

## TEACHERS' NOTES

This study guide is aimed at students of GCSE Media Studies, A'Level Film Studies and GNVQ Media: Communication and Production (Intermediate and Advanced).

Areas of study covered by this guide include an introduction to the Russian cinema of the 1920's, production techniques, narrative structure and the language of film, with specific reference to montage and editing.

Battleship Potemkin: Certificate: PG. Running Time 70 minutes.

### MAJOR CREDITS FOR BATTLESHIP POTESKIN

Battleship Potemkin 1925 (Goskino, USSR)

Producer: Yakov Bliokh

Director: Sergei Eisenstein

Screenplay: Nina Agadzhanova-Shutko~ Sergei Eisenstein

Director of Photography: Eduard Tisse

Editor: Sergei Eisenstein

Music: Edmund Meisel

Art Director: Vasili Rakhals

Cast: Aleksandr Antonov

Vladimir Barsky

Levshin

Grigori Alel sandrov

Mikhail Gomorov

## BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN

*There is no art without conflict, Eisenstein once wrote, and Battleship Potemkin was the classic example of a film that attempted to become a banner for revolution. Made with the utmost rigour and almost mathematically conceived piece by piece, this story of the abortive 1905 revolution in Russia still manages to be extraordinarily spontaneous in its effect. If the actual text is often propagandist, the editing and building of pace and tension circumvents that. Study the famous Odessa Steps sequence and you will see what editing is really about. But although the film has been studied by countless students rather than enjoyed, which it should be, it remains a masterwork that has seldom if ever been bettered, not just a primer. It uses, like Citizen Kane, everything that the cinema then had to offer and creates a new language too. Though made in 1925, it is still relevant enough today.*

Derek Malcolm

### INTRODUCTION

#### BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN - WHAT THEY THOUGHT

Battleship Potemkin received its premi-ere at the Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow on December 21st 1925. Since then, a lot of people have seen and praised the film.

David Selznick (in a memo to Harry Rapfi October 15, 1926):

“It was my privilege a few months ago to be present at two private screenings of what is unquestionably one of the greatest motion pictures ever made...I therefore suggest that it might be advantageous to have the organisation (i.e. MGM) view it in the same way that a group of artists might view and study a Rubens or a Raphael.”  
David O. Selznick, edited by R. Behlmer, 1972.

Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda, Third Reich:

“This is a marvellous film without equal in the cinema. Anyone who had no firm political conviction could become a Bolshevik after seeing the film.”

Speech to Film Industry, 28 March 1933.

Bertold Brecht (poem):

“I have witnessed how. ..the exploiters themselves were overcome by each wave of approval seeing the exploits of revolutionary sailors.”

Translation appears in *The Battleship Potemkin*, edited by Herbert Marshall, 1978.

Roger Corman, Film Director/Producer:

“I have chosen the...sequence from Battleship Potemkin by Eisenstein because I think it is a wonderful sequence by itself and because it occupies a unique place in the history of film.”

Close-Up, BBC, 1995.

### **Task**

What these different people and their views suggest about Battleship Potemkin's status in world cinema?

In 1948 and again in 1958 it was selected by an international film jury as the best film ever made. In a similar list compiled by Sight and Sound (the monthly magazine of the British Film Institute) in 1992, it still managed joint sixth. It is what we call a classic.

You will get a chance to make up your own mind when you see the film. Hopefully, this study guide will help you analyse your responses and decide how good you think the film is. Since the film is 70 years old, things that the original audiences took for granted no longer apply. The first part of this guide provides background information on the film and the cinema of the 1920's; the second part of the guide provides information and exercises for you when you have viewed the film.

Some people see the film as cinematic art, as in Corman's comment about its 'unique place in cinema history'. Others, like Goebbels, see it as propaganda, very effectively putting forward a point of view that convinces people. The guide will ask you to think about how good you feel the film is as art and propaganda, but also to consider what these labels suggest, and why they are tied to some films rather than others.

## **THE WORLD IN THE 1920'S**

### **Task**

Find a map showing the world as it was in the 1920s. It is worth examining it to see how different the world was then: a large British Empire, a French Empire, no Israel, no Pakistan. Spend a little time listing some of the differences. some of the differences.

World War I ended in 1918. It had provided the opportunity for rebellions and revolutions across Europe: Ireland 1916; Russia 1917; Germany 1919; even mutinies in the French and British armies in 1918.

The most successful revolution was that which took place in Russia and led to the abolition of tsarist rule and the establishment of a new state. You will see on your map what vast lands and peoples made up the old empire that now became the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic (later the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). The Russian Revolution went through several stages, and in October 1917 an insurrection brought to power the Bolshevik Party (communists) committed to a radically new form of society.

*“In order to put an end to the survivals of feudalism, the estates system, and inequality in all spheres of social life, decrees were issued abolishing the state, removing restrictions based on nationality or religion, separating the church from the state and the schools from the church, establishing equality for women and the equality of all nationalities in Russia.”*

*“In order to undermine the economic power of the bourgeoisie and to create a new, Soviet national economy, and, in the first place, to create a new, Soviet industry, the banks, railways, foreign trade, the mercantile fleet and all large enterprises in all branches of the industry - coal, metal, oil, chemicals, machine-building, textiles, sugar, etc. - were nationalised.”*

History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1939.

The new state had to fend off armed opposition within, and invasion from without (including troops from Britain, France and the USA), as it was seen as a threat to the whole capitalist system.

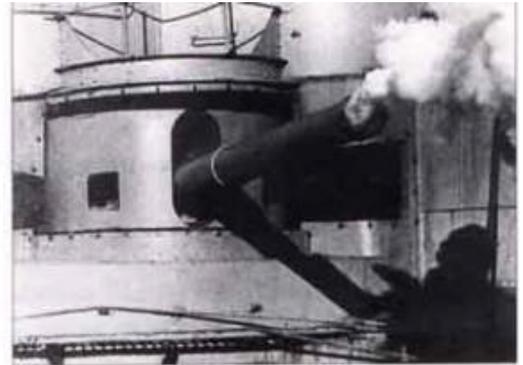
## **SOVIET CULTURE AND CINEMA**

Just as the new state planned to radically transform social and economic life, so the communists believed that art, culture and entertainment needed dramatic change. This provided both an opportunity and challenge to young artists and intellectuals, many of whose imaginations were fired by the great upheavals taking place. They wanted to celebrate the new Russia, they also wanted to try out new styles and ideas.

The Bolsheviks saw society developing through conflict: the resolution of one conflict (opposition to tsarist oppression) led to a new conflict (defending the new Soviet republic), whose resolution led to a further conflict (building the new Soviet society). This was the ‘dialectic’ and the new art aimed to incorporate this dialectic.

Cinema was key amongst the arts for the Bolsheviks, as shown in this quote usually attributed to the Soviet leader, Lenin: *“Of all arts, for us the cinema is the most important.”*

\* The constructivists saw art as analogous to a machine. Their new visual style can be seen in film posters:



\* In a poem, the dramatist Vladimir Mayakovsky, who also acted in movies, wrote:  
***“The cinema - purveyor of movement. The cinema - renewer of literature.  
The cinema - destroyer of aesthetics. The cinema - fearlessness.  
The cinema - a sportsman. The cinema - sower of ideas.”***  
Kino-Fot, Oct. 1922.

\* Young musicians, like Dmitri Shostakovich, wrote accompaniments for films such as *New Babylon*, a depiction of the Paris Commune of 1871, which communists saw as a precursor to the revolution of 1917.

\* Cinema was a popular art form, it appealed particularly to the working classes, and in the countryside provided a new experience for the peasants. It represented the modernism that was an essential part of Bolshevik ideas.

### **Task**

Look at a painting or a poem from one of the young artists of the 1920's in Britain or France - how different is Soviet art of the same period? In what ways?

## SOVIET CINEMA

Pre-war Russian cinema had relied on importing a large number of films and most of the basic materials of filmmaking. In the early 1920's there was a shortage of nearly all the ingredients for making a film, especially film stock. Whilst there were plenty of foreign films to import, these were full of the values the revolution aimed to abolish; they were propaganda for the opposition. These included the films of D.W. Griffith or adventures featuring Douglas Fairbanks. In some cases, films were re-edited with new intertitles to 'improve' their content. On other occasions, as with the film *Intolerance*, films were screened with inserts of music and drama to counterpose 'red' politics. But most pressingly, the Soviet state needed to develop its own film industry which could successfully dramatise the revolution.

One way was through the chain of Workers' Clubs, which provided a range of activities, social and political, including film shows, for the urban workers. In the vast countryside areas the Bolsheviks had to engineer new ways of reaching peasants, most famously with the *agitpoezda* (agit trains). Early film pioneers had used travelling film shows to reach people outside the urban centres, but these agit trains were more grandiose. They included a bookshop, library, offices, print shops, cinema equipment, and a team of agitprop workers to carry the message of the revolution to the peasants. They provided propaganda, theatre, film shows and were decorated with the new constructivist paintings and slogans.

Initially the clubs and trains offered newsreel and 'agitki'. The latter were short agitational films dramatising the revolutionary message.

*"Some were humorous sketches, such as "The Frightened Burzhui" (1919). As a result of the Revolution a capitalist lost his appetite and became an insomniac. Then he is ordered to appear in a work battalion. Honest labour cures him immediately. Others were melodramas..."*

Cinema & Soviet Society 1917 - 1953, Peter Kenez, 1992.

### Task

Try your hand at agitki by producing a treatment (very brief outline) for a film melodrama dramatising the need to support the Soviets in the civil war; you might try a story with a father who supports the 'whites' (pro-tsarist forces) and a son who supports the 'reds' (This is what occurred in Eisenstein's own family.)

Agitational films were simple:

*'An agitator presents only one or a few ideas, but he presents them to a whole mass of people.'* *'A propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons.'*  
CV. Plekhanov, a Russian socialist, 1892.

As the Soviet film industry became established in the 1920s, complex propaganda became more feasible. There emerged talented filmmakers, whose work was powerful, but different. One of these was Dziga Vertov, who worked in newsreels. His Kino-Eye approach attacked the distortion of reality produced by fictional films:

*"We proclaim the old films. based on romance, theatrical films and the like, to be leprous."*  
We, Variant on a Manifesto, Vertov, 1922.

'From the outset Soviet filmmakers had been faced with a shortage of raw film stock. Thus, they were compelled to look for ingenious ways of using the short end of negative and positive that were lying about studios and laboratories... Vertov discovered as early as 1920 that a shot of even two or three frames was visible to the human eye.' Sergei M. Fisenstein, a Biography, Marie Seton, 1978.

## **Task**

When you see *Battleship Potemkin* examine the way in which the filmmakers used Vector's discovery.

## **SERGEI MIKHAILOVICH EISENSTEIN**

The most famous of these new filmmakers, Sergei Eisenstein, described his apprenticeship thus:

*"I am twenty-eight years old. I studied for three years until 1918; I wanted originally to be an engineer and architect. During the civil war I was a sapper in the Red Army. At about this time I began to devote my free time to the problems of theatre and art: I had a lively interest in theatre history and theatre problems. In 1921 I joined the Proletkult organisation as a set-painter. It was the Proletkult Theatre's task to find a new art form that corresponded to the ideology and the actual state relations of the new Russia. The Theatre consisted of young workers who wanted to create a serious art and who brought with them a really new spirit and a new view of the world and of art..."*

*"In 1922 and 1923 I produced three dramas for the workers' theatre:...The Third Play was called Gas Masks and it was played in the gas works during working hours. The machines were working and the 'actors' were working: it was the first success for*

*absolute reality, for objective art.*

*“The path from this concept of the theatrical to film was now no more than simple consequence: only the most inexorable objectivity can be the sphere of film. My first film appeared in 1924; it was made in collaboration with the people from Proletkult and was called Strike.”*

Eisenstein Writings, 1922 - 1934, edited by R. Taylor, 1988.

Strike was powerfully different from the usual run of films. It showed the leaders of Goskino (the State organisation for film) that a new talent had arrived. Eisenstein's activities in the young film industry included debates about film and film techniques, conferences organised by the Bolshevik Party on cinema, and teaching in the new Film School, run by Proletkult. Strike was followed by Battleship Potemkin: it was very successful. Eisenstein even got offers from Hollywood. He made two more silent films - October/Ten Days That Shook The World and The General Line/Old And New. He then spent several years abroad, including a visit to Hollywood, studying the new sound films. His own first completed sound film was Alexander Nevsky, which was very popular. And his last films were the three parts of Ivan the Terrible.

### **Task**

**Compile a complete filmography for Eisenstein. Briefly summarise the films and see what this suggests about his career and work.**

After his initial success in the 1920s Eisenstein encountered increasing problems, as did other Soviet filmmakers and artists. These problems were two-fold. The Bolshevik Party advocated films that were popular with ordinary people, and many of the new films were seen as too difficult, guilty of formalism'. Also the Party leadership, dominated by Stalin, became more and more nervous and mistrustful of what they termed 'counter-revolutionary elements'. This eventually included not just subversives but any form of opposition. So some of his films remained unfinished. Most infamously the second and third parts of Ivan the Terrible were suppressed and the third part is lost. But at the time when Battleship Potemkin was made, such problems were still all in the future.

## BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN

1925 was the 20th anniversary of the 1905 Russian revolution, an earlier attempt to unseat the tsarist autocracy that failed. It was a country-wide rebellion against tsarist oppression, and included a street massacre outside the Winter Palace in St Petersburg\* known as 'Bloody Sunday', equivalent to the Derry 'Bloody Sunday' massacre of 1972 and as bitterly remembered in 1920s Soviet Russia.

*"The original intention had been to make a film to be called 1905, with the purpose of showing many of the remarkable events of that early revolutionary year and Eisenstein was appointed director in March 1925... we had until 31 December to finish it, or nine months from the day when Eisenstein and Nina Agadzhanova-Shutko first began work on the script. Nor should we forget that the film was originally intended to cover a great many incidents in 1905, and indeed the Potemkin affair was a tiny part of the original conception, occupying only two pages of the first scenario."*

*"Shooting for 1905 began in the early spring, not in Odessa but in Leningrad...but the weather was bad, shootings delayed, and as every day brought us nearer to our dreaded deadline, we became more and more anxious. In the end we were advised by the Leningrad experts to go south for a time and work on another sequence for the film in the hope of returning to Leningrad when the weather improved. So we went to Odessa and set up our Headquarters in the Hotel London, where Eisenstein himself wrote the script of what eventually became Battleship Potemkin. We never went back to Leningrad."*

Grigori Alexandrov in Eisenstein, a Documentary Portrait, N. Swallow, 1976.

The action in Odessa dramatised a famous mutiny in the Black Sea Fleet, and one of the many massacres of civilians by the tsarist troops in 1905. The film now included only this story, which stood in for the whole revolutionary upsurge of that time.

*\*St Petersburg was first renamed Petrograd, then Leningrad, the latter name in honour of the Bolshevik leader*

## FILMING BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN

Most of the filming took place between September and November 1925 in the Black Sea port of Odessa. This was the actual site of the events dramatised by the film. They used the sister ship (The Twelve Apostles) of the original battleship, Potemkin. Eisenstein, like other noted directors, had a regular group of very talented and dedicated filmmakers.

Photography was by Edward Tisse, who worked on all Eisenstein's films. He had started out as a newsreel cameraman during the war years. He was an imaginative lighting cameraman, with an eye for composition.

*"Tisse's ingenuity was ideal for Eisenstein's invention. The slaughter on the steps needed filming techniques as original as the new montage principles. A camera-trolley was built the length of the steps- dolly shots were then almost unknown in Russian films. Several cameras were deployed simultaneously. A hand-camera was strapped to the waist of a running, jumping, falling (and circus-trained) assistant."*

Kino, A history of the Russian and Soviet Film, Jay Leda, 1973.

Eisenstein used five regular production assistants

*"What about the heroism of the five striped assistants?! The 'iron five', taking all the abuse, shouting in all the dialects spoken by the crowd of 3,000 extras who are unwilling to rush around 'yet again' in the boiling sun."* Eisenstein Writings, 1922 - 1934, edited by R. Taylor, 1988.

These assistants also acted, and helped during the editing:

*"The film which lasts for nearly an hour and a quarter at its original length was edited in less than a fortnight by Eisenstein and an assistant, working day and night and hardly ever leaving the cutting-room. (30,000 metres of film edited down to 1,600 metres) ...I remember that we spent most of the final days with the man who helped us arrange the titles... (Sergei Tretyakov, who scripted the earlier play, Gas Masks)... We were still working on this on the night of the first screening, which was in the Bolshoi Theatre, and I spent the evening riding a motorcycle between the cutting-room and the theatre, carrying the reels one at a time."* Grigori Alexandrov.

The musical score was only added for the German release of Potemkin. Eisenstein worked with the composer, Edmund Meisel, in Berlin. He, later wrote that the 'crushing effect' which Battleship Potemkin had in Germany was intensified by the music score composed by Edmund Meisel.

## THE PRINT

The audience on the opening night at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow was an audience of activists, Party workers and intellectuals - an audience of 'the few' rather than a popular audience. It broke into spontaneous applause during the screening, both at the hand-painted red flag and between reels.

*'..in 1925 every film was shown on a single projector with a break between each reel - and incidentally we constructed our films with those breaks in mind, a fact sometimes forgotten by modern critics.'*

Grigori Alexandrov.

The print you will see will appear slightly different from the 1925 screening. Age and censorship have taken their toll. That is part of the reason why the film lasts only 70 minutes as opposed to the 86 minutes of the opening night. The other reason is that many silent films, like Battleship Potemkin, were still filmed in a hand-cranked camera. Film is a series of still photographs. When projected fast enough this creates for the viewer the illusion of movement. This speed, which has increased over the years to accommodate the soundtrack, is shown as frames per second (fps):

|                |        |          |
|----------------|--------|----------|
| approx. 16 fps | 24 fps | 25 fps   |
| silent         | sound  | TV/video |

Sometimes a soundtrack is added to the print to accommodate the music that in silent days was performed live in the theatre. This involves inserting extra frames so that the projection can be at 24 fps rather than 16.

Commonly filmmakers got round the lack of sound and dialogue by inserting intertitles - words flashed up on the screen. These could comment on the story, add information and supply dialogue. The advantage for international cinema was that for a different country you only needed to add intertitles in the new language.

## Task

Having seen the film, and before proceeding with the guide, discuss it with your friends, then write down your impressions. Did you enjoy it? If so, which parts impressed you most? If not, what was it about the film that failed to capture your attention? Is this to do with age? Maybe it didn't involve you, but it impressed you. If so, can you say why?

### ITS RECEPTION - HOME AND ABROAD

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| General Release in Russia | January 19, 1926                               |
| Release in Germany        | Berlin, May 1926                               |
| Release in France         | November 12, 1926                              |
| Release in USA            | New York, December 1926                        |
| Release in London         | Private Film Society Showing,<br>November 1929 |

Battleship Potemkin had a great impact on the more politically conscious audiences in the USSR, such as those who saw the film at the Bolshoi Theatre. It appears, however, to have been less successful with the mass or less advanced audience. Goskino produced figures showing Battleship Potemkin beat its biggest rival at the box-office, the Hollywood produced Robin Hood with Douglas Fairbanks. However, the Fairbanks movie was back at the film theatres by popular demand when Battleship Potemkin had been taken off. There were strong criticisms of the handling of the film's distribution by Goskino, for example from the poet Mayakovsky:

*"He demanded that Shvedchikov (a party man) immediately export Potemkin and told him he would go down in history as a villain if he did not."*

Kino, A History of the Russian and Soviet Film, Jay Leda, 1973.

In fact, it was when Battleship Potemkin was exported that the film became famous or infamous. To authorities in the capitalist West the film came from a very suspect source. Its main villains were the tsarist regime, which they had supported militarily only a few years earlier; its heroes were mutineers and revolutionaries. In Germany the war ministry was successful in having the film banned, for fear of what effects the depictions of mutiny might have on the ordinary soldier. (The German bourgeoisie and military had only narrowly managed to suppress a Soviet style revolution in 1919). This provoked a massive protest by the press, artists and workers' organisations. In March 1926 the Berlin Censorship Committee revoked the ban, though it insisted on cuts in the print screened. Among the sequences forbidden (from Part I) were:

*“Wrapped up in a sail, an officer is dragged by the legs and he tries to grasp at the deck. Length 1.90m. They throw the officer overboard; he surfaces again. Length 1.34m.”*

The Battleship Potemkin, edited by H. Marshall, 1978.

Even after this victory the German Military Command attempted to stop soldiers from seeing the film and posted pickets round the main film theatres. One of the aspects of the film considered to be subversive was the music written by Edward Meisel. In Stuttgart the film was passed for screening but the music was forbidden. Such censorship befell the film nearly everywhere.

The British Board of Film Censors had a particular category forbidding ‘Bolshevik propaganda’, and the film was banned in 1926. It was shown at the new Film Society in 1929, but this was effectively a private showing. It was only in 1954 that the BBFC (now the British Board of Film Classification) passed Battleship Potemkin with an X certificate.

### **Task**

Try and find out the reasons for the total ban on Bolshevik films in the 1920's. Why was the Film Society exempt?

## **FORM AND CONTENT**

Eisenstein, like other Soviet artists of the time, applied the dialectic to his art. Battleship Potemkin is built on a plan of conflict - resolution - new conflict. The five part drama is structured round a series of oppositions, developing the basic contradiction between tsarist oppression and the sailors/people's rebellion.

### *I. Men and Maggots*

*Exposition of the action. The conditions aboard the battleship. Meat teeming with maggots. Unrest among the sailors.*

### *II Drama on the Quarter-deck*

*All hands on deck!’ The sailors refusal to eat the soup. The tarpaulin scene. ‘Brothers!’Refusal to fire. Mutiny. Revenge on the Officers.*

### *III The Dead Man Cries for Vengeance*

*Mist. Vakulinchuk ‘s body in the Odessa port. Mourning over the body. Meeting.*

*Raising the red flag.*

*IV The Odessa Steps*

*Fraternisation of shore and battleship. Yawls with provisions. Shooting on the Odessa steps.*

*V Meeting the Squadron*

*Night of expectation. Meeting the squadron. Engines. 'Brothers!' The squadron refuses to fire."*

Eisenstein's introduction to the script, 1926.

### **Task**

See how many oppositions you can trace in the narrative (not only the story but the way it is told) of the film.

These Oppositions are reinforced through the characters in the story. Eisenstein avoids the central hero/heroine of the typical Hollywood film and the use of a professional star to play them.

"I do not pick my actors from the profession... They do not act roles. They simply are their natural selves. I get them to repeat before the camera just what they have done in reality. And in the mass action of my films, different as they are from each of other; they are significant not as separate human organisms, but as parts working together in a social organism, like the separate cells working together in the human body." Kino, A History of the Russian and Soviet Film, Jay Leda, 1973.

Thus Gilyarovsky is a type, who stands for the whole class of tsarist officers, who are opposed by the ordinary sailors.

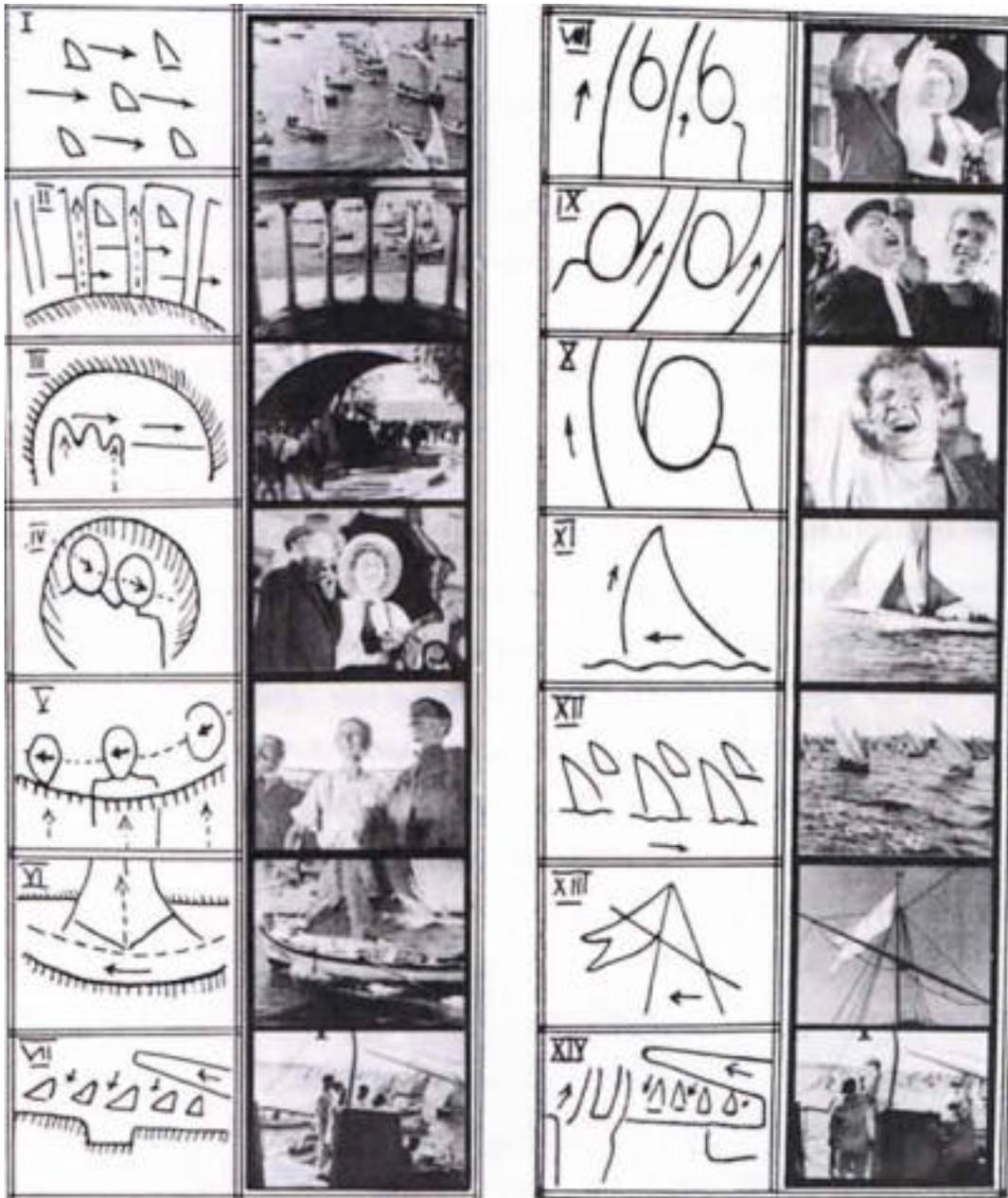
And the ordinary sailors' oppression is symbolised by the rotten meat they are forced to eat; just as the sailors symbolise the oppression throughout Russia in 1905.

### **Task**

The other important groups we see are the people around the Odessa harbour. What parts of the social organism -chat groups - do they typify, there do they fit in the larger conflict?

These oppositions and the forces they represent are developed further in the visual patterning of the film images (mise en scene) and the cutting between separate images (montage).

The way in which Eisenstein develops a pattern which visually reinforces and comments on the story can be seen towards the end of Part III The Dead Man Cries for Vengeance.



*“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.”*

Eisenstein Writings, 1922 - 1934, edited by R. Taylor, 1988.

### **Task**

**Study Eisenstein’s diagram, how well do you think he achieves his planned ‘merger’ - what parts of the images especially help this?**

Much of Eisenstein’s success was due to the very fine compositional sense of the cameraman, Edward Tisse. So before we arrive at the greetings on the Quay, we see the people of Odessa coming together to see and pay tribute to the dead sailor (the collection is towards the cost of his funeral). Look at these frames from the film.



The different components of the image balance the composition whilst the directional flow in the image draws the spectator’s eye forward with the camera.

### **MONTAGE - EDITING**

Eisenstein’s use of oppositions went further:

*“Their techniques were often diametrically opposed to the smooth, seamless continuity style of Hollywood-type films. In particular, these directors juxtaposed shots in vivid, energetic ways, and the main traits that distinguish the Montage style lie in the area of editing.*

*“The search for dynamism through editing resulted in one of the most pervasive characteristics of Montage films: on average they have a greater number of shots than does any other type of film making in their era.”*

Film History: An Introduction, Thompson & Bordwell, 1993.

This can be seen most clearly in Battleship Potemkin's Odessa Steps sequence. From the intertitle 'Suddenly...' to the shot of Potemkin's giant guns swinging into action numbers 158 separate shots, with three intertitle cards, in just six minutes of viewing. The shortest shots are only six frames. The most extended (217 frames) is a long shot of the mother carrying her child up the steps.

The viewers are bombarded with images, some hardly discernible in a clear fashion. *"...movement - is used to express mounting emotional intensity. First, there are close-ups of human figures rushing chaotically. Then, long-shots of the same scene. The chaotic movement is next superseded by shots showing the fret of soldiers as they march rhythmically down the steps. Tempo increases. Rhythm increases. 'And then, as the downward movement reaches its culmination, the movement is suddenly reversed: instead of the headlong rush of the crowd down the steps we see the solitary figure of a mother carrying her dead son, slowly and solemnly going up the steps.'"*

Eisenstein's introduction to the script, 1926.

In addition to cutting together predominantly short pieces of film to create dramatic impact and shock, Eisenstein is also integrating the visual movements and oppositions in the manner he described for the harbour scene. At six minutes, the filmed version extends the depicted event.

*"Eisenstein often divides a prolonged movement, filmed in a single shot, into a series of independent shots which are used in various places they are needed. The long shot of the Steps with the running crowd is thus included several times. The medium shot of the marching soldiers is cut into two shots. The beginning is spliced in before the shot of the firing at the mother with the carriage, and its continuation fourteen shots later."*

On the Editing of Potemkin by Lev Felonov, in *The Battleship Potemkin*, edited by H. Marshall, 1978.

## **THE MONTAGE OF ATTRACTIONS**

Whilst the term 'montage' is most frequently used to describe cutting and splicing the film for effect, Eisenstein used it in a wider sense. He talked of rhythmic' montage, associative, tonal and intellectual montage. The films were conceived both as whole works and in their detailed parts. Just as Eisenstein planned the complex interaction of mise en scene, movement and cutting for the harbour sequence, right through a film he conceived of images and narrative interconnecting - a complex dialectic. His editing (montage) was a key part, yet only a part of the whole. He wanted more than just to arouse emotional intensity and shock in the spectator, he wanted to strike them with new ideas.

Thus the counterpoint in the harbour sequence between ship and shore, sailors and civilians, is developed in the story and visualised through the use of waving arms spreading through the crowd. At the end of the Odessa steps massacre, after the shots of Potemkin's guns firing, come the three famous shots of sculptured stone lions:



10 frames



14 frames



17 frames

*The marble lions leap up, surrounded by the thunder of Potemkin's guns firing in protest against the bloodbath on the Odessa Steps"*

Eisenstein Writings 1922 1934 edited by R. Taylor, 1988.

There are other examples of visual contrasts and of cutting between different images both during the mutiny in Part II and in the final meeting with the Fleet in Part V.

### **Task**

If you are able, it is worth examining these excerpts on video and seeing what examples of montage you can identify. If a video copy is not available you could use either the published script or the shot-by-shot breakdown by David Mayer.

## INFLUENCE

One aspect of Battleship Potemkin's classic status is the influence it has exerted on other filmmakers. Goebbels put his admiration into effect, and had the German film industry produce its own version of Potemkin - Ohm Kruger - with its own 'Odessa Steps' sequence. You may have seen another imitation of the sequence in Brian De Palma's film The Untouchables.

A filmmaker who makes interesting use of montage, rather than just copying Eisenstein's film, is Oliver Stone. His films often stir up argument and are noted for their impact on viewers. Much of the films' visceral qualities are achieved through the type of montage developed by Eisenstein - fast cutting, contrasting images and strong, rhythmic editing.

### Task

Assess the use of montage in the first 10 minutes of Stone's JFK (USA, 1991).

## PROPAGANDA VERSUS ART

Battleship Potemkin's history is full of people who admire the film, but object to its politics. Goebbels is a good example. He wanted the German filmmakers to copy its successful 'propaganda'; he wanted a film that would "make people become Nazis after seeing it."

Battleship Potemkin is constantly referred to in terms of propaganda. One argument for the use of the term propaganda is that Battleship Potemkin changes the actual historical story. The mutiny ended in failure as did the 1905 revolution, but this is left out of the film. The Odessa Steps massacre actually took place elsewhere, and was not interrupted by the guns of the battleship.

However, it is worth considering how far Battleship Potemkin is unique in this use of dramatic licence.

One film in the list of Ten Films That Shook The World that certainly bears comparison with Battleship Potemkin is Schindler's List. It too is based on an historical story and the filmmakers went to great lengths in filming to recreate that past (e.g. art designers worked over old photographs in the Holocaust archives to capture the period). Also, like Battleship Potemkin, it uses strong images to generate sympathy for the heroes and victims and antipathy towards the villains of the story it tells.

## Task

Compare and contrast Schindler's List with Battleship Potemkin. Are one or both propaganda? if so, what is it about that film that makes us see it differently from 'mere entertainment'?

Eisenstein and his comrades had no illusions about Hollywood entertainment films of the 1920s. Eisenstein himself learnt some of his skills re-editing imported films to 'improve' their political content.

Returning to Battleship Potemkin, you might question whether everyone in the new society benefited from its 'propaganda'? For example, where do women fit into the scheme of the film? A feminist writer has critically examined images of women in Battleship Potemkin (Judith Mayne, Kino and the Woman Question Feminism and Soviet Silent Film, 1989) She feels that the differences between men and women in the film go beyond that demanded by the times and story depicted. Given the claim of "equality for all", are the images of women in Battleship Potemkin simply dictated by what actually happened in 1905, or is the way these images are composed and presented saying just as much about the position of women in the Soviet Union of the 1920s?

## Task

You could examine the dialectic between style, content and propaganda by examining how you would film an Odessa Steps sequence now. You have a choice of preparing a treatment, storyboard or even doing some filming. Select a story that includes oppression and protest, there are a number of recent examples: the poll tax riots; protests over racist incidents; anti-motorway protests. You need to decide on:

- \* where the steps' sequence figures in the story and why.
- \* who you want the viewer to sympathise with, and who to react against.
- \* how you can achieve this through:
  - the narrative
  - the characters
  - the film style
- \* a key locale for the confrontation - it doesn't need to be steps, but it needs the space for the clash of civilians and authorities.

You can use the methods of Eisenstein, or of a modern filmmaker. Or you can try to be original and do **it** differently. Try and imagine what Eisenstein would have done today, with sound, the handheld camcorder or a steady-cam, and electronic imaging.

### **FURTHER VIEWING AND READING**

Other Eisenstein films can be seen, sometimes at the cinema, all are on video - though their availability will depend on your local video shop. **Strike** and **October** give examples of typage, montage, repetition, and other aspects of Eisenstein's art. A number of films by other Soviet filmmakers can be seen - Vertov, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko are important directors.

#### **Eisenstein's writings are steadily appearing in English:**

**Eisenstein Writings 1922 -1934**, edited by R. Taylor (British Film Institute, 1988).  
**The Film Sense**, translated and edited by Jay Leda (Faber and Faber, 1986).  
**Film Essays**, edited by Jay Leyda (Praeger Publishers, 1970).  
**Battleship Potemkin**, Film Script, translated by C. Aitken (Faber and Faber, 1988).  
**Immoral Memories, An Autobiography**, translated by H. Marshall (Peter Owen, 1983).

#### **There is a vast library about both Eisenstein and the film Battleship Potemkin:**

**Potemkin, a shot by shot presentation**, David Mayer (Da Capo, 1990).  
*A detailed study of the print held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.*  
**Sergei M. Eisenstein, A Biography**, Marie Seton (Dobson, 1978).  
**The Cinema of Eisenstein**, David Bordwell (Harvard UP., 1993).  
**The Battleship Potemkin**, edited by H. Marshall (Avon, 1978).

#### **Books which provide helpful background:**

**Film History: An Introduction**, K. Thomson and D. Bordwell (McGraw-Hill, 1993). *Has a section on both Soviet filmmaking and the work and theories of Eisenstein.*

#### **Out-of-print, but available through inter-library loan:**

**Kino, A History of Russian and Soviet Film**, Jay Leyda (George Allen & Unwin, 1973).

You can see a mock-up of an agit-prop train, with examples of Soviet film and other silent film at the Museum of the Moving Image on the South Bank in London.