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“A Monstrous Staircase”: Inscribing the 1905

Revolution on Odessa

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And the grand staircase, as wide as a broad street, two hundred low, lordly steps; it seems there's no other one like it in the world, and if you tell me that there is, I wouldn't go to see it.

—VLADIMIR JABOTINSKY, *The Five: A Novel of Jewish Life in Turn-of-the-Century Odessa* (1935)

Russia's revolutionary unrest of 1905 spawned narratives set in various locales, including the two imperial capitals, Moscow and St. Petersburg; but it was in comparatively sleepy, provincial Odessa that the most vivid—albeit fictional—images of the 1905 revolution were composed. As this essay will argue, it was these images of 1905, captured on film by Sergei Eisenstein and in literature by such writers as Isaac Babel, Aleksandr Kuprin, and Valentin Kataev, that established Odessa as an important site of Soviet political and cultural memory. The canonical, yet imaginary, version of history to which these images allude lives on in the architectural spaces of Odessa to this day, installed there by Eisenstein's landmark film *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), which has acquired several generations of fans and emulators, and reinforced by Odessites' pride in the rich literary heritage of their city.

City mythologies occupy a privileged place in Russian culture, and the two most celebrated “city-texts,” those of Moscow and St. Petersburg, have been extensively documented and explored by literary and cultural scholars.¹ Without recapitulating that body of work, it is worth remarking that what brings these cities to life as significant places in the collective memory is a fundamental tension or contradiction at the heart of their mythol-

ogy: thus, Petersburg is the site both of “Pushkin’s drawing-room” and of “Dostoevsky’s slum”; Moscow is simultaneously an overgrown village and Filofei’s “Third Rome.”² Like its more celebrated counterparts, the comparatively understudied Odessa mythology rests on an uneasy consciousness of the city’s dual identity, well established by the turn of the twentieth century.

On the one hand, Odessa stood as a monument to imperial Russia, complete with palaces and boulevards that, like those of Petersburg, boast an Italian pedigree and the distinction of having been frequented by Pushkin (during the latter’s extended exile from the capital); on the other hand, it was a notorious den of thieves, peopled by a hardy tribe of stevedores, smugglers, and swindlers who plied their interconnected trades amid the cosmopolitan atmosphere and mercantile bustle of Odessa’s international port.³ Architecturally, the first, “Pushkinian” Odessa was symbolized by its colonnaded opera and ballet theater, which first opened in 1810 but was rebuilt later in the nineteenth century following a disastrous fire, and by the Italianate palace of the governor general Mikhail Vorontsov, whose wife was said to be suspiciously intimate with Pushkin during the latter’s Odessan exile in 1823–24.⁴ The second Odessa, that of the workers and thieves, took as its architectural metonyms two spaces that were literally “below stairs”: the bustling, black-marketeer-friendly seaport, and the famous “Gambrius” tavern, located in a basement on Preobrazhenskaia Street, and immortalized by Aleksandr Kuprin in an eponymous 1907 short story.⁵

Basements and cellars play a significant role in literary works about Odessa, symbolizing a figurative “underworld” of unlawful activities as well as a social space literally beneath the notice of the aristocratic drawing-room society.⁶ In contrast to the lonely lair of Dostoevsky’s narrator in *Notes from Underground*, Odessa’s “below-stairs” spaces are characterized as sites of social encounter rather than of isolation; they represent a milieu in which—at best—weedy intellectuals rub shoulders with brawny laborers, Jews with Russians, and Odessa’s signature tricksters with the naive rubes on whom they ply their trade. In “Gambrinus,” which focuses on the events of 1905, Kuprin offers a portrait of the tavern’s clientele that might almost serve as a casting call for extras in a film about that eventful year:

Sailors of various nations, fishermen, stokers, merry ships’-boys, harbor thieves, machinists, workers, boatmen, dockers, divers, smugglers—they were all young, healthy, and steeped in the strong odor of sea and fish; they understood hard work, loved the allure and terror of daily risk, and valued above all strength, prowess and the sting of strong language.⁷

It is perhaps not a coincidence that Eisenstein was working with Babel on a film scenario devoted to that quintessential Odessan gangster, Benya Krik, at the same time that he was working on the script of his epic film for Goskino, *The Year 1905*—a project that was intended to give, like Kuprin’s “Gambrinus,” a sweeping account of “the most important events of 1905, from the Russo-Japanese war and the Bloody Sunday massacre in January to the tsar’s manifesto establishing the Duma, the widespread strikes and the fighting on the barricades.”⁸ While the Benya Krik collaboration never came to fruition, Eisenstein did end up making an iconic Odessa movie, one that arguably combined the local color of the Benya Krik project with the political content of the equally unrealized 1905 project. This was *The Battleship Potemkin*. With this film, released in 1925, Eisenstein took the events of 1905 in Odessa—events already narrated in Kuprin’s “Gambrinus,” and later to be immortalized in other works of Odessa literature, including Isaac Babel’s childhood stories, Valentin Kataev’s *A White Sail Gleams* (*Beleet parus odinokii*, 1936), and Vladimir Jabotinsky’s *The Five* (*Piatero*, 1935)—and “added the heroic gloss that turned Odessa into the avant-garde of revolutionary change, providing a usable prehistory for the Bolshevik Revolution and, by extension, for the new Soviet state.”⁹ *The Battleship Potemkin* blended these ingredients into a visual narrative that served at once as a public event, an architectural document, and a mythologizing history, perpetually renewing the connection between place and event for successive generations of viewers, both within and outside the Soviet Union.

“A Monstrous Staircase”

The success of Eisenstein’s cinematic paean to the workers of Odessa rested in large part on the director’s inspired reading of the city’s most striking architectural monument, the vast marble staircase that mediates between the “two Odessas.” Not yet built in Pushkin’s time, this staircase arguably represents the culmination of the nineteenth-century building program that produced the “Pushkinian Odessa” of palace and opera house. During the productive year that Pushkin himself spent in Odessa, working on a draft of *Eugene Onegin* and the seduction of an assortment of local beauties, the aristocratic milieu of Odessa’s palaces and boulevards must have been taking shape before his eyes, under the supervision of the Sardinian-born architect Francesco Boffo.

Boffo, who served as architect of the commune of Odessa from 1822 to 1844, is credited with the construction of Odessa’s “marine façade”—that is, the edifices from which the “above stairs” contingent of Odessa society

looked out at the sea—in a classical style.¹⁰ His tenure saw the erection of numerous landmark buildings and thoroughfares, including Primorskii Boulevard, now an elegant tree-lined promenade; the Stock Exchange (1829–37); several luxury hotels; a theater (completed 1822); the Lutheran Church (1824); and Governor General Vorontsov's palace (1828). Boffo's most famous design, however, was not a palace or a church but the so-called Gigantic Staircase (*Gigantskaia lestnitsa*) leading from the elegant Primorskii Boulevard down to the port. Almost everyone who describes the steps expresses their function precisely that way—that they lead from Primorskii Boulevard down to the port—never in the opposite direction. The stairs lead down; they do not lead up.¹¹

In *A White Sail Gleams*, his children's novel about the tumultuous year 1905 in Odessa, Kataev describes the sense of distance between the “below stairs” world of the port and the “above stairs” wonderland of palaces and elegant leisure:

They drove past the famous Odessa Steps.

At the apex of its triangle, in the passage between the silhouettes of two semicircular symmetrical palaces, against the bright background of the nocturnal sky, stood the small figure of the Duc de Richelieu, his ancient arm stretched toward the sea.¹²

Petya knew that there above, beyond the Nikolayev Boulevard, was the brightness and the heartbeat of that extremely enticing, unapproachable, tenuous something that in the family circle of the Batcheis was referred to with a shade of contemptuous respect as “in the centre.”

In the centre lived “the rich,” that is, those special people who rode first class, who could go to the theatre every day, who for some strange reason dined at seven o'clock and who instead of a female cook had a chef, instead of a nurse they had a “bonne,” and frequently even had “their own horses,” which surely exceeded human imagination.¹³

In Pushkin's time, the Odessa of the palaces and the Odessa of the smugglers and stevedores were connected only by a steep cliffside path, later augmented by crude wooden stairs; apparently, the desirability of connecting the promenades of aristocratic Odessa to the port that supported them did not occur to anyone until it was suggested by Tsar Nicholas I on a visit to the city in 1837. The episode is acerbically described by Gustave de Molinari in his 1877 *Lettres sur la Russie*:

The city of Odessa had no paving. Prince Vorontsov did not for a moment entertain a notion of procuring for the city this object of primary

necessity; on the other hand, he ordered the construction of a monstrous staircase [*un escalier monstre*] of which no one felt any need.

The history of this staircase is rather characteristic. The emperor Nicholas was visiting Odessa. He arrives on the boulevard, which gives onto the sea at a remove of some forty meters from the beach. “How does one get down there from here?” asks the emperor. “I don’t see any staircase.” The prince says nothing, but he hastens to have constructed a Babylonian staircase, which costs the city a good million rubles and is used by fewer than ten people a day.¹⁴

Completed in 1841, the staircase is “monstrous” in more ways than one: not only is it vast in size, but it is also about as graphic an architectural representation of class warfare as one can imagine.

The architectural trick consists in a pair of related optical illusions. First, the top step is nine meters narrower than the bottom one, creating a false perspective. To an observer looking up the stairs, the top seems farther away than it really is, whereas to one looking down them from the top, the base of the stairs seems closer than it is in reality.¹⁵ In other words, an aristocratic Odessite peering down from the perspective of the Duc de Richelieu sees an easy path to the port below; the lowly dockworker gazing up from below, however, sees a forbidding journey. A second optical illusion is created by the disposition of the landings that break up the flights of steps; though clearly visible from an aerial perspective (figure 4), from the bottom of the steps these landings are completely invisible, contributing to the overwhelming fatigue engendered by just looking up the staircase: in the event that one actually begins to climb the steps, the trick of perspective makes them look progressively steeper and steeper (figure 5). From the vantage point of the Duc de Richelieu, on the other hand, it is the steps themselves that are invisible; a person looking (or walking) down the stairs encounters the inverse of the climber’s experience, seeing only the broad, comfortable landings (figure 6). The net effect of these illusions is an architecture that clearly articulates a response to Tsar Nicholas’s question: “How does one go down?” while firmly suppressing the converse question, “How does one go up?”

So powerful was the impression produced on Eisenstein, at first sight, by the combined force of these architectural effects that he immediately reorganized his filming plan to incorporate the staircase, laying the groundwork for the scene that would become the centerpiece of *The Battleship Potemkin* and one of the most quoted sequences in world cinema. In this scene, a crowd of people has gathered to wave and cheer as local fishing boats deliver food to the mutineers on board the *Potemkin*, when—heralded by the title



Figure 4. The “monstrous staircase,” in a classic postcard view (circa 1900). From <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001697474/>.



Figure 5. The view from below obscures the landings that offer a respite from climbing; the statue of the Duc de Richelieu (center) blends into the crowd of people admiring the view from the top. Photograph by the author.



Figure 6. From above, only the landings are visible. Photograph by Taivo55.
 From Wikimedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Potemkin_Steps-top_view.JPG.

card “AND SUDDENLY”—the cheery, sunny mood is shattered: the crowd begins to run, and in some cases fall, down the steps, and a few seconds later it is revealed that their headlong flight is occasioned by a detachment of armed Cossacks, who inexorably advance, firing continually as the crowd spills down the steps before them.¹⁶ As Eisenstein would later observe, the scene brings to life a narrative whose shape appeared to him at first sight in the very architecture of the staircase:

The Odessa Steps themselves were our third on-the-spot find.¹⁷ . . . No scene of shooting on the Odessa steps appeared in any of the preliminary versions or in any of the montage lists that were prepared. It was born in the instant of immediate contact. . . . It was the very *movement* of the steps that gave birth to the idea of the scene, and with its flight roused the fantasy of the director to a new “spiraling.” And it would seem that the panicky *rush* of the crowd, “flying” down the steps, is no more than a materialization of those first feelings on seeing the staircase.¹⁸



Figure 7. The vertiginous architecture of the steps as seen from below accentuates the “panicky rush” of the fleeing crowd, creating the effect of a seething human waterfall. From Sergei Eisenstein, *The Battleship Potemkin* (Kino International, 2007), 46:30–46:35.

Eisenstein harnesses the inherent “movement” of the steps—their “downward” current—to create one of montage cinema’s most famous contrasts: between the waterfall-like, pell-mell descent of “the people” (filmed from below, to maximize the vertiginous effect of the steps’ architecture; figure 7) as they flee, leaping and tumbling, from the firing Cossacks, and the deliberate, stolid advance of the Cossacks themselves (filmed from above, maximizing the grandeur and exploiting the “static” view of the staircase; figure 8). The Duc de Richelieu himself, initially almost seeming one of “the people,” smiling and waving to the boats along with them, subsequently appears to be calmly presiding over the massacre.¹⁹ Indeed, from Richelieu’s perspective, it is hard to tell that a massacre is taking place at all, since the optical illusion of the staircase erases both the steps and the people fleeing down them; the Cossacks appear almost to be marching along a flat surface

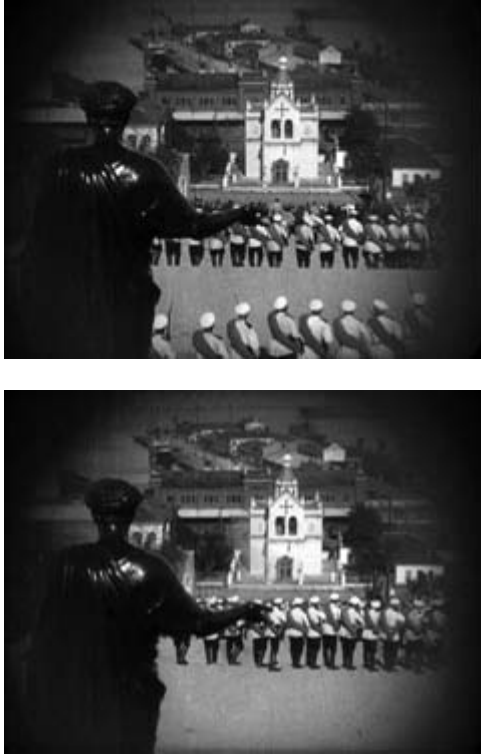


Figure 8. In contrast, the view from the top of the steps, with only landings visible, appears to show the Cossacks marching along a flat, solid surface; along with the steps themselves, the mass of fleeing people is all but erased from the picture. From Sergei Eisenstein, *The Battleship Potemkin* (Kino International, 2007), 47:03–47:05.

toward a church that occupies the center of the frame (figure 8). The director alternated these two main variations on the theme of “downward movement” with great care to create a mood of “mounting emotional intensity”:

First, there are *close-ups* of human figures rushing chaotically. Then, *long shots* of the same scene. The *chaotic movement* is next superseded by shots showing the feet of soldiers as they march *rhythmically* down the steps.

Tempo increases. Rhythm accelerates.²⁰

After establishing the main contrast—between the “chaotic movement” of the fleeing, falling people and the “rhythmic” marching of the soldiers on

their illusory horizontal plane—Eisenstein punctuates it with two grace notes, also based on movement, which he identifies as the main “structural and compositional means” in the scene. These two moments swiftly bring the abstract principles of content (violence) and form (“downward progress”) down to the level of the personal and maternal: first, there appears “the *solitary* figure of a mother carrying her dead son, *slowly* and *solemnly going up* the steps”; then, the inverse image of a dead mother with a still-living infant whose perambulator, left without an attendant, careens down the steps in a heart-stopping and much-imitated sequence.²¹ Both images serve to interrupt the “headlong rush” down the steps that Eisenstein saw as simply a “materialization of those first feelings on seeing the staircase,” but they only do so momentarily, to impress the principle of “downward movement” the more firmly on the viewer. The slow ascent of the mother carrying her dead son impresses by its very impossibility; palpably, this effort to defy the downward pressure of the scene’s form, content, and architectural setting cannot last long.²² The descent of the perambulator, an inanimate object merely obeying the laws of physics, “imitates” and accentuates the downward flight of the crowd, even as it enlists the viewer’s hope against hope that the infant inside will miraculously escape unscathed. Eisenstein dashes this hope, but obliquely; we see the perambulator begin to overbalance, then cut to a different scene of violence.

A remarkable feature of the scene is the sheer volume of downward-rushing people: this imagined massacre engulfs not only the original crowd of handkerchief-waving onlookers but also a seemingly endless stream of fleeing townspeople, who appear on the staircase almost as if generated by “the very movement of the steps” that so struck Eisenstein. One of them, the mother whose abandoned, careening perambulator becomes an emblem of the massacre, is killed as she pauses at the top of the steps to consider the logistics of getting a pram down them. Thus, the physical structure of the steps, their effect on the movement of people and objects, becomes as important a part of the scene as their symbolic structure (a staircase leading down, not up). While the architecture itself motivates the dramatic content of the scene, this in turn motivates the staircase-like cinematic “architecture” of the scene’s visual construction:

The visible steps of the stairs marking the downward progress of action correspond to steps marking qualitative leaps but proceeding in the opposite direction of mounting intensity.

Thus, the dramatic theme, unfolding impetuously in the scene of shooting on the steps, is at the same time the structural leitmotif, determining the plastic and rhythmical arrangement of the events.²³

Boffo's staircase is thus translated onto celluloid at the level of form as well as content; and the "*escalier monstre*" becomes the site of an escalating monstrosity.

Story and History

As it happens, Eisenstein's famous montage was not the first time the cinematic potential of the staircase had been exploited in precisely this way. According to Richard Taylor, "In 1922 Vladimir Gardin, veteran director and first head of the State Film School, [had] re-created a massacre on the same spot for his film *A Spectre Is Haunting Europe* [*Prizrak brodit po Evrope*, 1923]." Eisenstein's cameraman, Eduard Tisse, had also recently shot a dream sequence—significantly, about a fantasy of social mobility—on the steps for Alexander Granovsky's *Jewish Luck* (*Evreiskoe schast'e*, 1925), an adaptation of Sholem Aleichem's "Menachem Mendl" stories with title cards by Babel. Although Gardin's film was neither widely released nor of particular interest to the contemporary filmmaking avant-garde, his film "was reviewed in both *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*, and . . . may at least have made Eisenstein aware of the possibilities that Odessa offered as a suitable location for a massacre."²⁴ This possibility opens up intriguing parallels between Eisenstein's creative process in constructing the "Odessa Steps" scene and the method followed by Isaac Babel that same year—1925—in constructing a similarly iconic episode of violence, also centering on the 1905 unrest in Odessa.

Like Eisenstein, Babel had both the motive and the opportunity to adapt for his purposes a scene from an earlier work devoted to a similar topic. The pivotal episode of Kuprin's "Gambrinus" shows what can happen when the "savage enjoyment" of young, strong, but politically impotent workers like those frequenting the Gambrinus Tavern finds an outlet in mob violence. Intoxicated, a Russian stonemason vents his inchoate political rage on the tavern's popular Jewish fiddler, Sashka:

Suddenly he noticed a nervous little white dog that snuggled up to Sashka, trembling. He stooped down quickly, grabbed it by the hind legs, lifted it high, dashed its head against the paving stones, and started to run. . . .

Belochka's brains were scattered over Sashka's boots. He wiped them off with his handkerchief.²⁵

In Babel's quasi-autobiographical "Story of My Dovecote" ("Istoriia moei golubiatni," 1925), the plot similarly turns on a moment of violence in which

a pet animal is “sacrificed” as a surrogate for its owner.²⁶ Babel intensifies the emotional impact of the scene by narrating it in the first person (from the point of view of a ten-year-old child identified with the author himself), and increases its symbolic potency by replacing Kuprin’s “little white dog” with a dove—the universal symbol of peace—which the narrator’s assailant smashes directly against his forehead, so that the surrogate victim of the assault doubles as the weapon: “He struck me a swinging blow, his hand now clenched; the dove cracked on my temple. . . . I lay on the earth, and the entrails of the crushed bird trickled from my temple. They flowed down my cheeks, coiling, splashing and blinding me.”²⁷ As in “Gambrinus,” the human target of this onslaught is permitted to survive; but, because the child getting beaten up is explicitly identified with Babel himself, the attack on him is implicitly an attack on the very fabric of the text in which it occurs. Thus, Babel’s scene becomes—like Eisenstein’s—both a virtuoso showcase for “the importance of cutting and editing as a creative process” and a commentary that draws our attention to the construction of the narrative medium itself.²⁸

A further similarity between Babel’s narrative and Eisenstein’s is the astonishing success of both texts’ substitution of *story* for *history*, or as Jay Leyda puts it: “One of the curious effects of the film has been to replace the *facts* of the Potemkin mutiny with the film’s *artistic ‘revision’* of those events, in all subsequent reference, even by historians, to this episode.”²⁹ Babel’s use of the autobiographical mode conditioned readers to receive his stories (both here and in *Red Cavalry*) as a form of testimony, despite the self-conscious “constructedness” of his narratives. Eisenstein, too, aimed to achieve a reportage-like quality in his footage even as he organized his narrative into five acts and used the formal technique of montage to manipulate the viewer’s emotions. Later, he reported with satisfaction that “*Potemkin* looks like a chronicle (or a newsreel) of an event, but it functions as a drama.”³⁰ One might say with equal truth that *Potemkin* looks like a drama, but has functioned in some respects as a vintage newsreel of the events it chronicles; although audiences have always known that it depicted a thoroughly fictionalized version of history, its images are the first to come to mind when the *Potemkin* mutiny is mentioned, and the “debunking” of these images has not rendered them any less canonical.³¹

The conflation of fiction and reality, or more specifically the intrusion of fictional material into the domain of “real life,” was a recurring trope in Odessa narratives. A central part of the Odessa mythology was the fluidity of the boundary between fiction and truth, a phenomenon most vividly noted by Konstantin Paustovsky when he reported that he had “witnessed the true ending of the story ‘Gambrinus’: the funeral of Sashka the Musi-

cian. *Life itself wrote this ending in Kuprin's stead.*"³² In his memoir, *A Time of Great Expectations*—itself an ambiguously veracious narrative that "looks like a chronicle . . . but functions as a drama"—Paustovsky describes his confusion on first reading, in the newspaper, a death announcement for "Sashka the Musician from 'Gambrinus'":

Up until then I was convinced that almost all literary heroes were made up. Life and literature never flowed into each other in my imagination. So the announcement about Sashka the Musician's death confused me. . . .

I could hardly believe that Sashka the Musician, who had been for me since childhood a literary hero, had really lived just next door, in the garret of an old Odessa house.³³

Paustovsky discovers how porous the boundary is between "life" and "literature" (or between "story" and "history") in Odessa when confronted with the realness of "Sashka's" death—and, even more concretely, the funeral procession in his honor. In this commemorative rite "the whole of working-class Odessa from the docks and the suburbs followed Sashka the Musician to the cemetery," pausing in front of the "Gambrinus" tavern to sing "Sashka's favorite song," a *blatnaia pesnia* titled "Good-Bye, My Odessa." It is this public ritual, connecting the body of the literary hero to the storied public spaces of Odessa, that catalyzes for Paustovsky the realization that "life and literature" do indeed "flow into each other." Tellingly, the text responsible for this epiphany is again Kuprin's "Gambrinus," the ur-narrative of Odessa's role in the events of 1905. Moreover, Paustovsky's negotiation of the boundary between story and history, like Kuprin's, Babel's, and Eisenstein's, requires a blood sacrifice: Sashka, whose dog was sacrificed in his stead in Kuprin's story, finally meets his own end in Paustovsky's.

This fusion of fiction with the narratives of "real life" did not go unremarked by contemporary viewers and readers. Commander of the First Cavalry Semyon Budyonny, whose "Red Cavalry" formed the milieu for Babel's eponymous story cycle (also scheduled to be filmed by Eisenstein, but, alas, abandoned for the *Year 1905* project), was outraged by Babel's use of "imagination" when writing about historical events: "He invents things that never happened, slings dirt at our best Communist commanders, lets his imagination run wild, simply lies."³⁴ Conversely, Eisenstein was accused of "plagiarism" by "a certain comrade who claimed to have been a participant in the mutiny" and identified himself as one of the sailors "under the tarpaulin during the shooting on the quarterdeck." This accusation was truly bizarre, given that the film was ostensibly indeed based on real events

(so that “plagiarism” would seem not to come into the matter), and, moreover, so far as Eisenstein was concerned, the shooting under the tarpaulin was, like the Odessa Steps scene, his own “improvisation.” Indeed, according to the director, he had installed this “improvisation” in the screenplay over the objections of the actor playing Matyushenko, a former naval officer who warned that such a thing “was never done” in real life and that the scene would make them “a laughingstock.” If nothing else, though, the accusation of plagiarism provided Eisenstein with satisfying evidence that his inventions possessed a “verisimilitude” that allowed them to become “the very flesh and blood of historical events.”³⁵

“A Glorious Monument”

The distinction between “verisimilitude” and veracity was noted in contemporary reviews of *Potemkin*, but on the whole critics seemed inclined to agree with Eisenstein’s choice of the former over the latter, even arguing that the fictional version of events portrayed by Eisenstein was “truer” than the mere historical version: “We must not make petty historical demands on *Potemkin*. It may well be that the mutiny on the ‘*Potemkin*’ did not take place exactly as portrayed on the screen. But what does this matter when the director Eisenstein, in collaboration with his cameraman Tisse, has managed to express the very spirit of the revolution, its profound dynamics, its gigantic rhythm?”³⁶ Another reviewer opined: “Between the work of Eisenstein and history lies a proper interval. And Eisenstein, like *Potemkin*, with the revolutionary flag, passes through history. The success of the film is complete.”³⁷ A third wrote: “*Potemkin* is monumental. The everyday precision, the authenticity of the stripes and badges that is favored by others, left [Eisenstein] virtually unmoved. . . . For all its terrible concreteness and its absolute vitality, Eisenstein’s art is symbolic and it is great enough to act like gigantic generalizations.”³⁸ This third reviewer, Adrian Piotrovsky, saw Eisenstein’s film in explicitly architectural terms, not only as “monumental” in its own right, but also as “the first stone of a heroic epic of the revolution,” a “monumental fragment” that must be built upon “stone by stone” until “a glorious monument to Soviet film style” had been erected.³⁹

The theme of monumentality was picked up by the formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky, the second reviewer cited and a champion of both Eisenstein and Babel as well as other Odessa writers. Shklovsky argued that the principle of narrative selection employed by Eisenstein enabled the director not only to surpass history, but also to construct a dramatic edifice comparable in its architecture to the Odessa staircase itself:

Eisenstein is a colossal master. He used his liberties. His first success was where he narrowed down the theme of the film, skillfully choosing his facts, not the whole year 1905, but only the battleship *Potemkin*, and from all of Odessa—only the Steps. . . .

The flight of steps *is* the plot. The landings on the stairs play a role of arrested moments, and the flight of steps is organized according to laws, the esthetic laws of Aristotle’s *Poetics*; drama’s *peripeteia* is born in a new form.⁴⁰

Shklovsky’s contention that *The Battleship Potemkin* is not only a monument, but also a monument *the same shape as* the Odessa Steps, is borne out by the afterlife of the film in the canon of world cinema.

The reception of the film, both within the Soviet Union and abroad, has been richly chronicled by Richard Taylor, and there is little to be gained by attempting to recapitulate that chronicle here.⁴¹ As Taylor summarizes: “*The Battleship Potemkin* secured for itself and for its young director a unique place in the history of cinema. Neither could subsequently be ignored by anyone who took the medium seriously and, broadly speaking, neither has been by anyone who has done.”⁴² Initially blocked by censors in every country to which it traveled, the film eventually created a sensation among viewers in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. When it premiered in New York—heralded by posters that cited various Hollywood luminaries lauding it as “The Greatest Motion Picture Ever Made”—a review in *Photoplay* magazine approvingly noted its combination of verisimilitude (“you’d swear it was a prehistoric newsreel”) and dramatic structure (“action vivid and swift enough to satisfy any box office demand for drama”). The reviewer went on to pronounce: “The scene in which the Cossacks pursue the populace down a long flight of steps, shooting into the crowd, is unforgettably impressive. When enough of our directors have seen this episode, you’ll find it duplicated in home-made dramas.”⁴³ This prediction proved sound: the list of American and other films that contain tributes—ranging from the serious to the parodic—of Eisenstein’s iconic Odessa Steps scene is long. It includes some of Hollywood’s most eminent directors: Alfred Hitchcock (a shooting on steps in *Foreign Correspondent*, 1940), Woody Allen (a political assassination on steps in *Bananas*, 1971), Francis Ford Coppola (a mob killing on steps in *The Godfather*, 1972), Terry Gilliam (a direct parody in *Brazil*, 1985, with a floor polisher in place of the careening pram), and Brian De Palma (a shoot-out on steps involving a careening pram in *The Untouchables*, 1987). Via *The Untouchables*, the scene has made it into at least one Bollywood film, N. Chandra’s *Tezaab*

(*Acid*, 1988); and into at least one television commercial (for a breakfast cereal, 2009), where it serves less as “a glorious monument to Soviet film style” than as a kind of comically unmonumental tombstone. What could underline the triumph of capitalist values over revolutionary ones more sharply than a revision of Eisenstein’s pram scene in which an individual hero chases after the pram, now transformed into a shopping cart, and halts its precarious descent just in time to rescue, not the squalling infant in the kiddie seat, but the box of name-brand cornflakes in the grocery section?

A curious feature of the cinematic quotations that include the careening pram is that they all end with the pram, and its infant cargo, safe and sound—a happy ending, and degree of closure, that Eisenstein does not provide to his audience. In context, of course, this is only sensible: a dead baby is no way to market either cornflakes or the larger-than-life heroism of Bollywood superstar Anil Kapoor. But this approach also “rescues” the viewer from the chief effect of the massacre scene created by Eisenstein: its brutal inhumanity. Zbigniew Rybczynski, in his short video feature *Steps* (1987), explores the implications of this “de-horrified” engagement with Eisenstein’s work. In Rybczynski’s film, a group of American tourists is led on a “tour” of Eisenstein’s massacre scene by a Soviet tour director (figures 9 and 10). The tourists, in garish color, wander through Eisenstein’s black-and-white scene, tastelessly gawk at its participants, eat snacks, and photograph themselves against the background of firing Cossacks and dying townspeople, and, at the end, “rescue” the baby, who is propelled out of his overturned pram and into the full-color world of the tourists. The ending of the film is ambiguous: while the tour director is called to “the control room,” the tourists apparently disappear, not having completed the transition from Eisenstein’s world back to their own before the end of the scene. Only the baby remains in 1987, seemingly the sole survivor of the massacre on the steps.

Rybczynski’s film is superficially about the worst aspects of two societies (authoritarian Russia and shallow, individualistic America) and, as Rybczynski himself claims, about the evolution of filmmaking technology from the 1920s to the 1980s. But it is also a commentary on the relationship between a film and its viewers, the way a series of moving images can take on a life of their own when they are released from their original context to become part of an ever-evolving visual canon. Rybczynski captures two important aspects of *Potemkin*’s legacy. First, the crossing over between “story” and “history” is here vividly brought to life in the conundrum posed by the tourists who *enter* Eisenstein’s film: which group of characters in the scene is more “real,” the black-and-white participants or the in-color spectators? Second, and relatedly, *Steps* illuminates the implications of real-life tourism



Figures 9 and 10. Scenes from Zbigniew Rybczynski’s *Steps* (1987), in which American tourists visit the setting of Eisenstein’s massacre and—in several cases—record it for themselves, using written notes, a conventional camera, and home video equipment. From Zbigniew Rybczynski, *Steps* (Zbig Vision/KCTA-TV [PBS]/Channel Four, 1987), 10:20–10:27.

to the Odessa Steps. While the staircase must have been something of a landmark since its completion in 1841, it was one among many architectural treasures boasted by the city, and one designed for transit rather than lingering. It was Eisenstein’s film that really put the steps on the map, quite literally: on maps and tourist materials produced after *The Battleship Potemkin*, the staircase is labeled “Potemkin Steps.”

The many cinematic quotations, parodies, and homages that have helped keep the image of the Odessa Steps and their inherent “movement” and “flight” alive in the minds of successive generations of moviegoers around the world have also contributed to the aura of Eisenstein’s original and to the mystique of its real-life setting, the “monstrous staircase” that leads

down to Odessa's port. Tourists to Odessa flock to the staircase as a matter of course, and while the technology does not exist to insert them literally into the scene of Eisenstein's massacre, as in *Steps*, they go there to see and be photographed at a site that is charged with narrative; in effect, to insert themselves into a setting that still resonates with the significance Eisenstein imparted to it. If, as Shklovsky asserts, "the flight of steps *is* the plot," then to walk onto the steps *is* in some sense to enter the plot of Eisenstein's film, to enact one final crossing of the border between story and history.

Just as the very architecture of Odessa's "monstrous staircase" wrote itself, so to speak, into Eisenstein's screenplay, the resulting scene in turn inscribed the stirring narrative of injustice against honest workers onto the very architecture of the steps, converting them into a stage set of such symbolic power that it colonized history itself. In this way, Eisenstein's film transformed an imperial landmark, the "Grand" or "Richelieu" Staircase, into a national and international monument, "the Potemkin Steps"—so called not after Catherine's famous general, who conquered the territory on which they stand, but after Eisenstein's film about the battleship named in his honor: a memorial in the fourth degree (steps, film, ship, man). Tourists visiting this monument today participate in a collective and ongoing public ritual of commemoration—even if it is the commemoration of an event that never took place.

Notes

The epigraph to this essay is from Vladimir Jabotinsky, *The Five: A Novel of Jewish Life in Turn-of-the-Century Odessa*, trans. and ed. Michael R. Katz (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), 198.

1. See, for example, Julie A. Buckler, *Mapping St. Petersburg: Imperial Text and Cityshape* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Emily D. Johnson, *How St. Petersburg Learned to Study Itself: The Russian Idea of Kraevedenie* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006); Solomon Volkov, *St. Petersburg: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Caroline Brooke, *Moscow: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); B. Tench Cox, "The Role and Image of Moscow in Soviet Film and Literature" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2007). The concept of the city-text, or city as text, is proposed by V. N. Toporov in his article "Peterburg i 'peterburgskii tekst' russkoi literatury," in the volume *Semiotika goroda i gorodskoi kul'tury. Peterburg* (Tartu: Uchenye zapiski tartuskogo gorodskogo universiteta, 1984). On Odessa's dual (or multiple) identities, see Tanya Richardson, *Kaleidoscopic Odessa: History and Place in Contemporary Ukraine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Roshanna P. Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa: Crime and Civility in a City of Thieves* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005); and Jarrod Tanny, *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: Russia's Jews and the Myth of Old Odessa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

2. Buckler, *Mapping St. Petersburg*, 25; Coxe, "The Role and Image of Moscow," 2 and following.

3. Odessa enjoyed free port (*porto franco*) status from 1817 to 1857, which imparted a significant impetus to its harbor trade. See Patricia Herlihy, *Odessa: A History 1794–1914* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 39.

4. *Ibid.*, 63–64, 119, 266. Regarding Elizaveta Vorontsova, the wife of Governor General Mikhail Vorontsov (governor 1823–45), and the relations of both Vorontsovs with Pushkin, see also Monika Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion: Fragment, Elegy, Orient, Irony* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 93–97; David Bethea and Sergei Davydov, "Pushkin's Life," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pushkin*, ed. Andrew Kahn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 15–16.

5. A. I. Kuprin, "Gambrinus," in *Granatovyi braslet: Povesti i rasskazy*, ed. I. Parina (Moscow: Kudozhestvennaia literatura, 1984). These days a living memorial to the original "Gambrinus" exists in the form of a beer hall by the same name at the more upmarket address of 31 Deribasovskaia Street, as well as a café in New York's "little Odessa," Brighton Beach.

6. For a fuller exploration of this topic, see my article "From 'Underground' to 'In the Basement': How Odessa Replaced Petersburg as Capital of the Russian Literary Imagination," in *American Contributions to the 14th International Congress of Slavists*, ed. David M. Bethea (Bloomington, Ind.: Slavica, 2008).

7. Kuprin, "Gambrinus," 205. Translations from Russian are my own unless otherwise noted.

8. Richard Taylor, *The Battleship Potemkin: The Film Companion* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 2–3.

9. Charles King, *Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams* (New York: Norton, 2011), 196. King argues that *The Battleship Potemkin* is "the single most important cultural artifact in Odessa's modern history," a contention with which I respectfully disagree: Babel's *Odessa Tales* and Ilf and Petrov's *Ostap Bender* novels, as well as the hit songs of Leonid Utesov, must have a claim at least equal to Eisenstein's. But there is no denying that Eisenstein's film created a powerful set of images that became indelibly inscribed on certain of the city's public spaces.

10. Herlihy, *Odessa: A History*, 133 and following, and *Odessa Memories* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 12, 94–95.

11. As Patricia Herlihy puts it: "This city on a hill needed direct access to the harbor below it" (*Odessa: A History*, 140). Roshanna P. Sylvester, alone among the sources consulted for this essay, suggests the opposite: "for those arriving by sea," the staircase "immediately invited ascent from the port to the city center" (*Tales of Old Odessa*, 31).

12. Armand-Emmanuel de Vignerot du Plessis, Duc de Richelieu (1766–1822), appointed governor of Odessa by Alexander I in 1803, is memorialized in a bronze statue by Ivan Martos—nowadays, probably the sculptor's second most famous work, after his Monument to Minin and Pozharsky (1814) that stands on Red Square. The Richelieu statue predates the steps by over a decade, having been finished in 1826. "Clothed inexplicably in a toga"—a symbol at the time closely associated with the French Revolution and its inheritor, Napoleon—the statue seems imbued with an ambiguously foreign aura of authority, though perhaps Richelieu's costume is simply intended to match the neoclassical colonnades of the surrounding palaces. See Herlihy, *Odessa: A History*, 21.

13. Valentin Kataev, *Peace Is Where the Tempests Blow* [translation of *Beleet parus*

odinokii], trans. Charles Malamuth (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1937), 65–66. I have excised one paragraph, marked by an ellipsis.

14. Gustave de Molinari, *Lettres sur la Russie* (Paris: Libraire de la Société des gens de lettres, 1877), 229–30.

15. According to Herlihy, the respective widths of the top and bottom stairs are 12.5 meters and 21.5 meters. See *Odessa: A History*, 140.

16. The first part of the scene is factual enough. As Robert Weinberg notes, the Odessa public “warmly received the sailors and used launches and rowboats to sail up to the *Potemkin* and provision the crew. . . . The crowds [on shore] grew unimpeded for most of June 15 and numbered several thousand by evening.” Eisenstein departs from historical fidelity by omitting the elements of drunkenness, looting, arson, and violence on the part of the crowd that eventually led to the massacre of up to a thousand civilians. And the site and portrayal of the massacre as an organized event taking place on the staircase in bright mid-afternoon sunshine is Eisenstein’s invention. See *The Revolution of 1905 in Odessa: Blood on the Steps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 132–33, 136.

17. The first two “on-the-spot finds” were the famous “rampant lions,” filmed at Vorontsov’s luxurious Alupka Palace in the Crimea, and the clouds on the bay, eventually used in a visual “requiem symphony to the memory of Vakulinchuk.” See Herbert Marshall, ed., *Sergei Eisenstein’s “The Battleship Potemkin”* (New York: Avon, 1978), 42–43.

18. *Iskusstvo Kino*, no. 4 (1950), 16; quoted in Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 194–95.

19. In a shot of the waving crowd at 45:40, Richelieu is clearly visible, but in a very similar shot taken from slightly closer in a few seconds later (45:43), he is not. This progression suggests that he has been temporarily absorbed into their ranks. Of course, as a symbol of tsarist authority, he cannot be mistaken for an ally for long.

20. Eisenstein, *Notes of a Film Director* (New York: Dover, 1970), 59.

21. *Ibid.*, 60, 59.

22. *The Battleship Potemkin* (film), 49:18 and following. The image also has obvious symbolic resonance as a Pietà, albeit a pointedly secular one: the church behind the grieving mother—so prominently featured in shots of the Cossacks marching—is firmly excluded from the frame here.

23. Eisenstein, *Notes of a Film Director*, 60.

24. Taylor, *The Battleship Potemkin*, 6.

25. Kuprin, “Gambrinus,” 224.

26. A similar, but more detailed, examination of the afterlife of Kuprin’s story in the works of Babel and Paustovsky is undertaken in my article “From ‘Underground’ to ‘In the Basement.’”

27. Isaac Babel, *Collected Stories*, trans. and ed. David McDuff (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 38.

28. Leyda, *Kino*, 196.

29. *Ibid.*, 199. My emphasis.

30. Eisenstein, “The Structure of the Film” (“O stroenii veshchei,” *Iskusstvo Kino*, 1939), trans. Jay Leyda, in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (New York: Harcourt, 1949), 162.

31. Although the focus of this paper is on the famous "steps" scene, various other episodes depicted in the movie are similarly fictional. For a concise summary of the historical events, and of Eisenstein's departures from history, see King, *Odessa: Genius and Death*, 189–92.

32. K. G. Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii* (Odessa: Maiak, 1977), 149. My emphasis.

33. Ibid. Paustovsky "remembers" the musician's real name as Aaron Moiseevich Goldstein, but subsequent research has identified him as Aleksandr Iakovlevich Pevzner, which suggests that Kuprin intended his protagonist to represent a "real person" (with a real, identifiable name) rather than a character based on one (Mikhail Binov, "Kto on, Sashka iz 'Gambrinusa?," *Odessa*, no. 4 (1996); reprinted at <http://www.odessaglobe.com/russian/people/pevzner.php>).

34. First Cavalry Commander Semyon Budyonny, "Open Letter to Maxim Gorky" (*Krasnaia gazeta*, October 26, 1928), trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew, in *Isaac Babel: The Lonely Years 1925–1939: Unpublished Stories and Correspondence*, ed. Nathalie Babel, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1964), 385.

35. This account, and all the quotations given, are drawn from Marshall, *Sergei Eisenstein's "The Battleship Potemkin,"* 39–40. Jay Leyda reports a different version of the same story, in which the former mutineer thanks Eisenstein instead of accusing him (*Kino*, 199). It is hard to know now what the true story was: the director Alexander Dubrovsky, in remarks published in the February 1926 issue of *Kinozhurnal ARK*, dismissed the tarpaulin scene as "unconvincing," saying "I do not recall this moment from history" and asserting that it "could only have occurred aboard a pirate ship in an adventure film" (Taylor, *The Battleship Potemkin*, 92). On the other hand, James Goodwin suggests in *Eisenstein, Cinema, and History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) that Eisenstein was lying about having made up the scene of shooting under the tarpaulin, since the incident "in fact is included in eyewitness accounts of events shipboard" (58). Whatever the truth of the matter may have been, it is now obscured by the undisputed canonicity of Eisenstein's version—a common pattern in the reception of Babel's works as well.

36. Nikolai Volkov, review of *The Battleship Potemkin* in *Trud*, January 1, 1926; quoted in Taylor, *The Battleship Potemkin*, 69–70. Of course, the claim that a politically correct fictionalized narrative was "truer" than a historically accurate one would become a commonplace of socialist realist criticism, and Volkov's review is frankly political; but in 1925 significant critical dissent was still possible, and one imagines that Eisenstein might just as easily have been pilloried, as Babel was, for falsifying important history.

37. Victor Shklovsky, "Five Essays About Eisenstein" (orig. dated 1926–28), in Marshall, *Sergei Eisenstein's "The Battleship Potemkin,"* 250–52 (trans. and reprinted from N. I. Kleinman and K. B. Levina, *Bronenosets Potemkin—Shedevry Sovetskogo Kino* [Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1969]).

38. Adrian Piotrovsky, review of *The Battleship Potemkin* in *Krasnaya gazeta* (Leningrad), January 20, 1926; quoted in Richard Taylor, trans. and ed., and Ian Christie, ed., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 139.

39. Ibid.

40. Marshall, 250–52.

41. See Taylor, *The Battleship Potemkin*, 65–120.

42. *Ibid.*, 118. Taylor goes on to note that “in a series of international surveys of film directors and critics *Potemkin* has persistently emerged as one of the most highly regarded films in cinema history,” and is indeed “the *only* film to have appeared in *all*” of the five separate “Best Films of All Time” lists he surveys (119–20).

43. *Ibid.*, 117.