

Sergei Eisenstein Biography



Biography from Baseline's Encyclopedia of Film

Occupation: Director, theoretician

Also: screenwriter, editor

Birth Name: Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein

Born: January 23, 1898, Riga, Latvia

Died: February 10, 1948, Moscow, Russia

Education: School of Fine Arts, Riga; Institute of Civil Engineering,

Petrograd (architecture); Officers Engineering School (engineering); General Staff Academy, Moscow (Oriental languages); State School for Stage Direction

As a youth, Sergei Eisenstein attended the science-oriented Realschule, to prepare himself for engineering school. However, he did find time for vigorous reading in Russian, German, English and French, as well as drawing cartoons and performing in a children's theater troupe which he founded. In 1915, he moved to Petrograd to continue his studies at the Institute of Civil Engineering, his father's alma mater. On his own, he also studied Renaissance art and attended avant-garde theater productions of Meyerhold and Yevreinov.

After the February 1917 Revolution, he sold his first political cartoons, signed Sir Gay, to several magazines in Petrograd. He also served in the volunteer militia and in the engineering corps of the Russian army. Although there is little record that Eisenstein was immediately affected by the events of October 1917, in the spring of 1918 he did volunteer for the Red Army. His father joined the Whites and subsequently emigrated. While in the military, Eisenstein again managed to combine his service as a technician with study of theater, philosophy, psychology and linguistics. He staged and performed in several productions, for which he also designed sets and costumes.

In 1920 Eisenstein left the army for the General Staff Academy in Moscow where he joined the First Workers' Theater of Proletcult as a scenic and costume designer. After he gained fame from his innovative work on a production of *The Mexican*, adapted from a Jack London story, Eisenstein enrolled in his idol Meyerhold's experimental theater workshop and collaborated with several avant-garde theater groups, all of whom shared a mistrust of traditional art forms and "high" culture in general. The new theater's contribution to the revolutionary cause was to destroy the old art entirely and create a new, democratic one. The young Soviet artists resorted to "low" culture-circus, music hall, sports, fair performances-to educate the largely illiterate Russian masses in a "true" communist spirit. Eisenstein's studies of commedia dell'arte paid off in his 1923 staging of *The Sage*, a huge success not only as propaganda but also as sheer entertainment. For that production he made a short comic film, *GLUMOV'S DIARY* (1923), a parody of newsreels whose hero's grotesque metamorphoses anticipated the metaphors of *STRIKE* (1924), Eisenstein's first feature. But even more important for his career as a filmmaker was the structure of *The Sage*. Eisenstein took an old Ostrovsky play and reassembled it as a series of effective, circus-like attractions. The assemblage of such shocking scenes, as he claimed in his 1923 manifesto, *The Montage of Attractions*, would lead the public's attention in a direction planned by the "montageur."

Having studied the films of Griffith, Lev Kuleshov's montage experiments and Esfir Shub's re-editing techniques, Eisenstein became convinced that in cinema one could manipulate time and space to create new meanings, especially if the images were not to be merely linked, as Kuleshov suggested, but juxtaposed. Because at that time he believed that his duty as an artist was to contribute to the forging of the new life for his country, Eisenstein eagerly embraced the film medium as the most efficient tool of communist propaganda. However, as much as *STRIKE* was a condemnation of czarism, it was also an innovative work of art. With this film, an inexperienced director immediately caught up with the work of Soviet, German and French avant-garde filmmakers. *STRIKE* is filled with expressionistic camera angles, mirror reflections and visual metaphors. In a story of police spies, the camera itself turns into a spy, a voyeur, a trickster. The film was the first full display of Eisenstein's bold new cinematic grammar, a montage of conflicting shots that served as words and sentences endowed with the maximum power of persuasion. Although his command of this new technique was shaky-some sequences did not convey the intended message-*STRIKE* was a ground-breaking accomplishment.

As Eisenstein's second film, the enormously successful and influential *POTEMKIN* (1925), demonstrated, his art could be even more powerful when it achieved a balance between experimental and traditional narrative forms. If *STRIKE* was an agitated visual poem arousing emotions within a receptive

audience, *POTEMKIN*, the story of one of the tragic episodes of the 1905 Russian revolution, was a work of prose, highly emotional but clear in its logical, public speech. The close-ups of suffering human faces and the soldiers' boots in the now legendary "Odessa steps" sequence carried such impact that some screenings of the film outside the USSR provoked clashes with police when audiences were convinced they were watching a newsreel.

Later in his career Eisenstein would compare the film director's art with the craft of a shaman. But in the 20s he was trying hard to find a rational basis for it: in Bekhterov's reflexology, in Russian formalist literary theory, in Marxist dialectics. As his films became more complex, they raised the ire of the new breed of ideologues who called for art accessible to the masses and flexible enough to illustrate the latest party line. However, Eisenstein was too deeply involved with his personal research to follow everyday politics. Thus, *OCTOBER*, commissioned for the tenth anniversary of the October revolution of 1917 was not released until 1928; for one thing, all sequences featuring Trotsky, one of the leaders of the revolt, had to be deleted. Then too, the authorities were disappointed with Eisenstein, for while the edited *OCTOBER* was considered ideologically correct, its confusing structure and abundance of abstract metaphors diminished its propagandistic message, and it did not carry the same impact as *POTEMKIN*. Attacking him for the "sins of formalism," critics claimed that he "lost his way in the corridors of the Winter Palace" and pointed to the more intelligible anniversary films shot by his colleagues on more modest budgets and in less time. In a way, the critics were correct; in none of his other films was Eisenstein's search for the new cinematic language so radical.

After *OCTOBER*, Eisenstein was able to resume work that had been interrupted on *THE GENERAL LINE* (1929), a film meant to demonstrate the advantages of collective labor in the village. However, during the production of *OCTOBER*, the party policy toward peasantry had drastically changed from persuasion to coercion, and the film's surrealistic imagery and sophisticated montage, which anticipated Godard, were considered inappropriate. Stalin summoned Eisenstein and his co-director Grigori Alexandrov and ordered them to make radical changes. They made a few cuts and immediately embarked on a trip abroad to investigate the new sound technology. With Eisenstein out of the country, the film was released under the neutral title *OLD AND NEW* to vicious attacks. His claim that the film was an experiment which could be understood by the millions was ridiculed as wishful thinking; according to one of his critics, the public needed "simple, realistic pictures with clear plot."

Meanwhile, Eisenstein's reception in Europe nurtured his opinion that he could be both avant-garde artist and creator of popular and ideologically

“correct” films. In every country he visited he was hailed by radical students and intellectuals. He met with Joyce, Cocteau, Abel Gance, Marinetti, Einstein, Le Corbusier, and Gertrude Stein, all of whom seemed excited about his work. In May 1930 Eisenstein arrived in the United States, where he lectured at several Ivy League schools before moving on to Hollywood, where he hoped to make a film for Paramount. Although he was welcomed by leading Hollywood figures, including Fairbanks, von Sternberg, Disney and especially Chaplin, who became his close friend, his proposal for an adaptation of *An American Tragedy* was rejected as too complicated, as were several other highly original projects.

Just before he left America, Eisenstein was encouraged by Robert Flaherty and Diego Rivera to make a film about Mexico, and in December 1930, with funding from writer Upton Sinclair, he began work on *QUE VIVA MEXICO*. This project, which promised to become Eisenstein’s most daring, took a tragic turn when Sinclair, caving in to pressures from his family, who cited financial reasons, and Stalin, who was afraid that Eisenstein might defect, cancelled the film with shooting almost finished. Although Eisenstein was told the footage would be sent to Moscow for editing, he was never to see it again.

Upset over the loss of his footage and shocked at the differences in the political and cultural climate that he noticed after three years abroad, he suffered a nervous breakdown. One after another, his ideas for projects were bluntly rejected, and he became the target of intense hostility from Boris Shumyatsky, the Soviet film industry chief whose objective was to create a Stalinist Hollywood. With his bitter memories of commercial filmmaking and strong ties to European modernism, Eisenstein could not make the switch to directing cheerful agitkas and was thus perceived as a threat. He took an appointment to head the Direction Department at the Moscow film school and became a devoted teacher and scholar. In January 1935, he was villified at the All-Union Conference of Cinema Workers but eventually was allowed to start working on his first sound film, *BEZHIN MEADOW*.

On this notorious project Eisenstein tried to create a universal tragedy out of the true story of a young communist vigilante who informed on his father and was murdered in retaliation by the victim’s relatives. The authorities wanted to demonstrate that family ties should not be an obstacle to carrying out one’s duty—a theme common to Soviet and German cinema of the time. Why Eisenstein agreed to deal with such dubious subject matter is not clear, but what has been saved from the allegedly destroyed film suggests that he once again confounded the Soviet authorities’ expectations. After *BEZHIN MEADOW* was banned, Eisenstein had to repent for his new “sins of formalism.” As one Soviet film scholar put it, “Eisenstein was apologizing for being Eisenstein.”

As if to save his life, Eisenstein next made ALEXANDER NEVSKY (1938), a film about a 13th-century Russian prince's successful battle against invading German hordes. This monumental costume epic starring familiar character actors was a striking departure from Eisenstein's principles of montage and "typage" (casting non-professionals in leading roles). NEVSKY was a deliberate step back, in the direction of old theater or, even worse, opera productions which Eisenstein has been fiercely opposed to in the 20s. Still, the film demonstrated Eisenstein in top form in several sequences, such as the famous battle scene on the ice. Also significant were his attempts to achieve synthesis between the plastic elements of picture and music with the film's memorable score by Prokofiev, possibly reflecting Eisenstein's prolonged admiration for the cartoons of Walt Disney.

NEVSKY was a huge success both in the USSR and abroad, partially due to growing anti-German sentiment, and Eisenstein was able to secure a position in the Soviet cinema at a time when many of his friends were being arrested. On February 1, 1939, he was awarded the Order of Lenin for NEVSKY and shortly thereafter embarked on a new project, The Great Fergana Canal, hoping to create an epic on a scale of his aborted Mexican film. Yet after intense pre-production work the project was cancelled, and following the signing of the non-aggression treaty between the USSR and Germany, NEVSKY was quietly shelved as well. In February 1940, in a Radio Moscow broadcast to Germany, Eisenstein suggested that the pact provided a solid basis for cultural cooperation. At that time he was commissioned to stage Wagner's opera Die Walküre at the Bolshoi theater. At the November 21, 1940, premiere, the German diplomats in Moscow, not unlike Stalin's henchman before them, were dismayed by Eisenstein's artistry. They accused him of "deliberate Jewish tricks." Yet when the Nazis attacked Russia less than a year later, it was Die Walküre's turn to be banned while NEVSKY could once again be screened.

In 1941 Eisenstein was commissioned to do an even larger scale historic epic, a three-part film glorifying the psychopathic and murderous 16th-century Russian czar, Ivan the Terrible. However, IVAN THE TERRIBLE, PART ONE (1943) was an enormous success and Eisenstein was awarded the Stalin Prize. But IVAN THE TERRIBLE, PART TWO (1946) showed a different Ivan: a bloodthirsty tyrant, the unmistakable predecessor of Stalin. Naturally, IVAN THE TERRIBLE, PART TWO was banned and the footage of IVAN THE TERRIBLE PART THREE destroyed. Eisenstein was hospitalized with a heart attack, but he recovered and petitioned Stalin to be allowed to revise IVAN THE TERRIBLE, PART TWO as the bureaucracy wanted, only to be dismissed. In fact, Eisenstein was too weak to resume shooting, and he died in 1948, surrounded by unfinished theoretical works and plans for new films. IVAN THE TERRIBLE,

PART TWO was first shown in 1958 on the 60th anniversary of Eisenstein's birth. In 1988, at the international symposium at Oxford marking Eisenstein's 90th anniversary, Naum Kleiman, the director of the Eisenstein Museum in Moscow, showed a scene that survived from IVAN THE TERRIBLE PART THREE. In it, Ivan is interrogating a foreign mercenary in a manner resembling one of Stalin's secret police.

With the abundance of literature on Stalin's crimes now available even in the USSR, the significance of IVAN THE TERRIBLE, PART TWO as a document of its tragic time has diminished, but as a work of art it is still significant. In his last completed film, Eisenstein achieved what he had dreamt of since 1928, when he saw a Japanese Kabuki troupe performance: the synthesis of gesture, sound, costume, sets and color into one powerful, polyphonic experience. Both NEVSKY and Walk?re were steps in that direction, but only the celebrated danse macabre of Ivan's henchmen comes close to the synthesis of the arts which has haunted artists for ages.

Eisenstein's death prevented him from summing up his theoretical views in the areas of the psychology of creativity, the anthropology of art and semiotics. Although not many filmmakers have followed Eisenstein the director, his essays on the nature of film art have been translated into several languages and studied by scholars of many nations. Soviet scholars published a six-volume set of his selected works in the 60s. 1988 saw the publication of a new English-language edition of his writings.