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The Battleship Potemkin

THE SOVIET FILM

(September 25 - November 11, 1969)

Sunday, September 28, 1969 (2:00 and 5:30)

POTEMKIN (BRONENOSETS 'POTYOMKIN') * 1925. Produced by the First Studio of Goskino, Moscow. Directed by Sergei Eisenstein. Scenario by Sergei Eisenstein, from an outline by Nina Agadzhanova-Shutko. Photography by Eduard Tisse. Assistant director: Grigori Alexandrov.

CAST: A. Antonov.....Vakulinchuk
Grigori Alexandrov...Chief Officer Giliarovsky
Vladimir Barsky....Captain Golikov

and

Sailors of the Red Navy, citizens of Odessa, members of the Proletcult Theatre.

2:00 ENGLISH TITLED VERSION
5:30 NO ENGLISH TITLES

Ca. 75 minutes.
Ca. 75 minutes.

POTEMKIN is theatrically distributed in the U.S.A. by Janus Films; non-theatrical distribution by Brandon Films, and The Department of Film of The Museum of Modern Art.

* Silent film, piano accompaniment by Charles Hofmann.

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POTEMKIN (also known as THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN; THE ARMORED CRUISER POTEMKIN)

As handed to Eisenstein by Goskino, the scenario of '1905' covered the Revolution from the Russo-Japanese War to the armed uprising in Moscow. Before going south to film the several agrarian and naval episodes, Eisenstein and his staff staged episodes of a demonstration in St. Petersburg and incidents of the general strike.

POTEMKIN continued

Odessa was to be the setting for a strike of dock-workers and the demonstration after the mutiny of the battleship Potemkin. In the script, forty-two shots were to cover the Potemkin mutiny and consequent events. But Eisenstein's first sight of the great flight of marble steps leading from the center of Odessa to the docks determined the decision to use these as the stage for the Cossack attack on the populace, and out of this decision grew another -- to make the Potemkin mutiny the central episode of '1905'. In the final cutting, all material but POTEMKIN was dropped, and thus evolved what has been called the most perfect and concise example of film structure.

Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein was born in 1898, son of a well-to-do ship-builder. Educated in engineering and architecture, during the Civil War he worked on the construction of military fortifications, but at the close of the war Eisenstein chose to become a professional artist, in training for which he studied the arts and language of Japan at the Eastern Academy. His interest in the theatre dated from before the Revolution, and now he took a job as designer at Foregger's experimental theatre and later at the Proletcult Theatre where he began to direct as well.

Eisenstein was also developing his own theoretical approach to problems of art. The psychological aspect of artistic creation was a dominant one after the profound impression made upon him by Freud's essay on Leonardo da Vinci. As he said later, Marx and Lenin furnished the philosophical base for his psychological researches which were drawn from Pavlov (reflexology) and Freud (psychoanalysis). Eisenstein's theory of a performance as a series of 'shock-attractions' was expanded out of the theatre into cinema, where it more logically belonged. The faults of his first film STRIKE were the faults of experiment, but its new methods made it a turning point in the Soviet cinema, 'the first proletarian film' in form as well as subject, and the first film to depict collective action as its story line.

To film STRIKE, Eisenstein, as artist-logician, needed an artist-craftsman for collaborator, and when he found Eduard Tisse, schooled in the war-newsreel, each was fortunate. Not the least of the accomplishments of POTEMKIN can be ascribed to the understanding with which they worked together. Aside from the almost legendary efficiency with which POTEMKIN was filmed (all shots of the funeral procession completed in one morning, the whole drama on the quarterdeck filmed in one day, etc.), Tisse's ingenuity was ideal for Eisenstein's invention. The slaughter on the steps needed filming techniques as original as the new principles. A camera-trolley was built the length of the steps. Several cameras were deployed simultaneously. A hand-camera was strapped to the waist of a running, jumping, falling assistant. Many realities put on film for the first time, such as the scene in an actual ship's engine-room, have long since been absorbed by documentary techniques.

Although this is the classic example of a film without individual characters, it was introduced to this country as 'played by Moscow Art Theatre actors'! There are a few actors in the film, mostly assistant directors from Proletcult, but the Moscow Art Theatre can hardly claim the gardener who played the role of the priest or the furnace-man who was the ship's doctor, not to mention the dozens of vivid 'bit' roles, played more by Eisenstein's compositions and Tisse's camera than by the sailors and citizens whose faces we see.

POTEMKIN continued

The importance of cutting and editing as a creative function is perhaps the most widely recognized revelation of POTEMKIN. The sensations of fear on the quarter-deck, panic and machine-like murder on the steps, tension on the waiting boat could only have been communicated by this revolutionary cutting method. What must be remembered is that the total construction and frame-composition of POTEMKIN were gauged and carried out with these particular juxtapositions in mind. The shots taken on the steps were filmed looking forward to the cutting table as much as were the famous shots at the end of the fourth reel -- three different marble lions which become one single rearing lion in the editor's hands and the audience's eyes. Heretofore, the movement of a film had depended largely on the action within the sequence of shots. Eisenstein now created a new film-rhythm by adding to the content the sharply varying lengths and free associations of the shots, a technique growing directly from his interest in psychological research. Besides the behavioristic stimulation made possible by this method, a new range of rhythmic patterns and visual dynamics was opened by POTEMKIN.....

POTEMKIN often sacrificed the lesser historical facts for the dramatic essence of history. In actual fact, other ships did join the Potemkin in mutiny, and the Cossack slaughter took place quite differently, but when the fact touched the real drama, it became an integral part of the film. For example, the spontaneity of the uprising depended on the composition of the crew. Half of the crew consisted of raw hands enrolled during the previous year from villages where the agrarian movement had not commenced. It was a few old hands who took leadership when the revolutionary moment spontaneously broke.

-- Jay Leyda (Museum of Modern Art Film Notes)

The name Potemkin enjoys a triple fame after the world success of Eisenstein's film. Catherine the Great whom Voltaire appropriately styled "the Semiramis of the North," became notorious for the freedom she showed in making or unmaking lovers and ministers of state. Among the most capable of these favorites was Potemkin, a man known principally for building up the Tartar region incorporated into Russia. During the Seven Years' War, Potemkin worked hard for a British alliance. Indeed it was in part his capacity as a leader and diplomat that led to the sobriquet "the Great" accorded to his sovereign. She rewarded her devoted statesman by marrying him secretly in 1774.

-- C.J. McNaspy, S. J. (Loyola Film Series 1959/60)

....My first work in the sound-film was...in 1926. And in connection with (again!) POTESKIN.

POTESKIN -- at least in its foreign circulation -- had a special score written for it. The composer was Edmund Meisel, who wrote music for other silent films, both before and after his work on POTESKIN. But there was nothing particularly extraordinary in this fact -- for the history of silent films is sprinkled with such special scores. Music had even been used within the filming of certain films -- for example, Ludwig Berger had filmed EIN WALZERTRAUM to the music of Strauss.

Less usual, perhaps, was the way the POTESKIN score was composed. It was written very much as we work today on a sound-track. Or rather, as we should always work, with creative friendship and friendly creative collaboration between composer and director.

With Meisel this took place in spite of the short time for composition that he was given, and the brevity of my visit to Berlin in 1926 for this purpose. He agreed at once to forego the purely illustrative function common to musical accompaniments at that time (and not only at that time!) and stress certain "effects," particularly in the "music of machines" in the last reel.

This was my only categorical demand: not only to reject customary melodiousness for this sequence of "Meeting the Squadron," relying entirely on a rhythmic beating of percussion, but also to give substance to this demand by establishing in the music as well as in the film at the decisive place a "throwing over" into a "new quality" in the sound structure.

So it was POTESKIN at this point that stylistically broke away from the limits of the "silent film with musical illustrations" into a new sphere -- into sound-film, where true models of this art-form live in a unity of fused musical and visual images, composing the work with a united audio-visual image. It is exactly owing to these elements, anticipating the potentialities of an inner substance for composition in the sound-film, that the sequence of "Meeting the Squadron" (which along with the "Odessa steps" had such "crushing" effect abroad) deserves a leading place in the anthology of cinema.

It is especially interesting for me that the general construction of POTESKIN (a leap into a new quality) maintained in the music everything that pierced the pathetic construction -- the condition of a qualitative leap which we have seen in POTESKIN was inseparable from the organism of the theme.

Here the "silent" POTESKIN teaches the sound-film a lesson, emphasizing again and again the position that for an organic work a single law of construction must penetrate it decisively, in all its "significances," and in order to be not "off-stage," but stand as an organic part of the film, the music must also be governed not only by the same images and themes, but as well by the same basic laws and principles of construction that govern the work as a whole.

To a considerable degree I was able to accomplish this in the sound-film proper -- in my first sound-film, ALEXANDER NEVSKY. It was possible to accomplish this, thanks to the collaboration with such a wonderful and brilliant artist as Sergei Prokofiev.

-- Sergei Eisenstein, Film Form.

I first met Sergei Eisenstein at the house of the writer Tretyakov. Since Mayakovsky's noisy futurism is no longer an important influence, Tretyakov has become the literary leader of the group called the LEF, which includes Meyerhold, the most important figure in the Russian theatre, Rodchenko, the photographer, Stephanova, stage designer and Eisenstein himself. The LEF is aggressively utilitarian, materialistic, constructive. They despise the word "aesthetic"; they ignore (theoretically) artistic intuition. Tretyakov, who was once a poet, now refers to himself proudly as a journalist. His nearly finished life-history of a Chinese boy he calls a bio-interview. Meyerhold enjoys his function of propagandist extraordinary. Stephanova and Rodchenko were both painters, but they have deserted that "useless" art to work on constructivist stage-settings, photomontage, the designing of posters, books, and furniture.

In a similar spirit Eisenstein refers to himself in a statement published last year in the Nation: "I am a civil engineer and mathematician by training. I approach the making of a motion picture in much the same way that I would the equipment of a poultry farm or the installation of a water system." This ostentatious utilitarianism loses some force when one learns in conversation that his engineering was architectural, that he was also an amateur painter and during the war served as a staff artist.

Eisenstein has also impressed interviewers by his references to Marx, Pavlov, and Freud. The social and psychological principles which we connect with these names undoubtedly have much to do with his films, but they have more, possibly, to do with the criticism of them. It is true that he concerns himself with class warfare and that he has eliminated the individual as hero by the substitution of the mass in an orthodox Marxian manner. Yet POTEMKIN was criticised by no less an authority than Erwin Piscator, the conspicuous Berlin follower of Meyerhold, because Eisenstein failed to show clearly the connection between the revolt aboard the cruiser and the great social significance of the 1905 revolution in St. Petersburg, thus weakening his production as propaganda. From a Marxian point of view Piscator's criticism is justified, but artistically an elaborate presentation of the social and political issues involved would have greatly diluted the concentration and force of the dramatic issue.

-- Alfred H. Barr, Jr., The Arts, Vol 13-14, pp. 317-18, 1928.