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The Eisenstein Centenary

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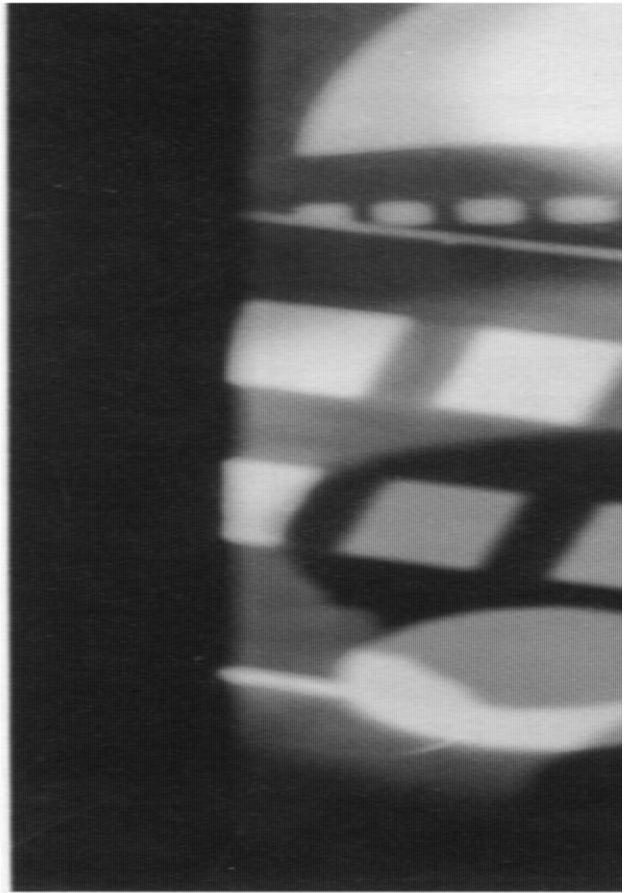
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The Eisenstein Centenary

Annette Michelson

Above left:
Sergei Eisenstein.
Incident in the Street.
1914. Drawing

Above right:
Sergei Eisenstein,
c. 1925

WE CELEBRATE, this year, the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Sergei Eisenstein, a central force within the intellectual landscape of this century, whose early film *Bronenosets Potyomkin* (*Battleship Potemkin*) (1925) exploded upon the scene of Western cultural production. In honoring this master artist and theoretician, The Museum of Modern Art joins in the tribute offered throughout the world to an oeuvre that continues to engage the ardent interest of artists in film, theater, painting, and photography, as well as that of historians, critics, and theoreticians in the widest range of disciplines, from architecture to linguistics.

Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Founding Director of the Museum, was dedicated to securing a place for film within the new Museum's collections. The Film Library, the very first of its kind, would consequently provide a model for the establishment of cinematheques and research centers abroad, reinforcing the relatively new conception of film as an artistic practice.

As a young man visiting Moscow in January 1928, Barr recorded his meetings with the members of the immediately post-revolutionary Soviet avant-garde, with whose works he and subsequent curators enriched the Museum's collections. Among those was the young Eisenstein, who arranged for screenings of both *Oktyabr* (*October*) (1928), made in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Revolution, and *Generalnaia Liniya* (*The General Line*), (1929). Later renamed *Staroye i Novoye* (*Old and New*) by order of



Oktyabr (October).
1927

Stalin, *The General Line* presented the struggle to revolutionize, through mechanization and collectivization, the traditional agrarian system. It was Barr's view, shared by Iris Barry, the first Curator of the Museum's Film Library, that Eisenstein had a central place both as artist and as theoretician within the Modernist art that was shaping the core concept of the Museum as an institution devoted to collecting and presenting twentieth-century art.

Below top and bottom:
Generalnaia Liniya
(The General Line).
1929

Eisenstein left a body of writings on film, art history, linguistics, ethnology, and aesthetics that continue to stimulate and to prompt debate. He began, however, as a talented graphic artist, and his drawings, produced throughout his life, clearly manifest from adolescence on a sense of heritage within an artistic tradition—that of Jacques Callot and Pierre Gavarni, of Honoré Daumier and Giovanni Battista Piranesi. The stimulus provided by Cubism is clearly evident in his designs for theatrical sets and costumes; and in later work, one can discern

his interest in the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. The vast corpus of preparatory drawings for his films demonstrates the importance of this stage of conception in the work as a whole; the linear vivacity of sketches, plans, designs, caricatures, portraits, and physiognomic exercises reveals the source of his mastery of expressive representation of feeling and thought.

Eisenstein's films drew upon his early work in the theater. He was of that generation of Soviet filmmakers known as "The Children of Meyerhold," for whom the claim for cinema's specificity meant not the rejection of theater as such, but rather that which, in the theater, was no longer alive. (The work



of filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Marie Straub, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder was to confirm this important insight four decades later.) His desire to find settings for his theatrical productions that were more powerful than his own highly inventive ones led him to use existing locations. Thus, the play *Gas Masks* (1923), produced in Moscow within an actual gas works—during working hours, with machines running—had a decor that, as he put it, overwhelmed the production itself; “The cart fell to pieces, and I found myself in the cinema.” Eisenstein’s first film *Stachka* (*Strike*) (1924), narrates the complex and tragic struggle of factory workers in pre-revolutionary Russia. It is in this film that we discern the origins of many of his major and most influential innovations: the telling composition within the frame, the dynamic editing, the establishment of the powerful filmic metaphor that can condense and encapsulate complex relationships and ideas. *Strike* is the laboratory within which Eisenstein develops the generative work of a new cinematic paradigm.

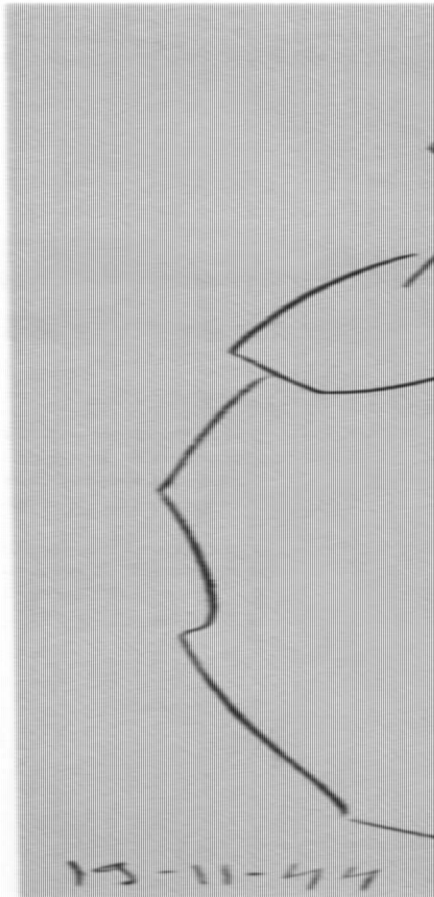
From that time on, his films chronicle, in non-linear order, the stages in Russian and Soviet history, from feudalism through the Revolution and the early stages in construction of the socialist polity. They do so with a vigor, intensity, and innovative drive that dazzled contemporary audiences and, perhaps more importantly, inspired filmmakers around the world.

In no country, however, did Eisenstein’s work receive more admiring attention than in the United States. Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, traveling in Europe and the Soviet Union, had been strongly impressed by the dynamism of *Battleship Potemkin*, to the point of insisting that Eisenstein come to work in the United States, and a contract was eventually offered by Paramount. A hope was expressed that another *Battleship Potemkin* could be produced in Hollywood. In 1930 Eisenstein, accompanied by his cameraman Eduard Tisse and his assistant Gigorii Alexandrov, spent six months in California elaborating several fascinating projects—among them adaptations of Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* and Blaise Cendrars’s *Sutter’s Gold*. None of the projects, however, secured approval for production.

Eisenstein’s interest in American culture and cinema remained intact despite the disappointment of his personal experience in Hollywood. Among his writings that testify to this passion are his essays on John Ford, D. W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, and Walt Disney; and among the heavily annotated books of his personal library are the novels of Dreiser, John Steinbeck, and John Dos Passos.

Opposite:
Camera position during
the filming of the attack
on the Winter Palace in
Oktyabr (October),
1927

Sergei Eisenstein.
Fear. 1944. Drawing





He was also enamored of icons of contemporary American culture, from Mickey Mouse to Judy Garland.

It was from America that Eisenstein launched the extraordinary project of a film that would encompass and articulate the culture and history of Mexico. Both his correspondence and the hundreds of drawings created during his stay there tell us that this encounter with a foreign culture of rich complexity involved a sense of freedom from the constraints then developing within the film industries of both the Soviet Union and the United States. The voluminous, unedited footage shot in Mexico for this ambitious uncompleted work provides particular insights into the methods and conditions of Eisenstein's work, documenting the thinking and reconsideration of camera setups, the direction of non-professional actors, and the dynamic placing of protagonists and objects in the field. It also demonstrates the concern for an expressive maximalization of drama and the landscape through the use of deep focus.

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Eisenstein: The Centenary Year runs through December and was organized by Jytte Jensen, Associate Curator, Department of Film and Video, and Annette Michelson.

Selections from the Mexico project, free of the distortions imposed upon it by the successive attempts of ill-advised film editors, are screened and discussed during *Eisenstein: The Centenary Year*. As part of its centenary tribute to the Russian master, the Museum's Department of Film and Video is acquiring new prints of the films to be shown during this year-long retrospective. Among them is another important and concluding component of the Eisensteinian oeuvre: the restoration, through film stills, of the lost film *Bezhin Lug* (*Bezhin Meadow*) (1925), to be presented by Naum Kleiman, Director of the Arsenal Cinematheque and the Eisenstein Archive in Moscow.