

Sergei's Eisenstein's *BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN* (1925)

Propaganda as Art

Brussels, Belgium, 1958. The World's Fair votes the Soviet film *Battleship Potemkin* as the greatest film of all time.

Since 1952, the most respected poll in the world – the British Film Institute's *Sight & Sound* Magazine – listed the same movie among the 10 best films of all time for 50 years in a row. In 2012 *Potemkin* is still hanging there, slightly downgraded to #11.

Roger Ebert, the world-renown film critic, calls *Battleship Potemkin* “one of the fundamental landmarks of cinema”, “obligatory for anyone interested in film history”, and still containing “a buried power”.

The “buried power” of the movie was obvious to the governments of the time and, after being tremendously successful in Germany, France and the US, Eisenstein's masterpiece was banned in all those countries. The UK, and even the Soviet Union - the initiator of the project - followed suit shortly. *Potemkin* was *too* successful with the masses. In the advent of the world's Great Depression, as daily life became increasingly difficult for the many, governments were suddenly afraid of the outstanding power of this propaganda film. They felt the danger of it stirring mutiny or social unrest.

But let us begin at the beginning.

Battleship Potemkin was commissioned by the Soviet Union's Communist Party's Central Committee - the supreme ruling body of the country - to commemorate 20 years from the partially successful - or partially failed, depending on how you look at it - Russian Revolution of 1905. The Revolution did not turn the Empire's absolute monarchy into a democracy nor did it initiate the collapse of Imperial Russia into a communist state as the later (1917) Bolshevik Revolution. It led, however, to the establishment of a more emancipated society through a new Constitution (1906). A parliament, called the 'Duma', was established, a multi-party system was tolerated, and the government system grudgingly let itself be turned into a limited constitutional monarchy. The successes of the 1905 Revolution were partly due to some factions of the Russian army which defected and fought along with the people. In Odessa – an important Imperial Russia harbour, today in Ukraine - some parts of the Black Sea Fleet mutinied and fraternized with the uprising masses. One of the most horrible massacres of the 1905 Revolution threw the city-port Odessa into a crimson nightmare. It is this particular moment that Eisenstein depicts in his acclaimed film. *Battleship Potemkin* (both the actual ship and the movie) was

supposed to be a revolutionary symbol, the epitome of the oppressed *muzhiks* breaking their chains and battling the 'monstrous, heartless' Imperial Guards.

The film unfolds into an overwhelming crescendo. The editing – the director's own – is revolutionary and gives this 70 minutes movie an incredible rhythm and a breathtaking visual polyphony. The audience is caught in Eisenstein's web of conflicting sequences that collide relentlessly in a bewildering mix of contrast and conflict. This dynamic juxtaposition of individual shots psychologically affects the audience and pulls them into a whirlwind of emotions. This incredibly fast and contrapuntal editing was indeed unseen before Eisenstein and still staggers modern audiences. According to Ronald Bergam the 70 minutes *Battleship Potemkin* "contains 1,346 shots, whereas the average film around 1926 ran 90 minutes and had around 600 shots" (*The Guardian*, Feb 15, 2005). The Russian director called it "dialectal montage". Nowhere in the movie becomes this more intense than in the *Odessa Steps sequence*. It is one of those moments "against which the whole cinema can be defined" (Bergam). The famous scene is almost eschatological - it seems the overture to serve as the overture to the Apocalypse. Faceless imperial soldiers march unremittingly against masses of civilians. The faceless march (only the booted legs are shown) gives the spectator a sense of tragic and imminent inevitability. By contrast, all victims are carefully portrayed with the camera avidly examining their grimaces, their terrorized eyes, and their morbidly contorted expressions. The scene is also unusually violent for a silent of 1925. So much so that, until 1972, the US censorship presented a severely cut version of this acclaimed sequence. The *Odessa Steps* sequence was quoted many times in more recent productions (most notably in Brian de Palma's *The Untouchables* - 1987). It became not only one of the few staple marks of cinema but also a 'historical document' for the Soviet revolutionary propaganda. Ironically, there was no czarist massacre on the *Odessa steps*. The imperial troops massacred civilians all over the city in 'small batches'. Eisenstein's genius metaphorically concentrated the horror of those days in one place. He did it so admirably that, for decades to come, including today, the revolutionary events in *Odessa* are referred to as "the bloodshed on the *Odessa steps*".

In 2005 a newly restored version of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* was shown during the Berlin Film Festival with a full orchestra playing the original score by Edmund Meisel. The refined and savvy audience of the Festival gave the performance a standing ovation. In 2009 the Parisians were even more generous, giving the film a triple standing ovation in the amphitheater of *Cité de la Musique*. In December 2011 *Potemkin* received a five-minute standing ovation from a sellout audience at the historic Coolidge Corner Theater in Brookline, Massachusetts. The same reaction was triggered by the screening of the film at *The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts* in New York with an original

score composed and conducted by the three times Emmy- nominated film composer and Berklee College of Music Professor Sheldon Mirowitz.

The glorious odyssey of the best propaganda movie ever made appears to go on. Eisenstein's film still arouses the masses, impervious to time periods or political systems; the famous destroyer keeps 'sailing on'. Perhaps this was one of the reasons that made Roger Ebert, to call *Battleship Potemkin* "one of the fundamental landmarks of cinema".

After watching it, you will feel like a small boat closely being passed by a huge destroyer. And, while apprehensively awaiting for the resulting tumultuous tides to calm down, and despite swinging dangerously in the foamy streak left behind by the big vessel, you will not be able to refrain from thinking: "Godspeed, *Potemkin*!... and good luck."

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