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POTEMKIN (1925)

One word: SUDDENLY. And then it all changes. With that "The Odessa Steps" sequence begins and cinema was never to be the same.

Originally, POTEMKIN was to be a single episode in a five-part epic on the year 1905. The forty-odd shots planned for the revolt on the Battleship Potemkin turned into the most influential movie in film history. It was hardly a joke that the ship used in the filming, a sister ship to the historical Potemkin, was filled with live mines. Even during the film of the "Odessa Steps," a French journalist thought another civil war was taking place.

Eisenstein's major objectives in POTEMKIN were to portray the Masses as the Hero, just as masses of people, more than individual persons, influence history, and to use rapid montage in such a way as to produce automatic social responses in the spectator's mind. The montage technique was accomplished through the first significant use of dollies and cameras strapped to actors' bodies. For reasons of time and efficiency, Eisenstein set up several cameras at different angles to shoot simulatenously.

In spite of the startlingly beautiful photography, the importance of POTEMKIN lay in the cutting. There, Eisenstein even employed the titles, always a source of irritation to both director and audience, in a new, meaningful way. The titles, many of which are cut from present Russian versions, act as part of the dialectics of montage.

The film, which seems documentary enough in its sheer vastness, in fact was completely historically "revised" by Eisenstein, and was cut into five reel/acts for dramatic rhythm and because Soviet agita-groups were usually only equipped with a single projector.

Another idea Eisenstein introduced was to use the discrepancy between real time and cinema time for dramatic intensity. The entire Odessa Steps sequence is an example of this.

Except for the montage, the Odessa Steps sequence is most noted for the way Eisenstein expressed its pathos through a kind of geometric rhythm. The measured steps of the descending Cossacks suggests mechanical movements of Death itself, as the crowd, confused and defenseless, runs in all directions in varying movements and speeds. Then the two most pathetic moments occur one after the other -- as the cossacks continue to march toward the crowd, shooting volleys of bullets, a woman tries to halt the panic-stricken people by crying, "Let us appeal to them." After another volley of shots, a woman holding a perambulator is hit; suddenly the buggy is released and spins head-long down the stairs. An intellectual (the audience) sees this as his fright and hate turned to rebellion. At this point the revolutionary "Potemkin" (with a red painted flag in the original version) opens fire on the police station.

Curiously, POTEMKIN was not an immediate success when released, and Eisenstein's detractors claimed his theory of montage resulted from a shortage of film footage. When the film was shown in Berlin, the Reichstag anxiously debated about the size of the Russian fleet. Actually Eisenstein had merely added stock footage of the British fleet in the Black Sea. In England POTEMKIN was banned because it was thought to "induce harmful dreams in children." It was heavily censored throughout Western Europe because of its possible revolutionary effect.

Program notes by Aimee Su and Mel Gordon