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# Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital* (Part 2)

ANNETTE MICHELSON

Eisenstein's double dedication of the projected film of *Capital*<sup>1</sup> at the end of the silent era of film, epitomizes a crisis of representation. Although we do not know and cannot even speculate as to the precision of his cinematic plans for Joyce, one thing is plain and certain: *Ulysses*, read in 1928 with the help of Madame Ivy Litvinov, offered him the deepest and most enduring challenge he had encountered since Meyerhold. Joyce's dissolution and relocation of narrative space, his explosion and regeneration of its language, continued, as we shall see, to inflect Eisenstein's thinking well into the middle 1930s. This challenge was not, however, entirely without precedent. Obscurely and in a different register anticipated, it had met with Eisenstein's resistance. It is therefore instructive, before turning to the question of the Joycean challenge, to consider in some detail an exchange, begun in 1925, between Eisenstein and Malevich. Most important is the manner in which this encounter articulates a series of misunderstandings. Their's was, in fact, *un dialogue de sourds*.

It was Malevich who began this exchange, publishing, in 1925 and 1926, two strongly polemical essays: "And Images Triumph on the Screen" and "The Artists and the Cinema."<sup>2</sup> The dates of these texts are interesting. In them, the films of Eisenstein and of Vertov are discussed as seminal and problematic—and this at a time undoubtedly following the release of *Strike*, and possibly of *Potemkin*. Vertov, at this time, had produced, apart from the early *Kino Nodelia* and *Kino Pravda*, only *Kinoglaz*, the very first of his major films. Malevich is, then, an early spectator, immediately attentive to the claims and aspirations of the medium.

What are the direction and emphasis of his reflections on contemporary film? They are, of course, determined by the position from which, as a painter, he speaks: it is the outermost limit of pictorial enterprise in our century, an extremity

1. "Capital will be dedicated—officially—to The Second International! They're sure to be 'overjoyed'! For it is hard to conceive of any more devastating attack against social democracy in all its aspects than *Capital*. The formal side is dedicated to Joyce." In "Notes for a Film of *Capital*," *October*, no. 2 (Summer, 1976), 71.

2. K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art*, trans. Xenia Clowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, ed. Troels Andersen, Copenhagen, Borgen, 1968. Passages cited are all drawn from Vol. 1, pp. 226-238.

of innovation exemplary for 50 years to come. Like Vertov's, his true posterity (one thinks of Robert Ryman, Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, Jo Baer) will emerge in the 1960s.

Until now we have had realism of objects, but not of painted units of colour. . . . Any painting surface is more alive than any face with a pair of eyes and a grin sticking out. A face painted in a picture gives a pitiful parody of life, and this allusion is only a reminder of the living. But a surface lives, it has been born . . . A living face, a landscape in nature, reminds us of a picture, *i.e.* something dead. That is why it is strange to look at a red or black painted surface.

For Malevich, then, contemporary art will be non-objective or abstractionist (he will use the two words interchangeably) or it will not be. This intransigent call for pure abstraction (the term, again, is his) is predicated upon the realization that what has been called into question is not the object, but rather the scene which it occupies, a space, for that time, at least, exhausted. That space is the scene of the action and its objects. It is, finally, the codes of representation governing the projection of that scene, its landscape, which are annulled by Malevich. And he does so, in the full knowledge of the manner in which those codes are the instrument of a dominant ideology, itself assaulted by a Marxist revolution. He has confronted the problem of the crisis of representation in the arts from within a revolutionary perspective, identifying the tradition of painterly and sculptural representation with that of a deposed bourgeoisie, and shocked by the proletariat, now victorious, whose art appropriates both the social function and the structural forms of bourgeois ideology.

Thus, "The proletariat is translating its domination into reality, and this at the time of great technical improvement in the organs of the human body—ears, eyes, arms. One such improvement in the sphere of art is the cinema. It has created new cinema artists, picture producers. Each production is simply called a picture, and a study for the picture has begun to be called a still. There, all producers and directors are to a large degree reincarnations of the old painters: they simply dispose of a new instrument of production, with which they can unfold a picture in time and fix a phenomenon in a film frame by means of light, as they once used to paint little studies by means of light.

Every film producer has his own peculiarity; this depends on his painter parents, and on their compositional upbringing; some have inclinations toward antiquity, the times of Rembrandt, whilst others adhere to the Barbizon school, and still others to the Impressionist or Wanderer reproductions of phenomena . . .

Eisenstein intends to liquidate easel-painting, he says, since he doesn't see its value as propaganda. He ought to strive for the consolidation of agitational easel painting, which he approves at present in practice, deepening the truth of its agitational content by using

contrast to express that content. His stills consist of the contents of content; translated into the language of painting this means the style of the Wanderers, where painting made use of the same sort of content. Painters at that time concerned themselves with facial traits, with psychological states, 'moods', as they expressed happiness and sadness, everyday life, history, various forms of grief, hope and gaiety—instead of revealing painting 'as such', or in our present case, 'the cinema as such'.

Eisenstein, however, has one advantage over other directors—he has a certain understanding and ability to use the law of contrasts; the depth of that understanding should lead him, eventually, to complete victory over content, through construction in contrast.

Eisenstein and Vertov are truly first-class artists, with an inclination to the left, for Eisenstein relies on contrast and Vertov on showing us the object as such. Both, however, still have a long way to go to reach Cézanne, Cubism, Futurism, and non-objective Suprematism: the path of their future development lies only in an understanding of these movements . . . Experimental cinema is the most important problem in that medium; only by means of an experimental laboratory can we create cinematology, in a special pharmacy without which the cinema will develop catarrh . . . In the West, important painters are gradually beginning to work in the cinema, and in beginning their work with purely abstract elements, they are beginning with our future source of new forms. This entry of the contemporary painter into the cinema should bring us, and him, to a new essence and significance for the screen, as a new way of showing the art of our new life to the masses.

Some contradictions and limitations of this position are immediately evident. This modernist, aware of the relationship between still and motion picture, is stubbornly resistant to its acknowledgement. That moment of release of still into motion, the constitution of the cinema inscribed within that relationship, was being celebrated, even as he wrote, as in the early, seminal work of René Clair, in *Paris Qui Dort*, a film that was to assume vital importance for Vertov himself. The properties inherent in photography as such receive no attention from Malevich; their materiality receives neither recognition nor location in that array of ideal essences which compose the Suprematist canon. The photo-montage is consequently dismissed as a somewhat perverse variation upon the codes of representation. Heedless of the manner in which it may inscribe Klee's "convergence of a hundred spaces," he ignores Eisenstein's energetic use of it in the superimpositions of *Strike*. Contesting film's subjection to pictorial conventions he seems, nonetheless, prepared to enlist it as the handmaiden of pictorial modernism, elevating that enlistment to the status of a cinematic ontology, prescriptive, ignoring the material and historical conditions of film's production,

the complex constraints and possibilities inherent in its insertion into the intertextuality of 19th-century culture.

Eisenstein's reply is brief and dismissive. It is also somewhat tardy, offered in "Methods of Montage," an important text of 1929 in which he explicates the modes of montage, metrical, rhythmic, tonal and overtone. Having explained the organic transitions which characterize the progressive radicalization of montage construction, he then says,

These considerations provide, in the first place, an interesting criterion for the appreciation of montage-construction from a 'pictorial' point of view. Pictorialism is here contrasted with 'cinematicism', aesthetic pictorialism with physiological reality. To argue about the pictorialism of the film-shot is naïve. This is typical of persons possessing a decent aesthetic culture that has never been logically applied to films. To this kind of thinking belong, for instance, the remarks on cinema coming from Kasimir Malevich. The veriest novice in films would not think of analyzing the film-shot from an identical point of view with landscape painting.

The following may be observed as a criterion of the pictorialism of the montage construction in the broadest sense: the conflict must be resolved *within* one or another category of montage, without allowing the conflict to be one of different categories of montage.

Real cinematography begins only with the collision of various cinematic modifications of movement and vibration. For example, the pictorial conflict of figure and horizon (whether this is a conflict in statics or dynamics is unimportant). Or the alternation of differently lit pieces solely from the viewpoint of conflicting light-vibrations, or of a conflict between the form of an object and its illumination, etc.<sup>3</sup>

But Malevich is not, of course, analyzing the film shot from a point of view identical with landscape painting; he is arguing for the dissolution of that space constructed by the codes of representation. For him, certain issues had been definitively settled and certain consequences inevitably followed. Abstractionist innovation had severed art from the ideological function of representation, marked off the *scene of action* and its objects from the *space of movement*, that space which, like that of Malevich's painting, addresses itself to the eye, to sight, rather than to the body and its kinesis. Malevich, in dismissing the codes of filmic representation, laid waste the scene of narrative action, replacing it by the painterly space of movement. He had not however—and Eisenstein knew this—given to film the same relentless attention he could give to the painting of Léger and Juan Gris. And certainly not, in any case, to Eisenstein's own films. For it is not Eisenstein's writing of that period, but his work that argues most con-

3. S. M. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda, New York, Meridian Books, 1949, p. 79.

vincingly against Malevich's strictures. Eisenstein's work tends increasingly throughout the 1920s to call into question the conventions of filmic representation. It is the hyperbolic montage of *October* and *The General Line*, his last two films of the silent period, which most forcefully articulates the commitment to a radically synthetic space. It was the work of Griffith which had animated the space of Repin. Eisenstein (whose allusions to Repin are critical, as in the procession episode of *The General Line*), moves, increasingly, in his mature work, toward the radically synthetic spatio-temporality of the optical mode, acknowledging cinema's confrontation with the crisis of representation. One might, in fact, say that the crisis is largely articulated and resolved in the elaborate spatio-temporal distensions and syntheses of *October* (as in the lifting of the bridge, the shelling of the trenches, the ascent of Kerensky), constituting the central axis of his most radically innovative work.

It is, however, the two closely related utopian projects, *Ulysses* and *Capital* that elicit Eisenstein's fullest explicitation of that crisis. Struggling still in 1932 to constitute a systemics for the articulation of a primary modernist text, remembering, in California, his wish to film *Ulysses*, he describes his "cinema of the mind, a film capable of reconstructing all phases and all specifics of the course of thought." He is shifting, at this point, from a pristine conception of 'intellectual cinema', which had culminated in a projected film version of *Capital* and its rendering of analytic, dialectical method, to another aspiration, more complex, even more problematic: the rendering of the movement of consciousness. He posits the filmic "interior monologue" as the agent of the dissolution of "the distinction between subject and object," undertaken in the novels of Edouard Dujardin, and completed in the work of Joyce. *Ulysses*, then, had become the other prime utopian project of the 1930's, out of which Eisenstein's notion of intellectual cinema continued to be refined. He informs us, in his excitement, of a period of preliminary work upon his script for *An American Tragedy*, another project of that period, which stimulated this sort of speculation, and of the "wonderful sketches" produced in the process. Here is Eisenstein's description:

Like thought, they would sometimes proceed with visual images. with sound. Synchronized or non-synchronized. Then as sounds. Formless. Or with sound—images with objectively representational sounds . . . Then suddenly, definite intellectually formulated words—as 'intellectual' and dispassionate as pronounced words. With a black screen, a rushing imageless visuality. Then in passionate disconnected speech, nothing but nouns. Or nothing but verbs. Then interjections. With zigzags of aimless shapes, whirling along with these in synchronization. Then reacting visual images over complete silence. Then linked with polyphonic sounds. Then both at once. Then interpolated into the outer course of action, then interpolating elements of the outer action into the inner monologue.

As if presenting inside the characters the inner play, the conflict of doubts, the explosions of passion, the voice of reason, rapidly or in slow-motion, marking the differing rhythms of one and the other in slow-motion, marking the differing rhythms of one and the other and, at the same time, contrasting with the almost complete absence of outer action: a feverish inner debate behind the stony mask of the face. The syntax of inner speech as distinct from outer speech. The quivering inner words that correspond with the visual images. Contrasts with outer circumstances. How they work reciprocally . . .<sup>4</sup>

And Eisenstein ends by remarking, “These notes for this 180 degrees advance in sound film culture languished in a suitcase—and were eventually buried, Pompeii-like beneath a mass of books . . .” There they remained. Sound was to lead Eisenstein in quite another direction, to the hieratic exacerbation of *Ivan the Terrible*.

This buried page, however, might figure as a blue-print for a cinema that was still to come. Its affirmation of disjunction, of the shifting relations of image and sound, its stress on polyphony, upon the use of silence and of the black screen as dynamic formal elements are familiar to us; Eisenstein, in a dazzling leap of the imagination, had invented on paper, the essential tenor, the form, the thrust and strategies of American Independent Cinema of our own last two decades.

Malevich’s injunction, then, recalled perhaps by Eisenstein in his attempt to construct the visual systemics of a Joycean subjectivity, was to be reinvented by American film-makers of the independent persuasion in that immediate post-war period of the 1940s which sees the flowering of painting in this same country. They discovered a viable continuity with a European tradition of the painterly avant garde, whose major cinematic figures—Richter, Duchamp, Léger, Man Ray—had, of course, taken refuge in the United States.

This latterday re-invention, grounded in the rejection of the material conditions of industrial cinematic production and of the alienation inscribed within the division of labor upon which that is postulated, was grounded in a thorough-going critique of the codes of representation in western art and film. This critique has been the subtext of the recent, collective enterprize of Brakhage, Breer, Snow, Landow, Frampton, Gehr, Kubelka, and their fellows. The work of some two or three generations of film-makers, it is most elaborately exemplified in the film practice and theory of Stan Brakhage. Here, then, is a passage from “Metaphors on Vision”:

And here, somewhere we have an eye (I’ll speak for myself) capable of an imagining (the only reality). And there (right there) we have the camera eye (. . . its lenses ground—to achieve 19th century Western compositional perspective—as best exemplified by the 19th-century architectural conglomeration of details of the classical ruin) in

4. *Film Form*, p. 182.

bending the light and limiting the frame of the image just so, its standard camera and projector speed for recording movement geared to the feeling of the ideal slow Viennese waltz and even its tripod head, being the neck it swings on, balled with bearings to permit it that *Les Sylphides* motion ideal for the contemplative romantic and virtually restricted to horizontal and vertical movements (pillars and horizon lines), a diagonal requiring a major adjustment, its lenses coated or provided with filters, its light meters balanced and its colour film manufactured, to produce that picture post card effect (salon painting) exemplified by those oh so blue skies and peachy skins.<sup>5</sup>

What was the cinematic strategy that would implement this insistence, like that of Malevich, on the pre-eminence of interiority and the assault upon the space of representation? How was this assault to be accomplished? Not by the destruction of the objects and actions of narrative representation, but *rather by the transformation of the spatio-temporality which is their pre-condition, of the coordinates which locate and define them.* Brakhage's major strategy was the *radical re-definition of filmic temporality, the creation of a perpetual Present*, one frame or sequence succeeding another in the most rapid fluidity of editing, devouring or eliminating expectation, as a vector of cinematic experience. Memory and expectation are annulled by images which have the intimacy and elusiveness of those we call hypnagogic, those experienced in the half-waking state. And like the hypnagogic image, the Brakhage film presents itself perceptually in a perpetual renewal, resisting observation and cognition. The hypnagogic image is immediate, appears and disappears all at once; it is not subject to the laws of perception—to those of perspective, for example. It has, as Sartre once remarked, the property of exciting attention and perception: one sees something, but what one sees *is* nothing.

In Brakhage, then, there is no time, no room, as it were, for expectation; the spatial *données* are obscured or fractured by hand-movement of the camera, by painting upon film, by speed; continuity is rhythmic, postulated on the metaphoric syntheses elicited in the viewer by cutting rapidly from one frame to the next. The painting upon film, which asserts the image plane; the use of fades, of superimpositions which, in setting movement upon movement, contract the space in which each develop; the frequent use of the empty frame, all tend, in one way or another, to contract space, to render it increasingly optical. It was the radical subversion of the spatio-temporal *données* that dissolved the scene of narrative action, constituting thereby another space, of movement. Eisenstein's eventual intimation of this was to come in 1939, and is clear: "Cinema is not only a solution for the problem of movement in pictorial images, but is also the achievement of a new and unprecedented form of graphic art, an art that is a free stream of changing, transforming, comingling forms, pictures and compositions, hitherto possible only in music."<sup>6</sup>

5. Stan Brakhage, "Metaphors on Vision," *Film Culture*, no. 30 (Fall 1963), n.p.

6. S. M. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, p. 105.





*(This is the second section of an essay in three parts.)*