Eisenstein and revolution

By Clive Bradley

"The cinema is for us the most important of the arts." V.I. Lenin

IN the years following the October revolution there was an explosion of creativity in film-making. A few short years, from the mid to late twenties in particular, saw the making of some of the finest films in the history of cinema. The best known are the films of Sergei Eisenstein, especially *Battleship Potemkin*; but Eisenstein was only one of many cinema artists who developed *revolutionary* films, both politically and in the form and method of film-making itself. But like the rest of the arts, which thrived in the early years of the revolution, film was to be stifled and impoverished by the rise of Stalinism.

Before the revolution, there was very little film production in Russia, and most films shown in Russian cinemas were foreign. Film was still in its infancy: the first, it is usually agreed, was shown in Paris in 1895. Today's audiences are of course very used to film as a medium, and take an enormous amount for granted about the ways in which film conveys meaning. But before the 1920s, things were not so obvious. When Eisenstein and his contemporaries came on the scene, there were few if any of the established conventions which shape films today, and the contribution of the Russian directors to one particular area of film-making is hard to overstate. This area is *editing*, or as they called it 'montage'. It is hard to express to modern audiences how novel it was to see the editing of the film as a vital (for the Russians, *the* vital) part of the process. Today, on the whole, editing is so basic to film that audiences are virtually unaware of it.

The earliest films — once it was realised they could tell stories — were basically attempts to recreate the experience of the theatre (and considered very much theatre's inferior cousin). The camera was static, as if from the point of view of a member of the audience, and single scenes in the drama were played out in front of it. There was no notion of moving the camera, changing camera angles, editing together different shots within the same scene, or cutting dynamically between scenes. Even such standard procedures as cutting together two people talking from separate shots over each actor's shoulder was a later development. There was no notion that the camera itself could convey meaning. This exchange between the seminal American director DW Griffith and his executives in 1908 gives a flavour of the unsophisticated attitude of the early years:

> *When Mr Griffith suggested a scene showing Annie Lee waiting for her husband's return to be followed by a scene of Enoch [her husband] cast away on a desert island, it was altogether too distracting.*
>
> *"How can you tell a story jumping about like that? The people won't know what it's about."*

"Well," said Mr Griffith, "doesn't Dickens write that way?"
"Yes, but that's Dickens; that's novel writing; that's different."[1]

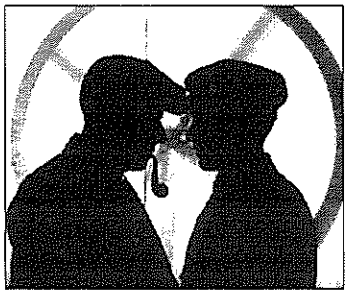
To us, it is perfectly obvious that a shot of a woman waiting, combined with a shot of the person she is waiting for stuck on a desert island, means she is waiting in vain. We relate the two shots together. To the company executives in 1908, it was incomprehensible.

Griffith, more than any other early film-maker, transformed this understanding. His two great films, *Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* developed a virtuoso apparatus of cinematic techniques. The assassination of Lincoln in *Birth of a Nation*, for example, consists of fifty-five shots, cutting between Lincoln, his assassin, the play Lincoln is watching, and members of the audience, the intercutting gradually speeding up. His predecessors would have shot the whole thing in one go (or very few shots), with none of the dramatic tension.

The Russian revolutionary film-makers were avowedly in Griffith's debt. In one sense this is odd, because Griffith was politically awful — *Birth of a Nation* is based on a book called *The Clansman*, and its hero is a member of the Ku Klux Klan fighting to defend the 'Aryan race' from freed black slaves after the American Civil War; it played a role in reviving the KKK in the early twentieth century. But it was Griffith's method which so influenced the Soviet film-makers of the twenties.

The Kuleshov Workshop, a radical group set up after the revolution, and which included all the great Soviet film-makers including Eisenstein, studied Griffith's films so much that their copies literally disintegrated.

Lev Kuleshov, the group's founder, was fascinated by the ways in which editing could create meaning beyond that of the shots in isolation. In a famous experiment, audiences were shown a short film which cut together the face of an actor — a pre-revolutionary matinée idol — and, in turn, a bowl of hot soup, a woman lying in a coffin, and a little girl playing with a teddy bear. The audiences raved about the skill of the actor in showing subtly varied emotions — hunger, sadness, joy — in relation to each image. But in fact, the actor's expression was identical in each case. The audience had drawn meaning from the relationship between the different images. To Kuleshov and his group, this was a revolutionary discovery; it became known as the 'Kuleshov effect'.



***Strike* (1924): Police informers discuss possible troublemakers.**

The Bolshevik government was no less excited by the potential of film. Lunacharsky, the Commissar for Education, who was himself a playwright, commented:

There is no doubt that cinema art is a first-class and perhaps even incomparable instrument for the dissemination of all sorts of ideas... Its effects reach where even the book cannot reach, and it is, of course, more powerful than any narrow kind of propaganda. The Russian revolution... should long since have turned its attention to cinema as its natural instrument.[2]

In fact, of course, it did 'turn its attention' to cinema, very early on. During the civil war, revolutionary propaganda films were used by the Red Army as a way of educating and entertaining troops — 'agit-trains' toured the fronts. It was here that Eisenstein cut his teeth.

There were three chief influences on the revolutionary film-makers. The first was DW Griffith, whose films were by far the most sophisticated yet made. The second was experimental, revolutionary theatre. And the third, often understated in accounts of the period, was the revolution itself. All of them were committed to the revolution, and made films intended as a contribution to it — not merely as propaganda, although they saw a role for that — but as an attempt to develop a Marxist aesthetic; to this extent they identified with 'Proletkult', the effort to create a 'proletarian culture', about which both Lenin and Trotsky were sceptical if not dismissive. They are distinguished from all previous film-makers, therefore, by the politics of their films, and by their intensely *theoretical* approach — which is especially true of Eisenstein. They attempted to develop their films in terms of Marxist theory, not only regarding the subject matter, but the method of film-making itself.

Eisenstein worked first in experimental theatre, before turning seriously to film. It is important to understand the tremendous ferment of creative ideas in Russia in this period; it is, indeed, one of the features which marks it out as a *revolution*, rather than a mere transfer of power. Moscow's Proletkult Theatre, which Eisenstein joined in 1920, was seething with debate and experimentalism. The world-famous director and actor Stanislavsky (founder of 'method' acting later popularised by James Dean, Marlon Brando, et al) gave daily lectures; Vsevolod Meyehold, whose theories were the diametrical opposite, argued for his conceptions; the great poet Mayakovsky put out manifestos; there were debates and discussions on everything from Hindu philosophy to Freudianism and Pavlovian psychology (Pavlov was an academic in Moscow at the time).

Eisenstein was influenced by Meyehold's experimental theatre. One of Eisenstein's productions turned the theatre into a circus with trapeze artists, tightropes and parallel bars. He staged an agitational play, *Gas Masks*, in the Moscow gas works, incorporating the actual workers arriving at work into the production. So it was through the theatre that Eisenstein first developed his theory of 'montage'. He concluded, however, that this theory could not be fulfilled in the theatre: "It is absurd to perfect a wooden plough; you must order a tractor."

The tractor was film, and in 1924, Eisenstein was commissioned by the Proletkult Theatre to make the film which became his first feature, *Strike*. It was to be one of eight films tracing the development of the Communist Party; although in the event, Eisenstein's was the only one which was finished.

Two features mark *Strike* out. One is the development of Eisenstein's theory of editing, discussed below. The other — which is a feature of all his early films, and distinguished him from many of his contemporaries — is that there is no single central character. Rather, the masses themselves — the striking workers — are the protagonist. These days, such a conception would be unlikely to receive funding, either in America or Europe. It was not a failure of dramatic imagination on Eisenstein's part, either: it was a deliberate attempt to abandon the concept of an individual 'hero', and instead present the working class masses as the subjective agent in the drama.

Eisenstein used early versions of his montage techniques to put across a dramatic message. In his theatre productions, he had worked out a system of 'the montage of attractions' — based on a theory of audience perception. Eisenstein believed that the emotional reactions of audiences could almost be calculated (the influence of Pavlov is obvious), and different images combined in ways to produce the right effect. This is not (see below) quite as manipulative as it sounds, although he was accused, then and later, of manipulative conceptions. In *Strike*, the idea — following the 'Kuleshov experiment' — is to produce an emotional result greater than the sum of its parts (the individual shots). He also described what he was doing as 'agit-Guignol' — Guignol being a Paris theatre specialising in the realistic depiction of violence.

***The Battleship Potemkin* (1925): The Odessa Steps sequence — Tsarist troops fire on a crowd gathered to welcome the mutineers.**

Strike was considered an impressive debut. In 1925 a 'Jubilee Committee' set up to organise celebrations of the defeated 1905 revolution commissioned Eisenstein to make a film of it. Originally intending a grand epic about the whole revolution, Eisenstein eventually paired his conception down to a drama centred around a single, representative moment from the revolution — the mutiny on the battleship Potemkin in the Black Sea.

Battleship Potemkin is widely regarded as Eisenstein's masterpiece (including by Eisenstein himself), and as one of the greatest films ever made, often compared to Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*. Charlie Chaplin, famously, considered it the best film of all time. And indeed it is an extraordinary achievement. It refines certain dramatic and formal techniques of *Strike* to creative a powerful, explosive drama of the struggle against oppression.

Once again, there is no single central character: at different moments in the unfolding story, individuals hold centre stage, but there is no 'viewpoint' character for the whole film. In this story, from the rebellion of the sailors against the rotten meat they are forced to eat, through the 'Odessa steps' sequence — one of the most celebrated scenes in cinematic history — to the final confrontation between the mutinous sailors and the Tsarist fleet, it is the masses who propel the action forward. Eisenstein mixed trained actors with non-actors: he adhered to the popular theory of 'typage', which sought to find actors representative of particular 'types', and tended to favour non-actors — preferably, for example, real peasants to play peasants.

The most famous section of the film is where the people of Odessa are brutally massacred on the city's steps by soldiers and Cossacks. In intricate detail, Eisenstein cuts between the rhythmic descent of the soldiers, and the chaotic flight of their victims, focusing on small pockets of the crowd, telling several moving stories purely through images.

***October* (1927): The peacock, Kerensky**

A child is shot, and his mother picks up his body, and climbs the steps to face the firing rifles. Eventually she stands alone before the line of troops, holding out the body of her murdered son; for a moment there is a pause. Then she is shot dead and the soldiers' advance continues.

Another mother, with a child in a pram, is shot dead. As she falls, she knocks the pram down the steps. With the baby inside it accelerates through the crowd, watched in helpless horror by an old woman and a revolutionary student. This sequence, the most famous of all, has been much imitated, for example in Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables*. It is a tour de force of the 'montage' technique — the frequency of the shots gradually accelerating as the drama intensifies.

The 'Odessa Steps' section finishes with the battleship Potemkin turning its guns on the Opera Theatre, the officers' headquarters, blasting it to bits.

Battleship Potemkin, does not, however, like many films of the period, end in the tragedy of successful counter-revolution. The ship goes on to confront the Tsarist fleet in the Black Sea. Once again with accelerating editing, the combatants draw closer, Potemkin blazing flags calling on the opposing sailors to 'join us' — which they do. The final scenes are of the sailors on the Potemkin and the other ships waving their caps at each other in solidarity.

Eisenstein's next film, *October*, commissioned to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Revolution, was beset by problems from the outset — precisely the problems which were to destroy the fledgling Soviet film industry. On the eve of the film's release, Trotsky was expelled from the Communist Party. Since the film truthfully portrayed Trotsky's central role in the historical events of October, it fell foul of the censors. Scenes with Trotsky had to be deleted (and have now been lost). Eisenstein's film has never been seen in the version he intended.

October is generally regarded as less successful artistically than *Potemkin*. Eisenstein took his ideas about montage a step further, but audiences reportedly found it difficult to follow. Here Eisenstein pursued his conception of 'intellectual montage', for example in a sequence where Kerensky, head of the provisional government, is intercut with scenes of a strutting peacock, and his militia with tin soldiers. In other words, images are used which are not straightforwardly part of the action. Nevertheless, the film lacks the dramatic drive of his earlier feature.

There were different theories of montage among Soviet filmmakers. Eisenstein's notions of 'dialectical' and 'intellectual' montage are the most radical, not just because they are an attempt explicitly to theorise film editing in Marxist terms, but because they are most distinct from the methods of editing typical of mainstream film from Griffith onwards. Eisenstein felt that the emotional power of the images juxtaposed through montage came from the *conflict* between them. Rather than smoothly progress from one image to the next, the montage of images should *shock, jar.* An important aspect of the theory is that this forces audiences not to be merely passive spectators, but to be active participants, 'working' to derive meaning from what they see. The editing of Kerensky and the peacock seems to us didactic and a bit crude; and while it was certainly intended to have educational and propaganda value, Eisenstein's idea was that an audience couldn't passively absorb such images: they had to interpret them, which demanded a high level of involvement.

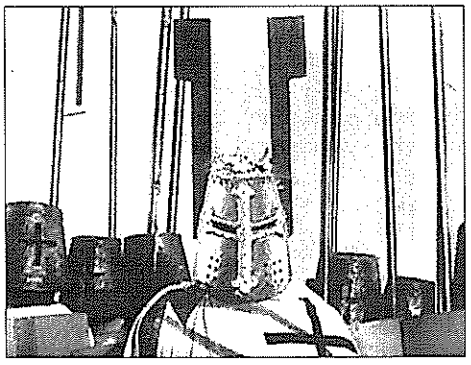
> *The strength of montage resides in this, that it includes in the creative process the emotions and the mind of the spectator... [T]he spectator is drawn into a creative act in which his individuality is not subordinated to the author's individuality... [E]very spectator, in correspondence with his individuality, and in his own way and out of his own experience — out of the womb of his fantasy, out of the warp and*

weft of his associations, all conditioned by the premises of his character, habits and social appurtenances, creates an image in accordance with the representational guidance suggested by the author, leading him to understanding and experience of the author's theme.[3]

Eisenstein saw montage as characteristic of all art, not only film, because the artist selects information which, in juxtaposition, forms a dramatic image. In his book *The Film Sense*, published in 1943, he analyses everything from paintings (or plans for them) by Da Vinci to poems by Pushkin and Milton to show how they employed the basic principles of montage to create an emotional effect.

Eisenstein tried to imbue his films with what he saw as a dialectical conception of conflict at every level. In 1939, explaining *Potemkin*, he described the entire structure of the film as operating dialectically.[4] The moment at which the mother ascends the steps with her dead son to confront the line of soldiers is a dialectical turning point (descent, violence, followed by ascent, a call for peace). He analysed the entire film in such terms — movement in one direction, producing movement in the opposite direction, synthesising into some greater meaning. It is a sophisticated theory of film aesthetics; indeed, it was not until after the Second World War that people began to write in such theoretical terms about film.[5]

Not all Eisenstein's contemporaries agreed with him. Vsevolod Pudovkin — an early collaborator of Kuleshov, who in the twenties was considered as great as Eisenstein, but whose name is now less familiar — made much more personal films, which are perhaps closer to the mainstream European tradition. *Mother*, based on a story by Gorky, is like *Potemkin* set during the 1905 revolution. But where Eisenstein's vision was huge and epic, Pudovkin's focused on a single family. The father, a drunk, joins the counter-revolutionary Black Hundreds, and is sent to attack a strike. But among the strikers is his son. The son is later arrested, and naively betrayed by his mother. She is politicised by her experience of Tsarist 'justice', and helps her son escape from prison. They meet again in a May Day demonstration, which is attacked by Cossacks.



***Alexander Nevsky* (1938): Teuton knights**

Pudovkin rejected Eisenstein's theory of 'dialectical montage', arguing instead for what he called *linkage*.

Alexander Dovzhenko, a Ukrainian, also made more intimate films; the best known is *Earth*, the story of a peasant family, which centres on the themes of life and death — as political as Eisenstein, but on a much smaller scale.

At a slight tangent to all of these film dramatists was Dziga Vertov, maker of the powerful and influential *Man with a movie camera* (1928) and other documentaries. He was the leader of a group calling themselves the 'kinoki', or 'cinema eye'. (Eisenstein, characteristically, commented "I don't believe in the kino-eye, I believe in the kino-fist.") They rejected conventional narrative, in favour of the "organisation of camera recorded documentary material." The later school of 'cinéma verité' is named after Vertov's 'kino-pravda' collection of documentaries. (Vertov's brother, interestingly, was the cinematographer in Elia Kazan's Oscar-winning *On the Waterfront* in the 1950s.)

All these film-makers — there were others, of course[6] — fell foul of the rise of Stalin. Eisenstein was to some extent protected by his international reputation. He was sent to Hollywood in 1930, where he worked on a number of projects, most notably *Que Viva Mexico!* with Upton Sinclair.[7] None of these projects came to fruition: Eisenstein didn't get on well with the Hollywood system.[8]

But Stalin, afraid of a high-profile defection, had him brought back to the USSR. Eisenstein was initially out of favour with the Kremlin in the 1930s, and several projects were abandoned, including what would have been his first sound film, based on a Turgenev short story. First he fell ill; then the bureaucracy demanded huge changes to force the film to accord with 'socialist realism'. In the end it was never made, and after a harsh attack on him for ideological errors in *Pravda*, Eisenstein was forced to recant the film.

However, when Shumiatsky, the Stalinist head of film production, was himself purged in the later thirties, Eisenstein was commissioned to make *Alexander Nevsky*. It was his first film with sound, made in 1938.

Unlike many of their American contemporaries, who had been horrified by the advent of sound, believing it would destroy cinematic art, the Russians were enthusiastic about it.[9] Eisenstein commented:

To remove the barriers between sight and sound, between the seen world and the heard world! To bring about a unit and a harmonious relationship between these two opposite spheres. What an absorbing task![10]

Alexander Nevsky is more like an opera (and deliberately so) than a normal narrative film, with an original score composed by Prokofiev which includes singing, mostly choral, that comments on the action. It describes the thirteenth century battle between the people of Novgorod and invading Germans. It was commissioned to be 'a film with a purpose', and it is an explicit propaganda piece, aiming to rouse the Russian people against the threat of Nazi invasion. After the Stalin-Hitler pact in 1939, the film was withdrawn in Russia, because it was considered too anti-German, but then revived when Hitler invaded the USSR.

The story, while it does concern the somewhat messianic exploits of Prince Alexander in fighting off the Teutons, poses the issues in quite clear *class* terms. Nevsky raises a peasant army, threatening the rich that if they fail to support the war, the peasants will turn on them. It is an army which includes, incidentally, one chain-mailed woman, who is recognised in the conclusion as the bravest fighter on the field. Nevertheless it is more a nationalistic film than a socialist one; Prokofiev's music, similarly, is stirring — but nationalistic — stuff.

Nevsky is not a sound film in the obvious sense. There is dialogue; but it is clear Eisenstein was not entirely comfortable with it. The blend of sound and image which excited him is largely between his visual images and Prokofiev's music. Some sections of the film have no sound at all, except for the music.

By far the longest section of *Alexander Nevsky* — in which there is very little dialogue — is the famous 'battle on the ice', an extraordinary sequence. Eisenstein has the Teutons dressed in white, with crosses (on their arms — reminiscent of swastikas), and helmets with narrow eye-slits evoking the Ku Klux Klan (again, the influence of Griffith). They move always in sharp geometric formations, while the Russians, with visible faces, are more chaotic, individual; woven into the epic drama is a more personal one of two warriors' rivalry for a beautiful woman.

After the invaders' rout, most of what's left of their army is swallowed up by the unforgiving ice. It is often noted that this serves as a prescient allegory for what was indeed to happen, more or less,

***Ivan the Terrible Part 1* (1944): The people of Moscow bid Ivan return from exile to 'work for the future of the great state of Russia'.**

to Hitler's army in the Second World War.

Eisenstein continued to have a fraught relationship with the Stalinist state.[11] *Ivan the Terrible* Part One was a huge success; Part Two was withdrawn for political reasons; and Part Three was destroyed. Reputedly as a result of the shock, Eisenstein had a heart attack and died, in 1948.

By the late twenties, the experimental arts which had exploded in the years following the revolution were being forced into the strait-jacket of 'socialist realism', which became official policy in 1933. 'Socialist Realism' demanded of art first that it present only uplifting images for the masses, and second that it adopt only the crudest pseudo-realist forms.

All the great film-makers were accused at one time or another of 'formalist errors'. They were, indeed, formalists. Formalism was an aesthetic theory which insisted that it was meaningless to separate a work of art's contents from its form. It is obvious that montage theory is intrinsically formalist, holding that the form (the editing and juxtaposition of images) determines the meaning. But all the Stalinist bureaucrats meant was that the film-makers were too experimental and intellectual. They wanted simple, crudely propagandist stuff.[12]

The result was that the great period of film-making ended in the 1930s.[13]

All this is highly instructive about the degeneration, or destruction, of the Russian revolution as a whole. The blossoming of path-breaking film-making — recognised as such throughout the world — is one index of the fact that a *revolution* had taken place. Great films were being made in the twenties and thirties elsewhere of course (in America, and Germany, for example), which strongly influenced Eisenstein and his contemporaries. But nowhere was there such a fever for invention and theory, for breaking new ground. That the Stalinist counter-revolution murdered this creativity may seem a small thing in comparison with labour camps, mass terror and millions of dead. But it is a measure of it.

How far is the Soviet cinema of the 1920s relevant to film-makers today? The conditions which created it cannot be recalled into being at will; and even if they were, seventy years have passed. A socialist revolution tomorrow would undertake its own artistic experiments, rather than merely try to recapture those of the early USSR. And much of what Eisenstein and the rest did simply could not be reproduced in contemporary film. For example, Eisenstein's attempts to tell stories without central characters is hard to copy. A Soviet audience watching *Potemkin* or *Strike* in the 1920s had lived through the revolution; some of them had lived through 1905, as well. They understood that 'the masses' were the hero, because it was their own experience. Today, when Ken Loach tells the story of the Spanish Civil War, he has to do it through the eyes of a worker from Liverpool, not just to get funding, but because a modern audience has not had the same experience. John Sayles in *Matewan* tries to establish the community of striking miners as the 'hero'; but even then, there are two characters in particular through whom we see the unfolding tragedy, with whom we identify.

The influence of the Russian revolutionary film-makers on subsequent film history is immense. If audiences today barely notice editing, it is to no small extent because of the vast breakthroughs in film-making technique perfected in Russia in the twenties. More than that, their films serve to remind us of what is possible when the working class seizes power, of the artistic and cultural revolution which will take place.

Footnotes

1. Quoted in David A Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* p67.
2. Quoted in Mark Joyce, *The Soviet Montage Cinema of the 1920s*, in Jill Nelmes (ed), *An Introduction to Film Studies*, p333.
3. Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, pp34-35.
4. See the *Introduction* to the screenplay of *Battleship Potemkin* (Faber edition).
5. In the 1950s, some film critics and directors began to develop a theory which rejected the primacy of montage in favour of 'mise-en-scène', i.e. what's in front of the camera and how the camera shoots it. This approach was initiated by André Bazin and the French *Cahiers du Cinéma* group, which included many of the directors who later formed the highly influential 'New Wave' — François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, etc. In place of the Griffith/Eisenstein tradition which placed all its emphasis on editing, they advocated an approach which had achieved its highest expression in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*; here, although there are montage sequences, the most important thing is how the individual shots are composed, and how drama takes place within each shot. With the advent of widescreen and new camera technology, according to this theory, it was possible to give the audience more democratic control over what they chose to see within the frame (for example, if it is possible to show two people speaking, both in close-up, the spectator can choose where to look; Eisenstein's montage is more manipulative). For the same reason, this school favoured 'deep focus', in which everything in front of the camera is equally in focus, rather than prioritising particular elements. The New Wave films, especially Godard's, are highly committed politically (on the Left), but in a very different way to early Soviet cinema.
6. Notably Esther Shub, whose *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) was compiled from 60,000 metres of film, entirely taken from old newsreels.
7. Eisenstein completed one more film before going to the United States, *Old and New* — released in English under the title *The General Line* — a film about collectivisation of the land. Among those planned over the next few years which were never made was a film entitled *Capital*, which was intended to be a cinematic exposition of Marxist theory, and one about the Haitian revolution.
8. Some of *Que Viva Mexico!* was shot, and the footage used in a silent melodrama by Hugo Reisenfeld, *Thunder Over Mexico* (1933).
9. Objections to sound were by no means entirely stupid. Most early sound films are very static, because of the limitations in microphone technology, and have none of the fluidity and dynamism of the great silent films.
10. *The Film Sense*, p74.
11. Eisenstein's homosexuality was kept a secret from Stalin, who would have been horrified by it. There are no explicitly homoerotic references in Eisenstein's films, although some commentators have spotted subliminal ones.
12. Pudovkin, who made films into the sound era, had party hacks assigned to him to make sure he stuck to 'socialist realism' in his films (a fate endured by Eisenstein for *Alexander Nevsky*). All the revolutionary film-makers were hounded by the state to enforce artistic conformity.
13. Russian film revived after the Krushchev thaw in the fifties. The most notable post-war Soviet directors include Sergei Parajanov and Andrei Tarkovsky.