

# SPEAKING CANDIDLY

EVERYBODY who takes more than a superficial interest in the cinema must at some time in the past 20 years have heard about or read about the Soviet film *The Battleship Potemkin*, made by Sergei M. Eisenstein in 1925. Most books on the cinema mention it in the same breath with *The Birth of a Nation* as one of the great landmarks of the motion-picture; every overseas critic, wishing to estimate some modern director's technique, periodically refers back to the Odessa Steps Sequence, described by Roger Manvell as "the classic sequence of silent cinema and possibly the most influential six minutes in cinema history." For any student of the cinema to have to confess that he has never seen *Potemkin* is almost an ignominious as for a Wellington resident to have to confess to a visitor that he has never seen Parliament in session. The chief difference in the two cases cited is that whereas Parliament is regularly available, until a week or so ago there just wasn't a copy of *Potemkin* in New Zealand, however much one might want to see it.

There is one now—a 16mm print purchased by the Wellington Film Institute from the British National Film Library, through the British Film Institute. It is one of several such films of historic interest which have already arrived, or are now being secured, from this source, largely through the efforts of the recently-formed film societies in Wellington, Auckland, and Dunedin. Among them are titles which I think are likely to arouse considerable enthusiasm among students of the film in this country—*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *The Last Laugh*, *The Italian Straw Hat*, *L'Idée*, *Film and Reality*, *Mother*, *Nanook of the North*, and *Spanish Earth*.

Most of these films, including *Potemkin*, are silent; several of them are of antiquarian or academic interest only, since they date back (in the case of *Dr. Caligari*) as far as 1919. Having, in most cases, no box-office value or "popular" appeal now they are obviously not intended for public release. But, since this column usually treats the cinema as being capable (when it likes to try) of providing something more than just a casual evening's entertainment, I think they are worth some mention here.

IF *Potemkin* were a new film about to be publicly released, and therefore due for grading, the Little Man would certainly greet it with his most enthusiastic pose. He would not, it is true, go as far as the English author who placed it "by the side of some of the greatest works that the human mind has been able to conceive, by the side of the works of Euripides, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Rembrandt," because "it plumbs the deepest founts of man's social being." *Potemkin* is very good, but it is not, as they say, *that* good. And I would question the same author's statement that "Boys at Eton College, with their basic social instincts still unimpaired, have raised the rafters with their cheers as

they watched the sailors upon the battleship *Potemkin* throw off the yoke of their brutal officers and run the flag of freedom up to the mast." I would like to believe this, but I find it difficult because, for one thing, the sailors don't merely throw off the yoke of their brutal officers, they throw their officers overboard; and it seems hard to believe that Eton boys, whether socially intact or not, would approve of that sort of behaviour.

Nevertheless, these quotations do give an idea of the status of this Russian film; they perhaps also indicate why, when it first appeared, the censors of some countries paid tribute to its emotional power by banning it.

FEW films, I imagine, can have stood the test of time better. Even after all these years, the simple story (which now has sub-titles in English) about the mutiny aboard a battleship of the Black Sea Fleet during the Russian revolt of 1905, is still enormously exciting; and the classic sequence of the massacre of the townsfolk on the steps of Odessa by the White Guards, though it is a sequence which has inspired imitation in countless directors since, is still unparalleled as an example of what can be achieved by editing. Here is a sequence in which every frame of film seems to count; which contains every variety of shot from the distant panorama to the close-up, some shots lasting for what seem like minutes, others for only a fraction of a second; and which builds up to a climax so intense that it leaves the average onlooker limp. In *Potemkin* you do indeed find the film fulfilling its function as the new art form of the 20th Century.

## KITTY (Paramount)

THOUGH it is set in 18th Century England, this film is really just *Pygmalion* without Bernard Shaw—and, as should be readily conceded, that is quite a lot to be without. I make no claim to originality in noticing the similarity between the two stories; at least half the audience must have noticed it at the same moment as I did. There was, indeed, a rather remarkable spontaneous tribute paid to the durability of the G.B.S. masterpiece when, at the point in *Kitty* where Sir Hugh Marcy and his aunt first set about transforming the guttersnipe into a lady of quality, one heard the words "Pygmalion" and "Shaw" coming from at least four different directions. However, this loyal demonstration fairly soon subsided and most of the audience seemed well enough content to watch Ray Milland and Paulette Goddard duplicating, in knee-breeches and Gainsborough gowns, the actions if not the conversation of Professor Higgins and Eliza Doolittle.

There are, of course, some variations on the familiar theme. It is one Thomas Gainsborough (you know it is Gainsborough before his name is mentioned because there is the "Blue Boy" right in his studio) who first notices the beauty beneath the grime on Kitty's face when she tries to snatch the buckled

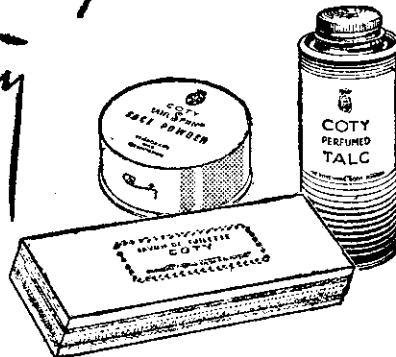
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