

Strike / *Stachka*

(1924, Sergei M. Eisenstein, USSR)

Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL)

Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area: Critical Debates (AL)

Rationale for study

- The first full length film directed by the 26 year old Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein is revolutionary in both subject matter and form. The new Soviet cinema, heralded by Lenin as “*the most important of all the arts*”, was a key ingredient in the building of a new society. Eisenstein’s recreation of a factory strike of 1912 presents the spectator with images of workers, bosses, spies, police and troops in a visual and technical masterpiece.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- A reason to strike. A worker is wrongly accused of theft and commits suicide, provoking his fellow workers to begin the strike 0:18:14 - 0:29:07
- Comic performances in Tubsville. The misfits of Kadushkino Cemetery are employed as *agent provocateurs* in order to break the strike 1:03:08 - 1:08:00

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Strike* began Eisenstein’s lifelong

collaboration with director of photography Edvard Tisse, as well as with his assistant director, Grigori Alexandrov.

- Eisenstein developed his cinematographic theory which he would put into practice in making his films, not only should there be conflict between shots, there should also be conflict within the frame at every level: graphic conflict, conflict of size, conflict of movement - of crowds, people in order, people in disorder, travelling shots inside the factory - conflict of direction. Movement towards or away from camera of groups of workers.
- Lighting and framing, close ups of objects, close ups of faces sometimes quite abstract.

Mise-en-Scène

- Patterns of streams of people, workers in their village, factory yard.
- Surreal inclusions, dead cats hanging on a frame in the Cemetery, small couple dancing on the table amongst the debris of an extravagant dinner table - “attractions” to stimulate a response in the spectator.
- Expressive locations, tight abstract images such as machinery, ropes, tools, bricks, hands.

Editing

- Narrative told in 6 chapters. This device, necessary when many cinemas had only one projector, also builds the film as an overall montage of events.
- Montage editing a formal principal that compelled the spectator to create a new concept, that of intellectual cinema, not telling a story but conveying an abstract idea. Opposing shots have the potential to create a synthesis, a new idea or emotion that leads to audience knowledge. Photographs come to life, water cannon sequence becomes a series of abstract colliding images.
- Conflict, the driving principle of the Revolution also becomes the basis of art. Dramatic potential of separate images. Close ups, rapid cutting between the worker accused of stealing the micrometer and his accusers gives a sense of

disorientation. Emotion generated through the suicide note and almost religious imagery of dead comrade. Worker's suicide told through images, not of his face but a belt, a fallen stool.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

Representations

- Departure from the classic Hollywood model of individual protagonists who determine the action. The Marxist view proposes social forces as the causal agents, not individuals. Eisenstein cast actors from the Moscow Proletkult (First Workers Theatre) who were not well-known. He also used non-actors who could best represent a particular trait, a practice known as “typage”. With the absence of psychologically rounded characters the emphasis was no longer on the individual but on the group, the proletariat. None of Eisenstein's first three films (*Strike*, *Battleship Potemkin*, and *October*) has an individual hero whose actions and motives form the basis of the narrative.
- The people represented in the film are more than just characters in a story, these are representations of ideas. Capitalist bosses and shareholders are caricatures, exaggerated theatrical symbols of greed and oppression. In contrast the workers are more realistically portrayed.
- The Spies employed to sabotage the strike are given animal names and characteristics. The juxtaposition of animal images adds to the comedic and theatrical tone of parts of the film. Other moments of comedy have their base in theatre and circus performances.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Eisenstein wrote “*The Revolution made me an artist*”. He adapted the ideas of dialectical materialism, made by Marx and Engels into the official philosophy of Communism, to cinema. Progress takes place through a struggle of opposites; in society the primary idea through which growth emerges from conflict is by means of the class struggle. “*I never make films in which the camera is an objective witness, to be watched by an impassive eye of glass. I prefer to hit people on the nose*”
- Eisenstein had an acute visual sense.

He had designed sets for the Proletkult theatre. His performers are arranged as components within their settings.

- In contrast to individualism as the basis for bourgeois cinema *Strike* is about mass action of the collective. The realism of this is mixed with his love of bizarre and often grotesque imagery.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- Cinema, education and experiment had a vital part to play in the New Society. VGIK, the state film school, opened in Moscow in 1920, the first of its kind in the world. As there was very little equipment the emphasis was on theories, particularly those of Lev Kuleshov who developed his montage theories on the juxtaposition of images. There was much discussion about the status of art and its purpose.

Historical

- The Bolshevik (majority) Revolution took place in October 1917. The Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR) was formed in 1922 as a Communist state headed by Lenin. The Revolution was a key factor in both the content and form of Soviet cinema of the 1920s; films had an important part to play in the dissemination of ideas through propaganda.

Political

- Karl Marx, together with Frederick Engels, published *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848 and in 1867 Marx developed his ideas on political economy where the workers would own the means of production in the first volume of his *Capital*. The USSR was founded on these ideas of a more equal society when the struggles of the exploited class (the proletariat) resulted in victory over their exploiters (the bourgeoisie).

Technological

- Early Soviet cinema was experimental. The shortage of resources, lack of film stock and experience and determination of the *avant-garde* to make art part of the revolutionary struggle led to a radically new cinema. This was accompanied by a body of theoretical writing.

Institutional

- The new Bolshevik government saw film as an effective means of propaganda. Theatre was bound by convention and couldn't be centrally

controlled. The poster was visual but static. Cinema was visual, dynamic, mechanical and could be centrally controlled. Lenin recognised that cinema had a vital part to play in the construction of the new society and the Soviet government set about reconstructing the film industry, which was nationalised in 1919. Film became a subsection of the State Department of Education under Lenin's wife Krupskaya. Goskino, a State Cinema Trust was established. This had virtual monopoly over film production, distribution and exhibition, with a special unit formed to make political films that were in line with Party ideology. Studios were established in the various regions outside Moscow and Leningrad. Production levels of films rose.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - STARTING POINTS - Soviet Montage

- Eisenstein was one of the most influential film makers not just because of his films, but also because of his writings on film. He published his first essay *The Montage of Attractions* in 1923. In it he stressed the importance of audience response. Montage was a formal principal that compelled the spectator to create the new concept of intellectual cinema, not telling a story but conveying an abstract idea. Following the experiments of the Russian scientist Pavlov on conditioned reflexes Eisenstein proposed that film making could be controlled in order to generate specific effects on the spectator. The emphasis should not be in representing the real world or constructing a narrative but in generating an effect in the spectator through a series of shocks or "attractions". Ideas of Agitprop agitation/propaganda, and the "Kuleshov" effect.
- Hollywood film developed on the basis of continuity editing that disguises the film making process in order for the narrative to appear seamless. Eisenstein confronted the spectator with conflicting images. These effects or shocks were a result of the opposition of shots and would jolt the spectator into a confrontation with the image producing "*not linkage but collision, not a passive audience, but an audience of co-creators*". Collisions bring about a new relationship between spectator and text giving him or her "*not a completed image but the experience of completing an image*" and bringing them into direct and questioning contact with the film.
- Eisenstein had been in Moscow from 1920 where the *avant garde* were at the forefront of a revolution in the arts. He worked in the Proletkult (Worker's Theatre) with its radical political programme absorbing the anti-realist ideas of the theatre director Meyerhold and the poet Mayakovsky. Meyerhold was looking for ways to "break reality down" and his ideas involved anti-naturalistic style and performances, with the human body seen as a machine. His "biomechanical" theory of acting was drawn from industrial motion. Cinema was movement: of actors, of camera, of montage. Montage with its ability to compress or expand time was organised, concentrated on essentials, directed the spectator's attention, and maintained this attention through rhythm, tempo, movement, emotion, intellect.