

Battleship Potemkin

SERGEI EISENSTEIN

1925

Battleship Potemkin (1925) was named the greatest film of all time at the Brussels World's Fair in 1958. It is compulsory viewing in film courses across the world and has retained its cinematic relevance for almost a century. Based on a true story, the real mutiny that took place on the ship *Potemkin* off the coast of Odessa in 1905, young director Sergei Eisenstein used the event for the basis of a Soviet propaganda film, conceived as part of a series of films on the Revolution. Whilst this series was not completed, we can look to Eisenstein's other films, *Strike* (1924) and *October* (1928) as contributions to this unfinished series. Eisenstein also utilised this production as an opportunity to personally trial methods of montage, drawn from new Soviet montage theory. The film's meticulous planning and overarching narration has led to its elevation as a masterpiece of both the Russian and Soviet milieu and global cinema.

Roger Ebert aptly observed, "Battleship Potemkin" has been famous for so long that it is almost impossible to come to it with a fresh eye. It is one of those fundamental landmarks of cinema. Its famous massacre on the Odessa Steps has been quoted so many times in other films that it's likely many viewers will have seen the parody before they see the original... like the 23rd Psalm or Beethoven's Fifth, it has become so familiar we cannot perceive it for what it is.' This is the bittersweet afterlife of such staples of art, to become so ubiquitous, symbolic and known that sometimes we don't experience their true power. In light of this, it is necessary for viewers to actively engage a fresh perspective when approaching this truly phenomenal film, and to linger on the small details as well as the grand sequences we have come to know and reference.

Eisenstein's masterful use of montage aside, there are scenes of ethereal beauty: the ship shot from above, lines of white sailors standing in perfect formation by each side, like an almost ghostly vision and a body hanging from a sail in a perfectly but horrific vision. There are also several framing techniques Eisenstein used, in order to handle his material and give new resonance to familiar images. For instance, the citizens mourning Vakulinchuk are seen mourning through the door of a tent. This gives the image an almost iconographic resonance. Inside the triangle made by the fabric, the mourners and Vakulinchuk appear similar to Christ's

death. One woman bends over his body in the foreground, and in the background there is a throng of mourners. The most visible of these are two women who rest their heads in their hands. *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), draws a comparison between the citizens and the proletariat as saintly, drawn into a holy primordial battle between good and evil. Their black robes both accentuate their poverty and their holiness. Vakulinchuk's body is bathed in light, in the shots in the tent, he becomes martyred in his death.

The rallying cry at the start of the film, 'This meat is rotten' is made into a protest refrain, made symbolic of society. Eisenstein's film is split into five chapters, the rebellion beginning with the micro situation on the boat, eventually feeds into the macro: the initial mutiny on the ship turns into a revolution in Odessa, and eventually the glorious end which features the Tsar's squadron joining the sailors.

From the rotting meat moment, food becomes an overarching theme in *Battleship Potemkin*. The sailors throw the doctor into the sea, as food for the 'worms'. Vakulinchuk's body is displayed with the phrase, 'for a spoonful of borscht.' Food as the catalyst for narrative yields a multitude of symbols that recall history and theological events. Jesus, with his relatively socialist preachings, fed the five thousand, in an episode that was as metaphorical as it was powerful. Infamously Marie Antoinette's assertion, 'Let them eat cake', prompted revolution. We can look to the Boston bread riots and revolts in response to famine in Ireland for historical examples of the power of food in revolution. In Eisenstein's hands, the sailors refusal to eat the meat puts Vakulinchuk and his comrades in the same pantheon as hunger strikers like Bobby Sands and the suffragettes. A refusal of what society is feeding you, that rotten meat, becomes a symbol for what the proletariat receives.

The enduring success of *Battleship Potemkin* is in part owed to the dynamism and the impressive filmic techniques of Eisenstein; but its emotional power resides within the narrative's mythological resonance. Beyond the Soviet example, Eisenstein's cleverly constructed narrative speaks to the global history of oppression and uprising and to one of the deep truths of humanity.