

The Odessa Steps and the Kuleshov Effect

Director Sergei Eisenstein's immortal Odessa Steps sequence, from 1925's *Battleship Potemkin*, depicts one tragic episode in his fictionalized account of the 1905 Russian Revolution. The Odessa Steps' influence has reverberated throughout subsequent cinematic works, from Brian De Palma paying homage to it in *The Untouchables*, to David and Jerry Zucker satirizing it in *Naked Gun 33 1/3*, to Alfred Hitchcock emulating its technique in *Rear Window*. Some might argue Eisenstein's Odessa Steps sequence is cinema's defining moment, the art of cinema at its most luminous. The images are haunting, terrifying. The drama and the horror stay with you.

Russian director Lev Kuleshov, the Godfather, if you will, of thematic editing, tried to manifest Pavlov's psychological theories on the association of ideas into the editing of a film. His conceit was to link a series of images together. Alone these images may appear unrelated, but seen together, juxtaposed one against the other, Kuleshov hypothesized, they would form a link to the viewer, creating a unified action out of fragmented details. This theory is known as the Kuleshov effect.

Kuleshov's best-known experiment with image association was a series of six shots. The first was a close-up of an actor with a neutral facial expression. The next was a shot of a bowl of soup. Then back to the actor. Then a shot of a coffin with a female corpse. Then back to the actor. Then, finally, a shot of a girl playing. Kuleshov's notion here is that the meaning in this series of shots comes not from the actor, but rather from the juxtaposition of his face with the three other shots. In the first two shots (man and soup), it appears the man must be hungry. In the second two (man and corpse) it appears the man is grieving. In the last two (man and little girl), it appears the man is portraying paternal pride (Giannetti, 136).

He believed that each shot in a sequence should be incomplete, and that the meaning should come from the composite of the shots, rather than from one self-contained shot. The transitions between shots should be simultaneously shocking, simultaneously jolting, simultaneously confusing.

So is the case with the Odessa Steps. Without having seen the rest of the movie, without knowing the context, we can find meaning in the sequence. As the shots mount up, the intensity increases, the complexity increases, the tragedy increases, the character development increases.

The very first shot (the hands with rifles) hints at violence to come. Then we get a hint at the potential tragedy: the possible loss of the life of a baby - in most literary contexts, the birth of a baby is a symbol of hope, and the death of one is the opposite. The baby's carriage begins to careen down the steps before it is finally killed, along with the rest of the crowd.

The Odessa Steps sequence is perhaps the greatest example of the power of the Kuleshov Effect and of thematic editing.