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# Editing the Past: How Eisenstein and Vertov Used Montage to Create Soviet History

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Editing the Past: How Eisenstein and Vertov Used Montage to Create Soviet History

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of History of the State University of New York

College at Brockport in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts.

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## Abstract

This study examines montage according to Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov and how their theories changed due to the political and social upheaval of the Cultural Revolution(1928-1931). In the case of both directors, montage also led to revisionism of Soviet History. By closely analyzing the writings of both directors regarding their film theories, and comparing them with the films they subsequently created, the following discussion demonstrates that both directors made conscious choices about the structure of their films that led to historical revisionism both before and after the Cultural Revolution. Their writings and films existed within the context of Soviet authority and thus reflected its ideals, yet created historical revisionism in a distinct way, in spite of political pressure. Eisenstein's intricate development of montage gave him the ability to include it in his films both before and after the Cultural Revolution in a variety of ways. Vertov's focus on documentary film as the medium to which montage was applied allowed him to continue to assert himself well into the 1930s. As a result, both film makers retained a degree of artistic freedom throughout the repressive regime of Stalinism.

## Introduction



Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov are among the most recognizable names in early Soviet film. Their contributions to film, in the areas of montage and documentary film respectively, have helped to shape film as we know it today. However, aside from their theoretical contributions to the field, both directors played an important role in Soviet film during the 1920s and 1930s. Their films created a false history for the U.S.S.R. This work examines historical revisionism within their film, how their theories of montage influenced the revisionism, and how they continued to use montage throughout their careers as film makers to assert themselves as artists.

Both Eisenstein and Vertov used montage in their films to create revisionist histories of the Soviet Union. Though both were forced to adapt due to changes in Soviet politics and society, their trend of historical revisionism through montage continued through the 1920s and 1930s. Furthermore, the oppressive forces which coerced them to, at least publicly, modify their artistic aesthetics, did not succeed in preventing them from expressing themselves as artists. Thus, later in their careers, both Eisenstein and Vertov continued to express themselves by introducing montage into their films, even when under pressure from Soviet censors to comply with socialist realism. When I use the term “historical revisionism” in the context of this study, I am referring to shots, scenes, or moments of montage within the film that portrayed distorted or false versions of history. The history that is created may be

explicit or implicit. Moreover, the distortions may be either premeditated or accidental.<sup>1</sup>

Soviet film has received an enormous amount of attention from historians and other scholars who have helped to shape the field as it stands today. There exist two major areas of study in Soviet film. In one area, historians have sought to understand the history of Soviet film and how it has changed over time. In the other, those in the field of film studies have sought to discover how Soviet directors and theorists have shaped the field of film, and how their contributions continue to influence directors. Both are valuable, and consequently, this study implements facets of both to examine Eisenstein and Vertov through the analysis of method and history to discover the points of contact between the two fields and how they can help illuminate the directors and their films.

Eisenstein and Vertov changed over the course of their careers, both in their theories and in their films. While the change can be partially attributed to the natural evolution and refining of their theories over time, the Cultural Revolution (1928-1931) played a crucial role in the way both directors approached film making. The changes in Soviet culture and art in response to Stalinism and the Cultural Revolution have been examined in part by David Brandenberger in *National Bolshevism*:

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, I do not distinguish between premeditated or accidental historical revisionism. Without knowing the directors specific intent for any given series of montage, one can not differentiate between the two, which would lead to pure speculation in many cases.

*Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity* and Brandenberger and co-editor Kevin M. F. Platt's *Epic Revisionism*.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, scholars such as James Goodwin and Jeremy Hicks have provided specialized discussions of Eisenstein and Vertov which have helped to influence this study. Goodwin's *Eisenstein, Cinema and History* provides essential insight into the historical nature of Eisenstein's film, which informed discussions and interpretations within this work. Similarly, I have referenced Jeremy Hicks' *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film* when discussing Vertov, as Hicks' account provides valuable analysis of both *Man with a Movie Camera* and *Three Songs of Lenin*.<sup>3</sup> This study most closely emulates the work of Goodwin and Hicks, while attempting to further merge the fields of history and film study.

Countless other scholars have written about, discussed, and examined Soviet Film, many of which have been referenced in the following study or included in the bibliography. All, though, have influenced the conclusions that I have drawn, and helped to shape the work as a whole. I have attempted to carve out a small niche for myself, where, rather than create an entirely new account of Soviet film, I can add to, shape and focus the current scholarship to craft an understanding of how montage and historical revisionism have co-existed in Eisenstein and Vertov's work. To facilitate such a discussion I have divided the work into two parts, examining both Eisenstein

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<sup>2</sup> Brandenberger and Platt have helped to illuminate the context within which Eisenstein and Vertov's post Cultural Revolution films were made, and how the changing values of Stalinism forced the directors to adapt.

<sup>3</sup> These works and others, which are relevant to particular chapters of this study, will be examined in detail within the chapter that they appear. In this way, I deal with many of the most important texts regarding Soviet Film in the body of the text, rather than in this brief introduction.

and Vertov before and after the Cultural Revolution. I have divided each section into two chapters, in which I discuss each director separately.

The first chapter, examines Sergei Eisenstein's *October* as a prototypical example of Eisenstein's theory of montage. To this end, Eisenstein's own theoretical works are discussed in an attempt to extract the meaning of his complex musings and apply them as directly as possible to the film. This sets a base line for Eisenstein's theory of montage, from which later films and writings can be compared. The remainder of the chapter focuses on *October* itself, where several crucial scenes are briefly outlined, then analyzed more closely.<sup>4</sup> The opening chapter is also used to provide a general definition of montage, such that Dziga Vertov's theories can be compared in the second chapter.

Chapter two continues my examination of film prior to the cultural revolution with Dziga Vertov, his theory of montage and documentary film. The early political climate of the Soviet Union allowed Vertov to experiment in both. Therefore, this chapter investigates the ways in which his political ideology shaped his theory, and thus his film. Vertov's dedication to documentary film is a distinguishing factor in his work. Chapter two also addresses documentary film and its relationship to the discipline of history in general, and to history as portrayed by Vertov. Lastly, the chapter examines Vertov's experimental film *Man with a Movie Camera*. Analysis of the film shows that even documentary that is not explicitly historical in nature can be

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout the study, I use this format for introducing and discussing films. In a single paragraph I will briefly outline the key scenes that I will discuss, and then go on to examine each scene in more detail. This format allows me to call attention to the most important points quickly before examining them in depth, and also allows readers that are familiar with the films to gather their thoughts about the scenes and shots in question before examining them in depth.

an agent of historical revisionism. Section one concludes by setting the stage for the Cultural Revolution, which provides the context for section two.

Chapter three returns to Eisenstein, this time focusing on his theory and film after the Cultural Revolution. It sets the historical stage for the second half of the study, discussing the Cultural Revolution in brief, as well as examining socialist realism in depth to identify a working definition. This chapter features discussion of two of Eisenstein's films from the era, *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible* both of which reflect the changing values and ideals of Stalinism, but continue to show glimpses of Eisenstein's theory. Both films reach far into the Russian past, but have had their history rewritten to such a degree that they more resemble Soviet Russia than the time periods in which they are set. While the prevailing theory has been that Stalinism was the main influence on the content of the films, Eisenstein's editing techniques contributed to historical revisionism within both films that would likely have been evident regardless of external pressure. With the historical moment established, the study return to Vertov.

The final chapter, chapter four, deals with *Three Songs of Lenin*, and the cults of Lenin and Stalin. Made during the Cultural Revolution, the discussion of the film builds from the previous chapter, incorporating the established settings and definitions. The cults of Lenin and Stalin are predicated upon inherent historical revision, and *Three Songs of Lenin* draws upon and contributes to the fabrication. In this section I discuss how Vertov's theories of montage and documentary film were modified after the Cultural Revolution, yet remained important in creating and

shaping meaning in his film. Elements of *Man with a Movie Camera* remain even while Vertov adopts a much more explicitly historical topic. In the end, like Eisenstein, Vertov's blend of montage and socialist realism led to historical revisionism that transcended the camera frame, and implied far more than was made explicit.

## Section One: Innovation and Montage

## Chapter One: Revolution in Film



The Revolution in Russia in 1917 sparked an era of uncertainty in which the avant guard of the revolution sought answers about how to implement socialist ideas in society. While it would be an exaggeration to say that all members of the newly created Soviet society completely rethought their existence in new socialist terms, it is no exaggeration that the Communist Party struggled with the task of converting political theory to reality in Russia. The early years of the Soviet Union were accompanied by radical experimentation in art and propaganda, especially in the area of film. Unlike socialist realism, which became the official artistic aesthetic of the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, the years after the revolution were characterized by discussion and indecision about the true meaning of socialist art.<sup>1</sup> The work of Sergei Eisenstein exemplifies the uncertainty in artistic aesthetics during this period. Sergei Eisenstein proposed a radical new theory of montage, which sought to create rhythm, pacing and meaning in film through the editing and juxtaposition of unrelated theatrical images. The Russian Revolution provided Eisenstein, and others, with an opportunity to create and expound upon new theories of film that they believed to be distinctly socialist and inseparable from the cultural progress associated with revolution. Thus, Eisenstein sought to create film as a distinct and unique art form that could be used to disseminate the ideals of the revolution.

The theory of montage has been the subject of considerable scholarship, most notably in two areas. The first area deals with montage as a movement in film that

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<sup>1</sup> This trend is evident in the variety of documents collected in Willian G. Rosenberg ed, *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia* (Ann Arbor, Ardis Press, 1984), especially in sections VII and VIII which deal specifically with art.

can be studied in its own right. David Bordwell's "The Idea of Montage in Soviet Art and Film" stands as an example of this type of intellectual inquiry. Bordwell tracks the origins, rise, and eventual fall of montage as a movement within Soviet art. While he mentions several films in particular, the thrust of his work is in outlining the history which gave birth to, and saw the evolution of, montage.<sup>2</sup> Other scholars, such as James Goodwin in *Eisenstein, Cinema and History*, have discussed montage by examining the films in which it appears. This section combines the distinct methods of Bordwell and Goodwin's by studying both the development of montage and how Eisenstein applied his theory in practice. It examines the relationship between film theory and Soviet ideology and how these two factors influenced the historical revisionism within Eisenstein's film.

Following the revolution, in 1920, Lenin wrote "[art] should unite the feeling, thought and will of the masses, and elevate them. It should awaken the artists among them, and help them to develop." Most importantly though Lenin argues that "art belongs to the people...It should be *understood* by these masses and loved by them."<sup>3</sup> Lenin believed that the goal of art was to instill revolutionary spirit in the people, as well as to disseminate communist values. Furthermore, the Party condemned bourgeois artistic methods as relics of pre-revolutionary Russia, incapable of communicating to a new, socialist people. Thus, a new distinct, socialist art form would be required to answer Lenin's call. Sergei Eisenstein believed this could be

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<sup>2</sup> David Bordwell, "The Idea of Montage in Soviet Art and Film," *Cinema Journal* 11 no. 2 (Spring, 1972): 9-17

<sup>3</sup> V. I. Lenin, "Art Belongs to the People. Conversation with Clara Zetkin," in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896 - 1939*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie trans. Ian Christie, (London: Routledge, 1988), 51. (emphasis mine)

achieved through the use of montage. Montage in film, at its most basic level, is simply the placing of one shot in juxtaposition with another. Montage created meaning with the comparison of two images that would not exist if seen independently. Eisenstein expanded upon this method to form a sophisticated and complex theory that would shape his films, which were based on reality and shaped to fit socialist ideology. Marxism was an expression of scientific socialism rather than utopian socialism, and thus thought to be a reflection of reality. By this logic, a flawless view of reality must inherently reflect Marxist, communist values. Eisenstein's theories *succeed* in being arbiters of communist ideals. However, his commitment to montage and communism led to his films creating a new "truth" rather than being historically accurate. While the nature of his film will be discussed later, first his theories deserve further analysis.

Eisenstein's theory of montage stems from the notion that film is a unique art form, and not merely an expansion of theater. In an effort to realize a distinct art form for film, montage used film's unique attribute, the shot. According to Eisenstein, there are five categories of montage which each manipulate film in a specific way. In brief, these five forms of montage are: 1) metric montage, in which the montage is based on the length of each shot; 2) rhythmic montage, in which different shot lengths are put together in montage to evoke tension; 3) tonal Montage, in which "movement within the frame impels the montage movement from frame to frame."; 4) overtonal montage, which Eisenstein describes as "distinguishable from tonal montage by the collective calculation of all the piece's appeal."; and 5)

Intellectual montage which deals specifically with the creation of meaning through “conflict-juxtaposition of accompanying intellectual affects.”<sup>4</sup> Eisenstein’s five expressions of montage are not without connection. According to Dana B. Polan “each level of montage grew naturally out of a simpler level -- that is, out of a level with a correspondingly simpler affective response.”<sup>5</sup> The relationship between each successive form of montage is essential to understanding Eisenstein’s theory and film.

Eisenstein notes that “the shot’s tendency toward complete factual immutability is rooted in its nature. This resistance has largely determined the richness and variety of montage forms and styles- for montage becomes the mightiest means for a really important creative remolding of nature.”<sup>6</sup> The shot, Eisenstein indicates, is absolute, without the ability to suggest meaning outside of itself. Thus, montage allowed directors such as Eisenstein to go beyond this inherent limitation in the shot.<sup>7</sup> This secondary meaning which arises from montage and exists outside a film’s narrative, was the ideal place for Eisenstein to introduce communist and revolutionary ideals. Though Eisenstein had certain meanings in mind when he used moments of montage within his films, that meaning was not necessarily communicated to the audience, who were left to interpret the film themselves. Thus, montage required active participation on the part of the audience. However, Polan suggests that there existed an inherent contradiction between the first four types of

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<sup>4</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, Ed. and Trans. by Jay Leyda, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1949), 75, 78, 82.

<sup>5</sup> Dana B. Polan, “Eisenstein as Theorist,” *Cinema Journal* 17 no. 1 (1977): 21.

<sup>6</sup> Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> In this chapter, when I refer to montage without specifying the type as defined by Eisenstein, I am referring to intellectual montage.

montage outlined by Eisenstein, and intellectual montage. According to Polan, the contradiction can be defined by the difference between “intellection and precognition.” Furthermore, Polan argues that the contradiction was a point of contention for Eisenstein, who attempted to abolish audience interaction from montage in practice.<sup>8</sup> While Eisenstein certainly attempted to convey his desired meaning through the use of montage, it is a reach to contend that he was naive enough to think that he could eliminate the possibility all together. The fact that Eisenstein’s montage required the populace to draw their own conclusions, even revolutionary conclusions, may initially seem an odd choice considering the overwhelmingly illiterate population at the time of the revolution. However, Eisenstein’s theory of montage was not arbitrary, and was justified using Marxist ideology.

Eisenstein’s theory of montage stems from his approach to art as a dialectic field. He explains that “according to Marx and Engels the dialectic system is only the conscious reproduction of the dialectic course (substance) of the external events of the world.”<sup>9</sup> Dialectic materialism, to which Eisenstein refers, is a materialist philosophy and is concerned at its heart with conflict. Dialectical materialism rejects the idea of dualism, and is thus concerned merely with the conflict within the dialectic system. Eisenstein explains that “the foundation for this philosophy is a *dynamic* concept of things: Beings - as a constant evolution from the interaction of two contradictory opposites. Synthesis - arising from the opposition between thesis

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<sup>8</sup> Polan, “Eisenstein as Theorist,” 22.

<sup>9</sup> Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 45.

and antithesis.”<sup>10</sup> He adds that “the projection of the same system of things/ *while creating concretely/ while giving form/ yields: ART.*”<sup>11</sup> Thus, shaping the perception of the external world into a form which shows its inherent contradiction is the only way in which a proper, socialist art form can be derived.

To Eisenstein, montage was not merely a matter of personal aesthetic choice, but rather the logical conclusion of viewing the world through the lens of dialectical materialism. In a society based on Marxism, montage portrayed communist ideals through, what he considered to be, a distinctly unique and Marxist art form. Since Eisenstein’s theory of montage was based on the philosophy of Marx and Engels, Eisenstein was able to forcefully contend that montage was a distinctly socialist art form. As a reflection of Marxist philosophy, Eisenstein’s films necessarily exhibited Marxist ideals, even at the expense of historical truth. Montage in Eisenstein’s film led to historical revisionism in several ways. Eisenstein used montage to insert communist ideals into historical moments and situations that were historically inaccurate. Coupled with political influences, Eisenstein’s montage produced several films which contained revisionist history. Eisenstein’s early productions *Strike* (1925), *The Battleship Potemkin* (1926), and *October* (1928) each exemplify this trend. Montage as an agent of historical revisionism was particularly apparent in Eisenstein’s film portrayal of the Russian revolution, *October*.

*October* stands as one of Eisenstein’s greatest achievements in montage. Nearly every scene contains numerous examples of montage, and thus it is a

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<sup>10</sup> Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 45.

particularly suitable case study for understanding how Eisenstein put his theory of montage into practice. Several examples, introduced here and examined in depth later, are especially relevant. The symbol of the statue of Tsar Alexander III, which is initially torn down, but later reassembled through montage provides a clear example of montage. Secondly, the significance of montage in the famous metal peacock scene in which Eisenstein compares the Provisional Government to a preening peacock demands analysis. Finally, in Eisenstein's book on film theory, *Film Form*, he identifies the "sequence of the 'gods'" as a distinct example of intellectual montage. Combined with the political influence on content, this provides for our final object of discussion.<sup>12</sup>

The film opens with the February revolution and the rebellious masses tearing down the statue of Alexander III. The symbolism is clear, as the titles proudly proclaim "FEBRUARY. The proletariat's first victory on the road to socialism!"<sup>13</sup> Shown in montage with images of raised guns and scythes, Eisenstein is using montage to argue that the downfall of the tsar was caused by, and beneficial to, soldiers and farmers, members of the proletariat. The symbol of the tsar reappears later in the film, when General Kornilov, an enemy of the Bolsheviks, returns to Petrograd. Eisenstein reverses the previous scene, depicting the crumbling statue reassembling itself. Through the use of montage, Eisenstein portrays Kornilov, who has returned to stamp out the revolutionaries, as a return to the autocracy. Kornilov's

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<sup>12</sup> Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 82.

<sup>13</sup> *October*, DVD, directed by Sergei Eisenstein (1928: Chatsworth, CA: Image Entertainment, 1998).

ostensible alliance with the head of the Provisional Government takes Eisenstein's statement further, associating it with the tsarist predecessor.<sup>14</sup>

Eisenstein's use of montage in the scenes containing the statue of Alexander III portrays two powerful revolutionary ideals. First, the proletariat, is responsible for tearing down the statue of Alexander III. Thus the revolutionary body of the working class itself is responsible for "the first step towards socialism" rather than being directed by a revolutionary leader. Secondly, the Provisional Government, appears counter revolutionary and comparable to the tsar. According to Eisenstein, the Provisional Government's resemblance to the autocracy is simply the inevitable result of an incomplete revolution. Thus, montage is used to convey political ideology, but also forms the content of the film. Eisenstein's use of montage lets the statue become more than a simple symbol representative of the tsarist rule, but rather as a means of expressing the need for complete revolution. Without the use of montage, the statue's meaning would have been far more limited, and thus far less prominent within the film. In this case, Eisenstein's use of montage influences the film's visible content as well as its meaning in a way that political ideology alone would not have. The meaning created through the use of montage also changes the context of the event. Dramatically, the scene involves the tearing down of a symbol of the tsar. Alone, this act would not *necessarily* indicate a support of communist ideals or government. However, in the film, montage changes the context. The act of tearing down the

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<sup>14</sup> *October*, Eisenstein.



statue becomes an act of support for Bolshevism. Eisenstein uses montage in a similar fashion in his portrayal of the metal peacock.

After a long series of shots in which Eisenstein identifies members of the provisional government and former members of the tsarist government, he shows Alexander Kerensky in montage with a preening metal peacock. The peacock represents vanity as well as the bourgeois attitude that Kerensky had assumed as leader of the provisional government. Furthermore, a peacock preens as a method of attracting attention. Through his use of montage Eisenstein is suggesting that Kerensky is acting in precisely the same way in order to receive attention from important government officials. Kerensky and the provisional government, then, are no different from the tsar and the absolutist government which existed prior to the provisional government's formation. Richard Taylor provides further insight into the significance of the metal peacock, by identifying it as a gift from Tsar Nicholas to Alexandra.<sup>15</sup> By associating Kerensky with the royal family, Eisenstein is not merely remarking on the behavior as similar to the former Tsar, but also creating a physical link between the two leaders. Kerensky, then, is merely an extension of the old regime. As the Bolsheviks argued, there had been no real change in Russia.

Once more, Eisenstein has used montage to create a wealth of meaning about the nature of the Russian Revolution. His use of montage in comparing Kerensky to the preening peacock betrays the Bolshevik disdain for the Provisional Government as counter-revolutionary, rather than advancing the ideals of socialism. Furthermore,

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*, (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 97.

Kerensky's meeting with former members of the tsarist government, further distances him from the revolution. Beyond merely signifying stagnation in the movement towards socialism, Kerensky's eagerness to please his guests represents a regression. Of course, this represents a highly subjective view of the history of the Provisional Government that is self serving to the Bolsheviks. As a final way to associate Kerensky with the Provisional Government to the Tsar, Eisenstein presents his "sequence of the gods."

General Kornilov's exclaims "In the name of God and Country!"<sup>16</sup> Eisenstein focuses on the word God, cutting to images of various gods shown in montage. He begins with an image of Christ on the cross, and progressing backward through time presenting religious imagery from various cultures.<sup>17</sup> The images of different gods in montage with one another challenges their legitimacy, and deconstructs the idea of god as a single divine entity, instead suggesting that they are created by man, and have been since the beginning of recorded history. Richard Taylor also notes Eisenstein's implicit comparison between patriotism and religion.<sup>18</sup> The communist revolution in Russia, viewed by its proponents as the beginning of an international socialist revolution, denounced both religion and patriotism. In this scene, Eisenstein's comparison of the two establishes both as primitive and counter-revolutionary. Both are bourgeois beliefs that only serve to distract the populace from their revolutionary consciousness and threaten the Revolution. Here Eisenstein

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<sup>16</sup> *October*, Eisenstein.

<sup>17</sup> *October*, Sergei Eisenstein.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, *Film Propaganda*, 98.

is portraying the communist value of materialism, and rejecting the idea of religion, faith, and dualism, outright. Shown in montage, the images of gods represent a regression away from socialism, and return to the irrational. Clearly, then, political ideology played a role in shaping the message of the scene. However, Eisenstein's theory of montage played an important role as well. Taylor notes that "this sequence served partly to indulge the director in one of his particular artistic interests."<sup>19</sup> While Taylor is correct to suggest that Eisenstein's theory played a role in the creation of the scene, his wording dismisses its importance, regarding it as mere "indulgence."

Eisenstein regarded the sequence as a prime example of his theory of montage in action, and thus the role of the theory in creating meaning should not be understated.

In regards to the sequence of the gods, Eisenstein claimed "these pieces were assembled in accordance with a descending intellectual scale - pulling back the concept of God to its origins, forcing the spectator to perceive this 'progress' intellectually."<sup>20</sup> Montage was more than aesthetic to Eisenstein, it was truth captured on film. The oversimplification of religion creates a false history of the development of gods in human societies to suit Bolshevik ideology. Thus, the construction of the scene suggests Eisenstein believed he was portraying truth as opposed to only ideology. Clearly then, Eisenstein meant the structure of the scene to be more than indulgence alone.

The sequence, however, would likely not have been accessible to the population, who was largely religious and slow to adopt the socialist value of

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<sup>19</sup> Taylor, *Film Propaganda*, 98.

<sup>20</sup> Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 82.

materialism. Lenin argued that art must be understood by the masses, and it is unlikely that most of the messages embedded in Eisenstein's montage in *October* would have been readily apparent to the average movie-goer in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s. In fact, upon its release, the film received criticism for being unintelligible.<sup>21</sup> The first two examples require an understanding of the tenets of communism according to the Bolshevik party and of the history of the Revolution. The final example would likely have been even more difficult. Though communist ideology officially despised religion and sought to destroy it, the onset of revolution in Russia did not suddenly stamp out religious belief in the country. The sequence of the gods would likely have been lost on much of the audience, who on average would not have self identified as atheist, nor had a clear understanding of the variety of deities shown in the montage. In this way, Eisenstein's theory of montage failed as a socialist art form, as it was inaccessible to the populace at large. Its failure can be tied to his reliance on intellectual montage, which relied on audience participation to be fully realized. Furthermore, *October*, despite Eisenstein's claims to the contrary, presented a highly stylized version of the revolution. The film's form, which led to historical inaccuracy and fictionalization, can be attributed to Eisenstein's theory of montage which, somewhat ironically demanded his film deviate from fact in order to portray "truth." Dziga Vertov, who, like Eisenstein, was passionate about creating a new distinctly socialist art form, would make similar decisions that led to revisionism in his film as well.

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<sup>21</sup> James Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema and History*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 94.

## Chapter Two: Documentary History

Like Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov was concerned with creating a new and distinctly communist art form in the early Soviet Union. Vertov wrote with revolutionary enthusiasm when defining his theory of film. He boldly stated “WE proclaim the old films, based on the romance, theatrical films and the like, to be leprous. --Keep away from them! --Keep your eyes off them! --They’re mortally dangerous! -- Contagious!”<sup>1</sup> As these comments reveal Vertov compared pre-revolutionary film to a disease, which could prove fatal, and thus needed to be done away with. Vertov also made radical statements about human progress in relation to film. To Vertov, the progress of communism was tied to the progress of industry, and specifically to machinery. “The machine makes us ashamed of man’s inability to control himself,” Vertov lamented, adding that “saws dancing at a sawmill convey to us a joy more intimate and intelligible than that on human dance floors.”<sup>2</sup> The inherent imperfection of man was constantly juxtaposed against the perfection of the machine, which replicated the work of humans with none of the shortcomings. The goal of communism was not merely a political revolution in Russia, but a worldwide cultural revolution in which the very foundations of society and humanity would be fundamentally changed. Vertov expressed this sentiment when he argued that “in revealing the machine’s soul, in causing the worker to love his workbench, the peasant his tractor, the engineer his engine -- we introduce creative joy into all mechanical labor, we bring people closer to kinship with machines, we foster new

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<sup>1</sup> Annette Michelson ed, *Kino-Eye, The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 7. (emphasis his)

<sup>2</sup> Michelson, 7.

people.”<sup>3</sup> Vertov’s belief in the machine’s superiority to man led to the conclusion that the camera’s ability to interpret objective reality far exceeded that of the human eye.

Dziga Vertov spoke with contempt towards humanity’s shortcomings. “Our eye sees very poorly and very little...” he claimed, “the movie camera was invented in order to penetrate deeper into the visible world, to explore and record visual phenomena, so that we do not forget what happens and what the future must take into account.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, his concept for film relied on the assumption that the machine, the movie camera, was superior to the human eye. Dziga Vertov differed from Eisenstein in that he was especially weary of the theater as the basis for film. In fact, Vertov sought to and wanted to divorce film from theater as an art form. Vertov argued that theatrical based film, film with a script, writer, director and coherent narrative “*lies outside the genuine purpose of the movie camera -- the exploration of the phenomena of life.*” Vertov called this concept and the group founded to explore and create within its theory *kinoglaz* (Film-Eye), which he considered to be part of the process of “creating Red Soviet Cinema.”<sup>5</sup>

Similar to Eisenstein, however, Vertov used montage as a cinematographic method of juxtaposing images on screen. Vlada Petric notes that “Vertov argued that the filmmaker should organize life facts into new cinematic structures which would reflect his own ideology. This reorganization was to be multi-levelled[sic] and had

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<sup>3</sup> Michelson, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Michelson, *Kino-Eye*, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Michelson, *Kino Eye*, 69. (emphasis his)

to be perfected during the process of montage...”<sup>6</sup> “Life facts” are the operative words in Petric’s description of Vertov’s theory. Vertov was interested in portraying “Truth”, which could only be seen through the objective lens of the camera. Vertov then set himself to the task of presenting the truth to his audience through montage. Petric also suggests that, much like Eisenstein “Vertov hoped to achieve an *active* seeing, not torpid observation.”<sup>7</sup> Without knowledge of Marxism or of Vertov’s film theory one can enjoy the imagery at face value. However, Vertov created a deeper meaning through montage that the audience would understand by becoming participants in the process of viewing the film, rather than simply, idly, taking in the film at face value. Thus, Vertov’s films require knowledge of his subject matter in order to comprehend the communist meanings that Vertov was attempting to instill in his audience. Vertov has most often been studied in the context of documentary film.<sup>8</sup> However, his films are also implicitly historical, and, thus, can be regarded as historical films. Dziga Vertov’s experimental film *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) exemplified his use of documentary footage edited using the principles of montage, together with documentary film’s inherent historical attributes.

Arguing that Vertov’s documentary style is inherently historical, and further, historically revisionist, requires explanation. Vertov’s own writings suggest an understanding of his work as an embodiment of truth in the present, but not necessarily as making historical statements. However, even though the intent is

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<sup>6</sup> Vlada Petric, “Dziga Vertov as Theorist,” *Cinema Journal* 18, no. 1 (Autumn, 1978): 30.

<sup>7</sup> Petric, “Dziga Vertov as Theorist,” 30.

<sup>8</sup> A recent example of such scholarship is Jeremy Hicks, *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film* (New York: I.B. Taurus and Co Ltd, 2007).



doubtful, Vertov's documentary films make implicit historical arguments. In "Wreckage upon Wreckage: History, Documentary, and the Ruins of Memory" Paula Rabinowitz contends that "documentary cinema is intimately tied to historical memory."<sup>9</sup> Documentary film informs historical memory and, thus, allows for documentary film to play an important role in historical revisionism. Rabinowitz goes on to state that "the documentary calls upon its audience to participate in historical remembering by presenting an intimate view of reality."<sup>10</sup> Vertov's firm belief in the ability of documentary film to present truth would perhaps give the director pause upon reading Rabinowitz's statement. While Rabinowitz is making a broad generalization about documentary film, the statement should not be disregarded as inapplicable. In fact, she references Vertov in her article, as a "fully articulated" definition of "the ideas and theories involved in documentary."<sup>11</sup> Thus, according to Rabinowitz her argument applies to Vertov. Later in her work, Rabinowitz more explicitly defines the relationship between documentary film and history.

Regarding documentary, she asserts that "film's relationship to historical meaning and history's dependence upon, yet refusal of, film's form leave space for *active viewing*. Both construct political subjects, whose self-consciousness about their positions lends itself to an analysis of the past and of the present."<sup>12</sup> Thus, documentary film does not rely only on the portrayal of historical information, but also inspires historical reflection by its audience through arguments about the present.

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<sup>9</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, "Wreckage upon Wreckage: History, Documentary and the Ruins of Memory," *History and Theory* 32 no. 2 (May, 1993), 119.

<sup>10</sup> Rabinowitz, "Wreckage upon Wreckage," 119.

<sup>11</sup> Rabinowitz, "Wreckage upon Wreckage," 121.

<sup>12</sup> Rabinowitz, "Wreckage upon Wreckage," 128. (emphasis mine)

Jill Godmilow, documentary film maker, producer and professor at Notre Dame University agrees with Rabinowitz's assessment, stating that "what's essential to me, also, is to produce an audience of individuals (not a 'community') who become active intellectual participants in a discussion of the social conditions and relationships represented."<sup>13</sup> However, while documentary film does engage its audience at more than the level of viewer, it is also undeniable that documentary film is not simply objective reality on film, regardless of Dziga Vertov's opinion of his craft and medium. In "How Real is the Reality in Documentary Film?" Godmilow articulates that the inherent bias in documentary film must be acknowledged before the film as a whole can be interpreted.<sup>14</sup>

Godmilow suggests that "these films [documentaries] exercise power by changing consciousness, by their *deliberate* attempt to alter their viewers relationship to a subject by recontextualizing it in the preoffered time, space and intellectual field of the film."<sup>15</sup> Godmilow's observation is perhaps unremarkable at first reading. However, her inclusion of the word "deliberate" is of particular importance. She is suggesting that documentary film is inherently manipulating. Though this does not suggest a moral judgement about documentary film, it does differentiate it from the somewhat commonplace understanding of the genre through the idea that documentary film does not imply an unbiased portrayal of truth. In her discussion of this phenomenon, she states that "the essential claim that traditional documentary

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<sup>13</sup> Jill Godmilow and Ann-Louise Shapiro, "How Real is the Reality in Documentary Film?," in *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (December, 1997), 83. (emphasis mine)

<sup>14</sup> Godmilow, "How Real," 82.

<sup>15</sup> Godmilow, "How Real," 82. (emphasis mine)

films make is that there's unmediated truth here because this was not scripted -- because the materials are 'found in nature' -- thus the text built out of them is truthful as well."<sup>16</sup> The essential distinction between the captured footage and the presented whole brings a more complex understanding to documentary film. With this concept in mind, Vertov's work must be considered not only on a scene to scene basis, but also in how any given scene or shot relates to the film as a whole. *The Man with a Movie Camera* epitomizes this understanding of documentary film. When viewed actively, the film requires the audience to analyze its arguments about the present, and its relationship to the past, thus making Vertov's newsreel style documentary portrayal of truth, into a reflective statement about the past in Russia and Soviet Union. However, one must not take Vertov's zeal for the camera and its ability to see truth at face value. Instead, a look at the film as a whole, and how individual scenes exist within that framework yields the most enlightening understanding of Vertov's work, his film theory, and the historical revisionism that resulted.

*The Man with a Movie Camera* is a visual glorification of Soviet life. Vertov sought to communicate communist ideals by showing images of life in Soviet society, using the principles of montage to create meaning across what would normally be unrelated imagery. In the beginning title of the film Vertov asserts "This experimental work aims at creating a truly international absolute language of cinema based on its total separation from the language of theater and literature."<sup>17</sup> *The Man*

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<sup>16</sup> Godmilow, "How Real," 83.

<sup>17</sup> *The Man with a Movie Camera*, DVD, directed by Dziga Vertov, (1929: Chatsworth, CA: Image Entertainment, 1996).

*with a Movie Camera* represents Vertov's ultimate vision for film, which would be distinctly socialist in both form and content. However, for Vertov, socialist form and content were synonymous with the truth. Vertov wrote that "the film is only the sum of the facts recorded on film, or, if you like, not merely the sum, but the product, a 'higher mathematics' of facts. Each item or each factor is a separate little document."<sup>18</sup> Here, Vertov seems to be arguing precisely the opposite of Godmilow. Ultimately, the conflict is between Vertov's understanding of *The Man with a Movie Camera* as an *ideal* embodied by the coupling of documentary footage and his theory of montage with Godmilow's *practical* understanding of the documentary genre. At the point of intersection where Vertov's theory becomes practice in *Man with a Movie Camera* one can most effectively show the way that both individual scenes, and the work as a whole, create historical revisionism in regards to the early Soviet Union.

In *The Man with a Movie Camera* Vertov uses montage to connect documentary footage to create socialist meaning similar to Eisenstein's use of montage in *October*. Several scenes, outlined briefly here and discussed in depth individually, present particularly strong examples of Vertov's theory. The beginning of the film, which features Vertov's city "waking up," he presents several images of industrial machinery in montage with the first people walking in the city streets (which in reality is a city made up of shots from several cities including Moscow and Kiev). Secondly, in a similar series of shots, Vertov shows a variety of transportation

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<sup>18</sup> Michelson, *Kino-Eye*, 84.

vehicles being readied for use in montage with a woman waking up. Finally, Vertov focuses a variety of industrial machines operating in montage with their operators. Each of these scenes utilize Vertov's theory of montage, give insight into Vertov's political ideology, and relate to the work as a whole to create a film that is ideological in nature, but also makes implicit arguments about the nature of Russian Revolution and its results.<sup>19</sup>

Vertov associates his composite city with a variety of dormant industrial machinery near the start of this film.<sup>20</sup> This initial use of montage indicates that Vertov correlates machinery with a literal "waking up" of society.<sup>21</sup> Vertov's focus on machinery at the onset of *Man with a Movie Camera* is indicative of a trend that is seen throughout the film; the importance of machinery in Soviet life, and its interaction with humanity. The scene eventually cuts to a woman who has just woken up and washed, and is blinking rapidly. She is shown in montage first with a rapidly opening and closing set of blinds, and then finally with the opening and closing of the lens on a movie camera.<sup>22</sup> This continues the metaphor, this time associating the waking up with the movie camera itself.

With this beginning, Vertov uses the analogy of waking up extensively. Through montage, Vertov creates meaning that indicates that socialism is waking the

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<sup>19</sup> Notably, these scenes often show images of women. While I acknowledge the importance of gender in Vertov's films, for the scope of this study, truly examining the films and their relation to gender would introduce many new topics for discussion which are in reality beyond the scope of the project. Therefore, the discussion has been minimized.

<sup>20</sup> *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov.

<sup>21</sup> Vertov's theme of industrialization being intrinsically tied to the creation of socialist people is common to the era. For a more complete discussion of this phenomenon see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov.

people from a, presumably long, sleep. Vertov, of course, is not simply making a statement about the waking up of a socialist society, but rather a larger statement about the new era in history that socialism represents. Vertov himself notes that the film “sharply opposes ‘life as it is,’ seen by the aided eye of the movie camera, to ‘life as it is,’ seen by the imperfect human eye.”<sup>23</sup> While this idea is inherent to Vertov’s understanding of documentary film and thus not particularly remarkable on its own, the observation is particularly relevant to his message about awakening and seeing in the scene. “Life as it is seen” by the movie camera is socialism, and it is no accident that the advent of socialism in Russian runs concurrent with Vertov’s film theories. Furthermore, Vertov is making a statement about the importance of industrial machinery in the new socialist society. Communism goes hand in hand with industrialization, and the awakening of a strong industrial economy, associated with the proletariat, is equated with the awakening of society as a whole. In addition to making a purely ideological argument, Vertov also makes a historical argument. If one were to evaluate the status of industrialization in the Soviet Union merely through *Man with a Movie Camera*, one might come to the conclusion that the country was already largely industrialized. Actually, Vertov’s selective shots show only the reality which reflects the ideal.<sup>24</sup> In 1929, at the time *Man with a Movie Camera* was released, the Soviet Union had a long brutal road of mass industrialization ahead, and was still largely rural and agricultural, a fact which Vertov

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<sup>23</sup> Michelson, *Kino-Eye*, 85.

<sup>24</sup> Incidentally, this is similar to Socialist Realism. However, they differ significantly in artistic aesthetic. Socialist Realism is discussed in depth in Chapter 3.

conveniently ignores. While Vertov begins his film with such a broad statement about the nature of a socialist society, he quickly turns to a more specific statement about the nature of socialism in the Soviet Union.

Having already associated industrial machinery with socialism, Vertov then goes on to associate technology specifically with the awakening of the woman. Vertov shows a woman waking on a park bench in montage with transportation vehicles coming online for the beginning of their day.<sup>25</sup> The vehicles are shown leaving their garages and acting as public transportation. Here Vertov is lauding the new socialist society in terms of its effect on gender relationships. The woman, who had historically been subordinate in traditional Russian society, is awakened by revolution to become a participating member of the proletariat. His specific choice to use vehicles seems to indicate his idea of the awakening woman as a form of moving forward or progress. This statement about gender reflects Communist rhetoric on the subject of gender and equality during the early years of the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup>

The official Communist stance in the early Soviet Union was that women were naturally equal with men. Vertov's use of montage in *The Man with a Movie Camera* to create an awakening woman in communist society betrays the importance to Vertov of using film to portray communist ideals. Though gender appears in Eisenstein's films, Vertov is making a much more dramatic statement about the ideal

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<sup>25</sup> *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov.

<sup>26</sup> Discussions of how women existed within the political and social spheres of the Soviet Union can be found in Gail Wharshofsky Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development, and Social Change*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). Discussion of how women have been portrayed in Soviet art in general can be found in Susan Reid, "All Stalin's Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 57, No. 1 (Spring 1998): 133-173. While Reid's discussion focuses on the 1930s, many of the concepts can also be seen in Vertov's earlier work.

nature of women in a communist society, and in this scene in particular is both showing, and calling for, the increased presence and importance of woman in post-revolutionary Russia. Though a modern reading might suggest that comparing a women to a vehicle is objectifying and ultimately counter to the idea of gender equality, Vertov's understanding of technology as an agent of progress suggests that he intended a much more favorable comparison. His comparison between human beings and industrial technology continues throughout the film, and in particular in a scene in which industrial machines and their operators are shown in montage with one another.

In this particularly long series of shots, Vertov shows workers in montage with their machines. Sewing machines are shown in montage with their operators, telephone operators connect calls in montage with the wires themselves, a woman folds cigarette boxes and packs them.<sup>27</sup> The images are repeated in an increasingly quick fashion, blurring the lines between human and machine. As the montage continues Vertov also shows images which omit most of the people's bodies, instead showing only an arm, a leg, a torso, or a head. This serves to strip the operators of their independence from the machine and treats them in the frame in a similar way to that of the machines themselves. Similar to his montage of the waking woman, Vertov is expressing the positive influence of machinery on socialist society. Vertov's assertion that his camera was a superior tool of observation to that of the human eye is extended to other machines through this use of montage, which

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<sup>27</sup> *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov.



indicates that machines are superior at completing the tasks associated with socialism, namely industry.

Communism was not merely meant to be an economic or social order, but also brought the hope of an improvement to humanity. Vertov's montage suggests that he believed that machinery would help humanity attain that higher level. In this unusually long sequence Vertov is making appeals to industry as a source of humanity. Again, a modern viewer might misinterpret his meaning with the assumption that machines act as a fundamentally dehumanizing force when portrayed in this way. However, Vertov sought the exact opposite meaning. The work of the proletariat, and mainly industrial work, was a source of a higher level of humanity achievable through communism. Vertov's use of montage sought to explain this complex idea to his audience, and thus succeeded at meeting Lenin's first goal of including socialist ideals in art. However, like Eisenstein, his message was communicated in an abstract way which was difficult to understand for the average movie goer. As such, the film was met with a largely negative reception, and played for only a week in Moscow before being removed in favor of other films.<sup>28</sup>

When discussing his film *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov noted that "the documents[shots] have been joined with one another so that, on the one hand, the film would consist only of those linkages between signifying pieces that coincide with the visual linkages and so that, on the other hand, these linkages would not require intertitles; the final sum of all these linkages represents, therefore, and

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<sup>28</sup> Hicks, *Dziga Vertov*, 70.

organic whole.”<sup>29</sup> Vertov is arguing here that the use of montage to connect shots would create meaning to the extent that intertitles would no longer be needed to communicate his ideas to the audience. Indeed, Vertov did include very complex arguments about the nature of communist society within his film. However, the use of montage did not communicate these ideas as clearly as intertitles could have. Though the ideas an awakening of society, the awakening of the woman, and the advancement of humanity through work and industrialization are all ideals held by the Communists within the Soviet Union, they are not portrayed in an explicit manner that would have been recognizable to the majority of movie goers. Vertov, in much the same way as Eisenstein, includes complex film theory in a film that was, ostensibly, designed to communicate ideas to the masses. As evidenced by its short stint in Moscow, *The Man with a Movie Camera* seems to have failed in this regard. It was, in part, this very reason that as Stalin rose to power and the Cultural Revolution shook the foundations of the Soviet Union, that montage would become decried as formalism, and deemed unfit as a socialist art form.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Michelson, *Kino-Eye*, 84.

<sup>30</sup> David Bordwell, “The Idea of Montage in Soviet Art and Film,” in *Cinema Journal* 11 no. 2 (Spring, 1972), 16.

## Section Two: Reversion and Revision

## Chapter Three: Socialist Realism?

The matter of the historical epic in the canon of Soviet film is a curious one. In spite of official focus of the Soviet government on the future of political, social, and cultural progress that communism would bring, prominent Soviet film makers were encouraged to make films depicting distinctly historical subject matter. Furthermore, these historically based films were used not to contrast the darkness of a tsarist past with the enlightenment of a communism future, but rather to glorify a subject and people that had been previously denounced by the Soviet government after the revolution. Thus, the fact that Soviet filmmakers made historical films depicting formerly “counter-revolutionary” themes decades after the revolution initially seems problematic. In the first decade of Soviet Union’s existence, film had often depicted the history *of the revolution* and films depicting the distant past in Russia were less common. However, by the late 1930s the historical epic caught the attention of the Soviet Union’s great filmmakers, in particular that of Sergei Eisenstein. This chapter will explore Eisenstein’s historical epics as works of revisionist history, both as a product of political pressure coming from above to include specific content, and of Eisenstein’s own theory of montage, which changed with the times, and continued to influence his film making.

Of particular note was Eisenstein’s series of films depicting medieval, and early modern Russian history. His two films *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944 and 1959), capture relatively distant Russian history and place Russia’s imperial past in an anachronistic communist context. Both films mark a notable change in Eisenstein’s form and content, and transition into a phase of films

which I have defined as the “historical epic.” I have used the term historical epic to describe the genre of film that takes place in the distant past and is historically separate from the Russian Revolution. This distinguishes Eisenstein’s later films from his earlier work depicting the Russian Revolution such as *Strike*, *October*, and *Battleship Potemkin*, which defined Eisenstein’s earlier place within the cannon of Soviet film.

The shift in Eisenstein’s film is parallel to the shift in Soviet ideology during the 1930s which David Brandenberger describes as “a new sense of pragmatism... which concluded that the utopian proletarian internationalism that had defined Soviet ideology during its first fifteen years was actually hamstringing efforts to mobilize the society for industrialization and war.”<sup>1</sup> Simply put, the party moved towards more traditional means of rallying the country for war. To achieve their goal, Brandenberger explains, “the stalinist party hierarchy use[d] Russian national heroes, myths and imagery to popularize the dominant Marxist-Leninist line.”<sup>2</sup> While Brandenberger focuses on the formation of national identity in *National Bolshevism*, he expands upon the use of “Russian national heroes, myths, and imagery” in *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda*.

In *Epic Revisionism*, David Brandenberger and Kevin M. F. Platt examine the reemergence of Russian historical figures in Soviet discourse during the 1930s, specifically Ivan the Terrible and Alexander Nevsky. The history of Ivan the

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<sup>1</sup> David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*, 2.

Terrible, they argue, was revised by downplaying his “terrible” character, and emphasizing his role as a state builder and strong leader. They argue that there was a “pragmatic rationale” to bringing Ivan to the forefront of historical epic.<sup>3</sup> The pragmatism, they continue, rested in the fact that “Stalin, Shcherbakov, and many others considered Ivan to be the perfect vehicle to express their vision of a glorious state led by a vigorous, powerful leader.”<sup>4</sup> The glorification of Ivan IV, then, was tantamount to an official justification for Stalin’s consolidation of power and hard line treatment of those whom he considered to be counter-revolutionary. Brandenberger and Platt recognize similar motivations for the resurrection of Alexander Nevsky.

As with Ivan the Terrible, pragmatism was certainly a driving force in what Brandenberger and Platt refer to as “Nevskii’s official rehabilitation between 1937 and 1938,” because of the parallels between the invasion of the Teutonic Knights, and the growing threat of Nazi Germany.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Nevsky was a figure that could convey the importance of strong leadership and, somewhat unintentionally the authors argue, the “primacy of the Russian people as well.”<sup>6</sup> Since Ivan the Terrible and Alexander Nevsky were important, near-mythological figures in Russia, the revision of their historical importance allowed the Soviet government to justify its actions through an appeal to the authority of individuals with whom the population

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<sup>3</sup> David Brandenberger and Kevin M. F. Platt, “Terribly Pragmatic,” in *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* eds. David Brandenberger and Kevin M.F. Platt, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 157.

<sup>4</sup> Brandenberger and Platt, *Epic Revisionism*, 170.

<sup>5</sup> Brandenberger and Platt, *Epic Revisionism*, 244.

<sup>6</sup> Brandenberger, *Epic Revisionism*, 246.

could identify or were very familiar. Brandenberger and Platt provide a useful context within which to interpret the content of both *Ivan the Terrible* and *Alexander Nevsky*. However, their analysis is indicative of a trend in the examination of the historical epic which focuses solely on the content of the films, and not on the film theory which informed Eisenstein's work.

Too often in the discussion of Soviet film, and in particular the historical epic, the discussion focuses on content at the expense of theory. *Epic Revisionism* identifies the political trends which led to the revisionism of historical characters. While Brandenberger and Platt mention film, they deal only with content, and not with artistic theory as such. While it would be unfair to criticize Brandenberger and Platt for this omission, as it is beyond the scope of their research, an examination of how film theory interacted with politics as a means of creating the films they discuss can lead to a deeper understanding of the trends that they identify. In *Eisenstein, Cinema, and History* James Goodwin adeptly interprets Eisenstein's historical epics, and specifically dedicates chapters to both *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*. However, he erroneously concludes that "history enters cinema as both subject and *structuring form* within Eisenstein's film work."<sup>7</sup> By suggesting that the content structured the form of these two films, Goodwin overlooks socialist realism and Eisenstein's persistent theory of montage as major influences on them. In contrast to Goodwin, in "The frame and montage in Eisenstein's 'later' aesthetics" Michael O'Pray argues that Eisenstein's historical epics can still be defined by their use of the

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<sup>7</sup> Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema and History*, 220.



shot, the principle component of Eisenstein's theory of montage, and are thus able to be viewed in the same theoretical vein as Eisenstein's earlier works, if not slightly modified.<sup>8</sup> Hence, unlike Goodwin, O'Pray de-emphasizes or omits political pressure and content as important factors when interpreting Eisenstein's historical epic. In fact, neither author is incorrect, but merely incomplete. As in earlier chapters, the importance of theory, here in the competing forms of montage and socialist realism, and political pressure, here in the form of the "rehabilitation" of historical figures, are vitally important for a complete understanding of historical revisionism in the context of Eisenstein's historical epics. Thus, this section will examine both films in the light of each influential factor to bridge the gap in the historiography. Both *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible* were filmed during the era in which the artistic theory known as socialist realism, the artistic aesthetic officially supported by the Soviet government, was espoused as the definitive socialist art form.

Socialist realism existed within the framework created by Stalin's Cultural Revolution, which ended in 1931. Though the Cultural Revolution as an event unto itself is beyond the scope of this discussion, it is none the less essential to briefly examine its origins and impact to provide context for socialist realism.<sup>9</sup> The First

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<sup>8</sup> Michael O'Pray, "The frame and montage in Eisenstein's 'later' aesthetics" in *Eisenstein Rediscovered*. (Christie, Ian and Richard Taylor eds. Eisenstein Rediscovered. London: Routledge, 1993.)

<sup>9</sup> The Cultural Revolution itself is a broad and somewhat controversial topic. The origin of the term "Cultural Revolution" is in Sheila Fitzpatrick ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931. Cultural Revolution in Russia 1928-1931*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). In 1999, Michael David-Fox challenged Fitzpatrick's use of the term Cultural Revolution to define this period in Soviet History. He argued for a more nuanced definition that does not constrict the the time frame, which seems to inherently call for a reduction in the understanding of culturally revolutionary actions after the given period. (Michael David-Fox. "What is Cultural Revoution." *Russian Review* 58 no. 2 (1999): 181-201). David-Fox makes a strong argument for an expanded definition of the term Cultural

Five-Year Plan (1928-1932), roughly corresponding to the years of the Cultural Revolution, was characterized by Stalin's objective to transform the Soviet Union both economically and culturally. In "The Cultural Revolution in Cinema" Peter Kenez explains that "in this period, cultural revolution represented a resurgence of utopian notions about the nature of culture and politics and a demand for a complete break from the past."<sup>10</sup> How then, do we reconcile "a complete break from the past" with political pressure to create films based on distinctly historical figures? The answer lies in the context within which the films were made. According to Kenez, during this time period, the enemy became a much more clearly defined concept in the Soviet Union. Amidst the cultural revolution, he asserts, "the Bolsheviks could now have no doubt that the creation of the society for which they labored...would not be achieved without the sacrifice of human beings."<sup>11</sup> The cultural revolution, then, can be said to have been a time of increased paranoia, in which the Soviet government attempted to establish hegemony and achieve their vision of a utopian Soviet state. Kenez argues that film during the Cultural Revolution was designed to assault ideas which differed from official state doctrine, exemplifying this goal. By the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1931, "the leaders decided that the chaos of mass mobilization had served its purpose and the country needed a reaffirmation of

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Revolution, many of which Fitzpatrick herself agrees with in "Cultural Revolution Revisited." *Russian Review* 58 no. 2 (1999), 202-209. However, in Fitzpatrick's original work, she makes a convincing argument that the period between 1928-1931 was host to significant changes in Soviet policy towards social, cultural, economic and political issues that would help to shape Soviet Policy for the next two decades. When I use the term "Cultural Revolution" I refer to the period Fitzpatrick originally referred to in 1978, without the intention of taking a particular stance on the overall use of the term in the historiography.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Kenez, "The Cultural Revolution in Cinema," *Slavic Review* 47, no. 3, (Autumn, 1988), 415.

<sup>11</sup> Kenez, "The Cultural Revolution in Cinema," 415.

order and authority.”<sup>12</sup> Ironically, then, the “break from the past” that was an integral part of the Cultural Revolution, also inspired the resurrection of historical figures such as Alexander Nevsky and Ivan the Terrible. The social, cultural, economic and political changes that occurred as a result of Cultural Revolution are evident in Eisenstein’s historical epic, which emphasize the legitimacy of state power, strong leadership, and national pride. These conservative ideals are reflected in the aforementioned theory of socialist realism, which became the official artistic aesthetic in 1932.

During the 1930s, the definition of socialist realism emerged through discourse concerning art and propaganda in the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup> The discussion continued throughout the decade, and received the attention of many important Soviet artists and theorists. Maxim Gorky, a writer and artist on the forefront of the socialist realist movement, chose to define it in terms of what it was not, bourgeois. In 1934, Gorky noted that regardless of the expertise with which a writer formed his work, that work “is nevertheless littered with empty and ugly words” unless that writer had “a good knowledge of the past history and of the social phenomena of contemporary society.”<sup>14</sup> While Gorky does not provide a working definition of socialist realism, his words give insight into the impetus that drove the movement. Central to the idea of socialism was the outright rejection of bourgeois society, and thus socialist realism demanded that artists be concerned with history and society, rather than merely

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<sup>12</sup> Kenez, “The Cultural Revolution in Cinema,” 432.

<sup>13</sup> Socialist Realism was to applied to all art forms in the Soviet Union. As such, my analysis and definition of the term is derived from the writings of artists from a variety of disciplines.

<sup>14</sup> Maxim Gorky, “On Socialist Realism” in *Socialist Realism in Literature and Art*. eds. Mikhail Parkhomenko and Alexander Myasnikov, trans. C.V. James (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 33.

beauty. Gorky's statement also suggests that art must be accessible to contemporary society, and therefore that socialist realist artists must reject radical art forms that had been popular among avant guard artists following the revolution and during the Cultural Revolution, such as Eisenstein's theory of montage. Gorky provides an excellent starting point from which to build a working definition of socialist realism.

Soviet author Alexander Fadeyev provides further insight into the concept of realism as it pertains to socialist realism. In 1932 Fadeyev explained that the "realism that crawls upon the surface of things and phenomena, seeing only their isolated aspects outside of their links with the process of history, and unable to foresee their development in the future was branded by the founders of Marxism as vulgar, creeping 'realism.'"<sup>15</sup> After criticizing older forms of realism, he goes on to give a much more useful description of how socialist artists should capture realism. He adds that "in Marxist-Leninist reasoning genuinely artistic realism is fidelity to historical *truth* and perception of the basic *tendency* of the development of reality in its struggle with the forces of the old order."<sup>16</sup> Two things are apparent from both Fadeyev's criticism and description. First, realism does not refer to what is real, but rather truth according to socialist ideology. Secondly, realism refers to the aesthetic of realism, as opposed to abstract, impressionist, or other forms of "bourgeois" art. Thus, in the context of socialist realism, realism refers both to an ideology, and an aesthetic.

However, the discourse on socialist realism did not end in the 1930s.

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander Fadeyev, "Socialist Realism," in *Socialist Realism in Literature and Art*, eds. Mikhail Parkhomenko and Alexander Myasnikov, trans. C.V. James, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 67.

<sup>16</sup> Fadeyev, "Socialist Realism," 69.

As the discussion of socialist realism stretched into the 1960s Vladimir Shcherbina, Nikolai Gei, and Vladimir Piskunov, each literary figures in the Soviet Union, claimed that “socialist realism was born of reality, embodies the revolutionary passion of our epoch, and penetrates boldly into its dramatic conflicts, investigating the complexity of life.”<sup>17</sup> Their collective statement adds further nuance to socialist realism, and in particular their emphasis on “revolutionary passion.”<sup>18</sup> The phrase “embodies the revolutionary passion of our epoch” can be taken to mean “reflects socialist values.” Writing thirty years later, Shcherbina, Gei, and Piskunov are making Gorky’s appeal to “knowledge of...the social phenomenon of contemporary society” more explicit. Noting this nuance, we can discern that the authors believed that for a work of art to conform to socialist realism it must reflect socialist values, which we can assume to mean the values put forth by the state. Included in these values, as noted earlier, are legitimacy of state power, strong leadership, and national pride, which would appear in Eisenstein’s films. In addition to the discourse generated by contemporary Soviet theorists, historians have since attempted their own definitions of socialist realism.

Socialist realism is by no means a new subject of inquiry and has thus been a topic discussed by art theorists and historians alike. Zbigniew Folejewski asserts that “in shirt-sleeve English it[socialist realism] can be described as a formula for

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<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Shcherbina, Nikolai Gei and Vladimir Piskunov, “Socialist Realism and the Artistic Development of Mankind,” in *Socialist Realism in Literature and Art*, eds. Mikhail Parkhomenko and Alexander Myasnikov, trans. C.V. James (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 233.

<sup>18</sup> That they are writing much later than Gorky does not invalidate their contribution. Instead, it stands to prove that the discussion of socialist realism continued for many years, and that even at this later date a comprehensive definition of socialist realism had failed to materialize.

presenting the reality not as it is, but as it should be.”<sup>19</sup> While he achieves his goal of creating a definition that is simple and easy to apply, Folejewski’s definition is problematic for this study because it is overly simplistic and lacks nuance. The weakness in his definition lies in his dismissal of *realism*, which he instead interprets as *idealism*. While Soviet political ideology played an important role in socialist realism, it was not the only influence. His definition describes only the political aspect of socialist realism, which dictated subject matter, and not the artistic theory through which the content was constructed. Thus, a working definition of socialist realism must include both an understanding of realism, and not merely socialism within the context of the term.

Conversely, in “Genre in Socialist Realism,” Greg Carleton compares socialist realism to neoclassicism. He states “Eighteenth Century literature certainly provides a comfortable metaphor because it invokes a picture of restraint, stasis, clarity and rigidity, in other words, those modifiers that so often characterize the monological tendency of socialist realism.”<sup>20</sup> Unlike Folejewski, Carleton focuses on the realist aspect of socialist realism. However, like Folejewski, Carleton only addressed half the term. His focus on realism rather than socialism gives a sense of the artistic theory which drove the aesthetic of socialism realism, yet does not describe its content. The disconnect between Folejewski and Carleton mirrors the

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<sup>19</sup> Zbigniew Folejewski, “Frustrations of Socialist Realism,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 14, no. 4 (Jun. 2000): 485.

<sup>20</sup> Greg Carleton, “Genre in Socialist Realism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 4 (Winter, 1994): 992.

disconnect in the historiography on Soviet film as a whole. Again, while neither is technically incorrect in their statements, they are both incomplete.

Taking into account both the writings of Soviet artists and theorists, as well as later works discussing socialist realism by historians and other scholars, I have defined socialist realism as “artwork utilizing a traditionally realist artistic aesthetic to depict socialist themes and content.” This definition takes into account both the ideology of socialist realism, as well as its form. Using this definition, the socialist realist influences on Eisenstein’s work will be more easily identified. However, Eisenstein retained his penchant for montage through the 1930s and 40s, and thus we must examine the changes to Eisenstein’s theories before examining his films.

In the 1920s Sergei Eisenstein pioneered his theory of *montage*. Eisenstein’s five categories of montage, outlined more extensively earlier, can be condensed into two broad methods in this period.<sup>21</sup> First, there is montage that is used to accent the story of a film through rhythm and pacing.<sup>22</sup> Secondly is ‘intellectual montage,’ which Eisenstein describes as “conflict-juxtaposition of accompanying intellectual effects.”<sup>23</sup> Simply stated, intellectual montage is a method which seeks to create meaning by showing two normally unrelated images in successive shots to create a meaning independent of the two original images.

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<sup>21</sup> For a more in depth discussion of montage and the history of montage in the context of the Soviet Film, see David Bordwell’s “The Idea of Montage in Soviet Art and Film. For examples of how montage was used in Eisenstein’s early film (with screen captures) see John B. Kupier’s “Cinematic Expression: A Look at Eisenstein’s Silent Montage.” *Art Journal* 22, no. 1 (Autumn, 1962): 34-39.

<sup>22</sup> Here, I am combining Eisenstein’s first four forms of montage as outlined in chapter one into a single entity for ease of discussion.

<sup>23</sup> Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 82.

David Bordwell notes that the first form of montage “use[s] montage solely for rhythmic and narrative ends; the juxtaposition of shots becomes a way to bring out the shape and nuances of a story.”<sup>24</sup> Eisenstein realized the importance of rhythm in his work to engage the audience and drive the narrative of his films. Eisenstein clarified that he did not mean this form of montage “should be recognizable as part of the perceived impression. On the contrary, though unrecognized, it is nevertheless indispensable for the ‘organization’ of the sensual impression.”<sup>25</sup> The fact that the audience’s experience is essentially passive sets it apart from intellectual montage.

The difference becomes even more apparent when Eisenstein explains intellectual montage in relation to his film *October*, examined earlier in this study. “An example of this [intellectual montage],” Eisenstein explains “can be found in the sequence of the ‘gods’ in *October*, where all the conditions for their comparison are made dependent on an exclusively class-intellectual sound of each piece in its relation to God...These pieces were assembled in accordance with a descending intellectual scale - pulling back the concept of God to its origins, *forcing the spectator to perceive this ‘progress’ intellectually.*”<sup>26</sup> During the period in which he directed *October*, Eisenstein placed the onus on his audience to gather the meaning as active participants in his intellectual montage. The meaning is not made explicit, and is thus open to the interpretation of the audience. Hence, in contrast to the first form of

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<sup>24</sup> Bordwell, “The Idea of Montage,” 10.

<sup>25</sup> Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 82. (Emphasis mine.)



montage discussed, intellectual montage appears to be incompatible with socialist realism.

One point of contention between Eisenstein's theory of intellectual montage and socialism realism is a matter of method. There is no doubt that Eisenstein was interested in displaying and promoting socialism through his use of montage.

However, intellectual montage does not rely on "realist artistic techniques," and is thus irreconcilable with our definition of socialist realism. Part of socialist realism's appeal to the Soviet government was that it provided the framework for an art form that was both easy to understand for a population that was overwhelmingly rural and undereducated, while also disseminating socialist ideals and Soviet policy to a wide range of people. Furthermore, socialist realism, as an art form that would impart ideas to its audience rather than demand that they interpret the work themselves, was intended to prevent viewers from coming to anti-Soviet conclusions, whether they were intentionally inserted into the film or not. Socialist realism was no doubt, in part, a reaction to more radical art forms that had been pioneered in the years following the revolution and during the Cultural Revolution, intellectual montage included.<sup>27</sup> Eisenstein's goals for montage were similar to that of socialist realism. Even prior to 1932, Eisenstein used montage to promote socialist ideology and support the revolution.

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<sup>27</sup> In addition to the articles cited while defining socialist realism, I also suggest Jeffrey Brooks, "Socialist Realism in *Pravda*: Read All About It!" *Slavic Review* 53, no. 4 (1994): 973-991 which deals with the evolution of the term in Soviet society.

However, Eisenstein's theory of montage did not remain static through the turbulent Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. In 1939 Eisenstein wrote "Montage in 1938," which was later inserted into Eisenstein's book *The Film Sense*. In 1939, socialist realism was well established, and radical theories such as Eisenstein's theory of montage were largely disavowed by the Soviet government. Eisenstein acknowledges the reality of the situation in the introduction, stating "there was a time in Soviet cinema when montage was proclaimed 'everything.' Now we are at the close of a period during which montage has been regarded as 'nothing.'"<sup>28</sup> Thus, Eisenstein recognized the official change in theory to socialist realism, and the denunciation of his favored theory of montage. However, Eisenstein then goes on to vigorously defend montage as a valid film theory even in the face of 1930s Soviet politics. He claims forthright that "montage is just as indispensable a component feature of film production as any other element of film effectiveness."<sup>29</sup> Notably, Eisenstein is not merely suggesting that montage has a place within the new political context, but remains *essential*. This suggests that Eisenstein knew that in order to make this argument successfully, he would need to change the focus of his discussion.

To this end, Eisenstein asserted that since the 1920s film makers had noticed that montage existed as an emergent property of film and that "this property consisted of the fact that two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a

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<sup>28</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, 3.

new concept, and a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition.”<sup>30</sup> Eisenstein’s new assertion is actually very similar to his description of montage as its most basic levels as he outlined in the 1920s. However, he framed the his definition much differently, in a way that he likely hoped would make montage appear to adhere to the politics of socialist realism. “This [theory of montage] is not in the least a circumstance peculiar to the cinema, but is a phenomenon which invariable met within all cases where we have to deal with the juxtaposition of two facts, two phenomenon, two objects.”<sup>31</sup> In the context of the late 1930s, Eisenstein was making the argument that montage, far from being a radical theory, simply recognizes the nature of associations that people make when confronted with images and ideas every day. In accordance with the conservative tendencies associated with Stalinism in the 1930s, he was attempting to remove the stigma of montage as an avant-garde film theory. Eisenstein instead paints the process of montage as a traditional concept and occurrence.<sup>32</sup> “Take a grave,” Eisenstein suggests, “juxtaposed with a woman weeping beside it, and scarcely anybody will fail to jump to the conclusion: a widow.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, Eisenstein argues, montage is not a radical or difficult to understand art form, but rather a natural phenomenon that everyday people are accustomed to experiencing and understanding.

To Eisenstein, his film theory was not in opposition to socialist realism. In 1935 Eisenstein claimed that “at the present stage, we craftsmen have no differences of principle and disputes about a whole series of program postulates such as we had

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<sup>30</sup> Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> By traditional, I mean to suggest a concept that people would apply in their lives on a daily basis, even if they would not have identified the process by name, or recognized it at all.

<sup>33</sup> Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, 4.

in the past. There are, of course, individual shades of opinion within the comprehensive conception of a single style: Socialist Realism.”<sup>34</sup> In the same essay he went on to say “Soviet cinema, after many periods of divergence of opinion and argument, is entering into its classical period”<sup>35</sup> In this statement, Eisenstein seems to be suggesting that socialist realism was the beginning of the finest era of Soviet art, in which he was proud to participate. Assuming Eisenstein is genuine in his professed willingness to conform to socialist realism, we must then reconcile the seeming incompatibility of intellectual montage with Eisenstein’s public assessment of his work, which found no contradiction at all.

Eisenstein seemed primarily concerned with socialist realism in a similar way to which Zbigniew Folejewski described it, which is to say “reality as it should be,” and less concerned with the cinematographic methods used to achieve this goal. However, his ideas about narrative montage, and rhythm are still applicable in socialist realist films. This key difference can be seen in Eisenstein’s historical epic, which continue to use his early theories about montage to enhance the narrative plot, rhythm and pace of his films, while relying less on intellectual montage to communicate ideas about socialism to his audience. *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible* represent a marked change from the way Eisenstein structured his early films. Despite his insistence that his theories were compatible with the overarching framework of socialist realism, it is clear that he had to make changes to make his newer films acceptable to the Soviet censors. His first historical epic, *Alexander*

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<sup>34</sup> Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 148.

<sup>35</sup> Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 149.

*Nevsky*, was his most striking deviation from intellectual montage to date, and defined a new stage in Eisenstein's film directing career.

*Alexander Nevsky* was released in 1938 with the threat of Hitler and the Nazi's looming to the west, and the rule of Stalin firmly established. The importance of the historical moment is not lost on the film, which was in part a warning and call to action to the Soviet people, as well as an affirmation of strong centralized leadership. Set in the thirteenth century, the film depicts Russia in a time of crisis, with the threat of the Mongols from the south and east, and the Germans from the west. The film follows Nevsky as he resists the German invasion, and eventually defeats them in the climatic battle on the ice. While the film is based on actual historical events, Eisenstein fictionalizes and revises events to fit the ideals of Stalinism in the late 1930s, in the mode of socialist realism. The characters often make anachronistic exclamations about socialism, nationalism, and a unified Russia. In contrast to Eisenstein's earlier films which often glorified collective heroes, *Alexander Nevsky* stresses individual characters, the most important of which is Nevsky himself. The film, then, emphasizes a strong willed Russian people who only need an equally strong leader to defeat a foe with far superior numbers.<sup>36</sup>

Socialist and nationalistic ideals pervade throughout, but are particularly apparent in several key scenes in the film. In the first scene one can see the tenets of socialist realism most clearly, the city of Novgorod is nearly under attack. Secondly,

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<sup>36</sup> This era saw the resurgence of the individual hero in Soviet society. On this subject in particular, I suggest Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous Comrades: Celebration in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), particularly in her discussion of the hero-traitor dichotomy. This also applies to the glorification of individual workers has shown in *Three Songs of Lenin*, which will be addressed in chapter four.

when the fighting begins, Vasya, one of Alexander's best warriors, disagrees with Nevsky on tactics, and is forcefully overruled. Finally, Eisenstein's theory of montage, in the sense of creating rhythm and pacing to the film can be most easily seen in the battle on the ice. Intellectual montage is kept to a minimum in the film though not omitted entirely. Each of these examples demands further scrutiny in order to illuminate their political and theoretical influences.

When the city of Pskov has been invaded and Novgorod is under the threat of imminent attack, several citizens rush to the town square where an injured soldier invokes the name of Prince Alexander as the only one who can lead the fight against the German invasion. The citizens initially reject their call, claiming that they need not rely on an outsider to lead them, displaying incoherence of the concept of a united Russia by arguing that is each individual must fend for themselves. However, the heroes of the film are quick to dissent from this view, arguing that they must unite under Alexander's leadership in order to fend off the German attack.<sup>37</sup> The character Ignat, the armorsmith, even goes as far to say "a mother or a stepmother, it's all the same to the rich! Where they make a profit, there is their motherland."<sup>38</sup> In other words, Ignat suggests that the bourgeoisie do not care about their homeland. Whether they are under the leadership of their mother, Russia, or a step mother, the invading Germans, as long as they can keep their wealth, the bourgeoisie will be content. If the message of his statement was not already perfectly clear, Ignat goes on to exclaim

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<sup>37</sup> *Alexander Nevsky*, DVD, directed by Sergei Eisenstein (1938; Irvington, NY: The Criterion Collection, 2001).

<sup>38</sup> *Alexander Nevsky*, Eisenstein.

“to us, the simple folk, the Germans bring certain death. We must invite Prince Alexander and strike at the Germans!”<sup>39</sup> The masses, then, must unite under a strong leader in order to fight off the invaders. As the following analysis shows, the tenets of socialist realism are very important in this short segment of film.

The cinematography is realist, and invokes simple shots of Novgorod and its people, using minimal symbolism. Ignat articulates socialist principles through simple dialogue, and Eisenstein does not resort to interpretation of images to make his points. Ignat’s words betray a blatantly anachronistic understanding of class conflict, and is an example of socialist realism’s emphasis on portraying historical reality through the lens of socialism. The scene has transformed medieval Novgorod into a modern Leningrad, in which the people are uniting and rallying against the bourgeoisie. Nevsky, also shown in montage with the masses, suggests a close connection between the two, even as he is portrayed as a strong leader. This reflects the Stalinist idea of a necessary strong leader, but also the realization that a dictator need not be malevolent. This brief moment of montage further anachronistically inserts Stalinism in the thirteenth century. Furthermore, it corresponds with Maxim Gorky’s earlier cited description of socialist realism since it contains elements of history and contemporary society. Eisenstein combines both to create a predominantly fictional representation of medieval Novgorod that communicates socialist ideals to its viewers. The scene also hints at the importance of a strong

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<sup>39</sup> *Alexander Nevsky*, Eisenstein.

individual leader, which becomes further apparent in the scene in which Alexander Nevsky orders his soldiers to attack on foreign land.

Following Nevsky's insight that forcing the Germans to fight on the frozen Chudskoye Lake will cause the latter to fall through due to their heavy, cumbersome armor, he returns to find Vasya ordering his troops to fall back to the Russian side of the lake. Vasya emphasizes that the Russians would fare better defending their own land, which they know far better.<sup>40</sup> Gavriilo, Nevsky's other experienced commander, agrees, and urges Nevsky to order his troops back to the shore. However, Nevsky balks, arguing that "one who won't fight on enemy soil has no need of his own!" He then boldly declares, that he "will not let these dogs tread on the soil of Russia!"<sup>41</sup> Nevsky's argument shifts from being strictly tactical, to appealing to a sense of national pride and defending the motherland of Russia. Nevsky exudes strong leadership, as well as a sense of national unity, which mirror two of the main tenets of Stalinism.<sup>42</sup>

Like the previous scene, Eisenstein chose very simple shots to convey the ideals of socialist realism, thereby forgoing his previous theory of intellectual montage. The scene is easily placed within the narrative, and does not show unrelated images that might invoke the same ideals of strong leadership and national unity. Instead, Eisenstein focuses on Nevsky, the leader himself. It is an excellent

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<sup>40</sup> *Alexander Nevsky*, Eisenstein.

<sup>41</sup> *Alexander Nevsky*, Eisenstein.

<sup>42</sup> In addition to the already mentioned work David Brandenberger's *National Bolshevism*, regarding nationalism under Stalin, I also suggest Robert Grigor Suny, "Stalin and his Stalinism: Power and Authority in the Soviet Union, 1930-53" in *Stalinism*, David L. Hoffman ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), which discusses the role of centralized power and authority in Stalinism.



example of both realist technique, and socialist ideals. First the need for even the strongest of soldiers to be subservient to Nevsky indicates that Eisenstein was emphasizing strong leadership as an absolute necessity. By having Nevsky overrule both Vasya and Gavriilo, he is implying that Nevsky has the ability to overrule any of the soldiers, and the insight to make the right decisions quickly and efficiently. In 1938, the message was clear, with the possibility of attack from a growing German menace, the Soviet Union needed to turn to and trust its leader, Joseph Stalin. However, the scene does not only suggest the importance of strong leadership, it also expresses a strong sense of nationalism. When Nevsky states that he will not tolerate Germans on Russian soil, he is also portraying a strong sense of national identity and pride. It is incumbent upon the leader to do what is right out of love for his country and his people. This patriarchal concept which equates the leader to a loving father figure further legitimized the sense of individual power within a concept of Russian unity. In thirteenth century Russia the concept of national unity did not exist and is further proof of socialist realism's influence on Eisenstein to revise history in order to fit the contemporary moment.<sup>43</sup> The climax of the film demonstrates that Eisenstein had not shed his theory of montage entirely. He uses both film and sound editing in order to dictate the pace and direction of the battle on the ice.

The battle on the ice illustrates both the heroic efforts of the Russian soldiers, fighting a foe with superior arms and armor, as well as the importance of individuals

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<sup>43</sup> For an in depth discussion of the formation of national unity and consciousness in Russia, I suggest Robin Aizlewood, "Revisiting Russian Identity in Russian Thought: From Chaadaev to the Early Twentieth Century." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 78, no 1 (2000): 20-43.

in battle, such as Nevsky, Vasya, and Gavriilo. Unlike the previous scenes in the film, the battle is highly edited, and contains definite uses of montage to drive the pacing and narrative of the section. The scene contains many quick shots, switching between several wide shots of the battle and individual shots of the main characters, Nevsky, Vasya, Gavriilo, and Ignat, in individual combat. When pieced together the shots show a fast paced and chaotic battle, even though the individual shots often convey relatively little of the battle and often contain two opposing soldiers fighting alone. The effect montage has in creating a quickly paced battle is intensified by the use of music which is fast paced, chaotic, and staccato in nature. The result is a confrontation in which both the collective and individual heroism of the Russians are apparent even during a chaotic battle against the superior Teutonic Knights, who gain their advantage through use of heavy armor and horses. The battle ends when Nevsky's plan comes to fruition: the German army is lured onto the thin ice, where their advantage is used against them. The weight of their equipment buckles the tenuous ice beneath them, effectively ending the battle in favor of the Nevsky and the Russians.

The final scene in the film shows one example the compatibility of Eisenstein's use of montage as a pacing mechanism with socialist realism. He is able to use montage to control the film's speed and tension, while still communicating socialist ideals through realist shots. Music is also used extensively in the scene as a part of the montage, and likewise exemplifies socialist realism. Douglas W. Gallez notes that "the music for *Nevsky* is completely original, although Prokofiev [the

composer], studied 12th- and 13th-century Catholic music as preparation for scoring. He rejected what he found as too archaic to communicate to 20th-century audiences.”<sup>44</sup> Prokofiev contributes to *Nevsky’s* historical revisionism by altering historical music to reflect the contemporary meaning of the film. Prokofiev’s choice to change the music to fit his historical moment conforms with socialist realism’s view that reality must be shaped to fit the ideals of socialism.

Eisenstein’s first historical epic *Alexander Nevsky* shows the influence of both socialist realism, as well as Eisenstein’s own theory of montage in informing the content of the film and revising Russian history to conform to socialism. James Goodwin notes that “Soviet culture in the Stalin period advances a social division that makes for individuation only among a select leadership and for an anonymous collectivity at all other levels.”<sup>45</sup> The film’s emphasis on the three main characters, all of whom assume leadership roles within the film reinforce this idea. Furthermore, Goodwin explains, “the Great Leader, through his fatherly concern and wisdom guides the common people toward a historic future.”<sup>46</sup> The film contains many anachronistic statements of class consciousness and Russian unity which would have been impossible in thirteenth century Russia. Ignat’s comments about classism, the poor uniting under a strong leader, along with Alexander Nevsky’s comments about the importance of Russia as an abstract concept are products of ideals contemporary to 1938 when the film was released, rather than the history on which the film is based.

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<sup>44</sup> Douglas W. Gallez, “The Prokofiev-Eisenstein Collaboration: ‘Nevsky’ and ‘Ivan’ Revisited,” *Cinema Journal* 17, no 2 (Spring, 1978): 17.

<sup>45</sup> Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema and History*, 162.

<sup>46</sup> Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema and History*, 162.

The film's content is, thus, a product of film theory which demanded a particular message far more than it was accurate reflection of Russian history. Eisenstein used montage to enhance these ideals. Paradoxically, using montage to espouse the ideals of Stalinism allowed him to express himself artistically, even while conforming. Eisenstein employs similar methods in portraying the concepts of leadership, national unity, and condemnation of the bourgeois in his next historical epic *Ivan the Terrible*.

*Ivan the Terrible part I* (1944), follows the narrative of Ivan as he resists boyar pressure, and seeks to unite Russia into a cohesive country. One way to interpret *Ivan the Terrible*, is in direct relation to Stalinism. Using this interpretation, Ivan becomes a surrogate for Stalin in the film. He is a strong leader, uniter and enemy and of the bourgeois menace that sought to forsake Russia for their own gain. While the film's makes clear parallels to Stalinism, it remains important to consider the film theory which drove its content.<sup>47</sup> Like *Alexander Nevsky*, *Ivan the Terrible part I*, takes the form of the historical epic. Eisenstein selectively choose historical events, and shaped them, in part through the use of montage, to create a film more grounded in Soviet contemporary society than an objective portrayal of the past. The film's first statement regarding national unity and individual power can be seen in Ivan's coronation. The scene captures Ivan's strong will to lead and to unite Russia as a nation, as well as the conflict between his will and the boyars' intent to resist his

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<sup>47</sup> For a more in depth discussion of *Ivan the Terrible* and both its intended and unintended relationships with Stalinism, I suggest Kristin Thompson's "'Ivan the Terrible' and Stalinist Russia: A Reexamination" *Cinema Journal* 17, no. 1 (Autumn, 1977), 30-43. The article offers an in depth look at the historical circumstances in which the film was created, including amidst World War II, Stalinism and the Soviet government's influence on the film. The work also contains a brief historiography regarding the film's interpretation.

power. The same themes appear again during Ivan's wedding when Moscow is set on fire and a mob storms the Tsar's palace. Lastly, when Ivan has left Moscow after the death of his wife, in the final scene of the film, Eisenstein firmly connects the strength of a centralized power to the will of the people and health of the Russian state.

After his coronation Ivan gives a speech, and announces his intention to unite all of Russia as a single nation. "From now on," Ivan declares "all the Russias will form a single State."<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, he makes clear his intentions to put "an end to the pernicious power of the boyars."<sup>49</sup> The scene sets up the power conflict that pervades the rest of the film, most notably in Ivan's struggle to consolidate power from the boyars, who resist him. Furthermore, it portrays Ivan as the single uniting force which envelops Russia, with the boyars in opposition to him, portrayed as the dividing force. Ivan institutes a national standing army as the force that will protect the new state, and issues the order that all who do not serve in the army must help to pay for it. Importantly, the boyars main objection is with the final statement, identifying them as mostly concerned with their personal financial situation. Near the end of his speech, Ivan asserts that "only a State strong and unified within its frontiers can defend itself beyond them."<sup>50</sup> This final point speaks not only to Ivan's goal of unifying Russia, but also of establishing the new nation as a world power. The content of the scene is very similar to that of *Alexander Nevsky*.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ivan the Terrible*, DVD, directed by Sergei Eisenstein, (1944; Irvington, NY: The Criterion Collection, 2001).

<sup>49</sup> *Ivan the Terrible*, Eisenstein.

<sup>50</sup> *Ivan the Terrible*, Eisenstein.

Filmed during World War II (The Great Patriotic War, in the Soviet Union), it is not surprising that Eisenstein included such vehement rhetoric about traitors and those who would wish to divide Russia. Socialist realism is front and center in the portrayal of Ivan's coronation, informing the content of his speech, as well as lending legitimacy to his words. The traditional symbols of the Tsar are present in the scene, including the crown, scepter and orb. However, Eisenstein does not associate the traditional symbols of the tsar through intellectual montage, as he may have done earlier in his career, but rather by having Ivan physically wield them, and placing them in full view in the frame as he delivers his speech.<sup>51</sup> Ivan's conflict with the boyars is also framed as a conflict between order and chaos. The boyars are clearly associated with contemporary counter-revolutionaries, and are thus demonized. The struggle between Ivan as the first ruler to call himself tsar, and the boyars' unwillingness to relinquish power is not entirely fictionalized. However, the history is portrayed and understood within the context of contemporary Soviet society, and is thus severely distorted. While Ivan struggles with the boyars, he wins over the people of Moscow. Ivan first becomes associated with the people of Moscow during his wedding ceremony.

Ivan's wedding reception is interrupted by an angry mob from the city, which claims the tsar has been bewitched by his new wife's family. As proof they claim that church bells have inexplicably fallen from their steeples around Moscow.<sup>52</sup> While the situation initially looks grim for Ivan, he quickly turns the situation into an

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<sup>51</sup> *Ivan the Terrible*, Eisenstein.

<sup>52</sup> *Ivan the Terrible*, Eisenstein.

opportunity. Ivan insists that the ropes must have been cut by the boyars. Thus a boyar plot to undermine his authority as well as the unity of Russia is responsible, rather than a supernatural cause. Ivan, then, places himself on the side of the people in opposition to the boyars. He shouts to the crowd that those who are “at the side of the Tsar will be rewarded,” implying that through him, through unity, all can be rewarded, rather than through division, which rewards only the boyars.

Several important connections are made between the historical and the contemporary in this scene. First, Ivan becomes identified with Russia’s citizens, in addition to his previous identification as a unifier of lands. By the end of the scene Ivan addressed the crowd as “we,” implying that he is inseparable from the people of Moscow, as much one of them, as he is their leader. By association then, Ivan’s conflict with the boyars becomes a conflict between the people and the boyars. Furthermore, the antagonism between the two groups is portrayed as mainly economic. Regardless of how citizens feel about national unity, Ivan is appealing to them by arguing that they will benefit monetarily by supporting him. The clash between the bourgeoisie, represented by the boyars, and the people, represented by both the mob and by Ivan, becomes a main subject of the scene. Like *Alexander Nevsky*, much of the dialogue in this scene is anachronistic. It is impossible that Ivan would have made economic arguments to a mob, appealing to the inherent class struggle between them and the boyars, as a means of winning them over. Eisenstein exaggerates the connection between Ivan and the people for the sake of suggesting to the Soviet audience that they must support their leader for the sake of unity, and to

crush the threat of counter-revolution. The connection is made complete in the final scene of the movie when a procession of pilgrims begs Ivan to return to Moscow as their leader, which leads to the third and final example.

Following the death of his wife, and the boyars' attempt to regain power, Ivan becomes disillusioned with his goal of a united Russia, and retreats to Alexandrov, abandoning Moscow. Upon leaving, he makes a proclamation to the citizens of Moscow stating "these princes and boyars have amassed great wealth but not a thought do they spare for the Tsar or the State, and they are even indifferent to religion...and oppress the people."<sup>53</sup> Upon hearing the news, the people lament the loss of their leader, and many choose to march to Alexandrov in a procession, begging him to return. Ivan's role as a unifier and leader capable of keeping the boyars in check has made him indispensable to them. Ivan is shown in montage with the procession several times, intrinsically linking him to the masses. Upon their arrival, Ivan is overwhelmed by the outpouring of support, and decides to return to Moscow at the people's request.

The final scene, while short, attributed Ivan's rule, and thus the historical creation of the Russian state to the combined will of the people and efforts of a great man, rather than to Ivan alone. Russia's tsarist history, then, is tied to the Russia populace as a critical agent in the formation of the Russian state, and the tradition of strong centralized power. The historical revisionism in creating this reality can be directly attributed to socialist realism and the domination of historical truth by

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<sup>53</sup> *Ivan the Terrible*, Eisenstein.



socialist ideology. However, Eisenstein also contributed to the creation of historical fiction through key uses of montage. Comparisons to Stalin and contemporary Soviet society are easily discernible. This last scene suggests that while the Soviet government under Stalin was centralized, powerful, and often brutal in its tactics, it was an expression of the will of the proletariat in the Soviet Union, and necessary for the the country's unity and security.

Finally, it is important to note that aside from the obvious socialist themes that were integrated into the story of Ivan, Eisenstein also fabricated much of Ivan's life in order place him within the new narrative. Goodwin notes that "the treatment of sixteenth-century history in *Ivan the Terrible* entails considerable compression, transposition, and excision of events."<sup>54</sup> He cites Ivan's son's death as an infant, his five marriages, his brother, as well as the misrepresentation of Vladimir Staritsky, as examples of Eisenstein's lack of concern for historical accuracy. When the story of Ivan's life did not correspond with Eisenstein's narrative, he simply omitted, changed, or made up "facts" in order to rewrite the history in a socialist vein. Furthermore, Goodwin explains that the historical events on which the narrative for *Ivan the Terrible part I*, were based took place over nearly thirty years.<sup>55</sup> No explicit indication of time is ever given in the film. *Ivan the Terrible*, then, is more mythological than historical.

In *Ivan the Terrible part I* Eisenstein transformed the historical figure of Ivan the Terrible into a socialist hero. The rewriting of history in this way was an essential

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<sup>54</sup> Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema and History*, 187.

<sup>55</sup> Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema and History*, 187.

part of the historical epic. Eisenstein used many concepts from *Alexander Nevsky* and built upon them in *Ivan the Terrible* to further equate the individual hero with the collective will of the people. The connection between Ivan and his people is made to be inherent by the end of the film. He is not only a champion for the people, but the only power strong enough to crush the counter-revolutionary boyars and their efforts to divide Russia for their own economic interest. *Ivan the Terrible* presents the character anachronistically, as a man of the people, and a unifier of Russia in the name of national pride.

The historical epic constituted a major change in Sergei Eisenstein's film making career and is indicative of the changing landscape of film in the Soviet Union after Stalin's rise to power. In the atmosphere that had become increasingly hostile to the radicalism which had accompanied the revolution, Eisenstein was forced to conform to the new ideals of Stalinism and socialist realism. Eisenstein attempted to reconcile his theory of montage with socialist realism and it would play an important, though clearly more minimal, role than in his previous films. The historical epic became the vehicle through which Eisenstein conveyed the new message for several reasons. First, the mythology and history behind historical figures, especially Alexander Nevsky and Ivan IV, was relatively well known among Russian society in a way that made the subject matter immediately accessible when represented in a realist manner. Second, the historical figures correspond with the contemporary Stalinist ideal that a great individual leader was necessary to a successful society.

The stories of Nevsky and Ivan were, in other words, simply manipulated to conform to Stalin's brand of socialism.

Socialist Realism required artists to use realist techniques in their portrayal of Stalin's socialism, and the distant past in Russia was easily depicted through the artistic aesthetic of realism. The advent of sound film, as opposed to Eisenstein's earlier films which were silent, allowed for the explicit communication of ideas in a realist manner without resorting to excess symbolism or intellectual montage which were less easily understood by the populace, and which by the mid-1930s the state had branded as reactionary or bourgeois. However, in many scenes implicit meaning through montage exists alongside the explicit meaning of the narrative. Historical films are inherently authoritative about their subjects, regardless of their accuracy. Alexander Nevsky's appeals to a strong belief in Russian pride, or Ivan's strong desire to unite Russia due to his immense love for his people are presented as historical truth in the film. Eisenstein's historical epics sought to rewrite history to suggest a long history in the traditions of socialism in Russian society. As we have seen, Eisenstein had created historically inaccurate films in the past. However, his use of realism, in addition to intellectual montage, created a more authoritative message than his earlier films depicting the revolution. While his theory of montage continued to shape his films, intellectual montage was used less frequently.

Eisenstein continued to use montage as a form of editing his films to create pacing and rhythm. It is most easily seen in *Alexander Nevsky's* battle on the ice, but is apparent elsewhere as well. Eisenstein noted that, when done properly, this form

of montage is imperceptible to the audience and only enhances their viewing experience. Thus, Eisenstein was able to continue to include it even in realist films, where intellectual montage became less common. Because his theory of montage remained integral to Eisenstein's understanding of film, it remained even in his historical epics.

Eisenstein's history of creating films with the intent of glorifying the revolution and the ideals of socialism did not begin with the historical epic. However, it is important to note that as the ideals of socialism in the Soviet Union changed, so did the ideals which Eisenstein communicated through his film. James Goodwin asserts that "*Ivan's* historical perspective can not be considered communist, particularly in comparison to Eisenstein's silent films."<sup>56</sup> While Goodwin is correct in noting the vast differences between Eisenstein's silent films and *Ivan the Terrible*, films should not be compared to each other when determining their portrayal of communism. Both his silent films, and his historical epics sought to illuminate the ideals of socialism as they existed in their respective contemporary moments. The ideals which accompanied the revolution and were called socialist were not completely the same as Stalin's interpretation of socialism. When taking into account socialist realism's effect on the creation of Eisenstein's historical epics, one must remember that the definition of socialism was not static.

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<sup>56</sup> Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema and History*, 210.

Karl Marx asserted that “in bourgeois society...the past dominates the present; in communist society, the present dominates the past.”<sup>57</sup> When read in the context of historical revisionism in Soviet film, his words seem prophetic. Socialist realism sought to make art an explicit form of propaganda in expressing socialist ideals in an easily understandable manner. Thus, socialist realism projected the ideals of the present onto the past and thus made the past subordinate to the present. Most importantly, socialist realism in part informed the content of *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*. Both figures had important historical roles in Russian history, and neither Nevsky nor Ivan can be said to have been any sort of socialist, yet they are portrayed as such in Eisenstein’s films. Their socialist tendencies gave them ahistorical attributes which were legitimized by the use of realism. While acknowledging Stalinism and socialist realism, Eisenstein’s work continued to be influenced by his theory of montage. In this way, political influences as well as theoretical artistic influences continued to shape his work, even during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Although the political environment in which Eisenstein worked in the latter half of his career demanded the historical epic as an expression of socialist realism, Eisenstein continued to assert himself as an artist. Vertov faced similar challenges in his later documentary films. In *Three Songs of Lenin*, Vertov would combine elements of socialist realism with documentary film and montage to create a unique artistic aesthetic.

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<sup>57</sup> Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. and trans. L.M. Findlay (Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2004), 76.

## Chapter Four: Cult of Personality

Like Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov's films show a marked difference following the Cultural Revolution. Undoubtedly, the changed political climate, and Socialist Realism influenced Vertov in ways similar to Eisenstein. While Vertov remained committed to creating documentary film, changes in content, as well as as subtle changes in the manifestation of montage suggest that not even Vertov's radical statements about film during the early Soviet era were immune from state influence in the 1930s.

As early as 1931, Vertov expressed, at least outwardly, his acceptance of dialectical materialism. In his article "First Steps" Vertov explains that "together with the mastery of the method of dialectical materialism (a necessary condition for both acted and nonacted films), the former (acted films) must grow bolder and must be more decisive in the transition from the timid postsynchronization of silent films to the production of sound films; the latter (nonacted films) must tighten up their technique, master it further, and use it for the 100 percent realization of their projected plans."<sup>1</sup> Here, Vertov acknowledges that his film, nonacted film, must utilize the principles of dialectical materialism in the era of sound film. While Vertov overtly attributes this change in his theoretical approach to film to the sudden onset of "sound cinema," Annette Michelson explains that the "concession to the so-called dialectical method (the direct transference of the philosophical understanding of the world to the sphere of art) [was] forcibly propagated in the 1930s by the cinema

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<sup>1</sup> Michelson, *Kino-Eye*, 115.

section of the RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers).”<sup>2</sup> In other words, Vertov’s acceptance of dialectical materialism was likely a result of political pressure, rather than a genuine belief in the theory as valid. However, just as Eisenstein publically argued that his later films and theory were an extension and evolution of his earlier ideas, so did Vertov. In the conclusion to a short essay written about *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934), Vertov asserted that “I hope that it’s clear after all I’ve said that those elements in *Three Songs of Lenin* which comrades have liked most and which they considered to be absolutely new represent, in fact, the development of all our previous work.”<sup>3</sup> Here, Vertov is explicitly stating that although those who have watched his film suggest that his new film is somehow inherently different than his old film, it is actually the culmination of his work. In Vertov’s films during the 1930s, the tension between dialectical materialism and socialist realism to appease the state, and the persistence of Vertov’s earlier theories of montage, is evident. In no film is this more apparent than in *Three Songs of Lenin*.

Vertov remained steadfast in his belief that documentary film was superior to “acted” film. Similar to *The Man with a Movie Camera*, *Three Songs of Lenin* sought to glorify the Soviet lifestyle through the camera’s superior depiction of reality. However, Vertov’s subject matter changed significantly from his earlier work. *Three Songs of Lenin* clearly moves away from the depiction of reality in *The Man with a Movie Camera*, which concentrated on a more collective view of socialism in the Soviet Union, the glory of modern technology, and the Soviet people as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup> Michelson, *Kino-Eye*, 115.

<sup>3</sup> Michelson, *Kino-Eye*, 126.



Instead, *Three Songs of Lenin*, changes the focus from the broad to the specific, and in many cases from the masses, to the leader. The trend is not dissimilar to Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*, which glorified strong leadership and centralized power. In fact, the film can be read as a manifestation of the cult of Lenin and Stalin. The deification of Lenin after his death was part and parcel to Stalin's increasing power, and *Three Songs of Lenin* contributes to this process by focusing on the power of individuals, rather than the collective.

The cults of Lenin and Stalin were a feat of historical revisionism in themselves. Stalin's consolidation of power, in part, rested upon his ability to affirm his role as a legitimate and necessary leader. In Stalin's case, he sought to manufacture a history and personality for himself that was more fictional than based on reality.<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Tucker notes that Stalin's path towards securing his place atop the Communist party hinged upon his ability to associate himself with previous communist philosophers. Tucker argues that "the holy quartet -- Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin..together became the symbolic centerpiece for Stalinist thought and culture."<sup>5</sup> He adds that "if Marxist philosophy was the first area Stalin selected for building the stately edifice of the Stalin cult, party history was the second."<sup>6</sup> Tucker's description of the Stalin cult implies an important connection that is visible in *Three Songs of Lenin*. The cult of Stalin was itself predicated upon the creation of the cult of

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<sup>4</sup> As an example of Stalin's creation and manipulation of his biography see Alfred J. Reiber. "Stalin, Man of the Borderlands." in *The American Historical Review* 106 no. 5, (2001): 1651-1691.

<sup>5</sup> Robert C. Tucker, "The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult," *The American Historical Review* 84 no. 1 (1979): 352.

<sup>6</sup> Tucker, "The Rise of Stalin's Personality Cult," 352.

Lenin, which created a false history of the Lenin and the Soviet Union, which Stalin used, in turn, to justify his rule.

Nina Tumarkin notes that the Lenin cult was “only partially regulated” at its inception.<sup>7</sup> However, after his successors recognized its power as a tool of control and self promotion, it became a consciously and methodically espoused concept by Stalin and others. “At the very least,” Tumarkin argues, “the organized cult of Lenin was to be plainly a display of power by those who wielded it.”<sup>8</sup> Stalin manipulated the Lenin cult to evoke emotions sympathetic to his nationalistic and authoritarian cause, not unlike those expressed in *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*. Thus, although the cult was explicitly an expression of loyalty to a fallen comrade, it was also an expression of loyalty to a myth. Stalin exploited the myth to transfer the outpouring of support of Lenin to himself. In 1934, when *Three Songs of Lenin* was released, Jeremy Hicks notes that “the cult of Stalin was eclipsing the cult of Lenin.”<sup>9</sup> During this period of increasing authoritarianism and revisionism, a film about the founder of the Soviet Union became subordinated to Stalinist ideals.

The pseudo-narrative of *Three Songs of Lenin* mirrors the false narrative of succession created and dispersed throughout the Soviet Union by Stalin. As previously mentioned the film begins by focusing on Lenin himself, but slowly and subtly shifts to Stalin and his accomplishments. While Lenin is certainly the most prominent figure in the film, Stalin’s achievements in the period following Lenin’s

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<sup>7</sup> Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 207.

<sup>8</sup> Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!*, 208.

<sup>9</sup> Hicks, *Dziga Vertov*, 91.

death actually become the focus by the film's conclusion.<sup>10</sup> While Lenin is celebrated and serves as a motivation for the Soviet people throughout the film, his legacy is shown in montage with Stalin's accomplishments.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Lenin becomes a political symbol in the film, as much as a historical political figure. However, even as Vertov appears in lock step with Stalinism, he continued to assert himself artistically through montage in each "song."

Vertov's use of montage has several important implications for the film, including how it revises the history of Lenin, Stalin's rise to power, and particularly life in the non-Russian Soviet republics. Historical revisionism in *Three Songs of Lenin* should not only be attributed to Stalinism, but also to Vertov's use of montage. Unlike Vertov's depiction of Soviet life in *The Man with a Movie Camera*, which requires a somewhat sophisticated analysis of documentary film to properly understand the film as historical in nature, the historical revisionism in *Three Songs of Lenin* is far more readily apparent. The first song, quite short in length, likens the darkness of the Muslim woman's veil to the darkness of ignorance, and contends that Lenin was responsible for removing their veils, and thus their ignorance. The second song deals with Lenin's death and life (in that order, the importance of which is discussed below), and the process which created the cult of Lenin.<sup>12</sup> The final song glorifies life in the Soviet Union after Lenin's death, and attributes, implicitly, much of this progress to the guidance of Stalin.

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<sup>10</sup> Hicks, *Dziga Vertov*, 100.

<sup>11</sup> Several examples of which will be specifically discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>12</sup> Though it is never articulated as such by Vertov.

The first song, “My face was in a dark prison,” cites Lenin by name several times, though does not actually feature images of him. Vertov uses techniques of montage throughout the section, most significantly in relation to his metaphor of unveiling and enlightenment. Immediately following a sequence portraying first Muslims in prayer, and a veiled woman on a horse, apparently in a state of confusion, Vertov cuts to an unveiled young girl who appears to be reading from the works of Lenin.<sup>13</sup> Through the use of montage in this scene, Vertov makes several claims that exist outside the explicit message of Lenin as a harbinger of knowledge.<sup>14</sup> First, implicit to the scene is that the unveiling process was immediate and peaceful. After Lenin’s word spread to the area, the film would lead its viewer to believe, the power of his words alone changed the culture so severely as to overturn centuries of practice. In reality, of course, unveiling and literacy were not so easily obtained by women.<sup>15</sup> This point, made through montage, is also an expression of socialist realism. The world portrayed in the first song is socialism as it should be, rather than as it was. The first song then, shows the point of contact between Vertov’s montage, and socialist realism. In this case the two forms create historical revisionism together through what is shown in the frame, and what is implied by moments of montage.

Vertov also uses montage to implicate religion as an arbiter of ignorance.

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<sup>13</sup> *Kino Eye and Three Songs of Lenin*, DVD, directed by Dziga Vertov, (1924 and 1934; Chatsworth, CA: Image Entertainment, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> I say explicit here because, unlike *Man with a Movie Camera*, which is devoid of title screens after the introduction, Vertov does not shy away from using them in *Three Songs of Lenin*. Thus, the main message is clear. However, the inclusion of explicit meaning titles does not preclude secondary meanings from arising.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919-1929*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 275. See chapter seven “Patterns of Popular Response: Implications of Tension-Inducing Action” for a more in depth discussion of male and female responses to Soviet interference and unveiling.

The darkness of ignorance is associated, through montage, with religious faith. This is not surprising when considering that the Soviet Union was an atheistic state. Yet, it is ironic given Nina Tumarkin's "Religion, Bolshevism, and the Origins of the Lenin Cult." It was the Russian peasants' inclination towards religion and authority, as well as the Soviet government's capitalization on this knowledge, that allowed the Lenin cult to flourish throughout the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> Tumarkin contends that "from the moment of Lenin's death, the assertions of his immortality became the central focus of his cult."<sup>17</sup> The similarity to Christ, in this case, is obvious to most observers, and no doubt played a role in the acceptance of the Lenin cult. However, Vertov's condemnation of religion in the first song implies that Lenin and his work were antithetical to religion. Lenin was genuinely against religion, though ironically, the second song shows his deification.

The beginning of the second song, "We Loved Him," deals with the immediate mourning of Lenin's death and an outpouring of sadness, as well as the conviction to continue in the realization of his ideals. However, the tone of the song quickly turns away from his death, and towards his leading role in the creation of the Soviet Union. In this way, Lenin's death is actually subordinated to his life. Vertov also includes the first shots of Lenin that appear in the film in the second song. Whereas the first song was about his ideology, the second song is undoubtedly about the man himself. Importantly, the first image seen of Lenin is of his dead body,

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<sup>16</sup> Nina Tumarkin, "Religion, Bolshevism, and the Origins of the Lenin Cult," *Russian Review* 40 no 1, (1981); 37.

<sup>17</sup> Tumarkin, "Religion, Bolshevism, and the Origins of the Lenin Cult," 37.

shown in montage with weeping women, mourning his death. As the film turns towards Lenin's role in the revolution, Vertov focuses on footage of Lenin giving speeches and other shots where he is particularly animated.<sup>18</sup> After Lenin's death, the images of him alive portray a resurrection of sorts. However, curiously, the film takes a more somber tone near the end of the second song.

Lenin's dead body is shown again, though keeping with Vertov's earlier theme the body is shown in montage with a shot of Lenin while still alive, saluting. In a series of shots, Lenin's body is shown in montage with mourners, and twice, Stalin.<sup>19</sup> Here, the beginnings of the transfer of Lenin's legacy to Stalin are readily apparent. The theme of life after death remains. However, Lenin is no longer *resurrected*, but *reborn*, in the body of Stalin. Vertov's use of montage here is essential to this interpretation of the film. John E. Bowlt suggests that Stalin was preoccupied with the concept of immortality and sought to use Lenin's death as a catapult to eternal life.<sup>20</sup> Bowlt likens the transition of Lenin to Stalin to the succession of Pharaohs in Egypt, as well as the embalming of Lenin to preserve his body to mummification.<sup>21</sup> The suggestion of immortality through the transfer of power is made explicit by Bowlt, who noticed that "Nikolai Stoiarov's 1950 history of the mausoleum reinforces the message: 'The name of Lenin, written on the mausoleum, sounds as a call to battle, an appeal for victory. Lenin lives with us, he

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<sup>18</sup> *Kino-Eye and Three Songs of Lenin*, Dziga Vertov.

<sup>19</sup> *Kino-Eye and Three Songs of Lenin*, Dziga Vertov.

<sup>20</sup> John E. Bowlt, "Stalin as Isis and Ra: Socialist Realism and the Art of Design," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 24 (2002): 62.

<sup>21</sup> Bowlt, "Stalin as Isis and Ra," 60.

leads us. Stalin is Lenin today.”<sup>22</sup> Vertov’s use of montage, depicting Stalin as the successor to Lenin, state far more than the images alone, which could imply that Stalin was merely one of the mourners. Finally, Lenin is linked to timelessness when several Soviets citizens are depicted as showing their respect for Lenin and hold a banner reading “Lenin is our immortality.”<sup>23</sup> “We Loved Him” not only rewrites the history of the transition from Lenin to Stalin as uncontested, but also portrays Lenin and thus Stalin as nearly god like figures through which the ideals of communism can be realized. The third song, “In a Big City of Stone,” focuses on the successes of the Soviet Union in creating a socialist paradise since the death of Lenin.

“In a Big City of Stone” moves away from the religious undertones of the second song to the material accomplishments of the Soviet Union. Many shots from the third song look as though they could appear in *Man with a Movie Camera*, glorifying technological progress and the workers which make it possible.<sup>24</sup> However, the third song may also be the film’s clearest example of socialist realism. In highlighting only the accomplishments of the U.S.S.R since Lenin’s death, the third song essentially portrays the Soviet society as it should be. Although the titles give the credit to Lenin for the country’s progress, the montage of technology, machinery and workers suggests glorification of the proletariat, and seems to be a small expression of Vertov’s resistance to the total glorification of the state at the expense of all else. Notably, much of the footage is actually from industrial projects

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<sup>22</sup> Bowlt, “Stalin as Isis and Ra,” 62.

<sup>23</sup> *Kino-Eye and Three Songs of Lenin*, Dziga Vertov.

<sup>24</sup> *Kino-Eye and Three Songs of Lenin*, Dziga Vertov.

that were completed after Lenin's death. Thus, the advancement depicted in this song implicitly occurred under the rule of Stalin. The infrastructure shown in montage with the workers that created it then, is a tribute to Lenin, rather than a product of his rule. The message is not contradictory, as it is implied that Lenin and Stalin have guided the Soviet people to their successes, even when it is the masses who labored at the actual work.

Most remarkable, however, is Vertov's use of interviews in the third song, which seem out of place with the rest of the film. The interviews, at first, of Soviet workers place value on the work of citizens, rather than the Soviet leadership. They are not, however, necessarily ordinary workers. Each is held as a paragon of the working class, and have completed a feat worthy of recognition. For this reason, the interviews are in some sense an early expression of the Stakhanovite movement which sought to drive workers to achieve nearly impossible results. The Stakhanovite movement did not begin until 1935.<sup>25</sup> The release of *Three Songs of Lenin* in 1934 makes the interviews consistent with the emphasis on individual heroes prior to Stakhanovism.<sup>26</sup> Often, the interviews are shown in montage with a statue of Lenin, or the same infrastructure which had already been recognized as a tribute to him and expression of his vision. In this way, even the individual testimonies make

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<sup>25</sup> R. W. Davies and Oleg Khlevnyuk, "Stakhanovism and the Soviet Economy," in *Europe-Asia Studies* 54 no. 6 (2002), 867.

<sup>26</sup> For an in depth discussion of Stakhanovism, see Lewis Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Implicit here is the same reemergence of the individual hero as noted in chapter three. Moreover, like *Man with a Movie Camera*, *Three Songs of Lenin* is making an argument socialist or Soviet personhood. For a discussion of how socialist realism modified existing images of Soviet personhood see Lilya Kaganovsky, "How the Soviet Man was (Un)Made," *Slavic Review* 63, no. 3 (2004): 577-596.



reference to Lenin. As the third song can not be read outside of the context of the earlier songs in the film, one can assume that any association with Lenin is an association with Stalin as well.

Jeremy Hicks argues that “the use of folklore in *Three Songs of Lenin* conveys a strong sense of anonymous collective power, rather than individual heroism.”<sup>27</sup>

While Hicks is correct in noting that folklore plays a large role in the film and helps to give a sense of the collective in certain shots and scenes, he fails to take into account the larger context of the film, and the cults of Lenin and Stalin which pervade it. Vertov’s expressed his individuality by continuing to use montage alongside socialist realism. Stalinism and socialist realism played a large role in shaping the film, yet not at the total expense of Vertov’s own ideology and theory.

Like Eisenstein, Vertov shaped his theory around the changing political climate during the Cultural Revolution and after in response to Socialist Realism. The result is film which bridges earlier Soviet ideology with Stalinism. The historical revisionism in *Three Songs of Lenin* exists both in the socialist realist depiction of the Soviet Union under Stalin, and the more subtle arguments that Vertov makes through montage. Whether it is the explicit revision of history which suggests that unveiling was a simple process introduced through the wisdom of Lenin, or the implicit argument that Stalin was the symbolically reborn Lenin, the editing and fabrication of Soviet history at the hands of Vertov was essential to the creation of *Three Songs of Lenin*. Though the cult of Lenin had begun to decrease in significance following the

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<sup>27</sup> Hicks, *Dziga Vertov*, 96.

rise of the Stalin's cult, Vertov's film reinforced the fiction of both. He ultimately created a work of art that reflected the competing ideas of the pre and post Cultural Revolution eras.

## Conclusion

Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov offer interesting insight into art in the Soviet Union and how artists were forced to change during and after the Cultural Revolution. Both directors made historical films which, both before and after the Cultural Revolution rewrote history to reflect their own ideals as well as those of the Soviet government. They were proponents of montage, which was heralded as true socialist art, and just as quickly decried as formalism and discouraged. Montage, of course, was not subject to a single set of rules and both filtered their use of montage through their own experience. Their theories about film, while similar, were also in conflict, most notably in their disagreement between the usefulness and desirability of acted film. To Eisenstein, acted film led to the ability to create just the meaning he presupposed, while Vertov sought to show the truth through documentary, non-acted, film. Their similarities and differences as theorists and film makers makes comparing their progress a fascinating look at how individuals dealt with the oppressive nature of the Cultural Revolution and attempted to assert their individuality in the face of Stalinism. Of course, the films did not exist in a vacuum, and were not influenced only by Soviet policies. They were also influenced by the evolving society around them, which reflected and often times rejected the changing values of the Soviet government.

Eisenstein changed from films that were dominated by intellectual montage such as *October*, to much more simply filmed and edited films such as *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*. *October's* statue and metal peacock scenes show Eisenstein's desire and ability to create meaning through the juxtaposition of

unrelated images. The meaning created in this way, Eisenstein thought, expressed the truth of socialism in a way that previous film methods and art forms could not. Unfortunately, it was short lived, as the changes brought by Stalin forced him to change as well. As this study has shown, Eisenstein modified his theory, and in that sense defended it. His creations following the Cultural Revolution are distinct from earlier films, though they share a common heritage based on Eisenstein's theories.

Eisenstein's carefully articulated hierarchy of montage gave him numerous options for incorporating his theories into his films during the 1930s and 1940s. Eisenstein continued to use montage in *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible* to control pacing and audience reactions, as well as including occasional moments of intellectual montage. As shown in chapter three, Eisenstein's concessions to socialist realism did not mean an end to montage in his film. Both the form and content of his later films continued to feel the impact of montage, intellectual and otherwise. The association of Ivan with the masses through the use of montage in the final scene of *Ivan the Terrible*, and the control of pacing on the battle on the ice in *Alexander Nevsky* reveal that Eisenstein would not give up his film theory. Vertov demonstrated a similar progression in his work.

*The Man with the Movie Camera* was truly an experimental film that combined Vertov's belief in the superiority of documentary footage with his ideas of montage as the ideal method of editing film to show the truth as seen by the movie camera. Much as Eisenstein did in *October*, Vertov sought to portray the truth of socialism through film. His focus on the theme of awakening conveys the sense of

seriousness with which Vertov approached his work. Not only was socialism an awakening for the people of Russia, but it was also an awakening for art and in particular film. Vertov's work in the first full decade of the Soviet Union's existence can be seen as a reflection of the changes taking place in Soviet society during the 1920s. Similarly the Cultural Revolution, Socialist Realism and Stalinism helped to shape Vertov's work in the 1930s.

Like Eisenstein, Vertov insisted that his theories were compatible with socialist realism, and adjusted where necessary to fit within the new requirements. *Three Songs of Lenin* is not nearly the experimental film that *Man with the Movie Camera* was. However, it stayed true to Vertov's love of documentary film, and continued to create meaning through montage. As the final chapter shows, Vertov continued to use montage throughout the film, in some cases going against the prevailing ideals of Stalinism, and occasionally expressing them as well. His use of documentary footage remained the prominent feature of his work, as Vertov was less willing to compromise in this area of his film. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s both Eisenstein's and Vertov's films contained a strong historical component. Regardless of their theories or political pressure, their films were revisionist in nature.

Each film discussed in this study revises, edits or sought to create the history of the Soviet Union in some way. The fictionalization of events, whether they were real events or entirely fabricated, was an inherent if not articulated component of both Eisenstein and Vertov's theories of montage. The desire to find a socialist art form capable of expressing the truth according to socialism led both directors to express

truth only from an ideological point of view. They not only inaccurately displayed historical events, but also assigned to them false emotions, ideological conclusions and outcomes. Whether it was the implied mass involvement in the Russian Revolution in *October*, the industrialization in *Man with a Movie Camera*, the fictionalized relationship between Ivan and his subjects in *Ivan the Terrible*, or the deification of Lenin and the transference of immortality to Stalin in *Three Songs of Lenin*, the creation of meaning through montage necessarily led to the creation of false history as well.

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