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Battleship Potemkin

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SERGEI EISENSTEIN: "POTEMKIN" (Feature)

Producer:

Jacob Bliokh

Director:

Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein

Associate Director:

Grigori V. Alexandrov

Assistants:

A. Antonov, Mikhail Gomorov, A. Levshin, Maxim Straukh

Cinematographer:

Eduard Tisso

Production Organization:

First Studio, Goskino, Moscow

Scenario (Original):

Nina Agadzhanova-Shutko (originally titled "1905")

Release date:

1925

Running Time:

81 Minutes

Cast:

A. Antonov (Vakulinchuk, the martyred sailor); Grigori Alexandrov (Chief Officer Giliarovsky); Vladimir Barsky (Captain Golikov)

Also: Sailors of Red Navy, citizens of Odessa, members of Proletcult Theater

STORY:

1. MEN AND MAGGOTS: It is night, and sailors are sleeping in their hammocks. A petty

officer strikes one of the men. In the morning, the sailors refuse mess call after seeing the meat for mid-day stew swarming with maggots. Group shots are contrasted with individual shots of officers.

2. DRAMA ON THE DECK: The captain orders the entire crew on deck, and threatens to shoot those who refuse to eat. A tarpaulin is thrown over the recalcitrant ones, and a squad of Marines is formed into a firing squad. Upon an appeal from a sailor, the marines refuse to shoot, and a revolt breaks out, resulting in officers being thrown overboard, and the sailors take over the Potemkin. The body of a dead sailor, Vakulinchuk is taken ashore, to lie in state at the end of the harbor mole.

3. AN APPEAL FROM THE DEAD: With the dawn, the people of Odessa come to the improvised bier to pay homage, first individually, then in trickles, then in massive streams. Among the masses of people individual close-ups of faces and clenched fists are seen. Aboard the Potemkin, the red flag is raised.

4. THE ODESSA STEPS: A veritable fleet of craft of all descriptions stream out to the Potemkin loaded with provisions of all kinds for the sailors. Joy prevails on the battleship and in the small craft.... "SUDDENLY", the people are seen hurrying down the steps, harried from above by the lines of White Guards with bayoneted rifles. As if on parade, they march down the steps in formation, pausing only to fire into the people below them. Among the scenes of terror, individual glimpses flash out of: a mother picks up her dead child, and carries him upward toward the White Guards, only to be shot down in turn... a woman pleads with the Guards for mercy, and her glasses are shattered on her face... a woman is shot in the stomach, and falling, she releases her baby's carriage, which careens down the steps to the horror of the onlookers.

The Potemkin opens fire on military headquarters, and a stone lion leaps from sleep in startled rage. The people are saved.

5. ONE AGAINST ALL: Night has fallen, and the exhausted sailors sleep. With the morning a report comes: "The fleet is approaching". The mutineer's committee decides to sail to meet it, and the suspense starts building. As the fleet appears in the distance, the Potemkin loads guns, and signals "Comrades, come join us!"... no reply. The battleship trains her guns, signals again, with her red flag flying in the breeze. Then, the affirmative from all sides. Crews line the deck and cheer as the Potemkin steams, unassailed, through the hostile fleet.

Comment:

If ever there were a more famous film, more universally recognized by critics as a film classic, it would be very difficult to find. Almost immediately upon its release,

Potemkin found itself the center of a storm of controversy which has raged almost unabated ever since. On its first showing in Germany, it provoked the same sort of reactions provoked by other revolutionary works such as at the premieres of Duvall's UN CHIEN ANDALOU and Stravinsky's SACRE DU PRINTEMPS, namely riots.

Without careful analysis, it is perhaps difficult to see what the cause of the impact may be, as on the surface, the story would seem to be a very straightforward one, that of the events aboard ship and ashore during a day in Odessa harbor. However, if any one word may be used to explain the cause of the impact, it is shock.

In every part of the film, periods of calm serve as preludes to forthcoming events of violence, much in the way that a master composer of music plays upon audience emotions with successive loud and soft, fast and slow passages for maximum effect. In the opening moments of the film, audience sympathy is immediately focussed on the side of the sailors, whose peaceful sleep is brutally shattered by the officer. Extreme closeups of the maggoty meat further fill the onlooker with antipathy to the officers who wish to force the men to eat it.

In the words of Eisenstein himself, the entire film is a work of propaganda. The young Soviet regime early realized the potential of the film medium to get across to a far-flung, mostly illiterate population its viewpoint, and to this end put together a film production unit as almost its first order of business. Because of the universality of the visual picture, in contrast to the written or spoken word, the Russians rightly felt that films could exert influence in their favor, not only domestically, but internationally as well. Subsequent events proved them correct, as POTEMKIN is shown and admired to the present day.

Sergei Eisenstein started his career as a painter, who designed sets for stage productions. It is conceivable that this early ability to visualize masses and shapes are the factors which have given all his films the aspects of paintings boldly flung upon the greatest canvasses of all, the screens of the world's cinemas. From the first, he was to pioneer the use of non-professional actors, even in major roles. POTEMKIN has no "hero" as such, unless the entire population of the ship and the town may be considered to be a collective hero. We have here an idealization of decentralized power (the mob) at a time when it suited the Soviet leaders to emphasize the "dictatorship of the proletariat". Authenticity was a fetish...the battleship, Odessa, the sea, the staircase, etc., all combine to give the film a believability impossible to obtain with the most cleverly contrived sets. Characters were chosen for their parts because their faces and mannerisms insisted that they were the ones to use for the parts, regardless of actual backgrounds and training. Details of the film grew out of the locations. For example, the scene of the White Guards marching down the steps was suggested by the presence of the steps themselves, although the scene was probably not necessarily historically accurate. The scene however, attains such impact, such immense reality in context, that it ranks among the few most memorable scenes of all time in motion pictures.

If Eisenstein was not the discoverer of the use of montage in films (another holdover from his painting background), he was certainly the one who brought it to prominence. He discovered that by a judicious application of parts, the whole could be made to be greater than the sum of its parts. From a thorough and minute study of the works of Griffith, Eisenstein discovered that every facet of film technique: close-ups, cross-cutting, slow-ups, speed-ups, details, changes of viewpoints and angles, all could be used in a wide variety of juxtapositions. From his experiences with these techniques, he found that certain ones had more impact upon viewers than others. He could make time rush by or slow down at will. He could give a viewer a predetermined "viewpoint" emotionally by subjecting him to the proper visual stimulants, when performed in the appropriate sequences, and in the most persuasive rhythmical patterns. This then, is the essence of "montage". In POTEMKIN, all these elements of montage were deliberately gathered with one purpose in view...to shock the audience with a "montage of shocks" (anger, pity, disgust, shame) into a rebellion against the cause of the shocks, in this case the bestial officers on the ship and the charging guards on the steps, representing the oppression of mass "hero" by the brutal and callous pre-Soviet regime. The riots attending the showing in Berlin and elsewhere, attested to the success of Eisenstein's efforts.