

**Pudovkin's Precept [Summary]:
Pudovkin, Kant and the
Transcendental Unity of Apperception**

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[A summary of Parts 1, 2 and 3 of the lectures on 'Pudovkin's Precept ... ' available within the Evan Wm. Cameron Collection, the first presented in class in 1967, the others as additions over the next two decades. (See the title pages of each for more exact information.) Earlier versions of this condensation were presented 09 July 1990 under the title "Pudovkin, Kant and the Principle of Perceptual Coherence" to the Visiting Lecture Series of the Boston University Summer Internship Programme, London, England, on 29 May 1991 to the 1991 Annual Meeting of the Film Studies Association of Canada, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, on 25 October 1991 to the Film Studies Programme, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, and on 30 November 1992 to the 50th Anniversary Conference of the American Society for Aesthetics, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The revision reproduced here, retitled "Pudovkin, Kant and the Transcendental Unity of Apperception", was then presented to the 2005 annual meeting of the Canadian Society for Aesthetics, 2005 Congress of the Social Sciences & Humanities, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario.]

**Pudovkin's Precept [Summary]:
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In 1926 Vsevolod Pudovkin, a not-so-young Russian of 32, began to direct his first feature-length film, *MOTHER*. Pudovkin had decided to become a filmmaker in 1920 after seeing Griffith's *INTOLERANCE* and had thereafter assisted in the making of several films while studying with Kuleshov. Never before, however, had he been a party to the making of a feature film, much less one of his own.

As shooting commenced, Pudovkin began in the evenings to draft two booklets as a contribution to a series of manuals on filmmaking for his compatriots, one on *The Film Scenario* and the other on *the Film Director and Film Material*. Clearly, however, he was also writing to clarify for himself what he ought to be doing when directing a film, for he had little experience of constructing enacted continuities.

Pudovkin's booklets appeared while *MOTHER* was still in production and achieved enormous internal distribution. A single-volume German translation soon followed, and by 1929 an English translation under the title "Film Technique" had secured world-wide distribution.

Pudovkin had set out to teach filmmakers (and himself) how to make enacted films as powerfully as Griffith had done, employing a notion that he, in turn, had taken from his teacher, Kuleshov, namely, that every art has a material that must be formed, and the material to be formed by filmmakers are pieces of film (that is, shots). All of Pudovkin's examples, therefore, were drawn from within the tradition of constructing enacted films out of shots.

Fortunately, however, the precept that Pudovkin advanced to summarise for filmmakers how to make films better could be applied far beyond the limits either of the tradition of enacted filmmaking in which he was interested, the Kuleshovian notion of shots upon which he relied or the examples he chose with which to illustrate it. Indeed, it cut right to the root of the fundamental problem of film design, namely how to ensure that we shall be able to encounter the events we perceive by means of a film coherently - or, as Kant would have put, how to ensure that we experience them.

¹ Citations to the writings of Pudovkin, Kant and others have been eliminated from this summary. For quotations and references to sources, see Parts 1-3 of the lectures on 'Pudovkin's Precept . . . ' available elsewhere within the Evan Wm. Cameron Collection.

Unsurprisingly, Pudovkin's book changed irreversibly how filmmakers of every kind thought about filmmaking, as Newton's *Principia* had changed how physicists thought about physics (and I mean the parallel exactly). Whereas the diversities of their world had once appeared incomprehensible, they now appeared to be well-ordered and subject to principle.

What did Pudovkin say? He never summarized his precept succinctly nor amplified the reasons behind it, and within the restricted compass of this report I shall not attempt to integrate citations. I shall simply assume that listeners familiar with his argument will recognize my reconstruction of it, while others must go on trust.

Firstly, Pudovkin offered a precept, a guide to filmmaking through a *gedanken-experiment* within which, in his opinion, all filmmakers ought continually to work.

The Precept

If you wish, by means of a film, to enable viewers to encounter an event that will engage them most deeply and comprehensively, answer the following question:

To what aspects of the event, in what order, from what perspective and for how long would you attend were you free to move instantaneously but unobserved and were you the most discerning, wise and attentive observer of it? Then,

By means of the cinemactical tools, construct a film that will enable viewers to attend only to those aspects, in that order, from that perspective and for that (relative) duration.

Although Pudovkin never explained decisively why filmmakers ought to follow his precept, we may reconstruct the reasons behind it from the scattered hints he gave, reaffirming its generality. Reconstructed, they encompass four conjectures about how we must perceive things about us, a reminder of the capacities of our cinemactical tools and the lesson that follows from them.

Four Conjectures about Perceiving

(1) As evolved organisms, we are habituated genetically to attend perceptually to the things we encounter about us as reliably as we can, for our continued existence depends upon it.

(2) We are habituated, in particular, to attend perceptually only to those aspects of the things that we encounter that require prompt conscious consideration, relegating the remainder to peripheral nonconscious registration;

(3) We can attend visually to things only by focusing serially upon them, aspect by aspect, for our eyes have lenses (unlike our ears) that must at any time be focused upon a single focal point to enable us to register events in the world;

(4) Whenever we attend visually to things about us, however, we are limited in our capacity to attend differentially to aspects of them because we must be bodily present amongst them. We are constrained, that is, to attend to them only as a participant must, bound within our bodies and with regard for our safety and survival, rather than as a massless, freely-mobile and non-participatory reactor could do.

A Cinematical Reminder

By using the cinematical tools, however, we can access events, aspect by aspect, as freely as a massless and hence freely-mobile reactor could, unencumbered by the constraints of the body that would bind us as participants, and hence with maximal perceptual accuracy and concentration, and thus emotional engagement.

The Cinematical Lesson

If we are to enable viewers to encounter events by means of film that will engage them most deeply and comprehensively, we must permit them by means of the cinematical tools to attend to those events, aspect by aspect, as a maximally mobile yet attentive reactor would! We ought therefore to obey the precept noted above, for it exemplifies the only comprehensive and as-yet unrefuted conjectures we know, both perceptual and cinematical, by which to do so most affectively and efficiently.

Pudovkin had suggested, in a nutshell, that we encounter events about us constrained by nonconscious perceptual habits that compel us to attend, insofar as possible, only to those aspects of things that are causally and comparatively important. By means of the tools of filmmaking, we can present events to viewers that not only permit identical shifts of attention and hence correlative affective and cognitive responses, but that can intensify those responses by eliminating the unimportant aspects that intrude necessarily upon our everyday perception of things through our unavoidable presence amongst them as embodied participants.

Advantages of the Precept

Pudovkin's precept was to prove incomparably expedient as a tool of film design, and to this day we know of no alternative of comparable scope and power.

- A. It is uniquely economical. With his precept in mind, filmmakers may work from screenplays in master-scene form, making and correcting most of their mistakes on paper when scripting rather than later when spending money on location or in postproduction. Contra Griffith, one need photograph only what the script prescribes as interpreted through the precept.
- B. It is uniquely accurate, elegant and yet encompassing perceptually, and hence maximally engaging emotionally. Only the essential aspects of an event draw attention while others are registered peripherally if at all, and hence our deepest nonconscious global responses can be naturally engaged.
- C. It is generally applicable. One may use it to design films with synchronized sound as easily as silent ones, and, as we shall often hereafter have occasion to note, one may apply it to the making of films encompassing any kind of event whatsoever (and thus to musicals, documentaries, animated films, fantastical features, experimental works, etc.).
- D. It has proven historically to be uniquely refineable and extendable. Among the precepts of importance that were to be derived from it were the general maxims of continuity cutting, the canons of cinematical lighting and composition, the constraints on non-protagonal characterization, the proscription against 'mental images' and Capra's precepts of accelerated pacing.
- E. It is uniquely testable yet unrefuted. We know neither of any serious anomalies to it, nor of any even-reasonably adequate alternatives.

However remarkable the advantages listed above may be, they remain today, for even literate filmmakers of my acquaintance, only scattered benefits of a precept vaguely remembered. Sadly so, for Pudovkin's precept has a pedigree of unique historical and philosophical importance. If we are to understand why it has proven to be uniquely advantageous to filmmakers, we must look to Kant, for Pudovkin's precept of 1926 encompassed a constructive assimilation of a constraint first noted by Kant 150 years before, namely that a coherent experience of the world requires that we bring our encounters to the transcendental unity of apperception.

Kant's Principle of Experiential Coherence

What, from the broadest philosophical perspective, had Pudovkin discovered about the nature of our cinemactical tools and their possible effects? Pudovkin's insight was inadvertently Kantian and its Kantian context important.

Experience, Kant believed, required an empirical encounter with objects. To experience an object was to come to know it; to know it was to judge of it; to judge of it was to connect concepts referring to it within a unified act of consciousness. Every experience, therefore, presupposed a synthesizing unity of consciousness.

To experience the tree in my garden as a birch, for example, I should have to judge of it by combining the concepts of "tree" and "birch" into a unified and conscious reference to it, thus presupposing a synthesizing unity of consciousness unique to my experience of the tree at that moment. I need not be attending to myself as I consciously judge of the tree; I need only be attending to the tree.

My adjudging of the tree as a birch, however, presupposes as well a possible awareness by me of the adjudicating act itself - a possible awareness, that is, of my judging the tree to be a birch while being simultaneously aware of doing so. When judging that "The tree is a birch", it must always be possible, Kant believed, for me to combine the judgment with the judgment "I think" in a synthetic unity of self-consciousness as well (that is, a unity of apperception capturable in the complex judgment "I think that the tree is a birch").

To experience the tree in my garden as a birch, therefore, presupposes synthesizing unities of both consciousness and self-consciousness, each of them peculiar to my experience of the tree at that moment as evident empirically to me through introspection (or "inner sense", as Kant put it).

But here, for Kant, the fun was just beginning! Consider for a moment the judgment "I think" that, Kant believed, must always be capable of being combined in a unified act of consciousness with all other judgments I make, and hence that implies a unified self-consciousness as well. Were the "I" in the judgment "I think" to refer to an object and hence to be amenable to an empirical encounter through my inner sense as is the tree in the garden through my outer senses, little of interest would follow, for the unified self-consciousness presupposed thereby would be only an empirical generalization subject to counterexample.

Kant insisted, however, as had Leibniz and Hume before him, that we never encounter ourselves as objects! I may be empirically aware of encountering things from a spatiotemporal perspective that is shared, it seems to me, by no other object, and thus have empirical warrant for supposing that a stable and abiding being, distinct from all others, may be having those encounters uniquely. But the being that I surmise may exist as the subject of my encounters, consistent with the manner in which I encounter other things through my outer senses and in which my inner sense registers pains, pleasures, thoughts, feelings, etc., never appears to me.

To what, then, does the "I" in the judgment "I think" refer if to no soul or subject encounterable through inner sense and capable of encountering other things. As Kant everywhere insisted, it refers to nothing! Rather, it serves a formal function: it works as a universal place-holder expressing the fundamental formal constraint imposed upon every being capable of encountering things and judging of them as they appear, namely that to experience such things (that is, to encounter them coherently as interrelated objects) one must judge of them as if one were a unified self-conscious being, and conversely.

The "I" that must accompany our encounters with things refers to no subjective, empirical object. It expresses rather the fundamental transcendental constraint on our judging of things. When I adjudge that "The tree is a birch", the judgment is mine. If true, however, it is objectively true, not subjectively so, for the "I" that must accompany all our judgments, and thus entails the judgment "I think that the tree is a birch", is a transcendental placeholder, not a name. It signals that my judgment of the birch tree has been constrained by the transcendental unity of apperception, and hence has been opened to the possibility of being objectively (and not just subjectively) true.

Kant never claimed (contrary to some commentators) that our encounters will always cohere. Rather, responding to the sceptical Hume, Kant claimed that our encounters could never be incoherent provided we brought to them a transcendently unified possible awareness of ourselves, and conversely.

We must either encounter objects about us from the perspective of a self-consciously unified being, or both we and they must jointly deconstruct.

That is what unified apperception entails and why the constraint is transcendental.

No being capable of acting in accordance with the transcendental unity of apperception need fear incoherent encounters with objects, Kant argued, for such a being could synthesize appearances of any kind into a coherently perceivable world of stable,

abiding and interconnected objects. Conversely, all of us experiencing the world of interconnected objects we inhabit, however diverse we and our encounters may otherwise empirically be, do so only by acting in accordance with the transcendental unity of apperception (that is, by synthesizing appearances as if we were uniformly unified and self-conscious beings).

By drawing our attention to the dependence of perceptual coherence on the transcendental unity of apperception, Kant was excluding neither dreamers nor madmen from the world, nor limiting the possible varieties of its appearances to us. He was simply pointing out, contra Hume, that perceptual incoherence would entail the absence of a self-consciously unified awareness of oneself (implying a fortiori that philosophers would do well to pay more attention to the conditions of madness than they have done before or since!).

Unless pathologically disturbed, therefore, we need never worry about encountering incoherently the objects that appear to us in the space and time about us. But that returns us to Pudovkin and the fundamental problem of film design, for - wonderfully - we may encounter by means of film objects and events that are patently nowhere about us!

Pudovkin's Assimilation of Kant

To experience objects, Kant believed, was to have synthesized a manifold of intuition. Given the limited 18th-century tools known to him for creating and manipulating manifolds of intuition, and thereby experiences of objects, it is hardly surprising that Kant seems never to have imagined that objects, synthesized from intuition into experience, might themselves serve as a manifold of intuition enabling a further synthesis into other objects. It never occurred to Kant that we might someday possess tools that would enable us to present to ourselves objects in the space and time about us that, by means of that experience, would enable us to experience simultaneously other objects in distinct spaces and times!

In particular, Kant never suspected that someday, by means of the tools of filmmaking, we might be able to experience objects, namely the variably illuminated portions of a screen suspended before us in a projection room, and experience them as a manifold of intuition capable of being further synthesized into a simultaneous encounter with other objects (that is, people, places and things distinct from any of the objects in the projection room).

Kant, unlike filmmakers, had no 'metaphysical research laboratory' replete with tools within which to test conjectures about the scope and limits of experiential coherence before affirming them.

Kant never foresaw, therefore, the possibilities of nonpathological perceptual incoherence inherent in the use of the cinemactical tools. He never envisaged that incompetent filmmakers might compel us to encounter the illuminated portions of a screen as experienced objects in our space and time while at the same time precluding us from encountering coherently the distinct objects and events in other spaces and times perceivable by means of them.

Pudovkin, to my knowledge, knew nothing of Kant. He knew well, however, that it was not enough for filmmakers to illuminate a screen hung before us so that we might encounter the screen coherently! That, as Kant would have affirmed, was transcendently assured for any viewers capable of encountering objects as if they were unified self-conscious beings. Rather, the trick was to ensure that viewers could perceive coherently the other objects encounterable by means of the illuminated portions of the screen.

Pudovkin thus asked himself the fundamental question of film design, namely how must other objects and events appear to us, when encountered by means of the illuminated portions of the screen, if we are to perceive them as coherently and profoundly as possible? By what principle ought filmmakers to determine how things ought to appear when encountered by means of the illuminated portions of the screen to ensure that they are perceivable as coherently and profoundly as possible (to ensure, as Kant would have put it, that they can be *experienced* as such)?

Thoughtful readers will by now have guessed why Pudovkin's precept was to prove to be the primary precept of filmmaking, for, at root, the answer he gave was the one Kant would have applauded.

Filmmakers ought to mimic the transcendental unity of apperception when deciding how the other objects should appear!

A filmmaker wishing to enable a viewer to encounter an event as profoundly and pervasively as possible ought to ask how the event would appear to a transcendently unified apperceiver of extraordinary insight and perspicacity, if encountered otherwise than by means of film.

Pudovkin would have acknowledged that different filmmakers, asking the question in good faith of an identical event, could give different answers to it, for observers of equivalent insight and awareness can be imagined to whom an event would appear as distinctly as their empirical differences would allow. All of them, however, must alike be constrained by the transcendental unity of apperception, for all of them, however empirically distinct, must encounter the event objectively as if they were unified self-conscious beings.

The empirical element in Pudovkin's precept (that filmmakers ought to imagine a perceiver of extraordinary insight and awareness) was a distinctive contribution and, as we shall see, an important one, for it was to distinguish his precept sharply from later adulterations of it (Hollywood's measure of the common and ordinary viewer in particular). The transcendental element in the precept was Kant's, however, albeit assimilated inadvertently by Pudovkin to a practice of which Kant never dreamed; for, had Pudovkin known of Kant, his precept, fully unpacked, might well have read as follows:

To what aspects of the event, in what order, from what perspective and for how long would you attend, constrained by the transcendental unity of apperception (constrained to act, that is, as if you were a self-consciously unified being), were you free to move instantaneously but unobserved and were you the most discerning, wise and attentive observer of it?

When Pudovkin insisted that filmmakers ought only to present events to viewers as if being perceived by a maximally mobile and attentive observer, he was reaffirming the transcendental indispensability of Kant's maxim of unified apperception to all of the events we may encounter by means of film if we are to experience them as coherently and hence profoundly as possible. Filmmakers must ensure, he was insisting, that all of the events seen by means of a film can be brought by viewers to the transcendental unity of apperception and not simply the illuminated portions of the screen. To do anything less would be to prohibit viewers from encountering coherently all of the things that may appear to them by means of films no matter how hard they may try.

Pudovkin knew, of course, that the varying patterns of illumination on a screen may themselves engage us profoundly if artfully structured and sequenced as only musical things of their kind may be. They may only do so, however, if no other things are seen by means of them. Were the patterns to become contaminated by the appearance of other objects encountered by means of them, we should no longer be able to engage with them deeply as musical events no matter how artfully structured they may be; and should the other objects encountered by means of them fail to cohere as well, then nothing we perceive could engage us deeply, for while the other objects would appear

incoherent, the patterns would appear contaminated by accidental and hence meaningless objectual features.

When encountering things by means of film, therefore, we need never fear exhaustive incoherence, for, as Kant would have insisted, the illuminated portions of the screen will always as such cohere for us as long as we cohere, however contaminated by the appearance of other objects encountered by means of them. The danger, as Pudovkin recognized, is rather that we shall be bored silly by the meaningless perceptual clutter accruing to other objects that, through the incompetence of filmmakers, fail to cohere.

Avoiding Misunderstandings

Commentators have often misunderstood Pudovkin's precept as limited to the "Hollywood" style. We can now understand how they erred, reaffirming Pudovkin's insights and thus protecting ourselves from misreadings of Kant as well, for Kant has often been misunderstood in similar ways.

1. Films constrained by Pudovkin's precept need not encompass events that are temporally and spatially contiguous. With care, we may leap spatially or temporally by means of film or even encounter things related in no traceable spatial or temporal ways. Neither Kant nor Pudovkin ever implied that we could never coherently perceive events that were temporally or spatially disparate (though both would have affirmed correctly that we never encounter such things about us, and Kant knew of no alternative means, like film, of encountering them otherwise). Rather, they both affirmed that to be perceived coherently, things must be encountered from a perspective that permits we who do the perceiving to maintain our identities as self-consciously unified beings. It is the apperceptive integrity of the perceiver that must be maintained, not the spatial or temporal contiguity of the things seen.

Pudovkin's precept, for example, was to prove as essential to constructing documentary films coherently as enacted ones, however unobvious the application may have seemed to readers misled by the narrow range of his examples.

2. Nothing in Pudovkin's precept precludes us from perceiving coherently things of any particular kind by means of film (just as Kant's transcendental unity of apperception set no limits upon the varieties of things we might coherently encounter about us). By means of film, we may encounter animated rabbits, lying politicians, moving patterns of colour music, nonnarrative mood pieces or

even verité documentaries calculated to disengage us emotionally in the service of rational assessment, and perceive all of them coherently. Whether or not we encounter an event coherently by means of a film depends upon the context of events within which it is perceived rather than the kind of event that it is. If, in context, what we see and hear accords with what a maximally attentive and mobile being would have seen and heard constrained by the transcendental unity of apperception, having seen and heard what we saw and heard before, then our apperceptive integrity as perceivers will have been maintained. If not, perceptual incoherence will result. As Augustine once said of filmmaking (almost), anything goes, but not always or everywhere!²

Conclusion

Pudovkin undertook to solve the fundamental problem of film design, namely how to ensure that viewers can perceive coherently all of the events they encounter by means of a film. Unknowingly, he brought Kant's transcendental constraint of apperceptive unity to bear upon it, reaffirming the fact so often denied in era of artistical incompetence that respect for the self-conscious perceptual integrity of observers is the primal precondition of authentic art.

Pudovkin reaffirmed it so simply and elegantly with respect to filmmaking that his assimilation of Kant's insight could serve as exemplary for other artists as well. No wonder it was to prove to be of unparalleled use to filmmakers and the remaining precepts of filmmaking to be refinements of it.

² When Augustine admonished us to "Love God, then do what you wish", he was reminding us that anything goes, but only *in context*.