

On Eisenstein's Potemkin
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Sergi Eisenstein's Potemkin provides a powerful example of how a film can present a revolutionary and socialist political perspective and ideology. A thoroughly modernist film, Potemkin is highly innovative in form and is often taken as a model of editing; it has regularly appeared on many lists of the greatest films of all time and since its release in 1925 has been a major critical success. Formally, the film embodies Eisenstein's theory of montage, that the juxtaposition of images can generate meanings and on the level of ideology, the film serves as effective propaganda for the Bolsheviks.

The narrative deals with the revolt of a ship crew on the Battleship Potemkin in 1905 and provides an allegorical preview of the Russian revolution. Potemkin breaks with Hollywood narrative and its ideology of individualism, by portraying the oppressed sailor-workers as heroes, who are supported by the collectivity of the Russian people, who are in turn slaughtered by evil forces of Czarist troops and Cossaks, thus depicting clashes of good vs. good representations in the service of providing revolutionary heroes and attacking the oppressive Czarist system.

Rigorously constructed in five parts, the opening sequence "Men and Maggots" produces slow and harrowing images of sailors on the Battleship receiving poor food and authoritarian treatment. The film opens with waves crashing on the shore, followed by a quote from Lenin concerning the rising of the Russian people emerging from the Potemkin revolt, thus providing an ideological allegory of the coming revolution as the framing of the film. Close-ups of sailors waking up in the morning are punctuated by one saying: "The time has come for us to speak out!" An occasion for revolt will soon be provided as close ups of meat teeming with maggots are juxtaposed with the ship doctor denying the evidence portrayed to the audience's eyes. Facing with disgusting food, the sailors refuse to eat the rotten borscht they are given.

The montage captures the oppressiveness of life on ship and garners sympathy for the oppressed crew who in the second sequence "Drama on the Quarter-deck" are summoned to the deck and the captain orders those who are satisfied with the food to step forward two steps. The officers oblige but the sailors refuse and one urges his comrades "to the turrets!," triggering a mutiny. Soldiers are ordered to fire on the sailors but one shouts out to the troops "Brothers! Do not fire!" The troops rally to the sailors side and a division emerges between officers, representing the authoritarian Czarist regime, and the sailors and soldiers who represent the oppressed workers. One sailor, the exemplary socialist hero Vakulinchuk, calls upon them to kill the officers but he is himself killed in the resulting mutiny, providing the setting for the third section.

In "Dead Man cries for vengeance" Vakulinchuk is laid to rest on the Odessa pier and townspeople flow down to mourn him and greet the rebellious crew of the Potemkin. One citizen calls out "all for one!" and another shouts for all to unite, but a decadent looking bourgeois with a cigarette shouts out "Down with the Yids!," and the masses then attack him. Eisenstein lavishes the affection and ideological investment on crowds of people that Griffith bestows upon individuals. Both use frequent close-ups but while for Griffith it is to highlight individuality and subjectivity, for Eisenstein it is to delineate social types and individuals uniting against injustice.

The fourth “Odessa Steps” sequence is often considered one of the most brilliant examples of editing and montage in the history of film. As the Battleship Potemkin arrives in the port city of Odessa, masses of Russian people gather to greet the ship crew. The sequence begins by showing idealized images of the ship and sailors and then the townspeople who come to greet them. Eisenstein depicts the people as a great collectivity of variety and diversity, zeroing in on close-ups of young children, mothers with children, bourgeois couples, older people, and a variety of social types. The images embodied the Marxist-Leninist ideology of collectivity, juxtaposing the “good” people with the “evil” Czarist troops and Cossacks. However, the idyll of the crowds greeting the sailors is broken by the intrusion of the Czarist troops who fire on the crowd. The murderous soldiers are presented as robotic killers who viciously fire upon the people. Close-ups of an old woman screaming and a mother with a child provide iconic images that demonstrate the monstrosity of a Czarist regime that would fire upon and kill its people.

An old woman with glasses cries out “let’s go and plead with them,” and a mother holding her child comes up to the troops and proclaims: “Listen to me. Don’t shoot.” The troops fire on her and the crowd explodes in horror, turning on the Czarist forces. But the feared Cossacks appear and attack the people. In the most famous montage, a woman holding a baby carriage is hit and the carriage bounces down the steps as the camera cuts to close-ups of the horrified crowd, including the shattered face of the old woman, providing a powerful ideological sequence demonstrating the evils of the old Russian monarchist order.

In a fast montage of images, the baby carriage falling is juxtaposed with the old woman screaming in horror while the ship is portrayed coming to the people’s rescue. It fires on the Czarist guard’s headquarters and the montage of a lion first sleeping, this sitting, and then seeming to rise provides an iconic symbol of the people beginning to arise against Czarist institutions and rule.

A final sequence “Meeting the Squadron” provides another preview of the coming Bolshevik revolution. The sailors on the Potemkin consider liberating the people of Odessa, although they know that a squadron of sailors and soldiers from the Czarist regime is on the way. Images of dials, mechanisms of the ship, and guns provide positive pro-technology images that reproduce the technicist ideology of Eisenstein and the Bolsheviks. The Potemkin crew awakes to find the squadron bearing down upon them, but instead of firing on them, the Czar’s troops revolt and join the revolutionaries, providing an ideological narrative of the people uniting to overthrow the hated Czarist regime, as would indeed happen in 1917.