

Soviet Montage

The Soviet filmmakers who emerged in the aftermath of the 1917 October revolution in Russia were part of an artistic avant-garde committed to innovation and experimentation and the creation of new artistic practices. Directors Sergei Eisenstein and V. I. Podovkin were part of the formalist tradition in film history. These Russian directors believed that editing was the foundation of film art and they set out to shatter the illusionistic storytelling and seamless continuity cultivated by Classical Hollywood. The pattern of editing established by Hollywood pioneer D.W. Griffith (1915) in his films *The Birth of A Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1919) taught these filmmakers how different shots sizes and camera angles could be combined together in the editing suite with powerful narrative force. The Soviet filmmakers wished to harness the power of cinema as a tool of education and propaganda and they therefore wished to go much further than simply entertaining audiences with spectacle and historical romance.

The medium of film could be used to shock, excite and disturb a cinema audience. In the three films he made in the 1920s about the revolutionary struggle of the Russian masses – *Strike*, *Battleship Potemkin* and *October* - Eisenstein pushed the boundaries of this new medium with his radical approach to film editing (known as montage). In the *Odessa Steps* sequence of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), the director created one of the most influential sequences in cinema history. *Battleship Potemkin* and Eisenstein's theory of montage has inspired directors such as Alfred Hitchcock (*Psycho*) Stephen Spielberg (*Schindler's List*), Martin Scorsese (*Raging Bull*) and Brian De Palma (*The Untouchables*).

As Marilyn Fabe explains: "Eisenstein held that proper film continuity should not proceed smoothly, but through a series of shocks. Whenever possible, he tried to create some kind of visual conflict or discontinuity between two shots with the goal of creating a jolt in the spectator's psyche. The visual explosions on the screen were intended to create a continual source of stimulants or shocks to keep the audience wide awake." "The dynamics of montage serve as impulses driving forward the total film", Eisenstein wrote.

For Eisenstein conflict was created by the juxtaposition of shots of high visual contrast. In *Battleship Potemkin*, An extreme long shot of fleeing crowds cuts immediately to an extreme close-up of the legs of a man about to fall down the steps. Directional continuity is also disrupted. A shot of the crowd fleeing towards the left of the screen is followed by an image of the crowd fleeing in the opposite direction. Similarly shot composition also created visual dissonance and disunity. A

shot emphasising vertical movement down the vast Odessa steps cuts to a shot composed along horizontal lines. Diagonal lines from the left are juxtaposed with diagonal lines from the right.

The dramatic impact of Soviet Montage broke all the rules of the smooth, invisible editing of the Classical Hollywood Style. A style of filmmaking that evolved to immerse the audience in a story and disguise technique was turned upside down in order to create the opposite emotional effect – to bring the audience to the edge of their seat, and in the case of the Odessa Steps sequence, to push the viewer towards a feeling of vertigo. As Marilyn Fabe points out, the time-bending techniques of Soviet Montage pushed the cinema beyond the realism of Hollywood into new psychological territory. “Eisenstein was not striving to give us a literal, realistic picture of the massacre on the steps. Through his innovative, time-expanding film technique, he conveys the subjective reality of what it would feel like to be trapped in a traumatic situation that seemingly goes on forever. In the Odessa Steps sequence Eisenstein creates the time-space continuum of a nightmare from which there is no waking.”

Battleship Potemkin (1925): Odessa steps sequence (00:49:00-00:55:43)

The average film in 1925 was 90 minutes long and had around 600 shots. At only 80 minutes long, Battleship Potemkin contains 1346 shots, some of them only a few frames long, fractions of a second. “Eisenstein’s theory of montage was built around the collision and conflict of images and ideas.” (Renny Bartlett)

Art that Shook the World

Battleship Potemkin is the subject of a 50 minute documentary in the BBC series Art That Shook the World. The presenter, Renny Bartlett, examines the background to the making of the film and its reception at the time. The programme considers the enduring influence of Soviet Montage and the Odessa Steps sequence, featuring interviews with contemporary directors such as Sally Potter and Ken Russell. Sally Potter comments: “With hindsight a lot of things were invented for the film that people think they are inventing now – such as a strapping a camera to the body and running down a flight of steps; a dolly shot; cutting from a wide to an extreme close-up; lots of jumps and a sense of movement through time as well as through space.’

Montage and Art

The Open University regularly screen a 30 minute programme on Soviet Montage on BBC 2 as part of cultural studies. The programme discusses the aesthetic of montage as it was applied by the Russian avant-garde to graphic art, photography and film. Scenes from Eisenstein’s films Strike and October are featured as well as extracts from the ground breaking experimental documentary, Man With A Movie Camera, directed by V. I. Podovkin

The Untouchables (1987): (01:23:00 to 01:32:00)

In his big screen remake of the television series *The Untouchables*, director Brian De Palma uses a key image of the Odessa Steps sequence – a baby carriage hurtling down the steps – as the centre-piece of the film's climatic shoot out between the FBI and the gangsters. This 9 minute suspense sequence is worthy of close study for its stylish use of slow motion, high and low camera angles, tracking camera movements, close-ups of faces juxtaposed with long shots of the entire scene, etc. It is a brilliant illustration of how the technique of editing can manipulate time.