



Eisenstein, Sergei Mikhailovich (1898-1948)

by Daryl Chin

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One of the greatest filmmakers in the history of cinema, Sergei Eisenstein was one of the first directors to take seriously the role of film editing as a means of narrative, a way of manipulating time and space by linking and juxtaposing images.

Eisenstein was born on January 23, 1898 in Riga, Latvia. He attended the science-oriented Realshule to prepare himself for engineering school, but he also performed in a children's theater troupe while a student. In 1915, he entered Petrograd's Institute of Civil Engineering, his father's alma mater. However, he evinced as much interest in art and theater as he did in engineering.

During the February 1917 Revolution, Eisenstein served in the volunteer militia and in the engineering corps of the Russian army. In the spring of 1918, following the October Revolution of 1917, he joined the Red Army. His father, however, supported the White Russian army and subsequently emigrated.

In 1920 Eisenstein entered the General Staff Academy in Moscow where he joined the First Workers' Theater of Proletcult as a scenic and costume designer. He collaborated with several experimental theater groups.

Despite his success in the theater, however, Eisenstein eagerly embraced film as the artistic medium that could most efficiently convey communist ideas and ideals. From the beginning of his career as a filmmaker he took a theoretical approach. The idea of editing to create a truly cinematic language became codified as "montage."

This theoretical approach to the cinema can be found in Eisenstein's first feature film, *Strike* (1924). Although *Strike* is based on an agitprop theater piece, one would never know it, for the film became, in Eisenstein's fevered cinematic imagination, a torrent of visceral imagery, edited for maximum impact.

Strike's narrative is often obscured by the onslaught of imagery; nevertheless, the work remains one of the most startling debut films in the entire history of cinema, and might have attained legendary status were it not for the fact that Eisenstein's follow-up feature proved to be one of the most famous films ever made, the incendiary masterpiece *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

Potemkin's more linear narrative allowed the impacted editing and the rush of images to attain a greater emotional effect. Shot with the immediacy of a newsreel, this story of the naval revolt in Odessa in 1905 produced some of the most celebrated sequences in twentieth-century art: the Odessa steps scene must be the single most quoted, imitated, and parodied sequence in movie history.

Eisenstein's triumph with *Potemkin* was instantaneous and worldwide. But political problems surfaced



Sergei Eisenstein ca 1910.

during the filming of his next epic, *October* (1928). In that film, begun in 1927 to celebrate the October Revolution of 1917, Eisenstein planned his most elaborate scenario, which was to display his theory of "dialectical montage" to maximum effect. By the time filming was completed, however, Stalin's cultural policies were firmly in effect, which wreaked havoc with the film's final cut and the content.

When *October* was finally shown in 1928, the battles with the cultural bureaucracy had been fought, and Eisenstein had lost. His next movie, *Old and New* (1929), his paean to collective farming, proved a more conventional propagandistic piece, but it too was subject to censorship.

Chafing under the constraints of Stalinism, Eisenstein accepted offers to work abroad, which led to unfulfilled projects in the United States and to the spectacular debacle of *Que Viva Mexico!*, which was never completed, taken over by the producers, and edited into three separate films: *A Time in the Sun*, *Thunder Over Mexico*, and *Death Day* (1935-1938).

Eisenstein returned to the Soviet Union in 1935, where he continued the spiral of falling out of and back into favor with the Stalinist regime. His remaining films (*Bezhin Meadow* [1937]; *Alexander Nevsky* [1939]; *Ivan the Terrible, Part I* [1942]; *Ivan the Terrible, Part II: The Boyars' Plot* [1946]; and the fragment of *Ivan the Terrible, Part III* [1947]) were marked with the tensions of the political turmoil in which Eisenstein was embroiled.

Eisenstein's personal life was also chaotic. He married twice in response to political pressure, but his marriages were never consummated. His unexpurgated diaries, recently published as *Immortal Memories*, are filled with accounts of his infatuations with many young men, including his assistant, Grigori Alexandrov.

Often his infatuations (as in the case of Alexandrov) were with young heterosexual men, whom he would educate and assist in their careers. His drawings, recently exhibited during the centenary of his birth, include many illustrations of homosexual activity.

Despite his difficulties with censorship and other problems, Eisenstein created a remarkable legacy. His films reveal his continued commitment to experimentation in form. *Nevsky*, his first sound film, contains spectacular scenes, most notably the Battle on the Ice, as well as the incomparably thrilling film score of Sergei Prokofiev.

Ivan the Terrible, an intensely Expressionistic study of political power and corruption, with immense sets, voluminous costumes, and amazingly hyperbolic lighting, represents a contrast to this earlier work. It was not dynamically edited, but relied on extended long takes, in which dialogue, sound effects, and music were crucial. *Ivan the Terrible* pointed to new operatic possibilities in motion pictures.

In addition, *Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible* benefited from the charismatic performances of Nikolai Cherkassov, a "golden Adonis" on whom the director doted.

From *Strike* to *Ivan*, Eisenstein's career always excited controversy, but he remains one of the most important filmmakers in history, the exemplar of the true intellectual artist.

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