

Silent Film II

(Sept 19, 2005)

- Sergei Eisenstein, *Battleship Potemkin*
(Russia/Soviet Union, 1925)
- Soviet film, 1919-1930
- American film, 1910-1927
 - D. W. Griffith
 - Silent film comedy
- German film, 1919-1933
- French film, 1910-1929

Battleship Potemkin (1925)

- Deals with the abortive Russian revolution of 1905, seen by the Bolsheviks as the precursor to their own successful revolution of 1917
- A drama of mass action (no individual heroes)
- Performed mostly by non-actors, appearing in naturalistic settings
- Montage sequences
 - Breaking of the plate (end of Part 1)
 - Lions rising (at end of Odessa Steps, Part 4)
 - The Odessa Steps

Eisenstein and Montage Theory

(Montage = Editing)

- CONFLICT is the basic principle of all art
- MONTAGE (“the collision of independent shots”) is the basic principle of cinema
- Montage = construction
- Montage = conflict and dynamism
- Montage is not mere description; rather, it is a dynamic “visual counterpoint”
- Montage = SUPERIMPOSITION, leading to “a new, higher dimension”

The Odessa Steps (1)

- Juxtaposes shots from different angles
- Intercutting of long shots and close-ups
 - The Tsarist soldiers vs. the people
 - Crowd as a whole contrasted with individuals
- Conflicting movements and rhythms
 - Troops march & people flee, left-right, down the steps
 - Groups going up steps, right-left, to meet troops
 - Relentless precision of troop movements vs. chaos of people fleeing
- Jump cuts, reaction shots

The Odessa Steps (2)

- Average shot length is very short: 52 frames (just over 2 seconds, at 24 frames/second)
- Dilation of time (the sequence is considerably longer than actual event would have been)
- Individual dramas, standing out from the crowd
 - Mother carrying injured son
 - Drama of the baby carriage
 - Woman with pince-nez

Other Soviet Films

- Eisenstein's later work
 - *October* (1927)
 - Experiments with sound: *Alexandr Nevsky* (1938) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1945)
- Vsevolod Pudovkin: *Mother*, 1926
- Dziga Vertov: *Man With a Movie Camera*, 1929: avant-garde experimentation meets documentary
- Stalin and the decline of Soviet film

D. W. Griffith (1875-1948) and Continuity Editing

- Early short films (1908-1913)
 - Multiple shots during a single scene
 - Variety of distances and lengths
 - Development of continuity system
 - Multiple narrative strands; parallel editing
- Griffith's movement to long features
- *The Birth of a Nation* (1915): formal innovation and political controversy
- *Intolerance* (1916): four parallel narratives

American Silent Film Comedy

- Charlie Chaplin, *The Gold Rush* (1925)
 - Figure of The Tramp
 - Mixture of comedy, pathos, and social criticism
- Chaplin's later career: silence into sound
 - *City Lights* (1931)
 - *Modern Times* (1936)
- Buster Keaton, *Sherlock Jr.* (1924)
 - The Great Stone Face
 - Physical gags
 - Film within a film

German Expressionism (1919-1933)

- Violent exaggeration, anti-naturalism, social criticism
- Robert Wiene, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919)
 - extreme stylization (sets, lighting, angles)
 - dreamlike, psychotic atmosphere
- F. W. Murnau, *Nosferatu* (1922)
 - really a version of Dracula
 - naturalistic setting, deliberately underplayed, but with strange effects of camera angles, lighting, and depth of field

Metropolis

- Career of Fritz Lang (1890-1976)
 - Early silent films (from 1919)
 - Dr. Mabuse series (1922-1933)
 - *M* (first sound film, 1931)
 - To United States after 1933
 - Hollywood films, 1936-1956
- *Metropolis* (1926)
 - Expressionistic sets and images, special effects
 - Extreme emotions through lighting and angles
 - Social vision: class divisions, crowds
 - Determinism, fate

Silent film in France (and the rest of Europe)

- Louis Feuillade, serials in the 1910s
 - *Fantomas* series; *Les Vampires*
 - *Judex* (1917)
- Abel Gance, *Napoleon* (1927)
- Carl Theodor Dreyer, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928)
- Surrealism
 - Rene Clair (*Under the Roofs of Paris*, 1929)
 - Luis Bunuel & Salvador Dali, *Un chien andalou* (*Andalusian Dog*) (1929)