Battleship Potemkin (1926)

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Film Form and Revolution

Context

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia remained a fundamentally feudal country. Ruled by a succession of autocratic and cruel tsars, democracy, let alone Communism, remained a distant dream for most of the people. Our English word "intelligentsia" is of Russian origin and initially referred to the disaffected sector of educated Russians in the nineteenth century who had few ties with the mass of uneducated peasants and who were of no interest to the government, which ruled through a combination of surveillance and force. This intelligentsia often favored radical measures to bring Russia out of feudalism and into modernity. Democratic socialists, utopian visionaries, and Marxist revolutionaries all built their base among the intelligentsia, as did the extraordinary array of artists who gained prominence in the early part of the twentieth century. Many felt they were but biding their time before the government made its incompetence and cruelty so obvious that the new class of industrial workers would rise up in revolt.

A war with Japan for control of Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula in 1904 was intended to bolster support for Tsar Nicholas II's regime, but it went badly. The Russian navy was destroyed by the untested Japanese fleet in the Battle of Tsushima Strait in 1905, and U.S. president Teddy Roosevelt brokered a treaty that deprived Russia of any spoils (and limited Japanese gains). Protests grew as the war continued; work stoppages occurred across the country; and over two hundred thousand St. Petersburg workers took to the streets to urge the implementation of reforms they naively believed the tsar would surely understand as fair, such as an eight-hour workday and a one ruble (50 cents) per day wage. The tsar had fled the capital, and his

officers ordered troops to fire on the workers. Hundreds of workers died on that "Bloody Sunday" in January 1905. Other uprisings occurred: soldiers stationed at Kronshtadt and sailors aboard the battleship *Potemkin* in the tsar's Black Sea fleet mutinied, but these revolts were also contained. The tsarist government remained in power until World War I, and another set of hardships and defeats set the stage for the successful Communist revolution of 1917.

Lenin's government inherited a country in serious economic disarray and also had to wage a civil war against internal opponents. In the early years of the Soviet Union, the arts, and film in particular, suffered from shortages of raw materials, studio facilities, and a reliable means of distribution. No shortage of polemical or radical new ideas existed, however. Building on the innovations of prerevolutionary, modernist artists such as Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, and Vladimir Tatlin, a new wave of Constructivist artists moved to center stage. Combining a modernist emphasis on form and a Communist emphasis on mobilizing the masses, Constructivist artists embraced new technologies (steel, concrete, engines, and movement) while rejecting the "bourgeois" celebration of the individual hero. Easel painting, with its portraits and landscapes of the privileged and powerful, and narratives, with their stress on individual heroes and a series of linear actions, were cast aside in favor of found materials, collage assemblies, and abstract painting, on the one hand, and of stories that told of class struggle and provoked audience engagement, on the other.

The famous poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and the artist El Lissitzky both toured Germany in 1922. They brought back radical new ideas about the scathingly satiric photomontage work of John Heartfield and others, in which photographs and slogans were "doctored" by altering the original design and juxtaposing new elements to subvert the originally intended meaning. For example, an image of a Nazi swastika was remade in the form of ax blades dripping blood and given the title "Blood and Iron." Carrying the radical implications of such work forward, Alexander Rodchenko wrote, "Art has no place in modern life. It will continue to exist as long as there is a mania for the romantic and as long as there are people who love beautiful lies and deception" (253). Constructivists often saw themselves less as artists than as engineers, less as part of the former intelligentsia than as

comrades with the workers and peasants who were to be the heart and soul of a new society. It was against this background that the work of Sergei Eisenstein emerged.

In 1923, Eisenstein published his first essay, "Montage of Attractions," in which he cited German predecessors such as George Grosz and John Heartfield and the photomontage work of his Constructivist colleague Rodchenko as models for the type of theater and film he wished to create. "Attractions," for Eisenstein, were similar to circus acts, elements of a production that galvanized attention. Their organization into a whole followed from the goal of engaging and moving the audience rather than from the goal of producing a detached representation of a situation or event. As Eisenstein put it:

> The attraction . . . is every aggressive moment . . . that brings to light in the spectator those senses or that psychology that influence his experience—every element that can be verified and mathematically calculated to produce certain emotional shocks in a proper order within the totality—the only means by which it is possible to make the final ideological conclusion perceptible. (230–31)

Eisenstein wrote this essay while he was still working in the theater, after having trained as an engineer before the revolution, but the "montage of attractions" that he described came to greatest fruition in his film work. Montage became a highly elaborated concept for Eisenstein. Montage represents both a theory, in which the juxtaposition of distinct elements generates new meanings absent from the individual components, something like the relationship between letters and the words constructed from them, and a practice, in which filmmaking hinges not on the mimetic or realist representation of reality but on the filmmaker's ability to give to the assembly of fragments and pieces an interpretation that leads the audience to a new level of understanding. Juxtaposing shots in surprising ways allowed the viewer to grasp concepts and ideas that would have escaped attention in a form more fully devoted to realist representation. Eisenstein wrote numerous articles about montage and applied his evolving theories about it to all the films he made. Montage bore resemblance to the artistic principle of collage, and it was an important way of adapting cinematic techniques,

especially editing, to serve Constructivist principles that linked a rejection of traditional art practices with an embrace of new media and technologies and dedicated itself to the revolutionary goal of social transformation.

Eisenstein's theory of montage also borrowed from the work of the Formalist literary critics, who maintained that art's impact and importance was essentially a matter of form, not content, and that the purpose of artistic form was to prompt the beholder to see things in a new way. "Formalism" was, in the early 1920s, a positively charged synonym for innovation in the arts that became, by the late 1920s, under the tightening grip of Stalin and the party apparatus, a negatively charged code word for elitism and detachment from the masses. Victor Shklovsky captured the political potency of Formalism in his groundbreaking essay of 1917, "Art as Technique":

> The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (12)

Written with a typically Formalist preoccupation with form and its effects, Shklovsky's point nonetheless has vivid political implications. Realism, in this scheme, would only reinforce existing habits of perception and confirm the existing order of things. Constructivism and Formalism, however, confront the habitual, render it strange, and open the door to new ways of perceiving and acting. Shklovksy cites as an example a scene in "Kohlstomer," a story by Tolstoy in which a horse is flogged to goad it to perform more work. The story is told from the point of view of the horse. The horse observes what is being done to it with a mixture of bewilderment and insightfulness, which causes the reader to see the violence used to extract additional labor in a new way. The unquestioned cruelty of a customary action stands exposed as a result of a formal shift in point of view.

Eisenstein sought a similar, defamiliarizing effect in film. He chose a "montage of attractions" to prompt the viewer to see the familiar in an altogether unfamiliar way. "Bad editing" served a new goal. It did not

expose the incompetence of the director to achieve the smooth continuity favored by popular cinema. Instead, it tested his skill at seeing things in an entirely new way. The theory and practice of montage sought to draw out the political implications from actions and events by using form to galvanize the viewer to a new level of insight.[1]

Analysis

Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin) is a classic story of heightened political consciousness set during the failed revolution of 1905 and organized around the actual mutiny of the crew of this one battleship. In such stories the hero undergoes a set of life experiences that lead him or her to see things anew, specifically, to see how the larger social forces of capitalism and class struggle shape the more particular events that might otherwise be explained as accident, fate, or the product of individual will and determination. A heightened consciousness sees connection instead of disconnection, unity instead of alienation, class solidarity rather than personal pursuits. Individual experience becomes located in relation to the larger social and economic structures that govern social existence. To change the possibilities for social existence means not a Horatio Alger-like tale of individual determination so much as a direct assault on the already established socioeconomic structure. For someone who achieves a heightened political consciousness, this ability to see underlying linkages and structures becomes the guiding principle for his or her actions.

Eisenstein's approach to this type of story, however, differed from the work of his contemporaries, such as Vsevolod Pudovkin, who, in films such as *Mother* (1926), *The End of St. Petersburg* (1927), and *Storm Over Asia* (1928), told tales of how an individual character achieved a heightened political consciousness. Eisenstein deemphasized the individual and stressed the group. One of Eisenstein's great achievements as a filmmaker is that he provided a model for a cinema of groups,

[1]Noël Burch writes, regarding Eisenstein's editing technique, "These 'bad' position/direction matches are of course meant to emphasize moments of tension in the narrative flow" (91). "Tension" is too vague a word for Eisenstein's attempt to shift perception from a literal imitation to a metaphoric interpretation of reality, but Burch is certainly correct to stress that Eisenstein's style can only be judged "bad" if it is judged in terms of the conventions he deliberately set out to overturn.

crowds, and masses rather than individuals. In *Battleship Potemkin* he does so by telling the story of three distinct examples of political awakening over the course of five acts. The first example involves the sailors aboard the *Potemkin* awakening to the systematic abuse that their indenture to the tsar entails (Act I, "The Men and the Maggots," and Act II, "Drama on the Quarterdeck," sometimes titled "Drama in the Harbor"). In the second awakening, the citizens of Odessa realize and express their solidarity with the mutinous crew of the *Potemkin* (Act III, "Appeal from the Dead," and Act IV, "The Odessa Steps"). In the final awakening, sailors aboard the rest of the tsar's Baltic fleet realize that they and the *Potemkin*'s crew have the tsar as their common foe (Act V, "Meeting the Squadron").

Each awakening broadens the political scope of the film, from the revolt of one ship's crew through the rising up of one town to the rebellion of the entire fleet. Although the film concludes on a victorious note, with the battleship *Potemkin* being welcomed by the remainder of the fleet, this was clearly a form of poetic license by Eisenstein, who knew full well that the revolution of 1905 failed. The film's "montage of attractions," however, serves to demonstrate how heightened political consciousness can lead to successful revolution. In that sense, *Battleship Potemkin* is a film of retroactive wish fulfillment: it converts a historical defeat into a utopian victory. It does so by modeling, through its montage effects, how a revolutionary political consciousness perceives the world and sets about transforming it.

Battleship Potemkin was Eisenstein's second film. His first, *Strike* (1925), also addresses the events of 1905, but through the story of a strike among factory workers that is broken by the tsar's spies, the company's ruthless owners, and the repressive brutality of the military. It, too, ends on an optimistic, defiant note, as the eyes of a worker spring open in extreme close-up and one word, "Remember," appears on the screen. An awakening to political consciousness remains to be completed outside the domain of film form by the audience. In *Battleship Potemkin*, Eisenstein sets out to provide a more elaborate model, within the confines of the story itself, of what coming to political consciousness might be like. Like a good orator, he does not do so once but, instead, repeats himself, three times, so that the "lesson," as Bertolt Brecht might have called it, is driven home forcefully.

The first awakening introduces us to the central characters of Vakulinchuk and Matyushenko, two sailors who play pivotal roles in Acts I and V, respectively, without becoming so central as to take the role of protagonist or hero. The opening shots are of a turbulent sea beating against the shore. Without geographic specification these shots invite a metaphoric interpretation, especially on reviewing the film. They serve to foreshadow greater turbulence to come and to introduce the sea, a fluid, dynamic medium, as the stage on which many of the events will take place. Vakulinchuk and Matyushenko are engaged in conversation on the battleship, but not about the weather. They already agree they must support the revolution (of 1905) and find a way to act.

This lively discussion yields to shots of the ship's crew asleep. Taking the interpretation of the opening shots as a cue, these images can also be read metaphorically: the scene reveals the crew to be politically asleep, while an activist vanguard debates what to do. These shots of sailors sleeping in hammocks strung at odd angles to one another also reveal Eisenstein's penchant for montage within the frame. Each shot's composition involves angles and juxtapositions that set up contrasts and conflicts, sometimes formal ones of light and dark, sometimes political ones of domination and submission. They also convey a sensuous quality. The repose of the sailors is not simply a matter of a physiological need for sleep. Their bodies and their collective arrangement exude a sensual energy that intensifies the viewer's response to these men. Here is latent energy with the potential to be harnessed to a common purpose.

The opening scenes also introduce another crucial concept of Eisenstein's: typage (*tipazh* in Russian). Individual actors were not chosen for their acting ability (many were, in fact, amateurs, and some were members of the filmmaking team); instead they were chosen for how well they looked the part. Typage produced, for Eisenstein, another form of "attraction." The audience sees a character and immediately recognizes him as a sailor or officer just by his appearance. The character is not recognized by name as an individual person, or as a film "star," but is recognized as a social type, a member of a profession, or an example of a class. Similar to typecasting, but without the attempt to marry actor to part that typecasting usually implies, typage, when

joined to montage and the extreme fragmentation of performances, allowed Eisenstein to concentrate exclusively on qualities of physical appearance and movement. Eisenstein's chief assistant, Grigori Alexandrov, for example, played the ship's officer Giliarovsky based on his looks rather than his acting skills or class allegiance.

This approach to acting, which is also one of the qualities that linked Eisenstein to the birth of the documentary film tradition, means that he chose not to depend on trained performers to engage the audience through their acting abilities. That engagement came from montage. The juxtaposition of successive shots represented the conflicts and contradictions that traditional acting would allow to emerge from *within* an individual. Montage achieved an effect that for other directors came from the performance of trained actors portraying characters in a powerful way.

In this sense, Eisenstein's theory of montage represents a break with Aristotelian drama. Instead of achieving catharsis through the story of an individual character's struggles, catharsis occurs through the effect of film form, montage itself. And instead of a tragic drama, centering on the fatal flaw of a single character, Eisenstein presents a social comedy, centering on the unification of people according to class allegiance and a common goal. Eisenstein does not need "well-developed" characters to convey the sense of social integration, which Aristotelian comedy often symbolizes in the form of a marriage (the conventional "boy gets girl" plot), since he can rely on montage to provide a way of visibly and powerfully bringing disparate peoples and distant places together.

After a ship's officer beats one of the sailors, Vakulinchuk exclaims, "Will we be last to rise?" The images clearly peg the larger political meaning of revolt to the men rising from their slumber. Things quickly come to a head when the sailors refuse to eat a stew prepared with rotten meat, something the ship's doctor (also cast on the principle of typage) literally refuses to see. He uses his pince-nez as a magnifying glass, but the maggots teeming over the meat are, for him, mere eggs that a little water will wash away. Again, Eisenstein invites a metaphoric interpretation rather than an emotional identification with individual characters: those with a vested interest in the status quo cannot see the exploitative or oppressive nature of their relation to those in the subordinate classes. Montage allows the viewer to understand how

those in the subordinated classes must see things for what they are, rather than for what they can be made to appear to be. A brief close-up shot of the meat, for example, shows conclusively that maggots are present and the doctor wrong.

The exploitative nature of this episode is brought home when Eisenstein provides shots of the men buying supplementary rations from the ship's commissary. What the navy does not provide they must provide for themselves, but as an expense drawn from their own meager wages. One anonymous sailor is not quite so resigned. Staring at the motto engraved on a dinner plate, "Give us this day our daily bread," a motto that would also remind a Soviet audience in 1926 of the function of religion under the tsars as part of the state's political machinery, this sailor has finally had enough. He smashes the plate, a microcosmic "smashing" that will soon expand to the more profound destruction of a totalitarian system.

Eisenstein films this inciting incident with the plate according to his concept of a montage of attractions. He is not interested in a smooth continuity that would capture the event in real time, as if it were simply a real event. It is, for him, a metaphoric event, and it needs to be represented in a way that underscores its metaphoric significance. Hence, the smashing of the plate occurs through a montage of shots that breaks the action down into smaller pieces that less add up to the actual event than reveal its wider importance. The sailor's action of raising his arm with the plate and bringing it down so that the plate shatters on a table is captured in multiple shots that defy any strict sense of linear continuity. The shots stretch the action out in time; they repeat elements of the motion, and they intensify its emotional impact, but in a conceptual sense, detached from any audience identification with the individual sailor himself.

This opening salvo of rebellion propels the film into the second act, "Drama on the Quarterdeck." The ship's officers will not countenance defiance, even if it involves rotten meat. The order is given to identify the men who have refused to eat the meat, i.e., the men who won't swallow the lies and intimidation that has been their lot. Eisenstein uses long shots to provide images of the sailors massing on the quarterdeck and close-ups of Vakulinchuk urging the men to gather together to combine their strength as one defiant opponent. The order is given to cast a tarpaulin over some of the sailors who are slow to join

the others, an act that divides the men and poses the issue of class alliance in stark terms: Will the rest of the sailors witness the execution of their fellow crew members, or will they act to defend them?

By this point in the film, it is also clear that Eisenstein has rejected the traditional narrative pattern in which a hero embarks on a quest or responds to a challenge. In classical dramatization, the bulk of the narrative involves the successive stages of the journey or investigation undertaken by the hero, and the story's resolution brings closure to the initial dilemma or challenge. Vakulinchuk and Matyushenko are the only two sailors identified by name, but the quest or challenge is not theirs alone. We do not follow their journey, and we do not observe events through their eyes. These men and, soon, other similar characters enter the story at crucial moments to contribute to the action, but they do not drive the action. Like the others, they respond to the events as they unfold but do so in a way that contributes leadership and demonstrates a heightened form of political consciousness.

The crucial moment arrives: an order to fire on the shrouded sailors brings up the rifles of the ship's militia. An officer commands, "Fire!" Vakulinchuk responds, "Brothers!" The order to punish the rebels is met with the injunction to recognize commonality. Who is the enemy? Which side are you on? These crucial questions hover, suspended during the time it takes the militia to come to a decision. As soon as their rifles falter, however, the sailors burst into action. The cry of "Brothers!" has awakened them to their common cause, and soon it is the officers who are being chased around the deck and hurled into the sea. The ship's priest attempts to rise above the fray, invoking religion as an apolitical vehicle of reconciliation, but the sailors will have none of it. Played in some of the scenes by Eisenstein himself, the priest is cast down a flight of stairs and reduced to an impotent onlooker.

Eisenstein concludes Act II with the death of Vakulinchuk, a victim of the ship's officers before they are finally routed. Vakulinchuk's death takes on metaphoric significance as a symbol of the price that must be paid for freedom. Given that the film was made two years after Lenin's own death, the loss of this brave leader also carries a more particular historical resonance that has faded with the passage of time. Vakulinchuk's sudden death and disappearance from the plot, though, like the death of Marion Crane in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock,

1960), does galvanize further events. These events expand the action outward onto a broadening social plane.

The expansion begins with Vakulinchuk's funeral tent, set up on the waterfront docks of Odessa, the harbor to which the mutinous crew takes the *Potemkin*. As in Dziga Vertov's extraordinary portrait of Moscow, *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), the port city awakens and comes to life, but not in order to carry out the routine affairs of everyday life so much as to demonstrate a heightened political consciousness by paying tribute to this fallen hero. Eisenstein begins the process in the dawn, with the funeral tent in the middle of a long shot devoid of people. Slowly, a man approaches out of the background, then two women approach in a sinuous trajectory from the foreground, and then two men from the opposite corner of the background. It is as if the people are beginning to encircle and embrace Vakulinchuk from all sides. Other shots show streams of people filling the passageways and avenues that lead to the funeral site.

This is Eisenstein at his finest. Masses of individuals propel the action forward. Eisenstein does not need to cut to "typical" workers or civil servants to give us points of identification. He fashions the citizens of Odessa into a single character composed of many parts but all streaming toward the same site for the same purpose in shots that are memorable for their formal elegance and political persuasiveness. The city, like the ship's sailors, has awakened, come together, and acted as one in opposition to an oppressive regime.

In this sequence, the last to feature Vakulinchuk, Eisenstein establishes an approach to the relation between the masses and a leader that contrasts significantly with the approach later adopted in the Fascist documentary *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935) and in the democratic documentary film series *Why We Fight* (Frank Capra, 1942–45). Riefenstahl's film celebrates the dynamic, galvanizing leader above all (Adolf Hitler) and reduces those who cluster around him to an anonymous, mindless mass. Capra's film series celebrates the task given to the ordinary American soldier to combat Fascism in World War II but uses a didactic voice-over commentary to explain the task to citizens and soldiers who are not shown as capable of making decisions on their own. Eisenstein, by contrast, locates power and decision making squarely in the hands of the people. The leader is dead;

he can only provide a symbolic center, not actual leadership. Responsibility passes from the vanguard leader to the massed citizenry. Each film served the needs of a specific government to win the hearts and minds of its subjects, but each did so in a distinct manner.

Eisenstein embodies this transfer of responsibility in the speeches delivered at the funeral site. A large crowd has gathered, and different male and female speakers address the group, declaring, in one case, "We won't forget," a clear response to the injunction to "Remember" that concluded *Strike*. As the speakers exhort the crowd, Eisenstein assembles his montage of attractions, among which are fleeting shots of fists being gradually clenched. Every character we see bobs and sways within the frame. Like the waves that beat on the shore at the film's beginning, the crowd exhibits a force and vitality of its own. And like the smashing of the dinner plate aboard the *Potemkin*, the shots of clenching fists violate a realist representation of time. The process is drawn out and incorporates more than one person's fist. Begun with one speaker, the fist motif reaches its climax with another speaker as the mass of citizens thrust their fists in the air and declare their solidarity with the *Potemkin*'s crew.

More speeches occur aboard the battleship as the citizens come out to the ship in their boats to express solidarity and deliver food. This display of generosity, of course, contrasts with the display of callous indifference represented by the attempts of the ship's officers to foist rotten meat on the sailors. But just as the sailors' refusal to stomach such treatment provoked the wrath of the officers, so this refusal to treat the sailors as traitors provokes the tsar's military to carry out its own brutal retribution.

Act IV contains the most famous episode in *Battleship Potemkin*, and one of the most famous in all of cinema—the military's attack against the town's citizens on the Odessa steps. It is a prime example of how the principle of a montage of attractions can expand certain decisive moments out of all realistic proportion. This entire act adds only slightly to the overall story. But like song-and-dance routines, which do not normally advance the narrative of most musicals significantly, the "Odessa Steps" sequence gives the most vivid and memorable embodiment to Eisenstein's idea of montage as the essence of cinema. Like the sailors trapped under the tarpaulin, the citizens, cornered on the Odessa steps, are an easy target for the murderous Cossacks, but

in this case the attempt to call out "Brothers!" is to no avail. A woman on the stairs attempts to appeal to the soldiers' sense of decency and commonality with the people, but she is butchered with a saber blade and her glasses shattered; a mother is shot and her baby plummets down the stairs in its carriage, and another mother carries her dead son upward toward the advancing soldiers, pleading for help to no avail. The ensuing massacre, despite the battleship's own violent response, forces the mutinous sailors to leave port and, eventually, to head for a confrontation with the rest of the Baltic Sea fleet.

The individual shots in this sequence are brief and powerful, like fragments from a nightmare. Eisenstein himself, in his essay "The Structure of the Film," sketches out the principles of contrast and contradiction that organize this montage sequence:

> In this acceleration of *downward* rushing movement there is suddenly upsetting opposite movement—*upward:* the *breakneck* movement of the *mass* downward leaps over into a *slowly* solemn movement upward of the mother's *lone* figure, carrying her dead son. . . .
>
> Stride by stride—a leap from dimension to dimension. A leap from quality to quality. So that in the final accounting, rather than in a separate episode (the baby carriage), *the whole method of exposing* the entire event likewise accomplishes its leap: a *narrative* type of exposition is replaced (in the montage rousing of the stone lion) and transferred to the concentrated structure of *imagery*. Visually rhythmic prose leaps over into visually poetic speech. (170–71; italics in the original)

This passage echoes Eisenstein's earlier remarks, in which the montage of attractions amounts to "every element that can be verified and mathematically calculated to produce certain emotional shocks in a proper order within the totality—the only means by which it is possible to make the final ideological conclusion perceptible" ("Montage" 230–31). The desire to produce a *calculated* effect distances the filmmaker from the intensity of the emotion that is thus produced. Eisenstein approaches the challenge of offering a model of how political consciousness can be heightened from the perspective of the engineer he was trained to become, or from the perspective of a Formalist

whose greatest preoccupation is with the formal arrangement of elements that then produce, as an inevitable by-product, the intended emotional effect. Eisenstein's exploration of film form sought a technique adequate to the challenge of representing abstract concepts such as class conflict. He wanted to represent concepts powerfully more than emotions directly. Montage, with the aid of typage to signify groups and classes, was a technique for doing so. Eisenstein's concept of film form sought to raise audience engagement to a higher level, where a metaphoric interpretation becomes as passionately important as realist interpretations had been on an earlier, more rudimentary, bourgeois level.

The final act of *Battleship Potemkin* focuses on the third and broadest political awakening. Following the mutiny of the crew and the outpouring of support from the people, Eisenstein repeats the incident on the quarterdeck with the ship's militia but this time with the entire Baltic Sea fleet representing the preexisting "thesis" of loyalty to the tsar posed against the opposing "antithesis" of insurrection. Will this clash achieve a "synthesis" in revolutionary solidarity? This is the most classically narrative of the five acts in that Eisenstein devotes considerable attention to building suspense. After the sailors confer among themselves and agree that they must confront the rest of the fleet, the act develops as an extended example of editing for suspense. What will happen next? Will the fleet destroy the rebel battleship, can the *Potemkin* surmount enormous odds, and will the defiant sailors live to foment further revolution?

Matyushenko reappears as a galvanizing force, taking the place of Vakulinchuk and the other unidentified speakers who exhorted the crowd in Odessa. He orders the crew to prepare for battle, launching an extended montage that shows the tense, purposeful crew members loading ammunition and swinging the ship's guns into position to fire. Night descends, a time for sleeping and a loss of alertness, reminiscent of the men asleep in their hammocks in Act I. But the spotting of the fleet bearing down on the battleship changes that. Called to action, the men take their battle stations and prepare for the final conflict.

Up until this point in the film, Eisenstein has shown the crew's decision as a collective one, beginning with whether to remain in port or confront the fleet. Everything prepares us for a violent confrontation. Eisenstein succeeds in making visible, in giving tangible form to, the

mounting sense of inevitable conflict in which two opposing classes will fight it out until one survives. But Eisenstein is less concerned with providing an accurate historical representation of class conflict, particularly in the case of a failed revolution, than with providing a model for how ostensible conflict between oppressed groups that have been divided from one another by intimidation, bribery, and sheer habit can be overcome so that the tsar and his terrorist tactics can be identified as the true enemy. The remainder of the fleet is no more the enemy than the shipboard militia or the Odessa-based Cossacks were. Can common interests and shared perceptions prevail? Will habitual, ingrained ways of acting be seen in a new, defamiliarizing light, or will they be blindly, unthinkingly continued?

Matyushenko brings these questions to a focus. It is he who is the first to see things in a different light. Rather than issuing the command to fire, as the ship's officers had done, he issues the command "Signal them to join us." Language, in the form of an appeal, breeches the ostensible gap between the sailors already in mutiny and the fleet's sailors still caught up in habitual obedience. The refusal to eat rotten meat, the smashing of the dinner plate, the appeal to the ship's militia, the speeches at the funeral tent of Vakulinchuk, the (fruitless) appeals to the town's Cossacks, and now this appeal to the rest of the fleet's sailors are instances of symbolic actions that attempt to make something happen. These acts are symbolic because they serve to represent a state of mind and a possible course of conduct rather than to achieve results by physical force. Physical actions (shooting, killing, attacking) rely on material force, whereas symbolic actions (speeches, gestures, expressions) rely on emotional and cognitive impact. Both forms of action give rise to consequences, but they do so by very different means. Violence is clearly associated with the tsar and his instruments of repression; language or symbolic action, with the people and the process of revolution.

The final appeal to the rest of the fleet is the single word "Brothers," a clear refrain from the earlier drama on the quarterdeck, where the same word is uttered by Vakulinchuk. Just as the militia's rifles began to waiver earlier, now the fleet's guns lower and turn away. The *Potemkin* steams forward, its sailors greeted enthusiastically by their comrades aboard the other ships, the officers of which are nowhere to be seen. This conclusion might give the impression that the *Potemkin*

has catalyzed a mutiny by the entire fleet, which will now sail together as one united force. The film's shots lend themselves to this interpretation, which is quite likely the metaphoric and somewhat wishful conclusion Eisenstein desired. The historical facts are somewhat different. The *Potemkin* did come face-to-face with the Baltic fleet and did receive a peaceful reception. The mutinous ship was allowed to pass on its way to Romania, where most of the crew deserted; the ship was subsequently returned to the tsar (Taylor 54). This limited victory did not lead to a conversion of the entire fleet to the side of the revolution, but in the wake of the Communist revolution of 1917, a little historical revision to make earlier events more vivid harbingers of later ones did not seem altogether unreasonable. Revising the past to account for the present is a practice not reserved for specific moments in time or specific forms of government. As a model of how political consciousness can arise and grow to sweep up the citizenry of a country in revolutionary action, *Battleship Potemkin* remains a work of considerable power.

Conclusion

Battleship Potemkin is not just a classic film of importance to the history of film form. It, along with other films by Eisenstein and his contemporaries, has served as a model for political filmmaking around the world, from Gillo Pontecorvo's story of the Algerian independence movement in *The Battle of Algiers* (1965) to Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's account of political struggle in Argentina in *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968). The theory of montage as a way to generate new insight and to shift the emphasis of a film to a metaphoric level has had a lasting impact, but it has not served to guarantee the promotion of heightened political consciousness among viewers, as advocated by Eisenstein. Quite the contrary. The highly rhetorical, persuasion-oriented strategies of Eisenstein have become extremely familiar from television advertising, where typage comes to represent one group above all, the consumer, and from music videos, where montage generates a succession of "attractions" as little more than spectacle. These applications clearly serve ends diametrically opposed to those championed by Eisenstein and many of his fellow filmmakers. Dissociated from a conceptual plane of metaphoric interpretation and firmly

attached to the marketing of commodities, these strategies lose their political radicalism to become tools of the very economic system Eisenstein sought to move beyond.

In the debates of the 1920s in the Soviet Union, Eisenstein and his theories proved highly contentious. Many in the budding film industry saw them as detrimental to the creation of a sound economic base, to the cultivation of a cadre of writers, actors, and directors who could produce films using a model of standardization akin to that employed by the nascent Hollywood studio system. Many in the government saw the work of Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Lev Kuleshov, and the other Formalists as detrimental to the goal of promoting art that would be easily accessible to the uneducated masses. For Stalin, the failure of the film industry to generate as much income as the vodka industry was a serious concern (Youngblood 127). For others, like Eisenstein, such a view failed to understand the importance of creating new forms to convey the transformed social relations of a postrevolutionary society.

Eisenstein and his allies eventually lost the debate. By 1928, artistic experimentation was in decline, and in 1934, Andrei Zhdanov, a member of the Communist Party's Central Committee with responsibility for all the arts, declared that the style of Socialist Realism would be the only acceptable style. Socialist Realism called on artists to "depict reality in its revolutionary development," which meant, in effect, celebrating the triumphs of the party and ignoring its failings through stories that returned to the basic principles of realism (Zhdanov 293). Such an official policy spelled the end of an extraordinary period of artistic experimentation and achievement in the Soviet Union. Many of the great artists of the 1910s and 1920s, such as Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, Lev Kuleshov, Dziga Vertov, and Sergei Eisenstein were shunted aside and their accomplishments derided. Acclaimed elsewhere more than in their native land, until well after the death of Stalin, these artists remain central to our understanding of the history of twentieth-century art and cinema. That they are celebrated as great artists is itself an irony, further pointing to the ways in which the radical intentions of these Soviet filmmakers have been recuperated by the very system of social and economic relations they sought to overturn. *Battleship Potemkin* is one of many possible entry points into a range of similar work from Russia and the Soviet Union. The film is a

particularly vivid example of the dramatic expansion of the sense of the possible in film and other visual media through its rigorous application of the theories of typage and montage.

Credits

USSR, 1925/26, Goskino
The first screening took place at the Bolshoi Theater, in Moscow, on December 21, 1925, in a rough-cut form, just in time to contribute to the official celebrations commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the 1905 revolution. The public release of the finished film occurred on January 18, 1926, in Leningrad and at two theaters in Moscow, the façades of which were decorated to look like battleships, while the theater staff was dressed as sailors.

Director: Sergei Eisenstein
Producer: Iakov Bliokh
Screenplay: Sergei Eisenstein, from an idea by Nina Agadzhanova-Shutko
Cinematography: Eduard Tisse
Camera Assistant: Vladmir Popov
Assistants: Grigori Alexandrov (Assistant Director), Alexander Antonov, Mikhail Gomorov, Alexander Levshin, and Maxim Strauch
Editing: Sergei Eisenstein
Art Direction: Vasili Rakhals
Titles: Nikolai Asseev, with Sergei Tretiakov

CAST:

Vakulinchuk	Alexander Antonov
Matyushenko	Alexander Levshin
Captain Golikov	Vladimir Barsky
Chief Officer Giliarovsky	Grigori Alexandrov

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