Eisenstein, Part 1:
'A Fly in the Fly-Bottle' – Montage to 1930

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Eisenstein, Part 1:
'A Fly in the Fly-Bottle' – Montage to 1930[1]

Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality.

Joseph Conrad[2]

One can gain knowledge from words, but wisdom only from things.

George Wald[3]

Eisenstein, like Flaherty, became a legendary figure long before he died. Unlike Flaherty, however, whose reputation was sustained largely by filmmakers, Eisenstein personified the art of the cinema to many throughout the world who never made a film. Like Caruso, Toscanini, Eliot, Stravinsky, Picasso, Frank Lloyd Wright or Samuel Beckett, he was presumed by many non-artists to be the central figure of his art.

But therein lies a puzzle. For neither Eisenstein's films nor his teachings nor his writings have profoundly influenced filmmaking or its precepts. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Eisenstein has remained unappreciated.

Filmmakers as diverse as Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, Flaherty, Capra, Jennings and Antonioni were inspired, if we may trust their witness, to do better by having seen his films, yet no one of them ever imitated him.[4] Eisenstein spent his middle years teaching full-time, and before and after part-time, in the principal film school of his country, drawing many of its students and even some from abroad into a programme of

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[1] The phrase is adapted from Ludwig Wittgenstein: "What is your aim in philosophy? – To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle." *Philosophical Investigations*, vis-à-vis translation by G. E. M. Anscombe, edited by Anscombe and Rush Rhees (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963 [1953]), item 308. (Wittgenstein's numbering. The page on which it falls within this edition of the book is 103e.)

[2] Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, Part 1, Second Paragraph (1911).

[3] Radio broadcast, WBUR, Boston, 21 November 1971.

[4] According to Jay Leyda, Pickford and Fairbanks managed to bring a print of THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN back to the United States after their visit to the Soviet Union in 1926. "Fairbanks took POTEMKIN to the United States, and his praise of it swelled its audience everywhere. He also asked Eisenstein to follow it to Hollywood, the first of several such invitations. No other film shown to the visitors made such an impression on them … ." See Jay Leyda, *KINO: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (New York, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1960), page 205.

direction designed by himself, yet no filmmaker of significance emerged from his classes (excepting perhaps the Vassiliev brothers). And despite having written and published voluminously during his lifetime, commenting upon his own work, the work of others and much of cultural history besides, no coherent body of precepts emerged to guide the practices of filmmakers.[5]

Recalling the exemplary and continuing impact of Griffith or Flaherty as filmmakers, of Kuleshov as a teacher or of the slim pamphlets of Pudovkin as texts, the gap for filmmakers between Eisenstein and his legend is awesome. The question cannot be avoided:

> Why, amongst filmmakers, has Eisenstein remained so uninfluential as a filmmaker, teacher or thinker?

More exactly, how did it come about? Who was responsible? What does it signify?

The general line is that Eisenstein was an artist of unparalleled promise whose achievement was sadly curtailed by the accident of having to live and work within the Soviet Union of Joseph Stalin. He finished only a few films, saw even fewer completed as he wished to see them and witnessed the wrenching suspension of key projects well into production; the international release of POTEMKIN was at first denied him, and thereafter he never again worked free of duress; returning late from his visit to Europe and the United States, in direct violation of a directive from Stalin, he was refused work as a filmmaker during the central period of his creative life, being forced to teach others who, in turn, were denied work because of their association with him; only the coming of war permitted him to make films again, and then only of a different kind, and much of that work was to be savaged at Stalin's orders; and he died before he could complete the major theoretical works he had contemplated.

There is so much in the above account that is true and important that any sensitive and aware human being, able freely in the west to rethink the story, must hesitate to

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[5] Richard Taylor, the thoughtful and supportive editor of the first volume of the English translations of Eisenstein's collected papers, after paying tribute to the author as "the most important single figure in the history of cinema ... the leading practitioner of his art ... its principal theorist ... cinema's Shakespeare" (pages xi and 1), is obliged a paragraph later to admit that his task within the preface will be "to suggest some continuities in his [Eisenstein's] argument" and "above all to argue that there is a very considerable coherence and consistency in Eisenstein's thought even if ultimately his theory of art remained both partial and fragmentary" (page 1)! See S. M. Eisenstein, *Selected Works: Volume 1, Writings, 1922-34*, edited and translated by Richard Taylor (London, England: BFI Publishing and Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1988).

reconstrue it. The older I get and the more I learn of how complexly survivors were constrained physically, mentally and morally by the littler people serving Stalin (or Hitler or Mussolini or their imitators before and since), the less inclined I am to disapprove of such stories, even when rewritten as tragedies.

Nevertheless, I must do so here, for however true the 'story' of Eisenstein is, as far as it goes, it obscures something deep and important about him. However subtly, it refuses to take him *seriously* – both what he did and what he said about what he did. It misconstrues him, as only westerners could, to be both a western hero and a liar.

However talented as a filmmaker and unrepentantly proud and aware of it, Eisenstein never saw himself or his struggle as heroical. On the contrary, he saw himself as one amongst other Soviet artists working in the shadow of his teacher, Meyerhold, doing what they had to do to survive, work and preserve whatever integrity they could muster. Perhaps he underestimated his achievement, but that would have been equally uncharacteristic of him. Eisenstein was no 'average man', but one can recognize what he meant when he said near the end of his life, reflecting upon it while convalescing from a heart attack,

> I lived in an epoch without parallel. But it is not of the epoch that I wish to write. I want to describe how, like a completely unforeseen counterpoint, an average man passes through a time of greatness. How a man can not notice historical dates, which he brushes with his sleeve. How it is possible to be engrossed in Maeterlinck while in charge of trench work during the civil war, or in Schopenhauer which crouching in the shadow of a troop train.[6]

Eisenstein gave an equally forthright answer to the question that we have put that fails as well to conform to the legend, and his answer is confirmed in the historical record of the texts that he left to us. However constrained he may have been by events about him, Eisenstein never blamed anyone or anything but himself for having misdirected his career. He claimed on the contrary to have changed his mind in midlife about how to make films and to have done so because he had misconceived during his early career how films ought to be made. He insisted, that is, that his early 'successes', however fruitful in part, had rested in whole upon a mistaken conception of film design that he had to struggle hard to overcome.

I shall here take Eisenstein at his word and show as concisely as possible that the historical record supports it, for much of importance follows. True enough, Eisenstein was a public figure compelled like others in his sad country to recant cleverly on

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[6] Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Immoral Memories: an Autobiography*, translated by Herbert Marshall (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983), page 4.

occasion when he might have preferred to remain silent. But as everyone who knew him has confirmed, he was no liar and by 1938-39 was hardly about to mislead posterity if he could help it. When he permitted publication of his first book, the only collection of essays that he ever authorized for distribution (*The Film Sense*, 1939?), he chose as the first of its four chapters the essay "Word & Image" ("Montage in 1938") within which he had articulated without equivocation his change of mind. He was under no compulsion to remind others of it. He meant what he said.

I believe that the answer to the puzzle of Eisenstein lies in respecting the three-fold progression of his creative life as he described it.

> (a) In the 1920s Eisenstein made a series of films that, by his own admission, ought never to have served anyone as a model for filmmaking, for they had been designed to accord with a mistaken conception of how films ought to be made.

> (b) During the early 1930s, compelled when teaching to rethink his earlier work, he came gradually to recognize the mistake that he had made, enabling him to construct ALEXANDER NEVSKY (1937). And then,

> (c) Having overcome his misconceptions, he produced a masterpiece during the early 1940s, IVAN THE TERRIBLE, PT.1, and the mutilated parts of two others (PARTS II and III), a body of film work that lay so far beyond the capacity of other filmmakers to comprehend that it has never been imitated.

By his own account, what mistake did Eisenstein make early on? He mistook the implements of filmmaking to be tools for implanting *ideas* about an event within viewers rather for engendering naturally a unified and memorable *affective response* to it (an "image" of it, as he was later to call it) and hence misconstrued filmmaking as an 'intellectual', indeed linguistical (that is, message-making) art. He had reduced filmmaking to philosophy.

Eisenstein was to correct his misconception but not without struggle. He was to try firstly to combine ideas and images (1934-35) and only then (circa 1938) to realize that the aims of his art could only be achieved through presenting *events* as naturally as "in life itself" – presenting events, that is, of which viewers could think as hard as they might, but never prescriptively.

Why did Eisenstein misconstrue filmmaking early on? And how did he come later to correct himself? He misconstrued it for two interwoven reasons, one narrow and the other broad: he began his career as an artist working devoutly within the artistic constraints of Marxism as he understood them, realising only later that the task entailed

a naturalism rather than the *realism* that he had earlier presupposed; and he began, like Wittgenstein, as an urban intellectual bewitched by *language*, realising only later that he had confused events with symbols for them.

If we are to learn from Eisenstein's achievement, we must retrace, step by step, the path that he took from error to enlightenment. Firstly, however, we must note the aspects of his art that never changed, for it is only against this backdrop that the play has meaning.

Playing with Marx

Eisenstein was an exuberant synthesizer of the cultural surfaces of his time, perhaps the most absorbent working eclectic in the history of art. His interests ranged from mathematics and logic through philosophy and the sciences to oriental languages, Greek history, psychoanalysis, colour theory and the literatures in their original form of at least four languages, and he seemingly took something from everyone he meet and from everything he read or encountered. Nevertheless, he never wavered throughout his creative life from a conviction about the nature of art, and the art of the cinema, that was, by western standards, extraordinary.

Eisenstein was acquainted with many of the major abstract painters, designers and sculptors of his day, acted in *avant garde* movies on his travels, sketched masterfully, designed sets for theatre, directed operas and, as is everywhere apparent, retained to the end of his life a consistent, penetrating and practical interest in what many would call the *formal* aspects of art.

> Why then did Eisenstein never make an abstract film – a film, that is, whose patterns of colour and sound were not intended to amplify our understanding of human beings in historical situations)?

> Why did he insist, over and over again, that "the first sign of a cinema tendency is one showing events with the least distortion, aiming at the factual reality of the fragments" (TTC [1934], page 6), and that the proper goal of the cinema is "to reconstruct, to reflect reality, and above all the consciousness and the feelings of man" using images "equally as real in appearance as the objects themselves." (ACHIEVEMENT [1939], pages 184 and 189).[7]

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[7] The bulk of the translations of writings of Eisenstein that I shall use throughout this essay are by Jay Leyda as found within *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory and The Film Sense by Sergei Eisenstein*, edited and translated by Jay Leyda (Cleveland, Ohio and New York, New York:

Why, as late as 1939, was he attempting to convince his students that the study of film design must begin with the *mise-en-scène* [the arrangement of the activities of people within a bounded space without regard to questions of camera placement or editing], for "no one, without learning all the secrets of *mise-en-scène* completely can learn montage"? (ACHIEVEMENT [1939], page 193).

Why, when he came to design his programme for teaching the theory and practice of film direction at the VGIK, did he stress that students were not to begin thinking about *mise-en-cadre* [the shooting script] until their *3rd year of matriculation*, having spent the first two years developing skills at dramatic design, interpretation and *mise-en-scène* (with a good dose of physical education thrown in!)?[8]

And why, must remarkably of all, did he reassert throughout his career that filmmaking was not simply another art but the culminating synthesis of all previous arts?[9]

Meridian Books – The World Publishing Company, 1957 [Fifth Printing, 1963]. Leyda's translation of *Film Form* was originally published in 1949 by Harcourt, Brace & Company, New York, New York; that of *The Film Sense* in 1942 (new revised edition, 1947). The remaining quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the volume of Eisenstein's early works edited and translated by Richard Taylor as cited in footnote 5 above.

For abbreviations of the titles of the works by Eisenstein as used within this essay, see the Appendix.

[8] See the Appendix "S. M.'s 'Programme for Teaching'", pages 143-164 of Vladimir Nizhny's *Lessons with Eisenstein*, translated and edited by Ivor Montagu and Jay Leyda (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1962), pages 158f in particular.

[9] "The intellectual cinema will be that which resolves the conflict-juxtaposition of the physiological and intellectual overtones. Building a completely new form of cinematography – the realization of revolution in the general history of culture; building a synthesis of science, art, and class militancy." (MOM [1929], page 83) "... all the advantages of the cinema flash out if we can picture the arts arranged according to the degree to which they are adapted to their chief task – the reflection of reality and the master of this reality – man. … None of the 'previous' arts has been able to achieve this purpose to the full." (ACHIEVEMENT [1939], pages 183-184) "The arts themselves can escape the fetters of bourgeois limitations only in a revolutionary ideology and in revolutionary themes. As for their expressive means, escape here lies in a transition to a more perfected stage of all their potentialities – to cinema" (ACHIEVEMENT [1939], page 185) "... the cinema is that genuine and ultimate synthesis of all artistic manifestations that fell to pieces after the peak of Greek culture, which Diderot sought vainly in opera, Wagner in music-drama, Scriabin in his colour-concerti, and so on and on." (ACHIEVEMENT [1939], page 181) "Having at our disposal so perfect a stage of development of all the arts, fused into one – in

The answers in hindsight are transparent: Eisenstein's enterprise, first and last, was as Marxist as he could conceive of it. As Moussinac put it, recalling his first conversation with Eisenstein in 1927, the goal of Eisenstein's art was "to make films that exalted the revolutionary spirit and opened wide the doors of the future", and from this conviction he never wavered.[10]

Early on, however, Eisenstein linked the goal with an uncommon method.

> In these two experiments we have taken the first embryonic step towards a totally new form of film expression. Towards a purely intellectual film, freed from traditional limitations, achieving direct forms for ideas, systems, and concepts, without any need for transitions and paraphrases. We may yet have a
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> SYNTHESIS OF ART AND SCIENCE.
>
> This would be the proper name for our new epoch in the field of art. This would be the final justification for Lenin's words, that 'the cinema is the most important of all the arts'. (DAFF [1929], page 63)

The progression of Eisenstein's creative life, simply put, was to be his gradual disengagement from the method of *ideas* while deepening his understanding of the Marxist goal of insisting that art reflect *life as it is*. The method was mistaken, but it seemed to him early on to follow inevitably from the nature of the goal as he understood it. Why? What within the Marxist conception of things led Eisenstein astray?

To understand Marxism as Eisenstein understood it early on, we thankfully need not wallow in Marxist exegesis. We need only understand how he understood it. As usual, Eisenstein grasped it through a *gestalt* free from encumbrances of detail. Being no

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cinematography, we may already make infinite deductions from it as to the entire system and method of art, exhaustive for all arts, yet peculiar and individual for each of them. For here – in cinema – we have achieved *a genuinely synthetic art – an art of organic synthesis in its very essence, not a 'concert' of co-existent, contiguous, 'linked', but actually independent arts*." (ACHIEVEMENT [1939], pages 193-194) "At last we have placed in our hands a means of learning the fundamental laws of art – laws which hitherto we could snatch at only piecemeal, here a bit from the experience of painting, there a bit from theatre practice, somewhere else from musical theory. So, the *method of cinema, when fully comprehended, will enable us to reveal an understanding of the method of art in general*." (ACHIEVEMENT [1939], page 194)

[10] See page 21 of Léon Moussinac, *Sergei Eisenstein: An Investigation into His Films and Philosophy* [Edition Seghers' Cinema d'Aujourd'hui in English, translated by D. Sandy Petrey] (New York, New York: Crown Publishers Incorporated, 1970 [after French publication of 1964)).

scholar, he took what he could use and wasted no time on nuance. We must match the simplicity of Eisenstein's conception if we are to understand what he did with it.

Eisenstein's conception of Marxism hinged upon four integral assumptions of it specifying the kind of things upon which a proper study of human history ought to focus and the form that the evolution of those things must have taken in human history. His understanding of the assumptions may have been uncomplicated but it was hardly inaccurate, for they lay at the core of the Marxist endeavour as Marx and Engels had most simply explained it.[11]

> I.   To be human is *essentially* to strive in company with the other members of one's economic class to produce one's means of subsistence.
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> II.   To strive to produce one's means of subsistence as a member of an economic class is *essentially* to partake in the *historical* struggle of that class against another for control of the means of production.
>
> III.   The progression of human history, being the record of such struggles between economic classes, *essentially* encompasses *change* with the *dialectic* as its form and *conflict* as its source.
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> IV.   Whatever other things human beings may produce during the course of history (ideas, for example, or works of art), they are *unessential* accidents *unless* they arise from, reflect and contribute directly to the history of class struggle.

From these assumptions four consequences follow:

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[11] Readers can do no better than to turn to Marx and Engels explicit statement of their own premises in *The German Ideology*, the essay within which they attempted neither to justify their philosophy nor to work out its historical and economic implications, as in *Capital*, but rather to distinguish it as concisely as possible from the prevailing philosophical tradition of their day. The excerpts from the work reproduced in footnotes 10 and 11 below are taken from Part I, Section 9, "Historical Materialism: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels; Jean Jaurès", pages 145-169 of *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, edited, selected and introduced by Fritz Stern (London, England: Meridian Books, Thames and Hudson, 1957). Stern notes on page 145 that *The German Ideology* was "written by Marx and Engels in 1846" but "published in its entirety only in in 1932".

A.   No individual has value except when considered historically as a member of a *class* of producers, for what individuals *are* "coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce."[12]

B.   The everyday, mundane, economically productive activities of groups of ordinary human beings are of *essential* historical importance (the growing of wheat, for example, or the milling of steel or the manufacturing of tractors rather than love affairs, seductions, murders or even wars).

C.   Since human events are significant only when construed as contributing to the *theses-versus-antitheses-becoming-syntheses* of the evolving *dialectic* of the history of the struggle between economic classes, *conflict* between classes is the sole source of the dialectical changes of history (that is, historical progress occurs *only* through a dialectical clash between a pair of economically differentiated classes of people).

D.   Authentic ideas must emerge from and reflect the actions of classes of human beings producing *dialectically and through conflict* their means of subsistence in history; otherwise they are unauthentic. "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life."[13]

Eisenstein's early practices as a filmmaker were to be informed and progressively constrained by these metaphysical precepts. Let's see how.

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[12] "Man can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion, or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life. ...As individuals express their lives, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.". Ibid., page 147.

[13] "Morality, religion, metaphysics, all of the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking, and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life." Ibid, page 149.

The Rôle of the Marxist Artist

How did Eisenstein construe his function as a Marxist artist while making STRIKE, THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN, OCTOBER and THE GENERAL LINE (OLD AND NEW)? His problem was to find a way to encompass the making of films authentically within the class struggle. How could this be done? By reducing the goal and method of art to that of philosophy (that is, dialectical materialism) – or so he supposed in 1929.[14]

Agreeing with Marx and Engels that philosophy, or dialectical materialism, "is only the conscious reproduction of the dialectical course (substance) of the external events of the world", Eisenstein distinguished firstly the genesis of art from the genesis of philosophy as complementary ways of mirroring the dialectical progression of the substance of the world.[15]

Thus:

The projection of the dialectic system of things into the brain
into creating abstractly
into the process of thinking
yields: dialectic methods of thinking;
dialectic materialism -   PHILOSOPHY

And also:

The projection of the same system of things
while creating concretely
while giving form
yields: ART

The nature, function and methods of art could now, it would seem, be identified as complementary to those of philosophy, centring about the key concept of "conflict".

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[14] See in particular "A Dialectical Approach to Film Form" (DAFF [1929]), complemented by remarks of the same year in "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram" (CPI [1929]).

[15] According to Leyda, Eisenstein is here quoting from [Andreas] Razumovsky, *Theory of Historical Materialism* (Moscow, 1938). (DAFF [1929], page 45)

The foundation for this philosophy is a *dynamic* concept of things:

Being: as a constant evolution from the interaction of two contradictory opposites.

Synthesis: arising from the opposition between thesis and antithesis.

A dynamic comprehension of things is also basic to the same degree, for a correct understanding of art and of all art-forms. In the realm of art this dialectic principle of dynamics is embodied in

CONFLICT

as the fundamental principle for the existence of every art-work and every art-form.

For art is always conflict:

(1)   according to its social mission [what it *does*];
(2)   according to its nature [what it *is*],
(3)   according to its methodology [*how* it is put together].[16]

The apparent complementarity of art and philosophy, however, was but a preliminary evaluation, for Eisenstein's goal was to reduce the former to the latter: art was to appropriate the goal of philosophy, becoming a tool for the "forging of accurate intellectual concepts". Since "it is art's task to make manifest the contradictions of *Being*" as accurately as philosophy does, Eisenstein argued, the central social mission of the cinema, construed as conflict, must be

To form equitable views by stirring up contradictions within the spectator's mind, and *to forge accurate intellectual concepts* from the dynamic clash of opposing passions.[17]

And since art and philosophy are the opposite sides of the Marxist coin (so to speak), each reflecting the most advanced historical synthesis of dialectical evolution (Bolshevik

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[16] DAFF [1929], pages 45-46. Eisenstein's translators have tended to reproduce in English the truncated paragraph divisions of his Russian texts. Given Eisenstein's idiosyncratic prose style, this often leads to a less coherent presentation of his thought when read in English, fidelity of appearance notwithstanding. When quoting, I have retained exact word, sentence and paragraph sequences, but have freely combined paragraphs in the interest of coherence.

[17] DAFF [1929], page 46. [Italics: EWC.]

society), the newest art (the cinema) must be the culminating synthesis of all previous arts, just as the newest philosophy (dialectical materialism) had superseded its predecessors.

Eisenstein's "Tractor" and "Fist"

How did Eisenstein conceive early on of the task of the Marxist filmmaker? When proselytizing in 1925, he could be blunt.

> ... a *work of art* (at least in the two spheres in which I work: theatre and cinema) is first and foremost a *tractor ploughing over the audience's psyche in a particular class context*. (PMAF [1925], page 62)

> The *Cine-Eye* is not just a symbol of *vision*: it is also a symbol of *contemplation*. But we need *not contemplation but action*.[18]

> *It is not a 'Cine-Eye' that we need but a 'Cine-Fist'.*

> Soviet cinema must cut through to the skull! It is not 'through the combined vision of millions of eyes that we shall fight the bourgeois world' (Vertov): we'd rapidly give them a million black eyes!

> We must cut with our cine-fist through to skulls, cut through to final victory and now, under the threat of an influx of 'real life' and philistinism into the Revolution we must cut through as never before!

> Make way for the cine-fist! (PMAF [1925], page 62)

Four years later, however, in 1929, he got down to business.

> It is the task of the coming age in our art to tear down the Great Wall of China that separates the primary antithesis between the 'language of logic' and the 'language of images'. We demand from the coming age in art a renunciation of this opposition. (PERSPECTIVES [1929], pages 155 and 156.

> Only *intellectual* cinema will be able to put an end to the conflict between the 'language of logic' and the 'language of images'. On the basis of the language of

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[18] 'Cine-Eye' (Kinoglaz) was a six-reel 'exploration of "life caught unawares"' directed by the documentarist Dziga Vertov that had been released in Russia on 13 October 1924. (See note 10, page 307, of the volume of Eisenstein's early writings edited and translated by Richard Taylor as cited in footnote 5 above.)

the cinema dialectic. An *intellectual* cinema of unprecedented form and social functionalism. A cinema of extreme cognition and extreme sensuality that has mastered the entire arsenal of affective optical, acoustical and biomechanical stimulants. (PERSPECTIVES [1929], pages 155, 156 and 158.

How, then, did Eisenstein apply his understanding of Marxism to his practice? How, in particular, did he appropriate the four consequences of the precepts of Marx and Engels noted above (pages 8 and 9 above)?

Consequences A and B were appropriated exactly: masses of human beings were to be the only causal agents in his films (that is, no individual was to be the protagonist of a film, for only classes of individuals are protagonists in history); and the everyday, mundane, economically productive activities of ordinary people were to be of prime importance (excepting, of course, celebrations of the revolution!)

Consequents C and D, however, had no equally obvious application. If art had to be rooted in *conflict* (like history), and yet be both *intellectual* (to raise the consciousness of observers) and *realistic* (to be authentic), what ought to be shown and how? Since the goal of every work of art was "to forge accurate intellectual concepts", a film, it seems, would have to consist of conflicting realistic events, somehow sequenced to convey sharply authentic ideas, somehow inherent in them. But what did this entail?

One consequence seemed obvious to Eisenstein at the time, namely that filmmakers should resolutely avoid *stories* and *plots*, a legacy of a conviction he had articulated five years before. In 1923, as Stroheim's GREED was being cut to pieces in America, Eisenstein, then working in the theatre but beginning to us some segments of film therein, had published an essay called "The Montage of Attractions" to convince his colleagues that theatrical events staged by Soviet artists ought to emulate the circus and the music hall by associating radically different events into a unified whole rather than mimicking the story-and-plot sequencing of western drama. By providing spectators with sequences of "specific emotional shocks", Soviet dramatists could provide them with "the only opportunity of perceiving the ideological aspect of what is being shown, the final ideological conclusion." (MOA [1923], page 34)

At the time, Eisenstein had thought his thesis applicable only to the theatre, for he had yet to conceive of filmmaking as an art encompassing drama and everything else.[19] A year later, however, having decided to devote himself principally to filmmaking, he completed a typescript called "The Montage of Film Attractions", extending to film his

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[19] Thus, immediately following the above sentence he inserts the parenthetical remark "(The path to knowledge encapsulated in the phrase, 'though the living play of passions', is specific to theatre.)"

conviction that works of art ought to consist only of sequences of emotional attractions focused onto ideational ends.[20] Much of what he had to say about the montage of attractions for filmmakers matched what he had said to dramatists, especially the conclusion that stories-with-plots ought to be avoided:

> An attraction ... is in our understanding any demonstrable fact (an action, an object, a phenomenon, a conscious combination, and so on) that is known and proven to exercise a definite effect on the attention and emotions of the audience and that, combined with others, possesses the characteristic of concentrating the audience's emotions in any direction dictated by the production's purpose. From this point of view a film cannot be a simple presentation or demonstration of events: rather it must be a tendentious selection of, and comparison between, events, free from narrowly plot-related plans ... (MFA, 1924, pages 40 and 41)

Speaking a year later of his film, STRIKE, Eisenstein reiterated his conviction.

> The *mass* material was put forward as the material *most capable* of establishing *in relief* the ideological principle being expounded of an approach to form in the new postulation of a particular resolution, and as *a supplement to the dialectical opposition* of this principle to the *individual plot material of bourgeois cinema* . (PMAF [1925], page 61)

Indeed, the precept of avoiding stories and plots was to remain as firm as a rock to him as late as 1929.

> Cinema can – and consequently must – convey on the screen in tangible sensual form the pure, dialectical essence of our ideological debates without recourse to intermediaries like plot [or] story ... (PERSPECTIVES [1929], page 159)

Nevertheless, Eisenstein felt compelled in 1924 to distinguish film from theatre in a single respect that was to entice him within five years into the major error of his creative life, namely the placing of *conflict* and *ideation* before the demands of *realism*. In the theatre, Eisenstein suggested, spectators confront "an actually occurring fact" that can precipitate within them "a direct animal audience reaction through a motor imitative act towards a live character like oneself", whereas in film they confront "conventional (photographic) representations", a "pale shadow on a screen", subject *essentially* to cutting. (MFA [1925], page 41)

> The application of the method of the montage of attractions (the comparison of facts) to cinema is even more acceptable than it is to theatre. I should call

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[20] See MFA [1924], pages 39-58.

cinema 'the art of comparisons' because it shows not facts but conventional (photographic) representations (in contrast to 'real action' in theatre, at least when theatre is employing the techniques we approve of). For the exposition of even the simplest phenomena cinema needs comparison by means of consecutive, separate presentation between the elements which constitute it; montage in the technical, cinematic sense of the word is fundamental to the cinema, deeply grounded in the conventions of cinema and the corresponding characteristics of perception.[21]

Whereas in theatre an effect is achieved primarily through the physiological perception of an actually occurring fact (e.g., a murder), in cinema it is made up of the juxtaposition and accumulation, in the audience's psyche, of associations that the film's purpose requires, associations that are aroused by the separate elements of the stated (in practical terms, in 'montage fragments') fact, associations that produce, albeit tangentially, a similar (and often stronger) effect only when taken as a whole. (MFA, 1924, page 41)

Convinced of this difference, Eisenstein drew an unequivocal conclusion:

From what I have said it is clear that the centre of gravity of cinema effects, in contrast to those of theatre, lies not in directly *physiological* effects, although a purely *physical* infectiousness can sometimes be attained ... The method of the montage of attractions [in cinema] is the comparison of subjects for thematic effect. (MFA, pages 42 and 43)

If we move on to the persistently posed question of the 'demonstration of real life' as such, we must point out that this particular instance of demonstration is covered by our general position on the montage of attractions, but the assertion that the essence of cinema lies only in the demonstration of real life must be called into question. ... The canonisation of this material and of this approach as the only acceptable ones deprive cinema of its flexibility in relation to its broadly social tasks ... (MFA, page 47)

Eisenstein was thus remarkably attentive in 1924 to the direction toward which his thought was taking him. By 1929, less attentive though consistent to a fault, he had sacrificed *realism* on the altar of *ideation through conflict*. Only ten years later would he come to recognize fully the *cul-de-sac* into which he had driven his "tractor ploughing over the audience's psyche" fifteen years before. As of now, however, the working problem seemed clear.

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[21] The phrase "the art of comparisons" was adapted from the subtitle 'a drama of comparisons' that Griffith had given to INTOLERANCE: 'a drama of comparisons'.

> How, having sacrificed stories and their plots, could authentic concepts be conveyed?
>
> How could encounters with sequences of things *seen*, ungoverned by stories or plots, give rise through conflict to ideas *thought?*

As a filmmaker, Eisenstein spent much of the mid-1920s working out solutions to his problem (or so he thought), but not until 1928-29, and only in hindsight, did he try to associate his practices with "methods" articulated in print. The associations, as we shall see, were never worked out in detail, and for good reason: the "methods" were inherently inconsistent.

To 'explain' his practices, however, Eisenstein drew two analogies, one musical, the other pictorial, both of which might have borne fruit. Unfortunately, by seeking a way to generate *ideas* through conflict in the first and connotation in the second, he bound them both in linguistical fetters, rending them fruitless. Both analogies were imaginative, the latter brilliantly so, both seemed persuasive to him, and both were to lead him astray. It would take a decade for Eisenstein to untangle himself from them, fully in practice, partially in thought.

We must look at each in turn, not only to discern error but because, within each, lay hints of uncontaminated power upon which Eisenstein and others were later legitimately to rely.

Hierarchies of Montage

Since art had to be *conflictual* in form yet *ideational* in aim, Eisenstein decided that films ought to consist of sequences of opposing units which, by their juxtaposition, would generate ideas. But what were the basic units? And how were they to be juxtaposed?

Eisenstein, along with every other filmmaker in the Soviet Union at the time, decided that the basic unit of film design was the *shot*. He alone concluded, however, that the transition from one shot to another – *montage* – was to be construed primarily as *conflict*, and thereby the means of generating *ideas*.

> Shot and montage are the basic elements of the cinema ... To determine the nature of montage is to solve the specific problems of cinema. (DAFF [1929], page 48)

> By what, then, is montage characterized and, consequently, its cell – the shot?
> By collision. By the conflict of two pieces in opposition to each other. ... from
> the collision of two given factors *arises* a concept. (CPI [1929], pages 37 and 38)

Five years later, in 1934, as he was struggling to free himself from the knots into which
he had tied himself by this misconception, he was to remark of it:

> The shot, considered as material for the purpose of composition, is more
> resistant than granite. This resistance is specific to it. The shot's tendency
> toward complete factual immutability is rooted in its nature. This resistance has
> largely determined the richness and variety of montage forms and styles – for
> montage becomes the mightiest means for a really important creative
> remoulding of nature. ... The minimum 'distortable' fragment of nature is the
> shot; ingenuity in its combinations is montage.
>
> Analysis of this problem received the closest attention during the second half-
> decade of Soviet cinema (1925-1930), an attention often carried to excess. Any
> infinitesimal alteration of a fact or event before the camera grew, beyond all
> lawful limit, into whole theories of documentalities. The lawful necessity of
> combining these fragments of reality grew into montage conceptions which
> presumed to supplant all other elements of film expression. (TTC [1934], page 5)

Chief among the culprits, of course, had been Eisenstein himself. It was he, after all, who
had advocated in 1929 a five-tiered hierarchy of *quasi-musical* montage types,
synthetically (and hence dialectically) generated from bottom to top, culminating in an
intellectual montage supposedly capable of generating ideas:

> *Metric montage*: in which one considers only "the absolute lengths of the
> pieces".
>
> *Rhythmic montage*: in which "the content within the frame [that is, the patterns
> of "movement within the frame"] is a factor possessing equal rights to
> consideration."
>
> *Tonal montage*: that "embraces all affects of the montage piece" [based, that is,
> upon "the characteristic *emotional sound* of the piece – of its *dominant*. The
> general *tone* of the piece."
>
> *Overtonal montage*: that which "is distinguishable from tonal montage by the
> collective calculation of all the piece's appeals" [that is, the collected appeals due
> to metrical, rhythmical and tonal aspects]

> *Intellectual montage*: in which one generates *ideas* ["intellectual affects"] from the juxtaposition of the montage pieces.[22]

Films were to be designed to accord with the four ascending "physiological" categories, musically mimed ("*methods* of montage", Eisenstein claimed, that "become montage *constructions* proper when they enter into relations of conflict with each other"), topped by an ideational summit. (MOM [1929], page 78).

Had Eisenstein been able at this point in his exposition, he would assuredly have given at least one clear, precise, exhaustive and unequivocal example of how to generate through his "constructions" an "accurate intellectual concept" derived from "stirring up contradictions within the spectator's mind" – the aim of all art, after all. Notoriously, he did not do so and was never to do so thereafter. He was never to derive a single testable precept from his "methods" of montage, and none follow from any of the skimpy analyses of filmic segments he frequently gave thereafter; and his celebrated full-length analyses, early and late, of how viewer's are supposed to perceive large segments of his own work are so inaccurate psychologically that they enlighten only by happenstance.[23]

Eisenstein was aware of the gap between what he was seeking and what he had found, but could offer only a promissory note:

> But this, of course, is not yet the intellectual cinema, which I have been announcing for some years! The intellectual cinema will be that which resolves the conflict-juxtaposition of the physiological and intellectual overtones, building a completely new form of cinematography, the realization of revolution in the general history of culture – building a synthesis of science, art, and class militancy. (MOM [1929], page 83)

Such promissory notes were to dominate Eisenstein's writings until the mid-1930s, for, unfortunately, this was neither "the intellectual cinema" nor a way to it, but rather an intellectual mess, a conception confused at the core.

Before unpacking the confusions, however, we must turn to the second of Eisenstein's analogies, for, although equivalently confused and for comparable reasons, it was ingenious.

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[22] See MOM [1929], pages 72-82.

[23] The end-charts of ALEXANDRE NEVSKY, for example, supposedly charting points of common aural and visual attention, are simply wishful thinking.

Hieroglyphical Hang-ups

> When we come upon the definition of a concept we ignore at our peril the
> method of purely linguistic analysis of the actual designation. The words we use
> are sometimes significantly 'cleverer' than we are.

Eisenstein[24]

While drawing his musical analogy, Eisenstein drew a second, the most brilliantly
mistaken association of his filmmaking career. It was to prove muddleheaded,
inconsistent and unworkable as originally conceived, was to mislead him for half a
decade, but it was undeniably brilliant.

In 1920, having been discharged from the Red Army, Eisenstein had enrolled briefly in
the School of Oriental Languages in Moscow. He had a gift for languages: his letters to
foreign friends often played with words or enquired about nuances of street-talk in their
tongue; and when he appeared in his first public meeting in Paris in November, 1929,
the audience was astonished at his fluency in French "slang". But his lifelong interest in
the language and culture of Japan was exceptional, and it was this interest, by his own
affirmation, that led him in the years before 1928 to associate Japanese hieroglyphs
with montage.[25]

Eisenstein had been looking for a way to use events to convey concepts. Having decided
that Japanese hieroglyphs often convey general *concepts* (verbs, for example), even
though they consist of complex pictograms of *things*, he drew a notorious conclusion.

> Hieroglyphs developed from conventionalized features of objects, put together,
> express concepts, i.e., the picture of a concept – an ideogram.[26]

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[24] PERSPECTIVES [1929], page 152.

[25] Near the end of his life, Eisenstein remarked that "Later I thanked fate for having
brought me, after so many troubles, into contact with the mode of thought and writing
expressed through the venerable tongues of the East, for it was through study of the
extraordinary quality of this mode of thought that I was helped to grasp the nature of montage;
and the realization that [Eastern thought] was the normal progression of an affective internal
logic, different from what we call logic, helped me find my way among the most secret lodes of
my art and its methods." Quoted in Moussinac, op. cit., page 17.

[26] THE UNEXPECTED [1928], page 25.

... By the combination of two 'depictables' is achieved the representation of something that is graphically undepictable. ... For example: the picture for water and the picture of an eye signifies 'to weep'; the picture of an ear near the drawing of a door = 'to listen';

> a dog + a mouth = 'to bark';
> a mouth + a child = 'to scream';
> a mouth + a bird = 'to sing';
> a knife + a heart = 'sorrow'; and so on.

But this is montage! Yes. It is exactly what we do in the cinema, combining shots that are *depictive*, single in meaning, neutral in content – into *intellectual* contexts and series.

This is a means and method inevitable in any cinematographic exposition, and, in a condensed and purified form, the starting point for the 'intellectual cinema' – For a cinema seeking a maximum laconism for the visual representation of abstract concepts.[27]

Again, Eisenstein would derive no precise precepts from this bold yet vague association, and understandably so. Even now, having pondered these essays for over thirty years, I find it difficult to believe that Eisenstein misconstrued it as seriously as he did for as long as did, for the association patently and incoherently confuses *symbols* with the *things symbolized*. By means of film we may see a dog, or a mouth, or a dog and then a mouth or even both superposed. Neither individually, in sequence nor superposed do we encounter a symbol for anything. Conversely, by means of brush marks on paper, we may encounter a pictorial symbol useful amongst Japanese for referring to a dog, but we encounter no dog; we may encounter a pictorial symbol useful for referring to a mouth, but we encounter no mouth; by superposing the two symbols, we may create another pictorial symbol useful for referring to an animal barking, but – again – we encounter only symbols for the things to which we refer rather than the things themselves.

Eisenstein was here unequivocally confusing the *use* with the *mention* of things to a degree that passes understanding were the confusion superficial. Eisenstein's confusion, however, was hardly superficial: it derived from a clever attempt to reconcile the concurrent demands of Marxist *realism* with *idealism*, as he understood them, a problem having no coherent solution.

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[27] CPI [1929], pages 29-30.

Why does it have no solution? We shall see in a moment. Before addressing this question, however, we should note in passing that both of Eisenstein's analogies, the musical and the pictorial, were transparently inconsistent with his precept of art as *conflict*. Eisenstein blurred the inconsistency, here and throughout his early writings, by simply pretending that every *difference* entails *conflict*, a sleight-of-hand common among other Marxists faced with the same dilemma.

Unfortunately, although a shot two feet long may *differ* from a shot five feet long, or two shots may differ in emotional tone, neither need therefore *conflict* with the other when sequenced. Similarly, the Japanese hieroglyph for the verb 'to bark' encompasses two symbols superposed, neither of which *conflicts* with the other; and the elements of a *haiku* or *tanka* poem, or the events of Kabuki theatre, however diverse, seldom if ever *conflict* with one another.

If conflict is a requisite of genuine art, then we have here no exemplars of it; conversely, if, as Eisenstein suggested, we have here exemplars of synthetical art, then the motive force of art cannot be conflict. Through the smoke-and-mirrors of listing categories of *difference* between things, Eisenstein was able to pretend (and to persuade himself for awhile) that he was thereby listing categories of *conflict*, and thus reconciling the concurrent Marxist demands for *realism* and *conflict*, yet another problem having no coherent solution.

Two Problems without Solutions

Eisenstein's understanding of his early cinematical endeavours was confused. The confusion, however, was hardly Eisenstein's alone, for it lay at the heart of the Marxist conception of art as he (and most others) understood it. He failed to find a way to apply either of his two analogies neatly to film, not because he lacked industry, ingenuity or dedication, but because no one could have done so with the incoherent conceptual baggage he was carrying.

Authentic art, as Eisenstein understood it, had to be *realistic, ideational* and *conflictual*. Unfortunately, he failed to notice that the demands of the first preclude satisfying either of the other two. Through his two analogies, Eisenstein backed himself along both walls into a corner from which there was no coherent way out.

> 1.   Eisenstein had assumed that a pair of shots, juxtaposed, must enable us simultaneously to encounter events that we could synthesize both *realistically* and yet *ideationally* (in keeping with twin goals of Marxist ideology as he understood it). But one cannot do both, for the conditions necessary to the

former obviate the latter, and conversely. The more realistic events are, the more distinctive, atypical and particular they are, and hence the more complex the associations we may draw from them; but the more complex the possible associations we may draw from events, the less we can abstract from them unique, precise and accurate *ideas*. Conversely, were we to strip a pair of events of their richness of association, enabling us to abstract an accurate *idea* from them, we should thereby have rendered them less *realistic*. A pair of events may be synthesized either realistically or ideationally, but not both.

2.   Eisenstein had assumed as well that a pair of shots, juxtaposed, had to enable us simultaneously to encounter events that we could synthesize both *realistically* and *conflictually* (again in keeping with twin goals of Marxist ideology as he understood it). Again he found himself hung on the horns of a dilemma: one cannot do both, for the conditions of the one obviate the other in exact parallel to the above. The more deeply realistical events are (and hence the more distinctive, atypical and particular), the more complexly they will relate to one another; but then we are unlikely to be able to perceive them as sharply conflicting. Conversely, we may render events sharply conflictual only by stripping them of their realistical richness. Thus, again, a pair of events may be synthesized realistically or conflictually, but not both.

Eisenstein had unwittingly failed to register the crucial difference between the order of means and ends within art versus the world: the methodology of art, to be authentic, had to *reverse* the methodology of the world, for art, like a mirror, had to reflect the world and thus work through a reverse method!

Marx had indeed insisted that the source of the progress of the world was class conflict; and when acting to foment and sustain conflict in the world, one could do so without regard to realism, for the world is unavoidably real. Likewise, one could speak and write while undertaking one's everyday economical activities without worrying about realism, for one's ideas, arising therefrom and hence efficacious, would automatically reflect the world. If, however, one wanted to make art or philosophy, one could not *presume* realism! Art could be unauthentic; philosophy could be false. When doing either, therefore, one had to aim firstly at being as realistic as possible! Only then would the genuine conflicts and ideas occurring in the world be inevitably reflected in what one made. If one were to begin, on the other hand, like Eisenstein, by aiming at structuring conflict and ideas, and only then trying to squeeze under them events as real as possible, one was bound to fail except.

Methodologically, Eisenstein had put the cart before the horse and gotten nowhere. When his compatriots complained, therefore, that the 'formalist' tendencies of his early

films were *anti*-Marxist, not all were philistines, and even those that were had stumbled, however blindly, close to the truth. It was a truth that Eisenstein was himself to recognize and articulate a decade later. Two questions remain to be answered, however, before we can trace the emergence of that articulation with understanding.

The Sins of Semiology

What, in the most general sense, had misled Eisenstein? And who amongst the peers he admired best exemplified the contrary way? Eisenstein had erred by misconstruing the demands of Marxism, but why had he succumbed in the *way* he had? Because there was another bias at work within him, deeper still and subtly reinforcing, that he shared with almost every living urban intellectual of his time, a bias toward viewing things in the world as if they were *semiotical* events.

Most intellectuals a century before, like everyone else, had lived amongst the diverse complexities of natural things, for one had no choice. As the industrial revolution dawned, however, uniting science and technology, and urban life came to subsume intellectual life as well, detachment from the intricacies of natural things came with it. Intellectuals who felt the loss waxed nostalgic about mountain vistas, shadowed forests, glittering lakes and autumnal pastures; those born too late, or well-trained technologically, tended more-and-more to perceive things through the only traditional tool that they now remained competent to use, namely language.

Increasingly, as events of the world were reconstrued to be knowable by *reading* of them without having to encounter them, those events were themselves construed to consist only of readable things. Things of the world that either resisted reading, were inconvenient to read or simply stretched too far from the foci of urban conversations were denied relevance or even existence.

By the time of the Bolshevik revolution, for example, Marx had determined that the surface events of the world had to be taken as symbols and decoded if we were to comprehend their true progression; Freud had insisted that the unconscious was ideational, with dreams and slips of the tongue as its symbols that had to be read to be understood; after Frege and Russell had suggested that logic encompassed mathematics, the young Wittgenstein concluded that the metaphysical structure of the world itself mirrored the logical structure of language; and everywhere scientists, seeking to describe things of increasing imperceptibility with ever-greater precision, reinvented their vocabularies every generation, reinforcing the notion among intellectuals (who by-and-large understood nothing but hearsay of what the scientists were doing or why) that to approach reality was not only to use specialized languages,

but to view the events of the world themselves as linguistical – that is, as things decodable only by those who had learned how to *read* them.

As Wittgenstein was later to remark when repenting of his earlier misdeeds, it was as if he had been "a fly in the fly-bottle", a prisoner of language unable to escape its bewitchment.[28] His comment was directed toward philosophers but was generally true of every urban intellectual, now divorced from and insensitive to the intricacies of the natural world, and forced to compensate by reading, writing and talking with the only tool they knew, language; for, aa the proverb goes,

> When your only tool is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.

Eisenstein never read Russell or Wittgenstein, but he read Marx and Freud who influenced him deeply, and just about every other important intellectual of his time or earlier.[29] He not only learned from them, but, like his peers, imbibed like mother's milk the semiological bias. Indeed, he was more susceptible to it than most, as he recognized, and as I can attest, for he, like I, was originally trained to think as mathematicians do. Speaking of his switch to film from civil engineering as a young man, Eisenstein remarked,

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[28] See footnote 1 above.

[29] Erasmus once said, "If I have money, I buy books; if I have any left over, I buy clothes." [source?] Eisenstein, in more ways than one, was Erasmus out-of-season. "He was a voracious, a merciless, purchaser of books, which he read incredibly quickly and copiously marked. In Hollywood, as I well remember, we spent everything we received from Paramount – nearly every cent, that is, above the bare domestic outgoings – on buying books. ... When we visited him in Moscow later, in 1933, the one-big-room flat he then inhabited was everywhere knee-deep in books. He could, of course, never find a wanted one and, if something had to be looked up, he had each time to buy another copy." (Ivor Montagu from page xv of his forward to Nizhny's *Lessons with Eisenstein*, op. cit., footnote 8 above.)

In his autobiographical reflections, written in the two years before his death, Eisenstein chose to filter his life through the echoing image of books within a strikingly poignant passage: "Putting books on the shelves and wondering who will take them off after my death. Peer Gynt wandering through a storm of dry leaves – his unformulated thoughts, his unaccomplished deeds. It is said of De Quincey that he would rent an apartment, accumulate books, then abandon everything and flee to a new place, where the same thing began all over again." (From page 4 *Immoral Memories* ..., translated by Herbert Marshall, op. cit., footnote 6 above.)

> Later I was profoundly grateful to fate for dealing this 'blow' *after* I had passed my examinations in higher mathematics, the full university course including the integrated differential equations, though, to tell the truth, today I have but a vague notion of what it is all about. But I must say that my faculty for thinking logically and love for 'mathematical' precision are undoubtedly due to my mathematical training.[30]

His repeated references, early and late, to film sequences as *logical proofs* were more, to him, than analogies; they were felt to have a structural *identity*, an intuition common amongst those trained to view the world mathematically, and difficult to overcome.[31]

I am suggesting, therefore, that Eisenstein was at this time (and indeed later, though he was then able to work through it) more deeply attuned to seeing things semiotically, and hence *ideationally*, then his devotion to Marxism alone can explain. When concluding his central essay on Marxism and film in 1929, Eisenstein reaffirmed that his early conception of film had been *intended* to be semiotical. Generalizing from his second analogy with the Japanese hieroglyphs, he drew attention exactly to the linguistical bias at work:

> Now why should the cinema follow the forms of theatre and painting rather than the methodology of language, which allows wholly new concepts of ideas to arise from the combination of two concrete denotations of two concrete objects? *Language is much closer to film than painting is.* [italics: EWC] For example, in painting the form arises from *abstract* elements of line and colour, while in cinema the material *concreteness* of the image within the frame presents, as an element, the greatest difficulty in manipulation. So why not rather lean towards the system of language, which is forced to use the same mechanics in inventing words and word-complexes? (DAFF [1929], page 60)

Within a decade, Eisenstein was to reverse the priority. After writing those words, Eisenstein left Russia to travel to Europe and America on a personal and intellectual odyssey that was to culminate, a decade later, in his renunciation of the semiotic construal of the cinema.

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[30] Letter of 1945 to Moussinac. See Moussinac, op. cit., page 16

[31] "Step by step, by a process of comparing each new image with the common denotation, power is accumulated behind a process that can be formally identified with that of logical deduction ... The conventional *descriptive* form for film leads to the formal possibility of a kind of filmic reasoning. While the conventional film directs the *emotions*, this suggests an opportunity to encourage and direct the whole *thought process*, as well." (DAFF [1929], page 62). "We are accustomed to make, almost automatically, a definite and obvious deductive generalization when any separate objects are placed before us side by side." (WI [1939], page 4)

A Parallel

In the same year, 1929, in Vienna, Wittgenstein heard a lecture by the great Dutch mathematician, Brouwer, the most articulate of those objecting to the *logicizing* (read: semioticising) of the mathematical endeavour. As Wittgenstein later recalled, the lecture spun him around and set him on the path to rethinking language as having many uses, none of them construable as a key to the metaphysical structure of things.

Eisenstein and Wittgenstein were superficially as different as night and day. The Russian was sociable, loved to teach, read everything in sight, tried to synthesize it all regardless of inconsistencies, and published as often as he was able; the Austrian sought solitude, disliked the academic world, read little, pondered minute discrepancies in his thinking for years on end, and even then refused to publish.

Yet both men read Schopenhauer when young and in combat and wrote on 'colour' as they were dying, shared identical sexual proclivities, and, above all, refused intellectually to settle for less than comprehending everything about them. Both therefore pursued without ceasing and in uncommon loneliness an encompassing unity of thought beyond the ken of their colleagues, and both – in the process – made early-on a semiotical error of a kind common amongst their peers but ingeniously deeper and more exhaustive: the young Eisenstein misconstrued semiotically what he took to be the cumulative and all-encompassing art form of his time, deriving "methods" that he mistook to be universal rather than a special case; the young Wittgenstein misconstrued logic to be the semiotical window onto the metaphysical structure of the things of the world, blinding himself to the multifarious uses of language by having focused narrowly on logic.

Both young men erred for roughly the same reason: having been mathematically trained, yet being artistically inclined, they were more susceptible than most to the semiotical currents of their time. Both were to correct the errors they made, but only after much labour and leaving much work unfinished.

When Wittgenstein completed in 1949 the notes later published as *Philosophical Investigations* (however incomplete and unsatisfactory they remained to him), it signalled the end of an era: an ever-widening crack had been created across the prevailing intellectual picture of the world as a semiological event whose deeper structures could be read-off from the surfaces of logic (or any other generalization of

language).[32] And when, a year earlier, Eisenstein had died of a heart attack, disillusioned, crushed by Stalin and the mutilation of Parts II and III of IVAN THE TERRIBLE, an era ended as well, for never again would a first-class filmmaker misconstrue filmmaking as a semiotical endeavour, much less recover it from to go on to greater things.

Eisenstein was to leave behind a massive written testament to the trouble it took him to correct his error. Much of what he had written in his later years, like Wittgenstein's writings, was scattered about in notebooks, unsynthesized and of little cohesion (though, unlike Wittgenstein, he often drafted articles rather than polishing paragraphs). But he had freed himself! In 1939 he was to publish his only book, commencing with an essay of remarkable clarity and scope in which he articulated clearly the mistake he had made, switching his priorities from "word" back to "image", from "language" back to "painting" and abandoning as misconceived the search through "conflict" for the holy grail of the "intellectual cinema". The error had been made for reasons deep and uneasily overcome, but overcome them he had.

To see how, however, we must address a final issue that will have much bearing on our understanding of it.

The Antagonists

> In that picture [MOTHER] I first of all tried to keep as far away as I could from Eisenstein and from much that Kuleshov had taught me.
>
> Pudovkin[33]

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[32] Amongst philosophers, Willard Quine was to try in 1953 and again brilliantly in 1960 to divert our attention from the crack, as was Nelson Goodman in 1970 with his equally brilliant and diverting attempt to try semiotically to understand "the languages of art", but it was the brilliance of a setting sun. J. L. Austin, I think, was the first to comprehend clearly how narrowly the philosophy of language had to be construed, after Wittgenstein, and, as Stanley Cavell has shown conversely ever since, how broadly the vocation of philosophy thereafter remains. Sadly, many of Wittgenstein's 'followers' have yet to catch on.

[33] From an interview late in life with Jeanne Gauzner, quoted by Leyda, op. cit. (see footnote 4 above), page 209.

My Dear Friend,

I am most acutely grateful for your book, which I have received and which pleased me very greatly. The distinction you draw between Pudovkin and me – 'song' and 'scream' – is superb and testifies to great insight. Each of us is very pleased and his personal vanity whispers in his ear, 'You're the best'. Joy everywhere. Don't think I'm mocking you, for your characterization is very just and very strong. On the other hand, I'm always flattered when I'm called romantic, adventurer, barbarian – unbalanced!

Hexameter á la Pudovkin (I admire his work greatly, but I wouldn't want to resemble him in any way) is the thing I'm most afraid of in the world!

Eisenstein[34]

Eisenstein, by 1929, had learned much from other filmmakers and sometimes paid tribute in passing to their works. With one exception, however, he recognized no filmmaker as his peer. The exception was Pudovkin.

Pudovkin had been a friend and associate since the early 1920s and by 1929 had acquired an equivalent international reputation as a filmmaker, and a vastly greater one as a theorist of filmmaking.[35] More importantly, however, Pudovkin was the only colleague against whose work, as filmmaker and thinker, Eisenstein measured himself recurringly, and the only antagonist whose films and ideas challenged him artistically.

Often, late at night, they would meet to discuss each others ideas, especially after Pudovkin's texts had begun to influence an entire generation of Soviet filmmakers while Eisenstein had been appointed to the staff of the GIK. The discussions were serious and recognized as such within the filmmaking community, for seldom was a choice between exemplars clearer, and, as both men understood, one or the other of them had to be wrong.

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[34] Letter of 1928 to Moussinac. See Moussinac, op. cit., page 24.

[35] Georges Sadoul, indeed, deemed Pudovkin's reputation among filmmakers to have been above that of Eisenstein in both respects during the silent era. ("Dominant both in the theory and practice of the silent film, he [Pudovkin] met a crisis with the coming of sound." See Sadoul, *Dictionary of Filmmakers*, translated, edited and updated by Peter Morris (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press: 1972). One must remember that few of Eisenstein's writings were translated until well after Pudovkin's little booklets had achieved world-wide dissemination.

Eisenstein, writing in 1929, could not resist parading Pudovkin's capitulation to the notion of *conflict* as the basis of montage, and tossing in a small self-advertisement for his own teaching as well:

> In front of me lies a crumpled yellowed sheet of paper. On it is a mysterious note:
>
> 'Linkage – P' and 'Collision – E'.
>
> This is a substantial trace of a heated bout on the subject of montage between P (Pudovkin) and E (myself). This has become a habit. At regular intervals he visits me late at night and behind closed doors we wrangle over matters of principle. A graduate of the Kuleshov school, he loudly defends an understanding of montage as a *linkage* of pieces into a chain. Again, 'bricks', bricks arranged in series to *expound* an idea.[36]
>
> I confronted him with my viewpoint on montage as *collision*, a view that from the collision of two given factors *arises* a concept. From my point view, linkage is merely a possible special case. ... Not long ago we had another talk. Today he agrees with my point of view. True, during the interval he took the opportunity to acquaint himself with the series of lectures I gave during that period at the State Cinema Institute ... (CPE, 1929, pages 37 and 38)

We have no way of knowing, of course, what really went on during those discussions, for Pudovkin never mentioned them publicly. We do know, however, that Pudovkin must have staunchly defended his principle, namely the need for a film to present to viewers a

> ... *connected and sequential exposition of the theme, the material, the plot, the action*, the movement within the film sequence and within the film drama as a whole ... [for] in the actual method of creating images, a work of art must reproduce that process whereby, *in life itself*, new images are built up in the human consciousness and feelings.

For the phrases quoted above are Eisenstein's rather than Pudovkin's(!), written a decade later as he was expounding his supposedly novel reconsideration of how films ought to be designed.[37]

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[36] By emphasizing the words 'linkage' and 'brick', Eisenstein here refers readers back to a well-known remark of Kuleshov's quoted earlier in the essay: "If you have an idea-phrase, a particle of the story, a link in the whole dramatic chain, then that idea is to be expressed and accumulated from shot-ciphers, just like bricks." (CPI [1929], page 36)

[37] WI [1939], pages 3 and 18.

We know, that is, that Pudovkin never retracted any of his earlier writings nor ever wrote or said publicly anything contrary to them, that Eisenstein's notion of *conflict* was incompatible with them, that Pudovkin's writings were within five years to dominate production in the Soviet Union, and five years after that Eisenstein himself was to withdraw his notion of *conflict* completely, capitulating to Pudovkin's principle.

In 1929, Eisenstein saw Pudovkin's principle of apperceptive linkage as "merely a possible special case" within the scope of the intellectual cinema.

> By 1935, however, Eisenstein had reversed himself, having recognised that the intellectual cinema contained within itself a "self-reductio ad absurdum when it laid claim to exhaustive style and exhaustive content." (FFNP [1935], page 147)

> By 1938, indeed, he had abandoned the intellectual cinema altogether in favour of what he had once thought to be Pudovkin's "special case".

As we shall see, however, by 1939 neither man was to be able to recognize clearly what the other had done, for Eisenstein had converged on Pudovkin's precept from so far afield that neither man recognized the identity. With the advantages of half a century of hindsight, however, we are better placed historically than either of them to understand exactly what both had done and how they had done it.

Before turning to Eisenstein's account of how he extricated himself from the quicksand of "intellectual" cinema (the cinema of *message-making*) during the difficult decade of the 1930s, we should take note of a remarkably prescient passage he wrote a decade before.

A Hint of Things to Come

In 1929, at the very end of his celebrated essay on approaching filmmaking dialectically to generate ideas through conflict, Eisenstein, reaching back to his essays of 1924, hinted in passing at a notion *contrary to the conclusions of the essay* that neither he nor anyone else recognized at the time as prefiguring his work a decade later. The hint was entrapped within the incoherent enigmas of the intellectual cinema, but in hindsight it was to prove a portent.

... murder on the stage has a purely physiological effect. Photographed in *one* montage-piece [a single shot], it can function simply as *information*, as a sub-title. *Emotional* effect begins only with the reconstruction of the event in montage fragments, each of which will summon a certain association the sum of which will be an all-embracing complex of emotional feeling. Traditionally:

1.   A hand lifts a knife.
2.   The eyes of the victim open suddenly.
3.   His hands clutch the table.
4.   The knife is jerked up.
5.   The eyes blink involuntarily.
6.   Blood gushes.
7.   A mouth shrieks.
8.   Something drips onto a shoe ...

and similar film clichés. Nevertheless, in regard to the *action as a whole, each fragment-piece* is almost *abstract*. The more differentiated they are the more abstract they become, provoking no more than a certain association.

Quite logically the thought occurs: could not the same thing be accomplished more productively by not following the plot so slavishly but by materializing the idea, the impression of *Murder* through a free accumulation of associative matter? For the most important task is still to establish the idea of murder – the feeling of murder as such. The plot is no more than a device without which one isn't yet capable of telling something to the spectator! In any case, effort in this direction would certainly produce the most interesting variety of forms.

Someone should try at least! Since this thought occurred to me, I have not had time to make this experiment. (DAFF [1929], pages 60 and 61)

What is striking here, in hindsight, is the illicit conflation of the "impression" or "feeling" of murder with the "idea" of it. As we shall see, had Eisenstein rejected the notion of evoking the *idea* of murder, while retaining the notion of securing an "accumulation of associative matter", and ensuring that the material be naturally assimilated by a spectator *as in life itself* (thus reopening the door to story and plot), he would have captured in 1929 the notion of how to generate an *image* of an event, time, place or theme – the key conception of his later thought.

That he came so close to doing so in 1929 without realizing it only confirms with what difficulty and how long it would take him to extricate free himself from the quick sands of the "intellectual cinema" – how much work, as we shall see, lay ahead.[38]

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[38] See "Eisenstein, Part 2: '[As] in life itself' – Montage from 1930" within the Evan Wm. Cameron Collection.

Appendix

**Abbreviations of titles of works by Eisenstein
as cited within this Essay**

Essays edited and translated by Jay Leyda:

From *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, pages 1-272 [first volume] of *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory and The Film Sense by Sergei Eisenstein*, edited and translated by Jay Leyda (Cleveland, Ohio and New York, New York: Meridian Books – The World Publishing Company, 1957 [Fifth Printing, 1963].

     ACHIEVEMENT [1939]: "Achievement" (pages 179-194)
     CPI [1929]: "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram" (pages 28-44)
     DAFF [1929]: "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form" (pages 45-63)
     FFNP [1935]: "Film Form: New Problems" (pages 122-149)
     MOM [1929]: "Methods of Montage" (pages 72-83)
     TTC [1934]: "Through Theater to Cinema" (pages 3-17)
     THE UNEXPECTED [1928]: "The Unexpected" (pages 18-27)

From *The Film Sense*, pages 1-295 [second volume] of the book of Leyda's translations cited above.

     WI [1939]: "Word and Image" (pages 1-65)

Essays edited and translated by Richard Taylor:

From *S. M. Eisenstein: Selected Works – Volume I: Writings, 1922-34*, edited and translated by Richard Taylor (London and Bloomington-Indianapolis: BFI Publishing and Indiana University Press, 1988).

     MFA [1924]: "The Montage of Film Attractions" (pages 39-58)
     MOA [1923]: The Montage of Attractions" (pages 33-38)
     PMAF [1925]: "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form" (pages 59-64)
     PERSPECTIVES [1929]: "Perspectives" (pages 151-160)