

# Old and New AKA The General Line (Staroye i novoye)

USSR | 1929 | 121 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Sergei Eisenstein
<b>Screenplay</b>	Grigori Aleksandrov, Sergei Eisenstein
<b>Photography</b>	Eduard Tisse
<b>Music</b>	Robert Israel
<b>Cast</b>	
<b>Marfa</b>	Marfa Lapkina
<b>Marfa's son</b>	M. Ivanin
<b>Tractor Driver</b>	Konstantin Vasilyev

## In Brief

The Old and the New (Staroye i Novoye), also known as The General Line, was Sergei Eisenstein's last silent film. The film was begun as a simple, accessible story of collectivism in a backward province, where a sturdy peasant woman (Marfa Lapkina, a non-professional actor) tries to lead her village out of the poverty of pre-Soviet life and into the ideal of collectivism. By the end, it became his most expressionist experiment in montage, visualizing the promise of collective success in the symbol-laden dreams of its heroine.

Eisenstein and Grigori Aleksandrov began writing the screenplay just after *Battleship Potemkin*. The idea was to illustrate the general line of the party in terms of rural development; Bukharin was advocating the mechanisation of the countryside and the enrichment of the peasants. The writing of the screenplay was interrupted in order to shoot *October* and, when it restarted in 1928, the line had already changed – Stalin was tidying up around himself and Bukharin had been sidelined. The new line was one of exalting collectivisation. Eisenstein therefore had to add the presentation of an ultramodern kolhoz (there is practically an advert in the middle of the film) and upbraid the individualism of the kulaks (independent peasants). The title had to be changed to "The Old and the New".

Although it was born in difficult circumstances, *The General Line* is a wonderful film. It is hard not to fall under the spell of the beauty of the images which Eisenstein offers us, with those marvellous wide takes (or even very wide takes) of faces which are so expressive even though they are static. He also uses nature and its wide expanses very well and, of course, the shots of machines are achieved as marvellously as always. Eisenstein indulges in some experimentation, not only in dreamlike images but also in the content. The sexual connotations are very evident, such as in the famous scene of the milk-skimmer, in which the peasants experience ecstatic, even orgasmic, pleasure as they admire a mechanical skimmer in action for the first time. The scene with the cow being serviced by the bull is also quite a surprise. ...

The film has a central character, the peasant woman Marfa, a role for which Eisenstein had great difficulty finding an actress; unable to hire a professional actress, he found a perfect illiterate peasant. The montage is also remarkable; much more than in his earlier films, Eisenstein plays with linked takes to create tension. *The General Line* is one of Eisenstein's most beautiful films.

From *Le Monde's* film blog, 'L'Oeil sur l'Ecran', 20th April 2011 (translated by Gillian Gloyer)

Sergei Eisenstein's 1929 *Old and New* (also known as *The General Line*) illustrates Lenin's stated imperative that the nation move from agrarian to industrial culture in an epic ode to farm-collectivization progress. Its visuals are always arresting — in his own way, Eisenstein fetishized unusual, even grotesque faces as Fellini — and some sequences are downright bizarre as well as kinetically exciting. There's the weirdness of a hog processing plant's operations intercut with a ceramic piggy whirling like a ballerina on a rotating plate; and a village "wedding" that turns out to be for appropriately attired cow and bull, the editing reaching a frenzied "climax" along with their copulation. The film ends with a triumphant procession of tractors that might have been choreographed by Busby Berkeley.

*From Early Soviet Cinema and the Revolutionary Imperative, on fandor.com*

In *Old and New*, completed in 1929 with his trusty codirector Grigori Aleksandrov, Eisenstein (1898-1948) was responding to the Communist Party's appeal to artists in all media to create work that addressed the transformation of the backward Russian countryside. The film's production was severely complicated by the frequent changes in official policy on economic development in the agricultural sphere, and Eisenstein had to several times reedit and retitile the film. The dominant theme (as in so many other Soviet films of the late 1920s) is the triumph of the machine over outdated traditional methods. In this case, a cream separator represents the apotheosis of progress and a symbol of the shining future. Eisenstein considered the playful sequence in which the cream separator springs into





action, spewing luscious cream, an experiment in “cinematic ecstasy” resembling (in Olenina’s words) “an erotic or religious rapture.” Farmwork never looked so sexy. The failure of the excessively “formalist” *Old and New*, roundly booed by the party press at its premiere, left Eisenstein traumatized. For nearly ten years afterwards he failed to complete another film, despite numerous false starts both in Hollywood and in Moscow. Only with the simplistically propagandistic *Alexander Nevsky* would he resurrect his career.

*From Cineaste magazine, Landmarks of Early Soviet Cinema*

#### **Review from The New York Times, May 3 1930, by Mordaunt Hall**

S. M. Eisenstein, the young Russian who produced "*Potemkin*" and whom Douglas Fairbanks hopes to engage to direct his next picture, is responsible for an enlightening cinematic study called "*Old and New*," which is to be seen now at the Cameo. In this film, a silent one, Mr. Eisenstein ridicules the Greek Church and also pokes fun at the Soviet bureaucracy. It is another production in which Bolsheviks blow their own horn for their efforts in introducing modern agricultural and other machinery in the near and remote areas of Russia.

Although this picture possesses in most of its scenes a fund of interest, there are times when Mr. Eisenstein dilates too long on some of his sequences, and consequently they become a trifle tedious. Throughout this film, however, this producer reveals his keen observation and

his marvelous faculty of stressing his points by means of photography.

In quite a number of instances he delights in extravagances, either in portraying the abject poverty of the people or in depicting the greed and laziness of the more fortunate farmer. One is impelled to think as these scenes are shown that Mr. Eisenstein has selected isolated cases to make his film impressive.

His ability to show the expanse of country on a relatively small screen is marvelous, and so is his work in close-ups. As in "*Potemkin*," which was infinitely more dramatic, the director in this current work is usually careful in the choosing of his types. There are never two persons alike among those who appear in this film. The woman, Martha, who, following starvation and disappointment because she cannot borrow a horse to work on her tract of land, turns out to be a kind of Joan of Arc of the soil, one who urges revolution against the prevailing conditions during the Romanoff régime. She encourages the acceptance of new inventions, the first of which is a separator. There are some remarkable views portraying the hopeful persons and the doubting ones watching the working of this machine.

It is during a stretch in which the priests and peasants are praying for rain that Mr. Eisenstein makes a target of the Church. There are the men and women on their knees with their heads bent low and the priests holding ecclesiastical banners leading the populace in prayer. Rain is expected after the service, but disappointed persons raise their eyes to the skies and perceive no welcome clouds. The priests mop their perspiring faces and eventually leave the spot.

Mr. Eisenstein goes on to show the wonderful improvement wrought by the agricultural machinery, and finally brings his production to a close with the performance of a tractor pulling a long train of carts, much to the wonder of many of the peasants, who had fancied that no machinery could take the place of the horse in the work on the soil.

In directing this film Mr. Eisenstein was assisted by George V. Alexandrov.

#### **Biography by Dan Shaw, in Senses of Cinema ([www.sensesofcinema.com](http://www.sensesofcinema.com))**

Sergei Eisenstein b. January 23, 1898, Riga, Latvia. February 11, 1948, Moscow, USSR

... The son of a Jewish architect, he studied to be an architect himself and, after distinguished service in the Red Army as an engineer, joined the theatre as a painter and designer. He soon became director of the Moscow Proletkult, an avant-garde theatre that rejected the naturalistic methods of Stanislavsky in favour of Vsevolod Meyerhold’s biomechanical approach to acting, which was based on Pavlovian reflexology. Thus began the director’s lifelong fascination with the question of how audience responses can be aroused in the theatre, and in film.

As an intellectual, Eisenstein adhered to the Hegelian view of artistic greatness:

... the idea satiation of the author, his subjection to prejudice by the idea, must determine actually the whole course of the art-work, and if the art-work does not represent an embodiment of the original idea, we shall never have as result an art-work realized to its utmost fullness.

Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*

Indeed, it was his prior theoretical commitments that led young Sergei to explore, invent and embrace all the expressive possibilities

of montage.

Crucial to understanding what Eisenstein was striving for cinematically is his seminal 1931 essay *A Dialectic Approach to Film Form*. Just as the conflict of classes drove history – with the bourgeoisie as thesis clashing with the proletariat as antithesis to yield the triumphant progressive synthesis of the classless society – so too (famously, in *Strike!*) shot A of the workers' rebellion being put down is juxtaposed with shot B of cattle being slaughtered and the synthesis yields the symbolic meaning C, that the workers are cattle. This technical innovation (which Eisenstein dubbed “intellectual montage”) resulted from his studies of Kuleshov's famous experiments (which demonstrated that the meaning of any shot is contextual) and of Japanese ideograms (where two separate symbols can be juxtaposed to create a third meaning, e.g. child + mouth = scream, white bird + mouth = sing). Less famously, in that same essay, Eisenstein distinguished between ten different types of dialectical conflict at the level of shot composition alone, many of which are utilised in the *Odessa Steps* sequence in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

While Eisenstein was proudest of his “invention” of intellectual montage in the parallel bloodbaths in *Strike!* (1924), what most endures about his work is his mastery of the editing techniques he identified as metric, rhythmic, tonal and overtone in *Methods of Montage*. In his view, editing involved the audience more than the passive reception of information from static and lengthy shots; that as viewers we actively come to the symbolic realisations of intellectual montage, and are driven into a Pavlovian frenzy by the dynamism of the rhythms of the *Odessa Steps*, or the rat-a-tat of the machine gun in *October* (1927).

It was Eisenstein's hope to harness that frenzy for revolutionary purposes, fond as he was of quoting Marx's dictum that the point is not to understand history but to change it. In *The Structure of the Film*, the director embraced Lev Tolstoy's version of the expression theory: a real work of art “arouses the complex of those feelings that gave birth to the composition”. In so doing, masterpieces like *Battleship Potemkin* (which was based on the successful mutiny 20 years earlier) can achieve an affect that, in Eisenstein's words, “sends the spectator into ecstasy”. Reverting to the Greek etymology of ecstasy “ex-tasis – literally, ‘standing out of oneself’, which is to say, ‘going out of oneself’, or ‘departing from his ordinary condition’”, he set the bar high for true art. For Eisenstein (as for Marx, and Brecht, and Godard), art should raise class-consciousness and transform the viewer, ideally causing the audience to take up arms against their sea of troubles as soon as they leave the theatre. Unfortunately, it was easier for the same editing techniques to sell capitalist commodities than to engender the revolution that would lead to their extinction.

Truth be told, [David] Thomson made a few good points in his critique of Eisenstein, the most telling of which was that such extensive (and often symbolic) editing didn't give rise to the emotional pathos the director sought. Rather, it had a distancing effect that resulted from the need to see the whole sequence in order to interpret (and respond to) the individual shots. Thomson is unfair, though accurate, when he criticises the lack of identifiable protagonists in Eisenstein's early films, because that was part of the ideological message. According to Marx, World Historical Individuals don't change history (as Hegel contended); economic conditions change as capitalism develops, and the people must of necessity rise up when their living conditions become intolerable. The people, not particular persons, were intentionally made the protagonists, and Eisenstein's meticulous avoidance of the cult of the individual was a dramatic problem he recognised in later writings, addressed in *The General Line* (1929) and *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and succumbed to totally in Part I of *Ivan the Terrible* (1942). Unfortunately, the writer-director was never capable of creating a believable individual character other than Vakulinchuk in *Potemkin*. Though he is granted little screen time as a common seaman who helps lead the mutiny, the sympathy generated by his death attests to the extent to which our identification with individuals is at the heart of much of our cinematic pleasure.

As an expressionist with a fascination for Pavlovian reflexology, Eisenstein's greatest formal innovations stemmed from his experiments in montage and its relationship to biomechanics. He tried various editing patterns, discovering that, for example, film cut metrically to the beat of a typical heart has a profound impact on us precisely because it mirrors our biorhythms. He learned how to whip his viewers into a frenzy (much easier then than now) by using such simple tricks as making the shots shorter and shorter to build to a climax (see the end of the crop duster sequence in *North by Northwest* for a definitive use of accelerated montage). His films were composed of an astronomical number of shots, a necessity when, say, you are trying to capture the power of a machine gun by cutting as rapidly as it fires bullets... In fact, Eisenstein was forced to abandon much of his most frenetic editing because of charges of formalism levelled against *Potemkin* and *October*. His attempt to rein in those formalist tendencies resulted in *The General Line*, which was totally disavowed by Stalinist censors (for its individualistic, Griffith-like sentimentalism) and renamed *Old and New*.

As a result, Eisenstein fled to Hollywood, where he languished for some time, beginning a film version of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* funded by Upton Sinclair, who quickly fired the clearly unsuitable émigré. He then (in 1931–32) embarked on an ill-fated South-of-the-Border documentary called *Que Viva Mexico* (Orson Welles wasn't the first auteur to stall his career in the Tropics), shooting over 100,000 feet of film stock in more than a year before giving up in disgust. Upon his return to Russia, his first undertaking, *Bezhin Meadow*, also fell foul of the censors, and again had to be abandoned. Desperate to return to the good graces of his superiors, Eisenstein responded with *Alexander Nevsky*, his most conventional, Hollywood-style epic. Stripped of most of the creative editing resources that formerly dominated his style, the images took on a posed and static quality (a vice that emerged in spades in *Ivan the Terrible*). Though his eye for visual design had not abandoned him (the armour of



the German knights is priceless), the whole point of this State-sponsored epic seemed to be that the people of Rus would have withered before the Teutonic onslaught had it not been for the resilience of one man, his eponymous hero. No wonder Stalin loved it...

If he was inept with individuals, Eisenstein exhibited an epic mastery of crowds and crowd movement that has perhaps only been surpassed by David Lean and Akira Kurosawa (the German hordes going from a thin line to a looming presence over the horizon of ice in Nevsky reminds me of Lean). Nowhere have the masses seemed to more convincingly rise up than in the set pieces from *Potemkin* and *October*. Unlike the frequent depictions of mob violence that reflected the reactionary suspicion of the masses and mass movements that was rampant in the Hollywood of the 1920s and 1930s (see, for example, *Fury* [Fritz Lang, 1936]), the people are shown to be heroic, and shrewd judges of character (they mob the bourgeois racist that yells “Down with the Jews” in *Potemkin*). If authority figures in the traditional regime are mere caricatures, the proles are noble and reliable, at times straining credulity just as far in the other direction.



By the time the first part of *Ivan the Terrible* was released in 1945, Eisenstein was a mere shadow of his former self, still struggling with Part 2 of *Ivan* and plagued with the chronic heart condition that would kill him less than three years later. Worse yet, the static iconography of his final film seemed to sanction Ivan’s tyranny (and, by implication, Stalin’s), and the second part of the trilogy he envisioned (but failed to complete) was never released in his lifetime.

As a propagandist, none of Eisenstein’s efforts are as viscerally effective as *Triumph of the Will*, where Leni Riefenstahl demonstrated that many of his cinematic innovations could be put just as easily in service to fascism as to Communist liberation. In that sense, charges of formalism from his contemporaries were accurate, if ideologically misconstrued. One could say that Eisenstein was too much of an artist to make a good ideologue. His cinematic art will long outshine the work of the Nazi propagandists who learned so much from him.