

What's Striking in Strike?

The Readability of Eisensteinian Propaganda along a Cyberpunk Subculture

0. Introduction

The point of departure of the present essay is that cyberpunk subculture accompanies narrative building blocks that make Eisenstein's 1925 creation readable in a contemporary context, and for a sociological group not necessarily interested in film history. In this sense my endeavour is as much pedagogical as it is philological in nature. In essence, I give a contemporary - postmodern - reading of the film entitled Strike through the glasses of a subculture.

The thesis shall unfold through the exposition of a series of points of orientation and contact.

1. Radical left-wing world-view [punk]

Both Strike and cyberpunk are admittedly committed to a Marxist ideology. Strike declares it is the propaganda of a communist state; cyberpunk fiercely wears 'punk' tattooed on its forehead. The punk movement - though generally counter-state - has always been the servitor of left-wing ideology, in a more fundamentally Marxist sense than for instance the socialist state with which it opposed in Hungary. It is a trivial turn of social psychology that the image of a common enemy essentially determines the identity of a group: the punk movement in this sense stands against the skinhead movement, thereby declaring its radical left-wing bias. Thus in an ideological sense, Strike for the cyberpunk audience is not merely acceptable, but perhaps one of the most expressive films ever made.

Beyond words and identity, how does such a world-view manifest? The explication of that point follows through the next paragraphs.

2. Periphery

Generally, people on the periphery of society - who are almost under-society (underground) - are both the subject matter and the focus group of left-wing ideology as a cultural text, especially the industrial working class. Cyberpunk is by definition about 'people on the verge of society'.

However, thematic parallelism is just the beginning: not solely does Strike take a cyberpunk topic, but even the very way it deals with the topic sustains and affirms cyberpunk conventions. Both Strike and cyberpunk revolves around a single question: what is your identity? Naturally, that is a double-edged issue: Strike aims at the formation of a class consciousness, while treats its formation as its subject matter; the workers in the film move on the periphery of identity, their attempts at the breakthrough from an employment group towards a political pressure group are vain. Cyberpunk received its sensitivity to the periphery, border areas and situations from the gothic novel. It exhausts that sensitivity primarily in a sociological sense, although from that point secondary senses of peripheral existence can be derived. Focusing on sociological periphery thereby implies exploring the spacial and technological periphery: stories take place at the outskirts of the city, in the so-called 'Sprawl', which more or less means abandoned residential and industrial areas. The vague, uncanonised or uncanonisable spatial determination brings about the doubtfulness of identity. A scene from the novel Snow Crash is an abandoned port area:

"Like all Sacrifice Zones, this one has a fence around it, with yellow metal signs wired to it every few yards.

SACRIFICE ZONE

WARNING. The National Parks Service has declared this area to be a National Sacrifice Zone. The Sacrifice Zone Program was developed to manage parcels of land whose clean-up cost exceeds their total future economic value."

Folk driven to the periphery of society find shelter at such places from the stational or corporational authorities. In the Strike, the old foundry, the barrel cemetery, and after the outbreak of strike virtually the whole of the train factory are places akin to that description. The latter includes smaller scenes, featured in the parts entitled

Introduction and Preparation: workers withdraw into extreme - which is equal to secure - positions for purposes of plotting: high iron structures, monstrous cog-hills, an anchor in the water. All these places have important technological bias.

3. Technology [cyber]

Representation of the working class in Strike is realised utilising three elements: the mechanical environment, the physical anthropological character and the clothes. The most specific of all that is evidently the mechanical environment, which is identified by the subcultural audience as another major feature of cyberpunk: namely the 'cyber'. The Machine is a determining factor of environment, identity, body, and moreover serves as a metaphor for the condition of society as a whole. The subjects of the narrative are out on the street because they refuse to function as parts of the Machine. To cite Snow Crash again: they would not fuse with the 'biomass'. Technologisation itself opens up anthropological questions as well: the imagery of Eisenstein incarnate the fears of Frankenstein. For how long can man dominate technology, and what is the point where man becomes - with the words of McLuhan - "the reproductive organ of technology?" How long can the self-definition of the workers hold, saying "Without our work fire expires in the furnaces, machines stop, and the factory dies!" The film - just like cyberpunk subculture in general - testifies the contrary: when the Machine comes to a standstill, man dies.

On the other hand, machines blend into nature: it is virtually unimportant whether the workers gather on a hill, a heap of cogs, amongst branches of wood or bars of steel. Interestingly, that does not contradict the anthropological interpretation: in a practical sense the strike is the pollution of the environment, which threatens with an ecological breakdown, let it be first an economical breakdown.

4. Pessimism [punk]

Let us consider the fact that few darker world-views are known to popular culture than the Strike of Eisenstein and cyberpunk subculture. A basic guideline of cyberpunk narratives is that at the end characters rejoice over the fact that they survived. Another basic is that the practical and moral outcome of the story is highly uncertain: the final outcome of the dealings is ambiguous; mostly it is hard to know

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what did in fact happen and what is its significance. Solely the revolutionary atmosphere is tangible, as at Eisenstein. The proto-cyberpunk samizdata 'Cheap Truth' words it thus: "Something new is imminent." The parallelism might not be trivial without the necessary knowledge of the material, but let us consider: how many narrative schemes do we know which napoo the happy end?

5. Oppression [punk]

In all two worlds in focus two major political and economic forces rule the scene, threatening the periphery with perpetually imminent destruction: the corporations and the state. The two are hardly distinguishable in their entangled form: in cyberpunk, national authorities can be hired by corporations, while corporations could provide well-being services like health insurance. All that said, the oppression of the periphery includes the deprivation of those services from the individuals by both power players: in Strike, the (national/royal?) corporation ceases to pay pays, while the authorities attempt to prevent the workers from drawing on the services of the firefighters in a case of emergency, otherwise ruthlessly assarting the demonstrators in the style of Firenze, and to top it all, the Royal Dramshop is under construction as well. In cyberpunk, all these ways are implemented formally: people on the periphery are bereft of IDs, personal rights, etc., while peripheral places are simply outside the area of operation of the authorities.

6. Folks [punk]

A striking feature of the depiction of society in both cyberpunk and the Strike is the blind spot over the middle classes. The citizen as such is unknown or at least uninteresting to both the Bolsheviks and the cyberpunks. On the other hand, classes of the periphery are presented by way of a rich taxonomy, opposed to the somewhat more schematically - and in all cases bottom-view - represented bourgeoisie. In the Strike there are the workers as a self-organising social class, juxtaposed with the people of the 'King', as a self-organising underground class. Moreover, there are the beagles, as the manifestation of the freelancer trash. In broad perspective the picture is the same in case of the class-analysis of a cyberpunk work, with the important exception that the protagonists are members of the latter group. Cyberpunk focuses

on the question of the development of the individual's consciousness and the quest for identity rather than on similar class issues.

Having said that, autonomous groups are always featured in the story, often indeed as the lords of run-down industrial territories, as in Mad Max movies, or more precisely the Bridge community of the film Johnny Mnemonic and the corresponding William Gibson texts. The pragmatics and aesthetics of the found object is crucial here: "all that's worth a bit is built of refuse" says one of the characters in Mona Lisa Overdrive (or so I remember). That is the way striking worksmen are forced to walk, roaming the concrete jungle as savage hunter-gatherers, liquidating their belongings and robe hammers from the smithshop. That is barricade aesthetics.

6. Information [cyber]

Power struggle organises itself around two poles in both the Strike and cyberpunk: information and physical warfare. The latter is meant as the strike itself by the periphery, and slaughter as a countermeasure by the centrum. The former naturally unfolds in a more sophisticated way: informants belong here from the power side, with their spy gear (I have the photo-watch in mind), and the manipulation of mass media in the form of newspaper headlines and articles. Consistently with reason, the tools of the underground are samizdat leaflets and secret gatherings. Mass media manipulation is also a hard core cyberpunk feature, juxtaposed with the informal flow of 'word' on the street. Furthermore, a well-established cyberpunk dichotomy is that of the street samurai and the hacker, as soldiers of physical and information warfare respectively. In Strike, these poles are one: workers fight on both fronts. However, knowledge of the local urban environment (as an information matrix) plays a vital role in the accomplishments of the periphery: the utilisation of the glass orb in window of the pub, as well as the lore of street arrangement for purposes of flight and pursuit bring the proletariat closer to consol cowboys.

Information(technology), however, is not purely an aspect of power. Beyond racial left ideology, it is the basis of another basic parallelism between the film and the subculture: cyberpunk's core experience is the ecstasy of information. The hacker moves across unbelievable expansions of informational space with breathtaking speed, linking from one IT network to the next, therewithal analysing information

along various criteria. That is the subject matter of the first two scenes of *Strike*: information spreads from the sneaks to the administration through the verbal medium; it gets to the authorities through telephone cable, where it jacks into the database of the snoopers, the city map and the files of the factory quarter. The Bolshevik program, as an ideology (virus), is opposed to the counter-virus authored by the establishment, which spreads false information and gathers illegal information (the information warfare aspect). All the while, members of both sides burn in the ecstasy of information: the force of the information virus (mem) having taken hold of them stretches them all the way to their existential thresholds, with no other purpose than to breed on from the corrupted bodies: they are almost burst under the burden of information. The administration is in utter fear, the president of the company shouts hysterically on the telephone, the clerk and the police chief can hardly deal with all their earcaps: as soon as they release one, they have to pick up another, to prevent fresh information from burning their brains, like the brain socket of Johnny Mnemonic in the film of the same name. Desktops hold skyscraper-high data heaps - the files, while the chief browses in animated folders for the right agents, whom he sends to mission with a sole imaginary command. The velocity increment of information translates into mass catastrophe.

7. Conclusion

That is the cyberpunk reading of *Strike*, determined ideologically by left-wing radicalism, aesthetically by the inspection of border situations, anthropologically by the ecstasy of information. According to my initial intentions have I demonstrated that along these lines such a reading of the Eisensteinian film is made possible that is accessible to a wider audience with a background in popular culture, rendering the film not merely consumable but even enjoyable. That could be important indeed, as in the light of novel statures by the authorities, in the near future the film analysed here shall be compulsory viewing for a broad set of individuals going to secondary schools all over Hungary. Finally, I would only add to the above that a somewhat undercover, although all-encompassing Christian symbolism is determinative in both the worlds in question, yet the exploration of that theme constitutes the subject matter of a subsequent paper. □