



# Marie REBECCHI & Elena VOGMAN (ed.), *Sergei Eisenstein and the Anthropology of Rhythm*

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Marie Rebecchi and Elena Vogman's small but exquisite *Sergei Eisenstein and the Anthropology of Rhythm* concerns itself with the Soviet artist's unfinished film projects *¡Que viva México !* (1931-1932), *Bezhin lug / Bezhin Meadow* (1937, Soviet Union), and *Ferganskii kanal / The Fergana Canal* (1939, Soviet Union). *Anthropology* belongs to a group of the authors' books on Eisenstein that have appeared over the last few years (along with Elena Vogman's *Sinnliches Denken : Eisensteins exzentrische Methode* [2018] and *Dance of Values : Eisenstein's Capital Project* (2019), and Marie Rebecchi's *Parigi 1929 : Ejzenstejn, Bataille, Buñuel* [2014 ; French translation 2018], and includes essays by the editors, Raffaella Frascarelli, and Till Gathmann, as well as select diary entries and drawings Eisenstein made while working on *¡Que viva México !*, the film that constitutes the book's principal focus.

Published on the occasion of the eponymous exhibition curated by the authors at Rome's Nomos Foundation (September 20, 2017 - January 19, 2018), the book places the reader who did not witness the event in the position akin to that of a researcher of the incomplete films. Paradoxically, however, the lacunae that the reader may experience as a result of her inability to consider the texts and images alongside the exhibits that have inspired the book appear not as a shortcoming, but a strength, as they correspond stylistically to the associative leaps of Eisenstein's own film, writings, and drawings, and of the various modernist texts that Rebecchi and Vogman demonstrate to have influenced the artist.

Beneath the book's dense web of references, whereby such trends that marked the epoch as

anthropology, surrealism, and psychoanalysis are connected innovatively and convincingly, a careful reader will discern a symmetry that provides the volume with a high degree of unity. On the one end of the book's symmetry axis are the sketches from Eisenstein's diary included in the introductory essay, Vogman and Rebecchi's *The Anthropology of Rhythm*. Showing the mythological figure of Janus, the sketches complete a long quotation from Eisenstein's ruminations on the dualistic nature of deities in various religious traditions. Dualistic relationships are a precondition for the existence of dialectical ones, which Eisenstein explored thematically and employed stylistically throughout his career. The sketches provide a visual representation not only of dialectics as an intellectual framework of Eisenstein's films and texts, but – Rebecchi and Vogman contend – also of film as a kinetic medium : they allow to be seen as composite film images showing a single face in different phases of a turn (Rebecchi, Vogman 2017 : 14), a gesture the writers identify as prevalent in Eisenstein's Mexican footage (ibid. : 17). Corresponding to Henry Lanz's understanding of rhythm adopted by Rebecchi and Vogman – “[a]ny repetition of identical, or even similar, sensory elements is rhythm” (ibid.) – the turning of a head possesses power that is transformative in the political sense. The argumentative force of this claim rests partly on the homonymy between “revolution” understood as a sudden, radical, or complete change, and the same word understood as “rotation” (9). The final in the chain of terms established by the introductory essay is “anthropology”, applicable here because of the human-centric orientation of *iQue viva México !* and the other films (a point that can be quickly verified by a comparison between this phase of Eisenstein's work with his pre-1930 cinema, which demonstrates various degrees of constructivist fascination with geometric shapes and mechanical motion).

On the other end of the symmetry axis is *Bezhin lug*, Rebecchi and Vogman's short essay on the aborted project, placed close to the book's end and richly illustrated with front and profile photographs of potential performers that Eisenstein made for the purpose of casting the film. These instances of implied movement bring to mind Eisenstein's examples of “artificially produced images of motion” from the essay “The Dialectical Approach to Film Form” (1929), such as the triad of shots from *Bronenosets Potemkin / Battleship Potemkin* (1925, Soviet Union) that shows a lion asleep, awakening, and rising up (Eisenstein 1949 : 52-53). The canonical essay establishes connections between some of the key terms of Rebecchi and Vogman's arguments : movement, conflict, and rhythm. Discussing the temporal nature of cinema, as a result of which every sequential element is perceived “on top of the other” (Eisenstein 1949 : 49), Eisenstein notes that

[t]he incongruence in contour of the first picture – already impressed on the mind – with the subsequently perceived second picture engenders, in conflict, the feeling of motion. Degree of incongruence determines intensity of impression, and determines that tension which becomes the real element of authentic rhythm. (ibid. : 50)

In Eisenstein's system, *Potemkin's* stone lion “standing up” represents an “illogical”, artificially produced image of motion. Eisenstein's opposition to logic as a pathway to what the sociologist and ethnologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl calls sensory thinking is a central theme of Marie Rebecchi's essay “The Unlimited Montage : Eisenstein's Anthropological Gaze”. Eisenstein's anthropology (and *iQue viva México !* as its practical manifestation) is based on a mode of mimesis that collapses the

boundary between the imitation and its model (Vogman 2018 : 16). It is this mode of representation, which Eisenstein calls “cannibalistic”, that enables his anthropology to avoid the pitfalls of exoticising and otherising its subjects that the discipline is often accused of falling into. As Eisenstein formulates it in an oft-quoted diaristic note from the period of his work on *iQue viva México !*, “Je ne fais [pas] du cinéma, je fais du Mexique et moi ! / I don’t make cinema, I make Mexico and myself !” (Salazkina 2009 : 175).

The adjective “cannibalistic” applies in a more literal fashion to much of the imagery that pervades this book’s pages, and the phase of Eisenstein’s work it explores. The aforementioned journal entry used by Rebecchi and Vogman as a departure point into the various branches of their discussions includes, for instance, a reference to the practice of the consumption of semen by members of Gnostic sects, while the narrative of *Ferganskii kanal* includes an episode where the emir of the Old Urgench – a city invaded by Tamburlaine – responds to the nomadic conqueror’s cutting off the supply of water to the city by ordering a slaughter of the Mongol captives and the use of their blood instead of water.

The uncanny violence of this imagery was shared by surrealist art, the intersections of which with Eisenstein are discussed in the introductory essay and in Marie Rebecchi’s “The Unlimited Montage. Eisenstein’s Anthropological Gaze”. Shortly prior to his trip to Mexico, Eisenstein spent several months in Paris, where he collaborated with George Batailles, the editor of *Documents*, a journal that gathered the French surrealists outside of the dominant, André Breton-led strain of the movement. Eisenstein’s above-quoted journal entry refers to an encounter with Bataille, who – Vogman and Rebecchi relate – was interested in gnosis as a manifestation of anti-idealist (materialist) notions of matter (Rebecchi, Vogman 2017 : 11) Borrowing from a variety of religious traditions, gnosticism discredited the linear model of time that those traditions posited, leading to “impure fermentation” (ibid. : 12) – a phrase that the authors liken with Eisenstein’s “survivals of the past” (ibid.). Implicit to both is montage, the technique that enabled “the fortuitous meeting, on a dissection table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella”, as Breton famously encapsulated surrealist art in a line borrowed from Lautréamont.

But Eisenstein diverges from orthodox Surrealism in rejecting the calculated rationality of translating thoughts into images, purportedly embodied by such artworks as *Un chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel, France, 1929) (ibid. : 23). Conceiving of the “unconscious” and “subconscious” not in terms of the individual, but of society, Eisenstein found a methodological impetus for his “lay anthropology” partly in Lévy-Bruhl’s *Primitive Mentality*, which operates with the notions of “prelogical modes of consciousness” and “sensory thinking.” His opposition to ratio, thus, can be said to stem from a direct engagement with actuality in a manner that is specific to film as an art of mechanical reproduction, which allows it to bypass language, an instrument twice removed from the object of its representations. The collage-like yet genuine photograph of a fish preparing to swallow a smaller one from the book’s early pages, derived from *Documents* and presumably photographed by Jean Painlevé, illustrates this “bottoms up” approach to the surrealist uncanny as much as it does the idea of cannibalism, a term that appears in the accompanying caption (Rebecchi, Vogman 2017 : 11).

Discussing Lévy-Bruhl's influence on the filmmaker in his seminal *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, David Bordwell notes that the concreteness of prelogical thought has the capacity to "[obliterate] distinctions between part and whole, self and other" (Bordwell 2005 : 194), and compares the idea to ecstasy, a term that recurs throughout Rebecchi and Vogman's book, but especially in Eisenstein's diary. Bordwell explains the idea's relevance to Eisenstein through a text that postdates the filmmaker's return to the Soviet Union, claiming that the meaning of ecstasy for Eisenstein should be interpreted neither in terms of the pleasure of sex (which he supposedly considered egoistic) nor in terms of religion (as the Marxist doctrine bars it) (ibid). But it is precisely sexual and religious tropes - often in combination with one another and with barbarity - that pervade Eisenstein's journal entries and drawings included in Rebecchi and Vogman's book. Whereas Bordwell explains the prominence of the concepts of pathos and ecstasy in Eisenstein's art and thinking after the 1930s in terms of the "strong dose of Romantic aesthetics" contained within Socialist Realism, these materials (and Vogman and Rebecchi's arguments stemming from them) demonstrate that Eisenstein had developed an interest in these concepts independently from the artistic style of the Soviet Union officially prescribed in 1932. The book thus provocatively yet persuasively blurs the boundary between the conventional truism of the two Eisensteins : the constructivist, who uses the brick as a metaphor for the film shot, and the later "organicist", who likens the film shot with a cell. In other words, it does not illuminate merely the "other" face of Eisenstein - whom the authors describe as a Janus-like figure (Rebecchi, Vogman 2017 : 9) - but also a continuity between the two faces as an agent of rhythm.

The third and final longer essay in the book, Vogman's "Figures of Rhythm and Archeology of Time" looks at the influences on *iQue viva México !*. It is well known that the muralists Diego Rivera and Clemente Orozco served as Eisenstein's guides to the Mexican culture as he was developing the project, but the differences between the media of painting and cinema make worth exploring the question of what those influences entailed in actuality. In doing so, Vogman focuses on *Mexican Folkways*, the anthropological journal whose complete issues the filmmaker owned, to put forward the argument that these influences concerned both the thematic preoccupations and stylistic procedures of the film. Orozco and Rivera were contributing editors of the journal (along with, among others, Anita Brenner, the American-Mexican anthropologist best known in the period for *Idols Behind Altars* [1929], which Eisenstein had read in preparation for the project). The journal covered topics ranging from village festivals to children's art and from Zapotecan religious ceremony to the gestures of a fortune teller, but its impact on *iQue viva México !* extended itself in the stance Vogman describes as descriptive and poetic, critical and emphatic (Vogman 2017 : 83), a method predicated on "astonishing montage work" (ibid. : 85), the encounters in whose pages of "heterogeneous elements, scientific research and 'anthropology for everybody'" (ibid. : 87) invited "a dialectical process [...] shared by the author and reader (ibid. : 91).

"Figures of Rhythm and Archeology of Time" exemplifies the unique virtues of this book, perhaps, more clearly than any of the other contributions to it. Earlier studies of Eisenstein's "Mexican phase", such as Masha Salazkina's *In Excess : Sergei Eisenstein's Mexico* (2009), emphasise the ideational affinities between the filmmaker and his supposed influences at the expense of stylistic ones (the mentioned book, for example, likens the trope of the skull in Eisenstein and in Walter Benjamin without comparing the vastly different formal operations of the Soviet filmmaker's cinema and the German essayist's prose) (Salazkina 2009 : 154). *Sergei Eisenstein and the Anthropology of Rhythm*, in contrast, divides its foci evenly between the thematic and stylistic preoccupations of the Soviet filmmaker and the various influences on him as he was working on the films and film projects discussed. It attempts and succeeds to consider Eisenstein in a manner comparable to his films and

writings, which allows it to be read not just as an exciting work of research, but as an exciting work of art.

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