Montage and spectator: Eisenstein and the avant-garde

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Montage, avant-garde, and reception of cinema

We could say that the avant-garde at the beginning of the century received the advent of cinema enthusiastically; that is not strange. Though the differences between groups, movements, works, or acts that are included under this arrogant name are sometimes too vast, there was a similar project — or group of projects — whose aim was to proclaim the crisis of a homogeneous world, born in the humanism of the Renaissance and validated in the Age of Enlightenment. Cinema thus became a suitable space for attacking and criticizing the artistic and cultural tradition.

We can enumerate briefly some reasons for this attitude. First, cinema was one of the less 'artistic' forms of art, so to speak. Cinema was a modality placed in a field that was historically nearer to the development of the productive forces; in this way, it reestablished the old link between art and production by means of technique. Furthermore, this took place under a precise form of production (industry) that demonstrates the rupture with a characteristic bourgeois idea — the autonomy of art (Bürger 1984).

Secondly, cinema revealed a high degree of mechanical reproduction. In its mechanism the 'loss of aura', whose beginnings were discovered by Walter Benjamin (1969) in the invention of the printing press and later in the general use of photography in the last two thirds of the nineteenth century, was definitively accomplished. The consequences of this loss — the end of the condition that links the artistic work with cult and ritual — were also pointed out in Baudelaire's poetry and criticism. In spite of his criticism of photography, Baudelaire's critical and poetic output showed the impossibility of artistic autonomy and its new status within modernity. Later, Adorno also found in cinema a 'suspicious' presence of these artistic auratic elements, but in any case cinema itself was the coup de grâce to the sacred basis of art.

Thirdly, the destruction of the rational subject, the guarantor of a

logical universe, which implied a non-problematic language, is the basis of avant-garde ideas about language and its distressing experience. Obviously, this fact is better realized by a mechanical means of expression than in the response of the avant-garde to traditional arts. Rather, this subject, which lost its power of organization in cubist painting or was replaced by the machine in Futurism, could be dissolved in a technical device (the cinema) and in its immediate consequence: the principle of montage.

Montage would not consist only of combining different materials and showing the heterogeneous character of signifiers, because montage itself was inseparable from the cinematic mechanism — the montage of frames, for instance, that gives the impression of motion. Considering these circumstances, it is easy to accept that cinema represented for the different movements of the avant-garde the ideal space where the old rationalist concepts could be destroyed (although their attitude about it was sometimes naïve).

Nevertheless, when we look at the avant-garde cinematographic works from the beginning of the century, the results are really discouraging. Two first-generation avant-garde movements were good examples of this. Their research, although close to cinema, in fact almost ignored it. We are referring to Cubism and Futurism.

Cubism introduced two elements that denied the illusion of a third dimension, hegemonic in Western painting since the Renaissance: first, the return to a two-dimensional pictorial surface — something we find also in Gauguin's painting; second, the incorporation of a fourth dimension — time — in the frame, because it contributes to represent simultaneously images that have their natural dimension in motion. Breaking at the same time the construction of a single point of view in the scene and introducing a plurality of perspectives, Analytic Cubism was responsible for the rupture with the Western tradition in painting. But cinema offered this rupture directly, because it accommodated a plurality of views over a single space and introduced the fourth dimension in a visual scheme inherited from the 'perspectiva artificialis'. We can establish a parallel to the systematic use of papiers-collés by Braque and Picasso since 1912. They showed a similar problem: they practiced montage revealing the heterogeneity of artistic components. This idea was assumed by other groups or personalities of the avant-garde. At the same time, cinema, far from the avant-garde aims, offered this possibility in its production, but without being conscious of it. It is very strange that cubist painters did not play a part in cinema, since cinema was characterized by the mechanical — almost automatic — attributes they were looking for in their projects.

A similar case is that of Italian Futurism. Fascinated by machines and obsessed with the destruction of art. Italian futurists were not able to find a filmic discourse to achieve their aims. Their attitude about cinema did not go beyond some proclamations in its defense. They draw our attention especially because of their inability to carry out their ideas about the identification of man and machine, the exchange of Reason for an instrumental reason, and the end of the artistic tradition, especially the classical idea of 'Bildung'.

Since the famous Manifesto del Futurismo published in Le Figaro on February 20, 1909, some elements that lead inevitably to the defense of cinema can be noticed. Particularly, what Marinetti called 'bellezza della velocità', a hectic race, the defense of machines or cars, are signs of an industrial world, by means of which he attacks a static and decadent preindustrial world that looks at art in an ecstatic way.

This attitude was emphasized in L'uomo moltiplicato e il Regno della Machina and, considering the syntactic and logical destruction of rational language in literature, it finally found a specific form in La Cinematografia futurista (September 11, 1916). In this text, in which Marinetti explains the destruction of art from the point of view of technique and industry, cinema is introduced as a protagonist of futurist renovation in order to create a multi-expressive symphony: 'Pittura + scultura + dinamismo plastico + parole in libertà + intonarumori + architettura + teatro sintetico = Cinematografia futurista' (De Maria 1973: 194).

But all these projects came to nothing because the leaders of Italian Futurism were unable to think about cinema in their artistic (or antiartistic) practice. They only considered cinema as the ideal end in their projects about art destruction.

On the constructive avant-garde

On the other hand, there are some concepts coming from another trend of the avant-garde that has a link with the present. We refer here to the triad machinism-productivism-mass culture. The direction of these avant-garde movements was fixed not by the emblematic role of one of the elements, but by the contradictory interaction of the three of them. A machine, for instance, belongs for the avant-garde to an uncertain field, and is subject to different — even opposite — kinds of projects.

In Marinetti's work the machine became only an inverted aesthetic phenomenon — inverted because it represented the end of artistic tradition, the consummation of conflict against Nature. Anyway, as futurists could not build a coherent discourse about the machine, they turned it

into an object for an aesthetic, almost cultural contemplation. On the contrary, when Russian-Soviet Futurism or the constructivist movements include the machine in industry, production, or factory, the avant-garde has to consider the idea of montage from its productive side and in its collective reception. Precisely at this moment, they start taking into account the possibilities of cinema.

The great interest of Russian-Soviet Futurism for cinema was probably not due to the influence of the late Italian cinematographic Manifesto, especially because the war had cut every link between Italy and Russia. Perhaps it is more probable, as Sadoul affirms (1970: 23), that Russians — particularly Dziga Vertov — received these ideas from music (Manifesto dei musicisti futuristi, January 1911; and La musica futurista: Manifesto tecnico, March 1911, both by Balilla Pratella, where he defends the 'enarmonia') and from literature (Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista, May 1912).

Vertov's first phonographic experiences (in 1916 he founded an auditory laboratory) employed as montage the futurist methods already mentioned, and the expressive elements proposed by Russolo's *L'arte dei rumori* (waterfalls, engines, power saws, etc.). The outstanding difference consists in the introduction, in Vertov's experiences, of a technical recording mechanism that did not exist in Russolo's or Pratella's writings. In the Russian–Soviet project machine, montage and cinema would be understood not only as a rupture with tradition, but also as something to be developed.

The importance of the different attitude toward machinism is obvious. The technical device is for the Soviets the support of economic development linked to some political and social projects. Anyway, access to cinema was made possible by the acceptance and use of montage. This is the reason why Vertov decided to eliminate psychology and also to criticize the fiction film in his defense of documentaries. This situation is impossible to conceive in Italian Futurism. In Marinetti's case, the myth of the progress of a rational science is replaced by technological progress and irrationality, but its future does not go beyond ambiguous technicality. In Russia, and later in the Soviet Union, industrial development and progress took a different direction that included social and political processes in spite of their contradictions.

Ostranenie, FEX and attraction

As far as our essay is concerned, it may be useful to pay attention to one of the first notions that come from the Russian Formalist studies on

literature: ostranenie, employed by Shklovsky (1965) for the first time in 1917. In a way, it represented the first formalist manifesto, as Eikhenbaum said, because it gave way to an analysis of form. Influenced by avantgarde poetry — Khlebnikov, for instance — formalists determined to study the specific characteristics of literary language — what Jakobson called *literaturnost* — thinking of the poetic image as a deviation from linguistic norms. For this reason, in ostranenie there is a relationship between automation and perceptibility in which the reader realizes the procedure of a literary text. The daily use of language means the automation of its structures in every sense, until they become indiscernible. Ostranenie consists of taking an object out of its usual context and putting it in an unexpected one. The consequence is to restore to the text the perceptibility lost due to its continuous use and to show these elements as a 'vision' — as if they were presented for the first time.

It seems important that this characteristic of the poetic image was theorized at this precise moment and had a contemporary reference, perhaps unknown by the author, to many avant-garde attitudes. For instance, the zatrudnënnaja forma (consciously abstracted form) reminds us directly of the zaumnyj jazyk (language abstracted from sense) proposed by Krucënyx and Kamenski, of Khlebnikov's project of freely ioining Slavic words, even of Tzara's poetics or the random use of words in automatic surrealist writing, etc. The outstanding point of all these different practices is a very important coincidence from the standpoint of composition: they evidence the principle of montage in the text — a literary text, in this case. The ostranenie of a fragment, a phoneme, or any other textual part referring to the logical and credible sense of the whole introduces the reception of heterogeneity through montage of series that do not belong to the homogeneous continuity of the text. Shklovsky's definition refers expressly to the place of reception, the reader, as the basis of the opposition. This is very important in any case, because it means that the phenomenon acquired for the first time a theoretical formulation.

Gillo Dorfles (1984: 98) defined ostranenie as all the cases of a split between a fragment and the text, a word and its context, a word and its usual place, etc., whose consequence is a deeper and more specialized enjoyment. If we admit this generalization we would find many parallels in the procedures of surrealistic or dadaist painting, etc. But these problems can be better observed in the works of the FEX (the Factory of Eccentric Actor).

We are especially interested in the FEX because it inherits two characteristics of the time and gives them a precise technological direction: Americanism. On the one hand, they assume the futurist fascination for the machine; on the other, they take on the theoretical postulates of Russian Formalism about ostranenie. If Futurism meets cinema by means of multi-expressivity and the cult of the machine, the FEX does the same by way of montage. Once they assumed the principle of montage in the theater, the group led by Kozintsev and Trauberg decided to work in cinema, thinking that it was the best place to include the industrial process and to stimulate a special attitude in the spectator. It is not strange that Nedobrovo (1978: 90) employed in 1928 a terminology and concepts similar to Shklovsky's in order to define the work of the FEX.

We are once again in the presence of the same concept of ostranenie that the formalists proposed, but in this case we are far from the literary field. As an example of the expansion of this concept through different kinds of artistic texts — and not only literary ones — we can observe Kozintsev's thoughts about a typical item of slapstick: the gag. The author thinks of this procedure as a transposition of elements, a metaphor that becomes reality as reality becomes the metaphor — that is, a process of ostranenie (Kozintsev 1973: 90). Moreover, he says that the gag consists in laying bare the device that has been employed in its composition. Humor is derived from the relation between the elements, not from the elements taken in isolation. Furthermore, the gag joins together devices that cannot logically be joined; that is why the gag reveals the heterogeneity of its components.

These arguments refer only to the sensibility of the FEX toward montage. We also have to ask ourselves about the technical sense of this motion and how the FEX goes beyond the formalist aspect of ostranenie. For this reason the Factory of Eccentric Actors affirms its break with the past when it considers the factory as a modern, planned organization of work whose techniques can be assumed by the intellectual production.

As Paolo Bertetto (1977: 89) pointed out, the importance of the FEX consists in the parallelism they established between some forms of industrial development and artistic practice, since their aim was industrialization in itself, and not as a step toward socialism. That is to say, they sought 'Americanization' considered as the destruction of nineteenthcentury culture and as an expression of the mobility of the urban way of life.

The montage of attractions and the reflection on the spectator

We noted above the confluence of ideas from the different Soviet avantgarde groups. Some of their members also converged in their artistic practice: for instance, Kozintsev and Trauberg directed The Overcoat, a film less inspired by Gogol than by a text by the formalist Boris Eikhenbaum: 'How Gogol's *The Overcoat* is made'. Eikhenbaum explained in this text how the grotesque can function as *ostranenie*, linking opposite aspects in order to destroy the logical and psychological bases of ordinary perception. The script of *The Overcoat* was written by Yuri Tynianov, member of the OPOJAZ, who also wrote the script of *S.V.P.* The case of Viktor Shklovsky is very similar. He often worked with Kuleshov, and dedicated one of his books to Eisenstein. Eisenstein himself also collaborated with the FEX.

However, the notion of montage changed due to some factors Eisenstein introduced in his essays. Shklovsky had succeeded in establishing a comparison between the way in which poetry works and associative series not related to the causal development of the story. At the same time, he discovered the presence of the metaphorical axis in the 'montage of attractions'. But Eisenstein was the first to analyze the element that determines the place of the spectator, guides him, and calculates his conditioned reflexes. In other words, in his first essays on the montage of attractions Eisenstein is already aware of the importance of the enunciation to montage, since enunciation determines the place not only of the real spectator, but also of his virtual correlative in the text, the enunciatee.

The difference between the concept of 'montage of attractions' and those of *ostranenie* and montage according to the FEX is already evident in the first definition given by Eisenstein:

Est attraction (du point de vue du théâtre) tout moment agressif du théâtre, c'està-dire tout élément de celui-ci soumettant le spectateur à une action sensorielle ou psychologique vérifiée au moyen de l'expérience et calculée mathématiquement pour produire chez le spectateur certains chocs émotionnels qui à leur tour, une fois réunis, conditionnent seuls la possibilité de percevoir l'aspect idéologique du spectacle montré, sa conclusion idéologique finale. (Eisenstein 1974a: 117).

There are several different aspects of this definition. First of all, like the left-wing section of the Proletkult, Eisenstein defends the intense moments of the filmic representation, since they have their origin in popular non-instituzionalized genres like the circus, music-hall, etc. Second, the attraction produces a shock in the spectator — that is, it works as an original cell, or in Montani's terms (1971), ideology degree zero. But third, Eisenstein suggests a mathematical calculation of the attractions taken as a whole, as important for him as the timeless desire to influence the spectator. Hence, Eisenstein resorts to Pavlov's theories, aiming not so much at eliciting a certain response as at linking these responses to produce a final thematic effect of an ideological kind. We are far from Shklovsky's idea of the timeless perception characteristic of

poetry, and from the FEX's proposal of an unexpected play between metaphor and reality. Unlike these theories, Eisenstein's mathematical and precise calculations on the relational value of any particular attraction (understood as the linking of associative series) means taking into account the representation in its entirety — the productive montage and its guided dialogue with the spectator.

That is why Eisenstein found in cinema the ideal space for the practice of attraction, the development of montage, and the production of shock in the spectator. In a later essay, he writes:

L'attraction...telle que nous la concevons est tout fait montré (action, objet, phénomène, combinaison, conscience, etc.) connu et vérifié, conçu comme une pression produisant un effet déterminé sur l'attention et l'émotivité du spectateur et combiné à d'autres faits possèdant la propriété de condenser son émotion dans telle ou telle direction dictée par les buts du spectacle. De ce point de vue, le film ne peut simplement se contenter de présenter, de montrer les événements, il est aussi une sélection tendancieuse de ces événements, leurs confrontations, affranchies de tâches étroitement liées au sujet et réalisant, conformément à l'objectif idéologique d'ensemble, un façonnage adéquat du public. (Eisenstein 1974b: 128–129)

Unlike the first formalists and the FEX, Eisenstein sees the text not as a simple addition, but as a system. The mechanics of attraction provide for and regulate the use of *ostranenie*. Breaking perceptive habits, *ostranenie* rejects the identification of meaning and object.

Therefore, on the one hand, ostranenie exhausts itself in its breaking of semantic relationships, and has no decisive links with other artistic procedures of the work of art. On the contrary, Eisenstein justifies attraction for its final thematic effect. This position implies a movement toward the unequivocal, as opposed to the ambiguity of poetic discourse. Consequently, Eisenstein's proposal of a disautomation aims not only at breaking perceptive habits, but at dissolving rational bourgeois culture in a constructive sense.

The idea of attraction is linked, then, to a wide notion of montage that includes the spectator. Eisenstein developed this idea throughout his life, both in his theoretical and his artistic practice — though with remarkable paradoxes and contradictions, as in the following statement:

La théorie des excitants et de leur montage dans l'orientation définie doit fournir des matériaux exhaustifs pour la question de la forme. Tel que je le conçois, le contenu est le résumé des bouleversements devant former l'engrenage auquel on voudrait soumettre le public dans un certain ordre. (Eisenstein 1974c: 27).

Eisenstein attempts to maintain a distance between himself and the formalists' theories and practice. So he emphasizes constantly the already

mentioned idea of structure and calculation, since it makes it possible to determine the 'propriety' of the ideological direction in the structure of the attractions

De même que pour le facteur attractif avec lequel il ne convient pas de spéculer sur l'actualité, il faut bien se rappeler que l'utilisation idéologique admissible de l'attraction neutre ou occasionelle ne peut servir qu'à exciter les réflexes conditionnés dont nous n'avons pas besoin en tant que tels, mais qui serviront à produire les réflexes conditionnés de classe utiles que nous désirons associer aux objectifs bien définis de notre principe social. (Eisenstein 1974c: 28)

This is one of the central points of the fierce controversy between Eisenstein and other outstanding representatives of the Soviet avantgarde. For instance, Eisenstein accused Dziga Vertov of being an impressionist. Actually, as opposed to the Kino-Glaz, Eisenstein wanted to build a solid script and to determine the construction of the film from its very beginning (this concept was elaborated on by the formalist movement only after its first avant-garde style was over).

Vertov prend du monde qui l'entoure, ce qui l'impressionne lui, et non ce par quoi, en impressionnant le spectateur, il labourera son psychisme.... Le Kinoglaz n'est pas le symbole d'une vision, mais d'une contemplation. Or, nous ne devons pas contempler, mais agir. Ce n'est pas un 'Ciné-oeil' qu'il nous faut, mais un 'Ciné-poing'. (Eisenstein 1974d: 152–153)

'Pathos' and the ecstatic seduction of the spectator

Whether Eisenstein held to the deep theoretical bases of the concept of attraction for years (as is the case of the so-called intellectual montage of attractions or, simply, intellectual attraction used in October), or whether he got rid of it to make way for other different theories on cinema, the most interesting fact, in our opinion, is that in those essays the Soviet director systematically introduced the notion of conflict (Eisenstein 1985). Eisenstein used this term to designate, on the one hand, the entire scope of montage, and on the other hand, the transcription of Marxist dialectic in the montage process — either in the primitive, traumatic form of shock, or in less intense models. For instance, in his chimerical project of shooting Das Kapital, the Soviet director tried to create an abstract concept starting from the concrete materiality of the image.

Therefore, Eisenstein defined montage as every structural possibility of regulating the heterogeneous — either in the shot, in the relationship between image and sound, in the use of the associative series of the attraction, or in large syntagmatic parts. However, this structural possibility has to be based upon Dialectics. It suffices to say that the notion of conflict gives shape to several different factors — the vertical montage, the montage within the shot, the montage of color, the performance of the actors, etc. — since there are some basic ideas that remained constant in Eisenstein's research:

- (a) Everything is heterogeneous; therefore art, or even reality, are nothing but montage. Any work must take this into account, and proclaim it.
- (b) The function and practice of cinema consist in bringing to light and making operative (ideologically and aesthetically profitable) the heterogeneous.
- (c) There is a need for a global structure, leading the spectator to the desired aims.
- (d) The spectator is the place where the closure of the filmic representation is brought about, and the montage will only acquire meaning insofar as it is capable of achieving a 'figurativization' of the spectator.

In his theories, Eisenstein varied his approach to the spectator (at first, traumatic and radical), but not its final sense.

Surprisingly enough, in the middle of his research on montage and spectator, Eisenstein developed the notion of 'pathos', which implies a relationship apparently contradictory to the one he had established previously between text and spectator. Eisenstein introduced this concept of pathos in his essay 'Constanza', speaking of the recently finished Battleship Potemkin. He described it as a way of affecting the spectator, eliciting his emotion — in other words, a way to achieve something positive using a negative procedure: those tricks of the passive art that lead to ecstasy (Eisenstein 1974e: 35). No less surprisingly, Eisenstein took his ideological precautions. According to him, his tactical retreat in the artistic field was the expression of a historical retreat: the NEP. The aim of the New Economic Policy was to give the badly damaged Soviet economy a push making some concessions to capitalist liberalism.

In the same way, the Potemkin yielded to the pressure of emotional identification, a step backward in relation to *Strike*, the October of Soviet cinema, according to its author. Therefore, *The Battleship Potemkin* had to be the first NEPist work.

One could draw the conclusion that the NEP and the use of 'pathos' would share an occasional character, since both were the result of a particular historical moment. But on the contrary, in *Neravnodusnaja priroda* (The Non-indifferent Nature), one of the most comprehensive projects of his last years, Eisenstein again focused his theory of the

montage and the mise en scène on the notion of pathos beside that of the 'organic'. And no less paradoxical is the fact that Eisenstein claimed for that notion the materialization par excellence of the revolutionary effect (Eisenstein 1976, 1978). It would be convenient to analyze Eisenstein's complex theorization of this notion, since it is perhaps the most interesting one, from the point of view of a modern theory of the filmic text.

In that essay 'pathos' is defined as all that which forces the spectator to jump out of his seat, to leave his place — in a word, to transcend himself. The function of 'pathos' consists in leading the spectator to ecstasy. 'Pathos' is no longer analyzed as the achievement of a positive effect using a negative procedure (emotional concession). Rather, transcending oneself is seen as a necessary step toward something different (that is, with a different quality). Consequently, the pathetic structure forces us to live the moments of fulfillment of the laws of the dialectic processes.

Built then upon the break between the sign and its signification, 'pathos' involves the transition from the dramatic order of the situation to the metaphorical order; therefore it will be the highest exponent of the revolutionary leap (from quantity to quality). This is why Eisenstein claims the presence of 'pathos' not only in cinema, but throughout the history of art: in Gothic art, El Greco, Zola, religious experience, or in The Battleship Potemkin.

We can draw some conclusions. First, the pathetic effect has a poetic dimension; it belongs to the paradigm, to the vertical order of the metaphor.

Inorganisée dans son cours habituel, la parole en se pathétisant acquiert aussitôt le martèlement d'un rythme nettement perceptible... prosaïque dans ses formes, elle commence immediatement à pétiller de formes et tournures de langage propres à la poèsie. (Eisenstein 1978: 29)

But second, we find the poetic character of 'pathos' less interesting than its function as a link between poetic discourse and spectator. This is not a defense of the spectator's passivity towards fiction; rather, it is to say, Eisenstein does not aim at identification.

On the contrary, in order to determine this new type of relationship between spectator and text, Eisenstein formulates the prelogical character of the filmic stream, defining 'pathos' as the pre-formal instant.

According to Eisenstein, 'pathos' would be that moment in which the notion does not exist yet, and in which the image is the only means of expression. And that is why this going beyond the limits of the 'image' is perceived as a need to live the subject, as if participating in it.

Il s'agit d'un certain état psychique, pas même psychologique, auquel l'auteur veut lier son thème pour produire sur son auditoire une impression ineffaçable. (Eisenstein 1976: 357)

It is not by chance that Eisenstein used a mystic concept: 'râvissement'. 'Pathos' is now seen more as an explosion within the spectator than as a mere guide.

In fact, Eisenstein so insisted on this point that he even stated paradoxically that 'pathos' had to be the highest form of the organic. On the other hand, it is obvious that he arrived at a dead end when he attempted to give a scientific explanation for these phenomena according to the universal laws of Nature's development and of the dialectic principles. But the most remarkable of all his research is the fact that Eisenstein theorized precisely this surplus of meaning, this prelogical ecstasy, inexhaustible for code analysis, and that, at the same time, he linked it with the guidance of the spectator toward a certain ideological position.

We do not think it causal that Roland Barthes (1970) made some of the most beautiful remarks on Eisenstein's work, since he was one of the authors who attempted most insistently to perceive this surplus of meaning. It matters little whether Barthes was in search of a filmic impossible, the frame; his thrilling adventure consisted in discovering a sort of ultimate bliss, beyond the possibilities of rational analysis. Because Eisenstein and Barthes, like Bazin or Renoir on another level, or even Loyola, express a limit of signification and open a more uncertain — though at the same time more painful — reading perspective.

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