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EISENSTEIN'S STRIKE: A STUDY OF CINEMATIC ALLEGORY
John B. Kuiper

"Montage," "juxtaposition," "conflict," "dialectical materialism;" these are the terms Eisenstein most often used when he began to build a theory to support his methods of constructing a silent motion picture. I do not propose that we discard them. But it is time to look more deeply at his actual films for clues about their construction that have meaning today. When we do, we find that a great deal of his work is relevant to today's film-making problems. Buñuel, Bergman, Fellini, Antonioni, Resnais have all adopted, or perhaps, re-discovered ways of working which Eisenstein and Griffith before him first began to explore.

Eisenstein's silent films demonstrate better than any theoretical text the figurative nature of his work. I mean to use the word "figurative" in place of that often contradictory assemblage of words Eisenstein came to utilize: "montage," "juxtaposition," and so on. I think "figurative" describes the nature of his innovations better and gives us a model lock into which fit a number of contemporary keys as well as those archaic and polemic ones Eisenstein used.
Figurative cinema is a cinema of mental images evoked by methods peculiar to film, but not different in kind from some constructions found in literature and drama. Eisenstein used two basic types of figurative cinema. In the first he juxtaposed and contrasted shots so that a spectator can compare them and generalize from them. In Strike, for example, he juxtaposed a monkey and a man. A spectator is invited to generalize about this juxtaposition. He compares monkey and man by virtue of their similar actions and appearance. Through such a comparison the man is made to appear sub-human. This use of figurative cinema is never rich or sophisticated. It is more poster-making than art, more propaganda than solid statement, but, by extending his comparisons into the areas of construction called simile and metaphor, Eisenstein did add a richness of meaning that cannot be disregarded today.

Eisenstein's use of simile and metaphor has been commented upon by a number of critics and scholars but his use of another type of figurative construction has been largely overlooked. Eisenstein constructed a number of cinematic allegories in which juxtaposition and comparison play little or no part in achieving the effects for which his silent films owe their reputation. Instead, these passages rely for their effect more upon a relationship to an idea or concept which unifies the whole passage. For example, his silent work contains two instances in which visual references to music are used to relate the individual images of a sequence and thereby stimulate a new dimension of meaning in the mind of a spectator.

One of these passages is illustrated by the reproductions in Figure 1. The sequences previous to the one illustrated have established the unrest of the workers and the attempts to organize them into groups that can take action. The sequence of shots which follows shows the first successful action by the strikers against the factory bosses. Considered in this context, a primary intention of the sequence under discussion is to indicate that a psychological unity has been achieved by the workers. They were disorganized and incapable of action before the sequence. After it, they are unified and capable of successful action. The unity of the workers is objectified in this sequence through an editing arrangement which organizes the shots so that they establish a mental image of unity and harmony by setting up a visual rhythm that uses the motions of an accordion, feet, and bodies. This sequence is allegorical because of the relationship that its parts have to the theme of unity
In this passage from Strike, workers and their friends are moving up a hill while singing and talking about factory conditions. As they walk along, arm in arm, an action which is an expression of unity, they sing and move together according to a concerted rhythmic movement established by a dolly-in to the workers singing (pictures 1 and 1A represent this shot). Next (picture 2) comes a shot of an accordion in motion with hands playing it while it is being carried. This is followed (picture 3) by a shot of feet in motion which pass the camera walking in time to the rhythm of the music. In the next shot (picture 4) two women, singing and smiling, move along on either side of the accordion player. The men seen before in pictures 1 - 1A are shown singing (picture 5). The accordion is again shown in motion (picture 6) and this shot is superimposed over a L.S. of the landscape in which the strikers are walking (picture 7). The strikers come nearer the camera as the shot progresses. The next two shots (pictures 8 and 9) show men singing and speaking about the possibilities of striking. The next three illustrations (pictures 10, 10A, 10B) illustrate a transition in which a line of singing women (picture 10) is changed into an accordion form. This is accomplished by two sets of masks which move into the frame from top to bottom and from side to side (picture 10A and 10B). At the same time the accordion is superimposed over the women (picture 10A). When the masks withdraw, the accordion alone remains on the screen (picture 10B). The sequence continues from this point with more shots of the workers agitating for action. (Illustration courtesy of the Film Library, Museum of Modern Art.)
or harmony and because this theme emerges as something greater than the specific mental attitudes established by any individual shot.

However, Eisenstein's use of an allegorical dimension of meaning is often richer than the evocation of harmony as the reproductions in Figure 2 indicate. The shots in this sequence are arranged climactically. Each shot produces its own meaning and at the same time contributes to a rising development of meaningful relationships. However, such an analysis in terms of climax does not answer many legitimate questions about the choice of subject matter or the order in which it occurs in the film.

Why, for example, did Eisenstein choose to return the dejected workman to the floor of the factory for his suicide? Why did he select a leather belt to do the job? The answer to these questions is not one of simple convenience. The construction of the sequence shows that there are no convenient choices made but that they are the result of a great deal of inventiveness and deliberation. Consider, for example, the composition of shot 13 (in Figure 2). The dead man "hangs" from the top of the frame forming a compositional motif completely in key with the whole "hanging" motif of the sequence. This example could hardly be anything but a deliberate choice and not a fortuitous or convenient one. Considering the sequence as a unit, one of its most prominent features is the perfectly logical way in which it develops, so that the grisly act of hanging is utilized to build a complete climax which draws forth the utmost horror from the spectator. But, as I have stressed, there is more than the horror of climax at work here. It is an examination of the allegorical logic behind this development which gives a clue to the richness of the sequence.

Notice the interplay in shots 1 - 7 between the men of the factory, including the dejected worker, and the multiplicity of the belts that transmit the power for their machines. The belts are used as material to postpone the recognition that the man has committed suicide. But why should Eisenstein have used shots of belts unless he wanted to reinforce the mental attitudes each shot builds by relating them to the fact that the dejected workman uses a belt to kill himself? Why also did the director not utilize the emotional reactions of the other men sooner than shots 8 - 12 unless the belts in shots 1 - 7 are significant?
In this sequence of shots from Strike a dejected worker, falsely accused of stealing, takes his own life. He is first shown (picture 1) dejectedly sitting on a ladder. He does not move and beside him is a large oil can with a long spout. The next shot (picture 2) shows the belts of the factory moving rapidly as sunlight filters down through them. This is followed by a shot (picture 3) of a hand adjusting a leather belt to form a loop. The factory floor (picture 4) is then shown. This is followed by shots of the ladder and oil can falling to the floor (picture 5) and the belt tightly drawn and stretched downward and out of frame (picture 6). Next comes another shot of the factory floor (picture 7) and then a shot (represented by pictures 8 and 8A) of two workers by their machines. One of them suddenly turns to look out frame left. Two feet (picture 9) are shown swinging back and forth. The two workers (picture 10) start to run out of frame. The two feet continue to swing (picture 11). The workers exit the frame (picture 12). In the last shot illustrated (picture 13), the workmen reach the hanged worker. One of them climbs the machine from which he hangs and lowers the body into the arms of a comrade. (Illustration courtesy of the Film Library, Museum of Modern Art.)
The answers to these questions lie in the associative meanings that this sequence permits a spectator to draw from the extended use of belts. Shot 6 provides the essential key to this interpretation. By virtue of its position in the sequence it becomes a symbol for the whole act of hanging. Note that it is followed by a shot of the factory in which belts dominate the compositional scheme. If we consider shot 6 in the context of the total film (which ends in a complete defeat of the strikers) and keep in mind the death of the workman at the end of the sequence reproduced here, the allegorical meanings that arise from this interplay of shots imply that the workmen shown in the factory are doomed to death and defeat as soon as they assume their future roles as strikers. Their cause is doomed to failure because the central source of power in the whole factory is in the hands of their enemies, and any tampering with the belts that transmit this power can result only in death, as it does to the dejected worker shown here. Such an interpretation is allegorical because of the breadth of the generalizations necessary to support it. Yet there can be little doubt that such an interpretation is possible and is fully justified by the context in which the sequence occurs.

The sequence of shots represented by Figure 3 can also be interpreted as an allegory which carries much wider and general meanings than a first impression would suggest. The sequence comes near the end of Strike. It shows the development of a situation which was planned by the police, acting as agents of the factory owners, to suppress the striking workers. A fire has been started deliberately by a gang of police-hired spies, and police guards have prevented the strikers from turning in the fire alarm until the fire is well underway. By the time the fire equipment arrives, a large group of strikers has gathered to watch the fire. The action develops from this point, in a roughly climactic order, with the fire brigade turning their hoses upon the strikers instead of putting out the fire.

As in the previous sequence we have examined, the richness of meaning inherent in a passage of this kind lies in the possibilities that exist for extending its connotations through generalization into a broader, allegorical dimension. The context of the film indicates that the fire brigade is an agent of the forces that are in control of power. The brigade can arrive only after the police permit the workers to call it. Clearly the fire brigade represents governmental power. It has water, the only means to put out the fire. The fire may be considered a symbol of the
The action in each shot illustrated above includes: (1) C.U. A fire hose, limp and lifeless, suddenly fills. (2) M.C.S. The police push back a crowd of spectators (strikers) from the scene. They are herded into a group. (3) C.U. The gloved hands of firemen hold two nozzles. They are pointed upward and no water comes from them. (4) L.S. The crowd of spectators point and shout at the firemen and at the fire. (5) C.U. Water spouts from the nozzles. (6) M.S. A dense spray of water hits the spectators. (7) C.U. Water spouts from the nozzles. (8) M.S. The spectators are drenched. They bend to protect themselves. (9) C.U. A woman shouts at the firemen. (10) TITLE: "FOOLS." (11) Omitted: six shots of the spectators getting wet. (12) L.S. The spectators begin to run. (13) Omitted: three shots. A spectator is knocked to the ground by a water jet. (14) L.S. The line of firemen train their hoses on the spectators. (15) The firemen advance as the spectators run from them. (16) Omitted: several shots of people getting wet. (17) L.S. Water hits several women standing by a house corner. (Illustration courtesy of the Film Library, Museum of Modern Art.)
disturbances which led to the successive waves of revolution in Russia during the early 1900's. Because of the autocratic rule of the period only the government itself possessed the means to alleviate the situation. The fire brigade and its possession of equipment and water, the only effective means of squelching the fire, symbolize this relationship. As the history of pre-revolutionary Russia proves, the autocracy chose to disregard the clamor for representative government and to suppress any section of the population which showed unrest. The analogy with the sequence shown on the screen with the political and social conditions of pre-revolutionary Russia is complete. In it, the fire brigade disregards the fire to direct its attention to the people who called upon the brigade for help. Considered in this wide frame of reference the title reproduced in shot 10, Figure 3 takes an added meaning. The woman standing in the midst of a stream of water calls out, "Fools," to the fire brigade, not only because they have apparently made a mistake in the direction they are pointing their hoses, but also because they are turning the only legal power the people can call upon for help into a method of suppression.

Allegorical interpretations can be constructed out of the contextual associations of many sections of Eisenstein's silent work. These associations may help account for the intriguing qualities that these films hold for contemporary audiences. In addition, the allegorical richness of Eisenstein's work demonstrates that the cinema does not necessarily have to remain tied to imitative naturalism. Eisenstein proved, once and for all, that the motion picture can be used to create mental symbols of the physical world. I do not mean that a film has no connections with physical reality. I do suggest, however, that the most important link between the outer world photographed by a camera, the photographic representation of it given on a screen, and what the spectator perceives is created by "the associative links of his thought," to use the phrase coined by one of Eisenstein's own cameramen.

It is precisely these associative links that today's most interesting directors are utilizing. Naturally, they do not utilize the same technical resources as Eisenstein. Nor do they treat similar themes. It seems clear today that Eisenstein's world of expression, especially the world of his silent films, was a limited one. It succeeds with today's audiences only because his enthusiasm for the human race spilled over the bounds of party and time created by culture and personality. Today's figurative cinema is more personal in structure. Its metaphors and allegories are more solidly
woven into the fabric of character. For example, Tore, in Bergman's *Virgin Spring*, struggles with the young birch tree in a passage that evokes his distress and predicts his vengeance. Marcello and Eva in *La Dolce Vita* pause before a fountain to wallow in a visibly ersatz sexuality which is shut off automatically by municipal ordinance at an appointed hour. The explosion at Hiroshima is a disintegration of personal as well as political worlds which can be reconstructed only by love. Buñuel's "Last Supper" in *Viridiana* points directly to the malicious heart of a sick world. None of the characters we have come to appreciate in contemporary films are as complete or as predictable as those we are led to expect from watching previous commercial film styles. None of them are "closed" forms nor are any of them part of what has been described as tragedy. However, we must not let these facts prevent us from recognizing that the method of organizing the film in which they appear is figurative. The simplest way of expressing what is going on today and a good way to point out its relationship to Eisenstein's work is to say: in today's best films, the eye is the servant of the mind.