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The Idea and the Image. On Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*

Abstract: *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) marks the twentieth anniversary of the uprisings of 1905 that were precursors to the revolution of 1917. The film is clearly a story of heightened political consciousness. Sergei Eisenstein's approach to this type of story, however, differed from the work of his contemporary Vsevolod Pudovkin, who told tales of how an *individual* character achieves heightened political consciousness. Eisenstein, by contrast, de-emphasized the individual protagonist and stressed the group working together rather than being led by a hero.

This essay reconsiders *Battleship Potemkin* not only in the aesthetic context of Soviet cinema and its director's *oeuvre*, but also in light of the historical, social, political, and cultural context that produced this Russian film. Indeed, Eisenstein's career describes a curve that coincides with the rise and fall of worldwide radical hope for Soviet communism. But at the height of his faith, he created, in *Battleship Potemkin*, a film that both proclaimed that faith and transcended it – a work of political fire that lives, that survives, because it is a work of art.

Keywords: Sergei Eisenstein, *Battleship Potemkin*, Soviet cinema, Russian Revolution.

1. Eisenstein and Soviet Cinema

Sometimes one imagines that there is a small but constant supply of genius throughout the world and that a particular juncture of circumstances in any single place touches the local supply to life. Otherwise, how to explain the sudden flowering of Athenian architecture, Elizabethan drama, or Italian Renaissance painting? Can one believe that there had been no previous talent in those places, at that time, and that geniuses were born on cue? It almost seems that the right confluence of events brings dormant, omnipresent genius awake; without those events, nothing.

This theory, admittedly fanciful, gets some support from what happened in Soviet Russia in the 1920s. A new revolutionary state was born as a new revolutionary art emerged, and that combination brought forth at least three superb creators in the new art: Vsevolod Pudovkin, Alexander Dovzhenko, and – the most important because the most influential – Sergei Eisenstein. Conjecturally, each of them might have had an outstanding career in another

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field, but the Russian Revolution and its need for film, one may say, made geniuses of these three men.

For all the joy and ebullience that attended the birth of Soviet cinema and Eisenstein's entrance into it, his career as a whole is a sad story, and it will put my comments on *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) in true, cruelly ironic light to have some of the biographical facts first. Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein was born in Riga in 1898, studied engineering in St. Petersburg, and entered the Red Army in 1918 to fight in the Russian Civil War (1917-1922). While in the army, Eisenstein became involved in amateur theatricals, which intensified an interest in theater that he had felt since he was a boy. As a result, he decided to abandon an engineering future for a life in the theater.

In 1920 he was demobilized, got himself to Moscow, and found a job as a set designer at one of the new workers' theaters, where he learned to distrust traditional, character-based drama and to seek instead a proletarian one in which the masses would become a collective hero and social problems would be examined. He went on to do some designing for the renowned theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, whose own anti-psychological, anti-"internalizing" views influenced him greatly; then from 1922 to 1924, Eisenstein himself directed plays, including one called *Gas Masks*, by Sergei Tretyakov. But his impulse toward direction was much more cinematic than theatrical: he staged *Gas Works* in an actual gasworks!

From there Eisenstein moved quickly into film. He had already done a short film interlude for a theatrical production, and in 1924 he was assigned to direct an episode of a planned eight-part picture that would explore the events that led to the 1917 revolution. The resulting film was *Strike* (1924), which was released as an individual piece because the plans for the eight-part epic were never realized. The picture depicts a 1903 strike by the workers of a factory in pre-revolutionary Russia, and their subsequent suppression by cavalrymen sent by the czarist state. *Strike* is quite an accomplished work for a first-time director and in many ways can be seen as a rough draft for Eisenstein's first masterpiece – *Battleship Potemkin*.

Absolutely congruent with his bursting film energies was his fervor for the Communist revolution and the establishment of the Soviet state. These factors are integral in any discussion of Eisenstein's career. To think of him as a director who just happened to be Russian or who (in those early days) was subservient to a state-controlled industry yet managed to slip some good art into his films despite his subservience, is to miss the core of Eisenstein. His works from this period were cinematic exponents of his beliefs.

With his next completed film, *October* – commissioned to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution and released in 1928 – the complications begin. Originally the picture had sequences showing Leon Trotsky's part in the revolution of 1917, but while Eisenstein was finishing

it, Trotsky went into disrepute and then into exile as Joseph Stalin ascended. Eisenstein had to revise *October* to take account of this rewriting of history. His troubles then multiplied as time went on, as his political enemies within the Communist Party increasingly denounced his films and charged him with “formalism” – a preference for aesthetic form over ideological content. For Eisenstein, such a view failed to understand the importance of creating new forms to convey the transformed social relations of a post-revolutionary society. For the Communist Party, by contrast, socialist realism became the only acceptable style – one that would be easily accessible to the uneducated masses, and a style in which the triumphs of the Party would be celebrated and its failings ignored through stories that returned to the basic principles of realism. The Stalin era, then, was not exactly a continuation of the high, shining Bolshevik days.

To sum up: the rest of Eisenstein’s working life, until his death of a heart attack in 1948, is a story of frustration and frequent abortion. Out of numerous projects, he completed only four more films: his last silent work, *The General Line* (a.k.a. *Old and New*, 1929), together with the sound pictures *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible*, Part I (1944) and Part II (1946). Even an expedition that Eisenstein made to the West ended abortively. He was allowed to go to the United States in 1930, discussed several projects with a Hollywood studio, made none, and then shot a lot of footage in Mexico in the early 1930s for a film never edited, although others arranged a version of it that was released in 1979: *¡Que viva México!*, about Mexican culture and the revolutionary spirit. (The picture was produced by Upton Sinclair and a small group of financiers.)

Eisenstein spent much of his time in later years teaching at the Institute of Cinematography in Moscow, writing on film form and theory, and not complaining about the state. Still, the facts speak for themselves. This furiously imaginative, innovative, and energetic man left a total of only seven completed films. One virtually completed picture, *Bezhin Meadow* (based on a Turgenev story) was apparently destroyed by the Soviet government in 1938, though the official line is that it was destroyed by German bombs in World War II. Then around 1968 a reconstruction of *Bezhin Meadow* was engineered when splices from the editing table, saved by Eisenstein’s wife, Pera Atasheva, were discovered. Cobbled together along with a track of Prokofiev music, intertitles fashioned from the original script, and a brief spoken introduction, the film exists today as a work of some thirty minutes.

2. *Battleship Potemkin* in Context

The U.S.S.R.’s waste of Eisenstein’s talent, melancholy in any view, is especially grim when seen in the light that blazes off the screen from *Battleship Potemkin*. When it was first shown abroad in 1926, it was hailed

by many, including such disparate figures as Max Reinhardt and Douglas Fairbanks, as the best film that had yet been made anywhere. Agree with that opinion or not, few can see this relatively short picture – five reels, at anywhere from sixty-five to eighty-five minutes depending on the print – without being catapulted into an experience that is stunning in itself and illuminating of much that followed in film history.

During the mid-1920s, one must recall, the Soviets were busy trying to consolidate ideologically their political and military victories, and they called on the arts to help. Soviet leaders, having recognized the power and potential of film in particular as a persuasive, patriotic medium (especially to reach the illiterate masses), assumed control of the movie industry, denounced the capitalist cinema of pre-revolutionary czarist Russia, and decreed that the Soviet cinema was to be used for education and propaganda – to indoctrinate the Russian people and to promote class consciousness throughout the world.

In the case of *Battleship Potemkin*, the Soviets wanted a film to mark the twentieth anniversary of the uprisings of 1905 that were precursors to the revolution of 1917. Eisenstein was assigned to make a huge work called *The Year 1905*, dealing with the events of the earlier, failed, but momentous outbreak against czarism. Accordingly, he and his collaborator, Nina Agadzhanova-Shutko, prepared a script in which the mutiny on the battleship *Potemkin* played only a small part. When Eisenstein went to Odessa to shoot that part, however, he decided to limit the film to that single mutinous episode and the events connected with it, as “the emotional embodiment of the whole epic of 1905” (*Notes of a Film Director*, 27).

In 1905, Russia remained a fundamentally feudal country. Ruled by a succession of autocratic and cruel czars, democracy, let alone communism, remained a distant dream for most of the people. A war with Japan for control of Manchuria and the Korean peninsula in 1904 was intended to bolster support for Czar Nicholas II's regime, but it went badly: the Russian imperial navy was destroyed by the Japanese fleet in the Battle of Tsushima Strait in May 1905. Protests grew as the war continued; work stoppages occurred across the country; and in St. Petersburg, hundreds of workers were killed by government troops for taking to the streets to urge the implementation of labor reforms. Other uprisings took place, as soldiers stationed at Kronstadt, near St. Petersburg, mutinied, along with sailors aboard the battleship *Potemkin* in the czar's Black Sea fleet. (The czarist government nonetheless remained in power until World War I, when another set of hardships and defeats set the stage for the successful Communist revolution of 1917.)

3. *Battleship Potemkin* in Parts

Eisenstein's film, shot on location, presents the story of the *Potemkin* mutiny in five parts. Each of these parts, like an act in a good drama, is a structure in itself – with its own cantilevered stress and tensions – that contributes to the structure of the whole. In the first part, “Men and Maggots,” while the battleship is anchored near Odessa, a major Ukrainian seaport, in June 1905, the restive crew – their morale low and their discipline harsh following defeat in the Russo-Japanese War – protest to their officers against the maggoty meat they are being served for the midday meal. The ship's medical officer examines the obviously infested meat and pronounces it edible, further provoking the men.

In the second part, “Drama on the Quarterdeck,” the captain of the *Potemkin* threatens to shoot any sailor who will not eat the meal. Some relent and some continue to refuse. The mutineers are then covered with a tarpaulin and a firing squad is ordered to shoot. The sailor Vakulinchuk pleads with the men not to shoot, and after a long, suspenseful sequence that alternates between the condemned men and the firing squad, the squad refuses to fire, joins the crew in mutiny, and helps to take over the ship. In the ensuing confusion, the ship's doctor is thrown overboard and Vakulinchuk is killed. In the third section of the film, “Appeal from the Dead,” the sympathetic townspeople of Odessa visit the body of the dead sailor, lying in state at the harbor, to pay their respects.

The fourth part, “The Odessa Steps,” is the highlight of *Battleship Potemkin* and one of the most famous sequences in the history of cinema, arguably the most famous. (A number of films pay homage to the scene, including Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* [1985] and Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* [1987], while several pictures spoof it, among them Woody Allen's *Love and Death* [1975] and Juliusz Machulski's *Déjà Vu* [1990].) This section begins with some of the citizens of Odessa as they take gifts of food by boat to the sailors on the anchored *Potemkin*, while others cheer and wave their support from the harbor. Suddenly, some of the townspeople begin scurrying down a long series of outdoor steps overlooking the harbor. The reason for this action becomes clear when viewers see a shot of a line of Cossack soldiers with their guns at the ready.

The action of part four continues as the Cossacks march down the steps, occasionally firing, as the townspeople flee before them. (Though many citizens of Odessa were killed in this actual 1905 incident, it was only when Eisenstein saw the steps, on location, that he thought of staging the massacre at that location.) Close-ups of wounded people, of hands being stepped on, and of horrified faces convey the terror. At one point there is a change in the relentless downward movement of the Cossacks, as a mother picks up her badly injured child, who is probably already dead, and walks up the

steps in an appeal to the soldiers not to shoot. They do not listen; they fire on her and continue their downward march. Another mother, holding onto a baby carriage with her child in it, is shot and slowly falls, letting go of the carriage – which, in time elongated by the editing, begins rolling down the steps uncontrolled. Intercut with the shots of the runaway carriage are shots of the horrified face of a young man wearing glasses.

In the fifth and last section, “Meeting the Squadron,” the *Potemkin* has to sail out of Odessa harbor past a squadron of other ships sent by the czarist government to retake the vessel. There are tense moments as sailors prepare to do battle, but when the mutineers signal to the other ships “Comrades, join us,” the *Potemkin* is allowed to sail out unmolested. In fact, the battleship sailed to Constanta in Romania, where the crew of over 700 opened her seacocks and then sought refuge inland (where the majority of them remained, at least until the Russian Revolution of 1917); Eisenstein, however, leaves the story open-ended, with the *Potemkin* sailing forward through the friendly squadron and bearing the seed of revolution that was to bloom twelve years later.

4. Meaning and Metaphor

Battleship Potemkin is clearly a story of heightened political consciousness. In such stories the hero undergoes a set of life experiences that lead him to see things anew: specifically, to see how the larger forces of capitalism and class struggle shape more particular events that might otherwise be described as the products of accident, fate, or individual will and determination. A heightened consciousness sees connection instead of disconnection, unity instead of alienation, class solidarity rather than personal pursuit. Individual experience thus becomes situated in relation to the larger political and economic structures that govern social existence.

Eisenstein’s approach to this type of story, however, differed from the work of his contemporary Vsevolod Pudovkin, who in films such as *Mother* (1926), *The End of St. Petersburg* (1927), and *Storm over Asia* (1928) told tales of how an *individual* character achieves heightened political consciousness. Eisenstein, by contrast, de-emphasized the individual protagonist and stressed the group working together rather than being led by a hero. Moreover, to further de-emphasize individuality or personality (let alone star aura), he used non-professionals rather than actual actors in many of the roles; since he did not place particular stress on character development, the look or physical type of the character was therefore much more important to this director than performing ability.

One of Eisenstein’s great achievements as a filmmaker, then, is that he provided a model for a cinema of groups, crowds, and masses rather than individuals. In *Battleship Potemkin* he does so by telling the story of three

distinct examples of political awakening over the course of five sections or acts. The first example involves the sailors aboard the *Potemkin* as they awaken during Acts I and II (“Men and Maggots” and “Drama on the Quarterdeck”) to the systematic abuse that their indenture to the czar entails. In the second awakening of consciousness, during Acts III and IV (“Appeal from the Dead” and “The Odessa Steps”), the citizens of Odessa realize and express their solidarity with the mutinous crew of the *Potemkin*. In the final awakening of Act V (“Meeting the Squadron”), sailors aboard the rest of the imperial Baltic fleet realize that they and the *Potemkin*’s crew have the czar as their common enemy. The film thus has a collective hero, the Russian masses – represented by the mutineers on the *Potemkin*, the people of Odessa, and the sailors who mutiny on other ships – who rebel against czarist oppression. Each awakening successively broadens the political scope of *Battleship Potemkin*, from the revolt of one ship’s crew, through the rising up of one town, to the rebellion of an entire fleet.

Irrespective of the viewer’s political beliefs, this story is a natural thriller apart from being a narrative of consciousness-raising. Nothing has wider or more direct theatrical appeal than resistance to tyranny, whether the resistance comes in the form of Spartacus, William Tell, the Boston Tea Party, or the crew of a Russian warship. To be sure, any competent Soviet director could have made the *Potemkin* story into an exciting film. But Eisenstein – and, to repeat, this is the core of his importance – was an *artist of revolution*, not merely a good director, not merely a gifted propagandist. That revolution was as central and generative for his art as, to cite a lofty precedent, Christianity was for Giotto. There are acres and acres of fourteenth-century Italian frescoes and canvases that present Christian ideas more or less affectingly, but the Arena Chapel in Padua is the work of a Christian genius and a genius that was Christian. In proportion, the same relation exists between Eisenstein’s genius and Soviet communism.

The dynamics behind the particularity of this director’s art can be traced to Marxist concepts and, I think, to none more clearly than to some in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. I do not maintain that Eisenstein used the *Manifesto* as an explicit text, but he certainly knew it well and its ideas were certainly part of his intellectual resources. One idea in the *Manifesto* seems outstandingly relevant in this context. In the second section, where the authors anticipate objections to their arguments, they write:

Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man’s ideas, views, and conceptions change – that, in one word, man’s consciousness changes – with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life ? (Marx, 260)

Straight to this profound concept, that a changed world means a changed awareness of the world, Eisenstein struck in his filmmaking, and never more deeply than in *Battleship Potemkin*. That he was following Marx preceptively I cannot say, but clearly he felt that a new society meant a new kind of *vision*; that the way people saw things must be altered; that it was insufficient to put new material before, so to speak, old eyes. Anyone anywhere, in any narrative art form, could tell a story of heroic resistance in traditional style; it was his duty as a revolutionary artist, Eisenstein felt (and later wrote [*Film Form*, 124]), to find an aesthetically revolutionary way to tell a politically revolutionary story.

5. Medium and Montage

The prime decision was in the visual texture. He wanted to avoid conventional historical drama; he wished to make a drama of history. He and his regular cameraman, Eduard Tisse, aimed at a kind of newsreel look: not coarse graininess (there is, indeed, a good deal of subtle black-and-white gradation here), but not painterly chiaroscuro either, no imitation museum-look. Eisenstein wanted the feeling, essentially, of extraordinary eavesdropping. A scion of this approach was Gille Pontecorvo's story of the Algerian independence movement, *The Battle of Algiers* (1965), except for the difference that, in these earlier days, Eisenstein relied very much less than Pontecorvo on individual performances. That was Eisenstein's second decision: as noted earlier, he used very few professional actors in *Battleship Potemkin*.

Mostly, the director used ordinary people in this picture, people whose faces and bodies he happened to like for particular roles – a furnace man as the ship's doctor, a gardener as the ship's priest. Each one was used for a relatively short performance that Eisenstein could control easily and heighten with camera angles and editing, in a kind of mosaic process. Eisenstein called this approach "typage," the casting of parts with such striking faces – often introduced in close-up, sometimes intense close-up – that our very first glimpse tells us most of what we need to know about the person as an element in the mosaic. In his subsequent films *Alexander Nevsky* and both parts of *Ivan the Terrible*, Eisenstein blended the use of typage with large roles for professional actors, but in *Battleship Potemkin* human depths come from the combination of "typed" pieces, of shots, rather than the performative exploration of any one piece or shot.

The idea of typage leads directly to the cinematic technique most closely associated with Eisenstein: montage (from the French verb *monter*, meaning "to mount, arrange, or assemble"). Basically, montage is editing: the selection and arrangement of bits of film to produce certain effects. Every film ever made, from *Battleship Potemkin* to television commercials, literally contains montage. But Eisenstein's use of montage was different from any use

of it before him, including the work of his acknowledged master D. W. Griffith; is immediately recognizable as Eisenstein's own; and is the source of much that followed him. To wit: Eisenstein's theory of montage – based on the Marxist dialectic, which involves the collision of thesis and antithesis – calls for the juxtaposition of shots, and “attractions” (e.g., lighting, camera angle, character movement) within shots, to create meaning. Such a theory does not simply require that shots with particular meanings be built into a whole, but sees each frame as a unit with a dynamic visual charge of a particular kind; the goal is to bring the dynamic charge of one frame into conflict or contrast with the visual charge of the next, and hence to create a wholly new phenomenon that is not the sum of the two charges but something greater than, and different from, them both.

Eisenstein's theory of editing was thus based on the dialectical synthesis of contradictory shots. Instead of trying to make a series of shots link smoothly together for narrative purposes, as most filmmakers did (so-called classical or “invisible” cutting), he wanted to produce a “shock” when one shot changed to another. He was particularly concerned with the rhythm established by this series of shocks, so that the length of individual shots was often determined by the underlying rhythm of the sequence rather than by the requirements of the overall narrative. Eisenstein wanted, then, to build a film almost musically by using different shots (long ones, medium shots, close-ups) and cutting them in such a way as to bombard the viewer with a whole series of conflicting images that would heighten individual moments, convey the intended mood, and enhance selected emotions. By experimenting in this way with the rhythm or tempo of his editing, he was able to affect audiences with a purely filmic style that could not be duplicated in any other medium.

Eisenstein wrote often on this subject, which for him was the heart of cinema. Like other Soviet formalists, he claimed that realism captured in long shot is too near reality and that films must capture the *essence*, not merely the surface, of reality – which is filled with irrelevancies. The artistry, for Eisenstein, lay not in the materials of reality *per se*, but rather in the way they could be taken apart and reconstructed to expressively convey the idea underlying the undifferentiated jumble of real life. He believed that the essence of existence itself is constant change, and that the conflict of opposites is the mother of such change. The function of all artists is to capture this kinetic collision of opposites, to incorporate dialectical conflicts not only in the subject matter of art but in its forms and techniques as well. Primary among those techniques, naturally, was not the realistic long take, or uninterrupted sequence shot, but atomized, formalistic, oppositional montage.

For Eisenstein, there were five kinds of montage. Briefly put, these are: metric montage, which is simply the relation or conflict between the lengths of the various shots; rhythmic montage, which is based on the conflict

generated between the rhythm of character movement within shots and the visual composition, as well as temporal duration, of those same shots; tonal montage, in which shots are arranged according to the “tone” or “emotional sound” of the dominant attraction within each shot; overtone montage, in which the basis for joining shots is not merely the dominant attraction, but the totality of stimulation provided by that dominant attraction and all of its “overtones” and “undertones” (overtone montage is thus a synthesis of metric, rhythmic, and tonal montage, appearing not at the level of the individual frame but only at the level of the projected film); and intellectual or thematic montage, in which similar actions are juxtaposed or seen in conjunction but have been performed for different reasons (e.g., a hammer blow by a blacksmith, a hammer blow by a murderer).

All five types of montage may be found in *Battleship Potemkin's* Odessa Steps sequence, in which czarist soldiers massacre Odessa citizens who are sympathetic to the *Potemkin* mutineers. As for the first three types, an example of metric montage is the increase in editing tempo to intensify audience excitement during the massacre. Rhythmic montage occurs in the conflict between the steady marching of the soldiers toward the fleeing crowd and the editing rhythm, which is out of synchronization with the soldiers' boots and thus ideationally establishes a different political impulse; the final pull of tension is supplied by the transfer from the rhythm of descending feet to another rhythm – a new kind of downward movement – the runaway baby carriage rolling down the steps. Tonal montage occurs in the many conflicts of planes, masses, light-and-shadow, and intersecting lines, as in the shot depicting a row of soldiers pointing their rifles down at a mother and her son, with the soldiers' shadows cutting transversely across the steps and the helpless pair.

Although Eisenstein claimed to have discovered overtone montage while editing *The General Line* four years after *Battleship Potemkin*, overtone montage can be detected in the Odessa Steps sequence in the development of the editing along simultaneous metric, rhythmic, and tonal lines – the increase in editing tempo, the conflict between editing and movement within the frame, and the juxtaposition of light and shadow as well as intersecting lines, of planes as well as masses. Finally, there is an example of intellectual montage at the end of the sequence, after the *Potemkin* has responded to the massacre by firing on the czarist headquarters in Odessa. Three shots of marble lions – the first is sleeping, the second waking, and the third rising – seen in rapid succession give the impression of a single lion rising to its feet, a metaphor for the rebellion of the Russian masses against czarist oppression.

These were not academic formulations on Eisenstein's part. These five kinds of montage were, for him, organs of a vibrant, living art. With them, and combinations of them, he fashioned *Battleship Potemkin* into a kind of bomb that penetrates our customary apperceptions to burst below the surface

and shake us from within. That bomb – the montage in *Battleship Potemkin* as well as its five-part structure – had its origins at least partly in practical considerations. Raw film stock was in very short supply in the early Soviet days. Most of what was available was in relatively short snippets, so directors had to work in short takes. Eisenstein thus developed the aesthetics of montage out of an exigency, but by fragmenting reality into bits and pieces in this way, he also suggested that reality could be reconstituted – to revolutionary end. His seemingly nervous, ever-cutting camera itself portends a society in transition, in restless movement to another (political) place: a society, that is, in the throes of change.

Furthermore, most Soviet film theaters at the time had only one projector; there was a pause when one reel ended and another reel had to be put on the machine. The five parts of *Battleship Potemkin* are on five reels, so the pauses come at reasonably appropriate moments. Yet, as is so often true in the history of art, the practical needs were not constrictive but stimulating. Another great precedent from the Italian Renaissance: the *David* (1504) in Florence is huge because in the early 1500s the city had a huge block of marble on its hands, left over from an unfulfilled commission, and asked Michelangelo to make use of it. One more example, from film itself: the postwar Italian neorealists, like Eisenstein, frequently used non-professionals in leading roles. But they did so less out of proletarian choice, or on account of a fragmented editing style that could accommodate the use of amateurs, than because amateur actors would mesh better with real settings, photographed in full shot, than would stars accustomed to studio surroundings, of which few remained in Rome (and were therefore too costly) on account of the Allied bombing – hence the need to shoot on location.

6. Odessa Steps and Giant Steps

With the very opening moments of *Battleship Potemkin*, in any event, we know we are in the presence of something new, and the miracle is that we know it every time we see the film. The waves beat at the shore, the lookouts converse, the ship steams across the sea, and all of this is modeled with an energy, controlled yet urgent, that bursts at us. Then, when we cut to the crew's quarters and move among the slung hammocks, we know we are in the hands of an artist who sees the difference between raw naturalism and poetic realism. The scene of the sleeping sailors is accurate enough, but Eisenstein sees the arabesques that the hammocks form, and he uses these graceful, intersecting curves as a contrast to the turbulence of the waves earlier and the tumultuousness of the mutiny to come. Shortly thereafter, he uses the swinging of the suspended tables in the mess hall in the same way – another moment of irrepressible grace in otherwise rigidly iron surroundings.

Fiercely, electrically, the film charges forward into the confrontation between officers and men, with the action caught in flashes that simultaneously anatomize and unify it – in Eisenstein's double aim to show things as they are yet make us see them as never before. One of his methods, which has been likened to cubism and is a forerunner of a technique Alain Resnais used in *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), is to show an action and then repeat it immediately from a slightly changed point of view. A celebrated instance of this is the moment when a young sailor smashes a plate on which is inscribed "Give us this day our daily bread." We see his action twice in rapid succession, from two different angles, and the effect is one of intensified or italicized rage.

Eisenstein shot the first and second parts of the film on board *The Twelve Apostles* (of all names for a Soviet vessel!), the surviving sister ship of the *Potemkin* (itself named after Grigory Potemkin, the eighteenth-century general who colonized the sparsely populated steppes of southern Ukraine), which met its demise in 1919 during the Russian Civil War. *The Twelve Apostles* had to be altered somewhat but its use nevertheless gives these sections a steely verisimilitude. (Remember Eisenstein's staging of *Gas Masks*.) When the obdurate sailors are herded together and the tarpaulin thrown over them before they are to be shot – itself an effectively simple, dehumanizing image – the firing squad prepares and then the film cuts away: to a close-up of two cannons, as if to implicate the setting itself, followed by a wishfully serene view of the ship at anchor. Of course this is Griffith's old technique of intercutting to distend a moment of climax, but here it is used to thematic as well as visceral ends.

When at the last moment the firing squad goes over to the sailors' side, in the fight that follows Eisenstein uses another of his favorite devices: synecdoche. After the corrupt ship's doctor is thrown overboard, we see a close-up of his pince-nez dangling from the rigging – the same pince-nez with which he had inspected the maggoty meat and pronounced it edible. The man's corruption and what followed it are caught in that close shot. And there's another such moment. Before the fight, we had seen the ship's priest, one of the clerics whom Eisenstein was constantly caricaturing in his films, lifting his crucifix and bidding the men to obey. During the fight, after the priest has been knocked down a flight of steps, we see a close-up of the crucifix, an edge of its lateral bar stuck in the deck where it has fallen, like an axe plunged into wood – an axe (Eisenstein implies) that, at least this time, has missed the necks for which it was intended.

The Odessa Steps sequence itself is oceanic. With a few hundred people, Eisenstein creates the sense of an immense, limitless upheaval. With the quick etching of a few killings, he creates more savagery than do thousands of commonplace gory movies. With crosscurrents of perspective and tempo,

he evokes the collision of status quo and coming revolution. Here is an additional example of Eisenstein's editing in this sequence, which is a treasury of montage aesthetics. He establishes, by typage, a woman with glasses who protests the soldiers' butchery. Shortly afterward, we see an officer swinging a saber at the camera; then we cut to the woman's face, one lens of her glasses shattered, her eye streaming blood, her features frozen in shock. (The bank teller in *Bonnie and Clyde* [1967] who was shot through a car window is her direct descendant.) The suggestion of the blow's force by ellipsis is masterly enough; but, in the brief moment in which we see the officer swinging his saber at us, totaling less than two seconds, there are *four different shots* of him that, taken together, explode his fury into a horrifying prism.

This episode raises one more point to be made about the Odessa Steps sequence, about the whole film. Even when one sees *Battleship Potemkin* without musical accompaniment – which is preferable to most of the scores that have been tacked on to it – when it is seen absolutely silent, the effect, as I've hinted, is of roaring tumult. One strong impulse to the development of montage in the days of silent cinema was the attempt to create visually the effect of sound: shots of train whistles or church bells or door knockers so that you could see what you couldn't hear. But in this film, by the way he counterpoises rhythms and faces, marching boots and firing guns and moving masses, Eisenstein draws from that silent screen a mounting and immense "roar" that has barely been surpassed in sound pictures.

The double vision of *Battleship Potemkin*, subjectivized and also cosmic, is paralleled in its double effect throughout the world. Subjectively, it was made as a celebration for those already fervent about communism; but it was simultaneously intended as propaganda for the earth's unconverted citizenry. Emotionally and aesthetically, if not politically, the film unquestionably has had a great effect: but those who control its distribution have much less faith in it than its maker had. No important picture has been more seriously tampered with. Political messages have been tacked on, fore and aft, on some prints; other prints have been snipped internally; in 1940 in New York, *Battleship Potemkin* was given a filmed prologue and epilogue spoken by American actors. The only music that Eisenstein approved was written by an Austrian, Edmund Meisel, for the Berlin premiere, and this score was rediscovered only in the 1970s. Most prints of the film have some other music ladled on.

In terms of its free growth, Eisenstein's career, finally, describes a curve that coincides with the rise and fall of worldwide radical hope for Soviet communism. But at the height of his faith, he created a film that both proclaimed that faith and transcended it – a work of political fire that lives, that survives, because it is a work of art.

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CREDITS: *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)

Director: Sergei Eisenstein

Screenplay: Sergei Eisenstein, Nina Agadzhanova-Shutko

Cinematographer: Eduard Tisse

Editors: Sergei Eisenstein, Grigori Aleksandrov

Music: Edmund Meisel

Art Director: Vasili Rakhals

Running time: 65-85 minutes, depending on the print

Format: 35mm, in black and white; silent

Cast: Aleksandr Antonov (Grigory Vakulinchuk), Vladimir Barsky (Captain Golikov), Grigori Aleksandrov (Chief Officer Giliarovsky), Ivan Bobrov (Sailor flogged while sleeping), Mikhail Gomorov (Militant sailor), Aleksandr Levshin (Petty Officer), N. Poltavtseva (Woman with pince-nez), Konstantin Feldman (Student agitator), Prokopenko (Mother carrying wounded boy), A. Glauberman (Wounded boy), Beatrice Vitoldi (Woman with baby carriage), Daniil Antonovich (Sailor), Julia Eisenstein (Woman with food for sailors), Sergei Eisenstein (Odessa citizen), Andrey Fayt (Recruit), Korobei (Legless veteran), Marusov (Officer),

Protopopov (Old Man), Repnikova (Woman on the steps), Brodsky (Student), Zerenin (Student), Vladimir Uralsky, Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo

FILMOGRAPHY: Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948)

Strike (1924)
Battleship Potemkin (1925)
October: Ten Days That Shook the World (1927)
The General Line, a.k.a. *Old and New* (1929)
Thunder over Mexico (1933)
¡Que viva México! (1932, released 1979)
Alexander Nevsky (1938)
Ivan the Terrible, Part I (1944)
Ivan the Terrible, Part II (1945, released 1958)

FILMOGRAPHY: Key Films of Soviet Formalism

Kino-Pravda (1922-25), directed by Dziga Vertov
Kino Eye (1924), directed by Dziga Vertov
The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks (1924), directed by Lev Kuleshov
Strike (1924), directed by Sergei Eisenstein
Battleship Potemkin (1925), directed by Sergei Eisenstein
Mother (1926), directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin
The End of St. Petersburg (1927), directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin
October: Ten Days That Shook the World (1928), directed by Sergei Eisenstein
Storm over Asia (1928), directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin
Arsenal (1929), directed by Alexander Dovzhenko
Man with a Movie Camera (1929), directed by Dziga Vertov
The General Line, a.k.a. *Old and New* (1929), directed by Sergei Eisenstein
Earth (1930), directed by Alexander Dovzhenko
Road to Life (1931), directed by Nikolai Ekk
Chapaev (1934), directed by Georgi & Sergei Vasilyev
The Youth of Maxim (1935), directed by Grigori Kozintsev & Leonid Trauberg
The Return of Maxim (1937), directed by Grigori Kozintsev & Leonid Trauberg
Bezhin Meadow (1937), directed by Sergei Eisenstein
Alexander Nevsky (1938), directed by Sergei Eisenstein
New Horizons, a.k.a. *The Vyborg Side* (1939), directed by Grigori Kozintsev & Leonid Trauberg
The Childhood of Maxim Gorky (1938), directed by Mark Donskoi
On His Own (1939), directed by Mark Donskoi
Valery Chkalov (1941), directed by Mikhail Kalatozov
Ivan the Terrible, Part I (1944), directed by Sergei Eisenstein
Ivan the Terrible, Part II (1946, released 1958), directed by Sergei Eisenstein