

Broken Glasses

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Battleship Potemkin, Eisenstein, 1925. Having seen the clip of the Odessa steps discuss it with your friends, then write down your impressions. Did you enjoy it? If so, which parts impressed you most? If not, what was it that failed to capture your attention?

The rest of the page was blank. A 3,000 word assignment, due on October 24th no later than 4pm. The trees outside my study bedroom were decidedly autumnal. I could see people in the park below, enjoying the last of the sunshine. If I didn't have this essay to write, I'd be out there too.

I know my parents are worried. 'Media Studies at Oakley college, where's that going to get him?' A few weeks into the course I'm wondering if they are right. Why am I supposed to study a film that was made a hundred years ago about a massacre of civilians by Tsarist troops in 1905? Who cares? Who knows what the rebels wanted or why they were being shot? In any case, Odessa is in Ukraine.

The tutor was enthusiastic: 'Watch the famous Odessa Steps sequence and you will see what editing is about!' Time stands still. Movements are unstoppable. Images of innocence and violence follow in quick succession. The robotic soldiers cut through the crowd. The face of the woman wearing the pince-nez shines with courage as she tries to stop the troops. A moment later she is aghast, her hair is dishevelled. Her jaw is bloodied. The Cossack's arm is raised. Did he hit her or was she shot? Blood spurts from her right eye. Her shattered glasses hang awry. The soldiers march on.



Grudgingly, I clicked the link to see the clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMWMq4AEyJU>

To my amazement I was captivated. The advance, the diagonals, the cuts and the shots, a few frames at most. The baby carriage teetering on the steps, the ruthless advance. The terror. I couldn't believe six minutes of silent black and white film could have such effect.

I turned back to the assignment. I don't have any friends, so I'd have to skip that bit. Did I enjoy the clip? What kind of question was that? How could anyone enjoy watching a massacre? Come to that, how could anyone be bored? It wasn't one moment or another that impressed me: it was the effect of the whole that took me by surprise.

If that's what 'montage' meant, there was no point in thinking about the impact of individual parts. Without the cutting to and fro, we'd have no sense of shattered illusions. We'd see broken glasses, but not the essence of brutality. Now I had my theme. I'd challenge the premise of the essay topic based on my new-found understanding of Eisenstein's method. I hesitated for a moment: perhaps I should take a more predictable approach. But no, I decided to stick to my guns: I wasn't being wilfully awkward: I had a point to make.

A few weeks later our work was returned. The response was not what I expected. B- 'An interesting approach and a good attempt, but you don't address the set question. The task was to explain which *parts* of the clip impressed you most.'

My parents were right. Oakley College was not a great place to start, but the injustice of the tutor's comments and the experience of watching the Odessa Steps spurred me on. It *was the effect of the whole* that counted.

I retired last year. Over the course of my long career, I won prizes for my editing technique, and I worked with some of the most famous film directors of our time. Enthusiastic followers claim that I led the way in modern cinematic montage. Others are sceptical, detecting Eisenstein's influence in all my work. To be honest, these critics have a point. It is true, I have had some success but at the end of the day, nothing, but nothing, matches the power of that flickering black-and-white sequence from 1925.