



УДК 17.00.03

N. Prigorian

Prigorian Nelly, master of philosophy, graduate of the Social Sciences and Humanities Department, Simon Bolivar University (Caracas, Venezuela), senior lecturer of the Theatre Arts Department, Krasnodar state institute of culture (33, im. 40-letiya Pobedy St., Krasnodar), e-mail: otdelnauka@gmail.com

SERGEI EISENSTEIN'S 120 TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY THE SOVIET SCHOOL OF CINEMA

The name of the Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein is widely known throughout the world. However, his theoretical work on editing is known only to small circles of critics and film theorists. Few know that his practical and theoretical work, which is largely based on what we call today the Soviet Film School, was accompanied by the great tensions that took place within the Soviet power circles. This article offers some reflections and thoughts on the complex relationship between power and art and, more specifically, the Soviet seventh art.

Keywords: Eisenstein, montage, film editing, formalism, sotsrealism, political power.

The one hundred and twentieth (120th) anniversary of Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein's birth forces a necessary reflection on the relations between art and politics, because he was the greatest exponent of theorization and experimentation

in cinema through montage, and the most renowned filmmaker in the Seventh Art world. More specifically, we must think about what we could call a particular way to evoke emotion and raise awareness through the juxtaposition of image frames in movement, or rather, the particular cinematic language he developed since the early years when Russia's revolutionaries began to structure the Soviet School of Film.

The significance of the famous directors most important films; such as "Battleship Potemkin" and of his theoretical texts collected in his books "The Sense of Cinema" and "The shape of the film", have meant not only his assured presence in many film encyclopedias all around the world, but the permanent use of his legacy as a referential or didactic material for the education and training of filmmakers of many generations. According to the film critic Naum Kleiman [1], President of the Museum of Film in Moscow, the validity of Eisenstein's theoretical work is due not only to the investigation of the specificity of cinema, but to the similarity of this technique with other branches of art. Hence, we can assert that Eisenstein transformed cinema, from being a mere technical process of capturing and staging images in front of the lens of a camera into an art.

However, in order to understand the full complexity of this development, these tensions and even the political and ideological obstacles that the Soviet seventh art had to overcome at its start, it would not be enough to merely locate it in a historical context, but it is evident that it is necessary to inquire about the motivations and ends to which cinema was propitiated and massively distributed, even during the most difficult times during the existence of the Soviet Republic.

To the question *what is cinema?* We obtain as many answers as varied as the goals that every film proposal aims to achieve: to entertain, raise awareness, educate, spread ideas, etc. Each filmmaker organizes his or her art and his or her creativity based on the answer he or she gives to the questions, *For what do I make films in general?* Or *for what specific purpose I am making this particular film?* From the very start, the Russian Revolution of October 1917 answered this

question with great clarity, which significantly conditioned the later development of Soviet cinema.

The incipient Russian film industry was nationalized in the first months of the Revolution when also the creation of the first state film production company *Sovkino* took place, even though this was somehow unexpected. As early as 1919, the first formal school of cinema - now known as VGIK - first not only in the country but in the world [2, p. 197] was founded. These manifestations only may indicate that film in revolutionary Russia was a matter of the utmost importance to the Soviet state. And this was tacitly underlined by Vladimir Lenin in 1922, when he said: "of all the arts for us the most important one is cinema", a phrase that is still exhibited in golden letters in the main hall of the Pan-Russian University of Cinematography, the VGIK.

A revision, even on a superficial level, of the titles of the first productions that gave rise to the Soviet film industry unequivocally indicated the answer to the question "*for what?*": "Father Sergei" (1917)¹, "The Revolutionary" (1917), "Anniversary of the Revolution" (1919), "Kino-Pravda", in its forty three editions, (1918-1919). The name of this latest production – "Kino Pravda" (Truth Cinema) - involves all the motivation and the ultimate goals that were assigned to film by the new socialist regime.

"Pravda" is the name of the newspaper that, from 1912 to 1991 served as the organ that was to popularize the strategic guidelines of the Bolshevik Party, later to become the Communist Party of the USSR (CPSU), a publication that inherits all the tradition, structure and purpose of another communications media of historical importance: the newspaper "Iskra" (1902), the governing body and organizer of the Russian Workers Party, that operated clandestinely in Czarist Russia. In his famous text "What to do?" (1902), among other things, V. Lenin highlighted the urgent need and importance for the revolutionary struggle of the existence of communications media through which the strategic and tactical guidelines for the organization of all the forces along the borders would be disseminated across the

¹An anticlerical film.

nation's territory. Trotsky, in turn, in his book "My Life" defined "Iskra" as "a Marxist newspaper, (...) whose mission was to serve as a central organ for professional revolutionaries, united by the iron discipline of action" [3].

What other media but cinema could fulfill this mission and arrive in a better way to reach a population that was illiterate in a 60%, but that at the same time was in need of means of vital importance to win their hearts and minds and organize them for the Revolution? Lenin's words on the importance of film for the new revolutionary government were not referred to film as an art form, but to its value as a tool of communication, instruction and propaganda for the ideas of Bolshevism. This same view was shared by the Commissar of Education and Culture, Anatoly Lunacharsky, who denied any other background and/or purpose for the Soviet film industry besides that of political propaganda [4, p. 151].

It is not surprising then, that a country in the decade of the 20s of the last century, still immersed in a civil war, amid hunger and other deep shortcomings, would make a titanic effort to produce films, and begin to massively build film-theaters in the most important urban centers, to found film clubs in the smaller cities and to create film-theaters in big villages. And, in those remote places where these constructions could not arrive, there were the *kinoshniki*, the projectionists with their trucks that needed only a white sheet and an electric outlet to perform their film séances.

However, despite the narrow role that political power had granted to the national cinematography, precisely the films that inscribed Soviet cinema in the History of Universal Cinema were produced in those decades: "The battleship Potemkin" (1925) , "Mother" (1926)), "The end of St. Petersburg" (1927), "October" (1928), "Arsenal" (1929). The names of Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Alexander Dovzhenko, Dziga Vetrov and Sergei Eisenstein are considered not only as the founders of Soviet cinema, but as the first theorists in film, who not only fulfilled the role of directing movies but that reflected and thought about the creative process itself and on the act of creation, while

experimenting with montage, establishing the theoretical and practical basis for what later would be called **audio-visual language**.

Through the composition of scenes through sequences of images they managed to transmit ideas without the need for words, their montage "spoke", articulating meaning through the juxtaposition of moving film images frames.

"The "leftists" among the group of editing theorists noticed another phenomenon: They noticed that when playing with pieces of film, a quality that surprised them emerged. This consisted in the fact that any two images, when placed one next to the other, irremediably acquired a new meaning, born from the sequence formed by these two images" [5, p. 5].

However, for each one of these creators even the ways of their individual "speech" kept a distinctive and unmistakable personal style: "Dovzhenko is the lyric. Pudovkin was for the principles of tragedy. Eisenstein for the principle of documentary chronicle" [4, p. 169]. But the imprint of the spirit of the latter director had some unexpected consequences, his film "October" (1928) in some film encyclopedias was considered a documentary film, and the scene of the assault of the Winter Palace by the Bolsheviks was used as a chronicle by the Soviet directors on at least two occasions, as reveals Cemion Freilij [4, p. 169].

The same Sergei Eisenstein explains the art of montage in this way: *Before the interior vision, before the perception of the creator, a certain general image is formed, an emotional incarnation of his theme. The task before him is to transform this image into a few basic partial representations, which, combined and juxtaposed, will evoke in the consciousness and feelings of the spectator, reader or listener, the same general image that the creative artist glimpsed [6, p.14].*

There is no doubt that the Soviet cinema of the 30's exceeded any Leninist expectation, surpassing the mere notion of propaganda and becoming an art form, however, never losing its main purpose, which was established from the very beginning by the Soviet power: *What the proletariat must be able to find in art is the expression of this new state of mind that has recently begun to form in it, to*

which art should help to shape. It is not a state decree, but a historical criterion [7].

That's how Leon Trotsky defined the mission accorded to any artistic expression in Bolshevik Russia, as expressed in a harsh article directed against formalism and the Russian formalists, calling them ignorant, decrepit and socially inadequate, among other considerations in the same tone. However, "the historical criterion" ten years after the publication of Trotsky's text became the state decree, when in 1934 during the First Soviet Writers Congress adopted, the one and only way to express art, and this was called *Sotsrealism*—that is socialist realism.

If for the world Russian Formalism was defined as a literary movement, which exposed a theory where "the notion of form obtains a new meaning : [that] is no longer an envelope but a dynamic and concrete integrity that has a content in itself, beyond correlation [8, p. 30] for the Soviet Philosophical Dictionary, it meant:(...) *contrast between art and reality, split between artistic form and ideological content, proclamation of autonomy and primacy of form in works of art. Formalism is part of the idealist conception of aesthetic enjoyment, which is presented as outside social ideas, essential vital interests, the aesthetic and social ideal, and, therefore, as entirely dependent on the "play of pure forms". In general, however, formalism reveals, in practice, that the content of artworks is completely dependent on bourgeois ideology. At the same time, the separation of form from content leads inevitably to the destruction of art, although it is presented under the heading of "formal creation". The CPSU. He has always fought formalism as a hostile phenomenon in Socialist art* [9, p. 192].

Paradoxically, formalism, as a dynamic and concrete integrity that possesses its own content without the need for any correlation, was the background on which not only literary and poetic creations were built, but also architecture, plastic arts and musical compositions, founding anew aesthetic movement that still dictates a pattern in the contemporary world : Constructivism. From the buildings that even today impact with their designs and the "assemblages ", even the political posters

that were used so successfully in the USSR as well as in the rest of the world, are based on the principles of this artistic movement.

In general terms, formalism made known to the world a group of creators who entered through the big doors of universal historiography and left their names printed in pure gold in its pages: Kasimir Malevich and Alexander Ródchenko in the plastic arts; Vladimir Mayakovski and Marina Tsvetaeva, in poetry; Mikhail Bulgakov and Boris Pasternak, in narrative; Vsevolod Meyerhold and Mikhail Chekhov, in theater; Viktor Sklovsky and Mikhail Bakhtin, in literary criticism and theory, are among the many creators who astonished the world with their insights.

Certainly, with their art they impacted the world, impressed, marveled and traced the multiple paths that illuminate the aesthetic journeys of several generations. However, in their own country, the formalists, that is to say all those who did not fit with joy and devotion in the formula of *Sotsrealism*, were execrated, shot, imprisoned, expelled, humiliated and/or "suicided".

Nevertheless, filmmakers were not safe at all from the watchful eye of the Soviet State in its struggle against Formalism. Text pages in "Montage" (1938) by Sergei Eisenstein, a brochure which was to be a mere reflection on the art and techniques of film editing, exceled in anxiety and timid defense of the montage based on the vision of the interplay of forms and a *Mea culpa* for incurring in the "deadly sin": *The mistake was to put too much emphasis on the possibility of contrast [of the images] and little accent on the value of the investigative effort of the counter opposition of the materials themselves. My critics were quick to accuse me of the very little interest that I lent to the content of the material, confusing the genuine interest of an investigation on a specific part of the problem with the researcher's own position on the representation of reality. I think I was a prisoner, first, by the idea of a set of uncorrelated bits, often yet which against their nature, united by the will of a publisher, created a "third something" and began to be correlated* [5, p. 8].

What might seem to us a theoretical "debate" about aesthetic forms and ways to approach a work of art, was actually a "combat" for the preservation of his own

life, since his career had somehow already been ruined. In the next ten years he will only manage to finish the first two parts and film the third part of a trilogy named "Ivan, the Terrible". The first part was praised and awarded with the Stalin Prize, and the last two parts were prohibited until the death of the People's Conductor, in 1953. But the most acclaimed director of Soviet cinema who was admired all over the world, did not get to see these films shown to Soviet film audiences, he died in 1948.

"Nobody is indispensable in this world", was a phrase that we frequently heard in the Soviet Union, addressed by those from above to those below (never the other way around). However, the early discovery of the emergence of the idea that from the collision of two completely independent images a new meaning emerged, allowed the new art form to establish a new language, not only for a very particular way of audio-visual narration, but for a symbolic language in cinema: a) first image, the head of the statue of Tsar Alexander II falls ; b) second image, the crowd cries victoriously; c) the result is that two independent images within the same film, play in the mind of the spectator to form the idea of the beginning of the Russian Revolution; outside, this may be read as the symbol for the fall of the Tsarist autocratic empire.

Perhaps, without the Eisensteins of their time there would not be the Tarkovskis of our time, nor his poetic film works would be structured from a new level of montage technique, montage inside the same frame, that still retains the principle to correlate two independent objects that, with their proximity, create a new meaning, symbolic and emotional : the milk spilled in the water; the clumsy flight of the white geese in the first very shot combined with the third shot of men in black heavily armed; the long passage of the iron canon having in the background the naked bodies of children.

"Today we can say that precisely the principles of montage, unlike a simple representation, require the proper viewer to become a creator, and this is how it manages to achieve this sublime inner emotional tension in the viewer, and this is

what makes a difference between emotion in a work of art and the mere logic in the naked informative narration of events”[5, p. 38].

Eisenstein's viewer is not a passive entity, is not a consumer of finished representations loaded with information which do not connect emotionally. The viewer of Eisenstein is a sentient being and a thinker, who reads, interprets, compares, analyzes, reflects, draws parallels, and draws conclusions. Does it make us wonder, then, that his last two works, “Ivan the Terrible II” –the finished part, and part “III” the unfinished one, on the tyranny of a Czar and his ways to impose his will and exercise power as an autocratic ruler were shelved until after Iosif Stalin's death? And is it not surprising that this was a practice too common in the Soviet Union, not only to prohibit certain works of art, but to arrest, literally, the film material or restrict its exhibition to the small cinema-clubs in the outskirts of the cities?

Of course, it is not surprising, because those in power knew too well the scope and force of a cinematographic work, because they used them consistently for their purposes. The high degree of emotional manipulation, which Eisenstein himself “confessed” in his theoretical texts on montage - especially in *Assemblage of attractions* (1923) - which can and usually uses cinema, makes it an extremely powerful weapon. And the Soviet State seized it for its exclusive and monopolistic use. The Soviet State used it from its birth and applied it throughout the country. It was used inside and outside the nation's borders, never forgetting what its main purpose was: to use effective political propaganda, subtle, sublime, aesthetically impeccable, dramatically insurmountable, but propaganda always, at the service of the main objectives or momentary needs of political power.

The French writer André Bazin (1918-1958), the most influential critic and film theorist, had already warned him, referring to the first works of Eisenstein, stating that: “(...) *his creativity is nothing other than "the cinema of violence". By this I mean that the director exerts an act of violence on the spectator, through the medium of the cinema, firstly, through montage, to expose certain ideas and impose his own vision of things, without leaving space for the speculation. For*

example, Luis Buñuel's impression can be seen after seeing "The battleship Potemkin ": "When we went out after the film was shown, we were ready to mount barricades. In the end, even the police intervened" [10].

Of course, every work of art pursues as its main objective, to impact emotionally. However, "*for what?*" Is this the question that is an inseparable part of that objective? Even, the movement "Art for art" completes the main objective with the answer "for the aesthetic enjoyment". The cinema also carries implicitly or explicitly the intentionality that essentially integrates the emotional impact of the films. But few branches of art had or have as much connectivity with political and ideological positions as cinematography. For historical reasons, the birth and subsequent development, of the Russian-Soviet film has an affiliate relationship, perhaps to a greater extent before today, with the power of the State and its political, strategic or tactical needs.

The new cinematographic experiences, the new technologies, the new aesthetic conceptions, the bets for the box office success and the impositions of financial mathematics, certainly condition the cinematographic productions all over the world. However, the Soviet School of Film and its theoretical and practical foundations, that is, *the how?* that the Soviet film industry managed to articulate in the first post-revolutionary decades, continues today. Its discoveries, findings and theories continue to be applied throughout the world, consciously or unconsciously, and many times without realizing the difficult path it had to travel to overcome the fierce political and ideological struggles of the country where it was born. *The how?* With the passing of time, new technological formats have arrived, it has been enriched, diversified, expanded, but never has left aside the "abc" of montage as taught by the Soviet Film School. And what about the *What for?* That, still remains the particular decision of each creator.

Translated from Spanish by Isabel Huizi Castillo

Caracas, March 2nd, 2018

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