

CHAPTER

6



SOVIET CINEMA IN THE 1920s



In France and Germany, avant-garde film movements began after World War I, whereas in the USSR, the Soviet Montage movement emerged during the 1920s. As in Europe, this avant-garde arose within a commercial film industry.

Although the new government controlled the industry in the USSR after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, it was not immediately able to finance filmmaking. Except for some educational and propaganda projects, films were expected to turn a profit. The Soviet Montage movement, which began in 1925, was initially lucrative partly because several of its films made money abroad—income that helped build up the Soviet film industry.

The postrevolutionary era of the Soviet cinema can be divided into three periods. During War Communism (1918–1920), the Soviet Union was in a state of civil war and experienced great hardships, with the film industry struggling to survive. The New Economic Policy (1921–1924) was designed to bring the country out of its crisis, and the film industry slowly recovered. Finally, the period from 1925 to 1933 saw renewed government control, resulting in growth and export as production, distribution, and exhibition expanded. This period also saw the experimentation of the Montage movement. Beginning in 1928, however, the First Five-Year Plan imposed strict state controls that were to hasten the movement's end.

THE HARDSHIPS OF WAR COMMUNISM, 1918–1920

Russia underwent two revolutions during 1917. The first, in February, eliminated the Tsar's aristocratic rule. In its place, a reformist provisional government was set up. This compromise did not satisfy the radical

Bolshevik party, which favored a Marxist revolution to bring the worker and peasant classes to power. When the provisional government failed to halt Russia's hopeless and unpopular struggle against Germany in World War I, the Bolshevik cause gained support, especially from the military. In October, Vladimir Lenin led a second revolution that created the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The February Revolution had relatively little effect on the Russian film industry, which had expanded during the war. Films made just prior to the revolution appeared, and a few films with political subject matter were rushed through production. Evgenii Bauer, a leading pre-revolutionary director, made *The Revolutionary*, released in April; it supported Russia's continued participation in World War I. Yakov Protazanov's *Father Sergius*, produced between the two revolutions, was released in 1918. This film carried on the tradition of the mid-1910s Russian cinema, with its emphasis on psychological melodrama (see pp. 60–62).

The Bolshevik Revolution in October created a far greater disruption in Russian life in general. Given that the Communists favored state ownership of all companies, existing film firms waited nervously to see what would happen. Coincidentally, Bauer died in the spring of 1917, and the illness of his producer, Alexander Khanzhonkov, ended that company's existence. Another major prerevolutionary producer, Alexander Drankov, left the USSR in the summer of 1918 and tried vainly to reestablish his business abroad. After a brief trial period of producing propaganda films commissioned by the new government, the Yermoliev troupe fled to Paris via the Crimea in 1919; there they established a successful company, Films Albarros (p. 90).

The logical first step for the new Marxist regime would have been for the government to acquire, or nationalize, the film industry. The Bolsheviks, however, were not yet powerful enough for this step. Instead, a new regulatory body, the People's Commissariat of Education (generally known as Narkompros), was assigned to oversee the cinema. The commissar, or head, of Narkompros was Anatoli Lunacharsky. He was interested in film and occasionally wrote scripts. Lunacharsky's sympathetic attitude later helped create favorable conditions for the Montage directors.

During the first half of 1918, Narkompros struggled to gain control over film production, distribution, and exhibition. A few Soviets, or local workers' governing bodies, set up their own production units, making propaganda films promoting the new society. For example, the Petrograd Cinema Committee produced *Cohab-*

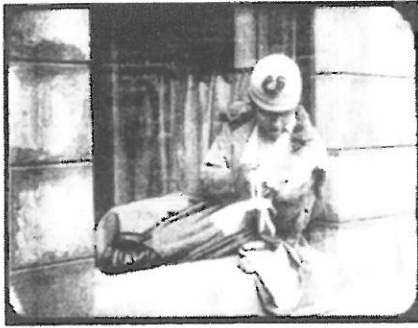


6.1 *Cohabitation* ends with documentary shots of cheerful revolutionary soldiers, giving this rather crudely made early Soviet film an air of historical immediacy.

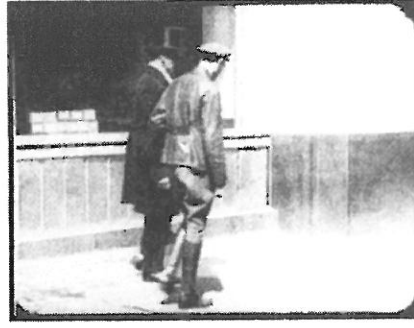
itation (1918), made by a collective of directors and scripted by Lunacharsky. Under Soviet rule, large houses that had previously belonged to rich families were divided to provide dwellings for poorer families. In *Cohabitation*, a well-to-do professor and a poor janitor work at the same school; when the janitor and his daughter are assigned to live in the professor's large home, the latter's wife objects. Eventually all learn to live together in harmony (6.1).

The year 1918 also saw the first directorial efforts of two young men who were to become major directors in the 1920s. In June, Dziga Vertov took charge of Narkompros's first newsreel; later he would be an important documentarist working in the Montage movement. Before the October Revolution, Lev Kuleshov made *Engineer Prite's Project* (released 1918) for the Khanzhonkov firm, where he had previously worked as a set designer. Only a few scenes from the film survive, but they indicate that, unlike his contemporaries in Russia, Kuleshov employed Hollywood-style continuity guidelines (6.2–6.6). Kuleshov's later teachings and writings explored the implications of Hollywood continuity style in detail.

Despite these tentative signs of progress, however, Soviet production received two serious blows during 1918. Because the companies that had fled after the revolution had taken whatever they could with them, the USSR badly needed production equipment and raw stock. (Neither was manufactured there.) In May, the government entrusted \$1 million in credit to a film distributor who had operated in Russia during World War I, Jacques Cibrario. On a buying mission to the United States, Cibrario purchased worthless used material and absconded with most of the money. Russia had little foreign currency, and the loss was serious. It is little wonder that the government was reluctant to give the film industry further large sums. Another problem arose in June 1918, when a decree required that all raw stock held by private firms be registered with the government. The



6.2 A scene in *Engineer Prite's Project* uses continuity editing, as a woman seated at a window drops something to attract the attention of two men passing below.



6.3 A long shot shows them noticing the object.



6.4 In a cut-in, the hero picks it up.



6.5 In another shot, he looks up and right.



6.6 In the reverse shot, the woman looks back at him. The rest of the scene proceeds in standard continuity fashion.

remaining producers and dealers promptly hid what little raw film remained, and a severe shortage developed.

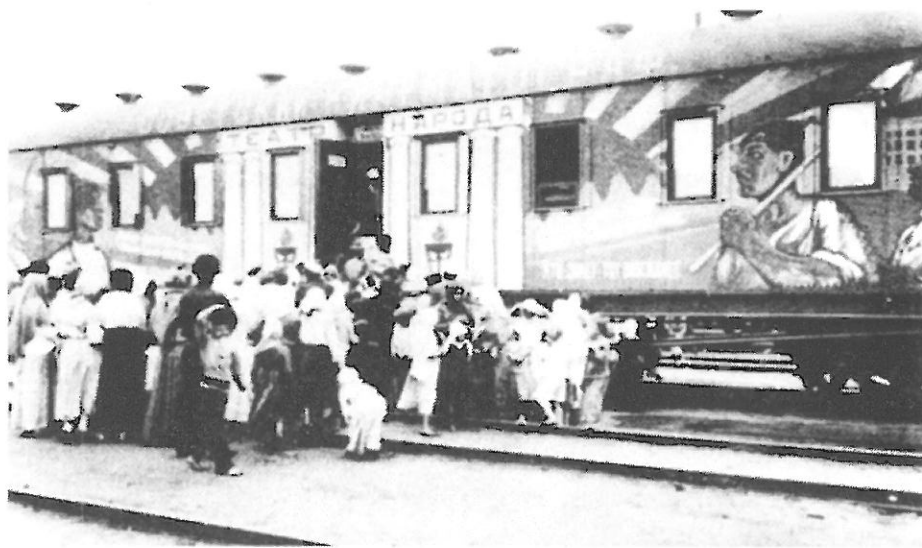
From 1918 to 1920, Soviet production, distribution, and exhibition were disorganized. Production remained low at first. Only six films were produced under state auspices in 1918. Sixty-three were made in 1919, but most of these were short newsreels and *agitki*, brief propaganda films with simple pro-Soviet messages. *Workers of All Lands, Unite!* (1919), for example, showed scenes from the history of the struggle of workers across the ages, linked by quotes from Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (6.7). Conditions remained bleak, however, especially for the few private firms still producing films. When the Russ company set out in 1919 to adapt Tolstoy's *Polikushka*, lack of food, heat, and positive film stock created incredible difficulties. The film did not reach theaters until late 1922.

These were the years of the civil war in the USSR, as the Reds, or Bolshevik forces, fought the Whites, Russians opposed to the revolutionary government and supported by Britain, the United States, and other countries. In 1920, the Bolsheviks won, but at a terrible cost.

During the civil war, a major concern was to get films out to troops and villagers in the countryside. Many of



6.7 An actor playing Karl Marx sits before a map of Europe, writing the *Communist Manifesto*. The superimposed clasping workers' hands symbolize his inspiration for the famous command (and the film's title) *Workers of All Lands, Unite!*



6.8. A decorated agit-train called the “V. I. Lenin.” The sign at the top reads “Soviet Cinematograph,” indicating that the train carried a projection setup.

the far-flung areas had no movie theaters, and the Soviet government innovated the use of *agit-vehicles*. Trains, trucks, even steamboats (6.8) visited the countryside. Painted with slogans and caricatures, they carried propaganda leaflets, printing presses, even small filmmaking setups. They put on theatrical skits or showed movies on an outdoor screen for local crowds.

Production, however, continued at a low level. In August 1919, Lenin finally nationalized the film industry. The main effect of this move was the discovery of many old films—both Russian and foreign—that had been stored away. These films provided most of what Soviet citizens saw in theaters until 1922.

The departure of the Yermoliev and Drankov companies, along with the dissolution of Khanchonkov, meant that a generation of Russian filmmakers had largely disappeared. Who would replace them? Despite the hardships of War Communism, Narkompros established the State Film School in 1919. In 1920, the young director of *Engineer Prite's Project*, Lev Kuleshov, joined the faculty and formed a small workshop that was to train some of the era's important directors and actors.

Over the next few years, working under conditions of great deprivation and often without film stock for their experiments, Kuleshov's group explored the new art. They practiced acting and put on plays and skits staged as much like films as possible. Some of the skits used small frames with curtains, within which the actors stood to create “close-ups.” Later they experimented with film scenes, reediting old films. In 1921, Kuleshov obtained a small amount of precious raw stock from the government and shot what are known as the “Kuleshov experiments.” In all of these, the group explored an editing principle now called the *Kuleshov effect*.

The Kuleshov effect is based on leaving out a scene's establishing shot and leading the spectator to infer spatial or temporal continuity from the shots of separate elements. Often Kuleshov's experiments relied on the eyeline match. The workshop's most famous experiment involved recutting old footage with the actor Ivan Mozhukhin. A close view of Mozhukhin with a neutral expression was selected. This same shot was repeatedly edited together with shots of other subject matter, variously reported as a bowl of soup, a dead body, a baby, and the like. Supposedly, ordinary viewers praised Mozhukhin's performance, believing that his face had registered the appropriate hunger, sorrow, or delight—even though his face was the same each time they had seen it. This Mozhukhin experiment does not survive, unfortunately, but two other Kuleshov experiments were rediscovered during the 1990s. One stages a fight on a balcony, watched by a man on a sidewalk nearby. Its skillful editing, especially with its use of eyeline matching, reflects the knowledge of continuity style that Kuleshov had demonstrated in *Engineer Prite's Project* (see 6.2–6.6). A second, poetically called *The Created Surface of the Earth*, assembled a unified space out of shots made in various widely separated locations, all united by the eyeline matches between a man and a woman who meet in a park. Unfortunately the ending is missing, but it showed the pair looking and pointing off-screen (6.9), followed by a shot of the U.S. Capitol (taken from an old film), and finally shots of the pair walking along a Moscow street ascending a flight of steps—which the editing suggests are those of the Capitol but which were actually filmed at a cathedral in Moscow. In all of the Kuleshov experiments, the filmmakers built up an overall space that had not existed during filming.



6.9. Actors in a Moscow park look and point offscreen. The next shot (missing) showed the U.S. Capitol, which they seem to see.



6.10 In scenes like this, when the children leap from a bridge onto a train during the defense of their town, *Red Imps* captured the fast pace of American adventure films of the 1910s.

The major implication of Kuleshov's experiments was that in cinema the viewer's response depended less on the individual shot than on the editing—the montage of the shots. This idea was to be central to the Montage filmmakers' theory and style. The move from classroom experimentation to film production would be difficult for Kuleshov's group, however, for the Soviet film industry's construction took several years.

RECOVERY UNDER THE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY, 1921–1924

By 1920, the hardships caused by the civil war and the disorganization of the new government had created a severe famine in parts of the USSR. Faced with this crisis, Lenin formulated the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921, which allowed a limited and temporary reintroduction of private ownership and capitalist-style dealings. As a result, hoarded raw stock reappeared, and film production by private firms and government groups increased.

In early 1922, Lenin made two statements that helped determine the course of Soviet filmmaking. First, he issued the so-called Lenin proportion, stating that film programs should balance entertainment and education—though not specifying how much of each type of film should be shown. He also declared (according to Lunacharsky), “Of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important.” Lenin probably meant that the cinema was the most powerful tool for propaganda and education among a largely illiterate population. In any event, his statement focused attention on the cinema and has been quoted innumerable times as an indication of the Bolshevik government's reliance on the new medium for propaganda.

In late 1922, the government attempted to organize the feeble film industry by creating a central distribution monopoly called Goskino. All private and government production firms were to release their films through

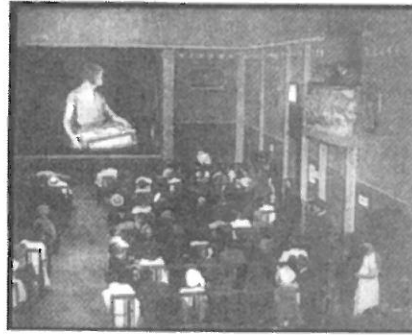
Goskino, which would also control the import and export of films. The attempt failed, since several companies were powerful enough to compete with Goskino. In some cases, private importers bid against Goskino for the same films, driving prices higher.

This was no small matter. During the NEP, the Soviet film industry became reliant on imports. In the early years after the October Revolution, the USSR had been cut off from the rest of the world, partly by the civil war and partly by the refusal of most countries to deal with a communist government. In 1922, the Treaty of Rapallo opened the way for trade between Russia and Germany. The treaty was a breakthrough for the USSR in its relations with the West, and Berlin became the main conduit for films going into and out of the USSR during the 1920s. Eager to beat their competitors into the vast new Soviet market, German film firms sold on credit, and lighting equipment, raw stock, and new films flowed into the USSR. A 1923 investigation found that 99 percent of films in Soviet distribution were foreign. Since most of the film industry's revenues came from distributing imported pictures, foreign trade played a crucial role in its recovery.

Although the industry faced an uphill struggle, the NEP period saw a slow growth. Production centers were gradually set up in the non-Russian republics of the USSR so that ethnic populations could see films reflecting their own cultures. With the acquisition of raw stock, production of fiction features increased. In 1923, there appeared the first Soviet film that was as popular with Soviet audiences as were imported films: a civil war drama called *Red Imps*. It was directed by Ivan Perestiani for the Georgian branch of Narkompros. The film concerns two teenagers, a brother obsessed with James Fenimore Cooper's adventure books and a sister devoted to a novel about anarchism. When their father is killed by the Whites, the pair team up with a black street acrobat and set out to join the Red Army. As scouts, they live out the sorts of adventures they had previously read about (6.10).



6.11 In a sequence from *Cigarette-Girl of Mosselprom*, set in a movie studio, a director reading a script sits in front of a German film poster.



6.12 At the end, the heroine's film premieres in what may have been a typical movie theater of the day.



6.13 As this shot of the hero and his mother indicates, *Palace and Fortress* used an old-fashioned style, with the camera facing the back wall straight on, the characters framed from a distance, and flat lighting coming from the front.



6.14, 6.15 In one shot from *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, a Soviet official gives a speech, and in the next Mr. West seems to be watching through binoculars—though the shots were clearly made in different spaces and times.

The year 1924 saw a further increase in production. Yuri Zhelyabuzhsky, who had gotten his start directing agitki, made *Cigarette-Girl of Mosselprom*, a contemporary comedy in which a street cigarette seller becomes a movie star by accident. Several scenes reflect the Soviet film situation of the day (6.11, 6.12). Another popular film, *Palace and Fortress*, was made by the veteran prerevolutionary director, Alexander Ivanovsky. It centered on a revolutionary of the era of Tsar Alexander II who is imprisoned and eventually goes mad (6.13). *Palace and Fortress* became a favorite target of the Montage directors over the next few years as they advocated a new approach to filmmaking.

Members of the Kuleshov workshop of the State Film School also made their first feature in 1924. *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* is a hilarious comedy about western misconceptions of the USSR. Mr. West, a naive American representative of the YMCA, reluctantly travels to Moscow, where thieves exploit his prejudices, pretending to defend him against “barbarous” Bolshevik thugs. Eventually he is rescued by real (and kindly) Bolsheviks. At the end, the film exploits the Kuleshov effect by combining newsreel and staged footage (6.14, 6.15). With

its playful use of acting and editing, *Mr. West* can be counted as a marginal Montage film. It brought the Soviet cinema to the verge of a truly avant-garde movement, as a new generation of directors interested in more radical stylistic exploration began working.

INCREASED STATE CONTROL AND THE MONTAGE MOVEMENT, 1925–1930

Growth and Export in the Film Industry

Because the centralized distribution firm Goskino had proved unable to organize the film industry, the government created a new company, Sovkino, on January 1, 1925. The few production firms that were allowed to keep operating were given a strong incentive to help Sovkino survive: they had to invest in stock in the new firm. Goskino continued on for a time, producing on a small scale; its main contribution was *Potemkin*, the most famous film of the Montage movement and the first Soviet film to have a major success abroad. A more extensive and long-lived company was Mezhrabpom-Russ (based on the old Russ collective that had made

Polikushka). This private firm was owned and financed by a German communist group, and it made a surprisingly large proportion of the most significant Soviet films—including Vsevolod Pudovkin's silent ones—before its dissolution in 1936. Specialist companies also held stock in Sovkino: Gosvoyenfilm made military propaganda until the late 1920s, and Kultkino produced educational films—including some by the major Montage-style documentarist Dziga Vertov. Sevzapkino was based in Leningrad, and it later became simply the Leningrad studio of Sovkino. Working at Sevzapkino were a number of young and talented Montage directors, most notably the team of Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg.

Sovkino faced a complex set of government demands. One policy dictated that the firm expand access to films throughout the USSR. Since 1917, the number of theaters had shrunk, due to the lack of films, the breakdown of projectors, the inability to heat the auditoriums, and similar factors. Lenin died in 1924, but his belief that the cinema should serve an educational role continued to influence policy. The government insisted on getting films to workers and peasants in remote regions. Sovkino faced the formidable tasks of opening urban theaters and of sending over one thousand portable projection outfits to the countryside. Moreover, most workers and peasants could afford only tiny entrance fees, so the portable theaters operated at a loss.

How was Sovkino to pay for these portable projection outfits? Not through government subsidies but through its profits on other enterprises. Many such profits would come from foreign films, which Sovkino imported and distributed in the USSR. During the second half of the decade, however, the company was pressured to reduce the number of imported films. Even reedited, as most such films were, they were considered ideologically harmful. A more desirable source of income was domestic production. Soviet films might make money within the USSR. Moreover, if they were sold abroad, they might earn much more. Sovkino thus had a strong incentive to export films. Partly by supporting the young Montage directors, Sovkino produced films that found an audience in the West, and the income that these exports generated bought new equipment and supported the expansion of the industry.

The first triumph abroad was Sergei Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, which proved enormously popular in Germany in 1926 and went on to show in many other countries. Other Soviet films, such as Pudovkin's *Mother*, soon followed and were exported very successfully. The foreign currency earned, especially by Montage-style

films, facilitated the Soviet industry's purchase of foreign production and exhibition equipment.

Another goal for Sovkino was to make films that embodied the new ideals of the Communist government so that they could be conveyed to the country's population. The early Montage films, with their dynamic depictions of Tsarist-period oppression and historical rebellions, were praised for their subject matter. Because these films were successful financially and critically, for a few years a new generation of filmmakers was able to continue experimenting in the avant-garde Montage style.

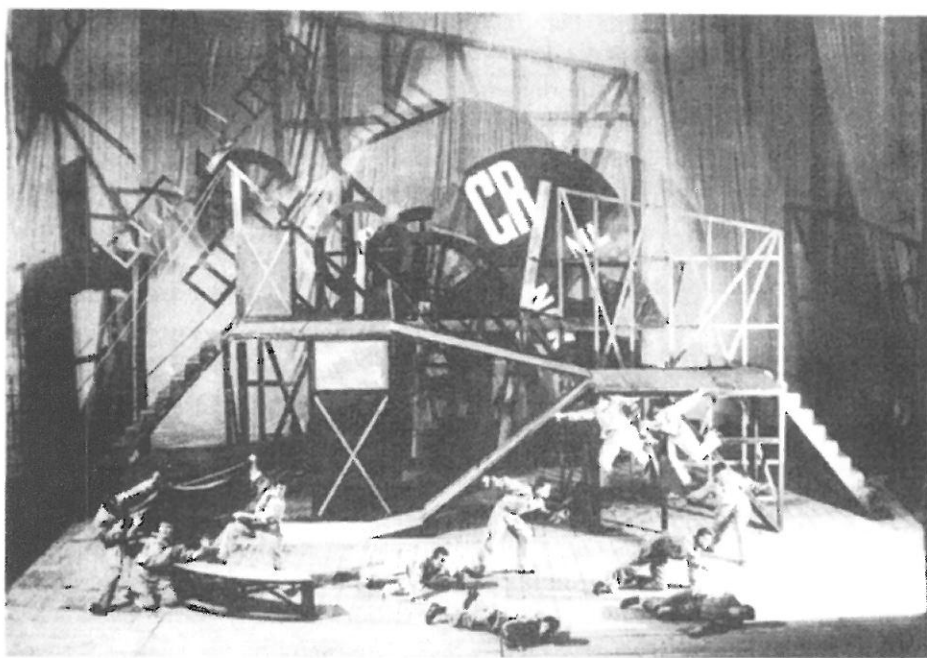
The Influence of Constructivism

The years after the revolution saw enthusiastic experimentation by artists in every medium. They tried to approach artistic creation in a way appropriate to a completely new kind of society. One result was a trend in the visual arts called Constructivism, to which the Montage movement in the cinema was closely linked.

Despite its radical aims, Constructivism had precedents in prerevolutionary tendencies. Influences from French Cubism and Italian Futurism combined in Russia in a movement called Cubo-Futurism, which led to a flamboyant attack on all traditional art forms. Artists affiliated with another movement, Suprematism, took a more spiritual, abstract turn. Simple geometric shapes were combined into compositions. Kasimir Malevich's "Black Square" (1913) was a black square against a white background; in 1917 he created "White on White," a white background surrounding an off-center square of a slightly different shade.

In this prerevolutionary period, few of the Cubo-Futurist or Suprematist artists had political alliances. While they criticized traditional artistic styles, they did not see the artist as having a political role. After the Bolshevik Revolution, however, most artists supported the new government, and there were many debates as to how art and politics could be fused. Some of these avant-garde artists were given teaching posts or put in positions where they influenced official cultural policy, and Lunacharsky, while not entirely sympathetic to the modernist styles of the day, allowed them a relatively free hand.

The search for a socially useful art resulted in the rise of Constructivism around 1920. Manifestos and articles declared that artists who had been exploring abstract styles need not abandon their ways of working—they simply needed to apply them to useful ends. For the Constructivist, art inevitably fulfilled a social function. It was not an object of rapt contemplation or a source



6.16 Biomechanical acting, work clothes, and a machine like set in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*.

of some enduring higher truth, as many nineteenth-century views of art had held. The artist was not an inspired visionary; he or she was a skilled artisan using the materials of the medium to create an artwork. Artists were often compared to engineers, using tools and a rational, even scientific approach.

The Constructivists also often compared the artwork to a machine. While earlier views of art frequently saw the artwork as analogous to a plant, with an organic unity and growth, the Constructivists stressed that it was put together from parts. This process of assemblage was sometimes referred to as *montage*, from the French word for the assembly of parts into a machine. (As we have seen, filmmakers applied the term *montage* to the editing of shots into a film.) This analogy between artwork and machine was seen positively. Because Soviet society focused on enhancing the USSR's industrial output, and also because communism stressed the dignity of human labor, the factory and the machine became symbols of the new society. Artists' studios were often seen as factories where laborers built useful products.

Because all human response was seen as based on scientifically determinable processes, the Constructivists considered that an artwork could be calculated to elicit a particular reaction. Thus artworks could be used for propagandistic and educational purposes promoting the new communist society—if only the right ways of making them could be discovered. Many artists therefore jettisoned the notion that elite art forms (like opera and

painting) were superior to popular art forms (like circus and poster). Art should be understandable to all, particularly to the workers and peasants so central to the Bolshevik cause.

Constructivism resulted in an extraordinary fusion of abstract graphic design and practical function. For example, El Lissitzky used a geometric composition straight out of Suprematism for a 1920 propaganda poster supporting the Bolshevik side in the civil war (Color Plate 6.1). Constructivist artists designed textiles, book covers, workers' uniforms, street kiosks, even ceramic cups and saucers—many using modernist abstract shapes.

In the early 1920s, Constructivism also affected the theater. The most important Constructivist theatrical director was Vsevolod Meyerhold, an established figure who offered his services to the Bolshevik government immediately after the revolution. Meyerhold's bold methods of staging were to influence Soviet film directors. Set and costume designs in several major Meyerhold productions incorporated Constructivist design principles. In his 1922 production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, for example, the set somewhat resembled a large factory machine; it consisted of a series of bare platforms, with their supporting legs visible and a large propeller turning during the play. The actors performed in ordinary work clothes (6.16). Meyerhold also pioneered the principle of *biomechanical acting*. The actor's body was assumed to be like a machine, and thus a performance consisted of carefully controlled physical

movements rather than of the expression of inner emotions. Meyerhold's actors trained by doing exercises to gain mastery over their bodies, and their performances had an acrobatic quality.

A New Generation: The Montage Filmmakers

During the first half of the 1920s, when all these sweeping changes were revolutionizing the arts, a new generation of filmmakers was moving into the cinema. For them, the revolution was a crucial formative event—partly because they were extraordinarily young. Indeed, Sergei Eisenstein was nicknamed “the old man” by his younger friends because he was all of twenty-six when he began his first feature film. Born in 1898, Eisenstein came from a middle-class family in Riga, Latvia. His education gave him fluency in Russian, English, German, and French. He recalled that, while on a visit to Paris at age 8, he saw a Méliès film and became interested in the cinema. Two years later he visited the circus and became similarly obsessed with this popular spectacle. Following his father's wishes, he began studying engineering in 1915. Eisenstein participated in the revolution and during the civil war put his engineering skills to work building bridges. He was drawn to the arts, however, and during this same period he also decorated agit-trains and helped design many theatrical skits for the Red Army. The combination of engineering and artistic work seemed anything but contradictory in the era of Constructivism, and throughout his life Eisenstein likened the production of his films to the building of those bridges.

In 1920, at the end of the civil war, Eisenstein went to Moscow and joined the Proletkult Theater (short for Proletarian, or Workers', Cultural Theater). There he designed and codirected many plays. In 1921, Eisenstein (along with his friend, Sergei Yutkevich, another future Montage film director) enrolled in a theater workshop under the supervision of Meyerhold, whom he would always consider his mentor. In 1923, Eisenstein directed his first theatrical production, *Enough Simplicity in Every Wise Man*. Although the play was a nineteenth-century farce, Eisenstein staged it as a circus. The actors dressed in clown costumes and performed in the acrobatic biomechanical style, walking on a tightrope above the audience or doing handstands as they spoke their lines. Eisenstein also produced *Glumov's Diary*, a short film to be shown on a screen on the stage (6.17). At the same time that this play was performed, Eisenstein gained some early experience as a film editor: along with Esfir Shub (soon to become an important maker of compilation documentaries), he reedited a



6.17 At the end of *Glumov's Diary*, Eisenstein takes a bow in front of a poster for the play *Enough Simplicity in Every Wise Man*. At his chin level are written “Montage of Attractions” and “Eisenstein.”

German Expressionist film, Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*, for Soviet release.

Eisenstein always maintained that his move from the theater to film came in 1924, when he directed a production of playwright S. M. Tretyakov's *Gas Masks*, not in a theater but in a real gas factory. According to Eisenstein, the contrast between the reality of the setting and the artifice of the drama was too great. A few months later, he began work on *Strike* (released in early 1925)—a film set and shot in a factory. It was the first major film of the Montage movement, and Eisenstein went on to make three more important works in that style: *Potemkin*, *October* (aka *Ten Days That Shook the World* in an abridged version), and *Old and New*. *Potemkin* was extremely successful abroad, which gave Eisenstein and his colleagues considerable leeway for experimentation over the next few years. Many Montage films proved more popular abroad than in the USSR, where they were often accused of being too difficult for workers and peasants to understand.

The oldest Montage director in years and experience was Lev Kuleshov, who had designed and directed films before the revolution and then taught at the State Film School. Kuleshov's own Soviet films were only mildly experimental in style, but his workshop produced two important Montage directors.

Vsevolod Pudovkin had intended to train as a chemist until he saw D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* in 1919. Convinced of the cinema's importance, he soon joined Kuleshov's workshop and trained as both an actor and a director. His first feature film typified the Constructivist interest in the physical bases of psychological response; he made *Mechanics of the Brain*, a documentary about Ivan Pavlov's famous experiments on stimulus-response physiology. In 1926, Pudovkin (born in 1893) helped

A Chronology of the Soviet Montage Movement

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|------|---|
| 1917 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> February: Tsar Nicholas II is overthrown; the provisional government is established. October: The Bolshevik Revolution |
| 1918 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Narkompros (the People's Commissariat of Education) takes charge of regulating the film industry. |
| 1919 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> August: Nationalization of the film industry Foundation of the State Film School |
| 1920 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lev Kuleshov joins the State Film School and forms his workshop. |
| 1921 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The New Economic Policy is instituted. |
| 1922 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formation of Goskino, the state film distribution monopoly |
| 1923 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publication of Sergei Eisenstein's essay, "Montage of Attractions" |
| 1924 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Kino-Eye</i>, Dziga Vertov <i>The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks</i>, Lev Kuleshov |
| 1925 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> January: Formation of Sovkino, the new government distribution monopoly and production company <i>Strike</i>, Sergei Eisenstein <i>Potemkin</i>, Sergei Eisenstein |
| 1926 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Mother</i>, Vsevolod Pudovkin <i>The Devil's Wheel</i>, Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg <i>The Cloak</i>, Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg |
| 1927 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Zvenigora</i>, Alexander Dovzhenko <i>The House on Trubnaya</i>, Boris Barnet <i>The End of St. Petersburg</i>, Vsevolod Pudovkin <i>Moscow in October</i>, Boris Barnet <i>SVD</i>, Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg |
| 1928 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> March: The First Communist Party Conference on Film Questions is held. <i>October</i> (aka <i>Ten Days That Shook the World</i>), Sergei Eisenstein <i>The Heir of Genghis-Khan</i> (aka <i>Storm over Asia</i>), Vsevolod Pudovkin <i>Lace</i>, Sergei Yutkevich |
| 1929 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sergei Eisenstein begins travels that will keep him abroad until 1932. <i>The New Babylon</i>, Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg <i>My Grandmother</i>, Kote Mikaberidze <i>China Express</i> (aka <i>Blue Express</i>), Ilya Trauberg <i>Man with a Movie Camera</i>, Dziga Vertov <i>Arsenal</i>, Alexander Dovzhenko <i>Old and New</i> (aka <i>The General Line</i>), Sergei Eisenstein |
| 1930 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formation of Soyuzkino, a centralized company to control all production, distribution, and exhibition <i>Earth</i>, Alexander Dovzhenko |
| 1931 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Alone</i>, Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg <i>Golden Mountains</i>, Sergei Yutkevich |
| 1932 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>A Simple Case</i>, Vsevolod Pudovkin |
| 1933 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Deserted</i>, Vsevolod Pudovkin |

found the Montage movement with his first fiction feature, *Mother*. Within the USSR, *Mother* was the most popular of all Montage films. As a result, Pudovkin enjoyed the highest approval from the government of any of the movement's directors, and he was able to keep up his experiments with Montage longer than any of the others—up until 1933. Another Kuleshov workshop member, Boris Barnet (born 1902) had studied painting and sculpture, and he trained as a boxer after the revolution. He acted in *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* and other mid-1920s films, and he also directed *The House on Trubnaya* (1927) and other Montage-style films.

The other important filmmaker who, along with Kuleshov, had started directing about the time of the revolution was Dziga Vertov (born 1896). During the mid-1910s, he wrote poetry and science fiction, composed what we now call *musique concrète*, and became influenced by the Cubo-Futurists. From 1916 to 1917, however, he studied medicine until becoming the supervisor of Narkompros's newsreel series in 1917. He went on, in 1924, to make feature-length documentaries, some employing the Montage style.

The youngest Montage directors came out of the Leningrad theater milieu of the early 1920s. In 1921, while still in their teens, Grigori Kozintsev (born 1905), Leonid Trauberg (born 1902), and Sergei Yutkevich (born 1904) formed the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS). This theatrical troupe enthusiastically embraced the circus, the popular American cinema, the cabaret, and other entertainments. They issued provocative manifestos in the manner of the Cubo-Futurists' "Slap in the Face of Public Taste" (1912). In 1922, the FEKS group defined how their approach to acting departed from that of the traditional theater: "from emotion to the machine, from anguish to the trick. The technique—circus. The psychology—head over heels."¹ They staged theatrical events that adopted the techniques of popular entertainments, and by 1924, they moved into the cinema with a short parody of American serials, *The Adventures of Oktyabrina* (now lost). Yutkevich went on to make Montage films on his own; Kozintsev and Trauberg codirected several important films of the movement. Because of their taste for bizarre experimentation, the FEKS group were criticized by government officials from the start of their careers.

Eisenstein, Kuleshov, Pudovkin, Vertov, and the FEKS group were the principal early exponents of Soviet Montage. Other directors picked up their influences and developed the style. In particular, filmmakers working in

the non-Russian republics enriched the Montage movement. Foremost among these was Alexander Dovzhenko, the principal Ukrainian director. Dovzhenko had been in the Red Army during the civil war and served as a diplomatic administrator in Berlin in the early 1920s. There he studied art, returning to the Ukraine as a painter and cartoonist. In 1926, he suddenly switched to filmmaking and made a comedy and a spy thriller before directing his first Montage film, *Zvenigora*, in 1927. Based on obscure Ukrainian folk legends, *Zvenigora* baffled audiences but demonstrated an original style that emphasizes lyrical imagery above narrative. Dovzhenko went on to make two more important Montage films, *Arsenal* and *Earth*, also set in the Ukraine.

The Theoretical Writings of Montage Filmmakers

The mid-1920s saw a burgeoning in Soviet film theory, as critics and filmmakers sought to understand cinema scientifically. Like the French Impressionists, several Montage directors considered theory and filmmaking to be closely linked, and they wrote about their conceptions of cinema. They were united in an opposition to traditional films. All saw in Montage the basis of revolutionary films that would inspire audiences. But the writings of the Montage directors differed in important ways.

In many respects, Kuleshov was the most conservative theorist of the group. He admired the succinct storytelling of American films, and he discussed Montage chiefly as techniques of editing for clarity and emotional effects. This conception of Montage influenced Pudovkin, whose two 1926 pamphlets on filmmaking were soon translated into western languages (in English as *Film Language*, 1929). Through Pudovkin, Montage came to refer generally to dynamic, often discontinuous, narrative editing.

Vertov was far more radical. A committed Constructivist, he emphasized the social utility of documentary film. Vertov saw the fiction films of his contemporaries as "cine-nicotine," a drug that dulled the viewer's awareness of social and political reality. For him, "life caught unawares" would be the basis of a cinema of fact. Montage was less a single technique than the entire production process: choosing a subject, shooting footage, and assembling the film all involved selection and combination of "cine-facts." As for editing, Vertov emphasized that the filmmaker should calculate the differences between shots—light versus dark, slow motion versus fast motion, and so on. These differences, or "intervals," would be the basis of the film's effect on the audience.

Eisenstein developed the most complicated conception of Montage. Initially he believed in what he called the “montage of attractions” (as he boldly declared in the poster for his first stage production; see 6.17). As in a circus, the filmmaker should assemble a series of exciting moments to stimulate the viewer’s emotions. Later he formulated elaborate principles by which individual filmic elements could be combined for maximum emotional and intellectual effects. He insisted that Montage was not limited to editing or even to Constructivist art in general. In a bold essay of 1920, he scoffed at Kuleshov and Pudovkin as treating shots like bricks that are joined to build a film. Bricks, he pointed out, do not interact with each other as film shots do. He asserted that shots should not be seen as simply linked but rather as conflicting sharply with one another. Even Eisenstein’s writing style, with its short sentences and paragraphs, tried to convey the principle of collision:

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.

By what, then, is montage characterized and, consequently, its cell—the shot?

By collision. By the conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other. By conflict. By collision.²

For Eisenstein, this conflict imitated the Marxist concept of the dialectic, in which antithetical elements clash and produce a synthesis that goes beyond both. Montage could compel the spectator to sense the conflict between elements and create a new concept in his or her mind.

In “collision Montage,” Eisenstein foresaw the possibility of an “intellectual” cinema. It would attempt not to tell a story but to convey abstract ideas, as an essay or political tract might. He dreamed of filming Karl Marx’s *Capital*, creating concepts through images and editing rather than through verbal language. Certain of his films took first steps toward intellectual filmmaking.

The filmmakers’ theories did not always accord with their practice. Kuleshov and Pudovkin in particular proved more daring as filmmakers than their essays might suggest. All the core Montage directors, however, wrote about film technique as a vivid way to shape the new Soviet society by arousing and educating their audiences.

Soviet Montage Form and Style

Genre Most non-Montage Soviet films tended to be topical comedies or conventional literary adaptations. In part because Montage directors emphasized physical conflict, in part because they sought to illustrate Bolshevik doctrine, they often chose uprisings, strikes, and other clashes in the history of the revolutionary movement. Two films marking the twentieth anniversary of the failed Revolution of 1905 (*Potemkin* and *Mother*) and three celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution (*October*, *The End of St. Petersburg*, and *Moscow in October*) used the Montage style.

Other historical Montage films portrayed earlier revolutionary movements. Kozintsev and Trauberg’s *The New Babylon* dealt with the doomed 1871 Paris Commune; the same pair’s *SVD*, with the Decembrist plot of 1825. Some presented Tsarist-period strikes (e.g., *Strike*) or the civil war (e.g., *Arsenal*). Several Montage films, however, were dramas or comedies on contemporary social problems. For example, as the new government gave rise to a cumbersome bureaucracy, it became common to satirize the red tape involved in getting anything done, as in the absurdist *My Grandmother*, made in the Republic of Georgia.

Narrative What about the narrative structure of Montage films? We have seen that French Impressionist films usually center around personal actions and psychology, while German Expressionism typically uses supernatural or legendary elements to motivate distorted style. The narrative patterns of Soviet Montage films differ considerably from both these other movements. On the one hand, there are almost no supernatural events (the one exception being Dovzhenko’s *Zvenigora*, which uses elements from Ukrainian folklore). Moreover, many Montage films downplay individual characters as central causal agents. Instead, drawing on a Marxist view of history, Montage films often make social forces the source of causes and effects. Characters do act and react, but they do so less as psychologically distinct individuals than as members of different social classes.

Thus a single protagonist might represent a general type or class. Pudovkin was noted for using this approach, with the young heroes of *Mother* and *The End of St. Petersburg* symbolizing different types of supporters of the revolutionary cause. Some films went so far as to eliminate major characters and to use the masses as the protagonist. Eisenstein’s early films—*Strike*, *Potem-*



6.18–6.20 No movement occurs during these three successive shots of an officer in *Storm over Asia*.

kino, and *October*—all take this approach; in *October* even Lenin becomes one figure in the sweep of revolutionary events.

Vertov, however, deplored narrative. Some of his films were fairly straightforward documentaries about the new Communist society. In *Kino-Eye*, he went further and recorded various everyday events using all sort of camera and editing tricks, the result being a film more about the power of cinema than about its purported subject. His most radically modernist film, *Man with a Movie Camera*, showed an onscreen audience watching a documentary about the making of the *Man with a Movie Camera* itself. This dizzying succession of short shots and elaborate superimpositions was so challenging that Vertov got in trouble with government authorities and had to tame his style.

The Montage directors believed that any subject matter would affect viewers most strongly if the stylistic devices created a maximum of dynamic tension. Thus their techniques were often diametrically opposed to the smooth, seamless continuity style of Hollywood-type films. In particular, these directors juxtaposed shots in vivid, energetic ways, and the main traits that distinguish the Montage style lie in the area of editing.

Editing The search for dynamism through editing resulted in one of the most pervasive characteristics of Montage films: on average, they have a greater number of shots than does any other type of filmmaking of their era. While Hollywood practice was to use one shot per action, Montage filmmakers frequently broke individual actions down into two or more shots. Indeed, an unmoving character or object might be seen from different angles for several shots in a row (6.18–6.20). Such editing reflects the directors' belief that cuts, in and of themselves, stimulate the spectator. Beyond this greater quantity of shots, we

can discern more specific strategies of editing, involving temporal, spatial, and graphic tensions.

While the goal of continuity editing is to create the illusion of a smooth flow of time within a scene, Montage cutting often created either overlapping or elliptical temporal relations. In *overlapping editing*, the second shot repeats part or all of the action from the previous shot. When several shots contain such repetitions, the time an action takes on the screen expands noticeably. Eisenstein's films contain some of the most famous examples of this tactic. *Potemkin* deals with a mutiny by sailors oppressed by their Tsarist officers; in one scene a sailor washing dishes gets upset and smashes a plate. This gesture, which would take only an instant, is spread across ten shots (6.21–6.30). Such overlapping helps emphasize the first rebellious action of the mutiny. In *October*, scenes such as the raising of the bridges and Krensky, the leader of the provisional government, ascending the stairs in the Winter Palace take more time than they would in reality.

Elliptical cutting creates the opposite effect. A portion of an event is left out, so the event takes less time than it would in reality. One common type of elliptical editing in Montage films is the *jump cut*, whereby the same space is shown from the same camera position in two shots, yet the *mise-en-scène* has been changed (6.31). The contradictory temporal relations created by overlapping and elliptical editing compel the spectator to make sense of the scene's action.

Despite the use of ten shots to show the plate-smashing in *Potemkin*, the action occurs rapidly, because the individual shots are all short. In general, rapid, rhythmic editing is common in Montage films, whether or not the shots contain overlapping action. In early Montage films, the editing would sometimes accelerate until the shots were only a few frames long.



6.21



6.22



6.23



6.24



6.25



6.26



6.27



6.28



6.29



6.30

6.21–6.30 Ten shots in the plate-smashing scene from *Potemkin*, showing the repeated action of the sailor raising his arm in contradictory directions.

Then, after *La Route* and other fast-cut French Impressionist films were shown in the USSR in 1926, Montage filmmakers began to use strings of two- and one-frame shots. In most cases, however, rapid editing does not convey characters' subjective perceptions, as it would in French films. Instead, fast cutting may suggest rhythmic sound (6.32) or enhance the effect of explosive, often violent, action (6.33).

As these examples of temporal relationships among shots suggest, Montage editing can also create conflict through spatial relationships. Again, the filmmakers do not guide the spectator through a clear, straightforward locale, as in a Hollywood film. Rather, the viewer must actively piece together what is going on. In the plate-



6.31, left A jump cut in *The House on Trubnaya*: two successive close-ups show a woman's terrified face as she sees a streetcar bearing down on her; in the first her eyes are tightly closed, but a cut reveals them suddenly open.



6.32, center In *October*, a rapid burst of two frame shots suggests the rat-tat of a machine gun.

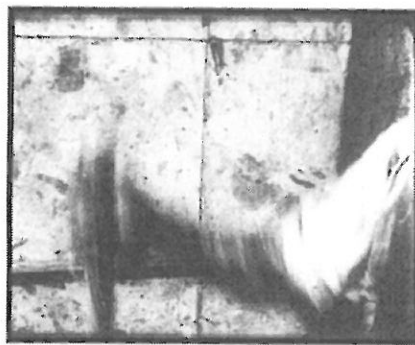


6.33, right Near the end of *Storm over Asia*, the Mongolian hero rebels against the British colonialists who have exploited him; single-frame shots alternate between him swinging his sword and the sword itself flashing against a dark background.

smashing scene from *Potemkin*, for example, Eisenstein creates a contradictory space by mismatching the sailor's position from shot to shot. The sailor swings the plate down from behind his left shoulder (see 6.24) and then is seen in the next shot with the plate already lifted above his right shoulder (see 6.25).

The Soviet filmmakers also used intercutting to create unusual spatial relationships. As we have seen, intercutting was common in the cinema from the early teens, and it most often presented simultaneous actions

in different spaces (as in Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, p. 73). In the USSR, it also served more abstract purposes, linking two actions for the sake of a thematic point. Near the end of *Strike*, for example, Eisenstein cuts from a police officer bringing his fists down violently as he orders a massacre of the strikers (6.34) to a butcher's hands bringing a knife down to kill a bull (6.35). The scene continues to cut between the death of the animal and the attack on the workers—not to suggest that these two events are happening simultaneously,

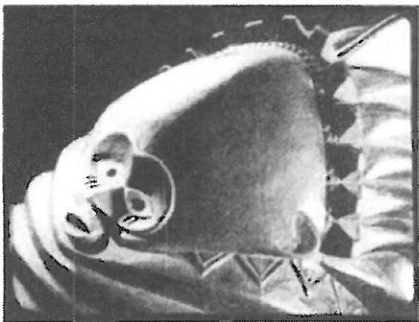


6.34, left Intercutting in *Strike* compares a police officer . . .

6.35, right . . . to a butcher.



6.36, 6.37 *October* makes a conceptual point when a diegetic shot of Kerensky is followed by a nondiegetic insert of a statue of Napoléon.



6.38, 6.39 In *October*, nondiegetic shots point up the contradictory religious beliefs and simplistic ideas of patriotism used to convince soldiers to risk their lives.

but to get us to see the massacre as being like a slaughter. In *Mother*, Pudovkin uses intercutting more lyrically, moving between the hero in jail and the ice thawing on a river, suggesting the hero's hope as he learns of a plan to rescue him. There is no indication, as there might be in a French Impressionist film, that the hero is thinking of the ice; Pudovkin eventually gives the imagery a social meaning, as a political demonstration is intercut with the surging river.

The slaughter scene in *Strike* makes use of another common Montage device: the *nondiegetic insert*. The term *diegesis* refers to the space and time of the film's story: anything that is part of the story world is diegetic; a nondiegetic element exists outside the story world. In a sound film, for example, the voice of a narrator who is not a character in the film is nondiegetic sound. A nondiegetic insert consists of one or more

shots depicting space and time unrelated to those of the story events in the film. The bull being slaughtered in *Strike* has no causal, spatial, or temporal relation to the workers. Its nondiegetic image is inserted to make a metaphorical point: the workers are being slaughtered like animals. The use of such nondiegetic shots to make a conceptual point was central to Eisenstein's theory of "intellectual Montage."

October makes extensive use of intellectual montage. At one point Kerensky is compared to Napoléon (6.36, 6.37). The film's most complex use of intellectual Montage comes when a leader calls upon soldiers to fight "For God and Country." There follows a lengthy series of nondiegetic shots of statues of gods and churches from widely differing cultures (6.38) and then shots of military medals (6.39). Intellectual montage creates its effects through conflict; by juxtaposing

6.40, left In one shot from the Odessa steps sequence in *Potemkin*, the steps create a set of strong diagonal lines from lower left to upper right, while the running figures move quickly down and rightward.



6.41, right In the next shot, the composition switches this orientation, with the row of unmoving rifles extending diagonally from upper left to lower right.



6.42, 6.43 *My Grandmother's* satirical treatment of bureaucracy uses a pair of shots in which canted framings juxtapose two typists.



6.44, 6.45 In Ilya Trauberg's *China Express*, a medium close-up of a soldier aiming a rifle rightward is followed by the same image, but with the soldier now facing left.



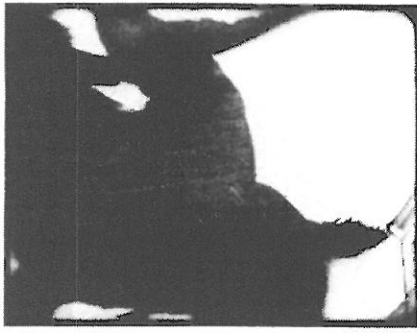
shots that have no apparent causal connection, the filmmaker leads the audience to create a general concept that links them.

Montage directors carried conflictual editing further by creating striking *graphic contrasts* from shot to shot. A cut might bring a distinct directional change in the composition. The Odessa steps sequence in *Potemkin*, perhaps the single most famous scene in any Montage film, gains much of its effectiveness through graphic conflict (6.40, 6.41). The cumulative effect of such cuts in this scene is to help heighten the tension. In other films, graphic conflict contributes to comedy (6.42, 6.43).

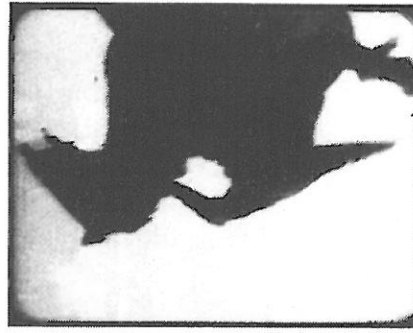
One of the most striking graphic conflicts involves cutting from one image to the same image, but the latter is flipped right to left or even turned upside down (6.44, 6.45). Near the end of Pudovkin's *Mother*,

mounted soldiers attack a workers' demonstration; the pace of the editing picks up, climaxing in a flurry of brief shots of soldiers riding past the camera, first to the right, then left (6.46), then upside down (6.47). Such cuts can be jarring, especially when they enhance the impression of violent action.

Camerawork Although the Soviet directors considered cinema's artistic qualities to depend primarily on editing, they also realized that editing juxtapositions would be enhanced if the individual shots were as striking as possible. Thus they used camerawork in distinctive ways as well. Many shots in Montage films avoid the conventional chest-height, straight-on framing and utilize more dynamic angles. Low-angle framings place buildings or people against a blank sky, making characters look



6.46, 6.47 Two quick shots from the demonstration scene in *Mother*.



6.48 A dynamic angle in *China Express*.



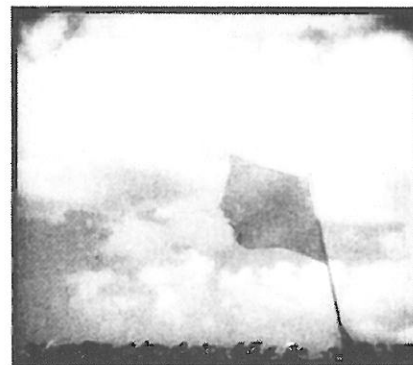
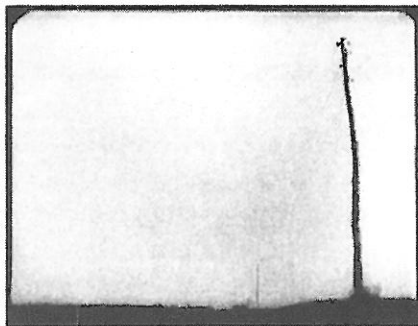
6.49 The heroine of *Mother* in the demonstration scene.



6.50 In *Arsenal*, a train carrying Ukrainian soldiers seems to rush upward at a steep angle, emphasizing its dynamic thrust.



6.51 In *The End of St. Petersburg*, Pudovkin satirized profiteers who wanted to carry on with Russia's participation in World War I by showing them only from the neck down.



6.52, left In *Earth*, Dovzhenko repeatedly emphasized the vast farmlands of the Ukraine through framings that show almost nothing but sky.

6.53, right Pudovkin used a similar device in *Deserter* to suggest the vulnerability of a workers' demonstration about to be attacked by police.

threatening (6.48) or heroic (6.49). Canted or decentered framings dynamize the image (6.50, 6.51). The Montage directors were also fond of placing the horizon line extremely low in the frame (6.52, 6.53).

Special Effects Montage directors also exploited special-effects cinematography. Vertov's playful documentary *Man with a Movie Camera* shows off the power

of the cinema through split-screen framing and superimpositions (6.54). Eisenstein's film about collective farming, *Old and New*, uses a superimposition of a bull towering above a field full of cows to suggest how important this one animal has been to the building of a successful farm (6.55). While such camera tricks were likely used for subjective effects in French Impressionism, Soviet directors often employed them to make symbolic



6.54 In *Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov makes a huge building split like a broken egg by exposing each side of the frame separately and rolling the camera in opposite directions for each.



6.55 A conceptual use of special effects in *Old and New*.



6.56 In *Potemkin*, an officer glances suspiciously at some sailors. The composition splits into two distinct halves, dark and bright, with the lighting on the figures' faces matching the color of their costumes.



6.57 In *The New Babylon*, the heroine stands atop a barricade built by the Paris communards; her plain dress contrasts with the lacy frills on a department-store mannequin.



6.58 In *Potemkin*, a high-angle shot down the side of the battleship shows men on the upper level, moving left to right, while the group on the deck below move right to left.



6.59 A contrast in volumes in *Old and New*, as a bull looms hugely in the foreground while farmers and a cow appear as tiny figures below it.

points. (The building that “splits” in *Man with a Movie Camera* is the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, home of traditional prerevolutionary opera and ballet.)

Mise-en-Scène Because many Soviet films dealt with historical and social situations, some elements of their mise-en-scène tended to be realistic. Scenes might be shot on location in a factory, as *Strike* and *Mother* were. Costumes often served primarily to indicate class position. Yet the Montage filmmakers also realized that dynamic tension between elements was not solely a matter of joining shots. Juxtapositions could be made within the shot as well, using mise-en-scène elements to heighten the impact on the viewer. Contrasting textures, shapes, volumes, colors, and the like could be placed within a single frame (6.56, 6.57).

We have seen how shots containing opposed directions of movement might be edited together. A single

shot can use this principle by setting up more than one direction of figure movement (6.58). Patterns might also create oppositions within the shot; in the plate-smashing scene from *Potemkin* (see 6.21–6.30), the horizontal stripes of the sailor’s shirt clash with the vertical stripes of the wall behind him. Although the precise effect of the juxtaposition is difficult to define, we can imagine that our impression of the scene would be very different if the wall were simply blank. Also, mise-en-scène elements arranged in different planes in the depth of the shot could create juxtapositions of volume (6.59, 6.60). When shots with visual juxtapositions are edited together with other shots, the multiple conflicting relationships can be complex indeed.

Lighting also gives Montage films a distinctive look. Soviet films frequently used no fill light on the sets, so characters appeared against black backgrounds. Note in 6.61 how the front of the officer’s face is relatively



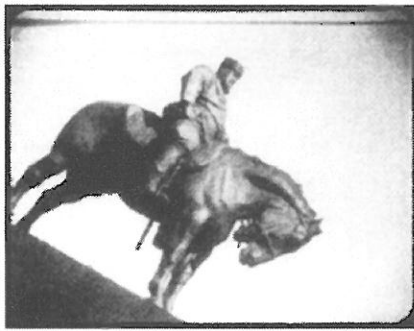
6.60 Similarly, *A Simple Case* arranges rows of mounted soldiers in depth, so that some appear large and some small.



6.61 A typical use of an unlit background in *Mother*.



6.62 For the unglamorous role of the peasant heroine of *Old and New*, Eisenstein cast a real peasant.



6.63, left In *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, Khokhlova uses eccentric acting in playing a crook who vamps Mr. West.

6.64, right A Montage-style framing in a non-Montage film, *The White Eagle*.

dark, while the sides are strongly lit; this approach to lighting actors is common in Montage films.

Montage films used a variety of types of acting, ranging from realistic to highly stylized—often within the same film. Because so many characters in Soviet films represented certain social classes or professions, directors used *typage*, casting nonactors whose physical appearances would instantly suggest what sort of people they were playing (6.62). There was no need for the nonactor to have the same job in real life; for *Potemkin*, Eisenstein chose the small, fastidious man who plays the doctor because he “looked” like a doctor—though he actually made his living shoveling coal.

Typage was a gesture toward realism, but many performers in Montage films borrowed stylized techniques from Constructivist theater and from the circus: *biomechanics* and *eccentricity*. As in the theater, biomechanical film acting stressed physical control rather than subtle emotion. The Montage filmmakers delighted in having their actors punch one another or scramble about over factory equipment. Eccentricity emphasized the grotesque; performers behaved almost like clowns or slapstick comics. Alexandra Khokhlova, Kuleshov’s

wife and a member of his workshop, offered vivid instances of eccentric acting. Tall and gangly, she avoided the glamorous image of the female star; instead, she grimaced and used angular gestures (6.63). Eisenstein’s *Strike* and Kozintsev and Trauberg’s silent films all contain eccentric performances.

Of the three avant-garde movements we have examined in Chapters 4 through 6, only the Soviet Montage style lasted into the early sound era. In Chapter 9 we shall discuss how the Montage filmmakers applied their approach to sound.

OTHER SOVIET FILMS

During the Montage movement’s existence, perhaps fewer than thirty films were made in the style. Nevertheless, as in France and Germany, these avant-garde films were prestigious and influential. Many more conventional films contain a few Montage techniques, usually employed in a milder fashion. For example, Protazanov’s *The White Eagle* (1928) begins with several dynamic



6.65, 6.66 In *The Tailor from Torzhok*, the star mugs broadly, at one point glancing at the camera and crossing his eyes.



6.67, left In 1926, the acclaimed theater actor, Leonid Leonidov appeared as Ivan the Terrible in Yuri Tarich's *Wings of a Serf*; his performance aided the film's widespread success abroad.

6.68, right Lavish production values in a conventional Soviet film, *Decembrists*.

views of statues against the sky (6.64), a device that had become a cliché. Although *The White Eagle* story is similar to those of some Montage films—the brutal repression of a strike by a provincial Tsarist governor—the rest of the film is done in the modified continuity style typical of European filmmaking in the 1920s.

Non-Montage films covered a wide range of genres. Although Soviet silent comedies are seldom seen today, there were plenty of them. Slapstick comedian Igor Ilin-sky, a sort of Russian Jim Carrey, was the decade's most popular star. In *The Tailor from Torzhok* (made by Protazanov in 1925 to publicize the government lottery), Ilin-sky plays a tailor frantically seeking a winning lottery ticket he has lost (6.65, 6.66). A light tone also prevails in the crime serial *Miss Mend* (codirected by veteran filmmakers Fyodor Ozep and Barnet, a Kuleshov alumnus, in 1925). In this fantasy, three American workers from the "Rockefeller" company hear of a plot to poison the Soviet Union's water supply and, in a spirit of class solidarity, foil the villain.

Despite the Montage directors' downplaying of major stars, other films exploited the fame of established stage actors by casting them in dramas. In a few cases, top stars of the famous Moscow Art Theater, established by Konstantin Stanislavsky in 1898 (and considered by many young filmmakers to be a bastion of conservative style), agreed to act in films (6.67). Other

Moscow Art Theater actors such as Ivan Moskvin and Mikhail Chekhov starred in films, and the only surviving film performance by the great Constructivist stage director Meyerhold is in *The White Eagle*.

A similar attempt at prestige came with historical epics and literary adaptations. Two popular films of this type were Viktor Gardin's *Poet and Tsar* (1927), a biography of the poet Aleksandr Pushkin, and *Decembrists* (1927, Alexander Ivanovsky). In a 1927 meeting to discuss the problems of Sovkino, Cubo-Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky dismissed the former film contemptuously: "Take 'Poet and Tsar' for example. The picture is liked—but when you stop to think about it, what bosh, what a monstrosity."³ Similarly, *Decembrists*, with its large ballroom set (6.68), looked like a tired version of Russian historical dramas of the prerevolutionary era. The Montage directors found such films conservative and thus diametrically opposed to their own approaches to filmmaking.

THE FIRST FIVE-YEAR PLAN AND THE END OF THE MONTAGE MOVEMENT

As we have seen, several of the early Montage films were successfully exported and were praised at home for their political content. As a result, between 1927

and 1930, the movement's activities intensified. At the same time, however, criticisms were increasingly being leveled at the Montage filmmakers by government and film-industry officials. The main charge was *formalism*, a vague term implying that a film was too complex for mass audiences and that its makers were more interested in film style than in correct ideology.

Ironically, the very recovery of the film industry, which the export of Montage films helped create, led to criticisms of the movement. In 1927, for the first time, the industry made more money from its own films than from imported ones. Official policy encouraged the industry to cut back its foreign trade. Sovkino and Lunacharsky came under attack for making films—including those of the Montage movement—that were more appropriate for sophisticated foreigners than for the uneducated peasant population at home. And as Montage filmmakers experimented with increasingly complex techniques, accusations of formalism intensified.

Criticized by the press, the major filmmakers had difficulties getting scripts approved and projects funded. Kuleshov came under fire first. Then Vertov had to move from his base in Moscow to make *Man with a Movie Camera* for the Ukrainian national company Vufku. Critics also charged that Kozintsev and Trauberg's eccentric stylization was frivolous and obscure. Eisenstein's early prestige, gained through *Potemkin*, protected him at first, but as he explored the possibility of creating abstract ideas through intellectual montage in the late 1920s, he too faced growing criticisms. For a time, Pudovkin was spared such attacks, and he managed to keep making Montage-style films until 1933, when his *Deserter* brought the movement to a close.

A turning point for the Soviet film industry came in March 1928, when the First Communist Party Conference on Film Questions was held. Until now, the government had left film matters largely to the control of Narkompros and other, smaller film organizations scattered through the republics. Now the Soviet Union was instituting the First Five-Year Plan, a major push toward expanding industrial output. As part of the plan, the cinema was to be centralized. The goal was to increase the number of films made and to build equipment factories to supply all the industry's needs. Eventually, it was hoped, imports of raw film stock, cameras, lighting fixtures, and other equipment would be eliminated. Similarly, exportation would not be necessary, and all films could be tailored strictly to the needs of the workers and peasants.

The implementation of the First Five-Year Plan in the cinema came slowly. Over the next two years, the government still put little money into the industry. This delay probably helped prolong the Montage movement. Soon, however, circumstances changed. In 1929, Eisenstein left the country to study sound filmmaking abroad. Spending most of his time working on abortive projects, first in Hollywood and then in Mexico, he did not return until 1932. Also in 1929, control over the cinema was taken away from Narkompros and turned over to the Movie Committee of the Soviet Union. Now Lunacharsky had little input, being only one of many members of the new body. In 1930, the film industry was further centralized by the formation of Soyuzkino, a company that was to supervise all production by the studios in the different republics and to handle all distribution and exhibition of films. The head of Soyuzkino was Boris Shumyatsky, a Communist party bureaucrat without film experience. Unlike Lunacharsky, Shumyatsky had no sympathy for the Montage filmmakers.

Soon the attacks on those filmmakers intensified. In 1931, for example, while Eisenstein was still in North America, an article criticized his films for their supposed "petty bourgeois" tendencies. If Eisenstein could strengthen his ties to the proletariat, the author concluded, he might "create real revolutionary cinema productions. But we must on no account minimize the difficulties confronting him. The way out of this crisis is possible only through a stubborn campaign for re-education, through merciless exposure and criticism of his first films."⁴ All the major Montage filmmakers, and, indeed, modernist artists in every medium, eventually adopted more accessible styles.

The Soviet Montage movement's influence lingered, however. Leftist filmmakers in other countries, especially documentarists like Scottish-born John Grierson and Dutch Joris Ivens, adopted heroic, low-angle framings and dynamic cutting for similar propaganda purposes. Pudovkin's and Eisenstein's theoretical writings have been read by critics and filmmakers ever since they were translated, and more recently Kuleshov's essays have become available in English (see "Notes and Queries" following). Few filmmakers have used the full range of radical Montage devices, but in a modified fashion, the movement has had a broad influence.

During the early 1930s, the Soviet film industry moved toward an official policy that required all films to follow an approach called *Socialist Realism*. We shall examine the early era of intensified government control and Socialist Realism, from 1933 to 1945, in Chapter 12.

Notes and Queries

FILM INDUSTRY AND GOVERNMENTAL POLICY: A TANGLED HISTORY

The film industry of any major producing country has a complex history, of course, but the Soviet situation in the fifteen years after the Russian Revolution was particularly volatile. Many organizations disappeared soon after being formed. Government regulations attempted to make the industry both profitable and ideologically acceptable.

Several books offer detailed overviews. Jay Leyda's *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983) provides an anecdotal account that gives a vivid sense of the events of the period. In his *The Politics of the Soviet Cinema 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Richard Taylor explores the workings of the industry and government policy. Denise Youngblood's *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era, 1918-1935* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985) examines the kinds of criticism leveled at the Montage filmmakers, and she takes the history up to the institution of Socialist Realism as the film industry's official style. An older, but still interesting, source is Paul Babitsky and John Rumberg's *The Soviet Film Industry* (New York: Praeger, 1955). Many contemporary decrees and essays are translated in an anthology covering all aspects of Soviet cinema, *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

THE KULESHOV EFFECT

Lev Kuleshov was an important theorist and teacher as well as a filmmaker. Modern historians have investigated the Kuleshov experiments and the "films without film," which the Kuleshov workshop staged in the early 1920s. Kuleshov's own accounts are available in English, in *Kuleshov on Film: Writings of Lev Kuleshov*, tr. and ed. Ronald Levaco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); and *Lev Kuleshov: Fifty Years in Films*, tr. Dmitri Agrachev and Nina Belenkaya (Moscow: Raduga, 1987). Vance Kepley, Jr., discusses "The Kuleshov Workshop" in *Iris* 4, no. 1 (1986), an issue devoted to Kuleshov (with

most of the articles in French). A lengthy essay by Stephen P. Hill, "Kuleshov—Prophet without Honor?" appears in *Film Culture* 44 (spring 1967). On Kuleshov's experiment *The Created Surface of the Earth*, see Yuri Tsivian, Ekaterina Khokhlova, and Kristin Thompson, "The Rediscovery of a Kuleshov Experiment: A Dossier," *Film History* 8, no. 3 (1996): 357-64.

THE RUSSIAN FORMALISTS AND THE CINEMA

During the period from 1914 to around 1930, a group of literary critics with close ties to the Cubo-Futurist and Constructivist movements created an important theoretical school called Russian Formalism. The Russian Formalists believed that artworks obeyed different principles than did other kinds of objects and that the theorist's task was to study how artworks were constructed to create certain effects. Working in Leningrad and Moscow, which were also the two centers of Russian film production, these critics wrote film reviews, essays on film theory, and even some scenarios for both Montage and non-Montage films. (For instance, Osip Brik scripted *Storm over Asia* and Viktor Shklovsky cowrote Kuleshov's 1926 *By the Law*.) Several Soviet filmmakers, including Eisenstein, the FEKS group, and Kuleshov, had close links to Russian Formalism, which influenced their theoretical writings. Like the Montage directors, the Russian Formalists were attacked and forced after 1930 into more conventional approaches.

One volume of the Russian Formalists' film theory, *The Poetics of Cinema*, was published in 1927; it has been translated by Herbert Eagle as *Russian Formalist Film Theory* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1981) and by Richard Taylor as *The Poetics of Cinema in Russian Poetics in Translation*, no. 9 (1982). Essays by both Montage directors and Russian Formalist critics have been published in *Screen* 12, no. 4 (winter 1971/1972) and *Screen* 15, no. 3 (autumn 1974). Material on the FEKS group, Russian Formalism, and eccentricism is available in *Futurism, Formalism, FEKS: 'Eccentricism' and Soviet Cinema 1918-36*, ed. Ian Christie and John Gillett (London: British Film Institute, n.d.). Several essays by Viktor Shklovsky appear in Taylor and Christie's *The Film Factory* (cited above).

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2. Sergei Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," in his *Film Form*, tr. and ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 37.
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