

Repetitions, dichotomies and transference in European cinema of the 20s

THE CASE OF **DOURO, FAINA FLUVIAL** [AKA:
DOURO, WORKING RIVER] AND OF
Броненосец «Потёмкин» [AKA: THE
BATTLESHIP POTESKIN]

Warning

Regarding the films under analysis, only words by their authors are used as references. There is, therefore, a deliberate 'disinterest' in other people's opinions. Authors do not always tell everything, sometimes they distort the order of things and facts themselves (not always to their own advantage), but even their 'lies' offer us clues, if not to the final significance, at least for their intentions and wishes - for the project. I think that one's own work and words are (almost) always the best point of departure for personal reflection, even if it results in already explored or proposed paths. This warning is justified because there are countless analyses, particularly of Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, openly ignored here. This is, evidently, a contradiction in terms, given that I know some of these analyses and it would be impossible to forget them completely. I believe, however, that this exercise of purification, of return to the initial object, of trying to experience a *first glance* at these films is necessary. I did everything I could not to value these reflections and I myself hope to be ignored.

en vérité, la vérité a deux visages
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1.

In 1927, Walter Ruttmann, then 39, made *Berlin: die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*); in 1931, Manoel de Oliveira, at almost 23, finished his first film, *Douro, Faina Fluvial*² (*Douro, Working River*), which he had begun in 1929. There have been many comparisons between the two films and in the recent exhibition dedicated to the work of Manoel de Oliveira, in Serralves Museum, a triptych was proposed: *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (Ruttmann) - *The Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov) - *Douro, Working River* (Oliveira). Rather than taking up again a reflection on 'city films' and the, apparently clear, formal analogies between these three films, and in particular between *Berlin, Symphony*

2

For the reflections in this paper I used the (re)edited 1994 version with music by Emmanuel Nunes, in which, according to Manoel de Oliveira, "the original montage was restored with some corrections". There is a 1934 version, with soundtrack by Luis de Freitas Branco, where, according to the director, the initial montage was altered.

"In 1931, I presented *Douro, Faina Fluvial*. I had started the film in 1929, but the cameraman was not always available. So the shooting took time. A soundtrack was added to the film later - it was the period of the transition to sound, the time of *The Jazz Singer*, of *Priz de Beauté* from Augusto Genina. After many years, I re-did the montage. Actually I thought of re-doing the montage of Douro because it had been changed when the sound track was added. I tried to recover the original montage, and took the opportunity to make some corrections."

"Em 1931, apresentei *Douro, Faina Fluvial*. Tinha começado em 1929, mas o director de fotografia nem sempre estava disponível. Por isso, a rodagem demorou. O filme depois foi sonorizado - era o momento da transição para o sonoro, a época do *Cantor de Jazz*, do *Prémio de Beleza* de Augusto Genina. Depois de muitos anos, acabo de refazer a montagem. Com efeito, pensei proceder à remontagem do *Douro* porque tinha sido alterada na ocasião em que o filme foi sonorizado. Por isso, procurei reconstituir a primeira e aproveitei para introduzir correcções" (Baecque & Parsi, 1999, p. 48).

1

In truth, truth has two faces

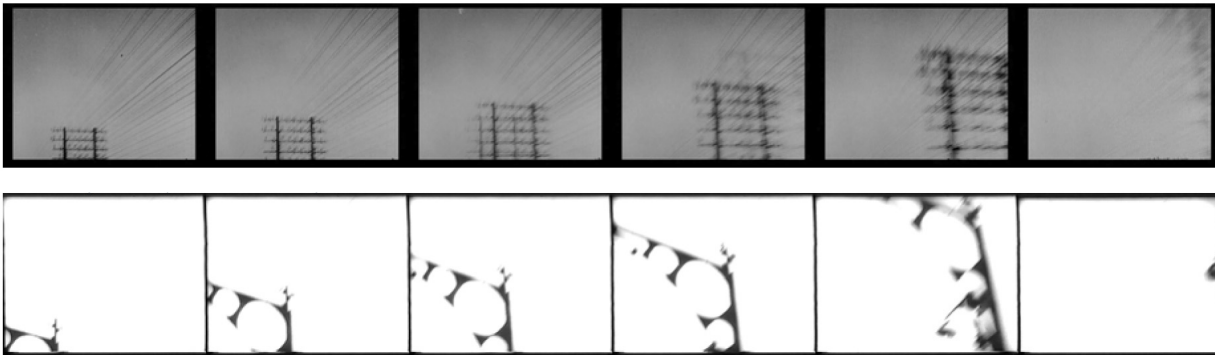
of a Great City and Douro, Working River. I propose here to go beyond what separates them (the one by Ruttmann and the one by Manoel de Oliveira), to introduce another film from the time as a possible referent for Douro, Working River and leaving Vertov aside.

Let us start with the Douro – Berlin pair.

Manoel de Oliveira recognises the influence of Ruttmann: “ ... when I saw Berlin, Symphony of a Great City by Walter Ruttmann, I thought it was possible and I wanted to do the same thing with the city of Porto. But, from Ruttmann’s film, all I retained was the technique.”³ If by “technique” we understand the rhythmic montage and the composition of shots, then the analogies we find between the start of Douro and that of Berlin are clear (up to the traveling shots from the bridge in each film).

Berlin starts with a train journey towards the city (towards work). Continuing earlier experiments (which also intended to make images audible) Ruttmann presents us with a rapid sequence of images, organised in a visual pattern that evokes the four beat rhythm of the sound made by the trains of the era, ending in a section that crosscuts between the traveling shot filmed from the bridge and the shot of telegraph wires.

At the start of Douro this pattern is recaptured in a sequence that crosscuts between the traveling shots filmed from the lower deck of the bridge and the one filmed from the upper deck. Framing, composition, the abstraction in some of the shots, and above all, the rhythm with which they are edited, are all similar.



Berlin, Symphony of a Great City

Douro, Working River

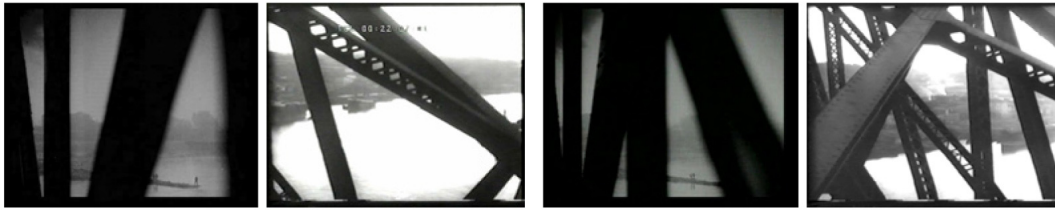


Sequences

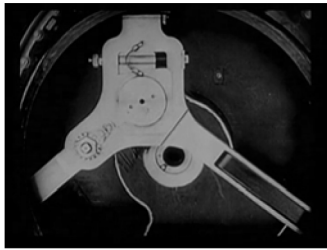
Berlin, Symphony of a Great City

Douro, Working River

3 “ ... quando vi Berlim, Sinfonia de uma Capital, de Walter Ruttmann, pensei que era possível. E quis fazer a mesma coisa com a cidade do Porto. Mas, do filme de Ruttmann, apenas retive a técnica.” (Baecque & Parsi, 1999, p. 95).



But as the train in Ruttmann's film approaches Berlin (city), the two films diverge. Who is the protagonist of Ruttmann's film? The machine. In *Berlin*, the human element is just another piece of the *mechanical ballet*, of the coupling of the modernist city-machine with the machines that inhabit it. The "mechanisation of the world" is the central theme of the film. And the machines are the object of the close-ups.



Ruttmann_ *Berlin* (1 photogram)

As for the inhabitants of Berlin, their faces (identities) are only rarely revealed to us. They are filmed in collective movements, sometimes so organised that they remind us of those in the fictional metropolis of Lang.

"Berlin is a deserted city. People and groups moving in its streets have solitude about them", wrote Walter Benjamin in the same year, 1927, on returning to his city after spending part of the winter in Moscow, and added: "Princely solitude, princely desolation hang over the streets of Berlin".

The suicide in Act IV is the only human close-up (in all senses) in *Berlin*, functioning, today, as if it were a flash forward. It is difficult to watch *Berlin* without thinking of what would come after. *Berlin*, because it was in Berlin shortly before Berlin ceased to be, will always have this significance.

Where would those inhabitants/actors be a few years later, when the "final solution" of another machine was set in motion? There are other traveling shots in film history that give us an answer to this question⁴.

4 Resnais, A. (Director). (1955). *Nuit et Brouillard* [Motion picture]. France.

2.

Perhaps due to this inevitable significance, it was not *Berlin* that came to mind when I saw *Douro* for the first time. Recently, reading the words of Manoel de Oliveira, "*Douro* is against military discipline, it is critical of the police, of power, of violence in Portugal at that time"⁵, I recalled this initial impression that *Douro, Working River* owed more to the opera of Eisenstein than to the symphony of Ruttmann. There is, however, an interesting paradox here. *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) did not premiere in Portugal until 1974. We do not know if Manoel de Oliveira had seen it in one of the clandestine screenings that sprang up as soon as the military dictatorship and censorship were installed in Portugal, but we do know that at the time he was reading about the "theories of cinema" and that these filled him with enthusiasm: "...I had read a lot about montage, in magazines. So I undertook a kind of illustration of film theory of the time, of the specificity of montage."⁶, "At the time that I made *Douro, Working River*, it was montage that fascinated me, the specificity of cinema, the rhythm."⁷

Even if Manoel de Oliveira had not seen *Potemkin* at the time, it is probable that he had seen Pudovkin's *Mother* (1926), since this film, was finished almost a year later, but accorded a more discreet reception (the huge success *Potemkin* had on its Berlin premiere in 1926 opened the scissors of various countries), did get to Porto.

Mother and *Potemkin* evoke the same period and events in history (the failed revolution of 1905) and although Pudovkin and Eisenstein diverged in their

5 "*Douro* é contra a disciplina militar, é uma crítica da polícia, do poder, da violência no Portugal da época" (Baecque & Parsi, 1999, p.95)

6 "...tinha lido muito sobre montagem, em revistas. Fiz, pois, uma espécie de ilustração das teorias do cinema de então, da especificidade da montagem." (Baecque & Parsi, 1999, p. 96).

7 "Na época em que fiz *Douro, Faina Fluvial*, era a montagem que me seduzia, a especificidade do cinema, o ritmo." (Baecque & Parsi, 1999, p.128). In an interview filmed in 2006 in Ribeira, the location of *Douro, Working River*, he stated again, talking about the film, that "the theories attracted me in such a way that I put them into action".

theories about montage the final scene of *Mother* seems to have had its roots (of form and content) in the Odessa steps sequence – the collective celebration abruptly interrupted by the rifle fire of the Czar’s soldiers; the shots of firing alternating with shots of people escaping, the shots of the soldier’s boots, and, in both films, the same powerful moment, that becomes imprinted indelibly on the memory: the mother, who has just watched the violent death of her son, confronts the assailants, one with her son in her arms (because he is small), the other with her son’s flag in her hands, a metonymy. The individual drama materialises in the most universal of icons, functioning as a representation of collective tragedy. *Pietàs* from the first half of the 20th Century. Isn’t the mother with her dead son in her arms the most studied, mentioned and reproduced fragment of Picasso’s *Guernica*?

But Eisenstein’s and Pudovkin’s films have little more in common.

3.

Douro and *Potemkin* are quite different, even though virtually, Manoel de Oliveira’s film seems like a reflection (the mirror is still the most virtual of visible spaces) of Eisenstein’s film. The attraction, both in *Douro* and in *Potemkin*, is in the human element,

where the detail (the individual) tells the general (collective) story. There are different levels of approximation (and emotion) in both films, which are induced by the camera angles and the montage (construction) of the shots taken from these angles, creating a superimposition of layers that refer to the vertical montage advocated by Eisenstein. This understanding of montage as a vertical process – “each sequential element is perceived not next to the other, but on top of the other”⁸ – drives both films and differentiates them from Pudovkin.

The human element moves both films away from *Berlin*. “Montage is conflict”, Eisenstein said; conflict has human roots. *Douro* and *Potemkin* are “projects of description of the world” and offer us *thought-images*, plastic (like the brain cells of the cerebral region that acts on the memory). We should remind ourselves here that Eisenstein called the shot a *cell*⁹, i.e. a budding block of a living body – the montage.

Watching *Douro*, *Working River* is like a journey to places visited before, recognisable, but at the same time surprisingly different. It is easy to confirm this impression when we see the so-called “accident sequence” in *Douro* (and difficult not to think again of the scene of the Odessa steps). *Suddenly*, routine and the movements of work are interrupted.



Sequência das escadas de Odessa, *Potemkin*, 1925

8 see *A dialectic approach to film form* (1929) published in *Film Form: essays in film theory*, anthology of writings by Sergei Eisenstein, translated and edited by Jay Leyda, first published in 1949.

9 see *The cinematographic principle and the ideogram* (1929), *A dialectic approach to film form* (1929) and *Dickens, Griffith, and the film today* (1944), all published in *Film Form: essays in film theory*



The formal and compositional grammar, the plastic construction of the sequences is similar to *Potemkin's* and uses the same devices, the expansion of time we experience in both and the massive use of low-angle camera shots being the most defining. It is also these angles, for their interpretation and proposition of the human, that bring *Douro* closer to *Potemkin* as a whole.

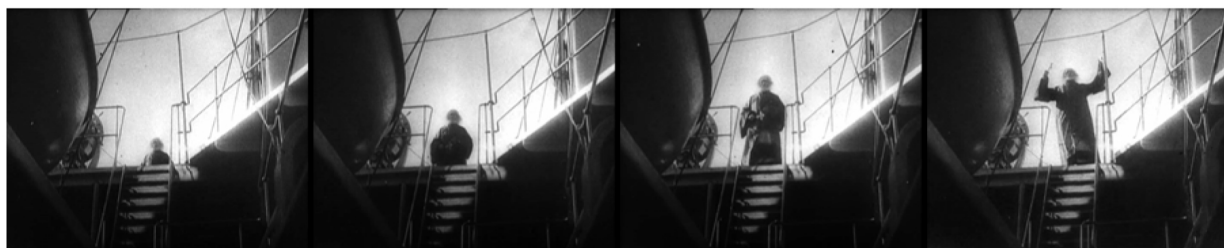
4.

Eisenstein was not the first to use these angles. The priest in *Potemkin* reminds us of the apparition of Orlok to the sailors on the deck of the ship that took him to Wisborg, both for the angle at which the camera is placed, and for the way the character ap-

pears in the shot. But in Murnau's film, this moment is an isolated event.

Before Murnau and the cinema, 19th Century painting and photography experimented with these *points de vues*. Suffice it to think of the ballerinas of Degas or one of the *femme à l'ombrelle* of Monet (who could accompany Orlok and the Potemkin priest in the earlier sequence). But even though he was not the first to use the low-angle shot, Eisenstein, in his pursuit of montage, was perhaps the first to use it with literary significance.

The Eisensteinian camera angle is defining. And this characteristic is also present throughout *Douro, Working River*.



Nosferatu, 1922
Potemkin, 1925

For Eisenstein, the arrival of sound would destroy the visual perfection that cinema had achieved through montage and that he, in particular, had pursued. He rebelled¹⁰ against the *dream of a sound-film*, but the road was irreversible. With the spoken word came also visual inertia, and the cinema returned to its theatrical roots. For Manoel de Oliveira these were also hard times¹¹ and eleven years would pass before he filmed his first feature film with synchronised sound *Aniki Bóbo*.

5. Visual Memory



Potemkin

Douro

Potemkin

Douro

¹⁰ *A Statement* (1928) was published in the Russian magazine *Zhizn Iskussiva* on August 5th 1928 and signed by Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov. Translated from the original into English by Jay Leyda, it features the anthology of writings *Film Form: essays in film theory*.

¹¹ “ (...) there was something else, something terrible: the arrival of sound. Like many people I was against it, at the time (...) For a long time, I thought that to judge a sound film, to know whether it was good or bad cinematically, one had to switch the sound off and watch the film”.

“ (...) houve uma outra coisa, terrível: a chegada do sonoro. Como muita gente, eu era contra, naquela época.(...) Durante muito tempo pensei que, para julgar um filme sonoro, saber se ele era bom ou não cinematograficamente, era preciso cortar o som e ver o filme”. (Baecque & Parsi, 1999, p. 99).

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