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CHATHAM FILM SOCIETY PROGRAM NOTES

Potemkin

November 20, 1964

KINO-PRAVDA, 1922 newsreels.
KOMBRIG IVANOV, excerpt from the 1923 film directed by Alexander Razumni.
REBELLION, MUTINY IN ODESSA, a 1906 studio re-enactment of the Potemkin mutiny, filmed in Paris.

POTEMKIN (THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN). Produced by Goskino, Moscow, in 1925. Filmed in the city and port of Odessa and in Sevastopol. Premiere in the Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow, January 1, 1926. Length: five reels. Directed by Sergei Eisenstein; scenario by Eisenstein from an outline by Nina Agadzhanova-Shutko; assistant director: Gregori Alexandrov; photographed by Edward Tisse. Cast: sailors of the Black Sea Fleet of the Red Navy, citizens of Odessa, members of the Proletkult Theatre, and

Vakulinchuk.....A. Antonov
Chief Officer Giliarovsky.....Gregori Alexandrov
Captain Golikov.....Vladimir Barsky
Petty Officer.....A. Levshin
A sailor.....Mikhail Gomarov

The films of Sergei Eisenstein

STRIKE, 1924
POTEMKIN, 1925
OCTOBER, 1928 (Also called TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD)
OLD AND NEW, 1929 (Also called THE GENERAL LINE)
ALEXANDER NEVSKY, 1938
IVAN THE TERRIBLE: Part I, 1944
IVAN THE TERRIBLE: Part II, 1946

In addition to the above, Eisenstein shot extensive footage for QUE VIVA MEXICO! in the early 1930's. This footage was used by others to make the following films: THUNDER OVER MEXICO, DEATH DAY, EISENSTEIN IN MEXICO, and TIME IN THE SUN.

In 1925, Eisenstein half completed a film called 1905 in which the Potemkin mutiny was one episode; this episode was expanded into the film POTEMKIN.

A completed film, BEZHIN MEADOW, was scrapped by the government as "too formalistic" in the 1930's.

S. E. Eisenstein was born in 1898 and died in 1948. He studied engineering, architecture, and painting, joined the Red Army in 1918, and worked as a theater designer in the early 1920's. He directed his first stage play in 1920 and abandoned the stage for the cinema in 1923. Thereafter, he wrote extensively on the film and taught in a state film school. He spent some time in America during the 1930's under contract to Paramount but completed no film projects in this country.

POTEMKIN

From its first appearances in 1926, POTEMKIN was hailed as a masterpiece by critics throughout Europe and its twenty-seven-year-old director Sergei Eisenstein acclaimed by some as the supreme film artist of the age. Its reputation as one of the great films (and many critics consider it the greatest film) has never been seriously questioned. Numerous revivals, particularly among film societies, attest to its continuing popularity with at least a segment of the film-going public.

All the attention and love showered on POTEMKIN by art theaters and film societies is really difficult to explain. For the truth is that POTEMKIN must often prove as disappointing to the vast majority of viewers in almost any audience as it did to the man at the American premiere who muttered, "But this is just newsreel!" Not that POTEMKIN is overrated; it surely is one of the three or four artistic landmarks in the cinema, but its art is neither obvious (other than on the superficial level of its being one of the most exciting films ever made) nor necessarily compelling. Brilliance is often disconcerting, and POTEMKIN is indeed a brilliant film. Perhaps it is one that at first viewing, or even second and third viewings, can merely be "appreciated" rather than enjoyed.

Among the chief difficulties encountered on a first viewing is the subject matter itself. POTEMKIN is a product of the state-owned industry, a film that Eisenstein was commissioned to make on the unsuccessful 1905 revolutionary uprisings throughout Russia. Thus, in an elementary sense, POTEMKIN is a nationalistic film, and its pre-conceived attitudes are heavily saturated with political overtones. The audience is allowed no ambiguity in emotional responses: sympathy for the oppressed Russians of the lower classes and hatred for the inhumane oppressors, the Czarist authorities and their troops.

Furthermore, the American public is likely to be put off by the absence of a leading figure whose point of view is the center of focus for both our interpretation of events and the proper placement of our sympathies. Lacking this focus, we are apt to wonder about the structural development instead of being swept immediately into the personal predicament of a particular character, as we usually are in a Hollywood movie. The "mass as hero" which we find in typical Russian films by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Dovzhenko, though not completely foreign to American films, is probably well-established in our minds as a characteristic of "social protest" pictures--that is, didactic cinema.[1] Eisenstein's use of the mass as hero is not, of course, artistically inferior to an American director's emphasis on the individual as hero; it is simply different, but it requires some reorientation on the spectators' part.

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[1] In the 1930's the official Soviet policy changed. The mass as hero was replaced by the individual hero from Russian history, resulting in Eisenstein's later works about Alexander Nevsky and Ivan the Terrible.

The formal innovations of POTEMKIN present less of a problem because they are easily appreciated in spite of being difficult to analyze. In this film Eisenstein develops many of his theories of montage, and POTEMKIN today is considered the basic "sourcebook" on putting together a film.[2] An understanding of what Eisenstein was attempting is obviously not necessary to an understanding of what the film is about--clearly, the director had in mind an illiterate peasant audience with little sophistication about the grammar of the cinema, and he successfully conveyed to them what he had to say. Nevertheless, since POTEMKIN is the essential text of film editing, the spectator who is alert to the technique employed is likely to learn a great deal about the art of the cinema.

As his basic principle, Eisenstein holds that "the shot is a montage cell (or molecule)."[3] The vehemence of his repeated assertions that the shot is a montage cell reflects his running disagreement with another leading director and theoretician, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Eisenstein's great contemporary. Pudovkin and others supported the concept of montage as a means of presenting an idea by a series of visual images, the rhythm--and rhythm is essential to film form--being determined by the length of the shots. Thus, to Pudovkin each shot is an element of the montage. Eisenstein, scornfully dismissing this theory (which of course has obviously been accepted as the editing principle in all ordinary movies) as "metric montage," which he calls a "completely false concept!" insists on the definition stated above: the shot is a montage cell.

An illustration of what Eisenstein is getting at is the brief three-shot sequence that occurs during the firing on the Odessa steps. To symbolize the idea of protest against czarist bloodshed on the Odessa steps, Eisenstein photographed three separate marble statues of lions, one sleeping, one awakening, and one rising. At the sound of the Battleship Potemkin's guns, these three shots are flashed in quick succession, giving the appearance of a single statue of a lion rising up against the czarist repression. Eisenstein has written:

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[2]"montage" as used in Europe means the putting together of all the separate shots taken in the process of filming. But because the virtuosity of certain sequences in POTEMKIN (particularly the six-minute Odessa steps sequence) dazzled Hollywood producers, the word "montage" in America has come to mean not editing in general but a specific type of editing which occurs in only a few sequences of most Hollywood films: the short, very rapid cutting or dissolving from shot to shot in order to show mental states or such things as a monster destroying a city or the rise to stardom of a singer (e. g., quick interspersed shots of theater marquees, headlines from Variety, mobs waiting at stage entrances, etc.) It is important to dissociate always Eisenstein's European use of "montage" from the more common use of the word in this country, even though our use of the word derives from POTEMKIN.

[3]All quotations are taken from the excellent collection of selected essays of Eisenstein, Film Form and The Film Sense, edited and translated by Jay Leyda (Meridian Books, 1957).

Placed next to each other, two photographed immobile images result in the appearance of movement. Is this accurate? Pictorially--and phraseologically, yes.

But mechanically, it is not. For, in fact, each sequential element is perceived not next to the other, but on top of the other. For the idea (or sensation) of movement arises from the process of superimposing on the retained impression of the object's first position, a newly visible further position of the object. This is, by the way, the reason for the phenomenon of spatial depth, in the optical superimposition of two planes in stereoscopy. From the superimposition of two elements of the same dimension always arises a new, higher dimension.

The point is that shot A followed by shot B occurs only on the film celluloid itself. In the mind of the spectator, shot A is not merely followed by shot B, nor do A and B together prodcue A + B or AB. What is produced is X, an entirely new element, the explanation of which lies in physiology (the brain's retention of visual images) and psychology (including the spectator's emotional response to the appearance of shot A and shot B). The collision of shots A and B producing the new element X is basic to Eisenstein's art: images in conflict. But since the single shot is a montage cell, conflict also occurs within the single shot itself. Eisenstein lists nine such possibilities for the silent film:

1. conflict of linear directions
2. conflict of planes
3. conflict of volumes
4. spatial conflict
5. light conflict
6. tempo conflict
7. conflict between matter and viewpoint (i. e., through unusual camera angle)
8. conflict between matter and its spatial nature (i. e., through lens distortion)
9. conflict between an event and its temporal nature (for example, slow motion)

The shots, the montage cells, are not truly meaningful individually, even though each contains elements of conflict. It is only when the cells are assembled in an organic relationship that meaning becomes possible. Each shot, however, achieves some emotional association in the mind of the viewer. Taking as an example the problem of conveying murder on the screen, Eisenstein refers to a typical eight-shot montage sequence:

> 1. A hand lifts a knife; 2. the eyes of the victim open suddenly; 3. his hands clutch the table; 4. the knife is jerked up; 5. the eyes blink involuntarily; 6. blood gushes; 7. a mouth shrieks; 8. something

> drips onto a shoe . . . and similar film cliches. Nevertheless, in regard to the action as a whole, each fragment-piece is almost abstract. The more differentiated they are the more abstract they become, provoking no more than a certain association.

From his basic ideas about dynamic editing, Eisenstein went on in POTEMKIN and later films to evolve methods of editing the hundreds of individual shots that go into any film along the lines of his new principles such as the principle of "shock attractions": e. g., a baby carriage rolling down the Odessa steps followed by the horrified look of a man turning his head to watch the carriage. In making the sequence, of course, the two shots were not filmed at the same time--all that was done was, at the time of editing, to juxtapose a shot of a child's carriage with a subsequent shot of a man turning his head. The associations of the carriage's movement and the man's head moving and of the catastrophe of the event and the horror expressed in the man's face are determined by the director's knowledge of audience psychology. There are other more complicated methods of cutting employed by Eisenstein such as rhythmic montage, tonal montage, overtonal montage, and intellectual montage, and all rely on a knowledge of the dynamic possibilities inherent in the montage cells.

The idea governing the organization of the film was simply that all the parts should be united in a formal manner and each bear on the central theme of brotherhood and rebellion; no padding and no interesting irrelevancies were allowed. The structure of the whole is developed from the movement of the theme, and the structure of each part is likewise determined by the movement of the theme within the part. The following analysis of the formal arrangement of POTEMKIN is based on Eisenstein's discussion of the film's organization.

Eisenstein divided the film into five parts so that its form would be comparable to that of a stage tragedy; although the content of the film suggests an epic or chronicle form, Eisenstein intended to stress the tragic quality of the events by selecting and arranging the facts in order that "they answer the demands set by classical tragedy: a third act quite distinct from the second, a fifth from the first, and so on." Each of the five parts is then divided into two almost equal segments (A and B in the outline that follows). These segments are of conflicting quality in both mood and rhthym. "Not merely contrasting but opposite, for each time it images exactly that theme from the opposite point of view, along with the theme that inevitably grows from it."

The divisions of POTEMKIN can easily be seen in an outline of the film's structure:

Part I--Men and Maggots

A) Exposition of action. Milieu of battleship.

Transition scene--maggoty meat.

B) Discontent ferments among the sailors.

Part II--Drama on the Quarterdeck

A) "All hands on deck!" Refusal of the wormy soup.

Transition scene with tarpaulin.
("Caesura shot"--motionless muzzles of rifles. The caesura is the moment of pause before the acceleration of the filmic rhythm.)

B) "Brothers!" Refusal to fire. Mutiny. Revenge on the officers.

Part III--Appeal from the Dead

(Part III is the "caesura" for the entire film. Eisenstein says that "the stormy action of the beginning is completely halted in order to take a fresh start for the second half of the film.")

A) Mist. Body of Vakulinchuk brought into Odessa port.

Transition scene of mourning for Vakulinchuk.
(Caesura shot--clenched fists.)

B) Demonstration. Raising the red flag.

Part IV--The Odessa Steps

A) Fraternization of shore and battleship. Yawls with provisions.

Transition scene of citizens smiling at the sailors on the battleship.
(Caesura shot--the title "SUDDENLY.")

B) Shooting on the Odessa steps. The battleship fires on the "generals' staff."

Part V--Meeting the Squadron

A) Night of expectation. Meeting the squadron.

Transition scene of engines.
(Caesura shot--"Brothers!")

B) The squadron refuses to fire. The battleship passes victoriously through the squadron.

POTEMKIN was certainly not produced in the purely synthetic manner of building sequences by figuring out in advance every montage cell and the method of uniting each one so that its pictorial and thematic content is relevant to everything that comes before and after. We know a good deal about Eisenstein's improvisatory procedures; we know, in fact, that the idea for the steps sequence did not occur to the director until he had already arrived on location in Odessa and discovered the famous steps.[4] While Eisenstein's later essays do give us the impression that POTEMKIN was completely thought out before it was filmed, we can assume that the editing of the film was as much a process of analysis (examining what he actually had gotten down on film, selecting from alternative montage groupings, and experimenting with contrasts among shots) as it was synthesis.

Of course, the orderliness and logic of the film by themselves do not explain the emotional impact of POTEMKIN. Balance and antithesis alone never insure quality. Nothing, for example, has been said here of the film's realism and humanism. Nevertheless, the film's importance for the history of cinema lies in its director's bringing intellectual and artistic order to bear on the depiction of emotional and chaotic events. More than two thousand years before, Aeschylus had shown how this could be done in the drama and Homer how it could be done in epic poetry. During what was practically the "infant stage" in the development of cinematic art, Eisenstein brought to the attention of the public the fact that the film too could be a medium for intellectual as well as artistic expression. D. W. Griffith, around 1914, had evolved the general principles of filmic narrative. The great German directors of the 1920's had realized the possibilities of psychological cinema and the depiction of inner reality. And in 1925, Eisenstein in POTEMKIN advanced film technique immeasurably by demonstrating through his use of montage the potentiality of intellectual cinema.

--Stanley J. Solomon

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[4]Eisenstein has described numerous examples of improvisation in a 1945 article entitled "The Twelve Apostles" published in The Cinema, 1952, edited by Roger Manvell (Penguin Books). E. g., "a furious opponent of our shooting . . . was the watchman of the park of the Alupka palace. His shabby boots and baggy trousers almost got into the picture: he stubbornly sat on the head of one of the Alupka lions and refused to let us shoot it, demanding a special permit. . . . Running with the camera from one lion to another, we so befuddled the severe and stupid custodian of order that he finally gave up in despair, and we were able to take close shots of three of the marble beasts. The lions were also a "location find"--on one of our off days, when we went to Alupka for a rest."