



Battleship Potemkin

Every phenomenon has a chance, superficial manifestation. And underlying it is a profound feeling that reason has dictated it. So it was too with the film *Battleship Potemkin*. A grand epic, '1905', was conceived by Nina Agadjanova and myself in preparation for the 20th anniversary of 1905. The mutiny on the battleship Potemkin was to have been just one among the many episodes chosen to commemorate that year of the revolutionary struggle.

The 'chance events' began. The preparatory work of the Anniversary Commission dragged on. Finally there were complications with filming the picture as a whole. August came, and the anniversary was due in December. There was only one thing for it: to choose one episode from the whole epic to encapsulate the integral sense, the feel of that remarkable year.

Another fleeting chance. In September you can film outdoors only in Odessa and Sebastopol. The mutiny on the Potemkin was played out in Odessa and Sebastopol. But then came something preordained: the episode of the mutiny, an episode which Vladimir Ilyich [Lenin] had earlier singled out for special attention, was also one of the most representative episodes of the whole year. It is curious to recall now that this historical episode had been more or less forgotten ... The Potemkin mutiny had somehow been erased from memory ... So it was all the more important to resurrect it, to focus attention upon it, to remind people of this moment which embodied so many instructive elements of the technique of revolutionary uprising, typical of the period of a 'dress rehearsal for October'.

Sergei Eisenstein in Richard Taylor (ed.), *Eisenstein Writings 1934-1947* (translated by William Powell, BFI Publishing, 1996) Reprinted in *Sight & Sound*, September 2002

The structure of *Potemkin* is that of the classic five-act tragedy, the Stairs sequence approximating act four. At its most obvious level, the film has been regarded (and censored) as propaganda for Revolution. At a deeper level it was a complex work of art which its director believed would affect all who saw it. As he later explained: 'Our psychological approach is on the one hand that of the great Russian scholar, Pavlov, with his principles of reflexology, and on the other, that of the Austrian Freud – the principles of psychoanalysis.'

The two theories that dominated Eisenstein's work up to the condemnation of Bezhin Meadow in 1937, are powerfully demonstrated in *Potemkin*. Of equal importance there is 'typage' and 'montage' (editing). His initial idea of 'typage' sprang from Italian Commedia dell'Arte as shown primitively, according to him, in *Strike*. For *Potemkin* he discarded professional actors except for Grigori Alexandrov. He replaced actors with 'people off the streets' who impressed him as embodying the greatest number of characteristics of the 'types' he envisaged. He found the perfect image of the ship's doctor in a man he saw shovelling coal in a Sevastopol hotel, while the Priest was mostly closely approximated by a gardener who had never acted in his life.

Prior to Eisenstein, numerous directors had made attempts at 'montage', probably most notably D.W. Griffith. But Eisenstein's ideas were more

complex and constituted the essence of his cinematic methods. Had the rushes of *Potemkin* been hung up in an editing room they would have made no sense to an editor. The editing pattern only evolved when Eisenstein sat with his splicer and began to work. His ideas of 'montage' had received stimulus from beyond cinematography. A vital influence had come from his knowledge of hieroglyphs for writing the Chinese language (traced back from his having learned 300 Japanese characters). Two simplified, unrelated images when united correspond to a concept – i.e. the ideogram 'to weep' is an eye and water. A simple example of Eisenstein's adaptation is the shot of the Cossack with raised sword followed by the shot of the spectacled woman whose eye streams blood. It is the spectator who jumps to the idea that the Cossack has struck the woman.

Eisenstein's use of close-ups to produce 'shocking' emotional effects was influenced by his study of the enlarged faces in Japanese prints, particularly Sharaku's actor prints. (Throughout his films and writings he was finding and adapting the 'cinematic' elements in other arts.)

Because the equipment available to Eisenstein and [director of photography] Eduard Tisse was old and primitive in comparison to that in Hollywood and elsewhere, they were compelled to experiment on a hit and miss basis. For the sequence of 'fog over the harbour', they had no idea if any of their shots would be visible, it being unheard of to shoot in such early morning misty light. Their risky experiments paid off. They used mirror reflectors for the first time in Russia, and Tisse devised out-of-focus photography. For mass scenes Tisse used a change in lens instead of a change in camera set-ups. For the Stairs sequence they built a moveable wagonette sufficiently large to hold the cameras. This was shuttled up and down alongside the steps on specially constructed wooden rails.

A description of the stairs shooting by Eisenstein's colleague and lifelong friend, Maxim Shtraukh, evokes the work: 'In the period of one week, people in panic, pushing and trampling each other, ran down and rolled down the stairway in order; on the signal of the director 'stop', to stop and again go up and begin the panic, the pushing ... Above they were squeezed by the measured steps of the soldiers' boots and below by the mounted Cossacks cutting into the people. This canvas of fabulous slaughter at the will of the director again brought to light the reality of the past as in a nightmare.' Many of the characters and extras were people who had been present and survived the real events in Odessa in 1905.

Later in analysing the sequence, Eisenstein noted 'the rhythmic drum of the soldiers' feet as they descended the steps violates all metrical demands. Unsynchronised with the beat of the cutting, this drumming comes in off-beat, and the shot itself is entirely different in its solution with each of these appearances. The final pull of tension is supplied by the transfer of the descending feet to another rhythm – a new kind of downward movement – the next intensity level of the same activity – the baby-carriage rolling down the steps ...' Silent as the film was, Eisenstein conceived it in sound in many places. With its success in Berlin he planned with Edmund Meisel, the German composer, a special score. They worked in the same manner as contemporary collaborators on sound tracks. Unfortunately this score was lost for many years.

Eisenstein never saw Odessa or the steps again for nine years. In 1934 when he did, he stared down the steps contemptuously, unable to recapture his

‘creative ecstasy’ of 1925. He flung out incoherent remarks and fled. Next morning he was drawn back when he spat grape pips and obscenities down the steps, declaring unconvincingly that the inspiration for the stairs sequence was only the chase denouement of ‘the Western’, a statement contradicted by the reams he wrote about *Potemkin*.

National Film Theatre programme notes

BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN (BRONENOSETS POTEMKIN)

Director: Sergei M. Eisenstein
Co-director: Grigori V. Aleksandrov
Production: First Studio Goskino
Production Manager: Yakov Bliokh
Assistant Directors: Maksim Straukh, Mikhail S. Gomorov, Aleksandr I. Levchin, Aleksandr Antonov
Screenplay: Sergei M. Eisenstein
From the screenplay for 1905 God by: Nina Agadjanova, Sergei M. Eisenstein
Director of Photography: Eduard Tisse
Assistant Photographer: Vladimir Popov
Editor: Sergei M. Eisenstein
Art Director: Vasili Rakhals
Intertitles: Nikolai Asseyev, S.M. Tretiakov

Cast

Aleksandr Antonov (*Vakulinchuk, sailor*)
Vladimir Barsky (*Captain Golikov*)
Grigori V. Aleksandrov (*Lieutenant Guiliarovsky*)
Mikhail S. Gomorov (*Matushenko, sailor*)
Aleksandr I. Levchin (*petty officer*)
Marussov (*officer*)
I. Bobrov (*conscript*)
Julia Eisenstein (*woman with pig*)
Beatrice Vitoldi (*woman with pram*)
A. Glauberman (*Aba, boy killed on steps*)
Propkopenko (*Aba's mother*)
Korobei (*sailor with no legs*)
N. Poltavtseva (*teacher with pince-nez*)
Zerenin (*student*)
Konstantin Feldman (*himself, Odessa revolutionary*)
Glotov (*anti-Semitic provocateur*)
Repnikova (*woman on steps*)
Maksim Straukh
Andrei Fait

USSR 1925
72 mins

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Le Mépris (Contempt) Wed 1 Feb 18:10; Fri 17 Feb 20:50

Daughters of the Dust Wed 1 Feb 18:15; Thu 16 Feb 20:30

Sans Soleil Wed 1 Feb 20:40; Fri 17 Feb 18:00

M (Mörder unter uns)

Thu 2 Feb 14:30; Thu 16 Feb 20:40; Wed 22 Feb 18:00

Moonlight Thu 2 Feb 20:45; Tue 14 Feb 20:30

Blade Runner: The Final Cut

Fri 3 Feb 20:40; Sun 5 Feb 20:40; Sat 18 Feb 18:10

Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)

Sat 4 Feb 12:40; Sat 18 Feb 18:30

La dolce vita Sat 4 Feb 14:15; Sat 25 Feb 19:30

Sherlock Jr. Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

City Lights Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

Goodfellas Sat 4 Feb 20:10; Wed 15 Feb 20:10

North by Northwest Sat 4 Feb 20:20; Thu 9 Feb 18:00

L'Atalante Sun 5 Feb 12:15; Tue 14 Feb 18:30; Wed 22 Feb 14:30

Rear Window Sun 5 Feb 12:20; Fri 24 Feb 20:45

Stalker Sun 5 Feb 17:40; Tue 7 Feb 20:10; Sun 26 Feb 14:00

Casablanca Mon 6 Feb 20:30; Sun 12 Feb 13:20

Psycho Mon 6 Feb 20:45; Mon 20 Feb 14:30; Thu 23 Feb 20:40

8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)

Tue 7 Feb 18:00; Tue 21 Feb 14:30; Sun 26 Feb 12:50

The Battle of Algiers (La battaglia di Algeri)

Tue 7 Feb 18:10; Sat 25 Feb 11:50

News from Home Tue 7 Feb 20:45; Fri 17 Feb 18:20 (+ intro)

Rashomon (Rashômon) Tue 7 Feb 21:00; Thu 23 Feb 18:20

The Piano Wed 8 Feb 20:35; Tue 21 Feb 17:50

Wanda Thu 9 Feb 20:30 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sat 18 Feb 18:20

Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)

Thu 9 Feb 20:55; Mon 27 Feb 18:00

Ordet (The Word) Fri 10 Feb 18:15; Sat 25 Feb 14:30

The 400 Blows (Les quatre cents coups)

Fri 10 Feb 20:50; Sun 19 Feb 18:40

Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette)

Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Mon 20 Feb 20:55; Thu 23 Feb 14:30

Barry Lyndon Sat 11 Feb 19:20; Sat 25 Feb 15:30

Some Like It Hot Sun 12 Feb 13:30; Tue 14 Feb 18:10

The Third Man Sun 12 Feb 18:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:40

Killer of Sheep Sun 12 Feb 18:40 (+intro); Sat 18 Feb 20:40

Mirror (Zerkalo) Mon 13 Feb 20:50; Tue 28 Feb 20:50

Pather Panchali Sat 18 Feb 20:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 15:45

The Apartment Wed 22 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 12:40

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