which were successful with the philistine public, have given inspiration to our reactionary film makers. They do not even want to hear about a film that reflects the Revolution: they think that the classical repertoire should furnish the basis of our cinema’s work.

A group of revolutionary workers in cinema is now joining together for an organised rejection of this trend. The battle has begun. Its outcome will to a significant extent depend on the Party’s final say on this matter. We are convinced that the Party will speak its mind and that the campaign against Soviet films will be halted.

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**Béla Balázs: The Future of Film**


Film can become a work of art only when photography itself ceases to be mere *reproduction* and becomes the *work itself*. When the work, the decisive creative expression of the emotions and the spirit, is realised not in staging and acting but through the *mediation of the photograph in actual shots*.

When the cameraman who does in fact make the picture also becomes its author, the poet of the work, the real film artist for whom acting and staging are the mere ‘occasion’ to which he relates, like a painter to a landscape (preferably the most beautiful one!), to a life only through his brush in a work of art, in the expression of his spirit. As long as the cameraman is last in line, cinema will remain the last of the arts. But the reverse is also true!

In insisting on the artistic integrity of the photograph itself I by no means have in mind the decorative beauty of the shot which, incidentally, you encounter very often and which is not infrequently accorded much greater significance than it deserves. The decorative charm of individual shots gives them something that is statically pictorial, immobile and wrapped up in itself: their ‘beauty’, as if petrified, is killed by a headlong rush of events in the form of a series of ‘living pictures’ through which the film as a whole staggers staccato fashion from one pictorial shot to another. Whereas the whole essence of cinema lies in the scope of the general rhythm of the passing events of real life.

No! I have in mind the hidden symbolic expressiveness, the poetic significance of the shot that has nothing to do with ‘decorativeness’ or ‘beauty’, that is not produced either by play or by the object (subject) of the photograph but is created exclusively by the methods and possibilities of photography.

I want to explain this through two recent examples, two wonderful shots from *Battleship Potemkin*.

The enthusiasm of the population of Odessa is shown by the increasing rhythm of the groupings of the enthusiastic masses and you begin to wonder: where do we go now? How can they possibly show more enthusiasm, joy or ecstasy?

Suddenly you see a sumptuous picture. Like a hymn of ecstasy that resoundingly interrupts what has gone before you see the skiffs sailing to meet the battleship. According to the plot they are carrying foodstuffs to the mutinous sailors. In the film it seems as if they are hurrying towards them with millions of hearts.

This delicate winged flight of hundreds of billowing sails evokes an image of the *collective display* of enthusiasm, joy, love and hope that no single face, even that of the greatest artiste, could express. It is not the plot motif but the photograph, the photograph itself taken beyond the bounds of the greatest lyricism and of such powerful figurative and poetic force that you can scarcely compare poetry itself with it!

It is in this hidden figurative quality of the shot, that has nothing in common with ‘decorative’ beauty, that the creative poetic opportunities for the cameraman lie concealed.

Then we see the sailing-vessels filmed from the deck. As if by some command they all lower their sails at once. The logical ‘content’ is that the boats have stopped near the battleship. The action of the picture suggests that a hundred sails, a hundred banners have been lowered before the hero. It is this figurative quality of the pictures that contains their original poetry, something that can occur only in a film, only through photography.

For two photographs on the same subject
would be deprived of any symbolic or poetic expressiveness if they were merely part of a vast landscape. Then they would not define the expression or physiognomy of the shot.

It is only through an undoubtedly conscious design that crams the whole shot full to its very edges with sails that these photographs acquire the unity of mimic expression and the significance of gesture that become the depth of experience and the sense of the film. There is not even any room for argument here: the poetic expressiveness of the scene is created not by the motif but by the photography.

But this is the only way that can help cinema to stop being a servant of art and become an independent art.

People say to me: both the camera positions in Potemkin that you have described were determined by the director and were not the original and independent ideas of the cameraman.

So be it. It does not matter in this context who is in charge of the photography. It makes no difference whether the director or the cameraman is the creator of such a work of art. The decisive factor is that cinema art of this kind emerges only through the lens; it can only be produced through photography.

Balázs’s article will surprise some people. Without its concluding stipulation: ‘The cameraman is the alpha and omega of film.’

We have such respect for foreigners that we might consider this a ‘blessing’. The idiots on the Moscow evening paper who accorded recognition to the exercises by young Frenchmen that Ehrenburg brought from Paris have declared it to be a ‘revelation’. These are sheer enfantillages – ‘children’s playthings’ – based on the photographic possibilities of the photographic apparatus. I am not exaggerating when I say that: if we have these ‘children’s playthings’ today, tomorrow they will be used to refurbish the formal methods of a whole branch of art (for instance, the ‘absolute’: the plotless film of Picabia, Léger or Chomette).

We are taking our conviction that light can come only from the West to the point of absurdity.

Professor Meller journeyed to London, to the egg market. To seek out standard eggs. He found unusual ones.

A search began.

Which farms, which ranches, which plantations? Where did this unusual breed of hens come from? Through a chain of Dutch egg wholesalers, agents, contractors and intermediaries they were traced to . . . the Novokhopysorsk district. This ‘Sirin’, ‘Alkonost’, ‘Firebird’ turned out to be a peasant’s hen.

A peasant’s hen from the Novokhopysorsk district. And a London market. . . .

But the hen is not a bird and Balázs is a great authority. Such a great authority that at a stroke his book is translated, published and paid for by two publishers. Why not, if it’s all right to make two films from the same material? One set at sea, one in the mountains, and so on.

To understand Béla Balázs’s position you have to bear two things in mind: the first and the second. The first is the basis (not the economic one), where and for whom his report was written. Filmtechnik is the organ of the German cameramen’s club. Give the cameraman his due or, more exactly, give him the position of respect that he deserves – that is its fighting slogan.

But that is already an integral feature of the economic basis.

The cameraman achieves. He is obliged to achieve ‘self-determination’. To us this kind of programme sounds somewhat savage.

What? In the cultured West?

Yes. In the cultured West. The steel jaws of competition in the Western metropolis are not accustomed to thinking of the ‘service staff’ as individuals. The director is just acceptable. But in fact the hero is of course the commercial director. And the cameraman? Round about where the camera handle ends, that’s where this . . . mechanic apparently begins.
In the advertisements for Potemkin even the heroic Prometheus wanted at first to leave Eduard Tisse out altogether. So strong is the tradition. That is not surprising because in the UFA-Haus – the multi-storey headquarters of Universum-Film-Aktiengesellschaft – they don’t even know men like Karl Freund or Rittau by sight. That’s how it is. They told us themselves. Whereas even we know them by sight. They are like the Novokhopyorsk eggs . . . only from the Cöthenenerstrasse, where UFA shares its enormous building with the ‘Vaterland’, the largest café in Berlin. And not for nothing. It is not coincidental that this corner is swarming with swastika-wearers (German Fascists) distributing news-sheets and leaflets. UFA will follow suit.

The Tägliche Rundschau of 12 May 1926 writes: ‘The declaration by the board of the leading German film organisation UFA of its truly national and common-sense interests is undoubtedly a slap in the face for the Committee of Censors: “In view of the character of the political inclinations of the film we decline to include The Battleship Potemkin in the distribution plan for UFA theatres.”’ On the same subject Film-Kurier writes that, ‘The wrath of a businessman who has missed the brilliant commercial success of the season is understandable.’ But in other ways UFA remains true to itself. And not only UFA but Phoebus and the others, whatever they are called.

The cameramen are setting up a union to defend the character of their activity.

That is the first thing. It explains the emphatic nature of Balázs’s positions.

The second thing concerns that same economic basis. Balázs is unaware of collectivism not just in film but also in its production, in work. There is nowhere that he can have seen it. He is due in the USSR in July. Then he’ll realise. In Germany man is to man as wolf to wolf and the link between the director and the cameraman is the bank-note. Unity through non-material interest is unknown there.

Balázs’s ‘starism’ is the individualism of bourgeois countries in general. They do not think beyond this in the West. Someone has to be the ‘star’. One person. Yesterday it was the actor. This time let’s say it’s the cameraman. Tomorrow it will be the lighting technician.

The idea that a film is the result of collective efforts goes to the devil.

What about the man who is nearly dying from the heat of the burning sun, who has to be sponged down, the man Kivilevich whom nobody has ever heard of, who is bent down under the weight of a lighting mirror and dares not move in case a shaft of light should run across little Abraham while he’s being trampled on the Odessa steps?

Or what about the heroism of the five striped assistants?! The ‘iron five’, taking all the abuse, shouting in all the dialects spoken by the crowd of 3,000 extras who were unwilling to rush around ‘yet again’ in the boiling sun. Leading this human current behind them. Regardless of its mood. By their own example. And what about the Odessa crowd itself?!

What of Kulganek, Stepanchikova, Katyuasha, Zhenya, who stayed up three nights in succession to edit the negative for the demonstration copy that was shown on 28 December in the Bolshoi. Do you realise what it means to edit a negative of 15,000 metres down to 1,600?!

Who remembers them? . . . Even in our own country. Cheap overtime workers who were viewed with suspicion by the work inspectorate. Their collective enthusiasm a mere debit in the ‘administrative plan’.

Balázs cannot yet conceive of the idea of the cameraman as a free member of a union of equally creative individuals, not of the cameraman as a ‘star’ but of the camera operator as a co-operator. There the camera crew is a transient pact between self-seeking individuals, here it is a ‘creative collective’.

In his approach Balázs makes the same mistake in his theoretical principles as he makes in his section on creative organisation. Because he dissociates himself from a rigid view of the externality of the shot, from ‘living pictures’ but bases his view on the figurative quality of the shot as the decisive factor, he falls into rigidity himself in his definition of methods of influence.

It cannot be the decisive factor. Even though it responds to such an undeniable sign as the specific result of specific (i.e. peculiar to it alone) characteristics of the instruments of production, i.e. it corresponds to the possibilities that are the exclusive prerogative of cinema. But Balázs’s individualism encourages him to dwell on this.

The shot itself as ‘star’.

His stipulation about the staccato effect between ‘beautiful shots’ is extremely woolly even
in the case of ‘symbolic shots’ because for Balázs the compositional harmony would be preserved in the film as a whole. He does not mention the conditions for a ‘genetic’ (constructive) amalgamation of the shots.

A long time ago, before The Strike was released, we wrote in Belenson’s ill-fated book Cinema Today opposing the individualism of the West: ‘a). down with individual figures (heroes isolated from the mass), b). down with the individual chain of events (the plot intrigue) – let us have neither personal stories nor those of people ‘personally’ isolated from the mass. . .’ It remains to add one more ‘down with’ – the personification of cinema in the individualised shot. We must look for the essence of cinema not in the shots but in the relationships between the shots just as in history we look not at individuals but at the relationships between individuals, classes etc.

In addition to the lens Balázs has forgotten another defining ‘instrument of production’: the scissors.

The expressive effect of cinema is the result of juxtapositions.

It is this that is specific to cinema. The shot merely interprets the object in a setting to use it in juxtaposition to other sequences. That is characteristic. Balázs always says ‘picture’, ‘shot’ but not once does he say ‘sequence’! The shot is merely an extension of selection. That is, the selection of one object rather than another, of an object from one particular angle, in one particular cut (or Ausschnitt, as the Germans say) and not another. The conditions of cinema create an ‘image’ [obraz] from the juxtaposition of these ‘cuts’ [obrez].

Because the symbolism (in the decent sense of the word!) of cinema must not be based on either the filmed symbolism of the gesticulation of the filmed person, even if there is more than one (as in theatre) or the autonomous pictorial symbolism of the emerging shot or picture (as in painting).

However strange it may seem, we must not look for the symbolism of cinema – for its own peculiar symbolism – in the pictorial or spatial arts (painting and theatre).

Our understanding of cinema is now entering its ‘second literary period’. The phase of approximation to the symbolism of language. Speech. Speech that conveys a symbolic sense (i.e. not literal), a ‘figurative quality’, to a completely concrete material meaning through something that is uncharacteristic of the literal, through contextual confrontation, i.e. also through montage. In some cases – where the juxtaposition is unexpected or unusual – it acts as a ‘poetic image’. ‘Bullets began to whine and wail, their lament growing unbearably. Bullets struck the earth and fumbled in it, quivering with impatience.’ (Babel.)

In cases other than those of traditional juxtaposition the meaning acquires its own autonomous sense, distinct from the literal, but no longer featuring as an element of its figurative quality (no literary Darwinism!). The notion of ‘swine’ has its own independent legitimacy and nobody thinks of the figurative fascination of the results of ‘swinish’ behaviour. Why? Clearly there is little demand. But figurative expression, generally speaking, forever represents a ‘mutation’ that emerges only in context. When someone says, ‘I feel crushed’, you still do not know whether ‘grief’ or a ‘tram’ is responsible. It becomes obvious from the context.

But Balázs gets bogged down in skiffs and his own definitions which are far removed from ours: the effect of hauling down the sails (simultaneously) appears to have been created by the symbolism of the collective gesture (Gebärde) and not by the lens. The way the image is cut [obrez], of course, is here exactly as decisive – no more, no less – in the final analysis as the Sebastopol fishermen’s union in toto once they are resolved and able to ‘symbolise’ this scene!

Nevertheless we must welcome Balázs for his good intention of constructing a cinema aesthetic on the basis of the possibilities that are unique to cinema, i.e. on pure raw material.

In this respect he has, of course, rather fallen behind the USSR. But we must not expect a man to discuss the ‘montage shot’ when this concept is generally unknown in Germany.

There are ‘literary’ shots and ‘pictorial’ shots, i.e. those that tell us what is happening (an acted sequence), and those that constitute a performed intertitle (the scriptwriter’s responsibility) or a series of easel paintings (the cameraman’s responsibility).

Germany is unaware of the director’s shot that does not exist independently but is a compositional shot, a shot that, through composition creates the only effect specific to cinema thought.
People still speak of ‘American montage’. I am afraid that the time has come to add this ‘Americanism’ to the others so ruthlessly debunked by Comrade Osinsky.

America has not understood montage as a new element, a new opportunity. America is honestly narrative; it does not ‘parade’ the figurative character of its montage but shows honestly what is happening.

The rapid montage that stuns us is not a construction but a forced portrayal, as frequent as possible, of the pursuer and the pursued. The spacing out of the dialogue in close-ups is necessary to show one after another the facial expressions of the ‘public’s favourites’. Without regard for the perspectives of montage possibilities.

In Berlin I saw the last two reels of Griffith’s 1914 film The Birth of a Nation: there is a chase (as always) and nothing formally different from more recent similar scenes. But in twelve years we might have ‘noticed’ that, apart from its narrative possibilities, such, ‘if you’ll pardon the expression, montage’ could offer the prospect of something more, something effective. In The Ten Commandments, where there was no special need to portray the Jews separately, the ‘Flight from Egypt’ and the ‘Golden Calf’ are shown without recourse to montage but, speaking technically, by long shots alone. Hence the little nuances of the composition of the masses, that is the action of the mass, go to the devil.

In conclusion, a word about Béla Balázs’s style. His terminology is unpleasant. Different from ours. ‘Art’, ‘creativity’, ‘eternity’, ‘greatness’ and so on.

Although some prominent Marxists write in the same dialect and this counts as dialectics.

It looks as if this style has become acceptable.

56 Alexander Dubrovsky: The Soviet Cinema in Danger

The Soviet cinema is now undergoing a major crisis. Suffice it to say that a number of film-producing organisations in Moscow and Leningrad have either ceased production altogether or reduced it to insignificant levels. In Leningrad the state film factory has been closed (laid off). Leningradsdino (formerly Sevzapkino), one of the earliest Soviet cinema organisations, is now in a state of depression, awaiting its merger with the Moscow organisations in the limited company that is now being formed. In Moscow the position is no better. Of the Moscow film-producing organisations both Proletkino and Kultkino – organisations whose very names indicate the great tasks confronting them – have ceased to exist since the spring. The remnants of these organisations have been transferred to Goskino. In the meantime Goskino is also suffering from a serious illness.

Goskino is curtailing production in one (the third) of its two Moscow factories. The first state film factory is still alive. But all its productions (The Traitor, The Wind and The Chestnut-Tree) have been completed and the new productions have not yet quite begun, despite the fact that half the summer shooting season has passed by. Thus, instead of Proletkino, Kultkino, the first, third and Leningrad film factories, which during the current season produced approximately fifty feature-length films, there remains in fact only the first Goskino factory, because the Goskino production plan envisages no more than ten films. This situation can only be described as catastrophic. Only Mezhrabpom-Rus and Gosvoyen-kinokino are in a healthier state.

The consequences of the crisis in film production will be felt in distribution in the immediate future. By the end of this year the entire existing supply of unreleased Soviet films (around twenty titles) will have been exhausted. Even now Sovkino, whose purchases abroad are limited, has been forced to re-release on to the market old rubbish like The Headless Rider, The White Moth, and so on.

It is first and foremost the network of cinema installations in workers’ clubs and of mobile rural projectors for the peasants that has grown in such an extraordinary way during the last year that will