Natascha Drubek

Alexander’s III severed head in Moscow (1918)

*Exegi Monumentum Revolutionis – On Eisenstein’s October (1927)*

My essay will look into the cinematic representation of Revolution in Sergei Eisenstein’s film *Oktiabr’ / October*, a film which not only was commissioned by the Party Anniversary Commission¹ to celebrate the

¹ The “October Anniversary Commission of the Presidium of the Central Executive
decennial of the October Revolution but also had a decisive impact on the revolutionary development of film history and theory. I will explore how Revolution can be re-enacted and shown in the medium of cinema, and how this medium is capable of not only staging or even falsifying history in a pseudo-documentary form, but also retain the dialectical gist of the philosophy behind the political revolution. The motifs I will draw upon for my analysis will be sculptures and monuments.

For Eisenstein Revolution on film was never merely the screen narrative of the historical event, more importantly, it was a philosophical concept confronting him with the challenge of its representation – bearing in mind his particular Soviet audience that in significant parts then was still illiterate. It was this kind of viewer he wanted to introduce to philosophical thinking in a visual form, to teach him and her the dialectics of Marxism using a montage sequence intelligible to everybody. *October* introduces a new system of visual argumentation which Eisenstein in his influential article “The Dramaturgy of Film Form,” written for the 1929 “Kinofot” exhibition in Stuttgart, described as “film language.” In close connection with the metaphor of individual film shots as parts of a syntactical continuum we find in Eisenstein’s theoretical works several attempts to underline the ability of cinema to replace verbal language and transcend conventional types of writing. In order to fully understand Eisenstein’s treatment of Revolution in the medium of film, we need to recall the meaning of his term “intellectual montage.”

Committee of the USSR” was headed by the Bolshevik N. Podvoiskii who also plays in the film.

2 In the German original: “Dramaturgie der Filmform;” The Russian title is “Dramaturgiia kinoforme.” The essay was later revised and published in English in *Film Form*, where it had the alternative title "The Dialectical Approach of Film Form.”
“Intellectual Montage” in October

According to Eisenstein film montage can perform dialectics through the combination of unrelated (often colliding) images creating a synthetical ‘third’ through the editing of shots:

The combination of two ‘representable’ objects achieves a representation of something that cannot be graphically represented. For example, the representation of water and an eye signifies ‘to weep’; a representation of an ear next to a door means ‘to listen’; a dog and a mouth mean ‘to bark’; […] a knife and a heart mean ‘sorrow’, and so on. But this is montage! It is precisely what we do in cinema. Juxtaposing representational shots […]3

This newly created ‘third’ in itself is often invisible (an abstract concept such as “sorrow”) or cannot be represented for reasons of decorum or censorship. “Intellectual montage” stimulates and creates the dialectical process of juxtaposing two unrelated images to produce a thought in the viewer's mind.

3 Eisenstein, Beyond the Shot, 139.
A challenging abstract idea would certainly be “revolution” which in *October* is created over and over again by different juxtapositions many of which draw upon cultural erudition. One example from the beginning of the film is the colliding montage of the statue of Emperor Alexander III intercut with the raised scythes carried by the masses; together they form a cinematic ideogram of the lethal aspect of the October Revolution based on the personification of Death, the Grim Reaper.4

However, the “most famous example of ‘intellectual montage’ in the history of cinema”5 is *October’s* sequence of the gods, “a sudden cut from the round face of a Japanese deity to a shot dominated by rays spreading from the Baroque statue of Christ was meant to create a kinesthetic sensation of an exploding bomb.”6 The director believed that the rapid alternation of these two figures representing divinities has an optical effect in the perception of the viewer. Here, the tertium quid emerging from the montage is a reference object which is difficult to obtain or costly and dangerous to produce in this case.

Eisenstein’s montage of similar and antithetic iconic features (round vs. rectangular) is shaped by the dialectical process of identifying all sacred figures as one. The anti-religious “series” of idols, gods and the Christian Son of God constituted a breach of pre-revolutionary censorship, and was most probably, even in the 1920s, perceived as blasphemous by the audiences. The message of the Divinity montages would be: the figure of Christ despite its gilded aureole is a thing no different from the wooden idols, multiple-armed Shiva or the smiling porcelain Buddhas. Many figures and idols do not add up to a synthetical

4 For a different interpretation of the scythes cf. Tsivian, Hyperkino Commentary for *October*, Footnote 3, who links them to the strong peasant element in the army and Eisenstein’s film The General Line. A combination of both, the agricultural tool as a metonymy of the peasant uprisings and the scythe as a personification of Death would most fully describe the impression of this “intellectual” game Eisenstein plays.

5 Tsivian, Hyperkino Commentary for *October*, Footnote 19.

6 As described by Yuri Tsivian, ibid.
concept of God but rather delete or neutralize each other in a negation of a constructive dialectics.

Viktor Shklovskii in his 1928 analysis of the film explains the reduction of different godlike figures to one paradigm, enabling Eisenstein to connect the anti-religious parade of the gods to a political topic, expressed in another “series” of representations – the sculptures in October. The director in the opening shots of October confronts us with a massive monument to imperial power, followed by sculptures on a much smaller scale depicting rulers of the past and present, such as Napoleon Bonaparte, and by analogy the current head of the Provisional government, Kerenskii, accompanied by his double, the general Kornilov.

These “two Bonapartes”, as they are called in a film intertitle, in Russian history are – quite literally – figureheads of Restoration:

He arranges things into series, transitioning, for instance, from god to god until he reaches a phallic African idol, and through this idol – the idea of the “statue,” which is in turn associated with Napoleon and further with Kerenskii, via a certain deflation. All these items resemble

Figure 2. “Two Bonapartes” / “Dva Bonaparta.” (Film still from October, 1927)
each other only in one aspect – they all represent divinity – but they differ from each other in their semantic timbre.7

Shklovskii sees the Divinity sequence directly related to the “idea of the statue”, which takes us to our next chapter analyzing the shapes and functions of sculptures in October in relation to the history of the 1917 revolution(s).

The “idea of the statue” in October

Figure 3. Poster for October by Voronov & Evstafiev, 1927. http://ljrate.ru/post/206/1106949

Today, it is hardly known that revolutionary activity in 1917 began on International Woman’s Day 1917 (8 March [February 23]). The February

7 Brik, Osip; Pertsov, Victor; Shklovskii, Viktor: The ring of the LEF. In: Novyi Lef. 1928, No. 4, 27-36, 35.
Revolution started out in Petrograd with strikes and bread riots as a protest against the government's food rationing. Women of all classes played an important part in the uprising, recruiting female and male workers for the strike; the February Revolution led to the abdication of the last Tsar, Nicholas II on 15 [2] March 1917. The film *October* not only omits this achievement but also minimizes other activities of the “Bourgeois Democratic” Revolution, as the Bolsheviks would later describe the events in February-March 1917.

The film introduces the fall of imperial rule in highly symbolic sequences showing the dismembering of an imperial sculpture as different parts of the body crumble and this monument to the old regime is pulled down. This attack is carried out by the people storming a monument to Alexander III, the father of Nicholas II.

Apart from the fact that the toppling of this particular monument happened no earlier than May 1918, it had nothing to do with any of the revolutionary activities in Petrograd: the monument was, after all, standing in Moscow. Women, on the other hand, do play a role in *October*, albeit a negative one, representing mainly the “Bourgeois” element, a reference to those middle-class feminists who mobilised working class women to demonstrate for women’s suffrage. Additionally, women are ridiculed in the Death Battalion sequences, dressed in their underwear, protecting in vain the weak Provisional government at the Winter Palace.

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8 Engel, Women in Russia, 130.
Figure 4a. Photo (June 1917): “Women’s battalion of death”

Figure 4b. Photo: Women soldiers having their heads shaved. https://im0-tub-ru.yandex.net/i?id=f9c1dc14cbb3f95587eb79c4e6d88d94-l&n=13
Eisenstein seems neither interested in the geographical authenticity of the event nor in chronology or historical accuracy. Instead he chooses freely those motifs which promise to have the strongest visual impact and symbolic value.

Why does October bother to show the assault on a sculpture in Moscow if it could have re-enacted the removal of the last Emperor from the capital Petrograd and his arrival in the Urals as shown in this 1927 painting:
We will return to this question later since the answers can be found in political circumstances on the one hand and artistic prefigurations of the substitution of real people by sculptures on the other.

What is striking in Eisenstein’s film on rebellion, upheaval, and revolution is the central position monuments and sculptures inhabit. The quintessence of a sculptural work is its immobility as well as by representational capacities allowing a realistic mimesis of the object or person referenced. Often this representation is connected with a larger-than-life augmentation as was the case with both statues of Alexander III erected by his son in Moscow and the capital. The lack of movement of a statue perfectly embodied the gravitas of the Emperor of “all the Russias.”
Sculpture as an artistic form shows a certain propensity to serve most readily the despot who wishes to legitimize their rule by erecting statues to commemorate and celebrate either their predecessors (Louis XVI, Nicholas I and II) or themselves (Napoleon). When it comes to material and media properties, statues seem to be very far removed from moving images. Eisenstein’s choice of a giant pre-revolutionary sculpture (the statue of a seated Alexander) and a multitude of statues showing post-revolutionary restorers (white statuettes of Napoleon) as material for his film on the Bolshevik revolution seems to be contradictory and even provocative.
Figure 7. Postcard of the monument to Alexander III as seen from the embankment of the Moskva with the Cathedral Khrista Spasitel’ on the left. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Monument_to_Alexander_III_Moscow_1.jpg

Of interest will be two monuments which Nicholas II had erected in honor of his father and predecessor on the throne, Alexander III. One was unveiled in 1909 in St. Petersburg, the other three years later; both occasions were recorded on film for the Court chronicles to which Eisenstein had access. In October, as I already pointed out, the main iconoclastic activity revolves around the latter monument in Moscow, even though the Revolution took place in Petrograd.

The large sculpture by A.M. Opekushin (also responsible for the Pushkin statue in Moscow) was placed on an extraordinarily steep pedestal between the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and the Moskva river and unveiled on 30 May 1912.\(^9\) However, its lifetime was short, only four years. The pedestal survived until 1931 when it was removed in

\(^9\) http://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/DEKRET/18-04-12.htm
connection with the demolition of the Cathedral. It had to cede to the preparation for the foundation pit of a building for the Palace of the Soviets (Dvorets Sovetov) for which the planning began as early as 1922. The project chosen in the early 1930s was of gigantic proportions – a huge pedestal topped by a sculpture of Lenin – combining aspects of preceding monuments, Alexander’s column in St. Petersburg carrying an Angel and the stairs leading to the high pedestal to Alexander III in Moscow:

Figure 8. Project for the Palace of the Soviets (1930), never built. https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:Dvorec-sovetov1950.jpg
It was the large Moscow monument to Alexander III which was bound with ropes and dismantled in the presence of a cheering crowd in 1918, following a “Decree on the monuments of the Republic” from 12 April 1918. The removal of the imperial statue was followed by the liquidation of the current Emperor. In July 1918 the last Romanov Tsar together with his family and entourage were secretly murdered in Ekaterinburg.

When Eisenstein wanted to film the falling apart of imperial power in


11 Slater, The Many Deaths of Tsar Nicholas II, 153.
1927, he had “a papier-mâché replica” erected.12

One answer to the initial question “Why does October attack a Moscow sculpture?” lies in the history of the performing arts in Imperial Russia and the monitoring of Court chronicles by a strict censorship which did not allow professional actors to impersonate divine rulers, either on the theatrical stage or for a film. This ban on representation applied to all Russian tsars going back to and including Alexander I., whom we will discuss later in connection with Pushkin’s aversion to imperial and military monuments.

Just as on the theatrical stage, it was forbidden for an actor to impersonate the Emperor on film. When the Romanov dynasty in 1913 wished to celebrate their tercentenary, the Drankov film studio was at odds with how to comply with the rules and deliver a celebration of the rulers at the same time. The experienced theatre set designer Evgenii Bauer was entrusted with this problem which lead to his first engagement in cinema.13

12 Tsivian, Hyperkino Commentary for October, Footnote 1. The 1912 clip is included into the Footnote 1.

13 Bauer (1865-1917) was a pre-revolutionary film director who not only transferred Russian symbolism to the screen but also introduced several aesthetic and technological advances during his short career between 1913 and 1917 (Drubek, Russisches Licht, 2012). Bauer had studied at the Moscow Academy of Art with the Art Nouveau architect Franz (Fedor) Shekhtel, who had designed the plinth for the St. Petersburg monument to Alexander III which measured more than 3 m (see below).
For the film *Trechosotletie tsarstvovaniia doma Romanovykh / The Tercentenary of the Rule of the Romanov Dynasty* (1913, directed by A. Ural’skii and N. Larin) Bauer used busts and sculptures, transferring a stage tradition to the cinema in order to circumvent censorship limitations when portraying Royalty.

In this film Alexander III is represented both by a framed photograph and another monument, this time on horseback, sculpted by Paolo Troubetskoi, shown in the documentary shots of its unveiling in St. Petersburg filmed in 1909. In the panegyric film by the Drankov studio he was the first Emperor who was introduced neither through impersonation (as the old Tsars) nor a bust – as had been the case with the preceding 19th century rulers. Alexander III was thus presented twofold through modern camera media: in a 1909 film of the unveiling of his equestrian sculpture and an authentic photograph. In this cinematic celebration of the Romanovs, Nicholas II is the first Emperor to be seen in authentic moving images, which drew upon the French film material of his coronation festivities from May 1896.

Even though the unveiling of the seated Alexander in Moscow had been filmed in 1912 by Pathé as well, Eisenstein did not use any of this authentic chronicle material, and *October* does not seem to be inspired by it. The inspiration comes from the substitution of a person with a sculpture in the Russian film made by the Drankov studio and having to deal with the specific regulations of Court Censorship. Eisenstein quotes former cinematic practices of using statues and genres connected to monuments.

Eisenstein’s film about the Russian Revolution does not start with the fall of the Tsar himself, instead with an attack on one of the most iconic representations of imperial rule, originally standing not far from the Kremlin, the old center of power, renewed in the USSR.
In 1927, when choosing historical monuments as a backdrop, motif and object for his film *October*, Eisenstein was not interested in the Petrograd equestrian statue even though it could have formed a series with the small-scale sculpture of Napoleon on a horse shown later and earlier targets of the iconoclasm of the French Revolution.

Instead, his production puts enormous effort in recreating and rebuilding an already destroyed Moscow monument to Alexander III for the purposes of the film. Thus, Eisenstein transfers and applies his visual dialectics to the then capital of the Soviet Union, Moscow, as well. When in *October* Eisenstein addresses the theme of Revolution, it is therefore never purely historical, neither does it update itself through the choice of time and place of the revolutionary enactment of a Moscow uprising, which had never happened in this form. Through this shift

14 The space in front of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior had been in the 19th century designed as a memorial to the victory over Napoleon.
towards Moscow and the period after the Revolution, *October* seems to be referring to both 1917/18 and to 1927, to history as well as present time.

**Dismantling Royal Monuments in the Historical Perspective**

Notable cases of iconoclastic attacks on Royal statues in modern history happened in the American and in the French Revolutions. In Manhattan the statue of George III was removed as a symbolic act of dissolving all connection with the British Empire. Inspired by George Washington’s Declaration of Independence on July 9, 1776, citizens of New York City marched to Bowling Green and pulled down the larger than life equestrian statue of George. Lieutenant Isaac Bangs wrote in the *Pennsylvania Journal and the Weekly Advertiser*, July 17, 1776.

Last night the Statue on the Bowling Green representing George Ghewelph alias George Rex was pulled down by the populace. In it were 4,000 pounds of Lead and a Man undertook to take off 10 oz. of gold from the Superficies, as both Man and Horse were covered with Gold leaf. The Lead we hear is to be run up into musket balls for the use of the Yankees, when it is hoped that the emanations of the Leaden George will make as deep impressions in the Bodies of some of his red coated and Tone Subjects.

The mention of the “run up” lead being used as “musket balls for the use of the Yankees” who were striving to free America from the British establishes a model. It establishes a material nexus between the dismemberment and melt-down of the metal sculpture transforming it into ammunition of the revolutionaries: bullets, projectiles, and bombs. After all, most revolutionaries had no access to arms and *matériel*.

Cf. the source:
https://archive.org/stream/equestrianstatue01wall/equestrianstatue01wall_djvu.txt
The destruction of George’s leaden statue the metals of which later were recycled in different ways, was achieved with ropes – just as in October – as one can see in this contemporary illustration:

![Image](http://www.boweryboyshistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/114.jpg)

In France many churches and statues were destroyed during the Revolution by the revolutionary crowd. As a forerunner to October the most striking space formerly adorned by a Royal sculpture was the Place Louis XV, renamed Place de la Révolution where the guillotine was erected. In his phantasy Eisenstein joined the topographies of Paris and Moscow when he wrote: “How many times, upon passing the Monument to Alexander III, did I imagine “la veuve” – Dr. Guillotin’s machine – on its granite pedestal.”

16 Tsivian in his Hyperkino Commentary for October, Footnote 1. Eisenstein’s quote continues: “One desperately desires to be part of history! Now, what sort of history can make do without a guillotine?” Sergei Eisenstein. Izbrannye sochineniia v shesti tomakh. Vol. 1. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964, 273). The director’s interest in the Place de

The empty pedestal facing the guillotine had sparked Eisenstein’s imagination. In August 1792 on the Place de la Révolution the first step towards the abolition of the monarchy was the removal and melt-down of the metal sculpture of Louis XV upon his horse. This symbolic execution was followed by the real severance of the head of his grandson and successor, Louis XVI, several months later, in January 1793. The revolutionary guillotine was erected opposite the empty pedestal which once had supported the equestrian statue of his grandfather Louis XV creating a symbolic space of the rituals of the Revolution which later was called Place de la Concorde.

These instances of iconoclasm can be traced back to the Roman practice of obliteration of the memory of an individual, the damnatio memoriae. However, there is an indigenous and much older Russian
tradition of ridiculing and attacking idols, statues and representations of worldly power. As reported in the Primary Chronicle (Povest’ vremennykh let), the wooden statue of thunder god Perun formerly set up by Prince Vladimir, in 988 at the occasion of his Christianization of the Rus’ was publicly derided and thrown into the Dnepr river:

When the prince arrived at his capital [Kiev], he directed that the idols should be overthrown and that some should be cut to pieces and others burned with fire. He thus ordered that Perun should be bound to a horse’s tail and dragged along Borichev to the river. He appointed twelve men to beat the idol with sticks, not because he thought the wood was sensitive, but to affront the demon who had deceived man in this guise, that he might receive chastisement at the hands of men. Great art thou, O Lord, and marvelous are thy works! Yesterday he was honored of men, but today held in derision. While the idol was being dragged along the stream to the Dnepr, the unbelievers wept over it, for they had not yet received holy baptism. After they had thus dragged the idol along, they cast it into the Dnepr. [...] Having spoken thus, he ordained that churches should be built and established where pagan idols had previously stood. He thus founded the Church of St. Basil on the hill where the idol of Perun and the other images had been set, and where the prince and the people had offered their sacrifices.17

Mocking the sculpture of a former god who now is called a mere idol does not exclude the erection of new monuments to the current gods.

Why is the topic of religious sculpture so prominent in this film on Revolution, even though it was of little importance in the Soviet revolutionary situation? Religious beliefs in 1927 still were strong. Soviet anti-religious campaigns had not succeeded in eradicating the magical belief in the material representations of deities and revered leaders, i.e. different types of religious sculptures, idols, or relics. Apart from the fact that the film October seems to reflect more upon idolatry as a universal phenomenon than on anti-religious and esp. anti-Christian propaganda, the afore mentioned failure virtually explodes into the repetitive use of sculptures throughout the film. The Tsarist sculpture becomes an idol: sitting Alexander, the gods (standing, seated and

17 The Russian Primary Chronicles, http://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/chronicle.htm
equestrian), and the Napoleon statues (standing and equestrian) … Using the same art form to represent the political leader and God, the idols reveal that Eisenstein not only understood the meaning of the representation of the Russian Emperor but also of the Soviet Autocrat. Examples of the latter include Lenin’s embalmed body in 1927 lying on the Red Square, now transformed into a replacement figure for a Saint, the emerging Lenin statues in the 1920s, and Stalin whose cult of personality started forming in the wake of a lavish celebration of his 50th birthday in 1928.

It should be mentioned that in Russian traditional religious art three-dimensionality is an exception. The suspicion towards idols and sculptures lived on until the 20th century, when the lorry driver Nikandrov who played Lenin is criticized for looking like the statues of Lenin:

It is disgusting to watch, when a person strikes Lenin-like poses and makes similar gestures – for all the outward similarity, there is no hiding the inner emptiness. How right the comrade was who said that Nikandrov doesn't resemble Lenin, rather all of Lenin's statues.19

Alexander I – Pushkin’s “Sculptural Myth” – “Bonapartism”

A dislike for imperial monuments on the part of the Russian intellectual elite is analyzed by Roman Jakobson in his article “Puškin and His

18 On the cinematic support for the utopian ideas of reviving Lenin cf. my article: The Second Life of the Corpse (Lenin in the Films of Vertov): Das zweite Leben des Leichnams.
19 V. Maiakovskii, On cinema, 1927. “Отвратительно видеть, когда человек принимает похожие на Ленина позы и делает похожие телодвижения — и за этой внешностью чувствуется полная пустота, полное отсутствие мысли. Совершенно правильно сказал один товарищ, что Никандров похож не на Ленина, а на все статуи с него.” (Maiakovskii, O kino [1927], 42)
Sculptural Myth” (1937). Jakobson describes how poet Alexander Pushkin, “sworn enemy”\textsuperscript{20} of Alexander I, intentionally absented himself from the capital during the unveiling of the monument to the Tsar:

At the end of August 1834 Puškin left Petersburg so that he would not be forced to participate in the unveiling of Alexander's column […]. He notes this in his diary on November 28, and his aversion to the monument to Alexander I still reverberates a few lines later in the same note in his annoyed remark about the superfluousness and pointlessness of another, similar kind of monument, a column with an eagle, erected by Count S. P. Rumjancev at Tarutino in honor of the victory over Napoleon in the War of 1812.\textsuperscript{21}

Later one can read in the poem “Exegi monumentum” (1836) Pushkin’s dismissive lines on the column:

I’ve reared a monument not built by human hands.
The public path to it cannot be overgrown.
With insubmissive head far loftier it stands
Than Alexander's columned stone.\textsuperscript{22}

“Alexander's columned stone” (in Russian: Aleksandriiskii stolp) refers to a 25 meter high quarried granite column, which was erected in St. Petersburg in 1834 as a monument to the Emperor Alexander I by his younger brother Nicholas I who, after the failed Decembrist revolt, became one of the most reactionary rulers of Russia. At the time, it was considered the highest building in Europe, surmounting the bronze Colonne Vendôme in Paris, measuring 44.3 m – erected by Napoleon in his own honor for the defeat of Russia in Austerlitz in 1805.

The monument to Alexander (with the column measuring approximately 25.5 m) was 47.5 m high and it commemorated the Patriotic War of 1812 won against Napoleon’s army which had invaded Russia. The face of the angel statue on the column is said to bear

\textsuperscript{20} Jakobson, The Statue, 335.
\textsuperscript{21} Jakobson, The Statue, 336.
\textsuperscript{22} Translation by A. Z. Foreman. http://poemsintranslation.blogspot.de/2013/10/pushkin-exegi-monumentum-from-russian.html
similarity to the features of Emperor Alexander I. who is obliquely mentioned in Pushkin’s poem where the monument is a symbolical representation of autocratic power.\textsuperscript{23} Pushkin’s poem “Exegi monumentum” is anti-panegyrical and an ode to poetry as a superior instrument of memory, surpassing a monument cast out of metal. Pushkin quotes Horace’s ode “Exegi monumentum aere perennius” which predicts the poet’s, instead of the Emperor’s, fame: “I have raised a monument more permanent than bronze.”

In fact, it was Pushkin, who first conjured an “image of a moving crowd” around the monument, and with the lines “From step to step fly the idols” and “From the toppled columns the idols fall”\textsuperscript{24} seems to have started writing a script for Eisenstein’s Divinity sequence as part of the Russian Revolution toppling monuments.

As we can see, it is already in the treatment of monuments by Pushkin that the decisive topics and ideas come together in the motif of the sculpture – forming an overarching theme which Jakobson called the “sculptural myth.” The sculptural theme is intimately connected to the questioning of autocratic and despotic power by the ideas of Revolution\textsuperscript{25} which in Europe, at that time were represented by the French revolution. The development of the young republic, established by the Revolution, assumed halted, if not reversed by Napoleon Bonaparte who in 1804 had become the first emperor of the French. Thus, we have a multiple designation of the Napoleon sculptures in October. The historical ones are expressed in sculptural motifs: Napoleon and Alexander I are adversaries in the “Patriotic War of 1812”,
and the 19th century patriotic memorial on the Moscow embankment in front of the Cathedral was dedicated to the memory of the defeat of France, still the revered nation of La Révolution. The name Napoleon also stands for the beginning of “Bonapartism” in a Post-Revolutionary situation, which in the USSR would be increasingly identified by Stalin’s adversaries as his methods. Leon Trotsky named “Soviet Bonapartism”, owing “its birth to the belatedness of the world revolution”, as the reason for the “betrayal of the Revolution:”

Caesarism, or its bourgeois form, Bonapartism, enters the scene in those moments of history when the sharp struggle of two camps raises the state power, so to speak, above the nation, and guarantees it, in appearance, a complete independence of classes in reality, only the freedom necessary for a defense of the privileged. The Stalin regime, rising above a politically atomized society, resting upon a police and officers’ corps, and allowing of no control whatever, is obviously a variation of Bonapartism – a Bonapartism of a new type not before seen in history. It is no coincidence that the film October was one of the early victims of the rise of Stalinist censorship. Stalinism meant a return to an authoritarian state and a conservative culture. Stalin at that time was trying to get rid not only of Leon Trotsky, but also the “trotzkyite” opposition, and Eisenstein’s “intellectual” experiments seemed to wholeheartedly support a Permanent Revolution (the title of one of Trotsky’s books)

26 In The Revolution Betrayed (1936) Trotsky sees in Stalinist restoration – referring to Karl Marx’s use of the term – a form of Bonapartism, comparing Stalin with the French dictator Napoleon Bonaparte and his capture of the French state after the revolution. The book advocates another political revolution to overthrow Stalinist dictatorship.

Censorship 1913 and 1927: Monuments as Substitutions

The revolution shown in Eisenstein’s film reminds us of the fact that *revolutio* means “eternal recurrence“ which Hannah Arendt in her book *On Revolution* (1963) called “the ancient cycle of sempiternal recurrences […] based upon an assumedly ‘natural’ distinction of rich and poor.” Revolution as the “same irresistible force which makes the stars follow their pre-ordained paths in the skies” meant cyclical return to a former state applying not only to the post-revolutionary Bonaparte (Kerenskii or general Kornilov) but also Stalin. According to the memoirs of Eisenstein’s co-director Grigorii Aleksandrov he came to the editing room himself:

In the morning of November 7, we were busy polishing up the final cut of the film. *October* was to premiere in the evening of that day at a special ceremony in the Bolshoi Theater. […] At 4:00 pm, the door to our editing room opened, and there came in Joseph Stalin. Having greeted us in a familiar way, as if he had already known us, Stalin asked: ‘Do you have Trotsky in your film?’ ‘We do,’ said Eisenstein. ‘Show me the footage,’ Stalin demanded. Not predisposed for further conversation, Stalin went straight to the screening hall, with a stern, pensive air around him. Projectionists were absent. I myself went to the booth and began screening the reels that contained Trotsky. Eisenstein sat in the hall with Stalin. After watching the reels, Stalin informed us about the political actions of the Trotskyite opposition, who had launched an open campaign against the Bolshevik party and the dictatorship of the proletariat. In the end, he said: ‘The film with Trotsky can not be shown today.’ We managed to cut out three scenes with Trotsky. Two more episodes, from which we could not edit Trotsky out using the simple editor’s scissors, had to be left out all together – we re-edited them later, during November and December.

30 Aleksandrov, *Epokha i kino*, 104-105. Cf. Tsivian, Hyperkino Commentary, Footnotes 24 and 30 (with a still from an excised Trotsky scene). Stalin started to expel so-called Trotskyist opposition from all areas of Soviet life around this time. According to some sources the premiere at the Bolshoi was delayed until March 14, 1928.
The appearance of Trotsky (played by an actor) was one of the reasons why Eisenstein’s film could not be screened at the Bolshoi Theatre on November 7, 1927. Stalin had first censored *October* ordering changes and to have Trotsky excised from the 1928 premiere version, and his censorship apparatus in 1933 made sure that *October* was withdrawn from public distribution.31

The history of the October Revolution had to be re-written because of Trotsky’s decisive role as President of the Petrograd Soviet. Trotsky had been excluded from the Central Committee of the Communist Party in October and expelled from the Party in November 1927; like Nicholas Romanov, he was exiled. Trotsky had to leave for Kazakhstan at the end of January 1928. His expulsion from the USSR in 1929 was followed by his assassination by a NKVD agent in 1940.32

We have seen how the sculptural motif in Eisenstein’s “intellectual montage“33 draws upon literary sculptures, only to ironically inscribe itself into the system of preceding Russian cultural cinematic conventions which were the response to then defunct Censorship regulations: *October*, after all, in 1927 could have shown the arrest or even the murder of the current Tsar – instead of substituting the man for a statue, exactly as Evgenii Bauer had done in 1913.

Following the logic of French revolutionary iconography of the decapitation of the French king under the name of “Louis Capet” described above, Eisenstein, as director of the film *October*, must have taken into consideration a depiction of the execution of “Nicholas

32 Volkogonov, *Trotsky*, 466.
33 To understand all of these “intellectual” references of Eisenstein’s in *October* one needs considerable erudition and historical knowledge, as Viktor Shklovskii noted in his article “Oshibki i izobretenia” In: *Novyi Lef*, 1927, No. 11-12, 29-33) criticizing Eisenstein’s “nadumannost’.”
Romanov” which indeed was demanded by different groups in 1917 while the Provisional Government attempted to protect the Royal family. There is no historical footage of the shooting of Nicholas II and his family. Unlike Louis’s XV, these executions were not in a public space opposite monuments, which were later derided or destroyed in lieu of witnessing the end of the Emperor himself. The Bolshevik murders were committed out of sight, in remote Ekaterinburg, approximately 2000 km away from both, the equestrian and the seated monuments to Nicholas’ predecessor. The fact that Eisenstein resorts to substituting the end of the last monarch of Russia by a rhetorical shift to the monuments of his father, shows the difficulties his anniversary film was facing. To show the history of Revolution would and did result in a conflict with Soviet censorship.

Instead of re-enacting the end of the Romanovs, Eisenstein shows the destruction of a sculpture, as a megalomaniac personification of the Romanov dynasty – but still only a personification. This “intellectual” transfer from the real Romanov in Ekaterinburg to a statue of a Romanov, and finally its cardboard replica contains several cultural motifs from literary history: The reversal of the Don Juan motif which Pushkin used in his tragedy *Kamennyi gost’ / Stone guest* (1830) where borders between the dead and the living are torn down when the statue of the murdered takes the murderer’s (Don Juan) hand. Another reference is Pushkin’s poem *Mednyi vsadnik / Bronze Horseman* (1833) in which the equestrian statue of Peter the Great comes alive and pursues the doomed protagonist. While in Pushkin’s texts the statues kill, in Eisenstein’s *October* it is the statues which fall, attacked by the people and decapitated, just as it happened in the cities of the former Russian Empire in the thralls of Revolution:

In addition, *October* revives the genre of anniversary films which usually celebrate current rulers and their dynasties. In certain respects
October could be called a pastiche, or even a parody of Tercentenary of the Rule of the Romanov Dynasty and similar manifestations of Royal eulogies. Eisenstein’s October topples the 1913 cinematic monument to the Romanovs just as the real monument to Alexander was toppled by the Revolution.

Conclusion

The film October succeeded in cementing visually the Bolshevik narrative concerning the revolutionary year 1917, one of them the myth of the storm of the Winter Palace. The denigration of the Provisional Government took the visual form of ridiculing Kerenskii as a peacock and the grotesque image of women battalion. The depiction of Leon Trotsky’s historical role as the organizer of the uprising fell victim to the censor’s scissors. Other significant omissions relate to aspects of revolutionary terror as shown in the contemporary French film Napoleon (1927) by Abel Gance in great detail, thus highlighting the plight of the victims of all revolutions.

Through the use of monuments, Eisenstein reminds the viewer of the literary genre of the panegyric praise of the absolutist ruler. This cultural reference to a genre seems to be an “intellectual” one but can still be read as a political warning. After all, the praise of the ruler in the Russian past was hardly ever absolute. As I have shown in a comparison

34 There are more parallels between Eisenstein’s production of October and other pre-revolutionary films such as O borona Sevastopoli / The Defence of Sebastopol, 1911; Vasili Goncharov / Aleksandr Khanzhonkov), Russia’s first feature length film. This film was facilitated by the Emperor, an early fan of the cinematography, by allowing the film studio to use the Imperial army and navy for the military scenes. Eisenstein was able to enlist the Red Army, as well, and to use the Winter Palace for his enacting and staging revolutionary events.

35 In the late 1930s and 1940s Eisenstein successfully returned to this genre in his historical biopics on Alexander Nevskii and Ivan the Terrible.
of Pushkin’s and Eisenstein’s “sculptural myths,” the director’s primary reference in a historical perspective of cultural critique of Russian autocracy was Pushkin’s anti-panegyric “Exegi monumentum” which at the same time extolls poetry, or more broadly, art as the only legitimate and permanent monument deserving to enter the Memory of the Nation.

With his film, Eisenstein, was aiming at something similar: erecting a cinematic monument to the memory of the Revolution and thus to his own, rather complex understanding of true Revolution, which must overcome the never-ending cycles of the ancient revolutiones of world history.

Eisenstein illustrates in visual form how easily the course of Revolution is reversed. In a later sequence of October the director returns to the statue of Alexander III and magically reassembles the monument with a film trick: the toppled throne jumps back to the pedestal, limbs fly back and reattach to the torso, the severed crowned head takes its old place. If the pulling down with ropes had provided the revolutionaries and the viewer with a certain amount of shared delight in destruction, the reverse done by the film trick yields pure comic pleasure – but only for the audience. The reinstatement of the dismantled sculpture and with it autocracy, symbolizes the perils of the Post-Revolutionary situation and the establishment of a new autocracy.

Perhaps Eisenstein’s October even was reminding his contemporaries that the process of Revolution cannot be artificially halted and a New Revolution might raise its head again, this time in Moscow where – while Eisenstein was making his film on the October Revolution – from the ruins of the empire a new autocracy was forming itself on the old pedestal.

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