Fully Explain Sergei Eisenstein's 5 theories of montage.

A montage is a narrative technique that shows sequences of action but not restrained by time. The perfect example for a brief description of montage is the training sequence in the 1985 sporting classic “Rocky IV” where the titular character trains for a boxing match over what is supposedly four months, but the montage runs for four minutes on screen. This is the idea that lengthy actions can be shortened through montage.

When talking about montage there are two main names you have to take into accounts the American D.W. Griffiths and the Russian Sergei Eisenstein. Both used montage in two very different ways, D.W Griffiths kept the language of continuity very important in his pieces, characters and time would only be bent slightly as Griffiths featured heavily on his directorial role as a narrative storyteller, Griffith started with very political films, notably the 1915 film “The Birth of a Nation”, his following film in 1916 “Intolerance” was one long montage of 4 parallel stories stretched over a 3 and a half hour run time. His comparison in many aspects is Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein had some grasp of continuity, but was a more abstract filmmaker than Griffiths; Eisenstein included montage to his repertoire. He edited to create emotion within his films and montage was a good way to achieve this. Eisenstein also edited to create an intellectual point. Eisenstein patented his five points of montage; they can be used to define any montage included in film today.

Eisenstein first noted metric montage; it is a very basic form of montage rarely used for the entire montage and hard to find this day and age, the metric montage will have a specific amount of time between edits. I made an example metric montage with a second between each edit, here is the time line from the editing software featuring the edited montage.

The metric montage shows a man making tea the time line shows each clip, the first 6 shots are a second long, the last 4 are 2 seconds long and this is just to show how the metric montage works. It features in many old films where there are 20 seconds between each view; it was common when editing was done by cutting the film as the editor could decide the exact length of an edit by cutting it per frame.

The second point of montage is Rhythmic editing. This is one of the most common montages to find in today’s cinema, the edits can happen at any point in this so differs from metric, it edits to the beat of a rhythm in the scene be it music or action, when edited properly it can create real emotion, it’s a technique made to cause tension. It is used perfectly in Hitchcock’s 1960 thriller ‘Psycho’ in the shower murder sequence; the montage is perfectly edited to the score provided by Bernard Herrmann.

In the third point of montage, Eisenstein introduces tonal montage. The emphasis in this montage is not on the pace of the edits or the rhythm that is true of the previous two, the emphasis on temporal montage is a change in emotion from the start of the montage to the end of the montage. A new sense being achieved is the goal of this form of montage. This is visible in the 1973 film “Don’t Look Now” where the montage goes from a child playing in the woods with her doll to the ending where we see the same girl drowned, this shows the focus of tonal montage as the feeling is completely changed, although we do get the feeling something will go wrong it starts of innocent and ends sad.
The fourth montage point is a combination of the previous three (Metric, rhythmic and tonal) and is often referred to as ‘over tonal’ montage or association montage. It is led by the content but with undertones of the other montage points. A good example is PT Anderson’s 1999 film ‘Magnolia’ which features a montage of characters in different locations, parallel action, singing the song “Wise Up”, this creates the solemn feel of a tonal, is edited to the rhythm of the song, and the edits happen at regular metric intervals.

The fifth montage devised by Eisenstein is the intellectual montage. It is the one that is closest to Eisenstein’s heart as it portrays the intellectual points he enjoyed including in his films. It allows the montage to have an undertone of seriousness despite its subject matter; it often combines two shots to give an overall more highbrow message. This being the case you can often remove some of the shots that make it so highbrow and the scene will still make sense it is only included for the intellectual point it pervades. This is present in Coppola’s 1979 Vietnam War film ‘Apocalypse Now’ where a lone assassin is sent to whip out the insane AWOL American officer Colonel Kurtz; during the montage of the assassin approaching the natives who serve under Kurtz regime are sacrificing a bull, the holy animal. The intellectual point is obvious a God like figure being assassinated as a holy symbol is slaughtered, although the scene would work without the sacrifice, it is still included to further make the point.

In conclusion the importance Eisenstein’s five points of montage is valid today as we still classify modern montage into his categories, also any montage made will abide by the rules he laid down.