

Battleship Potemkin

Sergei Eisenstein

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3)

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Sergie Eisenstein

- Soviet film director, film theorist, a pioneer in the theory and practice of montage.
- Noted for his silent movies: Strike(1925), Battleship Potemkin (1925), october (1928).
- Strike is his first full length movie.
- Began his career as a theatre writer.
- Famous essay : “ The Montage of Attractions”.
- Known as father of montage.



Summary

- *Battleship Potemkin* is split into five parts, each clearly stated with its own title card.
 1. The Men and Maggots
 2. Drama on the quarter Deck
 3. Appeal from the Dead
 4. Odessa step Sequence
 5. Meeting the squadron

The Men and the Maggots

- Eisenstein opens his film moving between shots of violently breaking waves; then cuts to a title showing a quote from Lenin attributed to the year 1905: 'Revolution is war.'
- Of all the wars known in history it is the only lawful, rightful, just, and truly great war...in Russia this war has been declared and begun'.
- ' Lenin wrote these sentences at the end of January 1905, in an article 'The Plan of the St. Petersburg Battle'.
- Though the film is often stated to eschew the individual in favour of the mass, still the collected sailors on the *Potemkin* have a figurehead: Vakulinchuk, who takes one of his comrades aside up above the deck, and asserts that the sailors must support the workers, acting in the vanguard of the revolution. Now Eisenstein takes us below deck, to the sailors sleeping in their bunks.

- The influence of *Battleship Potemkin* on the art of Francis Bacon is often cited: Bacon apparently first saw the film in 1935, and the image of the screaming nurse from the 'Odessa Steps' sequence was a prominent influence upon the variations of Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* which he undertook through the 1950s and early 1960s. But here too, the angled hammocks and overlapping bodies of the sailors resemble Bacon's paintings of hanging meat.
- An officer prowls the sailors' quarters, and when he stumbles, in irritation he lashes one of the sailors on the back. Eisenstein's title cards don't only provide dialogue or narrative exposition: they also serve an overt didactic purpose, and a title here suggests 'easy to vent one's rage on a recruit'. Vakulinchuk gives a rousing speech, asking 'What are we waiting for? All of Russia has risen'.

- The next day, when the sailors argue that the rotten meat which they are to be served is covered in worms, their complaints are dismissed by the ship's doctor. However, they refuse to eat the borscht prepared with the meat. As several sailors do the washing up, their physical labour and repetitive motion is juxtaposed with the still, shimmering silver of the cutlery. The same soldier who was lashed the night before notices a line on one of the plates he is washing: it is from the Lord's Prayer, 'Give us this day our daily bread'. In anger and frustration he smashes the plate.

Drama on the Deck

- In part two, 'Drama on the Deck', the men who refused the borscht are charged with insubordination. Informed that they ought to be strung from the ship's yard, one elderly sailor looks up and envisions the hanging corpses. The offending sailors are covered with a tarpaulin, and the firing squad is brought out – as the ship's priest looks on approvingly, proclaiming 'Bring the unruly to reason, O Lord!'. But Vakulinchuk cries out in protest and causes the firing squad to hesitate, and the sailors take the opportunity to mutiny. They triumph over the officers – while the priest feigns unconsciousness, the doctor is thrown overboard – but Vakulinchuk is shot and killed.

A Dead Man calls for Justice

- In 'A Dead Man Calls for Justice', the sailors reach the port of Odessa as free men. Vakulinchuk's body is placed in a tent, with a sign stating 'Dead for a spoonful of soup', as crowds from the city flock past in support. When one aristocrat attempts to turn the people of Odessa towards other ends, encouraging amidst the rally 'Kill the Jews!', he is rounded on by furious onlookers

Odessa step Sequence

- The 'Odessa Steps' is the best-known sequence of Eisenstein's career, and the epitome of the montage technique. Odessa joyously sees the sailors off, with baskets of fruit, much waving, the fluttering of eyelashes, and the twirling of umbrellas. Amidst the throng, Eisenstein highlights a young man, happily cheering, who has lost both legs. Then 'Suddenly...', there is the first close-up of a shrieking woman's face; the legless youth scurries down the vast stairway; and everyone is on the move. A mass of marching gunmen emerge over one of the stairway's landings, and bodies begin to drop.

- This stairway – extending 142 metres, constructed by 1841, and today known as the Potemkin Stairs – stands as the main entrance from the port into the city of Odessa. It was built so that one looking down the stairway sees only the landings, and none of the steps. Eisenstein uses this aspect in his film: from below, we see the people scuttling down the many stairs in panic; but shot from above, beyond the corner of a statue, we see the Imperial soldiers moving against a blank surface, steady and austere.
- A child is shot in the back and his mother grieves in slow-motion; people are trampled underfoot; and as the soldiers steadily descend from above, mounted Cossacks arrive with guns at the bottom of the stairway to continue the assault. Finally an infant's pram teeters down the stairs and, as it is about to tumble, the sequence ends with the famous shot of the nurse, open-mouthed, bloody, and with broken glasses. These images have been echoed and parodied across all of cinema; but perhaps most notably in the round of assassinations which mark the climax of *The Godfather*.

- The *Potemkin*'s guns fire off in response to the massacre, but meanwhile the sailors receive news that a squadron sent from the Tsar is on its way to take care of their revolt. The sailors determine to meet this squadron, and the fifth and final act of *Battleship Potemkin* – variously rendered 'The Meeting with the Squadron' and 'One Against All' – concerns the nature of this meeting.

