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| Eisenstein, Sergei Mikhailovich (1898 – 1948) |
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| Sergei Eisenstein was an early Soviet film director and theorist who produced widely acknowledged masterpieces of both silent and sound cinema, such as *Strike* (1924), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *October* (1927), *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) *Ivan the Terrible I* (1944), and *Ivan the Terrible II* (1958). He is widely known for devising influential theories on montage as the basis for cinematic art.  Although acclaimed for his cinematic masterpieces and film theory, Sergei Eisenstein began his career in theater. He joined the Red Army in 1918 after studying civil engineering, and he was assigned to a theatrical troupe where he worked as set designer. After being demobilized in 1920, Eisenstein found employment at the Proletkult Theater in Moscow, where he worked under the tutelage of Vsevolod Meyerhold, who would have a lasting influence on him. After spending approximately five years in theater, Eisenstein wrote ‘Montage of Attractions’ (1923), outlining the theory that he had conceived while directing his first play for stage, Alexander Ostrovsky’s *Enough Stupidity in Any Wise Man* (1868). Defining ‘attractions’ as calculated emotional shocks delivered by a play, Eisenstein claimed that an accumulative series of affects could guide audience members to adopt a given ideology. Thus, he believed, a good script consisted of a plan for engendering attractions in a compelling sequence. He implicitly deemphasized character-driven plots and suggested that attractions prove most potent, not when arising from the context of a story, but rather when originating with extra-textual associations triggered by action. By 1924, however, he deemed action less effective at evoking such extra-textual associations than images, the fundamental vessels of meaning in cinema, and he therefore resolved that film provides the more powerful means of generating attractions. He thus adapted his theory to cinema, which became the basis of his work in that medium. |
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By 1924, however, he deemed action less effective at evoking such extra-textual associations than images, the fundamental vessels of meaning in cinema, and he therefore resolved that film provides the more powerful means of generating attractions. He thus adapted his theory to cinema, which became the basis of his work in that medium.  Eisenstein’s first two films, *Strike* (1924) and *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), exemplified the core principles of his theory with great success. Both films are considered among the most powerful propaganda films ever made, and *Battleship Potemkin* is frequently counted among the greatest cinematic works of all time. Neither film has a main character, nor do they rely on acting to carry the story. In fact, Eisenstein used mostly amateur actors, whom he selected for physical traits that fit his vision for character or personality types; he called this casting method ‘typage’. Instead of relying on character-driven plots, Eisenstein’s early films depict insurrection as a communal process precipitated by an institution’s systematic oppression of the people. In each case Eisenstein presents the institution in question — a capitalist plutocracy in *Strike* and the tsarist military in *Battleship Potemkin* — as exploitative, bloodthirsty, and irredeemably evil. Meanwhile, he portrays their victims as sympathetic, good-willed, mostly anonymous crowds of innocent people.  Eisenstein’s focus on pathos sets his theory apart from those of his contemporaries, several of whom saw montage as the foundation for what one might describe as a generative film grammar. This approach stemmed from Lev Kuleshov’s observation that a montage can generate images that transcend the ontology of its constituent shots (i.e., such images exist only as the sum of certain shots in a sequence, and their referents may exist only within the film). Although Eisenstein did not dispute the veracity of Kuleshov’s theory, he downplayed its significance, referring to it as ‘building-block’ montage (*Film Form*, 48). For Eisenstein, montage was not grammatical or arithmetical but psychological; it coincided with the very structure of perception.  This view of montage as a perceptual phenomenon and cinema as an emotive manifestation of it touched the root of an intense polemic between Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, a documentarian. Vertov claimed that ideally cinema unveiled aspects of reality not accessible to human perception alone, because the camera could show us ‘life caught unawares’ (*Kino-Eye*, 41) and the edited film product could ‘show and elucidate life as it is’ (47). To this end, he emphasized the collection of raw footage with minimal or no manipulation of the subject, and he insisted that in order to access the truth revealed by cinema filmmakers must overcome their addiction to the stuff of illusions — scripts, actors, costumes and sets. In other words, Vertov attacked the very type of films Eisenstein made.  As early as 1924, however, Eisenstein acknowledged (in ‘Montage of Film Attractions’, first published posthumously) that a purely intellectual cinema resembling Vertov’s ideal might someday be possible, although he believed the general public would misunderstand it until directors conditioned them to read film in a more sophisticated manner. The best way to do so, he suggested, was through an appeal to the emotions that would lead to greater political and aesthetic awareness. Nevertheless, Eisenstein developed his theory to include ‘intellectual montage’, in which a synthesizing concept, idea or thought resolves the conflicts established among sequential shots. He demonstrated this in his third film, *October* (1927), which depicted the Bolshevik revolution and the events leading to it.  Eisenstein’s concept of ‘intellectual montage’ represents the next logical step in the development of the theory he first established while working in theater. Eisenstein had conceived of attractions as rhetorical devices with the purpose of indoctrination, so the ends toward which he strove were inherently intellectual even if his means were emotive. Furthermore, the cinematic rhetoric of his first two films embodied a dialectical pattern, in which the attractions that pushed his audience toward Marxist ideology emerged from the tensions among images representing antithetical values.  Despite the Marxist values he expressed in his films, Eisenstein’s career began to stall after *October* was censored for its depiction of Leon Trotsky. After writing ‘A Statement on Sound’ (1928) with Vsevolod Pudovkin and Girgory Alexandrov, Eisenstein left for an extended trip to Western Europe and America (1929-32). He was unable to complete any films there, but he made some progress on *Que viva Mexico!* before Upton Sinclair pulled his funding. After returning to the USSR, Eisenstein found that his critics had in his absence accused him of abandoning his country for the hotbed of capitalism, and he fell into disfavor along with several of his colleagues, including Vertov and Kuleshov, as the advent of Socialist Realism brought a backlash against the avant-garde. From then on his film projects were hampered and suppressed, he spent more time teaching than making movies, and he never again enjoyed the same degree of artistic autonomy as in the 1920s.  Eisenstein redeemed himself with his first sound film, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), which includes the famous scene of Prince Nevsky defeating the Teutonic Knights in the battle on the ice of Lake Chud. Because the authorities saw its potential to inflame anti-German sentiment, however, they pulled *Alexander Nevsky* from theaters when Stalin and Hitler created the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. The film was later rereleased and vigorously promoted when it became clear that the USSR was going to war against Nazi Germany.  In the 1940s the Stalin regime continued to subject Eisenstein to a cycle of praise followed by criticism, support followed by suppression. *Ivan the Terrible I* (1944) won him the Stalin prize, but was criticized by others for drawing an analogy between Joseph Stalin and Ivan IV that portrays the Soviet dictator in a positive light. In contrast, *Ivan the Terrible II* (1945) so displeased Stalin that it could not be released until 1958, ten years after his death. Some view it as a corrective to the first installment about the notorious tsar. It was Eisenstein’s last film. He died of a heart attack in 1948 at the age of 50.  Selected Filmography  *Strike* (Sovkino, 1924).  *Battleship Potemkin* (Sovkino, 1925)  *October* (Sovkino, 1927).  *Alexander Nevsky* (Mosfilm, 1938).  *Ivan the Terrible I* (Mosfilm, 1944).  *Ivan the Terrible II* (Mosfilm, 1945). |
| Further reading:  (Briley)  (Carroll)  (Christie and Taylor)  (Eisenstein)  (Eisenstein, Film Essays)  (Eisenstein, Film Form: Essays in Film Theory)  (Eisenstein, The Psychology of Composition)  (Neuberger)  (Shaw)  (Taylor)  (Vertov) |