

KINO FILES

THE FILM COMPANION



THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN

RICHARD TAYLOR

I.B.TAURIS

Υλικό με προστασία πνευματικών δικαιωμάτων

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sailor. Once more we see his head and shoulders and the slogan, repeated like a leitmotif throughout this part of the film. A hand drops two more coins into the cap. In a medium shot of the tent and the surrounding crowd two women with lace parasols cross the foreground from right to left: apart from them, the crowd at this stage is overwhelmingly composed of working-class men, women and children.

A series of carefully choreographed general shots establishes the scale of the crowd that is assembling. First we see the crowd crossing the front of the frame, while many more approach along the break-water that stretches across the left side and back of the frame into the distance (Mayer's shot 676); then a shot from above (possibly from the masthead of one of the sailing ships) shows the crowd moving across the frame from top right to middle left; next, an overhead shot has the crowd moving downwards from top to bottom middle of the frame; lastly the camera pans upwards tracing the curving course of the break-water out of the frame towards top right (Mayer's shot 680). These changes of angle and the subsequent intercutting of shots of the break-water with views of crowds descending steps, crossing bridges, and streaming endlessly into the distance, all emphasize that the crowd is coming from all directions, echoing and illustrating the earlier title 'Along with the sun, rose the whole city.'

An overhead shot of the tent shows the crowd surrounding it in a swirling pattern. A woman in black harangues the crowd: among them is the woman with the white parasol. Everyone is united in grief and anger. The first woman gesticulates as she speaks: 'We will remember' ... 'For a spoonful of soup!' A young sailor also gesticulates as he reads the appeal to the townspeople from the mutinous crew of the battleship 'Potemkin':

People of Odessa!

Before you lies the body of Grigori Vakulinchuk, a sailor cruelly murdered by the senior officer of the battleship 'Potemkin'.

We will avenge ourselves! Death to the oppressors!

The crew of the battleship 'Potemkin'.

The young sailor finishes his appeal. As the ever-growing crowd files past in the background, we see two elderly women grieving, a peasant woman bends low over Vakulinchuk's corpse as if to kiss his face, another elderly woman is seen crying, while an old gentleman removes his pince-nez, overcome with emotion. Not all pince-nez wearers are

battleship from their officers. Once more the traditional hegemonies are overthrown.

The student harangues the crowd, which is visibly moved. Scenes of the orator are intercut with those of the crowd's reactions. One peasant woman tears off her shawl and twirls it around her head. The next title emphasizes the growing solidarity of the townspeople of Odessa: 'Shoulder to shoulder'. Earlier shots of the crowds advancing towards the harbour are repeated and intercut with titles reflecting revolutionary slogans: 'The land – for us!'; 'Tomorrow – for us!' Still the crowd comes, and the student continues his appeal. A sea of waving fists confirms the effectiveness of his words and a young man tears off his shirt. In response to the agitation a sea of raised fists fills the screen.

The film cuts back, for the first time in Part 3, to the battleship itself. The quarterdeck is seen from above, bisected by the two cannons on the gun-turret. The sailors swarm forward, covering the deck where the confrontation between officers and men took place in Part 2. It is now unequivocally *their* space. We see a head-on shot, followed by a side shot, of the gun-turret, and then the bridge. The mutineers swarm over the whole ship. A closer shot focuses on the bridge and a title announces: 'A delegate from the shore'. In medium close-up a civilian appears among the sailors on the bridge and addresses the crew: 'The enemy has been dealt a decisive blow!' This is the first clearly uttered statement of revolutionary solidarity between the townspeople and the mutineers. A rear view from above shows the civilian delegate gesticulating as he addresses the sailors below him: 'Together with the rising workers of all Russia...' The title is followed by a closer front shot of the civilian speaking and then an overhead shot of the teeming quarterdeck with the sailors looking up at the bridge: 'We will win!' The sailors raise their white caps and cheer, confirming their own solidarity with the people of Odessa. A series of long and side shots shows the scenes of triumphant celebration. Even the crow's nest is crammed with cheering sailors. The newly forged alliance is endorsed by the next title: 'Tensely and vigilantly the shore watched over the "Potemkin".'

The scene of the action returns to the shore. At the foot of a vast staircase leading down to the harbour a huge crowd of Odessa townspeople stand looking anxiously out to sea. They represent a cross-section of society: some are workers, some shade themselves with parasols. There is a closer shot of a well-dressed group of adults and children. On the left of this group we can clearly see the 'schoolmistress' (another example of Eisenstein's typage) who is to play such a

crucial part in the Odessa Steps sequence that follows. This is the calm before the storm. Back on the 'Potemkin' an overhead shot shows the quarterdeck, then the gun-turret, with sailors looking aloft. From below we see a sailor in the crow's nest: behind him a huge red flag, the flag of revolution, is raised on the masthead. In the original print this flag is reputed to have been hand-tinted red to enhance the dramatic effect. The sailors cheer: back on land the townspeople echo the cheers and waves. The red flag flutters in the breeze. Mutiny on board the battleship 'Potemkin' has become generalized into the revolutionary uprising of 1905. The ship is part of the whole, which it symbolizes: this is in embryonic form the metonymic device that Eisenstein called '*pars pro toto* – one for all and all for one.

Part 4: The Odessa Steps

The pivotal Odessa Steps sequence of *The Battleship Potemkin* may well lay claim to being the most famous single sequence of images in the history of world cinema, and especially of silent montage cinema. It also provides a classic example of poetic licence: a filmic creation of a historical event that in itself never happened but that encapsulates in *microcosm* the *macrocosmic* drama of a more general historical process. In this sense the Odessa Steps sequence is a paradigm of *pars pro toto*.

Part 4 begins with a title: 'That memorable day the city lived one life with the rebellious battleship.' In the foreground we see the masts and furled sails of a large number of sailing boats moored against the wooden jetty. Then sailors clamber aboard and start casting off. The next title comments: 'White-winged boats flew to the 'Potemkin'.' In the next shot a group of townspeople carrying bundles walks along a gangplank towards one of the boats. A billowing white sail fills the screen: as it glides off-frame to the right the rush of other craft is revealed in the background. The townspeople board a boat, carrying their bundles of provisions for the 'Potemkin'. Two shots show a flotilla of small sailing boats moving left to right, then one of them sailing from top left to bottom right. These varying shots suggest a general movement in all directions and universalize the particular.

The sequence that follows, and that precedes the actual massacre on the Odessa Steps, was analysed by Eisenstein himself in his 1934 article '“Eh!” On the Purity of Film Language'. It would be redundant to offer an alternative analysis and I therefore reproduce Eisenstein's own:

In order to demonstrate the compositional interdependence of the plastic aspect of the changing shots I have deliberately chosen an example at random rather than from a climactic scene: fourteen consecutive fragments from the scene that precedes the shooting on the Odessa Steps. The scene where the 'good people of Odessa' (as the 'Potemkin' sailors addressed their appeal to the population of Odessa) send skiffs with provisions alongside the mutinous battleship.

The sending of greetings is constructed on a distinct intersection between two subjects:

- 1 The skiffs speed towards the battleship.
- 2 The people of Odessa wave.

In the end the two subjects merge.

The composition is basically on two planes: depth and foreground. The subjects dominate alternately, advancing to the foreground and pushing one another into the background.

The composition is constructed: (1) on the plastic interaction between both planes (within the shot), (2) on the change in line and form on each plane from shot to shot (by montage). In the second case the compositional play is formed from the interaction of the plastic impression of the previous shot in collision or interaction with the succeeding one. (Here the analysis is by purely spatial and linear sign. The rhythmic temporal relationship will be examined elsewhere.)

The movement of the composition (see the attached table, p. 37) takes the following course.

I. The skiffs in motion. A smooth movement parallel to a horizontal cross-section of the shot. The whole field of vision is occupied by the first subject. There is a play of small vertical sails.

II. The intensifying movement of the skiffs of the first subject. (The entrance of the second subject facilitates this.) The second subject comes to the fore with strict rhythm of motionless vertical columns. The vertical lines sketch the plastic disposition of the future figures (IV, V, etc.). The interplay of horizontal waves and vertical lines. The skiff subject is pushed into the background. The plastic subject of the arch appears in the bottom half of the shot.



9. Eisenstein's visual analysis of the skiffs sequence

III. The plastic subject of the arch expands into the whole shot. The play revolves around the change in the frame's articulation from vertical lines to the structure of the arch. The vertical subject is maintained in the movement of small-scale people moving away from the camera. The skiff subject is finally pushed into the background.

IV. The plastic subject of the arch finally occupies the foreground. The arch structure moves into the opposite resolution: the contours of a group forming a circle are sketched in (the parasol completes the composition). The same transition to an opposite also occurs

within the vertical construction: the backs of the small-scale people moving into the background are replaced by large-scale static figures filmed from the front. The subject of the movement of the skiffs is maintained by reflection in the expression of the eyes and in their movement along the horizontals.

In the foreground a common compositional variation: an even number of people is replaced by an uneven number. Two becomes three. This 'golden rule' in changing the *mise-en-scène* is supported by a tradition that dates back to the Italian *commedia dell'arte* (the direction of the glances also intersects). The arch motif is once more straightened out, this time into an opposite curve. Repeating and supporting it, there is a new parallel arch motif in the *background*: a balustrade. The skiff subject in motion. The eye passes over the whole breadth of the shot along the horizontal.

VI. Sections I-V provide the transposition from the skiff subject to that of the onlookers, developed in five montage sections. The interval V-VI produces a sudden transition back from the onlookers to the skiffs. The composition, which strictly follows the content, suddenly turns all the signs back in the opposite direction. The line of the balustrade is brought suddenly to the foreground, and repeated in the line of the boat's gunwale. It is echoed by the line where the boat comes into contact with the surface of the water. The basic compositional articulation is the same but the treatment is the opposite. V is static. VI is sketched out through the dynamic of the boat in motion. The division into 'three' along the vertical is maintained in both shots. The central element is texturally similar (the woman's blouse and the canvas of the sail). The elements at the sides are sharply contrasted: the dark shapes of the men beside the woman and the white spaces beside the sail. The articulations along the vertical are also contrasted: three figures cut off by the bottom of the frame become a vertical sail cut off by the top of the frame. In the *background* a new subject appears: the battleship seen from the side, cut off at the top (a preparation for Section VII).

VII. Another sudden change of subject. The background subject, the battleship, moves forward into the foreground (the thematic jump from V to VI serves as a kind of *Vorschlag*¹¹ to the jump from VI to VII). The angle is turned through 180: the shot from the battleship towards the sea is the reverse of VI. This time the side of the battleship is in the *foreground* and is cut off by the *bottom* of the frame. In the background is the sail subject, working in verticals.

Eisenstein's analysis may not appear 'quite obvious and easy' to the general reader but it does challenge the film viewer to examine each shot for its thematic, compositional and eventually also rhythmic content. It also offers us some pointers to the techniques underlying the construction of the montage for *The Battleship Potemkin* as a whole.

The sequence from the first appearance of the skiffs in the harbour of Odessa to the shot of the red flag flying on the mast of the 'Potemkin' represents an idyllic interval between the elegy of the mourning scenes for Vakulinchuk and the consequent agitation, on the one hand, and the violence of the actual Odessa Steps sequence on the other. It constitutes the calm before the brewing storm. It also introduces us to some of the principal characters peopling the Odessa Steps, most notably the woman who is always referred to as the 'schoolmistress' (because, thanks to Eisensteinian typage, she looks like one), the disabled boy and a number of well-dressed women whose presence emphasizes the solidarity between all classes of the city's population and the mutinous crew of the battleship. In the midst of the calm, these characters represent a *Vorschlag* – to use Eisenstein's own term – of the storm that is about to break, a storm whose imminence was indicated by the very opening sequences of the film.

A mother stands on the steps with her little son. She takes the basket he is holding and shows him how to wave at the battleship. A boy and girl are also held aloft to wave. The next shots capture the bottom half of a woman in black with a white parasol and a woman in white with a black parasol. The balance between their vertical figures crosscuts the shadows falling across the steps, recalling the contrast between light and shade, upper and lower deck, in the shots of the battleship before the mutiny and the tension that that contrast represented. The next title says simply: 'Suddenly', and suddenly the atmosphere does change.

A close-up shows a woman's head jerking backwards, her hair falling over her face, and then the women with their parasols and the disabled boy rush forward down the steps. The white parasol fills the screen obscuring what is happening and adding to the sense of sudden disorientation. Then we see the side wall of the steps with figures running forward from left to right down the steps. The legless boy uses his hands to scuttle downwards; he turns round to look back for a second and then continues. An overhead shot shows the statue of the Duc de Richelieu, former governor of the city, at the top of the steps in the foreground with the backs of the escaping citizens beyond it. In the foreground a group of Cossacks, wearing white jackets and black



trousers and boots, appear at the top of the steps. They are carrying rifles with fixed bayonets. Because of the camera angle their presence looms over the whole steps and below the crowd continues its flight.

An angle shot shows another woman in high-heeled shoes (an obvious bourgeois trait) picking herself up from the ground where she has fallen and running forwards, again from left to right. A long shot highlights the disarray of the panic-stricken crowd at the top of the steps as they flee, descending towards the camera. The legs of a man in



10. (a, b & c) The Odessa Steps sequence: the crowd before, during and after

a suit buckle beneath him. Other bodies fall across the screen. A young boy, his path of escape blocked by the bodies, sits on the steps, covers his ears to shut out the sound of gunfire and screams. Different kinds of movements echo the different swirling movements earlier on the quarterdeck. The crowd continues its forward flight, jumping over the bodies. Some people are so confused that they run sideways in their panic. Again we see the Richelieu statue and the Cossacks from the rear and then a travelling shot takes us down the steps from left to right as the crowd flees in parallel. Women, including the schoolmistress, crouch behind a low wall in fear. A long shot depicts a tree and rooftops as the crowd flees downwards, followed by closer shots of people crouching and collapsing. Another overhead shot of the Richelieu statue shows that the Cossacks are now well on their way down the steps. An officer treads on an elderly man lying dazed on the ground. An overhead shot depicts the chaos. A travelling shot, this time slightly ahead of the fleeing crowd, includes the young mother who had shown her son how to wave. The Cossacks fire and the boy falls on the steps. His mother is swept onward, again from left to right, by the fleeing crowd, unaware that he has fallen. A close-up shows the

boy's bloodstained face as he shouts, 'Mama': the shot is so vivid that we almost hear him shout as well. The camera follows the mother down the steps to the next landing, when she realizes that her son is no longer with her, turns and looks back. We see the look of horror on her face as she realizes what has happened. The camera cuts to the boy, whose head drops to the ground. His mother presses her hands against her temples in shock and horror. The boy's limp and prostrate body is now being trampled by the crowd, still fleeing left to right. The frenzied mother advances towards the camera, her face filling the screen in extreme close-up. Further shots depict the crowd fleeing downwards left to right as the shocked mother slowly moves from right to left up the steps. These are intercut with images of hands, feet and even bodies, being trampled on in the panic flight. As the boy is trampled, his body rolls over like a rag doll. The mother approaches her son, her eyes filling the screen. She cradles her dead son in her arms and moves further up the steps towards the approaching Cossacks, while the crowd continues in downward flight around her. The mother stops, turns and shouts something to the crowd. This marks the point at which something like resistance to the Cossacks begins. It is a visually striking moment and a turning point.

The schoolmistress stands up and draws her shawl around her. The mother turns again and shouts. The schoolmistress calls to those around her and we see the title: 'Let us appeal to them!' Her companions cling to her skirts. The sequence that follows has its own symmetry: close-up of the schoolmistress; close-up of the group; long shot of the Cossacks descending left to right; long shot of the mother ascending right to left; close-up of the group; close-up of the schoolmistress. Her appeal has gone full circle: the group, including an elderly man on crutches, stand up and follow her. The Cossacks fire. A travelling shot once more shows the crowd fleeing from left to right, this time shot from behind, a device that increases the dynamism of the movement. Then we see the mother and son again moving in the opposite direction, cutting to the group around the schoolmistress and then back to the mother and son. The Cossacks advance, rifles at the ready, but this time their direction is different – still from left to right but this time from bottom left to top right. This device could well be another Eisensteinian *Vorschlag*, this time of the possibility of compromise. A rear-view shot shows the mother and son centre frame against a white strip of light up the middle of the steps. This strip of light is a device borrowed from religious paintings. In rear frame the Cossacks

are visible descending towards the camera, with bodies strewn on either side. The moment of confrontation, the moment of truth, has arrived.

The mother ascends the centre strip of light shouting: 'Listen to me! Don't shoot!' A medium close-up shot shows the Cossacks still descending the steps from left to right but *upwards* across the frame: another *Vorschlag* of possible compromise serves to heighten the tension. A travelling front-angle shot shows the mother ascending right to left and then standing in the shadow of the Cossacks, an officer's sword raised above her. The next title explains: 'My boy is hurt!' The previous shot is repeated. The group round the schoolmistress advances, their arms outstretched in supplication. The officer gives the signal for the Cossacks to fire. For a moment the smoke from their rifles obscures the figure of the mother. As the smoke clears the mother falls slowly across screen to the ground. In the next shot fleeing civilians at the bottom of the steps are briefly blocked by two cavalymen. Further up the steps the mother's body falls to the ground, her dead son spread-eagled across her chest. The next title finally informs



11. The Odessa Steps: 'My boy is hurt'



12. The Odessa Steps: the pram

The descent of the pram down the Odessa Steps is probably the most famous image in *The Battleship Potemkin*. The device of using the suffering of a child to move the audience has been much imitated, although Eisenstein, unlike so many of his imitators, leaves the sufferings of this particular baby to our imagination, rather than depicting it in graphic detail. The pram moves *upwards* to the left across the screen, although it is in fact moving *down* the steps. The schoolmistress sees what is happening to the helpless child and is appalled. Blood runs across her cheek and her hat and shawl have fallen away. The baby is now crying in the pram as it moves from left to right. A travelling shot accompanies the pram on its downward journey. The steps are littered with the dead and wounded. There are now more cavalymen attacking the civilians at the bottom of the steps. The young mother in black now lies dead, sprawled across the steps, her head extending over the edge, just as the head of the young woman and her hair extend over the edge of the bridge being raised in Eisenstein's later film *October*. The pram moves on. In close-up we are shown the horrified expression on the schoolmistress's face: she is looking dishevelled and bloodied as she stares off-screen at the pram. A close-up shows the

COVER ILLUSTRATION: The woman with the pince-nez on the Odessa Steps

COVER DESIGN: Graham Seamon

Thought by many to be the greatest film ever made, **THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN**, directed by Sergei Eisenstein, is a key film in the history of Russian and of world cinema. Based on a mutiny in Odessa during the 1905 Revolution, the film is regarded as a pioneering milestone in the development of world cinema – especially Eisenstein's bold camera-work and breathtaking editing.

This **KINOFIL** investigates the production, context and critical reception of the film and the people who made it and provides an analysis of the film itself and its place in Russian and world cinema.

Written by a major authority on Eisenstein, this lively companion to **THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN** will be welcomed by film enthusiasts and students alike.

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