



Eisenstein in Guanajuato

Peter Greenaway on 'Eisenstein in Guanajuato'

I discovered the films of Eisenstein by accident when I was 17 in 1959 in an East London cinema. My first amazement was Eisenstein's *Strike*, made in 1925 when he was at the absurdly early age of 27.

Back in 1959 I was impatient to see what else I could view of this – at that time to me – unknown filmmaker, just 11 years after his death in 1948, aged 50. I checked up on all the films of his Soviet filmmaker contemporaries and apart from a fascination with the rapid turnover and wide range of Vertov's visual enthusiasms, Eisenstein was the truly great excitement for me.

I had never seen such serious-purpose early-cinema films before – by contrast the Americans seemed showy and sentimental, the Germans extravagant and unbelievable, the French too self-regarding and literary. Here in Eisenstein was serious purpose and fast-moving self-conscious cinematic intelligence – no film in American early cinema moved as fast – and nowhere was there so many shots – and surprising violence of action and a fascination for violence itself. And a curious use of side-stepping metaphor and associative poetry is involved and embraced – all of which I came later to understand as characteristics of montage, the cinema of comparison – film by association – an 'only-connect' – cinema, cinema at long last not a slave of prosaic narrative but hopping and skipping about with serious purpose to run like the human imagination runs, making everything associative till everything past, present and future, old and new, both sides of the wall – like Cubism – which so influenced the contemporary Russian avant-garde in painting – though Malevich said that Eisenstein could never join the Russian avant-garde, he was 'too real'. Amazing! I had found my first cinema hero.

I have run and rerun Eisenstein's films ever since, consumed everything I could in translation that he wrote and published, followed all the news about him that seeped out of Russia in bouts of unexpected liberated knowledge. I visited his library in Moscow several times with each time a different Russian guide, I went to the sites of his filmmaking in Odessa and St Petersburg, his place of forced exile in Alma Ata in Kazakhstan, his father's art nouveau architecture in Riga, asking to sleep in a cold deserted apartment there where he was rumoured to have played as a child. I was not permitted but the concierge gave me an apple from the garden across the street and I ate it in the cold room looking out the window he too may have looked out, watching the apple trees and carthorses. How about that for empathetic association?

I kept nurturing my Eisenstein enthusiasms from all angles. I bought all the Eisenstein biographies – the good ones and the bad ones – had a London painting exhibition called Eisenstein at the Winter Palace, read the Freud material on da Vinci which fascinated Eisenstein, edited political commercials for the London Labour Party, shouted useless abuse at the London American Embassy over Vietnam, and seemingly argued on both sides of the fence for and against the idea that Soviet cinema was all threadbare Cold War propaganda, East and West, ending with the unsurprising and somewhat hopeless plea to deliver 'a plague on both your houses'. It was both

propaganda and was not propaganda – in the way that Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling is magnificent propaganda for Catholicism. And indeed why not? Great art is always propaganda for great life. And most cinema frames for low ambition, scared of over-reaching, scared of *lèse-majesté*, scared of the taunt of high purpose, even scared of considering that cinema is art, scared indeed that the feature film can rival the highest successes of painting and the symphony, the novel and the theatre play. Cinema in 1930 was, and still is, largely throwaway ephemerality unhitched to any programme, conceit or agenda of content or – especially for me – theory of language. Having been trained as a painter, most cinema as compared to painting is remarkably uninterested in language. It's largely genre-led content conceived as illustrated literary, dialogue-directed stories – forever leaving you dissatisfied. Cinema is far too rich a medium to be left merely to the storytellers. Bring on the writers! That's practically all we hear isn't it? The syllabus of every film school. No wonder we have a text-based cinema all over the world. Every film you have ever seen started life with a text. We have a film industry that illustrates text. A cinema of conductors and very rarely composers. Why were, and are, so many people underselling the medium?

So you can see why Eisenstein has been so satisfying. Big ideas consciously promoted in a rush of imagery. Intense interest in putting those ideas down as images not as deodorised illustrative texts. Rembrandt said in hopeless hope, 'Just because you have eyes does not mean you can see'. Eisenstein says in irony, 'I suffer from too much looking', and Derrida said with wisdom, 'The image always has the last word'.

There were of course mysteries about Eisenstein – perhaps the largest aesthetic mystery for me was how come the first three great films – *Strike*, *Potemkin* and *October* were unlike the last three great films – *Nevsky*, *Ivan* and *The Boyar's Plot*?

There was a change of film manufacture between the early and late films for Eisenstein and not just because of Stalin's vindictiveness, blind-sidedness and general animosity to all that was beneficial. I grew to believe it was because of those years – 1929-1931 – that Eisenstein spent away from Soviet Russia, that the change had taken place. Away from your own country and surroundings you give yourself license to behave differently. Travelling across Russia and then Western Europe and then America, and then Hollywood which Eisenstein was convinced was a country all on its very own, he met every important cultural celebrity alive – he handshaked them all. He had met Malevich, Mayakosky, Prokoviev, Shostakovich, Gorky, Pudovkin, Dovzenko, Vertov, and now he was to meet Joyce, Brecht, Cocteau, Shaw, Dos Passos, Gertrude Stein, Stroheim, von Sternberg, Flaherty, Chaplin, Stravinsky, Disney, Corbusier, Buñuel, Dietrich, Garbo, Mickey Mouse, Rin-Tin-Tin ... and all those visionaries in Mexico – Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Orozco, Siqueiros – all those contacts that gave him new perspectives he was unlikely to have back in the winter-dark tenements of Moscow. He was endlessly curious, had an imagination like an elephant sponge (he later bequeathed his brain to the neuropsychologist Luria) and he was hit hard with emotional traumas of sex and death in Mexico.

'This country is astonishing. The large things in life continually hit you on the head – in the pit of your stomach, in your heart. Nothing can be superficial.'

The fascination with the endless stimulations of sex and death – Eros and Thanatos – the very beginning and the very end – both unknowable to the

subject and victim – the non-negotiables – you don't ask for or agree to the first and you don't have any say in rejecting the second. Eros and Thanatos sober up your image of yourself, reduce exhibitionism, demand attention to make use of your mortality – and hit Eisenstein hard in Mexico. He never lost track or denied his cinematic intelligence, but I believe abroad, away from Soviet conspiracy and paranoia and all that dialectical materialism which no-one really understood how to define, let alone how to support – away from the deadening hand of Stalinist Russia, and essentially being alive in the living-in-the-present country that is Mexico, he emotionally matured, learnt cross-identifying empathy and his later films demonstrated as much.

Production notes

EISENSTEIN IN GUANAJUATO

Directed by: Peter Greenaway

©: Submarine, Fu Works, Paloma Negra Films S. de R.L. de C.V., Edith Film, Potemkino

A co-production by: Submarine, Fu Works, Paloma Negra Films

In co-production with: Edith Film, Potemkino, Mollywood

In association with: VPRO, YLE, ZDF/Arte

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(Conaculta), Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE)

Presented by: Submarine, Fu Works, Paloma Negra Films

World Sales: Films Boutique

Producers: Bruno Felix, Femke Wolting,

San Fu Maltha, Cristina Velasco L.

Co-producers: Liisa Penttilä-Asikainen, Wilfried Van Baelen,

Peter De Maegd, Guy Van Baelen

Line Producer: Karin S. de Boer

Production Manager: Alex Sánchez de la Peña

Location Manager: Alexander de Graaf

Post-production Supervisor: Maarten de Graaf

1st Assistant Director: Julio Quezada

Script Continuity: Arturo Jimenez

Casting Director: Alejandro Caballero

Written by: Peter Greenaway

Director of Photography: Reinier van Brummelen

Camera Operator: Floris Van Der Lee

Visual Effects Supervision: Florentijn Bos, Reinier van Brummelen

Visual Effects: Flow

Editor: Elmer Leupen

Art Direction: Ana Solares

Costume Designer: Brenda Gómez

Hair and Make-up: Maripaz 'La Negra' Robles

Direct Sound: Raúl Locatelli, Pablo Taméz

Re-recording Mixer: Gareth Llewellyn

Supervising Sound Editor: Srdjan Kurpjel

Cast

Elmer Bäck (*Sergei Eisenstein*)

Luis Alberti (*Palomino Cañedo*)

José Montini (*Diego Rivera*)

Cristina Velasco Lozano (*Frida Kahlo*)

Rasmus Slätis (*Grisha Alexandrov*)

Jakob Öhrman (*Eduard Tisse*)

Sara Juárez (*Mercedes*)

Alaín Vargas (*Gideon*)

Maya Zapata (*Concepción Cañedo*)

Gustavo Galván (*Rolando*)

Emiliano Morales (*Pascal*)

Alexander Knaifel (*Pera*)

Alenka Rios Hart (*Alba*)

Lisa Owen (*Mary Craig Sinclair*)

Stelio Savante (*Hunter Kimbrough*)

Netherlands-Mexico-Finland-Belgium-Germany 2015©

106 mins

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