

The Odessa Steps Sequence
As Continuing Film History

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Sergei Eisenstein quite possibly could be the greatest film theorist of all time. His writings on color, composition and especially montage are as important today as they were when he wrote them more than a half century ago. To fully comprehend his writings, however, is a difficult task because of the wide range of ideas presented and scattered manner in which they were presented. Bringing together ideas as varied as Japanese Kabuki theatre, 19th Century English literature, and 20th century American film, Eisenstein was able to develop a theory of montage that still influences filmmakers today. Perhaps not aware of the depth of Eisenstein's writings, filmmakers today seem to pay homage to him in one simple way: By recreating the Odessa Steps sequence from "Battleship Potemkin." Filmmakers as varied as Woody Allen, Terry Gilliam, and Brian DePalma have each included scenes closely resembling the Steps sequence. By doing so they have reasserted Eisenstein's place in film history and brought his work and writings to a new generation of film goers.

explain - To fully understand why modern filmmakers would pay tribute to a filmmaker from a half century ago, one must delve deeply into the writings of Eisenstein and discover their timelessness and relevance to today's audience. The basic, and most developed aspects of his writings dealt with montage. Putting it quite simply he wrote, "For those who are able, montage is the most powerful compositional means of telling a story."¹ For Eisenstein, the shot was the "cell" of a movie and montage was the means by which the cells were brought together to form the compositional makeup of the movie. Without montage a filmmaker was recording reality, not

¹Eisenstein, Sergei, "Film Language", Film Form. Edited by Jay Leyda. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1949.) p. 111.

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heightening it, as Eisenstein saw film's goal. Within his writings Eisenstein drew separate distinctions between different types of montage, each holding a certain importance, depending on the goals of the filmmaker.

The first, and perhaps least desirable type of montage, according to Eisenstein was metric montage. Metric montage consisted of the linking of shots in a purely measured manner. According to Eisenstein, metric montage lacks any type of artistic motivation because the length and connection of shots is tied to a completely arbitrary design. Because the filmmaker who uses metric montage cannot determine edit points on the basis of artistic need, tension can only be created by shortening the length of the shots. This can only be done by changing the metric formula of the edits and compensating on future edit lengths. Although Eisenstein does not seem to favor metric montage, he does find certain uses for it's use. One possible use he sights is in creating the psychological effect of the regular beats of the metric measurements. In the end, however, Eisenstein does not seem to regard metric montage's value as anything artistic.

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By initially stating that rhythmic montage allows for the "actual length" of the shot to determine it's time on the screen, Eisenstein deems his second type of montage far more artistic than metric montage. In Eisenstein's terms "actual length" means the length that naturally flows within the edited piece as a whole, as well as the length that flows within the shot itself. This may be determined in a variety of ways, but when imposed artificially failure of the montage occurs. The artificial imposition can be caused by the filmmaker/editor forcing an unnatural time rhythm on the edited sequence and, in turn, on each shot length. This can cause uneven and imbalanced montage ruining the effect created by montage.

Rhythmic montage was at it's most successful, according to Eisenstein, when he used it during the Odessa steps sequence of Battleship Potemkin.

"The final pull of tension is supplied by the transfer from the rhythm of the descending feet to another rhythm—a new kind of downward movement—the next intensity level of the same activity"²

Rhythmic montage, then, can create a more natural means by which a filmmaker may determine edit points. In the same way it allows for the shot to determine the edit point, by it's content, not an artificially imposed strategy.

Because the "steps sequence" is so important to Eisenstein, and, therefore film history, rhythmic montage has often been forced into an editing sequence through the use of music. This seems, initially, to be an artificially imposed means of determining edit points, but instead replaces the emphasis of the edit from the shot to an exterior entity, that being the music. This, in turn, destroys the very idea of rhythmic montage, that being the determining of edit points through the natural flow of the shot.

Eisenstein seems to believe that music, when used in conjunction with the natural length of the shot, and shot sequences, can be an effective supplement. ✓

Just as rhythmic montage is more complex than metric montage, the third type of montage spoken of by Eisenstein is still more complex. Tonal montage envelops not only the picture within the frame, but takes into account the picture's place in the mise en scene of the movie. When editing in a tonal fashion the filmmaker considers the emotional impact of the montage, using it to build tension through it's emphasis. Taking into

²Eisenstein, Sergei. "Methods of Montage" Film Form. Edited by Jay Leyda. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949.) p.74.

follow through what develops from this?

Good!

consideration such things as light and shapes within the frame, the filmmaker draws feeling from the viewer through manipulation. To create a somber mood, for instance, less light may be used. In much the same way, sound may be heightened to add a sense of forboding or gloom. Through such manipulation, then, the "tonal" qualities of the montage are stressed, building a more complex image and a richer filmic experience.

In tonal montage less attention is paid to exact metric measurements, in order to alter emotion, and more paid to the "feeling" the sequence can generate in the viewer. (Suspense movies seem to be a prime example of exclusive tonal montage.) *often w/ rhythmic use -* The montage is used solely for the heightening of fear, with each sequence building the suspense until the climax.

What creates an added dynamic to tonal montage is the combination of a tonal dominant with a secondary rhythmic dominant. This combines the ideas behind both tonal montage and rhythmic montage to create even greater depth. Music, for instance, can be used as a supplement to the emotion of the piece to create a fuller experience for the viewer. By taking away the special dominance of metric editing, the combination of the dominant tonal and the secondary rhythmic montage creates change not through movement, but through feeling. Eisenstein clarifies, "Here specially immeasurable changes are combined according to their emotional sound."³

Although an extension of both metric montage, through it's building on "measured" pieces, and rhythmic montage, through it's use of external rhythms, tonal montage transcends them by being able to combine them and use positive elements of both.

³Ibid, p. 76.

Within the sphere of tonal montage Eisenstein states that the fourth type of montage, overtone, is the most advanced. By appealing to the viewer on a psychological level, overtone montage deals primarily with what is sensed intuitively. Unlike tonal montage, where emotion dictates change, overtone montage strikes the viewer at an almost imperceptible level of consciousness. According to Eisenstein overtone montage deals with the conflict between the dominant tone of the piece and the psychological effect the dominant has on the viewer. Because its effects are subconscious overtone montage has the capability to be the most persuasive. While the viewer allows the overtone sequence to unfold before him, seemingly unaware of its effect, it nonetheless creates an emotional response. Drawing on such things as light and dark contrasts, harsh and soft surfaces, and even bright or muted colors, the filmmaker can impress upon the viewer certain feelings through their repetition or their conflict. Repetition of softer images behind a certain character, regardless of the character's actions, most likely will create a positive response from the viewer. Conversely, if light colors are contrasted with hard surfaces the result might be confusion in the mind of the viewer and lead to mixed feelings.

Cut this out.

Although appearing quite simple, in theory, the idea of overtone montage is obviously the most difficult in practice. To successfully implement overtone montage the filmmaker must take into consideration a variety of factors. Most notably among them the complete control over the psychological effect the montage may have on the greatest number of viewers. Every detail must be controlled or the failure of the sequence is guaranteed.

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like tonal.*

The final type of montage mentioned by Eisenstein is, in his words, the most advanced. Calling it intellectual montage, Eisenstein sees it as the intellectual accompaniment to the understanding of the effects of montage. The viewer not only reacts to the montage sequence before him, but understands why he reacts in the manner he does. ^{- well part.} It is the intellectual process of understanding cinema. In several essays Eisenstein discusses what he calls "intellectual cinema", which seems to be the synthesis of all the elements that make up culture. In essence it would be the ultimate artistic form of expression. Intellectual montage, then, fosters intellectual cinema by its creating an understanding within the viewership. Such an understanding allows for more difficult concepts and the inclusion of more wide ranging cultural phenomena.

Within each of these types of montage lies the understanding that all successful montage is created through collision. Eisenstein championed the idea of "montage is collision" and argued against most notably Pudovkin, other Russian formalists. ✓ Based on the fundamental idea of the Japanese alphabet, Eisenstein's theory of montage relied on the belief that the collision of two unattached ideas would produce a third, separate idea. ✓ The Japanese alphabet developed as a series of symbols and grew to include two symbols placed next to one another to form a third meaning. Eisenstein used this idea and applied it to film to form his theory of montage. By joining two different shots, a third, completely different meaning could be created.

✓ The collision of these two separate ideas created a new meaning. Within the filmic language there are seemingly endless combinations with which to create new cinematic "words."

Using many sources to formulate his theory, Eisenstein seems to have relied most heavily on psychological study of the early 20th Century. Rudolf

Arnheim and E.B. Titchener helped in the early formulation of his theories, "but it (was) the famous psychologist Jean Piaget who provided the most striking psychological parallel to Eisenstein's theory."⁴ The most notable concept was that of "montage thinking", where Piaget realized that a child determined the difference between two objects, but did not realize the connection to create the difference. Applying this idea to film Eisenstein reached the conclusion that the end difference was the only important concept that needed to be gathered by the audience. Thus ~~by~~ collision of two unlike pictures would create a third concept, completely separate from the preceding picture.

Very fine explanation of Eisenstein's theory. I need a little more detailed citation of sources, etc. his essays, etc.

It is no wonder Eisenstein's theory is so intricate because he practiced much of what he wrote in the films he directed. Using his films as vehicles to practice his theories he was able to create films that were far more technically advanced than his peers. The six films that he was able to complete in his lifetime offer a wealth of information, both subtle and obvious. His championing the advent of sound film, for instance, which was contrary to other formalists, brought about it's genesis. As was the case with most technical innovations Eisenstein saw sound as an added dimension that could only strengthen film's place among the arts. Among the other contributions to cinema that have marked Eisenstein's genius was his careful attention to detail within the shot. Geometric shapes, for instance, play a large part in determining the overall mise en sen of a particular scene. One particular scene encapsulates the entirety of Eisenstein's writings, combining his theories on montage, composition, and structure.

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⁴Andrew, J. Dudley. The Major Film Theories. (London: Oxford University Press, 1976.) p.55.

The Odessa steps sequence, from Battleship Potemkin, is one of a handful of scenes in film history that crowns the era in which it was made.

Eisenstein was aware of his achievement when he wrote, in 1939, "the whole method of exposing the event likewise accomplishes its leap: a narrative type of exposition is replaced and transferred to the concentrated structure of imagery."⁵

The idea that imagery could replace the seemingly logical progression of a narrative was unheard of as Eisenstein created it in 1926. Within the structure of the steps sequence are many cohesive and conflicting images all working simultaneously to create imagery outside the narrative. Because the sequence is so successful, however, the viewer is left with the impression that what he has just seen is completely feasible within the narrative.

To begin with, the Odessa steps sequence is built upon the idea that the collision of images creates cohesion. Through a variety of means, such as movement within the frame, tempo of that movement and rhythm of montage, Eisenstein leads the viewer through the sequence. At no point is the viewer able to determine the scope of the event.^{regret} Instead, Eisenstein creates the image that the viewer is at the center of the conflict, turning about as the events unfold around him. This illusion is accomplished by the fact that no long shots are used from which a viewer could determine perspective.

In the opening of the scene the pandemonium of the rebelling crowd immediately disorients the viewer. The chaos of the crowds movements suddenly gives way to the patterned movement of the soldiers. The conflict of this sudden shift, from chaos to control, disarms the viewer into

⁵Eisenstein, Sergei. "The Structure of the Film" Film Form. Edited by Jay Leyda. (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1949.) p.171.

momentary calm, until the realization of the peasants' impending doom. By starting the scene off as he does, Eisenstein reinforces the idea that that conflict is inevitable. The soldiers' ordered marching so greatly contrasts the confusion of the crowd that there is little doubt as to the outcome of that conflict.

As the tempo and rhythm increase in the scene, the soldiers' feet become straight shafts of shadow moving down atop the peasants. The use of the shadows, shown as diagonals across the screen, heighten the feeling of doom for the peasants because they appear to be the bars of their imprisonment. The stairs, too, offer no comfort to the peasants for their horizontal lines reinforce the cage-like environment. As an old woman comes to pick up her dead son from the steps she is visually overwhelmed by the soldiers' shadows. Such an image is so stark as to be beautiful. The lines drawn by dead bodies reach to the far corners of the frame, more fully heightening the geometricity of the image.

Similar to the geometric composition of the sequence is the contrast between the upward movement of the peasants and the downward pacing of the soldiers. As if their oppressors are literally on top of them, the soldiers move down to crush the peasants. Feeling the inevitability of their doom, the peasants retreat downward, en masse. The contrast between movements holds firm as the dead boy's mother breaks free from the retreating mass to retrieve her son. As her lone figure stands before the downward march of the soldiers, she raises her son towards them emphasizing her desperation. She is the lone vertical image on the screen and greatly contrasts the diagonals of the soldiers and their guns and the horizontals of the stairs. All movement seems to stop momentarily, neither

Very interesting reading

Nice — did you get any ideas from that outside source? — so — should cite it.

downward nor upward, as she stands, a solemn representative of the defeated townspeople.

At once the movement continues, faster, accelerating through the pace of the editing, cutting between the peasants and the soldiers. All the movement is downward, however, and the conflict arises between the order of the movement, between chaos and control. Just as when the scene opened the conflict is between control and disorder, but now the tempo has increased.

While the rhythm of the montage increases to maintain the conflict, there is a brake, a sudden interception. A baby carriage slowly makes its way down the steps. Completely destroying the seemingly logical acceleration of the montage, the carriage creates yet another conflict by slowing the montage. Also, by diverting the viewers' attention from the peasants retreat, the carriage interrupts the flow of the narrative. The carriage, then, creates several natural conflicts with its otherwise innocent appearance. Eisenstein notes a third conflict caused by the baby carriage when he writes,

"It propels the idea of rushing downward into the next dimension-from rolling, as understood 'figuratively,' into the physical fact of rolling."⁶ Clearly, then, the baby carriage is meant to add many levels of conflict to the sequence. Together they seem to represent the fact that just as the projected innocence of the baby carriage faces immediate doom, so to do the peasants. The physical act of rolling, then, is combined with the "figurative" death of innocence.

⁶Ibid. p. 171.

*Really nice
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the sequence's
form.*

A final element of the Odessa steps sequence is the woman who is shot in the eye, destroying her pince-nez. By exploiting the idea of persistence of vision, Eisenstein is able to create the illusion of her death through montage. The quick collision of the two shots, one before she is hit and the other just after, makes the viewer believe he has witnessed the woman's violent death. Collision, in this case then, has a more immediate and obvious effect on the viewer, while at the same time shaping the violent nature of the steps sequence.

Eisenstein was well aware of the impact the Odessa steps would have on viewers. He wrote, "the steps sequence in its compositional progress 'it behaves like a human being in a state of ecstasy.'⁷ The quickening of the action and the pacing create the emotion of one moving to some sort of climax. In the violence of the scene Eisenstein manipulates the viewer's emotion to a heightened sense of tension, then goes even further by disorienting them within the scene. Together, along with the emotional inclusion of the baby carriage and the dead woman, Eisenstein's Odessa steps sequence renders the viewer helpless but to be drawn in and overwhelmed.

Because the steps sequence is so perfectly rendered and has become a filmic classic it has often been recreated in order to pay homage to its creator. Most notably among the reproductions are those made by Woody Allen, in Bananas, Terry Gilliam, in Brazil, and Brian DePalma, in The Untouchables. Each man uses different elements of the sequence, for a variety of reasons, to either conjure the idea of the sequence or more accurately recreate it.

⁷Eisenstein, Sergei. "The Structure of the Film" Film Form. Edited by Jay Leyda. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949.) p.191.

The first modern reproduction of the steps sequence was created in Woody Allen's 1971 film Bananas. Because the film is a comedy an exact recreation of the sequence seems impossible. In fact, Allen's version lasts a scant seven shots and uses little of the original's images. The similarities to Eisenstein's are threefold. The first is the opening shot. In each a long shot of mass confusion ensues. People scurry about during the chaos of an insurrection. As the people come to a large pillared building they begin to rush up the steps. This is where Allen diverges from everything Eisenstein wrote. While Eisenstein created a disorientation in the viewer by not allowing him the perspective of the whole scene, Allen tries to create a different effect entirely. His camera moves as if trying to follow the action as it unfolds before him, instead of creating the action for the camera. The final look is one similar to live action news. No disorientation occurs because only one perspective is given, from behind the group storming the building.

A second element slightly similar to Eisenstein's is Allen's use of light and shadow to create geometric spheres across the screen. While Eisenstein's are cylindrical and ordered, Allen's are diffused and chaotic. The similarity lies in the illumination of the action of the sequence. In both cases the primary action moves in and out of shadows directing the viewers eyes from one place to another. While Eisenstein create the eyes movement through montage, Allen relies on the quick movement of the camera as it pans and dollies nearer the building. A different feeling is created by these individual choices. Allen's sequence lacks the ordered structure of Eisenstein's and does not logically build the tension towards a climax. Instead, Allen's jumps to an artificial climax inflicted upon the sequence by Allen, in order to pay homage to Eisenstein's original.

That artificial climax in Allen's sequence is the baby carriage as it tumbles down the steps. Because there is no logical reason for the carriage's appearance Allen's sequence fizzles into making the similarities to the original steps sequence a joke. What seems interesting in Allen's use of the carriage is that instead of taking the time to build the effect of the carriage's appearance, by perhaps using close-ups, as Eisenstein did, he uses one long shot of the carriage's desension. This creates a slight guffaw in the viewer, but hardly renders any similar feelings to the original.

good / Brian DePalma's sequence in The Untouchables more closely resembles the spirit of Eisenstein's, but only attempts to create a small portion of the original. Concentrating on the baby carriage's descent down the stairs DePalma is more able to render the concept of Eisenstein's montage. The sequence begins much as the original did, in that there are two groups coming together on the steps. In this instance, however, the good guys are at the top of the steps going down and the bad guys are at the bottom moving up. As the carriage leaves the top step time and motion are suspended and greatly slowed down. Instead of creating the tension through the quickening of action and montage, DePalma slows things down to a near crawl. By doing this DePalma is able to heighten the sense of doom for one small element of the scene. Instead of lifting the carriage out of a sea of desperate people, DePalma has placed the initial emphasis on the carriage and allowed the people around it to momentarily take background positions.

As the carriage slowly moves down the steps DePalma cuts to close ups of the wheels, just as Eisenstein did. This helps to raise the tension of the viewer as he watches the wheels slowly tumble over each step. Immediate close-ups of the men around the carriage, in addition to the screaming mother, momentarily disorient the viewer because, in the

elongated pacing, he wishes someone to act on the baby's behalf. Adding to the viewers' raised tension ^{are} the bullets that fly about as the carriage tumbles. Again, similarly to Eisenstein's, the innocence that the carriage represents is placed at the center of a terribly violent scene. The viewer vicariously wishes to intercede and rescue lost innocence, but is unable. By varying the tempo of the sequence, from fast to slow, DePalma has rendered the idea of Eisenstein's theories, while altering them.

Although DePalma neglects the use of light and shadow he instead concentrates on creating interesting geometric composition within the frame. The horizontals of the steps are mixed with the vertical lines of the pillars at the top and bottom of the stairs. Combined with the diagonals of the stair railings the shapes help focus the action in a very ordered manner. The carriage moves diagonally, following the railing, while gunman stand near vertical pillars straight as arrows. The horizontal steps seem to, at the same time, divide the angles present while the baby helplessly stumbles down them. DePalma's steps sequence, instead of rendering Eisenstein's step sequence cliché, creates an alternative to the accelerating montage of the original.

The final treatment of Eisenstein's steps sequence was created by Terry Gilliam in the movie Brazil. His style, while not as stylized as DePalma's, seems a fair rendering of Eisenstein's step sequence. His, it seems, is the most complete of the three because it includes three major elements of the original, but remains true to Eisenstein's montage theories. As the pace of the action accelerates, so does the rhythm of the montage. Together with the shot composition, the montage creates an effective reproduction of Eisenstein's original.

The opening of Gilliam's sequence immediately sets the tone for what is to follow. As the insurrection occurs to cause the confrontation, soldiers rush through a dimly lit door. As they pass before the camera they climb steps below the frame. As they do so their shadows are cast on the wall behind them, both elongating them and creating the sense of ordered doom that is also prevalent in Eisenstein's sequence. The upward motion of the soldiers is contrast with the movement of the rebels down a staircase and into a lobby where the battle is to take place.

What follows is a sequence of ten shots, cutting between the two fighting groups. In the accelerating action medium shots are used to disorient the viewer as to the positions of the different groups. Just like Eisenstein, Gilliam places the viewer at the center of the conflict by this crosscutting and disorienting. At the same time the pace of the montage increases, building tension. At the conclusion of the ten shots, the rebels begin their decent down another set of stairs that furthers the action.

While they back down the stairs Gilliam includes the object he has chosen to represent Eisenstein's baby carriage, a floor cleaning machine. In a comic bit of irony, Gilliam uses the cleaning machine's unimportance to contrast the great importance placed on the carriage by the viewer. The viewer's eyes shift only to the cleaning machine because it is thrust before him in center frame. Otherwise it would have merely remained as an unimportant piece of scenery. It seems as though Gilliam uses this instance to make a final statement about the importance of montage. He creates the attention we are to pay to the cleaning machine. This alone seems to link his thinking to that of Eisenstein's theories of montage. There is no innocence lost in this sequence as in Eisenstein or DePalma's steps

sequence. Instead, it is a ruse to divert the viewer's attention from the violence, not a way to emphasize it.

A third element in Gilliam's steps sequence is the use of the pince-nez. Just as in Potemkin an innocent bystander is shot in the eye, killing them and destroying their eyewear. This seems like a small detail for Gilliam to recreate, but it is in fact important because it helps reinforce the montage sequence through its use of instantaneous action. Without a cut away shot the person goes from bystander to victim.

The final piece of Gilliam's sequence is perhaps its most important; the final shot of the soldiers marching down the steps in an ordered row. This shot punctuates the sequence and brings it to an important climax. It also reinforces the ordered doom that is to befall the insurrectionists. As the soldiers continue downward they imply the death of the rebels by casting their shadows once again. Just as Eisenstein used shadows to imply the imprisonment of the rebels, so to does Gilliam. His lines do not cut across the rebels as Eisenstein's do, but instead block the light to cast them into darkness.

As can be seen by these three filmmakers attempts at paying tribute to Eisenstein there are varying degrees of success at duplicating his style. Describing the steps sequence as the near perfect representation of rhythmic montage, Eisenstein set the steps sequence against all future uses of rhythmic montage. While DePalma and Gilliam are successful in different ways in creating a rhythm through their sequences, neither comes close to matching the purity of Eisenstein's. Similarly, they both come close to matching moments of the sequence, through both composition and tempo, but cannot sustain the brilliance of Potemkin's Odessa steps sequence. In trying to reproduce the sequence, however, the three filmmakers pay tribute to

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perhaps the greatest filmmaker/theorist in the history of cinema and try to bring his crowning achievement to a new generation of filmgoers.

This is a really well written, incisive essay, with some very nice explanations of Eisenstein's complicated ideas. Film analysis of the Sept sequence & its descendants is also very fine. Well done.

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