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October and the Question of Cinematic Thinking

By thinking, we enter the space of reasons. [1] A reason is simply a consideration in favour of believing something, adopting an attitude towards something or doing something. Thinking sometimes furnishes reasons to believe a proposition. At other times it furnishes reasons to adopt an attitude (for example, contempt or admiration) or to take action (for example, to buy a new phone or participate in an anti-government rally). There is more to thinking than explicit argument and practical deliberation, however. Thinking sometimes leads us to see things in a new light. Rather than simply representing an argument, thinking might remove blockages to insight. What might have previously seemed like a poor reason for a belief might take on new significance after a bout of thinking. Thinking can be conservative. Sometimes it merely reconfirms beliefs and commitments and reinforces the way we already see them. It can sometimes repeat patterns already well-established without adding anything of value to them. And, of course, thinking can make things worse: more muddled, obscure or tendentious. Thinking can be many things, but it invariably engages in some way or another with reasons and it does so in a way that can itself be the object of critical assessment and engagement. Thinking is, in this way, experience that enters the space of reasons.

Given this account of thinking, it is natural to define cinematic thinking as cinematic experience that enters the space of reasons. Of course, this definition raises the question of what exactly cinematic experience is: how it differs from other kinds of experience and how it depends on the conventions, techniques and genres of cinema. I won’t venture answers to these questions, but it is worth noting that understanding cinematic thinking in this way makes it a feature of cinematic spectatorship. It is not thinking about films. Nor is it thinking prompted by watching a film. For example, we might think a matter through whilst temporarily disengaged from a film we are viewing. Such an experience would not count as cinematic thinking on the definition in play even if it occurred directly in response to the film because it is not a cinematic experience as such. It is thinking offline as it were. Much more might be said about the nature of cinematic experience in this context, though to do so would take me beyond the scope of this paper. I explore the nature of cinematic thinking in this paper using what I think are uncontroversial examples of cinematic experience: the viewing of various montage sequences from Eisenstein’s October.

October

October is a portrait of the October Revolution of 1917. It depicts key events leading from the overthrow of the Tsarist regime in February to the storming (as Eisenstein would have it) of the Winter Palace on October 25, when the Bolsheviks deposed the Provisional Government lead by Alexander Kerensky. Eisenstein did not think of it as a mere depiction of the revolution, however. In 1927, he writes that “After the drama, poem, ballad in film, October presents a new form of cinema: a collection of essays on a series of themes which constitute October.” (Eisenstein 1976, 4) Eisenstein’s intellectual ambition is apparent, but what of his achievement?

Robert Rosenstone views the film as an extended historical argument (Rosenstone 2001). Eisenstein’s key thesis, he claims, is that the October revolution was an authentic expression of the popular will aimed at the removal of a despised and ineffective provisional regime. The style of argument is not unlike that of the professional historian. Rosenstone implies (but does not make explicit) that this form of argument is interpretative. In interpretative historical argument, certain aspects of an historical situation are emphasized and linked together in a way that brings the situation as a whole into a plausible (if fully contestable) focus. For example, the role of Lenin in events is systematically under-emphasized by Eisenstein. Lenin appears in the film a great deal less than Kerensky and never as the immediate instigator of events. Even Eisenstein’s greatest historical license – the storming of the Winter Palace – functions as a historically interpretative argument by Rosenstone’s lights. The storming of the Winter Palace dominates the final part of the film, but it is largely fiction. The actual takeover of the palace was a mostly (perhaps wholly) bloodless and un-dramatic affair. Rosenstone suggests that Eisenstein sought a filmic substitute for the resolution of the great and bloody struggle that October initiated: the Civil War of 1917-1921 (Rosenstone 2001, 271).
Whatever the plausibility of this assessment of Eisenstein’s historical argument, it seems clear that it doesn’t constitute cinematic thinking as I have specified it. Historical films interpret historical events. Perhaps they sometimes constitute an interpretative argument. However, an over-arching historical argument of the kind Rosenstone attributes to Eisenstein is something that is put together by an audience after the spectatorial fact. It is only by piecing together and making explicit the structure and linkages exhibited in a film – after the fact of having watched it, probably a number of times – that the nature of an interpretative historical argument is likely to emerge. This means that the overarching historical argument of October is the wrong place to look for an example of cinematic thinking. Cinematic thinking is not thinking in response to film spectatorship, after the fact of it. In post-spectatorial reflection we may discover an argument embodied in a film – an argument that the film can be interpreted as making – but this would not be something experienced as thinking within cinematic spectatorship itself. Since cinematic thinking is a feature of cinematic spectatorship, its most readily identifiable form occurs in short sequences. So let us examine a few well-known sequences from October.

Affect and Assertion: two uses of montage

The July Days episode of October contains a sequence famous for its demonstration of the emotional power of Soviet montage: the raising of a bridge over the Neva River (17:40 – 19:10). The episode as a whole depicts a key event in the civil unrest of the July Days: the July 17 suppression of a demonstration against the Provisional Government. As many as 500,000 people participated in the demonstration and something like 700 people were killed by government forces. The demonstrations were principally an anti-war affair.

The raising of the Neva Bridge is cut together with a sequence in which a Bolshevik man is attacked by a group of bourgeois women with the pointy end of their umbrellas. The purpose of the depiction appears to be to express the cowardice, spitefulness and unmanliness of the defenders of the Provisional Government.[2] The Neva Bridge is raised in order to isolate the protestors and cut them off from the city – its depiction has a clear narrative purpose – but it adds nothing informative about the character and significance of this central event of the July Days unrest. (And probably didn’t occur in any case.) The power of the bridge raising sequence rests squarely on two figures: a dead woman and a dead horse. They are victims of machine-guns attacking fleeing protestors. The tension in the sequence emerges from the fate of their bodies. The women’s body rests atop the bridge until it eventually falls into the river. The horse dangles precariously from the rising arm of the bridge until it eventually falls into the river. Eisenstein draws out the sequence to remarkable effect. The most important effect is to raise the tension in spectators to a high pitch. When will the horse fall? Does the women’s body still rest atop the bridge? This tension has valuable consequences. The combination of tension generated by the bridge sequence and anger generated by the umbrella attack sequence, together with their concatenation, yields an experience of absurdity. (Anger entails unsatisfied desire and the tense experience of unsatisfied desire is frustration.) In the spectator, this furnishes a simulacrum of the sort of frustration the workers awaiting a Bolshevik strike at the Provisional Government experienced during the July Days. The raising of the Neva Bridge itself is a montage sequence of great emotional power, but little relevant content. Let me label this style of montage, affect montage.

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Now contrast this sequence with our first introduction of Kerensky (23:30 – 26:20). Eisenstein adopts comic techniques here. These include the protracted progression of Kerensky up the Winter Palace stairs: his rise to the top, both literally and figuratively. Inter-titles announce his multiple successive ministries and Eisenstein depicts him as a childish figure. At 24:10 Kerensky is shown being introduced to the old servants of the Tsar. He wears a uniform that is slightly too big for him. Nickolay Popov, the actor playing Kerensky, has a slight stature and a boyish face. (Popov resembles Kerensky fairly closely, however.) The sequence, and indeed the portrayal of Kerensky throughout the film, is a form of mockery. Two things about Kerensky are clearly expressed, both in conventional ways and through adroit use of montage. The first is that Kerensky is a preening narcissist and the second is that he is wildly ambitious. Kerensky’s ambition is expressed primarily through the depiction of his Napoleonic affectation. At 25:10 – 26:15, Kerensky adopts a stereotypical Napoleonic stance: one polished boot in front of another, left arm hooked behind his back, fondling a leather glove. (Later, at 29:20, a more menacing depiction of Kerensky is concatenated with a statue of Napoleon just in case the audience is in danger of missing the point.) Kerensky’s preening absurdity is expressed in a rather different way. Inter-cut with depictions of Kerensky’s Napoleonic affectation are depictions of a mechanical peacock working its way through its routine. This very mechanical peacock was installed in the Winter Palace, though no clue to this is given in the film. Its concatenation with Kerensky’s Napoleonic affectation is intended to generate a cognitive response in a spectator: the belief that Kerensky is not in fact a figure of Napoleonic stature, but a preening figure of absurd Napoleonic pretensions. Let me label the form of montage employed in this sequence, assertoric montage. Whereas the affect montage of the Neva Bridge sequence principally generates an affect response, the assertoric montage of the Mechanical Peacock sequence principally generates a belief state.

Assertoric montage does not plant an idea in the spectator’s mind through brute psychological force. And nor does it work in a disguised way. It works like an assertion. In the mechanical Peacock sequence, spectators view Kerensky in full Napoleonic affectation about to enter his private quarters in the Winter Palace, after brief cutaway shots of attendees either snickering or staring ponderously, Eisenstein cuts to the peacock. Since the peacock has no integration with the scene, spectators are immediately made aware of its role as a comment on proceedings. It is as if Eisenstein is saying – just saying – that Kerensky is a preening narcissist and spectators can either accept his word for it or not.

God and Country: the montage of persuasion

Perhaps the most celebrated example of Eisenstein’s use of intellectual montage is the God and Country sequence of October (31:00 – 32:40). This is quite a complex sequence and comes in the midst of Eisenstein’s account of the Kornilov Affair. Historians have conflicting theories about the Kornilov Affair. What is generally accepted is that Kornilov – the discontented, conservative head of the armed forces – advanced on Petrograd and eventually formed the intention to occupy the city and dismantle bolshevism. Kerensky’s role in the affair is uncertain. Kornilov claimed that he was acting on Kerensky’s orders; Kerensky claimed that Kornilov secretly planned a coup against the Provisional Government. In the end, Kerensky recognized the threat Kornilov represented, ordered his arrest and elicited the help of the Bolsheviks in the defense of Petrograd. Eisenstein glosses over the uncertainties of the affair and presents Kornilov as forming a threat to the revolution that is overcome at the spontaneous initiative of workers and army deserters, aided by the organizational and propaganda efforts of the Bolsheviks. Kerensky spends almost the entire span of the depicted episode in bed, his face buried in pillows. Bolshevik leadership is unrepresented throughout the episode except for a short scene of their release from jail.

The God and Country sequence concerns the counter-revolutionary thinking of Kornilov and his supporters. The sequence has two parts, corresponding to the appeal to religious tradition and to patriotism. The first part is a montage of religious images, beginning with images of Christianity and Russian Orthodox architecture that would have been very familiar to the film’s intended audience, moving to images from South Asia – Hinduism and Buddhism primarily – and ending with a series of images that appear to
come from Africa, the South Pacific and Polar Regions. The sequence ends with an extraordinarily simple human-like figure. Aaron Smuts calls this final figure “a crude stone bobblehead” (Smuts 2009, 416). The appeal to patriotism sequence is very different. Here, conventional images of patriotic attachment (medals, epaulettes) are concatenated with a depiction of the magical reconstruction of a statue of Tsar Alexander III. (This is a reverse edit of the statue’s destruction depicted at the beginning of the film.) The appeal to patriotism is represented and interpreted (it aims at restoration of the monarchy whatever Kornilov and his supporters might say), but not explicitly criticized. The patriotic value of a restoration of the monarchy does not seem to be in Eisenstein’s critical sights. He probably thought it an unnecessary object of critique. By contrast, a religious justification for counter-revolutionary action is explicitly criticized. But just how is this criticism accomplished?

Noël Carroll argues that the sequence takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* (Carroll 1973). A *reductio ad absurdum* argument in this context would express something like the following: there are many gods, and if an appeal to one’s own god constitutes a legitimate basis for deciding upon a political order, then appeal to a Chinese Dragon or a Polynesian idol would form a similar basis. But this is absurd. So the appeal to Russian Orthodox Christianity is also absurd. Aaron Smuts claims that the sequence takes the form of an argument by analogy (Smuts 2009). I agree with Carroll and Smuts that a significant intellectual move is being made in this sequence, but I do not believe it takes the form of an argument, either an argument by analogy or a *reductio* argument. In this discussion, I concentrate on Smuts’ interpretation of the montage, but a similar case can be made against Carroll’s interpretation.

In the first part of the God and Country sequence, the spectator sees, in order: a picture of a Russian Orthodox Church followed by a baroque image of Christ, back to the church seen from a different angle and a slightly closer perspective, back to the image of Christ also from a slightly different angle and closer, back to several images of the church, this time from much closer in, and then an image of menacing and monstrous Hindu figure devouring something we can’t see, the image repeated at a slightly greater distance. Then follow close-up images of a Buddhist temple, an image of a smiling Buddha’s face, the Buddha’s hands in meditative pose, a full-length image of the same Buddha, a close-up of the head of a mythical Chinese creature – it could be a dragon or a kylin – and so on. Smuts interprets the sequence as asserting something quite complex: that this set of images represents things that are so overall that they share similar political and cultural power. He writes “It is as if Eisenstein says to the viewer, ‘Look at these products of Christianity and notice the similarities with these animistic icons. The practices arise from the same motivations and are both equally false.’” (Smuts 2009, 416, emphasis added). Of course, it is possible to respond to the sequence as if it were an argument by analogy of this kind, but doing so requires one to read a great deal into the sequence that isn’t there. A concatenation of images may tend to produce the thought that the depicted objects belong together in some sort of group, but assertion of group membership is not sufficient for argumentative analogy. In an argument by analogy one has to signal reasonably unambiguously that an analogy is drawn for targeted argumentative purposes. For example, Eisenstein has to signal, not just that a particular image of Christ and a particular image of the Buddha are both religious images, but that they are sufficiently similar that the targeted feature of one (the absurdity of appealing to it for political purposes) is shared by the other. One might think that this is Eisenstein’s intention – given what we know about his beliefs and his intention to defend Marxist historiography – but this is something read into the passage, not taken from it. The sequence may prompt an argumentative response from suitably informed spectators: a viewer might be prompted by the sequence to develop an argument against appeals to religion in politics. But this is not the same thing as constituting an argument experienced through cinematic spectatorship.

As image succeeds image in the sequence, a particular structure emerges. The depicted objects become simpler and their execution cruder; they also become less obviously images of gods. Some of the final images look like simple ancestral funerary carvings rather than images of gods. The concatenation of images emphasizes group-membership, but even if the audience accepts that they are all images of gods, what stops the audience seeing the sequence as a study of differences within the group? The obvious thought elicited by watching the passage might be that there are many different sorts of idols, and they are spectacularly different from each other! Some are gentle and familiar (Christian images) others are menacing (the monstrous Hindu image), some are playful (the Chinese kylin), some are fatuous (the reclining Buddha), some are aggressively bird-like, and others are almost featureless. A group of such disparate images does not encourage an argument by analogy. To constitute an argument by analogy, the sequence needs some way of signaling the argumentative use to which this concatenation of extraordinarily diverse images is to be put. Eisenstein’s technique did not encompass an elegant and effective way of doing this. (An inter-title seems to be the only feasible option available to him.)

We know from Eisenstein’s comments on October that he intended to produce a deductively valid argument in the God and Country sequence. He writes of the sequence that “by a process of comparing each new image with the common denotation, power is accumulated behind a process that can be formally identified with that of logical deduction.” (Eisenstein 1977a, 62) Eisenstein’s ideological commitments made him particularly susceptible to certain forms of bad argument, but the problem here is that the sequence is incapable of sustaining the argumentative structure he wished for.

Earlier in the same essay he describes the sequence more fully.

Kornilov’s march on Petrograd was under the banner of “In the Name of God and Country”. Here we attempted to reveal the religious significance of this episode in a rationalistic way. A number of religious images, from a magnificent baroque Christ to an Eskimo idol, were cut together. The conflict in this case was between the concept and symbolization of God. While the idea and image appear to accord completely in the first statue shown, the two elements move further from each other with each successive image. Maintaining the denotation of ‘God,’ the images increasingly disagree with our concept of God, inevitably leading to individual conclusions about the true nature of all deities. In this case, too, a chain of images attempted to achieve a purely intellectual resolution, resulting from a conflict between a preconception and a gradual discrediting of it in purposeful steps.” (Eisenstein 1977a, 61)

At the very least Eisenstein is exaggerating. A series of images that increasingly disagree with a familiar concept of God does not *inevitably* lead to a conclusion about the nature of all religious imagery, let alone to a conclusion about the true nature of the objects of religious imagery. A more realistic aim is expressed in the passage, however. The aim of the sequence is to discredit the appeal to religious tradition by political conservatives and to do so in gradual, purposeful steps. To discredit something is to bring about a withdrawal of positive evaluation. I have argued that Eisenstein does not do this through argument. So how might he do it?

My answer is that Eisenstein demystifies conservative appeals to religious tradition through mockery. Presented without contextual information and observed without knowledge, unfamiliar idols tend to appear ridiculous. Eisenstein puts familiar Christian images at the head of a series that would appear more and more absurd to his intended audience, culminating in some extraordinarily simple images that his intended audience would think were quite childish and ridiculous. Near the end of the
sequence, what looks like a Polynesian figure is shown with wagging hands – a transparently comic touch. Eisenstein's montage is mocking the appeal to religious tradition. By themselves, Eisenstein's images of Russian Orthodox Christianity might be expected to resonate with value for many of his 1928 audience. However, in Eisenstein's view, they do so in a false way – a way that repeats the habits, associations and mystifications of the past.[4] The montage transfers the felt absurdity of later images backwards – so that the aura surrounding earlier images might be broken. Such a breaking down of mystifying aura is the key process in demystification. The aim is to break the hold of false attachments and associations so that one can see them as false. The point of demystification is not to persuade viewers directly – by furnishing reasons for them to believe one thing rather than another – but to generate an epiphany in them.[5] Mockery can be an effective means of demystification when it works to remove obstacles to clear thought. It is not an argument for a negative conclusion – such as an argument in reductio or analogical form would be – but it can be a valuable, transformative cognitive process nonetheless.

Let me call the kind of montage at work in this sequence, persuasive montage. Persuasive montage is cognitively transformative in a defensible (and also contestable) way. It might conceivably take the form of an argument, but here it takes the form of demystification.

**Entering the Space of Reasons**

I have described in a preliminary way three kinds of montage: affect montage, assertoric montage and persuasive montage. Intellectual montage is a mix of the latter two. By employing assertoric and persuasive montage, a film enters the space of reasons. Cinematic assertion enters the space of reasons by inviting viewers to consider claims that may count as reasons. Cinematic persuasion enters the space of reasons either by furnishing reasons (as in an argument) or clearing the way for reasons (as in demystification). Cinematic assertion and persuasion are both cognitively engaging activities. Let us explore in a little more detail how this works by looking once more at key montage sequences in *October*.

Consider the Mechanical Peacock sequence in *October*. Eisenstein mocks Kerensky by concatenating images of him with those of a mechanical peacock. Since it is an assertive rather than persuasive gesture, its cognitive powers are those of assertion. In conversation, assertions have the power to bring about belief change, but only if the right conditions are met. The listener must be disposed to accept the speaker's utterance as veridical. The listener must understand the speaker's utterance and interpret it as an assertion. The listener must lack the relevant belief. Similar conditions apply in the cinema. To effect belief change, a spectator of the Mechanical Peacock sequence must be disposed to accept Eisenstein's presentation of Kerensky, must recognize the assertoric character of the sequence and understand its content, and must lack prior belief in Kerensky's narcissism. Of course, it is possible to resist the film, just as it is possible to resist assertion in conversation. The possibility of resistance is an integral part of life in the space of reasons.

The Mechanical Peacock sequence is cognitively engaging in spite of the fact that it does not furnish reasons. The sequence is not an argument by analogy. Eisenstein does not argue that Kerensky is a preening narcissist because he resembles a peacock. The montage encourages belief in the way conversational assertion encourages belief. Since Eisenstein is not arguing for Kerensky's narcissism, his method of assertion is not itself a proper object of epistemic attention. It would be foolish to complain of the sequence that it misrepresents Kerensky because he is neither a machine nor a bird. It would be a mistake to complain of the sequence that it begs the question. The Mechanical Peacock montage is cognitively engaging because, as an assertion, it invites defense and criticism. Imagine the mechanical peacock inserted into the scene of Lenin's arrival at Finland Station (at 11:08). Nothing else in the film counts as supporting evidence for this claim about Lenin's character. The insertion itself would invite critical appraisal (or worse), not necessarily on the grounds that it is incorrect, inelegant or superfluous, but on the grounds that it is false and unjustified.

The God and Country sequence is also cognitively engaging. In the God sequence, Eisenstein mocks the appeal to God made by conservatives. If successful, the sequence leads spectators to see the appeal to God as mystifying nonsense. It does this, not by supplying reasons to believe the appeal to God is mystifying nonsense, but by bringing spectators into a condition in which they can see for themselves that it is mystifying nonsense. They are brought into this condition by counteracting the aura of familiar sanctity surrounding appeals to Christianity, and Eisenstein does this through mockery. Demystification invites cognitive assessment. It is always apt to interrogate the validity of the process. Is the mockery persuasive because it breaks the spell of false consciousness or is it persuasive because it exploits complacent racism and an ignorance of other cultures? If the latter, then it fails as demystification by merely replacing one form of mystification with another.

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The patriotization of *God and Country*, by contrast, is assertoric in nature. Eisenstein is not mocking the appeal to patriotism in 1917, but asserting what he takes to be its true character: that it is cover for a plot to restore the monarchy. This brings out an important aspect of assertoric montage. Assertoric montage is cognitively transformative. It has the power, when appropriate conditions are satisfied, of bringing about belief change. But what is the relevant belief about? In this instance, the object of belief is extra-diegetic: it refers unambiguously to the world outside of the film. The actual plans of Kerensky are at issue. It would not do to defend Eisenstein's assertion by claiming that it refers only to the narrative construction he has built. Say I object to the claim that Kornilov had any intention of restoring the monarchy, insisting that all available evidence points to the fact that he had no such intention throughout the period of Provisional Government.

On this basis, I may criticize Eisenstein's montage and his use of the magically reassembling statue of Alexander III. It is not a valid response to this criticism to point out that Eisenstein is true to his own film and the version of events it portrays. *October* is an historical film and its assertions are, for this reason, extra-diegetic. The assertoric elements of fiction films do not have this extra-diegetic character automatically, though they can acquire it by advancing general claims (e.g. that loyalty is dangerous or that moral action is beautiful and immoral action ugly). Semi-factual films – films "based on a true story" or, worse, "inspired by a true story" – complicate the distinction between diegetic and extra-diegetic assertion; it is often difficult to work out when such films are making claims about their "true story" and when they are not.

Assertoric and persuasive montage enter the space of reasons by being cognitively engaging. I have used the Mechanical Peacock and *God and Country* montage sequences of *October* to illustrate something of what is involved in these two claims. Now the question remains: how should we describe the fundamental character of cinematic thinking?

**Cinematic Thinking**

In the period following the completion of *October*, Eisenstein conceived a plan to film a version of Marx's *Capital*. This wasn't an idle idea; Eisenstein was much exercised
with the project and wrote extensive notes for it (Eisenstein 1976; Michelson 1976). It was to be an elaboration of the techniques of intellectual montage pioneered in October. In the same period, in his theoretical writings, Eisenstein began to explore the possibility of a semiotics of cinema. His initial model was the ideograms of Japanese writing [6]. However, if my interpretation of the intellectual montage of October is correct, Eisenstein misunderstood in this period both the potential and the limitations of intellectual montage. A film version of Capital – a work of complex and elaborate argument – was well beyond his filmic resources.

Eisenstein’s intellectual montage was not the hesitant beginning of a film language, with all the iterative and combinatorial possibilities that such a thing would entail. It did, however, introduce into film practice the possibility of something like a speech act. One of the simplest forms of speech act is assertion and October abounds with assertoric montage. [7] Argument is a complex form of assertion: it is an assertion that one thing is an epistemically good reason to believe another thing. I cannot find a single, genuinely argumentative, montage in October. The sequence from the film usually cited as a montage argument – the first part of the God and Country sequence – is not genuinely argumentative and does its persuasive work in a different mode. This is not to say that films cannot constitute and embed arguments. Nor is it to suggest that intellectual montage is incapable of constituting arguments. It is simply to suggest that arguments are harder to realize in montage form than Eisenstein thought. Nonetheless, intellectual montage illustrates how readily film spectatorship enters the space of reasons, and this is the key to understanding the nature of cinematic thinking. Thinking is a kind of experience. It is experience that enters the space of reasons. Cinematic thinking does this by consisting of experiences that are cognitively engaging.

Eisenstein sought, in this period, to impose a pre-determined pattern of cognition on his audience. As I noted earlier, he thought of the God and Country sequence as inevitably leading spectators to particular conclusions about the true nature of deities. This ambition is not essential to cinematic thinking. There is no particular reason to require cinematic thinking to be pre-determined thinking. If we recognize the assertoric character of much of Eisenstein’s montage, it becomes clear how little of it imposes thoughts on an audience. Assertions are claims that we see as claims; we may fall in with them or resist them. They are not, generally speaking, cognitive impositions that bypass our critical faculties. In the late 1930s, Eisenstein emphasized quite a different purpose for the directive intent of montage.

A work of art, understood dynamically, is just this process of arranging images in the feelings and mind of the spectator. It is this that constitutes the peculiarity of a truly vital work of art and distinguishes it from a lifeless one, in which the spectator receives the represented result of a given consummated process of creation instead of being drawn into the process as it occurs. (Eisenstein 1977b, 34)

In montage the spectator is able to reassemble a whole and thus experience the work in an active and engaged way. In the same essay, Eisenstein emphasizes the role that a spectator’s individuality plays in the success of the method.

In fact, every spectator, in correspondence with his individuality, and in his own way and out of his own experience – out of the womb of his fantasy, out of the warp and weft of his associations, all conditioned by the premises of his character, habits and social appurtenances, creates an image in accordance with the representational guidance suggested by the author, leading him to understanding and experience of the author’s theme. (Eisenstein 1977b, 35)

By the late 1930’s, then, Eisenstein came to believe that, putting the point in my terms, the value of intellectual montage does not reside in the insertion of ideas into the minds of an audience, but in the experiential opportunity it affords an audience to enter the space of reasons alongside the filmmaker. I think he was right about this and in his October experiments with intellectual montage, Eisenstein demonstrated the possibility of cinematic thinking in an especially vivid and convincing way.

References


Notes:

[1] The phrase “space of reasons” was coined by the American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars, who used it to demarcate normative practices of reason giving and taking from causal processes that may be studied scientifically (Sellars 1997).

[2] As Bordwell points out, the gender politics of October are deeply problematic (Bordwell, 2005, 90 – 91).
In the Neva Bridge sequence the spectator is made to feel frustration in a way that does not match its object. It is an intended by-product of something that has nothing to do with the reason workers are frustrated and has everything to do with Eisenstein’s cinematic manipulation of his audience. This is not an inevitable feature of affect montage, but it is a common one.

It is interesting that, though Eisenstein chooses unmistakably Christian iconography, he is careful to avoid famous and esteemed works of Russian religious art. How effective might the sequence have been if Eisenstein had chosen a famous icon — such as Andrei Rublev’s Old Testament Trinity — as his starting point?

Marguerite La Caze suggested this formulation of the distinction to me.

As Bordwell points out, however, written Japanese is not, strictly speaking, ideographic (representing ideas pictorially) but glottographic (representing elements of speech) (Bordwell 2005, 126).

Another well-known example is the introduction of clocks from around the world marking the moment the Provisional Government is deposed (1:40:26 – 1:40:56). The clocks are not evidence that this is a world-historical event, they are introduced to assert that it is.

About the Author

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