

Writings of Samuel Brody Paris hears Eisenstein

by Samuel Brody

from *Jump Cut*, no. 14, 1977, pp. 30-31
copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1977, 2004

The following is Brody's enthusiastic account of Sergei Eisenstein's lecture, "Principles of the New Russian Cinema," given at the Paris Sorbonne on February 17, 1930. It is reprinted here from the British film journal *Close Up*, 6:4, April 1930.—Tony Safford

It was nine o'clock in the evening. In a small lecture hall at the Sorbonne University in Paris, nearly two thousand people are crowded together to witness a private showing of THE GENERAL LINE, and hear S. M. Eisenstein lecture on the "Principles of the New Russian Film." The occasion is given under the auspices of a group of austere academicians ponderously named, *Groupe d'Etudes Philosophiques et Scientifiques pour l'Examen des Tendances Nouvelles*.

The atmosphere is severe. Many learned men of France have been heard in this same room before. The problems of Intuition and Kantian Transcendentalism as well as other burning questions of the day have time and again been discussed here by copiously bewhiskered professors before bored young students of the University. In a few minutes our beloved Eisenstein will be sitting on this same platform. We have never seen him before, but POTESKIN still lives in our minds and the tempered steel quality of TEN DAYS has not been forgotten.

Eisenstein appears on the platform. The atmosphere of respectable behaviour is immediately broken as his wide smile announces a friend, a comrade. Loud applause. But he does not seem to like that and he motions to the audience to stop.

In the meantime, something has happened. Whispers in the audience. The chairman announces that the Parisian police has forbidden the showing of THE GENERAL LINE. Faintly he mutters a few words about "...hindering the spread of knowledge ... shameful ... liberty." No one is satisfied, and the audience starts a demonstration that lasts for fifteen minutes. Eisenstein seems to be pleased with all this. The prohibition of the film has been a powerful boomerang. No Russian film that I have seen has ever succeeded in arousing so much bitterness against the powers that be as was evident in the crowd that night.

The commotion subsides and the speaker is introduced. He does not "lecture" nor read from a prepared paper. His French is slightly tight, but his accent flawless and delivery fluent. The words he cannot remember he describes with characteristic gestures that *everybody* understands.

"I am sorry that you cannot see my film ... This makes my task much harder, as I will have to make up for what you cannot see with my limited French. When I am thru speaking you may throw questions at me and I will try to answer. A sort of friendly ping-pong game. But I beg you not to ask me the whereabouts of General Koutepov or what salary I earn in the USSR, for if you do I am certain that my replies will not satisfy you."

And thus, after he has won the confidence of everyone in the audience. Eisenstein proceeds to a broad outline of his subject. He begins by drawing a clear differentiation between the conception of the film in the Soviet Union and in the capitalist countries. The destruction of the rotten dramatic trilogy and the raising of the film to an educational and cultural level, he says, was the first task of the Russian directors after the Revolution. He tells of the concrete problems which confront the Soviet movie in regard to the education and political enlightenment of the formerly oppressed national minorities; the establishment in Moscow and Leningrad of the first cinema universities in the world for the purpose of training permanent scientific and artistic cadres.

"We are working to draw broad masses into the production of our films. Criticism of our work by the workers and peasants is most valuable to us. Indeed, only their needs and opinions are important, as we are working with and for them. They discuss the value of scenarios in their factory committees and are quite frequently very critical of our work. In the Soviet Union the director and his cameramen play a comparatively secondary role. They are only called in when the ideological importance of a certain theme for a film has been decided upon by those for whom the film is produced."

Eisenstein then gives a brief resume of the Russian directors' achievements in the technical sphere of the movies.

"The importance of our method lies in the fact that we have discovered how to force the spectator to think in a certain direction. By mounting our films in a way scientifically calculated to create a given impression on an audience, we have developed a powerful weapon for the propagation of the ideas upon which our new social systems is based."

"We have discarded the professional actor for 'the man in the street.' We are convinced that this has brought us a step nearer to life. When we require an old man in a film, the actor who rehearses three days before he can play the part can never do it so well as a real old man who has been rehearsing for say—sixty years. This method has its difficulties, of course, but so far it has proven its advantages over the old way."

This does not all sound like music to many highly-paid movie actors in the audience, but in Eisenstein's case, "first came the deed," and those who have seen his films acted by real sailors, real workers and on authentic locales, are well convinced that the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Cinedialectic. The making of Marx's *Capital* into a film. The cinema of the future!

A lot has been said and written recently about Eisenstein's so-called "new principle of the film." Distorted translations of his articles and vague interpretations of his new theory have appeared in the press. The author now speaks for himself.

"My new conception of the film is based on the idea that the intellectual and emotional processes which so far have been conceived of as existing independently of each other—art versus science—and forming an antithesis heretofore never united, can be brought together to form a synthesis on the basis of *cinedialectic*, a process that only the cinema can achieve. A spectator can be made to *feel-and-think* what he sees on the screen. The scientific formula can be given the emotional quality of a poem. And whether my ideas on this matter are right or wrong, I am at present working in this direction. I will attempt to film *Capital* so that the humble worker or peasant can understand it."

Our skepticism means but little, for we are before a man who has succeeded in making people weep at the sight of a milk-separator in THE GENERAL LINE. Moreover, the organization of human feeling on the basis of a correct understanding of reality is nothing new to the Marxian. Incidentally, the famous French physiologist, Claude Bernard, had the same problem in mind when he said more than sixty years ago,

"Can we speak of a peremptory contradiction between science and art, between sentiment and reason? I do not believe in the possibility of this contradiction."

Eisenstein is making a concrete approach to this problem which is obviously not an academic one. As he tells us, it was born out of the necessity to teach economics to workers and peasants.

"If we succeed, it will have been Russia's great contribution to the general history of the arts."

And in conclusion:

"Our cinema has developed in the midst of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Its birth and development cannot be dissociated from the great aim of our country, the building of Socialism."

The lecture is over and Eisenstein calls for questions. Sound? Stereoscopy? Colour? The speaker is bombarded with questions from all sides. Some are bitter and unfriendly, but Eisenstein never weakens.

An actor shouts:

"Will the speaker please tell me whether it is possible for an actor who is an individualist in his art and in his philosophy, to exist in the Soviet Union?"

Eisenstein:

"Stay here young man, you will find Parisian soil much more fertile than ours"

In answering questions on sound, the speaker again expounds what he and his co-workers had to say a few months ago in the official statement issued by them.

"Every fact optically perceived has its corresponding value in sound. As far as I know, only the Japanese Kabouki Theatre has employed sound-sight in this way. For example, while an actor is seen committing hari-kari on the stage, the tearing of silk is heard offstage. The Mickey Mouse sound cartoons have also come very close to this method. It is the only justification for sound in the movies. The present usage which establishes a naturalistic coincidence of image and sound is nonsense."

Eisenstein believes that in the near future the black-and-white film will disappear to be replaced by the colour film, of which, he says, he has seen some fine examples.

"There will remain only a few isolated enthusiasts who will crusade against the colour film in the name of the black-and-white principle."

He further emphasizes that none of the recent discoveries in the cinema, (colour, stereoscopy, wide film, etc.) will create revolutionary changes. He understands, above all, the commercial significance of all these innovations.

And so Eisenstein leaves us amidst a tremendous acclaim.

We have not seen THE GENERAL LINE, but two hours in presence of its genial creator have been ample compensation to us.

The greatest movie director in the Soviet Union is at present working in the Tobis Sound Studios at Epinay, near Paris, where he is experimenting with a German sound system. This in the midst of a conspiracy of silence on the part of the French movie press and an active boycott by the official cinema circles of Paris.

Out of over two hundred people present at a dinner tendered in honour of Eisenstein and his assistants by the Friends of the Soviet Union, not a single soul from the French movie world was present.

I cannot help agreeing with Leon Moussinac on this matter:

"Jealousy and envy are one of the forms of the petty-bourgeois mind. Cowardice is a form of decadence."