

**SERGEI EISENSTEIN: CRITICAL NOTES**  
**Lecture by Peter Thompson**  
**(Revised 10/8/90)**

Personal Contexts:

Eisenstein studied engineering. Worked with modular pipefittings at the St. Petersburg Department of Public Works. Charicaturist. Studied set and costume design. Playwright. Worked with Myerhold. Bi-sexual (at least: remark to Kenneth Rexroth after "Que viva Mexico!": "I have to return to the Soviet Union. They will tell my mother and it would kill her if she knew.")

Historical Context: the times demanded partisanship. Certainty. Will. Therefore, his metaphors of industry and mechanics. Futurists.

Theorist: similar to Heidegger's statement about the one star which you spend your life shinning. Eclectic, not systematic. Gradually changed his stance on intellectual montage.

**FILM FORM**

"THE UNEXPECTED" (1928)

Written after seeing a troupe of Kabuki actors in it European tour of 1928 performing in Moscow and Leningrad. Hailed the junction of the Kabuki and the sound film.

Monistic Ensemble--sound, movement, space, costume, voice function as elements of equal significance.

Transference--the method of transferring the basic affective aim from one material to another ("...from one category of provocation to another". See, for example, Satyjit Ray's "Pathar Panchali".)

Felt that tanka poetry should be seen, not read.

"A STATEMENT" (1928)

E., V.I. Pudovkin and G.V. Alexandrov signed a joint statement on sound film.

Danger of sound: that ADHESION of sound to the visual piece increases its inertia as a montage piece and increases the independence of its meaning.

Opportunity: only in contrapuntal use of sound will it become a montage element. E. calls for non-synchronization of sound and visual images.

"THE CINEMATIC PRINCIPLE AND THE IDEOGRAM" (1929)

Discussed the development of the hieroglyph.

E. Is most interested in the "copulative" category of heiroglyph where two objects when placed together become a concept which is regarded not as their sum but as their product, a value of another dimension: the ideogram. This is what is done in montage in cinema: combine depictive shots which re neutral and single in meaning into intellectual contexts and series. Principle of ideogram: denotation by depiction.

Laconism: compressed, brief forms characterize Japanese poetry. Haiku, for E. is montage theory at work, for it is a series of shot lists which creat a psychological effect.

Disproportionate depiction of an event: talks about child's picture of stove and room and huge matches which show how important they are--that this is natural in humans. E. feels that "absolute realism is by no means the correct form of perception. It is simply the function of a certain form of social structure." p. 35.

Shot: montage cell (which can form an embryo).

Montage: characterized by the *collision* of two pieces in conflict from which arises a *concept*. E. talks about Pudovkin thinking of montage as linkage and E. thinking of it as collision. E. thinks of linkage as just a special case of montage.

Montage compared to the explosions of an internal combustion engine which drive the tractor (or film) forward. (E.'s definition of film art: the film must plough the psyche of the viewer according to class principles). Stalin: artists are the engineers of the soul.

Conflicts:

Graphic directions

Scales

Volumes

Masses--volumes filled with various intensities of light.

Depths

Stresses the principle of conflict: counterpoint.

Talks about two methods of teaching drawing: without reference to the frame, or by cutting out compositional elements from a cherry tree branch (framing). These ways are analogous to two basic tendencies struggling in cinema:

1. artificial spatial organization of an event in front of the lens.
2. picking out, organization by means of the lens, hewing out a piece of actuality with the ax of the lens.

Kabuki's "disintegrated" acting. Acting with an arm, or leg, breaking up the unity of the actor. Cutting. Uses as an image the teaching of rifle handling to an illiterate recruit by breaking down the steps as opposed to the "spongy shapelessness" of naturalism.

"A DIALECTIC APPROACH TO FILM FORM" (1929)

Art is always conflict, according to its:

Social mission--its task is to make manifest the contradictions of being.

Nature--embodying a conflict between natural existence (organic inertia) and creative tendency (purposeful initiative). Hypertrophy of purpose makes art too rational. Hypertrophy of naturalness dilutes art into formlessness.

Methodology--montage, which is the *idea* which arises from the collision of independent shots.

E. acknowledges that montage is most suitable for the expression of ideological statements. Seeks a purely intellectual film freed from traditional limitations.

"THE FILMIC FOURTH DIMENSION" (1929)

Orthodox montage is montage on the dominant, the foreground, the chief tendency within the frame, the central stimulus attended by a whole complex of secondary stimuli.

These secondary stimuli are the overtones and understones. In cinema the trick is to exploit these collateral vibrations to achieve the visual overtone complex of the shot.

Overtones cannot be traced in the static frame, just as they cannot be traced in the musical score. Both emerge only in the dynamics of the musical or cinematic process.

The visual and aural overtones are elements of a filmic fourth dimension which can be felt.

## “METHODS OF MONTAGE” (1929)

Metric montage--fundamental criterion is the absolute lengths of the film pieces. Tension obtained by shortening or lengthening the pieces while preserving the original proportions of the formula.

Simple relationships are best because they give clarity of impression.

Suitable for simple march-time montages.

Content is subordinated to the absolute length of the piece.

Danger: over-complexity to the point where perception is by measurement rather than by impression. When metrical montage is forceably applied it can result in montage failure.

Rhythmic montage--the content within the frame is a factor possessing equal rights to the length. The practical length derives from the specifics of the content and its movement within the frame.

Tonal montage--movement within the frame is here given a wider sense. Movement embraces all affects. Montage is based on the characteristic emotional sound of the piece, its dominant, the general tone.

Overtonal montage--distinguished from tonal montage by the collective calculation of all the piece's appeals.

Intellectual montage--conflict juxtaposition of intellectual affects. E. hoped thereby to build a synthesis of science, art and class militancy.

(See “Vertical montage in “Synchronization of Senses”).

These types of montage enter into conflict with one another.

Transition from Metric to Rhythmic because metric does not take into account the movement within the frame as it relates to the length of the shot.

Transition from Rhythmic to tonal because of need to honor the dominant emotional tone of a piece.

## “A COURSE IN TREATMENT” (1932)

Study of cinema must proceed with the study of the theater.

Only by critical comparison with the more basic early forms of spectacle is it possible to master critically the specific methodology of the cinema.

Needed for creative work: persistence over time.

Nothing gets created from pre-conceived methodological positions.

Nothing gets created from the tempestuous stream of creative energy unregulated by method.

Specialists are only called in to deal with specific, concrete cases.

E. excoriates the short film for the graduate student. Useless.

E. then wonderfully describes the course of thought in creating a screenplay. p. 105.

This is E.'s theory of the “inner monologue” and it is out of the tradition of stream of consciousness (see “Film Form: New Problems”).

### “THROUGH THEATER TO CINEMA” (1934)

Discusses two elements in his move from theater to cinema:

Photography: a system of reproduction to fix real events of actuality. These fixings permit any degree of distortion and abstraction, however.

Because of photography's dependence on reality, the film shot is much less independently workable than sounds for music or words for poetry.

This has placed more weight on the ways in which shots can be combined: montage.

Eisenstein then traces his film career beginning as a theater director and experiencing the tension between the practical and the fictitious-descriptive principles. He noticed that his play about a gas factory would have been stronger if produced inside a gas factory. This brought him to the brink of cinema.

Discussed typage--the method of least interference with the natural course of events. It is the modern development of the Commedia del arte with its seven stock figures. The modern film use of typage is based on the wish to delineate a character so sharply that upon entrance the audience will “place” him as a known element. Typage concerns, therefore, the creation of immediate conventions.

Montage--discusses his direction of “The Wise Man” and his use of taking a fragment of dialogue from one scene and leaping with it into the next scene, and also his making the diary film to be projected.

Cites Flaubert's cross cutting of dialogues in “Madame Bovary”.

Believes that a director should be well grounded in theatrical construction and the art of mise-en-scene (the first two years of the directing course in the State Cinema Institute emphasized this). A director must master the techniques of film diction, the theory of montage, the technique of the frame, and the traditions and methodology of literature.

### “FILM LANGUAGE” (1934)

E. stresses how each shot is dependent upon the others. Shots which call attention to themselves *as composition* force the film into a disconnected assemblage of lovely phases, “a shopwindow full of pretty but unrelated products.”

E. uses the term “film culture”.

E. then gives a full analysis of the yawls resupplying the battleship sequence in “Potemkin”.

E. makes it clear that this analysis was not thought out beforehand, and that the sequence could actually be re-edited in almost any way to further the plot, BUT an alternate sequencing would destroy the compositional movement through the pieces.

### “FILM FORM: NEW PROBLEMS” (1935)

E. seems to rationalize the loss of the formal brilliance of early Soviet films because Soviet filmmakers are now absorbed in “deepening and broadening the thematic and ideological formulation of questions and problems...” (Note: this was the time E. was filming “Bezhin Meadow”).

E. questions his prior formulation of Intellectual montage which had as its task “restoring emotional fullness to the intellectual process.” E. now feels that intellectual montage

represented a hypertrophy of the montage concept.

The specific content of intellectual montage--the movement of thoughts as the substitute for story (an exhaustive replacement of content) does not justify itself.

The theory of the inner monologue now replaces the theory of intellectual montage--sensual-image thought processes, embodied thinking, are the base of creation of form. (For an example of what E. means by "inner monologue", see p. 105 of "A Course in Treatment". The inner monologue is within the tradition of "stream of consciousness".) E. then looks at synecdoche (the substitution of a part for a whole and uses as his example the doctor's pince-nez in "Potemkin".)

The effectiveness of a work of art is built on a dual unity: the penetration of sensual thinking into consciousness by means of the structure of the form.

## THE FILM SENSE

WORD AND IMAGE" (originally published as "MONTAGE IN 1938") (1938)

E. reviews his thinking on montage.

Portmanteau words as the unity of two objects into a concept.

Montage as a creation which is qualitatively different from each of the shots separately.

E. realizes that he needs to stress the unifying principle behind montage. Each

montage unit is a particular representation of a general theme that in equal measure penetrates all shot-pieces.

Looks at psychological habit of looking at terminal states of a process so that only the beginning or the end is perceived (Piaget).

The separate representations are built up into an image.

E. looks for montage in the preparation of an actor.

Actors take suggestions or details from reality in order to build up their characterizations.

The characterization is the juxtaposition of determining close-ups.

Studies Leonardo's shooting script for "The Deluge".

The creative process: "before the perception of the creator hovers a given image, emotionally embodying his theme. The task that confronts him is to transform this image into a few basic partial representations which in their combination and juxtaposition, shall evoke in the consciousness and feelings of the spectator, reader, or auditor, that same initial general image which originally hovered before the creative artist." p. 31. This process stresses dynamism and includes the creative role of the spectator.

Talks about affadavit-exposition as the opposite of montage. The affidavit method conveys bare documentary information not raised to art by creating emotional effect.

Cites examples from Pushkin, Keats, Milton, Mayakovsky.

### "SYNCHRONIZATION OF SENSES"

In principle there is no difference in montage between silent and sound films.

Examines "Alexander Nevsky" for his use of a new kind of montage: vertical montage, which is Polyphonic montage--the simultaneous advance of a multiple series of parallel lines, each maintaining an independent compositional course but aligning vertically into chords.

## “COLOR AND MEANING”

Cites many examples maintaining that there is an absolute relation between particular colors and particular emotions.

States that purely physical relations exist between sound and color. “But it can also be said, just as categorically, that art has extremely little to do with such categorical relationships.” p. 150. “In art it is not the absolute relationships that are decisive, but those arbitrary relationships within a system of images dictates by the particular work of art”. p. 150. The emotional intelligibility of a color comes from within the work.

## “FORM AND CONTENT: PRACTICE”

Exhaustively examines his and Prokofiev’s method for building audio-visual correspondences in “Alexander Nevsky”.

Speaks against narrowly representational uses of music within film. Argues for sensing the inner movements of a scene which are the correspondences between the music compositional and formal structural elements in music and a scene.

Brief mention of “typage” again.

E. argues for a complete correspondence between the movement of the music and the movement of the eye over the lines of the plastic composition.

## THE SHORT FICTION SCENARIO 1941 lecture

Montage is micro-dramaturgy. Combining three pieces in a montage phrase is the same as joining three scenes or acts in a play. Through montage we trace the same laws which are repeated in the compositional structure of a feature or serial film.

Shooting in long take is almost always neutral and passive.

Detective literature structured on gradual accumulation of evidence and on the thifting of suspicion.

The principles of constructing a plot and the principles of montage construction are identical: the breaking of inertia and the ability to mentally reconstruct a whole from a part. E. then looks at both principles in the art of Daumier, Michelangelo.

Examines shooting from character’s vs. author’s pov.

Argues for understatement, the accumulation of “untrue” association (talking about tea as a pretext for an old man to avoid talking about what is really important).

Advises beginning the shot breakdowns as a director with they key scene of the film.

## CRITICAL ESSAY TITLES AND DATES:

THE UNEXPECTED 1928

A STATEMENT 1928

THE CINEMATIC PRINCIPLE AND THE IDEOGRAM 1929

A DIALECTIC APPROACH TO FILM FORM 1929

THE FILMIC FOURTH DIMENSION 1929

METHODS OF MONTAGE 1929

A COURSE IN TREATMENT 1932

FILM LANGUAGE 1934

THROUGH THEATER TO CINEMA 1934

FILM FORM: NEW PROBLEMS 1935

WORD AND IMAGE--MONTAGE IN 1938

SYNCHRONIZATION OF SENSES

COLOR AND MEANING



FORM AND CONTENT: PRACTICE  
THE SHORT FICTION SCENARIO 1941

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