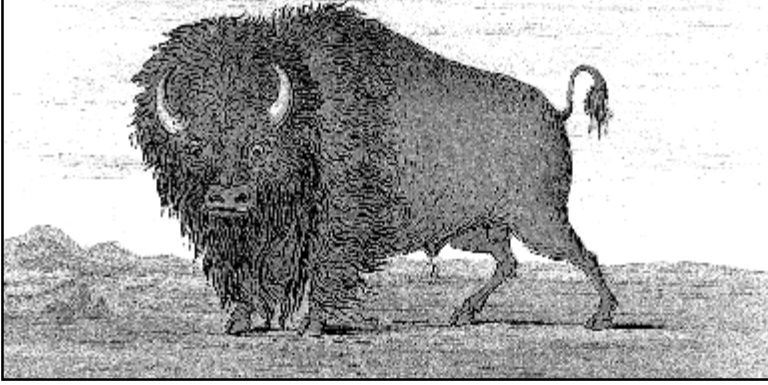


The Buffalo Film Seminars



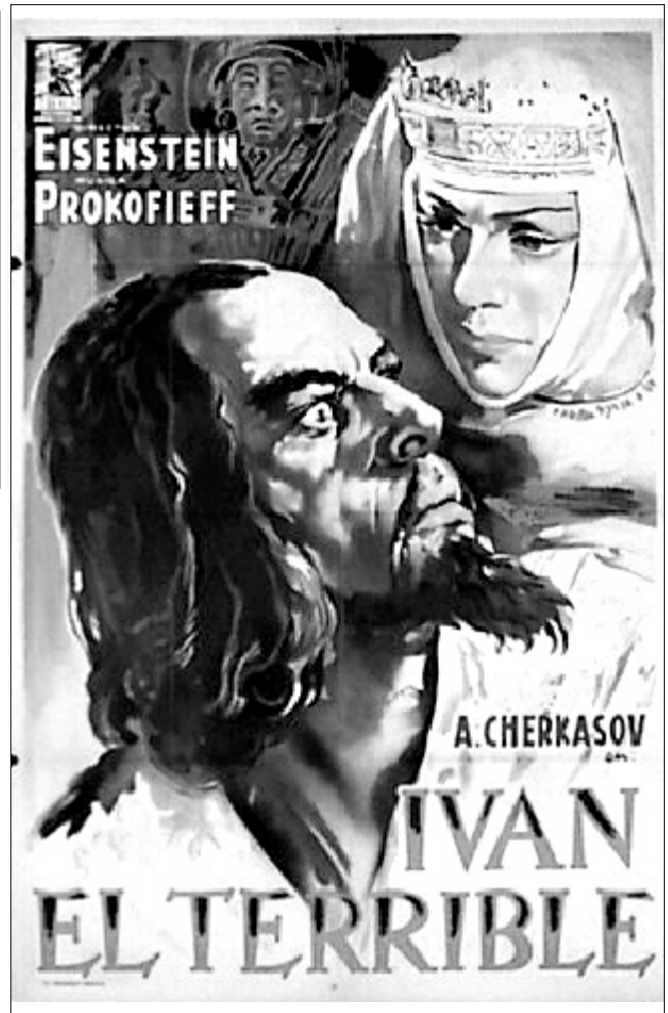
13 FEBRUARY 2001 (III:6)

SERGEI M. EISENSTEIN (Sergei Mikhailovich Eizenshtein, 23 January 1898, Riga, Russia. [now Latvia]—11 February 1948, Moscow) completed only seven films: *Ivan I & II*, *Aleksandr Nevsky* 1938 (*Alexander Nevsky*), *Romance sentimentale* 1930, *Staroye i novoye* 1929 (*The General Line, Old and New*), *Oktyabr* 1927 (*October, Ten Days That Shook the World*), *Bronenosets Potyomkin* 1925 (*The Battleship Potemkin, Potemkin*) and *Stachka* 1925 (*Strike*). One of those seven is on just about every film critic's short list of greatest films (*Potemkin*) and three of them are on the long lists. His writing on film theory and practice are essential for anyone wanting to do serious film criticism or scholarship. Because of that film work and writing, he remains, a half-century after his death, one of the most influential figures in the realm of film.

Encyclopedia Britannica's bio on Eisenstein: Russian film director and theorist whose work includes the three film classics in *Potemkin* (1925), *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), and *Ivan the Terrible* (released in two parts, 1944 and 1958). In his concept of film montage, images, perhaps independent of the "main" action, are presented for maximum psychological impact.

Eisenstein, who was of Jewish descent through his paternal grandparents, lived in Riga, where his father, Mikhail, a civil engineer, worked in shipbuilding until 1910, when the family moved to St. Petersburg. After studying in 1916-18 at the Institute of Civil Engineering, Eisenstein decided on a career in the plastic arts and entered the School of Fine Arts.

With the outbreak of the Russian Revolution of 1917, he enlisted in the Red Army and helped to organize and construct defenses and to produce entertainment for the troops. Having now found his vocation, he entered, in 1920, the Proletkult Theatre (Theatre of the People) in Moscow as an assistant decorator. He rapidly became the principal decorator and then the codirector. As such, he designed the costumes and the scenery for several notable productions. At the same time, he developed a strong interest in the Kabuki



theatre of Japan, which was to influence his ideas on film. For his production of *The Wise Man*, an adaptation of Aleksandr Ostrovsky's play, he made a short film, "Glumov's Diary," which was shown as part of the performance in 1923. Soon afterward the cinema engaged his full attention, and he produced his first film, *Strike*, in 1924, after having published his first article on theories of editing in the review *Lef*, edited by the great poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. He said there that in place of the static reflection of an event, expressed by a logical unfolding of the action, he proposed a new form: the "montage of attractions"--in which arbitrarily chosen images, independent of the action, would be presented not in chronological sequence but in whatever way would create the maximum psychological impact. Thus, the filmmaker should aim to establish in the consciousness of the spectators the elements that would lead them to the idea he wants to communicate; he should attempt to place them in the spiritual state or the psychological situation that would give birth to that

Argentine poster for *Ivan the Terrible*

idea.

These principles guided Eisenstein's entire career. In the realistic films that he undertook, however, such a technique is effective only when it utilizes the concrete elements implicit in the action; it loses validity when its symbols are imposed upon reality instead of being

implied by it. Thus, in *Strike* (1924), which recounts the repression of a strike by the soldiers of the tsar, Eisenstein juxtaposed shots of workers being mowed down by machine guns with shots of cattle being butchered in a slaughterhouse. The effect was striking, but the objective reality was falsified.

Possessed by his theory, Eisenstein was bound to succumb often to this failing. *Potemkin*, also called *The Battleship Potemkin*, happily escaped it. Ordered by the Central Executive Committee of the U.S.S.R. to commemorate the Revolution of 1905, the film, made in the port and the city of Odessa in 1925, had a momentous impact and still remains among the masterpieces of the world cinema. (In 1958 it was voted the best film ever made, by an international poll of critics.) Its greatness lies not merely in the depth of humanity with which the subject is treated, nor in its social significance, nor in the formal perfection of its rhythm and editing; but rather, it is each of these magnified and multiplied by the others.

Having by this accomplishment earned recognition as the epic poet of the Soviet cinema, Eisenstein next made a film entitled *October*, or *Ten Days That Shook the World*, which in the space of two hours dealt with the shifts of power in the government after the 1917 Revolution, the entrance on the scene of Lenin, and the struggle between the Bolsheviks and their political and military foes. If the film was sometimes inspired, it was also disparate, chaotic, and often confused.

Also uneven, but better balanced, was *Old and New* (originally titled *The General Line*), filmed in 1929 to illustrate the collectivization of the rural countryside. Eisenstein made of it a lyric poem, as calm and as expansive as *Potemkin* had been violent and compact.

In 1929, putting to profit a visit to Paris, he filmed *Romance sentimentale* (*Sentimental Melody*), an essay in counterpoint of images and music. Engaged by Paramount studios in 1930, he left for Hollywood, where he worked on adaptations of the novels *L'Or* ("Sutter's Gold"), by Blaise Cendrars, and *An American Tragedy*, by Theodore Dreiser. Refusing to modify his scripts to meet studio demands, however, he broke the contract and went to Mexico in 1932 to direct *Que viva Mexico!*, with capital collected by the novelist Upton Sinclair.

The film never was completed. After disagreements between Eisenstein and Sinclair, some of the negatives were sold and released as the films *Thunder over Mexico*, *Eisenstein in Mexico*, and *Death Day* (1933-34). In 1939 a fourth film, entitled *Time in the Sun*, was made from the footage. None of these films bears more than a distant resemblance to the original conception.

After his return to Moscow in 1933, Eisenstein undertook *Bezhin Meadow*. Several weeks before its completion, however, he was ordered to suspend its production. The scenes already shot were put together by Eisenstein, but the film, which was never released, was attacked as "formalistic" because of its poetic interpretation of reality. Eisenstein thus suffered from the same governmental policies toward art that had embroiled the composer Sergey Prokofiev, the writer Isaac Babel, and many other artists in difficulties with Soviet officialdom.

Having expressed contrition for the errors of his past works, Eisenstein was able to make a film recounting the medieval epic of *Alexander Nevsky*, in accordance with Stalin's policy of glorifying Russian heroes. Made in 1938, this film transfigured the actual historical events, majestically leading to a final resolution that represented the triumph of collectivism. As in medieval epics, the characters were the strongly stylized heroes or demigods of legend. Produced in close collaboration with Prokofiev, who wrote the score, the film represented a blend of images and music into a single rhythmic unity, an indissoluble whole.

During World War II Eisenstein achieved a work of the same style as *Alexander Nevsky* and even more ambitious--*Ivan the Terrible*--about the 16th-century tsar Ivan IV, whom Stalin admired. Begun in 1943 in the Ural Mountains, the first part was finished in 1944, the second at the beginning of 1946. A third part was envisaged, but Eisenstein, suffering from angina pectoris, had to take to his bed for several months. He was about to return to work when he died, only a few days after his 50th birthday.

IVAN THE TERRIBLE, PART ONE (IVAN GROZNYI I, 1944)

Nikolai Cherkasov.... Czar Ivan IV
Lyudmila Tselikovskaya.... Czarina Anastasia Romanovna
Serafima Birman.... Boyarina Efrosinia Staritskaya
Mikhail Nazvanov.... Prince Andrei Kurbsky
Mikhail Zharov.... Czar's Guard Malyuta Skuratov
Amvrosi Buchma.... Czar's Guard Aleksei Basmanov
Mikhail Kuznetsov.... Fyodor Basmanov
Pavel Kadochnikov.... Vladimir Andreyevich Staritsky
Andrei Abrikosov.... Boyar Fyodor Kolychev
Aleksandr Mgebrov.... Novgorod's Archbishop Pimen
Maksim Mikhajlov.... Archdeacon
Vsevolod Pudovkin.... Nikola, a Simple Beggar

Directed, written, produced and edited Sergei M.Eisenstein
Original music Sergei Prokofiev
Cinematography Andrei Moskvin
Production Design Isaak Shpinel
Costume Design Nadezhda Buzina
Production Company Alma-Ata Studios

IVAN THE TERRIBLE PART II (IVAN GROZNYI II, released 1958, completed 1946, aka BOYARSKY ZAGOVOR, THE BOYARS' PLOT)

Nikolai Cherkasov...Czar Ivan IV
Serafima Birman...Boyarina Efrosinia Staritskaya
Pavel Kadochnikov...Vladimir Andreyevich Staritsky
Mikhail Zharov...Czar's Guard Malyuta Skuratov
Amvrosi Buchma...Czar's Guard Aleksei Basmanov
Mikhail Kuznetsov...Fyodor Basmanov
Aleksandr Mgebrov...Novgorod's Archbishop Pimen
Andrei Abrikosov...Archbishop Philip
Vladimir Balashov...Pyotr Volynets
Erik Pyryev...Ivan IV as a boy
Mikhail Nazvanov...Prince Andrei Kurbsky
Pavel Massalsky...King Sigismund of Poland
Ada Vojtsik...Elena Glinskaya, Ivan's Mother

Directed written and produced Sergei M.Eisenstein
Original music Sergei Prokofiev
Cinematography Andrei Moskvin (interiors), Eduard Tisse (exteriors)
Film Editing Eleonora Praksina
Production Design Sergei M.Eisenstein, Isaak Shpinel
Costume Design Leonid Naumov

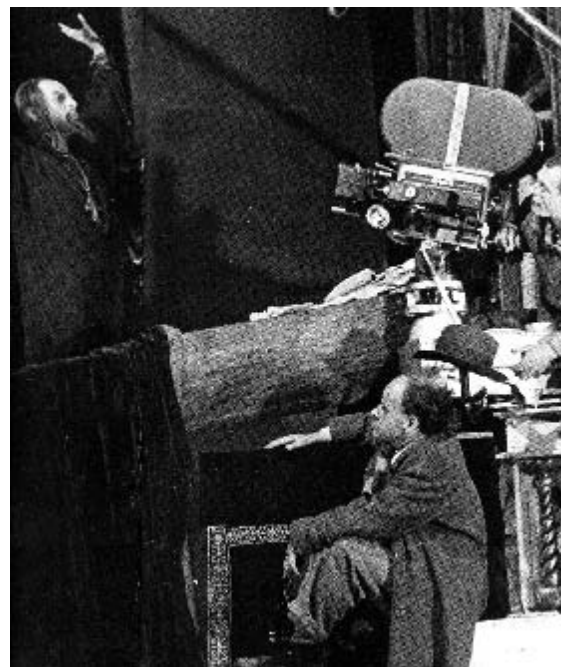


Most critics would agree that though Eisenstein's three greatest films stand far above the others, all of his work is significant; their flaws are those common to artists probing the limits of their craft. It may be that in the entire history of motion pictures, no other filmmaker has surpassed him in his understanding of his art.

For more on Eisenstein, see Earl Jackson Jr's on-line bibliography of books and articles by and about him [//www.anotherscene.com/cinema/bibs/eisenbib.html](http://www.anotherscene.com/cinema/bibs/eisenbib.html) and Ronald Bergan's *Sergei Eisenstein: A Life in Conflict*.

EDUARD TISSE (1 April 1897, Lithuania—18 November 1961) was Eisenstein's cinematographer for the Mexican fiasco, *Aleksander Nevsky*, *Bezhin Meadow*, *October*, and *Potemkin*. Work by the great Russian composer **SERGEI PROKOFIEV** (23 April 1891, Sontsovka, Russia. [now Ukraine]—5 March 1953, Moscow) has frequently been used as the basis of film scores, and he several times composed directly for the screen himself, most famously the two Ivans, *Alexander Nevsky*, and *Lieutenant Kije* 1934 (*Poruchik Kizhe*, *The Czar Wants to Sleep*). For excellent biographical info on him visit [//www.prokofiev.org/biography/](http://www.prokofiev.org/biography/) **NIKOLAI CHERKASOV** (27 July 1903, St. Petersburg, Russia—14 September 1966, Moscow) appeared in nearly 50 films and was one of the Soviet Union's most famous actors. He had a propensity for playing great literary characters and real-life bigshots: Don Quixote, Mayakovsky, FDR (twice), Maxim Gorky (twice), Alexander Nevsky (twice).

IVAN THE TERRIBLE (Ivan IV Vasilievich Groznyi, 25 Aug 1530, Kolomenskoe near Moscow—18 Mar 1584, Moscow) was Grand Duke of All Russia 1533-1547 and Tsar of all Russia 1547 until his death. He was the first Russian ruler to use the title "Tsar," which derives from "Caesar." He had six wives after Anastasia Romanovna Zaharin-Juriev (whom he married the same year he became tsar and who died 7 August 1560). He was paranoid and violent; in one of his fits of rage he killed his son Ivan. He centralized the administration of Russia, massively expanded the boundaries of the Russian Empire, and began trade with the west. And he created the *oprichniki*—a standing army/police force that killed somewhere between 400 and 10,000 boyars. The few boyars he didn't kill, he destroyed financially. There's a story that Ivan gouged out the eyes of the architects who built St. Basil's so that so beautiful a cathedral could never again be created. One of his 5 children with Anastasia, Feodor, succeeded him as tsar. Fyodor was feeble-minded, so his brother-in-law, Boris Godunov became regent and governed the country. After Fyodor's death in 1598, Godunov was elected tsar by the Imperial Assembly. And there began "The Time of Troubles," years of famine and political unrest.



On 25 February 1947, Eisenstein, Nikolai Cherkasov (who plays Ivan in both films) were called to a meeting at the Kremlin with Stalin and two of his closest advisers, foreign minister V. M. Molotov, and Andreai A. Zhdanov, who was in charge of cultural policy for the Communist Party Central Committee. The following is from notes Eisenstein and Cherkasov made immediately after the meeting, first published in Russian in *Moskovskie Novosti* in 1988. This translation is from Richard Taylor, ed., *The Eisenstein Reader* (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1998), pp. 160-161.



STALIN. Have you studied history?

EISENSTEIN. More or less.

STALIN. More or less? I too have a little knowledge of history. Your portrayal of the *oprichnina* is wrong. The *oprichnina* was a royal army. As distinct from a feudal army, which could at any moment roll up its banners and leave the field, this was a standing army, a progressive army. You make the *oprichnina* look like the Ku-Klux-Klan.

EISENSTEIN. They wear white headgear; ours wore black.

MOLOTOV. That does not constitute a difference in principle.

STALIN. Your Tsar has turned out indecisive, like Hamlet. Everyone tells him what he ought to do, he does not take decisions himself.

Tsar Ivan was a great and wise ruler and, if you compare him with Louis XI (you have read about Louis XI, who prepared the way for the absolutism of Louis XIV?), he dwarfs Louis XI. Ivan the Terrible's wisdom lay in his national perspective and his refusal to allow foreigners into his country, thus preserving the country from the penetration of foreign influence. In showing Ivan the Terrible the way you did, aberrations and errors have crept in.

Peter I was also a great ruler, but he was too liberal in his dealings with foreigners, he opened the gates too wide and let foreign influences into the country, and this allowed Russia to be Germanised. Catherine even more so. And later—could you really call the court of Alexander I a Russian court? Was the court of Nicholas I really Russian? No, they were German courts.

Ivan the Terrible's great achievement was to be the first to introduce a monopoly on foreign trade. Ivan the Terrible was the first, Lenin was the second.

ZHDANOV. Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible comes out as a neurasthenic.

MOLOTOV. There is a general reliance on psychologism; on extraordinary emphases on inner psychological contradictions and personal experiences.

STALIN. Historical figures should be portrayed in the correct style. In Part One, for instance, it is unlikely that the Tsar would kiss his wife for so long. That was not acceptable in those days.

ZHDANOV. The picture was made with a Byzantine tendency. That was also not practised.

MOLOTOV. Part Two is too confined to vaults and cellars. There is none of the hubbub of Moscow, we do not see the people. You can show the conspiracies and the repressions, but not just that.

STALIN. Ivan the Terrible was very cruel. You can depict him as a cruel man, but you have to show why he *had* to be cruel. One of Ivan the Terrible's mistakes was to stop short of cutting up the five key feudal clans. Had he destroyed these five clans, there would have been no Time of Troubles. And when Ivan the Terrible had someone executed, he would spend a long time in repentance and prayer. God was a hindrance to him in this respect. He should have been more decisive.

bo•yar also **bo•yard**: a member of a Russian aristocratic order next in rank below the ruling princes until its abolition by Peter the Great **au•to•crat** 1: a person (as a monarch) ruling with unlimited authority 2: one who has undisputed influence or power **Li•vo•nia** region *cen* Europe bordering on the Baltic in Estonia and Latvia

To determine the essence of montage is to solve the problem of film as such.

The old film makers----regarded montage as a means of producing something by describing it, adding individual shots to one another like building blocks.

Movement within these shots and the resulting length of the pieces were thus to be regarded as rhythm.

A fundamentally false notion! It would mean defining an object exclusively in terms of its external course. Regarding the mechanical process of sticking the pieces together as a principle. We cannot characterise this kind of relationship between lengths as rhythm....

According to this definition...montage is the means of *unrolling* an idea through single shots (the 'epic principle').

But in my view montage is not an idea composed of successive shots stuck together but an idea that DERIVES from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another (the 'dramatic' principle). ('Epic' and 'dramatic' in relation to the methodology of form and not content or plot!!). As in Japanese hieroglyphics in which two

independent ideographic characters ('shots') are juxtaposed and *explode* into a concept. **THUS:**

Eye + Water = Crying

Door + Ear = Eavesdropping

Child + Mouth = Screaming

Mouth + Dog = Barking

Mouth + Bird = Singing

Knife + Heart = Anxiety, etc.

Sophistry? Not at all. Because we are trying to derive the whole essence, the stylistic principle and the character of film from its technical (-optical) foundations.

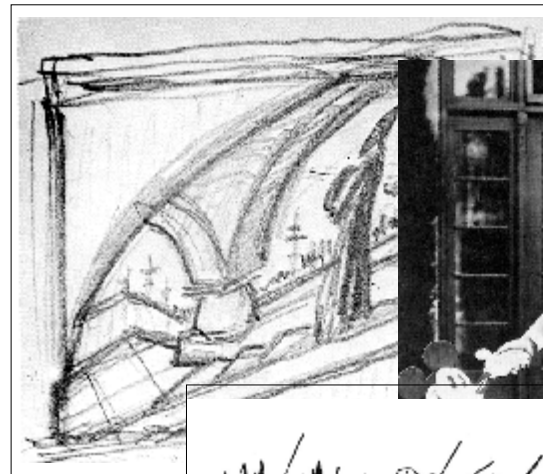
We know that the phenomenon of movement in film resides in the fact that still pictures of a moving body blend into movement when they are shown in quick succession after the other.

The vulgar notion of what happens —as a *blending*—has also led to the vulgar notion of montage mentioned above.

(Eisenstein, from "The Dramaturgy of Film Form (The Dialectical Approach to Film Form)," in Taylor, 93-94.)

<http://us.imdb.com/search.html>

HERE'S SOMETHING LUIS BUÑUEL WROTE: Filmmaking seems to me a transitory and threatened art. It is very closely bound up with technical developments. If in thirty or fifty years the screen no longer exists, if editing isn't necessary, cinema will have ceased to exist. It will have become something else. That's already almost the case when a film is shown on television: the smallness of the screen falsifies everything.



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Join us next week, Tuesday, February 20, for Vittorio De Sica's BICYCLE THIEVES

...email Bruce Jackson: bjackson@buffalo.edu