

102 min., color. Available from First Run/Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11201, U.S.A. Web: <www.frif.com>.

*Reviewed by Roy R. Behrens, Department of Art, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0362, U.S.A. E-mail: <ballast@netins.net>.*

Even those unacquainted with film history may recognize at least one image from the Odessa steps segment of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), a film that brought immediate fame to Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948). It is a close-up of a distraught Russian woman, wearing pince-nez glasses, whose face and glasses have been struck by the sword of a Tsarist soldier. That frame is often reproduced, not just as a scene from the movie, but also because it was “quoted” (just as famously) 25 years later by British painter Francis Bacon in his portraits of pontiffs in boxes. As a Marxist, Eisenstein believed in the dialectical process by which the opposition of one force (thesis) by another (antithesis) is resolved by their emergence in a new, unanticipated unity (synthesis). He used a comparable process in film editing (called “dialectical montage”), juxtaposing this moment with that, believing that the audience would synthesize those (at first incompatible) elements in a new, cohesive event. To its credit, this film biography of Eisenstein uses related editing techniques to show us the life of “the master” of montage—a surprisingly short life (he died of a heart attack at age 50) in view of how widespread his influence has been.

The film’s title alludes to Eisenstein’s architectural training (his father was a prominent architect) and the fact that the film is divided into seven episodes of his life, poetically referred to as his “houses.” Born in Latvia, he grew up in St. Petersburg and was an architecture student when the Bolshevik revolution began in 1917. While designing posters and stage sets, he became a follower of avant-garde theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, who taught him how to create forms that were both structured and spontaneous. His international renown was established between 1925 and 1928 by four films (*Strike*; *Battleship Potemkin*; *October*, an account of the revolution 10 years earlier; and *Old and New*), after which he spent four largely fruitless years in Hollywood (under contract to Paramount, while friends

with Charlie Chaplin and, of all people, Walt Disney) and Mexico (where he worked on an ill-fated project about Mexican socialism, funded by Upton Sinclair). By the time he returned disillusioned to his homeland, forced collectivization had been established, and experimental art and film had been outlawed in favor of Social Realism. In his final decade, he fought to maintain his artistic integrity (and, surely, his sanity) while dodging the growing restrictiveness of the government censors. His last huge film, never finished, was a reinterpretation of the life of Ivan the Terrible (who had unified Russia in the 16th century). He suffered his first heart attack in 1946 (the year in which part of that film was denounced for suggesting parallels between the historic tsar and Stalin), followed by a second and fatal attack in 1948.

Like the unrestrained dreams of its subject, as well as the ambitious films he produced, this detailed (and often humorous) biography of Eisenstein is at once fascinating and exhausting. Narrated in Russian with English subtitles, it is enriched by the juxtaposition of scenes from historic documentaries, dozens of photographs and film clips of Eisenstein himself, current footage, and excerpts from the master’s films. Anyone seriously interested in film history, the Russian Revolution or the rise of Modernism will be delighted by it.

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### HOWARD FINSTER: MAN OF VISIONS

by Julie Desroberts, Randy Paskal and Dave Carr. 1988. VHS video, 20 min., color. Available from First Run/Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st Floor, Brooklyn NY 11201, U.S.A.. Web: <www.frif.com>.

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Howard Finster was a Southern tent preacher and a prolific creator of amateur art. In a mere 25 years, he made more than 46,000 works of “sacred art” (once producing as many as 17 pieces in less than a half hour), some of which he initially placed in his Paradise Gardens Park and Museum, a major tourist attraction in northern Georgia (U.S.A.) He experienced his first religious vision

at the age of three: While searching for his mother in “the ‘mater patch’” on their farm in Alabama, he saw his dead sister Abby emerge from the clouds. (He was sure of the date, because it took place in the year that he was hit in the head by his mother with “the tater fork.”)

Called to preach at age 16, he served as the pastor for nine different fundamentalist churches, while also conducting tent revivals. He retired from the ministry in 1976 and turned instead to making art (along with bicycle and mower repair). This happened in part because one day, while repairing a bicycle, he saw a face in a paint stain on his fingertip. When a voice then told him he should “make sacred art,” he demurred, believing that he lacked the training to be a serious artist, to which the voice then responded, “How do you know?”

In this brief and slightly dated film, a somewhat tired Finster talks about his religious and artistic development and the way in which the two tracks merged in the use of his paintings for preaching. This film (which is made up of portions of interviews with Finster and with university art professors, critics, collectors and art dealers) was produced in 1988, by which time the artist had appeared on the Johnny Carson Show, had illustrated album covers for R.E.M. and the Talking Heads, was selling his “Outsider Art” like hotcakes, and was well on his way to becoming as much of a ballyhooed insider in the corrupt New York art world as any aspiring artist would want. In anthropology, sincere observers do their best to guard against their own contamination of the culture that they are observing. Just back from a final publicity jaunt to New York, Finster came down with pneumonia and died in 2001 at age 84. From all appearances, he was a sincere, ambitious and talented man (even gifted)—but he was not, as a scene from this film would suggest, the postmodern era’s equivalent of William Blake.

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### AUDIO CD

### STEP ACROSS THE BORDER

by Fred Frith. Fred Records/ReR Megacorp, Thornton Heath, Surrey, U.K., 2002. (ReR/FRO 03)