



# THE TECHNIQUE OF FILM AND VIDEO EDITING

History, Theory, and Practice



FOURTH EDITION

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following shots could yield widely different results with an audience. In their famous experiment with the actor Ivan Mosjukhin, they used the same shot of the actor juxtaposed with three different follow-up shots: a plate of soup standing on a table, a shot of a coffin containing a dead woman, and a little girl playing with a toy. Audience responses to the three sequences suggested a hungry person, a sad husband, and a joyful adult, and yet the first shot was always the same.

Encouraged by this type of experiment, Pudovkin went further. In his film version of *Mother* (1926), he wanted to suggest the joy of a prisoner about to be set free. These are Pudovkin's comments about the construction of the scene:

I tried to affect the spectators, not by the psychological performances of an actor, but by the plastic synthesis through editing. The son sits in prison. Suddenly, passed in to him surreptitiously, he receives a note that the next day he is to be set free. The problem was the expression, filmically, of his joy. The photographing of a face lighting up with joy would have been flat and void of effect. I show, therefore, the nervous play of his hands and a big close-up of the lower half of his face, the corners of the smile. These shots I cut in with other and varied material—shots of a brook, swollen with the rapid flow of spring, of the play of sunlight broken on the water, birds splashing in the village pond, and finally a laughing child. By the junction of these components our expression of "prisoner's joy" takes shape.<sup>12</sup>

In this story of a mother who is politicized by the persecution of her son for his political beliefs, a personal approach is intermingled with a political story. In this sense, Pudovkin was similar in his narrative strategy to Griffith, but in purpose he was more political than Griffith. He also experimented freely with scene construction to convey his political ideas. When workers strike, their fate is clear (Figure 1.12); when fathers and sons take differing sides in a political battle, the family (in this case, the mother) will suffer (Figure 1.13); and family tragedy is the sacrifice necessary if political change is to occur (Figure 1.14).

Pudovkin first involves us in the personal story and the narrative, and then he communicates the political message. Although criticized for adopting bourgeois narrative techniques, Pudovkin carried those techniques further than Griffith, but not as far as his contemporary, Sergei Eisenstein.

## □ SERGEI EISENSTEIN: THE THEORY OF MONTAGE

Eisenstein was the second of the key Russian filmmakers. As a director, he was perhaps the greatest. He also wrote extensively about film ideas and eventually taught a generation of Russian directors. In the early 1920s, however, he was a young, committed filmmaker.



Figure 1.12 *Mother*, 1926. Still provided by Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archives.



Figure 1.13 *Mother*, 1926. Still provided by Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archives.



Figure 1.14 *Mother*, 1926. Still provided by Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archives.

With a background in theatre and design, Eisenstein attempted to translate the lessons of Griffith and the lessons of Karl Marx into a singular audience experience. Beginning with *Strike* (1924), Eisenstein attempted to theorize about film editing as a clash of images and ideas. The principle of the dialectic was particularly suitable for subjects related to prerevolutionary and revolutionary issues and events. Strikes, the 1905 revolution, and the 1917 revolution were Eisenstein's earliest subjects.

Eisenstein achieved so much in the field of editing that it would be most useful to present his theory first and then look at how he put theory into practice. His theory of editing has five components: metric montage, rhythmic montage, tonal montage, overtonal montage, and intellectual montage. The clearest exposition of his theory has been presented by Andrew Tudor in his book *Theories on Film*.<sup>13</sup>

#### METRIC MONTAGE

Metric montage refers to the length of the shots relative to one another. Regardless of their content, shortening the shots abbreviates the time the audience has to absorb the information in each shot. This increases the tension resulting from the scene. The use of close-ups with shorter shots creates a more intense sequence (Figures 1.15 and 1.16).



Figure 1.15 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films. Still provided by British Film Institute.



Figure 1.16 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films. Still provided by British Film Institute.

### RHYTHMIC MONTAGE

Rhythmic montage refers to continuity arising from the visual pattern within the shots. Continuity based on matching action and screen direction are examples of rhythmic montage. This type of montage has considerable potential for portraying conflict because opposing forces can be presented in terms of opposing screen directions as well as parts of the frame. For example, in the Odessa Steps sequence of *Potemkin* (1925), soldiers march down the steps from one quadrant of the frame, followed by people attempting to escape from the opposite side of the frame (Figures 1.17 to 1.21).

### TONAL MONTAGE

Tonal montage refers to editing decisions made to establish the emotional character of a scene, which may change in the course of the scene. Tone or mood is used as a guideline for interpreting tonal montage, and although the theory begins to sound intellectual, it is no different from Ingmar Bergman's suggestion that editing is akin to music, the playing of the emotions of the different scenes.<sup>14</sup> Emotions change, and so too can the tone of the scene. In the Odessa Steps sequence, the death of the young mother on the steps and the following baby carriage sequence highlight the depth of the tragedy of the massacre (Figures 1.22 to 1.27).

### OVERTONAL MONTAGE

Overtonal montage is the interplay of metric, rhythmic, and tonal montages. That interplay mixes pace, ideas, and emotions to induce the desired effect from the audience. In the Odessa Steps sequence, the outcome of the massacre should be the outrage of the audience. Shots that emphasize the abuse of the army's overwhelming power and the exploitation of the citizens' powerlessness punctuate the message (Figure 1.28).

### INTELLECTUAL MONTAGE

Intellectual montage refers to the introduction of ideas into a highly charged and emotionalized sequence. An example of intellectual montage is the sequence in *October* (1928). George Kerensky, the Menshevik leader of the first Russian Revolution, climbs the steps just as quickly as he ascended to power after the Czar's fall. Intercut with his ascent are shots of a mechanical peacock preening itself. Eisenstein is making a point about Kerensky as politician. This is one of many examples in *October* (1928).

### EISENSTEIN: THEORETICIAN AND AESTHETE

Eisenstein was a cerebral filmmaker, an intellectual with a great respect for ideas. Many of his later critics in the Soviet Union believed that he was too academic and his respect for ideas would supersede his respect for Soviet realism, that his politics were too aesthetic, and that his aesthetics were too individualistic.



Figure 1.17 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films Company. Still provided by British Film Institute.



Figure 1.18 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films Company. Still provided by British Film Institute.



Figure 1.19 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films Company. Still provided by British Film Institute.



Figure 1.21 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films Company. Still provided by British Film Institute.



Figure 1.20 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films Company. Still provided by British Film Institute.

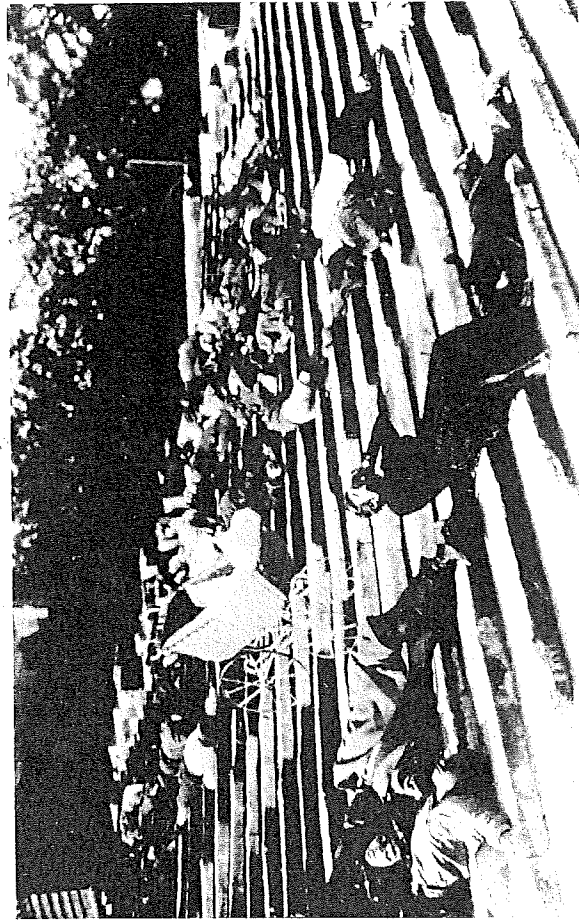


Figure 1.22 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films Company. Still provided by Moving Image and Sound Archives.

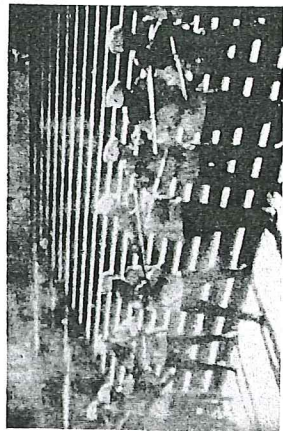


Figure 1.23 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films. Stills provided by Moving Image and Sound Archives.



Figure 1.24 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films. Stills provided by Moving Image and Sound Archives.



Figure 1.25 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films. Stills provided by Moving Image and Sound Archives.



Figure 1.26 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films. Stills provided by Moving Image and Sound Archives.

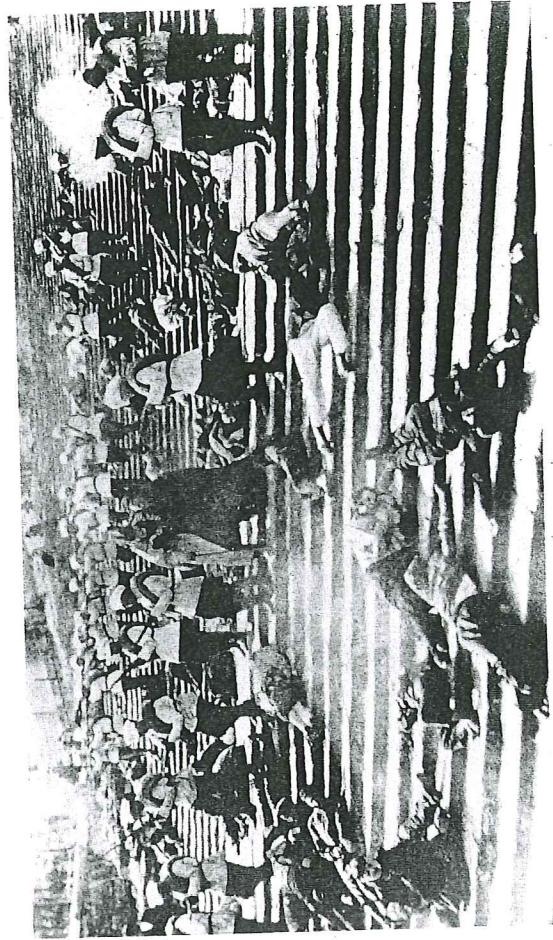


Figure 1.28 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films. Still provided by Moving Image and Sound Archives.

It is difficult for modern viewers to see Eisenstein as anything but a committed Marxist. His films are almost as naive as those of Griffith in their simple devotion to their own view of life. In the 1920s, whether he was aware of it or not, Eisenstein discovered the visceral power of editing and of visual composition, and he was a master of both. He was dangerous in the same sense that every artist is dangerous: He was his own person, a unique individual. Today, Eisenstein is greatly appreciated as a theoretician, but, like Griffith, he was also a great director. That is the extent of his crime.

## □ DZIGA VERTOV: THE EXPERIMENT OF REALISM

If Eisenstein illustrated an editing theory devoted to reshaping reality to incite the population to support the revolution, Dziga Vertov was as vehement that only the documented truth could be honest enough to bring about true revolution.

Vertov described his goals in the film *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) as follows: "*The Man with a Movie Camera* constitutes an experiment in the cinematic transmission of visual phenomena without the aid of intertitles (a film with no intertitles), script (a film with no script), theater (a film with neither actors nor sets). Kino-Eye's new experimental work aims to create a truly international film—language, absolute writing in film, and the complete generation of cinema from theater and literature."<sup>15</sup>

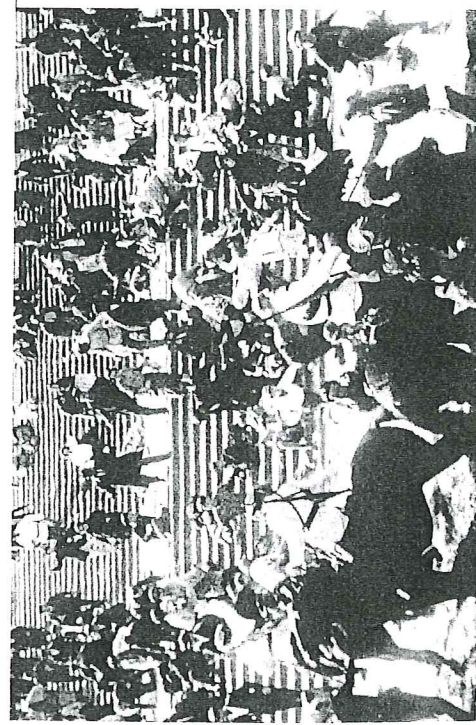


Figure 1.27 *Potemkin*, 1925. Courtesy Janus Films. Still provided by British Film Institute.