

Humanist Masterpieces No 32

Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*

Brian McClinton

THE late *Observer* film critic Philip French described *Battleship Potemkin* as “one of the iconic works of the 20th century, among the greatest movies ever made”. Polls in 1948 and 1958 named it as the greatest film of all time. By 2012, however, a *Sight and Sound* poll had relegated it from 7th place in 2002 to 11th (strangely, Hitchcock's *Vertigo* was top, consigning *Citizen Kane*, which had occupied that spot for 40 years, to second place). Perhaps, as the attraction of communist revolution has receded, so has admiration for Eisenstein's work. Nevertheless, despite its ‘cartoon message’, as Pauline Kael called it, the film remains a visual humanist masterpiece – a verdict echoed by Kael herself who acknowledges its freshness and excitement.

Sergei Eisenstein, aged only 27, was assigned to direct the film by the Jubilee Committee planning the 20th anniversary of the abortive 1905 Revolution, described by Lenin as the ‘dress rehearsal’ for the real thing in October 1917. The original title was to be *The Year 1905*, in which Eisenstein envisaged a vast panorama of six episodes, beginning with the Russo-Japanese War and Bloody Sunday – when a peaceful demonstration was fired on before the Tsar's palace in January – and ending with the crushing of the insurrection in December. Shooting started in March 1925 in Leningrad (as St Petersburg/Petrograd was now officially known in honour of Lenin, who had died in 1924). But bad weather made it impossible to continue, and it was decided to go south and work on another sequence until the weather in Leningrad improved.

For much of the summer Eisenstein and Nina Agadzhanova worked on the screenplay, and it was not until late August that the unit arrived in Odessa, the Black Sea port where the battleship *Prince Potemkin-Taurichevsky* (named after a favourite of Catherine the Great) docked during the mutiny on board in June 1905. This incident was originally intended to occupy only 44 of a total of 820 frames. But soon it became obvious that, since the film had to be finished by December, its over-ambitious scope had to be reduced to this one episode. The title was changed accordingly. Eisenstein was still finishing the last reel on the night of the film's premiere.

Battleship Potemkin received this first screening to a select audience of party officials and veterans at the Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow, on 21st December 1925, the first



film ever to be shown in the famous venue. Its public premiere followed in January 1926, but soon it was performing to half-empty theatres, the Russian audiences preferring Hollywood movies. Its greatest impact was outside Russia. After a few initial showings and a great reception, it was banned by the Berlin censorship office on the grounds that “the film was likely to endanger public order and security on a lasting basis”. This ban was lifted on appeal but it was passed for adults only with 14 cuts, and a few days later German soldiers were banned from seeing it on the grounds that it could undermine discipline.

The French, banning it for general showing, burned every copy they could find, but it was shown at Paris film clubs. In the UK it was similarly only shown at private venues, having been banned by the British Board of Film Censors in 1926 on the grounds that “films should not address issues of political controversy”. The Board's annual report stated that it was rejected ‘for inflammatory subtitles and Bolshevik propaganda’. Astonishingly, this ban was not lifted until 1954 when it was given an X certificate!

Battleship Potemkin was personally imported to the United States by silent star Douglas Fairbanks and screened privately for film-industry luminaries during the summer and autumn of 1926. Fairbanks described it as ‘the most intense and profoundest experience of my life’. Charlie Chaplin proclaimed it ‘the best film in the world’. Nevertheless, it was initially banned in many parts of America, the Pennsylvania authorities stating that “it gives American sailors a blueprint as to how to conduct a mutiny”. The film's power was acknowledged by Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Minister of Propaganda. He told members of the German film industry in 1933: “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”. Ironically, Stalin too recognised its potential and eventually he banned it over fears that it might incite a riot against his regime.

THE film is symmetrically divided into five movements or acts. In the first, ‘The Men and The Maggots’, a few days into manoeuvres on the Black Sea, the 700-man crew on the battleship, already stirred up by news of worker uprisings in the country, refuse to eat borscht (beetroot soup) because the meat in it is infested with worms. In Act 2, ‘Drama on the Quarterdeck’, —>

an execution squad is ordered to shoot the men who refused to eat the meat, which had been pronounced fit for consumption by the ship's doctor: "Those are not worms! They are only maggots!" A tarpaulin is thrown over the men and the ship's priest proclaims: "Bring the unruly to reason, O Lord!" But the squad refuses to fire and the crew, led by a non-commissioned officer called Matyushenko and a sailor named Vakulinchuk, mutinies. They seize control of the ship, but Vakulinchuk is shot dead by the first officer, who is himself thrown overboard and shot dead in the water, followed by the doctor, his pince-nez glasses seen hanging from the rope used to hoist him up.

In 'A Dead Man calls for Justice', the crew take Vakulinchuk's body ashore at Odessa, where it is laid out in a tent for viewing, with a sign stating: "killed for a plate of soup". Thousands of civilians come to the pier to pay homage to the fallen hero and his funeral turns into a political rally. Inflammatory speeches are made by some of the mourners: "Death to the Oppressors!" "Down with the Butchers!" "Down with Tsarism!" "All for One and One for All". One man dressed like an aristocrat shouts: "Kill the Jews!". He is promptly beaten up.

Act 4 is 'The Odessa Staircase'. Many citizens show their solidarity with the crew of the *Potemkin* by setting sail in a flotilla of yawls to deliver baskets of food and livestock to the battleship moored offshore and now waving the red flag of revolution. It is an idyllic scene of friendship and solidarity. Back in the city a joyful crowd gathers on the vast Richelieu Steps overlooking the harbour to wave the ship off. Several are shown in a state of euphoria. Then, 'suddenly...', there is a close-up of a shrieking woman's face. A legless youth scurries down the stairway. Everyone is moving fast. Faceless troops march past Richelieu's statue at the top. They begin firing into the crowd. A boy is shot and trampled on. His mother rushes to pick him up. She carries him up the steps towards the soldiers. They shoot her as well. Another woman has a child in a pram. She too is shot. The pram teeters on a step... and then she falls back and knocks it over. Down it goes, step by step, to a certain death. A third woman wearing a pince-nez is shot in the right eye. At the bottom mounted cossacks appear, charging into the crowd.

The six-minute 'Odessa Steps' sequence is one of the most stunning spectacles in all cinema and, as a graphic illustration of inhumanity, ranks with Goya's *Disasters of War* and Picasso's *Guernica*. Eisenstein focuses on the most vulnerable: a man without legs; a one-legged man on crutches; and, above all, defenceless women and children. He builds tension and momentum through what he called a 'montage of conflict', like 'the explosions of an internal combustion engine'. He uses montage as a rapid counterpoint of different images and camera angles – he even strapped a camera to an acrobat and had him do a flip to obtain topsy turvy footage suggesting the point of view of someone falling headfirst downstairs.

The notion of conflict was inspired by Hegel's concept of dialectics, on which Marx's theories of revolution were based. The dialectic is the principle behind change, a universal law of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, of contradiction and reconciliation, that governed all matter and history. The Bolshevik revolution itself was seen as a



clash of dialectical opposites, between the workers and the property-owning establishment, resulting in the synthesis of the new workers' state. Eisenstein believed that a work of art would have more power if it was structured according to these same dialectical principles. Hence, he imbued his films with conflict, starting at the most fundamental graphic level but proceeding to the emotional and humanistic dimension.

Here he is showing defenceless human beings suffering from the indifferent brutality of an oppressive state. True, there was no actual massacre on the Odessa steps in 1905, but thousands were killed elsewhere in the city and throughout Russia during that year. Since he was unable to cover all the main events, Eisenstein used inspired poetic licence to encapsulate it all in one unforgettable scene. Artistic truth serves to represent historical truth.

In Act 5, 'The Meeting with the Squadron', the film ends after the *Potemkin* has made one pass of the fleet sent to quell the mutiny with no shots being fired and the other crews cheering the mutineers. But the story didn't end there. The ship sailed to the Romanian port of Constanta, farther south in the Black Sea, where the crew finally surrendered the ship to the Romanian authorities, who handed it over to Russian naval officers. Of course, Eisenstein wanted to end on an uplifting note, so he omitted the fact of the ultimate failure of the mutiny.

Battleship Potemkin is critical of religion under the Tsar. The priest sides with the officers against the crew, symbolising religion's role as the bulwark of an unjust regime. In the Odessa Steps sequence one shot from above shows the fleeing people trapped between the militia at the top and the cathedral at the bottom, making the point that the church and state (represented by Richelieu's statue) are the enemies of the proletariat. When the aristocrat shouts: "Kill the Jews!", the proletariat attack him in the spirit of a communistic belief that everyone is equal and that religion and ethnicity are meant to be things of the past.

Eisenstein went on to make other great films including *October* (1927), *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible*, Parts 1 and 2, (1944 and 1945), and was working on Part 3 when he died of a heart attack in 1948 at the age of 50. *Ivan the Terrible* was commissioned by Stalin but he banned Part 2 because Eisenstein had made little effort to conceal the connection between Ivan's 'Man of Iron' and Stalin's 'Man of Steel'. Thus the artist who portrayed the evils of one oppressive regime ended as the victim of another. □