

Jon Fauer, ASC

Special Report from Russia

FILM AND DIGITAL TIMES



Russian Cinematographer Style



Sergei Eisenstein. 1898-1948

Poster from "Battleship Potemkin"



A lot has happened since Sergei Eisenstein's classic "Battleship Potemkin" (1925, Mosfilm). The boom years beginning 2000 generated successful blockbusters like "Night Watch" ("Nochnoi Dozor," 2004, directed by Timur Bekmambetov, cinematography by Sergey Trofimov) and "Mongol" (2007, directed by Sergei Bodrov, cinematography by Sergey Trofimov). "Mongol" was nominated for the 2007 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film as an entry from Kazakhstan. This period of innovation also led to interesting Russian technology being used on major productions worldwide. For example, Filmotechnic (www.filmotechnic.com), founded by Anatoliy Kokush, designed and manufactured lightweight modular camera cranes (Cascade and Traveling Cascade) and gyro-stabilized remote systems (Flight Head, Russian Arm). But, back to Eisenstein.

Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein was born in January 1898. His father was an architect, his mother was the daughter of a successful merchant. He studied architecture and engineering, joined the Red Army in 1918 (his father supported the White Army), and worked on propaganda. In 1920, he moved to Moscow, began working on theatrical productions and writing about film theory and montage. The success of "Potemkin" was followed by "October" ("Ten Days that Shook the World").

In April 1930, he and his entourage (co-director/screenwriter Grigori Aleksandrov and cinematographer Eduard Tisse) arrived in Hollywood. Jesse Lasky and Paramount Pictures gave him a short-term contract for \$100,000. James Goodwin writes (in *Eisenstein at 100*), "They stayed in Hollywood to learn the new sound technology and advanced studio methods. Eisenstein looks upon the year 1930 as the close of the golden age led by 'the old romantic pioneers of the movie industry,' each one of them an 'adventurer, dreamer, sportsman and poet of profit.'"

"While in Hollywood in 1930, Eisenstein observed the effects of the emergence of a managerial echelon comprised of 'creatures of Wall Street without initiative...dry bureaucrats driven by the clatter of adding machines' causing the movie business to unravel into a 'debauchery of unaccounted volume, large staffs, and useless expenditures....the world's most perfect technical apparatus for movie-making remains unfulfilled due to a chaotic expenditure of talent, opportunity and capital.'" Eisenstein's attitude, not to mention his highly technical and unique style, probably did not endear him with the studio heads and producers; his stay in Hollywood was short-lived.

For further reading, see *Eisenstein at 100: A Reconsideration*, edited by Dartmouth Film Studies Professors Al LaValley and P. Scherr (available in libraries, books.google.com and as a Kindle edition). A collection of 19 essays, it includes the director's later work, writing, teaching and, of course, montage.

Cut to: Russia. 2009. Here's an article by Roman Hoffmann, who knows Russia well, provides production services (www.pb-hoffmann.com) and is Marketing Director at Dedo Weigert Film in Munich, with a branch office in Moscow.



Moscow photos and cover by Roman Hoffmann

From Russia with Roman

by Roman Hoffmann

Several years after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the proud Russian film industry plunged to a terribly low level of production, with few hopes of improvement. However, the Russian economy recovered in the second half of 1990s until 2008—along with the Russian film industry.

In 2008 it even reached a top production level of up to approximately 300 films, until the worldwide financial crisis put the brakes on yet again. There are reports that from the end of 2008 to early 2009, more than half of the film projects were cancelled or postponed.



An Interview with Igor Klebanov, RGC



Igor Klebanov, RGC



In the “West,” we don’t know all that much about Russian production style and modern Russian film history. How do Russian film professionals deal with these economic and political ups and downs? What is similar and different between American and European productions? What is Russian Style?

Igor Klebanov, Cinematographer, president of the Russian Guild of Cinematographers, R.G.C. (www.kinoglaz.ru), professor of the camera department of VGIK (www.vgik.info), and winner of many awards for best cinematography (including “Nika,” “The Golden Ram,” “Kinoshock” and “White Square”) provides some answers. As a Russian Cinematography hero, he provides insight into the Russian soul. I interviewed him recently in Moscow for Film and Digital Times, a kind of sequel to the themes Jon Fauer raised in his documentary and book “Cinematographer Style.”

When did you start working as a professional Cinematographer?

My debut as a Cinematographer was on the movie “The Ship’s Boy of Northern Fleet” in 1974.



Zhukhray and Klebanov

What was different when you started working compared with today?

From my point of view, the character of a Cinematographer's work has changed only concerning the technical side of the profession, if we talk about a comparison between today and the days of my beginning.

I am talking about the bad quality of color negative film, the sometimes very low film sensitivity of 15 to 20 ASA, and of course I am also talking about the quality of studio cameras, lenses and camera accessories which in those days often caused us to pray for an improvement.

But time went by and today we use Kodak and Fuji film, work on Arriflex cameras and light our objects with the wonderful lighting equipment from ARRI and dedolight. Today's equipment even flies above our heads on all possible cranes and moves without any shaking on uneven ground with the help of gyro stabilized systems like the "Russian Arm."

What is special about Russian film production?

Without a doubt every cinematographic culture has its own specialty. We are members of the European Association of Cinematographers "IMAGO" since 2001. Since that time we have discovered that the problems of a Cinematographer are very similar all around the world. Specifically, I mean the recognition of the authorship of a Cinematographer's work at the legislative level, achievement of a fair contract for a Cinematographer, and so on.

What are typically Russian shooting problems?

Modern Russian cinema production follows decades-old and proven international standards of film production. So it is really difficult for me to point out a special "Russian" problem. The drama quality and a talented director – this is the basic and most important component of every film production. And if you add the skills of a qualified Cinematographer – this is already victory! And then it does not matter if it is a Russian or a foreign film.

From your experience how do Russian film productions differ from American or European?

I think that the most obvious difference between a Russian and a foreign production is the fact that Russian Cinematographers get involved in a very early stage of a project, often prepping three months before shooting starts. This concerns film projects and TV series. Actually I do not have sufficient information about American or European production styles although I know American, French, German and Czech Cinematographers. But I think that the most substantial difference is the firm commitment to the working conditions stipulated by the contract.



Klebanov, snow and Arriflex 16SR



Klebanov and eagle on "Rabbit Above the Abyss"



Klebanov and Director on "Rabbit Above the Abyss"



Above: Klebanov and Arriflex 35BL

Below: with producer/director/actor/TV show host Fyodor Bondarchuk

Below, right: winning Golden Ram Award



Where do you see the future of Russian films?

I would like to see the future of Russian films closer to the more leading position of the past – I mean the period of the 20s, 30s and 40s of the last century, when our cinematographers were respected, admired and seen as “teachers.”

For example, Italian cinematographers saw Mark Donskoy as a founder of neorealism and Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov became classical figures. And I would say that you can easily add M. Kalatozov, S. Urusevskiy, A. Tarkovsky and V. Yusov to this list of important and influential names.

What hopes do you have for Russian films?

Everybody hopes for lighter, happier and better times. There is no other way of being. So are my Cinematographic hopes. They are connected to bright debuts and talented performances. Because honestly speaking, I am tired of depression, violence, and greyness.

What was the hardest job you ever had to do?

In general, the work of a Cinematographer is the only profession in the film process that combines both sides – technical craftsmanship and creativity. So what else can I add but to say that our profession already has a lot of difficulties?

What I like about my job is the ease that I feel after a hard twelve hour shift, when I know that today everything worked exactly the way I wanted it to be. Today, of course, everybody argues about the quality, differences, and advantages or disadvantages of digital versus film. But the most defining factor in art is the talent of the artist and not the type of sensor.

What job are you still dreaming of?

I would not be original if I did not say that I always dream of projects that combine and concentrate talents of the screenwriter, director, actors and, of course, the Cinematographer. Because after all, cinema is an expressive art.



New RWS Studios In St. Petersburg



Front of new RWS Studios in St. Petersburg, Russia. Below: model of future studio plans



New high-tech production facilities have opened in Russia. One of these is RWS, Russian World Studios. (www.rwstudios.ru)

RWS was founded in 1998 and today is one of the largest film, television and production services companies in the Russian market. The studio has collaborated on productions with international entertainment companies, including Sony Pictures, Television International, Hallmark Entertainment, HBO Films and Beacon Pictures.

Two major productions were "ICON" (Hallmark Entertainment, Larry Levinson Productions, Russian World Studios) and production services on "PU-239," also titled "The Half-Life of Timofey Berezin" (HBO Films, Beacon Pictures, Plutonium Production Ltd.)



Russian World Studios

RWS provides a full range of film production-related services and is among the most rapidly growing companies in the industry.

RWS launched a new film studio in St. Petersburg in late 2008.

RWS's St. Petersburg facility is the first dedicated production facility built in Russia in the past 60 years, and consists of high quality, modern equipment and amenities.

The new St. Petersburg studios offer:

- 11,000 sq. m. total area (118,403 sq. feet)
- 8.5 m height (27.8 feet)
- Soundproof elephant doors, unique patented technology, that can withstand external levels of sound pressure up to 120 dBA
- Water tank
- And much more (see pictures)

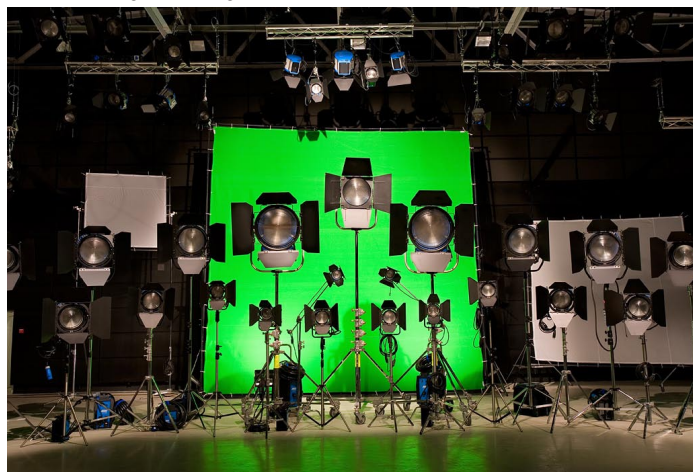
The Moscow studio complex offers:

- 11,000 sq. m. total area
- 5,250 sq m. backlot area
- 2 x 800 sq. m. stages
- 4 x 920sq m. convertible stages (up to 2,000 sq. m. stage)
- 14m height, working height of 10.8 m
- Wi-Fi throughout studio



Above: corridor, RWS St. Petersburg

Below: ARRI Lights on Stage 3





Above: panorama of RWS St. Petersburg Stage 3. Below: Control carts, Stage 3



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