Eisenstein, Sergei Mikhailovich
{ize'-en-shtine, sihr-gay mee-hy'-loh-vich}

Sergei Eisenstein, b. Jan. 23 (N.S.), 1898, d. Feb. 11, 1948, was a seminal figure in the history of FILM, known for his stylistic innovations and theory of Montage. His theoretical and practical work are still intensely studied.

Of a well-to-do family from Riga, in Latvia, Eisenstein studied engineering and architecture in Petrograd, (now Saint Petersburg), where he witnessed both the February and October revolutions of 1917. His service in the Red Army during Russia's Civil War led him to design (1920) for a front-line mobile theater troupe. Following the war, Eisenstein worked in Moscow's experimental theaters and studied under Vsevolod Meyerhold. As a designer and director for the Proletcult Theatre, Eisenstein and the experimental group he gathered around him staged Aleksandr Ostrovsky's Even a Wise Man Stumbles (1923) as a circus, incorporating into the production a short film interlude. This foreshadowed Eisenstein's subsequent theater work, all of which contained significant cinematic elements.

Placed in charge of Proletcult's first large film project, Towards the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, envisioned as a series of seven historical films, Eisenstein began work on Strike (1925); combining exaggerated theatrical elements with some of the most realistic footage ever filmed by Eisenstein, this was recognized for its artistic and political power. Eisenstein's next film, a treatment of the June 1905 naval mutiny on the battleship Potemkin, received international acclaim after it was shown in Berlin. The Battleship Potemkin (1925) demonstrated abroad that the USSR could produce an original film masterpiece and also demonstrated Eisenstein's use of montage, a revolutionary film editing technique.

October (1928), also known as Ten Days That Shook the World, was similarly innovative, introducing sequences that tested Eisenstein's theory of an "intellectual cinema," which aimed at nothing less than the communication of abstract thought by visual means. A propaganda film (The General Line) on behalf of the collectivization of Soviet agriculture was released in 1929 under the title Old and New. Between 1929 and 1932 Eisenstein studied foreign sound-film systems in western Europe; signed a contract with Paramount Pictures (later canceled); and, with the financial backing of Upton Sinclair, began filming an epic of Mexican culture to be called Que Viva Mexico!, all footage of which was seized by the Sinclairs after production was halted (1932).

Trouble also plagued Eisenstein's projects in the USSR, where, in the 1930s, Stalin's socialist realism supplanted earlier Soviet experimentalism. The historical drama Alexander Nevsky (1938) temporarily restored Eisenstein to favor, besides showing what he could do in sound film (in collaboration with composer Sergei Prokofiev). His last film, made in Kazakhstan during World War II, was Ivan the Terrible (1944-46), of which only Part I was seen in uncensored form. Eisenstein's thoughts on film theory and practice can be found in translations of his The Film Sense (1942), Film Form (1949), Notes of a Film Director (1959), and Film Essays (1968).