

FILM: BATTLESHIP POTESKIN by SERGEI EISENSTEIN (1925)

EXTRACT: Odessa steps (50:36 – 55:36 on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TgWoSHUn8c>)

The film "Battleship Potemkin", by Sergei Eisenstein, was created in 1925 as a piece of entertainment for the 20th anniversary of the first Russian revolution. It was written by Nina Agadzhanova and portrays the mutiny aboard the battleship "Potemkin" in 1905, and the consequences that followed at the city of Odessa. In this essay, I will examine how the editing of the film and its motifs and themes connect to its political and institutional context and how it conveys meaning and the director's vision.

One of the most significant aspects of this film is its editing. Before its creation, the filmmaker D.W. Griffith had established editing techniques with films like "The Birth of a Nation" and "Intolerance". He had set up guidelines for directors to cut smoothly within their film, taking into account the continuity of action, and started to establish such things as the thirty-degree rule to eliminate jump-cuts. This basis allowed for almost seamless action, where the camera was completely objective, and the only emotional conductor was the action onscreen. Eisenstein, however, believed that the ability to convey meaning through an image came not only from what was going on inside it, but also how it was formatted. He therefore decided to break the rules established by Griffith, and to use the rhythm of the cuts to evoke emotion within the viewer. In this extract, for example, he does this by quickly cutting back and forth between shots, such as from a wide crowd shot to a closeup of a character, and then back to the wide. This gives a feeling of disorder, and even of panic, to the shot, creating an intense reaction within the viewer. It ultimately makes them feel like they were present as it provokes empathy within them towards the victims of the shooting. It even creates such an effect on the viewer that people still refer to the "Odessa steps massacre" like it had actually happened. Creating this feeling of confusion and panic was mainly an artistic concept, but which followed specific guidelines given by the institution which created it. As I had previously stated, this film was made for the 20th anniversary of the first Russian revolution, only a few years after Stalin taking full control over the USSR. This meant that communist Russia was still stabilizing, and that its government was in constant need of any pro-state material, which could help to lighten public opinion of its leader. It can be said, therefore, that "Battleship Potemkin" was created as a propaganda tool, an instrument to shed a positive light over the revolutionaries; and to do so, Eisenstein had to create a new style of editing which would do exactly that: show the revolutionaries as the victims or the wronged, and the tsarists as the evil superior power which had to be defeated.

Another editing technique used by Eisenstein in Battleship Potemkin is the concept of soviet montage, where two supposedly unrelated or meaningless images are juxtaposed in such

a way that it creates an entirely different significance. In the Odessa Steps sequence, he does exactly this with the image of the soldiers shooting at people, combined with the famous image of a baby carriage falling down the steps. This is a perfect example of soviet montage in that the images, analyzed separately, have no significant meaning: The soldiers shooting could signify violence, and the baby falling down the steps would evoke sympathy, worry at the most; combined, however, they counteract to make the sympathy and worry for the baby turn into hatred towards the soldiers. Furthermore, it makes the audience believe in the cause of the wronged (i.e. the revolutionaries), and it shows the soldiers as being cruel and merciless as they are portrayed doing the horrible act of trying to kill a baby. This can be furthered when looking at the political context of the film. The soldiers in the film are explicitly said to be Tsarists. The baby, in turn, could represent the new, innocent, pure society wished for by the revolutionaries, who are being attacked by the former in an incomprehensible act of violence. This is, at least, how it is portrayed in the film, and it is extremely effective, as it initiates a feeling of indignation and horror within the viewer; however, there is an unmistakable bias towards the revolutionaries, even in terms of cinematic elements. Though this film was created with a true story as a basis, Eisenstein twists reality to make the revolutionaries' fates seem even more dramatic. This was obviously an assignment from the institution which created it rather than an artistic choice, and although it is very effective in creating empathy throughout the film, it could, in the present day, lead an informed objective viewer to feel that they could no longer trust the historical accuracy of the plot. This could lead to a possible loss of interest, or at the very least, keep the viewer from fully diving into the story. However, this opinion is only accurate when referring to present-day viewers; the viewers in 1925 in the USSR might not have been fully aware of the correct circumstances and events of the revolution, and so could have been more easily convinced.

Another cinematic element other than editing that is significant in the Odessa Steps sequence of "Battleship Potemkin" is the extensive usage of Motifs and Themes to communicate emotion and meaning. The first themes are the essence itself of the scene, and are the base of its action: death and fear. They are portrayed very explicitly, showing an unprecedented violence onscreen, and channeling fear not only in the characters but into the viewers themselves. The second theme only appears twice in the action, but permeates throughout: family. Explicitly, it appears twice, once with the child who is shot down and his mother who, when trying to help him, is killed as well; and the second with the mother who, upon death, accidentally pushes her baby's carriage down the steps. Both of these examples are directly related to death and fear as well. In the sequence, these two themes cannot, in fact, be taken separately, as they feed into each other to create a sensation of deep anguish: indeed, the concept of family is one that any audience, no matter what age, belief or nationality, can relate to. It is a universal idea that evokes love and fragility to anyone. This theory is used by Eisenstein when associated with the horror of death and the urgency of fear,

as it creates a terror that everyone can not only feel but imagine on themselves, that the viewer can identify with. When looking at the political aspect of the film, this concept is essentially the same, except that families represent the bonds between the revolutionaries, and the love and happiness that would be brought by a new government. Death and fear, in turn, would represent all of the things that this new government stood against, and how it would directly destroy the previously mentioned bonds. These connections are obviously biased, and the situation was infinitely more complex than that; this simplification, however, would likely have helped to augment the people's disliking of the tsarist government, and so the film would have served, once again, as a pro-communist propaganda tool.

The final theme or motif that I am going to talk about in the "Odessa Steps" sequence is power. This is an idea which is used extensively throughout this extract and which is portrayed under a very negative light. One of the reasons for this scene was, as I have previously written, to make the audience hate the Tsarists, and Eisenstein does exactly this when portraying them as an evil, powerful entity set out to destroy their good cause. This is done with a combination of images and compositions which display angularity, movement and unity, such as the shot displayed below:



Above: Soldiers shooting at the revolutionaries from the top of the steps.

In this still, the linear directions of the composition are very easy to spot: the stairs and the line of soldiers crossing the frame from top left to bottom right, and their shadows more or less perpendicular to them, stretching directly in front of them. This creates a cross over the frame, an angular shape which signifies severity and power. Combined with the action of killing innocents, it sparks subconscious fear into the audience. This angularity and symmetry make

them seem like a robotic unity, a mindless group obeying to everything that their controlling power, the Tsar, says. Rather than individuals shooting at more individuals, it seems to be a machine firing heartlessly. This was done by Eisenstein for the purpose of convincing the audience that the Tsarist government under which they had previously lived turned individuals into this violent, indefinite body, and that it would, once again, hurt the metaphorical love bonds supposedly present in communism.

In conclusion, one can say that the Odessa Steps extract of Sergei Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin" uses various editing techniques such as soviet montage to subconsciously put across ideas and emotions, but also omits smooth editing rules to create a sensation of panic. It also includes various motifs and themes such as death and family to build anguish and despair within the audience. These cinematic techniques are used not only for artistic purposes, but also political and institutional ones, as they help convince the audience of specific opinions or ideas, such as hating the Tsar and loving communism and the revolutionaries of 1905. In this sense, it could be considered a propaganda tool, but in my opinion, this does not damage its artistic value as its tremendous impact on the history of cinema makes up for an arguably dubious agenda.

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