

Discuss how the film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) illustrates Sergei Eisenstein's claim that Cinema is a revolutionary art form.

Of the many that are available, the version of Battleship Potemkin that I used for any reference or analysis was from the German Film Library Museum of Film and TV (see references for link).

One primary idea prominently visible in Eisenstein's work is his revolutionary ethos that is seen both in the political pertinence and artistic ingenuity of his films. This essay will outline the elements of *Battleship Potemkin*'s (Dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1925) structure and production that illustrates his ideas of cinema being a revolutionary art form by engaging with Eisenstein's essays and some contemporary writings about Eisenstein. To do this I shall first discuss the dialectic philosophy of *Potemkin* and its director, before considering the sociological themes that run throughout the film.

The two aforementioned aspects of revolutionary filmic approaches - the political and the artistic - are not simply separate, but integrated and can complicate any discussion involving Eisenstein's oeuvre. For this reason I shall first address the director's artistic and philosophical ideologies. According to Fredrick Engels, "dialectics is nothing more than the science of the general laws of motion and development of Nature, human society and thought." (Engels, 1878 p.179) It is this philosophical mind-set that fuelled Eisenstein. In his renowned essay, 'A Dialectic Approach to Film Form' (Eisenstein, 1963 [1929]), he opens by explaining how a dialectic approach "is a *dynamic* concept of things: Being... Synthesis..." (p.45) Both terms denote philosophical ideas of conflict, something already established by Eisenstein as "the fundamental principle for the existence of every art-work and art-form." (p.46) It is clear that the foundations for creating meaning in film to Eisenstein were built upon the chemistry of separate events colliding, most transparently seen in his idea of montage; "...Montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots - shots even opposite to one another" (p.49) suggesting that the collective body of shots in sequence is of a greater meaning than the sum of its individual parts.

I suggest that *Potemkin*'s finest example of this is in Act Five, during the ship's charge towards the squadron on the horizon where a mix of interior and exterior shots of the ship's movement and the crew's angst builds to the film's climax. Shots of the ship's engine parts furiously pumping are followed by exterior shots of the *Potemkin* crashing through the water and emitting clouds of smoke. Gradually the shots become shorter, reflecting the increased speed of the ship. Here, the scene's meaning is birthed from the collision of montage: Isolated, each shot of engine mechanics, ship smoke, or water crashing off the side of a ship would fail to convey to viewers that the ship is accelerating, nor would it create an increasingly tense atmosphere. This meaning and rhythm is only achieved by the collision of the film's seemingly unrelated shots being edited at an increasing pace.

Like other Formalists in Soviet cinema, Eisenstein saw shot and montage as the “basic elements of cinema.” (p.48) The Soviet Formalists believed that montage was the essential distinguishing feature from other art forms. It was such a significant attribute of a film’s construction that, to Eisenstein, the acknowledgement of dialectical mind-set of filmmaking as a synthesis of emotion and intellect - or, as he describes, “art and science...” - through collision was nothing less than an “embryonic step towards a totally new form of film expression.” (p.63) This progressive ideology may be one that reflects a revolutionary agenda aspiring to re-establish what Eisenstein deemed to be the traditional construction of a film.

I argue that this philosophy is demonstrated in *Potemkin* in Act 2, where the ship’s priest prays and the firing squad is interrupted by Vakulinchuk (21:45-23:01). Here, a synthesis of emotion and intellect is created through the collision of shots. After the priest prays that God will “Help the disobedient see reason” we see a group of anonymous sailors underneath the blanket. As tension builds a number of close-ups of fellow sailors and crew members appear, guiding the audience’s emotions according to the nature of various characters. This directs the emotional, but the intellectual is further directed through shots of the ship’s body parts being intercut with the confrontation and, most importantly, the priest hammering his hand with a cross. The collision of such imagery allows audiences to draw individual conclusions regarding fate, God and reason. It is Eisenstein’s use of montage that positions the viewer to understand the sailors to be heroically working as a body of men, and possibly compels viewers to interpret the ‘reason’ that is ‘being seen’ to be the inhumanity of the oppressive crew. This showcases Eisenstein’s idea of a synthesis of emotion and intellect in practice, an example of film “freed from traditional limitations.” (p.63)

Continuing the discussion of syntheses, Richard Taylor raises an interesting point about the structure of *Potemkin* playing a role in demonstrating the emotional effect of conflict:

“This structure ensures that each part of the film contains within it the tensions involved in the dialectical clash between thesis and antithesis that is resolved in a concluding synthesis...” (Taylor, 2000, p.15)

Speaking again of the collisions in *Potemkin*, Taylor suggests that the film’s pacing has a direct relationship with Eisenstein’s philosophy of oppositions creating meaning. In *The Structure of the Film*, Eisenstein confirms this by stating that the five episodes are “totally unlike the others, but piercing and, and as it were, cementing them, there is a repeat.” (Eisenstein, 1963 [1939], p.163) It is clear that, though montage played a leading role in constructing the film’s emotion, Eisenstein also deemed *Potemkin*’s structure to be an important form of construction that, like montage, could create meaning through its colliding components. Soon after, Eisenstein displays how the philosophy of a

synthesis of opposites within a film's structure is a leap "from quality to quantity" that, "in the interpretation of social phenomena, is present in those revolutions to which social development and the movement of society are directed." (p.172) That is to say, the larger significance of a collective effort (the quantity) over the individual parts (the quality) is demonstrated in the film, in this case in the sociological and political interpretation of the word 'revolution'.

On the topic of social development, I will now draw attention to the political side of *Potemkin* and consider that, though dialectic considerations are key to understanding Eisenstein to a fuller extent, they are not necessarily the dominant motives behind his writings. In fact, Robert Stam suggests that "[for] Eisenstein, the cinema was above all transformative, ideally triggering social practice rather than aesthetic contemplation, shocking the spectator into consciousness of contemporary problems." (Stam, 2000, p.41-42) *Battleship Potemkin* is a fitting example of this, as its plot revolves around a mutiny and as such demonstrates that these ideas of collision and revolution are not limited to philosophy. It should be remembered, at least for Eisenstein, ideas of artistic and political movements are not mutually exclusive. The remainder of this essay will identify the elements of Eisenstein's writings that reflect the political prominence in *Battleship Potemkin*, whilst attempting to identify when these elements become parallel with his philosophical ideas.

Being made for the 20th anniversary of the 1905 Russian Revolution, the political themes within the narrative are obvious; it is recognisable how the plot of a crew mutinying against a ship's captain is political, for example. The discursive elements of this inquiry, rather, can be found in the film's production. When speaking of *Potemkin*, Eisenstein stated "The slogan 'All for one and one for all' was not confined to the screen, "because we are making films... for us all." (Eisenstein, 1988[1926], p.76) A sense of pride and unity is prominent and there is an indisputable link between this and the socialist political subject matter of the film. An example of this is with Eisenstein's use of typage. A common occurrence in Eisenstein's work, typage "was a technique by which abstract, social processes could be concretized in a character through external, physical traits associated with particular classes." (Smith, 1995, p.198) Eisenstein believed the use of 'real people' in this way was something that was exclusive to Russia "where each and everything is a matter for the state." (Eisenstein, 1988 [1926], p.76) I suggest this is a reflection of the beliefs of the sailors in *Battleship Potemkin*: The revolution, led by Vakulinchuk, celebrates the power of a unified state - not dissimilar to Eisenstein leading a collective force of 'real' non-actors. Upon this consideration, consistencies between Eisenstein's socialist ideologies and *Potemkin*'s unified spirit become apparent and, again, demonstrate Eisenstein's idea of cinema as a revolutionary art.

These political motivations within film are not simply confined to Eisenstein's personal essays. In a fiery letter to Joseph Goebbels, Eisenstein bitterly retorts to Goebbels' "complimentary reference"

(Eisenstein, 1934, p.282) to *Potemkin*. He argues that the National Socialists misunderstood the criteria for a 'good' work of art:

"A genuine work of art is the formally organised striving of a class to consolidate its struggle, its achievements, its social profile in the lasting images of art."

(Eisenstein, 1934, p.282)

This is a total reflection of the narrative in *Battleship Potemkin*, which follows oppressed and struggling sailors that later unify. The consolidation of this social profile through such politically fuelled imagery does not only illustrate *Potemkin* representing the revolutionary aspects of socialism, but also demonstrates Eisenstein's interpretation of 'lasting' art. At this point the artistic and political ideas become integrated. Here, Engels' notion of nature, human society and thought in dialectical motion is seen through collision within *Potemkin*, both in the literal political sense (the ship's mutiny) and the artistic sense (the use of Soviet montage).

To conclude, it is important to be reminded of Eisenstein's viewpoint of philosophy and politics being integrated with art. Upon appreciating these elements working together within Eisenstein's writings the significance of *Battleship Potemkin* becomes clear. It can only then be realised that the film is not only one that remembers a revolution, but one that continued to be remembered throughout the years and led by example in revolutionising cinema as an art form.

Word count: 1663

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