

# ANALYSIS

BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN

Sub : Film Studies By: Farah Faisal 2018-2021

- VOTED THE GREATEST FILM OF ALL TIME BY AN INTERNATIONAL PANEL OF CRITICS IN BRUSSELS IN 1958, AS IT HAD BEEN IN 1950, POTEMKIN (RUSSIANS AND PURISTS PRONOUNCE IT PO-TYOM-KIN) HAS ACHIEVED SUCH AN UNHOLY EMINENCE THAT FEW PEOPLE ANY LONGER DISPUTE ITS MERITS.
  - THE FILM ONCE HAD SUCH POWER THAT IT WAS BANNED IN MANY NATIONS, INCLUDING ITS NATIVE SOVIET UNION. GOVERNMENTS ACTUALLY BELIEVED IT COULD INCITE AUDIENCES TO ACTION. IF TODAY IT SEEMS MORE LIKE A TECHNICALLY BRILLIANT BUT SIMPLISTIC "CARTOON" (PAULINE KAEL'S DESCRIPTION IN A FAVORABLE REVIEW), THAT MAY BE BECAUSE IT HAS WORN OUT ITS ELEMENT OF SURPRISE.

### CRASHING WAVES (SYMBOL)

- AT THE OPENING OF THE FILM, WE SEE WAVES CRASHING AGAINST A CEMENT BARRIER IN ODESSA. THIS SYMBOLIZES THE STRUGGLE OF THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE AGAINST THE SEEMINGLY INTRACTABLE TSARIST REGIME. THE WAVES CANNOT BREAK THE ROCKS, BUT THE WATER INDICATES THAT THE TIDE IS TURNING AGAINST THE TSAR.
- VAKULINCHUK'S BODY (ALLEGORY)
- VAKULINCHUK IS PRESENTED AS A NOBLE MARTYR, THE PERSON WHOSE INITIATIVE WAS NECESSARY TO START THE REVOLT THAT HIS FELLOWS ULTIMATELY FINISH. THIS IS DIRECTLY ANALOGOUS TO VLADIMIR LENIN, THE BOLSHEVIK LEADER WHO HAD DIED RECENTLY WHEN THE FILM WENT INTO PRODUCTION. VAKULINCHUK'S BODY IS EVEN REPOSED IN PUBLIC IN A VERY SIMILAR MANNER TO LENIN'S BODY.

## FOOD (MOTIF)

 FOOD AND THE EXCHANGE OF FOOD IS THE METHOD EISENSTEIN USES MOST FREQUENTLY TO ILLUSTRATE THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHARACTERS. THE ROTTEN FOOD SHOWS HOW LITTLE THE OFFICERS CARE ABOUT THE SAILORS. IN CONTRAST, THE SHARING OF FOOD FROM THE STOREROOM AND THE TRANSPORT OF FOOD SUPPLIES FROM ODESSA TO THE SHIP REPRESENT SOLIDARITY BETWEEN THE SAILORS AND TOWNSPEOPLE.

#### • SLEEPING SAILORS (SYMBOL)

 THE SAILORS BEGIN THE FILM ASLEEP BELOW DECKS. THIS IS MEANT TO SYMBOLIZE THAT THE SAILORS ARE NOT YET RADICALIZED AND INVOLVED IN THE REVOLUTION; THEY ARE "ASLEEP" TO THE PROBLEMS OF RUSSIA AND NEED TO BE "AWAKENED" BY VAKULINCHUK SO THAT THE MUTINY CAN BEGIN IN EARNEST.

#### • ARGUING CROWD (ALLEGORY)

 THE PUBLIC DEBATES AMONG THE PEOPLE OF ODESSA AT THE PIER ARE MEANT TO REPRESENT THE DEBATES AND DISAGREEMENTS WHICH HAD TO BE IRONED OUT AMONG RUSSIANS BEFORE REVOLUTION COULD BE VIABLE. WE SEE ALL SORTS OF DISAGREEMENTS AND ALTERNATE VIEWPOINTS, AS WELL AS SOME ATTEMPTS TO DISTRACT AND DISRUPT (THE MAN WHO YELLS INVECTIVE AGAINST JEWS) BEFORE EVERYONE MORE OR LESS AGREES ON A COURSE OF ACTION. IT ALSO TOOK MUCH DEBATE BEFORE THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONS COULD GET UNDER WAY, INCLUDING A MAJOR IDEOLOGICAL SPLIT BETWEEN COMMUNIST FACTIONS IN 1903. IT TOOK A UNITED FRONT BEHIND LENIN AND THE BOLSHEVIKS FOR REVOLUTION TO FINALLY SUCCEED.

# SIGNIFICANCE OF ODESSA STEP SEQUENCE

- ONE OF THE MOST CELEBRATED SCENES IN THE FILM IS THE MASSACRE OF CIVILIANS ON THE ODESSASTEPS (ALSO KNOWN AS THE PRIMORSKY OR POTEMKIN STAIRS). THIS SEQUENCE HAS BEEN ASSESSED AS A "CLASSIC"<sup>[26]</sup> AND ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL IN THE HISTORY OF CINEMA.<sup>[27][28]</sup>IN THE SCENE, THE TSAR'S SOLDIERS IN THEIR WHITE SUMMER TUNICS MARCH DOWN A SEEMINGLY ENDLESS FLIGHT OF STEPS IN A RHYTHMIC, MACHINE-LIKE FASHION, FIRING VOLLEYS INTO A CROWD. A SEPARATE DETACHMENT OF MOUNTED COSSACKSCHARGES THE CROWD AT THE BOTTOM OF THE STAIRS.
- THE VICTIMS INCLUDE AN OLDER WOMAN WEARING <u>PINCE-NEZ</u>, A YOUNG BOY WITH HIS MOTHER, A STUDENT IN UNIFORM AND A TEENAGE SCHOOLGIRL. A MOTHER PUSHING AN INFANT IN A BABY CARRIAGE FALLS TO THE GROUND DYING AND THE CARRIAGE ROLLS DOWN THE STEPS AMID THE FLEEING CROWD.







THE MASSACRE ON THE STEPS, ALTHOUGH IT DID NOT TAKE PLACE IN DAYLIGHT<sup>[29]</sup> OR AS PORTRAYED,<sup>[30]</sup> WAS BASED ON THE FACT THAT THERE WERE WIDESPREAD DEMONSTRATIONS IN OTHER PARTS OF THE CITY, SPARKED OFF BY THE ARRIVAL OF THE *POTEMKIN* IN ODESSA HARBOUR. BOTH <u>THE TIMES</u> AND THE RESIDENT BRITISH CONSUL REPORTED THAT TROOPS FIRED ON THE CROWDS; DEATHS WERE REPORTEDLY IN THE HUNDREDS.<sup>[34]</sup>ROGER
<u>EBERT</u> WRITES, "THAT THERE WAS, IN FACT, NO TSARIST MASSACRE ON THE ODESSA STEPS SCARCELY DIMINISHES THE POWER OF THE SCENE ... IT IS IRONIC THAT [EISENSTEIN] DID IT SO WELL THAT TODAY, THE BLOODSHED ON THE ODESSA STEPS IS OFTEN REFERRED TO AS IF IT REALLY HAPPENED.