

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Battleship Potemkin 1925

Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948)

STORY

It is hard to imagine a film, even a propaganda film, more tightly locked into its historical setting, than this film directed for 1925 release by the 27 year old Sergei Eisenstein. The film commemorates the twentieth year anniversary of the first Russian Revolution—the preface to the True Revolution of 1917—in which popular dissatisfaction with Tsarist rule, and frustration at an antique and inefficient economy drove millions into the streets in protest. The significance of this revolution, in heralding the True Revolution, which opened the Soviet twentieth century, is great in retrospect, and in its time, the formative first quarter of the last century, it was a world-historical landmark. And the event targeted in Eisenstein's film, the mutiny of the crew of the Russian Imperial fleet's Black Sea naval vessel Potemkin, was one of the brilliant moments of popular uprising in the course of the Russian 'move for liberation' from the Tsars. Eisenstein seems to have penetrated, in this single silent film, into the romantic and liberating essence of the revolutionary spirit.

Act I. The silence—for this is a silent film-- accentuates the spectral fierce light on the Potemkin, as two waking sailors are muttering to one another about their readiness for rebellion against their conditions and their society. As though to illustrate the point, an officer enters the bunk room and starts to berate one of the still sleeping sailors on board. The commotion of the reprimand awakens Vakulinchuk, the sailor who will most effectively ignite the revolutionary spirit among the men on board. True to character he arranges to speak with each of his fellow sailors, as they wake, to encourage them to support the revolution. At this point the scene cuts to the upstairs deck—a sharp cut of montage; the technique on which Eisenstein saw himself as an innovator—and we find the sailors commenting on the lousy quality of the meat being prepared for the crew. To the sailors it seems that they are being served worms, but the ship's doctor, who comes over to inspect, assures the men that the insects they are studying are not worms, but maggots—which can easily be washed off the food before eating. Despite being assured that their food is wholesome, the sailors refuse, to a man, to eat anything but bread and canned vegetables.

Act. II. Those who refuse meat are ordered onto the top deck, read the last religious rites, and covered with a tarpaulin, so that they can be shot for insubordination. As they are about to meet their makers, at the gunshot of the crew officers, Vakulinchuk cries out that the officers should lower their guns, which takes place—and the revolution thus begins. There is a chaotic melee on board, in which the mutineers take over the ship, though at the cost of the life of Vakulinchuk, who emerges as a hero from the struggle.

Act. III. Upon arrival in the port of Odessa, the mutineered ship is eagerly greeted by the residents, who are on the whole disposed to favor rebellion against the oppressive Tsarist pressure. The residents greet the mutineers as heroes, but in their exuberance and celebration they attract the concerned attention of the Odessa police, who are fully intertwined with the Tsarist regime.

Act IV. Deep conflict, between the Odessa authorities and the forces of rebellion, explodes. A contingent of Cossacks descends the Odessa steps, a majestic flight of stairs leading from the port to the center of the city, and as they descend, in lock step intransigence, they pause periodically to fire into the crowd. At the foot of the steps, ready to catch citizens in flight, ride Imperial cavalry, ready to complete the slaughter. Scenes of dreadful horror—a baby in a baby carriage, bouncing to death down the steep stairs; a woman with her face slashed, blood streaming from her mouth and eyes; the stomping boots of the inexorable Cossacks. In revenge, the mutineers train their guns on the Odessa opera house, where a commission of Tsarist bigwigs are currently meeting. Buzz

on the streets Indicates that a squadron of Tsarist vessels are on their way to Odessa to squash the Potemkin rebellion.

Act V. The final act: the mutineers decide to take the Potemkin out into the Odessa harbor, to face the Tsarist squadron. Just as the fatal battle gets, the sailors of the Tsarist squadron decide not to fire, but to express their solidarity with the mutineers. They allow the Potemkin, flying the red flag, to make its way out to sea, passing through their own ships. The revolution has at this point truly been ratified.

THEMES

Rebellion In a sense the whole film is about **rebellion**, the rebellion of mutineering sailors and of rumbling crowds in Odessa. The precise spark to rebellion, on board the Potemkin, is ignited by the discovery of maggots in the sailors' food, and then by the outcry of Vakulinchuk, at the moment when the Imperial administration of the Potemkin is about to shoot the tarpaulin-covered sailors on deck.

Revulsion. The worm or maggot covered meat on the Potemkin sounds the alarm bell of revulsion. The sailors on board the ship are being treated worse than animals, sadistically. The refusal of the ship doctor, to react appropriately to this violation of human respect, is a turning point for the men on board.

Violence The first outpouring of violence takes place on board the Potemkin, when the tarpaulin-covered sailors break onto the open deck and take control of the ship by brute force. It is in this outbreak that Vakulinchuk is killed.

Unity The broadest expression of unity, in this film designed to show the unity of rebellion, occurs when the citizens of Odessa join with the sailors of the Potemkin, in a single outburst of protest against the Tsarist rulers of the city of Odessa.

CHARACTYERS

Vakulinchuk is the leader of the mutinous crew aboard the Potemkin, and the prodding spokesperson, among the crew, for the rights of the sailors and the large social protest movement which is sweeping across Russia. Vakulinchuk is killed during the mutiny on board.

Chief Officer **Giliarovsky** is emblematic of the officer cadre on the Potemkin. He is uninterested in the situation of the sailors, and when the soldiers stand around gasping at the meat, Giliarovsky forces the sailors to leave the area, so that the cook can prepare borscht. The officer cadre at its worst.

The woman in the pince-nez shot in the face:an emblematic visual take from the terrified Odessans on the stairs down which the Cossacks were descending. The woman's glasses have been soldered into her cheek bones, and her face is a rictus of bloody terror. (The painter Francis Bacon called this image a catalyst for his work.)

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

VAKULINCHUK

Character Vakulinchuk, the most vocal of the rebellious sailors on the Potemkin, remains a simple heroic figure. It is he who talks up the revolution, to the men on the ship, he who cries out in protest against the upcoming shooting of the mutineers, he who, even in death, becomes a hero to the citizens of Odessa, for the stand he has taken against Tsarist repression.

Parallels. Howard Fast's novel, *Spartacus* (1960), gets inside the mind of a powerful Roman slave leader, who leads a slave rebellion against the oppression of the Roman state. He fully embraces the spirit that animates the mutineers aboard the Potemkin. In our time films lead the way in opening the rebellious spirit: one thinks of Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), about a workers' rebellion in the year before the

1905 Revolution; of *The Battle of Algiers* (1966); or of the 1992 film, *Malcolm X*, which boils with one man's refusal to bow to white supremacy

Illustrative moments

Participative. As the film opens, the crew of the *Potemkin* are just awaking. Two of the sailors, Matyushenko and Vakulinchuk, are discussing the rebellious political climate around them, and Vakulinchuk begins to address the waking crewmen one by one, urging them to consider shaking off their chains.

Supplicative. After those of the crew, who have refused to eat the ship's food, are given the last rites, and readied for execution, Vakulinchuk—who understands the political currents on board the ship—begs the Imperial troops not to shoot; he has correctly calculated that they will hesitate before firing, thus enabling the crew to assault and overpower the officers.

Heroized. In the onboard skirmish that follows the chaotic struggle on board, Vakulinchuk is killed. From this moment on he becomes and remains the symbolic martyr of the rebellion.

Discussion questions

Battleship Potemkin has been widely praised, from the start. Even though it is transparently propaganda, it catches our usual contemporary distaste for that genre; we feel we are witnessing a plea on behalf of human liberty in general. At the Brussels World Fair, in 1958, this film was named 'the greatest film of all time.' Would it still be considered that great? Would you consider it that great? What, if anything, does its greatness consist of?