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SOVIET CINEMA: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Thursday, October 6 - 8pm

(BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN) (BRONENOSETS POTEMKIN)

CAST: A. Antonov, Vladimir Barski, Grigori Alexandrov, Repnikova, Marusov, I. Bobrov, A. Fait

CREDITS: Producer: Jacob Bliokh; Director: Sergei M. Eisenstein; Story & first treatment: N. Agadjanovoi; Photography: Eduard Tisse; Assistant director: Grigori Alexandrov; Art director: Vasili Rakhals; Editor: Sergei M. Eisenstein 1st Goskino

Released in 1925

Running Time: 70 minutes

The following is an excerpt from Dictionary of Films by Georges Sadoul:

On 19 March, 1925, the commission responsible for the 20th Anniversary celebrations of the 1905 Revolution assigned most of the films to seven or eight directors. Among these was the 27-year-old S.M. Eisenstein. He soon prepared a script, THE YEAR OF 1905, in collaboration with Nina Agadzhanova-Shutko, a militant who had been involved in the revolutionary period. The manuscript was hundreds of pages long and would have recounted the complete history of that year from January to December, including the dozens of events that took place in 20 or 30 towns. The production began in Leningrad in July but was interrupted by bad weather. After filming several scenes in Baku, Eisenstein and his collaborators went to Odessa. There, he developed the idea of reducing THE YEAR OF 1905 to a single one of its episodes: the "Potemkin" mutiny, an event which took up only one page in the original script. Using this simple outline, the film was made in six or seven weeks (end of September to the beginning of November 1925). Several sequences and details of the action were improvised during shooting. The film was barely finished by the morning of its official premiere, December 21, 1925, at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. It was enthusiastically received at the premiere, as it was in Berlin, London, Amsterdam, and New York.

It was given its premiere in Paris by the Cine Club of France at l'Artistic, rue de Douai. It was acclaimed by many important directors and by the surrealists. But the film was banned (as it was in many countries) by the French censor until 1952.

Eisenstein's refusal to use an individual hero was derived from theories of the Proletkult Theatre. In the two revolutionary groups (the battleship and the town itself) individuals are reduced to recognizable types, each appearing only briefly. Eisenstein laid great stress on the meaning of small details and objects, such as the surgeon's prince-nez, which reflects his whole character: "The dangling eyeglasses were made to symbolize their owner helplessly struggling among the seaweed after the sailors had thrown him overboard" (Eisenstein). In one of his theoretical articles, Eisenstein compared the close-up with the figure of speech known as the synecdoche: "When can a particular episode take the place of the whole logically and completely? Only in cases where the detail, the part, the particular episode is typical. In other words, when it reflects the whole like a piece of broken mirror...Maggoty meat became a symbol of the inhuman conditions in which the whole mass of the exploited classes...lived. The quarterdeck scene is equally characteristic of the cruelty with which tsarism crushed every attempt at protest...The refusal to shoot at the crowd, the masses, the people, at their own brothers was extremely typical of the time...The mourning over the body of Vakulinchuk was one of the countless instances when the funerals of revolutionary heroes became impassioned demonstrations...The scene on the Odessa steps in a synthesis of the slaughter in Baku and the January 9 Massacre (and) the Black Hundred pogromists

who set fire to a theater in Tomsk where a meeting was in progress. And the finale of the film with the battleship sailing majestically past the Admiral's squadron...is symbolic of the 1905 Revolution as a whole...The "Potemkin" was no more than an individual episode, but one reflecting the greatness of the whole" (Eisenstein, Notes of a Film Director).

Eisenstein invented at least two episodes that became "history" for many "historians"; the tarpaulin scene, and the events on the steps, which actually took place elsewhere in Odessa.

"The Odessa Steps" sequence is the high point of the film and is a sequence Eisenstein analyzed in detail in a 1939 article: "Organic Unity and Pathos in the Composition of Potemkin."

The international success of the film was doubtless due to the unrivaled perfection of its form, but it was also due to its humanitarianism and to the enthusiasm that impregnated its revolutionary subject. With POTEMKIN the Soviet Cinema burst on to the international film scene and the effects of its breakthrough have not yet disappeared.

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