—his symbol is a very ornate telephone—orders the Neva drawbridges raised, separating the bourgeois and working class sections. He also confuses these symbols with actual power, and later he will discover what occurs when the telephone wires are cut.

The still understructure of the bridge fills the screen; slowly, inexorably, the machines move. Eisenstein, always fascinated with machinery (and during his earlier constructivist phase, optimistic about it), equates it here with inhuman destruction. At the exact center of the bridge lies the body of a young woman—her long hair is slowly stretched as the bridge opens. She is a symbol of the human tragedy of civil war. Shot by government troops, she is at the exact symbolic center of this divided country. While the Provisional Government raised the bridges in order to preserve class division, the Bolsheviks will lower all bridges.

A white carriage horse hangs from the opening bridge. A symbol of luxury and waste, its plunge into the Neva implies the abuse of nature and the end of a decadent era. The impassive stone head of a Pharaoh fills the screen. The Provisional Government does not care about the loss of human and animal life. ("Pharaoh" was also a popular epithet for the Tsar's police.) As the sides of the bridge stand apart, we realize that the revolutionary synthesis was not possible in July.

But within the Provisional Government's power are the seeds of its own destruction. The bourgeois, on their bank, laugh and clap as the workers flee. An army officer throws a stack of captured Pravda (truth) tracts into the Neva. They bob about and some do not sink.

The streets of Petrograd: those soldiers who have fought with the workers trudge in file, guarded by their captors and jeered at by the bourgeois spectators. Treated like trained animals, they are forced to march in unison with the hoofs of their captors' horses. A cut to the face of an elderly man. In the sentimental tradition this face would signal a kindly old man, but when we see the man mocking the soldiers, Eisenstein breaks through the surface and reveals class venality. This sequence, some of it shot through columns and ruins with the resonances of prisoners being led into Rome, repeats the analogy of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.

A corridor in the Winter Palace. First the back, then the body of a man in a Provisional Government officer's uniform walking down the long corridor of ornate columns: Kerensky. As he moves away from the camera, he becomes smaller and dwarfed by his surroundings. In February, Kerensky loomed large but as the months went by, he shrank to his true insignificance. At the end of the hall is a large stone crucifix: Kerensky is moving closer to the establishment church and the old order. Visually tiny, slowly he begins to mount the huge staircase. He is the usurper coming to power and his slow, unsure pace contrasts with the people's earlier rush up the public stairways (and the Bolsheviks later charge up these same Winter Palace steps).

The sequence of titles is ironic. "Dictator." Kerensky's shiny boots fill the screen, all surface and polish. "Commander-in-Chief." Kerensky has power backwards, he is all symbol and title and no reality. He begins to trot up seemingly endless stairs—the comic sequence continues at length because he will never arrive at real power.

He passes a statue of the goddess Diana. She extends the laurel wreath of victory. Kerensky studies her—again mistaking stone symbols for real victor. "The hope of the homeland and the revolution: A.F. Kerensky" (a pun on Kerensky's surnames, Alexander Fiodorovich, and initials, the initials of the hated Tsarina, Alexandra Fiodorovna). "The lackeys of the Tsar" await Kerensky on the landing. Fat, bemedalled Rodzianko, former Lord Chamberlain to the Tsar, greets him.

Eisenstein shoots, Kerensky from side angles to make him appear even less important. For much of the sequence, a naval attaché's white uniform dominates the picture. Kerensky chats politely with the liveried Palace servants. Rodzianko exclaims, "Ah, what a democrat!" (This is doubly ironic because Rodzianko was working to restore the monarchy and Kerensky, upon assuming the Prime Ministership, insisted upon moving into the Tsar's Winter Palace.) Kerensky moves down the line of servants, threatening to slip through the frame and out of every picture.

Kerensky's polished boots fill the screen. (Boots and feet are a central metaphor and we are to contrast these shiny ones with the battered boots of the captured soldiers, and later, the ragged, urgent feet of the Bolsheviks at their Smolny headquarters). We see either the parts of Kerensky's body—boots, gloves, back, etc.—in close up or his whole body in miniature. We never view Kerensky as a whole, life-sized person.

A padlock on a cell door: Kerensky's synthesis becomes the Provisional Government's thesis of oppression. Two sailors, one the famous Bolshevik, Dybenko, in chains, on mattresses. "Traitors." "Bolsheviks." Shots of the ransacked Khesinskaia Palace—the Bolsheviks had liberated the palace of the Tsar's ballerina mistress for their original headquarters and after the July Days' uprising, government soldiers wrecked it.

Antithesis—a moonlit night in the country, the pastoral quiet of a lake and a hut in the woods: “Underground ... Lenin in his cabin.” A simple campfire with a kettle over it. When the kettle begins to whistle, the Bolsheviks will move.

These sequences, with their sharp dialectical montages and transitions, produce the rhythm of drama and revolution. The chambers of “Alexandra Fiodorovna,” the immense opulence of the palace apartment (all for Kerensky) contrast with the squalid, overcrowded prison cell and Lenin’s spartan hut. Kerensky sits on a throne chair. Unlike Lenin, who always consumes his setting and the screen, Kerensky appears tiny.

Kerensky, at his oversized desk, signs the decree restoring “capital punishment at the front.” This decree allowed officers to shoot mutinous soldiers. It marked the Provisional Government’s irrevocable commitment to the war machine.

Kerensky trudges up more stairs, even slower and less sure of himself although he holds his hand in his coat à la Napoleon. A cut to a statue of Napoleon in the same pose. (Eisenstein did not create this analogy: as soon as Kerensky came on the scene in 1917, the Bolsheviks were calling him a “two bit Bonaparte.”) The statue of Napoleon dissolves into long lines of porcelain grand levé soldiers: Kerensky’s army is a collection of china dolls. Then Kerensky sits contemplating a chess board. He fiddles with a four piece crystal decanter and he fits the pieces together. He slides open a hidden panel in the chess board and pulls out a small jeweled crown. Kerensky, the self proclaimed revolutionary, secretly hopes to restore a monarchy. (It is not clear whether it is the Romanoffs or Kerensky himself. In 1917 wits were saying that Kerensky had come ... “to be crowned” (Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Ann Arbor. 1932, Vol. II, 150.) Kerensky places the crown on top of the crystal decanter, and in one of Eisenstein’s greatest montages, a jet of steam from a factory stack erupts. The workers’ revolution will not accept a monarchy. The montage flashes back and forth and the title proclaims: “The revolution is in danger.”

Then Tsarist “General Kornilov attacks.” The next sequence, cut from most U.S. prints because of its anti-religious symbolism, is best described by Eisenstein himself:

“Kornilov’s march on Petrograd was under the banner of *In the Name of God and Country*. Here we attempted to reveal the religious significance of this episode in a rationalistic way. A number of religious images, from a magnificent Baroque Christ to an Eskimo idol, were cut together. The conflict in this case was between the concept and the symbolization of God. While idea and image appear to accord completely in the first statue shown, the two elements move further from each other with each successive image.

Maintaining the denotation of 'God,' the images increasingly disagree with our concept of God, inevitably leading to individual conclusions about the true nature of all deities. In this case, too, a chain of images attempted to achieve a purely intellectual resolution, resulting from a conflict between a preconception and a *gradual discrediting of it in purposeful steps* (*Film Form*, 62).

The titles read: "In the name of God and of the native land. In the name ... OF GOD." Eisenstein plays upon the fact that Kornilov's troops were the Wild Division from Asiatic Russia, composed mostly of Moslems. He then intercuts a baroque Christ with a huge mask of Uzume, Goddess of Mirth, and a ferocious Chinese dragon, a roly-poly Buddha, the Hindu god-goddess Shiva, an Eskimo carving, and a South Sea island mask.

"IN THE NAME OF THE NATIVE LAND." To illustrate Kornilov's attempt to restore the monarchy, Eisenstein returns to the opening shots of the statue of Tsar Alexander III beneath the Church of Christ the Savior. The statue begins to reassemble, and the dismantled throne pops back onto its pedestal. The Metropolitan of Novgorod blesses the scene.

"General Kornilov." The Russian General sits on a white horse. Cut to the famous statue of Napoleon on a white horse (the one in the Courvoisier Brandy ads). The man on the white horse will save the country. But Napoleon has additional meanings for Russians—a dictator and an invader of their country. Cut to Kerensky, arms crossed, in the Napoleonic pose; cut to the statue of Napoleon: "Two Bonapartes." Eisenstein attempts to animate the Bolshevik 1917 position. Trotsky called this chapter, "Kerensky and Kornilov (Elements of Bonapartism in the Russian Revolution)." Shots of the various Napoleons are intercut with the religious statues, ending with a juxtaposition of Christ and Kornilov.

A huge tank rears up, consuming the screen. Kerensky tinto hundreds of pieces. The sequence constitutes both an historical flashback and a foreshadowing. Within the Bonapartist Invasion resides its own destruction—Napoleonic overreaching. Trains, tanks, and trucks move from all angles across the screen and seem to descend upon a spot in the center—Petrograd and the revolutionary proletariat. "And the government?" Kerensky cowers, then sleeps on his bed. "The government is impotent."

Factory smoke: then a line of Bolsheviks move toward us brandishing red flags. "We will not let the General pass." The revolutionary antithesis: long lines of workers, peasants, women, children, and soldiers. The people move across the screen from right to left—from apathy to revolution. The Bolsheviks free the political prisoners, some of whom we have seen earlier. Historical events are not isolated but

connected and dynamic—the Government oppressors were foolish to think that padlocks could contain a revolution. But the Bolsheviks only free the political prisoners, for, as Eisenstein will underline in the Winter Palace cellars, common criminals are lumpenproletariat and cannot make a revolution.

Onto the screen comes the famous shot of the people dragging a cannon. (One of Tissé's cameramen, Vladimir Nilsen, described in detail how this scene was shot: *The Cinema as Graphic Art*. tr. Stephen Garry, New York, 1959, 32.) The arsenal is opened and arms are distributed to the people: part of Eisenstein's on-going lesson in how to make a revolution. Each worker takes two rifles; although the Russian people were supposedly, tired of fighting, this scene shows that they were ready for the just struggle.

Cut to Smolny Institute, Bolshevik headquarters, the center of the dejse. Kindly old working women giving out stacks of Bolshevik handbills show the crucial importance of the written word in making a revolution. Ironic titles—"Traitors" "Felons"—punctuate the Bolshevik defense of Petrograd.

Equal forces, the political Right and Left, are moving toward mortal struggle. A railroad yard at night. This is the most dramatic scene in OCTOBER. The Reaction: the train carrying Korniby's Wild Division moves across the screen. From the left of the screen come the Bolshevik representatives: one, an honest, middle-aged man in civilian clothes, another, a soldier in Red Guard uniform. We are not certain what they are doing so close to the enemy. Out of this suspense and tension comes a telescoping of the confrontation between the Bolsheviks and the Wild Division troops.

Kornilov's soldiers move from right to left. Their Tartar faces fill the screen. Eisenstein choreographs the movements of the Wild Division from right to left. The Bolsheviks advance in the opposite direction, their profiles left to right.

Quick cut to Smolny: Bolshevik tracts and newspapers are carted out. In the railroad yard, the Bolshevik soldier on the left side of the screen argues with a Tartar leader on the right. Unlike the bourgeois ministers, they argue without theatrics or self-dramatization. For the Bolsheviks, ideas are more important than the individual speakers. The Bolshevik civilian takes out a handbill hidden in his boot: "Bolshevik tracts spoke a language understood by all." (the counterpoint to the scenes in Smolny). Slowly the Bolsheviks convince the Tartars: montage of Asian faces and growing awareness with the titles, "For bread," "For peace," "For land." A soldier wearing a Moslem head shawl nods in agreement. "For brotherhood"—a Kronstadt sailor, moving from left to center, begins to make friends. Swords are sheathed.

The synthesis. Dancing Tartar feet, first the Bolsheviks watch and then join in the rhythmic clapping. A Bolshevik soldier joins the dance. The Tartars, through their national dances, are celebrating the revolution. The rhythmic montage quickens the dance pace. Eisenstein shoots at boot level and soon we cannot tell which boots are Bolshevik or Tartar. He then cuts with such speed that the boots begin to blend together into one continuous pair. Then the dancers, Bolshevik and Tartar, become one. This visual synthesis seals the revolution—the army comes over to the Bolsheviks. The scene ends with a cut of a broken statue of Buddha (the Tartars no longer follow false gods), the title, “General Kornilov is arrested,” and the broken statue of Napoleon.

ACT III

Out of this synthesis immediately comes the thesis for Act III: “Proletarians, learn to use the gun.” This is Lenin’s post-Kornilov thesis that the revolution must take the offensive. (This is also part of Eisenstein’s world propaganda message: In the 1920s, the Bolsheviks believed that worldwide revolution was possible, if not imminent.) Shots of the red guards being trained: young, old, workers and peasants, all have rifles on their shoulders and their worn boots march in step.

At this point in the film. Eisenstein departs radically from his original shooting script. He had planned a series of shots showing Lenin in hiding and the effect of Lenin’s underground tracts, with the sequence building to Lenin’s dictum: “It is necessary to seize power.” Then, with the title, “For the Soviets,” intercut between scenes, Eisenstein planned shots of massive rallies of Kronstadt sailors, tank corps soldiers, and munitions factory workers voting “For the Soviets.” In “80 Provinces ... the flame of insurrection spreads.” Then, key dramatic scenes in Petrograd when the Provisional Government orders the Petrograd garrison “to leave the city immediately.” The Bolsheviks agitate in the garrison and the soldiers mutiny and announce, “The Petrograd garrison does not recognize the Provisional Government ... We will only obey orders from the revolutionary Military Committee of the Petrograd Soviet.”

Almost none of this is in the film (possibly Eisenstein lacked the time to shoot it). The result is a short and truncated Act III which renders the film somewhat lopsided and less dramatic. The key to the revolution was the army coming over to the Soviets. Although Eisenstein had suggested as much with the Wild Division-Bolshevik understanding, his elimination of the scenes of the mutiny of the Petrograd garrison places too great a dramatic emphasis upon the earlier dance sequence. In the film, the climax occurs too soon and undercuts the drama of the final acts. In dialectical terms, the film becomes a struggle between the old, decayed order—and Eisenstein lumps the monarchy and bourgeoisie together here—and the people, led by the Bolsheviks. The synthesis occurs when Kornilov’s Army comes over to the people. The final three

acts, therefore, instead of presenting the ongoing dialectic of history, merely illustrate the synthesis of Act II.

Eisenstein violates his own “Dialectical Approach to Film Form.” As his script indicates, he believed that winning over the army was the key to the revolution and that the revolution was decided before the storming of the Winter Palace (purely a symbolic event). For this reason, he needed to find and depict the dialectic of these events. Instead, he tries to infuse other events, especially the siege of the Winter Palace, with tension and drama. The result is contradiction and confusion.

What we see of Act III is perfunctory and unsatisfactory. The one scene that remains from the original script occurs when a speaker addresses a huge crowd of uniformed red guards. The camera points down at them and suddenly, in unison, they look up and lift their rifles, bayonets fixed, skyward. (This is juxtaposed to the opening scenes of bayonets in snow and unwillingness to fight for the old order.) Next, titles tell us:

“On October 10th, the Bolshevik Central Committee decided upon armed insurrection. The Second Soviet Congress was scheduled for October 25th. At this Congress, the question of seizing power will be discussed. The 24th is too soon (for insurrection).”

Lenin, arguing across a table, consumes the screen, “The 25th (will be the date for insurrection).” Lenin’s colleagues applaud.

The third act ends with the Bolsheviks planning the insurrection. A map of Petrograd fills the screen and a hand with a crayon marks certain key points and circles the Winter Palace and the Admiralty Building. The map is a clever device for conveying in visual, silent language the plan of action. Unfortunately, the effect depends upon the viewer’s familiarity with Petrograd—a Russian audience would follow the crosses and circles as easily as Americans would understand a marked map of Washington, D.C.

With his revised Act III and his emphasis upon the date and plan of insurrection, Eisenstein begins to construct a new dramatic movement—the seizure of power. Unfortunately, the premises for drama are not present and when we see what opposes the Bolsheviks—windbags and cowards and women and children—we smile rather than tense. In the first two acts, we experienced the fight for power: a thesis protagonist, the people, in mortal and equal struggle with their antithesis antagonist, the old order. But with Act III, the tension evaporates. As a result, in the final acts, the director will use every visual trick of humor, showmanship, and sensation in his magician’s storehouse merely to keep his viewers’ interest.

ACT IV

“During the night of the 24th, they prepared ...” the insurrection. The Cruiser *Aurora* rests at anchor in the winter dawn: the fortuitously named ship symbolizes the dawn of a new era. *Aurora* marines land and government soldiers scuttle away without firing a shot. Their haste is almost comic.

The draw bridges close: now the machines are controlled by the revolution and work for, not against, the people. A bridge falls into place and the boots of ordinary citizens run across it toward the city center, toward the symbolic center of power.

In the Ministers' Council Chanter, Konovalov slams down his ornate telephone: his symbol of power no longer works. Cut to a red guard, rifle over shoulder, and the *Aurora* in the background: the objects of real power. The dialectic here is between the red guards, rifles and action, versus Konovalov's frustration with his ornate telephone, speech and inaction. The film cuts back and forth, but each time the red guards advance.

Kerensky, nervous, telephones from the Tsar's office to the Cossack stable. (The Cossacks, traditionally, were the most conservative and dependable of government troops.) In the stable, one lone Cossack on duty, answers. Kerensky announces, “This is the Minister of War.” The Minister of War is speaking very close to the telephone's mouthpiece and cowering alongside his desk. “Where are the Cossacks?” The stable keeper looks over the horses in their stalls—“We are in the midst of saddling the horses.” When he hangs up he makes a contemptuous gesture of thumb to lips. (This title seems based on the famous message of the Cossack assembly to Kerensky's plea for aid: “He was told that the regiments would soon ... ‘begin to saddle their horses.’” (Trotsky, Vol. III, p. 243.) A montage of Kerensky slamming down his phone, the Cossack shrugging his shoulders, Kerensky's jewel-encrusted telephone, and a long line of horses' rear-ends: Kerensky is a horse's ass. In dialectical and dramatic terms, the horse business, although amusing, flattens out the action and renders Kerensky an unworthy opponent, a fool outwitted by a stable keeper.

The red guards take, in an orderly and almost peaceful way, various key points in Petrograd. Cut to the Winter Palace courtyard, a huge, plush, open touring car with the U.S. Embassy's pennant on it stands ready (the U.S. ambassador had loaned Kerensky the car). Cut to the red guards advancing; they encounter no Government resistance. “And at the head of the betrayed armies ...” Kerensky grabs his hat, the chauffeur waits. Kerensky enters the car. Eisenstein first shoots him from overhead—Kerensky appears as a tiny figure standing in a huge open car, making operatic gestures. Then at ground level perspective: Kerensky's upraised arm in a Napoleonic gesture and, then, behind him, a pillar with the Tsarist eagle and a cross on top—the ongoing and relentless connection of Kerensky and the old order.

Part of the grotesquerie of Kerensky's farewell speech is that he delivers it as if addressing a huge crowd. In fact, his audience consists of a handful of sinister-looking officials and frightened flunkies. When the car starts with a jerk, Kerensky falls down into his seat and is whisked off the stage of history. It all happens quickly and comically as in the old stage routine in which the comedian is jerked into the wings.

The car roars off and the Winter Palace gates close behind it. Dominating the upper center of the picture, on top of the gates, is a fierce bronze Romanoff double eagle, wings spread, with vicious heads and beaks. When the gates shut, the imperial bird of prey moves uneasily (like Yeats' falcon in "The Second Coming"—a poem partly prompted by these events). The car speeds through the city. With the camera on the hood and the scenery flying by, Kerensky's flight is accentuated, and the comic fluttering of the stiff little U.S. flag contrasts with the rich waving of the Bolshevik banners in other scenes.

Eisenstein's unyielding portrayal of Kerensky's farewell can be seen in a number of ways. It is a reasonably accurate representation of the event (although historians argue about whether Kerensky was cowardly or clever in leaving the city under a diplomatic flag). It is a propaganda portrait—for Soviet consumption as a reminder of the past, for export as an example of the present, for both to show that bourgeois leaders and governments are cowardly, corrupt, and ineffectual. Or it may be Eisenstein's personal comment on his own bourgeois father's flight from revolutionary Russia. The personal element probably explains the relentlessness of the attack.

The scene moves to the Winter Palace. Student cadets, with well fed, chubby faces, arrive to defend it—they are like sleek piglets. The Women's Battalion of Death marches in. They go up a short flight of stairs; their short climb signals how brief their power over the Winter Palace will be. A Provisional Government official, Stankevich, hails the women as he stands beneath the massive, beautiful head of a statue of Adonis. Weasel-faced Stankevich is no Adonis, his greeting the Women's Battalion of Death is a parody of authentic sexual greeting and love, and the Provisional Government is self-absorbed and narcissistic to ththrik itself beautiful like Adonis. As with all false gods—a reference to the breaking idols sequence—it will soon be shattered.

The women bed down in Nicholas II's private billiard hall. Some, shirts removed, admire themselves and strike Adonis-like poses. One woman is trying to make, out of a magnificent piece of silk and lacework, some stockings (the popular name for these were "Russians"). The camera lingers upon ample bosoms, but it renders them more grotesque than sexually attractive. The Women's Battalion of Death, like the effeminate cadets, have been sexually perverted by Tsarism. This scene is amusing within itself and connects to Eisenstein's portrait of the decadent old order, but rather than intensify the struggle between the Provisional

Government and the Bolsheviks, the grotesquerie diffuses potential conflict.

Cut to Kerensky's car on the outskirts of Petrograd. The camera is on the hood and the aide-de-camp in the front seat consumes most of the picture. The little man in the rear, even more hunched up in his coat than before, occupies almost no space on the screen. This sequence again violates Eisenstein's rule of dialectical montage: "*Art is always conflict.*" Here, the dialectical movement is *away* from conflict. Instead of Kerensky, the embodiment of the Provisional Government, moving toward a final collision with the Bolsheviks and the proletariat, he is fleeing. Immediately after, titles announce, "At the call of the Revolutionary Military Committee, the people were assembling at Smolny." At that point we doubt that a real fight will be necessary. The revolution has been won, and only a few symbolic events, like the storming of the Winter Palace, need to take place.

Cut to the Bolsheviks' victory in the Second Soviet Congress. (It was called by the Provisional Government and scheduled for October 25th—thus Lenin's desire for a successful coup on the eve of its convocation in order to have it legally ratify his new government.) Again the dialectical structure is undercut by the lack of real collision. At the Second Congress, a struggle occurred between the Bolsheviks and their main opponents on the left, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. But Eisenstein so stacks his portrayal in favor of the Bolsheviks that once again (as he himself later admitted) he undercuts his drama (Film Form, 38 and 245).

The final events of OCTOBER become more a pageant than a dialectical struggle. First, we see nighttime activity at the Smolny Institute, the Bolshevik headquarters (this follows John Reed's eyewitness account). Bolshevik delegates rush upstairs to get instructions; red guards rush out to go to the Winter Palace and up those stairs. The activity is fused with Eisenstein's humor: a sign on a door announces "Guardian." Since the Smolny Institute had been a boarding school for wealthy girls, it is implied the Bolsheviks are watching over haut-bourgeois virginity.

Groups of delegates come and go; among one group Trotsky appears. In the entrance corridor stands a huge sword—the Bolsheviks are about to seize power. Outside, trucks filled with red guards and armored cars roar off, as the camera focuses on these moving wheels of history. The massiveness of the red guard buildup, its size and organization, which does not balance with what we have seen of the Provisional Government defenders, convinces the viewer of its inexorability.

At the Second Soviet Congress delegates present their credentials: workers and peasants are Bolsheviks; bourgeois citizens and regular army officers are Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. In one of the corridors outside the meeting hall, a man in an overcoat sits on a bench,

cap pulled low and face wrapped as if suffering from a toothache. Two rat-faced bourgeois look at him carefully. A superimposed image reveals Lenin, whose bald head appears through the cap and bandage. Lenin turns to his companion, either Trotsky or Eino Rakhia, and says, "They have recognized me, the bastards!" Lenin takes out his watch and taps his foot—it's only a matter of time now. His heavy working man's boots, in marked contrast with Kerensky's polished shoes, signal his impatience.

The Winter Palace: all seems quiet. In the Council of Minister's chambers, around an ornate table, sit the ministers of the Provisional Government—later. Antonov-Ovseenko will leap upon this same table when he seizes power on behalf of the Revolutionary Military Coffnittee. A montage with the title, "The Head," an empty chair at the head of the table, the final shots of Kerensky leaving the city. The ministers "direct an appeal to the people." Cut to Lenin beating out his foot signal. This dialectic will soon resolve in a Bolshevik majority at the Congress and in the country.

A hand ringing a bell fills the screen: it is both tolling the demise of the Provisional Government and ringing for the Bolshevik triumph. A rat-faced Menshevik, in Provisional Government officer's uniform—the one who had recognized Lenin—speaks first. Historically, this speaker was the famous Menshevik leader, Dan. Eisenstein sharpens Dan's features in the service of typage (Reed described him as "a mild-faced, baldish figure in a shapeless military surgeon's uniform" (Ten Days That Shook the World, New York, 1960, 132). As Dan speaks, the secretaries sit at their table, but they do not take down the Menshevik's words. Their inattention contrasts with the end of OCTOBER when Lenin speaks, and they fall upon their dictation. Dan claims, "The Provisional Government alone represents the popular power."

Cut to the red guards in the corridors outside; to a single soldier in front of the Ministers' Council chamber; finally, Smolny, huge in the night sky. The title: "The question of power was envisioned otherwise by the Military Revolutionary Committee." Then the office of the committee: Antonov-Ovseenko. Podvoisky, and Chudnovsky discuss their plans. A map of Petrograd fills the screen. The Committee members trace out their plan on the map, cutting through the verbal questions with decisive action. (Eisenstein here suggests the superiority of visual imagination to word games.) As the crayon marks each point in the plan, the film cuts to the action: marines land from the *Aurora*, red guards take their battle stations around the Winter Palace, and red sailors move beneath a huge statue of Neptune on a throne (the Bolsheviks will control the seas). The crayon surrounds the Winter Palace: shots of that dark and ominous building.

Cutting from the map to the action gives the film an organic quality rare in silent movies. All too often silent titles are imposed and annoying.

Here Eisenstein solves the problem with a more integrated technique. Statues, stairs, boots, and other ongoing visual metaphors form part of his silent film language. They are more effective and cinematic than titles or voiceover narration.

Act IV ends with the temporary synthesis of the Bolsheviks in readiness for the new thesis, the final seizure of power. But the Military Revolutionary Committee and the red guards have so weighted the scales for the Bolsheviks that the cross-cutting from the map to the action is less dialectical than complementary—with the result that the viewer cannot take the opposition, the Provisional Government, seriously.

ACT V

The final act opens at the Second Soviet Congress, a Menshevik delegate (historically, Martov) challenges the impending Bolshevik seizure of power. The soldier delegates jeer and one shouts, “Down with the valets of the bourgeoisie.” Then the presidium running the Congress, mainly Mensheviks and Soviet Revolutionaries, is voted down and leaves the dais. A Bolshevik banner unfurls.

Cut to Smolny Institute: frantic activity as delegates, red guards, and messengers come and go, tattered boots moving back and forth. The Bolsheviks do not use the telephone, they send their messages in human hands, they walk in and out of rooms.

Cut to Konovalov, who is still trying to make his telephone work. Meanwhile, outside the Winter Palace, Antonov-Ovseenko, floppy artist’s hat pulled over his forehead, composes a surrender ultimatum. Unlike the ponderous and hollow formality of the Provisional Government Ministers writing their “appeal to the people,” he writes on a crumpled piece of paper. Two young, fresh faced red guards carry the message into the Winter Palace. They enter the huge vaulted corridor where we first saw Kerensky and his aides. Because Eisenstein shoots from floor level up, the Bolshevik emissaries are never dwarfed by these vast surroundings. They belong here, they take the full measure of power. Waving their white parley flag, they approach a barricade. Eisenstein achieves tension in this scene by cutting back and forth between the two sides and raising the question: Are the Provisional Government defenders treacherous or stupid enough to fire on these two isolated red guards?

A Women’s Battalion of Death officer, a particularly large, nasty faced one, emphasized by Eisenstein’s low-angled shot, halts the two red guards. They look at her and one asks. “Little father?” (a polite, friendly Russian greeting). “Little mother?” the other red guard asks. “Countryman” (from the same region). Her hauteur is foolish and inappropriate, for she will soon be brought down from this false height.

The grotesque humor undercuts much of the tension: the two red guards, still vulnerable, sit in the courtyard awaiting a reply, but we no longer believe that anything terrible will happen to them.

The cruiser *Aurora* guns ready. "ALL WAIT." A montage of positions in the city, the two sides are ready: the Council of Ministers' chamber, all asleep except one who stares out the window; a bivouac of red guards, not asleep but waiting attentively; the Ministers' chambers, all sleep now—the *Aurora* ready.

A close-up of Rodin's "Printemps": two nude lovers embracing passionately. A Women's Battalion soldier looks wistfully at the statue. As she studies the embracing lovers, she brings her hand to her forehead as if suddenly realizing what she has missed in life. Eisenstein cuts from her to the statue, from the lovely naked limbs of Rodin's lovers to her masculine boots and leggings.

Almost midnight, the time of attack. Some red guards have slipped into the Winter Palace through the cellars from the Hermitage next door. They run up a flight of stairs, discarding all caution because they are so close to power. One group comes upon a sumptuous banquet being prepared for the cabinet ministers: the bourgeoisie will be decadent to the end.

Provisional Government officers have trouble rallying their troops. The initial fighting in the Winter Palace is less an ebb and flow of battle than a red tide. A Provisional Government minister exhorts some cadets:

"We will not abandon our native land to those German spies, the Bolsheviks" (a standard accusation because Lenin had been transported from Switzerland by the Germans).

The words are hollow, late and mendacious; even the cadets listen in silence, without enthusiasm. In the courtyard, the Cossacks, after hearing a Bolshevik speaker, cover their cannons, put down their rifles, and leave.

Back to the Second Congress: the Mensheviks claim, "The Army is not with the Bolsheviks." The door of the hall bursts open, a soldier announces, "The 12th Army is with the Bolsheviks." Cut to a forest of soldiers raising their rifles—bayonets attached—in agreement; at the Second Congress, delegates stand and cheer. Cut to the Winter Palace—a Minister exhorts the increasingly passive cadets. Back to the Congress where a man announces, "The motorcycle battalion is for the Soviets." There is a montage of motorcycle wheels and entering delegates, Cossack artillery wheels leaving the Winter Palace; a secondary montage between the Soviet Congress working efficiently and the Provisional Government Ministers asleep in the Winter Palace. Gun fire in the distance—a crystal chandelier shakes: the Provisional Government is

now as fragile as glass. At the Winter Palace, everything is ready for attack. At the Congress, a Menshevik speaker proclaims, "The Bolsheviks violate the process of history." For Eisenstein, images are real, words lie. This Menshevik speaker's symbol is a strumming balalaika.

The Bolshevik delegates stomp their feet. Their impatience for power is increasing. A bourgeois woman with spectacles, obviously a Menshevik, disapproves of their rudeness. Cut to artillery flashes in the night. The Bolsheviks proclaim the new synthesis: "The time for words is over."

In the Palace courtyard, the two Bolshevik emissaries get up and leave. With a montage of the Bolshevik speaker receiving wild applause (all words were not over) and machine guns loading and beginning to fire, the titles flash the Bolshevik slogans. "For peace," "For bread," "For land," and then, "The signal." The *Aurora* opens fire, bombs burst above the Winter Palace, the Ministers' table shakes.

At this point in OCTOBER, a bizarre but important incident occurs. Probably taking his scene from Reed, Eisenstein skewers the bourgeoisie one last time (see Reed, 124). A delegation of bourgeois "notables," led by Schreider, Mayor of Petrograd, starts across the bridge between the Hermitage and the Winter Palace. The "notables" appear tiny as they approach; then the black legs and back of a Kronstadt sailor fill the screen. The next shot is from behind the crowd looking up at the massive sailor. The crowd halts; only one red sailor has stopped a whole flock of bourgeoisie. A little old lady tries to scold the sailor, the mayor shows his medal of office (another false bourgeois symbol of power), and a man with a huge beard (historically, Avksentiev, President of the Peasants' Soviet) tries to bluff his way through. The Bolshevik will not be moved: he does not argue, he knows his mind and his orders.

Once again, we see the reification of the middle class, their false symbols of power, and their failure to grasp the changing political reality. And the message—especially for export—is that if the proletariat, who form the navies, armies, and police in all countries—act in their own interests, instead of serving those of the bourgeoisie, they could easily run the state. The mayor's delegation wants the sailor to follow their orders, but the Bolshevik, having come to an awareness of his class interests, refuses to move. Because the bourgeoisie lack real power, armed might in the form of a single, determined, and armed Bolshevik can stop them.

The crowd becomes angry, the sailor raises his hand—still open, no need of a fist—higher. Bourgeois faces become distorted in impotent rage. The camera pauses in close up on the square face and square glasses of an older woman—Julia Eisenstein, the director's mother. She, however, looks more pained than angered by this adamant Bolshevik!

The bourgeois characters are all relatively old, in contrast to the young,

handsome sailor. Finally, the “notables” leave. Seen from above and behind the sailor, the bourgeoisie appear small and cowering.

The scene works because it contains dialectical conflict in the form of a struggle between a bourgeois crowd and one Bolshevik (the balance here being part of the imbalance of the final three acts). For scenes where more than one Bolshevik appears—when an army of red guards attacks—we know exactly what will happen.

Artillery fires, red guards rush toward the Palace, a machine gunner, whom we have seen in the July Days’ massacre, fires. A few bodies fall but now the gunner shows no delight. A Kronstadt sailor climbs the locked main gates: his boot steps on the plaque of the Tsarist crown—down with the old order. The imperial eagle wobbles, and the sailor opens the gates to the revolution. Red guards flow in, and the Woman’s Battalion, looking particularly bedraggled, surrenders immediately. (Eisenstein shows his streak of misogyny here.) As a grenade explodes, the red guards burst into the long entrance corridor of the Winter Palace. The camera focuses on the cross at the end of the hallway. Slowly the aperture closes until only the cross is visible in the diminishing circle of the screen, then it too dissolves—the end of the old order.

The red tide swallows the few cadets still fighting. Up the stairs, where Kerensky once reluctantly walked, rush the red guards. The Tsarina’s bedroom becomes the final battle station for four cadets who hide behind the Tsarina’s skirts—the revolution, however, allows no hiding places. Red guards and marines quickly overwhelm them, then one marine pauses to examine the strange, opulent world of the Tsarina’s bed chamber. Amazed at the silk underwear and rich clothes, he then discovers some imperial crested chamber pots and a finely upholstered chair. It is the real throne and when he lifts the seat to examine the toilet beneath, he laughs. The joke is both a bizarre curiosity and a means to demystify the Tsar and Tsarina—they too go to the bathroom, even if royally.

Other red guards in the Tsarina’s room are first stupefied and then angered by this opulent world. They bayonet the thick mattresses (we remember the straw mats for the Bolsheviks in prison), and they create a great storm of stuffing and feathers. The storm of history is blowing away the Romanoffs and their way of life.

On a small altar in a corner of the Tsarina’s room sits a wooden sculpture of Christ, a portrait of the Tsar (signed “Nicky”), other pictures of Jesus and Mary, and one of a woman lifting her petticoats, exposing herself, cut to a shot of the Tsarina’s bidet. The montage connects the religiosity of the Tsarina (and the old order) with the rumored sexual liaison between her and the monk Rasputin.

A sailor opens a trunk and finds hundreds of mint-new St. George

medals. He demands, "Is this what we fought for?" Suddenly perceiving the hollowness of the symbols of the old order, he overturns the trunk. The medals cascade out like so many worthless coins. Eisenstein wants his audience to come to this same critical awareness about the old order, the church, and the war. Only Bolshevik symbols, like the seizure of the Winter Palace, have meaning now. They represent and connect to current reality, i.e., political power.

Cut to the Second Soviet Congress: Antonov-Ovseenko appears wearing a dark, floppy felt hat, rimless glasses, and a small beard—in his artiste's costume he very much resembles the famous photograph of James Joyce in similar dress. Perhaps Eisenstein is making a subtle homage to Joyce, whom he greatly admired.

Cut to the wine cellars: the lumpenproletariat enter and begin looting the shelves. Their portrayal is consistent with Eisenstein's earlier portrayal of this class. For as early as *STRIKE*, with its hostile picture of the lumpenproletariat, Eisenstein had illustrated the Marxist position that a revolution cannot be made by thieves and street people. Upstairs, in searching some captured cadets—mercenaries rather than real soldiers—the red guards discover hidden loot, including a fancy jeweled letter opener, decorated with the Tsar's portrait. From under the cap of another cadet spills a stream of stolen silverware. The red guards keep a scrupulous account in a large ledger book of all property in the Winter Palace: it is now the property of the people and not to be pillaged.

Back in the wine cellars, the lumpenproletariat loot the shelves. Two Kronstadt sailors appear, chase the thieves out, and take axes to the bottles. An orgy of breaking glass and running liquor. The red guards, the ideal heroes of the revolution, are too sturdy and honest to be tempted by thievery or drink; therefore they destroy the wine cellars of the decadent old order. In the 1917, 1927, and even in the present day Russian context, this scene is part of an ongoing Soviet campaign against alcoholism.

Cut to the Tsar's throne room where a young boy, dressed in a kind of junior Cossack outfit, twirls his cap in joy and jumps onto the throne. This young ragamuffin soldier first appeared peering through a barricade—his face framed by a machine gun—when the two Bolshevik emissaries presented the ultimatum. Later, when the red guard climbed up to open the gates, he was in the crowd below, cheering the guard on. Then, in the scramble over the barricades, he was with the second wave of red guards; and finally, he appears in the throne room. Young, short and chubby, he stands out unmistakably in all of these scenes. Who is he? Is he Eisenstein's attempt to focus on a face in the crowd and to trace a single story? Why is he here?

Because there is no other single participant whom Eisenstein follows through the storming of the Winter Palace, and because it is

uncharacteristic of Eisenstein, at least in *OCTOBER*, to focus on such a non-historical character, the young boy is possibly a kind of subtle self portrait of the director. The young boy, like Eisenstein at the time, begins on the bourgeois side but then, joyously, embraces the revolution. The young boy could be a projection of what Eisenstein might have done if he had been at the Winter Palace—instead of in his family home in Petrograd—on that famous night.

Two famous photographs taken during the filming of *OCTOBER* and reproduced in Marie Seton's biography offer farther evidence. One shows "Eisenstein lolling in the Tsar's throne in the Winter Palace at the commencement of *OCTOBER*, 1972" (Seton's caption) and the other is the frame from the film where, sitting on the throne, "A small boy welcomes the Revolution in the closing scenes of *OCTOBER* (Seton's caption, *Sergei M. Eisenstein: A Biography*, New York, 1951, 92). The poses are so close, the boy so resembles the short, chubby Eisenstein, and the entire film is so much an expression of Eisenstein's revolutionary joy that we can conclude that the young boy who embraces the revolution in the film is probably a self portrait. Eisenstein, like some of his favorite Renaissance painters, has put himself in a corner of his own canvas.

The boy jumps onto the throne. From a very low angle, we see the boy's feet swinging in the air. This blasphemous treatment of the sacred throne of the Romanoffs underlines the meaning of the revolution: everything is changed, everyone is liberated. There is nothing mystical or sacred about the throne. Why shouldn't a young boy enjoy it? It is now state property and belongs to everyone. Even the ordinary citizens of the old order can sit in it with impunity, for the people have become the monarchs of the new order.

Cut to Antonov, followed by the red guards, in a central rotunda of the Winter Palace. Opposite him are some cadets: one detachment of cadets separates the Bolsheviks from power. The red guards flood the hall and swallow the cadets.

The Council of Ministers: agitated, the ministers discuss their fate. Antonov leads the rush down the hallway. On the Ministers' table sits a line of empty glasses: the empty well of the Provisional Government. Konovalov says, "Let us meet them (the Bolsheviks) with dignity." Here we have bourgeois morality. A silly and false sense of dignity means nothing in the face of the people's revolution—and Antonov will jump on the table to prove the point.

Montage of an axe breaking a wine cask and the Ministers' door being broken in—Antonov rushes through and announces, "You are all under arrest." Meekly the Ministers raise their hands. The red guards treat the "prisoners" kindly, in marked contrast to the Provisional Government's vindictive treatment of them. Konovalov—trapped to the end by false

bourgeois symbols—tries to straighten his tie before being led out.

Antonov at the Ministers' table: with emphatic sweeps of his arm, he knocks away various ministerial paraphernalia in order to clear a space to write (just as the Bolsheviks were sweeping away the old order and clearing a space for themselves in Russian and world politics). Assisting him is the old Bolshevik agitator whom we first saw persuading Kornilov's troops not to fight. Antonov writes: "In, the name of the Military Revolutionary Committee, I declare the Provisional Government OVERTHROWN."

A montage of clocks read: 2:10 a.m. Clocks all over the world spin to the moment when the Bolsheviks seize power.

Cut to the young boy asleep on the throne: the red guards and the people have completed their night's work and the director has finished his project.

The Soviet Congress: wild applause, Lenin takes the podium, and secretaries fall to dictation. Lenin announces: "THE WORKERS' AND PEASANTS' REVOLUTION HAS SUCCEEDED." The film ends with Lenin's synthesis: The old thesis has been overthrown by the Bolshevik opposition—the result is a new "WORKERS' AND PEASANTS'" state.

CONCLUSION

OCTOBER Is a revolutionary film. It is a celebration and call to revolution. It is the culmination both of the most fertile decade in Soviet politics and art, and of the most productive period in the career of a great Marxist director. Yet OCTOBER is flawed.

No single observer or participant understood the Russian Revolution better than Leon Trotsky. In a passage from his History, he sums up Eisenstein's dilemma in OCTOBER:

"The final act of the revolution seems, after all this, too brief, too dry, too businesslike—somehow out of correspondence with the historic scope of the events. The reader experiences a kind of disappointment. He is like a mountain climber, who, thinking the main difficulties are still ahead, suddenly discovers that he is already on the summit or almost there. Where is the insurrection? There is no picture of the insurrection. The events do not form themselves into a picture. A series of small operations, calculated and prepared in advance, remain separated one from another both in space and time. A unity of thought and aim unites them, but they do not fuse in the struggle itself. There is no action of great masses. There are no dramatic encounters with the troops. There is nothing of all that which imaginations brought up

upon the facts of history associate with the idea of
insurrection.”(Trotsky, III, 232.)

Because Eisenstein perceived the dialectical truth of the revolution, he could not betray his perception for false drama. Yet he wanted to portray the revolution visually. His cinematic imagination could not find the visual equivalents for the hundreds of thousands of words Trotsky needed for his literary masterpiece on the same subject.

In explaining the revolution, however, in attempting to animate dialectical materialism, Eisenstein extended the boundaries of the cinema. And, in spite of his failure to sustain the dialectical form of the first two acts, he has greatly broadened our political and visual experience.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)