

OCTOBER AS HISTORY

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For the historian of the modern world, “October” can have only one meaning: that month in 1917 when the Bolsheviks ousted the Provisional Government of Russia, seized control of Petrograd, and commenced, in Lenin’s words, to construct the Socialist order. For the student of cinema, “*October*” is more likely to mean Sergei Eisenstein’s film about the events of that revolution. How these two meanings of the word connect has been at issue from the moment the film was released to the Russian public early in 1928. In the more than seven decades since then, *October* has become and remains one of the best known and most enduring accounts of October. So well known that it seems no exaggeration to suggest that more people have probably learned about the Bolshevik Revolution from the film than from any other single source.¹

But what have they learned? That is the question. *October* has often been called a work of propaganda. Just as often, fiction. Characteristic, even typical of the attitude of historians is that of Orlando Figes in his recent history of the Russian Revolution, who labels it “Eisenstein’s brilliant but largely fictional propaganda film.”² Part of such a judgment stems from the fact that Figes, like most historians who mention the film, focuses attention on a single sequence, the climactic, and highly fictionalized “storming” of the Winter Palace. (Of which more, later.) But another part of such a judgment is surely due to

¹ Perhaps the only account to rival it is John Reed’s *Ten Days That Shook the World* (New York, 1919). This is also the title by which the film is known in the United States, given to it by distributors who presumably wished to capitalize on the reputation of Reed’s classic account of the same events.

² Orlando Figes, *A People’s Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (New York, 1998), 484. He repeats the charge on 737. French historian Pierre Sorlin, in a chapter on “The Russian Revolution in *The Film in History* (Totowa, N.J., 1979), 159-198, mentions the general feeling that the film is “propaganda.” Oddly, at the outset of his essay, Sorlin agrees with this characterization, but thirty pages later contradicts himself and says it is not “propaganda.”

our intellectual tradition. Or our prejudice. We understand History to be words on a page not images on a screen. History is something we move through at our own pace, a text we can analyze at leisure, not an assault of moving images and sounds that rush by us at twenty four frames a second. Yet a century and more after the invention of the motion picture, a good deal of history (or interpretations of the past) is delivered in just this way. One wonders: can we historians continue to dismiss the visual media as a way of making the past meaningful? Or can we find in films have some sort of visual / historical integrity of their own? And might it be worthwhile to accept some of these works of visual history into our historiography?

Labels aside, the story *October* tells and the way it tells that story are surely part of a long tradition of explaining why and how the Bolsheviks took power. One might even argue that *October* has a significant role in creating that tradition. Images from the film -- crowds scattering from the gunfire of soldiers on the Nevsky Prospekt during the “July Days” or the “storming” of the Winter Palace -- have been used in newspapers, magazines, and books to illustrate the revolution. In some more general way, the film seems to hover over all later interpretations of what John Reed labeled the *Ten Days That Shook the World*. Many historians of the Russian Revolution, even today, feel the need to mention Eisenstein’s film, if only to dismiss it – usually as great art but poor history.³

How does *October* relate (to) October? What sort of history does it propose? What interpretation of the Bolshevik Revolution does it convey? To answer these questions –and to suggest how other films might possibly be seen as vehicles for history– it is necessary to go beyond the micro level of the individual image. Beyond the referential level of the individual fact. To answer them we must consider the film not merely as a collection of true or false individual assertions, but, like all works of history, as an argument about and interpretation of the historical moments and events it describes. That means we must situate it within the larger discourse of history, that ongoing and huge body of data and debates about the causes, course, and consequences of the Russian Revolution. To evaluate *October* as history, it is necessary to see how its interpretation fits with the seventy-five year tradition of representing October.

We must, at the same time, do something else: see it as a film, as moving images on a

³ Richard Henry Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York, 1991) and Figes, *A People’s Tragedy* both dismiss the film, though Figes has a high regard for its art, as does Sorlin, *The Film in History*.

screen, not as a book, as words on a page. That means to understand (and accept) that whatever it has to tell us about past, whatever sort of history it undertakes, *October* will do so as a film. A work of moving images and sounds subject to the demands and conventions of a particular medium and a particular genre. *October* can only make arguments about the past the way a film can make arguments: through visual, dramatic, symbolic, metaphoric, and fictional forms. Like any work of history, *October* will use traces of evidence from a vanished world as a basis for staging, or creating, a representation of that world in the present. As a film, it will deliver to us a world in a narrative, a story of people, events, moments, or movements of the past in an effort to make them meaningful to us in the present.⁴ Utilizing moving (in two senses of the word) images, *October* will explain what and how and why something important happened in Petrograd in October 1917.

Critiquing October

The well-known origins of the film can be used to lend support to those who wish to see it as propaganda. *October* was commissioned by Sovkino, a Soviet state agency for the production and distribution of films.⁵ Commissioned as part of a tenth anniversary celebration meant to commemorate the events that had brought the Bolsheviks to power. At the time, the twenty-eight year old Eisenstein was the most famous filmmaker in the Soviet Union -- and among the most famous in the world. Less than two years earlier, his great revolutionary (in technique and content) film, *Battleship Potemkin*, had taken the world of cinema by storm, winning accolades for its director not only across Europe, but even in far-off Hollywood. The style Eisenstein employed in that film, a kind of heroic collectivism rather than individualist drama, and his brilliant editing techniques, were widely admired -- among artists and filmmakers if not the general public. His first plan after obtaining the commission was to create a huge, heroic film about the entire revolution, from the overthrow of the Czar in February to the end of the Civil War in 1921. Pressures of time (both on the screen and in the production process) led to a version that covered a smaller slice of the past: from February through October 1917. Even with this reduced version,

⁴ Some of these arguments are spelled out in greater detail in my book, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA, 1995).

⁵ There was a certain competition over films for the tenth anniversary. The production company, Mezhrabprom, had already commissioned two films for the celebration, Vsevolod Pudovkin's *The End of St. Petersburg* and Boris Barnet's, *Moscow in October*. Both would be completed before *October*.

Eisenstein did not finish editing the film in time, and only of its few reels were shown at the anniversary celebrations at the Bolshoi Theater in November 1927.⁶

Criticism of the *October's* relationship to October began as soon as the full version of the film was screened to the public in Leningrad in January, 1928. These critiques could be broad or narrow. At stake in many of them was the question: how does the film handle –or mishandle– fact. There were complaints over the omission of important facts: “the growth of the workers’ movement, the collapse at the front.” And complaints over alterations in fact: “The October Revolution is such a major historical fact that any playing with the fact is unthinkable.”⁷ For some critics, the very idea of staging or dramatizing the past was a violation:

You must not stage a historical fact because the staging distorts this fact . . . You must not make millions of peasants and workers . . . think that the events of those great days happened exactly as they happen in . . . October. In such matters you` need historical truth, fact, document and the greatest austerity of execution: you need newsreel.⁸

For others the issue was less fact than philosophy, background, overall view or meaning of the past:

. . . we think that the task of a feature film consists not in the slavish imitation of historical facts, but in something quite different. The film must furnish the general background against which the events reproduced in it unfold. And it is against this background that some fundamental idea that

⁶ Background on the commission and the filming of *October*, as well as on Eisenstein, himself, comes from many sources. The best are as follows: Ronald Bergan, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Life in Conflict* (Woodstock, N.Y., 1997); James Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema, and History* (Urbana and Chicago, 1993); David Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (Cambridge, MA., 1993); Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (Princeton, N.J., 1960). Eisenstein himself, in his poetic and highly stylized autobiography, *Beyond the Stars: The Memoirs of Sergei Eisenstein* (London, 1995), provides only a few details about his life during both the revolution and the period when he worked on *October*. The most exhaustive study of the film is the two volume work by Michele Lagny, Marie Claire Ropars, and Pierre Sorlin: *October: Ecriture et ideologie* (Paris, 1976) and *La revolution figuree: film, histoire, politique* (Paris, 1979).

⁷ Adrian Piotovsky, “October Must be Re-Edited” and Osip Brik, “The *Lef* Ring: Comrades! A Clash of Views!”; both in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 216, 227.

infuses the entire script must lift, seize and lead the audience behind it. This is precisely what is missing from *October*.⁹

Today the same sort of complaints can still be heard:

The film's version of events is selective and exaggerated in many ways. Eisenstein never details the behind-the-scenes wrangles within Bolshevik ranks, nor does he articulate the positions of the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries. In accordance with Bolshevik historiography, he also presents the 25 October coup as far more carefully planned than it was.¹⁰

The Winter Palace was not taken by assault: the image of a column of storming workers, soldiers, and sailors as depicted in Eisenstein's film, "Days of October," is pure invention, an attempt to give Russia its own Fall of the Bastille.¹¹

All these criticisms seem to issue from people skeptical about more than *October*. The subtext of each suggests that film is not a proper medium for telling us about the past. One might wonder: how would Eisenstein respond? One thing he would certainly say is: I am a filmmaker. A person who can never forget the demands of the medium in which I work. Any filmmaker has to know that no matter how much you are committed to putting the past on the screen, and no matter how accurate you wish that past to be, the one thing you can never do is to mirror a moment -- all those moments that have vanished. You can only create such moments with the tools and the art of your trade. Every time you position the camera, or change the angle of a shot, or alter a shutter opening, or use a different lense, or set up just one more light to create a particular shadow, or ask an actor to make a certain gesture, you are inevitably creating facts and meaning about the past. Any filmmaker knows that facts can never speak for themselves. We have to speak for them.

⁸ Esfir Shub, "This Work Cries Out," *ibid.*, 217.

⁹ T. Rokotov, "Why is *October* Difficult?" *ibid.*, 219.

¹⁰ Bordwell, *Cinema of Eisenstein*, 80.

¹¹ Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 493.

We historians, too, are people who speak for the facts (though there may still be some of us around who wish to claim that the facts speak for themselves). But when we look at the screen, we tend –to judge from the way many historians review or write of film in various journals and books– to want to such visual history to be like a book in which the facts speak for themselves.¹² Perhaps this is because film is deceptive. Even more than written historical narrative, film seems to speak facts directly. Unmediated. What you see on the screen is the world of the past. But it takes little reflection to tell us this is clearly not true. With film and history, it is necessary to embrace the counter intuitive. To understand that however realistic it may look, dramatic film can never be a reflection but must, like a written work, be a construction of a past. A narrative prefigured by the consciousness of the historian / filmmaker. A struggle over the meaning of the present and the future set in the past. An argument in the form of a story; a story in the form of an argument. An argument that is also a kind of vision of the world. One that can retain a certain strength and validity long after the data on which it is based may be superseded.

Bearing such ideas in mind, I wish to approach *October*. See it, place it, explicate it, judge it against the field of knowledge, data, debates surrounding its subject: October. Since this is a field filled with more voices than we could ever attend to, speaking in more languages than we could ever fully understand, I will pursue the more practical strategy of comparing the film with accounts by five well-known historians writing of those events in English. Accounts written between 1919 and 1996: John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919); Richard Henry Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution* (1935); Alex Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution* (1968), and *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* (1976); Richard Henry Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (1991), and *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (1995); and Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy* (1996).

Historicizing October

The tradition begins with John Reed. American bohemian, poet, journalist, radical, and anti-war activist. He was there. He walked the streets. He listened to the speeches.

¹² One need only look over the film reviews in the *American Historical Review* or the *Journal of American History* to see this attitude expressed. It also pervades most of the essays on historical films in Mark Carnes, ed., *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York, 1995).

He studied Russian. He collected pamphlets, books, fliers, newspapers, handwritten notes. He joined the Soviet Foreign office and wrote propaganda directed at German soldiers saying: “Lay down your arms, brothers.” He went home and the American government confiscated his papers. When he got them back a year later it took him six weeks to write *Ten Days That Shook the World*.¹³

It was not the Bolsheviks but John Reed who invented the revolution as a Ten Day drama. Invented the notion of what a Twentieth Century revolution should be in a book the author calls “a slice of intensified history – history as I saw it . . . in the struggle my sympathies were not neutral.”¹⁴

Reed may be partisan, but he sees himself as a conscientious witness / historian, interested in setting down the truth. A truth that is dramatic:

No matter what one thinks of Bolshevism, it is undeniable that the Russian Revolution is one of the great events of human history, and the rise of the Bolsheviki and phenomenon of world-wide importance . . . historians . . . will want to know what happened in Petrograd in November, 1917, the spirit which animated the people, and how the leaders looked, talked, and acted. It is with this in view that I have written this book.¹⁵

William Henry Chamberlin gets to Moscow too late for the major events, but the afterglow still suffuses the Soviet capital and loosens the tongues of people who helped shake the world. Arriving there in 1922 as correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*, he is a young man who specializes in asking questions that can make people talk for days. For the next twelve years Chamberlin will continue the interviews while he also works in archives to produce, in the midst of the crisis of capitalism we know as the Great Depression, the first great narrative history of the revolution. One that as late as the Sixties can still be regarded by professional historians as the only broadly focused Western

¹³ For background on Reed, see Robert A. Rosenstone, *Romantic Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed* (New York, 1975).

¹⁴ Reed, *Ten Days*, xxxiii.

¹⁵ Reed, *ibid*, xxxviii.

investigation of the October revolution based on intensive research in primary sources.¹⁶ Like Reed, Chamberlin, sees the Revolution as

moving and dramatic, heroic, or tragic, or both, according to one's point of view: the panorama represented by the establishment of a new social order, based on extreme revolutionary theory, in a huge country with a vast population¹⁷

Forty years later, historian Alexander Rabinowitch can stand as representative of a new generation of scholars. A representative, too, of what we call the New Social history. Academics who are better trained than their predecessors, distanced, sober, in the process of freeing themselves from the mentality of the Cold War that chilled American academia well into the Sixties. Some call Rabinowitch's cohort "Revisionists." Like the New Left of the decade in which they begin to publish, they are less interested in old quarrels about the evils of Communism than in detailed studies of what happened at the local level during the revolution.

For Rabinowitch, too, the Revolution is a time of drama and monumental significance, but he tends to keep his adjectives under wraps. His focus is restrained, even narrow as he explains why the Bolsheviks triumphed in October. Back he goes to local sources, to a close study of workers in factories, companies of soldiers and sailors, sections of the party, men in the street. His aim is to give voice to the voiceless, to see the "revolution from below." In his pages, the Bolsheviks appear less as the united, conspiratorial, authoritarian party of both right and left wing mythology than as a shifting group ridden with dissension, conflicts, and splits. But great propagandists with a great message and a savvy leader. By October "the goals of the Bolsheviks, as the masses understood them, had strong popular support."¹⁸ Their seizure of power was neither "inevitable" (the official Soviet view) nor a coup d'etat (the conservative view): it was an enactment of the popular will that they had helped to mold.

Richard Pipes could not disagree more. A kind of "Re-Revisionist," or simply

¹⁶ Alex Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York, 1976), xvii.

¹⁷ William Henry Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution, 1817-1921* (New York, 1965), Vol. 1, viii.

¹⁸ Rabinowitch, *Bolsheviks Come to Power*, xvii.

someone who continues an earlier anti-Soviet, Cold War mentality, Pipes likes to refer to the “so-called ‘October Revolution,’ as nothing more than a “classic coup d’etat,” a movement that has nothing in common with “classic revolutions.”¹⁹ Seeing the revolution less as drama than disaster, Pipes roundly condemns the Bolsheviks both for gaining and keeping power illegitimately. To him the long range causes of October are the most important. Pipes admits the blunders of the Tsarist regime, the impotence of the Provisional Government, the adroit planning of the Bolsheviks. But in his work the real causes lie farther back, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the airy headed theorists of the Enlightenment and in the growth of a class of radical intellectuals and professional revolutionaries who harbored in their breasts the mad desire to reshape the world. Two centuries of propaganda by discontented, fanatical intellectuals translated legitimate complaints into an “all-consuming destructive force,” rebellion into revolution. It is arguably “the most important event of the century,” but October was also “a tragedy in which events follow with inexorable force from the mentality and character of the protagonists.”²⁰

The same ancient dramatic form governs the argument of Orlando Figes’ recent, magisterial history of the Russian Revolution. But his attitude towards this inexorable movement towards destruction is considerably different from that of Pipes, who can’t quite decide if the Bolsheviks or the Russian people are to blame for what happened.²¹ Figes has written a “social history” that focuses “on the common people.” He depicts the peasantry, the working class, the soldiers and the national minorities them not as victims but as participants “in their own revolutionary drama.” The basis of his portrait are numerous recent monographs that provide what he calls a much more complex and convincing picture of the relationship between the party and the people than the one presented in “top down” Cold War histories (such as that of Pipes?) Figes finds no abstract, single revolution imposed by the Bolsheviks on all of Russia, but a huge conglomeration of events “often shaped by local passions and interests.” The tragedy for him is that “what began as a people’s revolution contained the seeds of its own degeneration into violence and dictatorship. The same social forces which brought about the triumph of the Bolshevik regime became its

¹⁹ Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime* (New York, 1993), 498.

²⁰ Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, xvi.

²¹ See Frederick Charles Corney, *Writing October: Memory, Identity, and the Construction of the Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1927* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1997), 47-48.

main victims.”²²

Like John Reed, Sergei Eisenstein was also in Petrograd in October, 1917. But unlike the American journalist, he had little interest in or knowledge of what was going on. Eisenstein was seventeen, still living at home with his father, a reluctant student in the college of Civil Engineering, a closet visual artist and theater director. On the February day when the Czar resigned, he did not even notice of the end of a dynasty, and only learned about it in the evening after he walked across town to attend Meyerhold’s staging of Lermontov’s *Masquerade* and found the Alexandrinsky Theater closed temporarily due to the political upheaval. Five months later the demonstrations we call the July Days caught him in the midst of an errand on the Nevsky Prospekt; he was forced to cower in a doorway at the corner of Sadovaya and watch the troops of the Provisional Government fire on unarmed demonstrators (a view he would later incorporate as a stunning sequence in *October*). On the day the Bolsheviki took power, it vaguely registered upon Eisenstein that guns were going off somewhere in the city as he made the rounds, attempting to sell some anti-Kerensky cartoons to the editors of a journal.

Not much of an activist, Eisenstein did briefly join some of his fellow students who were playing at defending the new regime for a few days. But for him good thick book by Freud, Wilde, Maeterlinck, or Schopenhauer was always a far better companion than a rifle. Yet he quickly came to understand the difference between a book and a film. By the time he made *October*, he knew that the filmmaker never has the luxury of doing what historians do. Sitting down to research, to think, and then to take years to write on a topic. And when you finish, penning a preface in which you directly announce the theme that will govern what you say, the theme that has helped to constitute all the data in the work and that suffuses the overall interpretation that you have made.

Eisenstein knew that the filmmaker must create history in his own way. For weeks, perhaps months, he did as much research as a pressured filmmaker can do. Research in memoirs, newspaper accounts, newsreels, works of history, and into the early pageants commemorating the revolution, particularly the huge, 1920 event on Palace Square entitled “The Storming of the Winter Palace.” One of his chief sources was probably –nobody knows for certain– John Reed’s account, which since 1920 had borne a brief, introductory

²² Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, xvi.

endorsement by Lenin. Eisenstein's governing theme is never directly articulated, but he puts it into every image, every movement, every camera angle, every cut. Everything in *October* points toward and becomes part of an argument that might be summed up this way: October was a result of the criminality and stupidity of the Provisional Government, a great dramatic movement in which masses of common people spontaneously participated. Yes the final seizure of power was planned by a small group of Bolshevik leaders meeting in a tiny room. And yes, it is clear that Lenin is the mind behind the revolution. But the film, in its overall argument, counters any party line notion that the Bolsheviks were the revolutionary vanguard. For Eisenstein (like Rabinowitch) shows October as the time when the masses entered into history and history entered into the masses.

Detailing October

I deal with overall interpretations before details because that is the way History books are structured. Prefaces may be written last, but there is simple honesty in the way they go up front. Here is the one place the author's voice need not be veiled. No need for authorities, archives, footnotes. Here moral is all. So if you don't bother to read the book, you will still have a sense of what, when all the human struggles are described and done, the author wants it to mean. What let him (for in this case they are all male) do the work to put the book together. The faith that kept the project moving over the years. That let him decide between recounting this fact and that one. For there are always too many facts from which to choose.

Some theorists sneer and call the details of history "information." Some people call them "life." You can probably get the point of the work from the preface alone, but the drama of the change we call history is in the details. Histories of the Russian Revolution tend to be long, packed with details. Reed uses almost four hundred pages to cover ten days (though his work does spill over this time boundary). Chamberlin needs more than a thousand for four years. Rabinowitch gives us six hundred on the Bolshevik Party in a single year. Pipes more than thirteen hundred densely packed pages to take the regime into the mid Twenties; for his concise, popular edition he has boiled it down to four hundred pages. Figes uses eight hundred plus to go from 1891 to 1924, with more than five hundred devoted to the period beginning with the February Revolution.

Eisenstein has the normal screen time of about two hours to tell us what it was that shook the world. But measuring time against space, the screen against the page, is not an easy task. Today in a film script, the rule-of-thumb is one page of screenplay for one minute of screen time, but this is not true in the silent period when the image is far more important than the word. Eisenstein's (poetic, evocative) screenplay occupies thirty-five pages in English edition.²³ What this translates into are images and sequences that show the following: The February Revolution. The Provisional Government. Fraternization with German soldiers on the front. The resumption of hostilities in the summer of 1917. Deteriorating conditions in Petrograd -- bread lines, falling rations, discontent. Lenin at the Finland Station enunciating the April Theses calling for a Soviet government. The July days: the attack on demonstrators, the arrest of the Bolsheviks. Kerensky in the Winter Palace. The Kornilov threat to the capital and its collapse. The arming of the Red Guards. The Bolshevik decision to take power. The movement of Military Revolutionary Committee. The Second Congress of Soviets. Debates in Smolny. The taking of the Winter Palace.

Not all of these get equal treatment. Like any historian, Eisenstein consciously plays with time. Stretches it, collapses it, gives it to us in fragments. His camera lingers over some events; passes over others in the blink of an eye. He knows how to be incredibly brief. The February Revolution that ended the Romanov dynasty lasts a little more than two minutes: Masses topple a huge statue of the Czar. Rifles and sickles are raised aloft. A series of middle class people cheer. A priest swings a censor, stands before an altar. The Czar is gone. Long live the Provisional Government.

He can be even briefer. A diplomat in a frock coat bows deeply and then, in a jump cut, stands erect. Shells explode over trenches. Three or four seconds have elapsed. The Provisional Government has jumped back into war.

He can be (almost) interminable. The long long long evening wait before the assault on the Winter Palace. The silent statues of Petrograd brood over the Neva River. The women of the Death Battalion who defend the Winter Palace brood over the statues. Long speeches are given in Smolny. Red Guards endlessly ready themselves. We in the audience tend to snooze.

I mentioned earlier that, when looking at the film, academic historians tend to focus

²³ The screenplay occupies pages 49 to 84 in Sergei Eisenstein, *Three Films* (London, 1976).

on a single sequence: the climax at the Winter Palace. None quarrels about the length or brevity of any of the film's other sequences. Some covertly take issue with several of Eisenstein's other interpretations, but no more than they do with each other. Remarkably, there is little dissent over much that happens on the way to October. The February Revolution? Unanimous agreement that –as *October* suggests– it was spontaneous, popular, necessary. The Provisional Government? Inept, inefficient, stupid or criminal in its attempt to continue the war. Alexander Kerensky? Histrionic, vain, self-aggrandizing, better at making speeches than policy. When Eisenstein shows Kerensky as a would-be Bonaparte, by cutting from a closeup of him directly to a statue of Napoleon, he is hardly the only historian to suggest the prime minister saw himself in that kind of heroic role. As early as September 1917, a Congress of the Baltic Fleet passed a resolution calling Kerensky a “Bonaparte.” Pipes not only accuses Kerensky of thinking of Bonaparte when he restored capital punishment at the front (how does he know what Kerensky was thinking), he also mentions that the prime minister “liked to strike Napoleonic poses.” Figes mentions, in words that seem to describe a scene in the film, that Kerensky “began to strut around with comic self-importance, puffing up his puny chest and striking the pose of a Bonaparte.”²⁴

Other topics breed strong disagreement. Not just between the filmmaker and the historians, but among historians themselves. These are not exactly disagreements over data. Historians use the same documents, but read different parts of them, or read them in different ways, or quote different parts of them, or link them together in a different order. Documents from newly opened archives don't change the picture all that much. They still have to be fitted into a narrative whose moral we already know.

Take the “July Days.” The basic facts are not at issue. The Provisional Government's summer 1917 military offensive against the Germans failed miserably. Workers and soldiers in huge numbers came into the streets to demand the end of the government, some of them no doubt wished to overthrow it by force. Panicky leaders turned to the military for help. Blood was shed. The questions: Were the demonstrations planned and by whom? Was this a (failed) attempt of the Bolsheviks to seize power?

Reed, arriving two month after the events, calls the July demonstrations

²⁴ Chamberlin, *Russian Revolution*, 279; Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1995), 85; Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, 437.

“spontaneous.” Eisenstein shows us the masses of marching protesters, the bloodshed on the Nevsky Prospekt, the anger of the middle classes against the lower orders, the Bolshevik speakers calming the soldiers, insisting it is not time to seize power. Chamberlin agrees, saying the Bolsheviks were actually against the demonstrations. That they only took part to stay one step ahead of the masses and thus maintain their credibility as revolutionary leaders. Rabinowitch complicates the picture by finding Bolsheviks on both sides of the issue, some agitating, some pacifying the crowds. Clearly, he says, it was not party policy to foment revolt. His proof? Lenin was absent in the country during the July days; this means nothing important was supposed to happen. Pipes uses that same absence as part of his evidence to show the demonstrations were part of conscious attempt of the Bolsheviks to seize power. Lenin, he insists, always absented himself when something important was to happen. Even during the great days of October he is mostly in hiding, not from party policy to protect their leader but because he was, Pipes reiterates many times, a coward. Figes agrees that when it came things physical, Lenin was a coward, but asserts that this was not the issue in July. Had the Bolsheviks wished to seize power that day, they could easily have done so in the afternoon when 50,000 of their most revolutionary supporters, many of them armed, surrounded the Tauride Palace, seat of the Provisional Government. No less a leader than Leon Trotsky himself arrived and rather than seizing power, calmed the troops and released a leader of the PG who had been taken hostage.²⁵

Controversy also swirls around the “Kornilov Affair,” that brief period in late August when the Cossack general sent troops towards Petrograd. For Reed the issue is simple: Kornilov was leading a counter revolution. Eisenstein agrees, showing us Kornilov as yet another potential Napoleon by cutting from his image to that of the same statue previously linked to Kerensky. The film shows how the general’s march on Petrograd is undermined by Bolshevik agitators, who are able to convince the Cossacks of his Savage Division that the Soviet program of “Peace, Land, Bread” is not meant just for the workers of Petrograd but for everyone, including them. Like Eisenstein, Rabinowitch details the way Bolshevik propagandists persuaded the Cossack regiments to refuse to march on Petrograd. Chamberlin broadens the canvas: counterrevolution was not a personal goal of Kornilov, but a move supported by conservatives tired of agitation and political upheaval, desirous of

²⁵ Reed, *Ten Days*, 5; Chamberlin, *Russian Revolution*, 170-71; Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 419-31; Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 385, 428-30.

return to authoritarian ways. Pipes reads the very same telegrams between Kerensky and Kornilov that every other historian has read and comes up with this: the “affair” was a misunderstanding due to Kerensky’s misreading of the general’s messages. Kornilov was no threat. He was following Kerensky’s own orders to move troops to the capital to ward off a feared rising by the Bolsheviks. Figes agrees. What looked like an attempt to overthrow the Provisional Government grew out of a misunderstanding, though (as Eisenstein suggests), General Kornilov also saw himself as a kind of Bonaparte, and (as Pipes will not admit) much of his support came from people who hoped to use him to do away with the PG.²⁶

With October it always comes down to Lenin. Everyone agrees on at least one thing: the Bolsheviks would never have kept together, dared to move, pushed so quickly towards power, succeeded when they did were it not for his theorizing, his leadership, his remarkable ability to drive the party towards its destiny. Eisenstein, interestingly, almost marginalizes Soviet leader, giving him far less screen time than Kerensky. We see Lenin in a few brief flashes –arriving at the Finland Station and galvanizing the crowd with his rhetoric; arguing with the Central Committee over his insistence that it is time to seize power; surreptitiously returning to Smolny from hiding; taking the podium at the Congress of Soviets.

However you measure it, every later historian gives Lenin much more space than does the film. In books he may act behind the scenes, but his words, arguments, decisions, threats dominate every action. Reed sees the man as a strange political leader, one who leads by intellect alone. Rabinowitch, the social historian who wants to show that Lenin both represented larger forces and did not always get his way, ultimately has to admit that there would have been no Bolshevik revolution without him. Chamberlin and Pipes twin themselves with quasi religious descriptions of the man and his role. The former finds Lenin “inevitably fused with the system which he brought into existence, on which the last judgment has obviously not been pronounced. He was the incarnate doctrine of militant Marxism, the revolutionary Word become flesh.” The latter never quite calls him Satanic, but his description of Lenin’s “totalitarian mentality” has all the markings of a modern antiChrist, responsible not just for a Bolshevik “coup d’etat” but for the subsequent terrors

²⁶ Reed, *Ten Days*, 17; Chamberlin, *Russian Revolution*, 207-21; Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 439-67; Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 438-53.

and atrocities of the regime as well as a goodly number of the problems that plague of Europe for much of the rest of the century.²⁷

Figes too speaks of Lenin's "towering domination" of history itself. October is indeed one of the best examples of modern historical events which "illustrate the decisive effect of an individual on the course of history. Without Lenin's intervention, it would probably never have happened at all" Even so, the Bolshevik leader did not always get what he wanted, when he wanted it. Ideological and geographical factions within the Party often were able to resist his arguments or ignore his desires. The party itself was not, as Pipes argues, a monolith strictly controlled from above, with Lenin as a puppet master. Such a view is no more than a "myth which used to be propagated by the Soviet establishment, and one which is still believed (for quite different reasons) by right-wing historians in the West."²⁸

Inventing October

Maybe we should admit there is another way of looking at *October*: the film is a fiction. A creation. A text that cannot be read literally. One that, to fit things within its time frame, uses devices of condensation, symbol, and metaphor. *October* is no mirror to some vanished reality. None of it happened precisely the way we see it (and could we have seen it, where would we have been sitting and what would we have missed. Even the energetic John Reed saw less than we do in the film). Eisenstein can use the original settings: the Nevsky Prospekt, the Smolny Institute, Peter-Paul Fortress, the Winter Palace. He can get soldiers and political figures to recapitulate roles they played ten years before, during the actual events. He can hire Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko to once again lead a company through the Winter Palace to arrest the ministers of the Provisional Government. But its still fiction. Made up. An illusion in black and white. At best, a series of proximate realities. But proximate to what?

The question is what kind of fiction. The question is what kind of history.

Consider this sequence: The diplomat bows and jumps to attention. The soldiers

²⁷ Reed, *Ten Days*, 125; Chamberlin, *Russian Revolution*, 140; Pipes, throughout all his work.

²⁸ Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, 391-92; 456.

jump back into their trenches. Shells explode nearby. Soldiers crouch in the trenches, looking up. A huge machine is lowered in a factory somewhere far behind the lines. The soldiers cower. Because of the juxtaposition of images, Eisenstein's acclaimed montage, they do so apparently beneath the machine. Is this fact? Fiction? Certainly somewhere shells did explode on the front. Somewhere machines were lowered. Somewhere soldiers cowered in trenches. But the meaning of this sequence is not in some referential truth. It is in the connection of diverse details that we understand to be a metaphor

Even verifiable historical events can become metaphors. Like any historian, Eisenstein cannot show events without showing them from a particular angle (words or images, both need a point of view), with certain lighting, movement, a connection with preceding and succeeding images (or words, or phrases). Take the scene when Kerensky, the first head of the Provisional Government to move into the Winter Palace, climbs the grand stairway toward his private rooms. Without any piece of paper to document this moment, we do know there were stairs to the family apartments and that Kerensky must have climbed them. Know too –as the inter titles tell us as we see him climbing and climbing – that he had kept for himself three cabinet portfolios: Minister of Navy, Minister of War, Prime Minister. That, as in the film, he did like to wear a military uniform with glossy boots. That, though it is nowhere documented, must have been greeted by the same members of the Palace staff who had once waited on the Czar and his family. That, as Eisenstein shows, they probably regarded him with odd, duplicitous expressions.

Such humble details could be neutral, dramatic, solemn, irrelevant. Eisenstein underlines their importance by treating them with humor. He makes us laugh. Satire is not a common trope for history but hardly unknown. Chamberlain, Pipes, and Figs all agree that Kerensky was a pompous figure out of a comic opera, one given to self dramatization. The humorous sequence in the film points to more than the individual: both Kerensky and his government are depicted as equally a farce, unable to solve the problems facing the country, doomed to impotence and failure.

Others have said much the same thing. We see Kerensky in the former royal chambers as the end draws near, a leader in isolation, posturing, playing with a chess board, cowering beneath the bed covers, surrounded by the forces of the past, virtually impotent in his power to effect events. In later years, Kerensky himself will admit this. Admit he did not have force enough to stop the Bolsheviks. In life as in the film, *October* he makes a feeble

effort. He phones the Cossacks. He tells them to “saddle up” and come to defend the Winter Palace. A stableman says the Cossacks are on the way, but he is lying. The Cossacks don’t saddle up in film. Nor did they in history. Actually, in the film we don’t even see Cossacks. All we see is their horses. Or some horses on whose rear ends Eisenstein lets the camera linger. There were, presumably, horses in the Cossack stables. This is fact. Metaphor too.

Some inventions are so obviously symbolic that nobody should complain about their historicity, though some scholars do.²⁹ Take the film’s opening sequence: the destruction of the monumental statue of the Tsar. Knowing that this is not a statue of the deposed Czar Nicolas, but really one of Alexander III, his father, doesn’t add to or subtract anything to our understanding of the February Revolution. Nor does knowing that this particular statue was really in Moscow, not Petrograd, where the film is set. Nor does knowing the real statue was not pulled down until 1921. What we do know is that the film is telling us something simple: the collective masses pulled down the Czar in 1917. During the Kornilov threat, when, by reversing the film, Eisenstein has the statue reassemble itself, the meaning can only be figurative -- and yet historically very clear: Kornilov’s move is an attempt to restore the old regime.

Equally symbolic, and with no basis whatsoever in fact, is the most memorable sequence of the film: the brilliant montage that shows the raising of the bridges over the Neva River during the July Days. Shows them as part of the strategy by which the Provisional Government beats back a revolutionary challenge. Any viewer has to know that much of what happens on the bridges is not documented history, but historical moments created by the filmmaker -- that macabre, and strangely sensual image of the dead girl’s hair slipping into the crack between the two rising segments of the bridge; the horse hanging from the highest point of the raised bridge that plunges into the river to end the sequence.

How to explain this invention? In filmic or historical terms? Or both? Clearly Eisenstein (as he says in his memoirs) was captivated by the possibilities of using the bridges to produce sheer beauty on the screen --the implacable steel geometry of the slow-rising forms played off against the frightened, scurrying shapes of humans. But he also knew that it was a common strategy of the Russian government to raise these bridges in times of crisis. Knew too that the PG would try to do so, unsuccessfully, during October

(as we see later in the film). The filmic choice for Eisenstein is almost as old as cinema: to show the importance of the unsuccessful attempt to raise the bridge in October, he must let the audience in on its potential significance –by showing a successful raising in an earlier sequence. But the action also has a specific historical content. Raising the bridges demonstrates the way in which the geographic situation of Petrograd mirrors the class situation: the radical workers and soldiers who live around the factories north of the Neva, the bourgeoisie and the governmental centers south of the river -- with the hands of the PG leaders resting on the levers that keep the chasm between the two impassable. Eisenstein has here provided images to convey an abstract concept: the widening split between the PG and the lower classes, a split that will lead to the October days.

The greatest piece of fiction in *October*, the one that critics tend to seize upon – as I have twice mentioned – is the “storming” of the Winter Palace.³⁰ So wholly fictional is this large and impressive battle that good jokes were being told about it even during Eisenstein’s time. The most common: that more ordnance was detonated during the making of the film than during the original taking of the Palace. The second most common: that there were more deaths and injuries during Eisenstein’s recreation than during the historical events. The former is no doubt true; the latter is probably true. Reports are wildly divergent on what really happened the evening of November 7. Some say nobody was killed; others say as many as sixteen. Most historians agree on this: there was no grand fire fight, no heroic charge across Palace Square. At the end there was no opposition to the Red Guards. They slipped into the palace to arrest the ministers of the PG.

Why then does Eisenstein give us this heroic charge and firefight?

We need to see it from the filmmaker’s point of view. Eisenstein has a real problem: he is working in a dramatic form and must deal with the undramatic quality of what took place on November 7. Here is the way Leon Trotsky put it:

The final act of the revolution seems, after all else, too brief, too dry, too business-like – somehow out of correspondence with the historic scope of the events. . . . Where is the insurrection? There is no picture of the

²⁹ Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema, and History*, 84.

³⁰ Pipes, *Russian Revolution*, 495; Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 484, 737.

insurrection. The events do not form themselves into a picture. A series of small operations, calculated and prepared for in advance, remain separated one from another in both space and time. A unity of thought and action unites them, but they do not fuse in the struggle itself. There is no action of great masses. There are no dramatic encounters with. There is nothing of all that with which imaginations brought upon the facts of history associate with the idea of insurrection.³¹

Try to tell that to an audience sitting in a theater. Eisenstein desperately needs that missing “historic scope.” He has given us a long dramatic buildup. He has drawn out the moments towards a historic climax, the advent of the Bolsheviks, the definitive change of regimes. He has shown the plans of the city in the office of the Military Revolutionary Committee, the map with its strategic sites being circled, the troops fanning out at night, the sailors coming ashore to seize the bridges, the movements towards the rail lines, the centers of communication, the fortress of Peter Paul, the Cruiser Aurora steaming up the Neva. But he still needs something more dramatic. He needs to storm the Winter Palace.

Eisenstein’s problem on the screen is much the same as that of the Bolsheviks in 1917. They could have ignored the palace. Prime Minister Kerensky had fled Petrograd. His cabinet was in the palace, but cut off from communications to the outside world. To control the country, the Bolsheviks did not need to seize the residence of the Czars. Except in terms of its symbolic importance. Lenin knew that a revolution must have a heroic symbol for the coming ages. Like the Bastille, a symbol of the bad old world the revolutionaries have conquered. Similarly, Eisenstein knew a dramatic film must have a payoff. A release. By this point in the film there can be no doubt about the outcome. The viewer knows that the government is hopelessly surrounded. Knows that the forces on the two sides are hopelessly unequal. (This is the genesis of Eisenstein’s sexist humor: only women in slips and brassieres remain ready to defend the regime.) We have seen the strategic spots circled on the map. The troops in the streets. The Winter Palace circled and encircled. But still we need a release. A catharsis. On the screen as in reality: the revolution must have a climax.

The question: does the film tell us that this climax is not literal but symbolic?

³¹ Quoted in Roy Medvedev, *The October Revolution* (London, 1979), 50.

Perhaps. It depends, like all reception of history, on who you are and what you already know. Certainly the battle points ahead to another historical reality that weighs on the story the filmmaker is telling and the world in which he has lived. A reality that he wanted to show but could not encompass within the film's time frame: the gathering of native and outside resistance to the new regime that will plunge the country into a long, horrendous, and bloody civil war. The storming of the Winter Palace is Eisenstein's attempt to let us share in the ecstasy of revolutionary change. It is also a symbolic version of that change -- and the historical consequences that would flow from it, consequences that he could not show. The taking of the Winter Palace stands in for the victories the Red Army would achieve against the four year resistance of the Whites and the military intervention of a dozen nations which unsuccessfully attempted to crush the revolutionary regime.

Okay. These Inventions and Alterations, this playing loose with data, can be disturbing. Certainly to anyone who writes history by the traditional rules. But history on film, as I have argued elsewhere, cannot be about literal fact.³² The screen is a not an good medium for delivering the kind of unvarnished data that fills written histories. To take the model of written history for history on film is to look in the wrong place. Why? In part because we already have books. Film is another, a different way of seeing and representing the world. However literal it may look, history on film is no more than an evocation of the past and a commentary on the topic evoked. As long as we understand that, like fact and interpretation, there is no space between that evocation and that commentary. Both are present in every image we see upon the screen.

Maybe History is the wrong word. Maybe we should choose another word for the attempt to deliver and make meaning of the past in a dramatic film. Whatever we call it, *October* is certainly an attempt to convey the importance of the social and political happenings in Petrograd in the fall of 1917. To argue that October was a moment when the Bolsheviks embodied the spirit of the Russian masses who had overthrown the Czar in February and had become wholly disillusioned with the Provisional Government in the months since then. That the Bolsheviks did no more than lead where the Russian people wished to go. This interpretation, this argument comes in a presentational form different

³² See my *Visions of the Past*, especially "The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Post Literate Age," 45-79.

from that of we historians who work with words on the page. So different that one might say the film's meaning lies somewhere in the narrow land that separates history and poetry as Aristotle defined them. To make its argument, *October* tells us neither *what happened* nor *what might have happened*. Instead it presents a cunning mixture of the two –a mixture that (not completely different from written history) creates a symbolic or metaphoric expression of what we call the Bolshevik Revolution.

Let me take this one step farther: written history is also not entirely about facts, however much it needs them to underpin its argument. The tropes, the shape, the overall meaning of the histories we write is prefigured by the values of the historian and the demands of narrative form. Eisenstein, prefigures his story of October as a dramatic and heroic tale, then finds (and creates) appropriate images in which to tell it. He well knows that his truth is not referential but metaphorical. John Reed, whose earliest writings depicted the revolution as a implacable natural force, works much the same way; his ten-day structure, one that marks much subsequent thinking about October, is a dramatic, not a historical device. So in their own ways do Chamberlin, Rabinowitch, Pipes, and Figs. All, in prefaces, lay out the arguments that allow them to look at the same material and find very different meanings. For however true the congeries of data that each presents to us, the shaping of that data into an argument, the meaning of that data as we (are supposed to) absorb it, is not, ultimately, literal, but metaphoric and moral. After all the facts in, what we are left with is the argument. Or vision. Not with the details but with broad evaluations of what those details mean. For Reed the revolution is “a beacon for mankind.” For Pipes a horrendous tragedy perpetrated by a lawless minority. That Eisenstein provides an image of Revolution closer to Reed (and Rabinowitch) than Pipes has less to do with research or the accuracy of individual details than his personal experience, his beliefs, his value system.

One more important difference between *October* and the other accounts: save perhaps for Reed, who had also written drama, the other historians point to rather than involve us in the drama of those days. None has the emotional impact and excitement of *October*, which involves us, thrusts us into October as a time of human movement, action, hope, struggle, tension, humor, triumph, defeat, change. Like any film, it indulges in the kind of historical emotion that our written forms usually avoid. Part of this is due to the medium. Part is tradition: as academics we must be measured, distanced, objective, uninvolved -- even if we wish to depict October as world shaking drama, tragedy, necessity,

the story of one year in the life of the Party or thirty years in the life of a nation. To accept *October* as history is to accept emotion as part of reading history. Accept, too, the idea that the literal is only one criteria for judging the work of the historian. Perhaps the time has come for us to be willing to evaluate the forms and metaphors of the historian as well as the content that she or he produces. Doing so will allow us to gather the best of historical work on film, such as *October*, into our historiography

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