Eisenstein's Marxism, Marxism's Eisenstein: Utopian Spectatorship and Aesthetic Collectivity

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In this paper I will discuss certain elements of Eisenstein's later film theory and general aesthetic of the 1930s and 1940s. I will select a few elements in his theoretical interests that seem to be Marxist, with comments on one kind of imagination of the utopian. I will ask about some peculiarities in his very distinctive film and aesthetic theories, which could be read as interventions in official Soviet aesthetic theory, but are not only that.

But we must start earlier. Between 1925 and 1929, Sergei Eisenstein burst onto the scene of world cinema with four silent films. His work was immediately declared by many inside and outside the Soviet Union, including himself, to be aesthetically and politically revolutionary. In these same years, he produced a stream of theoretical essays and articles that promoted his own approaches and special claims about the still new medium of cinema within the politicized Soviet avant-gardes. Certain of Eisenstein's writings of the 1920s are now considered to be landmark texts in the history of film theory and also in the history of Marxist conceptions of cinema, mass art, and modernity.

It is well known that in the 1930s, things were different. With socialist realism declared the official Soviet aesthetic, most avant-garde artistic tendencies were suppressed. Eisenstein's very prominence mandated that he be criticized, and he was not allowed to realize several film projects. For a while his life was probably in danger, but he returned to intermittent official favor starting in 1938 with the release of *Alexander Nevsky*. Most important for present purposes, he continued to write theory throughout these years. By his death in 1948, he had produced thousands of additional pages of often unpublished theory, over and above his already canonical essays of the 1920s. This later theoretical work included something like complete drafts of at least two major books (now published as *Non-Indifferent Nature* and *Towards a Theory of Montage*) and work on a third (*Method*), as well as many additional essays and notes. In 1942, a few chapters from the montage books were published as an integral book in English, *The Film Sense*. In 1949, a couple of key chapters from *Non-Indifferent Nature*, were included in an English-language book, *Film Form*, which was a collection of some of his key writings organized chronologically to trace his 25-year theoretical trajectory.¹

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¹ See Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Meridia, 1957 [orig. pub. 1942] and Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1977 [orig. 1949]). Leyda, a former student of Eisenstein's consulted with him on the selection of chapters for *Film Form*.

In this paper, I will refer to English-language editions of Eisenstein's theoretical writings. The most important source of Eisenstein's theoretical writings in English is the three-volume collection of *S. M. Eisenstein: Selected Works* edited by Richard Taylor and published by the BFI and Indiana University Press: Vol. 1, *Writings 1922-1924* (trans. Richard Taylor, 1988); Vol. 2, *Towards a Theory of Montage* (trans. Michael Glenny, co-ed. Michael Glenny, 1991); Vol. 3, *Writings 1934-47* (trans. William Powell, 1996). However, there is more, especially his major unpublished treatise, *Non-Indifferent Nature*, trans. Herbert Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Citations from *Selected Works* will be as SW and the volume number.

Some readers received such available fragments of his later writings as a repudiation of his well-known earlier theoretical essays, and saw this repudiation as a tactic rather than a genuine theoretical development—as one put it in 1942, an attempt to “adopt the protective coloration of official Stalinist culture.”² This initiated questions that have haunted scholarly discussions of Eisenstein since then: Were there two Eisensteins, an earlier Eisenstein and a later Eisenstein? If there were, how seriously could the changes be taken? Given the pressures of Stalinism, what was Eisenstein's relation as a theorist to Marxism, especially in the later writings?

Nowadays we have many more of the later writings available. Some of the same questions may arise, but the seriousness of the later writings, their complexity, their philosophical and historical range and depth, and the long-term intellectual commitment they demonstrate are now beyond doubt.³ I want to ask, then, about how some of his central concerns may be considered within Marxist concerns of his moment, with ways to read a utopian element into them. In the limited time I have, I will focus on just a couple of examples of his writings that foreground a central concern throughout early as well as late Eisenstein. Throughout his life, one of the central concerns of his theoretical work was cinematic and aesthetic *form*, very often in relation to the audience, the beholder, the reader, or—as we say in film theory—the *spectator*. To ask about form and the spectator is to understand understanding a film or art work as an address to audiences.

It is well known that Eisenstein began his theoretical considerations of form with the term *montage*. He sustained and broadened his concept of montage throughout his theoretical corpus. In his writings of the 1920s, the concept of montage soon went well beyond film editing to mean a whole dialectics. It meant that all the various elements of a work confront one another in opposition and contradiction, but eventually resolve into a dynamic and dialectical synthesis. But furthermore, he also considered montage in this sense as a work on spectators and with spectators.

His very earliest theoretical polemics pose this framework in Marxist terms. A clear example is a short 1925 essay “The Method of Making Workers' Films,” written three years before his most canonical essays of the 1920s. Eisenstein had recently completed his first film *Strike*, and he discusses its climax, which is now famous. This is a complex montage of the massacre of strikers by Czarist Cossacks, intercut with documentary footage of the killing of a bull in a modern slaughterhouse. Eisenstein defines this montage as a formal mechanism, but he describes its significance with the relatively new Pavlovian terminology of conditioned and unconditioned reflexes. He explains that a film organizes stimulants or shocks that vector the spectator's previously conditioned associations into new paths that are ideologically desirable. However, Eisenstein reports a certain failure: He claims that only *bourgeois* audiences were suitably shocked and moved by the climax of *Strike*, but workers and peasants were not. He decides that the problem was that workers associated the slaughter of the bull with the everyday labor of meat processing factories, and peasants associated it with the ordinary countryside task slaughtering animals. Thus, the affect and emotion of the scene was absent for them.⁴

² The quote comes from a highly knowledgeable review of *The Film Sense* by a radical but anti-Stalinist American critic, Dwight Macdonald. See “The Eisenstein Tragedy,” in Dwight Macdonald, *The Responsibility of Peoples, and Other Essays in Political Criticism* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1957), p. 159.

³ In light of the large corpus of Eisenstein's previously unpublished writings now available, leading contemporary film theorists such as Jacques Aumont and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith now judge Eisenstein to be “one of the great philosophers of art of the twentieth century” and even “the foremost aesthete of the twentieth century...” Jacques Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*, trans. Lee Hildreth, Constance Penley, Andrew Ross (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. viii. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “Eisenstein's Aesthetics: Eisenstein in the 21st Century,” foreword to *The Montage Principle: Eisenstein in New Cultural and Critical Contexts*, ed. Jean Antoine-Dunne with Paula Quigley (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), p. xvi.

⁴ For this discussion in “The Method of Making a Workers' Film,” see SW1, p. 66.

This example implies the following difficulty for revolutionary filmmakers in the new Soviet Union: Cinema audiences are socioeconomically differentiated; however, according to Eisenstein, *this class differentiation determines a differentiation in mental and emotional life*. That is, the same perceptual stimuli may lead to different associative and therefore different emotional consequences for members of different classes. But in the 1925 Soviet Union, the social demand for filmmakers was to move *all* audiences to participate in building a socialist society, such that cinema and the arts could become key instruments for conveying the new cognitions and purposes necessary for that task. Would it not be ideologically beneficial if aesthetically-generated emotion could produce a commonality of spectators emotionally and therefore ideologically, in order to overcome social differentiation in the audience? Despite all the emphasis in Eisenstein's early writings on montage as the organization of shock and contradiction, this issue leads to the question of generating emotional unification in the audience. This is the real substance of the supposed failure of *Strike*. This question of how an audience may be emotionally unified became central to Eisenstein's subsequent theorizations of film form, film-spectator relations, and ultimately his general aesthetics.⁵

My account so far has framed the problem with key oppositions: an emotionally divided audience *versus* an emotionally unified audience; and a socially differentiated audience *versus* a collective audience. But the underlying Marxist concerns in "The Method of Making Workers Films," may also authorize rewriting these oppositions as an audience divided by social class *versus* a classless audience, or at least one not divided by class.

An audience not divided by class? Or better, an audience that may be divided by class at the beginning of the film, but which becomes classless by in the course of the film? This echoes the official goal of Soviet society, to construct a classless society. (Actually, by the mid-1930s, Stalin himself publicly declared that, because, the U.S.S.R. had successfully eliminated class exploitation, that class conflict had been eliminated among the few classes still in existence workers, peasants and intelligentsia. While not a fully classless society, according to Stalin, this was the achievement of a stage of "lower" communism, on the way to an actualized fully classless society achieving "higher" communism⁶).

But surely a film or art work by itself cannot make a classless society. In one kind of reading, this could mean that the socio-emotional unification envisioned by Eisenstein would be a utopian experience. For while it is assumed that the society is moving towards a classless future, the mental experience of classlessness could temporarily and actually exist at the site of reception. Spectatorship would be historically anticipatory.

Leaving aside the empirical realities of the Soviet Union, we can recall that it officially rejected utopianism, following Marx and Engels' attitudes towards utopians of their own time, and Eisenstein certainly does not embrace an explicit utopianism. But we may ask whether the problem posed by "The Method of Making Workers' Films" suggests that a utopian wish helped define some of the questions that led the later Eisenstein into his massive researches and writings in aesthetics. If so, what were its terms?

Here I will only attempt indicate a couple of schematic directions such a project took in his later film

⁵ For example, just a few years later in 1929, still utilizing the language of conditioned reflexes, he describes the goal as "the arena of a single collective passion..." in which an abstraction or idea becomes "a *collectively* experienced *perception*." Eisenstein, "Perspectives" in SW1, p. 157. Eisenstein is here describing a successful lecture as his model, but he goes on to make this a question of form and claim that cinema is the only art form currently capable of erasing the conflict between the language of logic and the language of images (*obraz*), thus restoring passion to ideas (ideology) *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁶ J. V. Stalin, "On the Draft Constitution of the U.S.S.R.: Report Delivered at the Extraordinary Eight Congress of the Soviets of the U.S.S.R., 25 November 1936," reprinted on Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1936/11/25.htm>.

theory and aesthetics, mainly with reference to his 1935 speech to the All-Union Creative Conference of Soviet Film workers. In this speech, Eisenstein publically announced major new developments in his conceptions of form and montage in relation spectatorship.⁷ As is typical in many of his later writings, he draws on a wide range of fields, including aesthetics, anthropology, history, philosophy, and rhetoric, as well as art history and cinema. He begins with lip service to the emergent terminology of socialist realist aesthetics, he continues to insist on the centrality of form for film theory and aesthetics as well as the social functions of film. Rather daringly, he retains the discredited formalist term montage, but he rethinks it by introducing new concepts of spectatorship into his theory. Here I will return to spectatorship as emotional unification and classlessness after pointing to two of these new concepts, mainly inner speech but also prelogical or sensuous thought.

Inner speech is a concept that circulated within important Soviet intellectual strata of the period. In addition to Eisenstein, it was of importance to the Bakhtin group in linguistic and literary studies and to leading Soviet developmental psychologists especially Lev Vygotsky, whose brilliant younger colleague Alexander Luria was close to Eisenstein. The psychologists focused on how thought becomes interlocked with speech in the development of a child's language learning. They conducted studies to show that a young child's mental life goes through a phase in which language use is internal, in the sense of being aimed at oneself rather than others. Such internal dialogues or inner speech may draw on elements of external speech. But its language-use is different than the mature individual's external speech, which is always social, addressed to other people and therefore subject to certain logical constraints, because while internal speech is to oneself rather than another, language operates differently, especially in its syntax and its semantic processes. On the other hand, a heritage of internal speech remains at work in the adult's thought processes. Writing as Marxists, Vygotsky and his associates inferred much from this, including the social and historical nature of individual subjectivity and thought. For some proponents of inner speech, especially members of the Bakhtin group, inner speech entailed that any utterance presupposed inner conversations, or what Bakhtin called dialogism, in all language-use. For Bakhtin, these ideas of dialogic inner life were evidence that mentality and individuality are social, and this plurality of inner voices corresponded with the literary work as the composition of multiple social voices.⁸

In his 1935 speech, when Eisenstein discusses the spectator, concepts of stimuli and reflexes are now absent.⁹ Instead, he makes inner speech a central element in his account of the spectator and form. Like

⁷ See "Film Form: New Problems" in Eisenstein, *Film Form*, pp. 122-149. This is a condensed, more polished version of the speech, and it should be compared to the first version, "Speech to the All-Union Creative Conference of Soviet Film workers" in *SW3*, pp. 16-47. Note that this speech was only slightly before Stalin's pronouncement that class conflict had been eliminated in the Soviet Union.

⁸ This does not do justice to discussions and implications of the concept inner speech in this period. Those discussions are much more subtle, nuanced, and differentiated than I can indicate here. For one account, including a careful differentiation of Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and another member of his group V. L. Voloshinov, see Gary Saul Morsen and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), Chapter 7. However, this book treats Bakhtin as anti-Marxist, which is not quite how I would put it. I have elsewhere argued that Vygotsky and his associates, the Bakhtin group, and Eisenstein, should be seen as Marxist innovators who were actually engaged in theoretical debates within Stalinist culture, and trying to intervene in it. They all invoked inner speech between the late 1920s and mid-1930s, and with varying consequences for each. See Philip Rosen, "Revolution und Regression: Zur Zeitlichkeit in Ėjzenštejns Theorien des Kinos und der Kultur" in *Jetztundann: Zeiterfahrung in Film, Literatur und Philosophie*, ed. Gertrud Koch *et al.* (Munich: Fink-Verlag, 2010).

⁹ However, it would be a mistake to claim that the physical or physiological framework or the conception of mental life nervous activity and reflexes completely disappears in all of Eisenstein's later writings. After all, this approach did have its own claims to being a materialist psychology, and its terminology is occasionally used in his Eisenstein's later work. But Vygotsky and the Bakhtin group did utilize the concept of inner speech in opposition to Pavlovian psychology and there seems to be some kind of shift in emphasis in Eisenstein. It may also be worth noting that Eisenstein was also reading some psychoanalytic theory, but it was not politically possible to have explicit and positive reference to psychoanalytic theory in his writings of this period.

Vygotsky, his distinction between inner and external speech emphasizes syntactic principles and semantic processes. On the level of semantics, he asserts that for inner speech, words designate particularities and concrete *qualities* of objects rather than grouping things as abstract concepts. As a result, these particularistic qualities become the basis of the connection of ideas in thought. On the other hand, the dominant tendencies of external speech do make words abstract categories or concepts grouping particulars, and these concepts are linked logically. But the syntax of inner speech works by means of *figurative* connections of the particularized, concrete qualities of the things its signs designate. Eisenstein emphasizes the classical rhetorical tropes of metaphor and synecdoche as regulating principles of this syntax of inner speech. If we think of inner speech as a constant flow of thoughts connected according to concrete qualities of the objects they designate, one might say that they are connected imagistically or even poetically. This enables Eisenstein to compare inner speech to montage as well as poetry.

Crucially for present purposes, Eisenstein also asserts that these connections are emotional. This makes inner speech the language of emotions, and the flow of thought in inner speech is an emotional flow. He often calls inner speech emotional as well as sensuous thought. Like Vygotsky, Eisenstein also asserts that external speech does not abolish inner speech, but the two levels mentally coexist and draw on one another. In Eisenstein, this means a constant presence of levels of emotion in thought, below the logical constructions of external speech.

But what do all these mean about form and spectatorship and the unification associated with classlessness? We may begin from Eisenstein's lifelong assumption that the special kinds of affect and emotion provoked by film and art must be traced to form. If inner speech is the flow of emotions, this flow has *form*, as particularized signs of concrete qualities are linked according to principles such as metaphor and synecdoche. It is not too large a step to something he describes as a major discovery. He says not only that the flow of emotional thinking is the basis for the emotional appeal of the film or art work to the spectator, but furthermore, this is because aesthetic form mirrors or echoes the form—the syntax—of inner, emotional speech:

[The] laws for constructing inner speech are ... the same laws that lie at the basis of the whole diversity of laws according to which the form and composition of works of art are constructed. And there is not one formal device [in film or any art form] that could fail to be a copy of one of the laws whereby inner speech (as distinct from the logic of external speech) is constructed.¹⁰

Eisenstein's account also becomes a new explanation of ideological work in cinema must be theoretically understood in light of the history of artistic forms and the continuity of cinema with earlier art forms:

In art, there is a determined progressive ascent toward ideas at the highest peaks of consciousness and at the same time, there is a penetration through the structure of form into the deepest layer of emotional thinking. The polarity between these two tendencies creates the remarkable tension of the unity of form and content that distinguishes genuine works.¹¹

This 1935 speech was a public foundation for the development of an extremely complex aesthetic theory that Eisenstein worked on for the rest of his life. But this founding claim is relatively simple, and it serves as a new justification for his lifelong attention to aesthetic form: The “content” of the work is the motivating idea for the work. This idea is socially and historically produced. It may be understood in historically materialist

¹⁰ *SW3*, p. 28. Emphasis in original.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

terms as ideologically produced, and its presence makes the film practice. But aesthetic form invests this idea with affect and emotion, which calls spectators to *participate* in the dynamic construction of the work and therefore engage ideology in a participatory way. Form does this because of its deep basis in the imagistic, figurative form or syntax that constitutes the flow of emotions as revealed in the study of inner speech. The correspondence between artistic form and the forms of inner speech underlies the special emotion of the successful film or art work. It also makes it ideologically effective.

This new conception may be read as offering a solution to the problem posed in "The Method of Making Workers' Films." All humans do not share the same emotions or ideas, but all emotions are organized by similar syntax or forms. *If the flow of emotions for all humans is regulated by the same syntax, then, this means that emotional form is beyond class and the same would apply to the effects of aesthetic form which echoes emotional form.* If we read this back into the earlier quest for classlessness, that quest threatens to be resolved by an ahistorical universalism. In 1925, he had argued that the failure of *Strike* to unify the audience was a formal failure. Within the framework of the 1935 speech, it would still be a failure, but the terms of the failure are different. When an audience is emotionally divided because of different class associations, this means that the filmmaker had failed to find the compositional solution that would appeal to universal forms of human mental processes by echoing *their* form, and thereby lift the audience out of its historically situated class position.

But in that case, the solution is a kind of universalism of form. Furthermore, crucial components of the account appear to be ahistorical. For in this account, it seems that form is not itself historical, even though it is at the roots of sociality and history.

To think this through, we should remark on one more major assertion of the 1935 speech. It has to do with culture and the prelogical. In an extraordinary move, Eisenstein extends the special qualities he attributes to emotional or sensuous thinking to cultures as a whole, through a kind of ontogeny-phylogeny argument. As individuals, young children go through early language phases where their mental lives are dominated by the kind of emotional, figurative thought analyzed as inner speech, that is, sensuous thought, which he also calls *prelogical* thought. Again, it will never completely disappear but is the basis for later external speech and logical thought.

In the 1935 speech he goes on to conceive of stages in the history of human cultures that parallel this individual psychological stage, finding the same structures underpinning trans-personal, cultural practices. He appeals to anthropology and related linguistics, focusing especially on Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's concept of "primitive mentalities." Eisenstein is especially taken by the idea that the origins of all culture are represented by contemporary aboriginal cultures and languages; he is also taken by the idea that the practices and rituals of these cultures are dominated by the same forms of prelogical thought as are in the child's egocentric and inner speech. He claims that the same laws that regulate the prelogical thinking of inner speech also regulate customs, rites, and everyday cognitive structures of non-modern forms of society—practices which may seem to us moderns to be magical thinking that ignores logical differentiations. For Eisenstein, these are societies at the "dawn" or "threshold" social and cultural development, and they manifest "early forms of thinking," which are "prelogical." They may seem to have been surpassed by modern societies but—as with inner speech in the individual—have not been eliminated.¹² This would mean that thought in aboriginal cultures operates in a

¹² SW3, pp. 30-31. SW1, p. 31. On the connection of these to emotion, see p. 30. "Dawn" is Leyda's translation in *Film Form*.

more concrete, emotional way than those of modern industrial cultures. Now, there are very good reasons to beware of the concept of an original aboriginal "primitive" mentality. Such distinctions were generated by a French thinker in an age of colonialism, and they can be identified with racism—as Eisenstein himself recognizes. Anthropology now repudiates them. But here we are concerned with the development of Eisenstein's thinking. On the one hand, this may seem to be confirmation of the Marxist idea that the type of social formation determines mentality. On the other hand, it means the developed art of modern societies exists at the intersection of inner and outer, prelogical and logical, emotional and rational connections of parts and wholes.

This brings up one more idea that seems crucial to Eisenstein's quest for unity of spectatorial emotion: regression. That is, the special qualities and benefits of the work of art involve regression. This regression is not only psychological, as it is for the individual when she or he is overwhelmed by emotional thinking or moved by the film or art work. It is also historical and cultural regression, which coexists with the modern and persists within the modern. The paradox of regression is that the appeal of artistic form involves residues of childhood and pre-modern cultural practices; yet, this regressive appeal makes art ideologically useful for modernization and, indeed, the construction of a communist society. For regression is the condition for emotionally unified audience in Eisenstein's later theory. Therefore, it is this regressive appeal which makes the utopia of a socially undifferentiated, classless spectatorship conceivable in Eisenstein's later theory.

Within the canon of Marxist thought, one might be reminded of Engels' accounts of a virtually prehistoric, primitive communism. On the other hand, one might think again of utopianism as it appears in Western Marxism: not as the imagination of an ordered space of the perfect society, but as an implicit, driving wish or desire, as in some writings of Ernst Bloch and Fredric Jameson.

At any rate, for the rest of his life, Eisenstein probed the notion of regression and the appeal of regression for humans, at first cautiously and then more extravagantly. He always associated it with an emotional drive for non-differentiation. His fascination with the connection he had drawn between regression and nondifferentiation led him to a concept of the plasmatic. This meant a perpetual coming into being not just of new shapes, but of new objects, and it presupposed the primordial fluidity of things impossible for everyday logic. He sometimes figured it as the amoebic, as the womb, as *mutter-liebe*, as sexual indifferentiation, as the fundamental malleability of matter. Its appeal is that of a return to origins, formlessness and nondifferentiation, in the womb, in the mother, in physical nature itself.¹³

And classlessness? For present purposes we may ask if the logic of utopianism is always the expression of a wish, which must refer to a regression. In Western Marxism, utopianism may appear not as the spatial organization of a hypothetical, perfect society, but as a wish, a desire, often unconscious, that underlies a social drive and that also motivates aesthetic and cultural practices. The names Ernst Bloch and Fredric Jameson can stand as signposts for this view. But what if one must assume utopia can be concretized? As early as 1936

¹³ Eisenstein's writings and notes on Disney contain definitions and discussions of the plasmatic. See, for example, *The Eisenstein Collection*, pp. 101, 101, 125-130. Eisenstein could refer to Engels on some of these issues, and he did so often; for example *Dialectic of Nature*, was first published in 1925 and, luckily for Eisenstein, was officially acceptable. Eisenstein was able to cite it in support of the idea that life is perpetual movement, perpetual becoming, perpetual transformation. On the terms Eisenstein uses for primordial regression, possible inspirations for his new thought, and some symptomatic readings of them especially with respect to sexuality and gender, see Masha Salazkina, *In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein's Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Stalin declared something close to this had occurred for the Soviet Union.¹⁴ I have tried to show that read Eisenstein's conception of spectatorship might be read as a utopian impulse generated by the dream of classlessness originating in a definitive historical moment but ending up with an ahistorical universalism. But does that not make spectatorship the manifestation of a utopian wish, a desire, a dream, as in Western Marxism, and is it a string that can tie Eisenstein's later theories to Western Marxism rather than a capitulation to Stalinist aesthetics? If so, perhaps Eisenstein might lead us to ask whether such a utopian wish entails an appeal to some sort of regression, imaginary or otherwise, as the psychoanalysts say about all dreams? These questions could start a broader inquiry, but for now, they are where we must end.

¹⁴ See Stalin.