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Aside from the similar visual styles of *Battleship Potemkin* and *The Birth of a Nation*, both films are examples of civil unrest during periods of political instability in a historical setting. Both movies take place during a national revolution and involve several instances of social turmoil and disturbance. The styles of these films can be contrasted by viewing their use of montage, focus, and basic film techniques in relation to thematic and constructive plot elements.

The Birth of a Nation is a story about the consequences of the Civil War on the friendship of a northern and southern family. It expresses the effects of the war on their lives in relation to major historical and political events. This movie is directed by D.W. Griffith and is based on the story of the origins of the Ku Klux Klan. In this film, Griffith uses certain film techniques, which have become the fundamental basis of all movies today. These include the addition of a musical score, the use of natural outdoor landscapes as backgrounds, close-ups, long shots, panning, cross-cutting, the iris effect, the combination of parallel action and editing in a montage. *The Birth of a Nation* is also the first film to incorporate the dramatization of history in a narrative structure, as the first epic. Before it was made, many films were only one reel in length and involved no camera movement or editing. This film brought movies into large theaters and completely revolutionized the way they were made. (Smith 31-33)

Battleship Potemkin is an examination of the Russian revolt of 1905 onboard the *Potemkin*. When the sailors are forced to eat rotten meat, they declare a protest strike. The following uprising leads to the death of

Vakulinchuk, the organizer of the movement. His body is placed on the steps of the Odessa harbor as a casualty of the revolution, an act that inspires rallying citizens to join the revolt. An intense fascination with the editing style of D.W. Griffith led the director, Sergei Eisenstein, to create this film in the style that he did, and to transform the dynamic tension created by cross-cutting and parallel editing into the modern idea of the montage. This film employs the revolutionary use of montage as a furtherance of the collisions of ideas as symbolic representation.

Historically, these films were reflections of true events that happened in the not so distant past. Both are propagandistic in nature, although only *Potemkin* was made to intentionally draw on the events it portrayed as a glorification of the past. Eisenstein felt that he could realistically commemorate the 1905 revolution in film form. Griffith, however, simply wanted to create a film that was a reflection on history. Although he did not intend for his film to be considered racist or condone the actions of the KKK, he does expressly cite his right to examine the “dark side of wrong” in a plea on the opening title card of the film. (Dirks, “The Birth of a Nation”)

There is a scene in both films that is used as a representation to foreshadow the impending events. In Griffith’s work, the shot that is used to establish the premise of the film comes during a scene of a kitten being dropped in between two puppies on the southern plantation and the subtitle “Hostilities.” This is an allusion to the ominous polarity of the black and white society during

the post-war role reversal. It also foreshadows the upcoming shift in power in Southern society, and the citizen's reaction to it. This sequence is so effective because it presents a contrast of innocence and violence, as do many of the images in both films. While the original image is an innocent one, even to the point of being humorous, the implicit meaning is one of a drastically different tone.

The similar shot in the work of Eisenstein occurs before the uprising in the depths of the Potemkin. The sailors sleep in hammocks suspended from the ceiling, and one by one are swung around as an angry officer passes through the area. Visually, this action diagonally crosses the hanging ropes and disrupts the symmetry of the shot, while theoretically this interrupts the fine balance of the sailors and indicates the first sign of unrest and revolt. These two shots serve a similar purpose in their respective films and are created by the concurrence of representative images and historical prepositions. Another example of this as a narrative technique is when images of men scrubbing the ship's deck are cut together with shots of the boiling broth. This particular montage is supposed to suggest to the viewer that the sailors are coming to a boiling point. Once again, this representative meaning intimates the future events through the collision of two seemingly disparate pictures. (Mayer 35-40)

The main battle sequence in both films includes a symbolic element, which adds to the intensity of the action. The scenes in *The Birth of a Nation* are composed of several panoramic shots cross-cut with medium shots of the

individual soldiers in battle. Griffith not only cuts shots before they are ended, but also juxtaposes long, medium, and close shots in order to obtain a variety of spatial and temporal lengths. The defining moment of the sequence comes when the youngest son of the Confederate family rams his flag down the barrel of a Union cannon, and collapses on the battlefield. The confederate flag is symbolic of the undying persistence of the Southern cause, and is a model of the unrest that motivated the cause of the war. The young man that the movie has followed thus far becomes a martyr to this cause. Through the combination of these scenes and the subtitles to verbalize the imagery, a representation of war is drawn which exposes the atrocities and the benefits as one. (Wagenknecht and Slide 58-61)

A similar sequence in *Battleship Potemkin* takes place during the uprising onboard the ship. The series of shots depict the division amongst the ranks and the battle itself. This includes several montages of the symmetry of the ship being interrupted by diagonal shots of the men, which suggests the electricity and tension of the moment. Through montage editing, in this scene Eisenstein uses numerous cuts from the guns to the preacher's cross. As the symbolic element, the cross is representative of the link between the church and the governmental regime. Secondly, by showing the images of the cross inter-cut with the battling, it is as if to say that the men are rebelling against god. The man who organized the uprising has been killed by the end of the fighting, and will serve as an image of the revolt that inspires other citizens to action. (Mayer 70-129)

The major difference between *Potemkin* and *Birth of a Nation* is the way in which they present dehumanization as being facilitated by the social turmoil. *Birth of a Nation* stands out, mainly because it was adapted from the novel "The Clansman," which was written by the openly racist Ku Klux Klan constituent Thomas Dixon. Due to this fact, many of the constructive plot elements, and therefore the cinematography, are reflective of these beliefs. The best example of this is the "Gus Chase" sequence in *Nation*. It occurs after the rise of the black mobs to power in the South, while a young girl is walking outside in the forest. She is confronted by a black man who asks her to marry him, and she begins to run away. The scene lasts only a few minutes and results in her jumping from a high cliff in order to avoid his lustful desire. Throughout the chase sequence, Gus is usually presented as lurking in darkness with more animal-like features than human. The girl is frightened, and runs from him as if he were another species. In this case, the deprivation of human qualities is much closer to racism than the mechanical, depersonalized characters in *Potemkin*. Although dehumanization is present in both films, it is presented more innocently in *Potemkin* as indicative of the soulless government. (Hart 109-111)

The two most comparable scenes from the two films are those that are composed mainly of montages and seem the most frantic and highly emotional. These climaxes are achieved in each film by revealing a dynamic tension between violence and innocence, with aspects of dehumanization. The final scenes in *The Birth of a Nation* begin with the mulatto leader taking a girl

hostage, and a southern family boarding themselves in an old cabin to escape the angry black mob. A highly dramatic score follows these images, which heightens the overall emotion of the scene. Shots of the helpless white faces are mixed with the frenzied assault of the black attackers in both cases. Griffith is able to tell both stories simultaneously through cross-cutting techniques, without losing a second of the action. Each different scenario is set to a separate pace of music, which adds to the integrity of the editing. The climax of each film also has a recognizable turning point during which the scenario is reversed. The ride of the Ku Klux Klan into the southern plantation to rescue a girl from a mulatto is the climactic scene in *The Birth of a Nation*. The scene mainly consists of inter-cut shots of close-ups of the girl's desperate face, the evil anticipation of the mulatto leader, and finally the ride of the Klan. (Dirks, "The Birth of a Nation")

The sequence on the Odessa steps is the climactic scene in *Battleship Potemkin*, and one of the greatest examples of civil unrest in the history of film. The imagery itself is graphic and stunning, and is comprised of many different shots. The scene captures the civilians' ascent of the steps in a revolt protesting the treatment of those onboard the *Potemkin*. The crowd is stopped in their tracks, the people facing the boots of the state militia. This chapter of the film is given a tone of dehumanization through strategic camera placement and quick, contemplated editing that shows the faceless soldiers attacking the helpless civilians. At this point, the reversal of action occurs with the chaotic masses rush down the stairs as they are followed by the mechanized disciples of the state.

This puts the soldiers in the position above all, as though they are in full control of the frightened citizens. Although the specific people's emotions are shown, there are still no memorable faces in the film, for the explicit point that the film serves to symbolize the power of the masses rather than the thoughts of an individual. The most striking pictures in the film include that of a crying mother embracing her dead child, an elderly man running for shelter, and a stray baby carriage rolling ominously in front of the Russian soldiers. The violent shots all refer to the social turmoil that occurred during the revolution with the Cossacks as the faceless henchmen of the state and the citizens as the emotional, frenzied innocents. (Smith 57-60)

Another way in which this period of the film conveys meaning on multiple levels is the combination of shot construction and editing with the intent of evoking certain feelings. Aside from the contrast between innocence and violence, Eisenstein uses the montage to produce the desired atmospheric consequences. For instance, during the mass ascent of the Odessa steps, the environment itself is shown from different angles. When shown this way, the staircase appears perpendicular to itself in successive shots, which succinctly expresses the threatening impending situation. Next, there are shots of clenched fists edited together with angered faces. Shots such as these continue, and are effective in showing the intent of the distraught mass of people. The cumulative scheme expressed within these frames is a continuance of the portrayal of societal injustice and its consequences.

The poignancy of the images in both scenes is achieved through the montages, which effectively couple images of violence with innocence. For instance, the young girl's pleading face with the lustful antagonist, or the vision of the boy followed by the images of him being trampled to death. The way in which these pictures are displayed is unparalleled, and creates the highest sort of tension in the films. The number of similarities is striking. Both scenes impart meaning through dynamic tension in multiple instances, in both films one side is presented as dehumanized and one as more humane and emotional, and both climaxes include a situation reversal. More importantly, each film uniquely portrays episodes of civil unrest during a stage of national revolution.

In conclusion, both films present the interrelationships of citizens and their involvement in society through a historical narrative. There are an incredible amount of similarities in the intricacies of the plot elements and the style of composition. While *The Birth of a Nation* is the foundation of many original film techniques, *Battleship Potemkin* better illustrates the full meaning that can be contrived through the collision of ideas in the montage. Both films efficiently present themes of dehumanization and revolution during periods of societal injustice and are concrete examples of social disorder.

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