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BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN

(U.S.S.R., 1925)

The Odessa Steps
10 min.

NOTES AND ANALYSIS
By Seymour Chatman

CREDITS

Director .... S. M. Eisenstein

Screenplay .... S. M. Eisenstein and
Nina Agadzhanova-Shutko

Photography .... Eduard Tisse

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BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN

Plot Synopsis

Eisenstein has written that he conceived of BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN in terms of a classical drama, that is, one divided into five major parts or acts. In some prints of the film the parts are actually separated by his own titles, as follows:

I. *Men and Maggots:* Sailors are asleep in their hammocks. A cruel boatswain awakens and humiliates a young sailor; the latter is comforted by his comrades. Next morning, the crew gather around a carcass of beef that has gone rotten and is crawling with maggots; the medical officer, a tiny man wearing pince-nez, "examines" the meat and says that it is sound, to the disgust of the crew. They boycott the mess-hall and eat whatever they can buy from the canteen. A sailor drying the fancy officers' dishes, ironically inscribed "Give us this day our daily bread," dashes one to the floor.

II. *Drama on the Quarterdeck:* The crew is assembled by the officers on the quarterdeck. The captain arises majestically from below and warns the crew that those who are not satisfied with the food will be hung from the yardarm. One sailor, Matyushenko, starts to spread the word to rally around the gun turret: mutiny has begun. Not all the sailors manage to reach this safe position however; some are trapped against the rail. The captain orders an armed guard of SP's to shoot the stranded ones, as an example to the others. They are covered with a tarpaulin. The Russian Orthodox ship's chaplain shows his approval of the execution. The SP's prepare to shoot, but at the critical moment they hear the voice of another sailor, Vakulinchuk, shout "Brothers! Do you realize what you're doing?" They falter, then join the rebels. An all-out battle between officers and crew ensues in which all the officers are killed and thrown over the side. One shot shows us that the tiny medical officer has been thrown overboard, since only his pince-nez is left, dangling from a rope. One officer manages to mortally wound Vakulinchuk, whose body is recovered from the sea by his comrades.

III. *Appeal from the Dead:* The ordinary sailors are now in

full command of the ship; they send a launch with Vakulinchuk's body at dawn to a deserted pier in Odessa's port. The body is left in an improvised shrine — a tent, with a candle burning between his hands and a note that reads "For a Spoonful of Soup." A huge but orderly crowd soon make their way out to the pier. Various reactions are registered along class lines. There is mostly grief among the poor and outrage among the workers and revolutionaries. A bourgeois scoffer is soon set straight. A delegate from shore vows solidarity with the sailors on the deck of the *Potemkin*. The sailors roar their agreement, and back on shore, on the Odessa steps, the population wave to the ship.

IV: *The Odessa Steps:* A throng of boats sails from the port out to the ship with provisions for the sailors. A variety of citizens (a bearded man, a woman with a parasol, a refined woman wearing pince-nez, a student in a white sweater, a legless youth, a mother and a child) wave from the steps. (These are well distinguished visually so that we can have specific individuals with whom to identify in the massacre scene that follows). Suddenly Czarist soldiers descend the steps shooting every man, woman and child in sight. Those who reach the bottom are caught by mounted Cossacks. The *Potemkin* responds by shelling the headquarters of the generals. A stone lion — symbolizing the spirit of the whole Russian people — seems to rise in anger.

V. *Meeting the Squadron:* The sailors prepare to land to defend the citizenry of Odessa, but they learn that they must rather defend themselves against the rest of their own squadron. With Matyushenko in command, the *Potemkin* heads out to sea. After a tense night, the squadron is spotted by the rangefinders. The *Potemkin* rushes at full steam toward the squadron, prepared for anything. Shells are readied as the ships approach each other. Matyushenko orders the following signal to be sent by flags: "Don't fight — join us!" For several suspenseful minutes the response is unknown. At the last moment, we learn from the jubilant faces of the *Potemkin* sailors that they will not be fired upon. They cheer, "Brothers!" The film ends with a close-up of the prow of the *Potemkin* figuratively breaking through the screen to freedom.

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Historical Background

For centuries Russia was ruled by absolute monarchs, the Czars; though a few were relatively enlightened, most were cruel and repressive or weak and ineffectual (which amounted to the same thing). Czars Alexander II (reigned 1881-1894) and Nicholas II (1894-1917) were by and large in the latter class. As of 1904 there was no representative assembly in Russia and no civil liberties available to the people. For at least half a century leftists had been attempting to rouse the masses against the regime. They were of all shades of the political spectrum, from extreme anarchists to relatively mild constitutional democrats. But so restrictive was the control of the government and the ruling aristocracy that little was done to ameliorate political and economic conditions. Ultimately, revolution seemed the only way out. The two principal revolutions of modern Russia occurred in 1905 and 1917; the first one failed, the second one succeeded. Eisenstein's film THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN recounts an incident in the 1905 revolution. Actually, his original intention was to produce a much more extensive overview of the 1905 uprising. The film was to have been entitled simply "1905," but though a scenario was written, the project struck him as too vast to manage. So he hit upon the idea of choosing a single but dramatic incident to characterize and symbolize the whole revolution.

On January 22, 1905 — "Bloody Sunday" — the police killed 130 demonstrators in St. Petersburg, absurdly enough, since they were *friendly* demonstrators, carrying icons and portraits of the Czar. This colossal blunder so enraged even those normally friendly to the Czar that pressure mounted rapidly for reform. In March, Nicholas II offered to permit a "consultative" assembly to meet and made statements encouraging religious and ethnic tolerance. But many people were not satisfied; in St. Petersburg the first *soviet* or council of revolutionaries was organized. As a further concession from the Czar, a manifesto in October changed the government to a constitutional monarchy, and this satisfied the more moderate wing of the opposition. But in December, the government became repressive again, arrested the members of the St. Petersburg soviet, and the year ended in bloody fighting.

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The revolution continued until May of 1906 when the government made new concessions, the so-called Fundamental Laws. These, however, were also breached in the course of following years, and ultimately the repeated failures of Nicholas II and the aristocracy to accept the inevitable necessity of democratizing the country led to the Revolution of 1917 and the final takeover by the Communist party.

It was in the context of the 1905 uprising that the Battleship *Potemkin* incident occurred. Revolutionary cells — groups of dedicated and militant radicals — existed in the armed forces, as in other walks of Russian life. They had been agitating on board the *Potemkin,* the most powerful ship in the Russian Black Sea fleet, hoping thereby to gain control of the rest of the navy and to help the revolution that had started ashore. Unbearable conditions, especially rotten meat, had made hitherto uncommitted crew-members ready to listen. On July 5, an officer shot a sailor who objected to the food; the officer in turn was shot and thrown overboard. When the armory guard refused to fire on the crew at the officers' command, the crew, led by the revolutionary Matyushenko, seized the weapons and proceeded to shoot and/or throw overboard the rest of the officers including the captain. The rebels then sailed to Odessa. A landing party was sent for supplies. They were captured but released when the battleship threatened to open fire on the city. Fellow revolutionaries from Odessa sailed out to the ship with the needed food and fuel, and the *Potemkin* sailed away, after failing to persuade other battleships in the harbor to join it. After a time, quarrels broke out among the crew, and the ship was ultimately turned over to Rumanian authorities, who let the sailors go their separate ways.

Art and Propaganda

As is evident from the preceding historical account, there are several events depicted in Eisenstein's film that do not correspond to actual history. There was no massacre on the Odessa steps (though there had been plenty elsewhere). There was no revolutionary hero shot in the mutiny and no mysterious and moving funeral at dawn on the Odessa quay. Eienstein "invented" these and other details to make the film a more powerful, unified, and moving whole. Further, he ended the film without telling us what really became of the *Potemkin* and the crew: as it stands, all we see is the prow bearing down on the screen in a victorious movement "passing through" the squadron, on to some kind of revolutionary immortality. But "What happens afterward?" is as meaningless a question as "What happened to Fortinbras after Hamlet's death?" The story simply ends there; it is the story of a single heroic action which is symbolic of the larger historical struggle that ultimately led to the victory of Communism in Russia. Thus, the film is not a documentary, but a fictional film based upon actual historical incidents. Does this mean that POTEMKIN is a propaganda film (in the sense of "mere propaganda"), a film that lies to manipulate public opinion? Does Eisenstein have the right to distort, invent, or delete facts concerning the *Potemkin* incident?

Eisenstein, as a good Communist, was interested in persuading Russians and others of the justice of the cause of the 1905 Revolution and of Communism in general; and it is true that Communism, to a greater extent than other ideologies, has never hesitated to use the arts as one more means of spreading its gospel. But it would be a serious mistake to write off the artistic brilliance of the decisions of the young Eisenstein (27 at the time) to capture, in the Odessa Steps sequence, an epitome of the cruel and senseless oppression that the Russian masses had suffered for so many centuries at the hands of their autocratic masters simply because it was his own "invention."[1] Indeed, the word "invention" has a long and noble history in rhetoric and literary criticism, and in a sense is the basis of all art, since art is never merely life but always an imitation of it. Though Eisenstein may not have been true to the literal record, he was true, in a larger sense, to the *spirit* of the time.

ANALYSIS OF THE EXTRACT

Cinematic Form and Content

Like other arts, cinema is open to analysis in terms of the basic distinction — familiar since Aristotle — between "form" and "content." By "form" we mean roughly *how* an art-object, for us, a film, is created. By "content" we mean the *what* that is communicated. We have already sketched out in general terms the *what* of THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN, that is, its *story content* and *themes*. Now we shall consider the *how*, that is, the cinematic form, the various ways that a filmmaker like Eisenstein can communicate his message by visual images to an audience. (We shall go back to a detailed study of content at a later point).

Almost every moviegoer knows a little about expressive techniques available to a director: camera angle (high, low, level), camera distance (close-up, medium and long shots), camera movements (pans, tracks, crane-shots, zooms), lighting (dark, light, high-keyed, low-keyed), editing transitions, (straight cuts, dissolves, fade-ins and fade-outs), and so on. These and related devices are defined in dictionaries and handbooks on film and some familiarity with them will be presumed in this analysis. But certain other terms, which are especially important in understanding Eisenstein's art, do need more explicit definition.

Composition and Montage

Eisenstein was not only one of the greatest film directors, but also one of the greatest film theoreticians. He wrote hundreds of pages and delivered many lectures on the art of the film, only some of which have been translated into English. Two important collections of his writings have appeared under the titles *Film Form* and *Film Sense.*² Eisenstein's theoretical discussion is a brilliant combination of abstract reasoning, imaginative comparison of film with other arts, and concrete practical analysis of actual film sequences, mostly his own. We are fortunate to have in these essays several analyses of the very extract we are studying; they form the basis for the following discussion of its

visual (or what Eisenstein as a sophisticated art theorist calls "plastic") design.³

Before beginning, however, it is necessary to define what is meant by "composition" and "montage." Visual "composition" usually refers to the arrangement and disposition of objects on the screen (or on an artist's canvas) in terms of the lines and masses which they form, quite separately conceived from the *what,* the things out of the real world that are being imitated (the content). Thus an egg and an elongated human head have roughly the same compositional form; so do an arrow, a stick and a distant railroad train. "Composition" in film theory can refer to what appears in a single frame (as in a photograph or drawing) or in a whole shot, i.e., a sequence of frames. The design is *literally* static, although it may be asymmetrical or off-balance in such a way as to suggest the imminence of movement, in which case art theorists say, figuratively, that it is *dynamic,* i.e., charged with the sense of change-to-come.

"Montage" is the French word for "assemblage," the act or product of putting things together. In its European sense (which is different from the Hollywood sense) it means the process of cementing the photographed pieces of film or shots together. This process is usually called simply "editing" in English, but "editing" emphasizes the aspect of the work that involves cutting *out* unwanted material, while "montage" emphasizes the art of determining exactly the right arrangements of parts so that the whole is unified and artistic. Requirements other than those of visual design are involved in this process, in particular those concerning the content of the film, its dramatic and story elements (involving surprise, suspense, economy, demonstration of time and space relationships, etc.). Eisenstein was profoundly concerned with how to correlate the visual design with story content in order to create a meaningful unity of effect.

If we examine in close detail the compositional design first of individual frames and then among frames, that is, within and between shots, as Eisenstein does in his essay "Film Language," we will see how cunningly he has chosen just those arrangements that would best enhance the message he wishes to communicate.

Composition of Individual Frames: How They Relate to Story-Content

Our extract divides neatly into two parts — the fraternization of the people of Odessa, through the sailboats representing them, with the sailors on the *Potemkin;* and the massacre on the Odessa steps.[4] These are obviously the crucial moments in the film, since the whole revolutionary effort depended on the unification of all elements of Russian society to overcome the tyranny enslaving them.

In both parts, one can easily find single frames in which Eisenstein has captured, in the composition, in the very visual design, the arrangement of lines and masses and tones of white, gray and black, an abstract representation of what is happening at that instant in the story. In other words, there is a clear match of form with content, when we stop the projector and look at the frame in isolation, as if it were an independent photograph or a painting.

Consider the theme of the first part of the extract — the fraternization of the Odessa citizens and the sailors on the *Potemkin.* Eisenstein represents this meeting by one basic compositional or graphic arrangement — the use of one or more vertical lines dominates the frame. These lines are frequently manifested as waving arms — the arms of both citizens and sailors. Thus, the very representation of vertical lines becomes associated with solidarity and comradeship. The *multiplicity* of such lines, with the inevitable suggestion of "moving upwards" (to a better life for everybody), occurs as the result of the free expression of feelings: the people — civilians and sailors alike — are shown *spontaneously* joining together in a physical gesture that makes a regular graphic pattern. (This is in stark contrast to another and more fearful regularity of the lines formed by the soldiers as they descend the steps in the massacre sequence, as we shall see in a moment). But it is not only arms that form

the pattern of vertical lines: other objects reveal the same pattern, objects which, though lifeless, represent or serve as extensions of the people in some way. An obvious example is the masts of the sailboats. Of course these are not strictly speaking straight verticals. Sometimes their diagonal or arrow-like quality is emphasized: this design occurs predominantly when the boats are speeding as fast as they can to the battleship (e.g. shot number 5). But as they are approaching the battleship, when contact is imminent, there is a shot (number 17), in which (relative) verticality again predominates — they come head-on into the battleship, and the lines of their masts in the background are in perfect harmony with the raised arms of the sailors, whose backs fill the foreground. Even the architecture of the city is shown as contributing to the solidarity of the verticals: in shot number 7 we are shown five tall stone columns, which, like the waving arms, emphasize verticality. But unlike the other people and objects, these are *perfectly* stable and *perfectly* vertical. They might be seen as representing the solidity of the shore, and of history, so that it is not only the moods of the people and their maritime extensions, the ship-masts (caught up in the flux of the sea), but also Russia's whole past, and destiny itself, that joins in and supports the theme of necessary fraternization.

When we turn to the massacre sequence, we get a completely different kind of graphic arrangement, to correspond to the different story-content. What is uppermost here is the conflict between the pattern of regular lines formed by the troops descending the steps, and that of the random scatter formed by the terrified crowd that had been standing waving at the battleship. The graphic disposition of the soldiers is typically the intersection of three lines, recurring at various angles, but basically in the same relationship: the lines of the steps, those of the guns and those of the soldiers' erect bodies. Sometimes a fourth line is introduced: the shadows of the soldiers' bodies on the steps. For example, a frame from shot number 137 (Fig. 1) takes on an abstract pattern (Fig. 2). Here the abstract pattern alone seems menacing and aggressive.
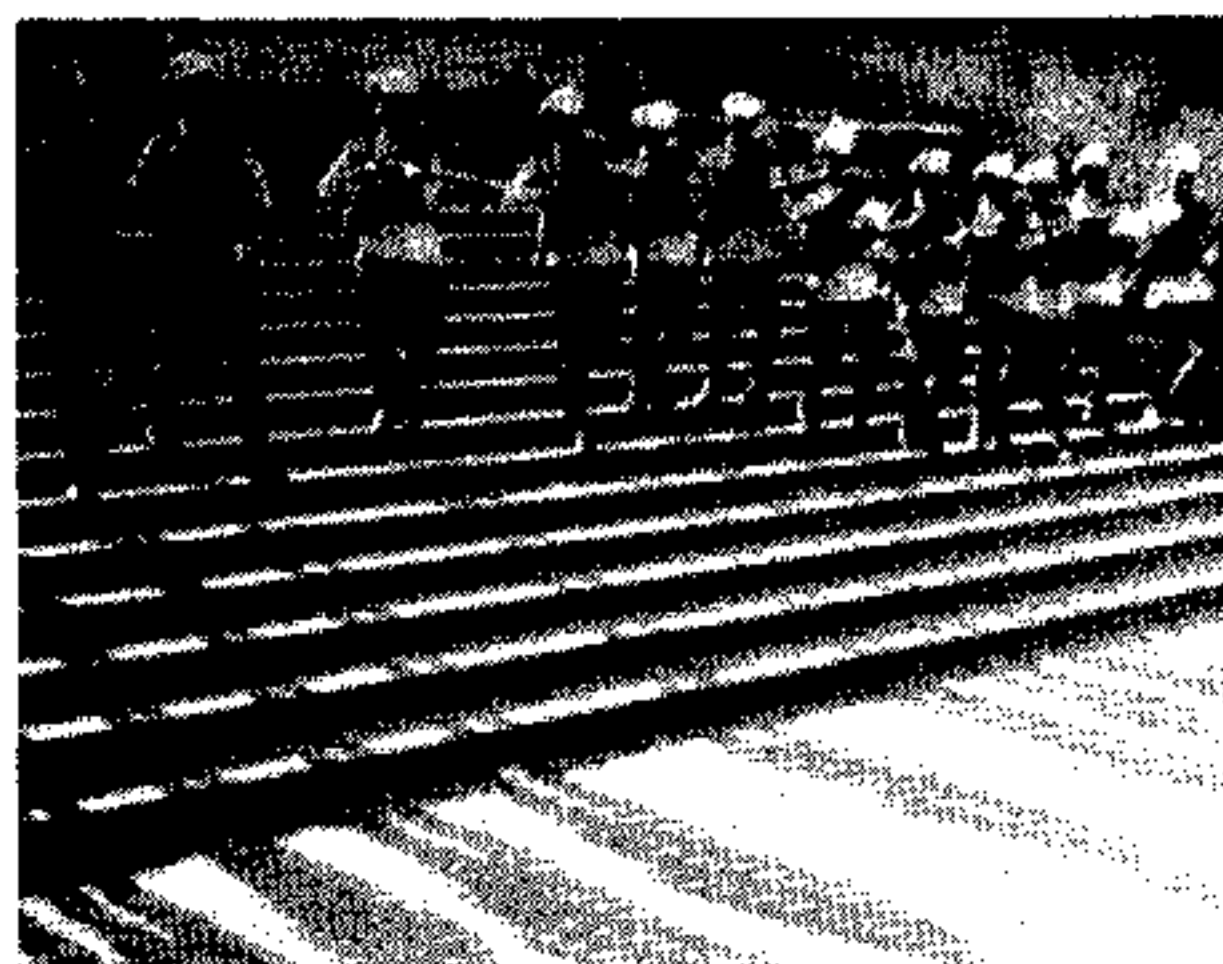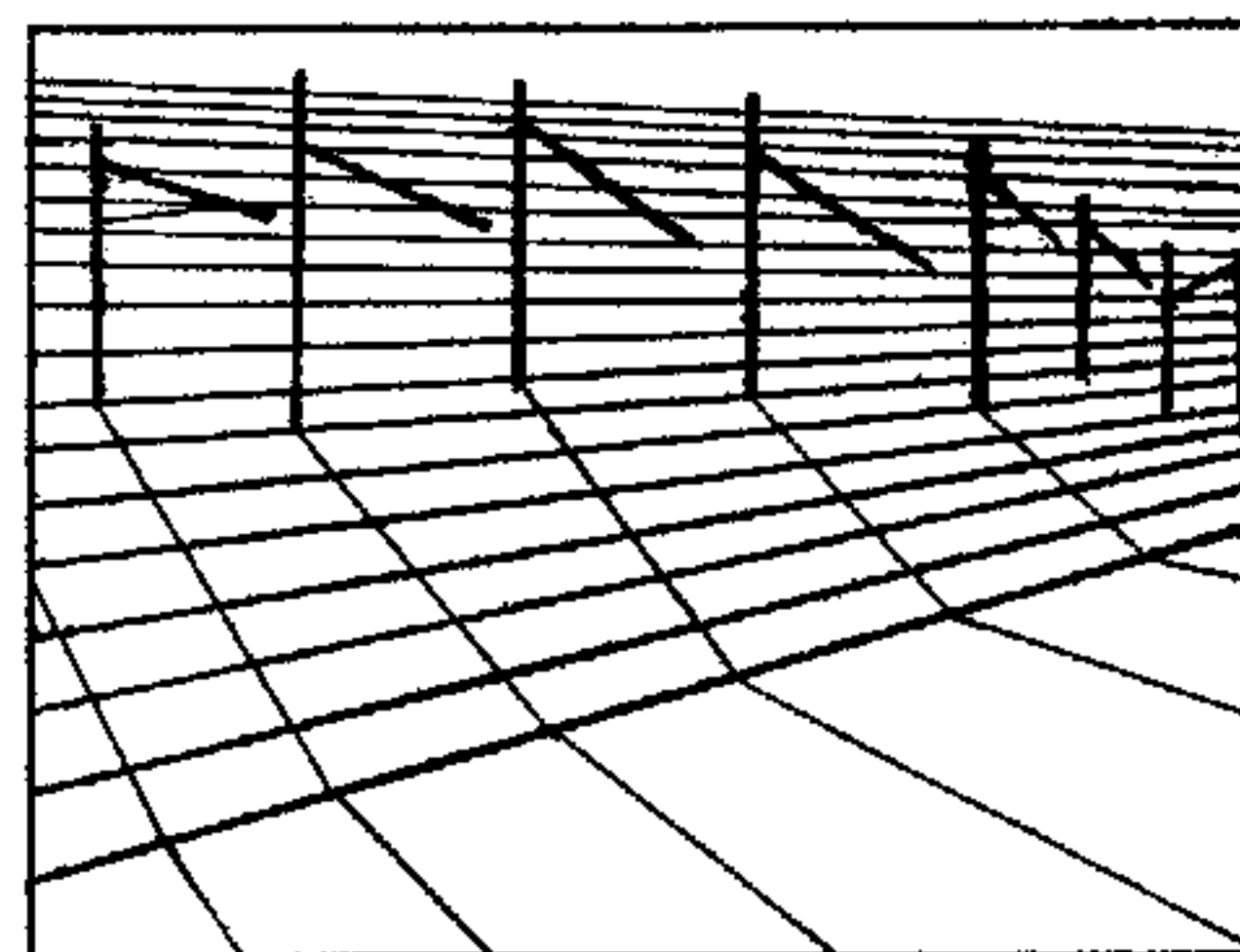
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Fig. 1

Fig. 2

The terrified populace fleeing down the steps form a completely different, highly irregular pattern (Fig. 3). The opposition between these two patterns, between the precise disposition of the troops and the scattered chaos of the crowd can be seen in Fig. 4. The soldiers' pattern is very precise: their bodies are straight and the bayonet-fixed guns follow the wicked angle of the bandoliers slung across their backs. The populace, higher in the frame (since the camera was placed at the top of the steps), forms the scatter, and a very sharp line, formed by the top step, cuts the frame precisely along its lowest quarter.

Just as the uniformity of verticals for both sailors and civilians in the first part of the extract signals harmony and solidarity between the two groups, so the disparity between the regular diagonal lines and the chaos of lines and points signals the violent clash between soldiers and populace in the second part of the extract.

Composition Within and Between Shots

Let us turn to composition as it relates to montage, that is, ·the assemblage of individual shots, and of sequences of shots. Here we can consider the entire first sequence of the extract — the fraternization episode — this time in terms not only of lines, masses, and so on, but also in terms of the *movements* of these from frame to frame and the directional orchestration of these movements between shots.
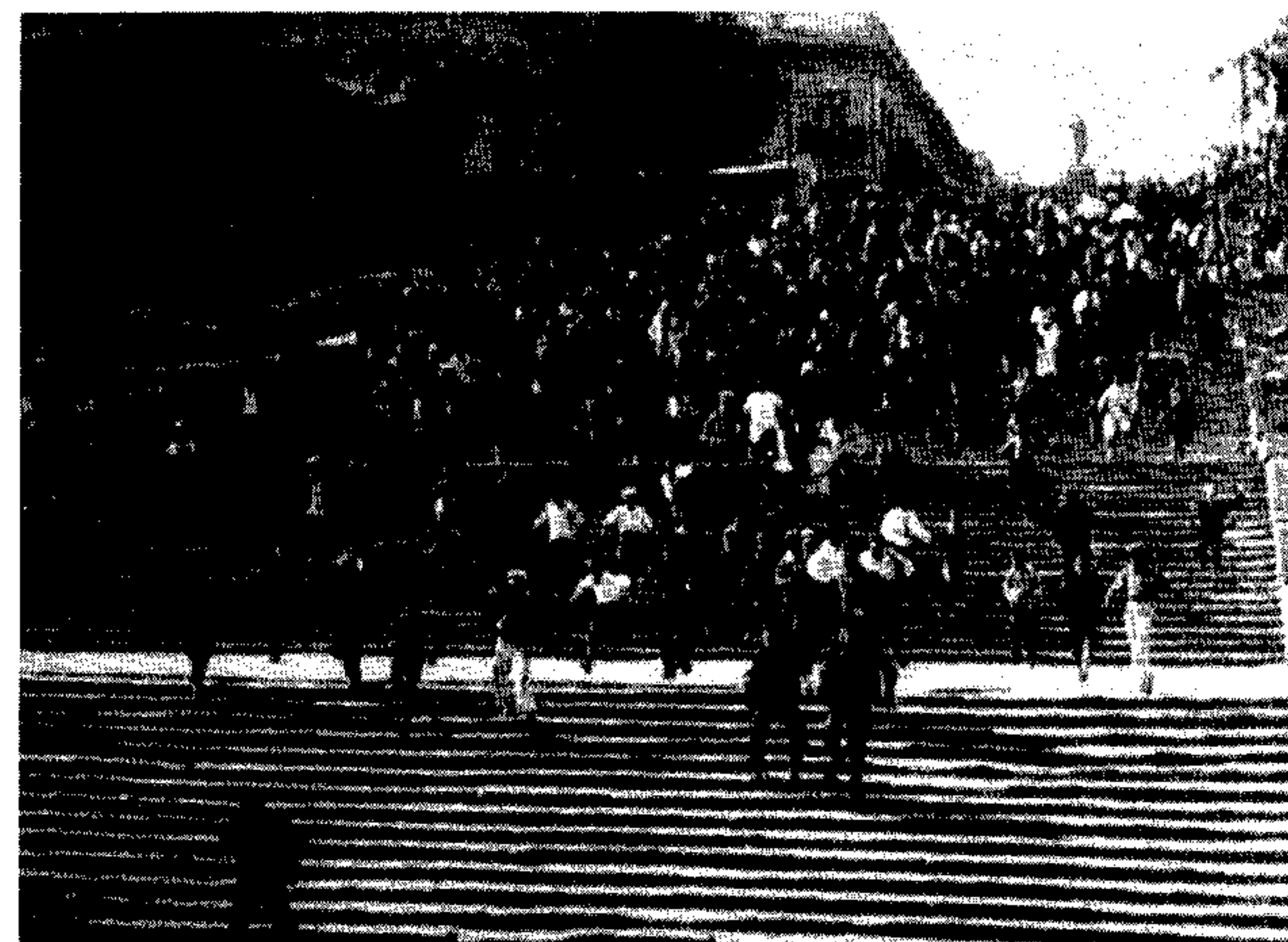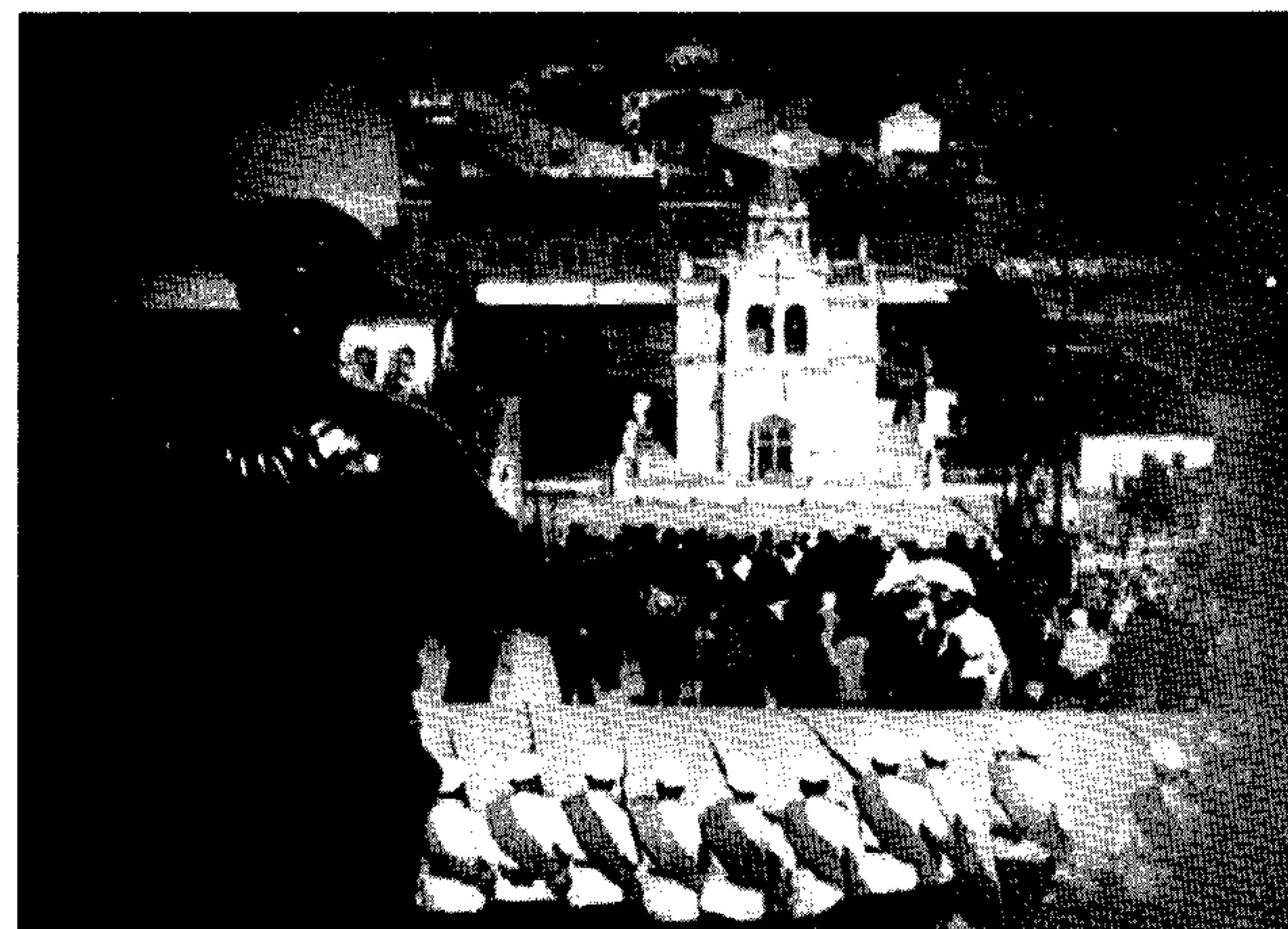
Fig. 3

Fig. 4

The sequence starts with eight shots depicting the movement of graceful slant-masted boats out to the battleship. The sailboats are first shown with their masts bare, sails down, at anchor, facing into the dock. In the background of the second shot, some are shown heading *right,* off-frame, with sails fully billowing. Thus, Eisenstein emphasizes the distinction "docked vs. afloat" by the change of direction of the boat prows. Next, in the third, a medium shot, we are shown a single boat being prepared, its sail filling the frame. Two more shots show boats preparing for embarkation with others again streaming by, rightward, in the background. Rightward is now clearly established as the direction "toward the battleship." There is, however, still a suggestion of the turmoil of beginning effort: boats are in different positions, states of preparedness, and so on. This is achieved by showing still-moored boats lying at angles different from those speeding rightward. But by the sixth shot, this rightward movement has become completely unanimous: all that is shown is boats sailing to the right. The sense of solidarity of purpose is now firmly established not only by the boats' direction, but by other lines formed by moorings, quays and buildings (whose windows seem transformed into regularly spaced landmarks past which the progress of the boats can be seen). The actual movement is further enhanced by the slant of the masts; they are like one of the two prongs of an arrow shot off to the right, with the prow forming the other prong (Fig. 5). The sailboats exit offscreen right, and then are picked up in the next shot from above. Thus, the rightward movement is continued but with a variation: instead of horizontal movement, the movement is now diagonal. In the final shot of this first group of
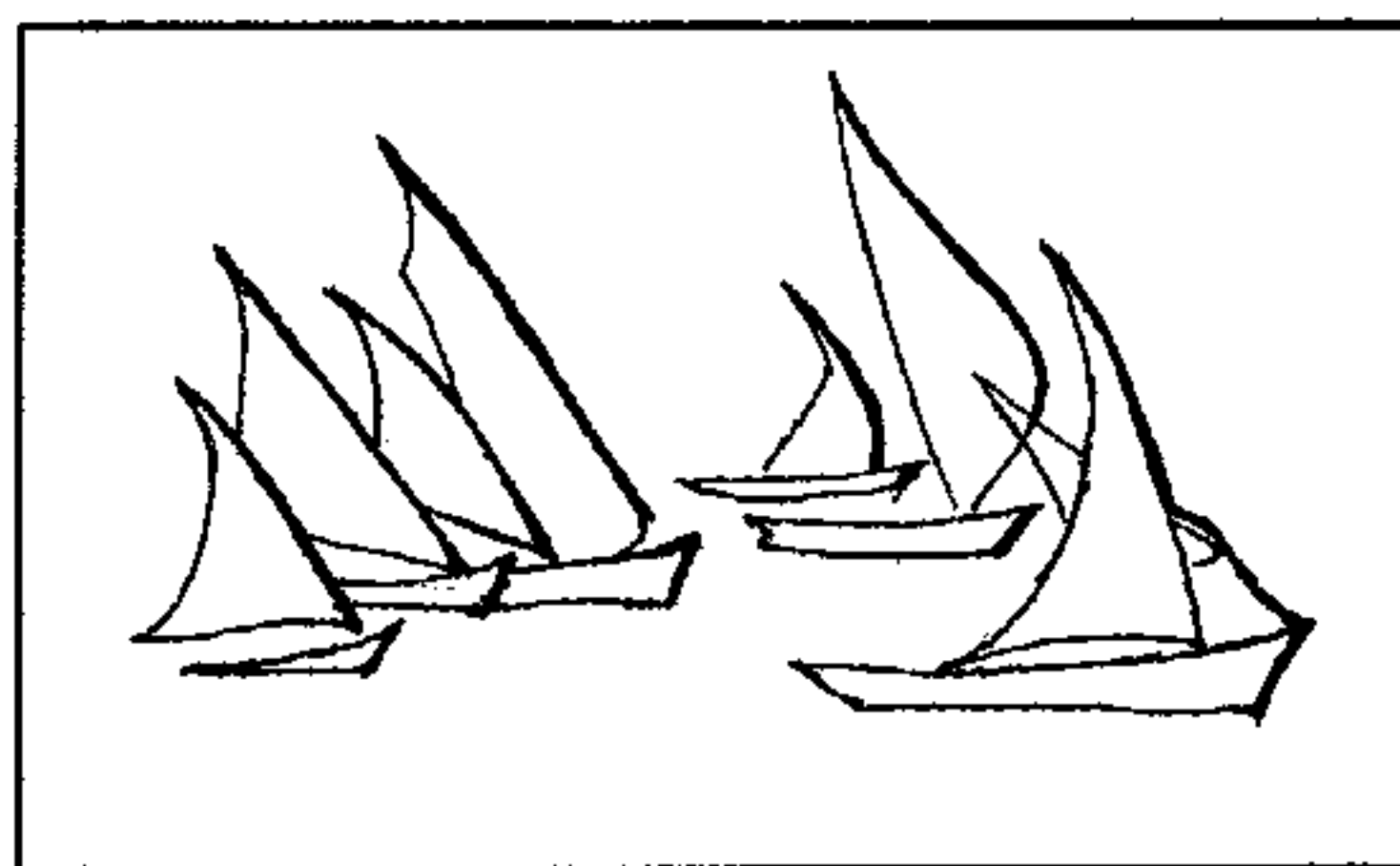

Fig. 5

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eight, the horizontal is resumed, but now the boats are seen passing behind tall columns. These columns, though they retain strongly their vertical character, curve outward toward the sailboats behind them. Thus, the columns continue to function as "markers," like the windows and piers of the sixth shot, and to show that the sailboats, though speeding as fast as they can, are still in some sense "tied" to the shore. They are the representatives of the shore, and the bulge outward of the columns can be seen, not too fancifully, as an extension of the hand of friendship from land-dwellers to sea-visitors. Also, as Eisenstein points out, they foreshadow the vertical figures of the actual human beings to appear shortly, the well-wishers on shore, who serve as reminders of the source *from which* the boats speed toward the "fraternization" encounter.

In the next section there is established a second theme; between which and the first there will be constant cross-cutting:

1. The sailboats speeding towards the battleship (moving and horizontal).

2. The people of Odessa watching and waving (static and vertical). The moment of unification will occur, that is, the two themes will merge, when the sailboats arrive at the battleship.

In his discussion Eisenstein shows how the montage takes place not only in terms of the vertical-horizontal dimension, but also in terms of the background-foreground dimension. Each theme alternates with the other by "thrusting" itself into the foreground at the crucial moment. "Thrust" is not too strong a word, for, in both the composition of the frame and in the change from frame to frame and from shot to shot in the montage, Eisenstein sought a *dynamic* effect. Dynamism, he felt, resulted from a *conflict* between forces both in the content (as we will see later in discussing the massacre on the steps) and in form. Here, though the parties to the meeting — populace and sailors — are friendly, there is another purely graphic element of conflict, namely the distance between shore and battleship which stands in the way of fraternization and must be overcome. In the form, the verticals — the populace on shore and the sailors on the ship — must be brought together by the moving horizontal "vectors," the speeding sailboats laden with provisions.

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Going back to the eighth shot, we note that the sailboats have been thrust into the background: this is a transition to a return to the shore, to show what is happening there — the enthusiastic expression of good will by the general populace. Not only do the columns anticipate the figures standing on the steps, but the dark mass at the bottom of the frame, representing the curved base upon which the columns rest, anticipates the dark curved mass of the very next shot (the ninth), formed by the arch under which a crowd of people pass on their way to the water's edge to watch the sailboats. The arch is properly established as such; i.e., not only as form but as content; it appears at the top of the frame, instead of the bottom, and now the verticals are not motionless columns but human beings, moving toward the background. What was only static and incipient in shot eight — the extension of "well-wishing" by the outward bulge of the columns — has become moving and actual in nine.

The tenth shot takes us directly to the second theme: the first of several groups of the well-wishers that are sharply characterized in appearance — here two, a bearded man and a woman with a dark parasol and a white blouse, the parasol recalling the "arc-formation." Eisenstein wrote that the moving sailboat theme was maintained only "by reflection, in the expression of their eyes and in their movement in a horizontal direction." In the eleventh shot (which is very brief), there are three people — two men in dark clothes standing on either side of a woman in a white blouse. Eisenstein explained why there were three: "a common compositional variant: an even number of persons is replaced by an uneven number. Two replaced by three. This 'golden rule' . . . can be traced back to the principles of Chinese painting as well as to the practice of the *Commedia dell'arte*." Shot twelve resumes on the figures in ten except that the horizontal eye-shifting gives way to vertical arm-waving. Thirteen introduces *two* new characters, one highly distinctive looking, who will play a leading role in the massacre sequence. She is obviously an intellectual, with her noble face, pince-nez and black hat tied to her head by a white scarf. (Remember the need to show that all elements of the populace were behind the revolution, and particularly the intelligentsia, who could work

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in close concert with the proletariat). The upward-downward arm movements are continued by the nods of approval of this distinguished looking lady in shot thirteen, again emphasizing the unanimity of emotion on shore. In fourteen, the two characters are replaced by one, a student wearing glasses and a white sweater (whom we shall also see during the massacre). He too raises his hand and waves.

In the next shot we go back to theme one, but for the first time we see a boat sailing from right to left! What does this mean? Did Eisenstein forget that he had established the movement to the battleship as *rightward?* Or is there some new motif opening at this point? We only feel disoriented if we insist on looking at the shot with "Hollywood-continuity," that is, with an overly-logical bias. Eisenstein is taking perfectly reasonable license here in changing the direction of a boat. This is the first time that the boat is seen against a background of open sea; thus it is separated from the shore and its old ties; it is the leader, for the rest of the boats, in the next shot, are shown (still moving rightward) against a land background. Thus, the breaking away from the land is underlined by the shock of the change of direction. But even on the literal level the shot makes perfect sense: sailboats often move by a kind of indirection dictated by a change in the wind, that is, by "tacking." Here the sailboat can easily be conceived as tacking into the *Potemkin*. (Not that Eisenstein *needs* a rational explanation for the composition of a shot; often he introduces elements, as we shall see, which are logically inconsistent but emotionally charged, precisely because he feels the latter are more important). The next shot, the seventeenth, shows all, since it is taken from the battleship. Notice how the verticals — representing both the shore-hosts and the sea-visitors — are shown meeting; the masts and the waving sailors merge as parallels all across the frame. Notice too that the ship's huge gun, which in another context would be threatening, here seems to extend a protective arm over the incoming boats: its importance is underlined by the oblique diagonal that it makes in the right hand corner. The movement into the *Potemkin,* established by the "tacking" shot of the single boat (fifteen) is reconfirmed by shot eighteen, in which all the boats move leftward. The meeting

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is virtually achieved, but just as was the case in embarkation from Odessa, so the debarkation, the joining up with the battleship, involves a kind of turmoil of individual and local movements. In shot nineteen a crew member is shown in close-up moving diagonally down the gangway, while in the background the boats bob around. Others veer inward from upper right and then change direction and go off at lower right (shot twenty). There is a plying back and forth of the tips of the sailboats against the background of the battleship in shots 21 (to the right), 22 (to the left), 24 (to the right again), 26 (to the left again). These are intercut with shots of sailors descending towards the bobbing boats. In a beautiful pair of shots, the sails of the boats, framed by the gun and the guard rail, are lowered; here again is a powerful image of amity — the gun is not forcing the sails to fold down, they are doing so under its protective wing. The movements become chaotic as sailors rush by the camera waving arms (29) and (in 30) the clustered boats seem to swarm like ants around the queen-mother (the analogy is not so farfetched, since they *are* bringing provisions to the enormous ship, which though it may be a "dreadnought" at sea, depends for its survival on the help of hundreds of small human beings whose natural habitat is land). Actual verbal communication begins in the next two shots (33 and 34): a sailor gesticulates, and in one of the boats a boatman responds by showing a package he has brought. Then after a shot in which more sailors rush to the rail, we reach the climax of the fraternization, for suddenly, without further ado, we cut back to Odessa shore and see hundreds of civilians, now assembled in all their magnitude for the first time, standing on the steps, the steps which are about to turn into a stage of ghastly slaughter. But that is yet to come. We cannot miss the visual correspondence between this shot and the twenty-first, in which the masses of sailors were shown perched on the battleship as the sails passed by underneath. Fraternization is now made complete by the magical power of montage to join together, almost instantaneously, the two groups which, though physically distant, are as close as can be in spirit. Eisenstein has brought together in fraternity the two crucial masses of Russians: the civilian and the military.

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Conflict as a Principle of Organization

Eisenstein's colleague, the director V. I. Pudovkin (whose masterpiece was an adaptation of Gorky's novel MOTHER, 1926) built his narratives on the principle of simple linkage; that is, he believed that a scene is most effectively presented by linking together short takes (shots) of various details of a scene's action. Eisenstein opposed this theory of film construction. He held that film continuity should proceed, not through a series of smoothly linked shots, but through a series of shocks. He writes in *Film Form:*

> If montage is to be compared with something, then a phalanx of montage pieces, of shots, should be compared to the series of explosions of an internal combustion engine, driving forward its automobile or tractor: for, similarly, the dynamics of montage serve as impulses driving forward the total film.

According to Eisenstein, shots could contrast or conflict with each other in a variety of ways to create this series of explosions: a long shot could contrast with a close-up; a directional movement leftward could contrast with a directional movement rightward; a low-key shot could contrast with a high-key shot; irregular movement within the frame could contrast with purposeful organized movement; vectors of directional graphic elements could contrast from shot to shot.

Eisenstein's dynamic — in his terms, dialectical — mode of film construction was deliberately intended to unsettle the viewer, revolutionizing not only his usual mode of seeing but his way of thinking as well. Thus the very form of his films, Eisenstein believed, was conducive to furthering the aims of the revolution. In *Film Form* Eisenstein discusses montage of conflict as the structural principle behind his portrayal of a portion of the massacre on the Odessa steps:

> In the first place, noticing the *frenzied condition of the people and masses that are portrayed,* let us go on to find what we are looking for in structural and compositional indications.

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Let us concentrate on the line of *movement*.

There is, before all else, a chaotic *close-up* rush of figures. And then, as chaotic, a rush of figures in *long-shot*.

Then, the chaos of movement changes to a design: the rhythmic descending feet of the soldiers.

Tempo increases. Rhythm accelerates.

In this acceleration of *downward* rushing movement there is a suddenly upsetting opposite movement — upward: the *break-neck* movement of the mass downward leaps over into a *slowly solemn* movement upward of the mother's *lone* figure, carrying her dead son.

Mass. Break-neck speed. Downward.

And then suddenly: A lone figure. Slow solemnity. Upward.

But — this is only for an instant. Once more we experience a returning leap to the downward movement.

Rhythm accelerates. Tempo increases. (p. 171)

Conflict is an organizing principle in Eisenstein's films not only as it exists from shot to shot but as it exists compositionally within the individual frame. Eisenstein distinguished four kinds of intra-frame conflict: graphic-conflict, conflict of planes, conflict of volumes and spatial conflict; and he illustrated the first two with frames from this extract. The first is that of the wounded young boy lying diagonally across the steps (Fig. 6). The conflict is called "graphic" because it involves *lines*. The line formed by the broken body of the child lies perpendicular to and in mute accusation of the cruel diagonal lines of the steps — lines made cruel by close association with the soldiers (the steps "allowed" the soldiers to massacre the civilians in a swift and efficacious manner). Conflict of *planes* is illustrated by a shot occurring a bit later in which the officer (on the right edge) orders the soldiers (three of whom are visible at the bottom left) to fire on the mother holding her wounded child (Fig. 7): three planes — that is, the landings intervening between the steps — which are still in the "territory" of the fleeing civilians are visible off to the right and stand in compositional and dramatic contrast with a fourth formed by the tops of the soldiers' caps.

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Fig. 6   Fig. 7

Story Construction (Content)

We have seen how Eisenstein's practice was governed by certain theories of composition, both in the construction of individual frames and in the assemblage of shots and shot-sequences. Let us now consider the extract from the point of view of the dramatic or story problems that faced Eisenstein and how he elected to solve them. What images did he choose to show and in what sequence, and why have film historians and critics found these choices so excellent?

The mutiny on board the *Potemkin* was successful, and Vakulinchuk's heroic death brought home to all segments of the Odessan citizenry the ruthlessness of the regime, but it also impressed upon them the possibilities of a general revolt against the regime. Eisenstein's first task was to show, artistically and economically, how solidarity arose between the battleship and the citizenry, and we have already examined some of the ways in which he did this (from the strictly formal, that is, visual-compositional point of view).

But, of course, such solidarity was a powerful challenge to the Czarist forces, so Eisenstein's second problem was to show how they reacted.

His solution was to display the murderous descent of the soldiers, the citizens' attempt to escape, the futile appeal by a few people to halt the massacre, and the *Potemkin's* mighty reply to the atrocity. In each case, we shall consider precisely *what* Eisenstein chose to show, as the manifestation of his general

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ability to tell a story through visual images, with only secondary consideration of *how* he chose to shoot it, i.e., its form, which we have already discussed.

As we have seen, the essence of film art for Eisenstein was conflict, and that is as true in the sphere of story construction as in the actual shooting and editing of sequences. So our first question is: how did he choose to frame the violence and cruelty of the government's reaction? He did it by conceiving a sudden attack upon and massacre of unarmed civilians, indeed the very civilians who had been waving their greetings to the *Potemkin* from the shore. (The revolution of 1905 was, after all, ruthlessly put down by the Czar). We noted above the biographical circumstances under which Eisenstein hit upon the idea of staging the massacre on the famous Odessa steps, though historically no such event occurred. The esthetic wisdom of that decision is not difficult to perceive. By having unsuspecting citizens attacked suddenly, from behind and above, Eisenstein stresses the absolute power of the military (they are figuratively "above" the people) and the defenselessness of the populace. That defenselessness is enhanced by the fact that there is really no escape, since at the bottom of the steps, the dreaded mounted Cossacks are ready to catch those who have managed to elude the bullets being fired at them from above. So in both a symbolic and practical way, the steps provide the perfect backdrop for the scene. Eisenstein clearly takes advantage of the shock value — he makes us feel the dismay and surprise just as the populace felt it — by showing us the *effect* on them first, even before the first soldier appears on the screen. After the title "Suddenly . . ." we see (as a preface to the soldiers' descent) the wild, incomprehensible tossing of a woman's hair (four brief shots, 58 through 61); her hair is down over her eyes as if to shield them from the disbelief and horror of the first volley. Then follow two shots of citizens scurrying in disorder down the steps (including the legless boy who moves downward with amazing agility). Thus, like many of the citizens, we know that something dreadful is happening, but we hardly know yet what it is. The next shot (64) reveals the entire situation (it is an "establishing" shot in Hollywood parlance): from the top of the steps we see the citizens fleeing

down the steps (that is, away from the camera). At the left there is an immense bronze statue of a soldier (doubtless some Czarist general or perhaps the Czar himself) with his right arm extended. For a moment, it looks like the populace is fleeing the statue, and in a sense, that is symbolically correct. But then the real source of their fear emerges from the bottom frame, namely the first wave of white-jacketed, white-hatted troops with rifles extended (in contrast to the predominantly dark-clothed mob descending the steps). The precise military array of the line of soldiers contrasts with the hurly-burly of the mob. Note, too, that a church looms in the background, at the bottom of the steps. But we know already (from the character of the pro-Czarist ship chaplain) that the Church will not protect the people, but will betray them to the military. So the appearance of a church here is ironic — indeed, the people are shown trapped between the military and religious forces of the regime.

This "preface" establishes at the outset certain choices of content — the *what* to show — that will be characteristic of the whole sequence. Eisenstein's basic procedure is to contrast the two groups — the orderly, relentless and murderous soldiers and the defenseless, terrified mob. The way in which these are contrasted is very ingenious: naturally the montage is primarily a constant *cross-cutting* going back and forth from hunter to hunted. To do this, Eisenstein must ensure that we always know which group we're looking at; he does so not only in obvious ways (uniforms vs. civilian dress, guns vs. the absence of guns, orderly movement down the stairs vs. every-man-for-himself-scurrying), but also more subtly. For example, our introduction to the as yet unnamed terror, remember, is through a *close-up* on a girl whom we've seen before; and throughout the sequence we will have additional close-ups of familiar faces among the terrified populace. But with one exception (about which we will speak in a moment), the soldiers are kept anonymous. We never are given a chance to see their faces, either because the frame is filled with some other parts of their bodies (e.g., their boots or guns), or because they are photographed from a distance and/or at an angle which makes it impossible to see them. Eisenstein's intention is clearly to dehumanize the soldiers, to

depict them as machines, reacting blindly to orders — for otherwise how could they countenance the horrendous act they are committing?

To make it perfectly clear that this is just the first wave, the camera's next look at the soldiers (after nine shots representing the crowd's terror-stricken descent) is from exactly the same spot, the top of the stairs. The extended arm of the statue seems almost to be commanding them to descend (a kind of antithesis to the protective arm extended by the battleship's gun over the sailboats in the fraternization sequence). Thus, in resuming its exact former position, after its shifts of movements to reflect the chaotic flight of civilians, the camera too emphasizes the methodical and mechanical character of the soldiers' descent. Five shots later (79) from the same perspective, the camera shows the second wave of soldiers stop and raise their guns. After six more shots of the terrified mob, the camera picks the soldiers up again (shot 86) at the very moment after they raised their guns, though now from a different angle (their right), a different height (their knees) and a different distance (medium close-up). The soldiers' methodicalness now well established, Eisenstein shifts the camera's position to show the deadliness of the volleys, closing in on the lines of guns and filling the frame with smoke to show their effect. Though close, the faces of the soldiers remain hidden; they seem mere extensions of their guns. The next time we see the soldiers is in connection with the shawled mother who goes back to rescue her wounded son, morally supported by the woman in pince-nez and a few others. This is the first resistance offered to the awesome and cruel force that has been unleashed, and it comes from a mother so outraged by what has happened to her son that she forgets all personal danger to herself in protesting. Eisenstein takes full advantage of her solitary brave figure against the wave of soldiers. The manner in which the soldiers reappear (shot 123) is extremely interesting. The woman wearing pince-nez has persuaded the tiny group around her to "appeal" to the soldiers. But it is already clear that the latter are machines, not men. We know in advance how fruitless any appeal will be; it would be like appealing to a rocket hurtling down on you. So

to emphasize the point, Eisenstein follows shot 122, the civilians' faces looking upward apprehensively, with one of the soldiers; not their actual bodies but their *shadows,* stretched out over an intermediate landing between the steps. Shadows, of course, are even less human than the soldiers who cast them, and they add an eeriness which makes the approaching terror more intense. Eisenstein cross-cuts back to the protesting mother (123), then to the group huddled around the brave woman wearing pince-nez (124-131), and then again picks up the soldiers with no time lapse (132). It is the very second after they have arrived at the landing; they stop, raise their guns and fire. The actual encounter of the resister, the mother, and the first wave of troops is made suitably dramatic by delaying it with shots of the crowds (133) and the supplicants around the woman with pince-nez (135). The mother continues to climb (136) and the troops move downward diagonally in the opposing direction, from left to right.

Confrontation is inevitable: we watch with baited breath. To heighten our suspense Eisenstein again arranges for the moment of confrontation to be delayed ever so slightly by leaving the frame of this shot virtually empty; it begins again with the shadows of the soldiers — but now lengthened grotesquely because they are seen from a new angle (going diagonally *upward* from left to right) — stretched out over several corpses on the landing and down the steps. They step over the bodies and exit to the right. Then follows (138), one of the most amazing shots in movie history: amazing, if not strictly believable, but we readily forgive Eisenstein this infraction of logic because of the beauty of the effect. At the top are the black boots of the soldiers descending; the steps to right and left are strewn with bodies of the dead and dying; but the center is clear — the better to form a path for the mother to ascend toward the troops. To etch this patch even more clearly, Eisenstein has cast a quite improbable vertical patch of bright light up the steps. There is absolutely nothing to explain it except the fact that he wanted it there; the direction of the shadows up till now has uniformly shown that the sun is shining from *behind* the soldiers. And yet this light patch is in no way blocked by any of the soldiers coming

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down towards it; on the contrary a black shadow appears at the *bottom* of the light patch and moves rightward across it, just at the very moment that the mother carrying her child moves rightward across it, just at the very moment that the mother carrying her child moves rightward into the frame. It is *she* that is casting the shadow (Fig. 8). And then, of course, she heads right for the path lighting her way. But then where could the light be coming from? If questioned about this apparent violation of astronomy, Eisenstein would no doubt give the same answer that the painter Marc Chagall gave when asked why he often painted blue cows flying in the sky: he said that he did so simply because they looked good there, they were needed to fill out the composition.

But, of course, the soldiers will not be stopped by this brave mother; their deadly march is continued in medium shot, their bodies cut off at the chest, to repeat the implication of the anonymous death machine. To emphasize the fact that they are not
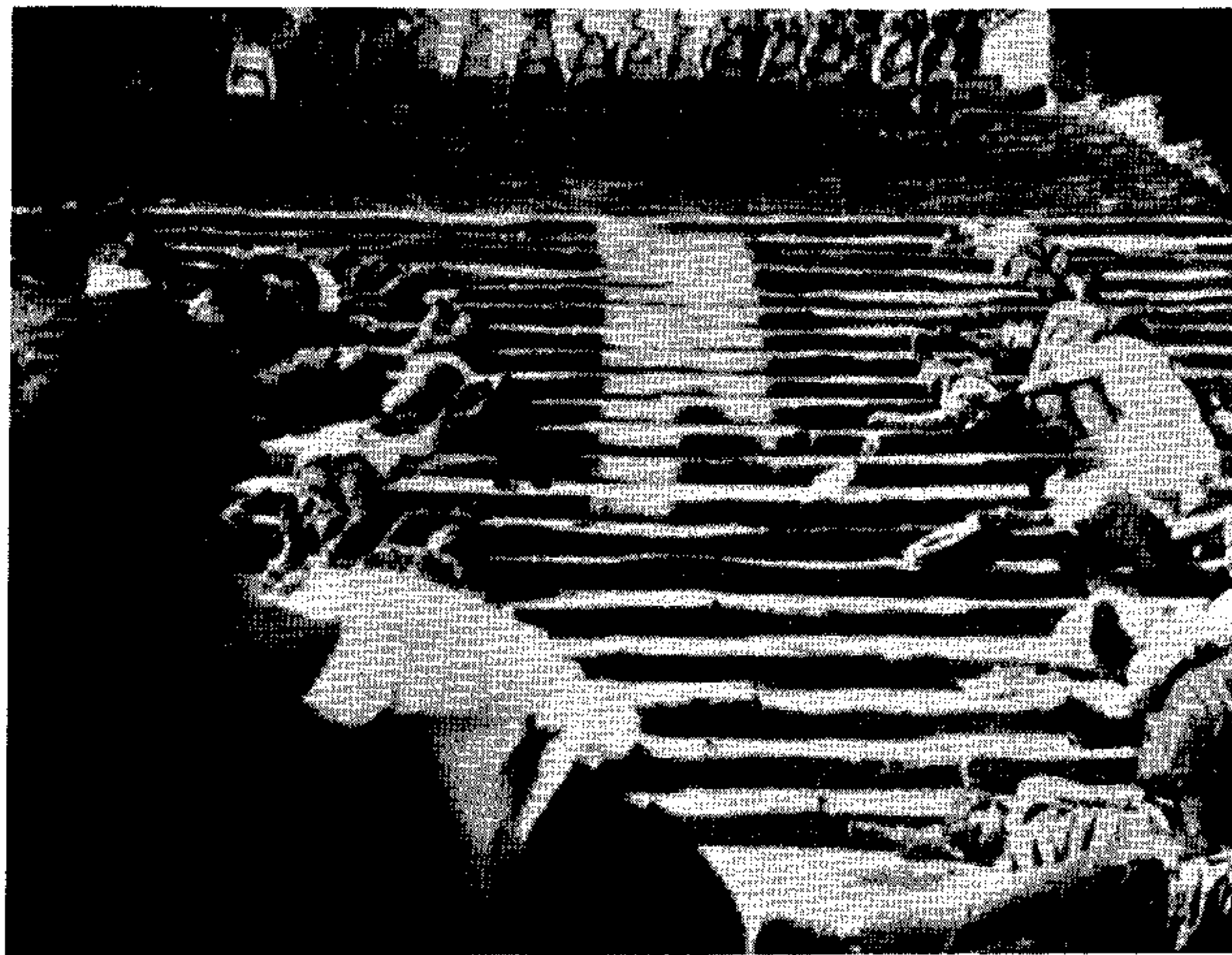

Fig. 8

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to be stopped by any appeal, Eisenstein has them march right through the frame, past the camera. At this distance we can see blood staining the steps as they march over corpses. In the next shot, the mother continues *her* march upward; note that this time the camera — which is elsewhere so predominantly static in Eisenstein's films — now moves with her, as if to heighten the tension and the imminence of the contact, but also to bring her up to a point — the landing — where she can be seen marching right into the soldiers' shadows. The shadows now strike us as the teeth of a monstrous beast about to devour her. She stops and then continues, until she is directly in line with the officer's arm, his sabre raised to give the next (and, to her, fatal) order to fire. But even the sabre doesn't stop her: in shot 141 she marches literally into the barrels of the guns (the camera also continuing to follow her in sympathetic emphasis). Then the sabre falls, the shots ring out, and the mother crumples to the landing. Eisenstein here, as in a later shot, makes an *officer* directly and personally responsible for this individual's death. The point is ideological: the soldiers are indeed behaving like machines, but in a sense that relieves them of a certain responsibility. They themselves are simply weapons in the hands of the evil officers, representing the aristocratic class. The common soldiers shoot because they are ordered to and if they didn't, *they* would be shot. But potentially, as common men, they might be reached and persuaded to come over to the revolutionary side (as did the firing squad of SP's on the *Potemkin*).

Unlike those made in the west, Eisenstein's films (at least those he made in the silent era) were not usually centered around individuals, but rather around masses of people. When he did close-ups on a single face, his purpose was not so much to characterize the individual in question as to show his or her relation to the mass movements taking place. The faces were exemplary or typical of certain elements in the groups. We have seen how the fates of certain individuals are followed by the camera — the crippled boy, the shawled mother whose son is wounded, the lady in pince-nez, the young girl (perhaps her daughter) who clings to her in fear, an old man unsuccessfully trying to help someone up, the student in the white sweater, the young mother

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who is killed and whose baby rolls to its death. We are not told the names of these people nor anything of their previous histories: they appear for the sole purpose of allowing us to identify with them, and hence to apprehend the enormity of the massacre. In selecting these particular individuals, he again shows his esthetic acumen. What greater crime is there than to kill innocent women and children? So, twice he shows a mother and child as victims (note the progression from the stronger and earthier to the more delicate and refined mother). The young student's fate, on the other hand, is not to die but to see, and in seeing, to *learn* — he is clearly there to symbolize the need for everyone to learn to the fullest extent the evils of tyranny.

The Relationship Between
"Film" Time and "Real" (Story) Time

As the horror mounts, the intercutting between the three basic groups — soldiers, the crowd and certain individuals — becomes more rapid and with it the emotional level more intense. Yet at the same time the action itself is not speeded up. In some ways, the tragedy is *drawn out* in an almost unendurable way. Here we touch upon one of the most original and modern aspects of Eisenstein's style. Like other great artists of the twentieth century, he never feels bound by artificial realism. He is perfectly capable of bending time (as well as light, space and so on) to his larger purpose. When he wants to, he can expressly *avoid* the sense of normal time-lapse. By various means he draws sequences out in an intentionally suspenseful way. That is, the screen-time — the time that we actually spend watching these events — lasts *longer* than the events would have taken to occur. Eisenstein was able to *stretch* time, to make events seem to last longer than they logically could, for the sake of stressing their importance.

There are several examples of this trick: let us consider three in particular. The first entails the movements of the soldiers. Several times we see them move, then cut to something else. But when we come back to them (as, for example, in shot 86) they

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are precisely where we left them; not the smallest fraction of a second has passed. Eisenstein wants us to dwell on the methodical, unhurried, and thus utterly inhuman character of their military action.

A second example is the sequence of the death of the delicate young mother in black, which is made excruciating by the way it is dwelt upon. Though she appears in relatively few shots, she seems to be on the screen forever: this effect is brought about by a partial *overlapping* of her movements. Consider shots 155 and those following: first we see her at a medium distance looking fearfully up at the troops. Then, in a close-up, she bites her lip in fear and indecision. Another close-up shows her hand on the carriage, as if to protect the baby. Then a medium shot in which, bending, she tries to protect the carriage with her body. Then a close-up of her face, her mouth wide with terror. Boots descend and rifles shoot, and in another close-up her face alone registers the impact of her death-wound as her head reels backward in agony. It is not so much the length of these shots that makes them so shockingly effective as the fact that they often present various perspectives on the same action or repeat an action, and are hence overlapping in time. Further, they are interspersed with shots of the growing peril of the baby carriage — which becomes *another* source of our concern. Eisenstein doesn't allow us to react merely to the plight of the mother; even while we are agonizing with her, wondering where and how badly she was hit, we are beginning to grow apprehensive about the teetering baby buggy wheels. In shot 163 her head sways back into the frame but her eyes are beginning to glaze. The next shot is an extreme close-up of her white-gloved hands clutching her stomach, ironically encircled by a fancy belt. Then a shot of Cossacks slaughtering people at the bottom of the steps; then back to a close-up of the belt, but now the white gloves have blood on them; then a brief shot of her torso sinking downward; then her face, in close-up again, eyes glazed and closing. In the next shot, the torso in medium shot *again* sinks downward and forward, and this time her eyes are *open*. But the overlap must be intentional, to heighten the emotion. Another shot of the teetering carriage wheels appears to keep up the suspense;

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then another wave of soldiers moving down; and then for the *third* time a medium shot of the mother *still* sinking downwards and sideways, her left arm first extended to break her fall, then pitching backwards, bumping into the precariously balanced baby carriage, which immediately begins to roll. The mother's death has taken only a minute or so of screen time, but so cleverly has it been mounted and overlapped that it seems like an unendurable eternity to us.

As a final example, consider the much shorter but equally effective sequence of the blinding of the woman in pince-nez. It is composed of five shots totalling only 85 frames, or roughly, five seconds of viewing time; yet the sequence is equally unforgettable. The climactic position of the sequence and the content, of course, are very powerful, that of a young and vigorous officer slashing open, with his sabre, the eye of a gentle, noble-looking, obviously intellectual woman — a woman who has come to represent the only voice of reason left in this holocaust of violence. Note, too, that it is her *eye* that is wounded — like the young student, she is an observer, a witness, a surrogate of the onlooking world. But unlike him, she has attempted to intercede, and it is not an accident that her capacity to *see* is what is impaired as the punishment meted out by the tyrannic system. But the effect of the content is immeasurably enhanced by the way that Eisenstein has drawn out the incident. True, viewing-time is only five seconds or so; but then it must take *less* than one second to swing a sabre down like that. So the delay, though actually slight, is *proportionately* long — say, five times as long as the "actual" event. And again there seems to be a time overlap. In the first shot (208) we see the officer's face turned to the right of the frame (though his eyes stare right into the camera at the object of his wrath), and his arm raised with the blade behind his head in preparation for a "backhand" slash. The second (209) is taken from an even closer position and so the frame is filled with his savage face and shoulder alone; the face is dead center into the camera, and the sabre is not even visible. The third (210) shows his face in a position turned now to the left and his shoulder down out of the frame, as if the slash has been completed. But the fourth shot (211) amounts to a virtual repetition

of the second (208): the arm is up again and the face is back at dead center. Now, if Eisenstein intended for us to believe that there were in fact two slashes, he picked a very odd way of showing it: he has the officer only *partially* recover his original position, and the whole shot lasts a mere sixteen frames, that is, one second's time. But it seems difficult to believe that he had "missed" on the first swing since the range was so close. And the woman shows the mark of only a single slash. So it would seem that there are only two possibilities: either that there were two victims, one of whom was not shown; or — as I believe more likely — the "second" slash is merely a subjective replay (like that of the fall of the young mother) of the original swing. This can only be a conjecture, but given other evidence of Eisenstein's use of overlapping (see for instance the dish-breaking sequence in the "Men and Maggots" segment), it seems to be a reasonably justifiable one. The point, in any event, is that the horror of this final, climactic atrocity is underlined by exaggerating screen time in relation to "real" time. The sequence provides one more instance of Eisenstein's daring disregard for the normal laws of nature when those laws conflict with his desire to achieve the special effects which are so uniquely his.

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APPENDIX

Notes

1. Eisenstein is said to have gotten the idea for setting the massacre on the steps from an illustration in the French magazine *L'Illustration* (July 15, 1905) of "a smoke-wreathed scene (against the steps) in which a soldier is lashing out at someone with his sword." — Yon Barna, *Eisenstein* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 98). That issue of *L'Illustration* also contained an illustration entitled "Omelchuk's body lying in state . . . on the new dike at Odessa" — doubtless the kernel for the funeral scene.

2. Edited and translated by Jay Leyda and available in paperback in several editions. I have used the Meridian Books Edition (N.Y., 1957).

3. Particularly pp. 116-120 of the essay "Film Language" (1934) in *Film Form*. But Eisenstein's arrangement into fourteen pieces does not correspond to our extract in every particular, and the reader of his essay should not be discouraged by the discrepancy.

4. David Mayer's *Sergei M. Eisenstein's Potemkin* (New York: Grossman, 1972) has proved an invaluable aid in preparing this analysis. He divides the "Odessa Steps" sequence into nine parts: "The Yawls Fly," "The Citizens on the Steps," "A Woman Wearing Pince-Nez," "The Battleship Potemkin," "A Mother and Son," "The Troops Attack," "Cossacks," "The Baby Carriage," and "The Generals' Headquarters."

Recommended Readings

In addition to the books by Eisenstein, Barna and Mayer cited above, the following may be consulted:

Sergei Eisenstein, *Notebooks of a Film Director* (Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1948 and republished London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1959)

Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Essays,* edited and translated by Jay Leyda (London, Dobson, 1968)

Ivor Montagu, *With Eisenstein in Hollywood* (N.Y., International Publishers, 1969)

Leon Moussinac, *Sergei Eisenstein: An Investigation into His Films and Philosophy* (N.Y., Crown, 1970)

Vladimir Nizhny, *Lessons with Eisenstein,* translated by Ivor Montagu and Jay Leyda (N.Y., Hill and Wang, 1968 and 1969)

Paul Rotha, Ivor Montagu and John Grierson, *Eisenstein, 1898-1948* (London, Faber and Faber, 1948)

Marie Seton, *Sergei M. Eisenstein* (N.Y., A. A. Wyn, 1952)

Extracts for Comparison

The juxtaposition of the extract from POTEMKIN with the extract in the series from MOTHER vividly portrays the practical results of the two directors' differing theoretical approaches to editing, i.e., Pudovkin's concept of "linkage" between shots versus Eisenstein's concept of "conflict." Despite this basic difference, their techniques are similar in that they both construct their films from a series of short shots as opposed to long takes, the latter style of filmmaking illustrated in the series by extracts from Jean Renoir's CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE and HUMAN BEAST. While the average shot length in POTEMKIN is four seconds, the average shot length in CRIME OF MONSIEUR LANGE is twenty-one seconds, and some of the shots last over a minute. A juxtaposition of the extract from POTEMKIN with either of the two Renoir extracts strikingly illustrates the two contrasting styles.

Both Leni Riefenstahl in the making of TRIUMPH OF THE WILL and Gillo Pontecorvo in THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS were influenced by Eisenstein's POTEMKIN. The juxtaposition of the extract from POTEMKIN with extracts from either of the above films provides a framework in which to discuss the traces of influence.