Discuss the uses and the function of editing in Sergei Eisenstein's The Battleship Potemkin. Illustrate your discussion with relevant episodes in the film.

EDITING AS A REVOLUTIONARY QUALITY IN "THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN"

Sergei Eisenstein's 'Battleship Potemkin' (1925) remains one of the most influential films in cinema, due to its innovative use and ideas around editing. Eisenstein refused to believe in the idea that editing should ensure continuity between shots, developing the concept of Montage editing. The meaning and emotional impact is produced through the juxtaposition and fragmented colliding shots, making editing the primary mechanism through which the narrative, emotion, and ideology are communicated. This approach is most overt in the Odessa steps sequence (0:46':15'- 0:52'16'), which demonstrates how Eisenstein's montage editing constructs high tension, collective identity, and this "awakening of political consciousness and oppression versus collective resistance" (Learning journal, 22/01/2026). Through rapid cutting, continuous visual repetition and fragmented shots, Eisenstein takes this violent historical episode and transforms it into this powerful cinematic representation of revolutionary struggle.

As noted within my learning journal, "meaning is constructed through cinematography and editing rather than sound" (Learning journal, 22/01/2026). The film entirely lacks any dialogue or diegetic sound; therefore, Eisenstein relies purely on visual techniques and composition to create this emotional intensity. The chiaroscuro, dramatic camera angles and constant chaotic movement between long shots and close up shots, all contribute to this idea of urgency and tension. Editing becomes the central element which organises these images into an emotionally driven and powerful sequence.

The Odessa steps sequence begins with a celebratory welcoming atmosphere, as citizens gather to welcome the sailors. The earlier shots are longer and wider and more stable, not only emphasising the scale of the mass of the crowd but also reinforcing the ideological emphasis on the collective rather than one individual, "There are hardly any individuals, and the only ones who make serious impressions are mostly victims of the previous regime" (Vining, 2025). Vining examines, soviet filmmakers, particularly during the 1920's, deliberately avoided the idea of the 'individual hero' to align with Bolshevik ideology, emphasising collective action, the proletariat, and socialist unity over individual glory. This approach was key to early soviet montage, which creates this new, revolutionary film

language which Eisenstein sought to create. In this sense, the crowd itself becomes the protagonist of the scene, switching from close ups of many individuals, adding to this warm sense of community. However, the tone changes dramatically (0:48':15') when the soldiers appear at the top of the steps. The editing rhythm accelerates and the sequence suddenly shifts from celebration to terror, making the space almost disorientating due to frequent change of perspective and shot type.

The key functions of editing within this sequence is creating a contrast between these opposing forces. The soldiers are shown upon the steps in this rigid solid formation, whilst being framed in medium or long shots with negative space above and below the soldiers, emphasising their unity and mechanic like movement. In contrast, the civilians are shown through fragmented long and close up shots, showing terrified faces, running feet, bodies collapsing onto the steps, hands grasping at railings, and people running in many different directions. This fragmentation emphasises the vulnerability of the crowd, whilst also highlighting the brutalities of military authority, showing the idea of the "continuity of viewpoint and discontinuity of duration" (Bordwell, 1984). When the young boy gets shot emphasises the brutality of the soldiers, but also the helplessness of the civilians. Through montage, Eisenstein constructs this clear visual opposition between oppression and resistance.

"Eisenstein concluded that montage editing is an idea that derives from the collision between two shots that are Independent of one another" (Lindop, 2007). Eisenstein "argued the juxtaposition of two different shots could create ideas and feelings that were greater than the sum of its parts" (Media Studies, 2025). In the Odessa steps sequence, this principle is clear in the repeated alternation between soldiers and civilians. The soldiers remain faceless and anonymous, while the civilians are depicted by these expressive and emotional close ups which encourage emotional identification from the audience. This contrast produces a strong ideological message, whilst making the audience create personal connections to these small few who we can identify. Am example of this would be the mother who carries her child off the steps, bringing him towards the soldiers, just to be shot down like her son (0:51':25'-0:52':13'), creates strong idea about the suffering of ordinary people.

Another important feature of the sequence is its use of repetition. As mentioned in my learning journal, Eisenstein repeatedly cuts between a series of key visualisations, including the falling bodies, marching boots, wounded civilians upon the steps and most importantly

the baby carriage falling down the stairs scene (0:54':11"), are all shown multiple times from different perspectives (Learning journal, 22/01/2026). This idea of rhythmic repetition intensifies the emotional effect, whilst creating this rhythm that substitutes for any diegetic sound, "new synthesis for the transmission of a new semantic and figurative sound" (Korotkova, 2019). This baby carriage sequence is an ideal example of montage. After a mother has been shot, her baby carriage begins to slowly roll down the steps. Eisenstein extends this moment through many rapid and fragmented cuts, between many different angles. We see close ups of the wheels, long shots of the carriage centralised within the frame bouncing down the staircase, as well as reaction shots of the terrified civilians. Eisenstein delays the descent through montage, transforming this simple scene into an emotionally intense symbol of innocent life caught in political violence.

In conclusion, Battleship Potemkin demonstrates the revolutionary potential of editing within cinema. Eisenstein's use of montage within the Odessa steps sequence (0:46':15'- 0:52'16), shows how meaning can be expressed through rapid cutting and fragmentation of images and rhythmic repetition, creating this intensely emotional and political experience without any sound or dialogue. Editing has been placed as the central tool, in which the film communicates its revolutionary ideology.

960 words

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