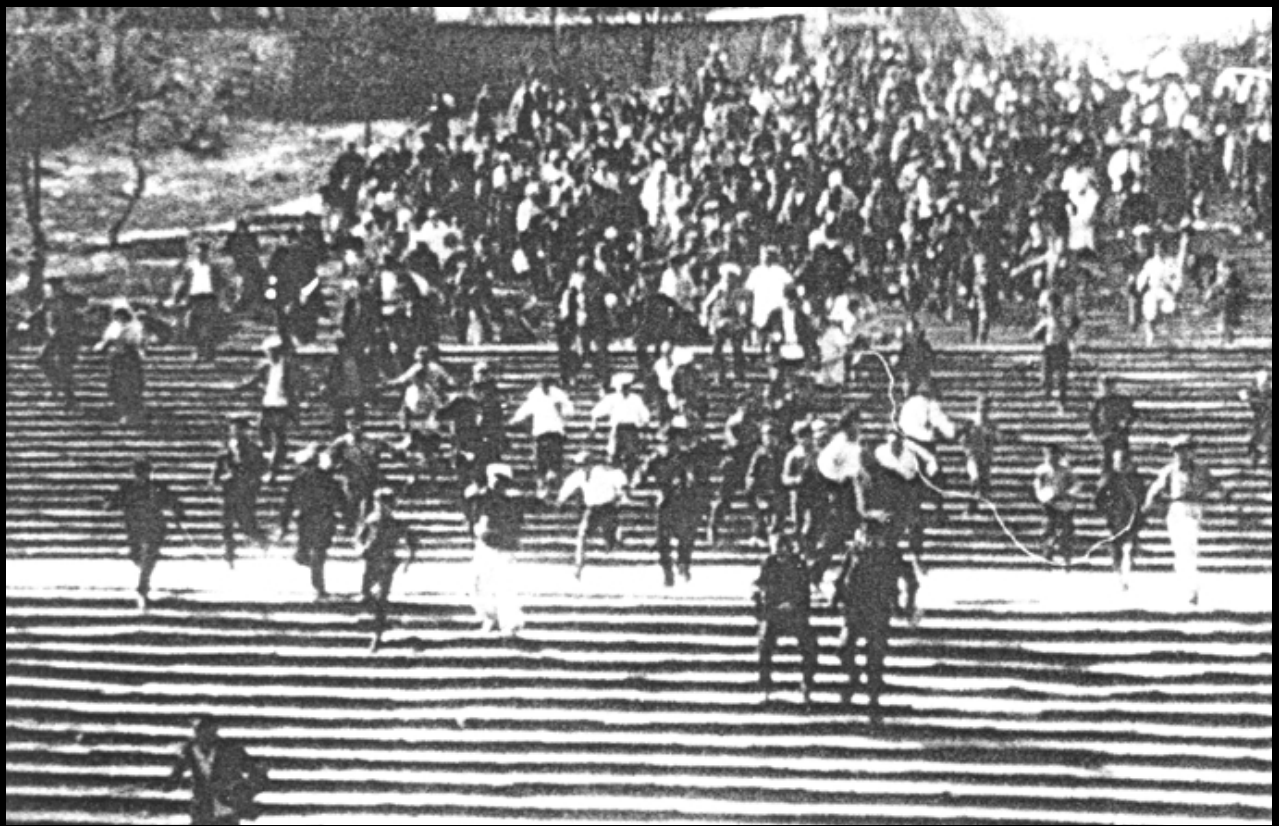




# COLLECTIVISM VERSUS ROMANTICISM IN THE EARLY CINEMA:

## SERGEI EISENSTEIN AND THE “MASS-HERO”

DAVID BOTSFORD



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# COLLECTIVISM VERSUS ROMANTICISM IN THE EARLY CINEMA: SERGEI EISENSTEIN AND THE “MASS-HERO”

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It would be a dull author with whom one agreed all the time. Just as George Bernard Shaw both infuriates and enlightens, often at the same time, just as one finds oneself always turning immediately on the newspaper page to any book review or opinion piece written by the Right Honourable J. Enoch Powell, so does one approach the philosophical and fictional works of Ayn Rand.

## PURPOSEFUL BEING OR HELPLESS VICTIM

The perceptive power displayed in *Atlas Shrugged* as to the direction of the collectivist creed of our time equals and in some ways even exceeds that of those other classic “dystopian” authors, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell; however, her insistence that the only acceptable form of libertarianism is agreement with every detail of her philosophy of Objectivism is precisely the demonstration of that philosophy’s limitations. Most university theology courses place a heavy emphasis on biblical criticism and the refutation of the more improbable aspects of the religious teaching that has been taught to their students since early childhood; to the truly rational individual there can be no “sacred texts” or “divine beings” whose words and actions are beyond the scope of rational evaluation. It is regrettable that the “fundamentalist” devotion to Rand, to quote the lady herself, “can serve as an example of what happens when concrete-bound mentalities, seeking to by-pass the responsibility of thought, attempt to transform abstract principles into concrete prescriptions and to replace creation with imitation.”<sup>1</sup>

To say this is in no way to diminish Rand’s genuine achievement. In the tradition of the Greeks, she offers the reader an all-round philosophy that is not confined merely to politics and economics, and her views on art, as presented in *The Romantic Manifesto*, a collection of her essays, are as cogent and penetrating as anything she wrote. Rand presents us with a vision of what art can and should be like, an art which corresponds to a conception of man as a purposeful, rational being, capable of achieving his values in the real world, a conception of man, in short, that is central to the libertarian and individualist philosophy.

Here we will examine Rand’s insights into art and its function with regard to the art of the cinema, and particularly to the film-maker who, on the theoretical level at least, has developed that art to its most sophisticated form, albeit for purposes diametrically opposed to those of libertarianism: Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein.

Rand recognises that art is not simply a peripheral issue, but is central to man’s sense of life and the actions and thoughts

which are motivated by that sense of life. “A sense of life is a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics, an emotional, subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence.”<sup>2</sup> Drawing upon abstract concepts, art provides a focus for man’s values:

Art is a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist’s metaphysical value-judgements. An artist re-creates those aspects of reality which represent his fundamental view of man and of existence. In forming a view of man’s nature, a fundamental question one must answer is whether man possesses the faculty of volition - because one’s conclusions and evaluations in regard to all the characteristics, requirements and actions of man depend on the answer.<sup>3</sup>

She goes on to cite examples of art forms and works of art which answer this central question of volition one way or the other. For example, “the Hindu dance presents a man of flesh without skeleton ... This is an image of man as infinitely pliable, man adapting himself to an incomprehensible universe, pleading with unknowable powers, reserving nothing, not even his identity.”<sup>4</sup> One is immediately reminded of the “Apu” trilogy of films directed by Satyajit Ray: *Panther Panchali* (India, 1956), *The Unvanquished* (India, 1957) and *The World of Apu* (India, 1959). These films concern the life of Apu, a Bengali Hindu, from childhood to middle age, and the disasters and fortunes which beset his family. In these films, according to Ray, “time passes according to a vast, irrevocable plan”; the characters take little action to determine the course of their lives, accepting misfortunes and sadness as passively as strokes of good luck. The trilogy is a beautiful and compelling piece of cinema and an illustration of Hindu fatalism; it is also an utter negation of the Romantic conception of man and art.

Another cinematic parallel presents itself when Rand tells us that

Western man can understand and enjoy Oriental painting; but Oriental music is unintelligible to him, it evokes nothing, it sounds like noise.<sup>5</sup>

One is reminded here of the two strands within Japanese cinema. So complex are the relationships and values which permeate Japanese society, and so different from those of the West, that the integration of these values contained within films set in contemporary Japan tend to mystify or bore the western viewer. *Tokyo Story* (Japan, 1953), directed by Yasujiro Ozu, concerns the strains placed upon a family which moves to the capital; from a Westerner’s point

of view, these strains seem obscure, and a disproportionate amount of screen time is given to the death of the mother. *Living* (Japan, 1951), directed by Akira Kurosawa, is about a civil servant dying of cancer; his inner conflicts seem incomprehensible, and the scene after his death in which his colleagues recall what a great guy he was is unduly long by Western standards. *Street of Shame* (Japan, 1956), directed by Kenji Mizogushi, deals with the lives of Tokyo prostitutes; one would require considerable knowledge of the position of women in Japanese society to fully comprehend the characters' motives.

By contrast, Japan's feudal past provides a background for films in which the Western viewer can instantly comprehend the issues at stake, and which, like the European middle ages or the Wild West, is an ideal setting for dramas based on individual heroism and fundamental values; in short, for a form of Romanticism. Examples include *Sansho the Bailiff* (Japan, 1954), directed by Mizogushi, about a family dispossessed by a wicked bailiff; *Rebellion* (Japan, 1967), directed by Masaki Kobayashi, about the dilemma of a samurai who feels compelled to rebel against his master; *The Seven Samurai* (Japan, 1954), directed by Kurosawa, about villagers who recruit seven samurai to defend themselves from bandits; and *The Hidden Fortress* (Japan, 1958), also directed by Kurosawa, an adventure involving a quest for hidden treasure. Of the last two, it is significant that the first was remade as a Western, while in the second Kurosawa drew his techniques directly from the Westerns of the American director John Ford.

Rand defines Romanticism as:

... a category of art based on the recognition of the principle that man possesses the faculty of volition ... If man possesses volition, then the crucial aspect of his life is his choice of values — if he chooses values, then he must act to gain and/or keep them — if so, then he must set his goals and engage in purposeful action to achieve them.

The literary form expressing the essence of such action is the *plot*.<sup>6</sup>

The emergence of Romanticism, she explains, was the product of the rise of the Aristotelean sense of life and of capitalism in the 19th century, but it went into decline in the latter part of that century, increasingly being replaced by Naturalism, a school which "rejected the concept of volition and went back to a view of man as a helpless creature determined by forces beyond his control; only now the new ruler of man's destiny was held to be *society*."<sup>7</sup> As a result, she goes on, Romanticism is today confined to the fringes of culture as "bootleg Romanticism" in thrillers and other popular entertainment.

### MIRACLES ARE THE ONLY HOPE

An explicit Naturalism is certainly present in many of the most accomplished examples of film technique. The Italian neo-realist director Vittorio De Sica created sympathetic characters, striving to achieve or maintain values, who gain the emotional support of the audience, only to dash their endeavours as hopeless. In *Bicycle Thieves* (Italy, 1949), an unemployed man obtains a job which will enable him to provide for his impoverished wife and young son. However, his new bicycle, on which he has spent all his money, and which he needs in order to perform the job, is stolen,

and he and his son embark on a desperate search through Rome to locate it. Their hopes — and that of the viewer, whose sympathy De Sica totally captures — are repeatedly raised, only to be frustrated again and again. Finally the man is reduced to trying to steal somebody else's bicycle; in the final shot he is caught, and his face shows as memorable a display of defeat as has ever been shown on a cinema screen.

In *Umberto D* (Italy, 1952) a retired and kindly old man, who stands up for simple justice among the residents of the boarding house where he lives, faces eviction because he cannot afford the rent, and is unsuccessful in raising the money. Evicted and homeless, he tries to give away his pet dog, whom he can no longer afford to feed, to a caring owner. Unsuccessful in finding such an owner, he tries to mercifully kill the dog; even this fails, and the film ends as the mystified dog rushes back to his master's side.

De Sica, who has so successfully convinced the viewer of the justice of his protagonists' goals, and the possibility of their realisation by the characters' actions — which is precisely the basis for the suspense within the films — is telling us that man cannot achieve his goals through purposeful and rational action in this world. The point is made even clearer in his comedy *Miracle in Milan* (Italy, 1951), in which a baby boy is found, like Moses, floating in a basket in a canal, and is adopted by an old woman. As he grows up, he is found to have miraculous powers to grant any wish, and provides the tramps, beggars and other poor people of the city with all kinds of desirable goods. Behind the comedy is the obvious proposition that it is only through such "miracles" that the poor can hope to achieve their goals.

The reader therefore understands what Rand means when she tells us that:

As far as their fiction aspects are concerned, movies and television, by their nature, are media suited exclusively to Romanticism (to abstractions, essentials and drama). Unfortunately, both media came too late: the great day of Romanticism was gone, and only its sunset rays reached a few exceptional movies. (Fritz Lang's *Siegfried* is the best among them.) For a while, the movie field was dominated by the equivalent of the slick-magazine Romanticism, with a still less discriminating level of taste and imagination, and an incommunicable vulgarity of spirit.<sup>8</sup>

*Siegfried* is the first part of *Die Nibelungen* (Germany, 1924), the epic film about the legend of the Germanic hero and his eponymous family. In *Siegfried* the hero carries out his deeds in a mythical and magical world until he is finally killed by trickery. The second part, *Kriemhild's Revenge* is set in the concrete historical world of the Dark Ages; Siegfried's widow, Kriemhild, marries Attila the Hun, and induces him to divert his horde from attacking Rome to slaying the villain who murdered Siegfried, after which Kriemhild herself drops dead, having been kept alive after Siegfried's death only by her desire for revenge. While Rand dislikes the "nature of the story, which is a tragic 'malevolent universe' legend", she argues that Fritz Lang is the only film director

... who has fully understood the fact that *visual art* is an intrinsic part of films in a much deeper sense than the mere selection of sets and camera angles — that a

“motion picture” is literally *that*, and has to be a stylized visual composition in motion.

It has been said that if one stopped the projection of *Siegfried* and cut out a film frame at random, it would be as perfect in composition as a great painting. Every action, gesture and movement in this film is calculated to achieve that effect. Every inch of the film is *stylized*, i.e., condensed to those stark, bare essentials which convey the nature and spirit of the story, of its events, of its locale. The entire picture was filmed indoors, including the magnificent legendary forests whose every branch was man-made (but does not look so on the screen). While Lang was making *Siegfried*, it is reported, a sign hung on the wall of his office: ‘Nothing in this film is accidental.’ *This* is the motto of great art.<sup>9</sup>

Neither indeed was anything accidental in the films of the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, films which set out to create a sense of life, an aesthetic, a cinema, diametrically opposed to the values of Romanticism. In was in the early years of the Soviet regime that the most systematic, conscious endeavour was made to use the cinema as a means of affecting human consciousness, attitudes and behaviour. And it was Eisenstein who took the project further, on both a practical and theoretical level, than any other figure in Soviet cinema.

#### AMERICAN CAPITALISM AND AMERICAN CINEMA

The cinema as a regular form of entertainment began with the public showing of films by the Lumière brothers in Paris in 1895. However, it implies no belittling of such European pioneers of film as the Lumières and Georges Méliès, whose trick cinematography impresses even today, to say that it was in the United States of America that cinema first reached its full stature both as a commercial industry and as an art form. Through the contributions of film-makers such as Edwin S. Porter and, especially, D. W. Griffith, within three decades after the birth of the cinema, American films had achieved a world-wide popularity that the output of no other country could match.

In Russia, beginning in 1916 and continuing after the Bolshevik revolution, Lev Kuleshov, the film-maker who was to become known as the father of the Soviet cinema, visited cinemas in working-class areas (where the audience would be less inhibited in demonstrating its emotions) to discover why American films were so popular and affective with audiences, Russian films so unpopular and dull, and European films somewhere in between. He found that in a typical Russian film there were from 10 to 15 different shots spliced together, in a European film between 20 and 30, in an American film no less than 80 to 100. A scene in which, for example, a man sits at a desk, takes a pistol from a drawer and shoots himself, would be handled very differently in an American film from a Russian one. In Russia, an elaborate set would be constructed, and the entire scene of the suicide would be filmed in a single long shot. Kuleshov describes the effect on the viewer as follows:

He sees a tiny actor among a large assortment of things, and while the actor is performing the juiciest psychological suffering, the viewer might be examining the leg of the writing table or the painting that is hung

on the wall — that is, the spectator receives an extraordinarily distracted account of what is taking place on the screen.

The Americans filmed things completely differently. They divided each separate scene into montage sequences, into a series of shots that made up each sequence; in addition, they shot each separate moment in such a way that only its action was visible, only that which was categorically essential. Even in a long shot they constructed scenery so that details were not noticed. If they needed to achieve the impression of a room, they would achieve it by some simple detail. If the wallpaper design did not have a particular function, walls were darkened, or blackened, and only those objects were left in the light which were essential to the incident.

Besides that, everything was shot in what is called close-up, that is, when it was necessary to show the face of a person suffering, they showed only his face. If he opened the drawer of a desk and took a pistol from it, they showed the desk drawer and the hand taking the pistol. When it came to pressing the trigger, they filmed the finger pressing on the trigger, because other objects and the surroundings in which the actor worked, were irrelevant at that particular instant. This method of filming only that moment of movement essential to a given sequence and omitting the rest, was labeled by us the “American method”, and it was thus placed in the foundations of the new cinematography which we were beginning to form.<sup>10</sup>

Montage, or creative editing, defined as “the organization of cinematic material”, was the key to creating an effective film, and the technique of montage was inextricably linked to the themes and sense of life encapsulated in the films. Kuleshov explained:

The flowering of American cinema was the result of the development of American capitalism. Capitalist America was being constructed, capitalist America developed, because the American society needed strong, energetic builders, fighters for the strengthening of the relics of capitalism. The Americans needed to utilize human resources at their disposal for the creation of a mighty capitalist order. This society required people of a strong bourgeois psychological orientation and world-view. Thus what was completely clear was that the task of American cinema was the education of the particular sort of person who, by virtue of his qualities, would fit in with the epoch of the development of capitalism.

At the same time capitalism inevitably nurtured the development of a proletarian class, and the consciousness of this class must have been awakening and developing; and it is utterly apparent that capitalism had to cloud this consciousness, to distract it, to weaken it. American art inevitably had to become a ‘consoling’ art, an art that lacquered reality, an art that diverted the masses from the class struggle, from an awareness of their own class interests; and, on the other hand, it had to be an art that directed energy to competitiveness, to enterprise, larded with bourgeois morality and bourgeois psychology.

That is how the ‘American detective’ was created — the American adventure films. From one point of view, they brought attention to energy, to competitiveness, to action; they attracted attention to the type of energetic and strong ‘heroes’ of capitalism, in whom strength, resourcefulness, and courage were always victorious. On the other hand, these films accustomed one to bigotry, to the lacquering of reality, ‘consoling’ and educating one to the fact that with corresponding energy a person can achieve individual fortune, can provide rent for himself, and can become a happy landowner.

The dramatic line of energy of the competition, the action and victory of those who found the strength in American films (to achieve their ends), created the rapid American montage of incidents. The American viewer demanded that directors pack the the greatest amount of action into a given length of film, the greatest number of events, the greatest possible energy, pitted characters against each other more vigorously, and built the entire construction of the film more energetically and dynamically.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps it was her time spent at the Leningrad film school in 1925 that led Rand to place such emphasis on supporting the “bootleg Romanticism” of thrillers, and on attacking attempts to denigrate the philosophical premises which underlie them in “spy spoofs” and the like:

‘Thrillers’ are detective, spy or adventure stories. Their basic characteristic is *conflict*, which means: a clash of goals, which means: purposeful action in pursuit of values. Thrillers are the product, the popular offshoot, of the *Romantic* school of art that sees man, not as a helpless pawn of fate, but as a being who possesses volition, whose life is directed by his own value-choices.<sup>12</sup>

A measure of how far the American cinema moved away from the broadly Romantic origins described by Kuleshov in the ensuing decades can be shown by the fate of the script Rand wrote for the film version of *The Fountainhead* (US, 1949), directed by King Vidor. Howard Roark’s line, “I wished to come here and say that I am a man who does not exist for others”, which is the crux of the entire work, was cut from the film by Warner Brothers before it was released.

## THE ACTOR BECAME SUPERFLUOUS

Lenin declared that “For us, cinema is the most important of all the arts”,<sup>13</sup> and regarded it as a central means of mobilising the masses for the construction of “the world’s first socialist state”: the film industry was nationalised in 1918. From 1919, Kuleshov became active in establishing and teaching in the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow, the world’s first film school, where his students included Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein, who were to become the two leading Soviet film directors and theorists. There, he carried out numerous experiments to discover the power of montage, and how scenes and even people could be artificially created by combining different strips of film. The most important of these, known as the “Kuleshov effect”, was described by Pudovkin as follows:

We took from some film or other several close-ups of the well-known Russian actor Mosjukhin. We chose close-ups which were static and which did not express

any feeling at all — quiet close-ups. We joined these close-ups, which were all similar, with other bits of film in three combinations. In the first combination the close-up of Mosjukhin was immediately followed by a shot of a plate of soup standing on a table. It was obvious and certain that Mosjukhin was looking at this soup. In the second combination the face of Mosjukhin was joined to shots showing a coffin in which lay a dead woman. In the third the close-up was followed by a shot of a little girl playing with a funny toy bear. When we showed the three combinations to an audience which had not been let into the secret the result was terrific. The public raved about the acting of the artist. They pointed out the heavy pensiveness of his mood over the forgotten soup, were touched and moved by the deep sorrow with which he looked on the dead woman, and admired the light, happy smile with which he surveyed the girl at play. But we knew that in all three cases the face was exactly the same.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that montage was so expressive meant that the role of the actor in films became virtually superfluous. Instead, the early Soviet film-makers used “typage”, in which individuals were selected to appear in films predominantly on the basis of their visual characteristics, which were supposed to allow the viewer to sum them up instantly. In *October* (USSR, 1928), directed by Eisenstein, for example, Lenin is played by a lorry-driver who was a virtual double of the Bolshevik leader. Typage also fitted in with the rejection of the “star system” of the western cinema, with its individualist emphasis on heroes and heroines.

Pudovkin’s conception of montage was that each shot represented “plastic material”, a building block in the construction of a film:

The expression that the film is ‘shot’ is entirely false, and should disappear from the language. The film is not *shot*, but *built*, built up from the separate strips of celluloid that are its raw material.<sup>15</sup>

In Pudovkin’s silent films, a multitude of shots, each one individually inexpressive, are cut together to create a meaningful sequence. His film *The End of St Petersburg* (USSR, 1927), concerns an impoverished peasant who moves to St Petersburg and becomes involved with revolutionary political activity, the first world war and the October revolution. In a scene in which the peasant is under arrest and is being interrogated by tsarist policemen, the latter throw him to the floor. There is almost no movement within each shot of this sequence: the illusion of falling is created by cutting from the seated peasant, to the policeman, and back to the floored peasant. An explosion is created by cutting together brief shots of a smoking flame-thrower, a magnesium flare and the shimmering surface of a river: footage of exploding dynamite had proved visually unimpressive. Montage is also used to create conceptual associations: in one sequence, shots of soldiers fighting in the trenches are cut with footage of brokers in the stock exchange: as the soldiers are killed, and the survivors become more bedraggled and their supplies run out, so the price figures chalked up on the stock exchange go up and up, to the pleasure of the dealers.

While Pudovkin’s technique of montage achieves a powerful affect on the viewer and achieves a superb economy of filmic construction, which keeps the tension at a high pitch

throughout the film, there is little that is particularly Marxist about the technique itself. Indeed, Pudovkin's method of montage was used to powerful effect in *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (France, 1928), directed by Carl Dreyer, which recounts the profoundly individualist story of the conflict of values faced by the Maid of Orleans, which is resolved by her being burned at the stake rather than confess to witchcraft.

Eisenstein developed a rival method and theory of montage that drew upon Marxist concepts in its very cutting together of the film. He began his artistic career in 1920 as a designer and director in the theatre, where he developed a concept of the "montage of attractions" as the basis of theatre. He used the word "attraction" as in the circus, the cinema or the music hall and described an "attraction" in theatre as:

*... every aggressive moment in it, i.e., every element of it that brings to light in the spectator those senses or that psychology that influences his experience - every element that can be verified and mathematically calculated to produce certain emotional shocks in a proper order within the totality - the only means by which it is possible to make the final ideological conclusion perceptible.*<sup>16</sup>

The montage of attractions was defined as:

*... free montage of arbitrarily selected, independent (within the given composition and the subject links that hold the influencing actions together) attractions - all from the stand of establishing certain final thematic effects.*<sup>17</sup>

In 1922 Eisenstein included a short film as part of the montage of attractions in the comedy *Enough Simplicity in Every Wise Man*, and in the following year staged *Gas Masks*, a play about the employees of a gasworks, actually in the Moscow Gas Factory, thereby breaking the bounds of theatre. As he explained:

In *Gas Masks* we see all the elements of film tendencies meeting. The turbines, the factory background, negated the last remnants of make-up and theatrical costumes, and all elements appeared as independently fused. Theater accessories in the midst of real factory plastics appeared ridiculous. The element of 'play' was incompatible with the acrid smell of gas. The pitiful platform kept getting lost among the real platforms of labor activity. In short, the production was a failure. And we found ourselves in the cinema.<sup>18</sup>

At that time, two principal currents in cinema had reached full artistic maturity: German Expressionism and the American cinema of D. W. Griffith. Eisenstein decisively rejected the former, which was composed principally of horror films such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Germany, 1920), directed by Robert Wiene; *The Golem* (Germany, 1920), directed by Paul Wegener; and *Nosferatu* (Germany, 1922), directed by F. W. Murnau, describing it as:

Mysticism, decadence, dismal fantasy ... reaching out towards us from our screens, achieved the limits of horror, showing us a future as an unrelieved night crowded with sinister shadows and crimes ... The chaos of multiple exposures, of over-fluid dissolves, of split screens ... reflected the confusion and chaos of post-war Germany ... *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), this barbaric carnival of the destruction of the healthy

human infancy of our art, this common grave for normal cinema origins, this combination of silent hysteria, particolored canvases, daubed flats, painted faces, and the unnatural broken gestures and actions of monstrous chimaeras ... [O]ur spirit urged us towards life - amidst the people, into the surging actuality of a regenerating country. Expressionism passed into the formative history of our cinema as a powerful factor - of repulsion.<sup>19</sup>

Rand, who also recognised the importance of art in reflecting and establishing values, also despised this genre:

The Horror Story ... represents the metaphysical projection of a single human emotion: blind, stark, primitive terror. Those who live in such terror seem to find a momentary sense of relief or control in the process of reproducing that which they fear — as savages find a sense of mastery over their enemies by reproducing them in the form of dolls. Strictly speaking, this is not a metaphysical, but a purely psychological projection; such writers are not presenting their view of life; they are not looking at life; what they are saying is that they *feel* as if life consisted of werewolves, Draculas and Frankenstein monsters. In its basic motivation, this school belongs to psychopathology more than to esthetics.<sup>20</sup>

#### D. W. GRIFFITH

By contrast, it was in the dynamic American cinema, with the "captivating and attractive" world it displayed, and particularly the films of Griffith, that Eisenstein found inspiration, just as Soviet engineers of the time found inspiration in American technology:

What enthralled us was not only these films, it was also their possibilities. Just as it was the possibilities in a tractor to make collective cultivation of the fields a reality, it was the boundless temperament and tempo of these amazing (and amazingly useless!) works from an unknown country that led us to muse on the possibilities of a profound, intelligent, class-directed use of this wonderful tool.

The most thrilling figure against this background was Griffith, for it was in his works that the cinema made itself felt as more than an entertainment or pastime. The brilliant new methods of the American cinema were united in him with a profound emotion of story, with human acting, with laughter and tears, and all this was done with an astonishing ability to preserve all that gleam of a filmically dynamic holiday ... That the cinema could be incomparably greater, and that this was to be the basic task of the budding Soviet cinema — these were sketched for us in Griffith's creative work, and found ever new confirmation in his films.<sup>21</sup>

These same films, at the same time and place, had a similarly inspiring effect on Rand, albeit in a completely opposite philosophical direction:

"My real enthusiasm for America, apart from its political principles, was formed then. I saw the essence of what Americans could be and ought to be. My favorite American movies were in the Milton Sills tradition — action, enormous benevolent freedom; they were not philosophical, but that's what I liked, it was as if At-

lantis had already arrived, the ideal was right here on earth, and one did not have to be philosophical, certainly not political, all those problems were already solved, and it was the perfect free existence for purposeful men.”<sup>22</sup>

Griffith’s film technique was characterised by the use of such novel cinematic devices as the close-up shot, parallel montage (that is, cross-cutting from one scene or line of action to another), and increasing the tempo of editing to increase tension and excitement, particularly in chase sequences. Griffith adapted the methods of parallel action and the close-up from the literary devices of Charles Dickens, who alternates short scenes showing connected events occurring simultaneously at different locations, and draws attention to significant objects or facial expressions (for example, “The kettle began it ...” at the opening of *The Cricket on the Hearth*), in order to enhance the effect of his writing. Like Eisenstein, Griffith came to cinema from the theatre, and drew his methods from the American theatrical melodrama of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which involved such devices as live animals and full-size trains on stage, together with fast-moving stories involving chases and rescues, and idealising the homestead and other essentially classical liberal values. According to Eisenstein:

In social attitudes Griffith was always a liberal, never departing far from the slightly sentimental humanism of the good old gentlemen and sweet old ladies of Victorian England, just as Dickens loved to picture them. His tender-hearted film morals go no higher than a level of Christian accusation of human injustice and nowhere in his films is there sounded a protest against social injustice.<sup>23</sup>

Griffith’s films typically show individuals caught up by political events beyond their control and struggling to overcome them. *Orphans of the Storm* (US, 1921), set at the time of the French revolution, concerns two sisters who become enmeshed in political intrigue and whose lives are threatened by the machinations of Robespierre. *Isn’t Life Wonderful?* (US, 1924) recounts the lives of a family of impoverished refugees in Germany during the hyper-inflation of 1922-3 and their determined attempts to build a home and a new life. *The Birth of a Nation* (US, 1915) concerns the impact of the American civil war and its aftermath on a Southern family. The fact that the heroes join the Ku Klux Klan as a means of overcoming the injustices of Reconstruction will doubtless horrify libertarians, but within the context of the film (as opposed to the historical record), the Klan is shown as defending the rule of law, individual security and private property rights against the tyranny imposed by a power-obsessed white Northern politician, who is shown as exploiting the blacks for his own purposes. The film contains several sympathetic black characters, and Griffith, who had grown up in the South in the decades following Reconstruction, was simply recounting the myths that were endlessly retold by white Southerners in that period. Certainly he was astounded by both the hostility that the film faced on its release, and by the resurgence of the Klan during the following decade, which was partly attributed to the influence of the film.<sup>24</sup>

## COLLECTIVIST VALUES

Eisenstein argued that Griffith’s method of parallel montage corresponded to his themes:

[T]he montage concept of Griffith, as a primarily parallel montage, appears to be a copy of his dualistic picture of the world, running in two parallel lines of poor and rich towards some hypothetical ‘reconciliation’ where ... the parallel lines would cross, that is, in that infinity, just as inaccessible as that ‘reconciliation.’<sup>25</sup>

Eisenstein sought to create a new form of cinema which in both themes and montage methods would be in tune with collectivist values:

“a) down with individual figures (heroes isolated from the mass) , b) down with the individual chain of events (the plot intrigue) — let us have neither personal stories nor those of people ‘personally’ isolated from the mass ...” It remains to add one more ‘down with’ — the personification of cinema in the *individualised shot*. We must look for the essence of cinema not in the shots but in the relationships between the shots just as in history we look not at individuals but at the relationships between individuals, classes, etc.<sup>26</sup>

He rejected Pudovkin’s view of “constructive” montage, and instead drew upon the Marxist-Hegelian dialectic to see montage as

... an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots — shots even opposite to one another: the ‘dramatic’ principle.<sup>27</sup>

The juxtapositioning of two shots, and the “conflict” that existed between them, created a “synthesis”, an affect that was no present in either of the two shots:

The shot is by no means an *element* of montage.

The shot is a montage *cell*.

Just as cells in their division form a phenomenon of another order, the organism or embryo, so, on the other side of the dialectical leap from the shot, there is montage.<sup>28</sup>

Eisenstein’s first film, *Strike* (USSR, 1924), concerning a strike in a factory in tsarist Russia, was the first in film history to dispense with the individual hero and the plot, and the first to make full use of real locations such as a factory, workers’ tenements, and so on. A micrometer is missing from the factory; a worker is accused of stealing it and, threatened with prosecution, hangs himself. A strike occurs, and the remainder of the film shows us a series of incidents in which the strikers, always shown as an undifferentiated “mass-hero”, confront the police and capitalists. In the final scene, the police shoot the strikers *en masse*; these shots are cut with footage of a bull being slaughtered, to increase the psychological impact on the viewer. To quote from the script:

- 1 The head of a bull jerks out of the shot, beyond the upper frame-line, avoiding the aimed butcher’s knife.
- 2 (*c.u.*) The hand holding the knife strikes sharply - beyond the lower frame-line.
- 3 (*l.s.*) 1,500 persons roll down a slope — in profile.
- 4 50 persons raise themselves from the ground, arms outstretched.
- 5 Face of a soldier taking aim.

6 (m.s.) A volley of gun-fire.

7 The shuddering body of the bull (*head outside the frame*) rolls over.<sup>29</sup>

## THE BATTLESHIP POTESKIN

Eisenstein's second film was his most famous: *The Battleship Potemkin* (USSR, 1925). This film is loosely based on the mutiny on board the *Potemkin* which occurred during the 1905 revolution. As in *Strike*, the film has a "mass-hero" rather than individual characters, but has more of a pronounced plot, and is divided into five acts, like a classical tragedy. There is unrest on the *Potemkin* as sailors refuse to eat maggot-ridden meat; the marines refuse to shoot the protestors and a general mutiny occurs in which the sailors take over the ship. They take it to the port of Odessa, where they fraternise with the people of the city, who are in revolt. Tsarist troops suddenly appear and gun down dozens of civilians; the sailors retaliate by shelling the general's headquarters and make their escape in the *Potemkin*. They encounter the rest of the fleet, expecting to be sunk, but are greeted by the other crews, who have themselves mutinied.

*The Battleship Potemkin* is as masterful a piece of film technique as it is of propaganda. In the scene where small sailboats from Odessa are sailing out to the *Potemkin* with supplies while people onshore wave to the ship, the montage creates combinations of shots, the shape and directions of which create a "fusion" of solidarity between ship and shore. The famous "Odessa steps" sequence, in which the soldiers massacre the townspeople, is justly regarded as one of the greatest in cinema: the pace of editing, first chaotic as the confused civilians scatter, then rhythmic with the soldiers' footsteps, then faster as the baby carriage rolls down the steps, is like a symphony in its emotional power. The film was also the first to introduce artificially created motion, as a means of showing the awakening of the people's anger: a sleeping stone lion appears to sit up and roar after the *Potemkin* shells the general's headquarters; this effect was produced by cutting together shots of three different statues of lions, one sleeping, one rising, one roaring.

*The Battleship Potemkin* made Eisenstein world famous, and the film became a sensation world-wide. So powerful did its message appear that in some countries, including Britain, it was banned for a time. In 1933, Dr Josef Goebbels, informing German film-makers of the sort of work they were expected to produce under National Socialism, said of Eisenstein's masterpiece:

It is marvellously well made film, and one which reveals incomparable cinematic artistry. Its uniquely distinctive quality is the line it takes. This is a film which could turn anyone with no firm ideological convictions into a Bolshevik. Which means that a work of art can very well accommodate a political alignment, and that even the most obnoxious attitude can be communicated if it is expressed through the medium of an outstanding work of art.<sup>30</sup>

The Soviet government commissioned Eisenstein and Pudovkin to direct a film each for the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. Pudovkin produced *The End of St Petersburg*; Eisenstein's contribution was *October* (USSR, 1928), a survey of events in Russia in 1917: the fall of the tsar; the continuation of Russia's involvement in the war;

the arrival of Lenin; the Bolsheviks' July uprising and its defeat; the Kornilov revolt; and finally the assault on the Winter Palace, all conveyed in a dazzling display of montage. It is a tribute to Eisenstein's powers as a film-maker that the distorted picture of the events of 1917 contained within *October* has permeated our view of what the revolution was actually like: Eisenstein's version of the storming of the Winter Palace, in particular, with its massed ranks of proletarians charging a tightly-defended building, has been used again and again in television documentaries, without attribution, as if it were live footage of the event.

Again, as in *Strike* and *The Battleship Potemkin*, there are no individual characters or heroes: even Lenin only appears in a couple of scenes. Eisenstein again uses montage to powerful emotional effect. The sequence of the raising of a bridge strewn with corpses after the suppression of the July uprising is particularly powerful: the bridge is shown from many different angles as its two halves rise into the air, a dead horse is raised hundreds of feet high, dangling over the edge before falling into the river beneath; the image recalls a Russian view of the Apocalypse as a time of "horses in the air". But what is distinctive about *October* is its use of intellectual montage, the cutting together of shots to express intellectual ideas, in which Eisenstein hoped to inform the intellect in the same way as montage had so dramatically affected the emotions. The editing shattered conventions of space and time, and it is worth examining examples in detail.

Successive shots of a rifle assembling itself, beginning with an unidentifiable machine part, and adding a magazine, stock, trigger and barrel, finally being primed and loaded, convey the idea of armed revolution gradually becoming Bolshevik policy, and the formation of the Red Guards. The rise of Kerensky is conveyed by a series of shots of him in uniform ascending a staircase, interspersed with sub-titles: "Dictator", "Commander-in-Chief", "Minister of the Army", "Prime Minister", "Etc., etc., etc." At the top of the stairs, within the Winter Palace, he is greeted by the tsar's former servants with the sarcastic subtitle "*What a democrat!*" He then enters the former tsarina's chambers, which he has taken over; as the doors open, a mechanical gilded peacock moves its wings and cries out, an obvious comparison with Kerensky. Inside the chambers, Kerensky muses over a figurine of a mounted Napoleon and plays with a chess king. The image of the chessman cuts to the identical shape of a factory hooter blaring, then the title "The revolution is in danger!", followed by shots of workers scurrying around in alarm. "General Kornilov is advancing!" There follow shots of tanks and armoured cars on the move in the countryside. "With British tanks ..." — more shots of tanks — "... and the Savage Division" — shots of bizarrely-dressed Muslim soldiers on a moving train — "General Kornilov" — Kornilov on horseback — the mounted figurine of Napoleon in the same pose — Kerensky — two figurines of Napoleon facing each other — "two Bonapartes — which is it to be?" — Kerensky — Kornilov — a tank advancing — the chess king broken on the board (these last two shots signify Kornilov's revolt shattering Kerensky's political ambitions). There follows a sequence in which a title informs us that Kornilov's slogan is "For God and country", then the title "For God", and a series of shots of idols from various religions, each in succession more grotesque in appearance. Eisenstein explains the significance of this sequence:



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.<sup>31</sup>

Watching *October*, one understands how Charles Wesley felt when he said that the devil has all the best tunes. Eisenstein believed that it represented a first step towards "a purely intellectual film, freed from traditional limitations, achieving direct forms for ideas, systems, and concepts, without any need for transitions and paraphrases."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, he planned a film version of Marx's *Das Kapital* based on intellectual montage.

### BUREAUCRATICALLY IMPOSED ROMANTICISM

But however dazzling these effects may seem to those who have studied Eisenstein's theories, to the masses whom the film was supposed to inspire to build socialism, they came across as incomprehensible. Indeed, by the end of the 1920s, the whole attempt to use "mass-heroes" and dispense with plots had been a failure in terms of the political purposes for which it had been developed. Russians stayed away from such films in droves, while crowding the cinemas when they had the opportunity to see foreign, and particularly American, films. Among Soviet films, audiences preferred *The End of St Petersburg*, with its individual revolutionary hero, to the hero-less *October*.

At the same time, Stalinism was increasing its grip over all aspects of the Soviet arts. In the early 1920s Lenin himself had said about the radical experiments of early Soviet art:

[W]e are Communists. We must not put our hands in our pockets and let chaos ferment as it pleases. We must consciously try to guide this development, to form and determine its results ... I cannot value the works of expressionism, futurism, cubism, and the other *isms* as the highest expression of artistic genius. I don't understand them. They give me no pleasure.<sup>33</sup>

After Lenin's death, Stalin put party officials in charge of the film industry and centralised its administration. The "cult of personality" emerged in the cinema as early as the propaganda documentary *A Sixth of the Earth* (USSR, 1926), directed by Dziga Vertov, in which Stalin's leadership is shown as one of the supposed benefits of life in the Soviet Union. While Eisenstein had been given *carte blanche* in the making of his first two films, the party had closely supervised the production of *October* to ensure that it kept to the current official line. In 1928 censorship was intensified, and 36 percent of previously authorised scenarios were banned from being produced.

From the late 1920s, under the auspices of Andrei Zhdanov, the Stalinist functionary who controlled the arts until his death in 1948, "socialist realism" increasingly became the approved style within all the arts; in 1934 it was declared as the only permitted method of art, and remained so through-

out the Soviet bloc until 1956. Stalin defined socialist realism as:

... the truthful, historically concrete presentation of reality in its revolutionary development which must be combined with the task of the ideological remaking and education of toilers in the spirit of socialism.<sup>34</sup>

In 1934, Maxim Gorky saw socialist realism as a form of mythology with an exemplary component in which heroes act as models for emulation, resulting in:

... the kind of romanticism which underlies the myth, and is most beneficial in its promoting a revolutionary attitude toward reality, an attitude that in practice refashions the world.<sup>35</sup>

Ironically, therefore, this bureaucratically-imposed dogma involved a greater degree of Romanticism, in the sense of having heroes and plots, that is, of individual revolutionary heroes or communist builders of socialism acting according to Marxist-Leninist values, than Eisenstein's early "mass-films". As a result, the Soviet cinema at the end of the decade was characterised by such films as *New Babylon* (USSR, 1929), directed by Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, about a Parisian shopgirl who becomes a revolutionary fighter in the Commune of 1871, and Eisenstein's *Old and New* (USSR, 1929), a comedy about Soviet agricultural mechanisation. Eisenstein, who always tailored his published writings to the current party line, explained:

[F]or the first time in our cinematography, there begin to appear the first finished images of personalities, not just of any personalities, but of the finest personalities: the leading figures of leading Communists and Bolsheviks. Just as from the revolutionary movement of the masses emerged the sole revolutionary party, that of the Bolsheviks, which heads the unconscious elements of revolution and leads them towards conscious revolutionary aims, so the film images of the leading men of our times begin during the present period to crystallize out of the general-revolutionary mass-quality of the earlier type of film ...

Thus one who is perhaps the most devoted partisan of the mass-epical style in cinema, one whose name has always been linked to the 'mass'-cinema - the author of these lines — is subject to precisely this same process in his penultimate film — *Old and New*, where Marfa Lapkina appears already as an exceptional individual protagonist of the action.<sup>36</sup>

*Old and New* concerns the efforts of a young woman, played by Lapkina, to bring the poverty-stricken people of her village to the wonders of collectivisation and mechanisation. She encourages them to pool resources to obtain such items as a communally-owned cream-separator, bull and tractor, which combine to transform the village to prosperity, against the scheming of a group of kulaks, who, among other acts of villainy, poison the villagers' old bull. (Needless to say, there is no hint of the coercion that would lead to the deliberate starvation of millions of peasants several years later.) Despite the revolting implications of the film in terms of what was about to be inflicted on the Soviet countryside, it cannot be denied that Eisenstein's montage works effectively for comedy, with the wedding between the bull and a cow (dressed as bride and groom); the testing of the cream-separator (with its phallic overtones), and the race

between the tractor and a horse (based on the chases in American comedies) being particularly amusing.

The editing of the film represents a new stage in Eisenstein's methods of montage. While the editing of two shots had previously been based on the conflict between two shots based on the dominant theme within each shot, sequences were cut together on the bases of varied "lines" of montage, rather like an orchestral score:

Shot is linked to shot not merely through one indication — movement, or light values, or stage in the exposition of the plot, or the like - but through a *simultaneous advance* of a multiple series of lines, each maintaining an independent compositional course and each contributing to the total compositional course of the sequence ... [T]he several interdependent lines virtually resemble a ball of vari-coloured yarn, with the lines running through and binding together the entire sequence of shots.<sup>37</sup>

In one sequence, the villagers follow the priest in a religious procession, carrying icons and crosses, to pray for rain during a drought. Here Eisenstein identifies no less than seven such "lines": those of heat, of changing close-ups, of mounting ecstasy, of women's 'voices' (faces of singers), of men's 'voices', of those who kneel under the passing icons, and of individuals grovelling in various degrees of religious ecstasy.

### HEAVY-HANDED PROPAGANDA

The development of sound films, coinciding with the tightening grip of Stalinism, marked the end of the radical cinematic experiments of the 1920s. While both Pudovkin and Eisenstein had developed their respective theories to take account of sound, these theories came a cropper against the new realities of film production, in Pudovkin's case in the Soviet Union, in Eisenstein's in the United States. Pudovkin saw asynchrony as the basis of the sound film, that is, using sound to show something different from what is shown on the screen, in order to create associations:

Now in sound film we can, within the same strip of celluloid, not only edit different points in space, but can cut into association with the image selected sounds that reveal and heighten the character of each — wherever in silent film we had a conflict of but two opposing elements, now we can have four ... Would a director of any imagination handle a scene in a court of justice where a sentence of death is being passed by filming the judge pronouncing sentence in preference to recording visually the immediate reactions of the condemned?<sup>38</sup>

His first sound film, *Deserter* (USSR, 1933) deals with a German ship-builder active in the trade union movement, who is sceptical of his communist colleagues and sympathetic to the Social Democrats, who are shown as wicked lackeys of the bourgeoisie, trying to use reformism to deflect the workers from their revolutionary destiny. Visiting the Soviet Union, however, and seeing the miracles achieved there for the toiling masses, the hero achieves enlightenment and returns to Germany to denounce the Social Democrats as "social fascists" and join with the communists in the un-sullied struggle for a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. *Deserter* is of the category of films known to theorists by the term "bloody awful": the long-winded, wordy attempts

to justify the Stalinist line of 1932-3 produce only embarrassment and amusement in the viewer. The film contains some interesting uses of asynchronism between sound and picture, such as shots of a policeman directing various types of traffic in Hamburg, from chauffeur-driven limousines to workers on bicycles, cut with grandiose orchestral music, signifying the attempt to orchestrate social forces by the authorities. *Deserter* is, however, more significant as a demonstration of how the Stalinist regime took advantage of sound to insist on the inclusion of heavy-handed verbal propaganda which negated the relative effectiveness of the Soviet cinema to that date.

Eisenstein's theories on sound went in a different direction. He saw the sound film as an opportunity to make use of the "inner monologue" of disjointed and random thoughts, rather as in the novels of James Joyce:

[O]nly the sound-film is capable of reconstructing all phases and all specifics of the course of thought ... As if presenting inside the characters the inner play, the conflict of doubts, the explosions of passion, the voice of reason, rapidly or in slow-motion, marking the differing rhythms of one and the other and, at the same time, contrasting with the almost complete absence of outer action: a feverish inner debate behind the stony mask of the face.<sup>39</sup>

After the release of *Old and New*, arrangements were made for Eisenstein to visit the West to work on sound films, which had not yet been developed in the Soviet Union. In 1930 he signed a contract with Paramount Pictures, under which he would submit projects for production by the studio. One of these was an adaption of Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* according to the principles of the "inner monologue". Rand describes the novel as follows:

[T]he author attempts to give significance to a trite story by tacking on to it a theme which is not related to or demonstrated by its events. The events deal with an age-old subject: the romantic problem of a rotten little weakling who murders his pregnant sweetheart, a working girl, in order to attempt to marry a rich heirless. The alleged theme, according to the author's assertions, is: "The evil of capitalism."<sup>40</sup>

Eisenstein's script makes use of the disintegrated "inner monologue" within the mind of Clyde, the protagonist, as a means of demonstrating his inner conflict. In the following extract, Clyde and his sweetheart, Roberta, are in a dinghy and Clyde is torn over the decision whether to drown her or not:

26 "Kill — kill" triumphs, and there passes through his mind the memory of his mother. "Baby — baby" comes the voice of his childhood and as "Don't kill — don't kill" rises he hears "Baby boy — baby boy" in the so different voice of Sondra, and at the image of Sondra and the thought of all that surrounds her "Kill — kill" grows harder and insistent, and with the thought of Roberta importunate it grows still harsher and shriller, and then the face of Roberta now, aglow with faith in him and her great relief, and the sight of the hair he has so loved to caress and "Don't — don't kill" grows and tenderly supplants the other and now is calm and firm and final. Ending the conflict. Sondra is lost forever.

Never, never now will he have the courage to kill Roberta.<sup>41</sup>

Although Dreiser himself wanted Eisenstein's script to be used, Paramount handed the project to Josef von Sternberg, who directed it as a conventional drama, without inner monologue, which led to a lawsuit by Dreiser against the studio. Neither did Eisenstein's other projects in the West meet with success: his proposed Mexican epic *Que Viva Mexico!* collapsed after he ran through all the investors' money through his extravagant filming methods. Being used to the "price-free" environment of Soviet film production, where vast resources (such as a sizable part of the Soviet navy in *Potemkin*) had been placed at his disposal without cost, he knew nothing of the concept of a budget, that manifestation of the economic principle that is the daily lot of every Western film-maker.

### EISENSTEIN'S MOST POPULAR FILM

Returning to the Soviet Union in 1932, Eisenstein found his earlier films under attack by the party for "formalism" and himself regarded with suspicion as a result of the time spent in the West. Rather more fortunate than so many other unapproved film-makers and other artists, who found themselves in Siberian labour camps or execution chambers, Eisenstein taught for several years at VGIK and planned several films that were never produced.

In 1938 Stalin believed that the Soviet Union was on the brink of war with National Socialist Germany, and commissioned Eisenstein to make one of the new genre of "patriotic-historical" films, based on the military achievements of figures from Russian history, that would inspire the Soviet people to fight. The result was *Alexander Nevsky* (USSR, 1938), an epic about the 13th-century prince of Rus who mobilised the people and led them to victory against the invading Teutonic Knights. The film was by far Eisenstein's most popular among audiences. It is close to Romanticism, with its individual hero, played by Nikolai Cherkasov; its values (fighting to maintain independence and against the knights' oppression); its actions to defend those values (recruiting an army and fighting a battle); its romantic love interest (it even has the "eternal triangle" of competition between two men for the love of a woman, which Eisenstein had so vigorously rejected as a manifestation of individualism 15 years previously); and its "happy ending", in which the hero's goals are achieved.

Through an odd quirk of fate, *Alexander Nevsky* contains no discernable Marxist element. Soon after the completion of the film, Stalin unexpectedly telephoned Eisenstein and demanded an immediate screening of the film in his private projection room. Such was Eisenstein's haste in taking the print to the Kremlin that one reel of the film was left behind. This reel contained scenes in which violent conflict occurs in one of the cities of Rus over whether the inhabitants should join Nevsky in resisting the Teutonic Knights. The common people are for joining Nevsky, while the wealthy merchants wish to keep out of the conflict, which would interfere with their trade. Stalin having expressed his unreserved enthusiasm for the film as shown to him, it would have been inadvisable on Eisenstein's part to have implicitly questioned his artistic judgement by adding the missing reel to the release print.

Neither is there any "inner monologue" in the construction of *Alexander Nevsky*. The basis of its editing was "vertical montage", in which the correspondence of the music, composed by Sergei Prokofiev, with the picture was as precisely tailored to produce an affect on the viewer as had been the correspondence between two adjacent pictures. Sometimes Eisenstein cut the film according to a piece of Prokofiev's music, elsewhere he cut a sequence and Prokofiev composed music to correspond with it.

One example of the latter is the famous sequence of the "battle on the ice", on the frozen Lake Chudskoye, between the Russians and the Teutonic Knights. (The scene was actually filmed during a heat-wave in a field outside Moscow covered with fake ice.) As the Russian army stands on a huge rock, with Nevsky on horseback on the pinnacle, awaiting the attack of the knights from over the horizon, the score consists of a repeated motif of first a chord, then two staccato quavers and two ordinary quavers, separated by quaver rests, that is, a "heavy" opening, or "left-hand side", of each bar, tailing off to a "lighter" or more "distant" close, or "right-hand side", of the bar. This corresponds exactly to the composition of each shot over which it is laid, as Eisenstein explains:

In Shots I-II-III this 'chord' is a group of dark figures, placed on the heavy mass of the rock ...

In Shot V — these figures, but with a greater mass of rock.

In Shot VI — the four spearmen in the foreground.

In Shot VII — the mass of troops, and so on.

And in each of these shots there is something to the right of the frame which occupies the secondary attention: something light, airy, consecutively 'moving' which compels the eye to follow it ... [T]hese separate movements of the eye from left to right throughout the sequence add up to a feeling of something on the left, striving 'with all its soul' in a direction somewhere to the right.

This is precisely the feeling that the entire complex of twelve shots was seeking: the prince on the rock, the army at the foot of the rock, the general air of expectation — all directed to that point, to the right, into the distance, somewhere beyond the lake, from which the as yet invisible enemy will appear.<sup>42</sup>

When the massed wedge of knights finally appears, its approach heralded by the sound of their horn, the effect is powerful indeed. The tension is then heightened by a montage conflict between the white-robed knights and the black-clad Russian troops, and by the immobile knights' faces, hidden by the visors of their helmets, and the open, expressive faces of the Russians. According to Eisenstein, the sequence is edited to correspond with

... all the shades of an experience of increasing terror, where approaching danger makes the heart contract and the breathing irregular ... This dictated all the rhythms of the sequence - cumulative, disjunctive, the speeding up and slowing down of the movement. The boiling pulsing of an excited heart dictated the rhythm of the leaping hoofs: pictorially — the *leap* of the galloping knights; compositionally — the *beat* to the bursting point of an excited heart ... Employing for source *the*

*structure of human emotion, it unmistakably appeals to emotion, unmistakably arouses the complex of those feelings that gave birth to the composition.*<sup>43</sup>

In August 1939, on the signing of the non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany, *Alexander Nevsky*, along with other films considered to be anti-Nazi, was banned, and Eisenstein was prevented from making any more films until after the German invasion. In 1940 he directed a production of Wagner's opera *Die Walküre* at the Bolshoi Opera Theatre; the guests of honour at its premiere were Stalin and Goebbels, who had earlier so admired Eisenstein's work.

### “NOT NEARLY ENOUGH!”

During the war, the Mosfilm studio was evacuated to Alma-Ata in Soviet Central Asia, where Eisenstein began work on *Ivan the Terrible* (USSR, 1944). This was the first in a projected trilogy of films about the 16th-century Duke of Muscovy who proclaimed himself the first tsar, and proceeded to unite Russia into a single autocracy, largely by means of murder and terror against the boyars, aristocrats whose powers lay in the way of his tyranny. He established a secret police, the Oprichniki, who knew loyalty only to the tsar and worshipped him.

The film is visually magnificent, with its elaborate costumes, interiors of palaces and cathedrals covered with paintings, and complex lighting. Such were the demands made by the lighting, in fact, that the interior shots were filmed at night, when the entire electricity supply of Alma-Ata could be diverted to the studio. The acting is based on that of Japanese Kabuki theatre, with its slow movements and exaggerated actions and expressions. Prokofiev's eerie score, which runs across the greater part of the soundtrack, fits the images perfectly and gives the film the atmosphere of an opera.

The film opens with the coronation scene, in which Ivan declares himself tsar and his intention to unite Russia. He begins removing the privileges of the boyars, and wins the support of the common people, from whom he draws members of the Oprichniki. He marches on the city of Khazan, Russia's enemy, and captures it by exploding gunpowder under its walls. Returning to Moscow, he falls ill, but cannot get the boyars to swear allegiance to his baby son before he dies. He recovers, and takes bloody revenge on the boyars, who in turn poison the tsarina. This leads to more terror from the Oprichniki and more political conflict, until Ivan, in despair, leaves Moscow for the country. However, the common people follow him to demand his return.

The political analogy is an unobvious one, and it was not unexpected that the film won Eisenstein the Stalin Prize. The odious message of this film, with its justification of wanton state terror, marked a new stage in Eisenstein's thematic work. He had portrayed Alexander Nevsky as having the virtues of a classical hero: courage, justice, vision, magnanimity to his defeated enemies, and being as ready to help his people with the fishing as to lead them into battle. By contrast, in one scene in *Ivan the Terrible*, the tsar (also played by Nikolai Cherkasov) is in contemplation when one of his henchmen enters and informs him of the execution of a number of boyars. There is a pregnant moment of silence in which the tsar is facing away from the henchman. The audience wonders whether he is feeling remorse for the kill-

ings. Slowly he turns to the man and declares, “Not nearly enough!”

However, Ivan is a rather more three-dimensional and convincing character than Nevsky, as, like Shakespeare's characters, he engages in regular monologues as to whether to continue in his task, while Nevsky never displays any doubts about his. One is perhaps reminded here of the characters of Hank Rearden and John Galt in *Atlas Shrugged* — Ivan and Rearden both come across as more real than the “ideal” Nevsky or Galt.

The footage for *Ivan the Terrible, Part II* (USSR, 1958) was shot at the same time as the first part, and editing was completed in 1946, at which point Eisenstein suffered a heart attack and went to hospital. Here, the boyars engage in a plot to kill Ivan and replace him on the throne with his idiot young cousin. The climax comes in a dazzling colour sequence (shot with Agfacolor stock captured from the Germans) in which the Oprichniki stage a dance during a feast, and Ivan, anticipating the assassination attempt, dresses the idiot in royal robes with crown and sceptre. The assassin, approaching the cousin from behind, mistakes him for Ivan and stabs him to death, thus ending the threat to Ivan's rule. Ivor Montagu, an Englishman who worked with Eisenstein in Hollywood, explains that although the pace of the film is generally slow, the “extraordinary variation in the image-speech relationship” enhances the power of the film:

Again and again a single speech is complete neither on the speaker's image, nor off the speaker's image. It is begun on one shot, finishing on another, or begun on one, continued on another and finished on a third. Always with significance and interest springing from the relationship. The sound acts as a rhythmic counterpoint link to the jump-rhythm of the images succeeding each other. There is no element inessential, no time to be bored without realizing why, watching or listening to what is already otherwise clear. Instead one is constantly receiving new exciting impulses, and one's senses alert, tingling — without realizing the cause.<sup>44</sup>

Throughout his career, Eisenstein had always bowed to the party line; when the authorities had accused him of “formalism” or some such heresy, he would always publicly admit his “errors”. He was undoubtedly a believer in the communist cause which his films had sought to advance. In *Ivan the Terrible, Part II*, however, doubtless hoping to make use of the very slight “thaw” that Stalin allowed in the war years, Eisenstein dared to introduce a critical note in the story. The Oprichniki are shown as a force whose powers have grown vastly beyond those needed to accomplish Ivan's mission, its leaders seeking to reinforce their own position and to control the tsar. (It is this situation that brings forth from Ivan the memorable line, “You dare to teach the tsar, you mangy dog?”). The film was banned without being released, and Eisenstein was to make no more films before his death in 1948. In 1958, when it fitted in perfectly with the policy of “de-Stalinization”, *Part II* was finally released, and Eisenstein was posthumously praised as a pioneering denouncer of the “cult of personality”.

### “HE CARRIED OUT ORDERS LIKE A DOG.”

Eisenstein was one of the great masters of the cinema. His contribution to our understanding of the medium and its possibilities, on a theoretical and practical level, is arguably

second only to that of Griffith. It is all the more significant, then, that his attempt to create a “mass-cinema”, in which individual characters and plot — the manifestation of individual volition — were replaced by a vision of man as an undifferentiated and effectively mindless mass, was a failure in its purpose of mobilising the Soviet people for the building of communism. It was when his technique was used in a film which precisely appealed to those individualist, indeed Romantic, values on which the American pioneers of the cinema had established the art, that it proved effective.

But Eisenstein’s work cannot be assessed only as if it were produced without relation to actual human life. While Eisenstein was directing plays and films, teaching, writing and travelling the world, millions of people were being deliberately starved to death, tortured, machine-gunned and subject to the slower death of the gulag archipelago by the very regime and philosophy he set out to legitimise. While Boris Pasternak, for one, was set up as a mouthpiece by the Stalin regime and resolutely refused to subordinate his art to glorify the tyranny, Eisenstein (with the partial exception of *Ivan the Terrible, Part II*) performed as dictated. There is no getting away from the historical realities of Stalinism today: the last apologists, the last explainers-away, have fallen silent in the face of the revelations of recent years. And there was not a single technique of Stalinism that had not previously be used by Lenin. One of the many terrible things about Stalinism was the way in which it made virtually everybody an oppressor as well as a victim; everyone was expected to inform upon and denounce their neighbours if they did not wish to end up the same way. The Stalinist ideal, held up to generations of Soviet youth, was encapsulated by Pavel Morozov, a peasant boy who denounced his own father to the regime during collectivisation. And one of Eisenstein’s abortive projects in the 1930s was a film, *Bezhin Meadow*, which sought to glorify Morozov.

Eisenstein himself, of course, neither killed nor tortured anyone, and it is difficult to condemn him for acting in a way that ensured not only the opportunity to continue making films, but also his physical survival. But one wonders how many killers and torturers saw his efforts to eliminate the individual from the cinema as some justification for their elimination of individuals from life, reassurance that they were acting in accordance with “objective laws of history”. It is only appropriate that the last word on Eisenstein should be had from the fictionalised conversation of two victims of the gulag, as recorded by a third, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*:

“One must say in all objectivity that Eisenstein is a genius. Now isn’t *Ivan the Terrible* a work of genius? The *oprichniki* dancing in masks! The scene in the cathedral!”

“All show-off!” K-123 snapped. He was holding his spoon in front of his mouth. “Too much art is no art at all. Like candy instead of bread! And the politics of it is utterly vile — vindication of a one-man tyranny. An insult to the memory of three generations of Russian intellectuals!” (He ate his mush, but there was no taste in his mouth. It was wasted on him.)

“But what other treatment of the subject would have been let through ...?”

“Ha! *Let through*, you say? Then don’t call him a genius! Call him a toady, say he carried out orders like

a dog. A genius doesn’t adapt his treatment to the taste of tyrants!”<sup>45</sup>

## TARKOVSKY

It was long after Eisenstein’s — and Stalin’s — death that Soviet film-makers were no longer willing to adapt their treatments to the taste of tyrants. But even then, their work typically gives little comfort to the advocate of Romanticism. Andrei Tarkovsky was a film director and poet who, during the period the Russians call “the era of stagnation”, produced films of astonishing visual power which sought to examine fundamental questions about the nature of man. After producing a couple of films which roughly conformed to Soviet conventions, such as *Ivan’s Childhood* (USSR, 1962), about a young boy who acts as a messenger in the Soviet forces during the second world war, Tarkovsky, a Christian within the tradition of Russian mysticism, began to make films which addressed philosophical issues, such as *Andrei Roublev* (USSR, 1965), about the 15th-century icon painter; the science fiction films *Solaris* (USSR, 1972) and *Stalker* (USSR, 1975); and *Mirror* (USSR, 1978), an autobiographical film about growing under Stalinism. The themes and sense of life of these films owed nothing to communism, indeed put responsibility for his own life and actions in the hands of the individual, and Tarkovsky was subjected to political interference and harassment which led him to take exile in the West in 1983. But while a full examination of Tarkovsky’s complex philosophy would require a separate study, the idea of the value of the sacrifice of the individual plays a central role within it, and the key to interpreting his often rather opaque work, he said, was: “The more you think, the less you feel”. This is true even of his last two films, which were made in the West and therefore not under the eye of the KGB. In the climax of *Nostalgia* (Italy, 1983), the central character burns himself to death as a statement on the ultimate futility of mortal human existence; in his last film, an old man believes that the Apocalypse has arrived, goes mad, and burns down his family home. The title of this final work is *The Sacrifice* (Sweden/France, 1986).

## WAJDA

While studying at the Leningrad film school in 1925, Rand hoped to write scripts which would smuggle Romantic, capitalist and individualist values into the Soviet cinema under the disguise of officially approved communist works. She hoped that audiences would understand these messages while the communists would not. This she was unable to do in the context of the time. It was left to a Pole to establish the first manifestation of Romanticism in the cinema of the Soviet bloc, and to succeed in what Rand had attempted in the early years of the communist cinema. In the 1950s, Andrzej Wajda directed a trilogy of films about the second world war, the third of which marked a turning-point in the history of that cinema.

The first, *A Generation* (Poland, 1955) concerns a working-class youth who joins the communist-led section of the resistance movement; all the other members of his unit are killed, except the girl he loves, who is captured by the Gestapo. The hero has to put aside his personal feelings and take command of a detachment of new recruits who replace his fallen comrades. Outwardly the film conforms to the dictates of socialist realism, but Wajda makes the conflict

within his hero more personal than propagandist. While the film contains the obligatory swipe at the non-communist Home Army as self-serving and divisive, Wajda succeeds in subtly ridiculing Marxism in the scene where an elderly worker, recruiting the youth to the resistance, gives him a summary of the labour theory of value, ending with the line "There was once a wise, bearded man, by name of Karl Marx. He wrote once that the workers were only given barely enough ... just enough to recoup their strength."<sup>46</sup> The way in which this scene is presented raised a laugh from the audience on the night I saw the film at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, not an establishment known for its staunch anti-Marxism, so one can imagine the effect it had in Poland in 1955.

A wider degree of artistic freedom was permitted in the aftermath of the "Polish October" of 1956, and Wajda's next film, *Kanal* (Poland, 1957) owed little to socialist realism or Marxism, and was allowed to take a positive view of the rank-and-file members of the Home Army (now it was only the leaders who were supposed to have been villains). The story concerns a group of Home Army members trying to escape from Warsaw through the sewers after the defeated uprising of 1944; a sense of doom pervades the film, as every character is killed or captured by the Nazis, but the real significance of the film lies in the fact that no Pole in the audience would have forgotten that the Soviet army was halted on the Vistula while the uprising was suppressed.

#### A TRUE HEROIC IMPULSE

But it is in the last film in the trilogy, *Ashes and Diamonds* (Poland, 1958), based on the novel by Jerzy Andrzejewski, that Wajda raises the undisguised standard of Romanticism. The story, which takes place on the day after the German surrender, has two central characters: Maciek, a young member of the anti-communist underground movement and Home Army veteran, played by Zbigniew Cybulski, often described as "the Polish James Dean"; and Szczuka, a middle-aged communist functionary and Spanish civil war veteran, played by Waclaw Zastrzezynski. Szczuka is attending a banquet to celebrate the war's end at a hotel in a small Polish town, and Maciek's mission is to kill him; throughout the film, both characters are idealists faced by conflicts of values. By contrast, most of the guests at the banquet are opportunists of one sort or another, ready to go along with whichever political force is in the ascendant. Maciek is torn between the sense of mission involved in his dangerous life in the underground, of which the assassination is a part, and his love for a girl, played by Ewa Krzyzewska, and the possibility of a quiet life with her. Szczuka faces the conflict between his desire for a better Poland, held out by the communism he has fought for all his life, and his love for his young son, who has joined the anti-communist resistance and been captured that night. Both idealists die for their values — Maciek kills Szczuka and is then gunned down by the communist police - leaving the opportunists in control.

Wajda's Romantic intentions could not be clearer. When he and Andrzejewski adapted the script from the latter's novel, they eliminated several characters and transferred the dramatic functions of those characters to Maciek, thus making him the central character. This combines with the extraordinary performance of Cybulski, which easily upstages that of Zastrzezynski, and makes Maciek the indisputable hero of

the film. Wajda and Andrzejewski also give the film a time unity, compressing the action to a 24-hour period.

Boleslaw Sulik, who translated the text of the scripts into English, explains the result of these changes:

They move the screenplay away from realism and from the specific nature of political problems discussed in the novel, making of it a draft for a symbolic drama not exactly timeless, perhaps, but certainly intended to burst the bounds of time and place: the drama of conflicting political attitudes and worthy individuals destroyed by their inability to resolve this conflict within the terms of the code they live by. The intention was to intensify and universalise the drama, to crystallise attitudes in poetic, not realistic terms ...

Both in motive and in form the film represents a somewhat decadent form of romanticism. But this very corruption of the original, inherited romantic impulse, formed a bond between Wajda and his proper, Polish audience. It corresponds closely to cultural attitudes prevalent among the Polish intelligensia. And decadence can be a natural, inevitable, honest response to the passing of a great and dynamic tradition.

Anyway, in Wajda's case romanticism is a great deal more than an inherited manner. Most of his films — and none more forcefully than *Ashes and Diamonds* — are in varying degrees animated by a true heroic impulse, desperately frustrated: a nostalgia for heroic action, made absurd by its context, its nobility corrupted by the modern Polish experience. The frustrated heroic sense can be turned against itself, but never extinguished. It gives the Wajda work its scale, feeds and intensifies inherent tensions.<sup>47</sup>

#### SMALL INSTANCES AND RANDOM MOMENTS

It is no coincidence that it fell to Wajda to become the cinematic chronicler of Polish opposition to communism and of the rise of Solidarity. And those of us who believe that art has a decisive role to play in the formation of the values and actions of individuals will regard it as no more a coincidence that, among the eastern European countries, the values of freedom triumphed first in Poland, where Wajda himself now sits as a Solidarity member of the Polish parliament.

Ayn Rand said that:

Potentially, motion pictures are a great art, but that potential has not as yet been actualized, except in single instances and random moments. An art that requires the synchronization of so many esthetic elements and so many different talents cannot develop in a period of philosophical-cultural disintegration such as the present. Its development requires the creative cooperation of men who are united, not necessarily by their formal philosophical convictions, but by their fundamental view of man, i.e., by their sense of life.<sup>48</sup>

Let us never underestimate the significance of "single instances and random moments".

## NOTES

1. Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto*, New American Library, New York, 1971, p. 104.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100. Italics in original.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 124. Italics in original.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 72. Italics in original.
10. Lev Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film*, translated and edited by Robert Levaco, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1974, pp. 49-50.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.
12. Rand, *op cit*, p. 132. Italics in original.
13. Quoted in Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, translated and edited by Jay Leyda, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1949, p. 63.
14. V. I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting*, translated and edited by Ivor Montagu, Vision Press, London, 1958 (1968 edition), p. 168.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 24. Italics in original.
16. Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, translated and edited by Jay Leyda, Faber and Faber, London, 1943 (1986 edition), p. 181. Italics in original.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 183. Italics in original.
18. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 202-203.
20. Rand, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
21. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, *op. cit.*, p. 204.
22. Quoted in Barbara Branden, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, W. H. Allen, London, 1987, pp. 57-58.
23. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, *op. cit.*, pp. 233-234.
24. A scheduled screening of *The Birth of a Nation* at Brown University in the United States was recently banned as a result of pressure from "anti-racists". The degree of cultural freedom at one of America's leading Ivy League universities should be compared with that of Lenin's Russia, where the film was presumably available to be studied by the early Soviet film-makers.
25. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, *op. cit.*, p. 235.
26. Sergei Eisenstein, *Writings, 1922-34*, translated and edited by Richard Taylor, British Film Institute, London, 1988, p. 79. Italics in original.
27. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 37. Italics in original.
29. Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, *op. cit.*, p. 184. Italics in original.
30. Quoted in Erwin Leiser, *Nazi Cinema*, translated by Gertrud Mander and David Wilson, Macmillan, New York, 1975.
31. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
33. Quoted in Kuleshov, *op. cit.*, p. 31. Italics in original.
34. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 31-32.
35. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 32.
36. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, *op. cit.*, 123-124.
37. Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65. Italics in original.
38. Pudovkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 184, 189.
39. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
40. Rand, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
41. Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, *op. cit.*, p. 188.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153, 156.
43. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-153. Italics in original.
44. Ivor Montagu, *Film World*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1964, p. 157.

45. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, translated by Max Hayward and Ronald Hingley, F. A. Praeger, New York, 1963. Italics in the original.
46. Andrzej Wajda, *Three Films*, translated by Boleslaw Sulik, Lorrimer Publishing, London, 1984, p. 43.
47. Introduction to *ibid.*, pp. 19-20, 24.
48. Rand, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

#### FILMOGRAPHICAL AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Opportunities to see most of the films discussed above at the cinema are limited chiefly to the selections of programming managers at London's repertory cinemas, which have shown a regrettable decline in the number of both silent and non-English language films in recent years. The National Film Theatre and the Everyman Cinema, however, have maintained a fairly good record in this respect, and at the NFT, silent films are accompanied by a live piano performance. Readers who are interested in seeing the films as intended should examine the listings in *City Limits* or *Time Out* for screenings. Alternatively, there are film societies throughout the country which encourage suggestions from their members.

While a great deal of their power is lost when seen on video, all of Eisenstein's films and several directed by Pudovkin and other early Soviet film-makers are available on video in a series of "Russian Classics", although the titles are those of their British release, which sometimes differ from the original Soviet titles used here.

Pudovkin's book *Film Technique and Film Acting*, which has recently been reprinted, is still the best book on its subject generally, as well as the best introduction to the methods of the early Soviet cinema. *Kuleshov on Film* is chiefly composed of what are today commonplaces, and his writing is principally of historical interest. The new selection of Eisenstein's writings published by the British Film Institute contains more material than is included in *The Film Sense* and *Film Form*, both edited by Jay Leyda, but the translation is less interesting than Leyda's and the direction of Eisenstein's thought more difficult to follow. Eisenstein's writing is best understood by the reader who has watched the films he is discussing.

The scripts of many of the films mentioned here are in print in editions by Lorrimer or Faber and Faber.