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MONUMENTAL HEROICS

Form and style in Eisenstein’s silent films

EISENSTEIN’S SILENT FILMS WERE, like those of his Left contemporaries, didactic works. Yet he saw no contradiction between creating propaganda and achieving powerful aesthetic effects. Indeed, central to his thinking was the belief that only if propaganda was artistically effective—structurally unified, perceptually arousing, emotionally vivid—would it be politically efficacious. This urge to plumb the artistic capacities of film made Eisenstein the most ambitious and innovative director of Soviet cinema.

His experiments drew on diverse sources. Certainly Constructivism, particularly its theatrical manifestations, strongly influenced his films. Yet Constructivism’s moment had passed when Eisenstein began filmmaking. Moreover, the movement’s reliance upon abstract design was not suited for a medium that would, in the Soviet state, have to utilize representational imagery. Kasimir Malevich quickly recognized this, criticizing film directors for plagiarizing academic realist art and refusing to use pictorial abstraction to expose the materials of “cinema as such” (Malevich 1925:228–229).

Eisenstein’s films can usefully be understood as part of a broad tendency toward “heroic realism” in 1920s Soviet art. This trend had its immediate sources in the Civil War period, which generated lyrical, episodic portrayals of collective action. In agit-dramas and novels the hero became the mass, and appeal to the spectator was posterlike in its directness. By the mid-1920s, when the avant-garde had declined, most painters, writers, and theatre workers accepted the obligation of celebrating the Revolution or portraying Soviet society through some version of “realism” (although the exact meaning of this concept was hotly debated).

Several trends emerged, notably Maxim Gorky’s “revolutionary romanticism,” which aimed to idealize the individual, and the easel painting of the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia, which demanded accessible content and comprehensible form. Other artists sought to meld the imperatives of heroic realism with avant-garde experimentation. Collage and photomontage could convey a pulsating modernity; Vladimir Mayakovsky’s machine-gun prosody could pay homage to Lenin; posters and typography could use Futurist design to galvanize the spectator’s eye.

Like other Left artists, Eisenstein enthusiastically acceded to demands for a Soviet mythology that would stir proletarian consciousness. All his silent features start with quotations from Lenin, and the leader’s image is central to the last two of them. In Toward Dictatorship and The Year 1905 and the two-part October he conceived multi-part sagas tracing the victories
of Bolshevism. These mammoth works went unmade, but the finished films did present a history of the Party's ascendency, from the turn of the century (Strike, 1925) and 1905 (The Battleship Potemkin, 1925) to 1917 (October, 1928) and the contemporary era (Old and New, also known as The General Line, 1929).

In constructing a cinematic mythology of the new regime, Eisenstein drew upon cultural formulas and iconography from his youth. For example, propaganda and popular legend already defined the key events of the Potemkin mutiny—the spoiled meat, the death of Vakulinchuk, the display of the body. (See Gerould 1989.) Public celebrations also furnished filmmakers a wealth of tales and storytelling strategies. From soon after the October revolution through the 1920s, the government sponsored mass spectacles to celebrate public holidays and commemorate historical turning points. On May Day in 1920, for instance, 4,000 participants performed in the "Mystery of Liberated Labor" for an audience of 35,000. Such spectacles, and the festivals and processions associated with them, were echoed in Eisenstein's films. The ritual of parading zoo animals dressed as class enemies finds its equivalent in Strike, while the mass spectacle "Storming of the Winter Palace" in October 1920 forms a plot outline for October.

Eisenstein was prepared to romanticize revolutionary action. In his films men (and occasionally women) fight, women and children endure, and all may die at the hands of the oppressor. The enemy slaughters innocents: the Odessa Steps are populated by mothers, infants, old men and women, a male student, and amputees. Yet these films never show a slain enemy. October's Bolsheviks are murdered, but the government's side appears to suffer no casualties. In Potemkin, Vakulinchuk is shot, but the officers are merely tossed overboard. Sometimes the film flatly ignores the question of revolutionary justice; Potemkin's priest, feigning death in the hold, is never seen again; in Old and New, the kulaks who poison the bull go unpunished. Eisenstein concentrates on the spectacular moments of upheaval, suffering, and victory and avoids confronting the ethical problems of insurrectionary violence.

Eisenstein's diverse aesthetic impulses find a place within heroic realism. Like the painters Alexander Deineka and Yury Pimenov, he merges monumental forms with grotesque distortions that defy verisimilitude. A "documentary" realism of locale and physiognomy can be overlaid with flagrant artifice, such as the theatrical stripe of light running down the center of the Odessa Steps (Figure 22.1). Like Malevich, whose 1927 painting Red Cavalry combines suprematism and illustration, Eisenstein shapes consecrated icons—fists, banners, factories, armored cars, tractors—into parts of a dynamic visual design.

The films thus explore various representational options of the New Economic Policy period (NEP) launched in 1921. Strike's script emerged from Proletkult, while Potemkin assimilated contributions from old Bolsheviks as well as Nikolai Aseev and Tretyakov. To writers and Formalist critics who took adventure and mystery stories as the solution to the problem of plot, Eisenstein offered Strike, which mixes espionage intrigue with Eccentric types and conceptual abstraction. Novelists and dramatists seeking to create a pathos-drenched Soviet epic (poema) could find one solution in Potemkin. While writers were looking for a "poetic prose" that mixed revolutionary romanticism with vivid metaphoric effects, Eisenstein was at work on October. And in the period when New Lef sought to find literature in the "fact" of everyday Soviet life, he produced Old and New.

Eisenstein was also impelled to turn further back. Each major film, he asserted, corresponded to a text from Zola (Germinal for Strike, La terre for The General Line) (1928b:95). The Symbolism of Andrei Bely, particularly his novel Petersburg (1922), also seems to have influenced Eisenstein's montage practice. Old and New's prayer ceremony cites Repin's painting Religious Procession in Kursk Province (1880–1883) in order to counterpoise that tradition to the
more “cubistic” rendering of the cream separator. The plate-smashing scene in Potemkin was derived from Daumier’s figures and Myron’s Discus Thrower.

In all, in the years before Socialist Realism became the official style, Eisenstein explored alternative aesthetic options within left cinema’s montage tendency. His “Leninist formalism,” that urge to extract compositional methods from diverse traditions and turn them to immediate ends, made him central to the development of heroic realism in Soviet cinema.

Toward plotless cinema

Indeed, one could argue that Soviet heroic realism was most richly realized in the new medium. Pudovkin, Dovzhenko, Ermler, and others were working in this tradition, with occasional contributions from the FEX collaborators Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg. Whereas mainstream entertainment film was derived largely from tsarist cinema, as well as from doses of German, French, and American influence, these directors offered a distinctly “Soviet” alternative. Eisenstein helped shape this alternative, and he often took it further than his contemporaries.

In his time, Eisenstein’s innovations were taken as exemplary of the trend of “plotless” cinema. This was not filmmaking that avoided narrative altogether; it was, rather, a new sort of narrative cinema. Plotless films, Adrian Piotrovsky pointed out, did not present the action as “a consequentially motivated development of individual fate.” Moreover, plotless cinema relied on “exclusively cinematic means of expression,” which included unrealistic manipulations of time and the use of “non-diegetic” and “associative” montage (1927:105). From these aspects of the “plotless” film Eisenstein created what Piotrovsky called his “monumental heroics” (106).

The prototypical Soviet film sought to show that history was made by collective action, and most directors provided narratives that treated characters as typical of larger political forces. Still, the characters are usually individualized, with distinctive traits and psychological motives. Often a figure is derived from an instantly recognizable type—the bureaucrat, the worker, the
middle-class woman, the Red Army soldier. Although Eisenstein is associated with the practice of “typage,” he did not take credit for originating it, and it is common throughout Soviet film of the period.

In Eisenstein, however, typage follows from his idiosyncratic tendency to build his plots around the “mass protagonist.” A scene will employ a crowd to manifest the central role that Marxist doctrine ascribes to class action as the motor of history. Most members of the crowd who get picked out lack psychological qualities. Their actions are more often determined by their historical or organizational roles. It is as if Eisenstein took literally M. N. Potrovsky’s dictum: “We Marxists do not see personality as the maker of history, for to us personality is only the instrument with which history works” (quoted in Willet 1978:106). In Eisenstein’s films, history is a process—of defeat in Strike, of gain in Potemkin, of victory in October, of building socialism in Old and New—and the plot is built around stages in the unfolding of a large-scale dynamic.

By avoiding the more concrete characterization favored by his contemporaries, Eisenstein exposed himself to a problem that had already arisen in other media. Mid-1920s drama and mass spectacles commonly idealized the masses and satirized the oppressors. For instance, in the first Soviet opera, Red Petrograd (1925), the class enemies were given grotesque music and the positive heroes were given lyric song. The avant-gardist faced a twofold problem: how to treat the enemies seriously without heroizing them, and how to render the revolutionary forces by means of avant-garde techniques that would not mock them. In Eisenstein’s case, perhaps Potemkin handles the matter most successfully, presenting the enemies in less caricatural terms than does Strike and using its montage experiments to elevate class allies. Old and New uses mildly modernist techniques to create moments of affirmative comedy. October is far more schizophrenic; as Eisenstein himself remarked at the time, intellectual montage was as yet appropriate only for satirizing the enemy (1928c:104).

In showing the masses making history, 1920s Left cinema builds its plots around social crises that trigger changes in the characters. Often an individual’s dawning awareness of revolutionary doctrine furnishes major stages of the plot. In Pudovkin’s Mother (1926), The End of St. Petersburg (1927), and The Heir to Genghis Khan (1928), the drama often hinges on the transformation of the individual’s consciousness.

No such psychological conversion interests Eisenstein. His oppressed multitudes are quivering on the brink of revolt, needing only agitation, direction, and discipline. A historical crisis provides the clear-cut outlines of a momentous process, a strike or a mutiny, mounting an insurrection or building a cooperative. Even in Old and New, the peasant protagonist needs no convincing of the right path; she simply lacks allies.

Once one has abandoned the psychologically motivated plot, the problem is how to unify the film. We have already touched on one means of achieving unity, the conceiving of a larger process within which actions form stages. A second unifying strategy, touched on by Potrovsky, is stylistic: the film achieves a single effect partly through a dynamic organization of material and technique.

Thus, for instance, the narration will typically rely upon parallelisms to display the broad sweep of the historical process. These parallels are typically diegetic—that is, they liken or contrast characters, settings, or actions that are located in the fictional world of the story. In Pudovkin’s Mother, for instance, the climactic march of the militants is compared with the thawing and cracking ice on the nearby river.

Again, however, Eisenstein goes further. First, he also utilizes nondiegetic material. In Old and New, the slaughter of pigs is intercut with spinning pig statuettes; these statuettes are evidently not in the same “world” as the pigs (22.2, 22.3). As this example indicates,
Eisenstein's typical cues for nondiegetic inserts are shots of objects framed in close-up and filmed against black backgrounds. Such inserts serve as a kind of abstract commentary on the action, making the viewer aware of an intervening narration that can interrupt the action and point up thematic or pictorial associations. Sometimes, however, Eisenstein's narration relativizes the distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic imagery. We find images that fall between the poles—concretely located in the story world, but treated with a freedom that "emancipates" the action from time and space (1929c:177).

Eisenstein's parallels differ from those of his peers in another way. His comparisons often emit a radiating network of graphic or thematic implications. Piotrovsky follows contemporary usage in calling this "associative montage" (105).

One of the most famous of Eisenstein's visual analogies occurs in October. There he intercuts Prime Minister Kerensky of the Provisional Government with shots of a mechanical peacock (22.4, 22.5). The most obvious connection is the association of peacocks with preening. Eisenstein pictorializes a figure of speech: Kerensky is as vain as a peacock. But the sequence triggers other implications as well. The peacock is mechanical, and it enables Eisenstein to reiterate the artificial pose and gesture of the man. Like motifs elsewhere in the film, the peacock's sparkling highlights and suggestion of precious metals associate Kerensky with a static opulence due to be overturned by revolutionary energy. The whirling of the bird and the
spreading of its tail coincide with Kerensky’s standing at a door that will not open, suggesting that the mechanical toy works better than the government. Moreover, the bird’s spinning is edited so that it seems to control the door’s swinging open; a toy becomes the mainspring of the palace. The peacock’s mechanized dance also suggests an empty ritual, like Kerensky’s grand march up the stairs and the flunkies’ insincere greetings. In ways such as these, Eisenstein takes fairly dead and cliché metaphors and enlivens them through contextual associations. His filmic figures go beyond one-for-one comparisons and acquire the penumbra of connotation that distinguishes a rich poetic metaphor.

Eisenstein’s exploration of associative montage exemplifies his fascination with the concrete properties of the film material. In his theorizing, he was driven to account for all the pictorial qualities and conceptual implications of each shot. This line of inquiry gave birth to ideas of “intellectual cinema,” “overtonal montage,” and other concepts. His decision to make “plotless” films committed him to a corresponding dependence upon the specific features of film technique.

Whereas most Soviet directors became identified with a severe, even laconic shot design, Eisenstein pursued sensuous lighting and intricate compositions. His cinematographer, Edward Tissé, agreed with Eisenstein’s ideas about making images perceptually arresting. Tissé used large mirrors to focus sunlight, marking out hard-edged blocks of space (as in 22.1) or endowing objects and faces with sculptural gleams. His expertise with the short focal-length lens (typically 28mm) enabled Eisenstein to create dynamically deep images.

It was with the technique of editing that Eisenstein was to be most closely identified. Pudovkin, along with Kuleshov, Barnet, and others more partial to Hollywood-style drama and comedy, came to be considered the proponents of a “montage” approach to filmmaking. This style emphasized abrupt, fragmented cutting. Soviet directors broke a scene into many shots, building up a dramatic action out of many short, close-up pieces.

Although Eisenstein influenced other directors, they tended not to carry montage techniques as far as he did. Whereas most directors’ films use crosscutting to convey simultaneity and parallelism, Eisenstein uses it as well to create graphic similarities and to suggest abstract meanings. He also presses the Soviet standard of rapid editing to extremes by cutting “excessively.” Calculated at twenty-four frames per second, the average shot length of Old and New is 2.6 seconds, of Strike 2.5 seconds, of October and Potemkin about 2 seconds—these latter figures being lower than those for almost any other Soviet director.¹

A montage tactic he particularly cultivates is overlapping editing. This consists of cutting so that the action on screen is prolonged beyond its presumed duration. The technique has its source in the American cinema, but Kuleshov, Eisenstein’s teacher and a subtle observer of Hollywood practice, took the device further. In The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks (1924), a brawl is rendered in four markedly overlapping shots. A year later, in Strike, Eisenstein refines the procedure. While overlapping the movement of a wheel striking a foreman, he shows the action from sharply different angles. The editing makes the vectors of movement clash (22.6–22.11). Later in this and other films Eisenstein experiments with lengthy prolongations, oscillations, even complete replays of events. Overlapping editing creates a nervous, vibrating rhythm and allows him to rearrange elements from shot to shot.

Such montage techniques fulfill a more general purpose. All Left directors sought to dynamize each scene, but Eisenstein often abolishes the sense that an independent, coherent fictional event is rendered by a series of shots. This strategy exemplifies that elimination of “real time” to which Piotrovsky refers. The tractor driver in Old and New is “matched” in the same position in two different places; the priest aboard the Potemkin strikes the cross into his right hand, then abruptly into his left (22.12, 22.13); the massacre on the Odessa Steps yields
incompatible spatial arrangements from shot to shot; one sequence in October refuses to specify whether action is occurring on a single bridge or on several. In all these instances, the very idea of a consistent story event falls into question. Once again the action becomes “quasodiegetic,” hovering between the story world and a realm of abstract, emblematic significance.

In using such rapid and disjunctive editing, Eisenstein creates a narration that sacrifices strict realism to perceptual and emotional impact. As in the metaphorical ramifications of certain passages, the result, however apparently didactic, goes beyond rhetoric and becomes aesthetically complex. Eisenstein pushes dynamized style to the limits of deformation, creating a mannerist version of Soviet cinematic norms.

The emphasis upon the moment-by-moment stylistic texture calls forth one more strategy in Eisenstein’s “plotless” approach to heroic realism. It goes unmentioned in Piotrovsky’s discussion, but it is a significant innovation in silent film history. It involves using recurrent objects and graphic patterns as motifs to unify the film.

We are very familiar with this organizational principle today, but motivic construction of Eisenstein’s sort, and on his scale, was not yet a commonplace of prestigious cinema. In dramatic cinema, both in Hollywood and Europe, the motif was typically a prop that was invested with some narrative or thematic significance. In William deMille’s Miss Lulu Bett (1921), for instance, the title character’s bedroom slipper takes on a charged dramatic significance in the course of a scene. In the course of Abel Gance’s La roue (1923) flowers and the locomotive acquire symbolic implications by virtue of their association with the characters’ feelings and experience. In such mainstream usage, the motif either enhances characterization, plays a specific causal role in the plot, or intensifies the thematic point of the scene. Moreover, the spectator is expected to notice and recall the motif upon its reappearance. Soviet filmmakers used motifs in comparable ways.

As a self-consciously modernist artist, Eisenstein took a somewhat different perspective. He was aware that imagistic motifs played a central organizing role in poetry and drama. His studies of Zola, Bely, Joyce, and other artists convinced him that a rich, truly unified art work coordinates cross-referring systems of repeated images, verbal tags, and compositional devices. He could have found in Shklovsky’s essay on Bely the remark that contemporary Russian prose was largely “ornamental” in that large-scale patterns of imagery prevailed over plot structure (1925:180). Later, in a lecture to aspiring directors, Eisenstein described a motif in La bête humaine as “delineated in order to be remembered,” like the cradle in Griffith’s Intolerance.
The idea of motivic construction led Eisenstein to make the pictorial or thematic implications of an image stretch across the entire film.

Sometimes he treats his motif as a simple geometric figure. In Old and New the bureaucrats are linked to the kulaks by the fancy circles seen on the kulak’s gate (22.14) and in the agency office (22.15). Eisenstein often dynamizes such a static motif in the course of a film, as when in Old and New the fleet of tractors plows in concentric circles (22.16). Less abstract motifs, such as objects and gestures, will also bind the film together, but in a way that broadens to include remotely associated items. In Potemkin eyes, worms, and hanging objects form a thematic cluster. The Eisensteinian motif does not simply repeat; it develops, expands its implications, and intertwines with others to create a network of visual and thematic associations.

Some films, such as October and Old and New, display a strictly binary motivic organization: a basic thematic opposition (such as “God and Country”) is mapped onto a welter of constantly varied visual and dramatic items. In Strike motifs associated with one group of characters abruptly “change sides” at turning points in the action. Potemkin relies more on a “nodal” principle, in which a single event, such as the inspection of a piece of rotten meat or the gathering of a crowd at the quai, knots together several motifs.

Although the principle of large-scale motivic organization gets almost no attention in Eisenstein’s theoretical writings of the 1920s, he would articulate it in later years. For instance,
in 1933 he noted: “A motif of the content may be played not only in the story but also in the law of construction or the structure of the thing” (1933c:308). As in most aspects of his 1920s work, practice preceded theory.

The innovations of Eisenstein’s “plotless cinema”—the construction of the action around stages of a historical process, the radiating network of motifs binding the film together, the foregrounding of style in image and montage—were not simply onetime accomplishments. Every project pushed further. This effort is particularly apparent in his last two films, which react against what he perceived as a hardening of Soviet montage conventions. After seeing October, Shklovsky noted that the “logical” montage of psychological analysis practiced by Kuleshov and Pudovkin had “ceased to be felt.” Eisenstein’s intellectual montage responded to a need for even more “perceptible” methods (1930:111). Old and New sought to go still further, exploring “overtonal montage” as a way of integrating intellectual stimuli with other aspects of the shots.

The urge to experiment drove him to surpass the norms of his own works. As Eisenstein repeatedly insisted, each of his silent films was an answer, a “dialectical” antithesis, to its predecessor. Each offers fresh stylistic experiments and new methods of plot construction, motivic organization, mise-en-scène, and montage. But each film can also be seen as pointing out one path for Soviet film. Strike borrows methods of Civil War art, using Eccentrism and mass spectacle to create an openly agitational appeal to the audience. Potemkin works within an epic mode, using carefully developed emotional progressions to carry away the spectator October, more episodic than its predecessors, suggests that Left cinema could exploit a pluralistic “montage” of different types of filmic discourse. Finally, Old and New seeks not only to make the innovations of the earlier films “intelligible to the millions” but also to imbue Soviet myth with a spiritual fervor. Each film tries something strikingly new, and each offers a different model for heroic realism in Soviet cinema.

**Strike (1925)**

Strike sets the pattern for Eisenstein’s silent features in several ways. It launches his chronicle-myth of revolutionary history; it establishes his mixture of naturalism and stylization; it initiates his research into “film language” and methods of montage. But Strike is unique in his oeuvre for its eclectic experimentation, its exuberant leaps of tones and style, its posterlike extremes of clownishness and romanticism. Rediscovered by Western cinéphiles in the mid-1960s, it looked far more vibrant and playful than the master’s canonized classics. Its unrelenting Eccentrism gives every reel a pursuit, fistfight, or gymnastic exhibition; each scene is enlivened by unexpected pictorial effects or performance flourishes. Strike constitutes what Eisenstein and Tretyakov called Do You Hear, Moscow?—an “agitguignol.”

The vibrant experiments, however, are held together by a fairly rigorous structure. Strike seems loose only in contrast with the extraordinary unity of Potemkin. As in Eisenstein’s next two films, the decision to create a mass historical drama impels him to devise a coherent structure and vivid motifs that will carry the propagandistic lesson.

Strike’s theme is laid out in the opening quotation from Lenin: “The strength of the working class lies in its organization . . . Organization means unity of action, unity of practical operations.” The film’s plot traces how Bolshevik factory workers, after laying the groundwork through agitation, turn a spontaneous protest into a strike. At the moment when the strike is born, the factory workers reassert Lenin’s lesson: they have power, they say in their meeting, “when we are united in the struggle against capital.”
But solidarity loosens. The prolonged strike intensifies workers’ family problems. A strike leader, acting in a moment of undisciplined violence, allows a spy to identify him. After police torture, he accepts a bribe to betray his comrades. At the same time, provocateurs from the lumpenproletariat provide the authorities with an occasion to attack the workers. The principal Bolshevik is captured, and the police launch a massacre that sweeps through the workers’ quarters. Strike both pays homage to the struggles that preceded the October revolution and warns that class solidarity and Party unity must be maintained against enemies, both within and without.

The film insists on the generality of the lesson by presenting a composite of several historical strikes. The action is based upon the 1903 strikes at Rostov-on-the-Don, which spread to more than five hundred factories and involved almost a quarter of a million workers. But the film, shot in and around Moscow, makes no explicit reference to these events; indeed, Alexandrov claims that spectators did not recognize the historical source (1976:43). The film further generalizes the action with a concluding title that lists other strikes that were harshly repressed, ranging from a 1903 massacre of workers in the Urals to a 1915 strike in spinning factories. As the film’s title suggests, Strike becomes an anatomy of the forces at work throughout several critical moments of Russian labor’s struggle for socialism.

Eisenstein’s habitual strategy of making every reel constitute a distinct “chapter” or “act” contributes to this generalizing quality. Each part is presented as a phase through which a typical strike will pass. The first reel, starting with the title “All is quiet at the factory/But—” covers the agitational phase of activity. Reel two, labeled “The immediate cause of the strike,” dramatizes the theft of a worker’s micrometer, the harsh response of the management, and the worker’s suicide. The death triggers an uprising that bursts into a full-blown strike. The third reel opens with the title “The factory stands idle” and portrays the effects of inactivity on both the capitalist owners and the workers. Reel four, “The strike is prolonged,” traces the debilitating effect of the strike on the workers. Here the turning point comes with the strike leader’s betrayal of his comrades. “Engineering a massacre,” the title of the next reel, becomes a parallel to the Bolsheviks’ agitation in the factory: a police spy hires some provocateurs. They set fire to a vodka shop, and although the provocation fails, the firemen turn their hoses on the workers, enabling the police to seize the main leader.

Although a spy, the police chief, and the captured Bolshevik appear in the last reel, “Liquidation,” the segment functions principally to expand the implications of the dramatic action. First comes a savage cossack assault on workers’ tenements. Previously, the factory workers have been shown living in suburban cottages; this new locale becomes a more generalized representation of workers’ homes. The tenement massacre is followed by the most abstract sequence of all, the intercutting of cossacks’ firing upon an anonymous horde of fleeing workers with butchers’ slaughter of a bull. The latter line of action is wholly nondiegetic, pushing the sequence into a realm of pure “attraction.” The last reel is virtually a detachable short film, a showcase of Eisenstein’s “free montage of attractions” that, operating independently of narrative, stimulate strong emotions and wide-ranging concepts.

Strike, then, presents an anatomy of a political process. It displays the techniques of the revolutionary underground, creating a film that, as Eisenstein somewhat obscurely suggested, paralleled the “production” of a strike with the process of industrial production itself (1925d:59–61). The plot also schematizes the typical stages, tests, and crises through which a strike must pass. In addition, the film diagnoses those forces with which the working class must contend. Seeking to dramatize the class struggle, Eisenstein builds up an enormous range of oppositions between the workers and their class enemies. And many of these call forth the sort
of stylization that Eisenstein associated with "theatrical October," the stage pageants during and immediately after the Civil War.

On one side are the forces of capital, personified at the outset by the obese, top-hatted factory director, who leers out at the camera (22.17). He oversees scurrying clerks, disdainful typists, a straw-hatted factory manager, and an old foreman. The director in turn answers to the factory's owners. Aligned with the capitalist and their flunkies are the police, with their herd of spies, and the lumpenproletariat, recruited by the spies. All these forces are presented as a spectrum of stylized types, ranging from the most realistic (the police) through caricature (the capitalists and their staff) and theatrical grotesquerie (the animalistic spies) to circus eccentricity (the hobo king and his retinue). Eisenstein introduces a bizarre touch into even more naturalistic moments: the bribery of the captured Bolshevik by the police administrator is accompanied by a pair of midgets tangoing on the table, their seductive dance mocking the traitor's acquiescence (22.18).

The workers, by contrast, are idealized in a manner typical of "heroic realism," with none of the bourgeois forces' exaggeration of costume or demeanor. Moreover, they are far less individualized. The film's opening depersonalizes the agitators: after the director's frontal close-up, they are presented obliquely, as silhouettes and reflections (22.19). Later, the workers are characteristically shown en masse. Individuals are momentarily picked out, but none is
portrayed in depth. Indeed, any worker developed as a distinct character is likely to die soon (the suicide) or to join the bourgeoisie (the traitor). And individualization itself is used to point up thematic oppositions. The capitalist's mistress, who frenziedly urges the police agents to beat the captured worker, contrasts with the more anonymous female Bolshevik leader who battles the police to get to the fire alarm.

The contrast between the caricature of class enemies and the romanticization of class allies will become central to Eisenstein's later films, but its sources lie in Civil War art. Strike is indebted to the agitki, propaganda vehicles that emerged in the wake of the October revolution, particularly the "epic" version seen in poster art and mass festivals, with their satirically individualized rulers pitted against a mass of workers. Mayakovsky's Mystere-bouffe and his emblematic designs for store windows had already shown that Left art could utilize such schematic material. The boss's sadistic mistress in Eisenstein's film has a parallel in Tretyakov's Roar, China! in which the merchant's daughter eagerly watches two men being strangled.

Strike finds vivid motifs to sharpen its conventional opposition. From the start the workers are associated with machines; when they go on strike, so does the equipment, so that the factory director's typewriter snaps itself away from his touch. The capitalists are associated with an intricate bureaucracy, in the factory and in the police force. One sequence uses reporting and phone calls to trace the chain of command running from foreman through managers to police officers. This contrasts with the machine-centered production process in the agitators' printing shop, where a handwritten text becomes—without human intervention—a leaflet, copies of which shower down on a locomotive in the factory. Through the opposition of machines and bureaucracy, Eisenstein again moves to the abstract level, portraying the Marxist distinction between the forces and relations of production. He further shows, by the radicalization of the workers, that a revolutionary situation has come to pass. The progressive factors in the base have outstripped the institutions that they originally supported.

Such clusters of imagery are reversed in the course of the film. Initially the workers occupy the factory catwalks (22.20); but the brutal cossacks eventually take over the catwalks of the tenements (22.21). Whereas the workers are established as in the heights, the lumpenproletariat are introduced as living in huge underground barrels (22.22); soon the Bolshevik leader will be captured by being hosed into a hole and surrounded by barrels (22.23). The children associated with the strikers come to prominence in the last reel, when toddlers become victims of the cossacks' rampage (22.24).

Again and again, Eisenstein's motifs reflect the drama's progression. Three of these—animals, water, and circles—undergo particularly rich development. In each case, a motif initially associated with one side of the political struggle becomes transferred to the other.

In the early scenes the capitalist forces are likened to animals. As the factory sits idle, the factory director is intercut with a crow and a cat. More explicitly, each police spy is given an animal identity: Bulldog, Fox, Owl, and Monkey are visually linked with their counterparts and move in a roughly appropriate fashion. In the same portions of the film, the proletariat are established as being in control of animals: geese and other domestic animals are part of their milieu, and children run a goat in a wheelbarrow as their elders had turned out the factory manager. But at the film's end, it is the workers who are equated with an animal—the bull, slaughtered by a casually proficient butcher likened to the soldiers.

The motif of water develops in the same way. At the film's start, agitating workers are glimpsed in a reflecting puddle; later they plot their conspiracy while swimming. During the battle for the steam whistle during the factory uprising, workers spray water to knock the guard off balance, and a dripping worker joyously pulls the whistle cord. But as the workers'
cause wanes, water turns against them. The first leader is captured in a soaking downpour. As the hobo king spruces himself up, he sprays water from his mouth onto his mirror.

Perhaps the richest development of motifs involves a geometrical shape, the circle. Introduced in an intertitle ("HO," that is, "BUT—"), the O takes on a life of its own by becoming a circle and then a rotating wheel in the factory. It is firmly associated with the workers: they run the wheel of a turbine; a wheel turns their printing press. The agitators meet in a scrap heap of wheels (22.25). A crane operator slams the foreman to earth with a suspended wheel, which at another point aggressively hurtsles at the camera (22.26). During the strike uprising, wheelbarrows roll the manager and foreman into the runoff pit, while the stopping of the factory is conveyed by a symbolic image showing workers folding their arms and a wheel ceasing to rotate (22.27). As the strike continues, Bolsheviks meet in huge pipes (22.28), another circular contrast with the barrels in which the lumpenproletariat live.

The motifs of water and circularity culminate in the sequence of the firemen’s assault. One of the most sensuously arousing passages in Eisenstein’s cinema, the hosing sequence uses rhythmic editing and diagonal compositions to create a pulsating movement. The water motif reaches its apotheosis as spray slashes across the frame in vectors that evoke El Lissitzky’s Constructivist compositions (22.29). The firemen turn their hoses’ punishing force on the workers. Now the wheel is on a fire truck, working against the strikers; the spume pins a worker helplessly to a cartwheel (22.30). In terms that Eisenstein would elaborate in his later theory, water and circles constitute image-based “lines” that weave through the film and “knot” in this climactic massacre.

Such opposed and transformed motifs function as associations reinforcing the film’s agitational purpose. Eisenstein uses other means to drive home the lesson. To a greater degree than his contemporaries, he overtly acknowledges the audience. Most obviously, this direct address occurs in expository intertitles. Eisenstein has already perfected the ironically echoic intertitle: “Preparation” denotes the activities of the workers and the police agents; “Beat him!” recurs in scenes in which the captured worker is thrashed. More daringly, Eisenstein creates “collective” intertitles. At the workers’ meeting in the factory, for instance, dialogue titles alternate with crowd shots, as if the words issue from the entire mass. Still other titles blur the distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic sources. We must often ask if a line, such as “Thief!” when the worker is accused, comes from a character or the overarching narration itself. Meyerhold approved of Eisenstein’s use of such direct address: the intertitle acts directly on the viewer, he suggested, and “the director assumes the role of agitator” (Meyerhold 1925:160).

Images also assault the audience. Sometimes characters face the camera, either in shot/reverse-shot confrontations with other characters or simply in direct address to the spectator. The film concludes with a pair of staring eyes in extreme close-up and the title, “Proletarians, remember!” This final appeal to the audience was a convention of Civil War drama; at the close of Do You Hear, Moscow? the protagonist shouted the title line at the audience.

The engagement of the spectator arises more indirectly from Eisenstein’s use of symbols and tropes. Like other art deriving from the Civil War tradition, Strike invokes religious iconography. The scene of the worker’s suicide becomes a proletarian Descent from the Cross (22.31), and the writhing figures of demonstrators under the firemen’s fusillade of hoses echo the postures of martyrs (22.32). Strike also shows a firm commitment to metaphorical filmmaking. Sometimes the intertitles create the linkage, as when, after the factory director petulantly kicks his wicker chair off his patio, a title remarks: “Their thrones rest on the labor of the workers.” Some titles are integrated with the visual motifs more dynamically. The title “Spreading ripple,” coming after the shot of workers reflected in a puddle, ties the agitational process to the water motif and suggests the expansion of the workers’ discontent. At the end of the firehose
sequence, an abstract burst of spray introduces the final reel, punningly titled “Liquidation”: the literal “liquidation” has been a prelude to the massacre.

Eisenstein explores an assortment of purely visual metaphors as well. Most are firmly located within the story world and are brought to our attention by means of close-ups and editing. Through crosscutting, the capitalists’ squeezing juice out of a lemon becomes analogous to the harassment of strikers by the mounted police. Intercutting the machine belts with the worker’s belt (22.33, 22.34) makes his suicide an ironic contrast to the machines’ activity. The animal motifs we have already considered are largely metaphorical, rendering the police spies bestial through symbolic superimpositions (22.35).

In this connection, the last sequence is especially revelatory. Eisenstein has often been criticized for intercutting the final massacre with nondiegetic footage of the butchering of a bull. Kuleshov, for instance, objected that the slaughter-house footage is “not prepared by a second, parallel line of action” (Kuleshov 1967:32). A more narratively motivated treatment would situate the slaughter-house in the time and space of the story, as the pet shop contextualizes the animal imagery that characterizes the spies. But it is clear that after using so many diegetically motivated metaphors—beasts, belts, lemon-squeezer, and so on—Eisenstein experimented with a more conceptual possibility.

Eisenstein prepares for the leap into nondiegetic metaphor by a rapid series of more motivated ones. Confronted by the defiant Bolshevik leader, the raging police chief pounds his desk, knocking bottles of ink across the map of the workers’ district. The shot literalizes the metaphor of “the streets running with blood” (22.36). The chief slaps his hand in the pool of ink, giving himself the gory hand of the executioner. Now comes the leap. Eisenstein cuts to connect the chief’s pounding gesture (22.37) to that of the butcher coming down to stab the bull (22.38), and the nondiegetic metaphor emerges—a literal slaughter in an abstract time and space, a figurative slaughter in the story world. In context, the slaughter sequence climaxes the film’s experimentation with metaphor by catapulting the event into a realm outside the time and space of the story. In October we will find that the nondiegetic metaphors dominate the first half of the film and become “narrativized” in the course of the action.

The wide-ranging exploration of cinema’s metaphorical possibilities is typical of Strike’s pluralistic approach. The performances, especially in the capitalist faction, constitute an anthology of contemporary theatrical styles. A similar breadth of experimentation characterizes the film’s editing. At many points Eisenstein demonstrates his command of orthodox editing
strategies: the breathless crosscutting between tumultuous strikers and the steam whistle, for instance, or the crisp shot/reverse shot when Monkey negotiates with the king. On the whole, however, the film moves a critical distance away from American-style editing and from Kuleshov’s earliest work.

We have seen that Eisenstein’s overlapping presentation of the wheel’s assault on the foreman revises Kuleshov’s reworking of American-style expansion of movement. This is only the extreme edge of a practice that pushes visual fragmentation to unprecedented limits. When Owl struggles into his pants, Eisenstein breaks the action into six shots, with slight overlaps and ellipses. As the strikers burst into the factory courtyard, seven shots of the swinging gates present graphically smooth but spatially inconsistent movement. Eisenstein often treats his sensational attractions less as discrete elements within the shot than as kinesthetic impulses to be connected by cutting. As the strikers dump the foreman and the manager into the muck, an old woman’s fiercely pounding forearms continue the gesture of descent. The pulsating crowd in the hosing sequence becomes, thanks to editing, pure patterns of flowing or clashing movement.

Despite his eclecticism, Eisenstein is at pains to organize many of his editing techniques. He systematizes Kuleshov’s manipulation of dissolves, superimpositions, and similar optical devices. He associates the police agents with irises and mirrors, as if to present visual analogues
of their spying (22.39). He pushes such camera tricks further when he introduces the spies as a set of animated photos (22.40), a motif that finds its parallel when the clandestine photo of the strike leader comes furtively to life. Later, the agitators meet in a cemetery (itself a token of the strike's decline), and Eisenstein superimposes the fist of the police chief hovering over a pen (22.41), not only indicating his power over them but also foreshadowing the hand that will hammer the ink-bloodied map in the last sequence.

That sequence also exhibits the most elaborate of Eisenstein's "montage of attractions." The editing certainly has some linguistic and conceptual basis. The workers are figuratively "slaughtered," and the metaphor endows the soldiers' act with the connotations of impersonal, efficient butchery. The cutting works out the conceptual parallels: as the soldiers fire, blood pours out of the bull. But Eisenstein's primary goal of provoking the spectators' emotions poses problems for the cinema. Whereas Grand Guignol theatre shocks its audience by portraying decapitations or electrocutions, the cinema, being a mediated presentation, must stir its audience to political consciousness through pictorial associations. The massacre scene can gain maximal intensity only if the filmmaker arouses the proper associations. Thus the documentary shots dwelling on the bull's torrential bloodletting and thrashing legs aim less to tease the mind than to arouse a revulsion that will take the massacre as its object. Eisenstein told a visitor that the bull's death should "stir the spectator to a state of pity and terror which would be
unconsciously and automatically transferred to the shooting of the strikers” (Freeman 1930:222).

Looking back from 1934, Eisenstein reflected that Strike “floundered about in the flotsam of a rank theatricality” (1934i:16), perhaps tacitly acknowledging its mixture of Eccentric and epic tendencies. It seeks to create a heroic Soviet cinema by leavening the “monumental” aesthetic of the Civil War years with elements of theatrical grotesquerie. Nevertheless, Strike establishes Eisenstein’s creative method as one of balancing set pieces and ornamental flourishes against a pervasive unity of theme, technique, and motif. [...]

Notes

1. At twenty-four frames per second, Pudovkin’s silent films consistently average about 2.5 seconds per shot, while Dovzhenko’s range between about 3.5 and 4.5 seconds. Only Ilya Trauberg, much influenced by Eisenstein, approaches his rapid pace in Goluboi Express (1929), with an average shot rate of 1.7 seconds. At the same period in Hollywood, a silent film’s average shot length was 5 to 6 seconds.
2. Most Soviet theatres and workers’ clubs had only a single projector, so filmmakers began to construct their films in reel-length episodes. In Strike and Potemkin particularly, Eisenstein used this material constraint to demarcate stages of plot action.
Bibliography

Works by Sergei Eisenstein
1933c “Vozvrashchennie soldata fronta” (Return of the soldier from the front). In *IP* 4:27–535.


