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UNDERSTANDING THE FILM: "THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN" AND CONFLICT THEORY A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Directors try to demonstrate their stories from a specific perspective. They use different methods for communicating with audiences. Some of the directors pay special attention to camera, some of them pay special attention to color and light, and some of them pay special attention to editing to be understandable. This research intends to examine the relationship between the film and its audience. Eisenstein's methods in film structuring, and his editing style are analyzed. At the same time, his film 'The Battleship Potemkin' is analyzed in terms of conflict theory.

Every film has a story. Films have different perspectives to show the things in frame. We can see many different traditions in film history: French New Wave Cinema, German Silents, Italian Neo-Realism, Film Noir, and so on. Their differences come from their different narrative and structural styles. Soviet Cinema, like others, has a significant role in film history. Directors in Soviet Cinema have used different ideologies, theories, and belief systems to build their styles. Especially, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Lev Kuleshov, in Soviet cinema, had strong effects on establishing new narrative styles and theories in the film industry.

This research examines the relationship between understanding film and conflict theory. According to this point, the research question

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can be stated as: “Can we understand a film in terms of the conflict theory?” Related to this question, we can state two important points for establishing the research strategy.

First, Eisenstein’s film ‘The Battleship Potemkin’ can be investigated in terms of conflict theory. Secondly, ‘audiences’ response must be considered.

There are also other questions that we will attempt to answer for supporting main question. Some of them are: ‘What is conflict theory?’, ‘What are the pieces in film that help us to understand the film?’, ‘How we can find the conflict theory in films?’, ‘How do we built meanings in film?’, ‘Can audiences identify the conflicts in Eisenstein’s films compared to other films in general?’

We may say that when we look for a presence of conflict theory in Eisenstein’s films, we have to look at his editing style. Editing in an Eisenstein film plays the most important role for understanding the film. That’s why we can look at his films from a narrower perspective to see the relationship between Eisenstein’s editing and conflict theory.

Generally, conflict theory is known as dialectic. Authors, academicians, and theoreticians use the same theoretical perspective. This helps us to use their explanations in combination. Jason Lunsford explains that “Eisenstein saw editing as a process which operated according to the Marxist dialectic. This dialectic is a way of looking at human history and experience as a perpetual conflict in which a force (thesis) collides with a counter force (antithesis) to produce from their own collision a wholly new phenomenon (synthesis) which is not the sum of the two forces but something greater than and different from the both [thesis and antithesis] (1)”.

Audience plays an important role to see the relationship between Eisenstein’s narrative style for understanding the film and conflict theory. It is not that important for us alone to see this relationship in Eisenstein’s films, but it is important for us to see if the audience is able to find out the conflict theory (conflicts) in Eisenstein’s films. At this point, if the audience is able to see this relationship, we can say that conflict theory in Eisenstein’s films has an important role for us to understand the film.

1 J. Lunsford (1995). **Eisenstein’s Theory and Use of Montage in the Silent Cinema**. The University of Georgia.

Briefly, it can be asked as: ‘Do people see what (conflict theory) we see in Eisenstein films?’ On the other hand, the results may be negative. The audience may not be able to see this relationship, and we can not expect that the results have to be positive. Sample size, knowledge on films, cultural differences, and many other variables can affect the results.

With this research we can find out and interpret the director’s behavior, and his philosophy toward conflict theory. Directors, critics, and theorists can see if the usage of conflict theory or any other theory is identifiable for audiences to understand the film. Additional to this point, we can learn to look at films from different ways and perspectives. Another important point is that we can understand the importance of editing in films with the results of this study. As we know, editing means grammar and/or narrative style for many directors to communicate to audiences.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Conflict is a part of our daily lives. Everything in our lives has its contrast. We can see big-small, old-young, tall-short, and many other contrasts. It can be said that these contrasts usually are in conflict in each other in our physical world. They actually have conflicts with each other because of each other’s size, volume, scales, etc. If we try to conceptualize these conflicts, we come to the point of conflict theory. Conflict causes new ideas and results, and it can be used to understand the relationships.

Dialectic is explained as “the process of finding truth by dialogue”(2). Web Dictionary of Cybernetics and Systems also shows the other definitions of dialectic: “The art or practice of arriving at the truth by stating a thesis, developing a contradictory antithesis, and combining and resolving them into a coherent synthesis (3)” and “the Marxian process of change through the conflict of opposing forces, whereby a given contradiction is characterized by a primary and a secondary aspect, the secondary succumbing to the primary, which is then transformed into an aspect of a new contradiction (4)”.

2 **Web Dictionary of Cybernetics and Systems** (1996). Belgium: Principia Cybernetica Web.

3 **Ibid.**

4 **Ibid.**

Dialectic (conflicts) is also described as: “A method of argument or exposition that systematically weighs contradictory facts and ideas with a view to the resolution of their real or apparent contradictions. The contradiction between two conflicting forces viewed as the determining factor in their continuing interaction (5)”.

“Dialectic is both a method of demonstration and an ontological principle. As a method, it is meant to show the necessity of development, or transition, from one stage of consciousness or of history, of from one abstract category of logic, to a higher stage or category. Once the dialectic [conflicts] has been separated from proof, Hegel says, the notion of philosophical demonstration has been lost (6)”.

Daniel Berthold-Bond focuses on the ideas of Hegel about the dialectic-conflict theory and he expresses the importance of negativity in dialectic. “Dialectic is defined by Hegel as the power (or energy or force) of negativity. Negativity involves, in general, the opposing of something to its ‘other.’ When applied to epistemology, this is the ‘pathway of doubt’ and ‘loss of immediate certainty’ involved in the disparity between subject and object in the course of consciousness’ experience of the world. And when applied to ontology, negativity is the EntauBerung of substance by which it ‘becomes other’ to itself (7)”. Berthold-Bond also focuses on the results of conflicts. He mentions that the conflict can be an element for transition. Berthold-Bond states that “conflict is transition of things, and of knowledge, from potentiality or abstraction to actuality and content, but in such a way that the arising of a fuller determination points beyond itself to a further determination. Every determination is both a result and a new beginning, concrete and abstract, for it occurs within a process of the becoming of a thing (or of knowledge), and hence is concrete relative to the origin of the process but abstract relative to the whole process. A thing becomes more and more fully developed through this successive conflict of self-construction (8)”.

Berthold-Bond points out that conflict must be considered as a mode of thought (9). That’s why we are able to relate film editing with

5 **Ibid.**

6 D. Berthold-Bond (1993). **Hegel’s Grand Synthesis: A Study of Being, Thought, and History.** New York: Harper, p. 6.

7 **Ibid.**, p.7.

8 **Ibid.**, p.7.

9 **Ibid.**, p.6.

human thinking. He also stresses one interesting point. "The employment of dialectic by the understanding dialectically overcomes itself and points beyond itself to the 'higher sense of dialectic,' dialectic as employed by reason. For the analytic method of the understanding leads to contradictions which the understanding can neither avoid nor resolve, and thus reveals its own limitations. The conflict [dialectic] of the understanding, then, is a way of thinking which, in seeing only the differentiation and opposition between things (10)". James Monaco shows the relationship between film and conflict. He states that "conflict is the 'art of arguing,' 'conflicts' are thus the relationships that film entities have with each other (11)".

Noel Burch also shows the relationship between film and conflict. She expresses that "only film contains conflicting structures, if only because there is bound to be some degree of contrast between sequences (however unpronounced) and some sort of interaction between the shot changes within a given sequence (however banal). Film form, it would appear, simply can not exist without some kind of underlying conflict(12)".

We can point out that meaning becomes an important part in the relationship between film and conflict theory. It can be said that meaning is usually placed contextually. If we look at editing and/or montage in film, we can see the creation of meaning. We establish a narrative style with editing, montage, camera angles, and color. We can say that Eisenstein's films are good examples for creating their own meanings. Certain parts of the narrative in his films give meaning to others, such as political viewpoint. These parts interlink in meaning to each other and to other parts and to smaller functions, such as characters, camera angles, light, setting, and so on. These parts further help to make up overall form of the film, by its series of interlinking parts and meanings.

James Monaco shows the relationship between montage and conflict. According to him, "montage (at least in its European sense) is

10 *Ibid.*, p.7.

11 J. Monaco (1981). **How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media** (Rev. ed.). New York: Oxford University Press, p.14.

12 N. Burch (1969). **Theory of Film Practice**. Paris, France: Editions Gallimard, p. 70-73.

characterized by a particular film editing method: shots, rather than just 'edited' together, are constructed. A conflicting process that creates a third meaning out of the original two meanings of the adjacent shots (editing thus has only two fundamental methods: cut and overlap). A process in which a number of short shots are woven together in order to communicate a great deal of information in a short period of time. Montage is a construction of a specific notion that the director has in mind (13)".

The Oxford English Language Dictionary shows the meaning of montage as: "selection, cutting, and piecing together as consecutive whole, of separate sections of cinema or television film; composite whole from juxtaposed pieces of music, photographs, etc.; production of this(14)".

Murray Johnson states that "real cinematography begins only with the collision of various cinematic modifications of movement and vibration. The concept of the montage attempts to illicit from the viewer what every great piece of film wants, psycho-physiological reaction; thought, feeling, and emotion (15)".

Michael Loehr explains how editing [montage] became an art. He explains that "directors experimented with different camera angles and movements, the overall concept of films stayed very close to the concept of a stage play. Actors provided most of the action in the film. As a result, editing was basically a mechanical necessity. It was until 1925, when Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and his film, *The Battleship Potemkin*, showed the film industry that editing is more than just a necessity. His work showed that it is an artistic opportunity. Eisenstein's great contribution to the world of editing is the montage: a series of related images presented in sequence to convey an emotional message to an audience (16)".

Many film theorists and critics agree that the Eisenstein's montage (editing) shows the principles for establishing meaning in film. Some of

13 J. Monaco (1981). *op.cit.*, p.183-184.

14 *The Oxford English Language Dictionary* (1973). England: Oxford University Press, p. 426.

15 M. Johnson (1995). *The Montage*. Canada, p.13.

16 M. Loehr (1996, September). "Master editors". *Videomaker*. p. 5.

the film critics address the relationship between Eisenstein's montage and conflict theory.

Nitin Sawhney shows that "Eisenstein felt that film must try to visually represent concepts to create intellectual cinema" (17). We can say that Eisenstein expects an intellectual involvement from the audience. Sawhney also includes some of Eisenstein's thoughts: "Eisenstein does not consider the shot an element of montage but rather a montage cell, characterized by linkage but conflict. He believes that a collision of shots, not there mere combination, creates the montage of film. Eisenstein subscribes to the 'dramatic' principle where montage arises from a collision of independent and even opposing shots. The incongruence in contour of the first picture -already impressed in the mind- with the subsequently perceived second picture engenders, in conflict, the feeling of motion (18)".

Sawhney also clarifies the relationship between conflict and the film. "The sense of aesthetic is structured and rules are used to suppress most sources of conflict. In film, conflict is used both within a shot and within a frame (19)". At this point, we can see the pure relationship between the conflict and the film.

Jason Lunsford defines the montage as a result of conflict. He points out different conflicts occurring in Eisenstein's films for narrative structure and intellectual involvement: "the conflict of graphic directions (lines), the conflict of shot levels (between one another), the conflict of volumes, to conflict of masses (of volumes filled with varying intensities of light), and conflict of spaces" (20).

Nitin Sawhney stresses the importance of conflict in Eisenstein's films. Sawhney adds that "conflicts may create a chain of associate links that may yield psychological responses and hence an emotional dynamization of the subject. Each montage fragment evokes no more than a certain association -it is nearly abstract, yet the reconstruction of such associations creates the emotional effect on the spectator and the

17 N.N. Sawhney (1994). **Visual Logics in Film, Video, and Television: Redefining the Aesthetics of Digital Expression**. Atlanta, GA: The Georgia Institute of Technology, p.6.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 6-7.

20 J. Lunsford (1995). *op.cit.*, p. 6.

sense of action as a whole. Finally an intellectual dynamization is developed by comparing the montage fragments to their signifying connotations. Eisenstein says that the 'decision to release these ideas, as well as the method used, is already intellectually conceived.' Seeking such dynamization by using conflicts can create a powerful effect on the spectator (21)".

David Bordwell shows the Eisenstein's methods for building the structures in the films and spectator's responses. He finds Eisenstein's works as "provocative reconceptualizations" (22). We can agree with this point, because Eisenstein's films encourage intellectual and emotional involvement.

Raymond Spottiswoode's book is very important source to understand Eisenstein films, film analysis, and differences between commercial films and art films. He states that "the commercial film of today is the result of the interaction of personal and economic factors"(23). At the first part of his book, he explains synthesis in film and analysis as: "The analysis is an analysis of structure...the synthesis, on the other hand, is a synthesis of effect; of the building up of a mental structure from the emotional and intellectual units it contains. The synthesis determines the analysis, and the analysis the synthesis (24)".

Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen's book uses the films for comparisons and ideological explanations. They show the significant points of the films from spectator's viewpoint (25).

METHOD

Eisenstein's film, *The Battleship Potemkin*, is our first source of information. Our focus point is to find the relationship between the use of conflict theory in his films and the responses of audience. Eisenstein's cinema theory includes many ideological and psychological segments.

21 N.N. Sawhney (1994). *op.cit.*, p. 7.

22 D. Bordwell. (1993). *The Cinema of Eisenstein*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 27.

23 R. Spottiswoode (1967). *A Grammar of the Film*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, p. 93.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

25 G. Mast & M. Cohen (Eds.) (1985). *Film Theory and Criticism*. Third ed.. New York: Oxford University Press.

Textual and rhetoric analyses are necessary for us to search on film pieces. Rhetoric analysis is helpful for us to see the relationship between editing and conflict theory, and their resulting meaning. Rhetoric analysis is helpful to examine Eisenstein's film theory for creating meanings. It is also helpful to look at theory from many ways. Textual analysis is a standpoint for us to see if we can interpret director's behavior and intention toward the conflict theory.

Visual analysis is also necessary for us and the sample audience to examine the Eisenstein's film, 'The Battleship Potemkin' and a commercial film. Interviewing is used for gathering the sample audience's responses. The goal of interview method is to gather respondents' answers as soon as possible after watching films. Interviewing helps us to record aural responses, and we can have chance to work on empirical data. Sample audience members are asked to watch selected pieces of 'The Battleship Potemkin' to see how conflict is identifiable in film for the viewers.

RESULTS

Results of this research project are very significant according to our analyses. According to sample audience's responses, it can be said that audience is able to see the secret meanings or messages in film. On the other hand, there is one important thing that they were not able to name or clearly identify in these messages. Their responses almost proved that audience notices things in films. It can be said that audience members were able to see Eisenstein's methods and conflicts in film. It was the main concern for this research.

Raymond Spottiswoode states that "the reverse side of the picture is the synthesis whereby the film produces its effect on an audience (26)". It was remarkable for us to see this effect on selected sample audience. Parallel to Spottiswoode's statement, some of the respondents' answers were alike: "...it was very tense and it was very emotional..." "Yet to be a lot of attention." "They caught my attention." "...but they got the message across."

26 R. Spottiswoode (1967). *op.cit.*, p. 10.

Audience also noticed another important thing, which was Eisenstein's method for editing (montage). Responses show that Eisenstein's editing method with conflict theory is understandable by the audience. According to Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen's explanations, "Eisenstein sees each shot as having a kind of potential energy- in purely visual terms of its direction of movement, its volumes of shapes, its intensity of light, and so forth (27)" and these shots and scenes are not continuous, because they are in conflict with each other to create meanings. Respondents' answers were very similar to what Eisenstein does in editing:

"...precise movements of everybody...It seems like they panned the cameras on everything back and forth really quickly. I don't know if it's really different than normal commercial film making..."

"pretty well visual aids...they had flashbacks."

"it was not continuous."

"...you never got to see the whole picture."

Respondents' answers are not reflecting the definite terms or explanations, because their professions are very different from film field. They tried to explain things according to their words or explanations. Respondents' explanations are close to prove another point about Eisenstein's editing (montage). It was emotional involvement with the help of conflicts in film. Stanley J. Solomon indicates that "...in every sequence, Eisenstein in a highly subjective fashion directs the viewer's attention to the condition of the suffering masses. The film's most memorable sequence, the massacre on the Odessa steps, is constructed so as to generate the most intense feeling...(28)". Leo Braudy and Morris Dickstein also points out the same things related with emotional and intellectual involvement. "Eisenstein invented the whole episode of the massacre on the Odessa steps, and he creates an almost musical rhythm of counterpointed images which built up visually and emotionally in a powerful crescendo (29)". Respondents' answers were parallel to the authors' ideas. Their answers were showing that they were able to see conflicts (conflict theory) in 'The Battleship Potemkin.' Members of the sample group were understanding the things in film according to conflicts

27 G. Mast & M. Cohen (Eds.). (1985). *op.cit.*, p. 78.

28 S. Solomon (Ed.) (1973). *The Classic Cinema: Essays in Criticism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Incorporation, p.67.

29 L. Braudy & M. Dickstein (Eds.) (1978). *Great Film Directors: A Critical Anthology*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 233.

in film, and their answers prove this statement:

“It seems like they panned the cameras on everything back and forth really quickly”.

“You could understand that it was a very tense moment talking about the first part we saw, battleship. I guess the battle that didn’t really take place. It almost took place.”

“It was not continuous, they showed like, one time that how they killed that little boy and they will move onto something...I think it wasn’t a continuous thing.”

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