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Author(s): Harlow Robinson

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LEWIS MILESTONE: THE RUSSIAN CONNECTION

by Harlow Robinson

For director Lewis Milestone, the unprecedented global success of his first sound film, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, was both a blessing and a curse. When this sensitively realistic screen treatment of Erich Maria Remarque's pacifist novel received two Academy Awards (for Best Picture and Best Director) in November 1930, Milestone (1895–1980) was thirty-five years old, but already a Hollywood veteran with ten years of experience. In a tribute to Milestone's impressive rise, Mark Hellinger of *The Daily Mirror* wrote:

You arrived in this country from Russia only sixteen years ago with nothing but the will to succeed between you and starvation. Unable to speak English, you handled a broom by day and a book by night. You drifted to Hollywood and fought your way to the top while hundreds of others, with more pull and greater educational advantages, were falling on the way up.

A toast to you, Milestone. You deserve it richly.

In fact this was already Milestone's second Academy Award. He had received his first in 1929, the first year the awards were given, for "motion picture achievement" for his direction of the 1928 silent comedy *Two Arabian Knights*. After *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Milestone was paid the substantial sum of \$30,000 to direct what would become another big hit, the newsroom comedy *The Front Page*, produced by the erstwhile film mogul Howard Hughes. By the time Milestone directed the first film version of Cole Porter's Broadway hit *Anything Goes* in 1936 (with Ethel Merman and Bing Crosby, no less) he was one of the highest-paid directors in Hollywood, getting \$65,000 per picture.

And yet none of the many films that Milestone directed after 1930 (including *The General Died at Dawn*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The North Star*, *Arch of Triumph*, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, *Ocean's Eleven*, and much of *Mutiny on the Bounty*) captured the public imagination the way *All Quiet on the Western Front* had managed to do. In the minds of many, Milestone would always be identified with that film, and his subsequent efforts always measured against it. In a 1964 letter to director Joseph Losey, who wanted to use the famous "butterfly" scene, the climax of *All Quiet*, as back-

ground for a title sequence in a war film he was directing, Milestone admitted that *All Quiet* had become "a symbol of the First World War." But he advised Losey to create his own footage rather than recycle someone else's—or risk the wrath of the critics. "Critics are very important to you at this state of

The director left his native country to find later fortune in Hollywood, but Russia never left him.

your career. Why take chances? Use your idea by all means, but create your own scenes."

Milestone once observed of the stubborn success and staying power of *All Quiet on the Western Front* that, "You hate to live on one picture," as though he were haunted by its spectre. This film, he remarked tartly, "proved to have a longer life than many a politician."

One of the most interesting stylistic features of *All Quiet* is its close relationship to the aesthetic of montage editing developed in the Soviet Union, especially by the director and theoretician Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) in such films as *Strike*, *Battleship Potemkin*, and *October*. Milestone agreed that "montage is fundamental to cinema," as Eisenstein wrote.

Significantly, Milestone began his career in Hollywood as an editor (or "cutter" as he

liked to say), a trade at which he became notably proficient, and he shared with Eisenstein (and other early Soviet filmmakers) the belief that creative editing was really the key to a film's success. A native speaker of Russian who also possessed strongly left-wing convictions (in the late 1940s he would be

attacked as a Communist, along with other members of the Hollywood community), Milestone was acutely aware of what was happening in the Soviet film industry in the 1920s. Nor did he attempt to conceal his fascination with what Russian filmmakers were doing. After an interview with Milestone around the time of the opening of *All Quiet*, William Boehnel wrote in *The New York Telegram*:

Like the Russian directors, Milestone believes that much of a picture's ultimate success lives in the cutting, and his chief complaint against Hollywood is that the producers there pay a director anywhere from \$1500 to \$4000 a week, entrust him with large sums of money to make films, and then pass the finished product over to some underpaid cutter who is seldom if ever acquainted with either the story or the players.

At the time *All Quiet* was released, in April 1930, Eisenstein's fame was at its height in Hollywood. That very same month, Jesse L. Lasky, Vice-President of Paramount Pictures, extended an invitation to Eisenstein (only three years younger than Milestone) to come work in Los Angeles. Lasky's idea was that Eisenstein "would spend six months in the United States making a film for Paramount, after which it would be open for him to return to Moscow to direct a Sovkino production." There was even naive hope that the relationship would continue beyond that, with Eisenstein dividing his time between Moscow and Hollywood. Such an idea would seem absurd just a few years later, after Soviet leader Joseph Stalin asserted full and tyrannical control over the film industry and turned the U.S.S.R. into one vast prison for artists of all kinds.

On May 24, 1930, *The Film Spectator* commented on Lasky's invitation to Eisenstein in a long unsigned editorial that praised the superiority of the Russian film industry and suggested that Milestone was the director who could successfully bridge the Russian and Hollywood styles.



Lewis Milestone (b. Lev Milstein), 1895–1980



Lew Ayres, as the scared young German soldier Paul Baumer, spends an entire night in a bomb crater with the corpse of a French soldier (Raymond Griffith) he killed, in this scene from Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

As a class, the Russian motion picture directors are the greatest in the world...The Russian directors are intellectuals; our directors are not. The Russians are technical experts; our directors the box-office experts. Intelligent contact between the two schools of direction should result in the Russians gaining box-office values without sacrificing any of their technical perfection, and in the Americans acquiring a closer grasp of what constitutes screen art without sacrificing any of their popular appeal...If we had known from the start, as the Russians always have known, what constitutes screen art, we never would have put it in. Lewis Milestone, a Russian, knows what screen art is, and he demonstrates it in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the greatest picture ever made. But if he had remained in Russia he never would have produced a picture that would appeal so grippingly to American audiences. American pictures have captured the world because our story psychology is universal; Russian pictures, vastly superior in technic, [*sic*] have failed of box-office appeal because their story psychology is national...We will achieve ultimate success with our pictures as a business only when we adapt the best there is in Russian technic to our manner of telling our stories.

On American soil Eisenstein was not greeted with universal enthusiasm, however. Numerous anticommunist politicians attacked him as part of a "Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy to turn the American cinema into a Communist cesspool." In his highly entertaining autobiography, *Beyond the Stars*, Eisenstein recalls that "America in 1930 was the America of anti-Semitism, of Prohibition: the imperialist America of Hoover, before, two years later, becoming the America of Roosevelt: the America of the New Era and democratic tendencies, which flourished during his second term, and the military alliance with the Soviet Union." On the East Coast, Eisenstein met with Paramount executives, lectured at Harvard and Yale, met Rin-Tin-Tin at a posh luncheon in Boston, and chatted with D. W. Griffith in the lobby of the Astor Hotel in New York. Douglas Fairbanks took him to a speakeasy.

Not long after he arrived in Hollywood (accompanied by his cameraman Edward Tisse and codirector Grigory Alexandrov), Eisenstein was lavishly feted at a dinner given in his honor at the Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood on August 21, 1930. In introducing Eisenstein, Frank Lloyd, chairman of the event, observed that the "talkies have made

us realize as never before that the whole world is not America, that the whole picture industry is not Hollywood. This is probably fortunate, as it requires us to open our minds and eyes, to learn new things. We can learn from our fellow-workers abroad." The centerpiece of the evening was a screening of Eisenstein's film, *The Battleship Potemkin*, which had already attracted the attention of many of Hollywood's most influential creative minds, including Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin.

Following the screening, Eisenstein delivered some remarks. In answer to a question about the origin of his concept of montage, he said, "I think the birth of the montage came from the scenes where the bad man was running away with the girl in his arms and the good man was running after, and in describing such a scene you are obliged to show the man who runs away and the man who runs after, and you have to show one and then the other." Eisenstein also declared (wrongly, as it turned out) that he did not believe that sound films would come to dominate the industry. "I certainly think that the 100% talkie is a type of picture that will die pretty soon." With his customary irony, Eisenstein stressed that the Soviet and

American ways of filmmaking differed fundamentally in the way they engaged the audience. "That is one of the points why our pictures are not such box office material as the American films because we have another purpose and not the purpose of making money and be entertainment—our one purpose is always educational. Here the people are all so educated they don't need that."

In the months to come, it became painfully obvious that Eisenstein and Paramount had radically different ideas about filmmaking. None of the projects the director proposed to the studio (most notably, an adaptation of Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy*) was filmed, and in October 1930 Eisenstein's contract was canceled. His sojourn in Hollywood failed to produce a single completed film, and revealed just how incompatible were the Hollywood and Soviet ways of filmmaking.

Milestone has often been considered to be the most "Eisenstein-ian" of all major Hollywood directors. His fondness for montage-style editing (very evident in *The Front Page* and *The General Died at Dawn*), split-screen devices, a hyperrealistic documentary-style approach and stories focusing on an ensemble rather than on individual characters, have been noted by many critics and historians. Like Eisenstein, Milestone was a Jew who had grown up on the periphery of the Russian Empire (Eisenstein in Riga, Latvia, and Milestone in Kishinev, Moldavia) during the decades just before the Bolshevik Revolution; both experienced considerable anti-Semitism in their youth. Despite the difference in their social standing (Eisenstein's family belonged to the intelligentsia while Milestone's worked in commerce), both strongly sympathized with the "have-nots" in society. Both worked extensively in the theater before finding their true calling in the new art form of cinema.

In his early days as an immigrant in the United States, Milestone worked at a number of menial jobs in New York and came to sympathize deeply with the plight of the working man exploited by large corporations. Like most Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, he had pronounced leftist political convictions. In the late 1940s, he was among the first in the Hollywood film industry to be identified as possessing pro-communist sympathies, as a member of the original nineteen "unfriendly" (uncoopera-

tive) individuals subpoenaed to give testimony before Congress, along with such prominent figures as Bertolt Brecht, Ring Lardner, Jr., and Dalton Trumbo. Although he was never actually called to testify, Milestone found that his reputation had been severely damaged. To escape the oppressive atmosphere, he left Hollywood in 1950 and lived abroad for most of the next five years, returning to direct *Ocean's Eleven* and *Mutiny on the Bounty*.

From the beginning of his career as a director, Milestone excelled in telling the stories of average people manipulated and ruined by capitalism. His silent film *The New Klondike* (Paramount, 1926, from a story by Ring Lardner) exposes the dishonest and unprincipled practices of Florida real-estate companies in luring unsuspecting customers into losing their life savings on worthless property. *The Front Page* (1931), Milestone's follow-up to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, reveals the corrupt collusion of the police and the press and the power of money in the criminal-justice system. The wrongly accused criminal Earl Williams, vilified as a Bolshevik, explains to the hard-bitten journalist Hildy Johnson, "I'm an anarchist. It's got nothin' to do with bombs. It's the philosophy that guarantees every man freedom."

Hallelujah, I'm a Bum (1933) celebrates the vibrant life of homeless people in Central Park. With a screenplay by noted "leftist" writer Clifford Odets, his first for Hollywood, *The General Died at Dawn* (1936) tells a sordid tale of gun running in China motivated by greed and the lust for power. As the film's hero O'Hara, Gary Cooper may well have been speaking for Milestone when he exclaims, "Why am I for oppressed people? Because I have a background of oppression myself."

Milestone's masterful treatment of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1939, an Oscar nominee for Best Picture) expresses deep sensitivity for those ostracized from society because they are judged mentally or otherwise defective. *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), an underrated film noir starring Barbara Stanwyck and Kirk Douglas, condemns the heartless behavior of large corporations operating with complete impunity (and the help of corrupt public officials) in small-town America. Similarly, Milestone's celebrated war films (*A Walk in the Sun*, *The Halls of Montezuma*, *The Purple Heart*) focus not on the officers or grand strategy, but on the combat experiences of average soldiers just trying to survive. Even *Ocean's Eleven* (1960), with its A-list Rat Pack cast, can be seen as a not-so-subtle critique of the capitalist system. In robbing the Las Vegas casinos, the characters (all veterans of World War II) are expressing a kind of economic anarchism, joyfully challenging the presumptions of a profoundly unfair economic order.

In their subject matter, then, Milestone's films share an attitude deeply critical of American capitalism, portraying the struggles of its victims rather than the glamorous lives of its victors. In his own dealings with Hollywood's capitalists, the executives at the major studios, Milestone exhibited a similarly truculent demeanor, largely because he refused to be categorized or to produce the standard escapist fare. Few directors had more disagreements and lawsuits with major studios than Milestone. In the late 1920s, he walked out on a picture he was making for Warner Bros., as he explained later, because "I'd become a slave to Warner Brothers, and something in my nature rebelled against that lowly status."

As an independent artist with an independent vision, Milestone viewed the studio system with unconcealed hostility and disdain:

When you work in a big studio you always invent things to protect yourself from what they



Lewis Milestone (standing left), screenwriter Maxwell Anderson (standing right), and dialogue director George Cukor (seated right) during a preproduction conference for *All Quiet on the Western Front* (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Top: *The Front Page* (1931) (photo courtesy of Photofest).
Bottom: *A Walk in the Sun* (1945) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

Top: *The General Died at Dawn* (1936) (photo courtesy of Photofest).
Bottom: *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

call the front office.... Both producers and financiers had respect for directors, but they wanted control of content, so if you did something as far as content went that didn't agree with their way of thinking they would stop you. If you put in some things that they thought were too literate or too partisan or whatever, they could stop you. It was a forerunner to 1947, when they started seeing Communists under every bed.

Milestone never developed a long-term relationship with a single studio, and many of his films were produced by independent companies. Howard Hughes, another famous Hollywood renegade, bankrolled *The Front Page*. In fact, it was with Hughes that Milestone had his longest "exclusive contract"—for four years he was on loan from Hughes to United Artists. Over the course of his career, Milestone worked for nearly every major studio at some point: Paramount (eight times), Warner Bros. (four times), Columbia (once), Twentieth Century-Fox (five times), RKO (three times), and Universal (once, for *All Quiet on the Western Front*). But it is no accident that

he made the greatest number of feature films—ten in all—for United Artists. Founded in 1919 by D. W. Griffith, Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, and Douglas Fairbanks, UA was designed as a sort of "antistudio," an independent entity that sought to protect the creative rights of artists from the "business" side of the film business. While Eisenstein after returning to the U.S.S.R. in 1932 had to cope with severe ideological censorship and control, in Hollywood Milestone had to confront the limitations imposed on a director by the "front office." As Milestone said in a 1969 interview with the Directors Guild of America magazine, *Action*:

It would bore me to make the same type of film. I'll do any subject the content of which appeals to me.... I was never anxious to sign a long term contract with any company and for a very simple reason...I always wanted to keep the privilege of saying, 'I don't like this or that story or script and I will not do it.' From a material point of view, that is not a very profitable way to be. But I never felt that a great deal of money was all that important.

Another atypical feature of Milestone's working method was his attitude toward actors. Like Eisenstein, he was not drawn to "stars"; he was much more focused on finding the right actor to tell the story at hand. "I made very few pictures with stars," he said in later life.

Often I had a chance to get them and didn't, because they never interested me. It becomes a different enterprise if you work with stars, you work for *them*. I like to work with actors, not with stars. The characters must be served, not the stars. When the stars come in you have to baby them, reshape the material, etc. and you do it all at the expense of the story you want to tell.

Despite this disclaimer, Milestone did direct quite a few "stars" in his career: Joan Crawford, Barbara Stanwyck, Ingrid Bergman, Kirk Douglas, Walter Huston, Al Jolson, Ethel Merman, Bing Crosby, Gary Cooper, Errol Flynn, Dana Andrews, Gregory Peck and (most unhappily) Marlon Brando. But he was never known as an "actors' director." Milestone preferred the idea of a collective rather than a group of individual

performers, as his most successful films testify: *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Front Page*, *A Walk in the Sun*, *Ocean's Eleven*.

Milestone remained strongly attached to his Russian roots and to the Soviet film tradition throughout his life. In 1933, he made a trip to the U.S.S.R. with screenwriter Laurence Stallings to work on a project for Columbia Pictures, a film tentatively entitled *Red Square* based on a novel (*The Life and Death of Nikolai Kurbov*) by the Soviet journalist and author Ilya Ehrenburg (1891–1967). In his entertaining memoirs, Ehrenburg described his meeting with Milestone. “He is a very stout and very kindly man,” Ehrenburg wrote. “He loved everything Russian, retained the colorful southern modes of speech and was happy when offered a small glass of vodka and some pickled herring... he was at once on the best of terms with our film-directors and kept saying: ‘I’m no Lewis Milestone, I’m Lenya Milstein from Kishinev.’”

Ehrenburg was not enthusiastic, however, about Milestone’s plan to film his novel, whose story about an idealistic Communist disillusioned by the world of postrevolutionary Russia he considered outdated and not among his best work. But Ehrenburg went to England at Milestone’s invitation to work on a scenario he called a “mixture of Hollywood and the Revolution, of some of Milestone’s bright inspirations and film routine, a melodrama seasoned with the irony of two adults.” When Harry Cohn, President of Columbia, read what they had produced, he dismissed it, according to Ehrenburg, as “too much social stuff and not enough sex. This is no time for throwing money down the drain.” The project was scrapped, but Milestone still managed to make Columbia pay Ehrenburg for his labor. *Red Square* was only one of a number of projected films about life in the U.S.S.R. that failed to make it beyond the planning stage at major studios in the early 1930s, when interest in Soviet life was at its height in the United States. On November 17, 1933, almost exactly sixteen years after the establishment of Lenin’s Communist regime in Russia, the governments of the United States (now headed by Franklin Roosevelt) and the U.S.S.R. finally established official diplomatic relations. But the task of representing the U.S.S.R. for the American audience was in the end too risky and uncertain for the studio executives.

Milestone also maintained contact with the culture of his homeland by employing émigré Russians actors. He enjoyed a particularly productive partnership with the versatile character actor Akim Tamiroff (1899–1972), who appeared as the evil General Yang in *The General Died at Dawn*, as the fixer Spyros Acebos in *Ocean’s Eleven*, and as Captain George One in *They Who Dare* (released in

England in 1953). Born in Baku, Tamiroff (like many other Russian émigré film actors) had studied with Konstantin Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theater. It was also Milestone who brought acclaimed stage designer Nicolai Remisoff (1884–1975) into the film business as an art director and production designer. Their first highly successful collaboration on *Of Mice and Men* led to many more, including *My Life with Caroline*, *No Minor Vices*, *The Red Pony*, *Pork Chop Hill*, and *Ocean’s Eleven*.

Despite numerous attempts, Milestone succeeded in completing only a single feature film set in Russia, the undistinguished *North Star*. This was one of several films (*Mission to Moscow*, *Song of Russia*, *Days of Glory*) made by the major Hollywood studios during World War II at the urging of the Roosevelt Administration and the Office of War Information, in order to win sympathy for the

“Eisenstein and Milestone were not afraid to use the word ‘propaganda’ in describing the impact of a film on an audience.”

American-Soviet wartime alliance. Produced by Samuel Goldwyn for RKO, *North Star* boasted an all-star cast and crew. Lillian Hellman wrote the screenplay and Aaron Copland the music; James Wong Howe did the cinematography; the actors included Anne Baxter, Dana Andrews, Walter Huston, and Walter Brennan. But even all these tal-

ented people could not rescue a film whose basic premise was so flimsy and dishonest. (The title page of Hellman’s screenplay bears the pretentious subtitle, “A Motion Picture About Some Russian People.”) Milestone knew that this well-meaning attempt to portray the lives of the inhabitants of a “typical” Russian farm village on the eve of the Nazi invasion, complete with extensive song-and-dance sequences choreographed by Broadway regular David Lichine, had nothing to do with the horrific reality of Soviet citizens, squeezed between two murderous tyrants, Stalin and Hitler. Later, he fumed that Hellman “knew nothing about Russia—especially the villages.”

In *The Nation*, critic James Agee agreed:

In its basic design Lillian Hellman’s script could have become a fine picture: but the characters are stock, their lines are tinny-literary, their appearance and that of their village is scrubbed behind the ear and “beautified”; the camera work is nearly all glossy and overcomposed; the proudly complicated action sequences are stale from overtraining; even the best of Aaron Copland’s score has no business ornamenting a film drowned in ornament: every resourcefulness appropriate to some kinds of screen romance, in short, is used to make palatable what is by no remote stretch of the mind romantic.

Here, Milestone was constrained by the demands and compromises of the studio system to produce escapist entertainment, even when the story and characters demanded a different approach.

Not long after World War II, the hero of Milestone’s youth, Sergei Eisenstein, died in Moscow in 1948, at the premature age of fifty. Eisenstein’s last years were very difficult, overshadowed by illness and the official condemnation of his brilliant film, *Ivan the Terrible, Part II*, judged by Stalin to be excessively “formalistic” and pessimistic in its “Hamlet-like” portrayal of his favorite Tsar. Forbidden to travel abroad and isolated from his many friends and colleagues in the film business around the world, Eisenstein must have remembered his brief sojourn in Hollywood like some sort of distant dream. In the end, Eisenstein managed to complete only eight films, while Milestone, who lived to the age of eighty-four, made thirty-eight.

Both directors saw cinema as a vehicle not only for entertainment, but also for educating the public, and for treating serious ideas. They were not afraid to use the word “propaganda” in describing the impact of film on an audience. Milestone’s conviction that commercial films could successfully deliver important messages had more in common with the ideological atmosphere that prevailed in the Soviet film industry, and made him a welcome oddity in the often fatuous world of Hollywood. ■

